

# *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadows: An Opera based on the Lives and Love of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore*

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## Summary

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born June 27, 1872, in Dayton, Ohio. He was



youngest of three sons born to former slave, Matilda Dunbar. His father, Joshua Dunbar escaped from slavery by enlisting in Company F, 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. It was the second regiment of all African-American troops formed during the Civil War.

Paul's poverty-stricken childhood was further marred by the prejudices and social ills of Post-Slavery America. His life would change suddenly when William Dean Howells, the foremost literary critic of the late nineteenth century, favorably reviewed Paul's work

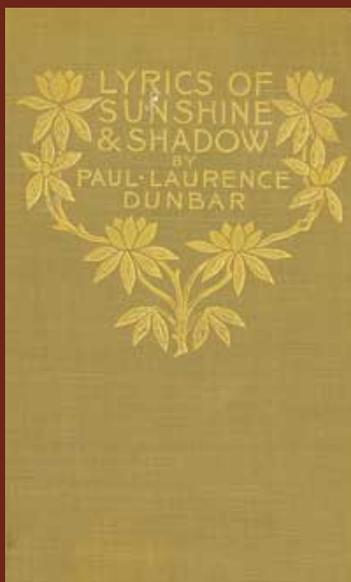
*Majors and Minors* (1896), in the prestigious Harper's Weekly Magazine. As with Dunbar's earlier work *Oak and Ivy* (1895), the larger "Majors" section contained what Paul considered his most serious work, poems in Standard English. The smaller "Minors" section contained his verses written in dialect. While it is true the review of the work instantly made Paul a national success, Howells praised only the works written in dialect, referring to them as "*darky poems*". He was astonished at the fact that such well-written verses were "*from someone who appeared to be of pure African blood... black skin and thick rolled-out lips.*"

Alice Ruth Moore came from a very different world. Born July 9, 1875, in New Orleans, Louisiana, Alice Ruth Moore was considered a member of African-American elite society. Her mother, Patricia Wright, was the daughter of a former Creole slave and seamstress, and her father was probably Monroe Moore, Patricia's former slave owner from Opelousas, Louisiana - a secret Patricia was sure to take to her grave.



Both Alice and her older sister, Mary Leila, were educators. Patricia made sure that her fair-skinned daughters were cultured and refined young women. They were active in various social and civic organizations. Alice was most noted for her collection of short stories: *Violets and Other Tales* (1895).

It was in the April 1895 issue of the *Boston Monthly Review* magazine that Dunbar discovered a photograph of Moore. Captivated by her beauty, he immediately wrote to her. The couple would correspond over a period of two years before meeting. This late 19th century romance is the first well - documented love story among the African-American elite.



The work is titled after a volume of Dunbar's poetry published in 1901.

An original libretto was inspired by over three hundred letters the two had written, all compiled in the dissertation; [The Letters of Paul and Alice Dunbar: A Private History](#) by Eugene Wesley Metcalf, Jr., the book; [Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore](#) by Dr. Eleanor Alexander, and several excerpts of poetry and short stories written by Dunbar and Moore during their relationship.

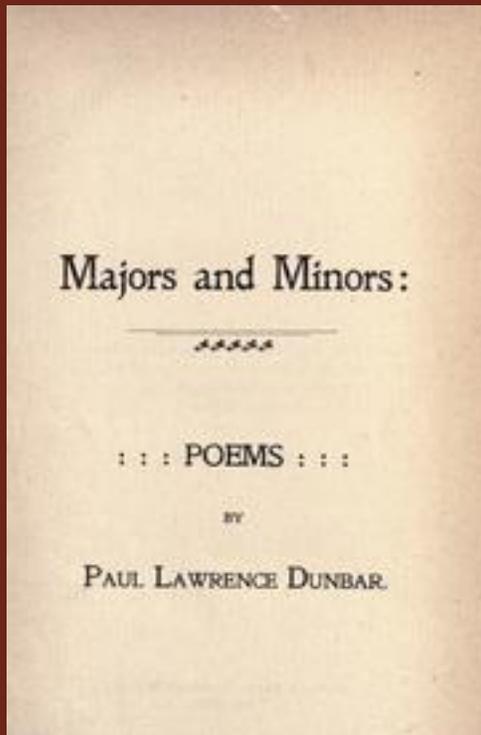
## Scene Highlights

### Majors and Minors' Review

#### Act I, Scene III

The review of Dunbar's collection of poetry printed in the Harper's Weekly magazine immediately attributed to his success. However, Howells' description of Dunbar's physical features and given the era of minstrelsy, Paul was faced with self-doubt and questionable integrity of which he confided in a friend.

*While I hope there is something worthy in my writing than just the novelty of blackface associated with the power to rhyme that has attracted attention.*

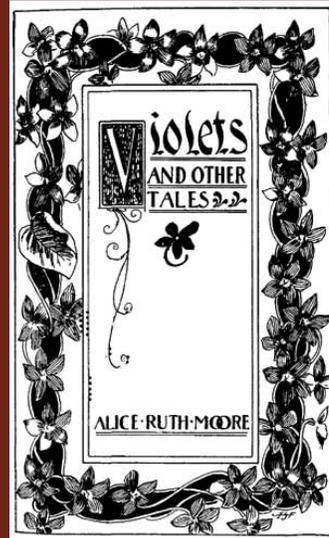


## Violets and Other Tales

### Act I, Scene VI

Alice is seen in a garden of violets:

*Violets, you know, are my favorite flower.  
Dear little human-face things.  
They seem always as about to whisper a  
love word.  
And yet they signify that word that always  
passes between you and me.*



Mary Leila Wright, Alice's sister, runs to the garden carrying a letter addressed to Alice from Paul.

Meanwhile, Alice becomes acquainted with the chair of the National Association of Colored Women, Ms. Victoria Earle Matthews, who happens to be a very close acquaintance of Paul's.



## A Lyric

### Act I, Scene X

Six months after their first correspondence, Paul confesses his true feelings for Alice in the following letter:

*Dayton, Ohio*

*October 1895*

*Dear Miss. Moore, while I do not wish to apologize for what I am about to write, I do think that it needs an explanation, that is, if the spontaneity of emotion can be explained. I am sitting here with your picture before me, and my heart is throbbing faster than my pen goes. You cannot and yet I believe you can understand my impulsive nature. But you will not understand me when I tell you that I love you, and I have loved you from the very first time I saw your picture and read your story.*

*I know it may seem foolish. Perhaps you will laugh, or even grow angry. If only you could read my heart - If you could read my heart.*

*Someday perhaps my heart will let my head write you a letter. But I can conceal myself no longer.*

*I am sincerely yours,*

*Paul*

## News From London

### Act II, Scene XV

Major James Pond, Paul's manager and a life long friend brings news of an extended reading tour in England. The tour would bring Dunbar's work to international acclaim. Although ecstatic at the opportunity, Dunbar is weighted with the thought:

*...Maybe they will only see me as a poet. An American, that just happens to be Negro.*

*Dear Child, Just Leave it to Me!*

Act II, Scene XVIII

Victoria Earle Matthews decides to host a party in honor of Paul Laurence Dunbar's tour of London. Her underlying purpose for the party is to facilitate the first meeting between Paul and Alice.

*In The Parlor with Du Bois, Washington and Dunbar*

Act II, Scene XXII

Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois are among the esteemed guests attending the party.

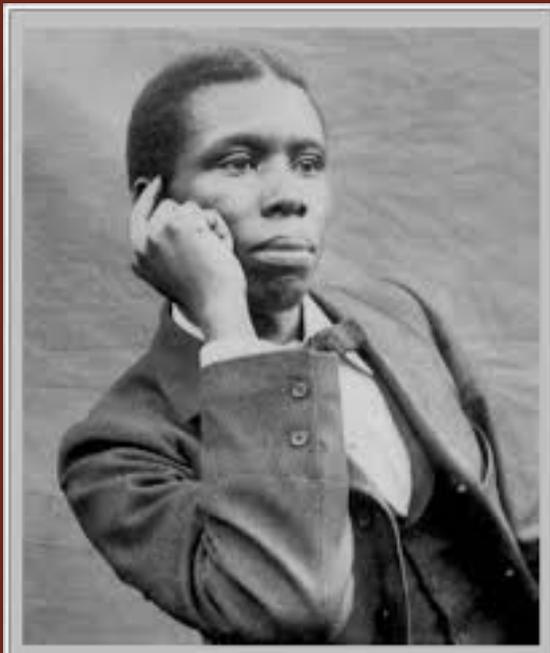


*One ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. — W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk” - 1903*

*Every person who has grown to any degree of usefulness, every person who has grown to distinction, almost without exception has been a person who has risen by overcoming obstacles, by removing difficulties, by resolving that when he met discouragement he would not give up. - Booker T. Washington, "Up From Slavery" - 1901*



Scene XXII, Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" ensues in Trio.



*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!*

## *The Engagement*

### Act II, Scene XXIII

Paul and Alice finally meet for the first time. He immediately proposes to her with a ring given to him by his mother. Alice accepts by offering a bouquet of violets.

*My heart to thy heart*

*My hand to thine;*

*My lips to thy lips,*

*Kisses are wine*

*Lily to lily*

*Rose to rose;*

*My love to thy love*

*Tenderly grows*

*Rend not the oak and ivy in twain.*

