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Sample Lesson Plan: Dialect Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar
Grades 6-12

Objectives:

- Students will learn about dialect poetry and its place in the career of Paul Laurence Dunbar.
- The lesson will be completed with the aid of the PBO bindings database and includes a related homework assignment.

Materials:

- 1) A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.
- 2) A hand-out containing the four poems to be read in class. (The poems also are incorporated in the text of the lesson plan.)

Lesson

[Teacher's Note: Distribute handout so that students can see the dialect poems as they are read. In more advanced classes, students may volunteer to read stanzas or entire poems.]

Background

As an African American literary genius in late nineteenth-century America, Paul Laurence Dunbar engaged in a constant tug-of-war between honoring his heritage and pleasing a predominantly white readership. In some ways, he won. He was the first black writer in the country to make a living at his art and the first to attain national prominence as a poet. He also inspired scores of African Americans during and after his short lifetime. However, the ignorance of his versatility by those who focused on his dialect poetry and the criticism heaped upon him by those who believed he perpetuated a negative stereotype would haunt him to his dying day.

Dunbar's roots run deep into mid-nineteenth century slave culture. Both of his parents were former slaves, who had taught themselves to read and write. They passed to him the oral tradition of their people and powerful stories about their years living in bondage. Dunbar's mother particularly loved poetry, and inspired him to begin reciting and writing poetry as early as age six. By the time he was in high school, he was publishing his work regularly and becoming well known locally.

Dunbar worked as an elevator operator after graduation, and wrote poetry in his downtime. He self-published several of these poems in a book called *Oak and Ivy* in

1893. Friends helped him publish a second book, called *Majors and Minors*, two years later.

Like *Oak and Ivy*, *Majors and Minors* contained two different kinds of poems. Most were written in standard English and were the poems that Dunbar called “majors.” A few of the poems were written in the Kentucky black dialect of his parents and their fellow slaves, and were called “minors.” Although far outnumbered, the dialect poems drew the most attention, particularly from prominent literary critic William Dean Howells. Howells’ glowing review in *Harper’s Weekly* propelled Dunbar to international fame.

Lyrics of Lowly Life

[Go to <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the “Search by Keyword” link, and click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00346. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

Howells was so impressed with Dunbar’s work that he arranged for the New York firm Dodd Mead and Co. to publish Dunbar’s first mass-produced anthology, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. This book, published in 1896, also contained standard English verse interspersed with a few dialect poems, and the dialect poetry continued to gain the most attention. According to Howells, these poems gave the “lowly people”—black former slaves—a voice they previously had not had except in their own music.

Lyrics of Lowly Life combined work from Dunbar’s two self-published books with some new material, for a total of 95 poems. One of these poems, “When De Co’n Pone’s Hot,” is an excellent example of Dunbar’s dialect poetry:

DEY is times in life when Nature
Seems to slip a cog an' go,
Jes' a-rattlin' down creation,
Lak an ocean's overflow;
When de worl' jes' stahts a-spinnin'
Lak a picaninny's top,
An' yo' cup o' joy is brimmin'
'Twell it seems about to slop,
An' you feel jes' lak a racah,
Dat is trainin' fu' to trot--
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
An' de co'n pone 's hot.
When you set down at de table,
Kin' o' weary lak an' sad,
An' you 'se jes' a little tiahed
An' purhaps a little mad;
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 de spot,
 When yo' mammy says de blessin'
 An' de co'n pone 's hot.
 When de cabbage pot is steamin'
 An' de bacon good an' fat,
 When de chittlins is a-sputter'n'
 So 's to show you whah dey 's at;
 Tek away yo' sody biscuit,
 Tek away yo' cake an' pie,
 Fu' de glory time is comin',
 An' it 's 'proachin' mighty nigh,
 An' you want to jump an' hollah,
 Dough you know you 'd bettah not,
 When yo' mammy says de blessin',
 An' de co'n pone 's hot.
 I have hyeahd o' lots o' sermons,
 An' I 've hyeahd o' lots o' prayers,
 An' I 've listened to some singin'
 Dat has tuck me up de stairs
 Of de Glory-Lan' an' set me
 Jes' below de Mahstah's th'one,
 An' have lef' my hea't a-singin'
 In a happy aftah tone;
 But dem wu'ds so sweetly murmured
 Seem to tech de softes' spot,
 When my mammy says de blessin',
 An' de co'n pone 's hot.

You can see from this example that Dunbar tried to emulate the language of former slaves, and also to tell a little bit about their lives. This particular poem speaks to the importance of food, and certain foods in particular, in their culture.

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00348. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

As Howell’s suggested in his introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, music also was important in African American culture. Dunbar emphasizes the soulful aspects of heart-felt, impromptu music in the poem “When Malindy Sings,” one of his most famous dialect poems. Inspired by his mother Matilda’s habit of singing in the kitchen, “When Malindy Sings” first appeared in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* and was published again in Dunbar’s 1903 anthology, *When Malindy Sings*.

“When Malindy Sings”

G' WAY an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy—
Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on tryin'?
Ef you practise twell you're gray,
You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin'
Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F'om de kitchen to de big woods
When Malindy sings.

You ain't got de nachel o'gans
Fu' to make de soun' come right,
You ain't got de tu'ns an' twistin's
Fu' to make it sweet an' light.
Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,
An' I'm tellin' you fu' true,
When hit comes to raal right singin',
'T ain't no easy thing to do.

Easy 'nough fu' folks to hollah,
Lookin' at de lines an' dots,
When dey ain't no one kin sence it,
An' de chune comes in, in spots;
But fu' real melojous music,
Dat jes' strikes yo' hea't and clings,
Jes' you stan' an' listen wif me
When Malindy sings.

Ain't you nevah hyeahd Malindy?
Blessed soul, tek up de cross!
Look hyeah, ain't you jokin', honey?
Well, you don't know whut you los'.
Y' ought to hyeah dat gal a-wa'blin',
Robins, la'ks, an' all dem things,
Heish dey moufs an' hides dey faces
When Malindy sings.

Fiddlin' man jes' stop his fiddlin',
Lay his fiddle on de she'f;
Mockin'-bird quit tryin' to whistle,
'Cause he jes' so shamed hisse'f.
Folks a-playin' on de banjo
Draps dey fingahs on de strings—
Bless yo' soul— fu'gits to move 'em,
When Malindy sings.

She jes' spreads huh mouf and hollahs,
"Come to Jesus," twell you hyeah
Sinnahs' tremblin' steps and voices,
Timid-lak a-drawin' neah;
Den she tu'ns to "Rock of Ages,"
Simply to de cross she clings,
An' you fin' yo' teahs a-drappin'
When Malindy sings.

Who dat says dat humble praises
Wif de Master nevah counts?
Heish yo' mouf, I hyeah dat music,
Ez hit rises up an' mounts—
Floatin' by de hills an' valleys,
Way above dis buryin' sod,
Ez hit makes its way in glory
To de very gates of God!

Oh, hit's sweetah dan de music
Of an edicated band;
An' hit's dearah dan de battle's
Song o' triumph in de lan'.
It seems holier dan evenin'
When de solemn chu'ch bell rings,
Ez I sit an' ca'mly listen
While Malindy sings.

Towsah, stop dat ba'kin', hyeah me!
Mandy, mek dat chile keep still;
Don't you hyeah de echoes callin'
F'om de valley to de hill?
Let me listen, I can hyeah it,
Th'oo de bresh of angel's wings,
Sof' an' sweet, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,"
Ez Malindy sings.

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pbw00987. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

Some of the verse in Dunbar’s 1904 anthology *L’il Gal* emphasizes the importance of family. It also exhibits the humorous elements Dunbar often injected into his dialect poetry. A good example of this is “The Turning of the Babies in the Bed.” It should be noted that although the poem is written in first person, it is not Dunbar’s experience that

the poem relays. Although he was briefly married, he and his wife, the poet Alice Dunbar-Nelson, never had children.

“The Turning of the Babies in the Bed.”

WOMAN 'S sho' a cur'ous critter,
an' dey ain't no doubtin' dat.
She 's a mess o' funny capahs
f'om huh slippahs to huh hat.
Ef you tries to un'erstan' huh
an' you fails, des up an' say:
"D' ain't a bit o' use to try to
un'erstan' a woman's way."

I don' mean to be complainin',
but I 's jes' a-settin' down
Some o' my own obserwations,
w'en I cas' my eye eroun'.
Ef you ax me fu' to prove it,
I ken do it mighty fine,
Fu' dey ain't no bettah 'zample
den dis ve'y wife o' mine.

In de ve'y hea't o' midnight,
w'en I 's sleepin' good an' soun',
I kin hyeah a so't o' rustlin'
an' somebody movin' 'roun'.
An' I say, "Lize, whut you doin'?"
But she frown an' shek huh haid,
"Heish yo' mouf, I 's only tu'nin'
of de chillun in de bed.

"Don' you know a chile gits restless,
layin' all de night one way?
An' you' got to kind o' 'range him
sev'al times befo' de day?
So de little necks won't worry,
an' de little backs won't break;
Don' you t'ink case chillun 's chillun
dey hain't got no pain an' ache."

So she shakes 'em, an' she twists 'em,
an' she tu'ns 'em 'roun' erbout,
'Twell I don' see how de chillun evah
keeps f'om hollahin' out.
Den she lif's 'em up head down'ards,

so's dey won't git livah-grown,
But dey snoozes jes ez peacefill
ez a liza'd on a stone.

W'en hit 's mos' nigh time fu' wakin'
on de dawn o' jedgment day,
Seems lak I kin hyeah ol' Gab'iel
lay his trumpet down an' say,
"Who dat walkin' 'roun' so easy,
down on earf ermong de dead?"
'T will be Lizy up a-tu'nin'
of de chillun in de bed.

[Click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba02276. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

Although Dunbar frequently complained that his regular poetry was overlooked in favor of his dialect work, he continued to write dialect verse until his untimely death in 1906, at the age of 33. Much of his work reflected on this plantation days of his ancestors. The desire to express the stories of former slaves extended into Dunbar's other work as well, particularly this book from 1900, *In Old Plantation Days*.

One of the dialect poems that best exemplifies Dunbar's desire to tell the slaves' story appeared in the 1905 anthology *Howdy, Honey, Howdy*. The poem, called "The Old Cabin," describes some of the joys of living in a slave community:

IN de dead of night I sometimes
Git to t'inkin' of de pas',
An' de days w'en slavery helt me
In my mis'ry--ha'd an' fas'.
Dough de time was mighty tryin',
In dese houahs somehow hit seem
Dat a brightah light come slippin'
Thoo de kivahs of my dream.

An' my min' fu'gits de whuppins,
Draps de feah o' block an' lash,
An' flies straight to somep'n' joyful
In a secon's light'nin' flash.
Den hit seems I see a vision
Of a dearah long ago
Of de childern tumblin' roun' me
By my rough ol' cabin do'.

Talk about yo' go'geous mansions

An' yo' big house great an' gran',
Des bring up de fines' palace
Dat you know in all de lan'.
But dey's somep'n' dearah to me,
Somep'n' faihah to my eyes
In dat cabin, less you bring me
To yo' mansion in de skies.

I kin see de light a-shinin'
Thoo de chinks atween de logs,
I kin hyeah de way-off bayin'
Of my mastah's huntin' dogs,
An' de neighin' of de hosses
Stampin' on de ol' bahn flo',
But above dese soun's de laughin'
At my deah ol' cabin do'.

We could gethah daih at evenin',
All my frien's 'u'd come erroun',
An' hit wan't no time, twell, bless you,
You could hyeah de banjo's soun'.
You could see de dahkies dancin'
Pigeon-wing an' heel an' toe,--
Joyous times I tell you people
Roun' dat same ol' cabin do'.

But at times my t'oughts gits saddah,
Ez I riccolec' de folks,
An' dey frolickin' an' talkin',
Wid dey laughin' an' dey jokes.
An' hit hu'ts me w'en I membahs
Dat I'll nevah see no mo'
Dem ah faces gethahed smilin'
Roun' dat po' ol' cabin do'.

Activities

Activity 1 (Grades 5-8)

Dunbar's dialect poems were based on his parents' experience as slaves. For this activity, students will interview a parent or grandparent about an experience he or she had as a child and then write a poem about it.

Students who wish to do so should be given an opportunity to read their completed poems for the class.

Activity 2 (Grades 9-12)

For this activity, each student will choose a dialect poem and a standard English poem that Dunbar wrote and write an essay comparing and contrasting them. Many of Dunbar's poems are available full-text by linking from the PBO Web site (<http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/gallery/dunbar.html#bib>). Students also may use the bibliography on the Paul Laurence Dunbar gallery to select another book of his poetry from which to draw poems for comparison.

In comparing the poems, students should focus on:

- 1) Language
- 2) Subject/theme
- 3) Length
- 4) Cadence/rhythm
- 5) Voice (first vs. third person)

Students also should express what they believe Dunbar is trying to say through his poetry and how well he achieves that goal. Personal opinions also may be included, such as which poem they like better and why.

For additional teaching resources on Paul Laurence Dunbar, see:

The African-American Experience in Ohio: Selections from the Ohio Historical Society, The Learning Page, Library of Congress
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/collections/aaohio/langarts.html>

Classics for Kids: "Afro-American Symphony"
<http://www.classicsforkids.com/teachers/lessonplans/still/dunbar.asp>

Guide for Teaching Dunbar, Heath Anthology
<http://www.college.hmco.com/english/heath/syllabuild/iguide/dunbarp.html>

Harlem Connections: Teaching Walter Dean Myers's *Scorpions* in Conjunction with Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*
<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/winter99/west.html>

A Middle School Approach to Black Literature: An Introduction to Dunbar, Johnson, Hughes, and Angelou, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/guides/1978/2/78.02.01.x.html>

Paul Laurence Dunbar Teaching Suggestions, University of Dayton
<http://www.plethorum.org/dunbar/teacher.asp>

"We, Too, Sing America," Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/guides/1994/2/94.02.07.x.html>