

Paul Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio on June 27, 1872. Paul's parents were both former slaves and his father fought for the Union during the Civil War.

Paul was one of the most popular American poets of his day and the first African American poet to obtain national prominence. Paul wrote his poetry in both standard English and in *Turn-of-The-Century Black Dialect*. Although, Paul felt the poetry he wrote in standard English was his best work, he is remembered more for his lyrical folk poetry written in the rural African American dialect of the late 19th century.

Paul's poetry written in dialect has alienated some of today's African American readers, however his background and the times he lived in should be considered when judging his writing style. His parent's personal stories of slavery were also a source of some of his poetry. Such eminent scholars as W.E.B. DuBois have praised Paul's work and I believe he used dialect to convey a sense of the reality and the character of his times.

Paul attended high school in Dayton where he was the editor of the school paper, class president, class poet, and president of the school literary society.

Paul graduated in 1891. He applied for several jobs in his chosen career field of journalism, but was turned down because of his race and had to settle for a job as an elevator operator. Paul took out a loan to pay for his first book of poetry, *Oak and Ivy* published in 1893. He sold copies to his elevator passengers to pay for the printing.

Paul published his second book, *Majors and Minors* in 1895. [William Dean Howells](#) the noted critic and novelist was so favorably impressed with the book that he wrote the introduction for *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). This third book contained some of the best verses from the first two volumes.

Paul became popular with audiences in both the United States and England He gave readings of his poetry in both countries during 1896 and 1897 and began working for the Library of Congress after his return from abroad in 1897.

In 1898 Paul began to write fiction as well as verse. He wrote four novels, the first three reflected spiritual issues and were about white characters. Paul's last novel, *The Sport of the Gods* published in 1902 was about an uprooted African American family in the urban north and is considered his best work.

Paul had become afflicted with tuberculosis sometime in either 1898 or 1899. His increasing dependence on alcohol as a pain killer and the ravages of the disease led to his death at the age of 34 in Dayton, Ohio on February 9, 1906.

[Ode to Ethiopia](#) *Lyrics of Lowly Life* - Paul Dunbar 1896

Sources:

[*Encyclopedia Africana*](#)

[*Encyclopedia Britannica*](#)

Forward to Lyrics of Lowly Life