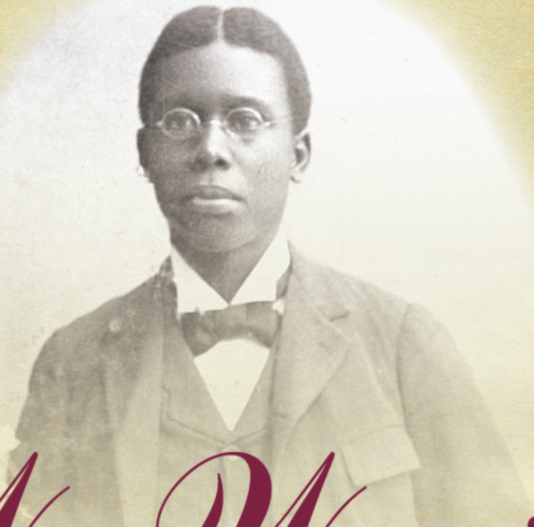
Edited by Willie J. Harrell Jr.



# We Wear the Mask

## Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality

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## Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality

Edited by Willie J. Harrell Jr.

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# *Introduction*

## *Dunbar and the Ethics of Black Identity*

Willie J. Harrell Jr.

> I want to know whether or not you believe in preserving by Afro-American . . . writers those quaint old tales and songs of our fathers which have made the fame of Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Ruth McEnery Stuart and others! Or whether you like so many others think we should ignore the past and all its capital literary materials.
>
> —Paul Laurence Dunbar,
> letter to Alice Ruth Moore, April 17, 1895

> [Dunbar's] 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.
>
> —W. D. Howells, introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896)

Of the innumerable accomplishments that secured Paul Laurence Dunbar's footing as America's "poet laureate of the Negro Race," perhaps none is more significant than the fact that he fashioned two distinct voices in his works—the traditional English of the conventional poet and the renowned, redolent dialect of African Americans at the turn of the century. Between the publication of his first collection of poetry, *Oak and Ivy,* in 1892 and his death from tuberculosis and the publication of his last volume of poetry, *Joggin' Erlong,* in 1906, Dunbar would write three librettos, eleven volumes of poetry, four novels, songs, and more than a few short stories and essays, rightfully leaving behind a legacy that would inspire many writers to come. By and large, Dunbar's legendary corpus has been highly praised as an extraordinary representation of black life in early twentieth-century America, which is the subject of this collection. *We Wear the Mask: Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality* builds upon the already significant body of research published over the past two decades on Dunbar's extraordinary creativity. What distinguishes this volume from previous

collections discussing Dunbar's artistic evolution is its focus. Supplementing the work of early examinations of Dunbar's life and works,[1] *We Wear the Mask* picks up where Jay Martin's *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar* left off in 1975. An assessment of some of the earliest scholarship of Dunbar's artistic ability demonstrates how crucial it is to compile these rereadings and critical approaches to his works.

Drawing on an array of approaches to analyzing Dunbar's poetic creations; most representative novel, *The Sport of the Gods;* and other works, the essays in this volume exemplify the kinds of issues being addressed in the twenty-first century, among them Dunbar's war verse, the influence of African aesthetics in his poetry, Dunbar's use of dialect and minstrelsy to represent his race, and his depiction of African American masculinity. The contributors concentrate on the politics of black representation and identity to advance Dunbar studies on two fronts: contributors situate Dunbar's works within the age of contemporary literary studies while locating his artistry in relation to various contextualizations of the politics of black reality that proliferated at the turn of the century, and they engage earnestly in the process of evaluating Dunbar's works, closely examining the self-motivated and dynamic effect of his use of dialect, language, rhetorical strategies, and narrative theory to promote racial uplift. Although the topics of the contributions vary, if read together, they offer valuable insights into why Dunbar has become one of America's most celebrated, widely taught African American authors. Indeed, the essays as a whole reveal the ability of Dunbar's works to spark enlightening discussions of the vexing and conflicting cultural conditions of turn-of-the-century America.

The evolution of Dunbar's representation of black reality meant that the poor reception of *The Uncalled* (1898), Dunbar's first novel, had an adverse effect on his racial consciousness. The story of a young white man who refuses to enter the ministry, *The Uncalled* lacked the local color of the African American community. After the publication of *The Uncalled,* Dunbar published his first collection of short stories, *Folks from Dixie,* which included stories about southern blacks, and some about African Americans who were trying to traverse the terrain of the Northeast. *Folks from Dixie* was immensely more popular than *The Uncalled.* It's not hard to see why Dunbar shifted his attention from nonracial themes in *The Uncalled* to matters of race interests in *Folks from Dixie* and later works.[2] To effectively represent the black voice in his works, Dunbar illustrated his awareness of the black struggle to triumph over the legacy of slavery and prejudice while affirming the civil liberties, responsibilities, and advantages of freedom. Since American society had previously disadvantaged blacks by denying them respect and the presupposition of integrity, Dunbar

characterized black reality by extracting his voice from the previous white representations to combat the negative stereotyping to which his people had been subjugated. Desiring not only self-determination for himself but also his race's liberation from the constraints of nineteenth-century American prejudice, Dunbar's most recognizable poem, "We Wear the Mask," was evidence of this racial manifestation.

Written during Reconstruction, "We Wear the Mask" epitomized the angst African Americans found themselves experiencing while attempting to construct an identity amid the preexisting racial hierarchy not long after the Civil War. Dunbar's usage of the metaphorical mask suggested that African Americans were preeminently commodities, and citizens only marginally as far as their rights as human beings were concerned. Employing a pre–Du Boisian "double consciousness" approach, Dunbar sought to assist white America in acknowledging the trials and tribulations blacks faced on a daily basis. Institutionalized racism of Reconstruction dictated that black writers had to silence or else *mask* their voices to be accepted by white audiences.[3] Dunbar believed, then, that African Americans had to wear a mask to hide their "torn and bleeding hearts." "We Wear the Mask" insinuates that the world never really sees blacks for their contributions to society. Instead, the dominate culture only sees "the mask" that "hides our cheeks and shades our eyes." The mask, then, conceals the pain, the anguish, the suffering of those who don it. By composing the poem, Dunbar "took a chance that could have cost him his life" had his white nineteenth-century reading audience fully comprehended the poem's multilayered meanings.[4] But what was the motivation behind the mask? Did Dunbar mean to convey the message that blacks were ultimately seeking acceptance in white America? Was he suggesting that blacks needed to find a voice and be heard amid the racial injustices that plagued them? Or was his message that wearing the mask was a part of the American experience, and that when African Americans wear it, it bespeaks their longing for a representative identity?

The search for a representative black identity and reality in Dunbar's works is a far-reaching subject, which is evident throughout this volume. While the contributors to *We Wear the Mask* have developed a greater understanding of African American literary and cultural studies, they have also developed a genuine appreciation for Dunbar's artistry. Although Dunbar believed in the morality of oppressed blacks, readings of his work have seemingly neglected this aspect of his oeuvre. This volume not only encourages a greater understanding of the complex readings surrounding the evolution of Dunbar's artistry but also emphasizes that he was actively engaged in the representation of the black community, which he saw as an ever-evolving phenomenon

(one that did not, however, begin with him). This volume is also premised on the fact that there has not been enough attention given to the ways in which Dunbar's representation of a black identity was positioned and conditioned in his works.

If, as Kwame Anthony Appiah argues in *The Ethics of Identity,* the contemporary use of the term "identity" "refer[s] to such features of people as their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or sexuality" gained notoriety "in the social psychology of the 1950s,"[5] how does identity for turn-of-the-century African Americans fit into the ethical scope of American democracy? If a black identity was to be recognized, and furthermore *represented,* what kind of demands could African Americans genuinely make as citizens of a society that did not view them as equal? Dunbar understood that there were no straightforward answers to these issues and that championing equality for his people would be a difficult task: the preexisting labels applied to African Americans ("ideals about people who fit the label") "come to have social and psychological effects."[6] Dunbar felt the call to eliminate not only the labels applied to blacks but also the effects that came along with them. On December 13, 1890, Dunbar wrote that "a great mistake that has been made by the editors of the race is that they only discuss one question, the race problem." Although he believed that "the race question" was indeed still important to the advancement of the race, Dunbar felt that a quarter of a century of discussion had "worn it thread-bare." Indeed, a new focus needed to be addressed. "Your cry is 'we must agitate, we must agitate.' So you must but bear in mind that the agitation of *deeds* is tenfold more effectual than the agitation of *words,*" Dunbar wrote. Therefore, he called to the architects of the race's public image to "stop saying, and go to doing. Find other things," he suggested, "than this one question to talk about. . . . Cease feeding your weary readers on an unbroken diet of the race problem."[7] His struggle with representing his race seems to anticipate W. E. B. Du Bois's declaration that racism was not the foreseeable consequence of primordial bigotry but was engrained or perpetuated by ignorance. Dunbar too felt his "dogged strength alone" kept his soul "from being torn asunder": his marked attempt to represent his people pulled him toward literature and, at the same time, toward discomfiture amid the "politics and prejudices of the white community."[8]

Dunbar's continuing exploration of black identity sheds light on the courses of action that African Americans encountered while they attempted to construct a public identity. His works addressed the complicated questions of advancement during Reconstruction, the hazards of the exodus of blacks from southern rural areas to northern cities, and the contradictions of realistically representing the black experience amid surviving stereotypes that held

a strong influence over society at large. However, his popularity as a dialect poet led him to feel that "I am tired, so tired of dialect. I send out graceful little poems, suited for any of the magazines, but they are returned to me by editors who say, 'We would be very glad to have a dialect poem, Mr. Dunbar, but we do not care for the language compositions.'"[9]

*We Wear the Mask* challenges facile interpretations of the role Dunbar played in representing the black community around the turn of the century. The contributors explore an array of topics on Dunbar's artistry and raise a variety of crucial questions relevant to ongoing discussions on Dunbar. While the essays in this volume are fully reflective of the vibrant diversity by which Dunbar critical studies are characterized, they are nonetheless striated by some common concerns: How did Dunbar create personal and group identity? What roles do dialect, urbanization, and movement play in the formation of a representative black identity? How does the interpretation of war affect mainstream national identity, ethnic identity, and race relations? *We Wear the Mask* seeks to respond to these questions by shedding light on the processes through which Dunbar sought to construct a black identity and to examine how this identity in turn supplied his reading public with answers to the questions surrounding his community. Not only is this volume a long-overdue reexamination of Dunbar's influential works, but above all else, *We Wear the Mask* challenges the superficial interpretations of the role Dunbar's prose played during the complex period of turn-of-the-century America, reassessing his works and introducing new paradigms for understanding the unfolding evolution of his artistry.

## Part I: Poetry

Because Dunbar's reputation is primarily based on a sizable body of poetry presented in the dialect of southern blacks, some critics have accused him of portraying negative stereotypes to satisfy a white reading public. The essays in this section denounce this notion and, instead, suggest that Dunbar used dialect not only to represent his race in a positive light but also to show that beneath the surface lay a disguised protest against their treatment as second-class citizens. Suggesting that Dunbar's poems owe a debt to African traditions and aesthetics, Lena Ampadu, in "The Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Influence of African Aesthetics: Dunbar's Poems and the Tradition of Masking," argues that by preserving the legacy of the African griot, Dunbar created poems in the genre of the African praise poem written in celebration of an honorable community member or leader.

Nassim W. Balestrini and Sharon D. Raynor explore Dunbar's war poetry in their contributions. In "National Memory and the Arts in Paul Laurence Dunbar's War Poetry," Balestrini suggests that approximately twenty of Dunbar's four hundred poems deal with the topic of war. The majority of these works, Balestrini argues, adhere to long-established poetic styles; even the poems written in dialect are presented in traditional metrical and stanzaic forms. In "'Sing a Song Heroic': Paul Laurence Dunbar's Mythic and Poetic Tribute to Black Soldiers," Raynor investigates several of Dunbar's war poems and concludes that Dunbar uses myth, memory, and folklore to both memorialize and pay tribute to the identity of black soldiers. She examines various aspects of Dunbar's tribute poetry and concludes that Dunbar's poetry historicizes, mythologizes, and memorializes the stories and sacrifices of black soldiers.

In "Minstrelsy and the Dialect Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar," Elston L. Carr Jr. suggests that there is little question that Dunbar's dialect poetry can be read as a mask in motion that presents oppositional and subversive themes within the signifying system as described by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and, to a lesser degree, within the blues matrix as described by Houston A. Baker. Carr proposes an additional way of reading Dunbar's work that amplifies the motif of masking by considering the cultural context and implications of dialect writing in the late nineteenth century. Megan M. Peabody, in "Dunbar, Dialect, and Narrative Theory: Subverted Statements in *Lyrics of Lowly Life,*" provides insight into Dunbar's use of a multileveled, dialect-driven narrative that proves that not all utterance can be trusted and that readers must look to the narrative gaps for answers and truths. Peabody encourages a rereading of Dunbar within this context as a means of reckoning with historical and critical marginalization and examining his importance as a purveyor of black experience. In doing justice to these dual modes, Peabody utilizes Gérard Genette's narrative theories in a close study of selections from *Lyrics of Lowly Life.*

## Part II: Race, Rhetoric, and Social Structure

The authors of the essays in this section open new avenues for reading Dunbar's works by bringing together several significant readings on issues ranging from his polemics from minstrel performances to his works published in popular magazines to representations of Christmas as a means of racial uplift. To begin, in "Rhetorical Accountability: Paul Laurence Dunbar's Search for 'Representative' Men," Coretta M. Pittman explores Dunbar's essay "Representative American Negroes" to discuss why character and respectability were twin components that drove the rhetorical message in Dunbar's search for what was representative of blacks during his time. Pittman suggests that

the recognition and examination of racial schism that would define America in the twentieth century is important in explaining the value of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) relative to Dunbar's essay on representative African Americans.

Mark Noonan, in "'Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back': Reading Dunbar in the Context of the *Century Magazine,*" examines the apparent influence of Clarence Edmund Stedman and James Whitcomb Riley on Dunbar to show that much of what is viewed as his "natural" pastoral inclinations and inherent lyricism was in fact gleaned from his readings in a genteel publication interested in promoting "the folk" and "the ideal," in part, as antidotes to urbanism and industrialization. Meanwhile, Matt Sandler, in "The Glamour of Paul Laurence Dunbar: Racial Uplift, Masculinity, and Bohemia in the Nadir," seeks to map Dunbar's work in what has been called the age of Washington and Du Bois by examining his relationship with one of the most prominent white editors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, George Horace Lorimer at the *Saturday Evening Post.* The possibility that Dunbar might have been a representative of a newly forming black bohemia during this time, Sandler argues, is thinkable only if we consider the existence of a fully fleshed-out community with teachings and culture to preserve, not merely based on the fact that he was an aesthete.

Tracing the politics of restoring Edward Windsor Kemble's almost forgotten illustrations to critical conversations, and of attempting to reconstruct their appearance before audiences, Adam Sonstegard's essay, "Kemble's Figures and Dunbar's Folks: Picturing the Work of Graphic Illustration in Dunbar's Short Fiction," offers a unique examination in which he suggests that reading these tales as they were written *and* illustrated resurrects Dunbar's struggle for authority over his own texts, reveals his work with as well as against stereotypes of slaves and the Old South, and animates his dialect-speaking characters.

In "'We Know de Time Is Ouahs': The Power of Christmas in the Literature of Paul Laurence Dunbar," Amy Cummins focuses on an area that has not yet been addressed by scholarship: the meaning of Christmas in Dunbar's writings. Dunbar utilized the subject and setting of this holiday in numerous poems. Cummings concludes that Dunbar used the topos of Christmas to express truths about life under slavery, to document the impact of racism and economic injustice on African Americans, and to urge reconciliation and charitable giving. Finally, "Creating a Representative Community: Identity in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *In Old Plantation Days*" adds a much-needed discussion to Dunbar studies as I examine race, representation, and identity in Dunbar's second volume of short fiction. Dunbar attempted to create a viable black community through tales that highlight the strength of women

and introduce gender politics, tales that illustrate the strength of religion as a community-building vehicle, tales that illustrate the rebellious slave, and tales that illustrate the importance of conjuring to the slave community.

## Part III: Novels, Identity, and Representation

*The Sport of the Gods* is Dunbar's final and most representative novel. In one of the first novels to callously depict the reality of ghetto life in the North, Dunbar clearly asserts that it is impossible for African Americans to escape the shadows of slavery. Jeannine King, Dolores V. Sisco, Michael P. Moreno, Jayne E. Waterman, and my discussion on *The Fanatics* offers modern readings of *Sport* by illustrating that Dunbar sought to reveal the forces that subjugated blacks in both the North and the South. In "Memory and Repression in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods,*" King examines memory and migration in *Sport.* Though many consider *Sport* to be typical of the plantation tradition, King argues that it both represents and challenges this genre. King concludes that a close examination of *Sport* reveals a dark portrayal of post-emancipation declension, violence, and traumatic memory as Dunbar, "beneath the cloak of the plantation novel," confronts the injustice of slavery and the possibility of freedom.

Sisco, in "A Little Something More Than Something Else: Dunbar's Colorist Ambivalence in *The Sport of the Gods,*" seeks to reveal the ways in which Dunbar indirectly modeled black masculinity based on white supremacy. *Sport* was a personal endeavor for Dunbar, who struggled with issues of race. Sisco concludes that *Sport* was Dunbar's first attempt at eliminating "intraracial color and class bias."

Moreno, in placing the emphasis on migration in "Mobile Blacks and Ubiquitous Blues: Urbanizing the African American Discourses in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods,*" argues that part of what constructs black identity in the migration narrative can be comprehended through examination of the disparate spaces generated by postbellum dichotomies: North and South, city and country, black and white, spirituality and the blues. As such, locales constructed throughout Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* serve to establish discourses from which notions of postbellum bodies and identities are manufactured and reconfigured.

Waterman challenges previous readings of *The Sport of the Gods* by focusing on the sociologist Erving Goffman's identification of the self, its "dramaturgical" stage management, and the shame that forms the basis of social interaction. In "'With Myriad Subtleties': Paul Laurence Dunbar's Constructions of Social Identity in *The Sport of the Gods,*" Waterman suggests that performance, in

its illusionary deception, and the ensuing embarrassment and consequence of wearing the wrong performative mask, characterizes key episodes in the narrative of *The Sport of the Gods* and the "myriad subtleties" of Dunbar's constructions of self-projection and identity.

The book ends with my discussion of Dunbar's third novel, *The Fanatics*. In "'Nemmine. You Got to Git Somebody Else to Ring Yo' Ol' Bell Now': Nigger Ed and the Rhetoric of Local Color Realism and Racial Protest in Dunbar's *The Fanatics*," I argue that Dunbar's portrayal of Nigger Ed was deliberate. Although Ed's character is presented through the eyes of the white community, Dunbar portrays Ed as a productive figure who aids in bridging the racial gap in the community. I conclude that through his use of local color realism, Dunbar's celebration of Ed's acceptance in the face of racial discrimination ultimately gains him the admiration of the white community at the end of the novel.

In 1892, early in his writing career, Dunbar insisted to James Newton Matthews, "I hope there is something worthy in my writings and not merely the novelty of a black face associated with the power to rhyme that has attracted attention."[9] What might we learn if we transpose this line of thinking to Dunbar's representation of black identity and reality? Readers will note that the sequence of essays in this collection attempts to follow the development of Dunbar's oeuvre of black representation, from his innovative dialect poems to his forays into fiction. The contributors to *We Wear the Mask* all agree that Dunbar's representations of a black identity deserve renewed investigation and analysis. They challenge lingering assessments of Dunbar's works and connect literary and rhetorical strategies that give authority to his diverse literary techniques. In all, *We Wear the Mask* offers considerable new ways of rethinking the artistry of America's preeminent pre–Harlem Renaissance poet and bears witness to the powerful effects of Dunbar's language, dialect, representation, and vision.

## Notes

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Alexander, *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Herbert Woodward Martin and Ronald Primeau, eds., *His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

2. Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 88.

3. Rafia Zafar, *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 4.

4. Daniel P. Black, "Literary Subterfuge: Early African American Writing and the Trope of the Mask," *CLA Journal* 48 (2005): 388.

5. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 4.

6. Ibid., 66.

7. *In His Own Voice,* 171–72.

8. Jay Martin, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: Biography through Letters," foreword to *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), 17.

9. *Dunbar Reader,* 412.

# Part I

## *Poetry*

# 1

# The Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Influence of African Aesthetics

## *Dunbar's Poems and the Tradition of Masking*

Lena Ampadu

His fame having rested mostly on his dialect poems, which have origins in the minstrel tradition, many critical studies examine Paul Laurence Dunbar's work and its relationship to the slave past in America and to the tradition of minstrelsy popularized in nineteenth-century America. By 1899, Dunbar was widely acknowledged as a master of poetic technique who commanded respect in the literary world at home and abroad. He began losing his prestigious status in 1922 during the Harlem Renaissance with the publication of Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry,* which made way for the poetry of the New Negro. Later, after the civil rights movement, consistent with the tenor of the times, which called for more direct social protest and often comic depictions of blacks, Dunbar continued losing popularity and was often heavily criticized because of the absence of racial affirmative pride in his poetry. He was generally cited as a kind of tragic black figure desiring to be accepted by predominantly white audiences.[1] A close and careful examination of the breadth of Dunbar's poems, both the standard and vernacular varieties, reveals an often neglected link to the oral traditions of the African past and shows his poetry to convey the tenets of racial consciousness and pride that would later characterize the Harlem Renaissance. To rectify this lack of attention to the debt that Dunbar's poems owe to African traditions and aesthetics, this chapter will examine his poetry by identifying the African retentions in his poetry and examining the transformation and revision many of these retentions underwent after arriving in the New World to become African American vernacular cultural forms.

In 1921, James Weldon Johnson, in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry,* lauds Dunbar as a poet whose skill and artistry had their beginnings outside dialect poems. However, Dunbar lamented the restrictive role that larger society had given him as an author of dialect poems: he launched a

public protest against this in the often-quoted lines of one of his poems: "But ah, the world, it turned to praise / A jingle in a broken tongue."[2] His explanation for why he seemed to placate white audiences by assuming the minstrel role and writing poems advancing black stereotypes and glorifying life on the plantation can be found in his poem "We Wear the Mask." In the tradition of African verbal discourse filled with dualities, he explains that one wears "the mask that grins and lies" to prevent the world from being "over-wise, / In counting all our tears and sighs."[3] Having originated in Dunbar's poem, this use of the term "masking" serves in literary and language conventions today "as both a rhetoric of deception and a kind of cultural 'shibboleth.'"[4] Revisionist criticism of Dunbar's dialect poems considers them to be "masks in motion" that act as facades for the messages communicated in the poems as well as the cryptic messages central to the African American experience.[5]

Although Dunbar probably did not have the African mask in mind when he wrote this poem, if one views his poem purely within an African context, one can interpret it as both a literal and figurative reference to a mask. The mask, a decorative carving usually made of wood or stone, can be worn during African ceremonies for different functions and can have the same kinds of dualities as language. In Africa, which one thinks of as traditionally having a purely oral culture, a mask can be considered a form of writing; such a view thus elevates African societies to ones of "mixed orality," in which writing coexists with orality.[6] We might view Dunbar's poems in a similar way: they are produced within a literate mainstream culture, but they reflect the oral culture of the people about whom they are written. His poems are also infused with the various strategies of orality, some being written strictly in dialect, while others are written strictly in Standard English. Still others are a fusion or a mixture of the two varieties of English.

The word "masks" can refer to the types of face coverings that people wear at celebrations throughout the African diaspora, for example, during Mardi Gras in New Orleans or Carnival in Brazil or Trinidad. When I introduce this poem in my literature classes and ask students to define the word "mask," the consensus usually is that the mask is a facade, and they usually admit that the poem could refer to a mask of revelry much like that of the clown in Smokey Robinson's "Tears of a Clown." The lyrics of Robinson's song facilitate their comprehension of the message of "grinning and lyin'" in comparison to the character of the clown in the song, who wears a mask that shows a happy outward appearance but masks the clown's true feelings of sadness and unhappiness.

Further drawing from an aesthetic originating in the African homeland, Dunbar, preserving the legacy of the African griot, created poems in the genre of the African praise poem (poems written in celebration of an honorable community member, leader, or event). An important dimension of African oral poetry, the praise poem is best understood and appreciated when preached, sung, or recited. African poems are direct and immediate but celebrate heroes and historical events and are concerned with the poetry's immediate effects.[7] Several of Dunbar's poems paid tributes in this fashion, including "Black Samson of Brandywine," "Douglass," "Booker T," "The Colored Soldiers," and "When Malindy Sings."

As African praise poems, his "Black Samson of Brandywine" and "The Colored Soldiers" examine the plight of black soldiers individually and collectively. In the 1930s, literary critic, poet, and professor Sterling Brown labeled these "race-conscious poems," and Dunbar labeled himself a "race representative." He declared of his role, "My ambition is to make closer studies of my people."[8] In the poems, Dunbar heaps praises upon the soldiers, "the noble sons of Ham,"[9] who, like his father, gallantly fought in the Civil War wearing the uniform of the Union army. These brave soldiers often fought just as courageously as the white soldiers but faced more imminent danger of being executed by rebel soldiers, who would kill them rather than take them as prisoners of war.[10] Since the heroic deeds of the black soldiers were never publicly acknowledged, Dunbar bestows this honor upon them in his "The Colored Soldiers." In the same vein, he praises Black Samson, who fought mightily against the British in the Revolutionary War in southeastern Pennsylvania. Using words that convey pride in Samson's and his own heritage, Dunbar labels him

> An ebony giant,
> Black as the pinions of night.
> Swinging his scythe like a mower
> Over a field of grain.[11]

In his description of Samson, Dunbar anticipates the positive comparisons of blackness to the night that later writers like Langston Hughes used to extol the beauty of blackness:

> I am a Negro:
> Black as the night is black
> Black like the depths of my Africa.[12]

Though Dunbar uses the term "colored" in his poem valorizing the soldiers who fought in the Civil War, a term that originated among the mixed-race group, he reverses the earlier negative connotations of the word "black" that writers like the eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley and the nineteenth-century political writer Maria Stewart had used in their writings. In the line "Remember Christians, Negroes black as Cain," from Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa,"[13] blackness is associated with the evil Cain, the first man to commit a murder in the Bible. Later, Stewart would write, "Though black your skin as shades of night, / Your hearts are pure, your souls are white."[14] Although she, like Dunbar and Langston Hughes, compares blackness to the night, she contrasts blackness with the purity and whiteness of the soul. Stewart, therefore, links darkness with sin and evil, as does Wheatley.

During his exceptional career as a poet, Dunbar came into contact with several nationally known leaders in the African American community, including Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary Church Terrell, James Weldon Johnson, Charles Chesnutt, and Booker T. Washington, all of whom advanced the educational goals and/or political aspirations of African Americans. Since all these leaders were engaged in social and political struggles for African Americans, Dunbar's friendship and association with them helped counteract the belief that he was merely a minstrel who avoided social protest. In fact, Du Bois, who often appeared at programs with Dunbar, labeled him a "protest writer."[15] Mary Church Terrell, a women's rights activist and spokesperson against lynching, was a neighbor and friend who maintained a lifelong correspondence with him. She dubbed him "poet laureate of the Negro Race," a title that survives today.[16]

Dunbar wrote poems extolling the virtues of several of these activist leaders. In 1893, Frederick Douglass praised Dunbar when he read his poetry at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In turn, Dunbar praised Douglass in the poem "Frederick Douglass," originally called "Old Warrior," which he dedicated to him upon his death in 1895. In "Frederick Douglass," Dunbar calls Douglass "a spirit brave" who "has passed beyond the mists."[17] Calling him a son of Africa, using the Ethiopian biblical reference to Africa, Dunbar in the same poem says of him, "And Ethiopia, with bosom torn / Laments the passing of her noblest born."[18] In "Douglass," he compares Douglass to the captain of a ship in the midst of a storm, a metaphor for the days of racial strife and segregation. Dunbar asserts that we need Douglass's "voice high-sounding o'er the storm," his "strong arm to guide the shivering bark / to give us comfort through the lonely dark."[19]

Episcopal priest Alexander Crummell, his advisor and mentor, who espoused firm, unshakeable beliefs that Africans and African Americans should

ban together because of their shared heritage, made Dunbar a member of the American Negro Academy, which Crummell had cofounded. Upon the death of Crummell, Dunbar lauded him in "Alexander Crummell Dead" as a "learned one and a leader," describing his fame as intertwined with the light of the dawn of day.[20]

Booker T. Washington, considered the spokesperson for African Americans, invited Dunbar to a convention at Tuskegee Institute for black farmers in 1890. Though Dunbar sometimes assisted Washington in fund-raising for this black institution, he did not embrace Washington's philosophy of industrial education. Feeling moved to honor Washington's accomplishments, however, Dunbar wrote a poem honoring him, calling him one who had risen from his humble beginnings in a lowly West Virginia cabin to become "a peer of princes in the world's acclaim / A master spirit for the nation's need."[21]

In addition to praising Washington, Dunbar wrote the school song for Tuskegee, glorifying the institution founded by Washington. In similar praise language, Dunbar paints a picture of the school as an enduring mother whose children shall not abandon her: "Oh long striving mother of diligent sons / And of daughters, whose strength is their pride / We love thee forever, and ever shall walk / Thro' the oncoming years at thy side." He concludes with similar praise: "Oh, Mother Tuskegee, thou shinest to-day / As a gem in the fairest of lands; Thou gavest the Heav'n-blessed power to see / The worth of our minds and our hands."[22] In emphasizing these two themes in the song, Dunbar sustains the African tradition of holding mothers and education in high esteem.

Continuing this reverence for mothers, his poem "When Malindy Sings," written in praise of Dunbar's mother, who had the gift of song, extends a tribute to those black musicians who delivered music in an emotionally expressive style learned aurally. In this regard, the poem examines the musical traditions and aesthetics linked to the African motherland by sharply contrasting the Western classical tradition of learning and producing music by strict note reading with the African-inspired form relying on improvisation and the ear. Music plays a pivotal role in West African culture, as expressed by Olaudah Equiano: "We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances."[23] True to Equiano's declaration about the Ibos' reverence for music, Dunbar's poem examines the primacy of music, a potent remnant of African culture found in African American culture. Thus music is

an integral part of many social events and entertainments, occupying a place of prominence in African American culture in slave quarters.

The narrator of Dunbar's "When Malindy Sings" offers valuable commentary about the production of music in the plantation life of slaves. Many parallels exist between the singing style of gospel and soul singers, like Aretha Franklin and Mahalia Jackson, or a jazz singer like Billie Holiday, and the style of Malindy, who "jes' spreads huh mouf and hollahs."[24] Closely allied with the oral tradition, musicians like Mahalia Jackson and Billie Holiday had no formal musical training and were unable to read music, yet they are widely regarded as having almost perfect musical styling and phrasing. They symbolize a lineage of African singers and musicians who have the gift of the ear. The poem's narrator observes that Malindy's robust voice, which delivers music that "strikes yo' hea't and clings," is far superior to that of Miss Lucy, the white woman whose musical training has her rely on "lines an'dots."[25]

Dunbar summarizes one of the key elements of black music: its ability to touch the heart or move the people—the emotional effect that the singer has on his or her audience, one that fills people with spirit. Having originated in the music of the church, this quality was carried over into the secular singing style called soul singing, best exemplified by Aretha Franklin, known as the Queen of Soul, whose earliest musical training was in her father's church in Detroit. A deacon reared in a traditional church in South Carolina during the 1930s aptly expresses the emotional effect this singing style has on the audience: "If you want people to be moved, let the spirit hit you then let it go to them. Because my Bible tells me that the spirit runs from heart to heart. Strike your heart first, then mine. It'll go from me to you and from you to somebody else—that's just how it goes."[26] The poem's narrator identifies this spiritual effect by pronouncing, "An you fin' yo' teahs a-drappin' / When Malindy sings."[27]

The narrator criticizes Miss Lucy for not having the "tu'ns an' twistin's / Fu' to make [the sound] sweet an' light."[28] One can imagine that those "tu'ns an' twistin's" are equivalent to the embellishments that the gospel singer uses to elongate words and lines in the song in the same way that the blues singer extends or prolongs the blue note.[29] The qualities that cause the narrator to declare this music superior to the music that Miss Lucy produces parallel those of importance in African music: robustness of voice, sometimes with a raspy timbre; stylistic expressiveness; and improvisation.[30] One might get a better sense of the comparison that the narrator is making by listening to a recording of "America the Beautiful" by Judy Garland and comparing it to that of Ray Charles. Although his voice is hoarse and raspy, and he embellishes notes, using improvisation, Charles's version, a soulful performance rooted in gospel, is more rhythmic and syncopated than Garland's version.

One can compare the performance of the college marching band from a traditionally white institution that plays classical and pop tunes with that of the marching band from historically black colleges and universities, which march soulfully onto the field with intricately rhythmic moves, playing the most contemporary rhythm-and-blues and hip-hop tunes. The contrasts between Ray Charles and Judy Garland and the white college band and the black college band are very much like the contrast between the white Miss Lucy's singing and the black Malindy's. Similarly, in another of Dunbar's poems, "The Colored Band," Dunbar contrasts these differences between the two musical traditions. He distinguishes ragtime and other music peculiar to the "colored" band from that of the white band:

You kin hyeah a fine perfo'mance w'en de white ban's serenade,
An' dey play dey high-toned music mighty sweet
But hit's Sousa played in ragtime, an' hit's Rastus on Parade
W'en de colo'ed ban' comes ma'chin' down de street.[31]

The narrator pays the highest compliment to Malindy by describing how the greatest natural singers, birds, hush their singing, along with the most accomplished percussionists on the plantation, the fiddlers and the banjoists, to listen to the talented Malindy sing:[32]

Fiddlin' man jes' stop his fiddlin',
Lay his fiddle on de she'f;
Folks a-playin' on de banjo
Draps dey fingahs on de strings—
Bless yo'soul—fu'gits to move 'em,
When Malindy sings.[33]

Other elements of African aesthetics include Dunbar's use of the sermon and the rhythmic preaching style of the black preacher, as in his poem "An Antebellum Sermon" and in a short story, "The Fruitful Sleeping of the Rev. Elisha Edwards." Dunbar describes the interactive style of the black church in his story about a pastor caught snoring in church during a fellow preacher's sermon. When he has awakened and the time comes for him to speak, instead of getting the usual response from his congregation, the Reverend Edwards gets "Not a cry, not a moan, not Amen."[34] Although during the era in which Dunbar wrote he was linked to the minstrel tradition because of his emphasis on pathos and humor, we can look beyond these limitations in this poem: the poem provides an in-depth look at the complexities of communication in black culture. We

have the black preacher comically portrayed, a ridiculing of the black preacher showing him as a buffoon, but the poem can also be interpreted in the context of the old folk saying within the African American community, "Got one mind for white folks to see, 'nother for what I know is me." Although some of the strongest examples of humor are found in the story of the black preacher, this story is designed to make the white audience laugh at the black preacher, while the black one laughs at and with him.

In the black language tradition, the preacher in "An Ante-bellum Sermon" highlights Moses as the subject of his sermon and appeals to the double audience. Black preachers, like the spirituals, use double-voiced language strategies: on one level the story is, in a biblical sense, about the prophet Moses delivering the Hebrews from Pharaoh's bondage, appealing to a white audience. On another level, it underscores freedom and its relevance to the black audience. By beginning the sermon with the communal "We," addressed to a gathering of "brothas," Dunbar places the action of the poem in a site of resistance, one emphasizing this cry for freedom. Using "hush harbor rhetoric,"[35] Dunbar situates the poem in a secret hiding place where people gather to seek freedom:

> We is gathahed hyeah, my brothas,
> In dis' howlin' wildaness,
> Fu' to speak some words of comfo't
> To each othah in distress.[36]

Indeed, one of Dunbar's accomplishments is the number and variety of people inspired to memorize and recite his poems in post–World War I America. Dunbar gave many public recitals of his own poetry and served as a model for many in the black community who followed in his footsteps. Like the griots in the African homeland, these New World storytellers, sometimes called elocutionists, continued this oral tradition, interweaving art into the fabric of society in black communities. When these griots delivered these poems, they were usually in black communities and performed for black audiences, thus altering the racial composition of Dunbar's intended audience.

These New World griots dramatized and performed his poems, bringing alive the vernacular and the cadences of the black preacher, often setting in motion the call and response associated with the kind of oral delivery to an African audience. In Africa, however, the griots often compose before a live audience, with the audience co-creating the text. From church pulpits and basements to classrooms and cafeteria/auditoriums in urban and rural com-