

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

One of the most important writers of the nineteenth century, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) was born in Dayton, Ohio, to ex-slaves. Early recognized for his poetic talent, he published a collection of poems, *Oak and Ivy*, when he was twenty. Throughout his brief career, Dunbar wrote poetry, fiction, essays, and criticism, often about the oppression and discrimination faced by African Americans. Famous literary figures Frederick Douglass and William Dean Howells saw his promise as a poet. Howells, an influential publisher, wrote the introduction to his collection *Lyrics of Lowly Life* in 1896. Dunbar continued to write articles, like the one included here, as well as fiction and poetry, until his death from tuberculosis at age 33.

The Race Question Discussed

Negro and White Man

(Suggested by the Wilmington, N.C. Riots)^o

Loud, from the South, Damascan^o cries
Fall on our ears, unheeded still.
No helping powers stir or rise.
Hate's opiate numbs the nation's will.
Slumbers the north. (While honor dies!)
Soothed by th' insidious breath of lies!

It would seem that the man who sits at his desk in the North and writes about the troubles in the South is very apt to be like a doctor who prescribes for a case he has no chance to diagnose. It would be true in this instance, also, if it were not that what has happened in Georgia has happened in Ohio and Illinois. The race riots in North Carolina were of a piece with the same proceedings in the state of Lincoln. The men who shoot the Negro in Hogsansville^o are blood brothers to those who hang him in Urbana,^o and the deed is neither better nor worse because it happens in one section of the country or other. The race spirit in the United States is not local but general.

^o*the Wilmington, N.C. Riots*: On November 10, 1898, white supremacists took over the city by force, killing a number of black residents, and installed their own officials in place of the just-elected biracial government.

^oPerhaps an allusion to the massacre of several thousand Christians in Damascus, Syria.

^oUrbana, Georgia, site of an assault against a black postmaster in 1897.

^oHogsansville, Ohio where Charles Mitchell, a black man, was killed by a lynch mob on June 4, 1897.

To the outsider, unacquainted with the vagaries^o of our national prejudice, the recent and sudden change of attitude of the American toward the Negro would appear inconsistent, to say the least. We are presented with the spectacle of a people gushing, through glowing headlines, over the bravery of its black heroes.^o In an incredibly short space of time—almost too brief, it would seem, for the mental transition of the individual, much less the nation—we find the mouthpieces of this same people chronicling the armed resistance of the community to the Negroes in the exercise of those powers and privileges which are the glory of the country for which the colored men fought. The drama of this sudden change of heart is incongruous^o to the point of ghastly humor.

The new attitude may be interpreted as saying: "Negroes, you may fight for us, but you may not vote for us. You may prove a strong bulwark^o when the bullets are flying, but you must stand from the line when the ballots are in the air. You may be heroes in war, but you must be cravens^o in peace."

It is true, as has been insistently urged, that it would be expedient^o for the Negro to forego his suffrage^o and climb to worth and to the world's respect by other means. By other means! That is the cry of the miners when they ask him out of the mines. It is the word of the whole commercial world when they ask him out of everything—the American shibboleth.^o Relinquish! Relinquish! And from the dust of the very lowest places, the places that grind men's souls and kill ambition, the Negroes seek to climb to places of worth and respect.

In order to cool the passions and allay the prejudices of the superior race the entire self-effacement of the Negro would be expedient—as expedient as it would be cowardly; and, say what you will of the American people, their respect is not to be won by cowardice. Let those suffering people relinquish one single right that has been given them and the rapacity^o of the other race, encouraged by yielding, will ravage them from every privilege that they possess. Passion and prejudice are not sated^o by concession, but grow by what they feed on.

5

vagaries: caprices, whims

the bravery of its black heroes: in the Spanish-American War, especially in the battles of El Caney on July 1 and San Juan Hill on July 2, 1898

incongruous: contradictory

bulwark: fortification, buttress

cravens: cowards

expedient: advisable, appropriate

suffrage: right to vote

shibboleth: commonly held principle or view that is unfounded or out-of-date

rapacity: greed, predatoriness

sated: fully satisfied

The Vaudois,^o hiding like wild beasts in their mountain fastnesses,^o shot like goats upon their own hills, purpling with their blood the streams of their own valleys, France could hate, but dared not despise. The Indian himself, ground to dust under the heel of civilization, driven to death by the greed of a stronger people, will not be remembered with a sneer. But for the Negro honor is dangerous; only cowardice is safe.

The African is told that he is not yet ready to participate in government, because he has not yet learned to govern himself, and the race which preaches this proves its own right to political domination by the rioting, the rapine^o and the slaughter, with which for weeks past the civilized world has been scandalized. Since when was ever a psychological^o published with a musket?

After all, the question is not one of the Negro's fitness to rule or to vote, but of the right of the whites to murder him for the sake of instruction. Not a groan that the Romans wrung from the hearts of the conquered Britons, but echoed and re-echoed in the sound of her own fall. Every drop of blood that France drew from her own suffering Huguenots on St. Bartholomew's Day^o but called its brother to the hungry sod on that awful 14th day of July.^o Rome sated her thirst for blood and called it civilization. France indulged her barbaric fancy^o and named it religion. America strides through the ashes of burning homes, over the bodies of murdered men, women and children, holding aloft the banner of progress.

Progress! Necessity! Expedience!

But why is it necessary to excuse these acts of sophistry?^o Is not murder murder? Is not rapine rapine? Is not outrage outrage?

The whites are stronger than the blacks. Why not then say to them openly: "We don't like you; we do not want you in certain places. Therefore when we please we will kill you. We are strong people; you are weak. What we choose to do we will do; right or no right. There is no one to wage with us a holy war in the cause of humanity."

Even the church has attempted to explain and palliate^o and we are told from the pulpit that the Negroes have been taught a salutary^o lesson: that the

Vaudois: or Waldenses, members of a Protestant sect subjected to a massacre by the French in 1545

fastnesses: strongholds

rapine: seizure by force

psychological: i.e., a psychological analysis or evaluation

Bartholomew's Day: a widespread slaughter of French Protestants began on August 23, 1572

o of July: of 1789, date of the fall of the Bastille and start of the French Revolution

palliate: to soothe

salutary: promoting

whites must prevail. The murderers of Wilmington are congratulated upon the effort they have made toward civilization and purer government. And some of this within a stone's throw of the nation's capitol: When the reckoning shall come, what shall such ministers say? They have not stoned martyrs but they have burned their shoulders with the coats of those who did; and every such is an accomplice dyed with the same blood of the men who stood redhanded over the murdered blacks. And yet, what else could we expect from the pulpit, when we remember that less than forty years ago with the same smug complacency, it was finding excuses for slavery in tracing out the divine intention?

The passions of the people often need a spiritual backing, and shame to say, we have a clergy always ready and willing to furnish it, whether it be when man restrains his fellow men from the exercise of his national rights or murders him for pursuing his political dues. It is a disgrace to the honor of their calling, a reflection upon the intelligences of their heroes, and an insult to the God they profess^o to serve.

The text for better and for different sermons might be found for those divines in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. It is as apt to-day as it was then, and it applies to the American people with no less strength than it did to the older race. "Take heed," said the apostle, "lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak."

We are comforted with the statement that the sudden enfranchisement of the Negro was a mistake. Perhaps it was, but the whites made it. The mistakes of life are not corrected in that way. Their effects are eternal. You cannot turn back the years and put ten millions of people into the condition that four millions were thirty years ago. You cannot ignore the effects that have ensued, the changes that have followed, and make the problem of today the problem of 1865. It is a different one. The whole aspect of the case has changed. The Negro has changed. Public opinion has shifted. Try as you will, though it has grown away, you cannot put the plant back into the seed. Of course you can root it up entirely; but beware of its juices.

Thirty years ago the American people told the Negro that he was a man with a man's full powers. They deemed it that important they did what they have done few times in the history of the country—they wrote it down in their constitution. And now they come with the shot gun in the South and sophistry in the North to prove to him that it was all wrong.

For so long a time has the black man believed that he is an American citizen that he will not be easily convinced to the contrary. It will take more than the hangings, the burnings and the lynchings, both North and South, to prove it to his satisfaction. He is not so credulous as he was. He is a different man. The American people cannot turn back the tide of years and make him what he was. And so it was an entirely new people with whom they have to deal. It is an entirely new problem which is presented to them for solution.

Why then should it not be met with calmness, justice, breadth and manliness which should characterize a great nation?

If the problem is as much the Negro's as the white man's—and I do not say that it is not—he is doing his best to settle it. He is acquiring property. Yes he even builds churches to the religion whose servants preach his damnation. He is going forward. Such catastrophes as the Southern riots, terrible though they be, are but incidents in his growth, which is inevitable. The principle of manhood is springing to life within him. Every year men are being educated to live for it. Every year to some—to many, it seems—God gives the better grace to die for it.

[1898]

Read

- What is the effect of the verse that begins the essay?
How does Dunbar use the analogy at the beginning of the essay to suggest the argument he will make about race?

Write

- Write a paragraph or two that discusses how Dunbar's critique calls Americans to task. What strategies does Dunbar use to convey his position to his audience?
Comment on Dunbar's use of logic in this piece. Why might it be important to use logic in confronting the subject?

Connect

- What connections can you make between Douglass's *Narrative* in Unit 3 and Dunbar's essay?
What is the role of experience in making arguments? Consider this piece and one other in this unit to speculate about experience as evidence for claims.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was born in Massachusetts, attended public school, and then studied at Fisk University in Tennessee. His experience in the South showed him the terrible burden newly freed slaves essays, faced—from oppressive laws and customs to outright danger from lynching. His famous collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, owes much to his education at a Southern black college, as do his histories of the slave trade and Reconstruction. He later attended Harvard University and became the first African American to receive a Ph.D. there. He taught, wrote nineteen books on African American culture and history, and fought for civil rights until his death at age 95. Du Bois was an influence on generations of young African American writers and thinkers, including those who were part of the Harlem Renaissance.