Dunbar and Dove: Two Great Ohio Poets, Two Different Worlds

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Eliza Stennis-Wade, who died April 11, 2001, in memory of her most valuable support of all that I ever sought to accomplish.

Leon Stennis

Abstract

Dunbar and Dove: Two Great Ohio Poets, Two Different Worlds

The aim of this thesis is to acquaint readers with the very different circumstances under which two of Ohio's most successful African American poets achieved national and international fame for their poetry, and their contributions to history and literature in doing so.

In comparing the biographies and critical acclaims of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Rita F. Dove, this thesis provides the reader with insight into the lives of the poets, and the times in which they lived/live and wrote/write, and how their works have been viewed by critics. The thesis also looks at the aesthetics that guided these poets' writings and it traces the history of aesthetics in African American poetry since Dunbar's time. Readers are also given the results of a study of how Dunbar and Dove are covered today in their hometown newspapers in Dayton and Akron, Ohio, respectively, and a Dunbar scholar gives his perspective on the significance of these Ohio poets' contributions.

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Introduction

The Dayton, Ohio-born, 19th century African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Akron, Ohio-born, contemporary African American poet Rita Dove grew up in cities only about 180 miles apart, and both went on to receive national and international fame for their poetry.

But the lives and works of Dunbar, who achieved fame near the beginning of the 20th century, and Dove, who received fame toward the beginning of the 21st century have stark contrasts that have led, through an evolutionary process, to what appears to be new aesthetics in African American poetry. That is the context for this thesis - *Dunbar and Dove: Two Great Ohio Poets, Two Different Worlds.*

The lives and works of these Ohio poets have similarities, but the contrasts are more stark as we will see in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 2. The focus of the first chapter is on the biographies of the poets and the second chapter deals with their critical acclaim. The contrasts in the lives and works of Dunbar and Dove and the times in which they lived/live have significance for African American literature and American literature in general. Those contrasts and their significance is at the heart of my theme.

The focus of Chapter 3 is on the role of Dunbar and Dove in the evolution of aesthetics in African American poetry. The chapter notes that Dunbar dominated the post-slavery era of African American poetry and set the tone for what was probably the first clearly distinguishable black aesthetic in poetry with his focus on a humorous, carefree verse in Southern black dialect. The aesthetic of Dunbar's dialect poetry was clearly distinguishable from that of his standard verse poetry which was not widely

published during his lifetime. He reserved his standard verse for more serious themes. The acceptance of the aesthetic for Dunbar's dialect poetry would continue until the advent of the Harlem Renaissance in 1920s. During the Renaissance, poets like James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Cuntee Cullen, and Langston Hughes shifted black verse more toward standard English and an aesthetic that reflected, in a mostly polite way, African Americans' desire for racial equality. Hughes, who became the dominant poet of the Renaissance, was uncompromising in his belief that his poetry should focus on the everyday lives of ordinary black people – the waiter, the bus driver, the maid, for example. In Chapter 3, I also take note of the fact that the heavy influence of the Harlem Renaissance continued until the 1940s when Gwendolyn Brooks became the dominant African American poet. Though her works often focused on the lives of people who lived on the predominantly black South Side of Chicago (where she resided most of her life), Brooks's earlier poems focused on universal themes such as war, romance and family life. Like Dove, she became a stable fixture in African American literature and American literature in general after winning a Pulitzer Prize in poetry and serving as a poetry consultant with the Library of Congress (the title had changed to poet laureate when Dove served).

Also, in Chapter 3, I recall for the reader that after Brooks's dominance for several decades came the 1960s and the Black Arts Movement, led principally by Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones). The Black Arts Movement called for black poets to adhere to a Black Aesthetic, which was popularized by the late Addison Gayle in

his book by the same name. This aesthetic says black poetry and other black art should be judged by what it does to contribute to the uplift of black people. The period between 1960 and 1980 was one in which many black poets shifted toward more racial militancy and protest in their verse.

Additionally, in Chapter 3, I note that since the 1980s and 90s more African American poets have been moving toward aesthetics that espouse the use of more universal themes in their poetry and less race-oriented themes. I see Dove, who seldom uses African American dialect in her poetry, but often writes on black events and themes in a universal way, as the leading African American poet of the 1980s and 90s. She has influenced many young poets, especially after earning a Pulitzer prize and serving as poet laureate of the United States. Dove says Hughes and Brooks, along with a number of white poets, influenced her. While there are a number of African American poets who have shifted toward *new* aesthetics that call for more universality in their poetry, Dove was among the first to do so and gain wide acceptance for it. The statue she gained as poet laureate and her status as a Pulitzer Prize winner has contributed to the wide acceptance of her aesthetic.

In Chapter 4 of *Dunbar and Dove: Two Great Ohio Poets, Two Different Worlds* I examine, through a text study, how the hometown newspapers of Dunbar and Dove, in Dayton and Akron, Ohio, respectively, cover the poets. Some readers of this chapter may be surprised to discover, as I was, that both poets are not only held in very high esteem by the *Dayton Daily News* and the *Akron Beacon Journal,* they are given extensive and

objective coverage by the papers. The study can provide a wealth of insight to students, writers and scholars of African American literature.

In Chapter 5, Dr. Herbert W. Martin, a Dunbar scholar-in-residence and professor of English at the University of Dayton, who is known across the country for his authentic portrayals of Dunbar and recitations of his poetry, cautions in an interview that interpretations of the life and works of Dunbar and Dove should be arrived at with an eye on the times in which they lived/live. This is precisely what *Dunbar and Dove: Two Great Ohio Poets, Two Different Worlds* has done. Martin believes that both Dunbar and Dove have made significant contributions to African American literature and American literature in general. With this I agree wholeheartedly.

Leon Stennis

Chapter 1

Dunbar and Dove Biographies: Success and Tragedy vs. Success

Ohioans Paul Laurence Dunbar and Rita Dove, two of America's most famous African American poets, have both been successful in gaining a bi-racial, international readership for their poetry. But Dunbar, who grew up in late 19th century Ohio when most African Americans were newly freed from slavery, did so at a far greater personal cost. Despite his substantial literary talent and the success he achieved with the help of critics and numerous white friends, Dunbar, who died in 1906, still faced the imposition of many limitations and restrictions because of his race. On the other hand, Dove grew up in 20th century Ohio at a time when African Americans were beginning to see an opportunity to experience just about every endeavor possible. While she has on occasion encountered racism, Dove's career, for the most part, seems not to have been hindered by her race. She has seized the opportunity to win acclaim for her poetry and to develop what seems to be a more favorable and lasting aesthetic for her work.

A look at the Dunbar and Dove biographies will reveal clearly that Dunbar's has been marked by success and tragedy while Dove's has been marked largely by success. The two Ohio poets lived in two different worlds, figuratively speaking, and the difference in the impact that this had on their lives and their works is tremendous. Despite the many breakthroughs that Dunbar made for African American poetry and African American literature in general, it would take nearly a century for more favorable, less race-oriented African American aesthetics to evolve in poetry. And Dove, during the latter part of the 20th century, was leader of the pack of poets personifying these aesthetics.

The breakthroughs that Dunbar accomplished in his time, according to Joanne M. Braxton, editor of the *Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, include "six volumes of poetry – including Oak and Ivy in 1893 - as well as novels, librettos, songs, and essays..." (iv). He also published a number of dramas and short stories.

My challenge in this chapter is twofold: to help the reader understand what shaped (or is shaping in the case of Dove) the lives and works of these two successful poets and to begin a linkage from that "shaping" to what I will have to say in other chapters about their critical acclaim, their role in the evolution of aesthetics in African American poetry, the favorable coverage given today by their hometown papers in Dayton and Akron, Ohio, and a conversation about the poets with another Ohio poet.

When Dunbar died at the age of 33, his spirit had been broken by problems in his personal life and his career. I will help the reader see that while the circumstances under which one African American from Ohio – Dunbar - had to live and write were tragic in another era, or *world*, his life and work laid the initial framework that made it possible for another African American from Ohio - Dove – and others to win national and international acclaim for their works and not have their lives and careers permanently marred by racism.

This chapter also begins my effort to show that while the circumstances surrounding Dunbar were tragic his contributions to African American and American literature are nonetheless monumental.

When Dunbar died in Dayton, after a professional literary career that lasted only about 13 years, his largely white reading audience and critics had refused to accept his

verse in standard English. His marriage had failed, he was an alcoholic and he was afflicted with tuberculosis. Today, after a professional literary career that started more than 20 years ago, Dove is still received with great acclaim by general readers of her poetry and critics alike. She has received some of the highest honors in poetry, including the Pulitzer Prize, and she has served as poet laureate of the United States.

Explore with me the two different worlds of these Ohio-born poets as I look at their family backgrounds, growing up experiences, education, personalities, marriages, careers, and works. These aspects of the poets' lives has had a significant impact on them. Dunbar was born on June 27, 1872, just nine years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, in Dayton, to former slaves Joshua and Matilda Glass Murphy Dunbar. This was at a time when newly freed African Americans were seeking new opportunities for freedom, economic uplift, and justice in record numbers in the North. Northward migration by black Americans was causing considerable unrest among many white citizens in both the North and South because of whites' uncertainty about the economic and political implications of freedom for blacks. The situation was at best tension-filled. Felton O. Best addresses the situation this way in *Crossing the Color Line: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar:*

> Racial hostility against African-Americans intensified in the North after the Civil War as a result of the increased black population within various states. The most blatant hatred came from lower-class white immigrants who felt that the newly freed blacks would work for lower

> wages in menial positions – thus presenting an economic threat to them (9).

According to Virginia Cunningham in *Paul Laurence Dunbar and his Song*, after the election of President Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, in 1884, rumor had spread that he would annul the Emancipation Proclamation "and Negroes scurried frantically to the North" (14). She notes, however, "the rumor was scotched at last, but there were more Negroes in the North than before to compete for the menial jobs allotted to them" (14). According to the *Dayton Daily News*, "As early as 1798, just two years after Dayton was founded, tax records refer to 'William Maxwell and his negro'" coming into Dayton Township" (4A). Ohio's closeness to Southern states drew freed blacks and fugitive slaves to the state before the Civil War. It drew Dunbar's parents to Dayton after the war. "But in those early days, blacks weren't particularly welcomed. In 1804, the first of a series of Black Laws were passed in Ohio that restricted blacks' civil rights," notes *the Dayton Daily News* (4A).

There was a constant effort to discourage blacks from being aggressive in the exercise of their new freedom as citizens in both the North and South and the ultimate weapon used was lynching. It was commonplace in both the North and South during this period. In 1897, for example, just as Dunbar was rising to fame, a black man who admitted sexually assaulting a widow in Urbana, Ohio, near Columbus, the state's capital, was lynched. He was lynched by a mob of citizens after receiving a 20-year prison sentence. The citizens were able to commit the heinous act of violence because

of neglect of duty on the part of the mayor, state militia, and county sheriff. That case received national attention. Part of an account of the story carried in the *New York Times* on June 5, 1897, is as follows:

> Two men were killed and two fatally wounded and seven others less seriously injured at 2:30 o'clock this morning [June 4] by shots fired by a company of the Ohio National Guard in defense of Charles Mitchell, a negro in jail at this place [Urbana]. In spite of the militia the mob finally entered the jail and lynched the prisoner. All of the victims were innocent citizens who were spectators of the scene of excitement. In addition to this list, it is feared that Mrs. Eliza Gaumer, who was assaulted by the negro, will not recover, and several of the injured are in a serious condition. While the past two nights and days witnessed scenes of lawlessness and bloodshed, yet the feeling at no time has been as intense as it is here to-night. The body of Mitchell was exposed all day in a rough coffin, and it intensified the feeling among the crowds who viewed it. The bodies of the citizens who were killed were tenderly cared for...(1A).

"In the year 1892 alone there were 255 known cases of lynching, mainly of Negroes," Benjamin Brawley writes in *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People* (6). "All told,

the period was one of the darkest in the history of the race in the country." Gossie H. Hudson writes in the essay "The Crowded Years: Paul Laurence Dunbar in History" that "accounts printed in the daily press show that 1,665 blacks were lynched in the decade ending 1900" (227). This is proof that the time in which Dunbar lived and wrote was precarious for all black people. For Dunbar, who had high visibility as a writer, the situation might have been even more precarious if he had been more aggressive in his poetry on issues of freedom and justice for his people.

In "The Haunted Oak," one of Dunbar's many non-dialect poems, which received little attention until after his death, Dunbar wrote courageously about the brutality of lynching and the shameful participation of respected citizens, as these lines attest in the *Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*:

> Oh, the judge, he wore a mask of black,
> And the doctor one of white
> And the minister, with his oldest son,
> Was curiously bedight (Braxton, 219-20:41-44).

Dunbar would write more than two thirds of his serious poems in standard verse but only his humorous and light-hearted poetry in 19th century African American dialect, which portrayed the newly freed slaves as a fun-loving, happy-go-lucky lot, were of interest to the majority of the white reading public, critics, and publishers. The newly freed slaves, who sought laughter and entertainment despite the fact that most of them could not read, also appreciated dialect poetry. They were entertained by the readings.

Dove was born 54 years after the death of Dunbar about 180 miles northeast of Dayton on Aug. 28, 1952, in Akron, a daughter of Ray A. and Elvira E. Hord Dove. She was born at a time when the migration of African Americans to the North had slowed

considerably and the racial climate in Ohio had improved considerably. But it was a period just before the advent of the civil rights movement that began in 1955. That movement would lead to sweeping changes in the racial customs and practices of both whites and blacks in the South. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, a popular military commander in World War II, would become president in 1953, the year following Dove's birth. In the aftermath of World War II, which had ended in 1945, the country had a love affair with the automobile and many other consumer goods. America's economy was booming and so was Akron's rubber industry.

But despite the fact that slavery had ended nearly a century ago African Americans, in the 1950s and 60s, in both the North and South, were being treated as second-class citizens at best when it came to economic opportunity. However, rigid racial segregation in education, housing, and public facilities was not the law in most of the North as it was in the South. So the migration of African Americans to the North from the South, which had begun after the end of the Civil War and continued during the lifetime of Dunbar, had also continued into the era in which Dove was born. So while Dunbar and Dove lived in and pursued careers in two different eras those eras were not entirely different. As we shall see their worlds intersected, so to speak, and still do today.

Dove learned about the great migration of African Americans from the South to the North from her maternal grandparents who had migrated North, just as Dunbar learned about what slavery was like from his former-slave parents. She writes about this in *Rita Dove*: *The Poet's World*:

> I spent my childhood and youth in Akron, Ohio, as a first generation middle-class black child. Both sets of grandparents were blue collar workers who had moved Up North as part of the Great Migration of rural southern blacks to northern urban centers during the 1910s and '20s. My parents were the first in their working class families to achieve advanced degrees. My mother graduated from high school at the age of sixteen with a full scholarship to Howard University but her parents decided their daughter was too young to be sent into the wide world, so she attended the local secretarial school. My father earned a master's degree in chemistry from the University of Akron. (He also completed all the course work toward the doctorate, but could not afford to take the time off from his menial job in order to write his dissertation.) (75).

More than a half century after Dunbar's death, it would be Dove's ties to her middle class family in Akron, stories told by her grandparents who migrated North, and her belief that there were no racial barriers to her becoming successful, that would shape her life and work. Dove's outlook during her growing up years was quite a contrast to Dunbar's. It was basically Dunbar's status as the son of poor former slaves who migrated North to Dayton, the stories in dialect that they told about slavery, and the blatant limitations that society placed on him because of his race that shaped his life and work.

Just as it was Dunbar's knowledge of the lives and language of the slaves that made his Southern black dialect poetry immensely popular, it was Dove's writing about the lives of her migrant grandfather and grandmother in her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Thomas and Beulah* book that increased her standing in the literary world. Although he included both dialect and standard English verse in his books, it was his dialect pieces that received the greatest acclaim. Dunbar's second and third books of poetry, *Majors and Minors* and *Lyrics of the Lowly Life*, propelled him to fame in 1896. He had published his first book, *Oak and Ivy*, in 1892. In *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar* Joanne M. Braxton lists all of Dunbar's more than 400 poems in six books, based on the 1913 edition of *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar.*

Braxton's revised edition of the 1913 text also has "miscellaneous" and "added poems" sections. The books of poetry included in her work include combined volumes. The titles of the books include *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar* are *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, *Lyrics of the Hearthside*, *Humor and Dialect*, *Lyrics of Love and Laughter, Lyrics of Love and Sorrow*, and *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow.* The added poems section includes works that were not published in the 1913 *Complete Poems* book.

Dunbar's novels include *The Uncalled,* 1898; *The Love of Landry*, 1900; *The Fanatics*, 1901; and *The Sport of the God*, 1902. The poet's three books of short stories include *Folks from Dixie*, 1898; *In Old Plantation Days*, 1903; and *The Heart of Happy Hollow*, 1904. Dunbar also had a number of his musical works published and wrote prose pieces on various subjects for a number of magazines and newspapers.

It was Dove's third book of poetry, *Thomas and Beulah*, published in 1986, some 90 years after Dunbar's rise to fame, that earned her a Pulitzer Prize in 1987 and established her as a ranking American poet. She had already published two other books of poetry, *The Yellow House on the Corner* in 1980, and *Museum* in 1983. Dove's other individual books and the years that they were published include *Grace Notes*, 1989; *Mother Love*, 1995; and *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, 1999. She has also published a collections of short stories, *Fifth Sunday*, 1985; a novel, *Through the Ivory Gate*, 1992; a collection of three of her books, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, *Museum*, and *Thomas and Beulah*, in *Selected Poems*, 1993; a verse drama, *The Darker Face of the Earth*, 1994; and a collection of essays, *The Poet's World*, 1995

Just as Dunbar and Dove's works were influenced by their overall growing up environments it was probably influenced more sharply by their parents and their family's economic situation. Dunbar's father, Joshua, escaped from slavery in Kentucky via the Underground Railroad and served in the 55th Massachusetts Regiment of the Union Army during the Civil War, according to Braxton (x). According to Best, Joshua taught himself how to read with a copy of the alphabet that he obtained from his owner during his slavery (11). Despite the fact that he had an occupation as a plasterer in the military, Joshua was unable to find steady work in Dayton. "The family's lack of money, especially considering the fact that Paul's little sister, Elizabeth, was constantly ill and in need of medicine, led to repeated confrontations between Matilda and Joshua" according to Best (14). In contrast, Dove's father, Ray, could find work over a half century later in Akron, albeit menial. These two conditions for males as heads of households, in two

different eras or two different worlds, would help weaken a family (Dunbar's) in one era, and on the other hand strengthened one (Dove's) in another era. The fact that Dove's father was not working in the field for which he was trained notwithstanding, he was still able to maintain stability for his family because of his personal determination and his apparent belief that the situation would eventually change. Dunbar's father apparently saw no hope for change. These occurrences, personified by the roles of Joshua Dunbar and Ray Dove, epitomizes to some extent what has happened to families over the centuries with the absence or presence of fathers.

Born in Fayette County, Ky., Matilda Dunbar had come to Dayton after marrying Joshua, who would later give up hope of finding work, desert his family, and live in a soldier's home for the remainder of his life. His father's deserting the family notwithstanding, Dunbar was never openly critical of him. He admired his father as a solider who served his country. Best says, "The social forces affecting Dunbar's early life, excluding his parents and church, were not positive" (13). Best adds:

> The inability of black men in Dayton to find permanent jobs placed the major financial responsibilities on their spouses, thus causing low self-esteem within black men, and in many cases the breakup of families as a result of economic hardship...Dunbar's father's inability to earn a consistent income equivalent to that which his wife earned sparked frequent arguments (13).

In the absence of her husband, Matilda Dunbar took in washing to keep food on the table. Paul and his two half brothers, William and Robert, took on odd jobs to supplement her income. Dunbar's half brothers were Matilda's children from a previous marriage to Wilson W. Murphy of Louisville, Ky. Joshua Dunbar also had roots in Kentucky. He was born in Garret County, Ky. Paul was one of two children born to Joshua and Matilda Dunbar. Elizabeth, Paul's sister, died when she was two years old, according to Best (11).

Unlike Paul Dunbar's parents, only one of Dove's parents was born in the South. Her father was, but her mother was not, although her mother's parents were. Like Joshua Dunbar, Dove's father is a war veteran. He served with the Army overseas in World War II. Unlike Dunbar's parents, Dove's parents never divorced. Rita is the second of four children born to Ray and Elvira Dove. Her other siblings are Ray Thomas, two years older, Robin, six years younger, and Rhonda, 10 years younger.

Although the employment situation was not as bleak in Akron for Dove's father in the 1940s as it was for Joshua Dunbar in Dayton in the 1870s, Dove was not happy with menial employment as an elevator operator. He had earned a degree in chemistry, graduating second in his class from the University of Akron. While Joshua Dunbar's departure from his family served as a major source of instability for the Dunbar family, Ray Dove's continuing ties with his family, served as a pillar of strength to the Dove family. Here we see two African American men, Joshua Dunbar and Ray Dove, who served their country in war in two different eras. Both would later be stung by the discrimination that they faced, and the will or lack of will to endure this stigma of race

would have a significant psychological impact on the lives and careers of their poet offsprings.

Paul Laurence Dunbar witnessed a troubled relationship between his parents, which eventually resulted in their divorce in January of 1876. Yet, young Dunbar was not hostile toward his father. "Despite family hostilities, Paul Laurence Dunbar, by 1900, commemorated his father in a poem titled "The Colored Soldiers (1900)," Best notes (14):

> I would sing a song heroic
> Of these noble sons of Ham
> Of the gallant colored soldiers
> Who fought for Uncle Sam! (Braxton, 50:4-8)

Best seems to suggest that Joshua Dunbar even physically abused his wife when he says that "quite possibly, Paul Dunbar's later difficulties in behaving properly in his own marriage had roots in these childhood experiences" (14). Nevertheless, young Dunbar is portrayed by Best as showing no anger or resentment toward his father. "Upon leaving his family Joshua moved to the Soldier's Retirement Home in Dayton where he lived off his Civil War pension. Paul visited his father regularly at this residence until his death," Best says (14). But the absence of Dunbar's father may have affected the poet in more subtle ways. Among other things, it may have contributed to his drinking problem or it may have been a factor in his inability to maintain a stable relationship with his wife.

In contrast, Dove's father provided his family with considerable stability. While Ray Dove's return to Akron after World War II was unsettling in terms of employment, many other things went well for him. After his service with the Army during the war Dove married and completed work toward his degree. "To his surprise, he said, he found

the doors to the corporate laboratories open to anyone - anyone, that is, except someone with a brain and black skin," Sarah Vradenburg writes in the *Akron Beacon Journal Magazine* (17). "For Dove, the only doors that were open were on the freight elevator he operated nights at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. to support his growing family." As Rita Dove has noted, her father did eventually get hired as a chemist by Goodyear and eventually earned a master's degree in chemistry. He retired from Goodyear with 45 years of service in 1986, six years after his daughter had begun her professional literary career and a year before she would receive the Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah* in 1987.

Unlike Rita Dove during her growing up years, Dunbar was never as close to his father as he was to his mother, especially after his father deserted the family. He remained very close to his mother, however, until his death. Best gives this account of Joshua and Matilda Dunbar's ambitions for their son, Paul:

> The name "Paul" was elected because Joshua argued, "Matilda Madam, don't you know that the Bible says that Paul was a great man? This child will be great some day and do you honor."
>
> Eager to fulfill the prophetical words of her husband, Mrs. Dunbar learned to read so she could eventually tutor her son. For a brief period she attended night school. A central part of her reading was the Bible and during certain moments she enter-

> tained the idea of a young Paul becoming an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church minister, while at other moments she dreamed of him as a prominent attorney. Matilda wanted to do all she could to assist her son in utilizing his talents to his fullest potential. She taught young Dunbar to read at the age of four by teaching him the alphabets and phonetics (12-13).

When they were older Dunbar's stepbrothers left Dayton to find jobs in Chicago, leaving Dunbar to take care of his mother after his father left to live in the Soldier's Home.

Despites contrast in the stability of their families, both Dunbar and Dove have religious backgrounds that date back to their early years. Both were affiliated with churches that have similar teachings, teachings that stem from the beliefs of John Wesley, the revivalist preacher and founder of Methodism. Dunbar was affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was formed by Richard Allen, a former slave in the 1800s in Philadelphia, in a dispute with the white Methodist Church. Dove's family is still affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, a denomination that was formed as result of African Americans' dissatisfaction with the white Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City in the 1800s.

As I suggested earlier, we'll see that the stability which we are seeing in Rita Dove's career and marriage was probably inspired to some degree by the experiences of her early life with her family. And the instability that Dunbar faced in his marriage and

career, his successes notwithstanding, was probably influenced by the impact of his early life with his family.

Both Ray and Elvira Dove were National Honor Society members in high school in Akron. Ray graduated from Akron's East High School and Elvira from Akron's West High School. Elvira "had dreams of a nursing career, but at 16 was told she was too young to attend the hospitals' schools, all of which had an age limit of 18," according to the Sarah Vradenburg in the *Akron Beacon Journal Beacon Magazine* (15). "She said she attended Hammel Business College for a year and worked at St. Thomas Hospital and Akron City Hospital as well as at a dress shop in downtown Akron." Elvira Dove chose to forego a nursing career so she could focus attention on her home and family.

As young children, both Dunbar and Dove grew up in families of storytellers. "Sometimes the thoughtful boy heard his father speak of the days of the war, of his own regiment or of the attack of the Fifty-fourth on Fort Wagner," Brawley says of Dunbar (14). "Again he listened eagerly to stories of old Kentucky, unconsciously impressed by his mother's inimitable phrasing." Brenda Shaughnessy says in *Publishers Weekly*:

> ...Dove recalls reading voraciously and listening
> to her relatives spin tales and reminiscences,
> teaching the young girl much about timing and
> word choice, creating suspenseful narratives and
> changing the tales to fit the occasion (48-49).

These early parental and family influences on the poets played similar roles in their excelling in high school, and in the case of Dove, excelling in college, graduate

school and study in Germany. Both Dunbar and Dove were inspired at a young age by their mothers' love of poetry. Dove, who wrote an Easter poem called "The Easter Bunny with the Droppy Ear" during a free-choice period in the fourth grade, recalls that as a child and teenager her parents allowed her complete freedom when it came to reading. "The important thing for me was that learning was freedom. I could read any book I wanted, go any where I wanted through that book," she told Tom Brazaitis in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine* (16). "Learning opened me up to all the possibilities of the world. That's the way learning was presented in our house. My father kept a dictionary next to the chair he sat in when he came home from work."

Dove has written about her parents and other family members in a number of her poems. She recalls in *Rita Dove: The Poet's World*, "My father had established a vegetable garden in which he'd toil all spring and summer, until his Cherokee blood betrayed him by August, turning his face, forearms, and shins an angry brick color" (20). In her poem "Adolescence – III" from *The Yellow House On the Corner*, Dove remembers her growing up years with her parents:

> With Dad gone[to work], Mom and I worked
> The dusky rows of tomatoes.
> As they glowed orange in sunlight
> And rotted in shadow, I too
> Grew orange and softer, swelling out
> Starched cotton slips (Dove, *SP,* 43:1-5).

The poem concludes:

> Over his shoulder, I see my father coming toward us:
> He carries his tears in a bowl,
> And blood hangs in the pine-soaked air (Dove, *SP,* 43:21-23).

After reading a lot about Dove's background in newspaper and magazine articles and in her own very short autobiography one can easily get a sense that while she has great admiration for her father, she did not get from him as much about his inner feelings about life as she did from her mother. She, for example, did not know doing her early years about the harsh racial discrimination that he faced in the workplace. In an editorial titled "Ray and Rita Dove," the *Akron Beacon Journal* comments:

> In Rita Dove's poems can be heard echoes not only of her father's life but also that of her mother, Elvira, and her grandparents, Thomas and Beulah, the heroes of her Pulitzer-Prize winning book by that title. So many stories. Our stories: the Doves and Akron – the prejudice, the poetry, the progress (B3).

Both of Dove's parents seem to have played a role in influencing their daughter's success.

In high school both Dunbar and Dove were exceptional achievers and were well liked by their classmates and teachers. Their teachers were also instrumental and encouraging their interest in poetry and helping in the promotion of their careers. Dunbar was the only African-American in his class at Dayton Central High School. Though he had difficulty finding employment because of his race he had no problem in demonstrating his talent and skills in high school. Best writes:

> In addition to serving as editor of the *High School Times*, *Dayton Tattler* [a paper that served the Dayton African American community], and making contributions to the *Dayton Journal* and the *Westside News* Paul Laurence Dunbar fulfilled several other editorial assignments while attending Central High School (25).

Dunbar also worked as an elevator operator in Dayton's Callahan Building before becoming established as a professional writer. The poet's pursuance of a high school education and his excelling at it was an exception to the aspirations of most young African Americans in the late 19th century. According to Best:

> When Dunbar graduated from Central High School he was regarded by the faculty and student body as a scholar who had great potential. Most children of high school age, black or white, did not finish high school since such degrees were not a requirement to obtain the jobs that they would most likely perform, and most did not expect to enter college (27).

Although Dunbar did not attend and graduate from college as Dove did he received more education that many young people from his generation did, black or white. Because of his high school education and recognition as a poet, Dunbar held status as an intellectual and leader despite the problems that he faced.

In contrast, Dove's education is more extensive. She graduated with honors from Akron's Buchtel High School in 1970 and Miami University of Ohio in 1973, where she earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1973 with honors. She also excelled in study at Universitaet Tuebingen in Germany and at the University of Iowa, where she earned a master's degree in fine arts in 1977. Dove's high school classmates did not seemed surprised by her success after she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987. "She had high goals. I'm sure she'll continue to make her mark," said Marco Sommerville in a story written by Eugene P. Farris in the *Akron Beacon Journal* (A1). "She was extremely bright and personable, with a wide range of interests. She never bragged about anything. I'm sure she's going to do greater things."

Though she excelled in all of her studies, Dove sometimes felt racial isolation in college where there were few black students and in graduate school where she was the only black student. "In 1975, Dove was the only black student at the Iowa Writers Workshop. She makes a wry comment about tokenism, noting that Sandra Cisneros was the only Hispanic there and Joy Harjo the one Native American," according to *Publishers Weekly* (48-49). The classroom is one area where Dunbar had a lot in common in that they faced situations where they were the only members of their race in their class. While their worlds are so different in many other ways, it is clear that they connect here. Even today, almost 100 years after Dunbar's death, racial isolation is still a problem in American education.

Although both poets faced racial isolation in the classroom, only Dunbar had neighbors and classmates who become as famous as he did. One of the neighborhood

families that Matilda Dunbar worked for was the family of Orville and Wilbur Wright, the aviation pioneers, with whom her son, Paul, attended Dayton's Central High School. It has been reported in a number of publications over the years that Dunbar also published the *Dayton Tattler*, the African American newspaper for a brief period, with help from the Wright brothers. Recently, however, some critics (which I refer to in Chapter 4) have disputed the claim of Dunbar's financial support from the Wright brothers. Nevertheless, Peter Revell reports in *Paul Laurence Dunbar* that:

> Orville Wright gave substantial help to Paul Dunbar in the last months of 1890 when the latter attempted to launch a newspaper, the *Dayton Tattler*, for black readers. Orville printed three issues at his own expense, but the project was abandoned after this as economically unviable, despite a measure of advertising support... (40).

Best believes the failure of Dunbar to make the *Tattler* successful convinced him that he could only build a national market for his literature though the use of the white press. This probably played a role in shaping many of Dunbar's other decisions about writing and publishing his works. It may have been the factor that shaped his life and career the most. "Dunbar was also able to develop white allies among various teachers," Best says. "He was able to benefit from the literary expertise of his intermediate and high school English teachers" (30).

During the early part of their lives both of the poets lived on the west sides of their respective cities, Dayton and Akron. Dove's parents still reside at her childhood

home on Winton Avenue on Akron's West Side. And Dunbar's last home, on what has since been named Paul Laurence Dunbar Street on Dayton's West Side, is maintained as a state memorial in honor of the poet.

Both poets originally aspired to be lawyers, but Dunbar's mother could not afford to send him to college and Dove decided later that becoming a lawyer was not her calling. Although Dunbar's mother could not afford to send him to college and law school, a benevolent lawyer eventually offered the poet an opportunity to study law. But by that time Dunbar was receiving successful reviews for his dialect poetry and making enough money to help support his mother and himself. "A kindly lawyer in town, Mr. Charles Wesley Dustin, had offered him a job clerking while Paul [would have] studied for the bar," Jim DeBrosse writes in the *Dayton Daily News* (9A) "How many Negro men had the chance to be a lawyer? Nonetheless, Paul could not bring himself to say yes to the offer." Dove, on the other hand, discovered that she did not want to be a lawyer after her first government class at Miami University. "She switched to English literature and, midway through college, announced to her parents that she intended to be a poet," Brazaitis writes in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine* (16).

Dunbar and Dove both worked for the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Dunbar worked as an assistant clerk from 1897 to 1898 and Dove as poet laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995.

Dunbar's marriage to writer Alice Moore (she was later known as Alice Dunbar-Nelson), whose parentage was racially mixed, was not successful. On the other hand

Dove's interracial marriage to German writer Fred Viebahn seems successful. They have a daughter, Aviva Chantal Tamu Dove-Viebahn, who was born in 1982.

Although Dunbar earned virtually no literary honors during his lifetime, both poets have been honored on many occasions over the years, and both earned the respect of presidents and other national and international leaders. Both poets also traveled and worked abroad during their careers, Dunbar to England where he recited his poetry for the queen and Dove to Germany and various other parts of the world.

When Dunbar died at his Dayton home he felt heartbroken and rejected. He died in his mother's arms as she read him the 23rd Psalms. The Bible and the original furniture are among the artifacts that adorn the memorial that was once the poet's residence. He is buried in a cemetery near the University of Dayton, where Dr. Herbert Martin, an English professor, serves as a Dunbar-scholar-in-residence. I will discuss the lives and works of Dunbar and Dove with Dr. Martin in an interview in the last chapter, Chapter 5.

In contrast to the tragic circumstances that contributed to Dunbar untimely death, Dove continues to serve as a Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, where she also lives with her husband and daughter and writes poetry, novels, dramas and short stories. Because she is so well known and her works remain popular, there is a heavy demand on her for interviews with media and speaking and recital engagements. She also travels and extensively in the United States and abroad.

After tremendous success, given the time in which he lived and wrote, Dunbar's career came to an abrupt and tragic end about 13 years after he published his first book

of poetry. On the other hand, Dove, who published her first book of poetry over 20 years ago, is still riding the high road of success and mostly favorable reviews by critics.

Despite his untimely death and the limitations imposed on him and his work, Dunbar has been praised widely by scholars and critics for his contributions to literature. However, he has not been without his critics. On the other hand, Dove has received mostly praise for her works – at least to this point.

My argument for Dunbar and Dove's greatness is boosted by the fact that most scholars agree that their contributions are substantial when one considers the times in which they wrote, or is writing in the case of Dove. Dunbar wrote during the physical and moral turbulence of the post-slavery era and Dove began her career at the height of the physical and moral turbulence of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. I will discuss the critical acclaim of both poets in Chapter 2 and trace the relationship between the aesthetics practices by the poets in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

The Critical Acclaim of Dunbar and Dove: 19th Century Dialect vs. 21st Century Universality

Paul Laurence Dunbar, who gained fame and popularity during the late 19th century and early part of the 20th century, was praised by critics during his lifetime for his ability to tell the story of former slaves in African American dialect. Nineteenth-century African American dialect was a language understood by whites and blacks alike, but its use in poetry was accepted for different reasons by the races. Many whites of that era perceived its use as support of the view that blacks are inferior, while blacks viewed its use in poetry as sort of tongue-in-cheek, humorous, laid-back, poke-fun-at-yourself kind of entertainment. Since the 1960s, however, Dunbar's standard English verse, which often deals with more serious themes, has become more popular and respected. And he is recognized in literary circles as America's first black professional poet.

Pulitzer Prize winner and former Poet Laureate Rita Dove is probably the most highly accomplished African American poet of the 20th and 21st centuries, in terms of awards and honors. She has been highly praised by critics for such things as the universality of her themes, mastery of language, sense of history, and economical use of words.

Dove has a dislike for political poetry and does not want to pigeonholed as a black or woman poet. She strives to avoid using only African Americans or themes that relate only to African Americans in her poetry. "I try very hard to create characters who

are seen as individuals – not just as blacks or as women, or whatever, but as a black woman with her own particular problems, or one white bum struggling in a specific predicament ...," she says in *Current Biography Year Book 1994* (146).

Although these poets wrote and lived in two different eras, both have been widely praised for their poetic skills and contributions to the world of literature. And the works of both have received careful scrutiny by critics over the years, although the scrutiny of Dove's works has been more favorable.

According to *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, W.D. Howells, the literary critic who made Dunbar and his African-American dialect famous, wrote this about Dunbar in 1896, with reference to Dunbar's second book of piety, *Major and Minors*:

> What struck me in reading Dunbar's poetry was what had already struck his friends in Ohio and Indiana, in Kentucky and Illinois. They had felt, as I felt, that however gifted his race had proven itself in music, in oratory, in several of the other arts, here was the first instance of an American Negro who had evinced innate distinction in literature (103).

For better and worse, Howell's assessment of Dunbar and his work propelled the poet to national and international fame. It was for better in the sense that no other black American poet had received such critical acclaim prior to Dunbar. But it was for worse in the sense that Dunbar would become known primarily for his dialect poetry, something that he believed he would eventually overcome with his proliferation of verse written in

standard English. Dunbar's wish, however, would not be fulfilled. So he was stuck with the image of a poet who used a language that whites found befitting to blacks and that blacks, especially black intellectuals in later years, would find demeaning. This tormented Dunbar for the remainder of his career.

As late as the early 1990s, according to some literary sources, Dunbar' dialect poetry, was still getting more attention than his standard verse poetry. Roosevelt J. Williams wrote in *Masterpieces of American Literature*:

> The qualities that he displays in his standard poetry – such as the detailed attention to nature, the skillful manipulation of imagery, the masterful experimentation with rhyme and meter, and the controlled handling of serious philosophical themes – have traditionally been ignored in favor of the rhythmic, narrative, and pleasing delineation of black peasant life that characterizes much of his dialect poetry (394).

The poetic aesthetic forced on Dunbar by the racial climate of his time dictated that he write in dialect, which was all that his primarily white readership would accept from a black writer. His earliest poetry had been written in standard verse and he continued to write in standard verse as well as dialect with the hope that his standard verse, too, would someday be appreciated by his audiences. While white audiences took Dunbar's folksy, humorous, and care-free dialect poetry as a realistic interpretation of the lives of former

slaves, blacks of Dunbar's day – many of whom were not literate because of the ban on educating blacks during slavery – enjoyed hearing it recited as entertainment.

That brings to mind another part of the poetic aesthetic that in a sense forced on Dunbar - the avoidance of protest against the system of second-class citizenship that he and his fellow African Americans had to live under in the 19th century, a system that included brutal lynchings and denial of economic opportunities. If he were to protest in his dialect poetry, which he did on rare occasions, Dunbar had to couch it in language that was decipherable only by blacks. On occasion he even couched ridicule of whites in his dialect poetry. An example can be seen in the poem "When Malindy Sings":

G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy –
Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on trying'?
Ef you practise twell you're gray....
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....
Easy 'nough fu' folk to hollah,
Lookin' at de lines an' dots,
When dey ain't no one kin sence it,
An' de chune comes in, in spots (Braxton, 82:1-20).

The speaker in the poem, apparently a slave, is poking fun at his or her white keeper, a female by the name of Miss Lucy, whom the slave believes can't sing – even with music notes. "Using irony, caricature, and understatement, Dunbar here 'signifies' on the whites' assumption of biological and intellectual superiority as well as their ability to read books and music," says Braxton (xxvii). Braxton also notes that, "Dunbar often used humor as a mask, set in motion by dialect, to conceal his angriest messages" (xxii).

Since whites rejected his standard verse, Dunbar felt freer to register protest there

more often. He used one of his most famous standard verse poems, "We Wear the Mask," to, at least for a period, shed that mask. The poem, in the *Lyrics and Lowly Life* section of *Collected Poetry*, reads in part:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, -
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding heart we smile
> And mouth with myriad subtleties (Braxton, 71:1-5).

Today, almost 100 years after his death, Dunbar is remembered for both dialect and standard English verse – more today perhaps for his standard English verse. On the one hand he is roundly praised for being able to accomplish so much as a poet (more that 400 poems in six volumes) in a relatively short lifetime and under such limitations. On the other hand, he has been damned by critics, both black and white, for catering to a white audience in a language that many people believe upholds degrading stereotypes of black people. Braxton believes that several previously unpublished lines of poetry written by Dunbar while he worked as an elevator operator at Dayton's Callahan Building reveals Dunbar's private suffering over his plight. The lines read:

> What's the use of dreaming all the time
> Yes there's lots of hope a-beaming though your rhyme
> But the work you've got to do
> Dreams won't ever do for you
> Even if they did come true (Braxton, xii:1-5)

Clearly, Dunbar's poetic aesthetic embraced the use of 19th century African American dialect in his poems. The question of whether he believed it was harmful to his race and whether he regretted using it is still being debated today by scholars and critics. In this chapter I'll compare some of the critics' assessment of Dunbar's dialect to their

assessment of some of Dove's poetry.

Dove's most widely acclaimed work that adheres to her aesthetic with regards to race is *Thomas and Beulah*, her Pulitzer Prize-winning book of poetry, which is based, at least in part, on the true story of Dove's maternal grandparents. In *Thomas and Beulah*, Dove's grandparents endure many vicissitudes before their death in the 1960s. Unlike Dunbar's dialect poems, which by virtue of the language make them to a great extent about race, *Thomas and Beulah* is not a story nearly as much about race, even though its characters are blacks. The poems in *the Thomas and Beulah* trace the history of Dove's grandparents who separately move North to Ohio, who meet and get married in the 1920s, and who go on to raise four girls. In his ts introduction to critical reviews of Dove's poetry, James P. Draper, editor *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook 1993* says:

> Dove's poetry is characterized by a tight control of words and structure, an innovative use of color imagery, and a tone that combines objectivity and personal concern. Although many of her poems incorporate black history and directly address racial themes, they present issues, such as prejudice and oppression, that transcend racial boundaries (131).

While it is fair to say that Dove's poem's less raced-based than Dunbar's, it is also fair to say Dunbar's characters in his dialect poems are not always described as black. But we know that the stereotypes used are ones that are often used to characterize blacks. In his standard verse poetry we often know that he is referring to black people when he protests.

On the other hand, many of Dunbar's standard verse poems have universal themes as just as many of Dove's do. If the times had been different or if Dunbar had lived for a much longer time I believe he would have become better known for his standard verse.

Nevertheless, history has dealt Dove a better hand in terms of critics being more receptive to the universality of her poems. "There is a powerful sense of community residing both in a family and in a place, lying at the heart of this book, and it is this that provides a locus to the poems," Peter Stitt wrote of *Thomas and Beulah* in the *Georgia Review* (1033). And unlike Dunbar's dialect poetry *Thomas and Beulah* is not over simplified, exaggerated, and unrealistic because of an emphasis on providing humor and entertainment. "Generally speaking, Dunbar's dialect poetry presents an idealized, and therefore unrealistic picture of black peasant life in the South," notes Williams (395). "This life is characterized by a plenitude of good living. There is an abundance of food of all descriptions..."

To compare how Dunbar wrote about the lives of black people of his era to how Dove writes about black people in her era, let's compare the poems in *Thomas and Beulah* to one of Dunbar's more typical, long dialect poems, "The Party." The first part of *Thomas and Beulah* is devoted to the story of Thomas and the second is devoted to the story of Beulah. "The very absence of high drama may be what makes the poems so touching - these ordinary people with ordinary struggles, successes, and failures," notes Stitt (1031). The poems are occasional. In the absence of a definite plot, Dove gives them continuity by reference to the recurring motif throughout each section to someone or something that was important in the early life of that character. In the case of Beulah, this

role is played by the powerful personality of her father, who was part Cherokee. For Thomas, the motif is the death of his friend Lem, with whom he left Tennessee to embark upon the riverboat life. The two musicians - Lem played the mandolin while Thomas sang were an inseparable pair. They make their appearances drunk in the first poem in the volume, titled "The Event." The poem ends this way:

> *You're so fine and mighty; let's see*
> *what you can do,* said Thomas pointing
>
> to a tree-capped island
> Lem stripped, spoke easy: *Them's chestnuts,*
> *I believe.* Dove
>
> quick as a gasp. Thomas, dry
> on deck, saw the queen crown shake
> as the island slipped
>
> under, dissolved
> in the thickening stream
> at his feet
>
> a striking circle of rags,
> the half-shell mandolin.
> Where the wheel turned the water
>
> gently shirred (Dove, *SP*, 141:14-28).

Unless the reader reads the lines and images very carefully, they will not realize that Lem has drowned. The poem that follows, "Variation on Pain," however, reinforces the truth of this reading by referring to "A man gurgling air" (143). Dove's omission of any reference to Lem's death seems like a serious flaw in her work at first. We find later, however, that the intrigue, mystery and drama added to the story because of that omission makes it worth it. The story might well have been flawed if Dove had not, later on, given us a clue as to what happened to Lem. But she did.

In contrast to the serious note on which the poems in Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* begins, Dunbar's long poem "The Party" begins on a much more care-free note with a party, to which everybody from four plantations - all of the slaves - is invited. They are viewed as children-like, drawn to the music of the fife and drum. Everybody is dressed in

their finest, the women in silk and satin dresses and the men in Prince Alberts, double-breasted frockcoats with the upper part fitted close to the body. In the first sixteen lines of "The Party" we learn the names of three of its characters, Tom, who is hosting the party; Isaac, "old man Babah's houseboy; and Malindy Jane, Isaac's date:

> Dey had a gread big pahty down to Tom's de othah night;
> Was I dah? You bet! I nevah in my life see sich a sight;
> All de folks f'om fou' plantations was invited, an' dey come,
> Dey come troopin' thick ez chillun when dey hyeahs a fife an' drum.
> Evahbody dressed deir fines' – Heish you' mouf an' git away,
> Ain't seen no sich fancy dressin' sense las' quah'tly meeting' day;
> Gals all dressed in silks an' satins, not a wrinkle ner a crease,
> Eyes a-battin', teeth a-shinin', haih breshed back ez slick ez grease;
> Sku'ts all tucked an' puffed an' ruffled, evah blessed seam an' stich;
> Ef you'd seen 'em wif deir mistus, could n't swash which was which.
> Men all dressed up in Prince Alberts, swaller-tails 'u' tek yo' bref!
> I cain't tell you nothin' bout it, y' ought to seen it fu' yo'se'f.
> Who was dah? Now who you askin'? How you 'spect I gwine to know?
> You mus' think I stood an' counted evabody at de do.'
> Ole man Babah's house-boy Isaac, brung dat gal, Malindy Jane,
> Huh a-hanging' to his elbow, him a-strutting' wif a cane (Braxton, 83:1-16).

I chose the examples of Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* poems and Dunbar's "The Party" because they are both loaded with action and drama. "Thomas and Beulah" has drama that deals with life and death matters, while the drama of "The Party" deals strictly with fun and good times. The poems present a very contrasting picture of the two poets styles

and aesthetics. One of the things that makes "The Party" clearly not a serious poem, in the sense that it is not dealing with a serious subject, is the fact that the narrator is telling the story for pure delight. "While the narrator tells us (at the end of the poem) you 'ought to have been' there, what listeners are really enjoying is the narrator's, delightful inventory recollection of what went on," notes Lorenzo Thomas in *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (216). "The fun is in the present narrative, not in the past event." That is quite the opposite of what we see so far in *Thomas and Beulah* where the *seriousness* is in the present narrative. The death of Thomas's friend, Lem, helps in setting the volume's serious tone. Despite it lack of seriousness, "The Party," like Dunbar's other dialect poems were popular among other blacks. It was popular primarily because it was not serious.

Two lines of "The Party" that tell a lot about Isaac and Malindy Jane also tell a lot about Dunbar's dialect poetry. Here Dunbar is offering a bit of titillating information abut the couple in revealing that "dat gal Malindy," who is apparently a lot younger than Isaac is, is keeping company with a man who is apparently much older and strutting with a cane:

> Ole man Babah's house-boy Isaac, bring dat gal, Malady Jane
> Huh a a-hangin' to his elbow, him a s-struttin' wif a cane (Braxton, 83:15-16).

Titillation, humor, and matters that sometime border on the absurd are characteristic of Dunbar's dialect poems. "Generally speaking, Dunbar's dialect poetry presents an idealized, and therefore unrealistic, picture of black peasant life in the South," notes Williams (395). On the other hand, in *Thomas and Beulah,* with the show of fondness and affection by two friends until death separates them, Dove's standard verse poems, about

people who just happen to be black, are somber and sobering. With its brashness and bordering on the ridiculous, "The Party" is silly at best. Dunbar was, in a sense "forced" to write about blacks what *appealed* to his largely white audience. Dove, on the other hand, is much freer to write about blacks as she sees fit, based on her own experience and the experience of others. And she does just that. Her white audience is quite different from Dunbar's in education level, social acceptance and general taste. And the same can be said about her black audience.

Dunbar's black audience was a people who were recently freed from the oppression of outright slavery, but they still faced many other oppressions, such as those resulting from lynchings, denial of economic opportunity, and intimidation from white citizens and law enforcement officials. One of Dunbar's short standard verse poems, "Life," in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* gives testimony to this:

> A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
> A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
> A pint of joy to a peck of trouble,
> And never a laugh but the moans come double'
> And that is life!
>
> A crust and a corner that love makes precious,
> With a smile to warm and the tears to refresh us;
> And joy seems sweeter when cares come after,
> And a moan is the finest of foils for laughter;
> And that is life! (Braxton, 8: 1-10)

Here Dunbar speaks of life and all of it contradictions, especially for black people of the Late 19th century. "Believing that each thing is an interpenetration of opposites, so that if life grant 'the smile to warm' it must also grants 'the tears to refresh,' the poet consoles himself with the thought that 'joy seems sweeter when cares come after, and a moan is the

finest of foils for laughter,'" Williams asserts (397). Clearly, when we compare the racial climate in 19th-century America to that of late 20th century and early 21st century America, Dunbar and Dove were writing for audiences with different levels of sophistication in both white and black America. White readers today, for example are much more accepting of black poets, especially those who write on diverse themes, as Dove does. And black readers of today are more accepting of non-black themes.

Now, let us look at some other contrasts, and (believe it or not) what some may see as a similarity between Dunbar's writing about African-Americans in the 19th century and Dove's writing about them in the late 20th century, in the Thomas section of *Thomas and Beulah* and "The Party." The Thomas section is haunted by the death of his friend Lem. This section is loaded with feelings of guilt, loss, and longing, even many years later, some of which are described in this poem titled "The Stroke":

> Later he'll say Death stepped right up
> to shake his hand, then squeezed
>
> until he sank to his knees. *(Get up*
> *nigger. Get up and try again.)*
>
> Much later he'll admit he'd been afraid,
> curled tight in the center of the rug, sunlight
>
> one cheek and plaited raffia
> scratching the sticking other. He'll leave out
>
> the part about daydream's aromatic fields
> and the strap-worn flanks of the mule he followed
> through them. When his wife asks
> *how did it feel, he won't mention*
>
> that the sun shone like the summer
> she was pregnant with the first, and
> that she craved watermelon which she smuggled

home wrapped in a newspaper, and how

the bus driver smirked as his nickel
clicked through - no, he'll say
it was like being kicked by a mule,
Right now, though, pinned to the bull's eye,

he knows it was Lem all along:
Lem's knuckles tapping his chest in passing,
Lem's heart, for the safekeeping,
he shores up in his arms. (Dove, *SP*,169:1-24)

As Stitt notes, "The interplay between imagination - Rita Dove's imagination - and reality here, as generally in these poems, is handled with great skill" (1033). Dove has supplied all the internal parts of "The Stroke," the details that give the narrative its power. She has a good sense of pacing and saves her best materials for last. This helps the story (of Thomas) achieve a compelling closure.

In addition to showing Thomas's very human side, the poem also shows the side of Dove that says that she writes about blacks in a realistic way without being boxed in as a poet who writes only about African Americans. This can be seen in the language of the line that reads: "Get up/ nigger. Get on up and try again."/ Dove does not hesitate to use language that many African American find offensive to dramatize Thomas's strong feelings of guilt about becoming ill. While Dunbar's use of dialect is considered racially offensive and stereotypical by some readers, critics, and scholars, I have never seen the word "nigger" in any of his poems. Dove has used it quite often in her poems. In Dunbar's day it was probably almost inconceivable that a black writer would use the word "nigger" in print. The fact that one of the most popular - if not the most popular – African

American poet can use it is print is probably testimony that the word is far from being as offensive in 21st century America as it was in 19th century America. The term's being less offensive can probably attributed to African Americans feeling much more secure about their being in America and their place in America – much more so than they did in the late 19th century. Somehow, words can be less intimidating and insulting when one is equal or close to equal (in terms of education, economic status, or political power) to the person hurling the insult. Sometimes the person that was offended by something in the past will becomes immune enough to take the former insult and use it as a tool in humor or absurdity - in an effort to further debunk it as an insult. This is what Dove has done with the term "nigger." That is not to say, however, that the term has become less offensive in every instance when used by a white person toward a black person. But certainly the term is less offensive overall today than it was in the late 19th century.

Another example of something being less offensive racially in Dove's time than in Dunbar's time is her reference to Thomas's wife Beulah, / "that she craved watermelon which he smuggled/ home wrapped in a newspaper. / One of the most widely known stereotypes of African Americans is their supposed "craving" for watermelon, which is indigenous to Africa. The fact that a popular African American poet can almost debunk the use of the image of "craving for watermelon" as a negative stereotype for African Americans speaks volumes about the "different world" in which Dove is writing, as compared to the "other world" of Dunbar.

Despite the contrast in their writing about black people, Dunbar and Dove do have something in common in this area. The one thing that Dunbar seems to always have

in common with Dove in writing about black people in his dialect poetry is his ability to tell a story effectively. Despite its lack of seriousness, the story told in "The Party" is told effectively. It is not difficult or impossible to get the gist of the message that Dunbar is conveying in the next sixteen lines of "The Party," for example:

> My, but Hahvey Jones was jealous! seemed to stick him lak a tho'n;
> But he laughed with Viney Cahteh, tryin'ha'd to not let on,
> But a pusson would 'a' noticed f'om de d'rection of his look,
> Dat he was watchin' ev'ry step dat Ike an' Lindy took.
> Ike he foun'a cheer an' asked huh: "Won't you set down? wif a smile,
> An' she answe'd up a-bowin', "Oh, I reckon 't ain't wuth while."
> Dat was jes' fu' style, I reckon, 'caus' she sot down jes' de same,
> An' she stayed dah 'twell he fetched huh fu' to jine some so't o' game;
> Den I hyeahd huh sayin' propah, ez she riz to go away,
> "Oh, you raly mus' excuse me, fu' I hardly keers to play."
> But I seen huh in a minute wif de othahs on de flo',
> An' dah was n't any one o' dem a-playing' any mo';
> Comin' down de flo' a-bowin' an' a-swayin' an' a-swingin',
> Puttin' on huh high-toned mannahs all de time dat she was singin':
> "Oh, swing Johnny up an' down, swing him all around',
> Swing Johnny up an' down, swing him all around' (Braxton, 83-84:17-32)

In this segment of "The Party" we pick up the name of one other character, Hahvey Jones, who is jealous because Malindy Jane is with Isaac, although he pretends not to be jealous. And we learn that Isaac is a person who actually practices good manners when he smiles and asks Malindy to have a seat. On the other hand, we learn that Malindy is one who pretends to have good manners when she accepts Isaac's offer to sit, but she exposes this pretense when she leaves Isaac, who apparently cannot dance because of his limp, to join the others in dancing and singing.

Some of the themes in "The Party" can actually be viewed as universal as Dove's are. "'The Party' in particular takes note of human nature, and the insight that the poet offers is that coyness and jealousy are not more basic to human than are generosity and the

joy of what life offers," notes Herbert W. Martin in *Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Singer of Songs* (17). "In this microcosm of black plantation life and society, Dunbar depicts jealousy and coyness. Despite himself, one person envies what another has." Though its central focus is on the "good times" of plantation life, jealousy and envy are among the more universal themes of the poem.

While the racial themes, mainly language and stereotypes, are more obvious and the universal themes more subtle in Dunbar's dialect poems it is often the opposite in Dove's poems. Take the grandfather-granddaughter relationship themes, for example. After Lem's death there seems to be a brooding, an emotional resonance in the tone. "One also has the feeling that Rita Dove knows Thomas better, despite the greater kinship one might expect between two women," says Stitt (1033). Stitt's interest in why Dove seems to know her grandfather better than her grandmother is a *growing* interest, so he reads on to find the answer that he is seeking. The critic's sense of things was reinforced in a poem called "Roast Possum," where the reader sees Thomas telling stories with "a granddaughter/ propped on each knee" / (167).

Dove's story about her maternal grandparents is not totally unlike the story of the newly freed slaves that Dunbar wrote about in the sense that Thomas and Beulah's families were a relocated and dislocated people, just as the former slaves were. Their relocation from the South was voluntary, but when they were struck by the Great Depression and its ravages they must have felt a sense of dislocation. Thomas has already lost his friend, who drowned, leaving only his mandolin behind. Thomas carries the mandolin North with him to Akron, plays it halfheartedly, and eventually hangs it from a

nail on the parlor wall. Thomas works in Akron for Goodyear, at the Zeppelin factory.

After the Great Depression put him out of work, he sweeps offices part time. Over the years Thomas and Beulah and their daughters attend church, where Thomas sings in the choir. When the war comes, he works again, this time at Goodyear. Beulah works in a dress shop, then makes hats. At 63, Thomas dies of his second heart attack. Beulah dies six years later.

Dove's closing picture of Beulah's deathbed as the sun enters the room is one that haunts the mind. The last poem in "Canary in Bloom," Beulah's section of *Thomas and Beulah* is called "The Oriental Ballerina," after the small ballerina that dances on Beulah's jewel box:

> where the bedroom of the poor
> are papered in vulgar flowers
> on a background the color of grease, of
>
> tea bags, of cracked imitation walnut veneer (Dove, *SP*, 201:15-18).

In the room, signs of age and sickness:

> ... a straw nods over
> the lip of its glass and a hand
> reaches for a tissue, crumpling it to a flower (Dove, *SP*, 202:27-29).

The sun hesitates at

> ... a knotted handkerchief that has slid
>
> on its string and has lodged beneath
> the right ear which discerns
> the most fragile music
>
> where there is none (Dove, *SP*, 202:38-42).

"The principle of composition here is cinematic crosscutting between the exotic claim on Beulah of the beautiful (expressed in clothes, hats, jewel boxes, idealized female grace in the paltry Ballerina," writes Helen Vendler in the *New York Book Review* (50). "As 'the radio scratches out a morning hymn' – 'The Old Rugged Cross' - we see the 'oversized'

gardenias on the wallpaper; this is America." And this is Dove, one might add. She is principally a poet of dramatic force.

Dunbar, on the other hand proves in "The Party" that he has a dramatic sense of humor. The characters get funnier and more bizarre as the poem continues. Other characters include ole man Johnson who is approaching 100, who swings into a dance with Aunt Marie, who weighs over 300 pounds. According to the narrator, ole man Johnson dances better than Scott Thomas, a young smart aleck. Then there's Mandy, the wife of Tom, the party's hostess. Mandy invites all of the guests to the table for supper and despite food galore she apologizes because there/ "wa'n't much upon my she'ves /. Eldah Thompson, the clergyman, blesses the food:

> 'Lawd, look down in tendah mussy on sich generous hea'ts ez dese;
> Make us truly thankful, amen. Pass dat possum, ef you please!' (Braxton, 86;77-78)

Another character is the fiddler, Jim, who "chuned his fiddle, put som rosum on his bow,/ set a pine box on de table, mounted it an' let huh go! / Finally, "cripple Joe, de old rheumatic, danced dat flo' f'om side to middle,/ th'owed away his crutch an' hopped it; what's rheumatics 'ginst a fiddle?

Martin, in *Paul Laurence Dunbar: A Singer of Songs*, contends that "there is pure

joy here, one that avoids stereotypes and at the same time offers a momentary glimpse of plantation life, which, according to all factual reports, could not have always been so happy" (18). I would not be willing to argue that Dunbar avoids stereotypes, but he does offer a view of plantation life which its seems that no other writer was able to capture quite the way he did. As to whether Dunbar's dialect poems did harm to African Americans over the course of history. I would think, yes. Yes, because they perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes and myths in the minds of the former captors of African Americans. But, did he make a significant contribution to literature and history despite the harm? Again, I would answer yes, because it gave us a significant record of literature and history that we might not have had otherwise.

After taking a look at the king of poetry that made America's first black professional poet famous and the kind of verse that made the most highly honored black poet in America today famous one could easily become astonished by the evolution that has taken place in African American poetry aesthetics. I will discuss that evolution and its key players in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

The Role of Dunbar and Dove in the Evolution Of African American Poetry Aesthetics

What is the new aesthetic personified by Rita Dove? How has it evolved from the aesthetic of Paul Laurence Dunbar, who wrote dialect verse that pleased both the white literary community and black field hands who migrated North after slavery, and standard verse that got very little notice during his lifetime? And why has this evolution taken place? The short answer to the last question is the fact that these two great African American poets lived in *two different worlds.* At the heart of this chapter, however, lies a longer answer to some of these questions.

To help answer those questions, I offer first the traditional meaning of the word aesthetics, the one used by *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* and by Clyde R. Taylor in his essay "Color-Coded Art Theory" in *The Mask of Art:*

> **aesthetics,** the branch of philosophy that examines the nature of art and the character of our experience of art and of the natural environment. It emerged as a separate field of philosophical inquiry during the eighteenth century in England and on the Continent. Recognition of aesthetics as a separate branch of philosophy coincided with the development of theories of art that grouped together painting, poetry, sculpture, music, and dance (and often landscape gardening) as the same kind of thing, *les beau arts,* or the fine arts. Baumgarten coined the term "aesthetic" in his *Reflections on Poetry* (1735) as the name

> for one of the two branches of the study of knowledge, i.e., for the study of sensory experience coupled with feeling, which he argued provided a different type of knowledge from the distinct, abstract ideas studied by "logic." He derived it from the ancient Greek *aisthanomai* ("to perceive"), and "the aesthetic" has always been intimately connected with sensory experiences and the kinds of feelings it arouses (8).

The traditional definition of aesthetics, as defined by Cambridge *Dictionary of Philosophy,* has much to do with beauty and taste. Of course everybody knows from an old saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and taste is in the head of the beholder. So it should surprise no one that a people, such as African Americans, with a non-European backgrounds, would perceive what is beautiful and in good taste with the various arts in a way that is different from the way Europeans or white Americans might perceive it. But that does not mean that the dictionary's definition of aesthetics cannot be useful to critics and interpreters of African American poetry. Controversies over aesthetics for African American poetry have swirled when critics and scholars have limited their evaluations and interpretations of it to the aesthetics embraced by the white literary world. That is why aesthetics in African American poetry have been evolving since at the least the late 19th century, the era of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

To get a full perspective on the evolution of aesthetics in African American poetry we need to also look at the definition of the Black Aesthetic, as laid out by the late Addison Gayle in *The Black Aesthetic,* a collection of essays, which he edited.

Besides Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones), Gayle was one of the most widely known leaders of the Black Arts Movement, which popularized the call for a black aesthetic in literature in the 1960s and 70s. Here is how Gayle defined the Black Aesthetic in his book:

> The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man? The Black Aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is a corrective - a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offering logical, reasoned, arguments as to why he should not desire to join the ranks of a Norman Mailer or a William Styron. To be an American writer is to be an American, and for black people, there should no longer be honor attached to either position (xxiii).

The good thing about the Black Aesthetic, as advocated by Gayle, is that it promotes the idea that there is room for aesthetics other than those espoused by the white literary world. The thing that is not good about the Black Aesthetic is that it seeks to limit or pigeonhole the black artist, in this case the black poet, and the black critic. It would have the black poet limit him or herself to writing verse that serves as "a means of

helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of America." And the black critic, if he followed Gayle's dictates, would limit his or her evaluation of the work of the black poet to "how much more beautiful" that work has made the life of black people. It seems to me that Gayle is trying to put the black poet (actually the black artist in general) in the same restrictive box that Dunbar was in with the white literary establishment of the 19th century with his dialect verse. The evolution that has taken place in African American poetry covers a spans from the late 19th century when Dunbar accepted the dictates of the white literary community and was pigeonholed as a dialect poet. That span reaches to early 21th century when Dove is refusing to accept the dictates of the Black Arts Movement by writing poems on a multitude of themes that include black themes, but not just black themes.

Although *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* makes a reference to the philosopher Baumgarten coining the word "aesthetics" in 1735, the earliest African American poets and their critics probably did not refer to the aesthetics of their poetry. Fahamisha Patricia Brown mentions the inadequate amount of attention paid to African American poetry over the centuries in her book *Performing the Work: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture:*

> Although African American literary tradition begins with the eighteenth-century poets Lucy Terry, Jupiter Hammon, and Phillis Wheatley, a search for critical discussions of African American poetry reveals sparse treatment compared to that for prose narrative (1).

Brown's statement is true whether it is in reference to African American poetry from the 18th century or the 21st century. However, critical discussion of African American poetry has steadily increased since the 19th century, the era of Dunbar.

To further evaluate the evolution of African American poetry aesthetics from Dunbar's day to Dove's day, I have taken a look at five eras of poetry as outlined in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (xiii-xxv), edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, and the poets whose works influenced those eras the most. Those eras include "Literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance: 1865-1919," the "Harlem Renaissance: 1919-1940," "Realism, Naturalism, Modernism: 1940-1960," "The Black Arts Movement: 1960-1970," and "Literature Since 1970."

Based on my research and analysis, the African American poets whose works dominated or influenced those eras the most (in the order that the eras are listed) are Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, and Dove. I would make adjustments to the spans of the last two eras. Since the periods tend to run in 20-year cycles, I would adjust the "The Black Arts Movement: 1960-1970" by 10 years to "The Black Arts Movement: 1960-1980" and I would rename the "Literature Since 1970" period to "Literature Since 1980." My need to adjust periods of the Black Arts movement is based on my belief that the movement did not reach its peak until about 1980 when Dove and other poets with similar aesthetics began publishing works. While the influence of Baraka and poets of the Black Arts Movement is still present in African American poetry and African American literature it is no longer dominant.

I need to define the aesthetic adhered to by each one of the major African American poets, discuss how they differed, and explain what it is that has connected them through nearly a century (since the death of Dunbar in 1906).

Through his poems about the everyday lives of black people who were newly freed from slavery, the use of their dialect language, and the use of protest - mostly subtle in standard verse poetry - Dunbar developed the first African American or black aesthetic in poetry. Timothy Seibles put it this way in his essay "A Quilt in Shades of Black: The Black Aesthetic in Twentieth-Century African American Poetry" in *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*:

> ... Until Paul Laurence Dunbar began publishing works in the late nineteenth century, even black American writers were inclined to avoid subjects directly relating to the experiences of black Americans. This was due in large part to the a lack of interest among publishers and to the miseducation of these earlier poets whose writing often reflected the bigotry of the whites who had taught them history and literature. When Dunbar began publishing poems in the mid-1890s, some of them featured phonetic spellings intended to approximate the sounds of what might be called "Slave English" (158-59)

The first two stanzas of Dunbar's "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," despite the underlying, subtle protest against the institution of slavery, is a clear example of what Seibles is referring to in the language of the poet's dialect poems:

> We is gathahed hyeah, my brothahs,
> In dis howlin' wildaness,
> Fu' to speak some words of comfo't
> To each othah in distress.
> An' we chooses fu' ouah subjic'
> Dis - we'll 'splain it by an' by;

"An' de Lawd said, 'Moses, Moses,
"An' de man said, 'Hyeah am I.'"

Now ole Pher'oh, down in Egypt,
Was de wuss man evah bo'n,
An' he had de Hebrew chillun
Down dah wukin' in his co'n;
'T well de Lawd got tiahed o' his foolin,'
An' sez he: "I'll let him know -
Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher'oh
Fu' to let dem chillun go." (Braxton, 13:1-16)

Seibles says "Dunbar began shaping what has now come to be called a 'black literary aesthetic.'" (159). That aesthetic, he says, "makes a point of including the experiences of black Americans (as witnessed through their dreams, their rhythms, their physical appearances, their wisdom, their anger) as distinct from their white counterparts" (159). Dunbar sought to tell the story of black people to all people through the use of both dialect and standard English. His dialect poetry was received as entertainment by blacks and by whites. The whites accepted the dialect with an air of patronization and it added to their belief that their race is superior. Fahamisha P. Brown notes that there are two schools of thought on Dunbar's use of dialect. "Dunbar used dialect to fill in the warmth, humor and humanity of the slaves. In doing so, he replicates in writing a culturally specific way of using language - double-voicedness or indirection, a kind of verbal duplicity," she says (34). "While one audience might read a simple stereotyping, another might read a more complex human being." This idea of writing poetry at multiple levels,

with parts of it aimed at different kinds of readers is a kind of sophistication that Dunbar is seldom given credit for.

As I mentioned earlier, the other part of the aesthetic that Dunbar is known for involves the more-often-than-not subtle messages of protest in his more widely known standard verse, which gained little attention during his lifetime. An even lesser known part of Dunbar's aesthetic is the part that attracted him to more universal themes like love, nature, death, or the part that led him to write some of his poems in various white dialects. This short poem called "Death," is an example:

> Storm and strife and stress,
> Lost in a wilderness,
> Groping to find a way,
> Forth to the haunts of day
>
> Sudden a vista peeps,
> Out of the tangled deeps,
> Only a point - the ray
> But at the end is the day
>
> Dark is the dawn and chill,
> Daylight is on the hill,
> Night is the flitting breath,
> Day rides the hills of death (Braxton 227:1-12).

Here the narrator of the poem discovers that the "storm and strife and stress" of life turns into a vista or a mental review of life, then to a view from the grave, which shows "daylight is on the hill and night is the flitting breath." And ultimately, "day rides (or follows) the hills of death," meaning that death has overcome life. This other side of Dunbar's aesthetic has for the most part been overlooked by critics and biographers throughout the years. Many of his poems, written in the Romantic tradition, had

nothing to do with race. They often idealized life, or imagined life as one might want it to be, like these lines from "The Dove":

> Out of the sunshine and out of the heat
> Out of the dust of the grimy street,
> A song fluttered down in the form of a dove,
> And it bore me a message, the one word – Love! (Braxton, 167: 1-4)

But again, that is the side of Dunbar that is not widely known. In this thesis and this chapter, I am exploring the role that the dialect and protest part of his aesthetic (for which he is best know) has played in the evolution aesthetics in African American poetry.

Has the African American aesthetic that Dunbar is *known* to have embraced undergone radical changes from Dunbar's day to the aesthetic that is espoused in Dove's poetry? It sure has. Dove detests what she calls "political poetry" and she prefers that her writing about blackness, whether it is about a black individuals or black history, be seen as just a matter of course in writing about a multitude of subjects or themes. "When I walk into my room to write, I don't think of myself in political terms," Dove told Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar in *Current Biography Year Book 1994* (146). "I approach that piece of paper or the computer screen to search for - I know it sounds corny - truth and beauty through language." She adds:

> I would find it a breach of my integrity as a writer to create
> a character for didactic or propaganda purposes, like concocting
> a strong black heroine, an idolized so-called role model, just
> to promote a positive image. (146).

Dove's reference to her search for "truth [which is not always beautiful] and beauty through language" in her poetry seems to make it clear that she has not discarded

Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics, which calls for "sensory experiences and the kind of feelings it arouses." In other words, whereas the strict advocates of a Black Aesthetic limit themselves to finding benefits (cultural, historical, educational, economic or otherwise) to African Americans in their poetry, Dove, through her sensory experiences expresses "truth and beauty" in her writings without regard to who will be the beneficiaries or non-beneficiaries, or where the chips will fall, so to speak. Dove believes that if the artist is true to his or her profession they must not allow themselves to be politicized in the sense that feel they must write on certain themes and not write others because someone believes they should or should not. She believes such choices must remain with the artist. In her refusal to "create a character for didactic or propaganda purposes" she is not allowing herself to be boxed in to write from a single perspective on any subject.

One has only to study Dove's works to discover that her aesthetic differs dramatically from Dunbar's, especially on the matter of race. But as different as their aesthetics are, the poems of Dove and most other African American poets deal, at least on occasion, with the matter of race - a subject that even the most universally oriented black poet in American cannot escape. That's because race has been and still is an obsession in America, an obsession that African Americans have been at the center of since their enslavement. But Dove, who grew up in a middle class family and has a successful inter-racial marriage, would probably acknowledge more readily than most African Americans that the obsession with race today is not the same obsession that prevailed in Dunbar's day. "Obviously, as a black woman, I am concerned with race.

But certainly not every poem of mine mentions the fact of being black," Dove tells Elizabeth Kaster of the *Washington Post* (B3). "They are poems about humanity, and sometimes humanity happens to be black. I cannot run from, I won't run from any kind of truth." That's because, unlike Dunbar in his era, she has been able to establish her own aesthetic. She doesn't have to cow-tow to the Baumgarten purists or the Gayle purists, whereas Dunbar had to cow-tow to the white literary establishment's demand that his dialect poetry be published at the expense of his standard verse. In another part of the *Current Biography Year Book 1994* article, Dove adds:

> I try very hard to create characters who are seen as individuals not just as black or as women, or whatever, but as a black woman with her own particular problems, or one white bum struggling in a specific predicament - as persons who have their very individual lives and whose histories make them react to the world in different ways (146).

Many of the poems written by Dove are about African Americans in middle class settings and with middle class values, such as her own. That is more in contrast with the aesthetics of the major African American poets of other eras - Dunbar, Hughes, Brooks, and Baraka. I'll make a slight exception for Brooks, whose earlier aesthetic was more universal. During her later years, however, she identified more, but not completely, with the black poets of the 60s and 70s, who pushed for strict adherence to the Black Aesthetic advocated by Gayle. Dunbar became known for his dialect verse in the late 1900s and Hughes for his jazz verse about the lives of average, everyday black

people (with some dialect but much less than Dunbar) in 20s and 30s. Brooks gained status for her poems about the struggles of black people on Chicago's South Side in the 40s and 50s and Baraka for poems that reflected black militancy during the 60s and 70s. Then Dove dominated African American poetry scene in 80s and 90s with poems that were totally universal and others that focused on black people in a universal way. A typical example of Dove's many poems that does not address issues of race is "Small Town." from *The Yellow House on the Corner*:

> Someone is sitting in the red house.
> There is no way of telling who it is, although
> the woman, indistinct, in the doorway must know;
> and the man in the chestnut tree
> who wields the binoculars
> does not wish to be seen from the window.
>
> The paint was put there by the previous owner.
> The dog in the flower bed
> is bound by indiscriminate love,
> which is why he does not bark
> and why in one of the darkened rooms
> someone sits, a crackling vacuum.
>
> The woman wears a pale blue nightgown
> and stares vaguely upward. The man,
> whose form appears clearly among the leaves,
> is not looking at her so much as she at him,
> while away behind the town a farmer
> weeps, plowing his fields by night
> to avoid being laughed at during the day (Dove, *SP*, 8:1-18)

Like "Small Town," there are other poems in *The Yellow House on the Corner* with subtle themes of provinciality, distrust, entrapment, migration, and vicariousness.

On the other hand doesn't avoid writing about black people. She often writes about them as a matter of course - as people and events that just happen to be black. "Geometry," another poem from *The Yellow House on the Corner and Selected Poems,* provides an example:

> I prove a theorem and the house expands:
> the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling,
> the ceiling floats away with a sigh.
> As the walls clear themselves of everything
> but transparency, the scent of carnations
> leaves with them. I am out in the open
>
> and above the windows have hinged into butterflies,
> sunlight glinting where they've intersected.
> They are going to some point true and unproven (Dove, *SP*, 17:1-9).

Dove's poetry is sometimes complex, but not so complex that most readers can't derive some meaning from it. Most readers would probably not conclude that "Geometry" is about the similarity of geometry and poetic form after a first reading. But on a second reading they would probably get the meaning. "The poem 'Geometry' is really about what geometry and poetic form have in common; and its concluding adjectives, 'true' and 'unproven,' are revealing ones with respect to Dove's poetry," says Helen Vendler in her essay "Identity Markers" in *Callaloo* (384).

The poem is typical of Dove's many poems where race never comes up and is far from being important in the interpretation of the poem. "It is a poem of perfect wonder, showing Dove as a young girl in her parents' house doing her lessons, mastering geometry, seeing for the first time the coherence and beauty of the logical principles of spatial form," says Vendler. According to *Current Year Book 1994,* one afternoon Dove was having difficulty with a homework assignment in geometry in the 10th grade when her brother advised her, "You have to sit down and think about it until you get it" (144). Acting upon the brother's recommendation, she soon overcame her problem by

visualizing points, lines, and planes as elements of the room around her and the world beyond. Years later she relates her experience in the poem. "The poem illustrates Dove's sure way with images, which are always, in her poems, surrogates for argument," says Vendler (385). "She avoids proof by propositions in favor of the coming arrangement of successive images, which themselves enact, by their succession, an implicit argument."

So, where do Dove and many of the other African American poets of the 1980s and 90s shift the gears that contrast with the aesthetics of the other poetry leaders of old, *and* where does Dunbar's aesthetic differ with the other major poets? A good way to find out is take a closer look at the aesthetics of the major poets that came after Dunbar and before Dove, starting with Langston Hughes.

With his authorship of numerous books of poetry, novels, short stories, autobiographies, books of nonfiction, and juvenile books; editorship of books; translations of publications; and involvement with other writers on other works, Langston Hughes is the most widely published African American literary figure of the 20th century. Hughes's career began in 1926 with the publishing of his first book of poetry titled *The Weary Blues.* His poetry aesthetic was probably influenced by events in his life. After his parents' separation shortly after his birth, Hughes's father moved to Mexico where he developed a deep resentment of other African Americans. His father's resentment of his people probably drew Hughes and his works, especially his poetry, closer to them. "With this essay ['The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain'], his first book of poems, and his second book of verse, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), Hughes's place as the primary proponent of a black literary aesthetic in America was secured" says Seibles (167).

This passage from Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" sums up his aesthetic and how his work was viewed by some of his critics:

> Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meaning and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems and yet after reading I answer questions like these from my own people: Do you think Negroes should always write about Negroes? ...What makes you do so many jazz poems (1270).

Hughes was determined to focus his poetry on the people and things that he knew best, the average black people whom he encountered everyday, their music, language, dress, lifestyles, etc. As Joyce A. Joyce notes in her essay "Bantu, Nkodi, Ndungu, and Nganga: Language, Politics, Music, and Religion" in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, that "Hughes was the first to bring the blues and jazz rhythms to black poetry in America" (103). Many of his poems also reflect the endurance and struggles that black people faced throughout history in Africa as well as in America. An example can be found these stanzas from his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers:"

> I've known rivers:
> I've known rivers ancient as the world and older that the
> flow of human blood in human veins.
> My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
>
> I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns were young.
> I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
> I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
> I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers (Gates,1254:1-13).

"Hughes's use of the word 'deep' in his poem resonates with the song 'Deep River.' The poem's musicality is achieved through long and open vowel sounds combined with liquid, nasal, and sibilant constants," notes Fahamisha P. Brown in *Performing the Word* (68). "Making use of common oral figures of repetition, Hughes enumerates rivers associated with African American heritage and history to evoke a mystical sense of the eternal presence of the speaking 'I'"

So how does the aesthetic of Hughes, the most influential African American poet of his Harlem Renaissance era, differ from that of Dunbar? And what common thread does Hughes's aesthetic have with the aesthetic of the others?

Hughes tried to follow Dunbar's example in many ways in writing about the lives of black people, in his use of their music and their language. Where Hughes shifted gears, in a dramatic way, away from Dunbar is his use of less dialect in his poetry. However, Hughes did not denounce Dunbar's use of dialect, as a number of African American literary critics and intellectuals would do during Hughes's lifetime. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes seems to be lamenting a lack of full appreciation for Dunbar's dialect poetry by blacks and whites. "The quaint charm and humor of Dunbar's dialect verse brought to him, in his day, largely the same kind of encouragement one would give a sideshow freak (A colored man writing poetry! How

odd!) or a clown (How Amusing!)," Hughes wrote (1269). Hughes's aesthetic, which led him to write poetry about all aspects of the lives of everyday black people, never wavered.

But the aesthetic of Gwendolyn Brooks did waiver. Although her poetry always focused on the everyday lives of black people in a humanistic or universal way from the beginning of her career in 1945, Brooks's aesthetic shifted in the 1960s. During the 1960s, and after, her poetry focused on the everyday lives of black people with stronger tones of assertiveness and preachment. In his essay "Gwendolyn Brooks and a Black Aesthetic," in *A Life Distilled,* Norris B. Clarks says of Brooks earlier and later poems:

> A different emphasis between the thematic content
> of her earlier poems - self, motherhood, tenements,
> war heroes, racial ambivalence, joblessness, pretens-
> ions, poverty, religion – and her later "black" poems -
> a black aesthetic, black unity, black consciousness,
> contemporary lack heroes, overt racism, riots – is
> noticeable (86).

As I said earlier, Brooks's earlier poems were focused more on the lives of black people not so much as black people but as human beings. There were no strong elements of assertiveness or protest. These two stanzas from a poem, published in 1945 and titled "Maxie Allen" shows what most of Brook's earlier poems were like aesthetically:

> Maxie Allen always taught her
> Stipendiary little daughter

To thank her Lord and lucky star
For eye that let her see so far,
For throat enabling her to eat
Her Quaker Oats and Cream-of-Wheat,
For tongue to tantrum for the penny,
For ear to hear the haven't-any
For arm to toss, for leg to chance,
For heart to hanker for romance.

Sweet Annie tried to teach her mother
There was somewhat of something other.
And whether it was veils and God
And whistling ghost to go unshod
Across the broad and bitter sod,
Or fleet love stopping at her foot
And giving her it never-root
To put into her pocket-book,
Or just deep and human look,
She did not know; but tried to tell (Gates, 1586:1-20).

The poems seems to be about a mother, Maxie Allen, and her young daughter, Annie, learning from each other as the mother teaches the daughter to be thankful.

Several stanzas of Brooks's "Riot" show clear evidence that by 1969, when the poem was published, her aesthetic has switched to a more assertive response in her poetry to everyday situations that black people were facing at the time:

John Cabot, out of Wilma, once a Wycliffe,
all whitebluerose below his golden hair,
wrapped richly in right linen and right wool,
almost forgot his Jaguar and Lake Bluff;
almost forgot Grandtully (which is The
Best Thing That Ever Happened To Scotch); almost
forgot the sculpture at the Richard Gray
and Distelheim; the kidney pie at Maxim's,
the Grenadine de Boeuf at Maison Henri.

Because the Negroes were coming down the street.

Because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty

(not like Two Dainty Negroes in Winnetka)
and they were coming toward him in rough ranks.
In seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud.
And not detainable. And not discreet (Gates,1596:1-15).

Brooks's "Riot" portrays what often happened in the 1960s and 70s, the era of black-initiated race riots, when prosperous whites encountered poor blacks in major urban areas. Her use of the character John Cabot, represents symbolically the Cabot family, which has been prominent in America since the early 18th century, according to the Norton Anthology of African American Literature (1596). Their fortune was initially based on trading in rum, slaves and opium. In the poem, John Cabot is overcome by fear when he observes two poor black people coming down the street. Cabot is unnerved "because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty (not like Two Dainty Negroes in Winnetka)." The two blacks apparently fit the stereotypical image of potential black rioters because they were not dressed neatly like the black people in Winnetka, a prosperous Chicago suburb. Brooks's over use of capitalization and coining of words like "Grantully" fits the mold of the poetry falling under the rubric of the Black Aesthetic espoused by Baraka and other African American poets who came to prominence during the 1960s and 70s.

In an interview with B. Denise Hawkins in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry,* Brooks, whose verse dominated the African American poetry scene between 1940 and 1960, acknowledged that she was influenced by the works of Dunbar and Hughes. "When I was fifteen, I discovered a little book called *Caroling Dusk.* It featured the writings of poets like Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown," she says

(278) "...It was exciting to see all those writers. Of course I knew about Paul Laurence Dunbar." In 1950 when she became the first African American to win the Putltzer Prize for poetry, Hughes, who never won a major prize for his work, offered his congratulations and discussed her work in his column.

Clearly, the aesthetic of Hughes was influenced by the works of Dunbar, and the aesthetic of Brooks was influenced greatly by the works of Hughes and to a lesser extent by the works of Dunbar. Onwuchekwa Jemie notes in *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* that:

> Dunbar's career is a striking illustration of the acuteness of "double consciousness." That he chose to write in both standard English and dialect is testimony to his recognition of the conflicting demands on his art, the demands of a mainstream esthetic on the one hand and a black folk esthetic on the other (152).

What distinguished Hughes's aesthetic from Dunbar's more than anything else is probably Hughes's use of music, especially jazz and blues with his poetry, his limited use of dialect, and the broadening of the spectrum of blacks which Hughes portrayed. As the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* states:

> His major step, encouraged in part by (Carl) Sandburg's example (as in Sandburg's *Jazz Fantasies, 1919*) but anchored by his own near-worship of black music as the major form of art within the race, was his adoption of traditional poetic form first to jazz,

> then to blues, in which Hughes sometimes used dialect but in a way radically different from that of earlier writers [such as Dunbar] (1252).

The closeness of the aesthetics of Dunbar and Hughes centers on the fact that they chose to focus their poetry largely on the lives of African Americans, with Hughes doing so by choice and Dunbar doing so because of the dictates of others. Although Dunbar could write what he wanted to write it would not get published if it did not please the critics, publishers and readers. For Dunbar, in his time, that meant dialect was the most acceptable for publishing. What distinguished Hughes's aesthetic from Brooks's is his refusal to accept the idea that black poetry should embrace universality. As a matter of fact he was dead set against it and believed, wrongfully, I believe, the issue of universality for African American poetry to be a false one. His "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" essay expresses his view this way:

> This is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America - this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and be as little Negro and as much American as possible (1267).

Just as Dunbar felt hopeless about getting recognition for his poetic works in standard verse, Hughes seems to have felt it would be a vain effort for him to write on universal themes when many Americans still viewed black people as second class citizens.

While Hughes chose to focus his poetry almost exclusively on the lives of black people, he did not use his works to lecture white America, at least not in an overt way,

about its practice of racism against African Americans. In her later years Brooks's aesthetic resembled Hughes's because she tended to reflect on black life more steadily. And like Hughes she did not refrain from the use of dialect, but she limited its use in her poetry. A resident of the predominantly black South Side of Chicago most of her life, she had written about what she observed there during most of her career. However, after participating in a conference attended by Baraka in 1967 Brooks "came to a new resolve," according to Houston A. Baker Jr. in *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (109). Baker quotes Brooks from her autobiography *Report from Part One* in his book:

> My aim in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully "call" all black people in gutters, schools, offices factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones (109).

Brooks was viewed as the link between the middle generation of poets of Hughes era and the newer generation of poets of Baraka's era. But as Fahamisha P. Brown notes in *Performing the Word,* in Brooks's poems, as well as Hughes's, and in some of the poets of Baraka's Black Arts Movement, "poet and the poem are the vehicles through which important lessons are taught" (56). The poetry of Baraka and the Black Arts Movement exemplifies Brown's statement more than ever. She became a political advocate for social change, a switch that many in the Black Arts Movement welcomed.

In addition to Baraka and Gayle, other leaders of the Black Arts Movement included poets like Larry Neal, Sarah Webster Fabio, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, and Nikki Giovanni. The Black Aesthetic, which was popularized by Gayle in his anthology of critical essays by the same name became sort of a manifesto of the Black Arts Movement, which Baraka took leadership of and became its leading spokesman. Onwuchekwa Jemie, in his *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* describes Baraka and the other leader's of the Black Arts Movement's difference with Hughes's aesthetic this way:

> They are, like Hughes, products of the oral tradition, deriving their strength from the same sources. Their tone is of course more militant, more defiant, with a clearly stated rejection of Western values. Hughes was a believer in the American Dream; He just wanted it fulfilled for blacks. But the literary generation of the late 60s and 70s at best views the American Dream with cynicism. Most of them do not believe that any healthy black dreams could be fulfilled within the America system as presently established (181).

A lot of the poetry written by the poets of the Black Arts Movement expressed anger, protest, and rebellion against an oppressive society in language that was sometimes crude. An example is Baraka's "I Don't Love You:

Whatever you've given me, whiteface glass
to look through, to find another there, another
what motherfucker? another bread tree mad at its

sacredness, and the law of some dingaling god, cold
as ice cucumbers, for the shouters and the wigglers,
and what was the world to the words of slick nigger fathers,
too depressed to explain why they could not appear to be men.

The bread fool. The don'ts of the white hell. The crashed eyes
of dead friends, standing at the bar, eyes focused on actual ugliness.
I don't love you. Who is to say what that will mean. I don't
love you, expressed the train, moves, and uptown days later
we look up and breathe much easier

I don't love you (Gates,1881:1-13).

Baraka began his career in the 1950s as one of the Beat poets who spent a lot of time in San Francisco and New York's Greenwich Village, where they were committed to the jazz aesthetic. "The Beat movement was biracial because the Beat community was too 'hip' to be caught up in the idiocy of racism, which, in their eyes, reeked of the lifeless, fearful rigidity that typified the whole white, mainstream, 'square' world," says Seibles in *A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry* (177). The key poem, "The Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note," from Baraka's first published collection of poems (with the same title as the poem), provides an example of Baraka's jazz poems:

Lately, I've become accustomed to the way

The ground opens up and envelopes me
Each time I go out to walk the dog.
Or the broad edged silly music the wind
Makes when I run for a bus...

Things have come to that.
And now, each night I count the stars,
And each night I get the same number.

And when they will not come to be counted,
I count the holes they leave.
Nobody sings anymore.

And then last night, I tiptoed up

To my daughter's room and heard her
Talking to someone, and when I opened
The door, there was no one there...
Only she on her knees, peeking into

Her own clasped hands (Gates,1879:1-17).

While the cadence and rhythm of jazz and blues often pervaded the poetry of Baraka when he was a Beat poet those poems were not dominated by themes about black life or culture. It was during the rise of the civil rights movement that Baraka made a clean break with the Beat poets and adopted an aesthetic for his poetry that advocated a more strident and forceful articulation of the story of black life in America and contempt for white society.

By the time that Baraka, the Black Arts Movement, and the Black Aesthetic began dominating the African American literary scene in the 1960s and 70, many black critics and intellectuals had almost totally dismissed Dunbar's aesthetic and contributions to African American literature in particular and American literature in general. Though they rarely admit it, there is a connection with the aesthetics of Dunbar and the aesthetics of Baraka and poets who led the Black Arts Movement. As Lorenzo Thomas notes in *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-*

Century American Poetry, like the poetry of Dunbar, the poetry of Baraka occupied two modes:

> The poetry of Amiri Baraka also occupies two modes: intensely personal lyrics and incisively political comment. The persona of Baraka's lyrics, however, is always clearly in this world. The result is that the poems have both a universality and dimension of social comment (204).

The disconnect between the Dunbar era and the Baraka era was very unfortunate because in allowing this to happen the leaders of the Black Arts Movement lost focus of the best way to accomplish what they sought to accomplish. The goal of most of the poets and others in the Black Arts Movement was greater empowerment for black art – empowerment from within, from the black community itself. That was fine. But an ultimate goal should have been to have black art reach and appeal to society as a whole.

The goal of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement was made more difficult by their denial of part of their own literary history, which includes Dunbar's failures as well as his successes. Traditionally, the leaders of new movements achieve success by learning from the failures of others and building on their successes. The Black Arts Movement was not a complete failure, although certain parts of its agenda were a failure. There were also some big successes, including the establishment of African American literature programs in Africana studies departments at major universities across the country. But such successes might have been even greater if the leaders of the

Black Arts Movement had been more open early to the idea of ultimately making their goal inclusiveness, diversity, and universality for African American literature.

Dunbar paid a rather high price for the way he was able to make his poetry appeal to both blacks and whites, but his success paved the way for future black poets. Not acknowledging Dunbar's success, as well as that of Hughes and Brooks, and not finding ways to expand on it is one of the major failures of the Black Arts Movement.

I mentioned earlier how the aesthetic of Hughes and the poets of the Harlem Renaissance differed from that of Baraka and the poets of the Black Arts Movement era. Despite criticism of the shortcoming of Hughes's Harlem Renaissance by leaders of the Black Arts Movement, that movement extended some of the critical assumptions of Hughes and other early modern writers. "Adherents to a Black Aeshetic called for an 'art for the people's sake.' They saw the poet as a performer in relationship to an audience," says Fahamisha P. Brown (14). Hughes would not have found fault with the call for "an art for the people's sake," but he would have found fault with the part of the Black Arts Movement's aesthetic that sees no hope for black people, especially black writers and artists, operating successfully within the traditional framework of American society.

Brooks empathized with Baraka and the poets of the Black Arts Movement and went as far as she could to have her poetry reflect some of the criterion of the Black Aesthetic, but without its harsh tones of protest and political rhetoric. In her essay, "In the Place of An Introduction: Eating Jim Crow," in *Reading Race in American Poetry: An Area of Act,"* which she edited, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, reports that critics tried to

spark a debate between Brooks and Baraka over their aesthetics at a conference early in Baraka's career in California in 1964:

> One day of the conference, both Gwendolyn Brooks and LeRoi Jones read their poems. In the course of the discussion session that followed, a number of the critics in attendance attempted to direct the audience toward a consideration of the aesthetic differences between Brooks and Jones, though the poets themselves were not terribly interested in the exercise. The obvious import of the comparisons the white critics were making was that Brooks was a writer of light, imitative verse, perhaps in the "mockingbird" tradition, and that Jones, aligned with the Beats and the Black Mountain School, was beyond the pale of what white critics would consider poetry (5-6).

According to Nielsen, "Brooks responded by letting the audience know that she held Jones [Baraka] and his work in very high regard, and Jones characterized the debate as something more appropriate to a 'Poetry 101' course" (6). In short, I think I can say that in her aesthetic Brooks felt akin to Hughes on the one hand and to Baraka on the other. Clearly, Hughes had more influence than Baraka on Brooks's overall aesthetic practices. On the other hand, it appears that Baraka and the poets of the Black Arts Movement had more influence on the shaping of Brooks's aesthetic during the 1960s

and 70s than she had on shaping theirs, her status as a veteran poet notwithstanding. Those who study Brooks's poetry seriously, however, are not likely to assess that as a weakness in Brooks. They are more likely see it as a measure of her humility.

Now, on to the Dunbar-Hughes-Brooks-Baraka-Dove connection. I have anticipated the critics and fans of Dove who will argue, as Dove might herself, that there is no connection between her aesthetic and that of Dunbar and Baraka. Dove is seen by many as an African American poet who writes sophisticated poetry. "Today, in the sophisticated and complex poetry of, say, Rita Dove, Michael Harper, Derek Walcott, Ai, Jay Wright or Audre Lorde, thematically speaking, tribal or folk elements and the universals are obvious," writes Clarence Major in the essay "Crossing a Sea of Black Poetry," in *American Visions* (30). "In fact, such elements are more in evidence in the 20th century, and especially since the mid 1940s, than they are, say, in the effort of [Lucy] Terry, [Jupiter] Hammon, or [Phillis] Wheatley." Major is right in saying that there was more "evidence in the 20th century" of black poets writing about both "folk elements and the universals." But this trend did not begin in the mid-1940s as he seems to suggest. Though, he is not generally credited with doing so, sophistication and complexity in African American poetry began with Dunbar being forced, in a sense, to write in both dialect and standard verse. Another part of that complexity and sophistication stemmed from his feeling a need to please both white and black audiences in both his dialect and standard English poems. So he often wrote poems that would be interpreted different ways by the two audiences.

Even so, most of the interviews or critical pieces that I have read on Dove have not alluded to her being influenced by Dunbar. Nevertheless, I think that just by virtue of the fact that Dunbar was America's first black professional poet [who also wrote on a number of universal themes, for which he is not generally credited for], who also wrote in other genres – fiction, drama, essays – has influenced all African American poets that came after him, including Dove – consciously or unconsciously. Helen Vendler, in *Callaloo*, writes about the struggle that Dove might have had in formulating her aesthetic, given the aesthetic struggles other leading African American poets faced in their generations:

> ...A young intellectual like Rita Dove, growing up with Hughes the most obvious literary role-model among older black poets, would have found her inner life asking for more than a populist linguistic practice; yet she would have taken, I imagine, the stern commitment of Dunbar and Hughes and Brooks to poetry understandable by all as a moral warning against a style cavalierly hermetic (381).

Noting that African American poets have presented various responses to blackness in their poetry, Vendler says, "for a man of Hughes's far-ranging mind and reading, that linguistic self-restriction was a sign of unquestioned moral commitment to the black reader..." Vendler seems to be suggesting that just as Hughes found it necessary to make a moral commitment to focus his poetry on the lives of black people Dove finds it necessary to make a commitment not to focus her poetry just on black people, events,

and situations. When asked by Steven Bellin in an interview in the *Mississippi Reiview*, to talk about direct influences on her style, she said in part:

> My list of influences is constantly changing: as soon as I become aware of their influence, it means that I'm no longer influenced by them. There are poets I return to again and again for sustenance: I read them, shake my head and wonder, "How did they do that?" I go back to figures like Emily Dickinson and Thomas Hardy, for example, and Langston Hughes and Shakespeare, and some prose writers as well – James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I love Derek Walcott's work, but I don't think I'm influenced by it. I don't know about Elizabeth Bishop – Elizabeth Bishop is someone I can't read if I intend to write that day [laughs] (4).

Dove probably believes that because the racial climate is considerably less hostile for her than it was for Dunbar, Hughes, and Brooks, and somewhat less hostile than it was for Baraka, there is no need to write just about the lives and situations of black people. And she is willing to take criticism from advocates of the Black Aesthetic for doing so. As Dr. Herbert Martin, the Dunbar-scholar-in- residence at the University of Dayton notes in his interview with me in Chapter 5, African American poets are often, as he puts it, "dammed if we do and dammed if we don't." He is referring of course to the fact that black poets sometimes receive double criticism both - writing verse with universal themes and for writing race-oriented poetry. Dove's role model for

taking criticism for her work is Langston Hughes, despite his inclination to focus his work on black people exclusively. Apparently she believes she has a freer hand than Hughes did at working to show that people are people, regardless of their race. So when I see Hughes and Dove facing the same pressures and the same dilemma, but giving different responses to them, I think of them, too, as two great poets in two different worlds.

When Bellin asks Dove how she feels about African American writers being characterized as Afrocentric, Eurocentric, male-identified, or feminist, she responded in part:

> My favorite response to that line of inquiry comes from Langston Hughes, who published an essay in 1926 called "The Negro Artist And the Racial Mountain," in *The Nation*, I believe. The "new Negro" artist of the Harlem Renaissance, he says, intend to express their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame"; if white people liked the results that was great, but if they didn't that was fine, too He then takes it one step further: it would be wonderful if other black people like what the Renaissance artists were doing, but if they didn't, that wouldn't matter, either. He ends with a declaration: "We build our temple for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within our selves" (12)

While it is evident from the interview that Hughes is one of Dove's literary heroes, her book review of Arnold Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume II, 1941-1967: I Dream a World*, which appeared in *The New York Times*, gives a clear indication that she is aware of his shortcomings and the literary pitfalls he faced. For example, she writes, "...Hughes's career as the first freelance Afro-American writer who made a living from his profession was hampered by the obligation he felt toward his intended audience – that is the black masses..." (Sec.7; 1). In another section of the review Dove writes, "...the upwardly mobile black middle class, eager to present a proper face to whites, cringed at the folksier aspects of a heritage Hughes unabashedly lauded" (Sec. 7;1).

What an unusual, if not strange, twist! Hughes occasionally commented on opposition from the black middle class because he wrote about the average, everyday black people who were generally at the lower end of the economic ladder. Now, Dove, on occasion, comments on the opposition that she receives because she does not focus her poetry on blacks exclusively and when she does focus on blacks she does not feel compelled to follow the dictates of the Black Aesthetic. I'll cite two examples. The first one is from Therese Steffen's *Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove's Poetry, Fiction, and Drama*, the first full-length book study of Dove's work. Dove tells the story this way in an interview with Steffen in the final chapter of the book:

> One day I got a phone call from one of the editors; it turned out that Alice Walker [author of *The Color Purple* and other popular novels] had refused to read at the book launch in San Francisco because a "racist poem" had been published

> in the anthology. The poem in question was mine: "Nigger-Song. An Odyssey." Alice objected to the use of the word "nigger," even by a black writer. I wrote her a letter explaining my philosophy about the word: my concern was to redeem the word, to reimagine it as a black concept. She responded with a polite, dignified letter in which she acknowledged my right to use whatever words I choose but argued that we should not use such words in the company of white people. My immediate response was: "No one's going to put me in that kind of cage – not whites, not blacks, not even myself. I am trying to make the best poem I possibly can, a poem that will defy whatever nefarious purpose people may want to use it for." So in spite of my precautions, the very thing I feared – being called to task by the Black Arts Movement – happened early in my career (169).

The other example that I will refer to is the poem Dove wrote about a real or imagined meeting she had with Haki Madhubuti (also known as Don L. Lee), another one of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, in *The Yellow House on the Corner*: The poem, titled "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream," reads in part:

> ...Moments slip by like worms.
> "Seven years ago..." he begins; but
> I cut him off: "Those years are gone –
> What is there now?" He starts to cry; his eyeballs

Burst into flame. I can see caviar
Imbedded like buckshot between his teeth.
His hair falls out in clumps of burned-out wire.
The music grows like branches in the wind.

I lie down, chuckling as the grass curls around me.
He can only stand, fist clenched, and weep
Tears of iodine, while the singers float away,
Rustling on brown paper wings (Dove, SP,12:1-12).

I don't know if Dove actually met Madhubuti but she certainly confronts him philosophically in the poem. "Dreaming or awake, Dove in her art certainly confronts Lee in his own once dominating, or domineering, version of the poet's role," says Arnold Rampersad in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook 1993* (133). "Her opposition may be couched in this poem in highly personal terms (neutralized by the idea that the perception of Lee here is in a dream) but it is in fact mainly philosophic." Nevertheless, Joanne V. Gabbin, reports in her introduction to *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, that Dove acknowledged her indebtedness to the Black Arts Movement at a conference, after which the book was named. "She [Dove] says if it had not been for the Black Arts Movement, America would not be ready to accept a poet who explored a text other than blackness," Gabbin writes (4). "Dove is one of a large group of poets who published their first poems during the 1970s and 1980s." The list that Gabbin mentions include Dove, Michael S. Harper, Pinkie Gordon Lane, Sherley Anne Williams, Toi Derricotte, Gerald Barrax, and E. Ethelbert Miller. Gabbin says this group of poets "made freedom both the medium and message of their poetry" (4).

So, even though she disagrees with much of the philosophy of Baraka and his Black Arts Movement or Gayle's Black Aesthetic, Dove believes they have been helpful to her in paving the way to her own aesthetic. We also knows that she benefited aesthetically from Dunbar's using his skill to write poetry that appealed to both blacks and whites at a time when America practiced the most rigorous separation of the races. And we know that she had been influenced greatly by the proliferation of Hughes's works and his fortitude in practicing his aesthetic in the face of opposition from blacks and whites. That leaves the aesthetics of Dove and Brooks for discussion.

At the same conference that Dove expressed her indebtedness to the Black Arts Movement, Dove also paid tribute to Brooks. According to Gabbin, Dove said:

> "Standing in front of this literary congregation as a grown woman, a woman who had entered her forties, I feel very strange thinking that when Gwendolyn Brooks was awarded the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen*, her second collection of poems, I was not even, as people used to say then 'a twinkle in my daddy's eye'" (4).

During the conference Brooks and Dove, both former poet laureates of the United States (the title was "Consultant to the Library of Congress" during Brooks tenure) read their works from the same stage. "In the span of one sunny afternoon Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove read and showed why their laurels rested so securely on their head," writes Gabbin (8). Critics seem to agree that Brooks's greatest influence on Dove's aesthetic can be seen in the fact that the works of both have been hard for critics to

pigeonhole, more so earlier in Brooks's career and throughout Dove's career. Both poets have on occasion been labeled "mainstream" American poet, "new" black poet, and forerunner of

a younger generation of writers. "I feel a deep affinity with Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright – indeed, with what one would call the African American canon of literature," Dove said in an interview with M. Wynn Thomas in *The Swansea Review* (159).

So it is clear that even though Ohio poets Dunbar and Dove lived in two different worlds, their literary and aesthetic worlds are connected. They are connected by the evolutionary trail left by Dunbar, Hughes, Brooks, and Baraka, along with the other poets of their eras. Each one of these poets helped to advance aesthetics in African American poetry. In Dunbar's day there was only one aesthetic, one that embraced both black dialect and standard English. Today, there are many aesthetics held by many African American poets, and among her generation of African American poets Dove is the leading advocate of a philosophy that embraces that diversity. "What I find refreshing...is that so many black poets are talking about those aspects of life which are human regardless of whether one is black or white," she says in *Poetry After Modernism* (263).

Exactly where the new and evolving aesthetics in African American poetry are headed is difficult to say. Timothy Seibles offers this perspective in *A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry*:

> If American society continues to evolve in a healthy, culturally pluralistic way, then it is likely black artists, the black aesthetic, will embrace more and more of the world's offerings because African Americans, like Asians and Europeans and Aborgines, are citizens of the world and, as such, are destined to share in and express its totality. If, on the other hand, whites insist on sustaining a virulent racism that allows them to treat other people as things, black people will sustain themselves with the same spiritual and physical tenacity that has allowed them to survive up to the present (187).

In the meantime, African American aesthetics of today are ironically are still "crossing color" by whatever means possible, just as in Dunbar's day. Irony can be found in the words "crossing" and "color," which are found in titles of two of the latest books on the lives and works of the two Ohio poets, *Crossing the Color Line: A Biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar 1872-1906* by Felton O. Best, and *Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove's Poetry, Fiction, and Drama*, by Therese Steffen. Yes, Dunbar and Dove are two great Ohio poets, but their lives and their times placed them in *different worlds*. In both of those worlds there were/are color lines to be crossed and the poets did so.

Proof of the contributions that Dunbar and Dove have made to African American literature and history in particular and American literature and history in

general is the recognition that they receive today in newspapers in their hometowns of Dayton and Akron. I will discuss that recognition in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Poetic Acclaim and Fame: Top Coverage by Hometown Newspapers

The lives and works of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Rita Dove are interesting for study because they can tell writers and writing researchers a lot about how American society was dealing with race relations at the beginning of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, which opened a new millennium. In this chapter I have included a text study of how the hometown newspapers of these poets cover their lives and works today. It is my hope that the results will give writers and writing researchers some ideas for writing about how America has treated other well-known, highly accomplished African-American literary figures, especially poets, over the last century.

As we have learned, by 1906, when Paul Laurence Dunbar died at the age of 33 of tuberculosis, the first nationally and internationally known African-American poet had written more than 400 poems. Yet he was denied many of the accolades and acclaim of other poets of his post-slavery era.

Many publications featured his works, during his lifetime, including his hometown newspapers, but they focused largely on his poetry in African American dialect, which would later be received negatively by some scholars, critics, and readers later in the 20th century. Dunbar's story is quite a contrast to the story of Rita Dove, who, as I stated earlier, in addition to winning the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in poetry for *Thomas and Beulah*, her third book of poetry, served as poet laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995. Dove, a Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, has also received numerous other honors and awards and is constantly in

demand for speaking engagements nationally and internationally. The story of her work and life is being told in mostly a positive way by various forms of media, including her hometown newspaper.

An ideal text study of newspaper coverage given to Dunbar and Dove, it seems, would be one that compares how the *Dayton Daily Journal Herald* and the *Dayton Daily News* (two of the newspapers in Dayton during Dunbar's time) covered Dunbar during the early part of his career and how the *Akron Beacon Journal,* the current daily newspaper in Akron, covered Dove during the early part of her career. But because of time constraints I decided to undertake a study of how Dunbar and Dove are covered by their hometown newspapers today.

My original interest in undertaking this study of how Dunbar and Dove are currently covered by their hometown newspapers stemmed from curiosity. As a writer and researcher, I was curious to know how these two highly accomplished African American poets, who have been well-received in various parts of the world, are received by their hometown newspapers. As an African American growing up in Little Rock, Ark., and Youngstown, Ohio, during the 1950s and 60s and 70s, respectively, I had a negative perception of how newspapers, who had virtually no African American writers, covered African Americans. Because I had an interest in journalism and politics at a very early age, I was always an ardent reader of newspapers. My recollection is that black people, even famous and highly accomplished black people, received very little favorable coverage by newspapers until after the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of the Black Arts Movement, which I discussed in Chapter 3. I've known of

Dunbar since my childhood days in the 1950s in Little Rock, where I attended the then all-black Dunbar Junior High School. I was a ninth grader at Dunbar during the outset of the infamous Little Rock school desegregation crisis, during which violent mobs sought to stop nine black teenagers from enrolling at all-white Little Rock Central High School.

Although I attended a school named after Dunbar I never read much of his poetry until I heard some of it recited in a recording of one of Dr. Martin Luther King's sermons about 18 years ago. When I attended Dunbar Junior High School the poet was always one of the historical figures that we talked about during Black History Week, which became Black History Month years later. Even though Akron is only 40 miles from Youngstown, where I have lived for 40 years, from 1961 to the present, (excluding four years in the Navy), I really knew nothing of Dove until about three years ago. I was introduced to her work in the 20th Century Poetry class of Dr. Steve Reese at Youngstown State University.

When I chose a topic for my thesis, *Dunbar and Dove: Two Great Ohio Poets, Two Different Worlds*, I wanted to know if the hometown newspapers of these two poets would be good resources for information about their works and lives. I decided to do this text study to find out. And in doing so I hope not only to answer my question, but also to answer some of the questions that other students, writing researchers, and scholars might have about how newspapers cover famous and highly accomplished African American literary figures from their areas, especially poets.

The newspapers of Dayton and Akron seemed particularly suitable for the study, not only because they are the poets' hometowns, but also because of their geographical

locations. Both are cities in Ohio and have populations that are fairly comparable in size, Akron with 223,019, and Dayton with 182,044, according to the 10th edition of *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1442, 1462). Akron is located in Northeastern Ohio, where culture and tradition tend to be more Northern and Dayton is located in Southwestern Ohio where cultural and tradition tend to be more Southern or Midwestern. Both are heavily industrialized cities (they were even more so in the recent past) with large numbers of blue collar workers. Dayton has the larger African American population, a situation that probably dates back to Dunbar's time when African Americans flocked to the city after being freed from slavery. In doing the study, I also sought to learn if coverage by a hometown newspaper of a famous, highly accomplished African American poet in the Southwestern part of the state would be different from the coverage of a hometown African American poet in Northeastern part of the state.

Both Dunbar and Dove are equally famous African Americans; however Dove's fame today seems to be more widespread among both whites and blacks than Dunbar's - maybe even more widespread among whites. During his era Dunbar may also have been more popular and perhaps more widely known among whites at times because they made up the largest part of his reading audience. In undertaking the study, I sought to determine if the poets' coverage by their hometown papers is influenced by whether the poet is still alive.

The overall study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. To produce triangulation, I used a preliminary surveys of editors from each paper on how and when the papers covered the poets, an observation and study of texts, and an interview with Dr.

Herbert W. Martin, a Dunbar scholar-in-residence and professor of English at the University of Dayton. I sought an interview with Dove, but her assistant said her schedule was too full at the time. However, Dove did answer several questions via E-mail. The overall study focused on random samples of 60 of the 150 stories in the *Dayton Daily News* (the *Dayton Journal Herald* is now defunct), in which Dunbar's name was mentioned, since 1990, and random samples of 60 of the 125 stories in the *Akron Beacon Journal,* in which Dove's name was mentioned during the same period. Proportionately or percentage wise (given the larger number of stories overall) the sample size for the Dunbar stories was a little smaller. However, I believe the larger number of stories to pick from compensates for a proportionately smaller sample.

In the preliminary survey, an editor from each of the papers answered nine questions (See the preliminary survey questions on pages 108-13 of Appendix A). Their answers to those questions should be of interest to students, scholars and researchers who write on African American literature. I asked the editors questions about whether their newspaper's stories on the African American poets from their city could be classified as general, about their life, about their work, or in some other category. There were also questions about the frequency of coverage, the poet's image in the community, whether the newspaper has a writer with expertise on the life and works of the poet, and what governs the kinds of coverage given to the poet. Two questions dealt with the audiences to which stories about the poets appealed. There were also two questions in the survey that required narrative answers. One asked the responding editors to give a summary of their perception of the coverage that their paper has given the poet from their city

between 1990 and 2000, especially with reference to fairness, relevance, and historical significance. The other question that I wanted a narrative response to was whether stories on the poet from their city were written by various writers or if they were written by a writer who has expertise on the life and works of the poet. A final question asked the editors if they would like to receive a copy of the report on the text study. Gloria J. Irwin, public editor of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, responded to the survey for her newspaper, and Steve Sidlo, managing editor of the *Dayton Daily News*, responded for his newspaper.

The actual text study of 60 stories for each newspaper, in which the names of Dunbar and Dove were mentioned respectively, was done by observation. Copies of the stories were printed from the newspapers' archives online via the Internet. I used a data sheet to record listings for four major categories of information and five sub-categories under one of the major categories. The major categories included:

- Story Subject/Topic
- Favorable/Unfavorable
- Specification of Subject/Topic
- Notations on Recurring Themes, Language, Patterns, and Traits in coverage
- Other

The sub-categorizations under the major category of Specification of Subject/Topic included:

- General
- Focus on the Poet's Works and Life
- Special Program or Event
- Indirectly Related Event

Data were compiled in each category for both Dunbar and Dove on the data sheets. The final part of the study involved the submitting of questions relating to the survey and the study via E-mail to Dove at the University of Virginia and Dr. Martin at the University of Dayton, for responses. Dr. Martin responded in depth to his 12 interview questions, but Dove, who responded to only five of her 12 questions, gave only sparse responses, because of her teaching, speaking, and traveling commitments, according to her assistant. To keep my report balanced, I chose to use only one of the responses from the interviews in this chapter. (I will use the full text of the interview with Dr. Martin in Chapter 5) Responses by editors of both of the papers to the preliminary survey were similar. The Dayton editor said his paper had carried 150 stories that mentioned Dunbar's name between 1990 and 2000, while the Akron paper carried 125 stories that mentioned Dove's name during that period. Both papers said they evaluated each story on the poet from their city on its own merits when deciding whether they should use it. Both papers carried general news stories about the poets as well as stories about his or her life and work and stories that fall in the "other" category. The papers do not have writers on their staffs with expertise on the lives and works of the poets. However, the Dayton paper does have a writer with an interest in history who has written often about Dunbar.

Audiences for stories about the poets in both papers included general, African American, older adults, female, and male. And the responding editors from both papers said they would like to see a copy of my report on the text study.

The results of my observation and analysis of the text study of stories in the two daily newspapers, which cover two of Ohio's larger cities, show that well-known, highly accomplished African-American poets are likely to get mostly favorable coverage from their hometown newspapers, despite the fact that they might be from different eras or deceased. An overwhelming majority of the stories in the study that mentioned Dunbar and Dove during the last decade of the 20th century, 49 for Dunbar and 55 for Dove, were favorable.

Regarding the Dayton paper's coverage of Dunbar, Sidlo says, "Paul Laurence Dunbar is seen as a major historical figure in Dayton and is widely respected by black and white readers. Virtually every story we've done portrayed him and his work positively."

Typical of the positive coverage given to Dunbar over the past 10 years is the printing of the poet's poem, "A Toast to Dayton," in a feature story by Roz Young, an author, historian and lifelong Dayton resident:

> Love of home, sublimest passion
> That the human heart can know!
> Changeless still, though fate and fashion
>
> Rise and fall and ebb and flow,
> To the glory of our nation,
> To the welfare of our states,
> Let us all with veneration
> Every effort consecrate.

> And our city, shall we fail her?
> Or desert her gracious cause?
> Nay - loyalty we hail her
> And revere her righteous laws
> She shall ever claim our duty,
> For she shines - the brightest gem
> That has ever decked with beauty
> Dear Ohio's diadem (Young, 11A:1-16).

Dr. Martin seemed to accept the favorable finding of the text study, of stories on Dunbar, with a bit of caution and qualification, however. "I am not sure African American poets of any era are readily given recognition by their hometown or any newspaper for that matter," he says. "I suspect that they have to prove themselves more than any other writer." He notes, however, that he is pleased with the coverage that Dunbar gets from the Dayton paper. "Dunbar's reputation continues to grow," he says. "There is a new edition of his poems and soon there will be a new book of uncollected work by Dunbar, which I hope will enhance his dramatic reputation."

Another example of the favorable coverage that the Dayton paper continues to give Dunbar, despite his tragic life and despite the tragedies that beset his career, is the highly empathetic feature story Jim DeBrose wrote about his spending much of his meager income from his poetry and his job as an elevator operator to help the poor at Christmas. The story also tells how Dunbar admired and was influenced by the works of British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and other Romantic poets:

> Then what I cannot tell! God, how he ached to
> write poetry like that [like Shelley], to make the

> words leap off the page to their own music. And someday he would. He would. Hadn't many of his poems already appeared in the local papers. Only they didn't pay much, if anything at all. Not enough, he thought drearily to buy a Christmas ham in time for tonight's dinner. If only one of the national magazines would buy his work instead of sending him too many graciously worded rejection letters (9A).

Given Dunbar's almost incredible accomplishments in an America where many white people still viewed black people as sub-human, one can only wonder how much more he might have been able to accomplish or the extent of fame that his works might have achieved if things had been different.

Like Sidlo, Irwin was assertive in emphasizing the fairness of the Akron paper's coverage of Dove. "Because of the awards she has won and her ties to the local community, we have reported heavily on Rita Dove over the past 10 years," Irwin says. "I think our coverage fairly reflected her contributions to the literary world and to her readers." Typical of the favorable coverage given to Dove are these lines from a glowing editorial:

> Rita Dove is going as far as words will take her, her words, packed close, and bound with feeling and the experience of family and friends and places, places like Akron.

> Dove, 40, Akron-born winner of the 1987 Pulitzer for poetry, becomes the youngest ever U.S. poet laureate in October. It's an honor that recognizes her as an accomplished artist, a writer whose fresh and versatile way with words gives her audience a different way to see and hear (A14).

Dove, through her assistant, offered no response to a question about whether she believes highly accomplished African American poets of any era are readily given recognition by their hometown newspapers. She did indicate, however, that she is pleased with the coverage given to her by the Akron paper.

Another example of the favorable coverage given to Dove over the past 10 years is the Akron paper's printing of the Dove poem "Lady Freedom Among Us," which was written and read by the poet as poet laureate to commemorate the return of the statue *Freedom* to the dome of the United States Capitol (after repair work). The poem begins:

> don't lower your eyes
> or stare ahead to where
> you think you ought to be going
>
> don't mutter oh no
> *not another one*
> *get a job fly a kite*
> *go bury a bone*
>
> with her oldfashioned sandals
> with her leaden skirts
> with her stained cheeks and whiskers
> and heaped up trinkets
> she has risen among us in blunt reproach (Dove, *PW*, 11: 1-11).

The publication of the poem is an example of how the Akron papers covers all major events that involve Dove, including her visits to the city and her publishing of new works.

Of the 60 Dunbar stories observed in the study, only 10 were negative or near-negative. The five negative stories involved the occurrence of crimes near Dunbar's home, which is now a memorial maintained by the state, and the discontinuance of a Dunbar display which had once been an annual event. The five near negative-stories involved racial segregation and the change in the academic climate at the school named in Dunbar's honor and racial difficulties in Dayton.

An example of a negative story in the study of texts from the Dunbar stories is one headlined "Dunbar's Legacy and Ho's [Whores'] Road" (10A). Its focus is on the deterioration of the neighborhood in which the Dunbar memorial (the preserved home of the poet) is located. The lead sentences of the story read, "This isn't Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. After dark most guys who come through here are known simply as 'John.' And the friendly women, the ones waving at each passing car, they ain't selling cookies" (10A). I should emphasize however that even though stories like this one are negative in a general sense they are not negative toward the poet or his work.

An example of a near-negative story is one headlined "Schooled in Commitment: Dunbar High School Staff and Students are Achieving Despite Building Deterioration" (1E). In one instance the story's focus is positive: "For example, in February of 1996 Dunbar was the only Dayton public high school where 100 percent of the seniors passed the ninth grade proficiency test" (1E). But in another instance, when the head custodian, James Mason Sr., is quoted the story goes negative. "When it rains, I get out the barrels and the buckets, and I ask the kids to move out of the way and I mop," he says (1E).

Of the 60 Dove stories observed in the study, five were negative or near-negative.

The three negative stories involved a fire at Dove's home in Charlottesville, Va., in 1998, which damaged the home and some of her papers, and the poet's apparent irritation at not being invited to former President Bill Clinton's town hall meeting in Akron in 1997. The two near-negative stories were ones which involved the calming of nearby Hiram College's fear that the poet would not show for an engagement and one that involved a statement of correction, which listed the times for the poet's appearances during a visit to Akron in 1992.

That story about President Clinton's town hall meeting in Akron in 1997 carried this sentence in a story by Margaret Newkirk and David Giffels, an example of the negative coverage: "Among the disgruntled are Akron native and former Poet Laureate Rita Dove, who got an impersonal invitation to watch the event on television..." (A6). In another part of the story Dove is quoted as saying, "It's not a matter of feeling left out, it's a feeling that they don't have their house in order" (A6).

A near-negative story in a column by Russ Musarra appeared with this headline: "Worry Over at Hiram College - Poet to Appear" (D9). The first part of the column reads:

> Hiram College officials were biting their nails about whether Rita Dove would take part in the fall-quarter African-American Scholar series...In fact, the Akron native was still considering her invitation to be the

second of four speakers when the series began Sept. 23

(D9).

Apparently because editors of the *Beacon Journal* view her as an asset to the city of Akron, Dove's negative or near-negative coverage is minimal. She receives a greater variety of coverage than Dunbar does in the Dayton *Daily News*, which one can argue is predictable because she is alive and still writing. From that we can infer that contemporary African-American poets, especially those who are still alive, are likely to fare somewhat better when it comes to coverage of their works and lives by their hometown newspaper. A list of reoccurring themes in the coverage of Dove included:

- Honors She Received, 14
- Her Works and Life, 12
- Editorials or Columns Praising Her, 8
- Her Tenure as Poet Laureate, 7
- Her Return Visits to Akron, 7
- Her Overall Accomplishments, 2
- Her Family, 2

In Dunbar's case the largest number of reoccurring themes in stories were:

- The Various Events Held in His Honor, 20
- The Dunbar Memorial, Which Includes the Late Poet's Home and Some of Its Original Furnishings, 14
- His Works and Life, 8

- The High School Named in His Honor, 3
- And the Work of Dunbar Scholar Dr. Herbert Martin, Poet-in-Residence at the University of Dayton, 3

As I mentioned earlier, one of the most striking differences in the coverage of the two poets is the broader spectrum of the coverage for Dove, eight categories vs. six for Dunbar. I find it interesting that the Dayton paper covers events that honor Dunbar (a third of the total coverage) even though he has been dead for nearly a century. That is about two thirds of what the Akron paper reports on honors for Dove. It probably gives testimony to the high esteem in which the poet is held in his hometown. On the other hand, the fact that the Akron paper devotes nearly a quarter (23 percent) of its coverage of Dove to honors that she receives is also a testimony to the esteem in which she is held. As might be expected, Dove's life and works got a larger share of the *Beacon Journal's* coverage of her (20 percent), while the deceased Dunbar received 13 percent of his coverage on his life and work. Also interesting is this bit of irony - the actual number of stories (14) and percentage (23 percent) of the total coverage of the Dunbar Memorial and the honors received by Dove were exactly the same (see the Recurring Themes Data Collection Table/Chart in the Appendix B on page 114). The examination of the lives and works of Dunbar and Dove in the early part of this thesis shows clearly that these two great poets were treated differently by the American literary community and by American society as a whole in two different eras. The irony of this study, however, is that it shows similar treatment for the poets today by newspapers in their

hometowns. That is not to say, however, that the coverage would have been the same if the study had compared coverage of the poets during the height of their careers.

The results of the preliminary survey, text study observation and analysis, and interview, which I undertook over several months, has significance for journalists, students, and scholars of African American literature. It shows that the hometown newspapers of well-known black poets tend not only to portray them favorably, but they cover them in a variety of ways and objectively. The papers report extensively on the works and lives of these poets, and their coverage includes a variety of other events related to them.

What use can such a study be to writers and writing researchers? The study of African American literature in general and scholarly research on figures in African American literature has been popular since the 1960s. Most students and scholars, particularly if they are African American, probably don't think too much about the hometown newspapers of African American literary figures as rich resources for knowledge about them and their works. One of the reasons for this is that historically African Americans have perceived the news media in general, and newspapers in particular, as I did - as being biased or lacking objectivity in their coverage of African Americans. This text study of the coverage of these two highly accomplished African American poets disproves those perceptions. This text study should prove useful in providing answers to writers and writing researchers' questions, especially with regard to Dunbar and Dove.

However, I should caution the reader to remember that the methodology used to conduct the study is empirical, not scientific. So the results found here may not be *totally* applicable to situations found at all daily newspapers. Nevertheless, the study can serve some use in gauging or projecting how the hometown newspapers of most well-known African American poets are likely to cover these poets.

And further, the text study shows that there are only a few significant differences between the way that newspapers of *today* are likely to write about an African American poet who lived and wrote in the post-slavery era, when black Americans were accorded only second-class citizenship status at best, and an African American poet of the 21st century, when African Americans enjoy many more freedoms. For example, the *Akron Beacon Journal* devoted 10 percent of its coverage to columns and editorials about Dove, while the *Dayton Daily News* devoted no columns or editorials (at least not in the study) to Dunbar and it devoted no coverage to Dunbar's family, whereas the *Akron Beacon Journal* devoted three percent of its coverage to Dove's family. In the case of the columns and editorials, the fact that Dunbar the poet is dead probably explains that occurrence. And in the case of the families, the fact that Dunbar's family is dead probably explains that occurrence. Again, other differences in coverage relate to the current status of the poets. A deceased Dunbar has a memorial that gets coverage, the University of Dayton has an active Dunbar scholar who gets coverage, and a Dayton high school named after Dunbar (as a number of high schools and other facilities around the country are) gets coverage. On the other hand, Dove is still an active poet and still receiving honors and awards, she travels a lot nationally and internationally, and she

generates news in general media and in literary publications. All of this prompts coverage of her.

In addition to finding it useful to know if the hometown newspapers have information on African American authors and their works, students and scholars will find it useful to know what kind of information is available, how closely the careers of the writers are followed, and how much and what kind of coverage newspapers give to the lives and works of African-American authors, especially poets, after their death. For example, over the years the *Dayton Daily News* has written about almost every aspect of Dunbar's life, from his birth to his family, from his education to his marriage, and from his works to his death. The *Akron Beacon Journal* is following a similar pattern in its coverage of Dove.

How much of the increase in variety in Dove's coverage is due to the fact that she is contemporary and how much is due to the fact that she is alive and active is uncertain. With the exploration of African American history and literature remaining high, I think there is considerable room for more new research in this area. One of the scholars engaged in such research is Dr. Herbert W. Martin, a Dunbar scholar-in-residence at the University of Dayton. He offers some interesting perspectives on the lives works of Dunbar and Dove in my interview with him in the final chapter, Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

A Conversation About Dunbar and Dove

Dr. Herbert W. Martin, a Dunbar scholar-in-residence at the University of Dayton, is also a published poet and critic who has studied Dunbar for four decades. He portrays the literary pioneer in a one-man show and has done extensive research on Dunbar's work in drama. Martin has some interesting things to say about the merits of *Dunbar and Dove: Two Great Ohio Poets, Two Different Worlds*. He believes that any comparison of the two poets must be made with a sharp eye on the times in which they wrote and lived/live. I have tried to do just that. – **Leon Stennis**.

It may be that African American poets suffer from a troubling paradox: we are black, we are often accused of writing too much about race relations; it is also suggested that we cannot write about anything but race. When we do write about other subjects we are often judged to be not as good as out contemporary white poets. So I think we are dammed if we do and dammed if we don't – **Herbert W. Martin**.

Stennis: I did a text study of coverage by the *Dayton Daily News* and the *Akron Beacon Journal* of Dunbar and Dove, respectively, between 1990 and 2000. One of the things that seemed significant in my study is the fact that both the Dayton and Akron papers did considerable coverage of events at which Dove and Dunbar were honored during the 10-year period. There were 20 stories on Dunbar being honored, out of 60, and 14 stories on Dove being honored, out of 60. Do you see any significance in this? Does that indicate that highly accomplished African American poets of any era are readily given recognition by their hometown newspapers?

Martin: Given the climate of how the reading public regarded literature in the last half of the twentieth century, I am always happy to see a favorable response to a writer, any writer at all. It reinvests me with hope.

There is some significance in the fact that both Dove and Dunbar are African

American poets, principally. We are not surprised that they are gifted and highly talented poets, but there are those haunting lines from Countee Cullen:

> Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
> To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

I am not sure African-American poets of any era are readily given recognition by their hometown or any newspaper for that matter. I suspect that they have to prove themselves more than any other writer.

Stennis: I studied 120 stories, 60 on each poet. The study shows that Dove received more coverage that focused on her works and life than Dunbar did - 12 of 60 stories for her and 8 of 60 stories for Dunbar. Do you think this is because poetry readers of today are more interested in reading about the works and life of current African-American poets?

Martin: The rise in interest in African American writers may be because of the rise of the renaissance of the 60s. I think there is more of an interest in African American women authors. Their time has come. Before their rise in fame the era belonged to [Richard] Wright, [Ralph] Ellison, [James] Baldwin, [Chester] Himes. Then came the women of that period: (Gwendolyn) Brooks, Margaret Walker, Alice Childress, etc. So I think there is a wonderful interest in what black writers are creating.

Stennis: As I have studied Dove and Dunbar, some of the similarities that I have discovered is the fact that both are/were musicians, both of them once aspired to be lawyers, their parents (grandparents in Dove's case) moved to Ohio during periods of heavy migration by African-Americans, both were born and grew up in highly

industrialized cities, both studied and traveled abroad, both were honored by presidents, both were inspired to focus some of their works on reflections about their family and hometowns, and both of them became nationally and internationally known early in their careers. Can you think of any similarities that I have missed?

Martin: No. Those are interesting similarities.

Stennis: The only "negative" or "near-negative" coverage of Dunbar involved in the study was on the deterioration of the neighborhood surrounding the Dunbar memorial, the changes that have taken place over the years at the high school that is named after him, and questions raised about whether the Wright Brothers, of aviation fame, (who were neighbors and classmates) actually helped finance the publishing of some of his early works. In Dove's case, the only "negative" or "near-negative" coverage involved a fire at her house and her apparent disappointment over not receiving an invitation to former President Bill Clinton's town hall meeting in Akron. Does the fact that an overwhelming majority of the stories studied were favorable indicate that highly successful African-American poets, be they from any era, are looked upon more favorably than African-Americans as a whole?

Martin: The highly visible African Americans are looked upon more favorably than the general African American public. By the same token more is demanded of them because they are more visible. In some instances, much more is demanded of the visible (African Americans) than is demanded from those who are not well known. Fame and attention seems to offer more latitude to those who are well known.

Stennis: A lot of the coverage of Dunbar seemed to be related to events in the

African American community. That was not the case with Dove's coverage. Do you think that is because much of Dunbar's work reflected on the bleak status of African Americans during his era? Do you believe that Dove's poetry, with its absence of a lot of rhetoric about race, reflects on the improved status of African-Americans today?

Martin: A good deal of the coverage [of Dunbar] may well have focused on the community because Dunbar was perhaps the representative black of his community and time. I am sure there were other individuals but they do not seem to have captured the national imagination.

It may be that African American poets suffer from a troubling paradox: we are black, we are often accused of writing too much about race relations; it is also suggested that we cannot write about anything but race. When we do write about other subjects we are often judged to be not as good as our contemporary white poets. So I think we are dammed if we do and dammed if we don't. If one bears witness to the career of Robert Hayden we see that this is exactly what happened. He was not black enough for the new black writers, even though much of his subject matter was concerned with African American themes. I think Ms. Dove is correct in pursuing the themes that best fit her considerable talents. Perhaps her poems address the sense of humanity, which is a part of all humans. Clearly, her Pulitzer Prize-winning volume, *Thomas and Beulah*, is not only focused on a black relationship but a human one as well.

I think the African American community has moved beyond these rhetorical requirements. I think the American poetic community has advanced as well. The fact

that African Americans from Gwendolyn Brooks through Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have won the Pulitzer Prize suggests a change in the American attitude.

Stennis: As a Dunbar scholar, poet, and teacher of literature, are you pleased with the coverage that Dunbar receives in *The Dayton Daily News*?

Martin: I am pleased with the coverage that Dunbar gets from *The Dayton Daily News*. Dunbar's reputation continues to grow. There is a new edition of his poems and soon there will be a new book of uncollected works by Dunbar, which I hope will enhance his dramatic reputation.

Stennis: Both the Dayton and Akron papers reported, respectively, on the fact that Dunbar and Dove have had some of their poetic works set to music. Is this something that Dunbar would have been proud to have as part of his legacy - the adaptability of his poetry to music?

Martin: Dunbar wrote the lyrics for two musicals as well as the libretto for a one-act opera and two one-act plays with music. So I think he was aware of how well he could write poetry which could easily be set to music. I do not think he would have been too surprised to find that many of his poems could be set to musical compositions. The answer to your question is yes.

Stennis: Give me your take on Dove. What is her greatest contribution to poetry, to literature in general and to African American history?

Martin: I think she was a fine poet laureate. I think she has written a fine body of poetry. She has entered into the canon, and she has written a substantial body of

poetry that increases the voice of American poetry around the world.

Stennis: What do you, a Dunbar scholar, feel when a writer like myself seeks to compare Dove with Dunbar? Do you think it is reasonable to do so, or are the differences too stark?

Martin: I am not troubled so long as you realize that, first of all, the times have changed considerably since Dunbar was alive. Ms. Dove had a few more opportunities at her disposal than Dunbar did. Ms. Dove had two excellent publishers to promote her work and to see that it was distributed well. When Dunbar is taken on by Dodd Mead & Co. his work does not go out of print in paper until the company folds. I think it is necessary for you to arrive at a new interpretation of these two distinctive writers from two different centuries.

Stennis: Dunbar's poetry often seems to reflect a lot on life experiences that he had in dealing with others - his mother, his wife, Frederick Douglass. - but there is very little reflection on his father (at least I don't recall very much). Why? Was it because he felt abandoned by father, who left the family after the Civil War?

Martin: I think that you can sense Joshua Dunbar in the Civil War poems and in the poems which deal more harshly with racism, which pervaded the times in which Dunbar lived. Observe "The Haunted Oak," "When Dey 'Listed Colored Soldiers," and "Little Brown Baby." I think Dunbar received an accurate interpretation of the realities that surrounded their lives. I think he received a more romantic view of the ante-bellum South.

Stennis: The coverage of both Dove and Dunbar over the 10-year period involved reporting on works other than poetry, like the coverage given your discovery of the original three-act play written buy Dunbar, for example. He is much better known as poet. As a Dunbar scholar, does it bother you that he is not as well known as a playwright or fiction writer?

Martin: I think there is considerable recognition of Dunbar as a novelist and short story writer. His books for musicals and his short, one-acts as well as his libretto have not been given due attention. I think his three-act play was an attempt to work himself out from under the thumb of dialect. He wanted to prove that he could write standard English with the best of the writers of the time. Unfortunately for him he found himself in a pigeonhole (dialect) and the only way he could free himself was to attempt this three-act play, not only in another time period, but in British English. I am bothered only in that Dunbar has had to wait a century to demonstrate the full range of his talent.

Stennis: A good deal of the coverage of Dunbar has focused on the memorial, the high school named in his honor, and your work and study as a Dunbar scholar. Do you believe Dunbar's achievements in literature will get the attention that they should as we approach the 100th anniversary of his death in 2006?

Martin: I think there is a good deal of interest in Dunbar, thanks to individuals like Professor Joanne Braxton who edited his latest complete poems. The edition of uncollected work, which I am editing, will add to Dunbar's reputation and tweak the attention of a number of critics who do not know of Dunbar's dramatic abilities. I think that when the *Dayton Daily News* can find a new handle for writing about his work it

does. The newspaper is aware that it has a potential gold mine in the variety of talented individuals who have come from the city of Dayton.

Appendix A

Dunbar/Dove Coverage Survey

This is a preliminary survey of the coverage given between 1990 and 2000 By the *Dayton Daily News* and the *Akron Beacon Journal* to poets Paul Laurence Dunbar and Rita Dove, respectively. A more extensive study of the coverage of the two internationally known, Ohio-born, African-American poets by their hometown newspapers will be done through the observation of stories written about them or related events.

(Survey of Paul Laurence Dunbar Coverage by the Dayton Daily News)

1. Name of survey respondent_____

2. Title of survey respondent_____

3. How many stories did your newspaper carry between 1990 and 2000 that was about, or, in some way had some relation or connection to Paul Laurence Dunbar?_____

4. Are stories about the poet written by various writers, or is there a reporter with expertise on the life and works of the poet who writes the stories? Explain_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. How does your paper determine when to do a story about the poet? Check any of the following that apply:

   A. Any news about or related to him is covered because of his prominence_____

   B. The same criterion is used that is used for other stories_____

   C. Only stories about his life and works are covered_____

   D. Each story about him is evaluated on its own merits_____

   E. Other_____ Please explain_____

   _____

   _____

6. What has been the range in the kinds of stories your paper has carried about the poet between 1990 and 2000? Please check the following that apply:

   A. General_____

   B. About his life_____

   C. About his works____

   D. Other_____Explain if necessary_____

7. What audiences have the stories about the poet appealed to? Please check the following that apply:

   A. General_____

   B. African-American_____

   C. Older Adult_____

D. Young Adult_____

C. Children's_____

8. Please give a short summary of your perception of the coverage that your newspaper has given the poet between 1990 and 2000, especially with reference to fairness, relevance, and historical significance._____

_____

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9. Would you like a copy of the results of this survey (of both papers) and the results of the overall study? Yes___ No____

Thanks in advance for your cooperation in this survey and in the overall study of the coverage that the Dayton Daily News and Akron Beacon Journal have given to poets Paul Laurence Dunbar and Rita Dove, respectively, between 1990 and 2000.

Dunbar/Dove Coverage Survey

This is a preliminary survey of the coverage given between 1990 and 2000 By the *Dayton Daily News* and the *Akron Beacon Journal* to poets Paul Laurence Dunbar and Rita Dove, respectively. A more extensive study of the coverage of the two internationally known, Ohio-born, African-American poets by their hometown newspapers will be done through the observation of stories written about them or related events.

(Survey of Rita Dove Coverage by the Akron Beacon Journal)

1. Name of survey respondent_____

2. Title of survey respondent_____

3. How many stories did your newspaper carry between 1990 and 2000 that was about, or, in some way had some relation or connection to Paul Laurence Dunbar?_____

4. Are stories about the poet written by various writers, or is there a reporter with expertise on the life and works of the poet who writes the stories? Explain_____

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_____

5. How does your paper determine when to do a story about the poet? Check any of the following that apply:

   A. Any news about or related to him is covered because of his prominence_____

   B. The same criterion is used that is used for other stories_____

   C. Only stories about his life and works are covered_____

   D. Each story about him is evaluated on its own merits_____

   E. Other_____ Please explain_____

6. What has been the range in the kinds of stories your paper has carried about the poet between 1990 and 2000? Please check the following that apply:

   A. General_____

   B. About his life_____

   C. About his works____

   D. Other_____ Explain if necessary_____

7. What audiences have the stories about the poet appealed to? Please check the following that apply:

   A. General_____

   B. African-American_____

C. Older Adult_____

D. Young Adult_____

C. Children's_____

8. Please give a short summary of your perception of the coverage that your newspaper has given the poet between 1990 and 2000, especially with reference to fairness, relevance, and historical

significance._____

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9. Would you like a copy of the results of this survey (of both papers) and the results of the overall study? Yes___ No____

Thanks in advance for your cooperation in this survey and in the overall study of the coverage that the Dayton Daily News and Akron Beacon Journal have given to poets Paul Laurence Dunbar and Rita Dove, respectively, between 1990 and 2000.

Appendix B

Table/Chart 1

Reoccurring Themes Data Collection
In Text Study of *Dayton Daily News*
And *Akron Beacon Journal* Coverage
Of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Rita Dove

Dunbar		**Dove**	
Events Held in His Honor	20/33.3 %	Honors Received	14/ 23.3%
Dunbar Memorial	14/ 23.3%	Life and Works	12/ 20.0%
His Work and Life	8/ 3.3%	Poet Laureate Role	7/ 11.7%
Work of Dr. Martin	3/ 5.0%	Visits to Akron	7/ 11.7%
Dunbar High School	3 / 5.0%	Columns and Editorials	6/ 10.0%
Other	12/ 20.1%	Overall Accomplishments	2/ 3.3%
Totals	**60/100.0%**	Her Family	2/ 3.3%
		Other	10/ 16.7%
		Totals	**60/100.0%**

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