Sources of pathos and humor in Paul Laurence Dunbar

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SOURCES OF PATHOS AND HUMOR IN PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

A THESIS

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine the facts that produced Paul Laurence Dunbar's talents, and to establish the sources of those talents and show him in the true critical light of his achievement; to show that he did not have a great imaginative mind; that he was a natural development of a special period of American and Negro history; and that it was this condition of the Negro of this period that shaped and moulded his work.

The design of the thesis calls for four chapters to be divided as follows:

First, "Sources and Materials of Dunbar's Pathos and Humor in Racial Temperaments", which will attempt to give the social background of the plantation Negro during the ante-bellum days, the epoch of the Civil War, the Reconstruction era and the last three decades of the nineteenth century. This chapter also will attempt to present in a concise manner the literary tenor of the period in which Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote.

Second, "Limitations of Dunbar's Poetic Gifts and Experience", which will attempt to show Dunbar's psychological reaction to the plight and exploitation of the late nineteenth century American Negro as expressed in his works, and also will attempt to establish the premise that Dunbar did not have a great creative or imaginative mind; that his poetry in conventional English is only a faint echo of the themes and subject matter of the great English and American romanticists - Wordsworth, Tennyson, Shelley, Keats, Poe and Riley.

Third, "Dunbar's Dialect Verse His Mirror of Imitation", which will attempt to show that Dunbar's plantation material shaped and influenced his talents; that he did not impose the pathos and humor which is
everywhere prevalent in his dialect pieces upon the Negro, but that the hardships which the Negro was forced to endure already had made him pathetic and sad and that Dunbar had only to reflect and record these pathetic and humorous qualities.

Fourth, "The Short-comings of Dunbar's Novels", which will deal with Dunbar's fiction, and, like the third chapter, will attempt to show that because his material was ready and made to his hand, Dunbar, when he sketched the plantation Negro, wrote with a surer, a much-firmer stroke, than he did when he ventured beyond the color line.

For four years prior to the turn of the last century and during the first five years of the twentieth, the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar created a vogue in American letters. This "Dunbar poetry vogue" was begun in 1896 when Mr. William Dean Howells, in his review of Paul Laurence Dunbar's initial volumes, _the Oak and Ivy_ (1893) and _the Majors and Minors_ (1896), which appeared in Harper's Weekly, called Dunbar to the attention of the American reading public as

"...The only man of pure African blood and of American civilization to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically. It seemed to me", he continues, "that this had come to its most modern consciousness in him, and that his brilliant and unique achievement was to have studied the American Negro objectively, and to have represented him as he found him to be, with humor, with sympathy, and yet with what the reader must instinctively feel to be entire truthfulness."^1

As a result of Mr. Howells' review, Dunbar became at once a popular poet. Men and women from the four corners of the nation sought his dialect verse. This poetry about the Negro slaves, who lived on the old plantations of the South was new and it appealed to them. It was humorous,

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^1 Paul Laurence Dunbar, _Lyrics of Lowly Life_ (New York, 1925), pp. XVI-XVII.
delightful, entertaining. Editors of several newspapers and magazines, especially Lippincott's Magazine, were anxious to print his verses. Many newspapers printed reviews of his poetry while sympathetic critics who understood his aspirations, his strivings, his burning desire to write great poetry, were both kind and lenient in their reviews of his works. Some critics acclaimed him as an innately great artist and compared him to the famous Scotch poet, Robert Burns. Other critics overlooked his many shortcomings as a poet and considered only one phase of his work - its lyrical quality. These critics declared that he was the greatest singer the race has ever produced. Still others credited him with possessing some mysterious genius. No one, however, insofar as we know, has made a comprehensive study of the sources which shaped Dunbar as a poet. This study has been preceded by Dr. Benjamin Brawley and Lida Keck Wiggins. But these authors have dealt mainly with his biography, rather than with a critical examination of the works of Dunbar. Recently, Victor Lawson's treatise, Dunbar Critically Examined, appeared. Mr. Lawson, however, has not treated quite the same theme as this present thesis. Perhaps William Dean Howells came nearest to expressing the theme of this study when he said that Dunbar

"...studied the Negro objectively and represented him as he found him to be, with humor, (and) with sympathy."\(^1\)

The other critics have not looked to the pre-war plantation and the status and plight of its Negro inhabitants as possible sources of Dunbar's literary talents.

Did Paul Laurence Dunbar possess the innate talent which the critics have been willing to accord him? If he possessed this genius, why was it that his mediocrity is evident as a writer of poetry in conventional

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\(^1\) Ibid.
English while, on the other hand, he became an effectual singer in his dialect verse? The problem, then, is to consider how much natural talent Dunbar had and to discern whether this talent would have developed to the extent which it did if the condition of the Negro during the forty year period from the advent of the Civil War to the turn of the last century had been otherwise.

The investigator here tenders his hearty thanks to Mr. William Stanley Braithwaite who offered many valuable suggestions, helped to plan the thesis, and was from the outset its enthusiastic champion.
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CHAPTER I

SOURCES AND MATERIALS OF DUNBAR'S PATHOS AND HUMOR
IN RACIAL TEMPERAMENTS

The advent of the Civil War and the wake of the Reconstruction Era marked two of the darkest periods in history for the American Negro. Although it was a known fact then, as now, that slavery was only a superficial cause of the war, the Negro was regarded as the spark which set the conflict a-flame. From the very outset he became a great problem. The history of the war, however, is too well known to need re-emphasizing here. Of Sherman's march through Georgia, of the slaves becoming 'contraband' of war, of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and of other highlights and horrors of the war we already know. The tension, the hatred and the long suffering caused by the war, too, are all known. However, regardless of the real cause, all the forces of intersectional bitterness were heaped upon the Negro.¹ He was held responsible, says J. S. Redding, "for the bloodshed, the pillage and ruin of the South."²

Whereas the war settled the controversy over whether states could secede from the Union, it created greater problems. Subsequently, at the close of the Civil War, the United States, especially the South, found itself face to face with some of the gravest socio-economic problems of modern times.³ There was the question of the restoration of the states to the Union and of rehabilitating the South. Too, there was still the great

¹ J. S. Redding, To Make a Poet Black (Chapel Hill, 1939), p. 49.
² Ibid.
problem caused by the aftermath of slavery - the abominable race problem. These were among the great problems which confronted the sick, weary, tired and defeated Confederate soldiers.

When the men in Grey broke rank after the war and returned to their respective communities, they discovered that what once was home was now ruins. In many sections only remnants of a once peaceful community remained. Towns had been bombarded, houses and barns had been burned, storehouses raided and what was once a thriving, prosperous plantation was left a waste land, barren for the most part, of its orchards, its crops of wheat, rye, corn, barley and potatoes, its rows of fluffy snow-white cotton and its slaves. Some of the soldiers were faced with even greater woes for they found that their families not only had been separated by the war but in many cases several members had been killed in the conflict. The women who had borne the burden of the war at home were poor and sickly and their children were undernourished. Both mother and child were fatigued for they were forced to do the work of the slaves. Even more distressing to the returning soldiers was the fact that President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had elevated the Negro's social status. He was declared free; he was now the white man's social equal. The thought of having been forced to meet their ex-slaves on the same military level during the war had angered the white men. But now that the war was over the very thought of 'social equality' made them bitter. Hatred, not tears, filled and blinded their eyes. The whites would be avenged. The Negro was the cause of all this misery, this poverty, this agony. Thus with sullen and resentful eyes, the whites gazed upon the Negro, vowing that emancipated though he was he would

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1 Ibid.
never be the white man's equal. From Carter G. Woodson's study in Negro history we learn that

"...The South was unwilling to grant the Negro the right to enjoy the fruits of victory of the Civil War. (and) the freedmen were being oppressed almost to the extent of being enslaved."

For a short while after the war, however, the Negro was indeed a happy individual. He no longer had to work twelve and fourteen hours a day. Nor did he have to suffer any longer the cruel master's lash across his back. He did not have to stand idly by and watch his wife or his children dragged helplessly from his slave quarters only to be sold down the river. He was free. He was one of America's own sons. He could work for his own living, rear his family and care for his children. He felt secure and safe for the white man's laws were now his laws; he was guaranteed the ordinary rights of citizenship.

The Negro, however, soon realized that he was disillusioned. He discovered that there was in the South a grave social problem and that, as Dr. Benjamin Brawley informs us

"The Negro was at the heart of the problem, but to that problem the South undoubtedly held the key."\(^2\)

Rather than help the freedmen advance, many of the Southern states sought to reenslave him.\(^3\) Innumerable plans as to how the Negro could be most effectively "kept in his place" were advanced, but the most effective system was the infamous Black Codes. According to the progenitors of the Black Codes, even though the Negro was nominally free he was wanting in both formal education and the ability to take care of himself and, therefore, needed

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\(^2\)Benjamin Brawley, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
the tutelage and oversight of the whites. Hence, developed the system of "apprenticeship", a system whereby a Negro was placed under the supervision of a master, or employer as he was called, for as long as eighteen years. The codes also penalized the vagrancy of Negroes and interfered with their rights as free men. Poor, hungry and bereft of hope and strength, many of the freedmen wandered aimlessly from town to town in an effort to escape the shackles of a new and more barbarous kind of slavery. However, with each stop they made they discovered that they were unwelcomed pilgrims, without friends, in a strange and hostile community. Wretched beyond comprehension these freedmen, says Carter G. Woodson, often

"...were reduced to poverty and subject to temptation and vicious influences, (and) tended to retrograde rather than advance. The vagrancy laws, therefore, generally provided for fines, corporal punishment, indenturing for a certain period of service, and in a few cases required that every Negro should be attached to some employer."^1

Great was the blench which such events and tendencies left on the face of the nation. In an effort to eradicate such noxious practices, Congress, led by Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, proceeded to pass the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments and the First and Second Civil Rights Bill, all of which laws were designed to protect the freedmen, to give them the right of suffrage, the right of citizenship and equality of treatment. It was during this period also that the powers of the Freedmen's Bureau were enlarged, and other governmental, private and missionary societies were organized. In some states it was necessary for the national government to establish military districts before order and the preservation of public peace could be restored. Under the effect of martial rule the Negro gained political and social prominence, and

^1Ibid., p. 244.
eventually many of them were elected to both state and national congressional offices.

The very idea of placing the "inferior" Negro above the white man also angered the Southerners. The ex-slave holders thought not of whether the Negro was capable or honest. They thought only of their pride and the antebellum days. And from these thoughts sprang race prejudice and race hatred. However, since the military rule was too strong to be overthrown, the South sought a "better solution of the problem by adopting the policy of watchful waiting", and careful but ruthless planning. Capitalizing upon the fears and superstitions of the Negro, the Southern whites organized an "oath-bound" order, the Ku Klux Klan, whose "costume...was especially designed to strike terror in uneducated Negroes".

Determined to keep the Negro in his place, the organization of the Klan eventually extended over the entire South, terrorizing and lynching the freedmen and often ostracizing, persecuting and killing the white men and women who attempted to help them in their struggle for absolute freedom, for moral, social, political and educational advancement. However, in spite of the deplorable operation of the Klan, serious and successful attempts were made towards educating the Negro.

It is often a paradox that when a nation is at a peak of extreme wealth there exists a pronounced amount of poverty; that when a nation acquires a vast amount of knowledge and enlightenment there exists a depreciable amount of ignorance; and that in the face of so much good there is a given amount of evil. To this paradox the South proved no exception.

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1Ibid., p. 248.
2Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 273.
3Ibid.
When it looked as though the Negro was gaining a slight foothold, when conditions were such that the federal troops were ordered to be withdrawn from military districts,

"The South", declared Benjamin Brawley, "changed so much that, especially in South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, the state of affairs were no longer tolerable".1

With the departure of the federal troops the old South came forth with renewed supremacy. Negroes were intimidated and insulted by whites, discriminatory practices grew apace and barriers of every description were placed in their paths. Even worse was the fact that the Negro failed to get justice from the courts. If a colored man was brought into court, he was tried by an all-white jury and was generally found guilty. If a Negro was murdered or lynched - and the Negro was murdered and lynched - the assailant went free for no one tried to find the murderer. With no laws to hold it in check mob violence ruled the South; "lynching grew apace....Between 1866 and 1879 more than three thousand Negroes were summarily killed."2 "Following (this) period the number of Negroes annually lynched in the whole country aggregated between fifty and a hundred...."3

Perhaps much of the bitter social and economic antagonism which existed during the period, says Carter G. Woodson, was

"...primarily due to the one great fallacy on which the prosperity of the New South was built, and that was that the labor of the Negro existed only for the good of the white man."4

More and more the South glorified the old aristocracy and the ante-bellum days, and attempted to reenslave the Negro. During the seventies and

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1 Ibid., p. 278.
2 Ibid.,
3 Carter G. Woodson, op. cit., p. 261.
4 Ibid., p. 264.
eighties the conditions which were imposed upon Negroes were so insufferable that a number of the freedmen moved west into Indiana and Kansas. Under the leadership of Henry Adams of Louisiana and Benjamin Singleton of Tennessee, this movement became an organized one and thousands of Negroes from every walk of life were either west or north bound. "This unusual movement of Negroes", avers Mr. Woodson, "threatened the South with economic ruin". The thinking class of whites sought to stop them, either through persuasion or by denying the Negroes transportation and imprisoning them on false charges. The South, however, was still unwilling to grant them the economic equality they desired. But in spite of these obstacles, or perhaps because of them, the march of the Negroes to the promised land of the north continued.

This picture of the Negro during the period of trials and tribulations was indeed a pathetic one. The Negro was standing, as it were, on the threshold of an unhappy past looking out into an uncertain and threatening future. The Negro had, as Paul Laurence Dunbar so aptly stated:

"...Nor freedom's nor a slave's delight."\(^1\)

Discouraged, disfranchised and almost demoralized, he knew not where to turn.

While the Negro was attempting to work out his own salvation, Southern whites caught the spirit and the longings of the South and conceived of a means of revivifying the morale of the people of this section of the nation. They glorified in their literature not only the beautiful

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\(^1\)Ibid.
Southern girl and the dashing Southern gentleman, but turned also to the plantation slave and made literary material of him. The slave was generally portrayed as a contented, happy-go-lucky individual. However, he loved his master and his work and was faithful to the one and conscientious in his performance of the other. According to the literary tradition, the slave had no aspiration beyond a place to eat, sleep, work, laugh and clown. He was frequently the object of many jokes. And for broad humor his social life was grist for the artist. When pathos was desired the author generally laid his setting in the North and showed the Negro migrant, weary of the hardships with which he was confronted, longing for the old ante-bellum plantation and his kind master.

Among the first, if not the very first, American writers to conceive of the Negro as a possible literary figure was Irwin Russell. Quite enthusiastic over the literary possibilities of this heretofore unexploited material, Russell wrote to a friend of his

"...It is a thing entirely new - nobody has ever tried it. Negro lovers - Negro preachers - Negro "literary and malevolent" sieties - Negro saints and Negro sinners - think of what mines of humor and pathos, plot and character, sense and nonsense, are here waiting development! I shall take my little dibble and scratch away on the surface. Though I may not do more than strike "color", I shall still work con amore."^1

Irwin Russell could not have conceived of this idea of treating Negro character at a more opportune time. As he said, they afforded excellent mines of pathos and humor. And, too, the period was definitely one of intense feeling and sentiment. Authors were purposely neglecting realism and naturalism and were devoting their energies towards themes which called for romance and "local color". Especially during

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^1Irwin Russell, Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems, (New York, 1917), p. XXXI.
the three decades following the Civil War did Southern writers of prose and
poetry become romanticists and local colorists; they not only glorified but
limited their subject matter to the South. The pre-war plantation became
the general subject for practically all Southern writers. These writers
attempted to soothe the hurt feelings of the Old South by producing lyric
romantic poetry about the ante-bellum days. In referring to the tone of
the literature of this period Addison Hibbard avers that

"It is, in a very real sense, a lyric South concerned
with beauty and emotional ecstasy almost to the ex-
clusion of anything like actuality...It is strongly
imbued with local color and legendary of the past.
Texas prairies, North Carolina mountains and South
Carolina lowlands, (Kentucky plantations), Virginia
rivers and streams; trees, gardens, sometimes Negroes -
these are the images and figures which most frequent-
ly are woven into the tapestry of the poet."1

Also listed among the local colorists who delved into planta-
tion folk-lore for literary treatment are Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas
Nelson Page, Frank Stanton and J. A. Macon. It was Harris who created
the Uncle Remus stories and continued the tradition of Russell as a de-
pictor of humor of Negro plantation life. Romantic in tone, the stories
of Joel Chandler Harris depict in a lesser degree the picturesque Negro
and the fitness for his dialect in humorous verse and prose.2 Thomas
Nelson Page pictured in his works the faithful Negro servant, the kind-
ly master, the 'great rambling house', and an endless plantation.
Steeped with plantation sentimentality, most of Page's prose and poetry
panegyrized the old pre-war and Civil War plantation life. Edd Winfield
Parks informs us that in two of his novels

"Red Rock and In Ole Virginia, (Thomas Nelson Page)
recall (s) much of that glamour and charm, that ro-
mantic aristocracy, which we associate with the old South."3

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1 Addison Hibbard, The Lyric South (New York, 1928), pp. XIX-XX.
2 Edd Winfield Parks, Segments of Southern Thought (Athens, Georgia,
1933), p. 274.
3 Ibid.
It was only on rare occasions that the unpleasant phase of plantation life became entangled in the works of the romantic plantationists. For the most part they ignored the "cruelty, mismanagement, illicit sexual relationships, and general lack of consideration for the Negroes" which, according to Mr. Parks, also existed. Even J. A. Macon failed to discuss the really bitter phase of plantation life. When his poems veered away from the happy Negro field hands, who worked hard all day, and sang songs and made love at night, he was only harsh enough to discuss a master, with a bull whip in his hands, chasing a run-away slave. A sympathetic writer of the homely life of the Negro slave, Frank Stanton ventured into the religious services and the homes of the slaves, says Victor Lawson, and portrayed

"The backsliding brother and the tender Negro parent. He showed little of the plantation fields, pastorally or otherwise." \(^2\)

The literary plantation tradition, then, was not altogether new when Paul Laurence Dunbar began his work in this field. Nor was he without forerunners in the romantic school of thought.

"The poetic material of Dunbar's school", declares Victor Lawson, "had reached heights of expression probably never to be excelled or equalled; the themes had been treated over and over again, so that set conventional mannerisms, 'clickes', had developed to dampen the original lyric ardor of the poet. Dunbar, in his poems in literary English, faced the problem of reviving or modifying the expression of the romantic themes if he was to produce remarkable poetry rather than romantic echoes." \(^3\)

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 33.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 18.
CHAPTER II

LIMITATIONS OF DUNBAR'S POETIC GIFTS AND EXPERIENCE

There is much truth in the old adage "poets are born, not made". "No one", declares Lascelles Abercrombie, "can be taught how to be an artist; (and) it is nevertheless quite true that no one can be an artist who has not learned his medium. You must know your perspective or your counterpoint - the grammar of your art... (and) once you have learnt the grammar, then there is no one who can stop you but yourself... that is - (you) can only consult (your) own talent."^1

Sometimes this talent is both great and rare as, for instance, in the case of our supreme poets, - Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. Then again it exists to a rich degree in such extraordinary writers as Pope, Dryden, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Browning and Rossetti - all of whom have given rich harmony to the world of poetry. This talent might exist in a lesser degree in some writers; as, for instance, our minor poets and versifiers. But it is only according to their talents that poets achieve greatness and success.

As a little child Paul Laurence Dunbar was forever rhyming. Dunbar's biographer, Lida Keck Wiggins, has observed that

"At as early an age as seven years he wrote his first bit of verse. It was a child's poem and naturally expressed childish sentiments, but even then flickerings of... talent were apparent."^2

In school he evinced a fondness for literary studies and excelled in "reading, spelling, grammar, and later in literature."^3 He was admitted
to his school's literary organization, the Philomathean Society, and also contributed to "The High School Times". Dr. Benjamin Brawley tells us that

"His tact and talent were of such that in his last year he was chosen both president of the society and editor of the paper".¹

Endowed with an easy, natural, lilting rhythm, Dunbar, even as a high school student, was attracted, like chips of steel to a lodestone, to the rhythmical poetry of Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, and Byron. He never tired of studying the poetry of these men. Employing their works as models, he made feeble attempts to copy their style, their themes and their metre. He also imitated such American writers as Poe, Riley, Longfellow, Russell, Harris, Page, Bacon, and Stanton. He borrowed heavily from these artists and slavishly imitated their poetic works. To borrow, however, is not a crime and no attempt is made here to condone Dunbar for imitating other writers. No less an artist than Shakespeare borrowed and also Chaucer before him. In fact, every great artist at one time or another during his career has copied the tone and sentiment, the rhythm and method and the ideas and themes of another poet. In fact, as Stevenson confessed, every writer plays the "sedulous ape". The great poets, however, have reclothed this borrowed material in a finer raiment; they have given it an added freshness, vitality, life. This, it seems, is the great demarcation between Dunbar and our truly great writers. Dunbar has not robed his poetry in the finest cloth. Frequently, in fact, too frequently, his poetry falls short of even average dress. His poetic talent was limited and he could not scale great heights.

¹Ibid., p. 15.
Paul Laurence Dunbar was a natural development of a special period in American and Negro history. For this reason we cannot study his poetry or his prose intelligently until we have considered him in relation to his age. He was born at a time when the South was awakening from the worst nightmare it has ever experienced - the Civil War. Born into one of the darkest periods in the history of the American Negro, Dunbar, as a member of an oppressed minority group, was greatly affected by the plight of the colored man. As late as the turn of the century the relationship which existed between the Southern white man and the Negro as a result of the war and later the Reconstruction Era was one of bitter strife and continuous conflict. "Disfranchisement abounded, andpeonage and the convict lease system flourished."1 Harsh vagrancy laws existed and the number of Negroes lynched during these terrible years of political, economic and social hostility reached a new high. Greatly demoralized by the complete transformation from the ante-bellum days to an entirely new and different order, the Southern whites were bitter and resentful beyond any compromise. They turned to mob violence in an effort to regain their lost supremacy; and through the operation of the infamous Klan sought to "keep the Negro in his place". Likewise, they exploited the illiterate Negro. When the Negro was given consideration he was always "the last hired and the first fired".

"All this seething, surging life Paul Dunbar saw", declares Dr. Benjamin Brawley, "and a part of it he was".2 However, he evidently concluded that little could be gained as a result of a belligerent or a rebellious attitude, and, rather than give a realistic portrayal of the Ne-

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1Benjamin Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People, p. 6.
2Ibid., p. 5.
gro's life in relation to the temper of the age, Dunbar, as we shall learn from a study of his works, subsided to a more romantic spirit and joined ranks with the multitude of young writers who idealized the past. ¹

Dunbar, like every author who depends upon the income of his literary productions for a livelihood, was forced to bend to the will of both his publisher and his reading public. Neither the reading public nor the publisher preferred anything that was bitter or harsh. Dunbar was quick to realize this and in order to gain an audience, he, like many Negroes in every walk of life,

"acquired a knowledge and command of the white man's psychology, and...moulded and tempered his actions and attitudes in the light of this knowledge."²

To paraphrase J. S. Redding's comment on the reaction of the Negro race as a whole to the spirit of the age, we may say that Dunbar knew that laughter was the instrument now as it had been for the slave under the lash, the broiling sun, and the threats of being sold down the river. A natural humorist, Dunbar pursued the gods of servile laughter as a conquering race might pursue the god of war. He wrote the gay nonsense poetry, the laughing, desperate poetry of heartbreak. He made jokes of the Negro's illiteracy and ignorance, and tears of the hardships and disappointments with which he was confronted in the North. Under his pen the Negro characters in sections of his poetry and prose frequently became minstrels, buffoons. ³

It must be added here that the above mentioned themes, insofar as Dunbar was concerned, were secondary. He aspired to become the poet of romantic verse in conventional English rather than the writer of 'a jingle in a broken tongue'. In a letter addressed to Dr. Henry A. Tobey and post-

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¹Ibid., p. 7
²J. S. Redding, op. cit., p. 50.
³Ibid.
marked July 13, 1895, Dunbar admits that his one desire is

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

He preferred to do this via the media of conventional English. His reading public preferred, however, the dialect pieces. While conversing with his beloved friend, the late Dr. James Weldon Johnson, he said

"I've got to write dialect poetry; it's the only way I can get them to listen to me."2

In order to be assured of even a small reading public, Dunbar sentimentalized after the fashion of other writers of the period. Thus, he wrote of the happy past, the ante-bellum plantation, the friendly, kind and congenial slave master, of 'possum hunting, fishing, rural love affairs and religious camp meetings. He frequently spoke of the Negro's loyalty to his master during slavery and the Civil War, but only rarely did he write of the lynchings, the cruelty of the vagrancy laws, or the peonage and the convict lease systems. When he did mention them he was not bit¬ter in his denunciation of these horrible and obnoxious practices. Paul Laurence Dunbar's biographer declares that

"There are no bitter tirades against the masters...."3

Dr. Brawley, too, noticed that Dunbar veered away from a realistic portrayal of the harsh conditions to which Negroes in the deep South were frequent¬ly subjected.

"One poem calls for special note", declares Dr. Brawley. "'To The South', different from most of the other pieces, is amazing in the light it throws on Dunbar's approach to a social theme. If any subject could possibly arouse indignation in a Negro poet about the year 1902, one would

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1 Lida Keck Wiggins, op. cit., p. 47.
3 Lida Keck Wiggins, op. cit., p. 78.
suppose it would be the peonage and the convict
lease system in the South. Instead of being dy-
namic, however, Dunbar sentimentalizes throughout
a fairly long piece of work. He says that the
time has come to strike "deeper chords, the notes
of wrong"; but he appeals to the South on the
basis of old memories.1

According to the tone of his poetry and prose, Dunbar was at
once forgiving. He felt that in time the Negro race would come into
its own and would be privileged to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit
of happiness. He preferred evolution to revolution and was willing,
in the darkest hour, to turn his other cheek. Dunbar's attitude or re-
action towards the old institution of slavery is best expressed in the
last two stanzas of his "Ode to Ethiopia" -

"No other race, or white or black,
When bound as thou wert, to the rack,
So seldom stopped to grieving;
No other race, when free again,
Forgot the past and proved them men
So noble and forgiving.

Go on up! Our souls and eyes
Shall follow thy continuous rise;
Our ears shall list thy story
From bards who from thy root
Shall spring,
And proudly tune the lyres to sing
Of Ethiopia's glory."2

When Paul Laurence Dunbar turned from the Negro to more general
themes, he continued to write in the romantic vein. Dr. Brawley tells us
that

"The taste of the day was for sentiment - sentiment,
simple, strong, and even tearful....Such was the
mood of the hour, and it was this that sought refuge
from all that was unpleasant."3

Such was the tenor of Dunbar's poetry. It echoed the spirit of the roman-
ticists and the local colorists.

1Benjamin Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People, p. 98.
2Paul Laurence Dunbar, Complete Poems, p. 15.
3Benjamin Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People, p. 5.
Few critics have realized or acknowledged Dunbar's shortcomings as a poet. In appraising his works these critics have been content to sing his praises to the four corners of the earth. In judging his poetry in conventional English they proclaim him as a writer of great verse, verse that is "full of poetry and philosophy", beauty and depth. 1 A closer examination of Dunbar's greatest endeavors in literary verse — his "Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes", "The Mystery", "Drowsy Day", "He Had His Dream", "Dirge", "The Poet and His Song", and "Accountability" — will reveal, however, that when he wrote in conventional English he was handicapped. He had neither the talent that produces great poetry nor the firm grip of those 'innumerable traditions, associations, connotations, and surprises, as it were, which make up the romantic and the literary life of words'. When Dunbar's poetry in conventional English is thoroughly and critically examined, certainly the examiner must agree with the following appraisal by Dr. Benjamin Brawley:

"If the hard test of phrasing is applied, neither in this poem "Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes" nor in any other does Dunbar reach final achievement." 2

If critically examined and appraised solely on his poems in literary English, Paul Laurence Dunbar would forever remain an obscure Aframerican versifier and 'nobody would have been a thrill or a memory better for his work'. Dunbar's achievements cannot rest on his poetry in conventional English for he left no imperishable poetry in literary English.

Dunbar's poetry in conventional English embraced a wide variety of themes. He composed many love poems, and dealt also with subjects per-

2 Benjamin Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People, pp. 119-120.
taining to nature, the sea, animals and flowers, the graveyard, religion, statesmen, philosophy, and outstanding local poets. In spite of his wide range of material, Dunbar did not produce any great poetry. As Charles Burch says:

"His was not the role of the great master with the mighty line."

With a single sweep of the pen, and sometimes through a more gradual development, the great artist produces both truth and beauty. He gives us in a combination of words, the longings, the hopes, the aspirations and the yearnings common to all people. His poetry also is written with a firm mastery of technique and expresses great thoughts, sentiment on conceptions in beautiful phrases in the "inevitable phrase" as it is so frequently termed. Too, the poetry of great artists is steeped with a universality of appeal. These notes, however, were beyond the pitch of Dunbar's literary voice. When he sought "the inevitable phrase", the strain was too much. And, as we shall see from his poems in literary English, the note was too high for him to reach.

"Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes", Dunbar's best work in conventional English, is here purposely omitted because it will concern us later in this chapter. We shall concern ourselves, then, with the several other poems which possess more than ordinary merit, attempting to show that Dunbar was the "sedulous ape", who imitated but never equalled his great romantic models either in power of expression, beauty of thought, or mastery of poetic technique. The "Dirge", a love poem about a beautiful dead girl who was "chaster than the moon", shows the influence of Alfred Lord Tennyson. The poem also suggests the influence of Edgar Allen Poe.

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However, it has not the literary power so characteristic of Tennyson and Poe. This point might be made clearer by comparison. Note from the following lines taken from the "Dirge" how Dunbar struggles feebly after the more sensitive power of Edgar Allen Poe:

"She was like a modest flower
Blown in sunny June,
Warm as sun at moon's high hour,
Chaster than the moon.
Ah, her day was brief and bright,
Earth has lost a star of light;
She is dead."¹

Poe achieves in "The Sleeper" a much greater lyrical power than Dunbar. There is neither a false image nor a poor line in the following stanza

"At midnight, in the month of June
I stand beneath the mystic moon.
An opiate vapor, dewy, dim,
Escapes from out her golden rim
And, softly dripping, drop by drop,
Upon the quiet mountain top,
Steals drowsily and musically
Into the universal valley.
The rosemary nods upon the grave;
The lily lolls upon the wave;
Wrapping the fog about its breast
The ruin moulders into rest;
Looking like Lethe, see! the lake
A conscious slumber seems to take,
And would not, for the world, awake.
All beauty steeps! - and lo! where lies
Irene, with her destinies."²

Dunbar continues to mimic the romantics in other of his poems. However, he had neither the poetic genius nor the originality of his older masters. Victor Lawson argues that

"It may be said against the claims to literary originality and greatness of such poems as "Ships That Pass in the Night", "Melancholia", and some parts of "Tone", and "At Sunset Time" that they are romantic echoes of Laura and other of Byron's heroes. Like all echoes, they are fainter."³

¹Paul Laurence Dunbar, Complete Poems, p. 66.
³Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 22.
At best Dunbar is able only to achieve the stern pathos which is expressed in the following lines from "Ships That Pass in the Night"

"My tearful eyes my soul's deep hurt are glassing;
For I would hail and check that ship of ships". 1

Obviously, Dunbar did not possess the vigor, rapidity of movement, sharpness of impact, or the creative power which was Byron's. Nor did he possess the same "ingenuity of rhyme and phrase", the same consciousness of strength.

Save for its excellent lyric qualities and its improved diction, the "Poet and His Song", like much of Dunbar's poetry in conventional English, would have fallen into a state of oblivion. There is expressed in the poem no deep thought, no inevitable phrase, no great philosophy. It only has rhythm, and, as might be expected, it is written after the manner of Tennyson.

"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;
When cows come home along the bars,
And in the fold I hear the bell,
As night, the shepherd herds his stars,
I sing my song and all is well."²

When one considers the bulk of American literature, one readily realizes the short comings of such a poem as "Drowsy Day". It is not to be considered among our great poetry and is quoted here only because it is among Dunbar's best poetic efforts.

1Paul Laurence Dunbar, Complete Poems, p. 64.
2Ibid., p. 4.
"I look far out across the lawn,
Where huddled stand the silly sheep;
My work lies idle at my hands
My thoughts like scattered strands
Of thread, and on the verge of sleep-
Still half awake - I dream and yawn"

because of their high praise of the Negro, such poems as "Ode to Ethiopia",
"The Colored Soldiers", and "Black Samson of Brandywine" have found a
secure place in the heart of the colored race. "An ebony giant, black as
the pinions of night", Black Samson of Brandywine is portrayed as a Negro
superman who, "swinging his scythe like a mower", battles his way.

"Straight through the human harvest,
Cutting a bloody swath"

So fierce is Black Samson's stroke that the spectator shouts a sympathetic
warning

"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"

No less heroic than Black Samson are

"...the gallant colored soldiers
Who fell fighting on that day!"

Dunbar becomes quite sentimental in the final stanza when he reviews for
the opposite race the feats of the Negro soldiers. He says of them

"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.
And their deeds shall find a record
In the registry of fame;
For their blood has been cleansed completely
Every blot of slavery's shame.
So all honor and all glory
To those noble sons of Ham-
The gallant colored soldiers
Who fought for Uncle Sam."
As we review Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry in literary English we are impressed with four conspicuous facts: first, that Dunbar's poetry in conventional English "consisted of romantic echoes, rehearsing the stereotypes and clinches of his predecessors and contemporaries; second, that he did not have a great creative or imaginative mind; third, that he produced no great works; and, fourth, that his chief qualities as a poet were lyricism and rhythm.

Realizing that Robert Burns was the great master of Scotch dialect poetry, some critics (who are apparently disillusioned by the word "dialect"), err in comparing Dunbar with Robert Burns. These critics rate Dunbar as a peer to Burns. This, however, cannot be an out and out rating of Dunbar with Burns; it is a relative rating: Dunbar's dialect verse is to American literature as Burns' dialect poetry is to British. Save for the fact that each employed in the greater portion of his poetical writings the colloquial or dialect speech of his people, the general comparison of Dunbar with Burns is fallacious. Admittedly Paul Laurence Dunbar had some literary talent; however, he was not the artist that Burns was. He had not the finished, the artistic technique of Burns; he had not the command of the conventional English language required of a great artist. Dunbar's success as a poet was confined to his dialect pieces.

If Dunbar's poems in literary English are as great as some critics claim, why is it that these poems are not considered among the Belle-Lettres of world literature? Why is it that Dunbar has given us no im-

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1 Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 47.
2 Ibid., p. 147.
mortal work of imperishable beauty? Where is the great masterpiece which he has contributed to our literature? Why is there not to be found in his works that indescribable something which critics and scholars, for lack of a more descriptive term, are prone to call "soul"? Burns achieved this goal not only in his dialect poems which treat of a lowly, hard-lived group of Scotch peasants, but also in his poems in conventional English. "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "Tam o' Shanter" (these poems are written partly in dialect and partly in conventional English; however, the greater part of each is written in literary English) for instance, afford striking example of Burns' versatility and poetic genius. Burns produced two masterpieces when he composed these poems. There is in them brilliant diction, finish of effect, a great movement, a warmthess and a universal appeal that cannot be found in Dunbar's poetry in conventional English.

Irrespective of his medium of expression, Robert Burns was able to write about a lowly people and yet produce poems which contained profound images and an everlasting beauty; he breathed a "soul" into his verse and gave it vitality and life. He had an innate talent that was capable of producing great art. "He had more genius, and genius of a finer, a rarer, and a more generous quality" than Paul Laurence Dunbar. Compare, for instance, the following stanza from "Tam o' Shanter"

But pleasures are like poppies spread;  
You seize the flow'r, it's bloom is shed,  
Or like the snow falls in the river,  
A moment white - then melts forever;  
Or like the rainbow's lovely form  
Evanshing amid the storm  
Nae man can tether time or tide;  
The hour approaches Tam maun ride:

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1W. Henley and T. F. Henderson, editors, Burns's Complete Poetical Works, (New York, 1897), p. XXXI.
That hour, o'night's black arch the keystone
That dreary hour Tan mounts his beast in;
And sic a night he takes the road in,
As ne'er poor sinner was abroad in.\(^1\)

With Dunbar at his best in literary English:

"Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
How questioneth the soul that other soul,-
The inner sense which neither cheats nor lies,
But self exposes unto self, ascroll
Full writ with all life's acts unwise or wise,
In characteristics indelible and known;
So, trembling with the shock of sad surprise,
The soul doth view its awful self alone,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.\(^2\)

There is in Burns's poem a keener artistic sense, greater power, movement and fire, more imagery and beauty. Burns breathed into his verse what Lord Byron terms "blood, bone, marrow, passion, feeling" and in so doing he exalted it above the mere level of "average verse".

Although in his poetry he dealt particularly with the human relationships, activities and aspirations of the lowly peasants of southern Scotland, Robert Burns worked into his verse those passions and experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, which confront all human beings regardless as to whether they are white or black, red or yellow, rich or poor, saint or sinner. Whether he dealt with beautiful flowers, domestic animals, wild life, or men and women, Robert Burns had an excellent knowledge and command of his material. He knew the streams and the flooded rivers that swelled and swept away bridges and homes and made travel precarious and living dangerous; he knew the frost, the cold weather, the rain storm and the hail-blast which brought destruction to the crops. Thus, when he writes about the Ayrshire farmers, his portraits of his friends and neighbors are of interest not only locally but wherever

\(^{1}\)Ibid., p. 91.
\(^{2}\)Paul Laurence Dunbar, Complete Poems, p. 4.
the seed is sown and the harvest garnered. Other human aspirations and
tendencies - liberty, political, economic, religious - also are treated
by Burns in such a manner as to be of universal appeal and interest.
When he speaks of unjust oppression, he speaks as one who has suffered.
When he requested economic security for the Scotch peasants, his was
the voice of one among many who cried out against the tyranny of taxa-
tion without representation. When Burns dealt with such themes as poli-
tics, economic insecurity and religious intolerance, his poetry was per-
meated with the spirit of democracy. It is no wonder that his voice re-
verberated around the world, sounding, as it did at a time when the Am-
erican colonists, and later the French Revolutionists were fighting
against the same obstacles as the Scotch people. Burns dealt with the
human relationships, activities, aspirations, fears and hopes of the
lowly Scotch peasants; however, the relationships which Burns found to
be of significance to the peasants of southern Scotland were equally
significant to the opposite side of the globe.¹

It is not his subject matter but his treatment of it that ele-
vates Burns's poetry and gives it an everlasting value and appeal. Dun-
bar, like Burns, wrote about the life and activities of a lowly people;
however his treatment of the Negro race remains local. Dunbar's handling
of his material is superficial. He did not delve to the very core of
universal human experience; he did not penetrate the surface of his char-
acters, he only scratched it. Burns was not content to write of the su-
perficialities of the life which he observed. He dug down beneath the
surface and drove his shaft so deep that he touched the very core of uni-
versal human experience. His themes need no footnotes: the beauty of na-

¹Franklin Bliss Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns (New York, 1932),
pp. 461-465.
ture, the sympathy between man and the brute beasts, the dreams and longings and aspirations of humble men and women, the passionate joy and poignant tragedy of human love, the age-old miracles of birth and death. These themes are not Scottish; they are not British; they are the inalienable property of human beings the world around. Wherever roses bloom red or stars shine clear on winter nights, these are the very stuff of human life. Burns, then, escaped the oblivion with which Dunbar struggled, not because his themes were different, but because he treated them with the touch and finesse of a finished artist. Burns "bore the marks of great and original genius, of a genius that immortalizes itself." Burns bore a literary torch that cast its light over the entire universe. Dunbar, however, held only a candle which cast its light over a very small section of the world.

As has already been pointed out, Paul Laurence Dunbar had not the command of the conventional English language that he had of the Negro dialect. His efforts at artistic success fell on barren soil when he attempted to express his ideas in literary English. How is it, then, we are inclined to ask, that Dunbar could excel in dialect verse and yet fail to produce a single masterpiece when writing in the conventional vein? The answer is simple. Paul Laurence Dunbar had not the imagination, the creative soul, the depth of vision, or the mastery of imagery of a great poet or an accomplished prose writer. Dunbar succeeded only in the use of dialect verse because, like Irwin Russell, he "imitated the fashion of the plantation Negro." Through the innumerable plantation stories told him by his mother, through his several visits to various plantations and his keen

1 Ibid., p. 474.
2 Ibid.
3 Irwin Russell, op. cit., p. XXII.
observations, and through reading the poetry and prose of his precursors, Dunbar undoubtedly seized upon the dialect and general characteristics of the Negro against the background of plantation life and made literary use of this material by giving it a detailed and realistic portrayal in the bulk of his poetry and prose.

Possessed of an abundance of humor, wit and sentiment, Dunbar was at his best in delineating the old fashion Negro - the Aunt Tempe, the Mammy Peggy, the Mistah Parker and the Anner 'Lizer type - and in giving a colorful setting to his works. He had the eyes and ears of a journalist and the ability to reproduce what he had seen and heard. In discussing "The Plantation Negro in Dunbar's Poetry", Charles Burch informs us that

"Aside from preserving the dialect of the plantation, (Dunbar) has given a true record and an honest interpretation of the black man of the South, who toiled and sang during the busy hours of the day and grew not tired of song when the evening bell at the "Big House" called him to rest."¹

Dunbar reproduced what his mother had informed him was true; but so latent with literary possibilities was the life of the people on the plantation that it made an artist of Dunbar when he transplanted this life into poetry and prose.

CHAPTER III

DUNBAR'S DIALECT VERSE HIS MIRROR OF Imitation

In spite of the fact that much of his poetry was written in conventional English, Paul Laurence Dunbar's lack of great poetic vision, imagination, power of expression and "broad literary training prevented him from accomplishing any sustained flights in the established media of the language". To appreciate Dunbar as a poet, then, one must turn to his dialect pieces. For authenticity, naive beauty, tenderness, simplicity and superb lyrical sweetness, Dunbar in his dialect verse is unsurpassed. There is no comparison between his dialect poetry and his verse in conventional English, or for that matter, between his dialect poetry and that of any of the other members of the school of Negro dialect poetry, including Russell, Page, Macon, Stanton, Harris and Foster. When he wrote of Negro characters and used their dialect in his poetry, Dunbar was in a class by himself.

If we are to discover the source of Dunbar's poetic achievement in dialect verse, we must look to the plantation life of the American Negro. Dunbar's dialect verse, it must be remembered, was an offspring of environment - it sprang from the two score years between 1860 - 1900. During this period the Negro plantation life was pregnant with much unexploited material. The Negro's condition and status and activities were latent with a wealth of natural pathos and humor, two qualities which could be used excellently for literary treatment. According to Joel Chand-

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Irwin Russell was among the first - if not the very first - of Southern writers to appreciate the literary possibilities of the Negro character, and of the unique relations existing between the two races before the war, and was among the first to develop them.¹

Russell was the father of the dialect school of poets to which Dunbar attached himself. Dunbar, however, achieved the greater success in the dialect media. He gave the Negro character his fullest treatment.

"He was deeper than Russell", declares Dr. Benjamin Brawley, "for he understood not only the humor but also the striving of the Negro; and was better than Page, for he had not that author's malevolence."

Inspired by sincere emotion, Dunbar, says John W. Cromwell, was without a rival in dealing with (the) dialect of his race as found on the plantation...."³

In his treatment of the Negro Dunbar gives us the real pictures of life and scenes as they actually existed on the plantation. There is in Dunbar no artificial copying.⁴ He was the chief sociologist of the age who recorded in homely dialect poetry the true conditions of the Negro on the plantation. From Charles Eaton Burch's article "The Plantation Negro in Dunbar's Poetry," we note that Dunbar

"has given us a true record and an honest interpretation of the black man of the South, who toiled and sang during the busy hours of the day and grew tired of song when the evening bell at the "Big House" called him to rest"."⁵

John Cromwell shares the same opinion. He writes in his book, The Negro in American History, that Dunbar's poetic

"sketches show him to be an artist whose models are life itself, which he has studied with close observation and sees in their true relations."⁶

¹Irwin Russell, op. cit., p. X.
²Benjamin Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People, p. 9.
⁴Ibid.
The models which Dunbar used were the Negroes on the plantation. Their life abounded in either pathos or humor, the two chief elements or qualities which are prevalent in the dialect poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

"In these", declares Mr. William Stanley Braithwaite, "(Dunbar) expresses that dilemma of soul that characterized the race between the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century. The poetry of Dunbar is true to the life of the Negro and expresses characteristically what he felt and knew to be the temper and condition of his people. But its moods reflect chiefly those of the era of Reconstruction and just a little beyond—the limited experience of a transitional period, the rather helpless and subservient era of testing freedom and reaching out through the difficulties of life to the emotional compensations of laughter and tears."1

This was the scene that gripped the very sensitive soul of Dunbar and enabled him to capture, command and express the sweetness, humor and pathos which he found in the temperament of the plantation Negro. With no attempts to elaborate upon the setting or to change it in any manner whatsoever, Dunbar painted plantation life as his mother, an ex-slave, had told him it existed. The picturesque plantation with its kind master, its considerate and sympathetic mistress, its faithful and devoted slaves are truthfully depicted and portrayed by Dunbar. The plantation is made the scene of many happy festivities, of dancing, singing, spelling bees, banjo-playing, and parties. Dunbar also accurately reproduced the general characteristics of the Negro on the old plantation—his love of simple music as played by the cornstalk fiddler, his delight of puppy-love, his love of eating, his "time-mellowed pain of bereavement", his superstitions, his religious beliefs, and his homely philosophy which came as a result of his keen observation and shrewdness.

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The "Corn Song" is Dunbar's best illustration of plantation life as it existed prior to the Civil War. In this poem he presents the field hands who, 'slow returning o'er the fields with heavy tread' to their cabins, are singing a plantation melody, "a corn song". The slavemaster, too, is given his customary setting. He is seated on the wide white veranda where

"...his dreamy thoughts are drowned
In the softly flowing sound
Of the corn-songs of the field-hands slow returning.

Oh, we hoe de co' n
Since de ehly mo' n;
Now de sinkin' sun
Says de day is done." ¹

The close friendship which existed between the slave and his master was exhibited through many little considerate and kind deeds which the master frequently rendered to one of his faithful servants. Occasionally, when rainy weather seemed inevitable and fishes were biting at every bait, the slave who wanted the day to fish, would go to

"...de big house at
a moughty pace, you bet,
An' ol' mastah say, "Well, Lishy,
Ef you t'ink hit's gwine to rain,
Go on fishin', hit's de weathah,
An' I 'low we cain't complain".²

Dunbar's poems reveal that the Mistress of the house was equally as kind and thoughtful as the master. She frequently sent "Li'l Missy" (this name was generally given to the master's daughter by the slave hands) down to a slave's cabin with

"Chicken meat an' gravy, too,
Hot an' still a-heatin';
Good ol' sweet pertator stew;
Missy believes in treatin'"³

¹ Paul Laurence Dunbar, Complete Poems, p. 59.
² Ibid., p. 173.
³ Ibid., p. 177.
In an effort to show his appreciation to the child for having brought him the basket of food, the slave, realizing that more than anything else the master's daughter had

"...des come fo' me to tell (her) a tale...." ¹

asks her to

"Des set down, you blessed chile,
Daddy got to t'ink a while,
Den a story mak you smile,
W'en he git thoo eatin'." ²

Seemingly, several of the slaves were such excellent storytellers that the children of the plantation, white and black, sought them out and asked them to tell some more stories. "A Cabin Tale" acquaints us with an old slave who is reprimanding his young master for

"Want (ing) a sto'y; jes hyeah dat!
Whah'll I git a sto'y at....
Di'n I tell you th'se las' night?
Go 'way, honey, you ain't right....
Well, set down in dat cheer,
Keep still ef you wants to hyeah" ³

Such events marked happy days on the old plantation and Dunbar records the history of these every day plantation incidents with as much zest as they had when they were in the making. Whereas these poems are not to be considered great, they constitute both fascinating and entertaining verse. Dunbar is sympathetic and truthful in his treatment and portrayal of these scenes and has given them his superb stamp of lyric excellence. His poems which picturize the ante-bellum plantation also are characterized by rollicking humor.

The plantation life, however, was not always happy. There were

¹Ibid.
²Ibid., pp. 177-178.
times when, for one reason or another, a master was forced to sell a slave. These were sad days. If the slave who was to be sold was old enough to mate, he was sad because he was forced to part from his family. Likewise, the uncertainty of where he was going, the problem of adjusting himself to his new surroundings, and the question of the temperament of his new master were vital and worrisome to him. Greater than any of these problems, however, was the problem of returning to his wife or sweetheart and his parents and friends. Such a setting as the departure of a young Negro slavehand from his sweetheart was enough to suggest the theme of a poem to Dunbar. Thus, he wrote, "Parted", a poem in which the slave laments that

"Ole Mas' done sol' me down the stream,
My lady, my lady
Day tell me 't'aint so bad's hit seem,
My lady, my lady"¹

Having sensed his own possible fate when, early in life, he had seen other young men being sold down the river, the slave informs his love

"I knowed some day we'd have to pa't
But den hit put' nigh breaks my hea't,
My lady, my lady."²

As the time of his departure approaches he tells her that if she will wait for him he will

"...stan' de ship, I'll stan' de chain
But I'll come back, my darlin' Jane...
A man's a man, an' love is love;
God knows ouah hea'ts, my little dove;
He'll he'p us f'om his th'one above,
My lady, my lady."³

The advent of the Civil War wrought many changes in the old plantation system. The slave masters were called from their soft, com-
comfortable lounge chairs and had to undergo the hardships and horrors of war. As town after town fell into the hands of the Union forces, the masters were forced to call their slaves into service. Some were loyal and aided their masters by building redouts and doing other rough work about the camp. Others, however, sought freedom in the North at every opportunity. Nor did all of the slaves who were left behind to care for the women remain loyal. The sound of freedom appealed to them in a fascinating manner and they responded to it. Other slaves, however, could not go off and leave "Missy" and "Lill Missy" helpless and unprotected. These slaves considered themselves a part of the family and were affected as much as any other member of the household when a wounded soldier or a carrier from the battlefront brought them news of how their master fell fighting. Greatly shocked by the news of his master's death, one old slave is rendered helpless. He begs to be permitted to

"...lay down awhile, dah by his bed;  
I wants to t'ink, hit ain't cleah in my head:...  
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....  
Pomised yo' pappy I'd allus tek keer,  
Of you,- yes, mastah,- I's follerin',- hyeah!"¹

With the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the passing of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, the slaves were not only declared free - they were granted the rights of American citizens. However, the forces of intersectional bitterness and race conflict deprived the freedmen of many of these rights. In a strict and true sense the condition of the Negro as a freed man was far worse than his plight as a slave. As Dunbar so completely summed up the situation in his poem entitled "To the South: On Its New Slavery" the Negro

¹Ibid., pp. 136-137.
...has nor freedom's nor a slave's delight."¹

Hated, exploited, and in many cases, lynched, as a rule the Negro, after the war was left to wander hopelessly from pillar to post. In some instances, however, an ex-master of a plantation was willing to retain his former servants with pay. But the process of rebuilding after the war was a slow, toilsome, painstaking job which required much careful planning. Little profit was to be realized; thus, the plantation owner was frequently forced to discharge several, if not all, of his hired hands. One gloomy Christmas morning on a particular plantation the Negroes were made very unhappy because

"Mastah'd tol' us we mus' go,
He'd been payin' sense freedom,
but he couldn't pay no mo';
He wasn't nevah used to plannin'
'fo' he got so po' an' ol'
So he gwine to give up tryin', 'an'
de homestead mus' be sol'."²

When the plantation hands learn of their employer's misfortune they become grieved and

"All de women was a-cryin', an' de men, too, on de sly...."³

Finally, Ben, an old faithful servant, reflects upon the happy past, and tells his master that

"...I's been servin' you' fu' lo! dese many yeahs
An' now, sense we's got freedom
An' you's kind o' po', hit pears
Dat you want us all to leave you
'cause you don' t'ink you can pay.
Ef my membry hasn't fooled me,
Seem dat whut I hyead you say.
"Er in othah wo'ds, you want us
to fir'git dat you's been kin',

¹Ibid., p. 218.
²Ibid., p. 137.
³Ibid.
An' ez soon ez you is help'less, we's
to leave you hyeah behin'.
Well, ef dat's de way dis freedom
ac's on people, white er black,
You kin jes' tell Mistah Linum
fir' to tek his freedom back.1

The pre-war days may be gone but they are not forgotten. Both
the ex-slavemaster and the Negro yearn for the old days. In "The Old
Cabin" an ex-slave reflects upon the past and confesses that

"In de dead of night I sometimes,
Git to t'inkin' uf de pas'
An' de days w'en slavery held me
In my mis'ry - ha'ad an' fas'....
An' my min' fu'gits de whuppins,
Draps de feah o'block an' lash
An' flies straight to somep'n joyful
In a secon's lightnin' flash.
Den hit seems I see a vision
Of a dearah long ago
Of de children tumblin' 'roun me
By my rough ol' cabin do!"2

Dunbar gives us another picture of the faithful and devoted
old Negro servant in "The Deserted Plantation". Steeped in pathos, the
poem has a superb rhythmic quality. Like the narrator of "The Deserted
Village", a forlorn old Negro has return to a plantation which is dear
to him only to find

"...de grubbin' - hoe's a-rustin in de co'nah,
An' de plow's a-tumblin' down in de fiel',....
An de big house stan's all quiet lak an' solemn,
Not a blessed soul in pa'lor, porch, er lawn;
Not a guest, ner not a ca'iage lef' to haul 'em,
Fu' de one's dat tu' ned de latch-string out air gone.
An' de banjo's voice is silent in de qua'ters,
D'a'int no co'n-song ringin' in de air
But de murmur of a branch's passin' waters
Is de only sound dat breaks de stillness dere."3

1Ibid., pp. 137-138.
2Ibid., p. 260.
3Ibid., p. 67.
When reproducing the prevailing attitudes and the dominant scenes which characterized the old plantation life, Dunbar was a voluminous writer. However, the reader must feel that his characters are puppets, not human beings. In his treatment of the relationship which existed between the slave and the master, one readily realizes that Dunbar has not drawn a profound character, but rather, a general type. He did not re-work any of the material which the plantation life afforded him; he simply reproduced this material in its own image.

"His deepest poetic note", says Mr. Braithwaite, was sentiment. He expressed a folk temperament, but not a race soul.\(^1\)

Dunbar was at his best when he was dealing with scenes which called for rollicking, unforced humor. He reached his greatest poetic achievement when he dealt with the special festivities - with parties, dances and spelling bees, which were given on the various plantations. Christmas on the plantation was, perhaps, the most enjoyable of all seasons. As one slave comments, Christmas was a time when

"...Ouah he'ats are full of pleasure, fu' we know de time is ouahs
Fu' to dance er do jes' what we wants to do."\(^2\)

In "Christmas Is A-Comin'", the slave can tell that the Yuletide season is coming because his

"Bones a-gittin' achy,
Back a-feelin' col',
Han's a-growin' shaky,
Jes' lak I was ol'...
Jes' keep t'ings a-hummin'
Spite o' fros' an' showahs,
Christmas is a-comin'
An' all de week is ouahs."\(^3\)

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\(^1\) William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro In American Literature", *op. cit.*, p. 38.
Every slave on the plantation, young and old alike, looked forward to Christmas with great anticipation. The young were happy because Santa Claus was certain to leave them a gift; the old folks were pleased because they did not have to work. Everyone was especially happy, however, because they knew that the advent of Christmas meant that

"Dey'll be banjo pickin',
Dancin' all night thou.
Dey'll be lots o' chicken,
Plenty tukky, too."\(^1\)

In his poem "Christmas", Dunbar takes us to the scene of action and shows us the hilarious merrymakers as they

"Step wid de banjo an' glide wid de fiddle,
Dis ain' no time fu to put tah and piddle...."\(^2\)

Dunbar shows sensitiveness to the life about him in "The Party". He has portrayed with ease and sincerity the high spirits and the sensuous joy which "de folks f'om fou' plantations" exhibited when they were invited to the party.

"Evahbody dressed deir fines'-
Heish yo' mouf an' git away,
Ain't seen no sich fancy dressin'
Sense las' quah'tly meetin' day;
...Sku'ts all tucked an' puffed an'
Ruffled, evah blessed seam an' stitch;
Ef you'd seen 'em wif deir mistus,
Couldn't swahed to which was which."\(^3\)

Seemingly, Dunbar's talent was for humorous poetry. He achieves unrestrained, rollicking humor when he relates the story of how old man Johnson who was almost one hundred years of age took three hundred pound Aunt Marier and danced around the cabin with the young folk.

"Had to laff at ole man Johnson,
he's a caution now, you bet -

\(^{1}\)Ibid.
\(^{2}\)Ibid., p. 269.
\(^{3}\)Ibid., p. 83.
Hittin' clos' onto a hundred, but he's spry an' nimble yit:
He 'lowed how a-so't o' gigglin'
"I ain't ole, I'll let you see,
D'aint no use in fittin feeble, now
You youngstah's jes' watch me,"
An' he grabbed ole Aunt Marier
- weighs 'ee hundred mo'er less,
An' he spun hul 'roun de cabin
Swingin' Johnny lak de res'."\(^1\)

No less a dancer than ol' man Johnson is Angelina who dances
with such ease and grace that she attracts, captivates and holds the at¬
tention of everyone

"When she's movin'thoo de figgers
er a-dancin' by herse'f
Folks jes' stan' stock-still a-sta'lin',
an' dey mos' nigh hol's dey brel"\(^2\)

Banjo playing, singing and dancing were definite parts of plan¬
tation life. In the still of the evening the Negro worker would lift his
banjo down from the wall and strike up a tune

"Then my fam'ly gadders roun' me
In de fadin' o' de light,
Ez I strike de strings to try 'em
Ef dey all is tuned er-right.
An' it seems we're so nigh heaben
We kin hyeah de angels sing
When de music o' dat banjo
Sets my cabin all er-swing"\(^3\)

Primarily a lyricist, Paul Dunbar's "When Malindy Sings" is
characterized by a sure, and limpid rhythm, restrained passion and a subtle
humor. That Malindy possessed a melodious voice is certain. Her voice
was sweeter than the nightingales and the

"Robins, la'ks, an' all dem things,
Heish dey moufs an' hide dey faces
When Malindy sings"\(^4\)

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 84.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 139.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 20.
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 82.
Likewise, the

"Fiddlin' man jes' stop 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
Drapes dey fingahs on de strings -
Bless yo' soul - fu' gits to move 'em,
When "Alindy sings"!

A good dancer himself, Paul Laurence Dunbar expresses the
syncopeation of a folk dance in "Itching Heels". Stimulated by the mu-
ic of the fiddle the would-be dancer, who is a church member, begs the
fiddler not to

"fiddle dat chune no mo';
I'll git up an take up dis grou'n
fu' a mile,
An' den I'll be chu'ched fu' it, sho'

finally the dancer can resist no longer and he asks the fiddler to

"fiddle dat chune some mo', I say,
an' fiddle it loud an' fas';
I's a youngestah ergin im de mi'ost o' my sin;
De p'sent's gone back to de pas'
I'll dance to dat chune, so des fiddle erway;
I knows how de backslidah feels;
So fiddle it on'twell de break o' de day
Fu de sake o' my eachin' heels."

There was not a phase of plantation life which did not find
its way into the dialect verse of Dunbar. Many of the stories which his
mother told him during his childhood became the themes for his poetry.
To these stories Dunbar added a smattering of humor or a "breath of pathos", and gave them an entertaining and fascinating if not a lasting value.
Many of these poems, like the "Uncle Remus" stories of Joel Chandler Har-

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1Ibid.
2Ibid., pp. 222-223.
3Ibid., p. 223.
ris, are regarded as a part of American Negro folklore.

The petty plantation love affairs, the slave's fondness for 'possum and other food, his love of hunting and fishing are themes for poetry. Likewise, Dunbar's shrewd observation of human nature, especially women, suggested "The Turning of the Babies in The Bed". In this poem Dunbar observes that

"Woman's sho' a cur'ous critter
An' dey ain't no doubtin' dat.
She's a mess o' funny capahs f'om
huh slippahs to huh hat."¹

"Jilted", further proves that "Woman's sho' a cur'ous critter".

In this poem a "plantation Romeo" complains that

"Lucy done gone back on me,
Dat's de way wid life.
Evah't'ing was movin' free
T'ought I had my wife
Den some darky comes along,
Sings my gal a little song,
Sence den, evah't'ings gone wrong,
Evahday dey's strife."²

The spontaneity, rapid movement, gusto and humor of "The Rivals" mark it as one of Dunbar's cleverest pieces. The conflict between the rivals arose one summer night between

"...me an Zekel Johnson; Zeke
'N' me'd b'in spattin' bout a week,
Each of us tryin' his best to show
That he was Liza Jones's beau."³

In spite of the keen competition for the hand of Liza, all went well until one Sunday night when Zeke saw Liza at church in the company of his rival. The tension became too great for Zeke to bear and he charged upon his rival who

¹Paul Laurence Dunbar, Complete Poems, p. 170.
²Ibid., p. 136.
³Ibid., p. 27.
...let (his) fist go 'bim',

with such telling force that in the narrator's own words

"I thought I'd mos' nigh finished him,
But Zekel didn't take it so
He jest ducked down an' dodged my blow
An' then came back at me so hard....
He punched an' hit, why, goodness lands,
Seemed like he had a dozen hands."

Each was disappointed after the fight, however, an

"Each started hum a different way;
An' what o' Liza, do you say,
Why, Liza - a little humbug - dern her,
Why, she'd gone home with Hiram Turner."\(^1\)

Paul Laurence Dunbar imitated James Whitcomb Riley's "When the Frost is On the Punkin" when he composed "When De Co'n Pone's Hot". To discover the extent of Dunbar's indebtedness to Riley one has only to compare these poems, noting particularly the similarity of sentiment and the rhythmic pattern. Dr. James Weldon Johnson concluded that

"Dunbar demonstrates a defter technique and a more delicate sense in handling the nuances of sentiment than his early master. He gives "When De Co'n Pone's Hot" a more musical lilt and...gives the recurring title line a cumulative force that Riley misses giving to the title line of "When the Frost is On the Punkin".\(^2\)

Note the gusto and spontaneity with which he writes the following lines:

"When de cabbage pot is steamin'  
An' de bacon good an' fat  
When de chittlins is a-sputterin'  
So's to show you what dey's at;  
Tek away yo' cake an' pie,  
Pu' de glory time is comin'  
An' its 'proachin' mighty nigh  
An you want to jump an' hollah  
Dough you know you'd bettah not."

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 29.
\(^2\)James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., p. 50.
An' de co'n pone's hot"  

Dunbar was on familiar ground when he turned to genuine humor. Frequently, the most obscure things and the most trivial incidents suggested possible themes for his poetry. The age-old argument between the pot and the skillet is revived and given a new twist by Dunbar in "Trouble in De Kitchen". The argument between these two kitchen utensils was started when

"De pot, hit called the skillet des a flat, disfigured t'ing.
An' de skillet 'plied dat all de pot could do was set and sing,....
Well, at dis de pot biled ovah, case his tempah gittin highah,
An' de skillet got to sputterin'
den de fat was in de fiah....
But de fiah uz so 'gusted how dey quorl an' dey shout
Dat he cooled 'em off, I reckon, w'en he puffed an' des went out.2

Dunbar's ability to produce rhythmic phrases is best brought out in "An Ante-Bellum Sermon". This semi-comic poem is typical of the later poetic sermons which James Weldon Johnson published in his small volume, God's Trombones. It is suggestive of the old-fashioned preacher who was both an orator and an actor; the shrewd plantation preacher who knew and could master all of the modes of eloquence, who, to paraphrase James Weldon Johnson, could move great crowds to ecstasy by the rhythmic intoning of sheer incoherencies.3 Finally, it was the sermon which was delivered by a cunning and tactful preacher who could modulate his voice from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing clap of thunder. Thus, Dunbar's "An Ante-

1 Paul Laurence Dunbar, Complete Poems, p. 57.
2 Ibid., p. 268.
Bellum Sermon" was a forerunner to what we now consider the folk sermons of The Negro.

The following stanzas best illustrate the power, gusto, humor and cleverness of the sermon of the old plantation preacher

"An yo' enemies may 'sail you
In de back an' in de front;
But de Lawd is all arou'n' you,
    Fu' to ba' de battle's brunt.
Dey kin fo' ge yo' chains an' shackles
F'om de mountains to de sea;
But de Lawd will sen' some Moses
    Fu' to set his chillun free.
An' de lan' shall hyeah his thundah,
Lak a flas' f'om Gab'el's ho'n,
Fu' de Lawd of hosts is mighty
    When he girds his ahmor on.
    But fu' feah some one mistakes me,
I will pause right hyeah to say,
Dat I'm still a-preachin' ancient
    I ain't talkin' 'bout to-day."

The poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar looked towards the past. His poetry, says Mr. William Stanley Braithwaite,

"Expresses that dilemma of soul that characterized the race between the Civil War and the end of the Nineteenth Century"

In a large degree his poetry is a record of the social history of the American Negro during the last four decades of the last century. Dunbar learned from his mother and other ex-slaves the general background, temper and condition of the slaves on the old plantation and of their relationship to their masters and mistresses, and of their individual hardships. He caught the temperament of the slaves and presented it to us with truthfulness and also with a fine rhythmic pattern. Sterling Brown informs us that

"As a portrayal of Negro life, Dunbar's picture has undoubted limitations, but they are by no means so grave as those of Russell and Page".
This is true. Dunbar failed to produce any great poetry. His dialect poetry fails to attain universal greatness not because he was handicapped by his themes and medium of expression, but primarily because he did not possess great poetic vision. He saw and recognized 'the world of man, the world of nature, and the world of the supernatural'; however, he did not have the creative genius nor the imaginative power to probe into the mystery of the slave master or the slave. He did not attempt to penetrate those 'measureless forces which underlie creation' - those forces which are so indispensable to great literature. As we review the dialect poems of Dunbar, we realize that he was not concerned with the supernatural. He was attracted to the fancies of Nature and to Man. His treatment of these two forces, as intimated, was a surface one. He did not reflect scenes over and over again in his mind. He painted with rhythmic words the first objects which reached his eyes. He was not concerned with the whys and wherefores, the whens, the whats or the hows. When he attempted to reproduce human beings he drew stereotyped figures. He did not touch the core of universal experience; he merely scratched its surface. In dealing with the plantation Negro "he expressed a folk-temperament but not a race soul".  

Upon what, then, does the literary achievement of Paul Laurence Dunbar rest? It rests upon several things; namely, upon his ability to write dialect poetry which is characterized by real lyric excellence, upon the delicate beauty of his verse, upon tenderness, freshness, senti-mentality, irresistible and unrestrained humor, genuine pathos, and a sure command of the general dialect speech of the Negro race. His one great contribution to American literature is humor. He drew his inspir-  

ation from the plantation life of the lowly Negro peasant. As William
Dean Howells comments, Dunbar felt this life aesthetically and expressed
it lyrically. He gave it form and beauty.

In a final tribute to Dunbar, the Boston Evening Transcript
of February 10, 1906, carried an editorial which stated that Dunbar
"has given value and permanence to the folklore of the (Negro) race
in this country". Likewise, as a recorder of plantation life, Dunbar
voiced the "unsung loves, longings, and aspirations of his race in...
a tuneful and prophetic voice", being compelled to do so not by the
power of an innate poetic vision, but because the experience of the
race impinged upon his imitative mind and sensibilities its peculiarities.
CHAPTER IV

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF DUNBAR'S NOVELS

Notwithstanding the fact that Dunbar is remembered chiefly as a writer of dialect verse, it must be borne in mind that he was the author of four novels and four volumes of short stories. His novels include The Uncalled (1899), The Love of Landry (1900), The Fanatics (1901), and The Sport of the Gods (1902), while numbered in his collection of short stories are Folks from Dixie (1898), The Strength of Gideon (1900), In Old Plantation Days (1903), and The Heart of Happy Hollow (1904). Although several of his short stories, for instance, "Jim-sella", and "The Truthfulness of Polly", prove delightful little narratives with well-drawn plots, Dunbar's works in prose are decidedly inferior to his dialect poetry. Of his four novels none are of sufficient merit to be considered as works of art. In fact, it is only in The Sport of the Gods that Dunbar shows any promise as a developing novelist.

As we read his novels we become more aware of the fact that Paul Laurence Dunbar was handicapped as a short story writer and novelist. Not only was Dunbar limited because of his failure to command the English language, but as J. S. Redding informs us, his shortcomings as a prose writer, also, were due to the fact that "he did not fully understand the extreme adaptability of folk material and he did not study the art of prose fiction. The result of the first", Mr. Redding continues, "is that nearly all the folk stories are limited to burlesque, while the result of the second is that some very fine story
stuff is hopelessly bungled."¹ We learn from Dr. Benjamin Brawley's criticism of Dunbar's works in prose that Dunbar, although "he had an eye for the picturesque, . . . was not always a deeply sympathetic observer . . . "² Nor was he the master of deep feeling, powerful climaxes, and finished technique.³ He was nothing more than an interesting, delightful and charming story teller.

Dunbar's collection of short stories and plantation sketches, most of which were copied after the plantation tradition of Joel Chandler Harris, Grace King, Ruth Stuart, and Thomas Nelson Page, are usually written in a sentimental vein; and, like his dialect verse, they are packed with either genuine pathos or irresistible humor. As pure literary productions, however, his short stories, like his novels, are generally lacking in "perfect focus of characterization, motivation, theme, plot and style."⁴ Dunbar, then, as we shall see, did not possess the technique which is required of a good novelist; nor did he show great skill as a short story writer. He was only a narrator of humorous or pathetic plantation incidents.

Not unlike the general theme which dominated his dialect poetry, the setting and subject matter for most of the short stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar sprang from the soil of both pre-war and post-war Negro plantation life. The southern plantation furnished Dunbar with a vast supply of ready developed material. Packed with natural pathos and humor, plot and character, and a concatenation of plain everyday incidents such as simple rural love affairs, religious services and "camp meetings" and the long sufferings of a downtrodden and suppressed race,

² Benjamin Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People, pp. 66-67.  
³ Ibid., p. 67.  
Negro plantation life was an ideal subject for literary treatment. So natural was this theme that to produce a great literary masterpiece a writer only needed to record the life of the plantation Negro, giving his background and delineating his disposition, language, character, customs and habits; it needed someone who would add a touch of philosophy to the Negro's rustic life, limit the general theme of plantation life to a single plot or a group of closely interwoven subplots, and provide the characters of the narrative with universal experience. Dunbar knew the disposition of the plantation Negro and came closer to reproducing it than any writer of his time. Likewise, he showed more skill as a recorder of Negro dialect. However, as will be pointed out later, he did not produce any great characters. He had not the ability to draw a Falstaff, a Robinson Crusoe, or a Eustacia Vye.

From the stories told him by his parents, both of whom were ex-slaves, Dunbar became acquainted with every phase of plantation life - the gay and humorous as well as the sad and melancholy. Dunbar, however, selected a special phase of plantation life and dealt with it. He preferred, as Charles Burch informs us, "the kindlier side of the relations existing between the master and slave" to the bitter antagonistic spirit which also existed. The phase of plantation life which Dunbar records in his short stories is romantic in tone; it sets a gay, light, humorous mood - a mood which is interrupted intermittently with a pathetic story of a Negro man and, as a rule his family, who departs from his happy surroundings in the South to meet with hardship and failure in the North. Dunbar very adequately describes the typical setting for his short stories and sketches in his book, The Heart of Happy Hollow.

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It is a place wherever contented, faithful and loyal slaves serve their master during the day and participate in festivities and merrymaking at night, "wherever Negroes colonize in cities or villages, North or South; wherever the hod carrier, the porter, and the waiter are the society men of town; wherever the picnic and excursion are the chief summer diversion, and the revival the winter of repentance ... wherever laughter and tears rub elbows by day, and the spirit of labour and laziness shake hands."

It was against such a background as the one just mentioned that Dunbar reproduced in short stories and sketches such gay, humorous, old fashioned, Uncle Tom, minstrel-like, stereotyped characters as the sympathetic Aunt Emmerline, who "'mence to cry (when old Marse Venable said anything harsh to) Mas' Tho'nton 'ca' se he was her boy, an' she (thought) a mighty heap o' him";  

Aunt Doshy, a faithful and "trusted house servant in one of the wealthiest of the old Kentucky families";  

and old Uncle Eben, an illiterate religious fanatic who advised Anner 'Lizer that:

"When you start's out on de Christian jou'ney, you's got to lay aside ev'ry weight dat doth so easy beset you an' keeps you f'om perglassin'; y' ain't got to think nothin' 'bout pussunal 'dornment; you's jes' got to shot yo' eyes an' open yo' hea't an say, Lawd, come; you mought'n wait fu' to go to chu'ch to pray, nuther, you muce pray anywhar an' ev'rywhar. Why, when I was seekin', I ust to go'way off in de woods to pray, an' dere's whar de Lawd answered me, an' I'm a-rejoicin' today in de powah of de same salvation. Honey, you's got to pray, I tell you."  

Other humble characters as sketched by Paul Laurence Dunbar are Mandy Mason, a shiftless, housewife who, having come North with her worthless husband, Jim, retains her plantation habits and customs in her new environment, and Mammy Peggy, a faithful old slave who forces her young mis-

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3 Ibid., p. 137  
4 Ibid., p. 19.
tress to retain her dignity and pride even though the Civil War had deprived her of wealth and poverty. Dunbar also drew sketches of preachers and church workers, lazy, carefree, coon and 'possum hunters, and kindly slave owners who were generally surrounded by dozens of laughing, giggling, clowning slaves and their children. In short, Dunbar drew characters from every walk of plantation life. Occasionally he painted his setting apart from the plantation and attempted to delineate Negro college graduates, school children, skilled laborers, and educated ministers who aspired to elevate the freedmen to a higher plane of living.

Notwithstanding the vast number of characters which he sketched, Dunbar failed to create a single great literary figure. We note Dunbar's utter failure as a character delineator when we compare him with, say, a writer like Thomas Hardy. Even when his works are compared with those of Charles Chesnut we are forced to accept Mr. Vernon Loggins' conclusion that "(Dunbar) created no such character as Uncle Julius".¹ This failure to create great characters was due largely to the fact that Dunbar did not comprehend the inner workings of the soul of man. The character sketches found in Dunbar's short stories show him to be a literary cartoonist who drew word caricatures of simple characters, displaying and developing only one or two phases of these men and women. We feel that Aunt Emmerline, Aunt Doshy, Uncle Eben, Mr. Anderson, Brother Brother and the remainder of Dunbar's characters have been given shape, form, and color, but none of them has been given life. His are stereotyped figures, not complex characters; they are individuals who, although drawn with a surer hand, are still of the

Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page order. They are literary pup-
pets, not men and women. These "old familiar figures," declares Victor Law-
son, "were props to the setting rather than people." ¹

Further proof of Dunbar's inability to draw great literary per-
sonalities is evidenced by his method of indicating character. His charac-
ters are revealed to us mainly through description and weak dialogue rather
than through action or through a "stream of consciousness" of treatment.

When one studies the structure of Paul Laurence Dunbar's prose
works one immediately concludes that the plots of most of his stories were
generally weak. The supposedly main incidents in the development of most
of Dunbar's plots generally hinge upon weak, unconvincing incidents - in-
cidents which have had neither adequate emotional emphasis, character por-
trayal, nor convincing situation. In some of his stories the method of
development of the plot is faulty.²

Most of his short sketches are padded with either irrelevant,
improbable or unreasonable incidents. Take, for example, "Jim's Proba-
tion". Jim, the central figure of the story, is a hard sinner who pre-
fers 'possum hunting to Sunday night church services. One night while
passing through a swamp he got wet, took a chill and was confined to
bed with an acute case of rheumatism. He was led by his wife, Mandy, and
Reverend Parker, to believe that should he join the church his pains
would disappear. Finally, he is converted, or at least he says he is,
and is put on probation before he is finally accepted into the church.
Before his probation period is over, however, Jim's rheumatism disap-
ppears and he again takes up hunting. One Sunday night after church serv-
ice is over, Jim, who did not attend the meeting, is seen carrying a 'pos-

¹ Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 85.
² J. S. Redding, op. cit., p. 60.
sum home by Reverend Parker who, seeing Jim's prize and willing to "mek 'lowances fu'...young convu'ts", asked Jim when was he going to cook his game. Jim is too fond of his game to share it and informs Parker that he will have to keep his 'possum and fatten it. Brother Parker, not to be outdone, appears at Jim's house the following evening "des in time... to tek a bite" of Jim's 'possum. Jim, however, refuses to give Parker any supper telling him that it is the duty of a church member to feed the preacher he "'specs to stay out o' (de) church". "The Ingrate", "One Man's Fortune", and "Silas Jackson", too, are good illustrations of Dunbar's inability to create perfect plots.¹

Dunbar's prose works, like his dialect poetry, were probably saved from oblivion because of two special qualities of his style - genuine pathos and unforced humor. J. S. Redding in giving his appraisal of Dunbar as a prose writer concludes that

"He (Dunbar) brought to this difficult art (the art of prose writing) an instinctive sense of the humor inherent in certain situations in his burlesque stories (of plantation life)."²

Dunbar also achieves a marked degree of success when he portrays with simple pathos the plight and exploitation of a lowly and suppressed people.

Dunbar's style seemed most natural when he was writing in a dialect vein. Whereas his vocabulary was not large, it was adequate enough to express in dialect the aspirations and failures of the plantation Negro. It was when he turned to subjects which were concerned mainly with white rather than Negro characters, as in the case of three of his novels, The Uncalled, The Love of Landry, and The Fanatics, that his

¹Ibid.
²Ibid.
style became uniformly "sullen and wooly", dry, stiff, and stilted. There are to be found also in the style of the prose works of Dunbar certain other faults, such as the use of old-fashioned phraseology and awkwardness of expression. "The language of (Paul Laurence Dunbar's prose stories)" says Grace Isabel Colbron, "is a great disappointment, after the music and easy flowing richness of (his dialect) poems." 

Among other faults, Dunbar's style also suffered because his "command of correct English was always somewhat meagre and uncertain".

Let us see from a review of the short stories and novels how Dunbar ranked as a prose writer. We have said already that he imitated the plantation tradition of Harris, King, Stuart and Nelson; that his works abounded with certain romantic themes; that his characters were generally the Negroes who were living on the old plantation or those who, having once lived there, were longing to return to the South.

In his first collection of short stories, Folks from Dixie, most of Dunbar's themes were set on the old pre-war plantation. There were, however, two or three stories which dealt with the current problems of Dunbar's day. Of the twelve stories appearing in this volume, "Jimsella", the shortest, shows fewer faults in both construction and style than the others. "Jimsella" is a story of a shiftless young Negro who deserts his wife, leaving her despondent and crying so that she could say -

"...I wish to Gawd dat you'd a' lef' me back home among my folks, whâ'dh people knowed me an' would' a' give me a helpin' han'. Dis No'f ain't no fit- tin' place fu' a lones colo'ed coman less'n she got money".

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3Paul Laurence Dunbar, Folks From Dixie, p. 116.
In spite of his wife's plea, Jim leaves her and refuses to provide for her until he learns that she has given birth to a baby daughter, Jimsella, who has been named after him. "Anner 'Lizer's Stumblin' Block" is dependent solely upon its rollicking comedy for its existence. The scene of the story is laid in the very heart of the plantation and depicts the spirited country revival meetings in which "a dozen eager worshippers (leap) to their feet and crowd...around (a) happy convert, (singing)

"Loose him and let him go,
Let him shout to glory."

In spite of the religious fervor which permeates the revival, Anner 'Lizer cannot "git 'ligion" until she is certain that Sam Merritt intends to marry her. The action in "The Ordeal of Mt. Hope" is focused upon Howard Dokesbury, a young minister from the North who accepts a church in a small, backward, southern community. The Negro inhabitants of this community are lazy and shiftless; they have neither hopes nor aspirations. Lias, the son of the family with whom Dokesbury is rooming is, as his mother describes him, not bad, but careless. He prefers the life of a saloon roustabout to the cleaner life that his mother would have him live. Dokesbury recognizes latent possibilities in Lias and sets about to reawaken them by establishing a chicken farm in Aunt Caroline's once filthy backyard, where he permits her son, Lias, to go into partnership with him. The business prospers and Lias aspires to attend a business school in order that he might make additions to his concern. As a result of Lias' success, other members of the community are stimulated and inspired to open up small business houses.

The plot of "The Ordeal of Mt. Hope" hinges upon improbable incidents, while the chief persons of the story are only simple character

\[1 \text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 14.}\]
types. Like so many of his short stories, "The Ordeal at Mt. Hope" is but another homely narrative.

"A Family Feud" is concerned with Aunt Emmerline, an old slave woman, who succeeds in reconciling two old Kentucky families that had been at war with each other for almost thirty years. The story reaches its weak climax when young Master Thornton Venable returns to his father's home to talk with him. The action follows:

"In a minute de liberry do' open an' Mas Tho'nton come in. He shet hit behin' him, an' den stood lookin' at his pa, 'dat ain't never tu'ned erroun' yit. Den he say sof', 'Father', Mas Jack tu'ned erroun'...(and) say, 'Do you still honor me wif dat name?' Mas Tho'nton...answer, 'I don' know no other name to call you'.

"'Will you set down?', (his father continued). 'Fa' be it f'om any Venable to fu'git cou'tesy to his guess'...Young Mas'...spoke up...'I do not come, suh, in dat cha'acter, I is hyeah as yo' son'.

"...'You air late in 'memberin' yo' relationship, suh?...

Well, what did you come fu'?"

"To be insulted in my father's house by my father, an' I's got all dat I come fu'!"\(^1\)

Aunt Emmerline, who had been listening to the conversation from the outside, opens the window and rushes in shouting

"'Wait!'...Mas' Jack',...'you an' Mas' Tho'nton ain't gwine pa't dis way...you's father an' son...you's bofe wrong....Mas' Tho'nton couldn't he'p it - it was de Venable blood, an' you mus'n't 'spise him fu' it."\(^2\)

The framework of the story is interesting enough, but Dunbar

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\(^1\)Ibid., pp. 150-152.
\(^2\)Ibid.
fails to make a great story out of his material. His characters are props; like a suit which is woven of one thread, his characters are plain. Dunbar fails to sense the value of a variety of types of characters. Jack Venable and his son are drawn by the same pen with a single heavy stroke. Both are portrayed as high-tempered and determined men. Aunt Doshay and Aunt Emmerline, too, parallel each other in character.

In "The Trial Sermons on Bull-Skin" Hannah Williams, a church member who is prejudiced against the Reverend Abram Martin, a preacher who is likely to be called as pastor of the church on Bull-Skin Creek, attempts to break up his services by paying Bud Lewis, a religious fanatic, to promenade down the church aisle like a wild man and create such a disturbance as to render religious worship impossible. The scheme, however, is detected in time by Brother Sneedon and Bud Lewis is removed from the church. Hannah Williams is later "churched" for "planning to interrupt divine service" and the Reverend Abram Martin is unanimously elected as pastor of the church.

There are in the story no well delineated characters. The dialogue is exceptionally poor at times. For instance, note the forced conversation between Hannah Williams and Mrs. Sneedon in the following passages:

"Well, we kin have dat kin' o' preachin' all de time ef we gits Broth' 'Lias Smith."

"Yes, 'm".

"Dey ain't no 'sputin' he'll be a movin' pouah at Bull-Skin".

"Yes'm".

"We sistahs'll have to ban' togethah an' try to do whut is bes' fu' de chu'ch."

"Yes'm".
"Co'se Sistah Sneedon, ef you's pleased wif his sermon, I suppose you'll be in favoh o' callin' Broth' 'Lias Smith'.

"Well, Sis' Williams, I do know...."\(^1\)

In "At Shaft II", Dunbar discusses a then current labor question which arises when the white employees at a West Virginia mine go on strike and Negro workers are employed as strikebreakers.

"(The) theme", says Benjamin Brawley, "called for hard and truthful realism, (but) the author became uncertain as he advanced and...closed with a sentimental note. Even when dealing with the problem of labor he could not free himself from the old romanticism".\(^2\)

The scene for "The Colonel's Awakening" is that of

"a great rambling old Virginia house, which in its time had been one of the proudest in the country. But it had been in the path of the hurricane of war, and had been shorn of its glory as a tree is stripped of its foliage".\(^3\)

Permeated with the romantic spirit of Harris and Page the story revolves around Colonel Estridge, a

"gallant aristocrat (who) a little past the age to enlist himself, (was) able and glad to give two sons to the cause of the South....But one day there came to him the news that his boy had fallen in the front of a terrific fight, and in the haste of retreat had been buried with the unknown dead .... (From this time on) he always lived in the past."\(^4\)

Believing that he still has a host of slaves on his plantation and that the ante-bellum days still exist, the Colonel is made to say:

"Tomorrow is Christmas Day, and I'm afraid I have been rather sluggish in getting things ready for the celebration. I reckon the darkies have al-

\(^{1}\)Ibid., pp. 89-90.
\(^{2}\)Benjamin Brawley, Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People, p. 68.
\(^{3}\)Paul Laurence Dunbar, Folks From Dixie, p. 69.
\(^{4}\)Ibid., pp. 71-72.
ready begun to jubilate and to shirk in consequence, and I won't be able to get a thing done decently for a week."

In this story Dunbar is again imitating the "plantation tradition" which was brought to its highest point of development by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. For twenty years after the Colonel was taken ill with a strange malady of the mind, Ike and Lise, two faithful retainers who, because they were grateful for the kindness which was shown them by their master, while they were yet slaves, have remained on Colonel Estridge's plantation, assuring him that "Mas' Estridge(,) you kin 'pend on (us)"

"Dunbar's first collection of short stories, Folks From Dixie", declares Vernon Loggins, "contains some of his most characteristic and best work as a writer of fiction... Whatever unity the book as a whole has is told by title, Folks from Dixie; the characters, not all of them colored, are either still on in Dixie or once lived there... "The Colonel's Awakening"... follows so closely to Page's method of extracting pathos out of the portrayal of the love and devotion of a faithful Negro servant that it might fit well into In Ole Virginia. A similar blending of kindliness and romance and sentimentality is in "A Family Feud".... The majority of the stories in the volume, however, show an indebtedness to Harris rather than to Page."

The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories is written in a vein similar to Dunbar's first collection of short stories, in that most of the stories appearing in this volume are set on a southern plantation. The title story itself tells of the love affair, the aspiration, and the faithfulness of Gideon, an extraordinary slave, whose innate talents were unlimited. Gideon aspired for more than merrymaking and special festivities and when a dancing-party was given

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1Ibid., p. 73.
2Ibid.
...because neither he nor Martha (his sweetheart) dared countenance dancing, they strolled away together under the pines that lined the road, whiter now in the soft moonlight." 

Nor did Gideon approve of the other slaves devoting too much time to parties and gay times. Thus, every Sunday he sought to teach them to appreciate and love the word of God, while during the week he taught them to respect and protect their master's property. Gideon's loyalty and his interest in the plantation were not unnoticed by his master, who admired Gideon and praised him no little for his effective work. The bond that united the friendship which existed between Gideon and his master grew firmer every day and when the Civil War came, Gideon's master did not hesitate to ask him to care after the plantation and to protect the womenfolk. This Gideon promised to do. He was so faithful in the execution of his promise that when

"Martha stole up (and whispered) 'c'mere, Gidjon... fu' my sake...! he kissed her, but shook his head.... 
"Then he answered (his mistress saying), "Yes, Mis' Ellen, I's a-comin'."" 

Dunbar secured the plot of "The Ingrate" from the experiences of his father, Joshua Dunbar, who, according to Paul Laurence Dunbar's biographer, Lida Keck Wiggins, "escaped to Canada before the war, (and) later enlisted in the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Infantry." The story is concerned with Josh, a slave plasterer, who is leased out by his master, Mr. Leckler, to work on neighboring plantations. On several occasions Josh, who could neither read nor write, was cheated out of a portion of his pay. Mr. Leckler, who was taking about nine-tenths of

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1 Paul Laurence Dunbar, The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories, (New York, 1900), pp. 11-12.
2 Ibid., p. 25.
3 Lida Keck Wiggins, op. cit., p. 25.
Josh's wages, teaches Josh how to read and write because as he tells his wife,

"...my conscience rises up in rebellion every time I think of that poor black man being cheated out of his earnings."1

As a result of these lessons Josh is able to strike better bargains. However, as his pay increases, Josh realizes that better opportunities await him in the North. Having forged in his master's handwriting a pass, Josh is able to escape to Canada. Mr. Leckler pursues Josh but his chase is futile. One day, several years later, while reading the public roster of Uncle Sam's Boston regiment, Mr. Leckler, according to the story,

"ran his eyes down the column of names. It stopped at that of Joshua Leckler, Sergeant Company F.... I have...been punished (said Mr. Leckler) but oh, that ingrate, that ingrate."2

Another plantation story, "Viney's Free Papers", treats of a theme similar to "The Strength of Gideon". Viney's husband, Ben, has worked hard to purchase his wife's freedom, after which time he begins working towards his own freedom. But ere he can receive his freedom, his wife realizing that no one else on the plantation is free, seizes upon the opportunity to become a social snob. Instead of socializing with her old friends, Viney seeks the companionship of some of the free Negroes who lived near by. Disgusted with her, Ben asks her to reconsider her friends. Viney, however, is determined to have her own way, saying,

"No, suh! I ain' goin' 'sociate wid slaves! I's free."3

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1 Paul Laurence Dunbar, The Strength of Gideon, p. 91.
2 Ibid., p. 103.
3 Ibid., p. 65.
Ben's kindly master attempts to help by reasoning

"You're one of the best hands on my place and I'd be sorry to lose you. I never did believe in this buying business from the first, but you were so bent on it that I gave in. But before I'll see her cheat you out of your money I'll give you your free papers now. You can go North with her and you can pay me when you find work."

Ben refuses, however, and promises his master that he will continue to work faithfully until he is able to pay for his freedom. Viney, realizing that her husband is both dear and rare, burns her free papers and decides to stay with her husband.

Of irresistible humor is "The Case of Ca'line", "A Kitchen Monologue, in which Caroline defends herself against her mistress's tirade about her cooking by informing the lady of the house

"dat (she) cooked dat steak an' dem 'taters the same lengt' o' time. Seems to me", she continues, "dey ought to be done de same". And later: "W'y de las' family dat I lived wid - dat uz ol' Jedge Johnson - he said my fried food stayed by him longer than anything he evah ett".2

"Uncle Simon's Sunday's Out" is commendable only for the truthful manner in which it records the physical layout of an old pre-war plantation with its indolent slave master. The setting for the story is the plantation of Mr. Martson. The description follows:

"Mr. Martson sat upon his wide veranda in the cool of the summer Sabbath morning. His hat was off, the soft breeze was playing with his brown hair, and a fragrant cigar was rolled lazily between his lips. He was taking his ease after the fashion of a true gentleman. But his eyes roamed widely, and his glance rested now on the blue-green sweep of the great lawn, again on the bright blades of the growing corn, and anon on the waving fields of tobacco, and he sighed a sigh of ineffa-

1 Ibid., p. 68-69.
2 Ibid., pp. 107-108.
ble content. The breath had hardly died on his lips when the figure of an old man appeared before him, and, hat in hand, shuffled up the wide steps of the porch.  

Of the twenty stories which appeared in these volumes, not one is to be considered as a great or even a good short story. They are lacking in plot, character, setting and style. In a review of the book, The Southern Workman (August, 1900) said "With the possible exception of "Mammy Peggy", the sketches are caricatures and must seem unsatisfactory to both author and reader."

As is indicated by the title, In Old Plantation Days, is limited to stories of plantation life. Set on the plantation of Stuart Mordaunt, these stories of faithful slaves and a kind slave master show us Dunbar as a local colorist who has preserved in story form the custom and idiosyncracies of pre-war plantation life. In a scene descriptive of the ante-bellum days, Dunbar tells us how

"The dogs ran and barked, the pickaninnies laughed and shouted, the servants gathered on the lawn and, in the midst of it all, the master and mistress came down the steps and got into the carriage. Another crack of the whip, a shout from the servants, more antics from the pickaninnies, the scurrying of the dogs - and the vehicle rumbled out of sight behind a clump of maples."

The slaves were especially happy when their master and mistress went away because in their absence the slaves did not have to work so hard. Their joyous feeling was expressed from cabin to cabin as slave after slave picked up the tune of "Juba, Jubal!" "Now and again", says Dunbar, "some voice could be heard rising above the rest improvising a verse of the song, as:

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1 Ibid., p. 179.
2 The Southern Workman, XXIX (August, 1900), 487.
"Mas' done go to Phiamundelphy, Juba, Juba. Lef' us bacon, lef' us co'n braid, Juba, Juba. Oh, Juba dis an' Juba dat, an' Juba skinned de yaller cat To mok his wife a Sunday hat, oh, Juba!"¹

The Christmas holidays marked another occasion for songs and dances. Preparation for the gaiety, the merriment, and fun-making which the holidays would bring are expressed in the following passage taken from "Ash-Cake Hannah and Her Ben":

"Already the overseers were relaxing their vigilance, the quarters were falling into indolence, and the master was guarding the key of a well-filled closet... Negro Tom was tuning up his fiddle in the barn, and Blophus, with his banjo, was getting the chords from him, while Alec was away out in the woods with his face turned up to the gray sky, getting the kinks out of his tenor voice. All this because the night was coming on, Christmas Eve night was the beginning of a week of joy."²

Several stories in this volume tend to ridicule the plantation preacher. "The Yalls of Jericho" tells of how the sensational Reverend Johnson used the fantastical device of having his members bring baskets of food to service in order that he might swell his membership. Dunbar informs us that

"Every night, at the very height of the service, he would command the baskets to be opened, and the people, following the example of the children of Israel, to march, munching their food, round and round the inclosure, as their biblical archetypes had marched around the walls of Jericho".³

In another story, "How Brother Parker Fell From Grace", the preacher is coaxed into a game of dice by several of the dice-shooters on the plantation, and is caught in the act of rolling the dice by the master. Aunt Tempy, of Aunt Tempy's Triumph", like Aunt Emmerline of

¹Ibid.
²Ibid., p. 108.
³Ibid.
"A Family Feud" is presented as a forceful family servant. This work differs from the earlier short story in that "its tone is that of light comedy".  

In Old Plantation Days contains many amusing but no great stories. It is imitative of the "plantation tradition". "(It) repeats the Thomas Nelson Page formula", declares Sterling Brown. "Negro house servants comically ape the "quality", or intervene in lover's quarrels, or in duels between cavaliers. One slave deceives his beloved master into believing that the good times of slavery still prevail. The planter, highbred and chivalrous, and the slaves, childish and devoted, rival each other in affection and sacrifice. These anecdotes of slavery, but a step higher than minstrel jokes, are all too happy for words, and too happy for truth."  

Dunbar's last volume of short stories, The Heart of Happy Hollow, is his worst volume. It veers away from the plantation and deals with the race track, with politics, with high school drills, lynchings, and of Negro families who have taken up residence in the North.  

In "The Lynching of Jube Benson" Dunbar shows how frequently the mob hangs an innocent man on what seems to be circumstantial evidence. A part of the rising action of the story is the scene in which  

"Annie, poor girl, (lay) bruised and bleeding, her face and dress torn from struggling"  

When asked who committed the dastardly crime the girl is only able to say "That Black-" before she dies. Immediately the crowd suspects that her servant, Jube Benson, committed the crime and they organize  

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1 Benjamin Brawley, The Best Stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York, 1938), p. XI.  
2 Sterling Brown, op. cit., p. 77.  
several hunting parties to "run him down". Jube is eventually caught, but he cannot get anyone to believe that he is innocent. Even his good friend, the doctor, who is the narrator of this story, does not believe Jube.

"'You lie!', I said, and my hands were busy helping the others to bind him upon the horse."

Jube is taken to view the dead girl's body and is then hung. However, before the lynch-mob is dispersed, but too late to save Jube's life, comes the cry:

"Cut 'im down, but 'im down, he ain't guilty....
Here's de man; we found him hiding in de barn!"2

When the criminal was brought forth he was identified as

"Tom Skinner - the worst white ruffian in the town - but the face we saw was not as we were accustomed to see it, merely smeared with dirt. It was blackened to imitate a Negro's.3

In "The Tragedy at Three Forks", Dunbar again shows how quickly one man can incite a mob to violent action. A search is begun for a couple of innocent Negroes when an excited white man addresses a large crowd with

"'Look a here folks, I tell you that's the work o' niggers, I kin see their hand in it'
'Niggers, o'course!', exclaimed everyone else.
'Why didn't we think of it before? It's jest like 'im."

Paul Laurence Dunbar blends pathos and humor together to produce the story "One Christmas at Shiloh". The motivation of the story is focused upon Mandy Mixon who, when asked why she came North explained that it was due to her shiftless husband.

"(I was married to) de settin' downest man you evah seed", she contends. "Hit wouldn't a' been so bad,

1Ibid., p. 236.
2Ibid., p. 238.
3Ibid., p. 239.
but Madison was a lakly man, an' his tongue wah smoothah dan ile; so hit t'wan't no shakes fu' him to fool ol' Mas' 'bout his wo'k an' git erlong des erbout ez he pleased....

"Mas' Madison Mixon hisse'f was a mighty 'dulgent so't o' man, an' he liked a laugh bettah dan any¬one in de worl'. Well, my man could make him laugh, an' dat was enough fu' him."

When Madison Mixon died, his servant was forced to seek and provide for himself. This he refused to do and, as a result of his shiftless ways, Mandy left him and came North. The story reaches a happy ending, however when Mandy's husband, who had become a minister during the interim he had been separated from his wife, is invited to deliver a Christmas sermon at her church.

"Schwalliger's Philanthropy" is the story of a man who makes his living by following the horse races and giving "tips" to the men and women who like to bet on the horses. The story is based upon a weak plot, lacks characterization and motivation, and is poor in style. The story reaches a very weak climax when Schwalliger, while attempting to recover some money which some gamblers had won (or taken) from a man who was ignorant of their tricks,

"...trapped with the very shrewd young man, while shriék on shriék of "Murder! Robber! Police!" came from his lips". 2

The Heart of Happy Hollow volume of Paul Laurence Dunbar's short stories exhibited no deep feeling, no powerful climaxes, no fin¬ished technique." With the possible exception of one or two stories, Dunbar's attempt at short story writing, as shown in this collection of short stories, was a miserable failure. In reviewing The Heart of Happy Hollow several months after its publication, the Southern Workman (December, 1904) said:

1Paul Laurence Dunbar, The Heart of Happy Hollow, pp. 35-36.

2Ibid., p. 225.
"It is with some sense of disappointment that we turn from Dunbar's latest book of poems to this collection of short stories called "The Heart of Happy Hollow". Only a few of the tales are of more than ordinary interest, and with the exception of a pathetic little Christmas story...none of them show us the heart that the author says and that others know is in Happy Hollow...."¹

With the possible exception of his last novel, The Sport of the Gods, Dunbar's novels are not as interesting as his short stories which deal with the plantation life of the Negro. Whereas the setting for most of Dunbar's short stories was that of the plantation of which he had a firm knowledge, the background for his novels was shifted to new and almost strange territories. The setting for his first story, The Uncalled, for instance, is in an Ohio town which Dunbar chooses to call "Dexter". Likewise, the scene for "The Love of Landry", is laid in Colorado, while most of the action in The Fanatics takes place in "Durbury", Ohio. The rising action of The Sport of the Gods takes place in a small southern town; but the climax occurs in New York's Negro section. Having lived most of his life in Ohio, Dunbar, no doubt, was more familiar with the scenes which were laid in or near his home state. He had frequented New York on several occasions and, as expressed in The Sport of the Gods, soon acquired a fair knowledge of the hazards of this city and their effect upon illiterate and inexperienced Negroes. About the West, however, save for the experience which he accumulated during his brief sojourn in Colorado while convalescing from tuberculosis, he knew nothing. Thus, when he begins to discuss these places, his description usually suffers because he is unfamiliar with the particular section of the country. His white characters suffer, too, because he treats them from a Negro's point of view, making them appear what he thinks they should be rather than what they really are.

¹Southern Workman, XXXIII (December, 1904), 693.
Paul Laurence Dunbar's most ambitious prose work, The Uncalled, is a story of Fred Brent, a white orphan boy in a small Ohio town, the son of a shiftless mother and a reckless and carefree father, who is adopted by Miss Hester Prime, who at the time is a kind but strict middle-aged celibate. A devoted church worker and Christian, Miss Prime insists that Fred Brent, even though it is against his own will, should prepare himself for the ministry. As an adolescent, Fred not only obeys but is later ordained as a Methodist preacher. He soon tires of his vocation, however, and abandons this forced profession.

As a novel the book has two or three good points, among them was Dunbar's conscious striving after art. That he sought consciousness of art in this book, declares Grace Isabel Colbron, is evinced by

"The earnestness which pervades it. The writer takes his work seriously; he believes that talent incurs responsibility and is willing to stand by his belief." ¹

The book has glaring faults, too. Like Christopher Marlowe's one man dramas, it is out of focus. So much action is centered around Fred Brent that we tire of him. In reviewing The Uncalled, Grace Isabel Colbron said

"We weary of him (Fred Brent), and turn with pleasure to the well-drawn sympathetic figures of his guardian, Hester Prime, and her lover and husband, Eliphalet Hodges." ²

The craftsman ship of the novel is fair but the language is stilted; the English is mediocre and altogether disappointing. The setting of the story according to Dunbar is Dexter, Ohio, while the characters are supposedly white. A careful analysis of the book, however, reveals that it is absolutely without local coloring.

"The story", declares Victor Lawson, "might have been set in another town, or among Negroes rather than whites, without great change." ³

² Ibid.
³ Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 125.
We feel towards Dunbar's white character sketches as we do towards the Negro characters in the works of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page - it is the work of an outsider.

Like his first novel, The Uncalled, Dunbar's next story, The Love of Landry, also deals with white characters. The plot is very thin and simple and is concerned with the experiences of Mildred Osborne, a young New York society girl, who is ordered to Colorado by her doctor. While convalescing in the West, she becomes fascinated by the somewhat mysterious Landry, a young chap of good birth who, having experienced some difficulties at home, seeks reclusion from his eastern home as a cowpuncher on a Colorado ranch. Not knowing that he is a member of a wealthy Philadelphia family, Mildred Osborne treats him coldly. However, her attitude towards him changes when he saves her in a moment of danger.

There is nothing extraordinary about The Love of Landry. It is the type of story that one would expect from a loquacious traveler who, while passing through the Middle West, had heard someone panegyrizing the daring and adventurous life of a cowhand, of an occasional cattle stampede, of a "round-up", and of the Wild West. The story is definitely lacking in incident and the language is stilted. "The Love of Landry is trivial", asserts Victor Lawson. "Unlike The Uncalled, it is not redeemed at all by powerful passages towards the end, or anywhere else.""1 Another critic, Vernon Loggins, states that "It (The Love of Landry) was, if that is possible, an even poorer performance than The Uncalled".2

The Fanatics is a story about the bitter intersectional strife which arose at the outbreak of the Civil War. The setting of the story is laid at Durbury, a small border village in the southern part of Ohio where opinion and sentiment is divided equally between those who favored

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1 Ibid., p. 127.  
2 Vernon Loggins, op. cit., p. 314.
the Union forces and those who believed in the policies of the Confederate government. "While it is a romance of the Civil War", asserts Vernon Loggins, "emphasis is not on the battle scenes, but on how the struggle affects (this) small Ohio town which is made up of sympathizers for the South as well as the North."¹ The book reminds one of the short story, "A Family Feud", which appeared in The Folks From Dixie collection, in that it deals with the family quarrel between Bradford Waters, a Northern well-wisher, and Stephen Van Doren, a Southern sympathizer; who are at bitter odds with each other until after the war when they are finally brought together through the mutual interests of their children, Robert Van Doren and Mary Waters, and also through deep admiration of the loyalty and devotion which each had rendered to what he considered a just cause.

Primarily a story of white people, the Negro plays only a small part in this story. However, when the "contrabands" are brought in the Negro is portrayed with a much surer touch than Dunbar's white characters. Dunbar failed to draw great white characters because he drew them, not as they are, but as he thought they should be. How drew them from a Negro's point of view.

As a Dunbar production, The Fanatics is greater than either The Uncalled or The Love of Landry; but as a work of art, it falls way short of its goal.

The Sport of the Gods is generally regarded as Dunbar's most significant novel. "(It)is significant", declares Mr. William Stanley Braithwaite, "because, thrown against the background of New York City, it displayed the life of the race as a unit, swayed by the currents of existence, of which it was and was not a part. The story", he continues, "was

¹Ibid., p. 317.
touched with that shadow of destiny which gave to it a purpose more important than the mere racial machinery of its plot.  

Falsely accused, unfairly tried, and imprisoned for a crime which he did not commit, Berry Hamilton becomes the forgotten man when his once happy family is driven from a peaceful Southern town to the faster, much faster life of the gay Negro section of New York City. The Hamilton family—Joe, Kit, and their mother—settle tentatively in a tenement house. While here they meet Mr. Smith, a dapper playboy, who lures Kit and her brother, Joe, who is eager to learn all of 'the ropes' of New York's gay night life, away from their mother. Kit goes on the stage and gradually disintegrates morally while Joe becomes successively a drunkard, a pimp, and finally, a murderer. The mother, distracted, distorted and despondent over the waywardness of her children, marries a gambler. Through the efforts of "Skaggsy", a 'yellow-journal' reporter, the Hamilton case is reopened and sufficient evidence is produced to prove that Berry was accused. Berry is released from prison and goes to New York to discover that his family has been separated. He threatens to kill the man who coveted his wife away from him, but ere his plan materializes, the gambler dies. Berry and his wife are reunited and return to their old home on the Oakley property.

The Sport of the Gods suggested that it was better for the Negro to remain in the peaceful shelter of the South than to run the risk of being engulfed by the hazardous and dangerous fast life of the big city. The Southern Workman (October, 1901) said

"The writer's purpose is commendable. It is better for Negro youth to sing to God across the Southern fields than to dance for rowdies in a Northern hall...."
At times the work is characterized by a certain cynical tone, and at other times by choice bits of sarcasm. It was a feeble but sincere imitation of Thomas Hardy's tragic novel, The Return of the Native, in which "we anticipate a...story of human passions thwarted by destiny."\(^1\)

_The Sport of the Gods_, like all of Dunbar's prose works, falls short of artistic completeness.

"(It is) a work of promise", declares Benjamin Brawley, "rather than one of assured achievement".\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Benjamin Brawley, *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People*, p. 95.
CONCLUSION

Dunbar's poetic accomplishments may be clearly seen when we pick up his dialect pieces. He is at his best when dealing with the special field of Negro folklore. As has been pointed out in the body of this thesis, Dunbar's material of the pre-Civil War and the Reconstruction Era made him. The Negro slave was an ideal subject for literary treatment. He offered the literary artists a natural picture of two great poetic qualities - pathos and humor. Made even happier at the thoughts and first signs of freedom, the laughing, gay, carefree, humorous, illiterate, and occasionally indifferent slaves, were striking figures to sketch. Additional natural color was furnished for the literary artist by the consternation of the freedmen when they discovered that their newly found freedom was one of continuous hardship, suffering and disappointment. Emancipation for the Negro was a delusion; it was a boomerang and rebounded as a more horrible form of slavery. Naturally when the shackles of a new and more vicious kind of servitude were placed upon the Negro, he expressed that pathetic quality which is so inherent in an oppressed and downtrodden group of people. This condition of the Negro, declares Mr. William Stanley Braithwaite, was

"an artistic temperament and psychology, precious for itself as well as for the potential use and promise in the sophisticated forms of cultural expression."

The humorous and pathetic pictures which characterized the Negro of this

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period were recorded by Paul Laurence Dunbar and, as a result of his efforts, he reached a pronounced level of success as a writer of plantation scenes in dialect verse. That his talents were shaped by the condition of the plantation Negro may be logically inferred from the fact that when he was not dealing with the Negro, he had practically no talents. Just as James Boswell, in writing his famous biography of Dr. Samuel Johnson, made Dr. Johnson an international figure and, in producing this work, unconsciously brought out his own talents, so Paul Laurence Dunbar in recording in poetry and prose the humorous and pathetic life of the ante-bellum plantation Negro, had his talents shaped by the material with which he dealt.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, however, was not the great poet claimed by many of his admirers. Due chiefly to his lack of a formal education, his insufficient background in literary training, and his inability to command the subtle shadings of the English language, he was able, in his verse in conventional English, to compose only lyrics of a mediocre quality. There is nothing exceptional about his poetry in literary English. Thousands of men and women in America could have written, have, in fact, written as well. His was a poetry of artifice, a poetry which was lacking in "blood, marrow and bone". Dunbar had neither the great creative mind nor the penetrating imagination which is required of a great literary artist. Much of his poetry was but a faint echo of the poetry of the English and American romanticists. He treated the same variety of subjects with which his older masters and senior contemporaries dealt; however, he not only lacked their literary talents, but being greatly handicapped was not able to attain their poet-
ic level. As Sterling Brown says

"Being too facile...and having little chance for thorough grounding in his craft and in thinking, he could not rival his poetic masters, Shelley and Tennyson..."¹

Notwithstanding the fact that the social life of the plantation Negro shaped Dunbar's talents, it must be remembered that even when he was writing in the dialect vein about the happy, contented Negro on the pre-war plantation, he did not scale great poetic heights. Part of his failure was due to the fact that he lavished too much on the superficial aspect of things and failed to achieve either profound thoughts or spiritual insight - the two chief qualities which are capable of producing in poetry a universality of appeal. The December, 1905 issue of the Critic said that

"Mr. Dunbar's poetic inspiration is slender but sincere."²

It was slender because he did not penetrate the very soul, the very core, of his characters. What he recorded was the superficialities of the plantation Negro. He comprehended only that which was obvious, that which was outermost. His was neither a super-imposed humor nor pathos. It was a reproduction of an actuality. He portrayed the pranks and plottings of a rollicking Negro world.³ A second commentary from the Critic bears out this point. It holds that

"...Dunbar...strikes again (and again) almost extravagantly those notes of pathos and humor, in purely dialect verse, which have won for the author a quite unique position among America's 'minor poets' of today."⁴

Dunbar's own contribution towards securing for himself a niche among America's minor poets was the natural, lilting, easy, yet powerful

¹Sterling Brown, op. cit., p. 48.
²Critic, XLVII (December, 1905), p. 583.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
rhythm with which his verse of the old plantation was saturated. To quote again from the Critic

"We find (in his works) a race sympathy with the homely characteristic themes of rhyme and rhythm."¹

Dunbar not only showed the pleasant phases of the old Southern plantation in his poetry, but also in many of his short stories. These sketches of the old South, the contented field hands, and the devoted slaves and their kind master and mistress are of interest to the present generation only because Dunbar has recorded in them with great accuracy and truthfulness the life, customs and habits of the Negro slaves. Dunbar produced no imperishable prose works. In fact, only two or three of his short stories rise above mediocrity; the others ephemeral. Practically all of his stories are lacking in "perfect focus of characterization, motivation, theme, plot and style". His short stories do not exhibit good prose technique; nor did Dunbar show special skill as a short story writer. At best he can be regarded only as a fireside story teller.

In all but one of his novels Paul Laurence Dunbar ventures across the color line and deals with white characters. Whereas his efforts are admirable, his accomplishments are negligible. Apparently Dunbar did not know the psychology of the white race. His characters are weakly drawn and his diction is stilted. With exception of The Sport of the Gods, Dunbar's novels do not approach the level of his short stories.

Victor Lawson states that

"Dunbar's novels were not the work of an able writer in that field... they do not give him standing as a novelist."²

The Sport of the Gods, a story which treated Negroes as its main characters, is by far Dunbar's most outstanding novel. His character-

¹Ibid.
²Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 135.
ization is delineated much better in this story, and the machinery of the plot is unique in that it pits the Hamilton family against destiny and fate. The Sport of the Gods, however, does not attain artistic perfection. Better, though similar to all of his prose works, this novel reveals that Dunbar has not mastered the prose or the short story technique. He was a lyricist, a singer of a 'jingle in a broken tongue'.

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 135.\]
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Backgrounds


**Criticisms**


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