



Paul Laurence Dunbar

1872–1906

Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the first influential black poets in American literature. He enjoyed his greatest popularity in the early twentieth century following the publication of dialectic verse in collections such as *Majors and Minors* and *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. But the dialectic poems constitute only a small portion of Dunbar's canon, which is replete with novels, short stories, essays, and many poems in standard English. In its entirety, Dunbar's literary body has been acclaimed as an impressive representation of black life in turn-of-the-century America. As Dunbar's friend James Weldon Johnson noted in the preface to his *Book of American Poetry*: "Paul Laurence Dunbar stands out as the first poet from the Negro race in the United States to show a combined mastery over poetic material and poetic technique, to reveal innate literary distinction in what he wrote, and to maintain a high level of performance. He was the first to rise to a height from which he could take a perspective view of his own race. He was the first to see objectively its humor, its superstitions, its short-comings; the first to feel sympathetically its heart-wounds, its yearnings, its aspirations, and to voice them all in a purely literary form."

Dunbar began showing literary promise while still in high school in Dayton, Ohio, where he lived with his widowed mother. The only black in his class, he became class president and class poet. By 1889, two years before he graduated, he had already published poems in the *Dayton Herald* and worked as editor of the short-lived *Dayton Tattler*, a newspaper for blacks published by classmate Orville Wright, who later gained fame with brother Wilbur Wright as inventors of the airplane.

Dunbar aspired to a career in law, but his mother's meager financial situation precluded his university education. He consequently sought immediate employment with various Dayton

businesses, including newspapers, only to be rejected because of his race. He finally settled for work as an elevator operator, a job that allowed him time to continue writing. At this time Dunbar produced articles, short stories, and poems, including several in the black-dialect style that later earned him fame.

In 1892 Dunbar was invited by one of his former teachers to address the Western Association of Writers then convening in Dayton. At the meeting Dunbar befriended James Newton Matthews, who subsequently praised Dunbar's work in a letter to an Illinois newspaper. Matthews's letter was eventually reprinted by newspapers throughout the country and thus brought Dunbar recognition outside Dayton. Among the readers of this letter was poet James Whitcomb Riley, who then familiarized himself with Dunbar's work and wrote him a commendatory letter. Bolstered by the support of both Matthews and Riley, Dunbar decided to publish a collection of his poems. He obtained additional assistance from Orville Wright and then solicited a Dayton firm, United Brethren Publishing, that eventually printed the work, entitled *Oak and Ivy*, for a modest sum.

In *Oak and Ivy* Dunbar included his earliest dialect poems and many works in standard English. Among the latter is one of his most popular poems, "Sympathy," in which he expresses, in somber tone, the dismal plight of blacks in American society. In another standard English poem, "Ode to Ethiopia," he records the many accomplishments of black Americans and exhorts his fellow blacks to maintain their pride despite racial abuse. The popularity of these and other poems inspired Dunbar to devote himself more fully to writing.

Shortly after the publication of *Oak and Ivy* Dunbar was approached by attorney Charles A. Thatcher, an admirer sympathetic to Dunbar's college education. Dunbar, however, was greatly encouraged by sales of *Oak and Ivy* and so rejected Thatcher to pursue a literary career. Thatcher then applied himself to promoting Dunbar in nearby Toledo, Ohio, and helped him obtain work there reading his poetry at libraries and literary gatherings. Dunbar also found unexpected support from psychiatrist Henry A. Tobey, who helped distribute *Oak and Ivy* in Toledo and occasionally sent Dunbar much needed financial aid.

Tobey eventually teamed with Thatcher in publishing Dunbar's second verse collection, *Majors and Minors*. In this book Dunbar produced poems on a variety of themes and in several styles. He grouped the more ambitious poems, those written in standard English, under the heading "Majors," and he gathered the more superficial, dialect works as "Minors." Although Dunbar invested himself most fully in his standard poetry—which bore the influences of such poets as the English romantics and Americans such as Riley—it was the dialect verse that found greater favor with his predominantly white readership, and it was by virtue of these dialect poems that Dunbar gained increasing fame throughout the country. Instrumental to Dunbar's growing popularity was a highly positive, though extremely patronizing, review by eminent novelist William Dean Howells. Writing in *Harper's Weekly*, Howells praised Dunbar as "the first man of his color to study his race objectively" and commended the dialect poems as faithful representations of the black race.

Through Thatcher and Tobey, Dunbar met an agent and secured more public readings and a publishing contract. He then published *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, a poetry collection derived primarily from verse already featured in *Oak and Ivy* and *Majors and Minors*. This new volume sold impressively across America and established Dunbar as the nation's foremost black poet. On the strength of his recent acclaim Dunbar commenced a six-month reading tour of England. There he found publishers for a British edition of *Lyrics of Lowly Life* and befriended musician Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, with whom he then collaborated on the operetta "Dream Lovers."

When Dunbar returned to the United States in 1897 he obtained a clerkship at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Soon afterwards he married fellow writer Alice Ruth Moore. Although his health suffered during the two years he lived in Washington, the period nonetheless proved fruitful for Dunbar. In 1898 he published his first short story collection, *Folks From Dixie*, in which he delineated the situation of blacks in both pre-and post-emancipation United States. Although these tales, unlike some of his dialect verse, were often harsh examinations of racial prejudice, *Folks From Dixie* was well received upon publication.

Not so Dunbar's first novel, *The Uncalled*, which recalled Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet*

Letter in probing the spiritual predicament of a minister. Critics largely rejected *The Uncalled* as dull and unconvincing in its portrait of Frederick Brent, a pastor who had, in childhood, been abandoned by an alcoholic father and then raised by a zealously devout spinster, Hester Prime (Hawthorne's protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter* was named Hester Prynne). After securing a pastor's post, Brent alienated church-goers by refusing to reproach an unwed mother. He resigns from his pastorship and departs for Cincinnati. After further misadventure—he ends his marriage engagement and encounters his father, now a wandering preacher—Brent finds fulfillment and happiness as minister in another congregation.

At the end of 1898, his health degenerating still further, Dunbar left the Library of Congress and commenced another reading tour. He published another verse collection, *Lyrics of the Hearthside*, and recovered any status he may have jeopardized with *The Uncalled*. In the spring of 1899, however, his health lapsed sufficiently to threaten his life. Ill with pneumonia, the already tubercular Dunbar was advised to rest in the mountains. He therefore moved to the Catskills in New York State, but he continued to write while recovering from his ailments.

In 1900, after a brief stay in Colorado, Dunbar returned to Washington, DC. Shortly before his return he published another collection of tales, *The Strength of Gideon*, in which he continued to recount black life both before and after slavery. Reviewers at the time favored his pre-emancipation stories full of humor and sentiment, while ignoring more volatile accounts of abuse and injustice. More recently these latter stories have gained greater recognition from critics eager to substantiate Dunbar's opposition to racism.

Dunbar followed *The Strength of Gideon* with his second novel, *The Love of Landry*, about an ailing woman who arrives in Colorado for convalescence and finds true happiness with a cowboy. Like the earlier *Uncalled*, *The Love of Landry* was deemed unconvincing in its presentation of white characters and was dismissed as inferior to Dunbar's tales of blacks. Dunbar suffered further critical setback with his next novel, *The Fanatics*, about America at the beginning of the Civil War. Its central characters are from white families who differ in their North-South sympathies and spark a dispute in their Ohio community. *The Fanatics*

was a commercial failure upon publication, and in the ensuing years it has continued to be regarded as a superficial, largely unconvincing work. Among the novel's many detractors is Robert Bone, who wrote in *The Negro in America* that Dunbar resorted to "caricature in his treatment of minor Negro characters" and that his stereotypic portraits of black characters only served to reinforce prejudice.

The Sport of the Gods, Dunbar's final novel, presents a far more critical and disturbing portrait of black America. The work centers on butler Berry Hamilton and his family. After Berry is wrongly charged with theft by his white employers, he is sentenced to ten years of prison labor. His remaining family—wife, son, and daughter—consequently find themselves targets of abuse in their southern community, and after being robbed by the local police they head north to Harlem. There they encounter further hardship and strife: the son becomes embroiled in the city's seamy nightlife and succumbs to alcoholism and crime; the naive daughter is exploited by fellow blacks and begins a questionable dancing career; and the mother, convinced that her husband's prison sentence has negated their marriage, weds an abusive profligate. A happy resolution is achieved only after Berry's accuser confesses, while dying, that his charge was fabricated, whereupon Berry is released from prison. He then travels north and finds his family in disarray. But the cruel second husband is then, conveniently, murdered, and the parental Hamiltons are reunited in matrimony.

Although its acclaim was hardly unanimous, *The Sport of the Gods* nonetheless earned substantial praise as a powerful novel of protest. By this time, however, Dunbar was experiencing considerable turmoil in his own life. Prior to writing *The Sport of the Gods* he had suffered another lapse of poor health, and he compounded his problems by resorting to alcohol. And after *The Sport of the Gods* appeared in 1902, Dunbar's marital situation—always troublesome—degenerated further due to his continued reliance on alcohol and to antagonism from his wife's parents.

Dunbar and his wife separated in 1902, but that separation only contributed to his continued physical and psychological decline. The next year, following a nervous breakdown and another bout of pneumonia, Dunbar managed to assemble another verse

collection, *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*, and another short story collection, *In Old Plantation Days*. With *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* he confirmed his reputation as America's premier black poet. The volume contains both sentimental and somberly realistic expressions and depictions of black life, and it features both dialect and standard English verse. *In Old Plantation Days* is comprised of twenty-five stories set on a southern plantation during the days of slavery. Here Dunbar once again resorted to caricaturing his own race, portraying black slaves as faithful and obedient, slow-witted but good-natured workers appreciative of their benevolent white owners. Dunbar drew the ire of many critics for his stereotyped characters, and some of his detractors even alleged that he contributed to racist concepts while simultaneously disdaining such thinking.

If *In Old Plantation Days* was hardly a pioneering work, it was at least a lucrative publication and one that confirmed the preferences of much of Dunbar's public. With the short story collection *The Heart of Happy Hollow* he presented a greater variety of perspectives on aspects of black life in America, and he even included a tale on the moral folly of lynching. Dunbar followed *The Heart of Happy Hollow* with two more poetry collections, *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow* and *Howdy, Honey, Howdy*, both of which featured works from previous volumes.

Dunbar's health continued to decline even as he persisted in producing poems. But his reliance on alcohol to temper his chronic coughing only exacerbated his illness, and by the winter of 1905 he was fatally ill. He died on February 9, 1906, at age thirty-three.

In the years immediately following his death, Dunbar's standing as America's foremost black poet seemed assured, and his dialect poems were prized as supreme achievements in black American literature. In the ensuing decades, however, his reputation was damaged by scholars questioning the validity of his often stereotypic characterizations and his apparent unwillingness to sustain an anti-racist stance. Among his most vehement detractors from this period was Victor Lawson, whose *Dunbar Critically Examined* remains a provocative, if overly aggressive, study.

More recently Dunbar's stature has increased markedly. He is once again regarded as

America's first great black poet, and his standard English poems are now, perhaps surprisingly, prized as his greatest achievements in verse. Contemporary champions include Addison Gayle, Jr., whose *Oak and Ivy: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, is considered a key contribution to Dunbar studies, and black poet Nikki Giovanni, whose prose contribution to *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, edited by Jay Martin, hails Dunbar as "a natural resource of our people." For Giovanni, as for other Dunbar scholars, his work constitutes both a history and a celebration of black life. "There is no poet, black or nonblack, who measures his achievement," she declared. "Even today. He wanted to be a writer and he wrote."

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