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Paul Laurence Dunbar

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About this Person

Born: June 27, 1872 in Dayton, Ohio, United States
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Nationality: American
Occupation: Writer
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Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the first important black poets in American literature and the first black American to achieve an international audience for his work. Best known for his poems in dialect, Dunbar became a sought-after writer at the turn of the century, popular with black and white audiences alike. During his brief life, this self-educated author published an astonishing number of poems, short stories, and novels, and he wrote song lyrics for stage shows as well. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* contributor Doris Lucas Laryea claimed that Dunbar "was a poet of genuine imagination who rose to literary fame despite nearly insurmountable obstacles.... His poems and stories picture the hopeful, sensuous, and joyous side of working-class black life as well as its sorrows and disillusionments. Few American poets before him attracted such a wide, diversified group of readers and held them for such a long, unbroken period of time. He lifted the black oral tradition to the height of art and looked at his people objectively and with pride."

The high level of recognition that Dunbar received in his lifetime did not necessarily satisfy him. He felt confined by the overwhelming popularity of his dialect poems and struggled in his later years with the gnawing notion that he had never reached his potential as a serious artist. Indeed, his literary reputation suffered at mid-century, when critics accused him of sentimentalizing plantation slavery and presenting negative stereotypes in his works.

Subsequent generations have rescued Dunbar from obscurity and accorded him a new measure of respect. Poet Nikki Giovanni, for instance, hailed Dunbar as "a natural resource of our people" in the book *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Giovanni added: "There is no poet, black or nonblack, who measures his achievement. Even today. He wanted to be a writer and he wrote."

Early Life

The son of former slaves, Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872. He grew up listening to the stories his parents told about their days in slavery and how that time compared to post-Reconstruction days. Dunbar's father, who was in his fifties when Paul was born, had escaped to Canada by the Underground Railroad as a young man and later fought with the 55th Massachusetts Regiment in the Civil War. Dunbar's mother had been a house servant on a Kentucky plantation before moving to Dayton to be near relatives. The marriage of Matilda and Joshua Dunbar was brief, beginning just before Paul's birth, and ending when the child was less than two years old. Nevertheless, the impressionable youngster enjoyed close relationships with both parents, especially his mother. It was their recollections that the poet would draw upon time after time in his pieces about plantation life.

Dunbar was the only black in his high school class. Far from being ostracized, however, he was immensely popular--he was elected president of the senior class, served as editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, and was named class poet. By that time, Dunbar had already begun to write regularly. He desperately wanted to be a journalist and a poet, but his father had died, and his mother could hardly make ends meet as a laundress. College was out of the question, and when he made the rounds of the local newspapers looking for a job, he was turned away. Dunbar did not lose faith, however. The newspapers in the region, most often the *Dayton Herald*, published his poems on occasion.

Shortly after graduating from high school, Dunbar founded his own newspaper, the *Dayton Tattler*, for black residents of the area. The newspaper was printed by his high school friend, Orville Wright, who would later achieve fame as inventor of the airplane.

Unfortunately, Dunbar could not make a financial success of the *Dayton Tattler*, and the publication folded in a short time. The frustrated would-be writer was thrown back into the working world, where he could find only menial jobs.

Early Career

Dunbar found work in a downtown office building as an elevator operator. There, between calls, he read books and made notes for poems and articles that would later be published in Midwestern newspapers. Dunbar was not usually paid for his published pieces, but he persisted in the faith that someday he would profit from his writing. The first work he sold was a Western tale entitled "The Tenderfoot." He earned six dollars for the story--a princely sum considering that he made just four dollars a week operating the elevator.

In June of 1892, the Western Association of Writers met in Dayton. One of the members, a former teacher of Dunbar's, invited him to give a welcoming address to the group. He composed a 26-line poem for the occasion; his work so stirred the audience that he was invited to join the association. At that same meeting, he met James Newton Matthews, a white author who helped Dunbar garner an audience for his work. A letter that Matthews wrote about Dunbar was published in newspapers across the country, bringing Dunbar to the attention of James Whitcomb Riley, one of the foremost American poets of the day. Together Matthews and Riley encouraged the young poet to continue writing, and they suggested he try to publish a volume of his verse.

Growing Reputation

Late in 1892, Dunbar found a publisher for his first book. The United Brethren Publishing House in Dayton agreed to print a volume of his poetry for \$125, allowing him to pay in installments from the proceeds of book sales. Five hundred copies of *Oak and Ivy*, Dunbar's first book, were delivered to him in December of 1892. They sold for one dollar per copy, and within two weeks, Dunbar had sold enough books to pay his debt with the publisher. *Oak and Ivy* contained Dunbar's first dialect poems, as well as one of his most famous standard-English works, "Sympathy," which included the lines: "I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,/ When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,/ When he beats his bars and he would be free."

Soon after the debut of *Oak and Ivy*, Dunbar met a wealthy Toledo lawyer named Charles A. Thatcher. Thatcher, who would be a major patron and supporter through the rest of Dunbar's career, offered to send him to college. The poet regretfully declined the offer, because he had to support his mother. In fact, through his reading and persistent writing, Dunbar had effectively educated himself. He was also earning money as a writer. He gave poetry readings throughout Ohio and sold his books to the audiences who attended them. A brief sojourn to Chicago, Illinois, acquainted him with Frederick Douglass and a number of aspiring black poets, both male and female.

Prior to 1896, Dunbar was merely a regional writer--still unable to support himself with the proceeds of his creative work. That changed with the publication of a second volume of poetry, *Majors and Minors*. A growing group of influential friends directed this work to the attention of William Dean Howells, a renowned novelist and critic. Howells gave *Majors and Minors* an enthusiastically favorable review in the June 27, 1896, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, with special acclaim for the dialect poems that Dunbar had grouped together as the "Minors." If Dunbar had labored in near anonymity before, he would do it no longer. By the end of 1896, he had embarked on a national reading tour, and had received a handsome advance of \$400 from a major publisher for his third poetry collection.

Lyrics of Lowly Life, published late in 1896, remained Dunbar's best-known work. The book contains 105 poems, many of them reprints from *Oak and Ivy* and *Majors and Minors*. The work sold well in the United States and was subsequently published in England as well. Dunbar visited England for six months, reading his poetry on the lecture circuit there and collaborating on musical numbers with black musician Samuel Coleridge Taylor. When he returned, he was nearly a celebrity. He was given a job as a clerk in the reading room at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and he traveled often to give readings and to meet with the other prominent black citizens of his day. In 1898, he married author and teacher Alice Ruth Moore.

Financially secure at last, Dunbar continued publishing at a prodigious pace, even though his health was not good. His output of poetry slackened, but he began writing more fiction. Lucas Laryea suggested that Dunbar turned to stories and novels "to present an enlarged perception of the tragic dilemma of the black American. Prose helped to free him of the yoke that bound him as a dialect poet." Whatever the case, Dunbar's fiction did not prove as popular as his poetry, especially his dialect poetry, which was often compared to the Hoosier dialect work of James Whitcomb Riley.

The busy round of travel and work took a toll on Dunbar's already frail health. He contracted pneumonia in the spring of 1899, and that illness accelerated his tuberculosis. At the request of his doctors, Dunbar left Washington, DC, for a lengthy convalescence in the Catskill Mountains and Colorado Springs, Colorado. His popularity was at its highest during that time. *Lyrics of Lowly Life* alone had sold some 12,000 copies, and another work, *Poems of Cabin and Field*, had sold 5,000 copies in less than one year. Lucas Laryea noted: "At the turn of the twentieth century, Dunbar was America's most notable black poet, and he was quite prosperous.... There was a constant flow of requests for his works from such magazines as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Lippincott's*, and *Century*."

A Change of Pace

Between 1898 and 1903, Dunbar published three short story collections and three novels. The novels failed to find large audiences, but the stories--including protest pieces set in both the North and the South--were widely read at the time. Dunbar's earliest stories and novels were romantic, often sentimental tales of plantation life or unlikely love affairs. As he aged, the author began tackling more pressing issues, such as prejudice, lynching, personal morality, Jim Crow laws that legally sanctioned racial discrimination, and the overwhelming pressures faced by blacks in a predominantly white society.

Dunbar felt that he himself had succumbed to those pressures. Writing for a white audience, he had produced the dialect poems that made him famous. These were, to his mind, mostly inferior to his standard English poems and not truly representative of his talent. Dunbar grew increasingly embittered about this as he grew more and more infirm.

His last novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, published in 1902, became one of his most impassioned attempts to protest the injustices of American society. Lucas Laryea explained that in Dunbar's novels, especially *The Sport of the Gods*, the black man "emerges as a new man fully capable of devising the means by which he can ameliorate his social and economic paralysis. Dunbar's depictions depart from the myth that blacks were contented with slavery and that they did not know what to do with freedom once they found it."

Death and Legacy

As Dunbar's health deteriorated, he began to drink heavily. Separated from his wife, he spent the last years of his life with his mother in Dayton. He died of tuberculosis at the age of 33 and was mourned as the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race." In the years immediately following his death, Dunbar's standing as America's foremost black poet seemed assured, and his dialect poems were prized as supreme achievements in black American literature. His reputation suffered a setback later in the twentieth century when scholars accused him of stereotyping and sugarcoating the harsh realities of plantation life. A more positive evaluation has emerged in recent years, and Dunbar has been reappraised with more attention to the context of his times.

No amount of criticism can negate Dunbar's achievements, however. At a time when most blacks were consigned to society's most menial roles, he emerged as an artist of passion and intellect, a poet and prose stylist of renown. Lucas Laryea called the poet a "master craftsman" who "captured the humor, pathos, and hopeful spirit of a resolute and struggling people in and out of slavery." The critic concluded that Paul Laurence Dunbar remains "among the best poets this country has ever produced."

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born June 27, 1872, in Dayton, Ohio; died of tuberculosis, February 9, 1906, in Dayton, Ohio; son of Joshua (a former slave, soldier, and plasterer) and Matilda Glass (a former slave and laundress; maiden name, Burton) Dunbar; married Alice Ruth Moore (a writer and teacher), March 6, 1898.

CAREER:

Writer, 1890-1906. Worked as elevator operator; editor of *Dayton Tattler*, 1890; court messenger, 1896; assistant clerk at Library of Congress in Washington, DC, 1897-98. Also gave numerous readings of poetry and fiction in the United States and England.

WORKS:

Writings

- Poetry *Oak and Ivy*, Press of United Brethren Publishing House, 1893 (also see below).
- *Majors and Minors*, Hadley & Hadley, 1896 (also see below).
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- *Lyrics of the Hearthside*, Dodd, 1899, reprinted, AMS Press, 1972.
- *Poems of Cabin and Field*, Dodd, 1899, reprinted, AMS Press, 1972.
- *Candle-lightin' Time*, Dodd, 1901, reprinted, AMS Press, 1972.
- *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*, Dodd, 1903.
- *When Malindy Sings*, Dodd, 1903, reprinted, AMS Press, 1972.
- *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow*, Dodd, 1905, reprinted, AMS Press, 1972.
- *A Plantation Portrait*, Dodd, 1905.
- *Joggin' erlong*, Dodd, 1906, reprinted, Mnemosyne Publishing, 1969.
- *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Dodd, 1913, reprinted, 1980.
- *Speakin' o' Christmas, and Other Christmas and Special Poems*, Dodd, 1914, reprinted, AMS Press, 1975.
- *Little Brown Baby: Poems for Young People*, edited and with biographical sketch by Bertha Rodgers, illustrated by Erick Berry, Dodd, 1940, reprinted, 1966.
- *I Greet the Dawn: Poems*, Atheneum, 1978.

- Fiction *The Uncalled* (novel), Dodd, 1898, reprinted, AMS Press, 1972.
- *Folks from Dixie* (short stories), Dodd, 1898, reprinted, Books for Libraries, 1969.
- *The Love of Landry* (novel), Dodd, 1900, reprinted, Literature House, 1970.
- *The Strength of Gideon, and Other Stories*, Dodd, 1900, reprinted, Arno, 1969.
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- *The Sport of the Gods* (novel), Dodd, 1902, reprinted, 1981.
- *In Old Plantation Days* (short stories), Dodd, 1903, reprinted, Negro Universities Press, 1969.
- *The Heart of the Happy Hollow* (short stories), Dodd, 1904, reprinted, Books for Libraries, 1970.
- *The Best Stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Dodd, 1938.
- Plays "Uncle Eph's Christmas" (one-act musical), produced in 1900.
- Also author of lyrics to songs in musical plays, such as "In Dahomey."

Other

- *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, J. L. Nichols, 1907, reprinted, Kraus Reprint, 1971.
- *The Letters of Paul and Alice Dunbar: A Private History* (two volumes), University Microfilms, 1974.
- *The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader*, Dodd, 1975.
- Contributor to periodicals, including *Bookman*, *Century*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Nation*, and *Saturday Evening Post*.

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Books

- *Black Literature Criticism*, Volume 1, Gale, 1992.
- *Black Writers: A Collection of Sketches from "Contemporary Authors,"* Gale, 1989.
- Gayle, Addison, Jr., *Oak and Ivy: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Anchor/Doubleday, 1971.
- Martin, Jay, editor, *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Dodd, 1975.
- Revell, Peter, *Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Twayne, 1979.
- *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Gale, Volume 2, 1979, Volume 12, 1984.

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