

## PART 2

## The American Dream

### Illusion or Reality?

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## PREPARING to Read



### Chicago

Poetry by CARL SANDBURG

### Lucinda Matlock

Poetry by EDGAR LEE MASTERS

#### Connect to Your Life

**Ideal Settings** Where would you prefer to live—the city or the country? Why? Which environment do you think would let you live your life to the fullest? List some positive and negative features of city life and of country life. Then, as you read these poems, compare your own ideas with those of the speakers.

### Build Background

**The American Spirit** Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters wrote poetry that captured the vitality of America in the early 20th century. What Sandburg found when he moved to Chicago in 1913 was a metropolis of bustling industry and appalling slums, cultural achievements and criminal activity. From the ruins of a devastating 1871 fire, Chicago had risen to become the railroad hub of the nation and a center of meatpacking and manufacturing. At the same time, the city's population had increased explosively as people moved there from small towns in the Midwest and the South to find work. Written in 1914, "Chicago" catalogs both the negative and the positive aspects of the city, reflecting the energy and enthusiasm of its citizens in the early 1900s.

"Lucinda Matlock" is from Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, a collection of 244 free-verse monologues spoken by deceased inhabitants of the fictional rural town of Spoon River. They disclose the joys and tragedies of their lives as they speak from the grave. Masters patterned these characters on the people he had observed while growing up in Lewistown, near the Spoon River of central Illinois. His model for Lucinda Matlock was his grandmother Lucinda, who died in 1910 at the age of 96.



### Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS TONE** Tone is the attitude a writer takes toward his or her subject. A writer can communicate tone through diction (word choice) and choice of details. Read these two poems aloud to help you identify the tone. The emotions conveyed in your voice should provide you with clues that hint at the tone.

**ACTIVE READING SYNTHESIZING DETAILS** "Chicago" catalogs, or lists, the attributes of a city, while "Lucinda Matlock" sums up the key moments of a woman's life. To bring these details into focus, synthesize the information. **Synthesizing** involves putting together clues, facts, and details to form an overall picture of a person, place, or event.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** For each poem, use a spider diagram, like the example shown, to help you gather details as you read. Then note recurring patterns or relationships among the details you collected.





*City Building* (1930), Thomas Hart Benton. From *America Today*, distemper and egg tempera on gessoed linen with oil glaze, 92" x 117". Copyright © The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States. Copyright © 1996 T.H. Benton & R.P. Benton Testamentary Trusts/Licensed by VAGA, New York. Photo Copyright © 1988 Dorothy Zeidman.

# CHICAGO

Carl Sandburg

*H*og Butcher for the World,  
 Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
 Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;  
 Stormy, husky, brawling,  
 5 City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your  
 painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have  
 seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.  
 And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of  
 women and children I have seen the marks of wanton hunger.  
 And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this  
 my city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them:  
 10 Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to  
 be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.  
 Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a  
 tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities;  
 Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage  
 pitted against the wilderness,  
 Bareheaded,  
 Shoveling,  
 15 Wrecking,  
 Planning,  
 Building, breaking, rebuilding,  
 Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,  
 Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,  
 20 Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a  
 battle,  
 Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his  
 ribs the heart of the people,  
 Laughing!  
 Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked,  
 sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of  
 Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation.

## Thinking Through the Literature

1. Would you like to live in a city like the one depicted in this poem? Share your ideas with a classmate.
2. In your opinion, what are the best and worst aspects of the Chicago presented in the poem?
3. How well do you think Sandburg's poetic style suits his subject?

**THINK ABOUT**

- how you would characterize his use of rhythm
- the effectiveness of descriptive names like "Tool Maker" in helping you picture Chicago
- how the repetition in the last three lines affects your impression of the city
- how the city would seem different if described in formal, rhymed stanzas

4. **ACTIVE READING SYNTHESIZING DETAILS** Review the spider diagram you created in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. Based on these details, what is the overall picture of Chicago presented in this poem?

# Lucinda Matlock

Edgar Lee Masters



*Country Dance* (1928), Thomas Hart Benton. Oil on panel, 30" x 25", private collection. Copyright © 1996 T.H. Benton & R.P. Benton Testamentary Trusts/Licenses by VAGA, New York.

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,  
And played snap-out at Winchester.  
One time we changed partners,  
Driving home in the moonlight of middle June,  
5 And then I found Davis.  
We were married and lived together for seventy years,  
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,  
Eight of whom we lost  
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.  
10 I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,  
I made the garden, and for holiday  
Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,  
And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,  
And many a flower and medicinal weed—  
15 Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.  
At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,  
And passed to a sweet repose.  
What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,  
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?  
20 Degenerate sons and daughters,  
Life is too strong for you—  
It takes life to love Life.

**2 snap-out:** a game—similar to crack the whip—in which players join hands in a line, then run about trying to shake off those at the end of the line.

**17 repose:** rest (here the reference is to death, viewed as a quiet, serene sleep).

**20 degenerate** (dĭ-jĕn'or-ĭt): showing a decline in vigor or moral strength.

# Thinking through the LITERATURE

## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

What is your opinion of Lucinda Matlock's life?

### Comprehension Check

- How did Lucinda Matlock meet her husband?
- What happened to most of her children?

## Think Critically

### 2. ACTIVE READING SYNTHESIZING DETAILS



READER'S NOTEBOOK

Refer to the details in the spider diagram from your

What were the sources of both

joy and pain in her life?

### 3. How would you describe Lucinda Matlock's approach to life?

### 4. Do you think Lucinda is fair in her judgment of the "degenerate sons and daughters"? Explain your opinion.

THINK ABOUT

- the attitudes she attributes to them in lines 18–19
- what she might mean by her statements in lines 21–22

### 5. What portrait of small-town life do you get from this poem? Explain.

## Extend Interpretations

6. **Comparing Texts** How is Lucinda Matlock similar to and different from the people that the speaker of "Chicago" admires? Support your answer.
7. **Critic's Corner** In a review of *Spoon River Anthology*, Carl Sandburg wrote, "The people whose faces look out from the pages of the book are the people of life itself, each trait of them as plain or as mysterious as in the old home valley where the writer came from." Do you think his remark accurately describes Lucinda Matlock, as she is characterized in the poem? Explain.
8. **Connect to Life** Would you rather live in Sandburg's Chicago or Lucinda Matlock's Spoon River? Consider the positive and negative aspects of country and city life you recorded for the Connect to Your Life activity on page 824.

## Literary Analysis

**TONE** Like tone of voice, the **tone** of a poem may reveal the speaker's feelings or the poet's attitude toward the subject of the poem. Tone often relies on the poet's choice of words and selection of details. For example, the tone "Chicago" might be described as brash and spirited. Calling Chicago "Hog Butcher of the World" and "Maker, Stacker of Wheat" suggest the energetic tone that the speaker is trying to convey. The words *shout* and *singing* in line 15 of "Lucinda Matlock" suggest the speaker's deep and joyful relationship with the natural world.

**Paired Activity** Reread "Lucinda Matlock" aloud to a partner, and discuss how the speaker's tone shifts toward the end of the poem. Cite words and details that reveal change in the speaker's feelings.

### REVIEW PERSONIFICATION

**Personification** is a figure of speech in which an object, animal, place, or idea is given human characteristics. For example, start at line 10 in "Chicago," Sandburg personifies the city as a proud man. If you were to personify your own city or town, what kind of person would it be?

# Choices & CHALLENGES

## Writing Options

**1. Hometown Poems** Write a poem about your own city or town. You might imitate the style of "Chicago," using epithets, or descriptive names, and personification to depict the

town. You might prefer to present the town indirectly, through a character sketch of a typical resident, as in "Lucinda Matlock." Gather the class's poems into a booklet of poems about communities.

**2. Comparison-Contrast Essay** Draft an essay in which you compare and contrast city life and country life. Place this piece in your Working Portfolio. 📁

**Writing Handbook**  
See page 1281: Compare and Contrast



## Carl Sandburg

1878–1967

### Other Works

*The People, Yes*  
*Always the Young Strangers*

**The Winding Road to Success** The renowned poet, award-winning historian, and popular folk musician Carl Sandburg was born in Galesburg, Illinois. Forced to leave school when he was 13 in order to find work, he roamed the Midwest as a youth, working at various jobs—including house painting and brick making. Eventually, he turned to journalism. After moving to Chicago in 1913, he became a reporter, editorial writer, and columnist for the *Chicago Daily News*.

**The People's Poet** The poem "Chicago" was one of Sandburg's earliest literary successes. His verse collections *Chicago Poems*, *Cornbuskers*, and *Smoke and Steel* established his fame as a poet of the people. Because he gave popular public readings around the country, it has been said that no other American writer was so widely read and heard at the same time.

**Literary Prizes** Sandburg won a number of awards and honors, including the 1951 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Complete Poems* and the 1939 Pulitzer Prize for history for *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, the last four volumes of a six-volume biography.

## Edgar Lee Masters

1868–1950

### Other Works

*Poems of People*  
*Illinois Poems*  
*Across Spoon River: An Autobiography*



**Bridging Two Centuries** Born with one foot in the nineteenth century and one foot in the twentieth, Edgar Lee Masters seemed at ease with both the old and the new. His poetry reflects his ties to small-town traditions and his awareness of the changing face of American culture in the early 1900s.

**The Birth of a Masterpiece** Edgar Lee Masters had already published 12 books of poetry, essays, and plays before he began writing his masterpiece, *Spoon River Anthology*, which he originally conceived as a work of prose. For the names of the poems' characters, Masters drew on "both the Spoon river and the Sangamon river neighborhoods, combining first names here with surnames there, and taking some also from the constitutions and State papers of Illinois."

**Critical Acclaim** The publication of *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915 immediately established Masters as an important American poet. In 1920, Masters gave up the Chicago law practice at which he had worked for 30 years and moved to New York City to write full time. He wrote more than 50 books, but none of his later works achieved the critical and popular success of *Spoon River Anthology*.

## PREPARING to Read



# Richard Cory Miniver Cheevy

Poetry by EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

### Connect to Your Life

**Life's Disappointments** What do you think causes some people to feel regretful about their lives? How might they try to escape their unhappiness? With a small group of classmates, discuss these questions. Brainstorm a list of both positive and negative ways of coping with disappointing experiences.

### Build Background

**Tilbury Town** Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory" and "Miniver Cheevy" are from a famous series of poems depicting the inner lives of imaginary residents in Tilbury Town, a fictional community modeled on Robinson's hometown of Gardiner, Maine. Tilbury Town, a typical small town in New England at the turn of the century, is a place where individuality and creativity are stifled. Though some members of this community chase after the American dream, it remains out of their reach. In most of his Tilbury Town poems, Robinson paints a complex psychological portrait of isolated individuals—often misfits and failures. "The failures are much more interesting," Robinson said. Along with his fascination with failed lives, Robinson also explores how his characters try to overcome their personal defeats and shortcomings.

### Focus Your Reading

#### LITERARY ANALYSIS CHARACTERIZATION IN NARRATIVE POETRY

**Narrative poetry** tells a story using elements of character, setting, and plot to develop a theme. To portray characters in narrative poems, poets may adapt the methods of **characterization** typically used in fiction:

- physical description
- the character's own actions, words, thoughts, and feelings
- other characters' actions, words, thoughts, and feelings
- the speaker's own direct comments

As you read "Richard Cory" and "Miniver Cheevy," note how you get to know the characters.

#### ACTIVE READING EVALUATING CHARACTER

Robinson does not direct state how to view the characters in his poems. Are they good or bad? weak or strong? likable or unlikable? He leaves these **evaluations**, or judgments, up to the reader. Robinson provides you with clues that shape your impressions of the characters' personalities and behavior.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** To form valid opinions about Richard Cory and Miniver Cheevy, note the descriptive details Robinson uses to portray them. As you read each poem, jot down details you learned about the characters. Use a chart like the one shown.

	Richard Cory	Miniver Cheevy
Traits		
Behavior		
Outlook on Life		



# Richard Cory

Edwin  
Arlington  
Robinson



Whenever Richard Cory went down town,  
We people on the pavement looked at him:  
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,  
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

5 And he was always quietly arrayed,  
And he was always human when he talked;  
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,  
“Good-morning,” and he glittered when he walked.

10 And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—  
And admirably schooled in every grace:  
In fine, we thought that he was everything  
To make us wish that we were in his place.

15 So on we worked, and waited for the light,  
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;  
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,  
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

4 **clean favored:** having a tidy appearance; **imperially:** majestically; royally.

5 **arrayed:** dressed.

10 **schooled in every grace:** extremely well-mannered and cultured.

11 **In fine:** in short



## Thinking Through the Literature

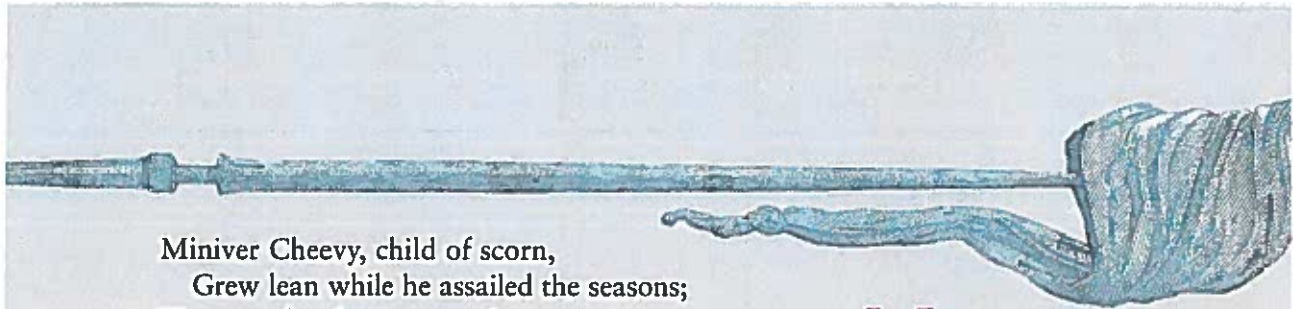
1. What is your reaction to the ending of “Richard Cory”?
2. How do the townspeople seem to feel about Richard Cory? Support your ideas with details from the poem.

3. **ACTIVE READING** **EVALUATING CHARACTER** Review the chart in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. What is your opinion of Richard Cory?

THINK  
ABOUT

- his physical appearance and other traits
- his speech and behavior toward the townspeople
- his apparent outlook on life

4. Why do you think Richard Cory kills himself?
5. What would you say is the theme of this poem?



Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,  
Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;  
He wept that he was ever born,  
And he had reasons.

5 Miniver loved the days of old  
When swords were bright and steeds  
were prancing;  
The vision of a warrior bold  
Would set him dancing.

10 Miniver sighed for what was not,  
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;  
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,  
And Priam's neighbors.

15 Miniver mourned the ripe renown  
That made so many a name so fragrant;  
He mourned Romance, now on the town,  
And Art, a vagrant.

20 Miniver loved the Medici,  
Albeit he had never seen one;  
He would have sinned incessantly  
Could he have been one.

Miniver cursed the commonplace  
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;  
He missed the medieval grace  
Of iron clothing.

25 Miniver scorned the gold he sought,  
But sore annoyed was he without it;  
Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,  
And thought about it.

30 Miniver Cheevy, born too late,  
Scratched his head and kept on thinking;  
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,  
And kept on drinking.

# Miniver Cheevy

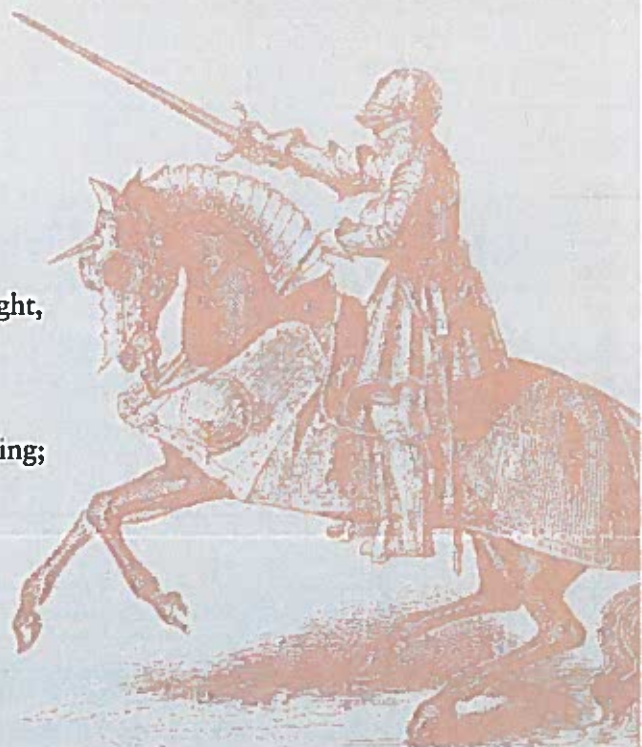
Edwin Arlington Robinson

**11 Thebes** (thēbz): a city of Greece, the setting of many famous legends; **Camelot**: King Arthur's legendary castle.

**12 Priam's** (pri'əmz) neighbors: participants in the Trojan War (during which Priam was king of Troy).

**17 Medici** (mēd'ə-chē'): a powerful Italian noble family, among whose members were several cruel and immoral rulers of Florence during the Renaissance.

**18 albeit** (əl-bē'yt): even though



## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

What is your impression of Miniver Cheevy? Share your thoughts with a classmate.

### Comprehension Check

- What is Miniver Cheevy's position in society?
- What does Miniver Cheevy daydream about?
- How does Miniver Cheevy respond to the disappointments in his life?

## Think Critically

### 2. How would you describe Miniver Cheevy's view of the past? Why do you think he holds this view?

THINK ABOUT

- the content of his daydreams
- why he is disappointed with his own life
- how he deals with his "fate"

### 3. How do you think the speaker of the poem feels about Miniver Cheevy? Cite lines from poem that suggest the speaker's attitude.

### 4. How does the final stanza of the poem influence your opinion of Miniver Cheevy?

### 5. ACTIVITY **READING EVALUATING CHARACTER** Review the chart you made in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. Do you think Miniver Cheevy is a sympathetic or an unsympathetic character? Defend your view.

## Extend Interpretations

- Comparing Texts** How would you relate "Richard Cory" and "Miniver Cheevy" to the idea of the American dream?
- What If?** If Miniver Cheevy had lived during medieval times, do you think he would have found happiness? Why or why not?
- Connect to Life** Both Miniver Cheevy and Richard Cory solve their problems in self-destructive ways. In your opinion, what are some positive ways of coping with life's disappointments? Think about your discussion with classmates in the Connect to Your Life activity on page 830.

## Literary Analysis

### CHARACTERIZATION IN NARRATIVE POETRY

Like a short story or novel, **narrative poetry**, such as "Richard Cory" and "Miniver Cheevy," relies on literary elements, such as character, setting, plot, and point of view, to tell a story.

Robinson adapts techniques of **characterization** to create compelling portraits of imaginary townspeople. For example, the speaker in "Richard Cory" and "Miniver Cheevy" acts as a narrator who reports information about the main character. The speaker in each of these poems provides you with a glimpse of the character's actions, appearance, feelings, and ideas.

**Activity** Create personality profiles of Richard Cory and Miniver Cheevy based on the specific details revealed about them in the poems. Use a format like the one shown.

Character's Name:  
Physical Description:  
Actions:  
Feelings:  
Thoughts:

### REVIEW RHYME AND METER

**Rhyme** is the occurrence of a similar or identical sound at the ends of words. **Meter** is the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. How do you think the arrangement of rhyming lines and the meter of "Miniver Cheevy" contribute to the overall effect of the poem?

## Choices & CHALLENGES

### Writing Options

**1. Miniver's Monologue** Write a monologue from Miniver Cheevy's point of view in which he glorifies moments from the past. Refer to images from the poem for ideas.

**2. Farewell Note** Compose a note that Richard Cory might have left, expressing his view of the townspeople and explaining why he took his life.

**3. Interview Questions** Imagine you are a reporter who writes a news column profiling Tilbury Town residents. Write a list of ten interview questions you would ask either Richard Cory or Miniver Cheevy.

### Activities & Explorations

**Musical Adaptation** Listen to the song "Richard Cory" on Simon and Garfunkel's 1966 album

*Sounds of Silence*. Compare a depiction of Richard Cory in a song with that in Robinson's poem. Which do you prefer? Why? Then create your own musical version of "Miniver Cheevy," composing original lyrics and music or setting the words of the poem to the words of a familiar song that captures the poem's mood.

- MUSIC



### Edwin Arlington Robinson

1869–1935

#### Other Works

*Tristram; Merlins; The Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson*

**New England Poet** A descendant of Anne Bradstreet, New England's first colonial poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson grew up in the river town of Gardiner, Maine. He began writing poetry when he was 11 and had already started to publish poems and translations before he entered Harvard in 1891. In 1893, after the death of his father, he returned to Gardiner, where he worked as a freelance writer, farmed, and worked on poems. His first collection, *The Torrent and The Night Before*, was privately printed in 1896. Although Robinson had intended the book to be a surprise for his mother, she died a week before the book was published.

**Life of Poverty** Following his mother's death, Robinson later moved to Greenwich Village in New York City, where he worked at a variety of menial jobs. Although living in poverty and obscurity, Robinson nevertheless continued to pursue his literary ambitions.

**President's Praise** Fortunately, Robinson's second volume of poems, the self-published *The Children of the Night*, came to the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt, who admired the book so much that he lent the struggling poet a hand by offering him a position as a clerk in the New York Customs House. Robinson gratefully accepted, working there from 1905 until 1909, when he was finally able to begin writing full time.

**Recognition and Rewards** Concentrating on his craft, Robinson slowly began to earn a living as a writer. His financial worries were eased by a small inheritance and a trust fund set up by an anonymous group of friends. As he became more able to devote himself to his poetry, Robinson gained a reputation as one of the country's most accomplished narrative poets. He was ultimately rewarded with a popular following and Pulitzer Prizes for *Collected Poems* (1921), *The Man Who Died Twice* (1924), and the best-selling *Tristram* (1927).

### Author Activity

Locate other Tilbury Town poems in a volume of Robinson's work or in a poetry anthology. Working with a small group, create an illustrated booklet of his poems. Group members should select about six poems and add accompanying illustrations, such as portraits of characters or a map of Maine.

## PREPARING to Read

# We Wear the Mask Sympathy

Poetry by PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

### Connect to Your Life

**Social Barriers** What social barriers sometimes keep people from becoming or showing who they really are? What happens to individuals who are prevented from realizing their potential? Discuss these questions with classmates.

### Build Background

**Turn-of-the-Century Race Relations** “We Wear the Mask” and “Sympathy” reflect the climate of racial prejudice that existed during Paul Laurence Dunbar’s time. At the turn of the 19th century, African Americans faced legal discrimination, such as voting restrictions and segregation in schools and transportation. African Americans were also compelled to follow informal rules and customs, called racial etiquette, that reinforced their status as second-class citizens. For example, most white people never shook hands with African Americans, a gesture that would imply equality.

In “We Wear the Mask,” the speaker reveals the pain that racial stereotyping caused African Americans. This poem was composed in the 1890s when a popular form of entertainment was the minstrel show, in which white men with blackened faces performed comedy and variety acts. In an exaggerated mimicry of African-American speech and behavior, blackface minstrels danced and sang sentimental songs while playing banjos, violins, and tambourines.

In “Sympathy,” also composed in the 1890s, the speaker’s attention is on a caged bird. The situation is perhaps reminiscent of Dunbar’s own experiences of operating an elevator cage, the only job he could find after graduating high school. He was denied positions in business and journalism because of his race.

### Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS SYMBOL** A symbol is a person, place, or object that has a concrete meaning in itself and also stands for something beyond itself, such as an idea or feeling. For example, a dove is not only a kind of bird but also a symbol of peace. Look for the central symbol in “We Wear the Mask” and “Sympathy.” Note recurring descriptions of a person, place, or object that seems to have broader meanings within the context of the poem.

**ACTIVE READING INTERPRETING SYMBOLS** Interpreting symbols involves discovering what they might represent. On your second reading of “We Wear the Mask” and “Sympathy,” follow these strategies to help you figure out the symbolic meanings in the poems:

- Identify a possible symbol.
- Consider the qualities of the symbolic object.
- Note the ideas or feelings the poet associates with the symbol.
- Consider the associations the symbol seems to trigger in you.
- Make a guess about what the symbol might represent.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** To help you organize your thoughts about symbols as you reread the poems, create a chart like the one shown and fill it in.

	Object	Qualities	Symbol of . . .
“We Wear the Mask”			
“Sympathy”			

# WE WEAR THE MASK

Paul Laurence Dunbar



Detail of *Three Folk Musicians* (1967), Romare Bearden. Collage on canvas on board, 50" × 60". Copyright © Romare Bearden/VAGA, New York.

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,  
5 And mouth with myriad subtleties.

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

10 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,  
15 We wear the mask.

**3 guile:** slyness and craftiness in dealing with others.

**5 myriad subtleties:** countless artful statements.

**12 vile:** disgusting or objectionable.

## Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** Who is the speaker of the poem?

2. **ACTIVE READING INTERPRETING SYMBOLS**

Review the chart you made in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. In your own words, explain what wearing a mask represents in the poem.

**THINK ABOUT**

- the description of wearing the mask as a "debt we pay to human guile"
- who is wearing the mask and why
- the feelings that the mask hides

3. Is "We Wear the Mask" relevant to people other than African Americans? Why or why not?



# *Sympathy*

Paul Laurence Dunbar

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;  
5      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;  
10 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!

15 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,  
20 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—  
I know why the caged bird sings!

## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

What was your reaction to the bird's plight?

### Comprehension Check

- What is the season and the scene described in the first stanza of the poem?
- Where would the caged bird rather be perched?
- What kind of song does the caged bird finally sing?

## Think Critically

2. What do you think the poem reveals about the speaker's inner longings?
3. What do you think is the significance of the title?
4. How would you explain the progression of ideas in the poem?

THINK ABOUT

- the situation described in each stanza
- what central ideas the speaker builds on
- the first and last line of each stanza

5.

ACTIVE READING INTERPRETING SYMBOLS

Refer to your the chart you made in your



READER'S NOTEBOOK. What do you think the caged bird symbolizes? Support your interpretation with evidence.

## Extend Interpretations

6. **Comparing Texts** How did the historical information presented in the Build Background section on page 835 influence your interpretation of both "We Wear the Mask" and "Sympathy"? In what ways do these poems reflect turn-of-the-century race relations in the United States?
7. **Different Perspectives** In 1895, Booker T. Washington, one of the most prominent African-American leaders of his day, remarked, "No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top." Do you think the speaker in "Sympathy" would agree with this statement? Why or why not?
8. **Writer's Style** "Sympathy" is a **lyric poem**, or short poem in which a single speaker expresses thoughts and feelings in intensely emotional language. Which descriptive details from the poem did you find the most deeply moving? Why?
9. **Connect to Life** What oppressed groups around the world might identify with the bird's plight in "Sympathy"?

## Literary Analysis

**SYMBOL** A **symbol** is a person, place, or object that represents something beyond itself. Symbols in literature generally have several possible interpretations, rather than one precise meaning, and often communicate complex, abstract ideas. For example, a symbolic mask is more meaningful than an ordinary mask; a symbolic bird is more meaningful than an ordinary bird. Clues to the meaning of a particular symbol are usually found within the work itself.

**Activity** Think of other symbols besides the mask and the caged bird that could represent a similar idea in these poems. For example, Dunbar might have described camouflage, rather than a mask; a prisoner, rather than a caged bird. Share your symbols with the class and then discuss whether any of them would work as well as the ones Dunbar used in his poems.

**REVIEW TONE** Describe the **tone** of these poems—the attitude expressed toward the subject. Point out words that suggest the tone and describe. How similar are the poems in tone?



## Choices & CHALLENGES

### Writing Options

**1. Narrative Sequel** Imagine that the bird in "Sympathy" is released from its cage. Write a narrative sequel to the poem titled "I Know What the Freed Bird Feels," describing the bird's emotions after its long captivity. You might want to connect the bird's liberation to the freedoms gained by African Americans after the civil rights movement.

#### Writing Handbook

See page 1279: Narrative Writing

**2. Lyrics of a Songbird** Write the lyrics to the plea that the bird sings in the final stanza of the poem. Share your lyrics with classmates.

### Activities & Explorations

**1. Personal Mask** Create your own mask, designing it to reflect the role that you think society, your friends, or your family

expects you to play. Display your mask in the classroom. - ART

**2. Political Cartoon** Draw a political cartoon that illustrates Dunbar's view of racism as reflected in "We Wear the Mask" or "Sympathy." Consider using phrases from the poem as captions and labels. Study cartoons from newspaper editorial pages as models. - VIEWING AND REPRESENTING



### Paul Laurence Dunbar

1872–1906

#### Other Works

*Lyrics of Lowly Life*  
*Poems of Cabin and Field*  
*Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow*

**Literary Beginnings** The son of former slaves, Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, and began to write when he was 12 years old. While in high school, he became editor of the school newspaper and contributed to a newspaper published by one of the Wright brothers, who later invented the airplane. Considered the class poet, he also published his first poems in the *Dayton Herald*.

**Budding Career** After high school, Dunbar took a job as an elevator operator, the only work he could find. His literary career was launched when a former teacher asked him to read a poem before a writers' convention. Dunbar published his first volume of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*, in 1893. The publication of his second volume, *Majors and Minors*, in 1896 attracted the attention of the noted writer William Dean Howells, whose favorable review helped establish Dunbar's career.

**Bittersweet Success** Despite earning critical acclaim, Dunbar felt disappointed that his serious

lyric poems were not as popular as his African-American dialect poems. He told a friend, "I didn't start with dialect, but dialect is what [white] people want. They won't let me do anything else, no matter how much I try. I've got to write dialect if I want them to listen."

**Failing Health** While his popularity continued to grow, Dunbar's health began to deteriorate. Following several bouts of pneumonia, Dunbar died from tuberculosis at the age of 33. By the time of his death, he had written four novels, four collections of short stories, more than ten volumes of poetry, and several musicals. He unfortunately did not live to see his lyric poems, such as "We Wear the Mask" and "Sympathy," win lasting respect.

### Author Activity

**The Music of Poetry** Excerpts from the following poems by Dunbar—"Twell de Night Is Pas," "When I Gits Home," "An Antebellum Sermon," and "Ode to Ethiopia"—were used as the prologues to *Afro-American Symphony* by composer William Grant Still. Read these four poems, and then listen to a sound recording of Still's symphony, available at many libraries. How does the music capture the spirit of the poems?