

*Much Ado* about Black Naturalism:  
Don John, Blood, and Caged Birds

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**Abstract**

William Shakespeare's comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy," peer through black naturalism's socially deterministic lens, despite conflicts in time, geopolitics, social norms, and literary imagination. Specifically, Don John's truculent reference about "sing[ing] in his cage" (1.3.32) inspired investigation into whether Dunbar's famed line, "I know why the caged bird sings" (21), intentionally alludes to Shakespeare's work. While the research is inconclusive, the references provide clarity for Don John's character particularly. Essentially, Don John's foolhardy evil meets society's standards for masking social truths, just as Dunbar's poem has been reduced to a sweet and imaginative ditty over time. Thus, this article broadly explores society's tendency to recycle oppression under expedient pretenses. Although Don John self-proclaims inherent evil, closer scrutiny of his figurative scar – coat of arms, representing illegitimacy – reveals a socially determined position, more consistent with Dunbar's second-rate life based on skin color and his naturalism based on whiteness. Because Mowat and Werstine suggest that Don John's ill-intentioned behaviors are less about biology (blood) than impassioned human response to social injustice (Blood), naturalism links the unlikely pair. As such, the article uses Dunbar's black naturalism to exemplify societal "caging" in *Much Ado* and "Sympathy."

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, black naturalism, Dunbar, biological determinism, Don John, sympathy, oppression, social determinism, comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Most people do not hope for a physical injury to leave a scar, for a visible reminder of pain, regardless of its origin. Instead, people prefer to detach pain from memory even though the scar's external demarcation is also a