



# Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore

*Eleanor Alexander*

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**A New York Times Notable Book of 2002!**

Sexism, racism, self-hatred, and romantic love: all figure in prominently in this scholarly-but nicely hard-boiled-discussion of the bond between the famous Paul Laurence Dunbar and his wife Alice. Eleanor Alexander's analysis of turn-of-the-twentieth-century black marriage is required reading for every student of American, especially African-American, heterosexual relationships."

—Nell Painter, Edwards Professor of American History, Princeton University, Author of *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol*

"Rich in documentation and generous in analysis, *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow* advances our understanding of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American social and cultural history in compelling and unexpected ways. By exposing the devastating consequences of unequal power dynamics and gender relations in the union of the celebrated writers, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore, and by examining the hidden underside of the Dunbars' storybook romance where alcohol, sex, and violence prove fatal, Eleanor Alexander produces a provocative, nuanced interpretation of late Victorian courtship and marriage, of post-emancipation racial respectability and class mobility, of pre-modern sexual rituals and color conventions in an emergent elite black society."

—Thadious M. Davis, Vanderbilt University

"Eleanor Alexander's vivid account of the most famous black writer of his day, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and his wife Alice, illuminates the world of the African American literati at the opening of the twentieth century. The Dunbars' fairy-tale romance ended abruptly, when Alice walked out on her alcoholic, abusive spouse. Alexander's access to scores of intimate letters and her sensitive interpretation of the Dunbars mercurial highs and lows reveal the tragic consequences of mixing alcohol, ambition and amour. The Dunbars were precursors for another doomed duo: Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. Alexander's poignant story of the Dunbars sheds important light on love and violence among DuBois's "talented tenth."

—Catherine Clinton, author of *Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars*

"**Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow** debunks Dunbar myths...

**Lyrics** asks us to consider the ways in which racism and sexism operate together."

— *The Crisis*

On February 10, 1906, Alice Ruth Moore, estranged wife of renowned early twentieth-century poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, boarded a streetcar, settled comfortably into her seat, and opened her newspaper to learn of her husband's death the day before. Paul Laurence Dunbar, son of former slaves, whom Frederick Douglass had dubbed "the most promising young colored man in America," was dead from tuberculosis at the age of 33.

**Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow** traces the tempestuous romance of America's most noted African-American literary couple. Drawing on a variety of love letters, diaries, journals, and autobiographies, Eleanor

Alexander vividly recounts Dunbar's and Moore's tumultuous affair, from a courtship conducted almost entirely through letters and an elopement brought on by Dunbar's brutal, drunken rape of Moore, through their passionate marriage and its eventual violent dissolution in 1902. Moore, once having left Dunbar, rejected his every entreaty to return to him, responding to his many letters only once, with a blunt, one-word telegram ("No").

This is a remarkable story of tragic romance among African-American elites struggling to define themselves and their relationships within the context of post-slavery America. As such, it provides a timely examination of the ways in which cultural ideology and politics shape and complicate conceptions of romantic love.

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