A BIOGRAPHY OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Gossie Harold Hudson, B.A., M.A.

* * * * * *

The Ohio State University
1970

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of History
Dedicated
to
My Mother and Father

Gossie Mack Hudson and Bertha Elizabeth Hudson
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In pursuit of facts about the life of Paul Laurence Dunbar, I have been assisted by a score of individuals in the Ohio Historical Society. My debt is gargantuan to all of them.

Especially helpful were Mrs. Sara S. Fuller, Manuscripts Specialist; Mrs. Andrea Lentz, Curator; Mr. David Larson, Chief of Archives and Manuscript Division; Mrs. Marion Bates, Assistant Librarian; Miss Patti Ellis, Division Specialist; Mr. Edward R. Lentz, Field Representative; Mr. Conrad Wertzel, Reference Librarian, and Mrs. Elizabeth Martin, Librarian. Of equal help was the assistance given by Mrs. Amy Givens, Curator of the Dunbar House, Dayton, Ohio.

Special thanks are due to the Dayton Public Library; The Schomburg Library, New York City; the Founders Library, Howard University; the libraries at Hampton Institute, Florida A. & M. University, Wilberforce University, Tuskegee Institute, and the Library of Congress.

I am grateful to Professors David Hodgson, Bradley Chapin and Mary Walters, a librarian at the Ohio State University, who read the dissertation and offered valuable suggestions.
Acknowledgment is made also to Professor Merton L. Dillon, my adviser, whose constructive criticism has been enlightening.

Above all to my wife, Florence Delories Hudson, the writer is indebted for helpful assistance in the task of composition and for numerous suggestions regarding the literary quality of this work.
PREFACE

The writer became interested in writing a biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar when, during the spring quarter of 1968, he took a seminar course under Dr. Merton L. Dillon, Professor of History at The Ohio State University. Dr. Dillon, at that time, informed him of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Collection in the Ohio Historical Society. It was here noted, after perusing the literature on the subject, that while biographies had been written on the poet, none had been done by a historian. Lida Keck Wiggins, a poet, wrote the first biography, The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, (New York, 1907). She used as references interviews, private letters and reminiscences.

The writings on Dunbar since 1907 have been scanty and extremely repetitious. As a result of the repetition, most of the works have the same information. However, Benjamin Brawley, Professor of English at Harvard, Paul Laurence Dunbar (Chapel Hill, 1936); and Virginia Cunningham, a novelist, Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York, 1947), in their treatment of the poet have more on his life than most of the other authors.
This dissertation is an effort to analyze all the facets of Dunbar's life and encompass them in a single work. The information in the biographies, the biographical sketches, the reviews and the critiques have been valuable. But the most substantial contributions to this paper have been provided by the Paul Laurence Dunbar Collections in the Ohio Historical Society, the Dayton Public Library, the Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library, The Manuscript Division in the Library of Congress, and the Founders Library, Howard University.

To this generation nourished on protest literature and relevant history, the writings of Dunbar may appear to have no value at all. Even so, they have historical interest as contributions to this country's literature. Added to this is the fact that the close of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century saw Dunbar as one of the most popular authors on the American scene. Some who considered him a genius also implied that he was without peer in his ability to write distinctively about some of the experiences of plantation life of the African-American.

The life of Paul Laurence Dunbar is one of a self-determined young man who achieved greatness and honor in the midst of hardships and difficult circumstances. He
lived less than six years after he reached his zenith, but his works have made indelibly articulate the ideas and moods of his time.
VITA


1956 . . . . . . B. A., North Carolina Central University, Durham, North Carolina

1956-1968 . . . . Teacher, Booker High School, Sarasota, Florida

1958-1959 . . . . Teacher, Butler-Baker High School, Eatonton, Georgia


1968 . . . . . . M.A., North Carolina Central University, Durham, North Carolina

1968-1970 . . . . Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: History of Sectionalism

1. The Civil War and Reconstruction. Professor Merton L. Dillon.

2. History of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democracy. Professors Mary Young and David Hodgson.


# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>INTRODUCING PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>MOLDING YEARS, 1872-1886</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>MARCH OF INTELLECT, 1881-1892</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>DOUGLASS, HOWELLS AND JOHN BULL, 1893-1899</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>DUNBAR AT HIS ZENITH, 1899-1902</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>CLOSING YEARS, 1902-1904</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>DUNBAR IN HISTORY</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>DIALECT ET LA NEGRITUDE</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

viii
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

Critics in this generation have dealt harshly with Dunbar. One is compelled to inquire if it is fair to intrude one's contemporary value systems and preconceptions and notions into his reconstruction of the past.¹ The duty of the historian is to understand the past in its own terms and not in his own. Thus, he should present his subject in the light of the literary milieu of the time.²

Still the historian cannot escape his own time. J. H. Hexter states that every "generation reinterprets the poet in terms of the exigencies of its own day."³ Indeed the present writer, in this estimation of Dunbar, has not divorced himself entirely from contemporary times. But, in most cases, he has striven to see Dunbar in Die Zeit die Geist.


³Ibid., p. 13.
Considering the past in its own terms and envisioning events as the men who lived through them did are not easy jobs. But the tasks are simplified by a knowledge of what the consequences were. The writer who refuses "to use insight that his peculiar time gave him would be merely foolish," Hexter concludes. "For history," said he, "is to be understood not only in terms of what comes before, but also what comes after." 4

On several occasions in the late 1890's Dunbar was asked to write an autobiography. In almost every instance, he began by relating that his life was uneventful and "that there is little in it to interest anyone." 5 In response to a letter written to him by a Mrs. A. S. Lanahan in 1898, 6 he mentioned that he was born at Dayton, Ohio, twenty-five years earlier. He attended the common schools there and was graduated from the Dayton High School. "This" he said, "constituted my education." About his parents, he intimated that they had been slaves in Kentucky, and that his grandparents had been slaves

4Ibid.

5These brief sketches written in Dunbar's hand and sometimes typewritten are found in his papers located in the Ohio Historical Society, the Library of Congress, and Dayton City Library.

6Dunbar to Mrs. A. S. Lanahan, February 17, 1898, The Paul Laurence Dunbar Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).
on the eastern shore of Maryland. He told Mrs. Lanahan that he began writing early, when about twelve, but published nothing until he was fourteen. "Then the fever took me" he exclaimed, "and I wrote ream upon ream of positive trash when I should have been studying English." Paul told Mrs. Lanahan that he wrote everything he could think or dream during these early years in the form of plays, verses, and stories. He added that he seldom tried to publish. [Dunbar remembered that his school life was pleasant. He was the only black fellow in his class and apparently popular with his teachers and school chums. He was made president of the School Society, and Philomathean Society, and after that he was elected editor-in-chief of the school paper. Continuing, Dunbar stated that after graduation there was nothing for him but to go into menial employment as other Negroes did. He became an elevator boy. In the nearly two years he spent in that capacity, he improved the leisure, between trips up and down, in studying and writing.]

While working in the Callahan Building in Dayton, he brought out his first book, Oak and Ivy. This book was privately printed and sold extensively in Ohio. Later Dunbar took engagements to give recitals from his own work. "While engaged thus," he related, "a copy of my second book Majors and Minors fell into the hands of James A.
Heine who sent it to Mr. Howells."⁷ After a review in the Harper's Weekly of June 27, 1896, the editor of the Century Magazine and other editors discovered that the contributor was of African descent. He published Lyrics of Lowly Life and went to England where in spite of the opposition which British sentiment offered to his having a woman manager, Miss Pond, he gained success. "There" the poet recalled, "my book was handsomely republished." And there in the heart of a typical English home, among the hills of Somerset, he finished the novel The Uncalled. In conclusion Dunbar said, "The Uncalled is to appear in the May Lippincott's. A book of short stories mostly of Kentucky life will also appear in March."⁸

If the above were Dunbar's full story, it would be useless to continue this account. Fortunately, there is a great deal more.

One newspaper commenting on his death in 1906 recognized Dunbar's loss to American letters but then observed that "he was not... a great poet but he was a

---

⁷William Dean Howells was the dean of American critics.

⁸The brief sketch is based on the reply to Mrs. Lanahan in which Dunbar ended by saying, "I have tried to be as full as possible without being prolix." Dunbar to Mrs. A. S. Lanahan, February 17, 1898, The Paul Laurence Dunbar Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).
real one." This writer contended that Dunbar was one of the true American poets of American literature. Surrounded by racism, and Jim Crow laws, "he was an offspring," one writer said, "so talented as to smile at handicaps and prejudices, so wise as to accept them only as challenges to the faint of heart." 10

Too often, unfortunately, Dunbar has been introduced in a false light that has distorted and debased the real soul of the man. The lowly life of his people interested him. He wrote about common everyday black folk and their experiences, and in Oak and Ivy he wrote:

I don't believe in 'ristercrats
and never did, you see;
The plain ol' homelike sorter folks
is good enough fur me. . . . 11

His work was that of the plantation blackman. Dunbar was a sort of black Paul Bunyan. During his time he was almost like the legendary John Henry. Dunbar was loyal to his race. Like a prophet, he identified himself with his people. He suffered and rejoiced as they did. And he never sought to erase racial peculiarities from what he wrote. Fame and comparative wealth did not turn his head

9Boston Evening Transcript, February 10, 1906.


or cause him to forget or to be ashamed of his lowly kindred.\textsuperscript{12}

The chief characteristic of nearly all of the writing by early black authors was its seriousness. There was little fiction, poetry, or humor. How to destroy slavery and bring freedom and equality to the enslaved was the burden of most of the first African-American writers. With the end of slavery, blacks lost their most inspiring theme. Since emancipation very few black men and women have gained name and fame as contributors to American literature. Foremost among that few (and in addition to Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Archibald Grimke and Charles Chestnutt) was Paul Laurence Dunbar.

One should not belabor terms like "black authors and black Americans,"\textsuperscript{13} because during the same period, the Afro-American novelist was judged, not on his merits as a novelist but as a black novelist. During the Dunbar period the same was in vogue. Perhaps it was not the smug patriotism which did the most damage, but the tendency to encourage careless work by black writers which, in all likelihood, would have been turned down had white writers written them.

\textsuperscript{12}The Dayton Journal, June 27, 1907.

The statement made by Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*, "One device evolved by the whites was to tab whatever the blacks did with the prefix 'Negro'," seems to approximate the Dunbar dilemma.

We had Negro literature, Negro athletes, Negro music, Negro doctors, Negro politicians, Negro workers. The malignant ingeniousness of this device is that... it concealed the paramount psychological fact: that to the white mind, prefixing anything with 'Negro' automatically consigned it to an inferior category.¹⁴

The black writer does himself a disservice to think of his work as being solely a tributary to some major American stream. In the area of rhythm and music, he often excels. Dunbar was a poet in his own right; not a "colored" poet, or a "Negro" poet, or a "poet laureate of his race"¹⁵ but a poet of African descent. To this extent, he is a great "Negro" poet and to regard him otherwise relegates his work to an inferior place in American letters. Even in 1903, when Dunbar had been hailed throughout the United States as a popular poet, he was never considered an eminent poet or novelist. And when John Clark Ridpath praised him for his poetry recited before the Western Association of Writers in 1892, Ridpath

¹⁴Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁵Booker T. Washington first called Dunbar "The Poet Laureate of His Race." The label is still used by black and white writers.
regarded him as an outstanding "Negro" poet. Consequently when Ridpath wrote *The Ridpath Library of Universal Literature*, he disregarded Dunbar altogether.

Of course, Dunbar would win few awards from today's critics, white or black. This brings up the speculation as to how Tennyson and Wordsworth would fare at the hands of the avant-garde. This poet was certainly not a Dante, a Goethe, a Schiller, or a Poe. He had none of Shakespeare's breadth of sympathy and understanding, and none of Dante's or Goethe's mastery of many fields. Furthermore, if one were to attempt the impossible task of selecting from American writers a "typical" poet, he would probably choose Frost, Sandburg, or Bryant rather than Dunbar. Nevertheless, there were prominent Americans who viewed him as a genius. The *Independent* called him a genius of African origin. While Archibald Grimke spoke of him "as having been born with a song in his heart," Mayor Brand Whitlock was saying: "For Paul was a poet;

---


18 *Independent*, July 6, 1899, p. 18.

19 Unpublished biography in the Archibald Grimke Papers (Founders Library, Howard University).
and I find that when I have said that I have said the greatest and most splendid thing that can be said about a man." The man was not great by the universal criteria determining a major poet. But he was a true poet, called to the life of poetic observation; and the observation of the best poet is never less than the observation of a human being.

As a human being the poet wrote within a framework of what may be termed reality. He interpreted a certain group of blacks as he saw them. Beneath the surface of his dialect he saw philosophy, rhythm, and efforts to survive the vilest of conditions. To be sure, the author suffered from the social proscriptions of a white man's world. Yet, he rarely regarded his writing as a task with a problem to solve. He merely "went into the Negro life" said Woodson, "and emerged portraying it with living characters exhibiting the elasticity, spirit, tone, and naturalness in the life about him." Dunbar wrote during the late Victorian Period. His writings in this period reflect the direction of literature


22 Woodson, The Negro in our History, p. 471.
in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. This was a period of romanticism and realism.\textsuperscript{23} He always considered himself a realist. Dunbar once wrote: "I have become a devotee to realism, and there is much exaggeration in it."\textsuperscript{24} Like Langston Hughes later, he was foremost a social poet concerned with the depicting of black life in America. And Dunbar believed that he knew his people well—"I believe I know my own people thoroughly," he said. "I know them in all classes, the high and the low."\textsuperscript{25}

As a human being, Dunbar believed in the unity of the human race. While writing a friend one day he surmised that "My all absorbing desire is... to be able to interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to the many that after all we are more human than African."\textsuperscript{26} Whitlock observed that "Paul was a poet not of his race alone, but the poet of... men everywhere. For the true poet is universal..."\textsuperscript{27} Most of all he


\textsuperscript{24}Interview with Dunbar, unidentified newspaper clippings, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).

\textsuperscript{25}Philadelphia Times, June 10, 1900.


\textsuperscript{27}Brand Whitlock, Letters, p. 21.
wanted to be known and remembered not as a black poet, but as a poet. His appeal was universal. Dunbar's concerns were not sociology or reform, but pure poetry and prose. His forte was "the spirit-wine of a singing line, or a dewdrop in a honeycup."29

Dunbar loved humanity.30 And as James Whitcomb Riley expressed it, he "possessed an individuality which eclipsed any racial characteristics. . . he belonged to the entire world."31 The poem "Two Little Boots"32 adds more argument to the view that Dunbar is human rather than African in his works. There is little difference between this poem and Eugene Field's "Little Boy Blue." In each work one finds identical sentiment and appeal to the world's heart which loves a baby and mourns its death. Fields wrote of a white baby who played with a little tin soldier and other toys, while Dunbar's "Two Little Boots"
belonged to some black mother's child. Here is the last verse:

Ain's you kin' sad yo' se'f,
You little boots?
Dis is all his mammy's lef',
Two little boots.
Sence huh baby gone an died,
heav's itse'f hit seem to hide
Des a little bit inside
Two little boots.

The Dunbar reputation sometimes suffers unfairly because the poet is associated with "dis," "dat," and "dere" poetry, usually in a derogatory manner. But his poems are completely and unpretentiously lyric in character. In general, they convey a simple, childlike message. In his poems the love of beauty is portrayed by sincerity and honest, unashamed emotion.

Six of such poems were set to music by Edward Riley Graham in 1949. In composing his Song Cycle, Graham observed that Dunbar's poetry is notable for its simplicity and basically universal qualities. The following poems suggest that the writer was a lover of nature for here are scenes of love: "To the Road," "Sunset," "Goodnight,"

33Ibid. This evaluation is based on Wiggins' introduction to the poem, p. 248.

34Edward Riley Graham, "A Song Cycle and Its Theoretical Analysis" (Unpublished Master's Thesis, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 1949), pp. 8-12.
"Invitation to Love," and "Dawn." The opening line in "To the Road," "cool in the wind for summer is waning"—sets the scene of Autumn with all the nostalgia accompanying the season. Serenity and calmness are the moods in "Sunset." "The river sleeps beneath the sky and clasps the shadows to its breast" gives not only the calm of night settling over nature but also the portrayal of a day's end. Of even greater singularity and tender romantic sentiment is "Goodnight." "Invitation to Love" is charmingly rhythmic like its author. Smiling moods and ideas and the haziness of a dream-world are manifested in "Over the Hills." Then too, there is a philosophical touch inherent in the second line: "Life is the night with its dream-visions teeming." But the third line introduces the main theme of the lyric—romantic love. This is seen in the words "down through the dales and the bowers of living." Finally, "Dawn" is short enough to quote in its entirety:

An angel robed in spotless white
Bent down and kissed the sleeping night
Night woke to blush; the sprite was gone
Men saw the blush and called it Dawn.35

Between Phyllis Wheatley and Dunbar, little of value had appeared except the ex-slave autobiographies. In

35Ibid., pp. 8-28. Dunbar's writing period was between 1892 and 1906.
deference to the white reading public, he restricted himself almost entirely to the plantation tradition with its stereotypes of carefree slaves, masters and jovial blacks who preferred the rural South to the urban North. Occasionally though, his works indicated the true soul of the race. In this vein he exhibited protest and race pride. "Frederick Douglass," "Ode to Ethiopia" and others are manifestations of this Negritude. Paul Laurence Dunbar had the capacity to reach down to the core of the American experience and yet was humble and simple about it. What he knew, he felt intensely and expressed distinctively.

To approach Dunbar and to read him as he ought to be read, readers of the twentieth century must discard the traditional views of his character and his work. It is true that he wrote in dialect. And there may be justification for labeling him an "Uncle Tom." Sometimes, however, the poet has received unjust criticism because black dialect includes the odoriferous memories of the slave trade and of black men and women packed in slave ships and transported to the Western world and there bound-up in slavery.


37To be mentioned in detail in a later chapter.

There is also a half century of constructing an inflexible system of caste which forbade anything but the master's menial relationship between black and white. Into this era were interwoven racism and prejudice, which promoted the most wretched obstacles for African-Americans to overcome. But, to dwell exclusively on the unpleasant aspect of the black experience in America might eventually produce a rather distorted picture. The Afro-American has been able to survive by deceit and humor. Gullible observers who have not delved beyond the surface, interpret this as lightheartedness, docility, Uncle Tomism, a happy-go-lucky attitude, indifference and the like. Seeing the true meaning of such attitudes Dunbar once wrote:

We wear the mask  
That grins and lies  
It hides our cheeks  
And shades our eyes.40

The problems in using dialect are rather complex. Speech is oral and writing can never do more than suggest its variety and complexity. The dialect writer is limited to the symbols of standard spelling and pronunciation.41

39Macy, American Writers on American Literature, p. 433.

40Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 184.

As a writer of dialect Dunbar had to solve the problem of making his characters distinctive and realistic without making their speech unreadable. Born in Ohio to ex-slave parents, he lived in a world of "aunties and mammies" of the old plantation types retaining the slave psychology that was obsolescent and despised in any case by some black writers in the last half of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, writing about the past became for Dunbar a satisfying escape from the financial pressures, sickness, estrangement, and other demands on his short life. This appealed to the satirist in him as he rejected the age around him and continued to popularize the romantic myths of the "Ole South."

Of course Dunbar, like Mark Twain, always wrote with one eye on the market. Dialect was a part of this commercial aspiration. Interested as Dunbar was in sales, he usually published writings which could bring quick pro-

42 Ibid.

43 The chapter dealing with the Dunbar psyche elucidates this contention.


He needed every dollar he could obtain to pay family bills and to pay for such other items as liquor and an extravagant wardrobe. But money was just one reason for writing. Another was to evoke those childhood experiences which included plantation stories told to him by his mother and father. This sort of writing gave him great pleasure. If his dialect describing the black man is objective, it is at the same time superficial. Robert Park, a sociologist, who agrees with Dunbar's objectivity, concludes that Dunbar describes the black man "objectively without prejudice and without apology." But the writing is "superficial" because it indicts a whole race.

Dunbar wrote in dialect, it is true, but so have many other poets. Beyond this fact, he voiced the joys and sorrows of his own people; he expressed their emotions and vividly told their story, at least in part. But Dunbar was far more bitter and much more of the protest tradition than his reputation suggests. However, in some respects his poems are rejected by many of today's mil-

---

46 Mark Twain, Huck Finn & Tom Sawyer Among the Indians, an unpublished manuscript, Life (December, 20, 1968), p. 32.


tants. That fact notwithstanding, some of his works evidenced protests against both the North and the South.\textsuperscript{49}

For the light of heart he wrote in dialect. And for the sentimentalist he wrote in standard English. But most of his poems were not in dialect. Out of nearly 400 poems in Wiggins' \textit{Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar}, no more than 140 are in dialect. Deservedly, he gained far greater fame for his poetry than for his short stories and novels. But despite their shortcomings, his four novels showed that blacks were competent enough to depict their own experiences.

Dunbar's biography is simply the record of human effort, of the success of an individual who, in his own way, made a pathway for other writers. The Dunbar story briefly told is that of a poor black man with very limited educational opportunities beyond high school; a humble fellow who had had ambitions to be a preacher, a lawyer, a teacher and sometimes even a musician; a young man who had gone to work at an early age taking charge of an elevator,--later to become a successful poet-novelist.

To meet with "triumph and disaster" while at the same time treating "both those imposters just the same"\textsuperscript{50} is difficult for most. Nevertheless, he kept the faith,

\textsuperscript{49}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{50}From Rudyard Kipling's "If."
never gave up hope, and continued to write until his death in 1906. Though born in obscurity, Dunbar died in honor as a literary giant of distinction and prominence. Had he lived longer he doubtlessly would have written still better works.

Dunbar stands as one of the outstanding writers that this country has produced. And like other Ohio authors, there was little feeling on his part that he belonged to a single unit of soil or to a single group of craftsmen.  

51 Harlow Lindley, Ohio in the Twentieth Century, 1900-1938 (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1942), Vol. VI, p. 268.
CHAPTER II

MOLDING YEARS, 1872-1886

To see Paul Laurence Dunbar only as a poet is to know hardly half the man. His personality was complex, emotional, and sometimes neurotic enough to require a deeper explication than that afforded by a mere microscopic examination of his environment. Attention, then, is drawn to his family background as well as the entire environment from which he sprang.

Paul Dunbar was born in the 1870's. Charlotte Conover called that period in Dayton "the gay seventies—a decade of beginnings."\(^1\) It was indeed! A poet had been born who would gloriously identify with the future history of Montgomery County, Ohio. In the 1870's Daytonians were busy pointing with pride to a one-street railway and several four-story business blocks.\(^2\) The 1870's, at Dunbar's birth, were gay and sentimental. They were ugly, self-conscious, pretentious, and romantic.


\(^2\)Ibid.
It was an era of unblushing pretense, an epoch of false fronts, of artificial protuberances and of light speech and mannerisms. The recreations were simple and natural. This was Dunbar's town in 1872—Dayton, Ohio.

Dunbar's heritage was a poor family, who less than ten years ago had been released from the insulting rigors of slavery. The manchild, Paul Laurence Dunbar, came into the world June 27, 1872. A sister, Elizabeth Florence, was born October 29, 1873. She died early—at the age of two years and seven months. Matilda, Dunbar's mother, had two other sons by her earlier marriage to Willis Murphy. They were William Travis Murphy, born February 12, 1864, and Robert Small Murphy, born August 1, 1866.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was of pure African lineage and the descendant of several generations of slave ancestry. His parents, Joshua and Matilda Dunbar, were natives of Kentucky, and his grandparents were from the

---


6 Interview with Dunbar, Unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).
eastern shore of Maryland.

Joshua Dunbar was born a slave in Garrett County, Kentucky and as an adult stood five feet, ten inches tall. He never did learn how to write his name legibly. During the Civil War, he enlisted for three years in Company F, 55th Regiment, Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry. This was June 5, 1863. He was forty years old then and his residence at the time was Troy, Ohio. On June 15, 1863, his active service was terminated as a private, and on October 28, 1863, he was honorably discharged with a physical disability.7 Joshua enlisted again for three years and was made sergeant in the Regiment of the Massachusetts cavalry, January 9, 1864. The 3rd day of October, 1865, he was discharged at Clarksville, Texas. Later, for his services, he received a pension of $25 per month.8

After the Civil War, Joshua moved to Ohio. Arriving in Dayton, he met the widower, Matilda, wooed her, and married her in 1872. He followed the self-acquired trade of plasterer.

Dunbar liked to listen to his father tell stories as a child. But they were different from the romantic


8Legal Documents, Box 8, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
ones told by his mother. His father's stories were about
grim battles during the war, and his hard life on the plan-
tation. Sometimes little Paul failed to understand his
father's stories. But he always knew to leave the house
when his parents raised their voices in angry words. After
one of these heated arguments, Joshua stormed out of the
house never to return. Later, Joshua moved to the Old
Soldiers' Home, where he received a soldier's pension.9

Matilda petitioned and received a divorce and cus-
tody of little Paul in 1876.10 Despite these family trou-
bles, the son revered his father and commemorated him in
1900 with a poem, "The Colored Soldier," in part reading;

I would sing a song heroic
Of these noble sons of Ham
Of the galant [sic] colored soldiers
Who fought for Uncle Sam:11

More than 40,000 blacks took refuge from the South
in Ohio during the years 1830 to 1870.12 Some of these

9Jean Gould, That Dunbar Boy (New York: Dodd,

10Matilda asked for a pension, January 25, 1917,
because of Joshua's participation in the war. The claim
was rejected on the ground that she was not the widow of
the soldier, having been divorced from him January 9,
1876 (Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions,
Washington, D.C., 1091, 416, January 28, 1918), Legal
Documents, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

11Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 168.

12Wilbur H. Siebert, "The Underground Railroad in
Ohio," Ohio History Sketches (Columbus, Ohio: Fred J.
Heer, 1903), p. 171.
persons had resided in Kentucky. Joshua, Dunbar's father, was one of them. He and some of those other old timers often conversed about the South. Little Paul was in their presence long enough to hear, in the old plantation language, stories entailing humor and pathos.\textsuperscript{13} The influence of Joshua on the boy may never be known since the father died before the lad reached the age of puberty. Anyway, the short association offered a source of conflict to the boy.\textsuperscript{14} Joshua's personality was domineering. He did not understand the "mental state" Walker Allen related, "of a child whose mind soared in clouds of fancy." Father Dunbar was a practical man.

The lad also accustomed himself to sitting with the black women of his mother's acquaintance where he listened to their southern dialogue.\textsuperscript{15} So while dialect was not native to the boy, he acquired a picturesque way of expressing himself in that vein.

At sixteen, a plantation owner had bought Matilda as a wife for his slave Willis. After emancipation, they

\textsuperscript{13}Interview with Dunbar, Box 2, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


took their owners name—Murphy. When she left Willis, taking a fourteen dollar watch with her, she was expecting her second child, Robert. Proceeding to Dayton under the direst of circumstances, she often recalled her estrangement with mingled emotions. Repeatedly she shed tears as she recalled the breaking-up of her family and the hardships which she had encountered thereafter.\textsuperscript{16}

Many of the blacks in Dayton had emigrated there from the South. In fact, one of Dunbar's neighbors had worked for Jefferson Davis in Richmond during the war. Most of "Ma's" friends came from Kentucky.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, in a sense, Dunbar's real environment was not Northern, but Southern. And many of his plantation stories drew upon early conversations with blacks who recreated in their conversations and social activities conditions in the ante-bellum and the post-bellum South.\textsuperscript{18}

Young Dunbar early caught the inflection of his mother's phrases. When she took him to call on friends, (former house slaves and field hands from Southern plantations), his ear absorbed their speech and their stories.

\textsuperscript{16}Gould, Ohio Scenes and Citizens, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{17}In most of Paul's correspondence to his mother he referred to her as "Ma."

\textsuperscript{18}Interview with Dunbar, Unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library)
Never did he forget them. And when he wrote, he echoed
the black man's vernacular of the rural South—the folk
speech of an American ethnic group. Dunbar loved his
poems on Afro-American life, dancing, and gaiety. Some
said he sang because it was instinctive with him. "I have
heard so many fireside tales of that simple, jolly,
tuneful life. Down in the country districts of Kentucky
I have seen it all," 19 he reminisced. Much of the material
from which he fashioned his poems was instilled at the
open fireplace at the feet of his mother. Said Walker M.
Allen: "This work was to him what the 'Madonnas' were to
the early painters—an idealization of motherhood."

Maybe the situation was different, but Dunbar might
well have said after the manner of Lincoln, "All I am
and all I hope to be I owe to my mother." "You, his
mother, are so dear to him, never have there been so ten-
der an affection between mother and son as exists between
Paul and you," Amelia Douglass, daughter of Frederick
Douglass, wrote Matilda. 20 Dunbar had great love and
affection for his mother. He often talked about her to
his friends. And not only did he have an especially deep
emotional attachment to her, but he took care of most of

19 Dayton Daily, July 16, 1897.

20 Amelia Douglass to Matilda Dunbar, May 9, 1899,
Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
her financial needs throughout his short life.\textsuperscript{21}

Indeed the main driving force in his life was his intense devotion to his mother. Throughout the poet's career, Matilda was never out of the background. Their united lives exemplified an historical drama of the race. Born a slave, signing her will with an "X", she bore and nurtured a son of great destiny. Her life as a house slave in Kentucky undoubtedly was easier than that of a slave in the deeper South.\textsuperscript{22} Yet, Mrs. Dunbar declared that there was nothing good in slavery. "I know for I was in it. It was wicked, inhuman. I never permitted Paul to go South until he became a man and I couldn't help it."\textsuperscript{23}

Matilda was never able to write legibly. Generally, someone wrote for her. Her granddaughter Ethel wrote: "Try and write yourself if there is no one else to write for you."\textsuperscript{24} When she did try, she would inquire about the legibility of her writing. To such an inquiry Amelia Douglass replied: "I have no trouble in reading your

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., Correspondence shows that he was always sending his mother money, sometimes large amounts, and sometimes small.


\textsuperscript{23}Interview with Matilda Dunbar, 1934, Dunbar Papers (Schomburg Library, New York).

\textsuperscript{24}Ethel Douglass to Matilda, April 25, 1904, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
letters, I can make plenty out of them even if the writer cannot." 25 Her handwriting was understood, but only with some effort. Still, she tried to write in spite of great stress and difficulty. Sometimes she complained to Paul, "you know how hard it is for me to write." 26 Matilda was proud whenever she saw her name written. Others had to read to her. She liked listening to others read the newspaper and believed that she could tell when things were left out.

Frequently, Matilda was called upon to do church and community work. She was a devout Christian. She said, "I love to hear His word read and I praise his holy name: When I used to do my washing I stood my Bible up in the window behind the tub and would read it while I washed." 27

As a very religious person from Eaker Street Church, friends continued to acquaint her with the affairs of the church whenever she was out of town. Besides that, Matilda was a leader in community affairs, and was respected by white as well as black citizens. The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of the Dayton realm of Ohio

25Ibid., Amelia Douglass to Matilda Dunbar, July 1, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

26Ibid., Matilda Dunbar to Dunbar, October 24, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

27Incomplete article on Matilda Dunbar, August, 1933, pp. 9-25. Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).
once sent her a Christmas greeting: "We wish you a happy and prosperous New Year regardless of race. We desire Christian fellowship over all our land, and our working motto is Not For Self But For Others."\(^{28}\)

Of course, she was not always the even-tempered lady Dunbar's biographers portray. She once asked her son Robert for twenty dollars, and when he refused, she "began to scream and rage and call all sort[sic] of bad names," Robert wrote. "I told her to leave the house." The verbal attacks on Robert and his wife caused a crowd to gather. "She sprang on me like a tiger, hitting me in the face and clawing me. I jumped up out of the chair in which I was sitting when attacked by her and caught hold of her, ..."\(^{29}\)

While to the public her name is mostly associated with that of her illustrious son, each of her children had his own individual place in her maternal heart. There was Willie, her first born, whose death in September, 1932, was a hard blow. Then Elizabeth Florence, the youngest who died in early childhood. "We called her mistress and sister as a baby. She was always always

\(^{28}\)Ku Klux Klan to Matilda Dunbar, December, 1934, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\(^{29}\)Robert Dunbar to Dunbar, n.d., Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
brighter than Paul," Mrs. Dunbar recalled. "If only my little girl had lived." she exclaimed. Mr. and Mrs. Robert Murphy, brother of Dunbar, happened in from Chicago one afternoon for a short visit. Mother Dunbar, as she was affectionately called, said, after they had gone, "his wife is such a nice woman, she has always been a daughter to me. Robert is a great man in my estimation," she concluded.

Matilda Dunbar brought to the struggle of rearing her son her own energies of life, health, and hopes of educating her children. Dunbar appreciated his mother's sacrifices and dedicated Oak and Ivy to her. In it he wrote:

To her who has ever been
My guide, teacher, and inspiration,
This little volume is inscribed,
My mother.

And later Paul reminisced: "As my first faint pipings were inscribed to her, I deem it fitting as a further recognition of my love and obligation, that I should also dedicate these later songs to "My Mother." Lyrics of

30 Interview with Matilda Dunbar, Incomplete article, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Dunbar, Oak and Ivy, p. 1.
Lowly Life was also dedicated to her.\textsuperscript{34} In an early letter to Dr. H. A. Tobey, superintendent of the State Hospital at Toledo, the poet stated that he was glad to say that for the past two or three years "I have been able to keep my mother from the hard toil by which she raised and educated me."\textsuperscript{35} Meta Dent, Matilda's granddaughter, remembered that in addition to her grandmother being a great storyteller "she was determined that her children be educated."\textsuperscript{36}

Both his father and mother were fond of books and although they were illiterate, they insisted that their children learn to read and write at early ages. Dunbar learned to read at age four.\textsuperscript{37} He realized that "to this he owed a great deal; but generally speaking," he said, "the influences surrounding me were not conducive to growth, and any development in myself came from fighting against them."\textsuperscript{38} Through the family reading he was introduced to Robinson Crusoe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and other books.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{34}Paul Laurence Dunbar, \textit{Majors and Minors} (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1895).

\textsuperscript{35}Wiggins, \textit{Life and Works}, p. 45.

\textsuperscript{36}Author's Interview with Meta Dent of Chicago, March 23, 1970.

\textsuperscript{37}Interview with Dunbar, Unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39}Ibid.
Many have speculated as to when Dunbar began writing. Some say that he began as early as seven years of age. Matilda Dunbar claimed that she did not know when he started. "Not me," she said in an interview, "she didn't know how to read or write." Matilda reported that Dunbar kept his papers on the dining room table and would say, "Ma, don't burn them." His papers were also kept in a box beneath the kitchen safe. Dunbar himself recalled that before he was twelve he wrote fragments and little attempts in press—stories and the like. At twelve he produced his first finished work—an Easter Hymn.

He had always been fond of reciting and wanted something to recite for Easter. Failing to find anything to his taste, he set to work and composed a hymn, and then, the poet said, "piece followed piece." In another interview, Dunbar mentioned that his first attempt at rhyming was made when he was six years old. He came across something by Wordsworth and "After that," according to Dunbar, "I rhymed continually, trying to put together words with a jingling sound."

---


42 *Dayton Journal*, April 18, 1926, p. 3.

43 *Dayton Daily*, July 16, 1897.
As a young student, little Paul lived just the ordinary life of a boy and had the chances and mischances of a boy at a common school. He was not brought up in absolute poverty, but he felt the pinch and knew that he had to shift for himself. In addition to attending school, he sold papers, mowed lawns, and ran errands to help his mother.\textsuperscript{44}

His first encounter with education was when his brothers Robert and William took him, as a visitor, into first grade. The building was located on East Fifth near Eagle Street—the Fifth District School. The family moved several times. When the family moved to Sycamore Street the following year, he began at the tenth district.\textsuperscript{45} William "Bud" Burns was his best friend in the tenth district. The two would go through the public schools and high school together. Paul was destined to become widely known as a man of letters. William loved medicine and would become a medical doctor. "Bud" died three months before Paul in November. Dr. William Burns was the first black doctor of Montgomery County to become a member of the County Medical Society.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45}Gould, That Dunbar Boy, pp. 18-23.
While in the district schools, Dunbar usually did well in everything but arithmetic. He excelled, of course, in literature. Delicate as he was and caring very little for outdoor life, he preferred to read and to write and to debate topics that were beyond the understanding of most children of his age. He carried his first poems to his teachers for encouragement and sought recognition from his fellow students by demonstrating his literary ability. Walker Allen says that his attitude toward his schoolmates was based upon a feeling of inferiority with compensatory attempts to excel along literary lines. The reclusiveness of the young poet's early school years was probably the result of the difference which existed between him and his white schoolmates.

Before he was thirteen, Dunbar passed from district school to intermediate school. Here, he met Orville Wright, future aviation inventor. Wright's father had performed the ceremony when Matilda and Joshua were

---

47Grade Reports, Box 11, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


50Ibid., p. 69.
married. In the intermediate school, Paul recited pieces at the regular Friday afternoon assemblies. Because he gave a poem life and drama, his readings at assembly soon became very popular. Paul had the good fortune to have as a teacher Samuel C. Wilson, who was both football player and poet. It was under Wilson's guidance that Paul wrote many of his early poems. Paul was graduated from Intermediate School in June, 1886, leaving behind him an excellent social and academic record. His teachers said that he was obedient, truthful, honest, and unselfish. In addition his schoolmaster praised him for his kindness.

51 Gould, That Dunbar Boy, p. 45.

52 Dayton Daily, July 16, 1897.

53 Grade Reports, Box 11, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

54 Henderson, A Child's Story of Dunbar, p. 15.
CHAPTER III

MARCH OF INTELLECT, 1881-1892

"A teacher at the intermediate school under whose care (Mr. Samuel Wilson) I was placed when I was thirteen years old did more in the beginning to keep the poetic fire within me burning than anyone else," Dunbar once recalled.¹ Professor Wilson, a writer of verse, criticised his work and encouraged him both to write and recite. Recalling that Mr. Wilson had "given him directions to the literary impulse" Dunbar said: "even after I had left his department, I often came back to him."²

A spur to young Dunbar's ambition (at least he thought so), after he entered high school came from the knowledge that he was the only black boy in his class. "The boys, as he put it, were "very kind to me."³ His popularity is attested by the fact that the second year he

¹Interview with Dunbar, Unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

36
was admitted to the literary society, of which he afterwards became president. This was the coveted Philomathcean Literary Society.⁴ At this time, he contributed frequently to the High School Times and in his senior year was made its Editor-in-Chief. He contributed poetry to the paper and won two prizes for literary excellence.⁵

While editor of the High School Times, he wrote a Western dialect story called "The Tenderfoot." It was the first literary work for which he was paid.⁶ He sent it to the A. N. Kellogg Syndicate in Chicago. The story sold for $6.⁷ It was the first literary production that any syndicate in the United States had ever published for a black man. Subsequently, the firm accepted other of the young author's stories. Dunbar, after this, rapidly came into public notice.⁸


⁵Scrapbook and vertical file material, Reel 3, No. 4, The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar on Microfilm (Dayton Public Library).

⁶Ibid.

⁷December 19, 1891, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

⁸Scrapbook and vertical file material, Reel, No. 4, Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar (Dayton Public Library).
Before Dunbar accepted the editorship of the High School Times, a Mr. Faber had initiated a newspaper in Dayton and had promised Paul a chance to write for it if he could work up the number of black subscribers to fifty. Dunbar set out to find subscribers largely on the west side and east side of Dayton, urging and asking his friends to help. Within six weeks the youthful poet had a list of sixty black subscribers, instead of the promised fifty. But instead of giving Dunbar editorial work, Faber evaded him with obscure and shifty excuses. Sorrowfully the boy wrote:

After having worked the circulation of your paper up... and having placed the paper in a condition to increase steadily its circulation, I find that you willfully and persistently fail to keep your part of the agreement. Whether your action is either honest or gentlemanly, it is not for me to say. Suffice it to say that your action added to the fact that I have accepted the editor-in-chiefship of the High School Times, causes me to resign. Make what you please of the sixty subscribers which you, to use a polite word, induced me to get.

He continued:

I heard and knew you, Mr. Faber, when you were on the Record years ago. I knew your mother and the Faber family when you were exceedingly, yes, even distressingly, poor. And I judge that it is no more than right that you, after having struggled up through adversity to a tolerably fair place in the

---

9 Dunbar to Faber, June 9, 1890, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
world, should try to crush and deceive people who can ill afford to lose, though not quite so poverty stricken as you were when I knew you in past years.

In a postscript Dunbar concluded:

I could not afford to walk and wear out my shoes getting news for nothing. Although by the middle of my June vacation I would have the circulation of the paper up very high as in my hands your little Democratic Sheet was becoming popular.  

Orville Wright, who in later years became an aviation pioneer and inventor, was Dunbar's classmate at the old Central High School.11 The young writer's interest in newspapers and publishing was something he had in common with Wright. When Wright started the Westside News in March, 1889, Dunbar became a contributor. A year later, the future inventor was the printer for Dunbar's Tattler, a black neighborhood paper.12

The Dayton Tattler (price five cents)13 was published by Orville Wright and edited by Paul Laurence

10Ibid.

11Central High became Steele High in 1893, Dayton Journal, February 13, 1906.


13Paul Laurence Dunbar, editor; Preston Finley, assistant editor; Chester B. Broady, business manager; Frank J. Mitchell, assistant manager; William Mason and Val W. Anderson, reporters; Dayton Tattler, December 20, 1890.
Dunbar. In 1890 the paper printed three issues, December 13, 20, and 27.\textsuperscript{14} These were all Wright could afford to print without compensation.\textsuperscript{15} In regard to Wright's printing acumen, Dunbar once wrote:

\begin{quote}
Orville Wright is out of sight
In the printing business
No other mind is half so bright
As his'n is.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

And about Dunbar, Orville recalled that the two were close friends in their school days and "in the years immediately following."\textsuperscript{17} Then, rather humorously he added: "We published it as long as our financial resources permitted of it, which was not too long."\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless, Dunbar made great efforts to promote its circulation. Making it known that "good live agents \textsuperscript{17} wanted in the surrounding towns," Paul advertised that the Tattler was a bright new weekly paper and "as an organ and representative of the colored population of this city... \textsuperscript{17}\textsuperscript{17}"

\textsuperscript{14}These issues are in the Dunbar Papers at the Ohio Historical Society and the Dayton Public Library.

\textsuperscript{15}Marvin McFarland, ed., \textit{The Papers of Wilbur and Orville Wright}, p. 696.

\textsuperscript{16}Scrapbooks 1886-1896, Box 11, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\textsuperscript{17}Orville Wright to Edward Johnson, January 2, 1934, Marvin McFarland, ed., \textit{The Papers of Wilbur and Orville Wright}, p. 1162.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
should go into every family of our race in this state.\textsuperscript{19}

Dunbar's short-lived newspaper, aside from the fact that it embraced the Republican Party, committed itself to the Afro-American race. "Politically," the editor related, "it will represent republicanism and will do all in its power to otherwise promote the interests of the people it represents. It ought to be encouraged," Paul wrote "in its proposed good works."\textsuperscript{20} Always quick to praise black contributions, he complimented a Mr. Larry Andrews for "instituting into Dayton the order of the Knights of Tabor." Said the poet, "It is a worthy cause, especially as it is the fruit and the product of the Afro-American intellect."\textsuperscript{21}

At least one patron was concerned about the name of the paper. Signing his name as Afro, the subscriber wrote:

\begin{quote}
I am proud of your bright weekly, but I think it was poorly named. The name will eventually kill it. As a friend, we advise you to change the name and it will live.
\end{quote}

Afro

The editor's reply was prompt:

\begin{quote}
No, friend "Afro," not even for your sake can we change our name, for it is a good one.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19}Dayton Tattler, December 20, 1890, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid.
What's in a name?  

The failure of the Tattler possibly resulted from the fact that there were not enough black subscribers. All too few blacks were readers. Too, few had received formal education.

Paul Dunbar at school was a diligent pupil. His favorite subjects were English Literature and Civil Government. He detested Algebra:

... for all the things I ever had in Algebra were very bad.
(My lessons aren't included here)
And over them I've shed many a tear,
But such is life and such is school
And such is Algebra the tool.

Probably one of the most popular students at old Central High School was Paul Laurence Dunbar. By the senior year, he had been elected to the two most coveted positions on the campus, President of the High School Times, and President of the Philomathean Society, the debating society. He had edited his own newspaper, was sending short stories and poems to Dayton newspapers and elsewhere, and was constantly being pursued by the faculty and the student body to write and to recite original verse.

---

22Ibid., December 27, 1890.

23School records, Box 17, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

24Ibid.
His deportment was usually excellent, and he was admired and respected for his gentlemanly attitude toward his class chums.

But he was not always the simple, smiling, and happy writer. He could be quite harsh and indignant when his feelings were hurt. Having written an intimate poem to "Miss Coons," it came to his attention that she had shared the contents with other classmates. "No one saw or knew anything about that poem except Arthur Nixon," mused Paul. A much disturbed Dunbar wrote:

> After receiving carefully your action in making of my miserable and most deplorable mistake public property, I am in some doubt as to whom an apology is due, whether to myself or you. But I am hoping that you will explain my case to the young ladies to all of whom you made well known my blunder and before whom you placed me in a false light.

"I have not," he went on, "been so foolish as to expose my own blunder by putting that poem on exhibition, but if you desire it, you have only to say the word and I will go to any extreme to please you, even to nailing it to a public well for public inspection. . . ."

In the same sarcastic tone he intimated:

I hope you will not be offended if I have tried to be very frank and plain with you and it is my earnest hope that you will feel as much pleasure in showing this letter to your confidential friends, that

---

is, the whole first and second year classes, as you felt in showing the others.

Yours
In equal indignation
Paul L. Dunbar

Paul had composed verse for "Miss Coons" on other occasions. However, she "asked everyone if they knew anything about [them] in such a suspicious manner," Dunbar recalled, "that they were inclined to affect a knowledge which they did not possess in order to draw you on to tell what you knew. And they were in the majority of cases successful."27

In 1891, Dunbar graduated with honors from old Central High School; and the class song, composed by him, was sung at the commencement exercises. The Central High School graduating exercises were held in the Grand Opera House Tuesday evening, June 17, 1891. Present that night were the thirteen faculty members, the principal, Charles B. Stivers, the superintendent of instruction, W. J. White, and forty-three students. Dunbar's class number was thirty-eight.28 The class song,29 of course, was written

26 Dunbar to Miss Coons, n.d., 1890, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 87.
by Dunbar. Part of it is recorded below:

Why stirs with sad alarm the heart,
For all who meet must some day part?
So, let no useless cavil be
True wisdom bows to God's decree.

The breezes take it up, and bear
The loud refrain on wings of air.
And to the skies, the sad notes swell
Of this our last farewell, farewell.

Even before Dunbar graduated, his classmates and friends believed that his talent and abilities, with the proper opportunities, would make for him a creditable career. His desire, like many of his colleagues, was to attend college. Unfortunately, he could find no self-supporting work which would fit in with his ambition. The schools of Dayton might graduate a black scholar, but few employers would use one in a clerical position. The National Cash Register Company hired Dunbar in the loading room, but he was too light to lift heavy freight, and after a few days, he quit. Soon after, he was hired as an elevator boy in the Callahan Building. The salary of four dollars per week was less than that being paid white schoolmates not as able as he. This Dunbar knew. He also knew that handling an elevator was something a person could do who had no training in Greek and Latin. Knowing chemistry

---

30 Ibid., p. 88.

and memorizing Shakespeare's sonnets had nothing to do with getting the cage up and down from floor to floor.\textsuperscript{32}

However, Dunbar continued his literary career although it was from his labor as an elevator boy that his living came. Dunbar later recalled, "I worked as an elevator boy in one of the big office buildings in Dayton. While in school, I studied a fairly extended range of authors. My reading included the whole of Virgil."\textsuperscript{33}

Dunbar was pessimistic about his economic status. When he was nineteen, he wrote to Dr. James Newton Matthews, a prominent Ohio writer. "My hopes are no brighter than when you saw me. I am getting on no better, and what would be possible, no worse. I am nearer discouraged than I have ever been."\textsuperscript{34}

"Poor Dunbar," Matthews pondered, "he deserves a better fate. Dayton should be proud of him, and yet with all his natural brilliancy and capacity for better things, he is chained like a galley slave to the ropes of a dingy elevator at starvation wages. Show me a white boy, nineteen, who can excell or even equal lines like these."


\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{34} Taken from the Indianapolis Journal, Correspondence, Box 1, 1891, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
The poem quoted was "A Drowsy Day."

The air is dark, the sky is gray,
The misty shadows come and go,
And here within my dusky room
Each chair looks ghostly in the gloom.
Outside the rain falls cold and slow--
Half-stinging drops, half-blindning spray.

Each slightest sound is magnified,
For drowsy quiet holds her reign;
The burnt stick in the fireplace breaks,
The nodding cat with start awakes,
And then to sleep drops off again,
Unheeding Trowse at her side.

I look far out across the lawn,
Where huddled stand the silly sheep;
My work lies idle at my hands,
My thoughts fly out like scattered strands
Of thread, and on the verge of sleep--
Still half awake--I dream and yawn.

What spirits rise before my eyes!
How various of kind and form!
Sweet memories of days long past,
The dreams of youth that could not last,
Each smiling calm, each raging storm,
That swept across my early skies.

Half seen, the bare, gaunt-fingered boughs
Before my window sweep and sway,
And chafe in tortures of unrest.
My chin sinks down upon my breast;
I cannot work on such a day,
But only sit and dream and drowse.

This poem was greatly admired and won Dunbar many encouraging letters. Among these was a note from James Whitcomb Riley. 35

Memorable in the life of Paul Laurence Dunbar were the two times when opportunities afforded him the privilege

35Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 177.
of returning to his Alma Mater. The year after the poet's graduation old Central High School was moved from Fourth and Wilkinson to the corner of Main and Monument. On the occasion of the first meeting of the High School Alumni Association, Dunbar was invited to read a poem. He read an original poem of forty-eight lines, "The Old High School and the New."36 The next year, on his twentieth birthday, he was invited to deliver the address of welcome to the Western Association of Writers.37 Mrs. Truesdale, one of his former teachers had secured a place for him on the program.

The Western Association, founded in 1886, was like an old-fashioned country literary society which congregated year after year for the pure joy of it. The meetings filled good-sized auditoriums. The Association held all its gatherings on Indiana soil throughout its existence, except once when the meeting was held at Dayton, Ohio. The "Hoosier Poet," James Whitcomb Riley, attended irregularly, but whenever present he was honored as a leading poet and his readings were the highlights of the


37 Dayton Daily Journal, June 27, 1892.
occasion.\textsuperscript{38}

The meeting in Dayton was the seventh annual meeting held, commencing with a reception, at the Becket House at 8:30 Monday, June 27 and closing with a banquet on Friday evening. Some of the most popular poets, essayists, storytellers and journalists were present.\textsuperscript{39} Attending the meeting were men like John Clark Ridpath, historian; James Newton Matthews and Will Pfimmer, authors. These writers were present when Dunbar delivered the address of welcome.

Because he had obtained permission to leave his elevator only long enough to read the original poem, Paul had to leave immediately after the presentation. Some of the writers were impressed with the dignity and culture of Dunbar and his verses.\textsuperscript{40} They congratulated Paul personally the day after his reading before the association.

They found him in the elevator with magazines, papers, law books, and literary works around him.\textsuperscript{41}


\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Dayton Daily Journal}, June 27, 1892.

\textsuperscript{40}Goulder, \textit{Ohio Scenes and Citizens}, p. 21.

Following his success before the Association, Dunbar continued to work as an elevator man in the Callahan office building. The day's work came first, of course, but with it, then as ever, was the constant drive for self-expression. Newspapers printed a poem now and then, but pay was scanty.

He had been encouraged by a number of men who promised to supply financial support, so the young poet began to have ambitions to publish a full-length book. For some reason, he named it *Oak and Ivy*. In an interview, the poet's mother told of how that "man of God" (William L. Blocher from the Brethren Publishing House) permitted the book to be issued with the young man's promise to meet the printing bill from the proceeds. The publisher agreed to wait for his compensation until the poems were sold. They were brought out accordingly and the author, becoming his own agent, sold the book for one dollar to those whom he carried up and down in his elevator. (By mail it sold for one dollar and five cents.) At the end of two weeks, the whole edition of one thousand volumes

---


43 Interview with Matilda Dunbar, *Dayton Journal*, April 18, 1926.

44 Frank Jewett Mather Collection, Manuscript division (Firestone Library, Princeton University), Case 7, Box 4.
was disposed of. One of them happened to fall into the hands of Dr. Henry A. Tobey.

Dr. Tobey was superintendent of the state asylum for the insane at Toledo. He bought twenty-four copies in all. The books were distributed and Dr. Tobey set up an interview with the young writer. Dunbar came to regard Dr. Tobey as his greatest benefactor. On a second invitation, Dunbar and his mother were introduced at a reception and dinner to the leading men of the town. 45

Not long after the appearance of Oak and Ivy, Judge Charles W. Dustin of the Court of Common Pleas in Dayton, having become interested in the young author, gave him a position as messenger in the Court House. This made it possible for Dunbar to study law. Having listened to a debate in court, Dunbar recognized that one lawyer had "painted a [prisoner] all over in a hue of blackest crime."

"Then," Paul went on, "the other lawyer started, an' with brimmin', tearful eyes—said his client was a martyr, . . . Till I saw the light o' virtue fairly shinin' from his face. Yet the other lawyer had smeared [the prisoner's reputation] with the thickest kind of grime, till I found myself wondering how the Lord had come to fashion, such an awful man as him." 46

45Interview with Dunbar, unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers, Dayton Public Library.

46Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 147.
This poem, "The Lawyer's Ways," is doubtless the fruit of his observations while a page in the Dayton Court House, and the "discoveries he made even in his youth of the instability of the law." This may have been one of the reasons why he gave up his chances and his ambition to become a lawyer, preferring to be a poet instead. In the poem he saw the ambivalent nature of a lawyer and wondered, "how an Angel an' a devil can possess the self-same soul." 47

Dunbar continued to write throughout the first two years after graduating from high school. One of these early productions was "Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes."

Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
Which all the day with ceaseless care have sought
The magic gold which from the seeker flies;
Ere dreams put on the gown and cap of thought,
And make the waking world a world of lies,—
Of lies most palpable, uncouth, forlorn,
That say life's full of aches and tears and sighs,—
Oh, how with more than dreams the soul is torn,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.

Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
How all the griefs and heartaches we have known

47 Ibid.
Come up like pois'nous vapors that arise
From some base witch's caldron, when
the crone,
To work some potent spell, her magic plies.
The past which held its share of bitter
pain,
Whose ghost we prayed that Time might
exercise,
Comes up, is lived and suffered o'er
again,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary
eyes.

Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary
eyes,
What phantoms fill the dimly lighted
room?
What ghostly shades in awe-creating guise
Are bodied forth within the teeming
gloom.
What echoes faint of sad and soul-sick
cries,
And pangs of vague inexplicable pain
That pay the spirit's ceaseless enterprise,
Come thronging through the chambers
of the brain,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary
eyes.

Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary
eyes,
Where ranges forth the spirit far and
free?
Through what strange realms and unfami-
liliar skies
Tends her far course to lands of mys-
tery?
To lands unspeakable—beyond surmise,
Where shapes unknowable to being
spring,
Till faint of wing, the Fancy fails and dies
Much wearied with the spirit's journey-
ing,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary
eyes.

Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary
eyes,
How questioneth the soul that other
soul,—
The inner sense which neither cheats nor
lies,
But self exposes unto self, a scroll
Full writ with all life's acts unwise or wise,
In characters indelible and known;
So, trembling with the shock of sad surprise,
The soul doth view its awful self alone,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.

When sleep comes down to seal the weary eyes,
The last dear sleep whose soft embrace is balm,
And whom sad sorrow teaches us to prize
For kissing all our passions into calm,
Ah, then, no more we heed the sad world's cries;
Or seek to probe th' eternal mystery,
Or fret our souls at long-withheld replies,
At glooms through which our visions cannot see,
When sleep comes down to seal the weary eyes.48

The above poem attracted the attention of many learned persons before the poet became famous. Among those who spoke of it especially were the playwright, James A. Herne, and the Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll.49 On August 31, 1892, the poem "In the Ol' Fashioned Way" was published by the American Press Association.50 On September 13, 1892, Dunbar once again sent a short story to


49 Ibid., p. 137.

50 Dunbar to the American Press Association, August 31, 1892, Dunbar Papers (Alderman Library, University of Virginia).
the American Press Association. Said he, "Please find enclosed postage for the return of my manuscript 'A Race for Revenge'. Could I make any corrections in it," Paul inquired, so that it would stand a show of acceptance or is it hopelessly bad?" Looking ahead, Paul questioned, "By what time do your Christmas stories have to be in. I should like to try my hand on one if there are no objections at that end of the line. . . . "51

With the opening of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago the next year (1893), Paul thought of finding profitable employment there. It would mean an extended stay away from home. But it would also mean making an acquaintance with the now famed Frederick Douglass, Commissioner in charge of the exhibit from Haiti, who employed him as a clerical assistant.

51Ibid., September 13, 1892, Dunbar Papers (Alderman Library, University of Virginia).
CHAPTER IV

DOUGLASS, HOWELLS, AND JOHN BULL: 1893-1898

Even before he graduated from high school, Dunbar had contributed verses and short stories regularly to popular magazines and Dayton newspapers. Fortunately, one of his poems came to the attention of a renowned poet, James Whitcomb Riley, from the Middle West. "See how your name is traveling, my chirping friend!" Riley wrote, "and it's a good sound name, too, that seems to imply the brave, fine spirit of a singer who should command wide and serious attention." Congratulating the young poet for his ability, Riley said, "Certainly your gift—as evidenced by this 'Drowsy Day' poem alone—is a superior one, and therefore its fortunate possessor would bear it with a becoming sense of gratitude, and meekness,—always feeling that for any resultant good, God's is the glory—his singers but His very humble instrument." Continuing, Riley commented: "Already you have many friends, and can have thousands more, being simply honest, unaffected, and just to yourself and the high sense of good endowment."\(^1\)

\(^1\)James Riley to Dunbar, November 29, 1892, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Dunbar showed his appreciation of Riley's letter by addressing a poem to the Hoosier poet in his first book—"James Whitcomb Riley—From a Westerner's Point of View":

No matter what you call it,  
Whether genius, gift or art,  
He sings the simple songs that come  
The closest to your heart.²

Near the end of the poem Dunbar makes it clear that polished poetry was all right, but "none of them kin tech the heart like our own Whitcomb Riley."³

The year 1893 was memorable in the life of Dunbar. At the opening of the World's Columbian Exposition an opportunity came for young Dunbar to go to Chicago. Lida Keck Wiggins recalled that "at first he hesitated, not wishing to leave his mother alone. But Mrs. Dunbar, feeling that the fair would be an education in itself for her boy, insisted upon his going."⁴ Dunbar left home for the Fair only reluctantly. He had misgivings and told his mother with a broken voice that he did not desire to go. The trip meant his first extended stay away from home. Chicago was a great wicked city; and he was afraid.⁵

²Dunbar, Oak and Ivy, p. 28.
³Ibid.
⁴Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 39.
⁵Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 32.
In an effort to ward off his loneliness, he corresponded regularly with his mother. Receiving flowers from his mother during the early days of his arrival to the city, overwhelmed the young man. "It was thoughtful of you to send them, 'Ma'," Dunbar wrote, "knowing how I had longed to see those bushes in bloom. But that's just like my own little mom." Always thinking of her welfare, Dunbar advised his mother to "keep and use all money for books you sell. You might see Mrs. Huffman and try to sell her one and so get another dollar."

Still, Dunbar was not content in being so far away from Matilda; he yearned to have her with him in Chicago. He promised, "Ma, you shall come out here if you want to come—just as soon as I can possibly bring you. Rooms are very hard to get and board and lodging are high." Said he near the end of May, "I am working pretty hard and am always very tired at nights, so tired in fact that I can hardly write." Next, he told his mother, "I want you to come out here very much, but I don't know how to manage it. What do you think of renting a furnished room here

---

6 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 7, 1893, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.
where I am staying and you do your own cooking here in this woman's kitchen." Several days later he suggested, "I want you to come out next week." Also, he admonished her to "write at once and tell me how much money you have and what day you can come because I do not intend to have you staying there alone. Your little home," he mentioned affectionately, "will cost me only seven dollars a month and you will have it to yourself." Soon thereafter Matilda moved to Chicago.

Black leaders wished that their race might receive proper attention at various world expositions, including the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Thereupon, a World's Congress Committee was established, and eventually an Ethnological Congress was held in connection with the exposition. William Sanders Scarborough, president of Wilberforce University, was active in the deliberations which led to the holding of the Congress. Scarborough was a noted philologist who played an important part in Afro-American contributions to American life.

9Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 26, 1893, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

10Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 6, 1893, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


12Ibid.
While attending the World's Fair, he met Paul Laurence Dunbar, who was then seeking the publication of his poems. Dunbar had come to the fair, primarily, because his half brothers, Robert and William, lived in Chicago and because the World's Fair seemed like an opportunity to find profitable employment. The thought also occurred to Dunbar that here was the possibility of a new literary audience.

He worked also as a hotel waiter. When the black employees were not busy they had a custom of congregating and conversing about their sweethearts. Then a man with a tray would come along and, as the dining room was frequently crowded, he would say, when in need of passing room; "Jump back, honey, jump back." Out of such commonplace experiences, the young poet wrote the poem, "A Negro Love Song":

Seen my lady home las' night
Jump back, honey, jump back
Hel' huh han' an' sque'z it tight
Jump back, honey, jump back
Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh,
Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye,
An' a smile go flittin' by--
Jump back, honey, jump back.15

---


14Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 168.

15Ibid.
The civic leader, Frederick Douglass, did much to publicize the work of Dunbar and to assist him in his bitter struggle for recognition. Douglass once remarked to Mary Church Terrell,16 after reading "The Drowsy Day," "What a tragedy it is that a young man with such talent should be so terribly handicapped by poverty and color."17 Deeply impressed with Dunbar's writings, Douglass used to read Oak and Ivy aloud to groups of people at the Exposition.18 Dunbar never forgot the friendly interest of Douglass and when the aged civil rights leader died in 1895, he paid tribute:

And he was no soft tongue apologist
To sin and crime he gave their proper hue
And hurled at evil what was evil's due.

In addition to his jobs as clerical assistant and hotel waiter, he took on other jobs to supplement his meager income. For helping to attend to a gentleman's toilet room, five hours a day, he earned $1.50 a day.19

16Mary Church Terrell was elected president of the National Association of Colored Women in 1895. She was active on picket lines and in sit-ins on behalf of civil rights as early as 1940.


18Dayton Daily, July 16, 1897.

19Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 4, 1893, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
"I am working in my old black clothes," he wrote 'Ma',
"although they do look shabby out here for all the young
colored men go dressed up all the time." 20 Feeling inse-
cure and inferior, he complained: "My timidity and shy-
ness among strangers hold me back out here. I am too much
like a green country boy in spite of my extensive tra-
vels." 21

But if shyness held him back from some, it never
interfered with Douglass' high regard for the writer.
During Dunbar's short stay at the Exposition, Douglass
invited him to visit his home in Washington. On one occa-
sion he told the author, "It would do my heart good just
to have you there and take care of you. I have got one
fiddler [his grandson], and now I want a poet; it would do
me good to have you up here in my old study just working
away at your poetry." 22

Douglass and Dunbar shared similar enthusiasm for
reading and writing; and their close acquaintance gave
the poet a chance to meet all the important people who
came to pay their respects to Mr. Douglass. And so Dunbar
met many people who came to the pavilion to see not only

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.

22 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 6, 1893, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Douglass, but to gaze at the exhibits. The exhibits included the sword of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the anchor of Columbus' ship, and the Santa Maria, which had been lost near Cape Haytien in 1492.  

For the most part, the young people Dunbar met were educated and considered intellectuals. They were going to do things for their race. Ida B. Wells, Hallie Q. Brown, and Mary Church Terrell, whom he met, already had outstanding reputations in the fields of civil rights and women's rights. Listening to them, Frederick Douglass said, "A new heaven is dawning upon us, a new earth is ours in which all discrimination against men and women on account of color and sex is passing away and will pass away."  

---

23 Cunningham, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 100.

24 Rebekah Baldwin, a school teacher, and Dunbar became close friends, a friendship which lasted until he met his future wife, Alice Ruth Moore.

25 Hallie Q. Brown helped to found the first national Negro women's organization in 1895 along with Mary Church Terrell. Ida B. Wells, civil rights leader during the first decade of the twentieth century, attacked segregation, demanded academic and professional education for the gifted, and insisted on the right to vote. August Meier considered her a radical like W. E. B. DuBois. Meier, Negro Thought in America, p. 182.

26 Cunningham, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 100.
Dunbar was exhilarated over his new friends whom he considered to be superior to himself. "I am in the very highest and best society, that Chicago affords," the poet exclaimed. "I am invited to attend a reception at Mrs. Jones house."27 He disclosed that the party would be "given to five distinguished Englishmen who want to see some of the representative colored people in this country and, Mama, your poor little ugly black boy has been chosen as one of the representative colored people after being in Chicago only five weeks."28

When autumn came in 1893, the Exposition was over. Dunbar returned with his mother to Dayton. The winter was near, there was little money on hand for food and fuel and none at all for other necessities. In addition, foreclosure on their home was threatened.29 Despondency plagued the family and so Dunbar, in desperation, asked Charles A. Thatcher, noted attorney from Toledo, to assist

27 Dunbar claimed that Mrs. Jones was seventy years old and worth over $200,000; and he wondered what Eugene Griffin, a school chum, of Dayton would have to say about that. Dunbar to Matilda, June 6, 1893, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

28 Ibid.

29 Records show that Dunbar began paying for his home in 1893. Financial Records, July 31, 1894, Box 9, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society). Under the provisions of the historic sites act of August 21, 1935, the U.S. Department of Interior designated the home as an historic landmark.
him with a college career. (Thatcher had made an offer a
year earlier to arrange a college plan for the poet.) The
attorney offered fifty dollars per year and thought that
he could persuade four others in Toledo to do the same. 30
The lawyer responded that he was as willing as ever to do
his part, but that others who had been interested now
seemed unwilling. 31 This was discouraging. However,
Thatcher was instrumental in helping Dunbar to obtain
reading engagements as well as in serving as an interme-
diary for selling some of his poems, stories, and books. 32

The next year, May, 1894, the author was in commu-
ication with William Edgar Easton, who was organizing a
black concert company. The author agreed to join the
company. Writing Dunbar from San Antonio, Texas, Easton
declared: "You have no idea how well pleased I am to know
you will act the part of Dessalines. (The name of the play
was Dessalines.) I have listened entranced to your reading
of your own lines. Dessalines is in good hands. The
ture source of eloquence is feeling. With your natural
ability and training, Dessalines must be a success." The

30 Charles Thatcher to Dunbar, April 21, 1893,
Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

31 Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 33.

32 Charles Thatcher to Dunbar, February 4, 1894 and
December 1, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
director suggested that Dunbar "be a Negro—be a man who has wrongs to avenge and you are an ideal Dessalines.\(^{33}\) Unfortunately, the company folded ten days before the opening.\(^{34}\) The compositions written and the lines committed to memory by the poet had been in vain.

Before Dunbar left Chicago to return to Dayton, he met a young school teacher, Rebekah Baldwin. Because of mutual interest, they soon became close friends. Rebekah was superbly educated and wrote well. They had in common too the fact that they both admired and respected Douglass. Sometimes Douglass resided in the Baldwin home.\(^{35}\) Following an enjoyable, intellectual "whirl," Dunbar promised to write to Rebekah after he and his mother returned to Dayton. The correspondence between them continued for over two years.

Rebekah never forgot their first meeting and often recalled it. Two years after she had met him she wrote "Strange is it not my friend that from the very first we were attracted towards each other. Will you forget that night on which we met? I can not—a crowded reception

\(^{33}\)William Easton to Dunbar, May 12, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\(^{34}\)Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 33.

\(^{35}\)Rebekah Baldwin to Dunbar, February 18, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
room, a formal introduction and then I listened to the music of your voice."

Letters between them were poetic and sentimental, but friendly, always ending with "Ever your faithful friend" or the like. It was a platonic relationship. Soon after Dunbar returned to Dayton, she wrote: "I thought of you last night mon ami and tried very hard to put into action those forces or conditions by which my thoughts might reach you. It was a perfect night and I know had you been near, you would have put it into rhyme, for 'twas indeed a night fit to be made into a poem." Some months later Rebecca wrote: "I wish you were here just now to talk soft nonsense to me as only a poet can. I would not miss the sunshine of the day then, for your rare rich voice setting your own sweet poems to music (your voice sets everything to music) would make a sunshine in my heart."

In the same month he wrote "One Life." Rebecca loved it and recited it to others who thought it beautiful also. "Apropos of your poem" she told him, "nothing could

36Ibid., July 30, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

37Ibid., September 24, 1893, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

38Ibid., December 3, 1893, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
be more sadly sweet than your 'One Life'. But in 1897, Rebekah criticized the poem. She inquired of Dunbar, "why do you look on the dark side? I think nothing quite so sad and plaintive as your 'One Life'. Tell me--what saddens all your songs." The poem follows:

ONE LIFE

Oh, I am hurt to death, my Love;
The shafts of Fate have pierced my striving heart,
And I am sick and weary of
The endless pain and smart.
My soul is weary of the strife,
And chafes at life, and chafes at life.

Time mocks me with fair promises;
A blooming future grows a barren past,
Like rain on fair full-blossomed trees Unburdened in the blast.
The harvest fails on grain and tree,
Nor comes to me, nor comes to me

The stream that bears my hopes abreast
Turns ever from my way in pregnant tide.
My laden boat, torn from its rest,
Drifts to the other side.
So all my hopes are set astray,
And drift away, and drift away.

The lark sings to me at the morn,
And near me wings her skyward-soaring flight;
But pleasure dies as soon as born,
The owl takes up the night,
And night seems long and doubly dark;
I miss the lark, I miss the lark.

---


40 *Ibid.*, December 5, 1897, Dunbar Papers (*Ohio Historical Society*).
Let others labor as they may,
I'll sing and sigh alone, and write my line.
Their fate is theirs, or grave or gay,
And mine shall still be mine.
I know the world holds joy and glee,
But not for me,--'tis not for me.41

The author was sometimes sad and melancholy and Rebekah had criticized this facet of Dunbar's personality before. She complained in July, 1894, that Dunbar's recent letter was pessimistic. "If you could only throw off the cloak of skepticism that envelopes you so completely and let the radiance of faith and trust enter your soul, how much happier you would be," she admonished. Continuing, she reminded him to "go through life with a heart as light as your poetic inspiration should make it."42

He always had a very active imagination, but one restrained by timidity. Therefore, he needed love and encouragement to offset a deep-seated sense of insecurity. Rebekah Baldwin helped a great deal. She called to his attention that "your exquisite letters are to me like some rare nosegay, the beauty of whose flowers--dazzles me and whose perfume intoxicates me when I read your letters. When I read your letters I love you. Somehow they touch a something in my heart that works its way

41Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 164.

42Rebekah Baldwin to Dunbar, July 18, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
into love for you. Be not alarmed though," she continued, "I love you only when I read your letters." Miss Baldwin contended that it was a grievous mistake to think that to men, woman could be nothing but a sweetheart. Rebekah thought: "She can be a friend. Friendship is woman's widest sphere--'tis there she can make her influence most widely felt."44

The year 1894 was most depressing and disappointing for Dunbar. The panic of 1893 affected Dayton too. Dunbar had asked friends for financial help without success; and he had put his heart in a black concert company which failed him. Following that unsuccessful venture, he went to Detroit to give a poetry reading in the expectation of earning a few dollars, only to learn that the affair was for charity. At the same time if C. A. Thatcher had not come to his rescue, he would have lost his home.45 These were dark days in the life of the poet. Only twenty-two years old, he found himself in great financial distress. He wrote a friend, "There is only one thing left to be done, and I am too big a coward to do that."46

43Ibid., October 7, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

44Ibid., December 13, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

45Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 34.

46Ibid.
While conversing with a friend a few years later on the subject of suicide, he defended what he wanted yet feared to do. He said:

Men court not death
When there are sweets still in life to taste.
Nor will a brave man choose to live when he,
Full deeply drunk of life, has reached the dregs,
And knows that now, but bitterness remains.
He is the coward who, outfaced this,
Fears the false goblins of another life.
I honor him who being much harassed,
Drinks of sweet courage until drunk of it—
Then seizing Death, reluctant, by the hand,
Leaps with him, fearless, to eternal peace.47

Douglass noticed Paul's despondency. He told Rebekah about it. She wrote Dunbar: "I saw your good friend Mr. Douglass not long ago. He says you are despondent. I, too, have noticed that, my dear Paul, and have remonstrated with you."48 She informed Dunbar that the position of teacher of English Literature in her high school was vacant. She advised him to apply for it. She also mentioned that Douglass was being named Trustee "in place of the present incumbent" and that Douglass and other friends "might be able to help." According to Rebekah Baldwin, the job paid one hundred dollars per month. Dunbar was requested to address his letter of application to

47 Allen, Study in Genius, p. 72.

48 Rebekah Baldwin to Dunbar, September 4, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
L. A. Cornish, Trustee.49

Rebekah had spoken to Douglass about the appointment, and he had told her that there was not a certainty about getting Paul a position, but he added that if Dunbar were to come to Washington he could make his house his home and would be under no expense there. Douglass offered to endorse Dunbar's application for a teaching position at some of the Negro academies and colleges such as Tuskegee and Wilberforce. By way of Baldwin, Douglass sent word to Paul not to grow despondent: "Success must come to you." Rebekah also told Dunbar that her school would be open on the 17th and that she would do what she could to get him appointed to take the place of a Miss Patterson who was ill.50

Seeking help in securing the teaching position, Dunbar contacted the Reverend Alexander Crummell.51 The young man asked Crummell to use his influence to help him obtain a position as a teacher of English Literature in the high

49Ibid.

50Rebekah Baldwin to Dunbar, September 6, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

51Crummell had the dream of organizing a group of younger blacks who would apply scholarly methods to the task of elevating the black people. The result was the formation of the American Negro Academy, which held its inaugural meeting at Washington, D.C., on March 5, 1897. John P. Davis, Negro Heritage Library (New York: Educational Heritage, Inc.), Vol. II, p. 541.
school in Washington, D.C., where he had already applied. On his qualifications, Dunbar reported:

"My high school course has been supplemented by much special and earnest study along literary lines and the appointment to this place would be a boon to me in more ways than one."52 This was Crummell's reply:

"I can't give you very much encouragement in your endeavor. There are local and wicked prejudices existing here which I fear may bar your success; but this shall not prevent my best endeavors in your behalf."53

But Dunbar was not completely unsuccessful in finding use for his talents. He was invited frequently to give recitals although the wage was small (usually a percentage of the receipts). He made appearances in Harrisburg, New York, Washington, Detroit, Chicago, and cities in Indiana.54 Sometimes he appeared in Cleveland where his school chum, William A. Burns, was a freshman at Cleveland University.55 "Bud" Burns wrote his pal fre-

52 Dunbar to Alexander Crummell, September 9, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Schomburg Library, New York).

53 Ibid., September 12, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Schomburg Library, New York).

54 Rebekah Baldwin to Dunbar, June 23, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

55 William Burns to Dunbar, October 14, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
quently and did favors such as arranging stage appearances and sending him important magazine articles. 56 A friend commenting on their relationship wrote Dunbar: "I so often think of him and also of your great love and friendship for each other and then admire it." 57

The year 1895 found the poet suffering from his old feelings of anxiety. A publisher commented that, "Whenever you have a burst of feeling you immediately anathematize yourself as if you had committed a grave fault in being natural." He suggested that Dunbar "write just as you feel. I love your moods as you call them. They are glimpses of your real self and that is what I want." 58 W. F. Weaver, an admirer, criticized: "I cannot imagine that you are sincere when you say that you think that was a misfortune, that you were ever born, why you of all persons should ever think that is a mystery to me. Had I your gift, I should not complain once, you, who, in a very short time will have the world at your very feet should not murmur." 59

56 Ibid., December 12, 1894.

57 William Weaver to Dunbar, August 20, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

58 Publisher to Dunbar, July 30, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

59 William Weaver to Dunbar, August 20, 1895 (Ohio Historical Society).
As a result of job offers and publications, Dunbar's condition began to improve considerably in 1895. He was offered a job as city clock winder, and a friend congratulated him with two lines:

Paul Dunbar is now the clock winder
Thank the Lord there is nothing to hinder. 60

In a letter to his mother, though, Dunbar disclosed that he decided not to accept the job because "I wasn't strong enough to do the work, some of the clocks, it would take two ordinary men to wind." Also, he said, "I was expected to do all the repairing and I do not count among my educational attainments a knowledge of the mechanism of a clock." 61

Dunbar had greater facility as a writer. By October of 1895 he had become a regular contributor to the New York Independent and the Century magazine. 62 He was to recall in an interview that publication in the Century had always been the goal of his ambition but it was only after nine years of persevering effort that it was reached. He began by sending his youthful productions to the Century

60 Douglass Brown to Dunbar, August 20, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

61 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, September 21, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

62 Autobiographical sketch by Dunbar, December 19, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Schomburg Library).
when he was fourteen years old. When he reached the age of twenty three, the editor accepted three poems from him at once. This exceeded the poet's highest hopes and he was "happy and so proud." A female admirer who would later become his wife congratulated Dunbar for his success with the Century. "I am delighted to know that you have been accepted to the Century," she wrote. This lady, Alice Ruth Moore, wrote her first book that year, 1895. Violets and Other Tales was published by the Monthly Review Publishing Company in Boston.

Sometimes Dunbar received only meager remuneration for his works and other times his contributions were rejected altogether. Two short stories, "The Shallows" and "Beyond the Years," were accepted by the Washington Publishing Company. He received in compensation one year's subscription to the Washington. The poem "Retrospection" was rejected by the Independent. However, the editor said that he liked "the spirit and movement of the poem very much and should have been glad to use it were we not

---

63 Interview with Dunbar, unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook (Dayton Public Library).

64 Alice Moore to Dunbar, January 19, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

65 Reel 9, Dunbar on Microfilm (Dayton Public Library)

66 Mrs. Eugene Fields to Dunbar, April 13, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
very much crowded in our poetic department."  

Dunbar's old friend and patron, Frederick Douglass, died in 1895 and he attended the obsequies of the "Old Warrior" at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, Washington, D.C., February 24, 1895. Alice secured the card of admission for Dunbar plus permission to sit in the reserved section of the church. "I expected you to come," she told Paul, "for I knew of your great love for him whose going has left such a gap in life."  

On March 2, 1895, Dunbar published a poem about Douglass, and in the meantime, W. B. Weaver called upon the author to contribute to a fund for the completion of a building dedicated to the memory of Frederick Douglass. "He was with us last fall. He was expecting to go again this spring and fall, but he has been called home, no more to return to us," Weaver mused. 

Dunbar was twenty-three years old in 1895 and he had not fully decided that he wanted to make a career of poetry. In fact, H. A. Tobey, learning that Dunbar's

67 Editor of the Independent to Dunbar, February 13, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

68 Alice Moore to Dunbar, March 3, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

69 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 139.

70 William Weaver to Dunbar, April 15, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
ambition was to be a lawyer, wrote: "The world is already full of lawyers for its good, peace or welfare. What we need is more persons to interpret nature and nature's God." 71

But wanting to become a lawyer was not the end of the poet's ambitions. He once said that he wanted to be a farmer, and the thought of becoming an English teacher intrigued him greatly. His mother wanted him to become a preacher. 72 While in Chicago in 1899, Dunbar related to a friend: "There are two things I have wanted badly, that I could not have, college and work on a newspaper. I wanted to go to Harvard and study under A. S. Hill. I studied Hill's rhetoric and I wanted to study English under the man who wrote it. But I had a mother to support and I could not leave my work in Dayton." 73 This responsibility precluded college.

During this period, Dunbar attempted to do dramatic writing. He wrote various lyrics and sketches to be set

71 Henry Tobey to Dunbar, July 6, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


73 Newspaper clipping, September 14, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
to music by the popular composer Will Marion Cook. Representative of the sketches was "Clorindy." Dunbar and Cook agreed to divide the royalties as the show was being sold in England, Canada, America and other foreign countries. For England and foreign countries Dunbar received 26 per cent and Cook 73 per cent.74

It was his second book, Majors and Minors, which brought him state and national recognition. In February of 1895, an acquaintance sent a copy of Majors and Minors to Dr. Henry A. Tobey, Superintendent of the State Hospital in Toledo. The poems pleased Tobey much and he wrote the author telling him so: "I must compliment you enough to say that I believe you possess real poetical instinct. I learned from the donor that in a biblical sense, God Almighty has placed the stamp of Cain upon you or in other words, your skin is black. Enclosed, a check for five dollars (send me the number of your poems that this amount will buy)."75 In the meanwhile, Charles Thatcher, a Toledo lawyer, wrote Dunbar that "H. A. Tobey has become much interested in your welfare and would like to meet you."76

74 Dunbar to Will Cook, July 15, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

75 Henry Tobey to Dunbar, July 6, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

76 Charles Thatcher to Dunbar, July 7, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Tobey and Dunbar became friends, and Tobey being something of a missionary, presented the merits of the young author's works to others, one of whom was James A. Herne, playwright. It happened that Dunbar was visiting Tobey when James A. Herne was in Toledo appearing in his own play, *Shore Acres*. Knowing Herne's literary ability and interest, Tobey urged Dunbar to take him a copy of *Majors and Minors*. Relieved to find that Herne was not at the hotel, Paul left the book, and a Mr. Childs saw that the actor dramatist received the volume.\(^7\) From Detroit, Michigan, Herne wrote that he would acquaint William Dean Howells and other literary people with Dunbar's poems.\(^8\)

Dunbar received a remarkable birthday present in the summer of 1896. In the *Harpers Weekly* of June 27, 1896, William Dean Howells, the most influential author and critic in the United States reviewed *Majors and Minors* in a favorable light. In those days, Howells presided over the column "Life and letters" in *Harpers Weekly*. In the issue of June 27, 1896, the entire review section of 3,500 words was devoted to Dunbar.\(^9\)


\(^8\)Wiggins, *Life and Works*, pp. 54-55.

The influence that this one review had on the poet's career was tremendous. For example, an educator wrote a publisher that, "I have just noticed in *Harpers Weekly* a collection of poems published by you. Kindly send me word when I can obtain a couple of copies. I do not even know the name of the author, but it is the collection noticed by W. D. Howells."^30

James Cotter, a black friend from Kentucky, sensing the significance of Howell's comments, advised: "Mr. W. D. Howells has done you a great and just favor. Profit by it. You and Governor McKinley are close together in *Harpers*. Do you see the point. If he is made president, get your friends to speak for you. It may bring you a position in Washington worth $1,000 or $1,200 a year. If you can get some New York house to bring out your book, a little fortune will be yours. Give readings in New England, go to New York and be your own manager. Why not make them a visit and recite 'The Party', and 'Ante Bellum Sermon' and 'Whistling Sam'. 'Whistling Sam' will carry New England."^31

---

^30 Thomas Shallcross to Hadly and Hadly, July 7, 1896, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

^31 Dunbar to James Cotter, July 13, 1896, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
About two weeks later the young poet felt confident
enough to post off his thanks to Howells. He wrote:

Dayton Ohio 7/13--1896

Dear Mr. Howells:
I have seen your article in Harpers and felt
its effect. That I have not written you
sooner is neither the result of wilful neglect
or lack of gratitude. It has taken time for
me to recover from the shock of delightful
surprise. My emotions have been too much for
me. I could not thank you without 'gushing'
and I did not want to 'gush.'
Now from the very depths of my heart I want
to thank you. You yourself do not know what
you have done for me. I feel much as a poor,
insignificant, helpless boy would feel to
suddenly find himself knighted.
I can tell you nothing about myself because
there is nothing to tell. My whole life has
been simple, obscure and uneventful. I have
written my little pieces and sometimes
recited them, but it seemed hardly by my
volition. The kindly praise that you have
accorded me will be an incentive to more
careful work. My greatest fear is that you
may have been more kind to me than just.
I have written to thank Mr. Herne for
putting the book into your hands. I have
only seen the man on the stage, but have
laughed and cried with him until I love
him.
Again thanking you, Mr. Howells, for more
than kindness,

I am Sincerely Yours,
Paul Laurence Dunbar
140 Ziegler St.
Dayton 0.82

Soon Dunbar received numerous letters. Thirty-six con-
tained money for the book. Three New York publishers then
solicited an interview and a fourth consented to bring out

82 Dunbar to William Dean Howells, July 13, 1896,
Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
a volume of his poems. So at twenty-four Dunbar had 
finally won recognition from a large body of publishers. 
As Dodd, Mead and Company offered the best returns, he 
made an arrangement with them to become his publishers.83

By August Dunbar was advised by friends to obtain 
the services of a lecture manager. Major James B. Pond, 
the platform agent for Mark Twain, was recommended. Pond 
had already managed appearances for Booker T. Washington 
and Frederick Douglass.84 Toledoans Brand Whitlock, 
"Golden Rule" Jones and H. A. Tobey bought the poet a new 
suit and put money in his pocket. Then Pond sent for him 
to come to New York.85

According to James B. Stronks, "Major Pond quickly 
booked [Dunbar] into readings around New York, meanwhile 
sending him with letters of introduction to several pub-
lishe. And soon he directed Paul out to William Dean 
Howells' summer home at Far Rockaway, on Long Island, for 
the first meeting of the two writers."86

83 Dayton Daily, July 16, 1897, p. 7.
84 Stronks, "Paul Laurence Dunbar and William Dean 
85 Edward F. Arnold, "Some Personal Reminiscences of 
XVII, 1932, p. 487.
86 Stronks, Paul Laurence Dunbar and William Dean 
Howells, p. 99.
They talked about Dayton at first. Howells had lived in Dayton from 1849 to 1850, when his family was putting out the Transcript. Then, the conversation turned to Dunbar's works. "Write what you know," Howells counseled the young man. "Write what you feel. Analyze detail. Build the picture. Make it real." Before the meeting was over Dunbar, shivering, began to cough as it was an unusually chilly evening and the house was near the ocean. Before leaving Paul was loaned a coat by Howells. He returned it later accompanied by a witty thank-you letter:

Dear Mr. Howells:
This note should have been written yesterday when I returned your coat by the National Express.
Let me thank you again for your kindness, although the circumstances brought to my mind the old fable of the ass in the lion's skin.
Not withstanding all my precautions, I have taken cold. I hope that you are more fortunate and that this note will find both you and your family well.

With warmest regards
I am Sincerely Yours
Paul Dunbar

Howell's reply was:

Dear Mr. Dunbar:
The coat came back safely and promptly; but I am sorry to learn that it did not save you from taking cold. May it cover,

87Cunningham, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 155

88Dunbar to William Dean Howells, August 21, 1896, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
hereafter, as good and gifted a man as when you wore it.  
We were all greatly pleased to meet you and make your acquaintance, and we shall watch your fortunes with the cordial interest of friends.

Yours Sincerely  
W. D. Howells

Lyrics of Lowly Life came out too in 1896 with an introduction by Howells. The book appeared in handsome green and gold on December 2, 1896. It was in good time for the Christmas trade. And making good use of the name William Dean Howells, it was an immediate success. Howell's introduction was a fifteen hundred-word digest of the points he had made in Harper's Weekly, but it was more emphatic and better written than the review had been.

Howells wrote the introduction even before he had read the book. It was written so promptly that Paul had returned home from New York only a short time before he again was indebted to the critic. He wrote to Howells: "Not the least source of my gratitude, by any means, is your excellent introduction to my new book. It was no little thing for you to introduce a book of verse by an obscure black writer and I believe that I fully appreciate the nobility of your act." 90

89William Dean Howells to Dunbar, August 23, 1896, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

Outstanding men of letters like Howells came to realize, even in the 1890's, that productions by black writers were not good simply because they had been done by a member of a race recently emancipated from slavery. Howells expressed this point of view in his introduction to *Lyrics from Lowly Life*. "I think I should scarcely trouble the reader with a special appeal in behalf of this book," he wrote, "if it had not specially appealed to me for reasons apart from the author's race, origin and condition." Writing more on the subject, Howells mentioned that "The world is too old now, and I find myself too much of its mood, to come for the work of a poet because he is black, because his father and mother were slaves."  

A couple of months later Dunbar visited Howells again. Dunbar was on his way to England and he believed that Howells would give practical help. This time Howells supplied him with a letter of introduction to Howells' friends in England. One was to David Douglas, a publisher:

My Dear Mr. Douglas:
Allow me to present my friend, Mr. Paul Dunbar, the first of his race to put his race into poetry. I hope he will show you his book, and let it say for his

---


his worth the things he is too modest to say for himself. 

Yours sincerely

W. D. Howells

On the eve of Dunbar’s departure for England in 1897, Dunbar’s friend, a Mrs. Victoria Matthews, tendered him a reception in New York. Booker T. Washington, William Edward Burghardt DuBois and other notables were present. And Alice Ruth Moore, an English teacher from New Orleans, now met Dunbar for the first time. As early as 1895 Dunbar had been attracted to her by a poem that he had found in a magazine published in Boston. And too, the picture of Alice interested him. Enclosing the poem “Phyllis,” Dunbar wrote to Miss Moore in care of the magazine:

PHYL LIS

Phyllis, ah, Phyllis, my life is a gray day, 
Few are my years, but my grieves are not few, 
Ever to youth should each day be a May-day, 
Warm wind and rose-breath and diamonded dew—
Phyllis, ah, Phyllis, my life is a gray day.

---

93 William Howells to David Douglas, February 4, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

Oh, for the sunlight that shines on a May-day!
Only the cloud hangeth over my life.
Love that should bring me youth's happiest
heyday
Brings me but seasons of sorrow and
strife;
Phyllis, ah, Phyllis, my life is a gray day.
Sunshine or shadow, or gold day or gray
day,
Life must be lived as our destinies rule;
Leisure or labor or work day or play day—
Feasts for the famous and fun for the
Fool;
Phyllis, ah, Phyllis, my life is a gray day.  

The correspondence thus begun, continued for two years.

Alice Ruth Moore, later to become Mrs. Dunbar, was
born in New Orleans of Joseph and Patricia Wright Moore,
July 19, 1875. She was educated in the schools of that
city and at Straight College, and was graduated from the
latter institution in 1892. That year, many of her verses
and stories appeared in print. Foremost among these was
a poem entitled: "A Plaint." Later she pursued other
courses at the University and the School of Industrial
Art in Philadelphia.

From the beginning they were attracted to each
other. Both of them loved to write. (Perhaps such was
the basis for a marriage after a very short courtship.)
Said Alice Moore: "I haven't much liking for these

---

95 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 187.

96 Dedicated to a friend, November 5, 1892, Dunbar
Papers (Schomburg Library).
writers that wedge the Negro problem and social equality—and write long dissertations on the Negro in general in their stories. Somehow, when I start a story, I always think of my folks (characters) as simple human beings, not as types of race or an idea—and I seem to be on more friendly terms with them."

And about dialect Alice had this to say: "You asked my opinion about the Negro dialect in literature? Well, frankly, I believe in everyone following his bent. If it be so that one has a special aptitude for dialect work, why it is only right that dialect work should be made a specialty. But if one should be like me—absolutely devoid of the ability to manage dialect, I don't see the necessity of cramming and forcing oneself into that plane because one is a Negro or a Southerner. Don't you think so?"

The young, attractive school teacher taught in the public schools of New Orleans until 1896, when she went to Boston and New York for study. At this time she met Dunbar for the first time, and they became engaged at a party February 5, 1897. Alice did not return to Boston, where

97Alice Moore to Dunbar, May 9, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

98Ibid.

she had been preparing to enter Wellesley College but remained in New York. After taking a course in Manual Training at the Teachers College, she was appointed a teacher in the public schools of Brooklyn. She taught there until after her marriage to Dunbar.

Embracing a large, desired opportunity for foreign travel, Dunbar left for London February 6, 1897. Mr. Pond's daughter was his agent. In addition to the encouragement he received from patrons and friends, he received a letter from one of his English admirers. "Your 'Lyrics of Lowly Life' have afforded me the greatest enjoyment," he said. "I learned that there is a chance of your coming to England and reading these charming pieces to us--do come--you will make them a great success." He continued, "The song of the Jubilee Singers touched our hearts years ago--Surely these poems cannot fail to be appreciated here." 101

Dunbar sailed for England on the Cunard Line, R. M. S. "Umbria." 102 He had not been at sea very long before he had written Howells asking him to send the name of an

---

100 Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 63.

101 John Keen to Dunbar, February 1, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

102 Ticket, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
English publisher for his book. The same day, he confided to his mother: "Everything has spurred up [sic] auspiciously. I have a nice steamer trunk and Major Pond has gotten me an elegant warm overcoat. My comfort is all that either you or I could wish," he wrote. 103 Telling his mother how surprised she would be to hear that Alice had run off from Boston to meet him in New York, the poet said that Alice was the "sweetest, smartest little girl I ever saw. But," he went on, "the half has not been told. Alice and I are engaged you know. This is what I longed for a year." 104

Dunbar had much cause for optimism during the early days of his European venture. He was interviewed constantly and was swamped with recitals. One of his recitals was before elite guests of a fellow Ohioan, John Hay, of Cleveland, then the United States Ambassador to Great Britain. The American Ambassador had heard of Paul Laurence Dunbar and he came to offer help. Hay welcomed Dunbar not only as a fellow American, but also as a fellow poet. John Hay had special interest in Dunbar's dialect pieces, since Hay's own *Pike County Ballads* were in

103 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, February 10, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

104 Ibid.
dialect. Following is an excerpt from Hay's "Jim Bludso."

Wall, no! I can't tell whar he lives,
Because he don't live you see;
Least ways, he's got out of the habit
Of livin' like you and me
Whar have you been for the last three year
That you haven't heard folks tell
How Jim Bludso passed in his checks
The night of the Praire Belle?106

Discovering that the black poet was an American who was trying hard for literary survival, Hay arranged for a recital before the Savage Club of London. The members in the Savage Club were accomplished men such as explorers, writers, actors, musicians, painters, sculptors, and scientists.107 After the recital, Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Stanley entertained the author at tea. Stanley was the roving journalist who, in 1871, found David Livingstone, a lost medical missionary, in Southeast Africa.108

Paul Dunbar and John Hay were in London when England's golden age had not yet been terminated by the Boer War and the diplomacy of Great Britain and America was already changing. These leaders of the Western World which had been at peace since 1815 had now entered into a

105 Cunningham, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 162.

106 Letters of John Hay and Extracts From His Diary (Washington: By Mrs. Hay, 1903), p. XV.

107 Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 58.

period of close cooperation which was going to be vital for both in the second decade of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{109} The successful diplomacy of John Hay and the poetry of Dunbar helped to put the United States in a more favorable light.

While in England, Dunbar met an old chum, Henry F. Downing. "Dip" had married a charming, educated white woman with a great deal of wealth. He told his mother that Dip looked like a prince. And with even more optimism, he wrote: "I am entirely white. My French waiter takes off his cap when I come up the steps. And my blooming rosy cheeked English maid kisses me as if I were the handsomest man on earth."\textsuperscript{110} Still the color of his skin did not go unnoticed. Boys on the street yelled "Blackie" at him derisively, and grown-ups stared in open amusement "as if he were a walking freak show." However, Dunbar learned to "ignore them as of small moment beside the fact that the guests in London drawing rooms welcomed him without prejudice," Virginia Cunningham noted.\textsuperscript{111}


\textsuperscript{110} Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 14, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\textsuperscript{111} Cunningham, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 160.
For a while Dunbar did well abroad. All of May and much of June, 1897, yielded recitals almost nightly. He even thought of sending for Alice. Seeing the possibility of lecturing in England during the fall and winter, he longed for his betrothal. 112

Moreover, Dunbar's social life in London seemed satisfactory. On one occasion he had dinner with the daughter of the chief justice from America. And at another time a Sidney Nordward from Ohio invited him out. 113 Sometimes Dunbar complained about too much social life, exclaiming that "I do not wish to go out socially but am somewhat compelled to." He was invited to a dinner of the Royal Society of Painters in Water Color. 114

But even the small success vanished when the London reading season ended in the middle of June. Recitals could not be depended on until the fall, Miss Pond informed him. Then she was off to Europe and left Paul without sponsorship. She refused responsibility for future recitals. Dunbar was completely flabbergasted. He attempted to book jobs through the Law Agency, 3 North Cumberland Avenue, Trafalgar Square, London, but London was no longer

112 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 5, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

113 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 6, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

114 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 5, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
interested.  

Unfortunately, Dunbar's and Hay's sojourn coincided with the jubilee of Queen Victoria, when half the world was paying its homage to this great personality. Queen Victoria planned a grand Diamond Jubilee in celebration of her seventy-fifth birthday and the city in June of 1897 was ajar with preparations. "The town begins to grow abominable for jubilee. Six miles of lumber deform the streets," John Hay wrote. There was general complaint that the jubilee injured the sale of books dealing with subjects other than of festivity. And some of the most popular novelists of England were considerably surprised at the serious falling off in their sales.

During the Jubilee celebration, Dunbar suffered greatly. His expenses were high and he needed money. "Everybody says wait," he related, "but I am tired of waiting and could be making more in America."

---

115 Dunbar to the Law Agency, June 5, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


119 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 14, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
At one time, he lived in an attic with holes in the roof and grimy back walls.\textsuperscript{120} Calling London "a great dingy hive," he recorded that he could work in London because "the constant gloom and frequent rains will accord with my mood."\textsuperscript{121} Still he found difficulty in trying to get critics to review his work because they, like everybody else, were caught-up in the Jubilee season.\textsuperscript{122} The money that Dunbar had saved disappeared rapidly and no more came in.

Henry Downing, Dunbar's landlord, came to the rescue. He invited Dunbar to live with him and offered to arrange a recital. The author accepted gratefully, but his gratitude soon vanished when Downing claimed more than half the proceeds, leaving the poet a meager forty dollars. To his mother Dunbar exclaimed that, "the recital was a great success and my share was $85.00. The dirty dog paid me $40.00 nearly all of which I owed and the other $45.00 he got away with. I have moved from his home into the house with Dr. Alexander Crummell, a black American educator."\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{120}Unpublished Letters of Paul Laurence Dunbar to a Friend," \textit{The Crisis}, Vol. XX, June, 1920, p. 73.

\textsuperscript{121}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 73.

\textsuperscript{122}Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 28, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\textsuperscript{123}Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 14, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Dr. Crummell suggested that Dunbar return home in October. And realizing that Dunbar was devoid of funds, Crummell promised that a number of friends would furnish capital for him to begin a magazine. They promised also to obtain him a job at the Library of Congress. By this time though, Dunbar was very pessimistic and indicated in a letter that he was "afraid that it would fail like everything else I put my hand to."\(^{124}\)

As if he did not have enough woes, the family was having difficulty over house payments and money to take care of "Ma." Dunbar wrote the following to Matilda:
"You must use your own judgement about the house. I will send you some money as soon as I can do so. I think that Rob and Will should remember that I am a long way from home and do all they can to make you comfortable without the worry of little details falling upon me. For five years I did my part as bravely as possible without aid from there. I think that for six months at least they might be able to supply you with all your needs while I am trying to get on my feet. If I am forced to I will throw everything up and come home, but if I do everything will be spoiled here and I do not know where to turn

\(^{124}\)Ibid.
then. In the poem "The Garret," Dunbar described his depression in London:

Within a London Garret high
Above the roofs and near the sky
My ill rewarding pen I ply
To win me bread
This little chamber, six by four
Is castle, study den and more
Altho no carpet decks the floor,
Nor dawn, the bed.

Another verse, "In an English Garden" shows an overpowering longing for home and love:

Beside the wall, the slim Laburum grows
And flings its golden flow'rs to every breeze.
But I'en among such soothing sights as these
I pant and nurse my soul-devouring woes
Of all the longings that our hearts wot of
There is no hunger like the want of love.

Yet it was rumored that Dunbar was stuffing his pockets with five pound notes, when he was really searching them for shillings. A London correspondent sent this cable to his American newspaper. A London correspondent sent this cable to his American newspaper.

Paul Dunbar is being lionized in London. The color line is not drawn in English society and the colored versifier, being the latest


126 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 200.

127 Ibid.

128 Cunningham, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 164.
literary novelty, is much sought for receptions, garden parties, and similar gatherings. 129

The trip to England was unsuccessful in many respects. However, Dunbar was fortunate in having the chance to go abroad because of the valuable experiences it yielded. "I have made a reputation here and gained a following that will help me in the long run," he realized. 130 Valuable indeed was the opportunity for Dunbar to write his first novel in the midst of an unsuccessful venture. The Uncalled was his first serious prose effort. Lida Keck Wiggins recalled that the book was really a history of his own life. It represented somewhat Dunbar's own pondering of the work of the ministry. Fred Brant, who at length freed himself from the calling he did not like was to some extent Dunbar himself. 131 The book was sold to Lippincott's Magazine in September of 1897. 132 The poet returned to New York August 7, 1897; 133 and for

---


130 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 22, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

131 *Wiggins, Life and Works*, p. 69.

132 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, September 24, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

a while he devoted himself entirely to literary work.

But soon he sought additional employment. Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, a patron, wrote the letter of introduction through which Dunbar secured the position as assistant in the Library of Congress. Frederick Douglass called Ingersoll Abou Ben Adams because he was a friend to blacks and he spoke and worked in their behalf throughout his life.134 "Prejudice," Ingersoll said, "is born of ignorance and malice and a man who cannot arise above prejudice is not a 'civilized' man; he is simply a barbarian."135

Dunbar's work in the library was located in the north stack of the library, up four short flights of stairs. Here he worked every other day from half past three in the afternoon till ten at night. The salary was $720 a year.136 But late work around musty books made rapid inroads upon his health.137 Moreover, the work kept him from devoting full time to writing. "One must eat and

134 Ibid.

135 Ibid., p. 683.

136 Ibid., p. 684.

137 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, October 2, 1897, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
so I plod along making the thing that is really first in my heart a secondary matter in my life," he thought. 138 True, Washington and the congressional library did not suit him, but there was much to hold him there. "The best Negroes in the country find their way to the capital and I have a very congenial and delightful circle of friends," he said in an interview. He found time to write several poems and short stories during his employment at the library. 140 "The Case of Cadwallader" and "Sister Jackson's Superstitions" were two of his short stories. 141

On Sunday, March 6, 1898, Dunbar married Miss Alice Ruth Moore who was not only beautiful but talented, and like her husband an effective reader. Bishop W. B. Denick of the A.M.E. Church performed the ceremony. 142 Richard B. Harrison, best known perhaps as "De Lawd" in Green Pas-

---


139Interview with Dunbar, unidentified newspaper clipping, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).

140Dunbar to James Pond, May 5, 1898 (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress).

141Manuscripts, prose and Poetry, Box 5, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

tures, agreed to be the best man. They made their home in Washington, D.C.

It was soon after his marriage that Dunbar was on the program of a meeting in Albany, New York, at which higher education of the Negro was discussed. Mrs. Merrill, a patron of the art and letters in Albany, spoke favorably of the young author. Before he returned home a telegram came to his Washington address asking terms for a recital. Usually the fee was fifty dollars. This time, however, his wife, who received the telegram, charged one hundred dollars plus expenses. The terms were accepted and the date was to be November 15, 1898.

Arriving at Albany about six o'clock in the evening, he asked a black bus driver to take him to the Kenmore Hotel. The driver wanted to know if he were going there to work. "No, to stay," was the reply. At the desk of the hotel, the clerk refused to register Dunbar until he looked in the reservations and found that one of the wealthiest women in the city had engaged the most expensive suite for the poet, without reference to race.

---

143 Incomplete article on an interview with Matilda Dunbar, August, 1933, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).

144 Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 1-64.

145 Ibid.
or color. The matter was not adjusted until Mrs. Merrill herself appeared on the scene and insisted on all possible courtesy for her guest.\textsuperscript{146} The recital was a success.

\textsuperscript{146}Ibid., p. 65.
CHAPTER V

DUNBAR AT HIS ZENITH, 1899-1902

Paul Laurence Dunbar was at his zenith in 1899. The year, too, saw a tremendous upsurge in progress for blacks. W. E. B. DuBois had already become the first Afro-American holder of a doctorate in the social sciences. His celebrated dissertation on "the Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States" and his study of the Philadelphia Negro had won him acceptance as one of the nation's leading scholars. Booker T. Washington had achieved the reputation as an educator and spokesman for black Americans while Dunbar had received acclaim as a writer in London and America. Now he was a mature, talented poet.

Dunbar resigned his position at the Library of Congress on December 31, 1899. Three days later he was one of the speakers at a banquet in honor of George H. White, Congressional Representative of the state of North Carolina.¹ The following month, he was invited to Tuskegee by Booker T. Washington. The annual conference of

¹Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 69.
black farmers was the occasion. At Tuskegee he gave a num-
ber of lectures on English composition before the two
advanced classes of school. On his return trip to Wash-
ington he read at other schools in the South including
schools in Atlanta and Nashville.

A rather notable meeting in March of 1899 was held
in Boston at the Hollis Street Theatre. The meeting was
in the interest of Tuskegee Institute. Bishop Lawrence of
Massachusetts presided, and Dunbar recited from his origi-
nal poems. Other notables included Booker Washington, of
course, and DuBois who read an original story.

Lyrics of the Hearthside was Dunbar's literary
fruitage of this crowded year. He had a broader outlook
reflecting travel and acquaintance with the world. And
one could observe, too, a refinement in technique. His
name now established, he sold whatever he produced,
poetry or prose. He wove the plots of his novels and
short stories largely around white characters, subject

2Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 84.

3Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, February 21, 1899, Dun-
bar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

4Booker T. Washington, An Autobiography (Atlanta:

of W. E. B. DuBois (New York: International Publishers,
matter which reviewers considered unsure ground for him. Dunbar contended that this was not valid criticism, indicating that he had nearly as much contact with whites as with blacks. 6

May of 1899 was like "a dream come true." The board of trustees of Atlanta University voted to confer upon him the honorary degree of Master of Arts. 7 However, at the height of his fame, it did not appear that success had elated him. Still, James Weldon Johnson, another writer said, "the hallmark of distinction was on him." He carried with him "that dignity of humility which never fails to produce a sense of greatness." 8

Despite his success, ill health plagued him. In May Dunbar moved from his home in Washington, D.C. to 131 West 3rd Street, New York City. During that month, May 7, 1899, he had another attack of pneumonia, and his frail body made his illness more serious. The doctor reported that after the illness "Paul ought to have complete rest

6Goulder, Ohio Scenes and Citizens, p. 27.

7Frederick Means to Dunbar, May 31, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

8James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), p. 152.
for at least six months."\textsuperscript{9}

Suffering from intense chest aches, and coughing continuously, the novelist needed a nurse.\textsuperscript{10} His wife, Alice, proved herself a good one. Alice had studied medicine and had some training as a nurse. It took strong, young eyes to read the doctor's thermometer which she had. One needed cold nerve to administer the hypodermic needle and solutions of morphine, and a good knowledge of anatomy to use it in order not to pierce any veins or arteries. Alice kept a regular nurse's chart in which she wrote constantly. Therefore, she slept on a couch by Dunbar's bedside.

Matilda wanted to come, but it was too expensive. Besides, Alice wrote, "I am sparing no money to make Paul comfortable and insure his speedy and complete recovery."\textsuperscript{11} Frederick Douglass' daughter, Amelia, wrote Alice, "You have seen that dear boy very ill more than once but you have pulled him through each time and landed him safely on his feet."\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{9}Lottie Brown to Matilda Dunbar, May 9, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\textsuperscript{10}Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, July 9, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\textsuperscript{11}Alice Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 12, 1899 Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\textsuperscript{12}Amelia Douglass to Alice Dunbar, May 24, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Near the end of May, Matilda Dunbar went to live with her son despite Alice's reluctance. Viewing the situation closely, she put him in a sanitorium. Then she explained to Alice that she had no doubt that everything possible had been done for him, "but in a case like this," she declared, "that is not sufficient." Matilda returned to Washington in June of 1899.¹³

The sanitorium pleased Dunbar because it had obvious advantages that his home did not have. But he affirmed: "they are dismal places." It was depressing to be surrounded by invalids. I am being well cared for--so well, indeed," he said, "that I am afraid I shall be killed by kindness."¹⁴ He was well and eating by June 6, although he had to be helped in and out of the carriage.¹⁵ (The doctor ordered driving out by carriage.) During his illness, however, Dunbar had energy enough to continue to write articles, stories and poems. "I have finished an article, done two stories, and three poems since I have been here, but I find that working does not agree with me,

¹³Amelia Dunbar to Alice Dunbar, May 28, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

¹⁴Tobey to Matilda Dunbar, June 6, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

¹⁵Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 13, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
so I am going slowly," he confided with Matilda.  

While sick he received gifts, attention, and encour-
agements from various sources. Foremost among these was 
a letter from Governor Theodore Roosevelt, who hoped that 
his health improved.  

Another friend wrote "You must 
face up! You have a wonderful future before you. People 
say splendid things of your work."  

Friends in Dayton 
were especially concerned about his health. Some believed 
that he had gone to the mountains. And when "Bud" Burns, 
now a doctor, went to New York where Dunbar was, they were 
even more concerned about the poet.  

The bout with pneumonia left its permanent scar, 
Tuberculosis. In an effort to recuperate, he began making 
plans to move his family to the Catskills Mountains, 
upstate New York. All the while Dunbar drove himself 
with relentless fury, turning out poems, articles, and 
stories in rapid succession. 

Before leaving New York for the mountains June 23, 
1899, Dunbar had entertained the notion of visiting his 

16 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 15, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society). 

17 Theodore Roosevelt to Dunbar, June 17, 1899. 
The Roosevelt Papers (Manuscripts Division, The Library 
of Congress). 

18 Rebecca Burton to Matilda Dunbar, July 3, 1899, 
Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society). 

19 Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 19.
brother "Rob" in Chicago. "Bud" Burns, however, thought that the mountains would be better. Dunbar agreed. But on the eve of his departure, the poet felt well enough to console himself with a cigar although his beer had been "shut off."

Dunbar's excessive and daily consumption of whiskey and ale was one of the big problems in his short life. As early as 1895, a girlfriend, Maud Clark had admonished Dunbar to give up that "cussed drink. Your income is small at present and you see nothing coming in for it. You are weakening your constitution... your mother requires clothes for her comfort and you have debts yourself. You cannot pay your way and drink as you do."

It was frequently reported in the public prints that Dunbar was a drunkard. According to Paul M. Pearson, writer for the Talent magazine and a friend of Dunbar, here is how the report started. With a friend, Pearson had engaged Dunbar to give an evening of readings at the First Methodist Church, Evanston, Illinois. They had thoroughly advertised the event, and a large audience from

---

20 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 22, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


22 Maud Clark to Dunbar, April 12, 1895, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
the university and the city were present to hear him. At 8 o'clock a messenger brought Paul Pearson the word that Dunbar had broken a dinner engagement at the women's college, and that no word had been received from the poet. After an anxious delay, Dunbar arrived a half hour late, and with him a nurse, a physician and his half brother, Robert Murphy. The first two numbers could not be heard, but not until he had read one poem a second time did the audience suspect the true cause of Dunbar's difficulty in speaking.\textsuperscript{23}

"I am now going to read the 'Party'," Dunbar said, "and I hope there has been no requests for it, for I would not read it if there had."\textsuperscript{24} The condition of the reader grew steadily worse and most of the people left in disgust. Pearson disclosed that "the report was passed about that he was intoxicated." The Chicago papers printed full accounts of the incident and it was copied throughout the country.\textsuperscript{25}

His whiskey habit caused other problems too. For an example, he had occasional blackouts. After one such occurrence he wrote his mother that "the drops must have been put in my beer while I stood talking at the bar and

\textsuperscript{23} Pearson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{24} The Chicago Post, October 20, 1900.

\textsuperscript{25} Pearson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 26.
that was the last I knew until the next day."26 A newspaper reported on another occasion that Dunbar lost his diamond ring, gold watch and other valuable trinkets while imbibing in a Chicago saloon.27

Dr. A. M. Curtis, the author's doctor, and other Washingtonians who knew Dunbar intimately recalled that he had an ungovernable habit of drinking.28 And in an interview, Bob Turner, a sportsman, told of the times that Dunbar and he spent together in an old drinking tavern in New York. Turner remembered that the poet, during drinking sprees, would sit for hours listening to "rousta-bouts" and odd expressions which he would later convert into poems.29

Happy times abounded in the Catskills. Alice, Bud and Paul fished, hiked and were entirely surrounded by high mountains. Dunbar's appetite increased enormously and he gained weight to 125 pounds. "This place is beautifull," he wrote, "Bud Burns has come up to spend two weeks here and will see if the air is all right for me, if it

26Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, August 30, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

27The Chronicle, December 2, 1900.


is not I shall go further up."^{30}

The close of the summer found him not significantly better. Many persons suffering from pulmonary troubles had found relief in the balmy air of the Catskills. Dunbar was little benefited; and the physicians then advised that he go to Colorado.

Matilda Dunbar came up from Washington and accompanied her son and his wife on their western journey. Dunbar had carried around a letter of introduction from Tobey in his shirt pocket since July 31. The letter stated: "I take pleasure by this letter in introducing to you Mr. Paul Laurence Dunbar. Mr. Dunbar has come to Colorado on account of his health. Any consideration you can extend to Mr. Dunbar I assure you will be greatly appreciated." The letter was addressed to a Dr. Eskridge who wrote back that he was in receipt of Tobey's letter plus a book of poems by the author. "I shall be very glad to extend to Mr. Dunbar any courtesy in my power when he comes to Denver, and will see that he gets the best medical help possible free of charge. I have read many of his poems, and some to me especially those imitating the Negro dialect, are simply exquisite,"^{31} he wrote.

^{30}Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 25, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

^{31}Dr. Eskridge to Henry Tobey, July 25, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Dunbar went to live in a cottage two and a half miles from town. This seemed to him within perfectly short and convenient reach of the city. For Coloradans this was a great distance. In fact some merchants doubted that they could deliver certain things to him. Nevertheless, Dunbar found Denver, Colorado novel, varied and so interesting that he was constantly receiving and recording new impressions. The succeeding sketch is, in part, one of the essays he wrote on Denver:

What one sees of the life of Denver in a few weeks busy sojourn here is so novel, so varied and so interesting that one is apt to be constantly receiving and recording new impressions. Some one with more of an ear for epigram than a soul for truth, has asserted that the West is the East, meaning, perhaps that there is no deep or essential difference between the people of the two sections. But if Denver be taken to represent the West even one of three cities, Washington, Boston or New York to stand for the East, nothing appears to me further from the truth, than the statement given above.

It may be urged right here that after all, the epigramatic writer's dictum is true, because so large a proportion of our Western population is of Eastern birth or extraction. But this makes no difference; for I doubt not that the place has more to do with moulding the disposition of a people, than the people in making the character of a place. So given the same material, the West with different resources, and different circumstances, must produce a different type of man. No doubt, in the elemental tho feeling, they will be the same. But in a
myriad of ways, arising from environment and associations, they will be a people apart. . . .32

Living beyond the city, Dunbar took long rides for his health. For this purpose he purchased a grey mare and soon learned to love the animal devotedly. Desiring to pay a tribute to his faithful dumb friend, he wrote the poem "Dat ol' Mare o' Mine." He sold this poem for a sum equal to half the price he had paid for the mare.33

Through a long golden autumn, the most beautiful he had seen, the season nursed him like a gentle mother. Dunbar recalled that "he lay on her breast drinking pure air like a child." New life glowed within him. New strength throbbed in his limbs. The future that had been so dull brightened. He awoke in the mornings to look out upon the mountains with joy in life again.34

Before leaving Denver in the spring of 1900, the poet novelist bought a coyote ring, Navajo blanket, Sioux moccasins, Apache bow and arrow, Pueblo pottery, and a Mexican rawhide shirt and sombrero.35 He was happy. He

32 Dunbar's Unpublished Essay on Denver, Manuscripts, Box 5, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

33 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 273.

34 Newspaper clipping, n.d., Box 15, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

35 Financial records, Box 9, April 13, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
rejoiced in the fact that he could work unrestrictedly again. "I can live again," he remarked, "and for this I thank Denver with her blue skies, her wine-like air and her great all-holding heart." But, had he remained in Denver his life would have been prolonged. Dunbar's complaint, however, was that it took too long for proofs to go back and forth to publishers.

Perhaps there was another reason for his decision to leave the West. Dunbar went to Colorado to regain his health, and he did improve. But his mother lost her health. The doctor advised her to leave. (The malady was no doubt due to the high altitude.) Matilda recalled that "Paul's doctor told him not to leave, he sacrificed himself for me and brought me back. He sacrificed himself for me." So in the spring of 1900, his wife and his mother returned to Washington. However, Dunbar would have recurring hemorrhages and terrible coughing spells until his death. Many were the times when his condition was relieved or arrested. But he was never cured.


37 Ibid.

38 Interview with Matilda Dunbar, August, 1933, Dunbar Papers (Schomburg Library).

39 Ibid.
When faced with speaking engagements or a publisher's deadline, he bolstered his weakness by strong spirits. He came to depend upon liquor and beer. Some biographers claim quarrels and recriminations developed between Dunbar and his wife as a result.\(^{40}\) The drinking problem would cause a rift three years later.

A major result of the Colorado sojourn appeared in October, 1900—\textit{The Love of Landry}. This short story depicts life on a Colorado ranch. The heroine, Mildred Osborne, is a fashionable New York girl who had been ordered by a physician to spend a year in Colorado to counteract certain consumptive tendencies. She finds Landry, the hero, on the ranch. He is a romantic creature involved in mystery. Their love affair is engagingly told in the novel. The story shows Dunbar's remarkable versatility.\(^{41}\)

Before that book appeared however, \textit{The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories}\(^{42}\) had been published in April. Dunbar dedicated this book to his High School principal, Captain Charles B. Stivers. The title story describes a Southern plantation at the time of the Civil War. A slave

\(^{40}\)Goulder, \textit{Ohio Scenes and Citizens}, p. 28.


\(^{42}\)Dunbar, \textit{The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories}, New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1900.
who had promised loyalty to his master resisted every inducement to leave as the war advanced. Even the plea of the young woman he loved was not enough to induce him to make his way to freedom. "Viney's Free Papers" tells a similar story. A young slave woman refuses freedom in order to remain with her husband.

Not all of the stories concern themselves with ante bellum themes. "The Ingrate" was founded to some extent upon the experience of the poet's father, Joshua Dunbar, during the war. "A Council of State" deals with the political maneuvering of the 1930's, while the problem of lynching is taken up in "The Tragedy of Three Forks." Some of the shorter pieces like "The Case of Ca'line" are rather humorous. "Ca'line," only six pages long is in "kitchen conversation." Seemingly, Ca'line, a maid, has been criticized by the lady of the house. The maid becomes intensely hostile and threatens to relinquish her job.

I's got to come an' ax you, has I? Look ahyeah, Mis' Ma'tin, I know I has to wo'k in yo' kitchen I know I has to cook fu' you, but I want you to know dat even ef I does I's a lady. I's a lady, but I see you do' know how to 'preciate a lady w'en you meets one. You kin jes' light in an' git yo' own dinner. I wouldn't wo'k fu' you ef you uz made o' gol'. I nevah did lak to so'k fu' strainers, nohow.

No ma'am, I Cain't even stay an' git de dinner. I know w'en I been insulted. Seems lak

43Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 81.
ef I stay in hyeah another minute I'll bile all over dis kitchen.


No, indeed, you needn't 'pologize to me; needn't 'pologize to me. I b'lieve in people sayin' jes' what dey mean, I does.

Would I stay, ef you 'crease my wages? Well--I reckon I could, but I--but I do' want no foolishness.

(Sola.) "Huh! Did she think she was gwine to come down hyeah an' skeer me, huh, uh? Wha'h's dat fryin' pan?"

Back in Washington, the poet had friends in the "camp," a black settlement on the edge of Howard University. Sometimes he would invite ante-bellum old timers into his home. At home he would listen to their stories on "before the war" while drinking beer. Then he would draw up his chair to his desk and scribble a poem in dialect.

Early in the summer of 1900, he and his wife returned to the Catskills. Although the vacation was rather pleasant, the ravages of consumption had only been

---

44 Dunbar, The Strength of Gideon, pp. 111-110.

checked. Nevertheless the mountains were fresh and cool. And besides fishing, he and Alice enjoyed the hiking through wooded hills.

Good news came to the family's residence in the Catskills. The June statement from Dodd, Mead and Company indicated that nearly twelve thousand copies of Lyrics of Lowly Life had been sold. Cabin and Field sold close to five thousand. His popularity had soared to the heights of James Whitcomb Riley and Eugene Field. In the meantime Dunbar's picture was published on the cover of the June issue of the Current Literature magazine. Inside he was featured as their monthly "American Poet of Today."

Additional honors included election to the American Social Science Association for distinction in literature, and the inclusion of several of his poems in E. C. Stedman's Anthology of American Literature. The publisher of the magazine overdid the blackman as a comedienne. In his answer Dunbar explained that there was a large humorous quality in his character just as there was in an Irishman. Reflecting further on the subject, he explained, "and I

---

46 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 92.

47 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 15, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

cannot see that a laugh, when one laughs with them, hurts either one or the other."

By fall Alice and Paul were back in Washington, where Mrs. Dunbar soon joined them. The poet's weight was up to 143½, "the highest yet," he exclaimed. "I doubt if father ever weighed more than that." But he had much more to be happy about.

In 1900 his poetic genius flowered. There was a steady and welcome market demand on his pen. At the turn of the century he was a successful magazine poet, reader, and novelist and essayist. Dunbar was "a master sentimentalist who wrung the heart of a simpler American." one writer says. In the space of six years, Dunbar had secured a recognized standing among men of letters. His rare ability was recognized by men of letters in Europe and America and he sustained this reputation.

More than one hundred blacks were lynched in the first year of this new century. Before World War I that number soared to more than 1,100, the Northern states and

---


50 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, August 9, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


52 Lerpziger Neueste Nachrichten, September 8, 1900.
the Midwest, as well as the South contributing. DuBois called the practice the greatest problem of the twentieth century. During the period Dunbar heard a story about a black who had been lynched. The man was illegally removed from a jail in Alabama and hanged on a limb of a giant oak by the roadside. Several weeks later the leaves on the limb turned yellow and dropped off while the other branches of the tree grew and flourished. Dunbar considered the story too good to be forgotten. Accordingly, he wrote an outstanding poem on the subject, "The Haunted Oak." It appeared in the Century, December, 1900:

And never more shall leaves come forth on a bough that bears the ban. I am burned with dread, I am tried and dead, From the curse of a guiltless man.

And ever the judge rides by, rides by, and goes to hunt the deer, And ever another rides his soul in the guise of a mortal fear. And ever the man he rides me hard, and never a night stays he; For I feel his curse as a haunted tree.

Along with popularity and honor came affluence. No more was he a part-time poet. Said Dunbar, "I found that


54 Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 88.

55 Manuscripts, Box 7, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
my pen yielded me a support."56 Finally he had reached a point in life when he did not have to rely on financial assistance from white patrons. Tobey offered to loan the author a sum of money. Dunbar turned him down. He told "Ma": "I had a nice letter from Dr. Tobey offering to lend me money, but I do not need it, so there is no use taking it."57

Early in the fall of 1900 Dunbar moved from a boarding house to an attractive home in one of Washington's suburban neighborhoods. It was located near LeDroit Park. Portieres curtained the doorways. Navajo maps and souvenirs of his western sojourn hung on the wall. And here and there the mounted skin of some animal stretching at full length before an easy chair and settee, covered the floor. The walls were adorned with posters, portraits of his fellow authors and artists' proofs of Kemble's illustrations of his Folks from Dixie. Below were book shelves, filled with well chosen volumes interspersed with the various editions of his own works and presentation copies of other writers. The center of the room was occupied by a beautiful flat-top desk with a

---

56 Interview with Dunbar, unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).

57 Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, September 13, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
green shaded lamp and adjacent typewriter. The poet's study was a large, well decorated room on the second floor.\(^{58}\) No, this was not a mansion. But it was a long way from the poet's meager beginnings on Ziegler Street in Dayton.

As contemporary writers became interested in his works, some proclaimed him to the world as a poet worthy of the consideration given Whittier, Lowell and Longfellow.\(^{59}\) His reputation gaining momentum; letters of all sorts came to him. Some commented on his worth as a poet, others thanked him for poems, still others like Mayor Whitlock of Toledo wrote to him about reforming the prisons, while some asked for advice. A friend inquired: "Who has made it possible for you to loom far and above any of your people? Whose fine nature do you possess? To whom are you indebted for your bright intellect? You to my mind are simply Mr. Paul Laurence Dunbar—a man with a rare talent—a most courteous gentleman may I add—without presuming—my friend."\(^{60}\) From the pen of Booker T. Wash-

\(^{58}\) Interview with Dunbar, unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers (Dayton Public Library).

\(^{59}\) Woodson, The Negro in our History, p. 470.

\(^{60}\) Martha Wright Evans to Dunbar, n.d., 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
ington came: "Thank you for the poem which you were kind enough to dedicate to me." (Paul had sent him a copy of the *New England* magazine with the poem "Booker T. Washington" in it.) "A poor Virginia cabin gave the seed, and from its dark and lowly door there came a peer of princes in the world's acclaim," wrote Dunbar. Washington informed the poet: "I send you under separate cover a copy which contains the first installment of an effort of mine."

Brand Whitlock, Mayor of Toledo, wrote a critical letter to Dunbar: "The truth is our whole system of punishment, of criminal law, of jails and gallows is a barbarous anarchonism [sic] and I grow sick of the brutishness which is always looking for a victim, guilty or innocent, legally or illegally." Another friend insisted on Paul's advice relative to a story he desired to send to the *Saturday Evening Post*: "It has 8000 words. Would they consider anything that long." To one acquaintance Dunbar scribbled a few verses:

> And o my friend as the years go by
> I think their passing will soon seem
> In mournful--poems, a wistful dream
> But--we have our friendship--you & I.  

---

61 *Booker T. Washington to Dunbar, November 3, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).*

62 *Brand Whitlock to Dunbar, December 5, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).*

63 *Alice Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, March 23, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).*
On the platform Dunbar was an excellent reader, unfailingly pleasing. He read with expression and taste. People who listened to the man were slow to forget the tender notes of his rich musical voice and the artistic rendering of his choice selections. What made him most effective were his facial expressions and his knowledge of the actors' art. He had a natural style of delivery, and his rich musical voice served to bring out all the better the pathetic and humorous selections he gave. The Knoxville Sentinel claimed that his selections were rendered with genuine pathos. Then The Mail Express commented that he rendered selections with "a fervor and intensity which compelled the closest attention of his audience." Dunbar anticipated Vachel Lindsay in public recitations in which he invited audience participation. The audience was usually moved to great enthusiasm when he recited his poems. He knew how to make a nice blend of the quaint and deeply serious. Paul's "voice was a perfect instrument and he knew how to use it,"

---

64 Newspaper Clipping, Box 17, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

65 Ibid.

66 Brooks, Confident Years, p. 546.

67 Newspaper clipping, Box 17, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

68 Johnson, Along this Way, p. 160.
Weldon Johnson once said of him. Dunbar's picturesque personality and great ability as a reciter of the humorous poems in which he so cleverly delineated the character of the plantation black made him a much sought after reader on programs.

In the poem "Life" the writer gives a bit of exhortation and comfort to mankind. He sings that:

Joy seems sweeter when cares come after
And a moan is the finest of foils for laughter. 69

This verse was a favorite selection of Dunbar when reciting, and his reading of it was very impressive. Wiggins believed that "Life" was "peculiarly typical of his own experiences in life as well as those of us all". 70

A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
A pint of joy to a peck of trouble,
And never a laugh but the moans come double;
   And that is life! 71

But audiences always liked his dialect poetry better than his verses in standard English. This was true not only in recitals but also when he submitted poems for publication. Truth magazine wrote him a blunt note in the fall of 1900: "The poem you sent last, and which I return

69 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 140.
70 Ibid., p. 140.
71 Ibid.
to you with this, is too fine for Truth. I don't believe the average Truth reader would appreciate its beauty. And I know you can give me something more suited to our needs."
The publisher was more interested in Dunbar's dialect pieces than he was in the standard productions.72

Frequently, although his interest and talent lay in his poetry, Dunbar was asked to write out impressions of the black race. Some of his best writing, this writer believes, is characterized in such impressions. Dunbar possessed the ability to infuse these essays with light touches of satire and sentiment.73 An example taken from one of his essays follows:

It is the middle-class negro [sic] who has imbibed enough of white civilization to make him prosperous. But he has not partaken of civilization so deeply that he has become drunk and has forgotten his own identity. The church to him is still the centre of his social life, and his preacher a great man. He has not—and I am not wholly sorry that he has not—learned the repression of his emotions, which is the mark of a high and dry civilization. He is impulsive, intense, fervid, and--himself. He has retained some of his primitive ingenuousness. When he goes to a party he goes to enjoy himself and not to pose. If there be onlookers outside his own circle, and he be tempted to pose, he does it with such childlike innocence and good-humor

72 Editor of Truth to Dunbar, August 1, 1900, (Ohio Historical Society).

73 Harpers Weekly, January 13, 1900.
that no one is for a moment anything but amused, and he is forgiven his little deception.\textsuperscript{74}

Tragic is it that this frail man with so much genius was a victim of pulmonary troubles aggravated by a chronic disorder of the stomach. Such a combination in the 1900's defied medical skill. The disease claimed a fourth part of all who died. Ravages of the plague, smallpox, and cholera dwindled into insignificance when compared with those of consumption in its manifold forms.\textsuperscript{75}

One cure for tuberculosis is rest, sunlight, and ventilation.\textsuperscript{76} But apparently Dunbar had other notions about curing his sickness. Usually he disobeyed the doctor's advice. He was often as headstrong, as impulsive, and as irresponsible as a child.\textsuperscript{77} For a nightly bedtime snack, he had a raw onion with salt and a bottle of beer. He had great faith in this smelly combination as an antidote to tuberculosis.\textsuperscript{78}

In February of 1900, Dunbar cancelled all engagements and gave up reading almost entirely. Giving up the

\textsuperscript{74}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{76}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{77}Johnson, Along This Way, p. 160.

\textsuperscript{78}Ibid.
recital tours for the most part, he concentrated on writing. He confided to a friend, "They are trying to force me back to Denver, but I am ill and discouraged, and don't care much what happens."  

Others cared. They were giving readings for him. In the South black students working their way through college earned their expenses by presenting programs of his poems at hotels and clubs. This gave the poet faith and hope. He was glad to know that his work was helping to give young scholars the college education he had missed.

In the year following the birth of the new century, he finished his third novel, The Fanatics. The book, which was really a historical novel, failed miserably. "My hopes were planted in that book and it has utterly disappointed me," Paul moaned. Dunbar began this novel during the fall of 1899. In an interview with a Chicago news reporter, he had remarked earlier: "Yes I shall write a long story and it will be about the Copperheads of the North. My sympathies are very strongly with them.

---


They were opposed to the war and they were not afraid to say so. They stood up for their belief and they suffered ostracism in many places and often bodily injury for it." He compared this group with William Lloyd Garrison and Elijah P. Lovejoy.

He also interpreted other aspects of the Civil War period. Referring to the black Congressmen of the post-bellum epoch, he adjudged the leaders as "The illiterate and inefficient black man, whom circumstance put into Congress. They were representatives," Dunbar decided, "but they were not representative."  

Dunbar erred in his usage of the word "copperhead" in the Fanatics. In the first chapter, portraying the situation before the beginning of the war, two citizens of the town, one of Southern birth and the other a New Englander, quarrel and the Yankee calls the other a "damned copperhead." The word "copperhead" was not used nor even invented as a political epithet until sometime after the beginning of the war. Another error of a similar character is in making a local mob hang Clement L. Vallandigham in effigy just after the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861, and while the first call for troops was

---

83 Chicago Daily News, September 14, 1899.

pending. Vallandigham did not become notorious as a Southern sympathizer until the thirty-seventh Congress, sometime after the war began. And it was not until after the close of his service in Congress in 1863 that he became so odious in Ohio as to cause his arrest. A writer should avoid anachronism. He should have read more history on the subject. One of the best episodes in the book is a description of the contrabands of the period; these were the Negro camp followers, many of whom found their way north.85

Already famous in America, his published works attracted widespread attention in Europe. A German newspaper made the point that Paul had made a great place in English literature. ("Paul Laurence Dunbar hat einer platz in der Geschichten der englischer Literatur beansprucht.")86 Another German paper inaccurately supposed that Dunbar had made a name for himself in philology. ("Auch in der Philologie haben sich Neger bereits einen Namen gemacht.")87

Early in the spring of 1900, James Weldon Johnson arranged to have Dunbar come to Jacksonville,

85 Dunbar, The Fanatics.
86 Berliner Börsencourier, March 4, 1901.
87 Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten, April 6, 1901.
Florida for a public reading. Johnson, a contemporary of Dunbar, wrote poems in dialect after the style of Dunbar. 88 Johnson commented in his autobiography that "Paul and I did not clash. I recognized his genius, and in a measure regarded myself as his disciple." 89

A reading by Dunbar was given in the St. James Hotel, Jacksonville, Florida. The affair was successful, and was attended by a large number of local white people. 90 Johnson reminisced that "his voice was a perfect musical instrument and he knew how to use it with extreme effect." 91 The next day, Johnson arranged with Mr. Campbell, the manager of the St. James, for a reading in other hotel parlors. 92

But Dunbar's visit to Jacksonville was more than professional. Johnson had, in the beginning, asked Dunbar to remain in the city a few weeks after the reading. As a result, Dunbar visited with Johnson for about six weeks. During that time, Johnson came to know Dunbar

88 Johnson, Along This Way, p. 158.
89 Ibid., p. 160.
90 Ibid., p. 159.
91 Ibid., p. 160.
92 Ibid.
intimately. 93

In the course of their talks Dunbar was shown poems written by Johnson which he had done while under the influence of Walt Whitman, poet and journalist. Dunbar read the poems and said to Johnson: "I don't like them, and I don't see what you are driving at." 94 Johnson recalled later that "He may have been justified, but I was taken aback." Johnson said that he obtained his copy of Leaves of Grass and read to Dunbar some of the things which the Dayton poet admired most. There was, at least, some personal consolation in the fact that Dunbar's verdict was the same on Whitman as it was on Johnson. 95

Before the author left Jacksonville, the black Masons decided to organize a lodge of young men and in honor of Paul, named it Paul Laurence Dunbar Lodge. The Lodge was organized and Paul and thirty men were initiated and carried through the first three degrees of masonry. Before the end of the spring season Dunbar returned to Washington. He always spoke of his stay in Jacksonville in high terms. 96

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., p. 161.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., p. 162.
The year 1901 saw the publication of *Roly Poly* and *Lil Gal*. *Lil Gal* was a collection of about ten dialect verses with illustrations by the Hampton Camera Club. However, the successes gained by Dunbar were accepted with humility—always leaving the poet with a desire to reach for greater heights. "Indeed my work becomes harder, rather than easier, as I go on simply because I am more critical of it," he observed. "I have never yet reached an elevated plateau, and I hope I shall never reach one. I believe when an author ceases to climb he ceases at the same time to lift his readers up with him."97

Perhaps the most signal honor bestowed on the author was an invitation to participate in President William McKinley's inauguration, 1901. President McKinley conferred on him the honor of a commission to act as aide with rank of Colonel in his inaugural parade. Dunbar accepted the invitation and rode in the procession, March 1, 1901.98 Matilda attended the ceremony with her son. She wore a silk evening dress. Robert Dunbar, Jr. wrote: "I am glad you enjoyed the inauguration procession. I know Uncle Paul looked like the gallant colored...

97 Interview with Dunbar, unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

98 Certificate in the Dunbar home, 219 Summit Street, Dayton, Ohio.
soldier who fought for Uncle Sam."99

At this point Dunbar had reached the pinnacle of success both at home and abroad. Now the tide began to turn. Domestic and personal tragedies mounted as drinking and martial difficulties accelerated. It was the beginning of difficult times, though his works continued to flourish mightily until his death.

CHAPTER VI

THE CLOSING YEARS: 1904-1906

The crash came early in 1902. The poet and his gifted wife separated and the beautiful home in Wasington was broken up. They were happy for a while but they did not remain so. Each was stubborn and unyielding. Rifts and separations followed one after the other and people talked publicly about Dunbar's treatment of Alice in public. One never knew when he would slap her in public, at a dance or in the street.¹ Once when the poet said disgraceful things about her at a saloon, she cried and was very shocked. Dr. Curtis, a friend, remarked that Dunbar had told him in New York that he had slapped her in Denver and she didn't seem to mind. He wondered why Alice minded it now.²

Dunbar's consideration of his mother's desire to be with him always tainted his relationship with Alice. The presence of a third party invoked jealousy between

¹Alice Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 26, 1902, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
²Ibid.
Matilda and Alice. Matilda was very hostile toward Alice after she found out about the separation. Alice tried to placate her by writing: "No matter what you think of me or what happens, I am always going to be faithful to you, for we have been through enough to stick together until the end of time." The poem "After the Quarrel" best describes Dunbar's attitude toward the separation:

AFTER THE QUARREL

So we, who've supped the self-same cup,  
To-night must lay our friendship by;  
Your wrath has burned your judgment up,  
Hot breath has blown the ashes high.  
You say that you are wronged—ah, well,  
I count that friendship poor, at best  
A bauble, a mere bagatelle,  
That cannot stand so slight a test.

I fain would still have been your friend,  
And talked and laughed and loved with you;  
But since it must, why, let it end;  
The false but dies, 'tis not the true.  
So we are favored, you and I,  
Who only want the living truth.  
It was not good to nurse the lie;  
'Tis well it died in harmless youth.

I go from you to-night to sleep.  
Why, what's the odds? why should I grieve?  
I have no fund of tears to weep  
For happenings that undeceive.  
The days shall come, the days shall go

---

3 Matilda Dunbar to Alice Dunbar, June 17, 1902, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

4 Alice Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, June 26, 1902, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Just as they came and went before,
The sun shall shine, the streams shall flow
Though you and I are friends no more.
And in the volume of my years,
Where all my thoughts and acts shall be,
The page whereon your name appears
Shall be forever sealed to me.
Not that I hate you over-much,
'Tis less of hate than love defied;
However, our hands no more shall touch,
We'll go our ways, the world is wide. 5

The separation hurt Dunbar deeply. He sent telegrams and letters from New York and Boston and received no answer. Also, he wired a friend to ask Alice if she would see him at the Wilmington station. Her reply was no. Dunbar wrote "Ma": "she is the cruelest person that God ever made and I hope never to make another advance to her. I have wasted my time and efforts." 6 In one poem after another he poured forth his tale of longing, gentle grief, and sadness. Such verses were "Heartbreak Hill," "Where Shall We Meet," "The Monk's Walk" and "To a Violet Found on All Saints Day." Thinking lightly on the situation he wrote "Jilted."

Lucy done gone back on me,
Dat's, de way wif life
Evah'ting was moving free
& T'ought I had my wife.
Den some dahky comes along,
Sings my gal a little song,

5Wiggins, Life and Works, pp. 161-162.

6Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, July 1, 1902, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Since den, evaht'ing's gone wrong
Evah day dey's strife. 7

These were productive days despite marital problems. He had already written a play in April, 1902. 8 Besides that he wrote "Plantation Child's Lullaby" in June of the same year 9 and his fourth and last novel, The Sport of the Gods. This novel treats the problems of blacks in the Northern Ghettoes. The thesis of the book is that the ill treatment of blacks in the South was no better than what awaited them in the great alley of New York. 10

Amazing is the fact that in spite of ill health and domestic troubles, Dunbar traveled and wrote in abundance. In January, 1903, he journeyed to Lawrence, Kansas, and Kansas City. Here he remained between January and March. 11 The poet was not as well received in Kansas as he had anticipated. In a letter to his mother he declared "I am not doing nearly so much reading here as I had anticipated, but I am loafing and having a good, quiet time. If I

7Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 231.
8Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, April 15, 1902, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
9Manuscripts, Box 5, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
11Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, January 24, 1903, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
think it worth while to go to California, I shall not be able to start before March and I shall stay in Denver anyway."¹² He returned to Chicago in March of 1902.

When he returned to the East coast, his agenda filled up with opportunities to read in Washington, Boston, New York, Baltimore and Ohio.¹³ Likewise he published a poem on Thanksgiving¹⁴ and wrote three volumes of poetry: *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*, *In Old Plantation Days*, and *When Malindy Sings*. Still with all of the traveling, writing and speaking he wrote his mother that "You know that I haven't got fifty dollars to my name."¹⁵

Dunbar came home to Dayton, Ohio in the fall of 1903. He was among old friends, one of the best being Dr. William Burns who became his constant attendant. But Dunbar was still lonely and tired and ill, and in his body was a fatal disease. In a way, he had come home to die:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Say, it's nice a-gittin' back} \\
\text{When your pulse is growin' slack,}
\end{align*}\]

¹²Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, February 16, 1903, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

¹³Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 8, 1903, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

¹⁴Dunbar to The Young Women's League Record, November n.d., 1903, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

¹⁵Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, September 5, 1903, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
An' your breath begins to wheeze
Like a fair-set valley breeze;
Kind o' nice to set aroun'
On the old familiar groun'
Knowing that when Death does come
That he'll find you right at home. 16

Having been home only a few weeks, Dunbar received a letter from a well meaning, but fanatical admirer. This man suggested that Paul not drink water, but drink wine, milk, mutton broth, and eat crackers, broiled mutton, honey and butter. Under no circumstances was Paul to eat vegetables. The diet, according to this gentleman, was recommended as suitable for soul, spiritual growth, and restoration. 17 However, Dunbar's health declined considerably in 1904: "I have been very ill and glad to be here at home where good nursing and good air ought to do me good, but I am afraid I am not going to be allowed a chance to stay, as the doctors are crying California, California, even as before they cried Colorado." 18

But he was well enough to write a campaign poem of four stanzas for Theodore Roosevelt in the Autumn of 1904.

There's a mighty sound a-comin'
From the East, and there's a hummin'

16 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 327.

17 Unsigned letter to Dunbar written from Chicago, September 21, 1904, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

18 Dubois, "Unpublished letters from Paul Laurence Dunbar to a friend," p. 76.
And a bummin' from the bosom of the West,
While the North has given tongue
And the South will be among
Those who holler that our Roosevelt is best.

We have heard of him in battle
And amid the roar and rattle
When the foemen fled like cattle to their stalls;
We have seen him staunch and grim
When the only battle hymn
Was the shrieking of the Spanish mauser balls.

Product of a worthy sireling.
Fearless, honest, brave, untiring—
In the forefront of the firing there he stands;
And we're not afraid to show
That we all revere him so
To dissentients of our own and other lands.

Now the fight is on in earnest,
And we care not if the sternest
Of encounters try our valor or the quality of him,
For they're few who stoop to fear
As the glorious day draws near
For you'll find him hell to handle when he gets
in fightin' trim. 19

The President acknowledged the letter by sending Paul two volumes of his speeches, "To Paul Laurence Dunbar, with the regard of November 2, 1904," 20 the inscription read.

At the same time Roosevelt wrote a letter:

My Dear Mr. Dunbar:
I am touched that you should have written me from your sick bed. I appreciate the

19 Cunningham, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 248.

20 This book is on exhibit in the Dunbar House State Memorial, 219 North Sumit Street, Dayton, Ohio.
poem. As a token of my regard, will you accept the accompanying two volumes of my speeches?

With best wishes, believe me,

Sincerely yours,

Theodore Roosevelt

Theodore Roosevelt won the approval of other blacks by inviting Booker T. Washington to dinner. He closed the Indianola, Mississippi, Post Office rather than accede to white demands that he replace the black appointee with a white man.

The famous poet was invited to read at his Alma Mater, Steele High School (formerly Central High School). "When de Co'n Pones Hot" was the opening selection. He returned as an Alumnus and an honorary member of the Philomathean Society. The Philo members occupied the first two rows of the auditorium and greeted the speaker with the old familiar yell:

Heigh ho! Heigh Ol Heigh Ol
We y'en, heigh Ol
For the old Philo!
Heigh ho! Heigh Ol Heigh Ol

After the entertainment, the society adjourned to the literary hall and heard several selections from Dunbar.

---

21 Theodore Roosevelt to Dunbar, November 2, 1904 (Manuscripts division, The Library of Congress.)


23 *Dayton Daily*, December 16, 1904.
Under great stress he persisted in producing books and poetry. There were many who corresponded with the author. Major Charles Young sent word from Port Au Prince Haiti: "They tell me that you are a fighting cock at your work; that you are still producing those essentially excellent things." Then the West Indian declared: "I hug you with my strong black arms and wish you were in this land of sun." Such letters were not always answered promptly because of Dunbar's malady. When he was well enough to answer Young's letter, he wrote a brief poem of apology:

Long silence does not mean neglect;
It only means
That we may trust to friendship to reflect
On the betweens.

The book Dunbar brought out in December of 1904 was The Heart of Happy Hollow. In the foreword the novelist asked the question, "Are you wondering where it is?"

Answering his own question he contended:

Wherever Negroes colonise in the cities or villages, north or south, wherever the hod carrier, the porter, and the waiter are the society men of the town; wherever the picnic and the excursion are the chief summer diversion, and the revival the winter time

---

24 Charles Young to Dunbar, November 30, 1904, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

25 Ibid.

26 Cunningham, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 247.
of repentance, wherever the cheese cloth veil obtains at a wedding, and the little white hearse goes by with black mourners in the one carriage behind, there---there---is Happy Hollow. Wherever laughter and tears rub elbows day by day, and the spirit of labour and laziness shake hands, there---there---is Happy Hollow.²⁷

Two stories in the book which spoke on the theme of racism were "The Lynching of Jube Benson" and "The Mission of Mr. Scatters."²⁸

Again in 1904, Dunbar was invited to participate in an inauguration day ceremony. Theodore Roosevelt, like McKinley, commissioned Dunbar to serve as aid of the Third Civic Division with the rank of a Colonel, March 4, 1905.²⁹ That same year appeared Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow, the thinnest of all the volumes except Oak and Ivy. A prominent feature of the little volume was the emphasis upon child life. "A Boy's Summer Song," "The Sand-Man," "Putting the Child Away," "The Fisher Child's Lullaby," "The Farm Child's Lullaby," and "My Muvver's Ist the Nicest One" are a few examples of his poems about children.³⁰

As Dunbar's health continued to fail in 1904, he became less optimistic. In an atmosphere of gloom and despair, the poet wrote: "I must drop you a line to let

---

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 223-240, 53-84.
²⁹ Certificate in the Dunbar home.
³⁰ Dunbar, Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow, p. 10.
you know just what bit of good for nothingness I am." The author complained that he spent most of the time in bed "studying the pattern of the ceiling" until he "could make a very clever sketch of it from memory without the trouble of learning how to draw."\(^\text{31}\) Reflecting on the importance of health education Dunbar determined that health education "ought to be taught in our schools if ever a branch needed teaching."\(^\text{32}\) As if the burden of consumption were not enough, he had a terrible fall in early January, 1905. His shoulder was injured and he had to carry his arm in a bandage.\(^\text{33}\)

Friendship was important to Dunbar. Probably, that is why he had so many friends. "My greatest help," he said "will be the knowledge that my friends keep in touch with me, and now and then a line like an electric spark flashes from one to the other and I am new again and unafraid."\(^\text{34}\)

Many friends attended him in this last year. Mrs. Eugene Field made a special trip to see him when she heard


\(^{32}\)Ibid.

\(^{33}\)Martha Evans to Dunbar, January 20, 1905, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\(^{34}\)DuBois, "Unpublished letters from Paul Laurence Dunbar to a friend," p. 76.
of his illness. Some, arriving in carriages, took the poet for drives. A university student, Miss Lulu May Clippinger, visited Paul. When she saw him he was propped up by pillows talking at length about the book he was about to put out. Dunbar said his most intimate friends outside his immediate family were white people.

During the last year of his life the author corresponded only with Booker T. Washington and "Bud" Burns. Twelve years ago, 1894, Rebekah Baldwin had commented on Paul's insatiable hunger to write. She said: "How I wish I were rich that I might make you a present of time. He should be your slave, and you should write, write, write." During the last months of his life he was too weak to write and had to hire a professional secretary. The secretary was white and did all of his stenography for nothing. She refused to take a cent of pay.

H. A. Tobey visited often. Finding the poet in despair, during one of his visits, the doctor was prompted to write a rather negative letter of encouragement.

Poor boy you are resting easy. Wish you had to fight like I do. You would forget you ever had what someone called tuberculosis.

35 Gould, That Dunbar Boy, p. 30
36 Pearson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 12.
37 Rebekah Baldwin to Dunbar, July 18, 1894, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
lossis. You poor black discouraged dying wretch, I envy you.

Four months before Dunbar's death in February, 1906, a great blow befell him. Dr. William "Bud" Burns died. 39 His qualifications were such that he had been made a member of the Montgomery County Medical Society of Ohio, the first black physician so honored. 40

The Dayton Evening Herald wrote editorially at the time of his death:

What is the secret of this widespread sorrow for William Burns? Simply that he was a man of noble nature, gentle, kindly, sincere, of fine instincts, of unerring integrity, of lofty purpose, of devotion to his chosen calling among his own people. Beginning humbly, early conceiving the ambition to acquire an education, and to succeed in life through his own efforts and upon his own merits, young Burns had reached that plane where prejudice yields before the conquering excellence of individual achievement. 41

As ill as Dunbar was he insisted on being taken to the house of Dr. Burns. Brawley disclosed that "Never afterward did he seem to realize that Bud was really gone." 42

After "Bud"'s death Dunbar's condition steadily became more critical. On the morning of February 9, 1906,

39 Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 107.
40 Conover, Saints and Prophets, p. 196.
41 Ibid., p. 198.
42 Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, p. 107.
he told "Ma," "I have made a brave fight. I have prayed to live; but it is no use; the Lord's will be done."43

No doubt it was a consolation to the aged mother that her son was conscious to the last, and his thoughts were filled with faith and hope. His last words were a fragment of the 23rd Psalm. He repeated, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—" There was a gasp and Paul Laurence Dunbar was no more.44 He died 3:30 P.M., Friday, February 9, 1906 at his residence, 219 North Summit Street, Dayton, Ohio.45

When news of Dunbar's death reached the newspapers, tributes poured forth. Whitlock sent a telegram: "You have lost a son, I have lost a friend, but America has lost more than all else, and that is a poet, in your sorrow, remember that his songs will preserve his beautiful personality for the world."46 From the Springfield Literary Union came:

Dear Madame
The race has lost a genius. The fact that he is a credit to the race of which he was

43 Box 16, Folder 4, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

identified and that by arduous and hard labor reached the pinnacle in his profession.\footnote{47}

Mary Church Terrell, civil rights fighter, wrote "The nation and the race as well as yourself have sustained an irreparable loss."\footnote{48} The Mayor of Toledo, "Golden Rule" Sam Jones, wrote to Matilda Dunbar: "You have lost a friend, but America has lost more than all else, and that is a poet. In your sorrow remember that his songs will preserve his beautiful personality for the world."\footnote{49}

Said Booker T. Washington, "I regret the loss of a sincere friend and the loss of a great man."\footnote{50} "Accept my sympathy, the widow of Eugene Field asked, "and be comforted in your son's greatness."\footnote{51}

One of the poet's publishers, Frank Dodd, assured Matilda that "his success did not disturb his self-possession or lead him to be content with anything short of the best that was in him. He has left behind him work of a high order in poetry which will make his name to be

\footnote{47}{The Springfield Literary Union to Matilda Dunbar, February 10, 1906, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).}

\footnote{48}{Dayton Herald, February 12, 1906.}

\footnote{49}{Ibid.}

\footnote{50}{Ibid.}

\footnote{51}{Mrs. Eugene Field to Dunbar, February 10, 1906, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).}
long remembered."^52

Robert Murphy, Dunbar's brother, wrote a poem:

Now lies he there, a lifeless bit of clay. 
A bit of clay from earthly sorrows free. 
Gone to his maker to meet his judgement day. 
Revealed to him now is death's mystery 
Weep not for him, for some day then shalt we 
Even as cold and dreary as he 
For it is written thou shalt surely die 
So from thy fate make no attempt to flee.^53

The funeral services were conducted at the Eaker Street African Methodist Episcopal Church to which Dunbar belonged.

Not knowing that William Burns had died in November, Alice wrote the following letter which explains her absence from Dunbar's funeral:

Dear Bud,
In 1904 you promised me that whenever Paul's illness reached a stage that was truly serious you would let me know. Knowing our home life as you did and realizing how I felt towards Paul you can imagine how I felt when I opened a paper in the car last Saturday morning. Oh, I thought you might have spared me that shock.
I shall go to my grave unforgettable... that... I was of so small account in Paul's life that not one of you remembered to say to me, He is dead.^54

---

^52 Frank Dodd to Matilda Dunbar, February 12, 1906, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

^53 Dayton Herald, February 12, 1906.

^54 Alice Dunbar to Bud Burns, February 14, 1906, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
The final chapter in the career of Paul Laurence Dunbar was closed on Monday afternoon, February 12, 1906, with the consignment of his earthly remains to the receiving vault at Woodland Cemetery, Dayton, Ohio.

The life work of the late poet was eulogized by four of the black leaders in the Dayton Community during the morning of February 12. (J. C. Farrow, John M. Butler, D. E. Bush and H. O. Williams). They resolved that "the invaluable service rendered by Dunbar to his race, the nation and to the world of letters he is held by us as a precious legacy and a constant inspiration to go forward in the work of uplifting, ennobling and unifying the race."55

55Cleveland Gazette, February 17, 1906.
CHAPTER VII

DUNBAR IN HISTORY

Easy would it be--indeed it is usual--to write the history of America without reference to Paul Laurence Dunbar. It is impossible—or at any rate it would be absurd—to write the life of Dunbar without reference to American history, 1872-1906. One of the responsibilities of the historian is to add new facts and/or to make new interpretations of the relations between facts. Viewed in this context, to endeavor the history of a poet about whom so much is written becomes one of the more difficult historical pursuits.

One of the glories of the period, 1865-1914 was the discovery by many of one aspect in particular of America's rich native folklore, the folk songs. Writers fitted poetic words with music which they were familiar with.¹ These folk songs probably had little appeal to that sizable group which thought that poetry had to be elegant, genteel, and ornamental. A number of poets wrote instead

---

of folk songs, folk poetry. Some of these Whittier, for instance, used ballad verse and employed language with ballad-like simplicity. Others in various parts of the country wrote dialect verse. During this period, Dunbar's dialect was given a favorable hearing by William Dean Howells. Howells discovered so many writers during the 1890's that Clyde Fitch called the 1890's "Howells age." That eminent critic and writer, who was to champion Frank Norris and Robert Frost as he had welcomed Mark Twain to the Atlantic Monthly, acclaimed Paul Laurence Dunbar as the first outstanding black author.

Henry W. Grady, the colleague of Joel Chandler Harris on the Atlantic Constitution, and William Hines Page, Ambassador to England, deplored the sterility and stagnation of the post bellum South. For them, Southern greatness lay in the past before the "cotton kingdom" was wrenched away from its old path of leadership. These gentlemen hoped for a revival of the great realistic South of the generation before 1830. The deep agrarian instinct of the South rejected the urban conceptions of indus-

---

2Ibid.


4Ibid., p. 41.
trialism and business. Industrialization was a violation of the typical Southern way of life. Thomas Nelson Page was a writer of the pre-war South whose hospitality he especially liked to picture along with the "Uncle Tom" blacks after emancipation. In the hands of the white dialect writers like Page, blacks were inclined to "elaborate on their family connections before the war, how fine the carriages were, how grand was the house and how the "niggers [sic] were thick as weeds."

Living in a world of new consequences of the reconstruction era, and the ugliness of a new industrial complex, Dunbar sometimes forgot his real existence. His other existence was within an imagination where he, like other romantic poets, satisfied his hunger for the sentimental. There his thoughts were unskackled, and his imagination could play with time and space, shaping the superficiality of the plantation epoch. Militant blacks criticized Dunbar's caricatures, but the whites enjoyed literature in the "shadow of the plantation." Some of

5Ibid., p. 42.
6Ibid.
7Ibid., p. 45.
8Ibid.
the blacks did too!

While Dunbar and others were writing about the ideal life on the plantation, there were those who saw the dehumanizing aspect of the period. The happy black American was coming to be regarded by vast numbers of blacks as mythical. That group forecast a new black attitude, a more realistic one. The new order, the men who represented these radicals, were militant, were insistent, repudiating compromise, and rejecting any paradise of hopes deferred. They dreamed of a world in which Afro-Americans would have freedom, equality, and justice—not in some dim, distant future, but presently—here and now. All the same, plantation poetry was in vogue because such themes were the mood and temper of the day.

Indeed, this was the Gilded Age—strange and puzzling, like all ages. The period lacked knowledge, discipline, historical perspective and an intellectual incapacity to deal with the complexities of a world passing through the twin revolutions of industrialism and science. For all the corruption of the period, it was nonetheless a robust, fearless, generous era full of gusto and joy of living, affording wide scope to individual energy and creation. And although not one of the greatest eras in American arts and letters, it was far from being

---

barren in these or in spiritual forces.

The age saw the publication of excellent American fiction and imaginative literature. The American attitude toward culture was suspicious and indulgent. It required that culture serve some useful purpose. Americans desired poetry that they could recite, music that they could sing, paintings that told a story. Stephen Foster was their beloved composer and Currier & Ives their favorite artists.12

Writers for the first time found a sufficiently large audience to make literature a really profitable profession. And much writing was geared to the task of training of the masses; this meant that standards were lowered or ignored. On the other hand, the gains were impressive. The common men and women now tended to become less hostile toward writers, while the habit of reading aloud became generally popular.13

The ills of industrialization, the pains of corrupt politics, and the evils of racism, too, characterized this


period. Social and political problems increased in the city. Urban population grew rapidly. Few people worried very much about these national ills since they were taken to be inevitable pains of growth. The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was made against a background of economic disorder, panic, and depression. Every interest was affected by the economic depression that struck the country in the late 1880's. The effect of this transition on the workman was tremendous. His living condition passed from country to city life. Urban population nearly doubled.

The changes were so sudden that little attention was paid to healthy working conditions until the necessity of such attention had been shown by experience and an awakened public conscience. The awakened conscience was motivated by muckraking books like Lincoln Steffens' *Shame of the Cities* and Upton Sinclair's, *Jungle*. Meanwhile, George Washington Plunkitt and cohorts of Tammany Hall bathed in "honest graft" and defended their action against the Civil Service Law and the direct primary election. 

---


15 Commager, *The American Mind*, p. 50.

Significant civil service reforms were enacted, and hundreds of blacks were appointed or elected to local offices. However, the press and the demagogues incited the white population against the blacks. The result of this activity along with the national debacle of populism in 1896 brought on a split in the fusion ranks and in 1898 the Democrats "rode to victory" in local campaigns. That same year the Wilmington, North Carolina, riot wrought a holocaust of death and destruction in which scores of blacks were beaten and killed by mobs. The Dayton poet, just twenty-four then, observed the victory of hate and vehemently spoke out:

Land, from the South Damascan cries
Fall on our ears, unheeded still
No helping powers stir and rise,
Hate's opiate numbs the nation's will
Slumber the North (while Honor dies!)
Soothed by the insidious breath of lies.

Dunbar had been rather silent since 1896 about politics. On the silver question during the Bryan campaign of 1896,

18 Ibid., p. 284.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 285.
21 Toledo Journal, December 1, 1898. This poem was never published in his works.
he wrote:

\[\text{An' hit ain't de so't o'money dat is pesterin' my min'}\]
\[\text{But de question I want answered's How to get at any kin'}.\]

As the new century approached, blacks became progressively pessimistic. Rayford Logan called it the "nadir." This low point was shaped by racism and a solidification of disenfranchisement and segregation in the South. Even so, some blacks were happy just to be alive. Dunbar's brother, Will, in a letter to Matilda declared:

\[\text{I hope the importance of the incoming century has impressed you. Just to think, God willing, we shall be permitted to see the birth of a century. In Chicago, they are talking of illuminating all the houses} \]
\[\ldots \text{It will be the grandest illumination ever witnessed in this city}.\]

Regardless of the optimism, the century was a moment of violence and racism. Racism was intensified during this era. The period saw the new imperialism and the jingoism of James G. Blaine, but it also observed the immigration restriction movements, the race riots, and increased lynchings. Samuel Eliot Morison said that the

22Dunbar, Howdy, Honey, Howdy, p. 15.


24Will Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, December 30, 1899 Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

age was the "most lawless... that America has ever known."26

Over 1,500 blacks had been lynched in the United States since 1859.27 Ida B. Wells' *A Red Record* was the first book to document the crime of lynching. In 1895, two years after she was driven out of Memphis for publishing information exposing those who had taken part in a lynching, she published the record.28 According to the accounts printed in the daily press, 1665 blacks were lynched in the decade ending in 1899. James Weldon Johnson wrote, "numbers of them were lynched with a savagery that was... nothing short of torture, mutilation and burning alive at the stake."29 In Montgomery, Alabama, four were lynched at once. Dunbar was moved to write the "Haunted Oak," a poem protesting lynching. The poem reveals an author very different from the one who wrote dialect poems. That the editor of the *Century* magazine


dared to print a piece so intensely realistic was a testimonial to the openmindedness of the editor and his associates. One New York newspaper reported nine lynchings in one week in Arkansas. Some were burned at the stake, others were roasted alive or hanged, or knifed, or mutilated. The New York Daily World reported a black hanged by the heels and K's cut into his body. A Georgia posse warned that "If the Negroes are captured the death awarded them will be out of the ordinary."  

Ohio was not much better. During a lynching in Springfield, Ohio, not only was a black hanged, but the mob threatened to lynch a judge. They burned the black saloons, and efforts to punish them were perfunctory. The most obnoxious part about it all was the fact that in most cases the victim was innocent. The Denver Daily News reported that "A great part of those lynchings have been of men against whom the crime was never proven. . . . The race cry is raised and on the only pretext which serves, he is removed."  

According to Booker T. Washington, "The

30 Ginzburg, 100 Years of Lynchings, pp. 1, 24, 26, 75.


33 Denver Daily News, September 24, 1899.
custom of burning human beings has become so common as scarcely to excite interest or attract unusual attention.  

Paul Dunbar was saddened by the political disfranchisement, the horrible lynchings, and the social injustice to which his race was subjected. In protest he wrote a poem on the South and its new slavery:

TO THE SOUTH

Heart of the Southland, heed me pleading now,  
Who bearest, unashamed, upon my brow  
The long kiss of the loving tropic sun,  
And yet, whose veins with thy red current run.

Borne on the bitter winds from every hand,  
Strange tales are flying over all the land,  
And Condemnation, with his pinions foul,  
Glooms in the place where broods the midnight owl.

Too long we hear the deep impassioned cry  
That echoes vainly to the heedless sky;  
Too long, too long, the Macedonian call  
Falls fainting far beyond the outward wall,

Within whose sweep, beneath the shadowing trees,  
A slumbering nation takes its dangerous ease;  
Too long the rumors of thy hatred go  
Is it for this we all have felt the flame,—shame?  
Nay, not for this, a nation's heroes bled,  
And North and South with tears beheld their dead.  

Yet it was a period of national optimism for most Americans.

---


35 Wiggins, Life and Works, pp. 292-293.
The epoch in which the poet-novelist began his writing was not a satisfactory time for Afro-Americans in this country. Amelia Douglass, daughter of Frederick Douglass, in corresponding with Alice Dunbar concluded: "We are in the midst of our Peace Jubilee or rather some kind of a Jubilee, but we colored people are not a part of it, for us there is no peace!"  

The 1890's were mired in discriminatory laws and practices. None of the reforms had much meaning for the minority groups. Segregation was declared constitutional and the lynchings of blacks accelerated. A number of blacks gained political power but it left a wake of white resentments. Presidential candidates of both parties sought Southern white votes at the expense of black rights. However dismal the black picture looked, black leaders during these years strove to advance their people through a series of accommodations and protests. Booker Washington, sought a modus vivendi with Southern and Northern whites based on accommodations in return for greater opportunities.  

To Dunbar, Washington was "a peer of princes in the world's acclaim." The author admired him. Following

---

36 Amelia Douglass to Alice Dunbar, May 24, 1899, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


38 Manuscripts, Box 7, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
is a poem written especially for Washington:

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

The word is writ that he who runs may read,
What is the passing breath of earthly fame?
But to snatch glory from the hands of blame—
That is to be, to live, to strive indeed.
A poor Virginia cabin gave the seed,
And from its dark and lowly door there came
A peer of princes in the world’s acclaim,
A master spirit for the nation’s need.
Strong, silent, purposeful beyond his kind,
The mark of rugged force on brow and lip,
Straight on he goes, nor turns to look behind
Where hot the hounds come baying at his hip;
With one idea foremost in his mind,
Like the keen prow of some on-forging ship.39

Black leaders were divided. There were three responses to the black question: (1) some felt that the Afro-American should stoop to conquer; that he should accept in silence the denial of certain political and social rights; (2) others believed that the black man owed America no apology for his presence and (3) others remained detached.40 The above sentence is more applicable to Dunbar; but there were times when Dunbar felt that being black made him no less a man, and that he should refuse to be assigned to an inferior place by his fellow man.41

39 Ibid.

40 An essay in The Reverdy Cassius Ransom Papers, n.d. (Carnegie Library, Wilberforce University, Xenia, Ohio).

Racism kept him from rising to the best that was in him. Reflecting on this, he set down his thoughts in a poem. He exclaimed: "Break me my bounds, and let me fly to regions vast of boundless sky." He wanted to be free like other human beings, or as he put it, "I would be free as yon same bird that in its flight outstrips the range of mortal sight." Notwithstanding the restrictions, few poets in America before Dunbar were able to "capture so completely," Franklin says, "the spirit of some aspect of American life, and to distill it into such delightful verse." He had an intuitive understanding of the needs and desires of the white public of his day, and he profited by providing it. Earl E. Thorpe suggests that "Each media stereotype or dictates its own environment."

The more militant blacks followed W. E. B. DuBois to Niagara Falls, Canada, where in June, 1905, they drew up a plan for aggressive action. These young radicals decided that the day of apology was over. They were not only aggressive, but determined to fight to the finish. Out of this kind of attitude emerged the N.A.A.C.P.

42 Manuscripts, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

43 Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, p. 411.


In the meanwhile, in Ohio, where the poet was born, the minority group had nothing resembling equality with the white man in social or industrial life. Blacks were refused admittance to public places and conveyances, they were barred from the labor unions and they usually made their living by personal services.\textsuperscript{46} In a brief general summary, Quillin reported that in almost every city he was an inhabitant of the most undesirable outskirt.\textsuperscript{47} Only two poets from Ohio at the beginning of the century were national or even state figures. One was Ridgely Torrence of Xenia, Ohio, and the other, Paul Laurence Dunbar. Ridgely was educated at Miami and Princeton universities, while Dunbar was operating the elevator in the Callahan Building, Dayton, Ohio.\textsuperscript{48}

More than 15,000 blacks lived in Montgomery County at the height of Dunbar's career.\textsuperscript{49} These Afro-Americans were subject to the worst kind of prescriptions.\textsuperscript{50} Some


\textsuperscript{47}Quillin, \textit{The Color Line}, p. 166.

\textsuperscript{48}Lindley, \textit{Ohio in the Twentieth Century}, p. 275.

\textsuperscript{49}Census of Ohio (Columbus: Fred J. Heer, 1901), pp. 7, 56.

\textsuperscript{50}Quillin, \textit{The Color Line}, pp. 134-139.
places refused to sell to them. A leading clothing store of the city refused to allow women to purchase garments. Restaurants refused to serve them. The above was true despite the fact that state law forbade discrimination. Labor unions did not admit black members. In 1886 the Brick-layers Union in the city of Dayton struck demanding higher wages. The black element in the group joined the strikers but when the employers called the union back to work, they would not employ black members. Blacks were not employed to teach in the public schools; there was one black policeman and one black fireman.  

The prejudice and segregation cited had grown steadily since the Civil War.  

To reiterate, Mark Twain called this age the "Gilded Age" and Louis Wright intimated that materialism so abounded that it perverted tastes and debauched the intellectual life of the country. Quillin referred to the times as "an age of crassness and vulgarity."  

Dunbar began his work when the general emphasis in American literature was on the sentimental. Also special emphasis was on what were supposed to be the good times before the war. He was affected deeply by that strong

\[51\text{Ibid.}\]

\[52\text{Ibid., p. 289.}\]
appeal. 53 And although much of his poetry was in plantation dialect, a large number of blacks North and South identified with it. Brawley indicated in his book that "In Dunbar, young blacks as well as the old found an idol. He was their own. His triumphs were their triumphs. They forgave his mistakes too. They heard about marital difficulties, his health and his travels. Young blacks recited his poems and saw in him what was possible for them." 54


54 Ibid., p. 10.
CHAPTER VIII

DIALECT ET LA NEGRITEDE

Are Dunbar's writings "black," or do they qualify him as a chief "Uncle Tom" writer of his race, or both? Dunbar cannot be exonerated from all charges of "Uncle Tomism." The present writer does not claim to make the poet black. Yet the degree of "blackness" in his works must also be estimated.

A poem is first of all an act of pure creation. Prompted by an idea, enhanced by rhyme and colored by metaphor, it may appear to be the simplest of expressions. Yet, the poem may be beyond logical analysis. The writings of Paul Dunbar often belong to the category of pure art. But in many of his pages, the works may be said to have an aim. This aim sometimes manifests itself in the garb of black self-hood.¹ The phenomenon of "La Negritude" developed principally among poets of African descent, writing the French language in the nineteenth century. Negritude is obviously based on race consciousness, but

it has avoided the move into racism. Analysis of the writings of the advocates of Negritude, especially the more militant ones, confirms such. Jean Paul Sartre was the first to reflect upon the anti-racist aspects of the concept: "Negritude is an anti-racist racism... which leads to an ultimate synthesis of a common humanity." In fewer words, Negritude is race conscious, but it is not racist in outlook. The chief elements in Negritude are adulation of blackness, an assertion of a unique cultural gift peculiar to blackness, and a non-racist attitude. Negritude asserts black genius and at the same time the determination to reveal this genius to the world. It proves to the world something the world has consistently denied--the dignity of the Black race. The sense of communion and the gift of rhythm are the essential elements of Negritude, "which," Senghor says, "one finds

---


3Thomas Addo Quaynor, "The Politicization of Negritude," (Unpublished Doctorate Dissertation, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 1965), p. 96; Leon G. Damas is one of the founders of the philosophical concept of Negritude. Negritude started out as a literary rebellion against France's assimilation program, which reflects that they were French often to the point of neglecting to teach them about their own countries. Later, the movement was to become political as well as a movement for black identification.

4Ibid.

indelibly stamped on all the works and activities of the black man. 6 "Finally," he declares, "our Negritude is humanistic." 7

The literary use of the term in the United States is related to the commonly held belief that the black man has been denied an acceptable place in the American culture. The term Negritude implies that denial. 8 In the present discussion, Negritude is always used as a term synonymous with black consciousness and black identity in America.

Dunbar attempted, by means of his writing, to create black consciousness in his black readers. He was not a revolutionary, neither did he articulate propaganda. But he felt the anger and the accompanying rage of his people. Still less was he a guerrilla fighter. He was not a spokesman for "Black English;" but he was cognizant of the fact that through over two centuries of bondage, blacks were denied the privilege of becoming literate. In his


7 Ibid.

more serious poems in literary English, he concerned himself with the injustices of which people of color in his generation were victims. Therefore his name may be added to the long list of blacks who consciously identified with all the efforts to gain the rights and privileges of a citizen in this democracy. 9

Dunbar charged that blacks were crowded out of many occupations "because of the prejudice which preferred the alien to the citizen." 10 When the Kentucky Legislature was discussing the passage of a separate coach bill in 1890, Miss Mary Britton, a teacher in the schools of Lexington, Kentucky, appeared before them. In a ringing speech she protested against the passage of the bill. Dunbar praised her efforts with a poem, "To Miss Mary Britton." "Too long thy children mourn in labor and travail," he wrote. "O speed the happy day when waiting ones may see the glory—bringing birth of our real liberty." He realized "that not in word alone shall freedom's boon be ours," but the "hind'ring bars" must be broken to "make us free indeed." 11

---


10 News clipping, 1895-1906, Box 15, Dunbar Papers, (Ohio Historical Society).

11 Dunbar, Oak and Ivy, p. 30.
Black poetry is functional. There is but one purpose which all such poetry attempts with more or less success—and that is to relate to black experiences.\textsuperscript{12} Dunbar, of course, wrote within the social context of his day. His Negritude was conditioned by the circumstances faced by black artists of his epoch.

Dunbar, to present-day black writers who are even more conscious of race than he, may appear superficial. Beginning somewhat with Marcus Garvey, "Black" has progressively become a fashionable color. It had become something not to be apologized for but to be exploited. In the 1920's one heard much about the "New Negro." Now "Black is Beautiful;" "I'm black and I'm proud," are the "in" words used by blacks at all social levels.

However, in Dunbar's time Black was not so revered. Blacks had to justify their place in America. This meant adherence to white attitudes and an effort to meet white standards of excellence.\textsuperscript{13} At that time, Dunbar's Negritude was always a matter of articulating blackness under the tutelage of white publishing houses. Therefore, racism played a large part in dictating the extent of black consciousness in his writings. In the final analy-


\textsuperscript{13}Brawley, \textit{Paul Laurence Dunbar}, p. 77.
sis, one must appreciate Dunbar's writings in their historical perspective.

Black dialect is easily caricatured. This language often has been used to represent the illiterate specimens of Afro-Americans found in the rural isolated regions of the South. That tendency in literature to caricature and misrepresent blacks indicted the higher class of blacks who did not use such crude dialect. W. S. Scarborough called it the "ridiculous fabrications for the almighty dollar. Surely," he said, "we ought to enter a protest against this common practice."14

True, Dunbar's poetry used local color and a Southern setting,15 and what he called dialect was really the old linguistic barbarisms of the days of slavery. Poetry in dialect helped to inflate the myth that blacks were full of silliness, and that their talk was peppered with childish exaggeration.16 W. J. Cash points out that such attachment rested on force. He said that "the black man occupied the position of a mere domestic animal,

14William S. Scarborough Papers (Carnegie Library, Wilberforce University).

15Unpublished biography, Archibald Grimke Papers (Founders Library, Howard University).

without will or right of his own." The lash lurked always in the background.17

The jovial, accommodating blacks in Dunbar's writings were the slaves and domestic servants in the best of the white families. In these situations there were bonds of intimacy, affection, and sometimes blood relationships between the races. The songs of those days depicted a joyous life for the slave--a careless and happy one.18 Dunbar's plantation poetry was popular with the white audiences who wished to believe the best about slavery. Perhaps there was something satisfying about black humour in the cotton fields that some white Americans were loath to relinquish.19

Dialect, as Dunbar used it, was not intentionally derogatory, rather it was used as a living language. Community, geography, and environment have always influenced speech patterns.20 His works revealed certain sympathies 


with the lowly life of his people. Nonetheless, inherent in it is superficiality and deception.

DuBois declared: "Deception is the natural defense of the weak against the strong." Blacks used it for many years against the Caucasian race. Dunbar was no exception. Blacks on the surface appeared acquiescent and contented, but the appearance was deceptive. With a quick intuitive understanding of what was required of them they were usually able to make their masters "believe in them as honestly as they believed in so many other doubtful things." Having acquired a knowledge of the white man's psychology, blacks molded and tempered their actions and attitudes in light of their knowledge. They knew that laughter was the one weapon which would enable them to survive. So they sang their "gay nonsense music, the laughing, desperate music of heartbreak. They made jokes and turned upon themselves. They became minstrels--buffoons," one black author noted. "We Wear the Mask" pictures the problems then faced by all Afro-Americans:

---


23 Cash, Mind of the South, p. 87.

24 Johnson, Along This Way, p. 159.
We smile, but O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise
We wear the mask. 25

The real harm of Dunbar's poetry in dialect was
that it portrayed only one kind of black man, a fact which
gave credulence to the opinion held by some whites that
the typical black man was the kind of person pictured in
the "coon" songs and the police reports. 26 Dunbar's
mistake in much of his poetry was to write of the black
man as a single being. There was the black of the cotton
field. There was the black of the gambling den. On the
other hand, there was the black school teacher, business-
man, professional man, the minister, and the social worker.
Of all types and all degrees of honor and ability and
outlook, blacks had all the problems of their white
counterparts and many which race added.

It is interesting that as a student in high school
Dunbar attracted the attention of his teachers, not be-
cause of his poems in black dialect, but because he
exhibited rare signs of promise in the production of

25 Manuscripts--Prose and Poetry, Box 5, Dunbar
Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

26 Macy, American Writers on American Literature,
p. 444.
English lyric poetry. Here, his verses later occasioned
the favorable comments of such men as James Whitcomb
Riley, James Herne, Dr. James Ridpath, and Colonel Robert
Ingersoll. This was before he had made any serious efforts
in dialect. Following is Dunbar's personal opinion of
dialect after he had gained fame because of it:

As to your remarks about my dialect, I have
nothing to say save that I am sorry to find
among intelligent people those who are unable
to differentiate dialect as a philological
branch from Negro minstrelsy.27

No doubt the poet received as many accolades for his
recitations in dialect on stage as he did for his writ-
ings. The oral tradition of the African civilization
influenced the poetry by Dunbar. One example is the Ibo
language. Ibo is a tone language. Suppose there are
seven tones in speaking which correspond to seven notes
in the key of C (C through B). If one sings n'akwa to
the notes E-B, it might mean sitting. If one sings it to
the notes F-D, it might mean crying. Add to this possi-
bilities of mood, accents, and rhythm and one has a
primitive tone language. The dialect poetry of Dunbar
to a degree reflects that aspect of African heritage.28

27 Dunbar to Helen Douglass, October 22, 1896,
Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

28 William Melvin Kelley, "On Africa in the United
"The African civilization was an oral rather than a written civilization," Malvin Kelley asserts. 29

The dialect in Dunbar's poetry had a lyrical, musical quality. This being so, he has often been called the "chief singer of his race." Such aspects of his poetry are identifiable with his black heritage, a heritage inclusive of rhythm and music. His poem, "A Negro Love Song," exemplifies Dunbar's sense of rhythm, music and oral tradition:

Seen' my lady home last night,
Jump back, honey jump back.
Hel' huh han' an sque'z it tight,
Jump back, honey, jump back.
Hyeahi huh sign a little sigh,
Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye,
An' a smile go flittin by--
Jump back, honey, jump back. 30

To discover the root source of Dunbar's black consciousness, one must work down to the very marrow of his being, his heritage, his blackness. One learns that there is a great deal more to Dunbar than his plantation poetry.

At least today, one knows that not only did Africa possess a peculiar fauna and flora, but distinctive musical forms and rhythms as well. The African drums produced a variety of beats and an exotic blending of rhythms. And this syncopated beat cleverly woven into dialect became

29 Ibid., p. 15.
30 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 168.
the distinctive mark of Dunbar's poetry.

The Ashanties\textsuperscript{31} were able to convey messages over great distances by means of drums. These drums were set in different keys and their sounds could be heard as actual spoken words, or made to reproduce them. That anthropological characteristic has remained untouched and unspoiled in Africa as well as America.\textsuperscript{32} Though uprooted, he brought such cultural "baggage" with him. The drum language was spoken with musical intonation. West Africa before the exodus possessed a language of tones or a tonic language. The parallel between Dunbar's poetry in dialect and the exotic blending of African rhythms and musical forms is discernible when one delves beneath the "jingle in a broken tongue."\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31}The kingdom of Ashanti was located in West Africa, in an area west of the Volta River, in what is modern South Central Ghana (the Gold Coast). A majority of the ancestors of today's Afro-Americans came from West Africa. Kenneth G. Goode, \textit{From Africa To The United States and Then... (Atlanta: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1969), pp. 1, 12.}

\textsuperscript{32}"The Drum Language of West Africa," \textit{Journal of the African Society, XXI, pp. 226-227, 228-229.}

\textsuperscript{33}As a writer of dialect, Dunbar is widest known, and though he was pleased to have the distinction, he sometimes fretted that people did not give more attention to his conventional poems. In these lines, from the poet he confessed to it: "He sang of love when earth was young and love, itself was in his days, But oh, the world, it turned to praise, a jingle in a broken tongue." Manuscript, Box 5, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
In the case of oppressed races particularly there is a tendency for a sentimental solidarity to develop among the racially conscious. At the turn of the century, Dunbar, more than any other black poet, offered a symbol of black leadership which young blacks admired and respected. 34 He was their "Poet." During his day and for many years he was a race hero much as Cassius Clay and Martin Luther King, Jr. were to be for a later generation. The name of Paul Laurence Dunbar invoked a feeling of black pride and dignity.

Whenever the poet dealt with the harsher aspects of black selfhood, he discarded not only dialect, but also child-like simplicity. 35 In place of this emerged a militant Negro. "Black Samson" of Brandywine 36 describes Black Samson as a giant black armed with a scythe who sweeps his way through the red ranks. Dunbar portrays Samson "Black as the pinions of night swinging his scythe like a mower over a field of grain." Referring to Black Samson as "my hero," he related that the giant was "honest, noble, and fine." The unpublished poem, "Our Hopes and


36 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 286.
Home

37 sees the author commenting on the courage of the black soldier on the battlefield:

Tramp, tramp, tramp the negro's [sic] marching, Onward, onward, to the goal. So then foremen, clear the track, For you cannot keep him back, He has got the fire of freedom in his soul.38

A similar poem, "Colored Soldiers," stirred the black man in exactly the same way as The Charge of the Light Brigade aroused the Victorian Englishman.39 And in "Emancipation," another unpublished work, Dunbar admonishes his "Brothers" to look:

Up! Men and brothers, be noble, be earnest. Ripe is the time and success is assured;  . . . 40

Not only did he include protest in his works, but he justified violence as well. "You know well," he wrote in his own newspapers, "that the Afro-American is not one to remain silent under oppression or even fancied oppression. When kicking is needed they know how to kick."41 He wrote

37This poem is unmentioned in any of the biographies or writings about Dunbar. Manuscript, Box 5, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

38Ibid.

39Redding, To Make a Poet Black, p. 64.

40Ibid.

41The Tattler, I, December 27, 1890.
in 1899 that: "Violence is always deplorable and harmful to everyone." But, he added, "you know that some men will persist in kicking a dog until it bites. Thus, the race fights teach a continual lesson."42

Know that your fate was the hardest and almost
When through those lash-ringing days you endured.
Never again shall the manacles gall you.
Never again, shall the ship stroke defame!
 Nobles and Farmers, your destinies call you
 Onward to honor, to glory, and fame.43

The Denver Sunday Post published Dunbar's article, "The Hapless Southern Negro," on September 17, 1899. He began the article by stating that he was on a business tour for the purpose of "looking into the condition of the people themselves." The conditions for the black man were deplorable; dilapidated cabins, mortgaged homes, etc. "But," he hastened to say, "They have industry. They will work. Two hundred and fifty years of enforced labor has proven that. The whip of the overseer was not more potent a factor to draw forth their best efforts forty years ago then would be... the breezy example of their fellows in the west." He added, "There is not a field or a city in

42 The Denver Republican (September 13, 1899).

43 Written September 22, 1890. Manuscript, Box 5, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
the Southland that has not felt the influence of their labor." Dunbar realized that Afro-Americans "have their idle, but they have their industrious. They have their criminal, but they have their virtuous. They have their high and they have their low. To sum it all up, they are strictly human." He then asserted that the blood and sweat of black people had "gone to give to the South whatever wealth it possesses today." Furthermore, the author predicted: "Should he come west, he will give her wealth without a question. He will go on your farms and ranches and into your mines... and the mountains at night shall hear his Southern son transferred to the West."44

Reviewers of the poet-novelist generally agree that he was a plantation apologist. There is a certain amount of truth in this appraisal. But some of his writings also emphasized the inequalities to which black Americans fell victim. These poems may be grouped into five classes: (1) those which pay tribute to leaders and champions of blacks, (2) those which stress the dignity and worth of the individual, (3) those which are an expression of hope for the future, (4) those which tell of the contribution of black soldiers in the country's wars, (5) those which

protest discrimination and lynching.\footnote{45}

Dunbar wrote in a tribute to Harriet Beecher Stowe that she is "a prophet and priestess who gave a race to freedom and herself to fame."\footnote{46} The poem, "Frederick Douglass"\footnote{47} is a lament on the passing of a great Civil Rights leader. Dunbar recorded that this black leader even in the face of blame and opposition was "strong, silent, purposeful." Douglass, he wrote, "was the master spirit for the nation's need."

The poem "Religion" shows the dignity and worth which Dunbar recognized in every individual:

For human wants and human needs
Are more to me than prophets' deeds;
And human tears and human cares
Affect me more than human prayers.\footnote{48}

An unpublished, undated, and untitled poem reminds one that he had "one great ambition and that was to be a leader of the simplest colored folks."\footnote{49} Also, a part of this obligation was being a representative black leader.


\footnote{46} Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 223.

\footnote{47} Ibid., p. 139.

\footnote{48} Ibid., p. 160.

\footnote{49} Manuscript, Box 5, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
Defining the black leader in 1903, he judged: "To have achieved something for the betterment of his race rather than for the aggrandizement of himself, seems to be a man's best title to be called representative." Earlier he had written: "My ambition is to make closer studies of my people. I don't want to write about the higher walks of life for I know very little in that field. The slums attract me, but at the same time I am not a missionary. If true art elevates, then I may accomplish something towards doing good in the world."  

Optimism and faith in a just future for the black man are evidenced in "Slow through the Dark" and "By Rugged Ways."

"Slow moves the pageant of a climbing race;"
Then
A Moses who shall smite the rock
call Manna from the Giver's hand
and lead us to the promised land."  

The same undaunted hope is expressed in his "On the Dedication of Dorthy Hall."

Not to the midnight of the gloomy past,
Do we revert to-day; we look upon
The golden present and the future vast
Whose vistas show us vision of the
Dawn.  

51Denver Daily News, September 13, 1899.
52Wiggins, Life and Works, pp. 289, 291.
53Ibid., p. 291.
The inspiration for the poem was the dedication of the new women's dormitory at Tuskegee, Alabama, April 22, 1901. 54

Dunbar's faith and optimism enlarged his contention that racism would not last. In Omaha, Oklahoma, two years before his death, he reiterated the faith he had always had. Speaking of the race problem, Dunbar said: "I believe it is one that will solve itself and all the sooner if those interested in it will talk and write less and work more." He was against those who would "drown the race to mechanical occupations." Here he takes a position similar to Dubois, a position that Dunbar would continue to hold. "I should have been very unhappy if condemned to follow a handicraft. Give the Negro," he said, thorough industrial training, and if any among them are able to get above this, let them do it." 55 Dunbar said also that "Race prejudice will die in time." 56

A well-known fact, substantiated in many sources, is that most of Dunbar's friends and patrons were white, some of whom were quite liberal for the era. They encouraged Dunbar to rise to the opportunity of leading his

54 Ibid.

55 World Herald, October 7, 1904.

56 The Denver Republican, September 13, 1899.
people. Brand Whitlock, reform Mayor of Toledo, Ohio, wrote: "All true poetry is prophecy, and you are a poet and a prophet." He reminded Dunbar of his responsibility to help his race and "have a part in bringing these things to pass in a day long after our own time. . . ."\textsuperscript{57} Later Whitlock wrote, "I cannot get away from the conviction that I am an unwilling participant in it all." Alluding to overt, racial attitudes toward fellow human beings, Mayor Whitlock went on: "It all comes from society's trained habit of separating people into classes. Founded on various false and artificial distinctions in regarding some people not as people, but as poor people, as bad people, or black people, or some other kind of people. This is the fundamental difficulty; the basic error and out of it grows all these awful deeds. Give every man a chance and life will be happy for all."\textsuperscript{58}

Mayor Samuel M. Jones of Toledo, comparing the anti-slavery movement with the social reforms of 1898, wrote, "We need and must have a new emancipation from the slavery of our competition system that makes men regard each other as enemies instead of brothers and brings out the very

\textsuperscript{57}Brand Whitlock to Dunbar, n.d., Box 1, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

\textsuperscript{58}\textit{Ibid.}
worst in us instead of the best as would be the case if we lived as brothers instead of competitors." He insisted that Dunbar could "be a great helper in the work of reform." Mayor Jones wrote further that "I yet hope to hear you sing for the disinherited and downtrodden millions of black and white as Lowell and Whittier sang for the black slaves fifty years ago."  

Only one day before Dunbar's death his brother Robert encouraged him to go South or to a warmer climate for his health. "Try hard to get well," Robert urged. "Ma needs you, I need you, Leck and the children need you and the race needs you--for there are too few of you to let one go."  

The race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina, 1898, were vehemently condemned by Dunbar. Defending the intellectual potential of blacks in 1900, he deplored the lynchings and murders of members of his race. Critically observing these injustices in the South, Dunbar penned "The Tragedy of Three Folks." There he points out the

59 Samuel Jones to Dunbar, December 12, 1898, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

60 Ibid.

61 Robert Murphy to Dunbar, December 12, 1898, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
justification used by some for hangings. 62 "The Wisdom of Silence" and "The Lynching of Jube Benson" are other examples of protest fiction. 63 In "The Wisdom of Silence," Jeremiah Anderson refuses help from his ex-master; and Jube Benson unsuccessfully explains why he had to lynch an "Uncle Tom" servant whom he merely suspected of rape. 64

In "Mr. Cornelius Johnson, Office-seeker," Dunbar castigated the Republican Party for exploiting blacks. Contrary to the accusations made by critics, the story reveals Dunbar's comprehension of the economic and the political problems of black men in the South. 65 Having confronted consistent bureaucratic racism in his bid for a political office, Johnson finally lashed out: "Damn you: Damn you: he cried; damn your deceit, your low cruelties; damn you, you hard white liar." 66

62 Manuscripts-prose, Box 6, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).


64 Ibid.

65 Critics have accused Dunbar of not publicly protesting unjust treatment of blacks.

Negritude is glimpsed in the "Ante Bellum Sermon."

So you see de Lawd's intention
Evah sence de wor'l began
Was dat His almighty freedom
Should belong to ev'h man.67

Reading "Ode to Ethiopia," one is tempted to classify
Dunbar with the nationalist:

Oh Mother Race: to thee I bring
This pledge of faith unwavering.68

The poem is an affirmation of the poet's black identity.
Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man makes the same affirmation.
When the nameless hero accepts his blackness by eating a
baked yam openly on the street he said exuberantly, "I yam
what I yam," Ellison wrote.69

Attacking the white man's religion, Dunbar criticizes:

With pity for mankind look 'round;
Help them to rise—and Heaven is found.70

And then in the "Colored Soldiers" he reprimanded the
white man for his unjust treatment of blacks. Dunbar
claimed that "in the early days" the black was always wel-
comed on the battlefield. "They were comrades then and

67 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 144.
68 Dunbar, Oak and Ivy, p. 5.
69 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 98.
70 Wiggins, Life and Works, p. 160.
brothers—are they more or less today?" In 1899, when
the author left Washington, he and his wife and mother
journeyed to Denver. Taking long rides for his health, he
purchased an old grey mare and soon learned to love the
horse devotedly. A white man desiring to buy the animal
from Dunbar was written of thusly:

A cannon couldn't skeer huh, but she
boun' to tek a fright
At a piece o' common paper, or any'ting
whut's white,
Dat ol mare o'mine.72

In "The Colored Band" he claims that the whites give a
fine performance, but it's "Sousa played in ragtime when
the colored band comes down the street."73 And in "When
Malindy Sings," the poet cautions "Miss Lucy" to put her
music book away, "an' quit dat noise" because if she prac-
ticed until she was gray her voice would not parallel
Malindy's when she sang. "Tain't no easy thing to do."74

He glorified the black woman in "On the Dedication
to Dorothy Hall." The women of a race "should be its
pride," Dunbar declared, "who come with open hearts to

71Ibid., p. 168.
72Ibid., p. 273.
73Ibid., p. 262.
74Ibid., p. 190. This poem was dedicated to his
mother.
help and speed the striving women of a struggling race." 75

"The Poet and His Song" indicates his hatred of oppression:

And then with throes of bitter pain
Rebellious passions rise and swell. 76

And in the "Warriors Prayer" he avows:

And grant me as I deal each
righteous blow strength for
the fight. 77

Generally, Dunbar did not write in the larger spirit
of a black concern. Too, many of his black colleagues had
moved toward a new humanity built on La Negritude at the
turn of the century. Yet he was aware that a new genera-
tion new issues, and new conditions had replaced the
old. 78 Certainly he placed too much emphasis on the happy
plantation Negro. But his voice was that of his race. He
wrote eloquently of the wrongs and of the gross injustices
that should not be tolerated anywhere in a free country.

Assuredly, the musical quality of his poetry dis-
closes an African cultural heritage. It has an intona-
tion of its own—where the rhythm follows the beat rather

75 Ibid., p. 291.

76 Ibid., p. 138.

77 Ibid., p. 225.

than any strict metrical norm. Because of these qualities, despite the plantation overtones, his poetry sounds truly Afro-American. 79

CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Paul Laurence Dunbar, whom Mayor Whitlock once described as "a rare and delicate soul in the blackest skin," did his best writing in the late 1890's. He was an unrivaled forerunner of the great literary development of his race that burst forth after the first World War—"The Negro Renaissance."

The poet-novelist, Paul Dunbar was born at a time when many blacks had left the South for the more promising Northwest. But they found the northern communities very hostile toward them. In fact, blacks were discriminated against in practically all spheres of American life.¹

In the state of Ohio, the strongest antipathy was manifested toward the black man by the white citizenry.² In Dayton, Ohio, too, black Americans were surrounded by strong prejudice. It was the opinion of those who lived in Dayton during the early 1880's that prejudice had


²Quillin, The Color Line in Ohio, p. 120.

197
given stronger every year since the Civil War.\textsuperscript{3} Out of such circumstances Paul Laurence Dunbar would become a famous American poet of pure African heritage.

Dunbar was a born poet. As soon as he could write words and sentences, there were indications of poetic genius. As he passed through the public schools of Dayton this genius continued to manifest itself. Pupils and teachers recognized the possession of this rare gift and encouraged him. As a student in high school he was acknowledged to be the leader in debate, oratory and literary ability. He was editor of the high school paper, and at graduation, he wrote the class poem.

When Dunbar was graduated from high school, "color told against him on every hand," Lulu Keck Wiggins wrote.\textsuperscript{4} White editors did not always publish his works. Also advertised vacancies in business firms were suddenly filled when he applied for jobs.\textsuperscript{5} Especially did poverty and racism encompass Dunbar during the first two years after his graduation. Out of sheer despair he was compelled to accept a position as elevator boy in the Callahan Building in Dayton, Ohio.

\textsuperscript{3}Quillin, \textit{The Color Line in Ohio}, pp. 92-96, 112-120.

\textsuperscript{4}Wiggins, \textit{Life and Works}, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{5}Goulden, \textit{Ohio Scenes and Citizens}, p. 18.
Numerous were the persons who encouraged him as he wrote verses while serving as a judge's page or running an elevator in an office building. His first book of poems, *Oak and Ivy*, was published by the United Brethren House in 1893. The attention of William Dean Howells, a native of Miami Valley, was directed to his writings in 1896. Receiving a favorable review, Dunbar was introduced to the wider literary world. Now he entered upon a career which became recognized on both sides of the Atlantic.

At the turn of the century black writers, far from being radical, strove to prove to white audiences that they could be responsible and respectable. Indeed Dunbar wrote at a time when the country was but thirty years from the Civil War. There were many who looked back to the Civil War period with regret. Not only was there general emphasis on the sentimental in American literature when Dunbar began his work, but also special emphasis on what were supposed to be the good times in the South before the war.

Dunbar was a typical exponent of the last decade of the nineteenth century. This was a period of accommodation, apology and a desire to prove to the majority group that the black man was "somebody." Booker T. Washington grew in that climate and so did Dunbar.

Washington advised blacks to train for better work and to avoid conflict with the white man. Hence, Wash-
ington contended, blacks would progress economically and eventually racism would die. Dunbar's writing period was in such an atmosphere.

Dunbar's fame rests almost wholly upon his poetry in dialect. He was a romantic who wrote in the shadow of the plantation. The rural blacks in his poetry were always full of song, food, laughter, and warmth. But a number of Southern writers had already written nostalgically of ante-bellum plantation life in the 1870's and 1880's. As a result, they popularized the plantation tradition in American literature.

Thomas Nelson Page, Irvin Russell, and Joel Chandler Harris, for example, wrote black dialect verse that was an apology for slavery. These works pictured the black man as docile and happy in servitude. Unquestionably such authors had great influence on Dunbar.

The writings of Dunbar are different from those by the Southern apologists. The black man in the hands of most white dialect writers was a subject for ridicule and served to document social notions about superior and inferior races. However, Dunbar's productions achieved a measure of reality and genuine pathos and humour which other dialect writers did not delineate.

In many of his poems, freed slaves regret their freedom. They dream of the days when there was no struggle for life, neither for them nor their ex-masters.
Dunbar was not a southerner himself, but his ex-slave mother, Matilda, gave the poet a rich background of Southern life which figures so prominently in his works. The plantation tradition was not altogether new. It had its origin among the slaves as early as 1820. J. Sanders Redding informs us that "every plantation had its talented band that could crack jokes and sing and dance to the accompaniment of banjo and bones." There is a record of at least one of these bands that became semi-professional and travelled from plantation to plantation giving performances. Hence the fun-provoking genius of the black man was put to some use.

Unfortunately this kind of black minstrelly hardened into the recognized speech and behavior of the black man. Moreover, the glee and jamboree songs became "coon" songs and darkey poetry. Thus the black man's medium of expression was regarded as limited.

Dunbar yearned to escape the conventions of dialect. But as late as 1920 serious black writers found it hard to go beyond the limits of popular writing and to destroy the stereotype picture of themselves as it had been created in the minds of white and sometimes black

---


7Ibid., p. 511.

8Ibid., p. 50.
But Dunbar's dialect pieces represent only one facet of his creative temper; they are merely what he had to write in order to win and hold an audience. He rose to dialect because that was what was expected of him. And his dialect was held to be proper because Dunbar used it.

Still his poetry in dialect was not native. "He never spoke in dialect," Alice once recalled. The dialect, he wrote was not even true of a few black communities. Had Dunbar imitated the speech of the North Georgia Black and uttered it among the GEEches of South Georgia or the Gullahs of South Carolina, he would not have been understood.

From a knowledge of many dialects he made a language or synthetic dialect that could be read with ease and pleasure by northern whites. Through this medium it was impossible for Dunbar to speak the whole heart of a people.

This poet was keenly aware of racism even if this feeling is not often mentioned in his verses. And, while realism had its inception in Dunbar's era, there was little in its outlook to attract an ambitious young man seeking, among other things, to make a living with his pen.
At his zenith his reputation allowed him to live exclusively from his royalties. He gave the buying public what it was accustomed to reading. By so doing he became the first black professional poet to earn a living from his productions. "When Dunbar tried to sell his serious verses in the classic style of English composition, they were refused, although a high estimate was placed upon them by some of the best literary critics of the day, because his characteristic Negro poems were considered so superior and were in such demand," Mary Church Terrell recalled. Dunbar was one of the best known and most popular Afro-American poet authors of his generation. Some pointed to him as the symbol of the intellectual and creative potential of the black race.

Dunbar's Negritude is expressed somewhat in his prose. He wrote several stories which broke with the plantation tradition. The mention of blacks being burnt out by envious whites, the attempts sometimes of slaves to escape, the aid given by escaped slaves and his occasional treatment of lynching were among the elements which were against the plantation tradition.

Perhaps the critics and literary authorities will forever consider Dunbar's niche in the hierarchy of poets as a modest one. His work has been dealt such a disheartening blow by some critics that the poet's entertaining pieces now seem "old hat." Blacks reject him because some
of his poetry is in the "Uncle Tom--Amos n' Andy" tradition. The general white population is unaware of him. And few textbooks mention the poet. Yet those who read his homespun philosophy find it as entertaining as Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac" and as appealing as Riley's "Knee Deep in June."

To say that Dunbar described the black man objectively, without apology and without prejudice, is to define precisely the nature of his achievements. With no problems to solve and no peculiar type to represent, he saw life his way and emerged portraying it as it impressed him personally. Militant writers "have demanded too much of Dunbar as a symbol," Darwin T. Turner, Professor of English at A & T University, Greensboro, North Carolina, opines, "commanding him to speak for the Negro, they forget that Negroes speak with hundreds of different voices. Dunbar is merely one."9 Sixty four years after Dunbar's death, it is easy to look at him and see some things that he might have done differently; and even something that he might have said better. But to be severe with him because he did not voice our age would be unfair.

Nevertheless, Dunbar's description of the black man, if objective, was at the same time superficial.

---

His writing period was one of storm and stress, and of conflict and contention. The old order with its accommodation, patience, humility and resignation, was passing away. The new blacks were increasingly becoming more militant, and insistent, and ready to repudiate compromise and reject any paradise of hopes deferred. They dreamed of freedom, equality, and justice, not in some distant future but presently, here and now. Of all this toil there are few intimations in Dunbar's prose and poetry.\(^\text{10}\)

Still, there were times when Dunbar observed the problems facing the black man in a more militant way. A letter to Whitlock bears this out. "Unless we live lives of protest, and few of us are willing to do that, we are as guilty as the lynchers of the South--we are all tarred with the same stick."\(^\text{11}\)

A major poet, maybe he was not; but his poetry and novels captured the attention of the most outstanding literary critics of the day. Some say that he never reached his potential; but who does? His worth is settled when one realizes that the history of American literature is incomplete without the inclusion of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

\(^{10}\) Park, *Race and Culture*, pp. 290-291.

\(^{11}\) Dunbar to Brand Whitlock, December 26, 1900, Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Manuscript Collections

Archibald Grimke Collection. Founders Library, Howard University.

Benjamin Brawley Collection. Founders Library, Howard University.


Reverdy Ransom Collection. Carnegie Library, Wilberforce University, Xenia, Ohio.


The Paul Laurence Dunbar Collection. Dayton Public Library

The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar on Microfilm, Dayton Public Library.

The Paul Laurence Dunbar Collection. Manuscript Division, Ohio Historical Society.


Baltimore Afro-American.
Cincinnati Union.
Chicago Chronicle.
Chicago Daily News.
Chicago Muhammad Speaks.
Chicago Post
Chicago Record Herald.
Chicago Times Herald.
Dayton Herald.
Denver Evening Post
Illustrated London News.
Kansas City Star.
London Daily Mail.
New York Sun.
Oklahoma World Herald.
Philadelphia Gazette.
Reading (Pennsylvania).
Springfield Sunday Republican.
Toledo Bee.
Toledo Blade.
Toledo Commercial.
Washington Evening Star.
Washington Post-Gazette.
Washington Times.
Wilmington, Delaware Delmarva Star.

Primary Sources

Census of Ohio. Columbus: Fred J. Heer, 1901.


In Old Plantation Days. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1903.


SECONDARY SOURCES

Articles


Books


Chesnutt, Charles W.  The Marrow of Tradition. (Intro-


________.  Some Dayton Saints and Prophets. N.P., 1907.


Cottman, George S.  The Western Association of Writers, Bloomington: The Indiana Historical Society, Vol. XXIX, 1933.


Quillin, Frank U. *The Color Line in Ohio.* New York: Negro Universities Press,


Dissertations and Theses


