

## ***A Valuable Collection of Poems***

*from Dunbar, Frost, and Whitman*

First, a definition: A **literary theme** is the central insight or unifying generalization about life presented in a work of literature (poem, novel, short story, drama). Rather than specific to the literary work in which it is found, a theme is stated as a generalization about experience that transcends cultural and historic barriers.

With that definition in mind, what follow are three poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), an African-American poet, who was the son of slaves.

### ***Sympathy* by Paul Laurence Dunbar**

[Hear It Read](#)

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!  
    When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;  
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,  
And the river flows like a stream of glass;  
    When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,  
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—  
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing  
    Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;  
For he must fly back to his perch and cling  
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;  
    And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars  
And they pulse again with a keener sting—  
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
    When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—  
When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
    But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—  
I know why the caged bird sings!

### ***We Wear the Mask* by Paul Laurence Dunbar**

[Hear It Read](#)

BY PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

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 hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
    We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
    We wear the mask!

*Life's Tragedy* by Paul Lawrence Dunbar

[Hear It Read](#)

It may be misery not to sing at all  
And to go silent through the brimming day.  
It may be sorrow never to be loved,  
But deeper griefs than these beset the way.

To have come near to sing the perfect song  
And only by a half-tone lost the key,  
There is the potent sorrow, there the grief,  
The pale, sad staring of life's tragedy.

To have just missed the perfect love,  
Not the hot passion of untempered youth,  
But that which lays aside its vanity  
And gives thee, for thy trusting worship, truth—

This, this it is to be accursed indeed;  
For if we mortals love, or if we sing,  
We count our joys not by the things we have,  
But by what kept us from the perfect thing.

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***Mending Wall*** by Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Many of Frost's poems describe walls, and roads, and walks, and Nature's attitude toward what humans create. Please recall our art project with Frost's poem *Two Look at Two* and the image of the "tumbled wall/ With barbed-wire binding" the narrator describes. A closer look at this description reveals that the "tumbled wall" is human-made (barbed wire) and nature is busy disassembling it (tumbled).

And so, too, it is with the following Frost poem *Mending Wall*. As you read the poem, please note the different barriers the wall represents, as well as the narrator's and nature's attitude toward them.

*Mending Wall*

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing: (5)  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made, (10)  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go. (15)  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them. (20)  
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across (25)  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors'.  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it (30)

Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall, . (35)  
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. (40)  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me~  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors." (45)

***This Compost*** by Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Many of Walt Whitman's poems celebrate the power of nature and our connection to it. The following poem *This Compost* is perhaps his best example of this. I've ***italicized*** the two verbs that provide the poem's structure and describe the narrator's feelings as he or she comes to understand the miracle of the Earth's power. Before you begin the poem, please be sure to set the scene: Imagine that just before the poem's narrator begins speaking, he/she reaches down, grabs a handful of garden soil, and, with open hand, holds it out to you.

1

Something ***startles*** me where I thought I was safest,  
I withdraw from the still woods I loved,  
I will not go now on the pastures to walk,  
I will not strip the clothes from my body to meet my lover the sea,  
I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to other flesh to renew me.

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?  
How can you be alive you growths of spring?  
How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?  
Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you?  
Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?

Where have you disposed of their carcasses?  
Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations?  
Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat?  
I do not see any of it upon you to-day, or perhaps I am deceiv'd,

I will run a furrow with my plough, I will press my spade through the sod and turn it up underneath,  
I am sure I shall expose some of the foul meat.

2

Behold this compost! Behold it well!  
Perhaps every mite has once form'd part of a sick person—yet behold!  
The grass of spring covers the prairies,  
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,  
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,  
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,  
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves,  
The tinge awakes over the willow-tree and the mulberry-tree,  
The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-birds sit on their nests,  
The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,  
The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from the cow, the colt from the mare,  
Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,  
Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the door-yards,  
The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.

What chemistry!  
That the winds are really not infectious,  
That this is no cheat, this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after me,  
That it is safe to allow it to lick my naked body all over with its tongues,  
That it will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it,  
That all is clean forever and forever,  
That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,  
That blackberries are so flavorful and juicy,  
That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that melons, grapes, peaches,  
plums, will  
    none of them poison me,  
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,  
Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.

Now I am *terrified* at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,  
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,  
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseases'd corpses,  
It distils such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,  
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,  
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.

