

Messages to african-americans in dunbar's works

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“ It was not Martin Luther King who emancipated the modern Negro, but Stepin Fetchit...It was Step, who elevated the Negro to the dignity of a Hollywood star. I made the Negro a first-class citizen all over the world.”- Lincoln Perry A. K. A Stepin Fetchit. This quote surely produces shock and ill feelings to many, but it displays the misguided thought process of Mr. Perry, along with some other African Americans in the entertainment industry during his time. Although many would disagree, the writer Paul Laurence Dunbar appeared to share this sentiment.

Dunbar was one of the first black writers in American literature who was successfully commercial. He favored traditional or old-fashioned techniques and his works were exemplary of literary naturalism. His literary body includes novels, short stories, essays, and many poems written both in standard English and old negro dialect. He distinguished these poems as his major and minor works. He gathered the more fervent poems, those written in standard English, under the heading “ Majors,” and he labeled the more superficial, works in dialect as “ Minors.” Though Dunbar’s poems written in standard English counted for most of his poetry, they were mainly ignored. Instead, it was his works written in negro dialect that elevated him to the high level of commercial success and wide publication.

During those times, most of the reading public were whites who were amused by the exploitive and stereotypical representations of the language and lifestyle of African Americans. The popular preference for the dialect did not sit well with Dunbar, and it placed him in a peculiar position that required him to choose between maintaining the dignity of himself and the African American people, and in turn alienate his white readers, or to continue to

please the broader audience and maintain his fame. He continued to straddle that fence and wrote many more works in dialect. Dunbar resorted to the cowardly approach and therefore sold his soul.

In 1828, T. D. “ Big Daddy” Rice, a struggling white actor, emerged onto the acting scene with a new concept. Rice pioneered what was called the “ minstrel show” or “ blackface minstrelsy.” Blackface minstrelsy was a type of racially charged entertainment that was developed in the early 19th century. The shows were comprised of a mixture of dancing, variety acts, comic skits, and music performances that brazenly satirized African Americans. The shows were performed by white people in black make-up with over exaggerated features and the use of dialect that mimicked the stereotypical verbiage. Because of the cultural hierarchy in America, coupled with naively tolerant attitudes of many Americans who consider racism and bigotry harmless, the shows proved wildly popular.

Later, African American actors began performing in the minstrel shows. However, like Dunbar, black minstrel performers felt the heavy responsibility to counteract the stereotypes of black identity. They appealed to white audiences on stage, but conducted themselves off-stage in a way to counter the negative representations of blacks with their connection with activist presentations, publications, and organizations. Nevertheless, they were not excused in their contributions to the embarrassment and oppression of African Americans. Dunbar’s straddling of the proverbial line by his attempts at countering the negative representations by producing intellectually written poetry in standard English are also unexcused.

Dunbar's dialect primarily consisted of dialogs and monologues spoken by illiterate, dimwitted, lazy, and buffoonish characters, that shared similarities with the personas of many cartoons and television programs of the Jim Crow era. In essence, his dialect poetry was a minstrel act on paper. It should be noted that many of the speakers in Dunbar's dialect, seemed hopeful for social change and possessed a level of self-awareness. Dunbar did not write "protest" poetry, however, he inserted a hidden agenda of hope and defiance in the messages of many of his works written in dialect. His conventional poems had watered down versions of his message, if at all, but they were also less circumstantial.

In the poem, "Speakin' At De Cou't-House," Dunbar funneled the message of African-American's disdain and mistrust of white politicians and their agendas. "When Malindy Sings," conveyed admiration for the natural talents of the African American singing voice. It is certain that these two messages would not be well received if they were undisguised and more explicit, but it is likely that his messages were missed because they were too well hidden.

Dunbar's messages were counterproductive because rather than using his platform to frankly address racism of his time, he chose to imbed them into poetry that is socially harmful to the black culture. Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" relays the pain that African Americans endure while hiding behind counterfeit grins or "masks," and also signifies the irony that he was conscious of his concealment of his anger in his works. The poem is a feeble attempt to unmask and reveal Dunbar's true feelings about the plights of blacks without "stirring the pot." Even the word "We" in the title is a

generalized protest, as it can be utilized both generally and particularly as the reader wishes. This exemplifies yet another timid avoidance of backlash from his white counterparts.

A diluted fight is insignificant, though some would argue that the difficulty of getting his message across would be more arduous because of the dynamics of the era, thus limiting his options. However, there are many African American authors during Dunbar's time who did speak out against social injustices without resorting to hiding behind hurtful imagery. W. E. B. Dubois was one of the most influential African American poets in our society. He was very candid in his fight against racial inequalities and still retained his fame and status. Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, and Frances Harper are also among those who took an outward stance on their beliefs without the abandonment of their values.

Dunbar was considered an embarrassment to some, and a revolutionary of social vision to others. Many were critical of him, but perhaps his worst critic was himself. In a conversation with James Weldon Johnson, Dunbar states, " I didn't start as a dialect poet. I simply came to the conclusion that I could write [dialect poetry] as well, if not better, than anybody else I knew of, and that by doing so I should gain a hearing. I gained the hearing, and now they don't want me to write anything but dialect. I've kept on doing the same things, and doing them no better. I have never gotten to the things I really wanted to do." It is unfortunate that Dunbar did not heed his own criticism. Instead, his talent clouded perceptions about blackness, and contributed to cultural transgression instead of using his voice to elevate African

Americans. He truly wore the mask, and placed a dunce cap on the heads of his people.