

Abstract

GILROY, JOSEPH WILLIAM. Understanding Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Life and Career in Context. (Under the direction of Dr. Anne Baker.)

Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the most popular poets of his day. He was highly regarded for his black dialect poetry, which earned him the title, “poet laureate of his race.” Dunbar’s second book of poetry, *Majors and Minors*, was even reviewed positively by the famous critic William Dean Howells. However, despite Dunbar’s popularity, he has also been widely criticized for his black dialect poetry. Many scholars and African-Americans have argued that it is an unsympathetic portrait of blackness meant to appease his paying white readership. This thesis discusses the conditions and circumstances that influenced Dunbar to write black dialect poetry. It places the poet’s life and career in the social, economic, and critical context of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. I conclude that Dunbar’s intentions for his dialect poetry were misconstrued by William Dean Howells’ racially-biased interpretation of *Majors and Minors*.

Understanding Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Life and Career in Context

by
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Dedication

To my family in Illinois, whose love and support knows no distance.

Especially, to my brother Ken, who personifies perseverance.

Always, to Holly, my fiancée now and wife forever.

Biography

Joseph William Gilroy was born July 7, 1982 in Chicago, IL. Under the guidance of teachers Ken Rarey and Michael Peterson, he cultivated a passion for literature at Saint Patrick High School, and graduated in 2000. The Chicago Cubs left Joseph with a career-ending hole in his heart following the 2003 National League Championship Series. He, like his brother, Ken, knows that this is the year. Joseph received a Bachelor's degree in English and Linguistics in 2004 from The Ohio State University. In April 2005, fate, school, and warmer weather called him to North Carolina State University. Joseph met his fiancée, Holly Ericson, in class. The two will marry in June, and live under the constant supervision of their 1 ½ year-old Pomeranian, Woofy.

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Thanks to Dr. Baker for all of her patience and direction.

Thanks to Kerri, George, and Amy for keeping me motivated and caffeinated.
I suppose I can get to work now.

And, of course, thanks to Holly for proofreading when my eyes wouldn't stay open anymore.

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Introduction

Following Frederick Douglass' death in 1895, few African-Americans were more well-known than the black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. He was highly regarded for his dialect poetry, a form that, in part, earned him the distinction of "poet laureate of his race."¹ Throughout his career, he defied the turbulent American economy of the late nineteenth-century by selling more volumes of poetry than nearly any other African-American before him. Dunbar won the favor of many prominent white critics, and consequently saw an outpouring of support – and a boom in sales – from a large white readership. Though new endeavors into prose later in his career would prove less profitable, Dunbar was rewarded both financially and critically for his dialect poetry until his death in 1906. However, it was then, too, that the public began looking to other writers for entertainment. Dunbar's popularity gradually diminished, leaving his once towering reputation in jeopardy. In 1907, Linda Keck Wiggins honored the poet with *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, a biography largely gathered from interviews and reminiscences. The definitive text was one of only several written on Dunbar until 1911, and little attention has been paid to the poet ever since. New scholarship on him typically corresponds with significant anniversaries and other relevant times. Nine Dunbar biographies have been published in the last century, but little new information about his life has been revealed since the Wiggins text. Dunbar's writing, specifically his poetry, has seen rather modest reprinting and is not frequently anthologized.

¹ Writer and civil rights activist Mary Church Terrell (1863 – 1954) made this comment in 1898.

In his 1974 article *Jump Back Honey*, Jay Martin tells a rather revealing story about the late poet's popularity. He explains that while he was working on a paper about Dunbar, he was approached by a renowned colleague who inquired about the project:

His initial questions seemed to me to be unusually askew, and I floundered in answering him until I abruptly realized that he supposed I must be studying William Dunbar, the fifteenth-century Scottish poet. He had never heard of Paul Laurence Dunbar, I soon learned, though this black poet had been born in America but a hundred years earlier.²

There are, of course, many reasons for Dunbar's fall from popularity over the last century. Several scholars contend that the poet's legacy has been overshadowed by that of other prominent blacks within a half-century of his life, such as Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, and Booker T. Washington. These men were famous writers like Dunbar, but had a much greater public presence than the poet. Other scholars contend that much of Dunbar's work, with the exception of several poems like "We Wear the Mask" and "The Colored Soldiers," has been forgotten among the more groundbreaking output of Harlem Renaissance poets like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, who both entered the literary scene in the 1920s. However, the most accepted rationale for Dunbar's drop in popularity is the widespread critical argument that his work is unsympathetic to African-Americans. Scholars have long accused Dunbar of intentionally misrepresenting black speech by way of his dialect poetry to please well-paying white audiences. Many African-Americans have further argued that the poet did not do all that he could to paint a positive portrait of the rising Negro. This omission, they believed, was a wasted opportunity, especially given Dunbar's popularity among influential whites and a larger international community. Without a strong base of African-American readers, and

² p. 41.

with a white audience flocking to other writers, Dunbar's popularity could not survive his death.

Martin responds to this theory with a nod toward Dunbar. He contends that critics are largely at fault for Dunbar's fall. In his article, Martin maintains that it is a critic's responsibility to introduce new ways of looking at literature, especially over the course of a century. This sort of evolving analysis, he says, has not been afforded to Dunbar. Instead, Martin contends, "our critical heritage has ignored him for reasons which pertain to the white perception of black writing in the nineteenth century."³ Martin's case is straight-forward: literary critics have not modernized their interpretation or treatment of Dunbar's work. Instead, they have considered his writing only racially "and seldom [have] attempted to find and create connections with the systems of human response...[thus] fostering a critical blindness."⁴ In other words, critics have either disregarded or ignored the conditions of Dunbar's career, that is, the reasons why he wrote in dialect, what contributed to his popularity, and so on. Further, Martin claims that scholars frequently return to the dialect poetry as the best representations of Dunbar, thus perpetuating his reputation as solely a dialect poet. Since roughly ten years after Dunbar's death, this critical oversight has resulted in a rather static and closed-minded impression of the poet that discounts his other contributions to literature, such as his short stories and prose, his preference for writing in Standard English rather than dialect, and his effort to reconcile with African-Americans by showing he was, in fact, sympathetic of the historical black plight. This lapse in scholarship has proven detrimental to the study of Dunbar and his work.

Martin offers critics a solution that is, as of yet, largely untried:

³ Ibid, p. 50.

⁴ Ibid.

I propose that we [begin to] understand Dunbar's work not through its individual texts, or in terms of the contradictions between one text and another, but as an écriture, a body of writing which has a certain meaning as a whole and in which each text calls upon all of his other texts for a part of its meaning.⁵

Martin, using William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha fiction as an example, admits that critics have approached most other writers in the same comprehensive fashion. His call for a more complete interpretation of Dunbar's work brings to light the relative primitiveness of scholarship on the poet. Martin's critique signals a need to look beyond individual dialect poems for the most accurate and complete portrait of Dunbar. Critics instead should view Dunbar as a whole, that is, as a writer, an African-American, and a human being. They must also examine how his experiences in each of these roles translated into his work. These points, I argue, will help build an understanding of why Dunbar wrote in dialect until 1899 and continued to address sensitive black issues in his prose, to the apparent dismay of many African-Americans, until the end of his career.

Gossie Hudson, a historian and prominent Dunbar scholar, has worked closely with Martin to conduct this type of comprehensive analysis on the poet. He asserts that critics "should present [their] subject in the literary milieu of [their] time."⁶ Hudson agrees that Dunbar scholars play a large part in promoting the poet and fairly interpreting his work. However, Hudson argues that these responsibilities have not been entirely upheld. He contends that the scholar must juxtapose a "knowledge for what the conditions were"⁷ in Dunbar's time with a more dynamic analysis into what consequences transpired. Hudson's own biography of the poet achieves this goal to some extent, though controversially. He

⁵ Ibid, p. 47.

⁶ *A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, p. 3.

⁷ Ibid.

considers Dunbar's condition a largely psycho-emotional issue. Hudson's overriding opinion, though not overtly stated until near the end of the book, is that "[Dunbar] exhibited psychological [sic] distinct ties [to his parents]: a straight-forward sexual object cathexis toward his mother and an object model identification with his father."⁸ Hudson contends that, in essence, Dunbar's motivation for writing in dialect was a husbandly need to provide for his mother. While this Freudian take on the poet's career comes across as fairly implausible, it does illustrate a rather daring, albeit somewhat outdated, attempt to incorporate more than just race into a discussion of Dunbar's poetry. It also considers the circumstances of what Hudson believes to have been the poet's personal conditions, and looks at a large body of his work as a whole. The analysis is one step in the direction of Martin's hope that Dunbar scholarship can eventually escape the limitations of an overwhelmingly racial critical perception.

The one-sided history of Dunbar scholarship and the lack of attention paid to Martin's practical call signal a need to employ new ways of analyzing the poet and his work. This thesis is in response to Martin's proposal for more comprehensive scholarship on Dunbar. It considers the poet's work in the context of a largely racist Reconstruction era. I identify the period as one in which many white Americans had nostalgic expectations for the characterization of blacks. It was also a time of very few employment opportunities for African-Americans. I consider these to be among the facets of Dunbar's condition, as Hudson puts it, one made more complicated by a white-dominated readership that demanded only dialect and viewed the poet's work as mere entertainment.

This thesis contends that Dunbar's label as a dialect poet was imposed on him by William Dean Howells, who created restrictive expectations of the poet, thus perpetuating

⁸ Ibid, pp. 135 – 170. Chapter Eight, "Dunbar and Psychohistory," explores this theory in depth.

Dunbar's need to write in dialect to keep earning money. I also argue that the poet's career grew out of necessity to provide for himself and his mother, given the harsh and unpredictable American economy. Also, this thesis illustrates an internal battle in Dunbar to shed the dialect label, a goal reflected in his public and private writings. Finally, following Martin's lead, I identify several essays and critics whose opinions of Dunbar and his work are indicative of the clouded history of Dunbar scholarship. I attempt to expose how critics have lingered on the issue of race with the poet, thus unduly propagating his reputation as an unsympathetic dialect writer far beyond his lifetime. Ultimately, this thesis is intended to open the field of Dunbar scholarship to a wider consideration of the conditions playing upon the poet as he was writing. My hope is that the history of criticism misrepresenting Dunbar can be exposed in another light, one that recognizes the poet's condition as a black man in the late nineteenth-century. I also hope to show Dunbar's attempt to escape the label that was placed on him, diminishing with it all of the expectations and implications suggested therein. Although Dunbar did not project the bold defiance of men like Douglass, Dubois, and Washington, he complemented the work of his predecessors by supporting himself and his family despite racism, and set the stage for others like Hughes to do just the same.

Chapter One: The Shaping of Paul Laurence Dunbar

1.1 Introduction to the Gilded Age

In his 1873 novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*,¹ Mark Twain suggests an ironic contrast between the prosperous but fickle times of the mid-to-late nineteenth century and the utopian, mythological Golden Age of humanity. Following the Civil War, the United States saw unprecedented growth in its economy, industry, territory, and population. Optimism was fairly high as the profitable effects of the Second Industrial Revolution inspired investment and entrepreneurialism across the United States. Many sought or made work in the North and West, hoping to capitalize on the surge of development and technology in these regions. The United States quickly earned an international reputation as a land of opportunity, especially as federal mandates such as the Homestead Act² promised many their share of the American Dream. In 1869, the American people made a bold statement about their progress when the Transcontinental Railroad, connecting Sacramento to Omaha, was completed with a final “golden spike.” Ten years later, the United States boasted revolutionary advancements in the communication and electric industries with the introduction of the telephone, phonograph, and modern light bulb. As the nation began to wind down the nineteenth century, it used the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago to showcase its rapid evolution since the Civil War.³ The change from bitter division to growth on a

¹ Co authored by Charles Dudley Warner, the novel satirizes postbellum greed and political corruption in America.

² A Federal law that gave freehold title to 160 acres of undeveloped land in the American West. Signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on May 20, 1862.

³ May 1 – October 30, 1893. Spread across more than 600 acres of prime Chicago lakefront and parkland, the Exposition was held to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of the New World. Nicknamed “The White City” because most of the buildings at the Exposition were built out of white staff, a compound made out of Plaster of Paris and jute cloth. Many African-Americans saw great irony in this, especially since white organizers tried to keep blacks from participating.

united front seemed undeniable. On the surface, American society was on a dazzling and lucrative course to world prominence.

However, as Twain's terminology suggests, the glitz signs of progress were thin and fragile. The period following the Civil War was also marked by great national strife. Greed, poverty, and political corruption were only several of the issues plaguing the United States at the time. A stark class divide existed, though the richest Americans were few in number. John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J. P. Morgan controlled much of the country's wealth and economics, leaving a vast number of Americans to labor in unsafe working conditions for low wages. Many others were unable to find work at all. The United States also suffered through extreme political disarray after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865. Northern carpetbaggers flooded the American South attempting to industrialize it. Idealist Southern voters aggressively fought the political migration, and elected former Confederate soldiers and officials to many state and local seats. Even President Andrew Johnson contributed to the chaos, as he attempted radically to change Lincoln's progressive Reconstruction plans. Johnson came within one vote of being removed from office by impeachment in 1868. The presidents that immediately followed him, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James A. Garfield, were also ridiculed for their ineffective domestic policies. However, as demonstrated by the rise of big business and continuing optimism among American whites, the madness affected some people more than others.

This period of national turmoil was especially difficult for the poor and oppressed, of which African-Americans were a large majority. Blacks faced all the same challenges as the rest of country, but had the added trouble of living in a racist society. They were denied basic liberties, such as the chance for equal employment or a decent education. Their

enduring plight in the United States, which began several centuries prior, illustrated that the country's problems extended far beyond money and politics, and into a cruel civil rights issue that showed little chance of being resolved. The core of this racism against them was a persisting belief among some whites that African-Americans were an inferior race, descendants of the savage beasts of the godless continent and unworthy of being called human beings. Within five years of Emancipation, several Constitutional amendments were passed⁴ to guarantee African-Americans their unalienable rights. However, the legislation was largely ignored on every governmental and individual level. Across the United States, Jim Crow laws and Black Codes were enforced by local officials. These statutes allowed for the racial segregation of public places. The federal government sided with these unconstitutional laws, declaring in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that whites and blacks could be separated as long as equal facilities existed. This unruliness in the nation's legal system encouraged many whites to impose their own governance upon African-Americans. Blacks were accused of guiltless or petty crimes, and their claims of innocence were rarely accepted. White mobs even carried out horrific "sentences" on African-Americans by lynching them or beating them to death. These appalling laws and actions further restricted blacks from advancing in an already repressive society. The racism also demonstrated that much of the country was still immersed in biased antebellum sentiment. In nearly all corners of the United States, it was becoming increasingly doubtful that blacks would ever receive fair treatment from their government or their fellow citizens. For aspiring young men like Paul

⁴ Specifically, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) bans slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) provides a broad definition of citizenship intended to include African-Americans. The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) bans race-based voting qualifications.

Laurence Dunbar, the emergent city of Dayton, Ohio showed more promise. However, even there, challenges were sure to surface.

1.2 Dayton and Paul Laurence Dunbar

There was no shortage of success stories in mid-to-late nineteenth century Dayton. To nearly any observer, few places in America could boast signs of achievement as apparent as those in the southwest Ohio city. In the 1870s, residents of Dayton were busy pointing with pride to one-street railways and several four-story business blocks.⁵ The constantly changing and growing cityscape made people optimistic about their futures there. Dayton's close proximity to the Miami and Ohio Rivers helped it become a national center of industry. Between 1860 and 1890, the city was one of the country's largest producers of farm equipment, bicycles, and metal castings. It was also home to the National Cash Register Company,⁶ which paid enough tax dollars to Dayton that city officials were able to light and pave every street in town by the turn of the century. The surge of industry and modernization brought with it a boom in population. By its centennial in 1896, Dayton had more than 80,000 people living within its ever-expanding borders. Many residents owned homes, attended good schools, and worked in fair-paying jobs. Despite the city's incredible growth, it retained a small-town quality that was fostered in its neighborhoods. Newcomers, including American migrants and European immigrants, adjusted to life fairly quickly. Genial residents welcomed new workers and their families, making the city a popular destination for anyone seeking a new and potentially more profitable life. Along its avenues

⁵ Hudson, *Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, p. 18.

⁶ Began as the National Manufacturing Company. Renamed National Cash Register Company by Patterson in 1884. Manufactured and sold the first mechanical cash registers.

and elsewhere, Dayton was a spectacle, a city glistening with the luster of progress. It epitomized America's best intentions and was unblushing in its contentment.

Dayton's racial climate was generally better than many other places in the United States. Ohio had been influential in maintaining the Underground Railroad, and residents of the State mostly held on to their tolerance for blacks after Emancipation. The best jobs in Dayton were, however, still reserved for whites, leaving African-Americans to vie for menial, low wage employment. Many blacks were poor, but possessed the resolve to endure with what little they had. Paul Laurence Dunbar was no exception to this group of survival-minded people. Even as a child, he aspired to succeed in Dayton. His parents taught him to be steadfast in his endeavors, as they, too, once dreamed of more rewarding days. As former slaves, Matilda and Joshua Dunbar understood that endurance had its benefits. When Paul was six, his parents divorced, leaving his mother with three children and a house to maintain. She was only able to work several hours a week because of pre-existing medical conditions, and relied on the financial support of her extended family and older sons. Paul was well-aware of his mother's situation, and knew she needed all the help she could get. He was determined to provide for her in the event that no one else would. Before he was able to work, Dunbar strongly pursued an education. He knew it would afford him the credentials he would need to earn a well-paying job. Matilda also held this belief, as revealed by Linda Keck Wiggins in her biography of Dunbar: "[Matilda] was determined her children be educated."⁷ The City of Dayton allowed Paul to attend an otherwise all-white school, a privilege his mother called a blessing. Fortunately, his teachers and many of his classmates accepted him regardless of his color. As Paul approached his teenage years, his desire to help his mother led him to take odd jobs to help pay her debts. While his employment did

⁷ *Life and Works*, p. 168.

not improve the family's dire financial situation, Dunbar proved that he was a young man of great resolve.

Dunbar's persistence reflected well on him in Dayton. Neighbors saw him tirelessly laboring in the city, taking work almost anywhere he could find it. Dunbar turned down an employment opportunity only when he was physically incapable of performing his duties or when he felt that he could not perform to standard. He was a thin, somewhat weak man all his life and, thus, had to be somewhat selective in the jobs he took. Even many whites in Dayton respected the young man. Dunbar set a good example for their children and was kind to the youths at school. James Whitcomb Riley, who reminisced on Dunbar's time in Dayton for the Wiggins' biography, explained that "[Dunbar] possessed an individuality which eclipsed any racial characteristics...he belonged to the entire world."⁸ Dunbar's teachers also paid him compliments and considered him an excellent learner. His obedience and intelligence distinguished him from many other students. Dunbar was often given more difficult assignments to develop his talents, and was encouraged to pursue learning opportunities outside the classroom. Dunbar acted on this recommendation. His contribution to the neighborhood was his writing, a passion that will be explained in the following sections. He wrote hymns for his church, edited the local high school newspaper, and contributed to another black interest newspaper published by Wilbur and Orville Wright. Dunbar was proud of participation in the community. He considered it "a worthy cause, especially as it is the fruit and product of the Afro-American."⁹ In his good actions, Dunbar demonstrated his sympathy for the black plight, donating his time and talents to make a positive impact in an unprivileged part of town. He did these things for his mother and

⁸ Ibid, p. 249.

⁹ Interview with Dunbar. Unidentified newspaper clipping. Arnold Scrapbook. Dunbar Papers (Ohio Historical Society).

community not to gain praise, but to make life easier for those he affected. Unfortunately, later in his life, these intentions were not only overlooked, but used against the budding writer.

1.3 Dunbar and Standard English Poetry

Dunbar's mother Matilda was nearly illiterate. She was able to read a few words she recognized from repetition. But, for whatever reason, she did not try to learn how to read any more. Matilda was also unable to write. She was never taught to do so and her arthritic hands could not hold a pencil properly. She attributed her inabilities to slavery and a tired body. Forfeiting to her own despondency, Matilda wanted her son Paul to be educated so he would not have to suffer through the same struggle she had faced. She encouraged Paul to continue with his schooling as long as he could. Matilda also tried to instill her own wisdom in him whenever the opportunity arose. Because she could not read for herself, Matilda complemented Paul's lessons at school with lessons at home. She demanded that Paul read to her daily from the newspaper and from books in the family's collection. Matilda reasoned that while she enjoyed a story, Paul was able to practice his literature at the same time. The routine introduced the two to American and European classics such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the plays of William Shakespeare. Eager to learn, Dunbar fondly acquiesced to his mother's request. He was as proud of his ability to read as his mother was, especially having seen the hardships illiteracy had placed on her. His practice at home was evident in the classroom: "He excelled in literature. Delicate as he was and caring very little for outdoor life, he preferred to read and write and to debate topics that were beyond the

understanding of most children of his age.”¹⁰ Dunbar spent his high school days refining the English he had learned in the family novels. It was a formal language that fit well in his endeavors in newspapers and literary magazines. Over time, Dunbar’s interest in Standard English writing grew dramatically, later turning into a portfolio of poetry that he treasured.

Scholars have speculated as to when Dunbar penned his first poem. His mother said that she had no idea when her son first started writing, but explained that, as early as the age of seven, he showed a love for his work in the mess he often left on the dinner table. She often threatened to burn all of Paul’s materials if they were not better organized. Dunbar guessed in 1903 that he started writing at the age of twelve. He explained that his first tries in the craft were “fragments and little attempts in press stories and the like.”¹¹ Regardless of when he started writing poetry, Dunbar’s talent quickly developed. His daily readings to his mother had a significant and resounding impression on him. With every new text Dunbar opened, he learned new styles, rhythms, and themes to incorporate into his poetry. In an interview with Wiggins, the poet admitted that after reading Wordsworth for the first time, “I rhymed continually, trying to put words together with a jingling sound.”¹² As he grew older and gained more experience, Dunbar’s short, rhyming phrases turned into multi-stanza poems. Dunbar admitted that he felt a sense of accomplishment in writing like his literary heroes, whose books were in the hands of people all over the world. It was an ability that required talent, and Dunbar believed he had more than just that. The poet had the support of his family and the spirit of his perseverant community. Dunbar continued to write Standard English poetry throughout high school, publishing his work in the newspapers he edited. Seeing his name and material in print was satisfying. It pushed Dunbar to write better

¹⁰ McGinnis, p. 170.

¹¹ Gould, p. 51.

¹² *Dayton Daily*, July 16, 1897. From Hudson, *Biography*, p. 30.

poems, and more often. Most important to the young poet, however, was the thought that it impressed his mother, who desperately wanted her child to succeed.

After graduating from high school, Dunbar discovered that, for an African-American, well-paying work was difficult to find. The shortage of money had become more of a concern to him and his mother in the early 1890s. Matilda's health kept her from working any longer and support from her older sons suddenly stopped. As bills went unpaid, the city threatened to foreclose on the Dunbar house. Paul scoured the city in search of work that paid enough to fully support his mother. However, at each place he inquired, employers and representatives gave him the same answer; "We have no jobs of this kind for Negroes."¹³ The frequent denials forced Dunbar to search for odd jobs once again, despite his high school diploma. In 1892, he was finally hired as a laborer for the National Cash Register Company, but quit within days because he was not strong enough to lift the freight. Several months later, Dunbar secured a job as the city's clock-winder, a position he obtained thanks to a family friend. He found that he "was expected to do all the repairing and I do not count my educational attainments a knowledge of the mechanism of the clock."¹⁴ Dunbar's employer deemed him useless, and the poet immediately resigned. Dejected and penniless, Dunbar returned home wanting to give up.

The streak of denials and disappointments erased Dunbar's confidence and led him to realize the extent that bigotry was having on his life. However, the poet understood that his responsibility to make money overshadowed his own personal feelings. Dunbar pressed on and continued his search for work. Later in 1892, he was hired as an elevator operator in Dayton's Callahan Office Building, a position he held for two years. Initially, this seemed

¹³ Gayle, Jr., p. xi.

¹⁴ Paul Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar. Undated. Dunbar Papers. (Ohio Historical Society)

like an ideal job for him, as he was allowed to take his books and papers to work. Dunbar wrote Standard English poetry while waiting for riders. While this proved pleasurable and liberating at first, the poet realized that his overall condition was no better. Even as an elevator operator, he was enslaved to the service of others. During his long hours in the dark building hallway, Dunbar dreamed of an escape from this oppressive life. He began to consider ways of supplementing his own pay, but realized that he had no time to do anything but write. In the early months of 1893, Dunbar happened across a potentially helpful idea. Seeing how popular his Standard English poetry had become, Dunbar thought to sell it. He put a collection of poems together, bound them with a string, and priced it at a dollar and a nickel. One by one he marketed the collection to his riders. Just as methodically, they declined his offer. At the end of several weeks, Dunbar was left with all his copies sitting in the corner of the elevator. Still in the same financial situation he was in to start, the poet believed he had no other choices.

Dunbar's attempt to sell his poetry ultimately failed because he did not consider his market. He needed to make extra money, and believed that the praise he received from his teachers, neighbors, and family was reason enough to try and sell his poetry. However, Dunbar's supporters had read his work when he shared it with them, or when it appeared in homework assignments or school and community newspapers. His supporters were not buying the poetry, nor were they in a financial position to do so. Instead, they paid him in compliments and encouraged him to press on with his talent. Dunbar understood that the price of his publication was too expensive for his family and friends, and did not market it to them. He believed that the Callahan Office Building was the ideal place to sell his collection. Dunbar worked there for twelve hours a day and rode the elevator with every businessman

who worked inside. He reasoned that he could pitch his publication to each of these men, and that they could afford his asking price. Dunbar did not consider, though, that, to them, he was a black elevator operator, not a poet. While they might have had the money, they unwilling to spend it on his collection. The businessmen had never read Dunbar's material, and the idea of buying poetry from a low wage worker did not appeal to them. Instead, they bought proven and legitimate poetry from writers, even black ones, who were known around the world or, at least, nationally. Dunbar's business venture, then, was simply miscalculated. He needed to make himself known as a poet to his potential customers before asking them to purchase his collection. This might have been achieved by giving it away at first, and then marketing another publication for a price.

Following his failed endeavor, Dunbar became despondent. He was proud of his Standard English poetry, and felt like a failure when it did not sell. Worse, he saw little hope in helping his mother out of her financial situation. In a letter to a friend in late 1892, Dunbar wrote, "My hopes are no brighter than when you [last] saw me. I am getting on no better, and what would be possible, no worse. I am nearer discouraged than I have ever been."¹⁵ His friend responded:

Poor Dunbar, 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 a dingy elevator at starvation wages. Show me a white boy, nineteen, who can excel or even equal lines like these.¹⁶

The poet had received so much praise for his Standard English verse that he had few doubts whites would buy it. He felt betrayed by his supporters, and figured that their words had

¹⁵ *Indianapolis Journal*. From Hudson, p. 38.

¹⁶ Ibid.

been insincere. Dunbar was unsure of where to look for help with his problems. He considered this one of the lowest times of his life. At this crucial point, Dunbar had to find a way to employ all of his resources. He was educated and knew many people in the black community. He could also write well, though his confidence in this was diminishing. Dunbar needed a profitable opportunity to come along, but thought that his color would prevent that from happening. Although he had only made one attempt to sell his Standard English poetry, Dunbar conceded that his failure in this was the mark of his fate. He believed that he would never escape this hopeless situation. This was a sentiment Dunbar would have for the rest of his life, one reflected in his future writing.

1.4 Dunbar and Black Dialect Poetry

Although Standard English poetry was his passion in writing, Dunbar had penned a small amount of dialect poetry before 1892. He claimed in interviews that it was only natural for him to do so.¹⁷ Hudson explains that “while dialect was not native to [Dunbar], he acquired a picturesque way of expressing himself in that vein – from [his parents].”¹⁸ The poet’s father was born enslaved in Garret County, Kentucky. Before he and Matilda divorced, Dunbar’s father spoke dialect in the family home. The poet’s mother was born elsewhere in Kentucky. Dunbar explained that he “heard so many fireside tales of the simple, jolly tuneful life. Down in the country districts of Kentucky, I have seen it all.”¹⁹ Though he had not traveled to the Bluegrass State before he was an adult, Dunbar claimed he could envision what it was like. He said that his mother’s stories in black dialect helped him imagine the sights and sounds of the old plantations of the antebellum South. He understood

¹⁷ Wiggins, pp. 54-55.

¹⁸ Hudson, *Biography*, p. 20.

¹⁹ *Dayton Daily*, July 16, 1897. From Hudson, *Biography*, p. 60.

the form as an authentic representation of blackness. It was the language of his parents and their friends, themselves former slaves. As he began to write in his early days, Dunbar put this speech on paper. He said that it was like a “jingle in a broken tongue”²⁰ that easily translated into poetry. The dialect was rhythmic. Its contracted words were easy for the boy to spell. It is unknown how much dialect poetry Dunbar wrote in his youth because only one dialect poem, “A Banjo Song,” has been published. It is likely that most of it was rather short and childlike, as Dunbar switched to writing in Standard English when he began reading it in short stories, newspapers, and novels. When he did, the more formal speech of his favorite writers inspired him. It made him feel above the dregs of poverty, and helped him to imagine the possibilities beyond oppression. Standard English became a way for Dunbar to demonstrate his abilities and his education. Dialect was of little concern.

Dunbar was unaware that literary representations of black dialect in the mid-to-late nineteenth century were largely stigmatized. Many African-Americans considered the form misrepresentative of black speech when it appeared in literature. They argued that the constant misspellings of “eye dialect”²¹ implied a childishness and lack of education in African-American characters. Also, black characters who spoke in dialect were often written as slaves, as illustrated in the short stories of Thomas Nelson Page²²: “I wish yo’ hed see ole marster. Marse Chan he warn’ mo’n eight years ole, an’ dyah dey wuz – old marster ctan’in’ wid he whup raised up, an’ Marse Chan red an’ cryin’, hol’in on to it, an’ sayin’ I b’longst to ‘im.”²³ Page’s attempt to imitate black speech validates the contentions of literary dialect’s opponents. His replication is inconsistent and does not reflect the legitimate, systematic

²⁰ Dunbar, “The Poet.” From Wiggins, p. 275.

²¹ As defined by sociolinguists Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes, “eye dialect is the use of misspelling to suggest dialect.”

²² 1853 – 1922. Born in Virginia. Popularized the plantation genre of Southern writing.

²³ *Marse Chan*, p. 4.

characteristics of the form. For instance, Page's use of the word *marster* does not follow the dialect's guidelines of *r*-deletion.²⁴ Because he was not reading dialect in his youth, Dunbar's knowledge of the form was pure. He associated it only with his family and neighbors, who spoke it naturally. Also, for financial reasons, Dunbar did not have access to journal, newspaper, and magazine articles that would have exposed and condemned black dialect in literature. Thus, when he was re-introduced to the form in 1892, Dunbar did not have any reservations about writing it himself.

That year, Dunbar was invited by one of his former high school teachers to a meeting of the Western Conference of Writers. She explained that it was "an old fashioned country literary society which congregated year after year for the pure joy of it."²⁵ Dunbar reasoned that he could benefit from meeting the other writers who would be present. Though he had suffered a devastating setback in trying to sell his collection, the young poet agreed. He was asked to present a poem to open the conference. He chose "The Old High School and the New," a Standard English tribute to his alma mater. When Dunbar finished, he was introduced to James Whitcomb Riley, the "Hoosier Poet" from Indiana. Riley, renowned for his poetry in Midwestern dialect, read some of his own work. As Dunbar listened, he was reminded of the similar sounds of his mother's speech. He appreciated Riley's rhythm and rhyme, and associated it to the dialect poetry he had written years prior. When Riley ended his closing remarks, the scores of other writers applauded and shouted praise to the Indiana poet. Dunbar was energized by the ovation and joined in. After thanking several of the writers for their show of appreciation for his poem, Dunbar returned to work at the office building. He reflected on Riley's reading, and replayed in his mind the response the Indiana

²⁴ Wolfram and Schilling-Estes call this "the absence or reduction of the *r* sound in words such as *car*."

²⁵ Hudson, *Biography*, p. 40.

poet received. Dunbar thought about the Midwestern dialect he had heard, and its similarities to the speech of some whites in Dayton. He did not think to consider Riley's poetry inconsiderate or misrepresentative of the vernacular. Instead, Dunbar was impressed by how the audience's support legitimized the imitation. For the remainder of the day, he contemplated his own ability to write like the Indiana poet, except in the black dialect he knew so well. Dunbar thought he, too, could excel if he had the support of other writers. Naively, the poet dreamed of how his readers would find his dialect poetry authentic and a true contribution to the race. As the rest of his life and career would demonstrate, Dunbar would exhaust himself trying to convey these genuine intentions to the world.

The audience at the Western Conference of Writers was very impressed by Dunbar's poem. They were disappointed that he had to return to work so quickly after his reading. Over the next several days, many of the writers visited Dunbar there. They praised him for his poem and encouraged him to write more frequently. Regardless of their acclaim, however, Dunbar was still unsure of his talent as a Standard English poet. He wrote, "Indeed this publicity is disturbing me. It upsets me and makes me nervous. I feel like a man walking a slack rope above thousands of spectators how knows himself an amateur and is expecting him to fall."²⁶ Dunbar loved writing Standard English poetry. To him, it was an accomplishment and a testament to his own mother's wisdom. For years, she told him to nurture his talents, believing that they would lift him out of adversity some day. Nonetheless, Dunbar feared that no one would ever buy his Standard English poetry. The poet found himself facing a difficult crossroad. He believed that as a black man, few job opportunities would ever arise. Dunbar felt that he needed to make a choice. He could take a risk in fulfilling his own wishes and continue writing exclusively in Standard English.

²⁶ Dunbar to Matthews, October 19, 1892. Dunbar Papers. (Ohio Historical Society)

Otherwise, he could write in dialect. Dunbar understood that he would not be satisfied in doing so, but he believed it had greater marketability. The poet reasoned over the following weeks that while Standard English was a worldly respected form, Riley had demonstrated that dialect was also. Dunbar compromised and wrote both. Over the next year, Dunbar wrote Standard and dialect poetry in his elevator. He shared it with Will Pfimmer and James Newton Matthews, two authors he had met at the conference. Though hesitant of this experiment and unsure of his talents, Dunbar acted on their recommendations to share the collection with others and prepared to sell it.

In response to the financial promise of dialect poetry, Dunbar published *Oak and Ivy* in 1893. He signed a contract with the Brethren Publishing House that guaranteed he would pay the printing costs with the proceeds from his book. The agreement would leave Dunbar with very little profit. However, he hoped to benefit from any publicity the collection would bring him. Dunbar believed that even if readers purchased *Oak and Ivy* solely for its dialect, they would eventually come to discover the poems in Standard English, which he felt were far better in quality. The next collection, Dunbar envisioned, would contain only formal English poetry. Within two weeks of releasing *Oak and Ivy*, all 1,000 copies were sold. Ironically, his patrons largely included the businessmen at the Callahan Office Building, who had seen Dunbar conversing over the past year with some fairly well-known authors. Dunbar was stunned at his success. He had nearly lost all hope for his writing just a year prior. Now his collection was in the hands of a significant number of people. Still, Dunbar was not overjoyed. Dunbar felt that he had surrendered a part of his identity by writing in dialect. He wanted his name to be associated with those that lined the family bookcase. They, Dunbar

reasoned, always wrote in formal English. However, the conditions of the American economy and its racist society made this difficult for a black man to achieve.

1.5 The End of Innocence

Following the success of *Oak and Ivy*, Dunbar published a second book of poetry called *Majors and Minors*. It was mainly a facsimile of his previous collection, with several new poems added. Dunbar's mentors, who included Pfimmer, Matthews, and Dr. Henry H. Tobey,²⁷ advised against a book containing only Standard English. As the men waited for the latest collection to be released publicly, they instructed Dunbar to begin promoting it. Tobey suggested he begin with James Herne, a nationally-acclaimed playwright. Tobey explained that Herne partnered with renowned authors and critics when writing stage productions. Drawing favor from Herne, Tobey said, would prove profitable for Dunbar. With little money and another book of dialect already on the way, the poet sent a copy to Herne. What transpired from this became one of the most significant events in Dunbar's life and career. The famous realist author and critic, William Dean Howells, obtained the collection from the playwright and read it immediately. On June 27, 1896, his review of *Majors and Minors* was published by *Harper's Weekly*, a magazine that catered to the tastes of the only people who had the money to buy it – whites. While the article would erase Dunbar's financial troubles almost instantly, it would bring with it a burden of expectations and implications that Dunbar would spend the rest of his life trying to escape.

²⁷ Psychiatrist and director of a state mental asylum in Toledo, Ohio.

Chapter Two: The Lasting Impact of William Dean Howells

2.1 The Popularity of Local-Color Fiction and Its Influence on American Literary

Criticism

Following a period of Romanticism dominated by Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville, mid-to-late nineteenth century American writers adopted new literary forms that emphasized more local and modern themes. As early as 1865, regionalist, or “local color” stories began to emerge. Writers portrayed nearly every corner of the United States by describing place-specific landscapes, customs, and manners, and by recreating dialects. Regionalism introduced America and Americans, revealing what the country looked like and how the races of the growing population co-existed. Many writers recalled the places of their youths in their stories, signaling an emotional attachment that is clear, for instance, in poetic descriptions of landscape or in the casting of a child as the main character. Areas in the West, Midwest, and Great Plains regions saw notable coverage from widely read authors such as Twain, Mary Austin, and Hamlin Garland. Stories set in New England were of particular interest to audiences, who, after the ravages of the Civil War and the inevitable end of the American frontier, longed for bygone times. New England writing recalled the places of the nation’s infancy, and stirred a patriotic sense of democracy. The American South was also heavily represented during this period. Kate Chopin and Grace King, among many others, recalled the fashion, architecture, and personalities of the Old South. For some, the nostalgia of Southern regional literature arose from the depiction of idealized chivalric and agrarian societies, which were thought to be endangered after the Civil War. For a nation in the process of rebuilding, local-color literature was a journey back to a more traditional and

familiar time. However, as some Americans would contend, a return to the past was far from desirable.

Because region played so heavily on the literature of the day, local-color stories were a natural platform for discussing race. White writers portrayed blacks as their opinions, beliefs, and agendas saw fit. Those who supported and sympathized with African-Americans used literature to illustrate the mistreatment imposed on blacks. This was a continuation of sorts of the white abolitionist writing of the antebellum and Civil War days. Other mid-to-late nineteenth century white authors illustrated blackness negatively, however. Black speech, appearance, manners, and intelligence were popular striking points. Many white authors enjoyed the sense of nostalgia evoked by these characteristics. Some white writers maliciously recreated idealistic plantation scenes, in which slaves were depicted bumbling through conversation and acting like children. As Kenneth Warren explains, plantation nostalgia provided white Southerners in particular with an escape from the desolation and loss incurred with the fall of the Confederacy:

For many white audiences the black African was the creature of a pre-industrial lifestyle with a pre-industrial appetite, allowing whites to indulge their nostalgia for a lifestyle that was no longer available to them as they congregated in urban centers.

The promise of black America was an assurance that old ways and old pleasures were recuperable [sic]. Of course the old ways were beyond recovery.¹

While they would claim that their intentions were pure, many of these “Lost Cause” authors crafted their stories on ignorance. They misrepresented legitimate elements of blackness they knew nothing about, as Page does in *Marse Chan*. White attempts to replicate blackness, then, were inevitably inaccurate or incomplete. However, as long as local-color

¹ p. 119.

and race literature remained popular with paying audiences, white authors disregarded the discrepancies.

The popularity of local-color was evident in nearly every type of written media. Bold headlines introduced the stories in newspapers. Literary journals included elaborate illustrations with the local-color they printed. Dozens of magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Harper's Weekly*, filled their pages with the stories for decades. While all these periodicals helped satisfy America's taste for local-color, they also made the stories inaccessible to certain audiences. At a cost of ten to twenty-five cents per copy, the expense was often too much for many people, as bread was comparably priced at the time. If low-wage workers wanted a copy of a magazine, for instance, they were often forced to wait for one to become available secondhand. In that span of time, several new issues would have already been published. This provided no incentive for the media to cater to the literary tastes of blacks and the lower-class. Thus, the interests of paying white readers more-or-less governed what was printed. If whites wanted to read about African-Americans laboring on the plantation, publishers would have to accommodate the demand or lose business to another publication that did. After all, companies did not want to offend their customers by printing material that was uninteresting or passé. This created a sphere of expectations for critics, authors, and poets who wanted their material published. They were forced to incorporate into their writing the popular themes and topics of the day, if they were not doing so already. This potentially complicated matters for writers like Dunbar, who discussed race innocently and sympathetically. These authors and poets were at risk of being misinterpreted when their work was in the context of other material that was intentionally demeaning.

The critic William Dean Howells had a significant impact on the readers and writers of the period. His literature reviews were widely-read across the United States and in places around the world. In response to his popularity, *Harper's Weekly* offered Howells his own regular column, *Life and Letters*, in 1895. He is credited with discovering and promoting writers such as Bret Harte, Frank Norris, and Dunbar. Howells is considered the founder of the American school of realism, a movement he defined as “no more and no less than the faithful representation of reality.”² Often, regionalism, or local-color, is considered a form of realism, as it attempts the same sort of verisimilitude. Regionalism aims to represent life and culture in a particular time and place. Howells worked to develop realism to its entire capacity. As a critic, he analyzed literature with a realist mindset. He asked of everything he reviewed, “Is it true – true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women?”³ In a half-century that expressed anti-black sentiment, much of the racial literature that he reviewed affirmed this question. Dialect and blackness easily became staples of the realist movement. Dunbar, then, proved to be a significant discovery for Howells. The critic explains in his review of *Majors and Minors* that Dunbar’s dialect is the speech of the “middle-south Negroes” with an “accent of his neighbors as well as...his kindred.”⁴ This placement affords Dunbar’s vernacular great legitimacy and value, especially among readers wanting to experience the sound of the middle-south, regardless of where they are. Howells’ analysis proved entirely successful in convincing readers of this. *Majors and Minors* went on to become one of the best-selling collections of poetry by an African-American. However, as this chapter reveals, Howells’ review presents a rather

² “Editor’s Study,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (November 1889), p. 966. Dunbar Papers. (Ohio Historical Society)

³ Scharnhorst, p. 440.

⁴ *Life and Letters*, p. 640.

skewed interpretation of Dunbar and his collection. The poet intends for his dialect poetry to be viewed as an honorable celebration of the black community, their humanness, and their speech. Howells suggests that the dialect is, instead, a jocular observation of an uncivilized race.

2.2 Howells' Description of Dunbar and African-Americans

Howells' begins his analysis of *Majors and Minors* with a racial illustration of Dunbar. He draws a verbal portrait of the poet in the first paragraph of the *Harper's* article. The illustration precedes even mention of Dunbar's name, suggesting that the poet's appearance is more important than his collection. Dunbar is depicted in the now-stereotypical features of the "young negro, with all the race traits strangely accented."⁵ Howells explains that the poet has "the black skin, the wooly hair, the thick, outrolling [sic] lips, and the mild, soft eyes of the pure African type...I suppose that a generation ago, he would have been worth, apart from his literary gift, twelve or fifteen hundred dollars, under the hammer."⁶ Howells emphasizes, especially in the constant use of *the*, that Dunbar's appearance has a commonness or familiarity that readers would easily recognize. The portrait has a dual effect for the poet, depending on how the *Harper's* readers interpret the illustration. If paired with Howells' enthusiastic review of Dunbar's dialect poetry, the portrait conveys a sense of accomplishment in the poet, one that suggests he has overcome his imperfect state and risen to literary prominence. Dunbar comes across as a champion of his race, affirming the oft-debated contention by late-nineteenth century blacks that they, as a people, had made significant progress since Emancipation. On the other hand, when

⁵ Howells, *Life and Letters*. p. 630.

⁶ Ibid.

considering it singularly, the portrait is rather unflattering, highly biased, and potentially nostalgic to whites of the time. It conjures thoughts of Dunbar as a plantation slave or minstrel character, even before the reader gets any sense of his poetry. In this vein, Dunbar appears as more of an entertainer – or entertainment – than a serious, competent poet.

Howells uses similarly offensive words to describe African-Americans. The critic suggests that the black race is inferior, referring to African-Americans as “them,” “those people,” and “that race.”⁷ Howells extends this characterization even further to say that their inferiority is inherent. He explains that blacks have a “primitive human nature.”⁸ These words are blatantly stereotypical. They do not reflect well on African-Americans or, on the surface, on Dunbar himself. However, Howells believes that his words make good marketing sense for *Majors and Minors*, especially with its potential of drawing a large white readership. By praising the poet’s work, Howells makes an anomaly of Dunbar, emphasizing that his poetic talents supersede the white public’s negative generalized impressions of African-Americans. This lends great credit to the poetry collection itself, in that it becomes a testament to how special Dunbar really is. Along these lines, asserting Dunbar’s blackness legitimizes all of his dialect poetry, which Howells calls “significant and valuable.”⁹ Despite these accolades, however, Howells’ comments about African-Americans have a lasting effect on Dunbar. The critic maintains that while the poet is an exception to his race, he is and always will be black. Thus, in Howells’ mind, the quality of Dunbar’s poetry will never equal what a white poet could produce. He implies that Dunbar is, essentially, the best of the least, hardly a compliment to such a talented human being from a race of equally proven writers.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Several African-Americans had made significant contributions to American literature by 1896. Howells even promoted one of them, Charles Chesnutt. However, the critic suggests in the *Majors and Minors* review that he may be getting ahead of himself by praising Dunbar. Howells says that it is possible he is so fond of the poet's work simply because Dunbar is black: "I hope that the love of dramatic contrasts has not made me overvalue [the collection] as a human event, or that I do not think unduly well of it because it is the work of a man whose race has hitherto made its mark in his art."¹⁰ As a whole, this statement undermines Dunbar's talents as a writer. It implies that Howells could be wrong in praising the collection as good poetry, and that he was merely sympathetic or disillusioned in doing so. On another level, Howells' comment insults other African-American poets. In the second part of his sentence, "it is the work of a man whose race has hitherto made its mark in its art," the critic suggests that black poets who preceded Dunbar, such as Phyllis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, and Fenton Harper, did not leave an impression on the genre. Wheatley is recognized today as the first African-American poet, while Horton and Harper were among the most popular poets of the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

Howells soon retracts his statement that he could be getting ahead of himself by praising Dunbar. The critic says that he trusts he has been able to critique Dunbar as he would any other new poet. Later in the article, however, Howells demonstrates that he has failed in his attempt to remain objective: "I am speaking of him as a black poet, when I should be speaking of him as a poet; but the notion of what he is insists too strongly for present impartiality."¹¹ The critic leaves no question here that he is analyzing Dunbar based on his blackness. Thus, Howells' article should be read as if his chief concern is the color of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Dunbar's skin, not the human being beneath it, full of thoughts, emotions, and good intentions. Howells shows little interest in the non-racial components of Dunbar's collection, such as love, serenity, beauty, endearment, and often, desperation. For the critic, these emotions are secondhand and irrelevant to understanding Dunbar's dialect as pure entertainment. The *Harper's* review, then, leaves an impression on Dunbar and *Majors and Minors* that is devoid of humanity. The critic's distorted interpretation transcends the rest of the review and plays heavily into his analysis of the poet and his work.

2.3 Howells' Analysis of Dunbar's Poetry

Dunbar had hoped that *Majors and Minors* would help him promote his Standard English poetry. He purposely included more Standard verse in the collection than dialect, thinking it would grab more attention this way. Thus, when he learned that Howells had reviewed the text, Dunbar guessed his non-dialect verse would be the highlight of the article. To his dismay, Howells analyzes only one Standard English poem, "Conscience and Remorse." At twelve lines, it is one of the shortest poems in *Majors and Minors*. The poem reveals an insensitive, then dejected speaker who breaks the heart of a love-struck woman, then tries, unsuccessfully, to convince her to return:

"Good-Bye," I said to my conscience –

"Good-bye for aye and aye,"

And I put her hands off harshly,

And turned my face away;

And conscience smitten sorely

Returned not from that day.

But a time came when my spirit
Grew weary of its pace;
And I cried: "Come back, my conscience;
I long to see thy face."
But conscience cried: "I cannot;
Remorse sits in my place."¹²

The poem parallels Dunbar's own relationship with his former girlfriend Rebekah Baldwin. The two met in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition. When Dunbar returned to Dayton after the fair, he and Baldwin began sending love letters to each other. This continued until 1895, when the poet decided to end the relationship because the two lived so far apart. Dunbar later attempted to reconcile with Baldwin, but she refused. "Conscience and Remorse" accomplishes part of what Dunbar hoped to achieve in his Standard English poetry. It illustrates a very emotive and human side of him, one that transcends the stigma of his poverty and color. However, few people at the time of the *Harper's* article, including Howells, knew of the failed relationship between Dunbar and Baldwin. Consequently, the underlying significance of the poem is lost on its readers. Thus, Howells disregards the poem as "not noticeable" and "like most of the pieces of most young poets." As the only Standard English poem in the *Harper's* article, the seemingly irrelevant "Conscience and Remorse," along with Howells' dismal review of the poem, sets low expectations for the rest of Dunbar's non-dialect. Dunbar would have been better suited if Howells had chosen a poem that did not require so much prior knowledge. Readers may have been more responsive to "Frederick Douglass" or "Phyllis," for instance. They could identify these black figures, may have known something about their lives, and possibly even

¹² Ibid.

respected them. However, Howells makes it clear in the opening paragraphs of the article that he is not interested in promoting Dunbar's Standard English. Thus, "Conscience and Remorse" is a perfect selection for the critic because it has a straight-forward message, is short in length, and is easily forgotten.

In contrast, Howells' review of Dunbar's dialect poetry is spatially and racially overwhelming. The critic's preference for the vernacular is apparent, as he commits the rest of the article to the three dialect poems. Nowhere is Howells' bias more evident than in his examination of the first one he reviews, a five-stanza dialect poem entitled, "The Party." Howells admits, "I wish I could give the whole of [the poem]...but I must content myself with a passage or two."¹³ The critic quickly reneges on his statement and reprints "The Party" in its entirety. This allows the reader to immerse himself in over a hundred lines of Dunbar's dialect. Howells believed this was effective publicity, as it provided a complete example of Dunbar's poetry free with the purchase of the magazine. However, it also makes "Conscience and Remorse" a mere memory. Despite his enthusiasm for "The Party," Howells' comments about it are rather brief: "It is not for [Dunbar] to blink [the poem's] commonness, or to be ashamed of its rudeness..."¹⁴ While the statement was meant to praise Dunbar for the poem, the critic instead silences the poet's narrative voice. By way of his analysis, Howells nullifies Dunbar's subjectivity in "The Party." Howells makes it seem as if his interpretation of the language in the poem as being "common" and "rude" is also Dunbar's interpretation and intent. This further detracts from Dunbar's humanness and undermines his ability to produce personal, meaningful, and sympathetic poetry. His voice, then, is reduced to a full-length dialect poem set in the context of Howells' racial agenda, and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

a brief analysis by the critic that contradicts much of Dunbar's worthy purpose for writing poetry. Howells treats "When Malindy Sings" and "When De Co'n Pone's Hot" in much the same way. Like "The Party," they are wholly reprinted, leaving the critic little room for useful comments. However, at this point, Howells has already made a substantially damaging impression on how Dunbar's poetry should be read.

2.4 Positive Effects of the *Harper's* Article

Howells' review of *Majors and Minors* reached an exceptionally large number of households. The June 26, 1896 issue covered the Presidential nomination of then-Ohio Governor William McKinley, who was favored by many to win the November election. Thus, thousands of readers who may not have normally purchased *Harper's* were introduced to Dunbar and his collection. Literally overnight, the poet's fame soared. Readers rushed to purchase *Majors and Minors* during the following weeks, forcing the collection into a second printing in August. Dunbar's growing audience loved his collection, and began sending him letters of congratulations. They lauded the dialect poetry, calling it "simply exquisite."¹⁵ Some people even sent Dunbar money for additional copies of the book. The show of public support initially pleased Dunbar. It also signaled to prominent publishers that he was worthy of a contract. Three publishing companies contacted Dunbar soon after the Howells article appeared. Each invited the poet to New York for an interview. Their offers were competitive and, at the age of twenty-four, Dunbar was able to choose which proposal suited him best. The poet decided to sign with Dodd, Mead, and Company, whose contract guaranteed him "four hundred dollars advance against royalties of fifteen percent on the first

¹⁵ Hudson, *Biography*, p. 62.

10,000 copies and 17 ½ percent on all sales beyond that.”¹⁶ The agreement also called for a new volume of poetry to be released later that year. As Dunbar returned to Dayton following the meeting, he reflected upon his sudden good fortune. He would no longer have to rely on a lonely elevator to feed himself and his mother. The threat of foreclosure on the family house diminished, along with all the debts his father had left behind. For once in his life, Dunbar felt financially secure.

Until this point in his life, Dunbar had seen limited opportunities because of the color of his skin. Once he received Howells’ endorsement, however, the poet found more work than his time would allow. Employers who had once refused to hire Dunbar were now eager to offer him a job. They wanted, in some way, to be associated with the young man who had been reviewed by William Dean Howells in *Harper’s Weekly*. Although his main focus was writing poetry, Dunbar accepted several of these employment opportunities. He believed the experience would give him fresh ideas for his poetry. In 1896, Dunbar was hired as a page at the Dayton Court House. The position inspired him to write “The Lawyer’s Ways,” in which he ponders “how an Angel an’ a devil can possess the self-same soul.”¹⁷ Dunbar quit the job after a month. He later took work as a clerk in Dayton and had a brief tour of duty with the Library of Congress in Washington. Universities and literary societies also courted Dunbar. They invited him to give readings to audiences numbering in the thousands. Dunbar received so many requests to speak that his advisors recommended he hire a lecture manager. The poet agreed and selected Major James B. Pond, Mark Twain’s platform manager, to coordinate his engagements. “Pond quickly booked Dunbar into readings around New York,

¹⁶ *Dayton Daily*, July 16, 1897, p. 7. From Hudson, *Biography*, p. 88.

¹⁷ *Lyrics of a Lowly Life*, p. 38.

meanwhile sending with him letters of introduction to several publishers.”¹⁸ It seemed from all his opportunities and travel that Dunbar was no longer a slave to his blackness. On one trip, he wrote home to his mother in a telling statement of how much his life had changed, “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.”¹⁹ Dunbar has achieved something he never thought possible: he was being treated like a man.

Some in the African-American community were inspired by Dunbar’s success. They considered the young poet a trailblazer, and saw his emergence out of poverty as a sign of where the race was headed. Dunbar’s African-American supporters understood the poet’s true intentions writing dialect. They were also amazed at the eloquence of his Standard English poetry. In 1899, Dunbar was officially recognized by the black community for his achievements when The Board of Trustees at Atlanta University²⁰ awarded him an honorary master’s degree. This was a significant and meaningful accomplishment for Dunbar, who had claimed:

There are two things that 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.²¹

James Weldon Johnson, one of the poet’s strongest supporters, remarked that “the hallmark of distinction was [now] upon [Dunbar],” and that the poet carried that “dignity of humility

¹⁸ Hudson, *Biography*, p. 65.

¹⁹ Dunbar to Matilda Dunbar, May 5 1897, Dunbar Papers. (Ohio Historical Society)

²⁰ Founded in 1865, by the American Missionary Association, with later assistance from the Freedman’s Bureau, was, before consolidation, the nation’s oldest graduate institution serving a predominantly African-American student body.

²¹ Newspaper clipping, September 14, 1889, Dunbar Papers. (Ohio Historical Society)

which never fails to produce a sense of greatness.”²² Dunbar was praised by African-Americans even more notable than Johnson. Among them was Booker T. Washington, an advocate for African-American self-help and racial solidarity. Throughout his life, Washington stressed the importance of arts education in the black community, arguing that a strong, unique racial identity was essential to ending white oppression. He was impressed by Dunbar’s efforts in poetry. In 1902, Washington sealed his endorsement of the poet when he commissioned him to write the Tuskegee Institute’s alma mater. Washington believed that Dunbar’s successful career epitomized the endeavoring spirit of the groundbreaking African-American academy. He considered Dunbar a typical exponent of the last decade of the nineteenth century. This was a period of accommodation, apology, and desire to prove to the majority group that the black man was “somebody.” Booker T. Washington grew in this climate, and so did Dunbar.²³

2.5 Negative Effects of the *Harper’s Article*

The negative effects of Howells’ review became apparent to Dunbar soon after the *Harper’s* article was published. He was helpless against them. The poet recognized that his reputation centered on his dialect poetry. Dunbar believed that if he abandoned it to pursue his dream of writing exclusively in Standard English, he would lose everything he had earned. Dodd, Mead, and Company also recognized the risk. The publisher insisted that Dunbar’s next collection, *Lyrics of a Lowly Life*, would be a single volume of his first two books of poetry. Judging from the popularity of *Majors and Minors*, this approach almost guaranteed that the new book would be popular among Dunbar’s existing readership.

²² Johnson, p. 152.

²³ Hudson, *Biography*, p. 127.

However, this also meant that the poet would pay a price for the success of *Lyrics*. With the familiar poetry of *Oak and Ivy* and *Majors and Minors* included, the new collection would carry all the expectations and implications that Howells established. Dunbar's label as a dialect poet would be perpetuated even longer. As the poet traveled across the country promoting the new book, he came to realize the extent of Howells' influence upon him. Audiences called out to Dunbar at speaking engagements, demanding he read his dialect poetry. The poet was treated similarly by magazine and newspaper companies. In 1900, he received a candid note from *Truth Magazine* after submitting a Standard English poem for publication: "The poem you sent last, and which I return to you with this, is too fine for the *Truth* reader would appreciate its beauty [sic]. And I know you can give me something more suited to our needs."²⁴ Dunbar felt as if he was reliving his days in the Dayton elevator, trying to sell his very first collection of poetry to people who only knew him as a unqualified black boy. In a definitive statement written in 1898, the poet blamed the *Harper's* article for his enduring troubles: "One critic says a thing and the rest hasten to say the thing, in many cases using identical words. I see now very clearly that Mr. Howells has done me irrevocable harm in the dictum he laid down regarding my dialect verse."²⁵ Only two years after the review, Dunbar had concluded that his dream of being read as a serious Standard English poet would never be realized. "The dialect tradition had been born of the most sinister of all jokes," Addison Gayle said of Dunbar, "and...as the greatest exponent of it he was the King of Jesters."

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding his rise to fame, Dunbar has received much scathing criticism. Many African-Americans and scholars over the last century have

²⁴ Editor of *Truth* to Dunbar, August 1, 1900, (Ohio Historical Society)

²⁵ From Gayle, Jr., p. 59.

considered the poet a traitor against his race. They view him as an ignorant man who capitalized on the mistreatment of blacks to appease his white readership. Dunbar's critics blame him for his dialect poetry, which they argue misrepresents centuries of oppressed African-Americans. W. E. B. Dubois, who endorsed Dunbar publicly as a prototypical member of the Talented Tenth,²⁶ had his reservations about the poet's dialect writing. Dubois advocated for a highly-educated African-American race, one that could counter inequality with intellect and style. He believed Dunbar's dialect inhibited the realization of his goal. Even today, scholars have denounced the poet for his dialect. The arguments of two particular critics, Robert Bone and Hugh M. Gloster, summarize the most common contentions of Dunbar criticism. Bone maintains that when considering the poet's career, "it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that his chief aim was to achieve popular success by imitating the plantation tradition."²⁷ It is apparent that Bone, like Dubois, has either overlooked or disregarded Dunbar's purpose for writing in dialect. Instead, Bone has been heavily influenced by Howells' narrow-minded interpretation. Gloster concurs with Bone, saying that "Dunbar generally accepts the limitations and circumscriptions of the plantation tradition,"²⁸ despite the poet's effort to demonstrate through his writing that oppression can be conquered. The core fault of Bone's and Gloster's arguments is that they themselves, not Dunbar, have deemed insurmountable the limitations and circumscriptions imposed on African-Americans. As Chapter Three will show, the poet's effort to overcome his limitations existed all along, beginning with the front cover of *Oak and Ivy*.

²⁶ From the 1903 Dubois essay of the same name. Dubois argued that "The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men," or, the most talented ten percent of all African-Americans.

²⁷ p. 114.

²⁸ p. 60.

Chapter Three: In His Own Words

In a word, Dunbar's life was turbulent. The small amount of happiness and comfort he felt was constantly offset by the relentless conditions of racism. Poverty and the ill-effects of his parents' enslavement plagued the poet's childhood and followed him well into his adult years. Dunbar encountered people in Dayton and across the United States who judged him only by the color of his skin. Though he tried to remain strong, Dunbar admitted that every day and every new endeavor were a battle: "The influences surrounding me were not conducive to growth, and any new development in myself came from fighting against such."¹ While Dunbar frequently relied on his mother and his community for support, his travels often took him away from Dayton. Thus, Dunbar found himself looking for other outlets to express his thoughts and emotions. He explained that during these times, "My pen yielded me support."² Indeed, this was true, as Dunbar wrote during nearly every stage of his life. He describes the behavior of racist whites at the World's Fair in the poem, "Columbian Ode." Dunbar recorded his somber thoughts in the dark hallways of the Callahan Office Building, and he later put them into autobiographical novels like *The Uncalled*. Dunbar conveyed his painful feelings to family and friends in personal letters, even when it seemed to him that there was nothing more to live for.

Now that the bleak and chaotic conditions of Dunbar's life have been revealed, we can begin to read Dunbar's poetry, personal letters, and prose in a more relevant context. Each of his texts offers an intimate look into how the poet was affected by the opportunities and challenges that shaped and changed his life. With this in mind, we can consider what we

¹ Interview with Dunbar, Unidentified newspaper clipping, Arnold Scrapbook, Dunbar Papers. (Dayton Public Library)

² Hudson, *Biography*, p. 14.

know to have been his intentions for his dialect and Standard English, and if he succeeded in these objectives. This will allow us to begin shifting away from a strictly racial interpretation of his poetry and his other writing. Dunbar's humanity, education, and good intentions will pervade throughout his words, regardless of the linguistic form. We can recognize the image Dunbar attempted to create for himself, not the one that others have blindly created for him. With any success, this will lead scholars and readers to a more accurate and complete understanding of the poet who helped usher in the black literary revolution of the early twentieth-century.

3.1 Dunbar's First Three Books of Poetry

The titles of Dunbar's first three books of poetry³ reveal his feelings about his writing. When he named the first collection *Oak and Ivy*, Dunbar intended for the "oak" to symbolize the book's Standard English poems. Jean Gould explains that "these serious poems were stronger than the humorous and dialect pieces."⁴ "Ivy," then, represented "the lesser ones, like ivy twined around a tree trunk."⁵ *Majors and Minors* makes the same correlations. In the *Harper's* review, Howells identifies the symbolism in Dunbar's titles, but claims it offers no insight into what the poet actually thought of the Standard English versus the dialect: "He calls his little book Majors and Minors; the Majors being in our American English, and the Minors being in dialect...I have no means of knowing whether he

³ *Oak and Ivy*, *Majors and Minors*, and *Lyrics of a Lowly Life* are the foundational pieces of Dunbar's public career as a writer. They are also his best reflections of the conditions in his life, as the shaping of Paul Laurence Dunbar mostly happened from his youth up to the Howells article. From there, it was Dunbar reacting to his state. The first three books of poetry are essentially what Howells responded to, and this is what we should look at.

⁴ p. 78.

⁵ Ibid.

values his Majors more than his Minors...”⁶ Howells contends that Dunbar is admitting to the inferiority of black dialect. The critic calls American English “ours,” that is, belonging to whites. This denies Dunbar any ownership of Standard English. By default, dialect becomes Dunbar’s official language. Gayle explains that, as a result, the poet would soon come to realize that “oak” and “ivy” had a more ominous and insightful meaning:

Only later in life was he to learn that within this title [*Oak and Ivy*] he had planted the seeds of a truer metaphor; that of the ivy engulfing the oak, strangling the life out of it, so that in time what was at first ornament replaced the dominant element, and was admired as if it had always been the more important of the two.⁷

After his self-published collection of poetry did not sell, Dunbar suspected that he would not have a future as a Standard English writer. This suspicion gradually became reality. When *Majors and Minors* gained publicity only as a result of the favorable reception of the dialect poems in *Oak and Ivy*, the poet all but conceded to his fate as a dialect writer. By the time the next volume of poetry was published, *Lyrics of a Lowly Life* was the only appropriate title from Dunbar’s perspective.

3.1.1 Analysis of the Dialect Poetry

Contrary to Howells’ interpretation, Dunbar’s dialect poetry is emotional and full of appreciation for the black race. Dunbar strives to uncover a more basic form of himself, one that is free of all the stereotypes and misconceptions of blackness. Thus, Dunbar attempts to depict himself as a human being, fully capable of thinking and feeling. Dunbar’s emotions are evident in the poem, “Lonesome.” The speaker contemplates his sadness over his mother

⁶ Howells, p. 630.

⁷ Gayle, Jr., p. 31.

leaving town for a visit. The poem parallels Dunbar's own relationship with his mother. The poet often expressed the same melancholy when he traveled outside of Dayton to promote his poetry. "Lonesome" conveys the extent of Dunbar's sadness when he was away from her. The speaker's separation from his mother is heartbreaking. Now all the happy things in life now seem sad to him:

The sparrings ac's more tearsome like an' won't hop

quite so near,

The cricket's chirp is sadder an' the sky ain't ha'f so

clear;⁸

Thinking of the poet as the speaker, Dunbar suggests that life changes significantly when he and his mother are apart. In reality, it was his mother that stayed at home and Dunbar that left for months at a time. No matter where he was, the poet always tried to make his mother feel as if he were there with her. He wrote her letters, sought her advice, and sent her money. It was Dunbar's way of suppressing the sadness and guilt he felt over leaving. There is little indication, however, that his mother had these same feelings. Thus, Dunbar leaves the impression that, despite being in his late twenties at the time this poem was written, he was still very much a child at heart. When considering the poem in this way, it is beneficial to note the ambiguity in the speaker's age. Only two lines in "Lonesome" offer any clues:

"You're purty lonesome, John, *ol' boy*, sence mother's

gone away."⁹

The notion of Dunbar as an "old boy" speaks volumes about his feelings of his relationship with his mother. Dunbar could be implying that although he is a grown man, he feels

⁸ Dunbar, *The Collected Poems*, p. 77.

⁹ Ibid.

depended on her – as a child is – because she is not able to take care of herself. If his mother were able to earn money on her own, Dunbar might have reconsidered writing in dialect to make a living. Then, he would have been able to write in Standard English and survive on the meager wage he would have earned, and been somewhat happier. However, his mother’s disabilities required Dunbar to forsake his own desires and instead, write in dialect in order to make money. This alternate interpretation of the poet’s relationship with his mother demonstrates a wealth of untapped information within his dialect poetry.

In some of his dialect poems, Dunbar tries to look beyond his sadness. After all, he thought, there were good times in his life, such as when he discovered literature and when *Oak and Ivy* became a success. Exploring this side of Dunbar provides much more depth to him as a person and a poet, especially since his life story is so full of sorrow. In fact, some of his dialect poems are extremely positive. In “Speakin’ O’ Christmas,” Dunbar describes a strong sense of wonder as he looks out at snow falling on a typically barren landscape. This sentiment carries over to “Spring Fever,” where the speaker watches in amazement as the ground thaws and grass starts pushing through. “The Spellin’ Bee” is a positive poem that is more contextually-relevant to Dunbar’s own life. The poem is narrated by a boy who falls in love with a girl named Nettie at a local spelling contest. Despite being given “big words,” the speaker and Nettie dominate the bee. The contest ends when the speaker misspells a word, giving Nettie the victory and the grand prize – a vocabulary book. The boy admits that the misspelling was intentional. He wanted Nettie to win because he wanted to see her happy. In the end, the two discuss their plans for the future:

So we agreed that later on when age had giv'
us tether,

We'd jine our lots an' settle down and own that
book together.¹⁰

Dunbar wrote “The Spellin’ Bee” in late 1893. He had just met Rebekah Baldwin, a schoolteacher, in Chicago. She became Dunbar’s first love. The poet was overjoyed and wrote the poem to express his feelings. Dunbar depicts himself as a schoolboy. He is educated, innocent, and caring. These are some of the qualities that the poet tried to convey in his service to his community, as well as in his treatment of others. Dunbar incorporates these characteristics into his poem to give his readers a better sense of the feelings inside of him. This contradicts Howells’ assertion that the poet is a one-dimensional observer of his “primitive” race, and has no characteristics other than stereotypical blackness.

Another interesting facet of Dunbar’s poetry is that his dialect writing is naturally musical. Derived from the “jingling” sound of his mother’s and neighbors’ speech, Dunbar heard poetry in their language, not the inherent inferiority that Howells interprets. The history and tradition of African-American music becomes, then, an important part of Dunbar’s dialect poetry. “A Negro Love Song” exemplifies this best. It is a poem that Dunbar wrote while working at a restaurant at the World’s Columbian Exposition. When there was downtime during the dinner shift, Dunbar and other black waiters would congregate near the kitchen door to talk about their girlfriends. Other waiters would pass by with their trays shouting to the groups of men, “Jump back, honey, jump back!”:

Seen my lady home las’ night,
Jump back, honey, jump back
Hel’ huh ban’ an’ sque’z it tight,
Jump back, honey, jump back

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 104.

Hyeahd huh sigh a littl sigh

Jump back, honey, jump back

An' a smile go flittin' by –

Jump back, honey, jump back.¹¹

The poem is reminiscent of the African-American spiritual and slave songs. Dunbar would have been familiar with these traditional songs, considering his interaction with former slaves in Dayton. The repetition of the line “Jump back, honey, jump back” is reminiscent of the songs slaves sang while working in the fields. The repetition was easy to remember and set a rhythm to work by. This association Dunbar makes to traditional slave songs is particularly telling of his desire to demonstrate authenticity in his dialect. He draws upon history to shape his poetry, thus bridging the past and the present.

Dunbar depicts African-American traditions elsewhere in his early dialect poetry. In Dunbar’s first-ever dialect poem, “A Banjo Song,” the poet combines the feelings of a hard day’s work with the comforts of a historically significant friend: the banjo.

Yet dere's times when I furgit 'em, –

Aches an' pains an' troubles all, –

An' it's when I tek at ebenin'

My ol' banjo f'om de wall.¹²

The modern banjo was made by African-American slaves and was based on instruments that were indigenous to their parts of Africa. These early banjos were spread to the colonies of those countries engaged in the slave trade. Thus, Dunbar suggests that after a long day of work, African-Americans turned to something of their own invention, which was also used

¹¹ Ibid, p. 221.

¹² Ibid, p. 68.

by whites of the time. There are records of urban banjo contests and tournaments held at hotels, race tracks and bars. Thus, the banjo became something that even whites embraced. The same sort of appreciation for African-American musical customs is also displayed in “The Ol’ Tunes”:

You kin talk about yer anthems

An’ yer arias an’ sich,

An’ yer modern choir singin’

...

But you orter heerd us youngsters

In the times now far away.

A-singin’ o’ the ol’ tunes

In the ol’-fashioned way.¹³

The poem almost condemns white music in support of “old-fashioned” black music, which could have been anything from spirituals to banjo music. Dunbar demonstrates a pride for the tradition, so much so, that he is willing to speak his mind about his preference for black music and risk opposition by white readers, rather than merely implying it.

Though he had relatively few plans for his dialect poetry, Dunbar demonstrates a familiarity with the craft and the themes that distinguish him as a notable writer. He accomplishes two major things in his dialect poetry. First, he searches for, and discusses, his own roots. While Dunbar would have argued that he was stationed in Dayton, his word and his presence had firm support everywhere. Thus, it is important for him to go back and consider what makes Paul Laurence Dunbar complete. He found this completion in his emotions and in his childhood. Dunbar considers these to be the things that define him best.

¹³ Ibid, p. 73.

Although his emotions were often spoiled and his childhood was sometimes hard, he suggests that talking about these things gives the audience the best impression of who he is, and who he wants to be. Second, Dunbar succeeds in searching for and discovering some of his African-American roots. This goes to show that Dunbar really was interested in demonstrating the uniqueness of the black race through an accurate depiction. He feels that it is inherent in their music, be it by instrument or by voice. As Dunbar always considered his poetry his “songs,” he can see for himself how these traditions have transcended time and influenced other generations of African-Americans. Dunbar’s dialect poetry, which uncovers the roots of the black race, demonstrates that African-Americans are making significant progress as a people.

3.1.2 Analysis of the Standard English Poetry

Dunbar intended for his Standard English poetry to demonstrate his education, his mastery of the language, and the notion that an African-American could overcome his or her limitations. While he would accomplish each of these objectives in the total sum of completing a portfolio of Standard English poetry, what transpires is a collection of poems that has rather dark, mature thoughts of death, depression, and hopelessness. These emotions are Dunbar’s extremes. They exhibit a progression away from the basic emotions he conveys in his dialect into an adulthood that would not bring him the same sense of security. The poem that best exemplifies this new way of thinking and writing is “He Had His Dream.” It parallels Dunbar’s dream of writing only in Standard English poetry, one that is made virtually impossible by the racist society around him:

He had his dream, and all through life,

Worked up to it through toil and strife.

...

He labored hard and failed at last,

His sails too weak to bear the blast,¹⁴

Those who are aware of Dunbar's personal situation, as well as those who are aware of the conditions of African-Americans during that time, can understand the poem's relevance to Dunbar's life and to the lives of so many blacks. Words like "toil," "strife," and "labored" sound so much like words used to describe slave work. The "blast" he speaks of is the rejection he would face not only as a writer of Standard English, but as a black man, in general. Dunbar composed this poem shortly after *Majors and Minors* was released and reviewed. He was still feeling optimistic that he would be able to live out his dream. Thus, there is a sense of optimism and perseverance in the poem:

He said, "The tempest will be short,

My bark will come to port."

He saw through every cloud a gleam –

He had his dream.¹⁵

At the time he wrote this, however, Dunbar did not realize the life that he had ahead of him. His optimism would soon be diminished by more and more demands for dialect writing. African-Americans, however, would have a slightly different fate. As they fought through racism and oppression during the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, more of their dreams started coming true. This would be apparent in the Harlem Renaissance, the Black

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 38.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Arts Movement, and the Civil Rights movement. While Dunbar did not fully realize his dream, the race he speaks for makes significant progress in fulfilling all of theirs.

These very mature and developed thoughts carry over into two other definitive examples of Dunbar's figurative enslavement. The first is the poem "The Sparrow." The speaker is visited by a sparrow, who taps on his window for attention. Instead of noticing it, the speaker claims to be engrossed in

...Traffic's rush and din
Too deep engaged to let [it] in,
With deadened heart and sense plod on,
Nor know our loss til [it] is gone.¹⁶

The poem reflects Dunbar's own feelings after his life started getting out of control. He said, "I am in love with literature and wish I could give my whole time to reading and writing, but alas! One must eat, and so I plod along, making the things that is [sic] really first in my heart, secondary in my life."¹⁷ Dunbar, too, wanted to be able to make a song that people would hear and appreciate solely for its beauty. The same frustration carries over to another bird-themed poem, "Sympathy." The poem has seen noticeable press since 1969 when poet Maya Angelou used one of its lines, "I know why the caged bird sings," as the title of her life story. The bird of this poem is initially free, swooping down into the pastoral fields, and enjoying nature in all its glory:

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 100.

¹⁷ Dunbar to Matilda, July 4, 1897, Dunbar Papers. (Ohio Historical Society)

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;

When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,

And the river flows like a stream of glass;¹⁸

However, in the next stanza, Dunbar explains that the bird has been caught. It is now a bird in a cage beating “his wing/Til its blood is red on the cruel bars.”¹⁹ Dunbar feels that he, too, was once able to see all the goodness of exploring the beauty of his mind and writing and reading in Standard English. However, he has been caged by the bigoted desires of a racist white public. Eagerly, but unsuccessfully, Dunbar tries to break free. Realizing that he is trapped in this sorry state, Dunbar and the bird go on singing their songs, as they wait for a better day to come in death:

It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –²⁰

Dunbar uses his Standard English poetry to pay tribute to the entire race. He believed that he must use his non-dialect writing to do this, as he felt it was the best representation of himself. Dunbar believed that by showing his own progress and mastery of the language, he could honor the people who helped him achieve it. This shows that Howells was wrong in his interpretation of Dunbar’s Standard English poetry as “typical.” Instead, these poems are well-devised. They speak of people who had a direct impact on Dunbar’s career or freedom. Poems like those mentioned in the last chapter, such as “Frederick Douglass” (“He dared the lightning in the lightning’s track,/And answered thunder with his thunder back”)²¹ are not

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 104.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dunbar, *The Collected Poems*, p. 151.

poems of shallow emotion, but are, instead, stirring tributes to Dunbar's predecessors in this racial plight.

"The Colored Soldiers" is another one of these examples. It pays homage to the previous generation of African-Americans who fought in the 54th Massachusetts regiment of the Civil War, the first all-black regiment in United States history. Some of the men he honors would have still been living at the time this poem was published. Thus, Dunbar is paying tribute to an existing community of African-Americans. As before, with "The Ol' Tunes," Dunbar risks offending his white readership in this poem. It virtually credits African-Americans with winning the Civil War. Dunbar suggests that blacks single-handedly saved the Northerners from losing the war:

Up the hills you fought and faltered,
In the vales you strove and bled,
While your ears still heard the thunder
Of the foes' advancing tread.

...

Then you called the colored soldiers,
And they answered to your call.²²

Dunbar expresses an extreme amount of pride in this poem. In the beginning of the poem, he hopes a muse will come down and help him tell this tale because it is so powerful. Not only does the poem expose the weaknesses of whites, but it also demonstrates that African-Americans have not only made progress since the Civil War, but they made progress during the Civil War while the whites fell behind. Dunbar proves, once again, that he is honorable to his race and deserves recognition for this.

²² Ibid, p. 238.

In “Ode to Ethiopia,” Dunbar praises other generations of African-Americans as he speaks to the entire race. This is a courageous move by Dunbar, whose audience is mostly white. Dunbar says that slavery crushed Ethiopia, forcing all of its good people to toil in the pangs of servitude. He compares this to slavery in the United States. However, Dunbar sees good things in Ethiopia now:

The forests flee before their stroke,

Their hammers ring, their forges smoke,--

They stir in honest labour.²³

Dunbar explains that as in Ethiopia, the blacks in the United States are honestly laboring, as well. The difference however, is that the blacks in the African country are free. For in Ethiopia,

The plant of freedom upward sprung,

And spread its leaves so fresh and young--

Its blossoms now are blowing.²⁴

Dunbar hopes that the blossoms of freedom will blow across Atlantic and into the United States. The poem is a testament to Dunbar’s own objectives and efforts. It is also a sign that the blacks in the United States will someday overcome all their adversities, as Ethiopia has done.

3.2 The Personal Letters

Dunbar’s personal letters to family and friends provide an excellent outline of his life and career. The letters have been archived by the Ohio Historical Society and several

²³ Ibid, p. 240.

²⁴ Ibid.

Dayton-area libraries. They are significant because they reveal firsthand the thoughts and emotions that were going through Dunbar's mind during all his trials and tribulations. The letters require no deep analysis, as Dunbar is candid and open in his conversation. As one would expect, the letters follow a path with Dunbar that begins quite innocently. His early correspondences with his mother and people back home in Dayton started when he was working at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. They go on to show how Dunbar started becoming more downtrodden in his travels, his fame, and in the sense that his dreams were going unrealized. There is a steady progression from innocent themes to ones that reflect the darkness and maturity of some of his Standard English poetry. Most of the letters are written to his mother and his advisors, who include Dr. Henry Tobey and James Newton Matthews. These letters span the entire course of Dunbar's career. The letters he sent to Rebekah Baldwin as they corresponded after Dunbar left the Exposition are also included in the collection. Later, he would correspond with another Alice Ruth Moore, who would eventually become his wife. The letters give us the best sense of Dunbar's outlook on his life and poetry. They ultimately illustrate Dunbar's desire to shed his label as a dialect poet and gain freedom from the public in any way that he can.

The early letters, which were sent when Dunbar was away in Chicago, depict a young man who has gone away from home for the first time and is lost in the busyness of the city. This greatly troubled the poet, as Wiggins recalls, "at first he hesitated [to go to Chicago], 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."²⁵ The young poet was scared of his surroundings, intimidated by the racism that was spewing from depictions of African-

²⁵ *Life and Times*, p. 10.

Americans as animals and freaks of nature. He called Chicago “a great wicked city,”²⁶ one in which he had lost his freedom and his movement. Dunbar tries at all costs to have his mother come to be with him: “I want you to come out at once. Tell me how much money you have and what day you can come because I do not intend to have you staying there alone.”²⁷ These early letters from Chicago show Dunbar constantly checking in with his mother, as he wrote her every day. He needed to make sure that she was taken care of, and the only way he could accomplish this was to make sure he always knew what her daily tasks were, and how she was getting along without him. Before his mother eventually made it to Chicago, Dunbar almost fell apart with grief and despondency over her not being there. He felt inferior to everyone there and wrote her begging for support: “My timidity and shyness among strangers hold me back out here. I am too much like a green country boy in spite of my extensive travels.”²⁸ Eventually, Dunbar succeeded in placing enough guilt on his mother that she came to see him. He paid her apartment rent and made sure that she was well-fed. For Dunbar, this was the greatest sense of security he had, and as his letters to her demonstrate, he was nearly paralyzed by fear without her. This gives rise to the reasons why he continued to write in dialect despite his not liking it, and despite the fact that it angered his critics. He needed to make sure she was well-taken care of.

Although it ended in separation in 1895, the written relationship between Dunbar and his girlfriend, Rebekah Baldwin, was one that exposed Dunbar’s desire for love and support. It was a different kind of love than what Dunbar asked of his mother. He liked to write to her and call her sweet names, such as “mon ami,” eagerly awaiting the type of bright response he would get back. When he returned to Dayton, Dunbar wrote, “I thought of you last night...It

²⁶ Hudson, p. 49.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 49-50.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 31.

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.” She responded, “I wish you were here just now to talk soft nonsense to me as only a poet can.”²⁹ This frivolity is nothing that Dunbar was able to have while in Dayton, as much of his time was devoted to working. Thus, when he got to Chicago, he started to sense with Rebekah this desire to uncover feelings that he never had done before. These are thoughts that are reflected in the darker, more mature Standard English poems. He wrote her a poem called “One Life,” that begins, “Oh, I am hurt to death, my Love;/The shafts of fate have pierced my striving heart.” It ends with “I know the world holds joy and glee,/But not for me – ‘tis not for me.”³⁰ To these thoughts she responded, “Why do you look on the dark side? I think nothing quite so sad and plaintive as your ‘One Life.’ Tell me – what saddens your songs?”³¹ At this time, Dunbar was not yet capable of exploring romantic possibilities with Baldwin or any other women. He was much too immersed in his project of making money and writing his poetry. Thus, instead of reflecting on the actual love he felt for her, he was inspired to think of how much it hurt him to think he did not have time for the pleasure of love. These pains could have resulted from the desire to have her as a wife, or from the pains of being trapped by his responsibilities and to his mother.

In many ways, the only people that did praise him for his Standard English poetry were the people he wrote it to in letters. As Dunbar’s career began to take him down a path that he did not like, his letters became overwhelmingly despondent. This sentiment largely stems from Dunbar’s negative opinion of dialect, and his perceived uncertainty that his career in writing black speech was bound to fail him eventually. He knew that his public was more

²⁹ Ibid, p. 54.

³⁰ Dunbar, *The Collected Poems*, p. 90.

³¹ Ibid, p. 59.

interested in his poetry for dialectal reasons he did not intend. Thus, Dunbar started to become angry and disappointed with himself for not writing Standard English as he wanted to. He saw this as a failure, suspecting that his readers could not like his poetry apart from the novelty of dialect and, therefore, his poetry must be no good, as he suspected when his first endeavor failed. He wrote to his mother, who had instructed him to take a job that he was offered after his dialect started selling: “I am afraid that it would fail like everything else I put my hand to.”³² In an uninspired, and uncalled for, letter to James Newton Matthews, Dunbar wrote, “I must drop you a line to let you know just what a good bit of nothingness I am.”³³ These were all indicators of what kind of torment Dunbar’s dialect was having on him. He felt that he could do nothing else, thinking people only saw him as a black man that spoke like a stereotypical African-American. He was frustrated that he could not sway them any other way: “The incongeniality [sic] of my work and surroundings cannot have but a depressing effect.”³⁴ However, Dunbar was wrapped up in a tale of the times. His fate was little fault of his own, but rather, the result of the circumstances of his life.

As his pains continued and his suffering increased, Dunbar began to succumb to his sufferings. Tuberculosis was gradually overtaking his ability to do anything. To remedy this ailment, Dunbar turned to alcohol, which made him far less optimistic and angrier over his condition. He began contemplating his own death, either by way of natural causes or by suicide. He saw no benefit in living a life that he did not want for himself. As he grew older, this mentality overtook him. He started shedding the notion that he always needed to take care of his mother, but this was the sickness talking. Dunbar wrote to Matthews in a fit of

³² Ibid, p. 30.

³³ Ibid, p. 74.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 153.

desperation, “There is only one thing left to be done, and I am too big a coward to do that.”³⁵

Dunbar saw no way out of his sorry situation. He believed he was living someone else’s life, catering to tastes that were not his own, and serving a public he had no respect for. Dunbar would make similar thoughts apparent to his small private readership in a poem he distributed to them in a letter, from which this is excerpted:

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 piece.³⁶

The poem terrified his mother, who had never heard her son say such things. His wife ridiculed him for his wanting to give up. However, this is what Dunbar was driven to, in his own words. It may not have been so apparent to those throughout the world who read his cheerful dialect poetry, but it was present, not only in the letters, but in the poems and stories, and largely ignored.

3.3 Protest, Fiction, and Resignation

Dunbar knew that he would never be known exclusively for his Standard English poetry. However, the desire to write it burned inside of him. This desire eventually led to try his hand at prose. It was an act of desperation. He wrote five novels from 1897 to 1902. As both he and his critics would admit, Dunbar did not have the same kind of talent writing prose as he did writing poetry. This blind shift demonstrated how trapped Dunbar considered himself. A positive aspect of this writing style was that he felt that he was able to tell his life

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 58

story this way, making it a bit more straightforward than in the poetry. Dunbar felt like he had to hide his inner self so much in his poetry, and that people were just viewing him as a black man: “I hope there is something worthy in my writings and not merely the nobility of a Black face associated with the power of rhyme that has attracted attention,” he wrote. “I shall write less dialect after this and try to make myself worthy of such a friend as you.”³⁷ His prose also allowed Dunbar’s work to be taken more as protest against the forces against him. This would eventually result in him speaking out more against the things that got blacks down, the things that got him down, and how he felt about it. From this, we are given another opportunity to see that Dunbar tried to establish his voice in a time when the African American male voice had little volume or credibility.

Linda Keck Wiggins was the first person to notice the similarities between Dunbar and Freddie Brent, the main character of Dunbar’s novel, *The Uncalled*. Brent is forced into doing things he does not want to do, such as be a minister, doctor, and lawyer. Although Brent is white in the book, these are all occupations that respectable blacks were expected to undertake, per Dubois and others like him. Addison Gayle suggests that both Brent and Dunbar were “restricted by tradition, and neither thought he could win his fight against ‘blind fate.’”³⁸ Both Dunbar and Brent attempt to play down their past. By the time he was forced into writing in the dialect style, Dunbar was forced to obey his critics and the demands of the public. He too, was attempting to live down his past. His similarities to Brent suggest that, in a way, if you think about Brent as Dunbar, Dunbar comes out ahead in the end, too, because he has escaped in a way. However, because he relies on royalties and his public’s opinion to survive, he has also lost, too. These are the first inklings we get in Dunbar’s

³⁷ Dunbar to Matthews, October 19, 1894, Dunbar Papers. (Ohio Historical Society)

³⁸ *Oak and Ivy*, p. 212.

fiction of him trying to speak out about what he has been going through. Although his poems contained emotions caused by his life's circumstances, the reader has to dig to unveil the deeper meaning. What is different about this work of fiction is that his message is expressed in much more explicit terms. Although Dunbar's reaction to his life was mostly internal, as evidenced in his poems, he used his fiction to openly express his feelings. Interpreting his fiction in this manner places a positive light on what could appear to be failed fiction. It gives you the sense that Dunbar did not really just sit around and think about his sorry state, he tried to fix it.

Dunbar penned two other books after *The Uncalled*. The first, *The Life of Landry*, also follows the lives of white characters. Dunbar hoped that whites would buy the book because they could relate to these characters. The novel depicts a conflict between the civilized world and nature. Dunbar says in the novel: "Nothing is quite so conceited as what we call civilization. And what does it mean after all except to lie gracefully, to cheat legally and to live as far away from God and nature as the world limit will allow."³⁹ Although Dunbar grew up in a town that mostly embraced him, he still did not like big cities. It reminded him of traveling to New York and London, where people were living in what he viewed as total chaos and just used him for his dialect. The city disappointed Dunbar because he looked out at it with optimistic eyes and all it did was put him in sadness. In 1901, Dunbar discussed the dichotomy of civilization again, but this time set in the North and South. He argues that sometimes when sides go into war, one side is really dominant and the other side just wants peace. This was the biggest plan in Dunbar's head. He desperately wanted this novel to be a success because he wanted that sadness and despondency that his public was putting on him to end. Dunbar was the one who was warring and wanted peace.

³⁹ *Life of Landry*, p. 6.

He thought that it would come out of being at home or relaxing with his Standard or retreating to the mountains. However, this was not the case. The novel was a flub and was his worst selling piece of fiction.

Nearing the end of his life, Dunbar hit a sad chapter. He put forth a great effort in telling his readers about the city and how corrupt and evil it was in *The Sport of the Gods*. The novel's central villain is the city itself, which is portrayed as a criminal. It tracks the goings-on of Berry Hamilton who lives with his son and daughter. Berry is the victim of the southern plantation system, who is a hard-working butler. He is sentenced to two years in prison for a crime he did not commit. When he got out of jail, he and his family moved to New York City. From here, the characters' lives continue to fall apart. His sons become pimps, and the daughter becomes a dancer. Like Dunbar, who went to the city only to find a depressing situation, the Hamiltons move back South in the end. There they live together knowing that something bad had happened in the South, but they thought life was far better down South than in Harlem. The closing paragraph says, "It was not a happy life, but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, for they knew they were powerless against some will infinitely stronger than their own."⁴⁰ The sad thing is that Dunbar knew this, as well. After publishing this book in 1902, he divorced his wife Alice. His tuberculosis worsened and he continued to rely on alcoholic concoctions to forget his troubles. Dunbar returned to Dayton nearly defeated by his ailment.

This book was the sad culmination of his literary career. It was almost a concession that he was returning home to die, knowing that the world outside of Dayton did not have anything to offer him. But then it also said something positive about Dayton that this was the place it all started, the place where there had been so much support and so many aspirations.

⁴⁰ *The Sport of the Gods*, p. 189.

However, Dunbar often thought about the elevator. He thought of never being free because he had his mother to worry about. Thus, there in Dayton, Dunbar lay in his bed, his lungs more frequently hemorrhaging. The visitors stopped coming because his sickness was getting so bad and ugly. On February 9, 1906, Dunbar died. The long, sad life had come to end in the town where it started, and with all the same people. They mourned his life, his pain, and his potential. Three years after his death, the people of Dayton erected a monument that now marks his grave. There it stands today in the shadow of an oak tree. Inscribed on the concrete pillar are the lines,

Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass,

Whah de branch'll go a-singin' as it pass.

An' w'en I's a-layin' low,

I kin hyeah it as it go

Singin', ‘Sleep, ma honey, tek yo res’ at las’.⁴¹

⁴¹ From Hudson, *Biography*, p. 339.

Conclusion

The racial and social issues of the Gilded Age did not afford African-Americans the same opportunities as whites. Across the country, even in Northern states, Jim Crow laws and other acts of intolerance made everything from obtaining an education to finding a job more difficult for blacks. Though Paul Laurence Dunbar did not see the harsh extent of disenfranchisement that others in the race endured, he faced a wealth of financial responsibilities that made menial work ineffective. He felt a close affinity to his mother, an ex-slave and a champion of the family, who was also aging and unable to work. Her divorce from Paul's father left the small family in economic shambles, desperate for a way out. Stoic Dunbar assumed the task of raising his mother out of this situation. His first attempts were unsuccessful, as jobs as an elevator operator and clerk did not pay well enough.

These are Dunbar's conditions, the real-life context surrounding the poet and his decision to pursue a career in writing. These facts have been largely ignored or overlooked by the last century of Dunbar scholarship, a trend begun by the bigoted analysis of William Dean Howells in his 1896 *Harper's* review. Unfortunately, the trend of examining Dunbar only as a racial figure has removed all occasion of examining him as a victim of circumstance, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation. For the last century, the Howells' article has been the definitive review of Dunbar's poetry not because it was an accurate portrayal, but because it was the first. Following the commentary, the poet was left to strive for levels in poetry that he did not want to pursue. However, because times were so difficult and fickle, Dunbar was forced to suppress many of his feelings on the subject and meet the demands of his paying white public.

Given these conditions, we are able to examine Dunbar's entire career as one *écriture* in the context of hardship and disparity. He began writing dialect poetry innocently. Dunbar felt that it was an accurate reflection of his mother's speech and an authentic representation of a unique African-American racial identity. However, he was naïve about the stigma attached to dialect. Dunbar's education in poetry was largely self-taught from primary sources. He was unaware that whites considered dialect a form of entertainment. Dunbar suffered greatly from his misinterpretation. Howells' article labeled Dunbar a dialect poet, and all the implications of this have shrouded Dunbar's work ever since. The review has perpetuated a discussion of race in most of the scholarship on the poet, thus leaving no regard for the human elements of his work that are certainly present and obvious. With the exception of a few, critics have been unwilling to look in this direction. This thesis has demonstrated that contrary to the popular critical opinion of Dunbar's career, there is indeed a desire inherent in his poetry, prose, and private letters to write in Standard English, to escape the label of dialect poet, and to prove his humanness. The struggle to do so was embedded in Dunbar's first publication, and plagued him until his death.

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