

Paul laurence dunbar and the harlem renaissance



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 1917-1938, The Harlem Renaissance was in full swing. In a small New York borough called Harlem, black people were beginning to gain social, cultural, and artistic freedom. Black poets, writers, musicians, and scholars flocked to Harlem in search of such new liberty, yet many poets wrote about the hardships they faced due to racism to help express their feelings against oppression. In "We Wear the Mask" and "Sympathy," Paul Laurence Dunbar depicts the harmful effects of racism through the use of symbolism, violent imagery, and a gloomy mood to develop the theme that oppression by society causes a desire for freedom among minorities.

Dunbar utilizes symbolism to explain that oppression by society causes a desire for freedom. During the time these poems were written, black people were still being treated poorly by white people and were searching for a way to end the oppression. In his poem "Sympathy," Dunbar writes, "I know what the caged bird feels" (ll. 1, 7). He uses the caged bird to symbolize the oppressed black minority. A bird, by nature, wants to be free and in its natural habitat, a bird can go wherever it pleases. However, a caged bird can not go far; he is restricted to where he can go. In the period of history that Dunbar depicts, blacks were restricted as to where they could and could not go, too. Blacks were not allowed to mingle with white people. They were forced to keep their distance through segregated facilities such as bathrooms and water fountains. While white people could do whatever they pleased, like birds in their natural habitat, black people were segregated, like caged birds. This restriction that black people faced caused them to desire to be equal and free like white people. In "We Wear the Mask," Dunbar writes that "we wear the mask that grins and lies" (l. 1). Dunbar uses mask to

symbolize the hidden feelings felt by the black majority as a whole. By saying that “ we wear the mask” (Dunbar l. 1), he explains that not only he or a select few feel the effects of oppression; it is the entire black community. The mask the black community wore was a facade to hide the pain and suffering. By mirroring the feelings of the unrestricted, free white peoples, they created an illusion of freedom.

In “ Mask: Hypocrite bared in South House,” Erin Perkins echoes the symbolism in “ We Wear the Mask.” Perkins writes that “ their ‘ masks’ are meant to disguise their flawed behaviors and backgrounds for the benefit of those watching” (Perkins 1). The mask provides a false sense of freedom to provide a sense of comfort to the white community. It allows whites to not acknowledge the oppression that black people face. With the illusion of freedom in place, whites can ignore the problems of racism. Since they do not see the suffering of the black community, they do not feel compelled to make a change in society, proving that a false sense of freedom allows oppression to continue.

Next, Dunbar utilizes violent imagery to explain that oppression by society causes a desire for freedom. Though the use of artistic expression, black people fought for freedom by writing about freedom until they exhausted the topic. In “ Sympathy,” Dunbar writes, “ I know why the caged bird beats his wing / till its blood is red on the cruel bars” (ll. 8-9). He sympathizes with the caged bird. The bird is so desperate to escape its cage that it is willing to attempt escape until exhausted and hurting. Just like the bird, blacks during the Harlem Renaissance were desperate to escape the restriction caused by racism. The desperation and desire for freedom leads to many protests and

<https://assignbuster.com/paul-laurence-dunbar-and-the-harlem-renaissance/>

other forms of resistance to gain artistic freedom. These attempts helped convey the desire to achieve freedom. Another example occurs when Dunbar writes that the bird's "wing is bruised and bosom sore, - / when he beats his bars and he would be free" (ll. 16-17). The bird fights his cage until exhausted to show how much he wants freedom; if the bird did not truly want freedom, he would not hurt and exhaust himself in an attempt to obtain it. Eleanor Alexander, a writer for the New York University Press, remembers memorizing Dunbar's poems as a kid; the black community saw him as its hero. She agrees that the violent imagery plays a role in the desire for freedom, and in this vein she explains that the bird beating its wings "is a gloomy parable of White oppression and battered Black self-identity" (Alexander 2). She further explains that the story of the bird struggling desperately to gain freedom from its cage is a clear representation of blacks struggling to gain freedom in a world where they are oppressed by white people.

Lastly, Dunbar uses a gloomy tone to express that oppression by society causes a desire for freedom. Dunbar transports the reader into the shoes of a black American during the Harlem Renaissance to further explain the desire for freedom. For example, Dunbar writes "With torn and bleeding hearts we smile" (l. 4). He expresses the effects of racism through the "torn and bleeding hearts" (Dubar l. 4). After many years of racism through segregation and slavery, the black community is run down as a whole. They lack the motivation to continue fighting for freedom. Pessimism has taken over the mentality of the black community, so African-Americans put on smiles as facades to hide the fact that they are torn and bleeding. And this

pessimism felt by the black community radiates back to the reader. The black community uses the false freedom to mask the uncertainty of their real freedom. Blacks desire freedom so badly, even though the false freedom under racism is better than no freedom at all. Also, Dunbar writes “ When he beats his bars and could be free; / It is not a carol of joy or glee, / But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core” (ll. 17-18). Dunbar explains that the caged bird is not singing because of joy or glee from being stuck in a cage, but in a prayer to heaven that it will be released from the cage. The bird is in dire desperation to escape his confining cage that he is willing to pray as a last effort. The bird believes that, after all the effort it has put into trying to escape, a higher power must have control.

As a last effort, the bird is begging for the higher power to help. Indeed, blacks at the time began to face the same dilemma. The gloomy last effort of prayers is echoed throughout black life during the Harlem Renaissance. Poems were written to express the feelings of black Americans; they expressed the hardships oppression had brought. Black poets felt that if white people could understand that the black community desperately desired to end the emotional pain of oppression, freedom could finally be achieved. The poems were not written for entertainment; they were written as a last effort to express a desire to be free. The poems were meant to be gloomy and upsetting to prove the point that the black community needed freedom. If African Americans had not desired freedom to that extent, the poems would not have required a gloomy tone. The gloominess came from Dunbar’s own life. Dunbar was looked to as a black hero to the community, yet his life was in some clear ways a sad experience. Eleanor Alexander

writes “ racial prejudice contributed to Dunbar’s depression and the alcoholism that led to his early death at age 33” (2). The toll of oppression changed Dunbar’s life. The lack of freedom drove him to alcoholism. Therefore, alcohol was his way of coping with the oppression black people in society faced.

The lives of black people during the Harlem Renaissance were forever changed by an cultural, artistic, and social boom. Although the change helped, it was not the end of oppression. Dunbar’s use of symbolism proved that black Americans were still caged in the oppression. Violent imagery was used to show that their attempts to end oppression were not successful, only leaving the community exhausted; finally, a gloomy tone helped express the dire need for freedom. By analyzing “ Sympathy” and “ We Wear the Mask,” the reader takes away the theme that oppression by society causes a desire for freedom.

Dunbar, Paul Laurence. “ Sympathy.” Print.

Dubar, Paul Laurence. “ We Wear The Mask.” Print.

Skerrett, Joseph T Jr. “ ‘ Sympathy’.” In Crumbley, Paul, ed., and Patricia M. Gant, gen. ed. Student’s Encyclopedia of Great American Writers: 1830 to 1900, vol. 2. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2010. Bloom’s Literature. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 4 Mar. 2016

Gabbin, Joanne. “ Intimate Intercessions in the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar.” African American Review 2(2007): 227. eLibrary. Web. 04 Mar. 2016.

<https://assignbuster.com/paul-laurence-dunbar-and-the-harlem-renaissance/>

Wellington, Darryl L. "A troubled literary union." *New Crisis*. 01 Jan. 2003: 62. eLibrary. Web. 04 Mar. 2016.

Wooley, Christine A. "'We are not in the old days now': Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Problem of Sympathy." *African American Review* 2/3(2009): 359. eLibrary. Web. 04 Mar. 2016.