

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Selected Poems



Overview

Paul Laurence Dunbar was the first African American poet to receive national recognition. Born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872, he started publishing poetry when he was 16 years old and continued until his death in 1906 at the age of 33. Dunbar's poems included light Victorian lyric poetry and entertaining poems in the Negro dialect, but some of his most famous and moving poems are written in standard English and deal with racial issues.

In this lesson, students will read, interpret, and write poems in both standard English and dialect. They will interpret and explore their connection to poems through essays and letters. At the end of the lesson, they will work individually to interpret Dunbar's 1899 poem "Sympathy" and (through research) place the poem both in its historical context and in its relation to their own lives.

Getting Started

Lesson Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Interpret (explicate) the meaning of a poem, in terms of both their own perspective and the poem's historical context
- Define/explain poetic terms and concepts including stanza, image, simile, and metaphor
- Identify and describe dialect poetry, and explain its history in 19th and 20th century America
- Write poems in standard English and in the students' own dialect

Note: This lesson includes complex themes and imagery. This lesson is best suited for grades 7-8.

Grade Level Indicators

In meeting the above lesson objectives, students will:

- D** Identify and explain the writer’s technique in describing characters and characters’ interactions and conflicts
- J** Write informational essays or reports (including research) that present a literal understanding of the topic; pose relevant and tightly drawn questions that engage the reader; provide a clear and accurate perspective on the subject; create an organizing structure appropriate to the purpose, audience, and context; support the main ideas with facts, details, examples, and explanations from sources; and document sources and include bibliographies
- K** Produce informal writings (e.g., journals, notes, and poems) for various purposes
- L** Locate information using parts of books, including index, appendix, table of contents, and online tools (search engines)

Reading Strategies

- Clarifying, Synthesizing Information, Visualizing, Inferring

Time Required: 7 class periods or more

This lesson includes three poems which require a total of five 45-minute class periods of instruction, with two additional periods for general poetry instruction and assessment. *This lesson is designed to be taught in its entirety and in the order presented; the knowledge and skills presented in this lesson develop progressively.*

Activity	Pacing
Prepare to Learn: The Poet’s Toolbox	45 minutes
Interpreting “The Poet and His Song”	45 minutes
Imagery; Writing Poetry Using Extended Metaphors	45 minutes
Translating “When Malindy Sings”	45 minutes
Interpreting “When Malindy Sings”	45 minutes
Interpreting “We Wear the Mask”	45 minutes
Assessment Essay	45 minutes

Materials Needed

- Student copies of Dunbar poems: “The Poet and His Song,” “When Malindy Sings,” “We Wear the Mask,” and “Sympathy” (Masters appear at the end of this lesson.)
- Student copies of the Poetry Glossary (found on page 199)
- Notebook to use as a poetry journal
- Chalkboard or whiteboard

Additional Resources

- (optional) Access to computers with word processing and printing capability
- (optional) Internet access
- (optional) The *Ohio Reading Road Trip* Instructional DVD/videocassette, television monitor, DVD player or VCR

Prepare To Learn

The Poet's Toolbox

Tell students that, in this lesson, they will use the same tools to understand poetry that the poet used to write the poems. Then they will use these tools to write their own poems. Their “toolbox” (where they keep these tools) will be a poetry journal—a notebook solely for making notes about poetry and writing their own poems.

Many of the “tools” in a poet’s toolbox are figures of speech like similes and metaphors. Ask students: *If you’re on the phone with a friend and you see something interesting that neither of you has ever seen before, how do you describe it?* (If you have a picture of something unusual, such as a large piece of public art, you might show it to the class as an example.) If students don’t volunteer, ask: *Does the thing look like anything you’ve seen before?* Lead them to recognize that, when we try to describe something unknown, we compare it to things that we *already know*. For example, we might say that something is “as tall as a skyscraper” or “round like a bowling ball.”

Similes and Metaphors

In this lesson, students will use two kinds of comparison: similes and metaphors. Tell students that when we describe something using the words *like* or *as*, we’re using a *simile*—saying that the two things are *similar*. The two things don’t have to be exactly alike—they only need to have one thing in common. Have students think of a simile to describe a family member or pet and write this in their poetry journals. Ask volunteers to share their similes, and write these on the board.

Tell students that a *metaphor* is also a comparison, but it *implies* the similarity instead of stating it directly. A metaphor can hold much more meaning than a simile. For example:

Simile: Dwayne swims *like* a fish.

Metaphor: Dwayne *is* a fish.

Ask students: *If we say that Dwayne is a fish, what could that mean?* Students may offer that he swims well, he can hold his breath underwater for a long time, he loves being in the water, and so on. Being able to take all of these ideas from four little words—*Dwayne is a fish*—is important in poetry, because poems put a lot of meaning in as few words as possible.



TECHNOLOGY LINK

More information about Paul Laurence Dunbar and his work is available at the Ohio Reading Road Trip website at <http://www.ohio.readingroadtrip.org/dunbar.html>



TEACHING TIP

To review basic poetic terms like speaker, stanza, and image, please see the Relevant Literary Terms section, which begins on page 185. To find tips for reading poetry aloud, please turn to page 184.

The Explicating Poetry handout on page 201 contains information and instructions for interpreting and explaining the meaning of a poem.

Now ask students: *What if Dwayne really was a fish?* If students have trouble with this, share with them ideas such as: If Dwayne was really a fish, he would have to swim in the river to get to school instead of riding the bus; when he got to school, the principal would have to help him out of the river and put him in a fish bowl for class; it's hard to take notes underwater, so Dwayne would have to memorize everything and soon he would be the smartest fish around. Tell students that this example of adding details and scenarios is called *extending the metaphor*.

As a class, choose one of the similes on the board and turn it into a metaphor. Then ask students to extend the metaphor as if it is true. Have them write down the simile, the metaphor, and the extended metaphors in their poetry journals.

“The Poet and His Song”

Tell students that poems are like messages in a bottle. A poet writes a work and then, by publishing it, sends the poem off to an unknown reader, just as someone might put a message in a bottle and throw it into the ocean to be carried off by the waves. Maybe it will take a long time and the poem will have to travel a long distance before it reaches you, the reader. Then you will have to figure out what the poem means. You might wonder why it was written in the first place.

Tell students: *We can read poems strictly from our own perspective, but it often helps if we understand what the poet was like and what he or she might have been feeling when the poem was written. In this lesson, we will think about what these poems mean to us today, but we will also learn about Paul Laurence Dunbar and the period of history in which he lived so that we can understand why he might have written the poems he wrote.*

After students have learned the vocabulary words, distribute copies of the poem “The Poet and His Song” to the class. (Masters are provided at the end of this lesson on page 171.) Use the three-voice method to read the poem.

Interpreting the Poem

Now that students have read the poem and heard it read aloud, ask them what words or phrases they don't understand and then help them locate the information they need.

Now ask: *What do you think Dunbar wanted us to imagine as we read this poem? What feelings was he trying to get across to the reader?* To help students understand the language and meaning in the poem, have them put passages of the poem into their own words. You may need to help with this exercise by giving an example: “There are no ears to hear my lays” becomes “No one is around to hear me singing.”

Tell students: *Let's interpret this poem together.* First, look at the sounds that the poet uses in this poem.

- Have students read the poem silently again. Ask them to open their poetry journals and make a list of the verbs they find in the first two stanzas. The verbs are: *sing, gives, long, come, hear, herds, hear, lift, live, laugh, love, matters, and feel.*



TECHNOLOGY LINK

Dramatic readings of the Dunbar poems in this lesson, as well as other examples of Dunbar's dialect poetry and an interview with Dunbar interpreter Mitchell Capel, can be found on the Ohio Reading Road Trip Instructional DVD/videocassette.



“The Poet and His Song”

blight
dell
lays
prune
throes
throng
toil
unfaltering
unheeding
zest

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.



The three-voice method is the suggested reading technique for presenting the poems in this lesson.

1. Read the poem aloud to the class.
2. Give students time to reread the poem silently.
3. Ask a student to read it aloud again.

Discussion Questions

- In the first two stanzas, are short vowels or long vowels found more frequently? What consonant sounds appear most often? (Answers: short vowels; soft consonants like s, h, l, f, and v)
- In the third and fourth stanzas, what are the verbs? Are short vowels or long vowels found more frequently? (Answers: till, prune, put, labor, toil, sweat, dream, makes, takes, rise, swell. These words include more long vowels and hard consonants like t and k.)

Now move from individual words and sounds to the lines in the poem. Have students re-read the poem, noting words or phrases that indicate emotions or feelings.

- What words or phrases in the first two stanzas reveal the speaker's happiness? (Answers: joy, it gives me zest, all is well, I live and laugh and love and sing, life is sweet, love is long.)
- What happens in the last two stanzas? (Answer: The speaker is working hard, and sometimes all the things that he is trying to grow are destroyed by the sun or disease.)
- How did the poet change the words and sounds that he used in the last two stanzas to convey a different feeling than the first two stanzas? (Possible answer: The soft, easy-to-pronounce sounds of the first and second stanzas match the easygoing attitude of the speaker; the harsher sounds of the third and fourth stanzas match the topics of working and having to endure hardship.)

The following questions deal with imagery. You may want to pause here to review earlier conversations with students about similes and metaphors.

- According to the title, this poem is supposed to be about a poet. What is the speaker doing instead of writing poetry? (Students should be able to recognize that the speaker is a farmer, growing fruit and grain.)
- What unlike things are compared in this poem? (Answer: A poem is a song, and the poet is a farmer.)
- Are these similes or metaphors? (Answer: metaphors)
- How does the speaker extend the metaphor in the first and second stanzas? (Answer: No one is around to hear the song—read the poem—or tell the poet that he's doing a good job. But he is happy anyway, and so he continues writing his poems.)
- What is the extended metaphor in the third and fourth stanzas? (Answer: It's hard work to be a poet, and sometimes he works and works and doesn't get anything out of it. But because he enjoys writing, he finds comfort: "And so I sing, and all is well.")

Tell the class that, by using an extended metaphor to compare a poet with a farmer, Dunbar is able to create an image that we can understand and relate to things in our own lives. Sometimes people work very hard, but they do not feel that their work is appreciated or valued. Dunbar is saying that we can find happiness anyway, by doing a good job at something we love.

Remind students that readers of poetry should not assume that the poet and the speaker in his or her poem are one and the same. It might be best to assume that all speakers are anonymous. "The Poet and His Song" could be about any poet.



Sometimes, teachers begin to discuss a poem by asking, "What lines are confusing to you?" This problem-solving approach zeroes in on difficult passages, but it may not be beneficial to students' appreciation of poetry. Instead, help students learn to read more closely and build on what they already understand.

Write Now!

Have the class brainstorm a list of occupations that make tangible products and some of the products made. (If you need to explain this further, you can say that the products have to be things that you could put on a shelf in a store.) Help them come up with items that are specific and easy to visualize. Examples might include: a farmer grows apples and wheat; a computer programmer writes software programs; a jewelry maker makes rings; a carpenter builds tables.

Tell students that they will write a poem with a title similar to “The Poet and His Song.” Ask them to begin by choosing one of the occupations on the list. Then, ask them to write similes and/or metaphors for the occupation and the product in their poetry journals. Tell students that their poems can be as short as four lines or as long as they wish; these poems do not have to rhyme. Remind them that metaphors in poetry are often most effective when they make comparisons between things that are not truly alike and when they use images that the reader can easily visualize. For example, a carpenter might be like a river that has flooded its banks.

“A Carpenter and His Table”

I move my hands and arms across the land;
I make my cuts and grooves and plane the soil;
My goal, a stretch of ground completely smooth,
And flat, and ready to be set anew.

“When Malindy Sings”

Copy and distribute the “Dialect Poetry” handout found on page 176. You can give students time to read the handout in class or assign the reading as homework.

After all students have finished reading the handout, tell them that, just like today, book publishers in the early 1900s tried to publish the type of books that they thought their readers would buy. There are two more important things for students to know about book publishing during Dunbar’s era: poems written in dialect were extremely popular, and most of the people who could read or afford to buy books were white. Dunbar had heard the dialect of enslaved Africans from his mother, a former slave. He found great success with his poems that used this dialect, a well-known example of which is “When Malindy Sings.”

Distribute copies of “When Malindy Sings” to the class. (Masters are provided on pages 172–173.) Use the three-voice method to read the poem.

Interpreting the Poem

Tell students: *Reading dialect poetry can be like reading another language.* Divide students into groups of three or four and have them work together to “translate” the poem into standard English. Assign one student in each group to be the reporter and write down the translation. When all groups are finished, bring the class back together to form a consensus on the translated



TECHNOLOGY LINK

Show students the video segment entitled “Paul Laurence Dunbar Biography” on the Ohio Reading Road Trip Instructional DVD/videocassette.



TEACHING TIP

Other examples of dialect poetry include “Little Orphant Annie and Other Poems” by James Whitcomb Kiley, “Huckleberry Finn” by Mark Twain, and “Plain Language for Truthful James” by Bret Harte.

Other examples of Twain’s dialect writing include “A True Story” by Mark Twain, available online at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/huckfinn/truest1.html> and “Sociable Jimmy” at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/huckfinn/socjimmy.html>

version. If necessary, the reporters should make changes to their group's translation so that everyone in the class has the same one. Have all students copy the agreed-upon translation into their poetry journals. They will use this for reference when they interpret the poem.

First, identify the characters in the poem. Remind students that the poet might give the speaker of the poem a certain role or persona. Have students reread the poem (in dialect and/or their translation). Then, ask students these questions.

Discussion Questions

- Who is the speaker in the poem? (Answer: someone who lives or works near Malindy, because he or she hears Malindy sing all the time.)
- In the second stanza, where is Malindy when she sings? (Answer: in the kitchen.) Because this poem is written in dialect, what can we guess about who Malindy is or what kind of work she does? (Answer: She might work in the kitchen for a white family.)
- Who is Miss Lucy? Can we make any guesses from her name? (If necessary, tell or remind students that, in the black community, children were expected to address older individuals as Miss or Mister. Miss Lucy could be an older person, or she could be someone of higher social status than the speaker or Malindy. She might be someone in the family that Malindy works for.)
- What clues does Dunbar give us to indicate that Miss Lucy is trying to learn to sing? (Answer: She has a music book and she's practicing.)
- Based on our guesses about Malindy and Miss Lucy, what else might we guess about the speaker—especially since he or she is speaking in dialect? (Answer: The speaker might be another servant who works for Miss Lucy's family.)

Tell students: *Now that we have some guesses about the characters in the poem, we can look more closely at what the speaker is saying.* Divide students into groups of three or four. Have each group work together to summarize the poem by changing it into prose, two stanzas at a time. They may need help getting started, so if necessary, write the prose for stanzas 1–2 on the board. (Here are some suggestions, but as long as students capture the basic idea, any words will do.)

Stanzas 1–2: Miss Lucy, you might as well give up trying to learn to sing, because you'll never sing as well as Malindy.

Stanzas 3–4: People can learn to read music and carry a tune, but, Miss Lucy, you don't have Malindy's natural talent.

Stanzas 5–6: When Malindy sings, birds and musicians just give up because they can't compete with the beautiful sounds that come out of her mouth.

Stanzas 7–8: Malindy makes people tremble and weep when she sings religious songs.

Stanzas 9–10: Malindy's songs are like gifts to God, better than anything a band could play, more moving and holy than even church bells.

Stanza 11: Everyone be quiet so I can listen to Malindy singing!

To help students determine to whom the poem is addressed at various points, ask them:

- In which stanzas is the speaker clearly addressing Miss Lucy, either by her name or “you”? (Answer: stanzas 1–5)
- In which stanzas does the speaker seem to be talking to himself or herself? (Answer: In stanzas 6–10, the speaker seems to get lost in the description of Malindy’s singing.)
- Who is the speaker talking to in the last stanza? (Answer: Towser the dog and someone named Mandy)
- Who do you think is in the room with the speaker? (Answer: Mandy, Towser, and a child are likely to be in the room, but Miss Lucy might not be there.)
- Based on our guesses about the characters in this poem, do you think the speaker would actually tell Miss Lucy to “quit that noise and put that music book away”? If you were a servant working for Miss Lucy’s family, would you feel that you could say something like that to Miss Lucy?
- If Miss Lucy isn’t actually there in the room with the speaker, where do you think Miss Lucy is? Where is the speaker? Why would the speaker be talking to Miss Lucy if she’s not right there? (Answer: Maybe the speaker is at a distance from Miss Lucy, but he can hear her singing, and he wishes she would stop.)

Ask students to look at the rhythm of this poem and compare it to “The Poet and His Song.”

- Both poems are about singing, and both have a similar beat—each line feels like a series of heartbeats: lub DUB lub DUB lub DUB lub DUB. But in “Poet,” the lines are less lyrical—they sound less like singing. Ask: What makes the sound of “Poet” less like a song? (This may be a rhetorical question at this point.)
- Have students look at the length of the words in “Poet” and compare them to the length of the words in “Malindy.” Most of the words in “Poet” are short, one-syllable words. But in “Malindy,” more of the words are long, especially toward the end of the poem when the speaker starts talking about the beauty and spiritual quality of Malindy’s songs.

Finally, say to students: *We know that dialect poetry was written mostly as entertainment, but do you think Paul Laurence Dunbar was trying to tell us something with this poem?* Let students share their ideas freely. Be sure to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers to a question like this. Part of the fun of poetry is figuring out what it means to each of us.

Write Now!

Have students rewrite their poems from “The Poet and His Song” into a dialect that they use with their friends or one that they hear at home or in their neighborhood. Encourage them to spell words the way they sound. They should copy their finished dialect poems into their poetry journals.

“We Wear the Mask”

Distribute copies of the handout “We Wear the Mask.” When all students are finished reading, ask them what they’ve learned about Dunbar’s life from the different things they have read or viewed during the previous class periods. (You could replay video segments from the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* Instructional DVD/videocassette as a review.) Ask: *What do you think it was like to be Paul Laurence Dunbar?*

Now distribute copies of the poem “We Wear the Mask” to the class. (Masters can be found on page 174.) Use the three-voice method to read the poem. Before you begin to interpret the poem, refer students to the Poetry Glossary and be sure that they understand the vocabulary words that may be new to them.

Ask students: *How can we start to interpret this poem?* Students should remember some of the techniques that have been used for the other two poems: examining sounds, words, lines, and images; looking for metaphors and extended metaphors; understanding what the poet might have been feeling when he or she wrote the poem and what the poet might have wanted the reader to feel.

Have the students use these tools to begin to interpret the poem. Suggestions are presented below in a somewhat linear order, but you should let the students lead the direction of this discussion and do most of the interpretation themselves. Your role in this part of the lesson should be to guide them and help them make connections.

Examining Words and Sounds

This poem has many long vowel sounds and hard consonant sounds, like the last two stanzas in “The Poet and His Song.” In “The Poet and His Song,” these sounds are used to underscore words and images that describe unpleasant emotions (pain, hard labor, loss, failure). “Poet” also uses short, one-syllable words to create a quick rhythm as the poem is read. In contrast, “When Malindy Sings” includes many words with multiple syllables, and the poem has a more relaxed quality and a singing rhythm.

“Mask” also uses mostly one-syllable words, with the notable exceptions of “bleeding” and “tortured.” The poet uses a combination of long and short vowels, and hard and soft consonants, but nearly every line ends with the long “i” sound, the sound of a cry. In the first stanza of “Mask,” verbs like *grins*, *lies*, *hides*, *shades*, and *pay* start the poem with an image of despair.



“We Wear the Mask”

guile
myriad
subtlety
vile

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.

Examining the Poem Line by Line

What is the mask? The poet does not say “a mask”—he is talking about *the* mask, something very specific that is worn by a group of people.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,

The mask is constantly smiling, but it does not represent how the wearer feels. *It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—*

When you smile, your cheek muscles move. If the mask hides your cheeks, no one can tell if you are really smiling or not. Sometimes you can see a person’s smile in their eyes, too, but the mask hides that.

Why do people wear the mask?

This debt we pay to human guile;

“Guile” means deceiving someone to get what you want. The mask is the debt, or price, that people have to pay to get what they want.

With torn and bleeding hearts we smile/And mouth with myriad subtleties.

It is killing these people to smile and to speak with myriad (an indefinitely large number of) subtleties (niceties).

What about the other people who don’t wear the mask?

Why should the world be over-wise/In counting all our tears and sighs?

Why should “the world” (the people who don’t wear the mask) really know how much the masked people are crying and suffering? The rest of that sentiment might be, “They don’t care or don’t want to know.”

Nay, let them only see us, while/We wear the mask.

The suffering people will only let the world see them while they wear the mask.

So what does this mean for the people who wear the mask?

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries/To thee from tortured souls arise.

The people will continue smiling, but it’s torture for them.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile/Beneath our feet and long the mile;

They will sing, but their journey is a long, hard one.

But let the world dream other-wise,/We wear the mask!

“The world” will continue to have an unrealistic view of reality because the mask hides the truth.

Images: The Smile

The poet has chosen his words very carefully. The words “grin” and “smile” appear several times in the poem. But right away, he indicates that “the mask that grins and lies” is not really smiling. A grin can be an expression of happiness, but it can also mean “to draw back the lips and show the teeth, as in anger or pain.”

We know that it is not real happiness because the mask *grins and lies*—the grin is a lie. This is reinforced when the poem continues, “With torn and bleeding hearts we smile.” The speaker and the people he is talking about are smiling in spite of terrible pain. In the last stanza, he says, “We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries/To thee from tortured souls arise.” Again, the smile hides pain.

Images: The World

Who is “the world”? In general terms, this could be the larger population, from which the speaker feels alienated. For Dunbar and black people of his time, this may be a reference to the white-dominated American society that discriminated against black people and caused them to suffer—while, at the same time, whites celebrated (in their minstrel shows) the idea of a smiling, singing “Negro” who had been happy on the plantation.

Images: The Journey

In the third stanza, the speaker says, “We sing, but oh the clay is vile/Beneath our feet, and long the mile.” People who could not afford other transportation had to walk to get where they were going, and few roads at that time were paved. In this line, the poet has conjured the image of a group of people, walking a very long way to get where they want to go. The road that they are traveling is made of clay, which is a sticky type of dirt. If clay gets wet, it becomes very hard to walk on because it is heavy and drags at the feet of the person walking. They sing, maybe so that they will appear happy, but perhaps also to keep their spirits up.

Once students have interpreted the poem to your satisfaction by examining sounds, words, lines, and images and by looking for metaphors and extended metaphors, ask them to think about what the poet might have been feeling when he wrote the poem and what he might have wanted the reader to feel. The purpose of this question is to help students consider how the events in Dunbar’s life might have affected his poetry and also to enable them to relate to the poet and the poem.

Finally, ask students to consider a more universal reading of the poem, which even today has meaning for everyone. Ask students: *If the mask prevents people from seeing how you feel, what does it allow you (the wearer) to do?* Students should realize that the mask works both ways. It does keep others from seeing how the wearer really feels, but it also allows the wearer to hide his or her feelings and even take on a new personality. *This is very important.* The poem tends to make us think of the mask from the wearer’s point of view. Ask them: *What would you think if you were looking at someone who was wearing the mask? Could you tell what he or she was thinking or feeling? How would that affect your relationship with him or her? What larger significance does this poem have for its readers?*

Write Now!

Assign students to write a letter to you that answers the following questions: *Do you ever feel like you’re wearing a mask? Why? How does that feel? How does that affect your relationships with other people?*



More information about black-face minstrelsy can be found on the Ohio Reading Road Trip website at <http://www.ohio-readingroadtrip.org/dunbar.html>

Assessment

Students will interpret the poem “Sympathy” and write an essay that accomplishes two purposes:

1. The students will explain their interpretation of the poem and answer the following questions:
 - What do you think the poem means?
 - What is the metaphor in the poem, and how is it extended?
 - In your opinion, what is the primary emotion that the poet wants you, the reader, to feel when you read this poem?
 - What poetic tools and images does Dunbar use to make you feel this way?
2. Students will also complete nonfiction library and/or Internet research to answer the following questions: *Note: At least one source must be a book.*
 - What was life like for African Americans in Dayton in 1899, when this poem was written?
 - What do you think the bird and the cage are supposed to represent for the speaker?
 - Can you relate to this poem? Why or why not?



The Ohio Graduation Test's 6-point rubric can be used for assessment of writing skills. The rubric appears on page 183 of this Instructor's Guide.

Dialect Poetry

Dialect poetry is written in a language that is different from the standard variety in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. In the 1700s, Robert Burns, a famous Scottish poet, wrote many poems in the Scottish dialect. In the 1800s and early 1900s, dialect poetry was very popular not only in America, but also in many other countries. Italian poetry was written using the dialect of Southern Italy. English poets wrote in the dialects of the English countryside.

Reading dialect poetry on the page can be challenging because some of the words look like they could be several different words. For example, here is the first stanza of Burns' poem, "The Country Lass," in Scottish dialect and a standard English translation:

*In simmer, when the hay was mawn,
And corn wav'd green in ilka field,
While claver blooms white o'er the lea
And roses blaw in ilka beild!
Blythe Bessie in the milking shiel,
Says-"I'll be wed, come o't what will":
Out spake a dame in wrinkled eild;
"O' gude advisement comes nae ill."*

*In summer when the hay was mowed,
And corn waved green in every field,
While clover blooms white over the unmowed grass
And roses blow in every sheltered spot!
Blythe Bessie in the milking shed,
Says, "I'll be wed, come of it what will."
Out spoke a woman in wrinkled age;
"Of good advisement comes no ill."*

In early 1900s America, dialect poetry was often written in Irish, Southern, and African American dialects. This poetry was usually read aloud or published in newspapers as entertainment. The subjects of these poems were often humorous or sentimental. Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote dialect poetry in African American, Irish, and even German dialects, as well as the "Hoosier" dialect that was made popular by Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley.

African American dialect poetry was especially popular because of the similarity to **blackface minstrel shows**. These shows, which became popular in the 1830s, featured white people dressed in shabby clothes with black makeup on their faces and hands. Through singing, dancing, and joke-telling, the white actors portrayed black people as ignorant, cowardly, and foolish. These shows tapped into what was, at the time, Americans' nostalgia for the old South, idealized as a place of high values, social grace, and charm. The "plantation tradition" portrayed African Americans as happy, sentimental, and always ready to sing, dance, and have fun—often at their own expense. At first, blackface minstrel acts appeared between more formal theatrical performances. Over time, full-length minstrel shows went on tour, becoming one of the first forms of national entertainment in America. White people who had little or no contact with African Americans could easily have assumed that all black people were represented in the minstrel shows' characters. That stereotype continued in entertainment of all types (including radio, television, and movies) into the 1950s.

Today, we might think that these poems were also meant to make their subjects (Irish immigrants, poor Southern whites, or African Americans) look ridiculous or stupid. However, dialect poems were generally not intended to be offensive at the time. Now, most people understand that it is wrong and hurtful to make fun of other people based on their race or ethnic background.

Today, dialect poetry is still being spoken in homes all over the world and written in novels, plays, and poems.

“We Wear the Mask”

Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote both serious and entertaining poems. He also wrote in many other genres, including novels, short stories, plays, and newspaper articles. Dunbar apparently did not suffer from much racial discrimination while he was in high school; he was a popular student and had many black and white friends. He wrote poetry and articles for his school newspaper and gave many poetry readings to white, black, and mixed audiences in Dayton. Many of these early poems celebrated the accomplishments of black people.

After graduation, he was refused the type of job he wanted—working as a clerk in a law firm—because of his race. Dunbar took a job as an elevator operator instead, and continued to write poetry. Eventually his poems were noticed and championed by notable people of both races, including William Dean Howells, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington. Dunbar also wrote a series of letters and articles that were published in newspapers across America, including the *New York Times*. In many of his newspaper articles, he wrote about issues that affected African Americans, including higher education for blacks, the poverty of black sharecroppers in the South, and protests against race riots, lynchings, and injustice.

Dunbar also tackled these themes in his poetry. For example, the poem “The Haunted Oak” is written from the perspective of a tree that has been used for a lynching. Other poems captured the black experience in more subtle ways. “We Wear the Mask” is one of those poems. While its meaning is universal, it cannot be separated completely from its author and the times in which he lived. Although Dunbar was clearly writing about the black experience in the early 1900s, his talent as a poet was so great that everyone can relate to his message.

