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PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S TREATMENT OF
PLANTATION LIFE

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OWENS

1948

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S TREATMENT OF
PLANTATION LIFE

By

Jennie Lucile Owens

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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J.L.O.

DEDICATION

To my Mother and Father

VITA

The writer was born in Smithville, Bastrop County, Texas.

Elementary education was received in the public school of Smithville, Texas, and she was graduated from Douglass High School, Lawton, Oklahoma, in 1936.

In 1940 the writer received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Samuel Huston College, Austin, Texas.

From 1943 to 1945 she was employed as an elementary teacher in the Solomon M. Coles School, Corpus Christi, Texas.

The writer has also attended Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, and Howard University, Washington, D. C.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will deal with Paul Laurence Dunbar's treatment of plantation life. A background of the era of slavery and the post-slavery period is given to acquaint the reader with the institution of slavery and its aftermath, inasmuch as the literature which Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote portrays the life of the slave and of the freedman.

Chapter II relates the story of Dunbar's life, and will serve to explain where most of his subject matter was derived. Chapter III deals primarily with Dunbar's poems in Negro dialect which depict life on the plantation.

The writer did an intensive study of all of Dunbar's poems in Negro dialect and read all of his primary works. Due to a scarcity of material available the writer was unable to do more research.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to discover Dunbar's conception of plantation life through the study of his poems in Negro dialect depicting plantation sentimentalism, family life, social life, and the religious life of the slave and the freedman.

Scope of Study

The scope of this study will extend from the introduction of slavery into America in 1618 to the year of Dunbar's death in 1906. The writer read all of Dunbar's poems in Negro dialect, his primary works,

Negro histories, and criticisms by authorities in the field of Negro literature.

CHAPTER I

THE INTRODUCTION OF SLAVERY IN AMERICA

There have been several mistakes by historians in ascertaining the date of the introduction of the first slaves into America. Nevertheless, 1618 is believed to be the year of the landing of the first slaves in Virginia. There is strong evidence to back this statement. Stith, in his history of Virginia, states the year as being 1618. The ship Treasurer had evidently left England in the winter of 1618. There were fourteen Negroes aboard. Some historians believe the number of slaves on the Treasurer to be twenty, but the council of Virginia in 1623, stated there were "fourteen Negroes on board."¹

Whether there were fourteen or twenty, it is a fact that the colony of Virginia purchased the first slaves. After she reached the Virginia colony with booty and a certain number of slaves she was furnished with a new crew and abundant supplies for her next voyage.

Status of the Slave: — The slaves brought to America from Africa were from weaker tribes. African criminals were sold into slavery as the highest penalty, save death; and often this was preferred to bondage.²

When brought to America the slaves had no political or military rights. If found with guns or with weapons they were turned over to the constable, who was required to give them twenty lashes on his or her back. They were not allowed to leave the plantation on which they were held without a written certificate or pass from their masters. If they

¹George Williams, History of the Negro Race in America from 1619-1880, Vol. I (New York, 1883), p. 117.

²Ibid., p. 122.

hit a white man, they were punished with thirty lashes.

In criminal causes the slaves could be arrested, put into prison, tried and condemned, with but one witness against him and sentenced without a jury.

In a moral and religious sense, most of the slaves received little or no attention from the Christian church. On some plantations the white men provided a space in their church for the slaves to attend services. Many communities had their own churches with rude worship by slave preachers.

Some attempts were made to teach the Negroes whenever they were brought in contact with the church. In this way the Negro Sunday school gave the Negroes the first opportunity for education and their first school book was the Bible.¹

The conditions of the slaves varied according to the character, intelligence and temper of the masters; kindhearted, religious masters often felt a strong personal responsibility for their slaves. It was part of the system of slavery that the coarse and overbearing men and women should own slaves, and frequently treat them with extreme cruelty.

The conditions of the slaves varied also according to their employment. Most of them were field hands, engaged in the rudest and most toilsome labor. Some worked on river steamers as long-shoremen, and others as skilled carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, and plasterers. A number of them were busy as household servants. The most handsome and most promising slaves were used for household service, which was a highly

¹Booker T. Washington, The Story of the Negro, Vol. II (New York, 1909), p. 26.

prized privilege, because it brought better food and clothing.¹

The field hands worked long hours, from sunrise to sunset, and were kept up to their work by white overseers, and on large plantations also by Negro slave drivers armed with a whip. Men, women and half-grown boys and girls were engaged in field labor. Their houses were small, dark, and dirty cabins in the Negro quarters. The clothing of the field hands was rough, coarse, and scanty.

Some adult slaves were married, but most of the couples lived together by common consent. Family relations were disturbed by the sale of one of the mates.

The slaves usually had Sunday free, and a few days off for Christmas. At this time they would gather and tell of their experiences, tell stories, sing, dance and pray. Sometimes the masters would give them food from the "big house" and the slaves would have a party. Other than this their social life was limited because after the day's work was done they were very tired and had to retire in order to get up the next day before "sunrise."

There were some free Negroes. Some had purchased their freedom while others had been freed by their masters. Some ran away. This aroused antagonism in those who were still being held as slaves. They felt they were being mistreated and were tired of the conditions under which they were forced to remain as slaves.

Negro Insurrections: -- Until now the slaves had been silent under these conditions. There were several instances in which the slaves revolted against their masters in an effort to secure freedom. The three

¹Ibid., pp. 126-138.

most important of these insurrections were those led by Gabriel Prosser, 1800; Denmark Vesey, 1822; and Nat Turner, 1831.

Gabriel Prosser's insurrection was in Richmond, Virginia, in 1800. The plan was to march on the city in September, seize the arsenal, kill the whites, and liberate the slaves. This plan failed.¹

The second effort was tried by Denmark Vesey, a free Negro, in 1813 in Charleston, South Carolina. The conditions of the Negro slaves disturbed his mind so much that he talked rebellion and discontent to the slaves. He secured several followers and waited until July, because many of the wealthier whites were then at the seashore. This plan also failed.²

The most exciting of these disturbances came in August, 1831. Nat Turner, a Negro insurgent of Southhampton County, Virginia, feeling that he was ordained by God to liberate his people, organized a number of daring blacks and proceeded from plantation to plantation to murder their masters. Like the others, Turner's plan also failed.³

All three of these plans failed for the following reasons: (1) Lack of leadership; (2) Lack of cooperation among the slaves; (3) Lack of proper planning; (4) Inadequate supplies for carrying on the revolt.

The Civil War: -- Such revolts as these continued, and each like the previous ones was unsuccessful, so the blacks remained in slavery by law until 1865, at which time Abraham Lincoln, as President of the United States, began his fight for the mass freeing of all the slaves. As a

¹Merl R. Eppse, The Negro, Too, in American History (Chicago, 1939), p. 156.

²Ibid., p. 157.

³Carter G. Woodson, The Negro in Our History (Washington, D. C., 1943), p. 178.

result the South objected to his proposal and the Civil War, the war between the northern states and the southern states, resulted. The northern states won the war and as a result slavery was abolished and all persons held in servitude were freed through this issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865.

Before the end of the Civil War Congress had established on March 3, 1865, a Freedman's Bureau, in the War Department. The duty of the Bureau was to look after the interests of the emancipated Negroes, to secure for them labor contracts, and to settle their disputes, aiding them in building homes, in establishing schools and teachers and in carrying on a general educational program.¹

Status After Freedom: --- Soon after the Freedman's Bureau Bill was passed, Congress enacted a Civil Rights Bill in 1866 giving the Negro the same rights to property and the same standing before the law that other citizens had.²

The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States adopted on July 23, 1868, gave the Negroes a right to vote; however, the southern states rejected this amendment.

Good relations between some of the freedmen and their former masters still existed directly after the war. Some of the freedmen remained with their former masters and worked as sharecroppers, but many left the plantation in search for other work.

The Negro was first employed in the work of clearing the forests, and planting and harvesting the crops. Later, he was employed in build-

¹Merl R. Eppse, op. cit., p. 238.

²Ibid., p. 239.

ing railroads, in digging the coal and iron from the mines, in laying out the streets, and erecting the buildings in the cities.

After the Civil War, the education of the Negroes really began. The places for holding school were anywhere and everywhere, they could not wait for schools to be built as everyone was anxious to learn to read and write. In nearly every home there was a Webster's blue-back speller and a primer. Not only children, but men and women, were learning to read and to write.

The night school became popular immediately after freedom. After a hard day's work in the field, in the shop, or in the kitchen, men and women would spend two or three hours at night in school. A great many of them got their first lessons in reading and writing in Sunday school. Some of the teachers were white and some were Negro men and women who escaped from slavery, and, having gained some education in the North returned to the South to become teachers of their race. Money, books, clothing, and teachers were provided for the Negro youth.¹

After emancipation one of the most perplexing problems of the Negro was that of the social one. Jim-Crowism, lynchings, discrimination, poor housing, disease, poverty, and crime were problems they had to face. The white man felt that the Negro had no place in society.

Most of the Negroes were religious. It was their songs, prayers and religion that gave them the courage to continue their struggle. It was their Christian religion that gave to the world the spirituals.

There were some pleasures for them -- harvest festivals, corn-shucking, barbecues, and Christmas. These were times for general cele-

¹Booker T. Washington, op. cit., p. 138.

brations. The old folk would gather and sing and pray and discuss the old days, while the younger and active ones would gather in the largest cabin and dance and sing. There was often a wedding to attend when everyone would dress in his Sunday best, cheer the bride and groom, join hands, sing, dance, and eat.

The primary purpose of this chapter has been to acquaint the reader with the institution of slavery and its aftermath, inasmuch as the literature of Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote portrays the life of the slave and of the freedman.

The second chapter relates the story of his life and will serve to explain where most of his subject matter was derived.

CHAPTER II

THE LIFE OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

Birth and Later Life: -- Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872, the child of former slaves, Matilda and Joshua Dunbar. He received his formal education in high school. He was editor-in-chief of his high school paper, president of the literary society and in his senior year, the class poet. After graduating from high school in 1891 Dunbar began running an elevator, but continued to write poetry which he had begun doing at the age of seven.

He finished his first book Oak and Ivy in 1893 which attracted attention and brought with it a great number of friends. Through the efforts of his friends, Dunbar's poems came to the attention of William Dean Howells, who made him famous by introducing him to the world in Harpers Weekly.¹

His poems became famous and he toured England. The trip was unsuccessful in many ways and left him across the ocean without funds.

After he returned from England, Dunbar went to Washington, D. C., where he was made an assistant in the Library of Congress. The climate nor the work was good for him because of his weak lungs.

In 1898 he married Miss Alice Ruth Moore, but they soon parted. The year 1898 also found him in poor health, ill with pneumonia. Because of its after effects he went to Colorado to rest. His later years were spent in hopeless striving for health and money.

His Knowledge of Plantation Life: -- Dunbar was born in the North

¹Victor Lawson, Dunbar Critically Examined (Washington, D. C., 1941), pp. x-xi.

after slavery, yet he had an intimate knowledge of the folk ways of Negroes and of plantation life. He did visit the South in 1899, but by this time he had written most of his poems that concerned the plantation. He wrote some stories after 1899, The Strength of Gideon, and a book in 1903, In Old Plantation Days.

Being of pure African descent he acquired an understanding of the primitive Negro's superstitions, religious zeal, romance, humor and language. He was the only man of pure African civilization to feel the Negro life aesthetically and to express it lyrically. He gave our poetry, which had hitherto been faintly expressed in music, a full complete literary interpretation.¹

Most of his knowledge of plantation life came from his mother who was a former slave and who, throughout Dunbar's life, was his constant companion. His mother would tell him of her experiences as a slave and of the experiences of others. She would also sing songs to him that she sang as a slave.

Dunbar was very fond of old folk and would often invite them into his home and listen to their stories about times down south before the war. From this source he was also able to collect material for his works.

Dunbar's Technique: -- Dunbar's poems in Negro dialect are considered the best which have been written in America. His realism is better than any other dialect writer, especially the white man, because of his sincere feeling and not for the search of a novelty.

The majority of his poems in dialect are concerned with the

¹Sterling Brown, et al, The Negro Caravan (New York, 1941), p. 809.

plantation life of the Negro and point out the social problems of the Negro on the plantation. Most of the characters are Negroes.

Dunbar stood as the conscious or unconscious apologist of the plantation.¹

There was nothing foreign in his poetry, nothing imitated: it was all original, native and indigenous. Thus, he became not only the poet of his race alone, but the poet of all men everywhere.²

¹Ibid., p. 84.

²Lida Keck Wiggins, The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York, 1907), p. 135.

CHAPTER III

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S TREATMENT OF
PLANTATION LIFE

Many critics believe that Paul Laurence Dunbar has contributed the best body of literature which reflects the life of the Negro during and immediately after slavery. His technique was unique and his approach realistic. His treatment of plantation life was all-inclusive in that he discussed every aspect of the society: the social life, the family life, and religious life.

The epitome of plantation life came in "A Corn Song." The master was shown sitting on a wide veranda at twilight to which place the songs of the field hands were wafted. The slaves returned with light hearts comforted by their songs, from the fields of their day long labor. The master heard the music through the dust as the slaves drew near the cabin door and a tear came to his eye. Dunbar shows a perfect picture of pastoralism in this poem:

On a wide veranda white,
In the purple failing light,
Sits the master while the sun is slowly burning;
And his dreaming thoughts are drowned
In the softly flowing sound
Of the field-hands slow returning.

Oh, we hoe de co'n
Sence de ehly mo'n;
Now de sinkin' sun
Says de day is done

.....
And a tear is in the eye
Of the master sitting by
As he listens to the echoes low-replying
To the music's fading calls
As it faints away and falls
Into silence, deep with the cabin dying.¹

¹Lida Keck Wiggins, op. cit., "A Corn Song," p. 183.

Sentimentalism in Plantation Life: -- In the poem "Fishin'" Dunbar shows plantation sentimentalism. The master and missus were friendly folk who would let a slave go fishing on a rainy day, or send presents of food to the cabin, or come down to hear folk stories of the weasel and the bear. In the mornings when it looked like rain, Lishy would go to the big house:

An' ol' mastah say,
 "Well, Lishy, ef you t'ink hit's gwine to rain,
 Go on fishin', hit's de weather, an' I 'low
 we cain't complain.¹

"Crismus on the Plantation" also shows plantation sentimentalism. It was Christmas Eve and everyone was sad and gloomy because the master had told the freedmen they must leave the plantation and seek employment elsewhere because he could not afford to pay them, and that he was old and poor and the plantation must be sold. Then, Ben spoke up:

Look, hyeah, Mastah,
 I's been servin' yo' fu'
 Lol dese many yeahs,
 An' now, sence we's got freedom
 an' you's kind o' po' hit pears
 Dat yo' want us all to leave yo'
 cause you don't t'ink you can pay.
 Ef my membry hasn't fooled me,
 dat whut I hyead yo' say.

.....
 We gwine to wo'k dis ol' plantation
 fu' what evah we kin git,
 Fu I know hit did suppot us, an'
 de place kin do it yet.²

The old master stood there trembling and smiling through his tears and the place was full of cheers. Every one was gay and watched

¹Ibid., "Fishin'," p. 259.

²Ibid., "Crismus on the Plantation," p. 231.

the Christmas in.

After the Civil War and the slaves were freed, most of them deserted the plantation to seek employment elsewhere and to move to the cities. There was only one freedman that remained on the plantation and as he was strolling around the plantation one day he noticed the decay of the plantation:

De grubbin'-hoe's a rustin' in de co'nah,
An' de plow's a-tumblin' down in the fiel',
While de whippo'will's a-wailin' lak a mou'nah
When his stubbo'n hea't is tryin' to yiel'.

.....
Whah's de da'kies, dem dat used to be a-dancin'
Evry night befo' de ole cabin do.

.....
Gone! No one o' dem is lef' to tell de story;
Dey have lef' de deah ole place to fall away.¹

Family Life on the Plantation: — The cabins on the plantation were very shabby and not well built, the floors were dirt, and usually there were no beds. Some of the slaves slept on the floor and used for covering any old cloth the missus would send from the big house. Sometimes snow was on the meadow and hill, the branch was frozen, and the wind went around the cabin like a wandering spirit. No fire could keep the shivering children warm:

I kin stan' de hottes' summah,
I kin stan' de wettes' fall,
I kin stan' de chilly springtime in the plough-
land, but dat's all;
Fu de ve'y hottes' fiah nevah tells my skin a t'ing,
W'en de snow commence a flyin',
An' de evin' begin to sing.²

¹Ibid., "The Deserted Plantation," p. 180.

²Ibid., "Snowin'," p. 253.

The freedmen that remained on the plantation were usually share-croppers and were up and ready to go to work in the field before sunrise.

A mother speaks to her lazy son:

'Lias! 'Lias! Bless de Lawd!
 Don' you know de day's erbread?
 If you don' git up you scamp,
 Dey'll be trouble in dis camp.

 'Lias, don' you hyeah me call?
 No use tu'nin' to'ds de wall;
 I kin hyeah dat mattuss squeak;
 Don' you hyeah me e'ven I speak?
 Dis hyeah clock done struck off six --
 Ca'line, bring me dem oh sticks!
 Oh, you down, suh; you down --
 Look hyeah, don' you daih to frown.¹

In the same poem Dunbar shows a family on the plantation around the breakfast table and the mother is saying the blessing:

Lawd, have mussy on ouah souls --
 (Don' you daih to tech dem rolls --)
 Bless de food we gwine to eat --
 (You set still -- I see yo' feet;
 You jes' try dat trick agin!)²
 Giv' us peace an' joy. Amen!

After a day's work in the field the family returns home and waits for mother to prepare supper. When supper is ready they gather at the table but cannot eat until mother says the blessing:

When you set down at de table,
 Kin' o' weary lak an' sad,
 An' you'se jes' a little tiahed and perhaps
 a little mad;

¹Ibid., "In The Morning," p. 275.

²Ibid.

How yo' gloom tu'ns into gladness,
 How yo' joy drives out de doubt
 When de oven do' is opened
 An' de smell comes po'in out;
 Why, de 'lectric light o' Heaven
 Seems to settle on the spot
 When yo' mammy says de plessin'
 An' de co'n pone's hot.¹

Sometimes there were heart breaks on the plantation. In the hey-day of the plantation a slave might be sold up the river, thus breaking up the family. But the slave tells his lady he is unafraid:

Ole Mas' done sol' me down the stream;
 Dey tell me 'tain't so bad's hit seem,
 My lady, my lady.²

"At Candlelightin' Time" depicts a striking example of family life. After working all day in the cornfield the father comes home to find that supper is being prepared. When supper is over the children snuggle up to the father to make shadows on the wall and to hear stories of Mister Rabbit. The father also plays the banjo for the children and then they are sent to bed:

But when suppah-time is ovah an' de t'ings is cleahed away;
 Den de happy hours dat foller are de sweetes' of de day.
 When my co'ncob pipe is sta'ted, an' de smoke is drawin' prime,
 My ole 'ooman says, "I reckon, Ike, it's candlelightin' time."

Den de chillun snuggle up to me, an' all commence to call,
 "Oh, say, daddy, now it's time to mek de shadders on de wall."

.....
 So I jes' teks up my banjo, an' I plays a little chune,
 An' you see dem haid's come peepin' out to listen mighty soon.³

¹Ibid., "When De Co'n Pone's Hot," p. 171.

²Ibid., "Parted," p. 238.

³Ibid., "At Candlelightin' Time," p. 235.

In order to make the children behave themselves properly and go to bed at night the parents would tell them tales about "The Boogah Man:"

Woo-coo, Woo-coo!
 Hyeah him ez he go erlong de way;
 Woo-coo, Woo-coo!
 Hide yo' peepers 'hind yo' han';
 Woo-coo, Woo-coo!
 Callin' of de Boogah Man.

.....

Ef you loves yo' mammy,
 An' you min's yo' pop,
 Ef you nevah wriggles
 Outen Sukey's sllap;
 Ef you says yo' "Lay me"
 Evah single night
 'Fo' dey tucks de kivers
 An' puts out de light,
 Den de rain kin pattah,
 Win' blow lak a fan,
 But you need n'bothah
 'Bout de Boogah Man!¹

Social Life of the Slave: -- In Dunbar's poem dealing with Christmas on the plantation, we are made acquainted with the Negro's society in eating, in dancing, at Christmas celebrations, and in love-making. The leniency of the master and the free hours after dark gave the slaves opportunity to hunt the 'possum and the coon:

Dey'll be banjo pickin'
 Dancin' all night thro'
 Dey'll be lots of chickens,
 Plenty tukky too;
 Drams to wet yo' whistles
 So's to drive out chills.
 What I keer fu dizzles
 Faller on the hills?
 Jes' keep t'ings a-hummin',
 Spite o' col' and showah
 Chrismus day's a-comin'
 An' all de week is ouahs.²

¹Ibid., "The Boogah Man," pp. 268-69.

²Ibid., "Chrismus Is A-Comin'," p. 237.

Another example of social life on the plantation is depicted in "The Party." Here Dunbar told that everyone was dressed in his finest regalia — the women in their silks and satins and the men in their Prince Alberts. All the neighbors of neighboring plantations were invited. The hostess had prepared a most elaborate menu which included "'possum," coon, "sweet pertaters," egg pone, wheat bread and the like:

An' I'd lak to tell you 'bout it — what we had — but I ain't able,
 Mention jes' a few t'ings dough I know I hadn't orter,
 Fu' I know 'twill staht a hank'rin' an' yo' mouf'll 'mence to worter.
 We had wheat bread white ez cotton an' a egg pone jes' like gol',
 Hog jole, bilin' hot an' steamin' roasted shoat an' ham sliced cold —

 Dah now — well, we had hot chittlin's — now you's trying again
 to fall,
 Cain't you stan' to hyeah 'bout it? S'pose you'd been an' seed it
 all;
 Seed dem gread big sweet pertaters, layin' by de possum's side,
 Seed dat coon in all his gravy, reckon den you'd up an' died!

 Well, we danced dat way an' capobed in the most redic'lous way,
 'Twell de roostahs in de bohnyard cleahed deir th'oats and
 crowed fu day.
 Yo' ought to been dah, fu' I tell you evanthing was rich an'
 prime,
 An' dey ain't no use in talkin' we jes had one scrumptious time.¹

In the evenings, after work was done, was the time for banjo pick-
 ing. The family and neighbors would gather to hear the music and sing:

'Bout de time dat night is fallin'
 An' my daily wu'k is done,
 An' above de shady hilltops
 I kin see de settin' sun;
 When de quiet, restful shadders
 Is beginnin' jes' to fall, —
 Den I take de little banjo
 F'om its place upon de wall.

 An' my wife an' all de othahs,

¹ Ibid., "The Party," p. 194.

Male an' female, small an' big ---
 Even up to gray-haired granny,
 Seem jes' boun' to do a jig.¹

Sometimes in the evenings, lovemaking rewarded the workers on the plantation. The lovemaking took place along lover's lane:

Summah night an' sighin' breeze,
 'Long de lovah's lane;
 Frien'ly shadder-mekin' trees,
 'Long de lovah's lane.²

Malindy's songs, the hunt for the 'possum and the coon, the young and old folk around the cabin door, and dancing and singing were the pleasures of the plantation workers. There was always a cordial welcome:

Howdy, honey, howdy,
 Won't yo' step right in?³

Often the young masters would visit the cabins to ask the slaves to tell them stories about the weasel and the bear:

Whut you say, dah? huh, uh! chile,
 You's enough to dribe me wile.
 Want a sto'y; jes' hyeah dat!
 Whah' 'll git a sto'y at?
 Di'n I tell you th'ee las' night?⁴

The young missus would also go down to the cabin to hear tales. Sometimes the slave was tired and did not want the little white lady to worry her, but when the slave smelled the victuals she invited the missy

¹Ibid., "A Banjo Song," p. 148.

²Ibid., "Lover's Lane," p. 148.

³Ibid., "Howdy, Honey, Howdy!", p. 278.

⁴Ibid., "A Cabin Tale," p. 243.

in:

You des come fu' me to tell you a tale, an' I ain' --- well ---
 Look hyeah, what is dat I smell?
 Steamin' victuals? Glory!
 Come in, Missy, how do you do?
 Come up by de fiah,
 I was jokin', chile, wid you; 1

Religious Life on the Plantation: --- Dunbar's poems dealing with religious life on the plantation were mostly concerned with backsliding brothers and sisters:

Is 'bout dat Lucy Jackson dat was sich a mighty belle.
 She was de preachah's favored, an' he tol' de church
 one night
 Dat she traveled thro' de cloud o' sin a-bearing of a light;
 But, now, I 'low he t'inken dat se mus' 'a los' huh lamp,
 Case Lucy done backslide an' dey trouble in de camp.²

In some cases they were only tempted but did not backslide:

I done got 'ulegine, honey, an' I's happy ez a king;
 Evahting I see erbout me's jes' lak sunshine in de spring;
 An' it seems lak I do' want to do anothah blessid t'ing
 But jes' run an' tell de neighbors, an' to shout an' pray an' sing.

 Listen, what dat soun' I hyeah dah? tain't no one commence to sing;
 It's a fiddle; git erway dah! don' you hyeah dat blessid t'ing?

 I could cut a caper,
 I could giv a mighty fling
 Jes' right now, I's mo' dan suttain I could cut a pigeon wing.

 Didn't t'ink I could be tempted, but you lak to made me sin.³

Deacon Jones was not in favor of the young folk singing songs for

¹Ibid., "The Visitor," p. 259.

²Ibid., "How Lucy Backslid," p. 245.

³Ibid., "Temptation," p. 239.

hire, because Christians did not sing for money, neither was he in favor of the way they had dressed up the old songs. In speaking to the parson, he said:

Then I don't believe in Christuns
 A-singin' hymns fu hire
 1

Superstition on the Plantation: -- There was a superstition on the plantation that if there were a green Christmas many people would die before summer:

It's goin' to be a green Christmas,
 Des hyeah my words an' see:
 Befo' de summah beckons
 Dey's many'll weep wid me.²

¹Ibid., "Deacon Jones' Grievances," p. 160.

²Ibid., "A Christmas Folksong," p. 315.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In Chapter I a historical background of the era of slavery has been given. The ship Treasurer brought the first slaves from Africa to America in 1618, and landed in the Virginia Colony. Little or no attention was given the slaves by the Christian Church and few attempts were made to teach them to read and to write. The conditions of the slaves varied according to the character, intelligence and temper of the masters and also according to their employment. Most of the slaves worked long hours and their houses were shabby cabins in the Negro quarters. The clothing depended upon their employment: the clothing of the field hands was coarse, rough, and shabby, but the household servants were better dressed. The household servants also had better food to eat than the field hands. Many of the adult slaves were married, but most of them lived together by common consent. Family relations were disturbed by the sale of one of the mates. The slaves had little time for social life. Usually they had Sunday's free and the afternoons after the day's work was done. At this time they would gather, dance, sing, tell stories of their experiences, and pray.

There were some free Negroes, but the slaves felt they were being mistreated and were tired of the conditions under which they were forced to remain as slaves. The slaves revolted against their masters in an effort to secure their freedom. The three most important of these insurrections were those led by Gabriel Prosser, 1800; Denmark Vesey, 1822; and Nat Turner, 1831. All three of these plans failed; therefore, the blacks remained slaves by law until 1865 when Abraham Lincoln, as

President of the United States, began his fight for the mass freeing of all slaves. This resulted in the Civil War, which the northern states won, and as a result slavery was abolished and all persons held in servitude were freed, through the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865. Good relations between some of the freedmen and their masters still existed directly after the war. Some remained on the plantation, but many left. Education for the Negro began and everyone was interested in learning. The Negro was faced with discrimination, poor housing, disease, and poverty.

In Chapter II the life of Paul Laurence Dunbar was included although he was neither a slave, nor did he live in the South, but because he had an intimate knowledge of the folkways of the Negro and of plantation life. He received most of this information from his mother, who was a slave, and from other former slaves. His poems in Negro dialect are considered the best which have been written in America. His realism is considered better than any other dialect writer. Most of his poems in dialect are concerned with plantation life and point out the social problems of the Negro.

In Chapter III Dunbar is said to have contributed the best body of literature which reflects the life of the Negro during and after slavery. His technique was unique and his approach realistic. His treatment of plantation life was all-inclusive in that he discussed every aspect of the society: the social life, the family life, and religious life.

Dunbar's picture of social life shows the happiness of the Negroes in eating, in dancing, at Christmas celebrations, and in lovemaking. Melindy's songs, the hunt for the 'possum and the coon, and the conversa-

tions of the young and old folk 'round the cabin door were the pleasures of the plantation workers.

Dunbar depicts in the family life of the rural Negroes the family as it gathers for meals, the mother's saying the blessing, the father's making shadows on the wall and telling stories about the weasel and the bear, and the father's picking the banjo for the family.

In the poems concerning religious life Dunbar was mostly concerned with backsliding brothers and sisters. In some instances the old folk would complain about the young folk's dancing, singing hymns for hire and about the young folk's dressing up the old tunes.

Conclusion

In the main, Dunbar's picture of plantation life is considered an idyllic one with few protestations against the present status quo. In his poems in dialect Dunbar stood as the conscious or unconscious apologist of the plantation.¹ His not revealing the injustices and inhumaneness in the system of slavery has prompted the majority of unfavorable criticism of him as a writer.

While realism in American literature had its inception in Dunbar's time, there was little in his outlook to attract an ambitious young man, seeking, among other things to make a living with his pen. Few writers, for whom writing was a profession, ever brought out the true picture of of slavery and the aftermath. Dunbar, therefore, fell in with the prevailing literary fashion which did not stifle his talent for melodic

¹Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 78.

verse, humour, antithesis, and pathos. His temperament was said to be that of a humorous observer, and not a reformer.¹ His poems depicting life on the plantation were realistic, although the cruelties encountered by the slaves were excluded.

Because Dunbar wrote of his own people for whom he had a genuine affection, his portraiture is more dimensional than that of white writers of poems about plantation life; and his poems of rural Negro life strike many as more memorable than theirs. Praised by William Dean Howells as the first American Negro to "feel the Negro life aesthetically and to express it lyrically,"² Dunbar has long been known as the best known American Negro poet. His best dialect poetry has kept a charming freshness over the years; his picture of plantation life, though it may seem idyllic, is peopled, not with clowns, but with likable human beings.³

Dunbar's pastoral representation of plantation life, stressing only the pleasant part of the truth paralleled that of Joel Chandler Harris, J. A. Malcon, Irwin Russel, and Page and Gordon in its outlines and many details. Like them, what he said had its truths; like them, the element of plantation apology lay in what he did not say.⁴

James Edwin Campbell was one Negro who preceded Dunbar in effective use of dialect.

Campbell came into contact with Paul Laurence Dunbar and was known as one of his close friends. Whether Campbell

¹ Sterling Brown, et al, op. cit., p. 277.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 278.

influenced Dunbar or was influenced by him is not known. It is clear, however, that Campbell did write creditable poems in Negro dialect before Dunbar was known to the public.¹

Dunbar's Influence

Dunbar had many imitators in the dialect tradition. James Edwin Campbell, who wrote in dialect about Gullah life; James David Carrothers; Daniel Webster Davis, long popular as a reader and lecturer in Virginia; J. Mord Allen, who approached Dunbar in his mastery of the dialect medium; John Wesley Holloway, whose "Calling the Doctor" is well known; and others down to J. Mason Brewer's Negrigo (1933) have carried on the tradition with varying degrees of popularity. These handled the church life, the courtships, the big dinners, the gossip, and the hunting and fishing of the plantation Negroes. It is not truly folk stuff, because of its sentimentality and often forced comedy.²

¹Carter G. Woodson, The Negro History Bulletin, November, 1938, quoted in Victor Lawson, op. cit., p. 62.

²Sterling Brown, et al., op. cit., p. 277.

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