

How To Grow a Dialect Poet in Thirty-three Years: Linguistic Influences on Paul Laurence Dunbar

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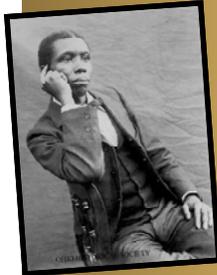


Photo by Josephine Watkins Lehman, from Ohio Historical Society Dunbar Collection.

"[F]rom the beginning, commentators [have] disagreed about the authenticity of the peculiarly Ohioan brand of Southern dialect in his poems. There has been debate about his mastery of standard English..."

—Herbert W. Martin

"Dunbar knows absolutely nothing about negro dialect" (OHS Reel 5, Box 19)

"Dialect was native to him ...he is bi-lingual" —Rubie Boyd

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

One of the first successful African American writers to produce texts in non-standard English, Dunbar lived in Dayton, Ohio during the Reconstruction Era just after the Civil War.

His poems, short stories, and novels depicted German, Irish, Mid western, Southern, and African American speech patterns. He died of tuberculosis at age 33.

Purpose: Scholarly and popular treatment of Dunbar's work have often centered around his dialect depictions, especially those of African American speech. Questions about the accuracy of his portrayals, and his motivation for creating them, have created the need for a more detailed account of the context in which he produced his work.

This project used a linguistic approach to sources by focusing on evidence directly related to Dunbar's exposure to, and engagement with, language varieties. New insight is gained from often-cited works, as well as obscure material not found in most Dunbar studies.

Method:

Survey of primary sources:

Dunbar's books of poetry, Dunbar papers on microfilm, other documents accessed at University of Dayton, Dayton Metro Library, and Ohio Historical Society

Literature Review:

Biographies, collections of poetry, scholarly articles, historical sources



Paul Laurence Dunbar House, Dayton, Ohio, 2008. Photo by Byron Hazard.

Results:

Dayton's Linguistic Climate

In Dunbar's lifetime, his hometown, Dayton, Ohio, served as a corridor for westward migration, making its population diverse and fluid.

5,000 African Americans

German, English, Irish, French, and other western European and Canadian immigrants, migrants

German newspapers, breweries; railroads; canal boats owned by or employing immigrants



Downtown Dayton, c. 1889. Photo from wright-brothers.org.

Language of Dunbar's Parents

"[Matilda] had a creditable amount of general information and a good, workable vocabulary. Her sentences were well-formed in Saxon style; her enunciation clear and forceful, and she did not speak in dialect" (Boyd 23).



Matilda Dunbar. Photo from Dayton Metro Library Dunbar Collection

Matilda and Joshua Dunbar were former slaves from Southern plantations

Joshua taught himself to read, Matilda took night classes

Matilda, told stories in one "dialect," naturally spoke in another

Both parents read to Dunbar from variety of genres

Dunbar's School & Self-Study

Dunbar not only studied language texts, but also had a keen ear for the living language around him, recording what he heard: "[He] kept a tablet, pencil, and dictionary always with him" (Cunningham 57).

Formal and informal study of German, Latin, Spanish, French, Greek, shorthand

Exposure to literature—Shakespeare, Burns, Keats, Shelley, Riley, dialect poets

Personal library included works on grammar, etymology, language development, specific language texts (Keller)



Dunbar's personal library. Photo from Ohio Historical Society Dunbar Collection.

"...every little while, some independent, vigorous-minded genius, who sees with his own eyes and who has a sense of what the literary language lacks, will fearlessly resort to the swelling stream of colloquial English, and he will take from it what pleases him..."

—Harry Thurston Peck
What is Good English (1899)



Photo from Ohio Historical Society Dunbar Collection.

Conclusion:

A linguistic focus yielded new perspectives from unexpected sources, such as the Rubie Boyd manuscript, which records Boyd's interviews with Matilda Dunbar, including features of Matilda's speech. Delores Keller's unpublished thesis provides a detailed catalog of Dunbar's personal library, demonstrating his wide-ranging interest in language study. Eye-witness accounts of Dunbar studying and recording language were reconstructed from information dispersed among biographies, commentaries, and newspaper articles.

In an interview in which he was asked to trace his path to success, Dunbar stated, "The influences contributing to one's development are so complex that the result can scarcely be attributed to a single individual or event" (OHS Reel 4 Box 14). The complexity of those influences is demonstrated by the evidence compiled in this study, providing broader insight into how and why Dunbar created his chorus of literary voices.

Selected Sources

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