

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Faith Cure Man

By Paul Laurence Dunbar  
1900

*Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), the son of former slaves and a prominent black novelist and poet, often depicted the harsh reality of black American life in the early 1900s. In "The Faith Cure Man," Dunbar tells a story about a poor mother who is willing to believe in anything that might cure her sick daughter. As you read, take notes on the author's characterization of the different characters, and what this reveals about the theme.*

- [1] Hope is tenacious.<sup>1</sup> It goes on living and working when science has dealt it what should be its deathblow.

In the close room at the top of the old tenement house<sup>2</sup> little Lucy lay wasting away with a relentless<sup>3</sup> disease. The doctor had said at the beginning of the winter that she could not live. Now he said that he could do no more for her except to ease the few days that remained for the child.



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But Martha Benson would not believe him. She was confident that doctors were not infallible.<sup>4</sup> Anyhow, this one wasn't, for she saw life and health ahead for her little one.

Did not the preacher at the Mission Home<sup>5</sup> say: "Ask, and ye shall receive?" and had she not asked and asked again the life of her child, her last and only one, at the hands of Him whom she worshipped?

- [5] No, Lucy was not going to die. What she needed was country air and a place to run about in. She had been housed up too much; these long Northern winters were too severe for her, and that was what made her so pinched and thin and weak. She must have air, and she should have it.

"Po' little lammie,"<sup>6</sup> she said to the child, "Mammy's little gal boun' to git well. Mammy gwine sen' huh out in de country when the spring comes, whaih she kin roll in de grass an' pick flowers an' git good an' strong. Don' baby want to go to de country? Don' baby want to see de sun shine?"<sup>7</sup> And the child had looked up at her with wide, bright eyes, tossed her thin arms and moaned for reply.

1. **Tenacious (adjective):** tending to keep a firm hold of something; clinging or adhering closely
2. A tenement house is a house divided into and rented out as separate residences, especially one that is run-down and overcrowded.
3. **Relentless (adjective):** showing no lessening of determination, intensity, or strength
4. **Infallible (adjective):** incapable of being wrong; never failing
5. A mission home is a benevolent institution (as for the care of the indigent or the aged) maintained by a religious organization.
6. "Poor little lamb" is an old term of endearment, often used for someone small or helpless.
7. Here, Dunbar has written Martha's dialogue phonetically to reflect the dialect of African American Vernacular English (sometimes referred to as "Ebonics").

"Nemmine, we gwine fool dat doctah. Some day we'll th'ow all his nassy medicine 'way, an' he come in an' say: 'Whaih's all my medicine?' Den we answeh up sma't like: 'We done th'owed it out. We don' need no nassy medicine.' Den he look 'roun' an' say: 'Who dat I see runnin' roun' de flo' hyeah, a-lookin' so fat?' an' you up an' say: 'Hit's me, dat's who 'tis, mistah doctor man!' Den he go out an' slam de do' behin' him. Ain' dat fine?"

But the child had closed her eyes, too weak even to listen. So her mother kissed her little thin forehead and tiptoed out, sending in a child from across the hall to take care of Lucy while she was at work, for sick as the little one was she could not stay at home and nurse her.

Hope grasps at a straw, and it was quite in keeping with the condition of Martha's mind that she should open her ears and her heart when they told her of the wonderful works of the faith-cure man. People had gone to him on crutches, and he had touched or rubbed them and they had come away whole. He had gone to the homes of the bed-ridden, and they had risen up to bless him. It was so easy for her to believe it all. The only religion she had ever known, the wild, emotional religion of most of her race, put her credulity<sup>8</sup> to stronger tests than that. Her only question was, would such a man come to her humble<sup>9</sup> room. But she put away even this thought. He must come. She would make him. Already she saw Lucy strong, and running about like a mouse, the joy of her heart and the light of her eyes.

[10] As soon as she could get time she went humbly to see the faith doctor, and laid her case before him, hoping, fearing, trembling.

Yes, he would come. Her heart leaped for joy.

"There is no place," said the faith curist, "too humble for the messenger of heaven to enter. I am following One<sup>10</sup> who went among the humblest and the lowliest, and was not ashamed to be found among publicans<sup>11</sup> and sinners. I will come to your child, madam, and put her again under the law. The law of life is health, and no one who will accept the law need be sick. I am not a physician. I do not claim to be. I only claim to teach people how not to be sick. My fee is five dollars,<sup>12</sup> merely to defray my expenses, that's all. You know the servant is worthy of his hire. And in this little bottle here I have an elixir<sup>13</sup> which has never been known to fail in any of the things claimed for it. Since the world has got used to taking medicine we must make some concessions to its prejudices. But this in reality is not a medicine at all. It is only a symbol. It is really liquefied prayer and faith."

Martha did not understand anything of what he was saying. She did not try to; she did not want to. She only felt a blind trust in him that filled her heart with unspeakable gladness.

Tremulous<sup>14</sup> with excitement, she doled out her poor dollars to him, seized the precious elixir and hurried away home to Lucy, to whom she was carrying life and strength. The little one made a weak attempt to smile at her mother, but the light flickered away and died into greyness on her face.

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8. **Credulity (noun):** ability or willingness to believe something
  9. **Humble (adjective):** modest; having or showing a low estimate of one's own importance
  10. A reference to Jesus
  11. In the Bible, "publicans" were tax collectors who got rich by helping the Romans oppress their people.
  12. At the time of this story, five dollars was a great amount of money – especially for a poor family.
  13. **Elixir (noun):** a magical or medicinal potion
  14. **Tremulous (adjective):** shaking or quivering slightly

[15] “Now mammy’s little gal gwine to git well fu’ sho’. Mammy done bring huh somep’n’ good.” Awed and reverent,<sup>15</sup> she tasted the wonderful elixir before giving it to the child. It tasted very like sweetened water to her, but she knew that it was not, and had no doubt of its virtues.

Lucy swallowed it as she swallowed everything her mother brought to her. Poor little one! She had nothing to buoy<sup>16</sup> her up or to fight science with.

In the course of an hour her mother gave her the medicine again, and persuaded herself that there was a perceptible brightening in her daughter’s face.

Mrs. Mason, Caroline’s mother, called across the hall: “How Lucy dis evenin’, Mis’ Benson?”

“Oh, I think Lucy air right peart,” Martha replied. “Come over an’ look at huh.”

[20] Mrs. Mason came, and the mother told her about the new faith doctor and his wonderful powers.

“Why, Mis’ Mason,” she said, “pears like I could see de change in de child de minute she swallowed dat medicine.”

Her neighbor listened in silence, but when she went back to her own room it was to shake her head and murmur: “Po’ Marfy, she jes’ ez blind ez a bat. She jes’ go ‘long, holdin’ on to dat chile wid all huh might, an’ I see death in Lucy’s face now. Dey ain’t no faif nur prayer, nur Jack-leg doctors nuther gwine to save huh.”

But Martha needed no pity then. She was happy in her self-delusion.<sup>17</sup>

On the morrow the faith doctor came to see Lucy. She had not seemed so well that morning, even to her mother, who remained at home until the doctor arrived. He carried a conquering air, and a baggy umbrella, the latter of which he laid across the foot of the bed as he bent over the moaning child.

[25] “Give me some brown paper,” he commanded.

Martha hastened<sup>18</sup> to obey, and the priestly practitioner dampened it in water and laid it on Lucy’s head, all the time murmuring prayers – or were they incantations?<sup>19</sup> – to himself. Then he placed pieces of the paper on the soles of the child’s feet and on the palms of her hands, and bound them there.

When all this was done he knelt down and prayed aloud, ending with a peculiar version of the Lord’s prayer, supposed to have mystic effect. Martha was greatly impressed, but through it all Lucy lay and moaned.

The faith curist rose to go. “Well, we can look to have her out in a few days. Remember, my good woman, much depends upon you. You must try to keep your mind in a state of belief. Are you saved?”<sup>20</sup>

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15. **Reverent** (*adjective*): feeling or showing deep and solemn respect

16. **Buoy** (*verb*): to keep (someone or something) afloat

17. **Self-delusion** (*noun*): a failure to recognize or accept reality

18. **Hasten** (*verb*): to hurry

19. **Incantation** (*noun*): the use of words as a magic spell

"Oh, yes, suh. I'm a puffessor," said Martha, and having completed his mission, the man of prayers went out, and Caroline again took Martha's place at Lucy's side.

- [30] In the next two days Martha saw, or thought she saw, a steady improvement in Lucy. According to instructions, the brown paper was moved every day, moistened, and put back.

Martha had so far spurred<sup>21</sup> her faith that when she went out on Saturday morning she promised to bring Lucy something good for her Christmas dinner, and a pair of shoes against the time of her going out, and also a little doll. She brought them home that night. Caroline had grown tired and, lighting the lamp, had gone home.

"I done brung my little lady bird huh somep'n nice," said Martha, "here's a lil' doll and de lil' shoes, honey. How's de baby feel?" Lucy did not answer.

"You sleep?" Martha went over to the bed. The little face was pinched and ashen. The hands were cold.

"Lucy! Lucy!" called the mother. "Lucy! Oh, Gawd! It ain't true! She ain't daid! My little one, my las' one!"

- [35] She rushed for the elixir and brought it to the bed. The thin dead face stared back at her, unresponsive.

She sank down beside the bed, moaning.

"Daid, daid, oh, my Gawd, gi' me back my chile! Oh, don't I believe you enough? Oh, Lucy, Lucy, my little lamb! I got you yo' gif. Oh, Lucy!"

The next day was set apart for the funeral. The Mission preacher read: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord," and some one said "Amen!" But Martha could not echo it in her heart. Lucy was her last, her one treasured lamb.

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20. To be "saved" refers to the Christian belief that if one accepts Jesus into their heart, they are saved from damnation.  
21. **Spur (verb):** to urge; to encourage

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses one of the themes of the story?
  - A. Everyone deals with death differently.
  - B. Blind faith and trust do not always yield rewards.
  - C. Proper religion is superior to mystic spirituality.
  - D. Religion and spirituality are more powerful than medicine and science.
  
2. PART B: Which TWO phrases from the text best support the answer to Part A?
  - A. "‘There is no place,’ said the faith curist, ‘too humble for the messenger of heaven to enter.’" (Paragraph 12)
  - B. "Martha did not understand anything of what he was saying. She did not try to; she did not want to." (Paragraph 13)
  - C. "It tasted very like sweetened water to her, but she knew that it was not, and had no doubt of its virtues." (Paragraph 15)
  - D. "She had nothing to buoy her up or to fight science with." (Paragraph 16)
  - E. "he knelt down and prayed aloud, ending with a peculiar version of the Lord’s prayer, supposed to have mystic effect" (Paragraph 27)
  - F. "Daid, daid, oh, my Gawd, gi’ me back my chile! Oh, don’t I believe you enough?" (Paragraph 37)
  
3. PART A: In paragraph 29, what does Martha mean when she says, "Oh, yes, suh. I’m a puffessor"?
  - A. She is an educator at a local university
  - B. She is a good mother
  - C. She believes in many possibilities, both spiritual and scientific
  - D. She proudly declares her belief in God
  
4. PART B: Which quotation from the text best supports the answer to part A?
  - A. "a peculiar version of the Lord’s prayer" (Paragraph 27)
  - B. "‘much depends upon you’" (Paragraph 28)
  - C. "‘Are you saved?’" (Paragraph 28)
  - D. "and some one said ‘Amen!’" (Paragraph 38)

5. How does the narrator's view of the faith cure man differ from Martha Benson's?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. How does the author's use of dialect enhance our understanding of the character Martha? Cite examples from the text.
2. Do you think the faith cure man believes he can make Lucy healthy? Why or why not?
3. If you were Martha's neighbor, Mrs. Mason, how would you react to Martha's excitement for the faith cure man?
4. In the context of this story, how do some people face death? Was Martha's approach for dealing with her dying daughter the right approach? Was it helpful? Harmful? How? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
5. In the context of this story, how do people face adversity in life? In what cases, if any, do you believe faith can have a powerful effect on overcoming obstacles? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
6. Was leaving her child's health up to faith the same as leaving it up to fate? In the context of this story, to what extent can we control our fate? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.