

29 QUOTATIONS



Paul Laurence Dunbar

(1872-1906)

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born to freed slaves from Kentucky and became the first African-American poet to attain international stature. His father escaped from slavery, responded to Frederick Douglass's call to arms and served in the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry Regiment and in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry through the Civil War. Dunbar wrote his first poem at age 6 and was the only black student in his Dayton, Ohio high school, where he was elected class president and edited the school newspaper. In 1891 his formal schooling ended because he could not afford to go to college. He took a job as an elevator operator earning 4 dollars a week, paid for the printing of his first collection of poems *Oak and Ivy* (1892) and sold copies to passengers on his elevator. He was encouraged by the prominent poet James Whitcomb Riley and his second book *Majors and Minors* (1896) attracted a favorable review from William Dean Howells, the most influential critic in the country. Howells wrote an introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, Dunbar's first two books in one volume, and made him famous. After a reading tour of England Dunbar received a clerkship at the Library of Congress, where he believed that dust in the stacks contributed to his coming down with tuberculosis. He separated from his wife in 1902 and suffered a nervous breakdown and pneumonia. Depressed and drinking too much, he returned to his mother's home in Dayton and died there at the age of only 33. Dunbar wrote both traditional poetry in standard English and poems in black dialect, which were more popular. In total he wrote 12 books of poetry, 4 books of short stories, 4 novels, and a play. He also wrote lyrics for the first musical written and performed entirely by African-Americans to appear on Broadway, in 1903. He was honored on a U.S. postage stamp in 1975.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, blacks and whites, Harriet Beecher Stowe, society, morality, writing, love, God, vision, death, immortality:

YOUTH

All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy.

What dreams we have and how they fly / Like rosy clouds across the sky.

The Lord had a job for me, but I had so much to do, I said, "You get somebody else—or wait till I get through." I don't know how the Lord came out, but He seemed to get along. But I felt kinda sneakin' like, 'cause I know'd I done Him wrong. One day I needed the Lord—Needed Him myself—needed Him right

away. And he never answered me at all, but I could hear Him say Down in my accusin' heart, Nigger, I'se got too much to do, you get somebody else or wait till I get through.

EDUCATION

“[In his essay “Is Higher Education for the Negro Hopeless?” Dunbar responds to an article by a prominent white writer, Charles Dudley Warner, who argued that blacks were better suited for industrial training than for higher education.] I believe I know my own people pretty thoroughly. I know them all classes, the high and the low, and have yet to see any young man or young woman who had the spirit of work in them before, driven from labor by a college education.

BLACKS AND WHITES

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

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, it is not a carol of joy or glee, but a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core.

People are taking it for granted that [the black man] ought not to work with his head. And it is so easy for these people among whom we are living to believe this; it flatters and satisfies their self-complacency.

Those who know all, but are lacking in themselves, are utterly lacking.

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

She told the story, and the whole world wept / At wrongs and cruelties it had not known / But for this fearless woman's voice alone.... Blest be the hand that dared be strong to save, / And blest be she who in our weakness came— / ...At one stroke she gave / A race to freedom and herself to fame.

SOCIETY

Money is a great dignifier.

MORALITY

Slight was the thing I bought,
Small was the debt I thought,
Poor was the loan at best—
God! But the interest!

This is the debt I pay / Just for one riotous day.

What Joe Hamilton lacked more than anything else in the world was some one to kick him. Many a man who might have lived decently and become a fairly respectable citizen has gone to the dogs for the want of some one to administer a good resounding kick at the right time. It is corrective and clarifying.

WRITING

I didn't start as a dialect poet...[I] talked again and again about poetry.

I simply came to the conclusion that I could write [dialect poetry] as well, if not better, than anybody else I knew of...and that by doing so I should gain a hearing. I gained the hearing, and now they don't want me to write anything but dialect.

With it all, I cannot help being overwhelmed by self-doubts. I hope there is something worthy in my writings and not merely the novelty of a black face associated with the power to rhyme that has attracted attention.

LOVE

Love me, honey, love me true? / Love me well ez I love you? / An' she answ'd "Cose I do"—

This, this indeed is to be accursed, / For if we mortals love, or if we sing, / We count our joys not by what we have, / But by what kept us from that perfect thing.

GOD

We reduce the deity to vulgar fractions.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile,
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

VISION

Of wealth, of fame, of sure success,
Of love that comes to cheer and bless;
And how they wither, how they fade,
The waning wealth, the jilted jade—
The fame that for a moment gleams,
Then flies forever—dreams, ah—dreams!

A minute to smile and an hour to weep in, / A pint of joy to a peck of trouble, / And never a laugh but the moans come double; / And that is life.

With our short sight we affect to take a comprehensive view of eternity.

Our horizon is the universe.

DEATH

The Master in infinite mercy offers the boon of death.

I t'ink de las' long res' / Gwine to soothe my sperrit bes'.

Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass, / Whah de branch'll go a-singing' as it pass.

IMMORTALITY

An angel, robed in spotless white, / Bent down and kissed the sleeping Night.

Somewhere out of the darkness a bird is singing to the Dawn.

There is a heaven, for ever, day by day,
The upward longing of my soul doth tell me so.
There is a hell, I'm quite as sure, for pray,
If there were not, where would my neighbors go?



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