# THE SPORT OF THE GODS

# Introduction

Of Dunbar's four novels, only the final one, *The Sport of the Gods,* remains in print and is read with any regularity in college courses or studied extensively by scholars. As a significant contribution to the naturalistic writing and the African American literature of its time, *The Sport of the Gods* has been seen, almost without question, as Dunbar's best novel. Few have found the story cheerful or uplifting, but many have admired the author's subversion of the plantation and minstrel traditions. Many have also appreciated the skillfulness with which he created the grimly fatalistic setting and action at the core of the naturalistic tradition. In pairing the two parallel families of the Hamiltons and Oakleys in plot and thematic networks, Dunbar undermined the conventions of plantation fiction, even as he advanced past many of the novelists of the time by portraying, with pinpoint accuracy, the duplicity and brutality facing African Americans who migrated to Northern cities.

Less than four years before his death and nearly a decade after the triumph of his dialect poems, *The Sport of the Gods* at last freed Dunbar from the bonds of problematic plantation stories and coon show dialect, and marked him as a forerunner of novels by Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, and Richard Wright. In spite of its achievements, even *The Sport of the Gods* has not received the critical acclaim it deserves. For too long the novel has been read in isolation from the earlier novels and with little regard for the plays, essays, and short stories Dunbar wrote around the same time.

The narrator's opening sentence sets the tone and direction for the action and social commentary to follow: "Fiction has said so much in regret of the old days when there were plantations and overseers and masters and slaves, that it was good to come upon such a household as Berry Hamilton's, if for no other reason than it afforded a relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration." Twenty years after the emancipation of slaves in 1865, Berry and Fannie Hamilton and their children live in what would be considered "the home of a typical, good-living Negro." Instead of being rewarded with freedom and the American dream, however, Berry is falsely accused of stealing and is condemned without a hearing, and the Hamiltons' world rapidly falls apart.

Perhaps Dunbar subsequently places too much blame on wicked city life as the culprit in the family's misfortune, as the novel invites us to see that everything, everywhere, has always been stacked against them. Life in New York does appear to offer hope, but Dunbar soon reveals that what seems to be an opportunity is filled with hypocrisy and indifference. Hopes for a new beginning turn into monstrosities that soon multiply. To protect his family honor, Oakley conceals the true identity of the thief. Through the efforts of a diligent reporter, Hamilton is exonerated. Freed at last from jail, Berry tries unsuccessfully to reunite his family. By the novel's

end, he and Fannie have returned to live in the South once more. Hand in hand, they listen to Oakley's shrieks of madness and endure the cruel jokes until the gods at last tire of their sport. The famous concluding passage is typical of Dunbar's understatement, but the proverbial mask has been dropped: "It was not a happy life, but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, for they knew they were powerless against some Will infinitely stronger than their own."

In this pivotal work, Dunbar is still experimenting with a variety of literary conventions new to him. Typically, he masters those conventions quickly, stretches them in new directions, and modifies or even undermines likely expectations. Paramount in his accomplishments completed over a short career was his propensity to experiment, his degree of success with little experience, and the way he managed to walk a very fine line between what might be accepted or even liked and the full range of his penetrating analysis and satiric wit. He used many conventions of literature in his time, only to subvert them to his own ends.

In line with many postbellum writers who were encouraged to see daily life progressing in accord with what they saw to be good on the plantations, *The Sport of the Gods* presents Maurice Oakley as caring and supportive of his former slave, Berry Hamilton, and his family. To suggest the alleged benefits of life on the plantation, Dunbar uses the literary device of mirroring: Maurice and Berry are not only on good terms but apparently alike in many of their ways of thinking and acting. Maurice sees himself as a model for Berry to follow. "There is no telling," he says with pride, "when Berry will be following my example and be taking a wife unto himself." When the money disappears, however, Maurice concludes that Berry is not to be trusted, and the accusations are quickly accepted as fact. Even though Oakley later learns who stole the money, he wants foremost to protect his own and ignores the advice of the detective he has hired: "I should advise . . . no open proceedings against this servant until further evidence to establish his guilt is found." Even Maurice's brother, the actual thief, urges Oakley to avoid extreme action: "Promise me you won't be too hard on him, Maurice. Give him a little scare and let him go." Finally his wife pleads: "Don't be revengeful, Maurice." Of course, legal proceedings would not be available to them, and nothing short of condemnation and cover-up are the goals from the beginning. The story is thus laced with ironies; the reader knows the guilty party all along, as Berry good-naturedly or naively allows himself to be reduced to something less than human and, in essence, to be returned to a form of slavery. While critical interpretation of the novel emphasizes the harsh and uncaring city, the Hamiltons' fate is sealed long before they migrate North in this undermining of the trust and mutual interdependence that is so often claimed as characteristic of the plantation tradition.

The indifference of the naturalistic tradition is found in both the opportunism that bludgeons the Hamiltons in New York and the total violation of values perpetrated by Oakley. "He is gone and will never know what happens," he assures his wife about his brother Frank's request for clemency toward Berry, "so I may be as revengeful as I wish." The fierce determination and perversity of Oakley's action leads to his own insanity when he discovers the truth and chooses to protect his

family and the old order they represent. At the same time, Berry falls into a trap after he asks Oakley how he can possibly suspect him, given his long-standing honesty, dependability, and loyalty. Hamilton's curse, though understandable, appears to create a self-inflicted wound, again adding to the layers of irony Dunbar creates: "Den, damn you! damn you! ef dat's all dese yeahs counted fu', I wish I had a-stoled it." The troubles the Hamiltons are about to endure within the communities of their own people introduce yet another dimension of satire that in many ways shows Dunbar to be a social critic far ahead of his time. Perhaps not totally surprised by Oakley's betrayal of his mentee, Hamilton might expect at least some level of support from his community. Instead the disapprobation of his own people is added to his jail sentence. Dunbar's satire extends to the fear and jealousy of Berry's neighbors who rejoice at his misfortune because somehow his being taken down raises them up. When even the members of their religious congregation turn their backs, Fannie Hamilton and her children look to the glimmer of hope offered by a move to New York.

Readers of Dunbar understand that his sympathies lie more with rural values than with the sophisticated and seductive, but likely much more corrupt, big city. In his essay "The Race Question Discussed," Dunbar underscores the dangers of the city and adds another level of satire on the state into which his people all too quickly fell: "The gist of the whole problem lies in the flocking of ignorant and irresponsible Negroes to the great city. But how is it to be done? They say they have no rights in the South; but better the restrictions there than *a seeming liberty which blossoms noxiously into license*" (emphasis added). At this point Dunbar is sounding much less like the naturalistic novelist decrying the grotesque indifference and evil of the big city and more like the social critic we know (from his essays, stories, plays, and poems) who exposes the corruption inside and outside the communities of people seeking betterment.

In *The Sport of the Gods,* New York (and the whole of the attempt to jump headlong into life after slavery) is, at best, a roller-coaster ride. For Joe, the loops up and down end in despair and violence. We are also left to wonder if Kitty will have the wherewithal to survive after she is warned by the more experienced Hattie. Even more devastatingly, Fannie loses her husband, son, daughter, and then herself to an abusive marriage. In the details of their lives in New York, Dunbar directs sharp satire as well at the black intellectual communities as a group of lower-class, unrefined individuals who will also take advantage of Berry and his family. The gamblers and night owls of the Banner Club, for example, instead of being exemplary of racial uplift protagonists, actually lead to the main character's downfall. Indeed, the club contributes to Joe Hamilton's moral decline, upon which, according to Kevin Gaines, "the gamblers continued to sermonize in their unlikely role as the purveyors of the moral discourse of Darwinian determinism and social control, cynically abdicating responsibility for their exploitation of Joe" (*Uplifting the Race* [University of North Carolina Press, 1996], 193). Far from being a formulaic naturalistic tract against deterministic entrapment, Dunbar's novel undermines naturalism itself by suggesting a human cause for what is often seen as mere indifference.

Even though *The Sport of the Gods* was written before Dunbar was thirty years old, we are accustomed to the maturity of his later writings. Now that we can read his last novel alongside the other three, we can see how he experimented with new literary conventions and genres, mastering them with speed and precision, and then manipulating them to his own ends. Usually that meant undermining or subverting themes, beliefs, and literary techniques with which he had been too quickly identified.