

## INTRODUCTION

Paul Dunbar



(1872-1906)

Paul Laurence Dunbar was the first black writer in post-Civil War America to gain national prominence and acceptance by both the black and the white communities. Born in Dayton, Ohio, on June 27, 1872, Dunbar learned of slavery from his parents, both of whom had served different slave masters in Kentucky. Joshua Dunbar, his father, had escaped to Canada through the Underground Railroad and had returned to the United States at the start of the Civil War. Growing up in Dayton, young Dunbar usually was one of a small group of black students who attended predominantly white schools. In fact, when he entered Central High School in Dayton in 1886, he was the only black student in his class. Involved in literary, debate, and journalistic activities at high school, Dunbar excelled and suffered no apparent racial prejudice; his white friends, in fact, remained constant throughout his life and included Ezra Kuhns, a Dayton lawyer, and Orville and Wilbur Wright, who gave substantial financial support to Dunbar in 1890, when he attempted to launch the *Dayton Tatler*, a newspaper for a black readership.

Although he began writing poetry and anecdotes as early as age sixteen, Dunbar sought clerical work in a law office after high school graduation in 1891, but, as positive as race relations had been in high school, he quickly discovered racial discrimination in the working world. He finally accepted a job as an elevator operator in Dayton. Never dismissing his literary aspirations, Dunbar continued writing poetry and in the tradition of Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Ben Franklin had them published in various newspapers. Despite his unsuccessful experience with the *Dayton Tatler*, which clearly suggested that he wanted to write for a black audience, he remained true to his objectives in his early poems: celebrating the accomplishments of his race and conveying a sense of racial pride. Besides writing poetry, he began to give readings to white and racially mixed audiences. He recognized early in his career that to be successful in his day a writer had to learn to entertain a predominantly white audience, which for a black meant some compromise. Nevertheless, Dunbar's early work reveals a desire to speak to and for members of his race.

Through the customary reprinting of his poems in various newspapers of the nation, Dunbar's recognition grew. Between 1892, when he published *Oak and Ivy*, his first collection of poetry, and 1896, when he negotiated a contract with Dodd, Mead, to publish his third collection, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, Dunbar became a recognized name. In the process, his poetry and his fiction evolved into literature rich with local color.

Dunbar's increasing recognition gained the attention as well of the black leaders W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington, whom he met in 1896 and 1897 respectively. Although increasingly he felt the pull

to produce poetry and fiction for a mass and largely white audience, his racial inheritance would never allow that. Some people found an 'Uncle Tom' attitude in selected work; yet Dunbar's feeling about his race never changed, and as the hope for black justice increasingly faded in the 1890's, he turned increasingly to themes of protest. Many of his later newspaper writings, in fact, place him closer in spirit to Du Bois than to Washington. Although he was able to live reasonably comfortably from his writings after 1898, his later years were marred by a failed marriage, an addiction to alcohol, and tuberculosis, which caused his death in 1906 at age thirty-three.

Although Dunbar wrote short stories and novels, his early recognition as a poet tended to obscure consideration in other areas. Among the more than four hundred poems which he wrote during his life, his earliest are regarded as his best. *Lyrics of Lowly Life* contains 105 poems, all but eleven of which had been included in his first two collections. This volume became the commercial basis for his career as well as his first commercial publication. Dunbar wrote in both literary English and black dialect in his early collections. He preferred literary English, for through that style he displayed his themes of racial pride and faith for his race in the future, themes he believed were compromised in the publicly preferred black dialect poems. Moreover, the nondialect poems on black themes work because, although the form was traditional, the statement was new, and he could reach both the black and the white audiences.

As in his poetry, Dunbar in his fiction focused from the beginning on black themes, from the plantation tale that glorified life in the Old South to protest stories that looked indignantly at racial prejudice. Of his four collections of short stories, his second, *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories*, ranks as his best fictional expression of racial consciousness. Of the four novels, his first two are 'white' novels; they deal exclusively with white characters, with virtually no reference to blacks within the culture. His last two novels deal with blacks--his final one, in fact, a portrayal of black culture coming close to breaking the mold of the white world.

Extremely prolific, Dunbar was at best an uneven writer. Nevertheless, within the substantial body of work during a very short life, he produced much of quality. Moreover, although not the first Afro-American writer, he was the first to achieve national prominence as well as acceptance among both blacks and whites.

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"Paul Laurence Dunbar"  
*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*  
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