



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3., 2017 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR AS A HUMANIST

U. JEROME JOSEPH¹, MOBI SAMUEL²

¹M.Phil scholar, ²Assistant Professor

Dept of English, Vels University, Chennai, Tamilnadu

<jeromejoseph1993@gmail.com>



ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the first African American poets to gain national recognition. His poems mostly deal with the basic and vibrant topic humanism. The poet always concentrates on the struggle of the Africans in the society of America the basic rights of the Africans had a big epic period. Dunbar was the poet who was criticized to an extend level. Many African-Americans have further argued that the poet did not do all that he could to paint a positive portrait of the rising Negro. This omission, they believed, was a wasted opportunity, especially given Dunbar's popularity among influential whites and a larger international community.

INTRODUCTION

Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of the most popular poets of his day. He was highly regarded for his black dialect poetry, which earned him the title, "poet laureate of his race." Dunbar's second book of poetry, *Majors and Minors*, was even reviewed positively by the famous critic William Dean Howells. However, despite Dunbar's popularity, he has also been widely criticized for his black dialect poetry. Many scholars and African-Americans have argued that it is an unsympathetic portrait of blackness meant to appease his paying white readership. This paper discusses the conditions and circumstances that influenced Dunbar to write black dialect poetry. It places the poet's life and career in the social, economic, and critical context of the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

Dunbar's popularity gradually diminished, leaving his once towering reputation in jeopardy. In 1907, Linda Keck Wiggins honored the poet with *The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, a biography largely gathered from interviews and reminiscences. The definitive text was one of only several written on Dunbar until 1911, and little attention has been paid to the poet ever since. New scholarship on him typically corresponds with significant anniversaries and other relevant times. Nine Dunbar biographies have been published in the last century, but little new information about his life has been revealed since the Wiggins text. Dunbar's writing, specifically his poetry, has seen rather modest reprinting and is not frequently anthologized. There are, of course, many reasons for Dunbar's fall from popularity over the last century. Several scholars contend that the poet's legacy has been overshadowed by that of other prominent blacks within a half-century of his life, such as Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, and Booker T. Washington. These men were famous writers like Dunbar, but had a much greater public presence than the poet.

Discussion

Other scholars contend that much of Dunbar's work, with the exception of several poems like "We Wear the Mask" and "The Colored Soldiers," has been forgotten among the more groundbreaking output of Harlem Renaissance poets like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, who both entered the literary scene in the 1920s. However, the most accepted rationale for Dunbar's drop in popularity is the widespread critical argument that his work is unsympathetic to African-Americans. Scholars have long accused Dunbar of intentionally misrepresenting black speech by way of his dialect poetry to please well-paying white audiences. Many African-Americans have further argued that the poet did not do all that he could to paint a positive portrait of the rising Negro. The one-sided history of Dunbar scholarship and the lack of attention paid to Martin's practical call signal a need to employ new ways of analyzing the poet and his work. This research work is in response to Martin's proposal for more comprehensive scholarship on Dunbar. It considers the poet's work in the context of a largely racist Reconstruction era. I identify the period as one in which many white Americans had nostalgic expectations for the characterization of blacks. It was also a time of very few employment opportunities for African-Americans. I consider these to be among the facets of Dunbar's condition, as Hudson puts it, one made more complicated by a white-dominated readership that demanded only dialect and viewed the poet's work as mere entertainment.

I conclude that Dunbar's intentions for his dialect poetry were misconstrued by William Dean Howells' racially-biased interpretation of *Majors and Minors*.

Work sited

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