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Basic concepts in the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar

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BASIC CONCEPTS IN THE POETRY OF
PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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After a period of time, all authors—writers of prose as well as of poetry—develop out of their experiences a definite point of view toward aspects of life. This point of view usually crystallizes into discernable concepts which usually influence choice of themes—themes and concepts that often challenge and inspire investigation and evaluation. Dunbar, no different in this respect from his literary confreres, certainly developed in the course of his relatively short life concepts and attitudes that merit investigation. But notwithstanding the amount of printed matter regarding him and his work, little has been done in an organized and scholarly way to study his treatment of universal themes; less has been attempted in setting forth his unequivocal militancy in many of his racial themes; and nothing, to the writer's knowledge, has been done to codify or interpret carefully Dunbar's theory of literary art. Since this study seeks to discuss these hitherto neglected or little understood areas in Dunbar—the first poet of his race "to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically"—it is significant as a first serious study of its kind on Dunbar and as area for further investigation.

In this study of Dunbar's major concepts, it was found that though Dunbar's concepts pertaining to literary art and to universal and racial themes are often conventional, sentimental, and commonplace, they, for the most part, are clearly expressed and prominently displayed in his poetry and, perhaps, are sources for further investigation.

The thesis of this study is developed in three chapters. Chapter One attempts to make clear by examining Dunbar's oblique references in his

poetry what seems to be the basic elements in his concept of poetry. An effort is made to answer the following questions with respect to Dunbar's poetic theory: Who is the poet? What is his mission? What is the subject matter of poetry? What is the appropriate style and language of poetry?

The second chapter is devoted to Dunbar's views regarding life, love, death, immortality, and religion. The work attempted here has been solely one of simple exposition, not one of evaluation and criticism. No effort therefore has been made to measure Dunbar's philosophy with that of others; and Dunbar, as often as possible, is permitted to speak for himself. Frequent reference, however, has been made to those who have held similar opinion. This is done purely for the purpose of showing affinities of thought.

The third chapter deals with Dunbar's treatment of the plantation tradition, his break with the tradition, his attitude toward lynching, and his concept of the racial hero.

The concepts discussed here are limited chiefly to those found in the poetical works of Dunbar. However, his prose has been consulted from time to time for ideas pertinent to the subject.

For intimate details in the life of Dunbar as well as for his works, the writer found Lida Keck Wiggins' The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar of inestimable help. Also Benjamin Brawley's Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People proved to be a rich source. Chapters in other works—such as, Vernon Loggins' The Negro Author, J. Saunders Redding's To Make A Poet Black, and Victor Lawson's Dunbar Critically Examined—served as intelligent guides to the writer.

The thanks of the writer are due to the staffs of the Atlanta University and Clark College libraries. Special thanks are due to Mr. G. Lewis Chandler, Professor of English at Morehouse College and Atlanta University, for his encouragement and for his generous and valuable assistance. Whatever merit this study may possess is the result of his interest.
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Some poets have been articulate in setting forth their ideas and theories of their art. Others have been either obscure in the pronouncement of their theories or have been non-committal. It is easy to tell, for example, what Edgar Allen Poe’s idea of the poet is; for he has definitely stated his ideas in "The Poetic Principle," "The Philosophy of Composition" and in other places. It is easy to codify Walt Whitman’s theory, for he has been very articulate in setting forth his concept of poetry in such works as his "Preface" to the 1855 Edition of Leaves of Grass; the prefaces to As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free and to Two Rivulets; poems such as "For You O Democracy," "I Hear America Singing" and "Pioneers! 0 Pioneers." Sir Philip Sidney is explicit in giving his ideas concerning the nature of poetic art in his An Apology for Poetry, while William Wordsworth shares his theories with us in the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads. Matthew Arnold has outlined his theories of art in his Essays in Criticism. Ralph Waldo Emerson sets forth his concept of poetry in his essays, "The Poet," "Beauty," "Art," "Books," "The American Scholar," and "Poetry and Imagination." William Cullen Bryant, America’s first important literary critic, wrote a great deal on literary theory. Among his works sharing his opinions are "Lectures on Poetry," and "Introduction" to a Library of Poetry and Song. Sidney Lanier, in The Science of English Verse and in his poems "Individuality" and "The Bee," sets forth his

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1 Among the important studies giving a summary of Whitman’s literary creed is that study by Norman Foerster. See Norman Foerster, "Whitman," American Criticism (Boston, 1928), p. 170.

2 Foerster has written a remarkably acute and cogent exposition and criticism of Emerson’s poetic theories. See Ibid., p. 59.

3 For the best analysis of Bryant’s literary theories, see Tremaine McDowell, Bryant (New York, 1935), xiii-lxviii.
ideas of the poet and of poetry.

Unlike those poets who have left extensive statements concerning the nature of art, there are those who have been less articulate in the pronouncement of the theories of their art and whose ideas concerning art are yet unassembled, uninterpreted and await exhaustive study. Such a poet as Philip Freneau left scattered sources which can suggest a few of his main theories. Some of his literary beliefs are suggested in "The Power of Fancy" and in his essay, "Advice to Authors." John Greenleaf Whittier hints his literary theory in such works as "Wordsworth," "Burns," and "The Last Walk in Autumn." Oliver Wendell Holmes' theories are partly embodied in his poems "Poetry: A Metrical Essay," "After a Lecture on Wordsworth," "After a Lecture on Shelley," "The Voiceless," "Prologue to 'Songs in Many Keys,'" and "To My Readers."

Thus, unlike Poe, Whitman, Sidney, Wordsworth, Arnold, Lanier and some others who have articulately set forth their theories regarding the nature and function of art, such poets as Freneau, Whittier, and Holmes have left no extended statements regarding the aims and theories underlying their poetic practice. Others like Edwin Arlington Robinson and Emily Dickinson had refrained somewhat consistently from making any direct statement regarding poetry and its function. In this respect, there is room for investigation in their work.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, like Robinson and Dickinson, has very little to say about the nature of his art, and what little he did say is highly dispersed. A definitive work on his literary theories is yet to be made. This chapter does not attempt a complete delineation of his theories, for this is only a phase of the present study. However, it will attempt to make clear by examining Dunbar's oblique statements in his prose and poetry what seems

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1The views of Freneau, Whittier, and Holmes are generally embodied in their poems. An exhaustive assembly and interpretation of their theories is a rich field for investigation.
to be five basic elements in this concept of poetry: namely, the nature of
the poet, the purpose of poetry, the subject matter for poetry, the language
of poetry, and the style of poetry.

Who is the poet? What is his mission? Dunbar does not state precisely
an answer to these questions. It would seem, however, that Dunbar believes
that "poets are born, not made." He states in "The Finding of Martha," a
short story in his collection, In Old Plantation Days: "There are some men
born to be husbands, just as there are some men born to be poets, painters,
or musicians...."¹ This is the only instance in which the writer has dis-
covered a clear-cut, direct statement revealing Dunbar's belief that the poet
is born.² However, in another instance, the poet intimates that poets are
born when he states in a poem that his talent for song is a gift from God:

  Because I had loved so deeply,
  Because I had loved so long,
  God in His great compassion
  Gave me the gift of song.³

Vaguely suggestive that his gift of song is indigenous is "The Poet and His
Song," a poem which shows that Dunbar spontaneously and naturally sings
under all kinds of circumstances. He sings even when there is no one to
hear him sing:

₁Paul L. Dunbar, "The Finding of Martha," In Old Plantation Days

²If Dunbar speaks for himself in "Equipment" (The Complete Poems of
Paul Laurence Dunbar with the "Introduction to Lyrics of Lowly Life" by
W. D. Howells, New York, 1945, p. 455.), it is possible that his belief
that the poet is born and that God endows him with certain abilities might
be expressed obliquely in the lines:

  With what thou gavest me, O Master,
  I have wrought.
  Such chances, such abilities,
  To see the end was not for my poor eyes,
  Thine was the impulse, thine the forming thought.

There are no ears to hear my lays,
No lips to lift a word of praise;
But still, with faith unshaking,
I live and laugh and love and sing.

In toil he sings:

I labor hard, and toil and sweat,
While others dream within the dell;
But even while my brow is wet,
I sing my song, and all is well.

In sorrow he sings:

Sometimes the sun, unkindly hot,
My garden makes a desert spot;
Sometimes a blight upon the tree
Takes all my fruit away from me;
And then with throes of bitter pain
Rebellious passions rise and swell;
But—life is more than fruit or grain,
And so I sing, and all is well.

In addition to showing the spontaneity of his songs, the foregoing passages show that Dunbar has to sing despite himself. While there is no definite reference to poetry as a gift, certainly the spirit of the poem suggests the spontaneity and indigenous gift of song with which he is endowed. To conclude positively that Dunbar believed that the poet is born would be somewhat risky. A single direct statement in this connection, supported only by oblique references in a few poems, can at best be only suggestive.

Dunbar makes no attempt to define the poet or his mission. Only in one instance does he casually imply that the poet is the instrument through which God and nature are interpreted. Regarding himself as fundamentally a poet, Dunbar mentioned in a letter to Dr. Henry A. Tobey that his—a poet's—desire was to be a "worthy singer of the songs of God and nature."

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1 Ibid., "The Poet and His Song," p. 5.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
might be further implied that the poet is a singer, one who flings "his poetical wings to the breeze and soars in a song." Poetically he repeats obliquely this idea in "A Bridal Measure":

Come, essay a sprightly measure  
Tuned to some light song of pleasure.  
Maidens, let your brows be crowned  
As we foot this merry ground.

From the ground a voice is singing,  
From the sod a soul is springing.  
Who shall say 'tis but a clod  
Quick'ning upward towards its God.

Who shall say it? Who may know it?  
That the clod is not a poet  
Waiting but a gleam to waken  
In a spirit music-shaken?

and in "The Poet and His Song":

A song is but a little thing,  
And yet what joy it is to sing!  
In hours of toil it gives me zest,  
And when at eve I long for rest.

There are no ears to hear my lays,  
No lips to lift a word of praise;  
But still, with faith unfaltering,  
I live and laugh and love and sing.  
What matters yon unheeding throng?  
They cannot feel my spirit's spell,  
Since life is sweet and love is long,  
I sing my song, and all is well.

A review of the titles of Dunbar's poems might reflect something of his belief that the poet is basically a singer. One cannot help noticing

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Lida K. Wiggins gives a clear presentation of the man and a full account of his external life. The details of Dunbar's parentage, birth, education, travels, social experiences, and friendships form a story full of quiet and continuous charm. Included in this work also are his complete poems and his best short stories. The subsequent poems quoted in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, are taken from this collection and will be entered without the name of the author.

the wide use of the word 'song' in many of the titles used as subjects of Dunbar's poems. Among examples, one would find such titles as "A Back-Log Song," "A Banjo Song," "A Boy's Summer Song," "A Corn-Song," "A Death Song," "Dream Song I," "Dream Song II," "Hunting Song," "Love-Song," "A Love Song," "A Negro Love Song," and "Nutting Song." Two poems carry the titles "Song" and "A Song." There is little need to multiply examples. Certainly, then, would the prevalence of the word 'song' strengthen one's belief that Dunbar would regard the poet as a singer.1

Just as Dunbar conspicuously refrains from definitely defining the poet and his mission, he refrains from giving specifically his ideas concerning the purpose of poetry. Only scanty, oblique expressions in his poems will enable us to envisage the ideal he sets for himself. In "To a Captious Critic," he replies to those who would reproach him for lightness in his verse:

Dear critic, who my lightness so deplores,
Would I might study to be prince of bores,
Right wisely would I rule that dull estate—
But, sir, I may not, till you abdicate.2

We can let the first line of this quatrain furnish us with a starting point for a discussion of what would seem to be Dunbar's concept of the function of poetry. It cannot be repeated too strongly that Dunbar has left only a few, thin statements which might hint some of his literary likes and dislikes and from which we can derive only indications of what might be his theory.

Dunbar, with regards to the function of poetry, is strangely silent. From his practice, however, he seems to have little inclination to follow Matthew Arnold, who holds that poetry is a serious criticism of life and who

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1It should be interesting to note that the words 'sing,' 'singing,' and 'song,' appear in the text or composition of more than 130 of Dunbar's poems.

2Ibid., p. 270.
feels that the great poet is he who can make his ideas teach us how to live. Arnold has said:

It is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of the poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas of life,—to the question: How to live.¹

Nor does it seem that Dunbar would necessarily be in accord with Lanier who has repeated over and over his high ideal of the mission of art. Lanier's ideas are parallel with those of Arnold, who feels that "noble and profound application of ideas to life is the most essential part of poetic greatness";² for Lanier is often openly and avowedly didactic. In "Individuality," Lanier declares that art is a serious thing with great responsibilities:

Awful is art because 'tis free.
The artist trembles o'er his plan
    When men his Self must see.
Who made a song or picture, he
    Did it, and not another, God nor man.³

To Lanier, "Art for art's sake" is the vilest cant.⁴ He tells us in "The Bee" that the poet's purpose is not to delight, but to teach. "What profit e'er a poet brings?" asks Lanier. He answers:

He beareth starry stuff about his wings
    To pollen thee and sting thee fertile.⁵

He strongly repeats his conviction that the purpose of poetry is to teach:

²Ibid., p. 140.
⁵Sidney Lanier, op. cit., p. 83.
The artist's market is the heart of men;  
The artist's price, some little good of man.¹

Both Lanier and Arnold reject the theory that art is merely to give pleasure. Both feel that art has a high purpose. Dunbar, it seems, assumes an attitude not so much in accord with Lanier and Arnold. The idea that poetry should not necessarily teach or that the poet is not necessarily a great moral teacher might be embodied in lines from "A Choice."

        They please me not—these solemn songs  
        That hint of sermons covered up.  
        'Tis true the world should heed its wrongs,  
        But in a poem let me sup,  
        Not simples brewed to cure or ease  
        Humanity's confessed disease,  
        But the spirit-wine of a singing line,  
        Or a dew-drop in a honey cup.²

Here Dunbar is expressing his distaste for didacticism. However, the ideas embodied in this poem cannot be a final expression of Dunbar's attitude toward didactic poetry, nor do they sufficiently prove that the poet, like Poe,³ is against the heresy of the didactic. An occasional hint is not to be taken too seriously nor can a single statement or idea wholly explain what is typical of a poet's belief.⁴ For further possible hints that Dunbar

¹Richard Webb, op. cit., p. 28.
³Although ideas relative to how to live do appear in some of his poems, it is possible that Dunbar would share Poe's belief that the end of poetry is the communication of delight and that poetry should not necessarily teach. Poe reveals his belief in "The Poetic Principle" in which he states that "it by no means follows...that...Duty or even lessons of Truth may not be introduced into a poem, and with advantage; for they may subserve, incidentally, in various ways, the general purposes of the work." Edgar A. Poe, op. cit., p. 11.
⁴It ought to be noted that of more than 1,000 poems, of seventy-three short stories and four novels written by Dunbar, this is the only instance in which the writer has uncovered any statement from which the poet's concept of the purpose of poetry might be derived, or in which the poet's concept is hinted.
does not wholly regard the poet as a moral teacher, let us turn to the poems in which praise of certain poets of England and America is found to see what attitudes are expressed therein.

Of James Whitcomb Riley, he writes:

No matter what you call it,
Whether genius, or art,
He sings the simple songs that come
The closest to your heart.1

Describing Riley as primarily a singer whose songs are characterized by "human feeling," Dunbar says that Riley teaches only "if there is a lesson to be taught."2 Could this obliquely hint Dunbar's belief that the poet teaches only incidentally? "Whittier" possibly indicates that Dunbar, who — it appears — feels that the poet is a supreme creation of God, regards the singer, not the moralist, as the true poet. Of Whittier, whom he praises as a sweet singer thrilling men with the living fire of his songs, he says:

Great poets never die, for Earth
Both count their lives of too great worth
To lose them from their treasured store;
So shalt thou live for evermore—
Though far thy form from mortal ken—
Deep in the hearts and minds of men.3

Such is Dunbar's praise of Riley and Whittier, both American poets. Seemingly, however, Dunbar is more enthusiastic in his praise of the English poet Shelley. If Dunbar speaks for himself, he admits that Shelley is his favorite poet.4


2Ibid., p. 476.


4Many of Dunbar’s themes were inspired by Shelley. Both poets have shared premonitions of death; both have written of the appeal of nature; both have written of the mystery of love; and both have given definitions of life. Vernon Loggins warns us, however, that "it was Shelley the melodist and not Shelley the humanitarian that Dunbar worshipped." Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author (New York, 1931), pp. 345-46.
Dunbar praises Shelley for his gift of song:

We have no singers like ones whose notes
Give challenge to the noblest warbler's song.
We have no voice so mellow, sweet, and strong
As that which broke from Shelley's golden throat.¹

From Dunbar's praise of the poets, we note that he is singularly consistent in his praise of the singer of simple songs. Nowhere in his poetry does he praise any of the great moral poets, those poets who are generally regarded as the world's great teachers, or those whom we call World Priests. This peculiar singling out and persistent praise of the lyrical aspects of poets like Riley, Whittier, and Shelley may possibly be inferred that Dunbar would regard the poet as a singer more than a teacher. Now that we have seen in a single poem ("A Choice")--and at least through inferences in his praise of certain poets—what appears to be possible manifestations of Dunbar's attitude toward didacticism in poetic art, let us see what an investigation of the subjects used by Dunbar might reveal regarding the poet's ideas concerning subject matter for poetry.

Concerning the poet and his mission, or the purpose of poetry, Dunbar leaves oblique references or at least a single idea which might hint his literary belief. These references, it has been pointed out, are not sufficiently strong to warrant a definite conclusion. They only suggest puzzling indications of what appears to be the poet's belief. Concerning the subject matter for poetry, Dunbar was absolutely silent. Therefore, any ideas concerning his belief with regards to subject matter must be restricted chiefly

¹"Prometheus," p. 222. Could the concluding stanza of this poem symbolize Dunbar's views of the state of American literature in his day?

The measure of our song is our desires:
We tinkle where old poets used to storm.
We lack their substance tho! we keep their form:
We strum our banjo-strings and call them lyres.
Ibid.
to comments from critics and reviewers who were his friends or life-long associates, and to his practice. And on the score of his practice, we may presume that Dunbar would not restrict the subject matter for poetry to any set topic. From the life and scenes about him came numerous hints and promptings for subjects. Brawley tells us that

The slightest suggestion—a sound, a picture, a gesture—was sufficient to call a poem into being. One night in Colorado there came to him through the dark the sound of a herd of cattle slowly plodding their way onward. Suddenly he thought of a race struggling to the light. He began, 'Slow moves the pageant of a climbing race;' and thus was born 'Slow Through the Dark.' To a little maiden he knew in Massachusetts it seemed that the 'woo-oo' of the east wind was the call of 'the Boogah Man,' and this was enough to make him build for her a poem on the theme.1

Occasions of trivial character furnished subjects for many of his poems. His mother's singing inspired "When Malindy Sings;" a violet found outside his window on All-Saints Day prompted "To a Violet Found on All-Saints Day," "Weltschmertz," and "The Monk's Walk;" a conversation with a friend on suicide called forth the poem "The Right to Die,"2 and watching the rain from his window inspired "Rain Songs." Dunbar's return to his home in Dayton, after his losing fight for health, furnished the subject "Bein' Back Home." "The Lawyer's Ways" is doubtless the fruit of his observation when he served as page in a Dayton courthouse.3 "Encouraged" is Dunbar's thanks to a friend who praised him; "To Louise" is his tribute to a child who gave him a rose; "Dat Ol' Mare O' Mine" is the subject of a tribute paid to a gray mare Dunbar purchased in Colorado, while "A Negro Love Song" illustrates the way Dunbar utilizes the most humble and trivial of happenings as material for his verses

1Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 4.
3Ibid., p. 117.

1Wiggins tells us that:

During the World's Fair he served for a short time as a hotel waiter. When the Negroes were not busy they had a custom of congregating and talking about their sweethearts. Then a man with a tray would come along and, as the dining room was frequently crowded, he would say, when in need of passing-room: "Jump back, honey, jump back." Out of these commonplace confidences he wove the musical little composition—"A Negro Love Song." Ibid., p. 168.

2Dunbar's ideas relative to subject matter as revealed by his practice do not seem to be in accord with those of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge argues that—in addition to prefect sweetness of versification and images modified by predominant passion—a poet must have an unusual choice of subjects. See Samuel T. Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," Coleridge's Principles of Criticism, ed. by A. J. George (Boston, 1895), pp. 57-58.
We have seen that Dunbar, like a sensitive musical instrument, reacted to almost any stimuli occurring in his simple life. Let us turn now to the language of poetry as Dunbar would probably prescribe it. Although Dunbar's ideas relative to the poet and the function of poetry have been limited and thin; although he has been non-committal concerning the subject matter for poetry, he has been somewhat explicit, though not entirely, in hinting his views on the language of poetry. An attempt to formulate Dunbar's ideas in this respect would necessitate a discussion of his attitude toward his dialect poetry and toward dialect as a vehicle of poetic expression.

Dunbar aspired to become a writer of great verse in classic English and not a writer of a "jingle in a broken tongue." His dream, it has been pointed out, was to become a singer of the songs of God and nature and to interpret his people through song and story. This purpose he was to achieve through classic expression. But contrary to the wishes of the poet, his best efforts in standard English were overlooked and were many times unwanted by his public. His publishers and readers both sought his dialectical works, and their irresponsiveness to his works in standard English fretted him at times. On one occasion Dunbar said to his friend James Weldon Johnson: "I've got to write dialect poetry. It is the only way I can get them to listen to me."\(^1\) The poet's popularity was grounded upon one thing: his excellence in dialect verse. And "the public held him to the thing for which it had accorded him recognition."\(^2\) Thus, it was not by choice, but by circumstance, that Dunbar used extensively dialect and plantation idiom as his media of expression. Although Dunbar carried dialect as a medium of expression to its highest


\(^{2}\)Ibid.
point of perfection, and his dialect verse is generally regarded as the best which has been written in America, he grew tired of it. He said once:

I am tired, so tired of dialect. I send out graceful little poems, suited for any of the magazines, but they are returned to me by editors who say 'We would be glad to have a dialect poem, Mr. Dunbar, but we do not care for the language compositions.' I have about decided to write under a nom de plume, and I have chosen a beautiful name.

Dunbar never regarded his dialect verse as his best work. He strikingly illustrates his disgust with the indifference of his reading public to his standard English poetry:

He sang of life, serenely sweet,
With, now and then, a deeper note.
From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
He voiced the world's absorbing beat.

He sang of love when earth was young,
And Love, itself, was in his lays.
But ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jingle in a broken tongue.

Again, in "Sonnet on an Old Book with Uncut Leaves," he concerns himself with the failure of his poems in standard English to merit him recognition:

Emblem of blasted hope and lost desire
No finger ever traced thy yellow page
Save time's. Thou hast not wrought to noble rage
The hearts thou wouldst have stirred. Not my fire
Save sad flames set to light a funeral pyre
Dost thou suggest. Nay,—impotent in age,
Unsought, thou holdest a corner of the stage
And ceasest even dumbly to inspire.

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1Ibid.

2Vernon Loggins states that:

/Dunbar's/ Negro dialect verse is today generally accepted as the best which has been written in America. It deserves that consideration, and will probably maintain it. For the picturesque and poetic Negro language which Dunbar knew so well is rapidly passing away; he preserved a record of it at the right time. Op. cit., p. 349.


The ideas embodied in the poems above indicate something of the poet's discontent with the appeal of his dialect to his audience. However, Dunbar does feel that there are themes which can be adequately developed with the use of dialect as a medium of expression. J. Saunders Redding tells us:

"Dunbar" knew what could be done with dialect and how far it could be made to go as a poetic medium. He knew the subjects it would fit—the sweet delight of calf love, the thrill of simple music, the querulousness of old age, the satisfactions of a full stomach, the distractions of an empty one, the time-mellowed pain of bereavement.²

For the comedy of the life about him, then, dialect could be used effectively. But for stronger and more serious themes, some of which will be discussed in subsequent chapters, dialect "seemed not sufficiently dignified for literary treatment."³ On the strength of those ideas embodied in his poems and the statements by Redding, Brawley, and the direct statements by the poet himself, we feel that Dunbar possibly held two concepts of the language of poetry: for superficialities and humor, dialect is permissible and advisable; for the universal themes in poetry, he would hold that formal, standard diction is the more appropriate means for poetic expression.

Dunbar, we have seen, left only oblique references relative to the function of poetry. He left no ideas concerning the subject matter of poetry. His own choice of subjects supplies us with what few hints we have in this respect. Of the language of poetry, we envisage the poet's ideals from his

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¹"Sonnet on an Old Book with Uncut Leaves," p. 218.
²J. Saunders Redding, To Make a Poet Black (Chapel Hill, 1939), p. 64.
³Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 8.
attitude toward dialect. What appears to be Dunbar's ideas concerning the style of poetry must be gained from his practice, a few limited, and, in many instances, negligible ideas.

It is highly probable that Dunbar employs in his poetry those techniques which he considers basic for all poetry. An investigation of his practice reveals that he had a distaste for a heavy, laborious style. Although Dunbar's views regarding the end of poetry seem opposite those of Lanier, for example, in composition they seem to be in close accord. Benjamin Brawley, a friend of the poet, states that

Dunbar almost never altered a poem after it was once printed. When one was written, it was written. It might be rejected for later use, or it might be approved; but if approved, it would be taken as it was; it would not be changed.1

When approached directly regarding his method of composition, Dunbar said:

I write when convenience lets me, or the spirit moves me, my object being to do a certain amount of work, rather than to work a certain length of time.2

Poetically, he repeated this idea:

This poem must be done today; Then, I'll e'en to it. I must not dream my time away,— I'm sure to rue it.3

We return to an already quoted poem in which Dunbar reveals an attitude toward highly polished verse:

Fur trim and skillful phrases, I do not keer a jot; 'Tain't the words alone, but feelin's, That tech the tender spot.4

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1Ibid., p. 56.
2Ibid., p. 89.
Unlike Tennyson and Poe, who built up their work elaborately and consciously, with the minutest care, never putting it aside until it suited their own most exacting tastes, Dunbar, like Lanier, was of the inspirational kind, who wrote their poems at a sitting, and for the lack of time or other reasons never revised them.

Dunbar has often been praised for the rhythmic quality of his poetry. Could his practice of rhythm and harmony, evident in whatever he wrote, hint that Dunbar believes that poetry ought to be rhythmical? For evidence of his achievements in rhythm, let us turn to a line or two from some of his poems.

In "Itching Heels" Dunbar captures the enticing syncopation of the folk dance:

Oh, fiddle dat chune some mo', I say
An' fiddle it loud an' fas';
I's a youngstah ergin in de mi'st o' my sin;
De p'resent's gone back to de pas'.

Note the lucid rhythm of "When Malindy Sings":

Fiddlin' man jes' stop his fiddlin'
Lay his fiddle on de she'f;
Mockin'-bird quit tryin' to whistle,
'Cause he jes' so shamed hisse'f.
Folks a-playin' on de banjo
Drops dey fingahs on de strings—
Bless yo' soul—fu'gits to move em,
When Malindy sings.

Equally remarkable for rhythmic quality are these lines from "The Deserted


2"Itching Heels," p. 297.

3"When Malindy Sings," p. 190.
Plantation" describing conditions found by a forlorn Negro who has returned to the plantation:

An' de banjo's voice is silent in the quarters,
D'aint a hymn ner co'n-song ringin' in de air;
But de murmur of a branch's passin' waters
Is de only sound dat breks de stillness dere.¹

Since examples as those cited might be easily multiplied, we may presume that Dunbar, on the score of his practice and achievement, would at least expect marked organic rhythm, obviously his delight, in poetry.

It would be very interesting, were there time, to consider the various elements in Dunbar's literary beliefs as hinted in his works. In addition to the five concepts which this chapter has touched upon, Dunbar left a few scattered statements in which other phases of his literary theory are hinted. The writer now refers to but two: Dunbar's attitude toward the professional writer and the qualifications of the literary critic. Of each of these but a word can be said here.

Dunbar was not reluctant in giving his attitude toward professional writing. During an interview in his home, Dunbar was asked his real reason for writing: "Do you write for fame, for money, or just for the pleasure of creating art?" Somewhat surprised at the query, Dunbar replied: "Why, I write just because I love it."² He declares that the true poet sings for the love of singing:

You sing, and the gift of a State's applause
Is yours for the rume that is ringing,
But tell me truly, is that the cause?
Don't you sing for the love of singing?³

¹"The Deserted Plantation," p. 80.
²Lida K. Wiggins, op. cit., p. 111.
³"To a Poet and a Lady," pp. 116-17.
We must add here that this is certainly one point in which Dunbar's theory is not wholly consistent with his practice, for he did depend on his pen for livelihood. In fact, he is among the first of Negroes who wrote for professional purposes.

Finally, Dunbar hints that the critic should be well trained. Most assuredly would Dunbar require of the critic those qualifications possessed by Dr. Samuel Johnson, the "crusty sage"—a great literary dictator in English Literature—whose position he praises in the poem "At Cheshire Cheese."¹ When a "bright young lady" wrote to Dunbar criticising him for using various kinds of Negro dialect in one volume, Dunbar commented:

Just think of it! a literary critic and yet doesn't know that there are as many variations of the Negro dialect as there are states in the union.²

This comment suggests that Dunbar's attitude is like, if not identical with, that of the writer who, speaking of the critic, said that "a little learning is a dangerous thing."

Thus summarily and tentatively has the writer given some indications of Dunbar's literary theories, since no comprehensive assembly and interpretation of evidence bearing on his literary theories is available. It may be said that Dunbar's literary tenets—in broad summary—appear to be somewhat as follows: (a) The poet, a singer, is one of God's supreme creations whose duty is to inspire and lift through song. (b) The end of poetry is delight. It may teach incidentally. (c) Subject matter for poetry is unrestricted, limited only by the poet's sensibility and interests. (d) Dialect is limited to superficialities and humor while, for universal and serious themes, standard diction is the more appropriate means for poetic expression. (e) Poetry


should be spontaneous, inspirational, and rhythmical. (f) The poet should sing for the love of singing and not for wealth or fame. (g) The literary critic should have a magnificent intellectual endowment.

Again, may it be repeated, this chapter, only a phase of the present study, has not attempted to complete delineation and interpretation of the poet's literary beliefs. Thus, the observations here are only tentative and, at best, suggestive. It is therefore readily admitted that while an attempt has been made to unravel the meaning of caliginous references and to drag an idea to light from its misty hiding place, an assembly and interpretation of Dunbar's poetic theories await exhaustive study.
CHAPTER II

DUNBAR'S CONCEPTS CONCERNING NON-RACIAL THEMES

In Chapter One, an attempt was made to assemble and interpret the scattered statements in Dunbar's poetry concerning the nature of poetic art. It was pointed out that Dunbar left no extended statements or organized theory regarding poesy. Hints of his literary likes and dislikes were derived from oblique statements in his poems, from information shared by his personal friends and those who had contact with him, from incidents in his life, and from his practice. The main design of this chapter is to interpret Dunbar's concepts with respect to non-racial or universal themes: namely, life, love, death, immortality, and religion.

All poets—the supreme poets, the high-ranking poets, and the minor poets—have dealt with so-called universal themes in their poetry. Dunbar is no exception. When the writer thinks seriously about life and its riddles, gives consideration to its expanded verities, and records his best thoughts and observations about life, he almost necessarily becomes a priest.1 In this respect, Dunbar becomes a priest. What, then, is his criticism of life? What is his message? Of what value is his philosophy?

Life

Life, Dunbar tells us, is only the possession of "a crust of bread and a corner to sleep in."2

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1 Because of their keen spiritual insight, profound thought, and catholic appeal, our supreme poets like Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante are often referred to as World Priests.

2 Paul L. Dunbar, "Life," The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York, 1945), p. 9. All poems from Dunbar quoted in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, are taken from this collection and will be entered without the name of the author.
Declaring that each moment of living is steeped in paradox, he proceeds:

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. 1

To Dunbar, then, life is a paradox, a mixture of smiles and tears, joys and troubles, laughs and moans. Embodied in the lines above is a philosophy suggestive of compensation and duality; we pay for pleasures with pain, for laughter with tears, the ratio of negative factors being the larger. But the pleasures of this life, Dunbar tells us, are few. 2 Therefore there is never ultimate balance, an equality of pain and pleasure, or of laughter and tears. The positive and negative factors never cancel out. Consequently, we miss in Dunbar the principle of counterpoise, a vibration between extremes, that we find in Emily Dickinson, an earlier American poet whose law of balance may be grimly stated:

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen ratio
To the ecstasy... 3

Symptomatic of the poet's belief that life is an unending paradox steeped in a sort of compensation is the first stanza of "The Sum":

A little dreaming by the way,
A little toiling day by day;
A little pain, a little strife,
A little joy,—and that is life. 4

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1Ibid.

2This idea is embodied in the lines:

...; an' de pleasures
O' dis life is few enough.

See "A Banjo Song," p. 32.

3George F. Whicher, This Was A Poet (New York, 1939), p. 303.

Dunbar expresses the idea of uneven compensation in life in "The Debt." So representative is this poem of the poet's general outlook and philosophy of compensation that it is reproduced in its entirety below:

This is the debt I pay
Just for one riotous day,
Years of regret and grief,
Sorrow without relief.

Pay it will I unto the end—
Until the grave, my friend,
Gives me a true release—
Gives me the clasp of peace.

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

It is interesting to note that in the development of many of the themes in which Dunbar's general view of life is reflected, the poet has employed antithetical statements to heighten the idea of paradox. Were we to marshal them to themselves, we would find such word combinations as smile and weep; joys and troubles; moans and laughter, pleasure and cares; smiles and frowns; cloud and gleam; cheer and bless, wither and fade; dreaming and toiling; catching and losing; gaining and failing; lives and fades. How representative of Dunbar's experiences—those experiences which tinged his attitude toward and colored his philosophy of life—is this selection of word combinations? This is neither the time nor the place to tell the story of Dunbar's life; that has been done by Ida K. Wiggins in The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar and by Benjamin Brawley in his Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People. However, some rapid facts about his life will bear out the possibility that these word combinations are oblique references to Dunbar's own experiences and that many of his poems are of autobiographical significance.

Throughout his short life, Dunbar lived on the brink of poverty and death. Poverty put a ceiling on his education in his early life. Dunbar had to write while he worked at menial tasks. Only with financial assistance from some of his friends was he able to publish his first volume of verse, *Oak and Ivy*, 1893. This publication came while he was working as an elevator boy in an office building. After a few years, his poetry was in demand; and his fame as a poet and lecturer spread in America and in England. Dunbar had "dreamed of fame and glory and viewed the future bright with gold." And it seemed for a moment that he would realize his dream of becoming a great poet. Between 1895 and 1898, appeared his *Majors and Minors*, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* with an Introduction by William D. Howells, *The Uncalled*, a novel, and *Folks from Dixie*, a collection of short stories. But even his season of success as a writer was not without financial distresses and personal tragedies. Several times Dunbar had to turn to friends for financial assistance. In 1898, the poet was married to Alice Ruth Moore.¹ By the time he was twenty-seven, he was fighting for his life against tuberculosis and an undisciplined use of alcohol. Resting in Denver and admiring the "great, rolling, illimitable plains and black mountains standing like hoary sentinels guarding the land," he seemed to get an upper hand in his struggle. He returned to the lecture platform and tried to add another patch to his now ragged life. He failed. Early in 1902, the poet and his gifted wife, a poet also, separated.² The strain of circumstance, domestic and personal failure, led the poet to destroy himself in alcohol. This lack of moral discipline caused the sick, sad poet to lose his hold on his work.

¹Benjamin Brawley, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²Ibid., p. 91.
Dunbar did not live to see the fruition of life. In 1906, at thirty-four, he died. Certainly, then, was Dunbar's a life of success and failure, joys and tears, catching and losing, pleasures and cares. "Through unrelenting years," Dunbar knew the "sting of misery's dart, the tang of sorrow's tears." Perhaps he was asserting something personal when he wrote:

We float upon a sluggish stream,
We ride no rapids mad,
While life is all a tempered dream
And every joy half sad.

Dunbar's attitude toward life, colored by his experiences and expressed in his poetry, perhaps shaped his view of happiness. To Dunbar, happiness in this life is a transient, fleeting thing. He says as much in "One Life":

But pleasure dies as soon as born.

Companion pieces, "Promise" and "Fulfilment," poignant in their disillusionment, show how happiness is often blighted by some unexpected sorrow. The poet has planted a rose, a symbol of that which will bring happiness and joy, and has cultivated it with care. He watches it as it slowly opens and he hastens "to find it blushing red," but he is

Too late! Some thoughtless child had plucked [His] rose and fled.

His second rose, safely fenced in, is ready for blooming, and

At last, oh, joy! the central petals burst apart.
It blossomed—but, alas, a worm was at its heart!

These pieces, consciously or unconsciously, are intimations on the transitory nature of happiness and show that even after laying careful plans for

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2"One Life," p. 115.
that which will bring lasting happiness, unsuspectingly and without warning, disappointment or sorrow comes before dreams are realized. The poet definitely, though subtly, shows that it is the unexpected that comes to blight our anticipation of happiness and to crush our hopes. When Dunbar writes of life, "of its flittin' joys and pleasures," he recalls a similar thought in "Tam O' Shanter":

But pleasures are as poppies spread:
You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river
A moment white—then melts forever.

The discussion up to this point has shown that Dunbar's interpretation of life was no doubt colored by his experiences, that life is a mixture of positive and negative forces with the negative forces predominant, and that happiness is ephemeral. But are his readers, on the score of these attitudes, forced to conclude that the poet is pessimistic?

Under a seeming crust of pessimism, we find in Dunbar pathos and melancholy, two notes which are not to be confused with pessimism; for pessimism denies the ultimate good of living; denies the existence of soul; says there is no joy or comfort; says there is no future life. We do not find these fatalistic attitudes in Dunbar. Let us strengthen this point with a few ideas embodied in "Promise" and "Fulfilment" recall these lines from Burns:

The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'ed joy!


1Ideas embodied in "Promise" and "Fulfilment" recall these lines from Burns:

2"The Old Apple Tree," p. 15.

3Robert Burns, op. cit., p. 91.

4If there is pessimism at all in Dunbar's poetry, it is only surface, superficial pessimism. Certainly it is not the pessimism of the realist or the naturalist.
Dunbar tells us that joy is heightened by sorrow:

And joys seem sweeter when cares come after,
And a moan is the finest of foils for laughter;

and that

De mo'n is allus brightah w'en do might's been long.

Dunbar would convince us that hardship paves the way to happier laughs; that pleasures are more meaningful, more significant when they follow pain; that moans make joy greater. Dunbar recalls kindred ideas in the works of John Dryden:

Sweet is pleasure after pain;

and in the works of Shelley:

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

In faint echo, Dunbar confirms what Shakespeare wrote centuries before:

Sweet are the uses of adversity;
Which like the toad, ugly and venemous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life exempt from public haunts,
Finds tongues in the trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in the stones, and good in everything.

Dunbar felt that the harder the rain falls in this life, the richer the soil

\[1\] "Life," p. 10.

\[2\] "Joggin' Erlong," p. 265.


\[5\] William Shakespeare, As You Like It, ed. by J. R. Crawford (New Haven, 1919), Act II, sc. 1, 11.12-17, p. 24.
of the soul. He tells us that "life is sweet"1 in spite of its storms.
Dunbar knew how

...oft life gives a crust
To starving men who cry for bread.2

His faith in the ultimate good of living—a faith unshakable in the pres-
ence of storms—prompted him to write:

..."The tempest will be short,
My bark will come to port;3

for certainly

[Dunbar] saw through every cloud a gleam.4

Although Dunbar frankly acknowledges the predominance of moans, he states
that there is still time for singing:

But twixt our sighs and moans and tears,
We still can smile, we still can sing,
Despite the arduous journeying.
For faith and hope their courage lend,
And rest and peace are at the end.5

A final statement extracted from his novel, The Uncalled, shows that Dunbar
repeats in his prose the note of optimism found often in his poetry. He de-
clares that

Life's turbulent waters toss us and threaten to send our frail
bark in pieces. But the swelling of the tempest only lifts us higher,
and finally we reach and rest upon the ararat of age, with the swirling
floods below us.6

Thus we see that Dunbar is fundamentally an optimist and that his optimism,

1 "The Poet and His Song," p. 5.
2 "Ione," p. 55.
3 "He Had His Dream," p. 97.
4 Ibid.
5 "By Rugged Ways," p. 351.
sentimental though it is, is an achievement of blended hope and faith maintained in despite of the recognized predominance of negative factors in this mixture, this paradox called life.

To Dunbar, not only is happiness in this life a transient moment, but life itself is, a transient, fleeting thing. In his poem "Love-Song" he states that "life is brief." In another poem he mentions the brevity of life when he describes life as a drama, a flitting picture on a wall:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Just dreaming, loving, dying so,} \\
\text{The actors in the drama go—} \\
\text{A flitting picture on a wall,} \\
\text{Love, Death, the themes; but is that all?}^1
\end{align*}
\]

Dunbar compactly gives us his views regarding the impermanence of physical life in the lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{What's the use o' even weepin'?} \\
\text{Might as well go long an' smile.} \\
\text{Life, our longest, strongest arrow,} \\
\text{Only lasts a little while.}^2
\end{align*}
\]

Repeating this idea, he declares that

\[
\text{...we all} \\
\text{Die soon, e'en those who live longest.}^3
\]

Because of its brevity, Dunbar would advise us to "make bright the 'arrow'." But how? Let us review his poems of challenge and see what encouragement they lend.

In "The Seedling," Dunbar encourages self-denial and work:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Little folks, be like the seedling,} \\
\text{Always do the best you can;} \\
\text{Every child must share life's labor} \\
\text{Just as well as every man.}^4
\end{align*}
\]

In addition to asking that we give to the world our best, Dunbar encourages

\[1\text{"The Sum," pp. 183-84.}\]
\[2\text{"What's the Use," p. 408.}\]
\[3\text{"A Border Ballad," p. 73.}\]
\[4\text{"The Seedling," p. 18.}\]
initiative:

There are no beaten paths in Glory's height,
There are no rules to compass greatness known;
Each for himself must cleave a path alone,
And press his own way forward in the fight.  

Again Dunbar encourages work and perseverance in an often quoted poem:

If the hills are high before
And the paths are hard to climb,
Keep a-pluggin' away.
And remember that successes
Come to him who bides his time,—
Keep a-pluggin' away.
From the greatest to the least,
None are from the rule released.
Be thou toiler, poet, priest,
Keep a-pluggin' away.

Perseverance still is king;
Time its sure reward will bring;
Work and wait unwearying,—
Keep a-pluggin' away.  

In his prose, as well as in his poetry, is perseverance a key word in Dunbar's philosophy. In The Fanatics, a novel of tolerance, Dunbar makes this statement:

It is the one thing we have to do in life, keep on going. No matter how many presentiments you have, you've got to go on to their fulfilment. That's the one thing that gives me the horrors at times until I want to shriek aloud—this unending, forward movement. If one could only stop sometimes—but we can't.  

Such was the poet's admonitions for meeting disappointments and overcoming

1"The Path," p. 33.

2"Keep A-Pluggin' Away," p. 70.

Dunbar's idea of work and patience is one with Longfellow's:

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.


difficulties. Such are his prescriptions for successful living. These admonitions in Dunbar's moralistic poems, however trite in expression, are not so simple as they are obvious. Their one great fault is the "impermanence of the value of their thought to the Negroes to whom they were addressed."¹

So far, we have seen that, To Dunbar, life, short though it is, is an unending paradox steeped in a sort of unbalanced compensation and that he, though often seemingly pessimistic, is fundamentally an optimist. We have seen also that, for successful living and overcoming difficulties, Dunbar encourages initiative, work, and perseverance.

According to Dunbar, there are two serious themes² in the drama of life: love and death. This declaration may be found in the concluding quatrain of his poem, "The Sum," quoted earlier in this chapter.³ Let us turn momentarily to Dunbar's treatment of his love themes.

¹Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 36.
Lawson argues:

'These admonitions praised the essentially middle-class virtues of thrift, initiative, striving for competence, and thus placed Dunbar with Booker T. Washington as an "eighteenth century individualist" in an age of corporate enterprise. The self-abnegation they praised was a virtue which marked the acceptable laborer, who never complained.... Despite their intrinsically sound principles...Dunbar's success poems, viewed in their definite social context were superficial applause of bourgeois life's pattern. Ibid.

²It has been pointed out in Chapter One that for serious themes, Dunbar would hold that standard diction is the more appropriate means of poetic expression. His medium of expression in his love poems seems to be consistent with his literary belief. In connection with his love themes, J. Saunders Redding has this to say:

'Dunbar realized the limitations of the broken tongue. In those years of his courtship and marriage, he could not use it to express his rapturous love and joy. Op. cit., p. 58.

³See supra, p. 29.
Love

Just as Dunbar attempts to define life, he attempts to define love. However, instead of giving one overall interpretation of love as he gives of life, Dunbar gives several descriptions of love. In one instance, he describes love as a Royal Guest:

Love is no random road wayfarer
   Who where he may must sip his glass.
Love is the King, the Purple-Wearer,
   Whose guard recks not of tree or grass
   To blaze the way that he may pass. ¹

In another poem the "Royal Guest" assumes the role of a ruler:

Oh Love is the Lord of the land of life
   Who holds a monarch's sway;
   He wends with wish of maid and wife,
   And him you must obey.²

The foregoing passages, however, reveal less of Dunbar's true attitude toward love than the lines that follow:

A little short-lived summer's morn,
   When joy seems all so newly born,
   When one day's sky is blue above,
   And one bird sings,—and that is love.³

It is doubtful that, to Dunbar, as we shall see later in this chapter, love is more than a "little short-lived summer's morn." Just as certain external circumstances colored his interpretation of life, it may be suspected that certain personal and domestic experiences directed his treatment of love. This phase of this study will show that, for the most part, Dunbar

¹"Ione," p. 50.
Dunbar also describes love as "the master passion, pure and strong." Ibid.

Besides seeing love as a ruling passion, Dunbar sees love as

   ...a guest that comes unbidden,
   But having come, asserts his right;
   He will not be repressed or hidden.  Ibid.

wrote independently of literary tradition and that his concept of love is very individual and autobiographical in its implications. But let us consider now the effect or power of love as reflected in Dunbar's poems.

The lines that perhaps best reflect Dunbar's ideas in regards to the power of love are those from "Dely":

Dis hyeah love's a cu'rus thing,
Changes 'round de season,
Meks you sad or meks you sing,
'Dout no urfly reason.
Sometimes I go mopin' 'roun',
Den agin I's leapin';
Sperits allus up an' down
Even when I's sleepin'.

In a less direct way, Dunbar repeats the idea that love has power to bring joy or sadness:

Because I had loved so deeply,
Because I had loved so long,
God in His great compassion
Gave me the gift of song.

Because I have loved so vainly,
And sung with such faltering breath,
The Master in infinite mercy
Offers the boon of death.

Is not the poet saying here that love has power to make one happy and thereby give a song? And does not the sting of love unrequited make one sad or long for death? Equally suggestive, but with less intensity, of the power of love to bring sadness or joy is the stanza in tribute to the object of the poet's worship:

Thou art my life, by thee I live,
From thee proceed the joys I know,
Sweetheart, thy hand has power to give
The meed of love—the cup of woe.

1 "Dely," p. 238.
"Ballad" suggests something of Dunbar’s belief that love has power to transform the day. Reciprocated love makes the day bright:

I know my love is true,
And oh the day is fair.1

Of false love, or of love unreturned, he writes:

My love is false I find,
And oh the day is dark.2

He concludes:

For love doth make the day
Or dark or doubly bright;
Her beams along the way
Dispel the gloom and gray.
She lives and all is bright,
She fades and life is night.
For love doth make the day,
Or dark or doubly bright.3

Love not only has power to transform sadness and joy; it has power to change an unpleasant situation into a pleasant one:

Out of the sunshine and out of the heat,
Out of the dust of the grimy street,
A song fluttered down in the form of a dove,
And it bore me a message, the one word—Love!

Ah, I was toiling, and oh, I was sad:
I had forgotten the way to be glad.
Now, smiles for my sadness and for my toil, rest
Since the dove fluttered down to its home in my breast.4

Or it cleanses:

Search thou my soul;
Be there deceit,
'T will vanish whole
Before thee, sweet.

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1 "Ballad," p. 91.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
Upon my mind
   Turn thy pure lens;
Naught shalt thou find
   Thou canst not cleanse.  

Or it becomes a religious experience:

If I should pray,
   I scarcely know
In just what way
   My prayers would go.

So strong in me
   I feel love's leaven,
I'd bow to thee
   As soon as Heaven!

Again love becomes a religious experience:

Folks dey go to chu'ch an' pray
   So's to git a blessin'.
   ... ... ... ... ... ...
Sabbaf day I don' go fu',
   Jes' to see my pigeon;
I jes' sets an' looks at huh,
   Dat's enuff 'uligion.

Thus we see that, according to Dunbar, love reciprocated gives a song, transforms sadness into joy, makes the reverse of an unpleasant situation, and

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2 Ibid.

If The Uncalled is autobiographical, as it is generally believed to be, then statements extracted from the novel, written after his engagement to Alice Ruth Moore, support the idea that love can be a religious experience as suggested in "Confessional." Of Alice, whom he loves, Dunbar writes:

I have been given a chance to love, and it has been like a breath of life to me. Alice understands me and brings out the best that is in me. I have always thought it was good for a young man to have a girl friend.


He follows with:

...I don't see why Alice needs to pray. She's a prayer in herself. She has made me better by letting me love her. Ibid., p. 254.

3 "Dely," pp. 239-40.
becomes a religious experience. Love unrequited transforms sunshine into shadow, dispels happiness, or causes one to long for death. Such were Dunbar's impressions of the power of love or the effect of love on man. It is a powerful transformer anyway one may wish to look at it. But how did love affect the poet? And how did his courtship and domestic experiences shape his concept?

One finds in poems that are the outgrowth of Dunbar's courtship sheer joy of loving. Such a poem as "Alice" stands as an example:

Know you, winds that blow your course  
Down the verdant valleys,  
That somewhere you must, perforce,  
Kiss the brow of Alice?  
When her gentle face you find,  
Kiss it softly, naughty wind.  

Lily holding crystal dew  
In your pure white chalice,  
Nature kind hath fashioned you  
Like the soul of Alice;  
It of purest white is wrought,  
Filled with gems of crystal thought.  

Such was Dunbar's tribute to the young girl who was the "soul of a summer's day"—the girl who brought love into his heart. The "Alice" of Dunbar's poem is identified as the gifted poet, Alice Ruth Moore, who, in 1898, became his wife. The poet's rapturous love for Alice called forth the poem "In An English Garden," written shortly after his engagement. Dunbar describes the "subtle scents and ancient beauties of an old-world garden." But the "soothing sights" only bring him a poignant heartache and an overpowering longing for love:

But e'en among such soothing sights as these,  
I pant and nurse my soul-devouring woes.  
Of all the longings that our hearts wot of,  
There is no hunger like the want of love.  

1 "Alice," pp. 61-62.  
2 "In An English Garden," p. 178.  
3 Ibid.
The yearning, the longing, the joy that dominated the poems written during the poet's courtship were to live but a while; for early in 1902 the poet and his gifted wife came to parting of the ways. It must be admitted that before Dunbar experienced disillusionment in love, he had treated the theme of love unrequited. Such poems as "Promise," "Fulfilment," "An Old Memory," "Worn Out," and "The End of the Chapter" bear out that fact. But in his autobiographical poems, his treatment is more revealing; and it is for this reason that we shall by-pass those poems dealing with the theme of love unrequited that were written before the termination of his connubial happiness.

In his love life, Dunbar had come "near to sing the perfect song" but "only by half-tone lost the key." Love to him is not a toy—"a fool's paradise and a wise man's plaything." Love is a serious business; perfect love is a goal to be desired. Dunbar describes the failure to reach the goal of perfect love as life's tragedy:

To have just missed the perfect love  
Not the hot passion of untempered youth,  
But that which lays aside its vanity  
And gives thee, for thy trusting worship, truth—  
This, this it is to be accursed indeed...2

That the "burden of Dunbar's own unfortunate love affair" is reflected in his love poetry cannot be denied. In "A Lost Dream," the poet recalls the joy he once knew:

Ah, I have changed, I do not know  
Why lonely hours affect me so.  
In days of yore, this were not wont  
No loneliness my soul could daunt.3

1Neither the poet nor his brilliant wife revealed the cause of their separation. Dunbar's biographer relates:

Neither has spoken to say why they parted [In Washington, D.C.], each going ever alone—and, an attempt at explanation would be unkind to[Both].


He remembers how she was by his side

When days were bleak and winds were rude;
And when the spring came o'er the land;
In summer, by the river-side.\(^1\)

But now all is changed:

Yes, all is changed and all has fled,
The dream is broken, shattered, dead.\(^2\)

"The Monk's Walk," written after the death of Dunbar's domestic peace, reflects the poet's desire of becoming a priest. But even in this work his deep personal grief breaks through. He makes reference to his lonely life:

It is living thus to live?
Has life nothing more to give?
Ah, no more of smile or sigh--
Life, the world, and love, good-bye.\(^3\)

More than once does the poet make reference to his lonely life. "Lyrics of Love and Sorrow," a group of poems at the close of *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*, were all born of Dunbar's great sorrow at the loss of his love. The poet, bereft of the "Alice" he worshipped reverently, is pictured alone on "Heart-break Hill,"

The great high place of a hopeless grief,\(^4\)

with his broken heart. It is there on a "Winter's midnight" that he weeps for the love of his earlier years:

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 149.

\(^2\) Ibid.


And there in the gloom, my soul and I,
Weeping, we sat us down.¹

The pathos, deep sentiment, and deep overtones of personal grief in these lines are conspicuously absent in the body of traditional love poetry of sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century England.

Also born of Dunbar's great personal sorrow are "Parted"² and "Forever," both with themes of love unrequited. Dunbar writes of a parting that is to last forever:

I had not known before
Forever was so long a word.
The slow stroke of the clock of time
I had not heard.³

Thus we see that sadness, agony, hope betrayed, love unrequited—these are the substances of the poems that were born of Dunbar's marital experiences. We may also observe that many of his love poems, like many of Keats', seem to be outgrowths of personal experience rather than stock expressions of a poetic tradition. We find in Dunbar a note of sincerity and a predilection for the sentimental which contrast significantly with the conventional cynicism and sophistication of seventeenth century Cavalier erotic poetry.

With respect to Dunbar's love themes, it may be observed that some of Dunbar's attitudes toward life find a parallel in his attitude toward love. These

¹Ibid.

²Victor Lawson, commenting on this poem, makes the following pertinent statement:

"Parted," if biographical also, is truculent and none too noble, but its lyric intensity comes from experience rather than books. The poet who says,

"She wrapped her soul in a lace of lies"

is a bitter man speaking almost as elementally as the folk songster moaning about a woman with a heart like a rock cast in the sea. Op. cit., p. 40.

attitudes may be stated briefly.

That Dunbar regarded love, like life, as a paradox is intimated in "Love's Phases." Love, symbolized by the wings of a butterfly, is a delicate thing whose poise can be stirred with the breath of a sigh:

Love hath the wings of the butterfly,
Oh clasp him but gently.¹

Or love, symbolized by the wings of an eagle, is strong and bold:

Love hath the wings of the eagle bold,
Cling to him strongly.²

Love, symbolized by the voice of the nightingale, can be a sweet, thrilling song:

Love hath the voice of the nightingale,
Harken his trilling—
List to his song when the moonlight is pale,—
Passionate, thrilling.³

Or love, symbolized by the storm, can be a powerful, thunderous roar:

Love hath the voice of the storm at night,
Wildly defiant.⁴

A few poems reflect Dunbar's abiding conviction that happiness, even in love, is transient and momentary. In "Nora: A Serenade," the poet sings:

I cannot but love thee; so do not reprove me,
If the strength of my passion should make me bold.

Ah, Nora, my Nora, there's love in the air,—
It stirs in the numbers that thrill in my brain,
Oh, sweet, sweet is love with its mingling of care,
Though joy travels only a step before pain.⁵

¹ "Love's Phases," p. 189.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
Intimations on the transitory nature of happiness in love are also reflected in the companion pieces, "Promise" and "Fulfilment," treated earlier in this chapter.\(^1\) Mrs. Wiggins tells us that these complementary poems, written before Dunbar's marriage, "came in after years to be a real part of the poet's heart history." She states:

At the moment when Dunbar's joy should have been at its height, and his rose of love was ready for blooming, it was discovered, alas, that in very deed, a "worm was at its heart."\(^2\)

Just as the poet believes that an unbalanced compensation is a law of life, he believes it to be also a law of love. Referring to his unfortunate love affair, he writes of the years of grief and regret that he must pay for a mis-step he made in love:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Slight was the thing I bought,} \\
\text{Small was the debt I thought,} \\
\text{Poor was the loan at best—} \\
\text{God! but the interest!}
\end{align*}
\]

Thus wrote Dunbar of love as he wrote of life, and thus did he repeat in his love poetry the dominant notes of paradox, fleeting happiness, and unbalanced compensation—the substances of his poetry giving his overall interpretation of life. Let us consider now Dunbar's views regarding the second great theme in life's drama.

Death and Immortality

Dunbar records a universally recognized fact: death is inevitable. He asks of one whom "Earth, the great mother," has called:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Shall he be tried again? Shall he go free?} \\
\text{Who shall the court convene? Where shall it be?}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^1\)See supra, p. 25.

\(^2\)Lida K. Wiggins, op. cit., p. 143.

\(^3\)"The Debt," p. 348.

\(^4\)"Mortality," p. 164.
He replies:

No answer on the land, none from the sea.  
Only we know that as he did, we must:  
You with your theories, you with your trust.—
Ashes to ashes, dust unto dust.¹

Although the poet readily admits that death is shrouded in mystery, he assumes a positive attitude toward death:

So I say to my heart, "Be silent,  
The mystery of time is here;  
Death's way will be plain when we fathom the main,  
And the secret of life be clear."²

The poet is confident that the mystery that cloaks death will be solved. Does he not say that death will give an answer to all that lies beyond the grave? And is death, then, to be feared?

Dunbar would convince his reader that death is not a cruel master or monster to be feared, but a slave:

Death may vaunt and Death may boast,  
But we laugh his pow'r to scorn;  
He is but a slave at most,—  
Night that heralds coming morn.³

Death should be faced courageously.⁴ In fact, he admonishes a resignation

¹Ibid.  
³In "Behind the Arras," p. 150, the poet has said:

Poor fooled and follish soul! know now that death  
Is but a blind, false door that nowhere leads,  
And gives no hope of exit final, free.

The writer feels that this statement is not typical of the poet's belief. The idea expressed therein seems to run counter to the prevailing ideas in the poems discussed later in this chapter.

³"Communion," p. 177.

⁴In "The Right to Die," Dunbar shows an aloof resignation to death. He honors one who

...seizing Death, reluctant, by the hand  
Leaps with him, fearless, to eternal peace!

See "The Right to Die," p. 149.
to death and advises whistling to use the waiting:

And perhaps 't would be best in a later day,
When Death comes stalking down the way,
To knock at your bosom and see if you're fit,
Then, as you wait calmly, just whistle a bit.1

It is not strange that Dunbar should assume a positive attitude toward death or that his poems show resignation to death, for he looked at death not as a grim reaper, but as a deliverer. The second stanza of "The Debt" indicates the poet's belief that death is a deliverer, a passport to peace.2 He expresses his attitude more directly in "The Sum":

A little sickening of the years,
The tribute of a few hot tears,
Two folded hands, the failing breath,
And peace at last,—and that is death.3

The last stanza of "Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes" stands as a summary of the ideas embodied in the poems treating the poet's attitude

1 "Just Whistle a Bit," p. 158.

The sentiment in this passage is reminiscent of Bryant:

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, that moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take
His chambers in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.


2 See supra, p. 23. See also William C. Bryant's "Hymn to Death" in which he says:

Raise then the hymn to death. Deliverer!
God hath anointed thee to free the oppressed
And crush the oppressor. Ibid., p. 63.

3 "The Sum," p. 163.
toward death. Death is a soothing balm:

When sleep comes down to seal the weary eyes,
The last dear sleep whose soft embrace is balm,  

It is a healer and a reward for pain:

And whom sad sorrow teaches us to prize
For kissing all our passions into calm,  

It is a deliverer:

Ah, then, no more we heed the sad world's cries,  

It is an answer to that which lies beyond the grave:

Or seek to probe th' eternal mystery,
Or fret our souls at long-withheld replies,
At gloom through which our visions cannot see,
When sleep comes down to seal the weary eyes.  

Such were Dunbar's ideas regarding the second great theme in life—death.
But does the poet feel that "that last dear sleep," the sleep that seals the weary eyes, is the end of all life?

While there are intimations of the poet's belief in immortality in some of the foregoing poems, definite ideas concerning his faith in immortality are embodied in certain of his other poems. An oblique reference is made to life beyond the grave in "Beyond the Years":

Beyond the years the prayer for rest
Shall beat no more within the breast;
The darkness clears,
The horn perched on the mountain's crest
Her form uprears—
The day that is to come is best,
Beyond the years.  

"The Ol' Tunes," voicing a nostalgic yearning for the old tunes which have

1."Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes," p. 4.

2.Ibid.

3.Ibid.

4.Ibid.

5."Beyond the Years," p. 63.
been replaced by anthems and arias, furnishes another reference. The poet, longing for the old tunes sung in the "ol'-fashioned way," thinks of some bright morning when

\[
\text{He shall hear the angel chorus,} \\
\text{In the realms of endless day,} \\
\text{A-singin' o' the ol' tunes} \\
\text{In the ol' fashioned way.}
\]

In his ode "To the Memory of Mary Young," Dunbar praises a God-fearing woman with a sweet and beautiful spirit—"the pearl of precious womanhood"—whose untimely death has brought sorrow to all. He ends his tribute with a note of triumph for Mary Young, giving her a victory over death. He thereby makes reference to life after death:

She went her way; but oh, she trod 
The path that led her straight to God. 
She lives as this put death to scorn; 
They lose our day to find God's morn.

In the preceding passages, the poet has made only indirect references to life after death. However, he does express his ideas concerning immortality more directly in the lines:

When all is done, say not my day is o'er, 
And that thro' night I seek a dimmer shore: 
Say rather that my morn has just begun,— 
I greet the dawn and not a setting sun, 
When all is done.

---

1"The Ol' Tunes," p. 84.
2"To the Memory of Mary Young," p. 131. Is not the same idea expressed in this stanza:

The change has come, and Helen sleeps— 
Not sleeps, but wakes to greater deeps 
Of wisdom, glory, truth and light, 
Than ever blessed her seeking sight, 
In this low, long, lethargic night, 
Worn out with strife, 
Which men call life.


3"When All is Done," p. 182.
While this poem indicates a belief in life beyond the grave, at the same time it, along with those cited in connection with death, surges with the undercurrent of optimism that underlies his philosophy of life. Certainly it is no extravagance to say that Dunbar sincerely believed in immortality and that he would agree with Emily Dickinson who declares that

This world is not conclusion,
A sequel stands beyond.
Invisible, as music,
But positive as sound
It beckons and it baffles;
Philosophies don't know,
And through a riddle, at last,
Sagacity must go.
To guess it puzzles scholars;
To gain it men have shown
Contempt of generations,
And crucifixion known.1

Although the conditions of life beyond the grave are not clearly revealed in his poetry, it seems, however, that, from the indirect references to life after death in such poems as "When All is Done," "The Change Has Come," "To the Memory of Mary Young," already quoted in this chapter, and "Whittier,"2 one feels that Dunbar's is an enlightened Christian concept of immortality—a concept predicated upon the belief that one lives on, after physical death, in spirit.

1Emily Dickinson, "This World is Not Conclusion," quoted in Harry H. Clark, Major American Poets (New York, 1936), p. 608.

2Dunbar hints a change from the physical to the spirit in his praise of Whittier as a great poet. In "Whittier" he sings:

O singer sweet, thou art not dead!
Great poets never die, for Earth
Doth count their lives of too great worth
To lose them from her treasured store;
So shall thou live for evermore—
Though far they form from mortal ken—
Deep in the hearts and minds of men.

Religion

Dunbar does not limit his themes to life, love, death, and immortality. He has something to say about religion and what he says is marked by a frankness that is less pronounced in his themes dealing with other so-called universal subjects treated in this chapter.

Dunbar has a firm, unshakable faith in and serves a benevolent God. He shows complete submission to the will of the God he serves in "Resignation." As the title suggests, the poet, putting an end to his railings against what he has long considered abuse, gives himself over entirely to God. If he must be crushed for God's use, so be it:

Grind on, O potent God, and do thy will!¹

Dunbar's implicit faith in God shines through his religious themes. A poem strongly indicative of Dunbar's great faith in God is "A Plantation Melody." The figure here, that of a violent rainstorm which strikes terror to the heart of a poor, ignorant creature, symbolizes, no doubt, the tribulations of life itself. The exhortation to trust God and "lay low in de wildaness" holds good alike for one caught in a rainstorm and one beaten by the torrents of life:

O sistah, w'en de rain come down,
An' all yo' hopes is 'bout to drown,
Don't trus' de Mastah less.
He smilin' w'en you t'ink he frown,
He ain' gwine let yo' soul sink down—
Lay low in de wildaness.²

"A Prayer" is another indication of Dunbar's ardent faith in the Deity. The poet likens himself to a footsore traveler exhausted by the labors of a journey and torn by thorns "thick and keen." He makes a brief, impassioned

¹"Resignation," p. 169.
plea that God will lead his "wounded feet" to where "healing waters flow" and bestow the "gracious balm" he needs:

Where healing waters flow
   Do thou my footsteps lead.
My heart is aching so;
   Thy gracious balm I need.1

Another confident assertion of Dunbar's faith in God is "A Spiritual." No one, he sings, is too bowed with grief that the Lord cannot grant him solace for his woes. He exhorts the sinner "moun' nin' in de dusty road," the weeping widow lamenting her husband, and the sorrowing orphan whom he tells that

De Mastah is a mammy an' a pappy too2
to calm themselves and to lift up their hands when "de King go by."

Besides showing faith in God, the poet shows the attributes of God. Dunbar's is a God of solace and a God of protection. "Hymn" is a brief and sincere declaration of the poet's faith in the Lord's power to soothe cares and grief, and to protect His own from harm. When buffeted by distress, the poet asserts:

To thee, O Lord, I raise mine eyes,
   To thee my tortured spirit flies
   For solace in that hour.3

From his God he obtains complete security:

Upon thy breast
   Secure I rest,
   From sorrow and vexation;
No more by sinful cares oppressed,
   But in thy presence ever blest,
Oh God of my salvation.4

1"A Prayer," p. 16.
3"Hymn," p. 106.
4Ibid.
Dunbar had little sympathy with dogma. "His theology was one of humanism."¹ To him a practical religion is more effective than a theoretical one. "Religion" shows the poet to be a humanist in religious matters. The poem decries the empty formality of the professed Christian who wastes his time in hollow utterances when there are services he might perform for a needy fellow being:

I am no priest of crooks nor creeds,
For human wants and human needs
Are more to me than prophets' deeds;
And human tears and human cares
Affect me more than human prayers.²

Affecting mournfulness as evidence of Christianliness is futile:

Go, cease your wail, lugubrious saint!
You fret high heaven with your plaint.
Avails your faith no more than this?³

Heaven is not to be found through loud pursuit of it, but through succoring an unfortunate humanity:

Take up your arms, come out with me,
Let Heav'n alone; humanity
Needs more and Heaven less from thee.
With pity for mankind look 'round;
Help them to rise—and Heaven is found.⁴

"A Little Christmas Basket" likewise shows the poet as a humanist in religion. This poem is a denunciation of preaching without practicing:

Wha's de use o' preachin' 'ligion to a man dat's sta'ved to def,
An' a-tellin' him de Mastah will pu'vide?

¹Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 75.
²"Religion," p. 58.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
Ef you want to tech his feelin's, save yo' sermons an' yo' bref,
Tek a little Christmus basket by yo' side.\(^1\)

During the winter season in which this poem is set poverty is most rife.
To preach a Christmas sermon is all very well, but a single Christmas basket of food is even more eloquent, more persuasive, and more welcome than a thousand sermons:

Ef you want to preach a sermon ex you nevah preached befo',
Preach dat sermon wid a shot or wid er hen;
Bein' good is heap sight bettah den a-dallyin' wid sin,
An' dey ain't nobody roun' dat knows it mo',
But I t'ink dat 'ligion's sweeter w'en it kind o' mixes in
Wid a little Christmus basket at de do'.\(^2\)

From the foregoing poems at least three observations may be made. First, Dunbar had an indomitable faith in God and was submissive to His Divine Will. Secondly, Dunbar's was a God of mercy, solace, and protection. And finally, Dunbar believed in practical and not professed Christianity. Thus he was a humanist and a humanitarian in religious matters.

The writer readily admits that the non-racial themes of Dunbar discussed in this chapter do not represent all possible subjects in Dunbar's non-racial interest.\(^3\) But they do represent his major themes in this area.

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\(^1\)"A Little Christmas Basket," p. 280.

\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)The neglect of treating nature, a universal theme in poetry, has not been due to an oversight on the part of the writer. Nature is a popular theme with Dunbar, for he makes reference to nature in more than one-third of his poems. In fact, almost every phase of nature is mentioned in his poetry. Such poems as "The Gourd," "Merry Autumn," "The Dove," "Roses," "The Wind and the Sea," "The Song of Summer," and "The Rising of the Storm" indicate that Dunbar was sensitive to both the sounds and sights in nature. Although Dunbar wrote poems on the pleasant aspects of nature and the gloomier view of the world as the graveyard, he has not treated nature so seriously as he has treated those universal themes touched upon in this chapter. For the most part, Dunbar seems to be concerned with or refers to nature where another interest (outside of nature) is dominant.
It is also admitted that Dunbar's concept of life, love, death, immortality, and religion have not been discussed exhaustively; for these concepts are only phases of the present study. An attempt has been made, however, to point out the poet's prevailing attitude toward, rather than make a definitive study of, certain of the so-called universal themes in poetry. A comprehensive and intensive study of Dunbar's treatment and concept of the universal themes is yet to be made.
CHAPTER III

DUNBAR'S CONCEPTS CONCERNING RACIAL THEMES

The preceding chapter was designed primarily for the purpose of interpreting Dunbar's concepts with respect to this non-racial themes. The themes discussed were those concerning life, love, death, immortality, and religion. This chapter purports to discuss Dunbar's treatment of his racial themes and to show that in his treatment Dunbar employs two avenues of approach: When he deals with the plantation tradition, he is a sentimentalist; when he breaks with the tradition, he is a frank, sincere poet writing out of loyalty to his race.

To understand Dunbar's racial attitude, we must see him in relation to his age. When Dunbar was born in 1872, the South was just recovering from the hard blows of the Civil War. The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation had freed the slaves. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments had granted them rights as American citizens. Negroes, then, were experiencing a civil and political power and prestige which they had not known before. High offices in local and national government, which had been restricted to whites, were open to competent Negroes. Thus, Negroes, for the first time, were enjoying tenure in Congress, either as Representatives or as members of the Senate, or in local public offices and legislatures. Many Southern states, including Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Florida, had representatives in the House and in the Senate.¹ But the civil and political rights which the Negro enjoyed were to last but a few years. More and more, Southern whites were growing antagonistic to the Negro office

holders and Negro citizenry in general and were devising methods by which they could deprive them of the rights granted them by the Amendments. Carter G. Woodson tell us that

...the South was unwilling to grant the Negro the right to enjoy the fruits of victory of the Civil War, for the freedmen were oppressed almost to the extent of being enslaved.¹

For the protection of the country's new citizens, Congress found it necessary to pass a series of repressive measures known as the "force bills."² Federal troops were stationed in military areas for the security of the Negro and preservation of public peace. Meanwhile, resentment in the South was growing stronger and stronger. The eruption did not come, however, until President Hayes ordered withdrawal of the national troops from the South. This action almost immediately restored to power the "unreconstructed element" which sought to deprive the Negro of his rights as a citizen and re-enslave him. Innumerable plans to abridge Negroes' rights were advanced. "Disenfranchise-ment abounded and peonage and the convict system flourished."³ The infamous Ku Klux Klan rose to intimidate the Negro and to prevent him from enjoying the new social and political status that had been granted him. Resentful Southern whites, with fresh devotion to their ideal of white supremacy, lynched Negroes in large numbers. Illiterate Negroes were exploited on every hand. Benjamin Brawley tells us that "all this seething, surging life Paul Dunbar saw, and a part of it he was."⁴ Dunbar's recognition of the many injustices meted the Negro and his consciousness of the Negro's

¹Ibid., p. 242.
²Ibid., p. 256.
³Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 6.
⁴Ibid., p. 7.
problem show forth in his poem "To the South On Its New Slavery." Dunbar adequately sums up the plight of the Negro as a free man in a traitorous South:

He has nor freedom's nor a slave's delight.

Conscious though he was of this "newer bondage and deeper shame," Dunbar did not consistently choose to give a hard, realistic portrayal of the Negro's problem in his age. Rather, he often chose to follow the romantic spirit and, like Irwin Russell, Thomas Nelson Page, J. A. Macon, and Joel Chandler Harris, idealized the past. Of course, there was reason for Dunbar's failure to give an utterly realistic or militant portrayal of Negro life during and after the Reconstruction Era.

Dunbar, it has been pointed out in Chapter One, depended upon his pen for livelihood. Writing for a living, he had to please his publishers, his editors, and his reading audience, neither of which wanted the serious, the philosophical, the radical or the bitter. Dunbar knew this and as a result

He acquired a knowledge and command of the white man's psychology and...moulded and tempered his actions and attitude in light of this knowledge.

Therefore, Dunbar followed the vogue of idealizing the ante-bellum plantation, of showing the kindliness of the old slave master and the loyalty of the slave to his master, and of writing about the plantation pastimes in order to gain and to appeal to a reasonably large reading audience.

A typical picture of the plantation is "A Corn-Song." The slave master is seated

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1Iida K. Wiggins, op. cit., p. 293. All poems quoted from Dunbar in this chapter will be taken from this collection and will be entered without the name of the author.

2J. Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 50.
On the wide veranda white,
In the purple failing light,\(^1\)
listening to the corn-songs of the field hands. A tear comes to his eye
as he listens to the fading music of their comforting song:

\begin{verbatim}
Oh, we hoe de co'n
Since de ehly mo'n;
Now de sinkin' sun
Says de day is done.\(^2\)
\end{verbatim}

The master is tender and kind. Often when dark clouds signaled rain, he
would say

\begin{verbatim}
..."Well, Lishy,
if you t'ink hit's gwine to rain,
Go on fishin', hit's de weathah,
and I 'low we cain't complain." \(^3\)
\end{verbatim}

Many times after dark, the master permitted the slaves to hunt for the
coon and the 'possum. Or nights could be spent in love making or in banjo
playing:

\begin{verbatim}
An' my wife an' all de othahs--
Male an' female, small an' big,--
Even up to gray-haired granny,
Seems jes' boun' to do a jig.\(^4\)
\end{verbatim}

During festival seasons, the considerate and kind master permitted parties
and dances:

\begin{verbatim}
2Ibid.
3"Fishing," p. 259.
\end{verbatim}
Step wid de banjo an' glide wid de fiddle,
Dis ain' no time fu' to pottah an' piddle;
Fu' Christmas is comin', it's right on de way,
An' dey's houahs to dance 'fo' de break o' de day.¹

For the merrymakers, a holiday was something special:

Dey'll be banjo pickin',
Dancin' all night too,
Dey'll be lots o' chicken,
Plenty tukky, too.²

Occasionally the plantation was the scene of a party for the "folk f'om fou' plantations":

Evahbody dressed deir fines'—
Heish yo' mouf' an' git away,
Ain't seen no sich fancy dressin'
Sence las quah'tly meetin' day;

Skuts all tucked an' puffed an' ruffled, evah blesses seem an' stich;
Ef you's seen 'em wif deir mistus,
Couldn't swahed to which was which.³

Thus it would seem that dancing, singing, banjo playing, and parties—privileges granted by the kind master—transformed the ante-bellum plantation into a happy resort.⁴

These kindnesses and privileges were enjoyed before the Civil War.

¹"Christmas," p. 335.
²"Christmas is A-Comin'," p. 221.
⁴Only rarely was plantation life unhappy. Whenever a master was forced to sell a slave, thus separating him from his sweetheart, there was occasion for lament:

Ole Mas' done sol' me down the stream;
I knewed someday we'd have to pa't,
But den hit put' nigh breaks my hea't,
My lady, my lady.

After the Civil War, however, many changes were brought about in the plantation system. Some of the slaves fought with their masters; some sought freedom in the North, while the more faithful slave remained on the plantation to protect his helpless mistress and her family. It is the loyal, faithful slave who is found in the plantation poetry of Dunbar. Such a slave was often shocked to learn that his master had been killed while "a-leadin' his men into fight":

Mastah, my mastah, dead dah in de fiel'?
Lif' me up some,—dah, jes' so I kin kneel.
I was too weak to go wid him, dey said,
Well, now I'll—fin' him—so—mastah is dead.\(^1\)

After the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the passing of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, the former servants were often retained with pay by their ex-masters. The discharge of hired hands who could no longer be retained because of low profits occasioned grief and regret. Dunbar's "Chrismus on the Plantation" concerns Negroes who remained faithful after the Civil War and were grieved because

...Mastah'd tol' us we mus' go,
He'd been payin' us sense freedom,
but he couldn't pay no mo'.\(^2\)

Their boundless devotion to their employer causes them to weep:

All de women was a-cryin' an' de men,
too, on de sly.\(^3\)

Deep loyalty prompts the old faithful slaves to decide to

...jes' tell Mistah Lincum
fu' to tek his freedom back.\(^4\)

\(^1\)"The News," p. 231.
\(^2\)"Chrismus on the Plantation," p. 231.
\(^3\)Ibid.
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 232.
Memories of the plantation after freedom had come, had a way of stealing back. The free Negro yearned for the "god ole days." "The Old Cabin" pictures a devoted former slave, haunted by memories of the past, openly confessing that

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In de dead of night I sometimes,
Git to t'inkin' of de pas',
An' de day w'en slavery helt me,
In my mis'ry--ha'd an' fas'.
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Continuing, he confides:

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An' my min' fu'gits de whuppins
Drops de feah o' block an' lash,
An' flies straight to somep'n joyful
In a secon's lightnin' flash.
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"The Deserted Plantation" presents another faithful and devoted old Negro servant who returns to a plantation only to find everyone gone:

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Dey have lef' de ole plantation to de swallers,
But it hol's me a lover till de las',
Fu' I fin' hyeah in de memory dat follers
All dat loved me an' dat I loved in de pas'.
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Devoted and loyal, the forlorn Negro decides:

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So I'll stay an' watch de deah old place an' tend it
Es I used to in de happy days gone by.
'Twell de othah Mastah thinks it's time to end it,
An' calls me to my qua'ters in de sky.
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Thus far, we have seen Dunbar's continuous effort to idealize life on the plantation before and after the Civil War. He depicts a merry life of dancing, banjo-playing, and parties on the plantation before the Civil War. He shows the kindness and tenderness of the master and the mistress to the

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1 "The Old Cabin," p. 333.
2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
slaves. Moreover, he tells how, after the Civil War, many of the former Negro slaves remained loyal and devoted to their kind masters. Hence throughout, we get a convincing picture of the contented slave or ex-slave. It cannot be concluded, however, that this picture of contentment and subserviency and appeasement fairly and completely represents Dunbar's stand on race relations in America. Dunbar has said that his desire was

To be able to interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to many that after all we are more human than African.¹

When Dunbar breaks with the plantation tradition, his racial themes seem to be geared to this expressed desire. His poems glorifying the Negro will bear out this fact. To accomplish this end, Dunbar discarded the "jingle in a broken tongue" and used conventional English as his vehicle of expression.

Dunbar loved his race and was deeply loyal to it. Occasionally he expressed his zealous loyalty impetuously. A case in point is his "Ode to Ethiopia." He enthusiastically relates the reason for his pride in the Negro, a race whose name is writ on Glory's scroll

In characters of fire.²

A magnificent tribute to his race for its fortitude in enduring hardship, "Ode to Ethiopia" praises the Negro for his uncanny power of forgiving those who had so inhumanely used him:

No other race, or white or black,
When bound as thou wert, to the rack,
So seldom stooped to grieving;


²"Ode to Ethiopia," p. 145.
No other race, when free again,  
Forgot the past and proved them men  
So noble in forgiving.1

Such was Dunbar's praise of a race who had borne the tribulations of slavery and who, after emancipation, had been subjected to a new kind of slavery more abominable than that preceding the Civil War.

To abuse and intimidate a struggling race was reason enough for protest. Of the horrible and atrocious forms of abuse, lynching, to Dunbar, was the worst.2 "The Haunted Oak," a ballad, is a specific poem on lynching. A Negro charged with the "old, old crime" is seized from the jailer by Southern whites who have

...fooled the jailer with lying words,  
They have fooled the man with lies,3

and is strung from the branch of an oak. Participants in the lynching are described specifically:

Oh, the judge, he wore a mask of black,  
And the doctor one of white;  
And the minister, with his oldest son,  
Was curiously bedight.4

The oak, spokesman for Dunbar, probably voices Dunbar's bitter protest against the inhumane practice of lynching when it refuses to bear leaves on the bough on which the guiltless Negro is hanged. In addition to what may be a subtle protest against lynching, the poem is an attack on the psychology of revengeful whites to hang a man without sufficient evidence. It might be advisable at this point to make a short excursion into Dunbar's

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1Ibid.

2Lynching reached a new high after the passing of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Brawley tells us that "between 1866 and 1879 more than three thousand Negroes were summarily killed. See Benjamin Brawley, A Social History of the American Negro (New York, 1921), p. 278.


4Ibid.
prose in which his views on lynching are revealed more directly than in his poetry.¹

"The Tragedy at Three Forks," in The Strength of Gideon, deals with the psychology of whites to lynch a Negro without proof of his guilt. It also shows how quickly a mob is incited to violent action. Guiltless Negroes accused of setting fire to the barn of a Southern white family are captured by a white searching party and are taken to the jail. The prisoners confess guilt upon advice of an attorney. Later they are removed from the jail and lynched by a blood-thirsty mob. Newspapers carried articles deplored the hanging but

...only in one little obscure sheet did an editor think to say, "There was Salem and and its witchcraft; there is the South with its lynching. When the blind frenzy of a people condemn a man as soon as he is accused, his enemies need not look for a pretext."²

Again Dunbar deals with lynching in a short story, "The Lynching of Jube Benson," found in The Heart of Happy Hollow. Dunbar shows how often a mob hangs a man with insufficient evidence of guilt. Jube, a faithful slave suspected of killing his mistress, is run down by a mob and is lynched. Afterwards it is discovered that the criminal is a white ruffian with a blacked faced. The Doctor, narrator of the story, accounts for his participation in the lynching thus:

Suggestions of bitterness at the memory of lynching may be embodied in a poem of generalized, masked protest in the lines:

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.

See "We Wear the Mask," p. 184.

Why I did it? I don't know. A false education, I reckon, one false from the beginning. I saw his black face glooming in the half light, and I could only think of him as a monster. It's a tradition. At first I was told that the black man would catch me, and when I got over that, they taught me that the devil was black, and when I had recovered from the sickness of that belief, here were Jube and his fellows with faces of menacing blackness. There was only one conclusion: This black man stood for all the powers of evil, the result of whose machinations had been gathering in my mind from childhood up.¹

The foregoing passage from Dunbar's prose, coupled with those ideas in "The Tragedy at Three Forks" and his poem, "The Haunted Oak," reveal something of Dunbar's belief that lynching is a horrible crime, motivated by prejudiced and resentful Southern whites incited to violent action, and predicated upon a system of false and twisted education. But we must return to Dunbar's poetry.

Just as Dunbar's attitude toward lynching stems from his intense dislike of violation of human rights, his celebration of the racial hero springs from his pride in, loyalty to, and love for his race. But who is the racial hero?

To Dunbar, the racial hero is a fighter—a man of militant thought, a man of militant action. The hero as a man of militant thought is one who uses his ideas as a warrior to fight against the injustices to which the Negro is subjected. His hero, fighting with his mind, champions the cause of the underdog, the underprivileged people. Such a fighter is Frederick Douglass. Dunbar praises Douglass as a courageous fighter for the rights of the Negro:

And he was no soft-tongued apologist;
He spoke straightforward, fearlessly uncowed.

And hurled at evil what was evil's due.  

He praises Douglass for his goodness and his kindness:

- No miser in the good he held was he,—
- His kindness followed his horizon's rim,
- Where poverty and ignorance were rife;
- He gave his bounty as he gave his life.

He regards Douglass as a war casualty. He had lived and died a fighter on the battlefield of Freedom and Right:

- In Freedom's lists and for the aid of Right
- Still in the foremost rank he waged the fray;
- Wrong lived; his occupation was not gone.
- He died in action with his armor on!

No less a hero than Douglass was Alexander Crummell. Crummell, like Douglass, was a champion of downtrodden and violated persons. In "Alexander Crummell—Dead," Dunbar praises Crummell for firing the imagination of an oppressed race:

- Back to the breast of thy mother,
- Child of earth!
- E'en her carress can not smother
- What thou hast done.
- Who shall come after thee out of the clay—
- Learned one and leader to show us the way?

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1"Frederick Douglass," p. 139.
This rare and fine tribute was inspired by Dunbar's reverence and affection for his illustrious friend. Douglass gave Dunbar a position in the Hayti building at the World's Columbian Exposition and paid him out of his own pocket. He spoke of Dunbar as the "most promising young colored man in America." See Lida K. Wiggins, op. cit., p. 100.

2"Frederick Douglass," p. 139.

3Ibid.

4For an interesting discussion of the services and influence of Alexander Crummell, see Vernon Loggins, op. cit., pp. 199-209.

Though less militant than Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington receives praise from Dunbar as the man who came from "a poor Virginia cabin" to be a "master spirit for the nation's need." The unmilitant Washington is praised for his ideas relative to the industrial needs of his race:

Straight on he goes, . . .
With one idea foremost in his mind,
Like the keen prow of some onforging ship. 1

From the foregoing poems, we see that, to Dunbar, the hero is the man who fights with his mind and heart, the man who champions the cause of the underdog in telling, manly words and the man who unselfishly uses his ideas and energy to further the pageant of "progress" of the Negro race. 2 But Dunbar's heroes are not thinkers alone. Many are men of action, the physical fighters, who fight to make real the dreams and goals of the militant thinker. Such a fighter as Black Samson deserved his praise.

Black Samson, "an ebony giant, black as the pinions of night," is a superman "swinging his scythe like a mower." He cuts a "bloody swath" Straight through the human harvest. 3

Black Samson's fierce and formidable stroke prompts the warning:

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2. Somewhat different from Douglass and Crummell, but a hero nevertheless, is Robert Gould Shaw. Praising Shaw as a military strategist, Dunbar feels that Shaw would have done better as a scholar at Harvard, where he attended school than as a military leader:

Far better the slow blaze of Learning's light,
Than this hot terror of a hopeless fight.


Woe to you, soldier of Briton!
Death is abroad in his path.
Flee from the scythe of the reaper,
Flee while the moment is thine,
None may with safety withstand him,
Black Samson of Brandywine.¹

Equally as heroic as Samson are

...the gallant colored soldiers
Who fell fighting on that day.²

Praising the colored soldiers for their fearlessness, Dunbar recalls that the whites, resenting the use of Negroes in the war, had said:

..."These battles are the white man's,
And the whites will fight them out."³

But when the ravages of war had taken a heavy toll,

Then you called the colored soldiers
And they answered to your call.⁴

Dunbar recounts the great services they rendered during the Civil War, glorying in the Negro's courage and fearless participation from Wagner "to the plains of Olustee" and at Pillow. He delights in reminding this country that his race helped to fight for its emancipation from the cruel, shameful bondage it endured:

Yes, the Blacks enjoy their freedom,
And they won it dearly, too;
For the life blood of their thousands
Did the southern fields bedew.⁵

¹Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., p. 171.
Finally, he, still reminding the country that Negroes are not indebted entirely to others for emancipation, reviews for the whites the feats of the colored soldiers:

They have shared your mighty vigils,
They have shared your daily toil;
And their blood with yours commingling
Has enriched the Southern soil.
They have slept and marched and suffered
'Neath the same dark skies as you,
They have met as fierce a foeman
And have been as brave and true.¹

"The Unsung Heroes" continues Dunbar's praise of the hero of physical strength. Again he recalls the great services the colored soldiers rendered at Wagner and Pillow. Seemingly, America has forgotten to pay tribute to these men

...who came from the corn-field,
Who came from the plough and flail,
• • • •
These men who feared the master's whip,
But did not fear the fight.²

The poet makes a plea that God will give "some seer" the power to sing

A song for the unsung heroes who stand the awful test,
When the humblest host that the land could boast
went forth to meet the best;
A song for the unsung heroes who fell on the bloody sod,
Who fought their way from night to day and struggled
up to God.³

Numbered among the unsung heroes are the black troops in Cuba. In memory of these stouthearted, fearless fighters, Dunbar, in "The Conquerors," glories in the dauntless courage of these "men of night" who so prize-worthily and bravely

...spoke through the battle cloud heavy and dun.⁴

¹Ibid.
²"The Unsung Heroes," p. 278.
³Ibid., p. 279.
The poet feels that the truth about the mighty deeds these heroes have done will eventually be known around the world and that the nation shall be proud to voice a thanks that has been hitherto left unsaid:

Then on the cheek of the honester nation that grows,
All for their love of you, not for your woes,
There shall be
Tears that shall be to your souls as the dew to the rose;
Afterwards, thanks, that the present yet knows
Not to ply'll.

Indeed, it is clear that not only does Dunbar recognize as a hero the thinker, fighting with his ideas for a worthy cause. He also recognizes the courageous, physical fighter, shedding sweat and blood and life to realize the dreams of the thinker and to push forward the march of progress of a downtrodden race.

To discuss all the themes in Dunbar’s racial interest has not been the purpose of this chapter. The themes discussed have been limited to those which are representative of Dunbar’s treatment of the plantation tradition and those typical of his treatment when he broke with the tradition. From those discussed, we have seen that Dunbar’s poems dealing with the plantation are steeped in sentimentality and panegyrics of the prewar and Civil War plantation life. A romantic plantationist, Dunbar, with seeming nostalgia, rarely wrote of the unpleasant or bitter phase of plantation life. Most of his poems in the plantation tradition deal with the happy past, the congenial slave master, and the loyalty, and devotion of the contented Negro to his master during and after slavery and the Civil War. But we have seen also that when Dunbar breaks with the plantation tradition in his poetry, he is frank, sincere, oracular. At times he even becomes the overt race spokesman, just a bit short of twentieth century militancy. Therefore, with

\[^1\text{Ibid.}\]
respect to his treatment of racial themes, there are two Dunbars: Dunbar the apologist of the plantation tradition; Dunbar, the champion of racism and enemy to all forms of oppression.
The first chapter, "Dunbar's Literary Theory," had as its primary purpose the setting forth of Dunbar's ideas concerning poesy. An attempt was made to arrange and combine the chance elements of a theory of poetry which Dunbar let fall, but never set forth consecutively or at length. In order to exhibit Dunbar's conception of poetry, scattered passages from his writings and pertinent remarks from his critics were gathered. The net results, then, of the writer's effort are a collection of references that seem to present Dunbar's views of his art. Obviously this chapter has its limitations. Often where it might have seemed important to be explicit and comprehensive, the elusiveness and sparsity of his ideas on literary art necessitated either an element of hypothesis or complete silence.

Chapter Two, "Dunbar's Concepts Concerning Non-Racial Themes," has been devoted to Dunbar's treatment of the universal themes in poetry—particularly life, love, death, immortality, and religion. In this discussion, Dunbar's attitude toward each of these themes is treated. In connection with Dunbar's concept of life, the following observations were made: (a) Life, to Dunbar, is an unending paradox, a mixture of positive and negative forces, governed by a law of unbalanced compensation. (b) Dunbar's views of life and happiness were colored by his experiences. (c) Though often seemingly pessimistic, Dunbar was fundamentally an optimist. (d) Dunbar's admonitions for wholesome living are initiative, work, and perseverance. Concerning his attitude toward love, the following points were brought out: (a) Dunbar regarded love as a powerful transformer capable of changing both the individual and his surroundings. (b) His concept of love has autobiographical implications. (c) The dominant notes of paradox, fleeting happiness, and unbalanced compensation are repeated in his love poetry. With respect to death and immortality, it was shown that: (a) Dunbar's was a positive attitude toward
death and immortality. (b) Dunbar regarded death as a deliverer, a passport to peace and life eternal. (c) Dunbar's mortuary poems surge with the undercurrent of faith an optimism that underlies his philosophy of life. And, finally, relative to religion, it was pointed out that: (a) Dunbar's religious poetry shows that he had implicit faith in a God of mercy, solace, and protection. (b) Dunbar believed in practical, not merely in professed Christianity. (c) Dunbar was a humanist and humanitarian in religious matters.

It is significant to note that in dealing with the universal themes in poetry, Dunbar was chiefly guilty of one great literary sin—the sin of unbridled sentimentality. His was the subjective approach of the sentimentalist and not that of the detached, objective thinker. In his moralizing poems, Dunbar expounds no profound, challenging philosophy of life. His philosophy is not so deep as it is obvious. His admonitions are often trite, conventional, and have—like those of Longfellow and Edgar Guest—popular appeal, not, perhaps, universal appeal. Writing out of his own personal experiences, Dunbar sentimentalizes and emotionalizes in his love poetry and thereby fails to express any deep philosophy of love. Likewise, he sentimentalizes when he deals with mortuary themes, the result being the same. He fails to achieve keen spiritual insight in his religious verse, for his expressions and views are often commonplace. Hence, we find in Dunbar no depth of thought or keen insight—requisites for great philosophy. At best, Dunbar's philosophy in his universal themes in poetry is no stronger than that found in popular magazine verse of today. The fact remains, however, that he had a clear-cut concept of traditional aspects of life and succeeded in making that concept articulate.

Chapter Three, "Dunbar's Concepts Concerning Racial Themes," was designed, first, to give a discussion of Dunbar's treatment of themes dealing with the plantation or the so-called ante-bellum tradition; and secondly,
to discuss those themes opposed to the plantation tradition. It was revealed that: (a) When Dunbar dealt with the plantation tradition, he followed the sentimental plantationists in idealizing the ante-bellum and post-bellum plantation life. (b) When he broke with the tradition, he was the frank, somewhat militant, and sincere race spokesman in showing that (1) lynching is an unnecessary evil caused by faulty education; (2) Negro leaders must be men of militant thought and militant action.

Few of Dunbar's anti-traditional racial themes deal with the harsher aspects of Negro life or of the evils of his day. For the most part, his militant racial poems appear to be designed for propaganda of aspiration. Sterotyped in praise and conventional in phraseology, Dunbar's poems glorifying the racial leader are marked by a superficial optimism "unwarranted by the complexion of the times." While this study has been detailed in some respects, it has not attempted to do more than present what is representative or typical of Dunbar's beliefs with respect to literary art, to universal and racial themes. It cannot be repeated too often, nor too strongly, that definitive works on each phase of this study are yet to be made.
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