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Elizabeth J. West

Georgia State University, ewest@gsu.edu

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### Recommended Citation

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Dr. Elizabeth J. West  
Dept of English  
Georgia State Univ

### Religion, Race, and Gender in the 'Race-less' Fiction of Alice Dunbar-Nelson

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1875, Alice Ruth Moore was the product of New Orleans Creole society and a post-Reconstruction South that reinstated a polarized racial divide. Black by American constructs of race, Alice Ruth Moore belonged to that society of fair-skinned blacks who could and often did pass as white. Though sometimes straddling the color line, this predominantly educated, elite society of blacks proved a significant presence in black activism and arts. While most of these turn-of-the-century black activists did not experience the depth of poverty and discrimination suffered by the larger population of blacks, they were nevertheless committed to black uplift. Alice Ruth Moore was one among this society, and for much of her adult life she directed her efforts to black intellectual activism. She was one among many black leaders energized by the belief that blacks would come to know prosperity and progress through education, and that through print media their struggles, sufferings and achievements could be given voice, even in the wake of the South's Jim Crow society. While the close of the nineteenth century marked a return to the Old South, that is, white rule and black subjugation, blacks nevertheless made strides in education and, despite the terror and apartheid of the Jim Crow South, black activism persisted.

The nineteenth century closed with the promises of post-war Reconstruction a worn and faded dream: blacks found themselves again relegated to second-class status. While they were no longer enslaved, blacks were installed again as the main labor source for the agricultural south, and they were remanded to a system that left them economic, political and social

prisoners. The slave system had been replaced by the sharecropping system—a land tillage and rental system that left most black sharecropper farmers in a cycle of unending debt to the white landowners from whom they rented. Throughout urban enclaves in the south, black workers fared little better: in southern cities such as New Orleans blacks had to contend with hostile white laborers who viewed black workers as a threat to their employment security. Despite this bleak economic picture and the social and political alienation that it fostered for blacks, the late nineteenth century was not a period of utter despair for blacks. The literacy rate for blacks was increasing, and with the rise of black institutions of higher learning blacks were becoming more educated. Black leaders understood the promise of this trend: with the growth of black schools, blacks could become educators in their communities, and with the rise of literacy, black leaders could better mobilize their activism. The evidence of this dynamic is seen in the rise of black magazine, newspaper and literary publications at the turn of the century.

Alice Ruth Moore (later known as Alice Dunbar-Nelson—after first marriage to Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and second marriage to Robert J. Nelson) elicits little critical attention from contemporary literary scholars. However, in her own lifetime, she was well entrenched in African American literary life. Dunbar-Nelson published two volumes of short writings at the close of the nineteenth century and well into the early decades of the twentieth century her publications included newspaper and magazine articles, poems, and editorial projects. The body of Dunbar-Nelson's works consists of her nonfiction projects; her lengthiest creative projects were her first. It is in these two collections that we find Dunbar-Nelson interrogating through fiction the connection between gender and Christianity, and she chooses settings that are most familiar to her. Although published in the era of the women's club movement that highlighted a surge in black woman activism and publishing, *Violets and Other Tales* (1895 as Alice Ruth

Moore) and *The Goodness of St. Roque and Other Stories* (1899 as Alice Dunbar) have been awarded only cursory critical attention. Dunbar-Nelson's relative obscurity in comparison to literary peers Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and Pauline Hopkins may have much to do with the unconventional nature of her writing. While Gloria T. Hull credits Dunbar-Nelson with helping to "create a black short-story tradition for a reading public conditioned to expect only plantation and minstrel stereotypes," Hull chides Dunbar-Nelson for what she deems her flawed strategy (xxxix-xxxii). According to Hull, "her [Dunbar-Nelson's] strategy for escaping these odious expectations was to eschew black characters and culture and to write, instead charming, aracial, Creole sketches that solidified her in the then-popular 'female-suitable' local color mode" (xxxii).

Since Hull's 1988 unflattering introduction in the Schomburg edition of Dunbar-Nelson's works, scholars have returned to Dunbar-Nelson's early fiction to reexamine charges that her writings are aracial platitudes, lacking social and political consciousness. Framing their readings of Dunbar-Nelson's works in the New Orleans milieu that shaped her imagination, a number of critics now argue that Dunbar-Nelson's early fiction "reveal underlying themes indicative of race and class differences in the socially stratified New Orleans at the turn of the century" (Gowdy 227). In his essay examining race and politics in Dunbar-Nelson's early fiction, Jurgen Grandt weighs in on the debate. Grandt concedes that "located at the intersection of the genteel and the local-color traditions, [Dunbar-Nelson's early stories] remained for the most part devoid of any explicit social commentary or even racial markers (46). While Grandt appears to simply reiterate Hull's position, he quickly qualifies this assertion and explains its shortfall. Grandt maintains that "it is only on the surface that her stories eschew social and racial issues," and that Dunbar-

Nelson's early work "contains multiple and often ironic layers of meaning which emerge only if placed in historical context" (47, 54).

Many critics read Dunbar-Nelson's use of creole characters as a marker of whiteness or racial indeterminacy; however, Dunbar-Nelson's concept of identity and race was informed by New Orleans' unique racial history. Kristina Brooks explains the dynamic of positionality in interpreting matters of race and identity in Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans fiction: "Outside readers' tendency to view Dunbar-Nelson's characters as racially indeterminate is partially a function of their own unfamiliarity with Dunbar-Nelson's native city and its singular history of tripartite social stratification" (4). Brooks cites Virginia Dominguez who explains that "the 1808 project of the Louisiana Civil Code acknowledged the existence of three social sectors—whites, free people of color, and black slaves" (4). This tripartite society was a staple of antebellum New Orleans society but would be disrupted by the influence of the larger South's post war insistence on a polarized black-white society. Unless they chose to pass, this then left many black creoles—gens de couleur—of the late nineteenth century relegated to the bottom social rung with the larger black New Orleans population.

In Dunbar-Nelson's turn-of-the-century New Orleans creoles of color were then struggling to negotiate their new lowered social status. Many who had enjoyed better labor and social opportunities, now met with the discrimination and alienation that had long restricted the progress of their darker counterparts. This period of transition resulted in some creoles of color abandoning their multiracial identity and choosing instead to pass for white. Others would accept their new social relegation, while many would hold on to their historical identity despite the overriding polarized climate. It is this cloudy social atmosphere, with mixed and uncertain shades of identity and class that informed the early fictional sketches of Dunbar-Nelson. As for

readers of Dunbar-Nelson's early sketches, their determination of character identities rest largely with their insider-outsider gaze: "Thus, a local audience, privy to the well-known stereotypes, will experience a racialized reading of the same stories that a non-local audience will find racially unmarked. . . . Just as countless Creoles of color successfully passed for white in New Orleans at the turn of the century, several of Dunbar-Nelson's Creole characters are able to pass in their encounters with non-local readers" (Brooks 8).

While contemporary critics suggest that Dunbar-Nelson's relative obscurity is the result of her fictional creole/non-black characters, Dunbar-Nelson's rejection of gender paradigms and genre expectations further contribute to the scant attention awarded her work. Unlike her black female contemporaries, Dunbar-Nelson overtly rejects sentimental paradigms that seat womanhood in Christian virtue. In Dunbar-Nelson's fiction, Christianity is not the medium through which the heroine emerges into ideal womanhood. Nor does Christianity facilitate domestic bliss and security. On the contrary, her heroines meet with fatal circumstances, oftentimes as a result of their blind faith—a faith rooted in a Christian worldview that delivers women over for exploitation in a male-centered world. Dunbar-Nelson not only challenges representations of Christianity as redemptive, but more poignantly she explores Christian conventions and ideals as mere enablers of white male hegemony. Dunbar-Nelson's short writings represent a significant nexus from the more genteel literary constructions of her contemporaries to the emergence of black women's fiction in the twentieth century that overtly interrogates the place of Christianity in black life. In this regard, Dunbar-Nelson presages the religious skepticism that informs the likes of Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance novel, *Quicksand* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

*Violets and Other Tales* and *The Goodness of St. Rocque* are collections of independent short works that vary in themes. This is especially the case in *Violets and Other Tales*, a volume of 29 vignettes containing poems, short stories, and essays that explore social, religious and literary questions. Several of the sketches in this collection focus on romantic relationships, and the endings in these works are usually not happy ones. For the most part, women do not fare well in Dunbar-Nelson's stories of romance, and this is particularly the case in the two most tragic tales in the *Violets* collection. The heroines in "Violets" and "Little Miss Sophie" meet with tragic endings that are notably interwoven into a backdrop image of Christianity and the church. In "Violets" Dunbar-Nelson employs this image to highlight her heroine's role as victim; however, in "Little Miss Sophie," she implicates the church as an agent in a systematic victimization of women that exceeds mere matters of the heart. With New Orleans as the backdrop in much of Dunbar-Nelson's early fiction, the Catholic Church signals her more general critique of Christianity and the church. In contrast to the predominant Protestant population of the colonial United States, New Orleans was a Catholic hub. While U. S. expansionism generally took on a Protestant face, New Orleans remained unique not only as an enclave of Catholicism in the South but in the U.S. at large. Rooted thus in this unique religious islet of an otherwise Protestant nation, Dunbar-Nelson's early sketches suggest that "the Catholic religion is more oppressive than comforting" (Brooks 13).

Four years after the publication of *Violets*, Dunbar-Nelson published *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899), a collection with fewer sketches and one that was less eclectic than its predecessor. *The Goodness of St. Rocque* was not a montage of genres, but rather a collection of 14 short stories, three ("Titee," "A Carnival Jangle," and "Little Miss Sophie") that had been included in the *Violets* collection. While the themes vary, half the stories are romantic tales

where again the heroines meet with suffering and despair in their romantic encounters. Only in the light-hearted opening tale, “The Goodness of St. Rocque,” do we find a story of love and desire where the heroine meets with a happy ending. In this story, the young, jealous Manuela consults with the Wized One, a soothsayer whose conjurations meld African and Christian practices<sup>1</sup>, to secure her lover, Theophile, who is being wooed by a petite, blond rival named Claralie. The Wized One instructs Manuela in a ritual of prayers and candle lighting that is clearly connected to Catholic ritual; however, she concurrently gives Manuela a charm that she must wear around her waist. The charm has no connection to church tradition, but rather signals a connection to African spiritual systems that maintain the use of charms or amulets to secure good fortune. This reminiscent African practice underscores Gloria T. Hull’s acknowledgment that in her later fictional work, *A Modern Undine*, Dunbar-Nelson “reveals her connection with myth, the mystical, and the spiritual,” a connection that “was rooted in her mother’s Obeah beliefs and enhanced by her own attention to the spiritual arts” (xiv). The story concludes with Manuela and Theophile wedded and the narrator wondering which ritual had affected this happy ending: “If you had asked the Wized One, she would have offered you a charm. But St. Rocque knows, for he is a good saint, and if you believe in him and are true and good, and make your novenas with a clean heart, he will grant your wish” (16). This African-Christian dualism seems to suggest that while the Wized One called on both traditions, the “good saint” is the more likely source of Manuela’s fortune. This conclusion is not so convincing, however, if we

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<sup>1</sup> In her essay, “Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s Local Colors of Ethnicity, Class, and Place,” Kristina Brooks explains that Dunbar-Nelson often names places in her fiction that correspond to real life locations that then offer information about her fictional characters. She explains that “St. Rocque’s is a small, eccentric chapel in New Orleans which is associated with mixed Catholic and voodoo, or hoodoo, practices” (23). Thus, the mixed African-Catholic inclination of the heroine, Manuela, reflects a particular sector of New Orleans society.



consider this story in light of the other four stories in the collection that explore connections between romance and Christianity.

In “Tony’s Wife,” “Little Miss Sophie,” “Sister Josepha,” and “Odalie,” Dunbar-Nelson returns to a more common theme in her short stories, that is, a heroine crushed by a deceptive lover (or would-be lover). Again, the backdrop of these four stories of female suffering and male deception is the image of the church as facilitator. In these four tales we find no cross-cultural mediator like the Wizeden One in “The Goodness of St. Rocque.” The women in these stories only have the church, and the church not only fails as a source of empowerment and fortune for them, it serves as a destructive resource for systematic male manipulation and exploitation of women.

Dunbar-Nelson’s fictional exploration of this gender-Christian dynamic in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* is more apparent with a return to her first collection, *Violets*. *Violets* contains a number of vignettes that question conventional discourse on gender at the turn of the century. This interrogation is especially prominent in the fictional dialog, “The Woman,” a sketch that challenges the prevailing presumption that marriage grants women natural and needed companionship and protection. The story begins with a secretary recounting a conversation that turned into heated debate after a literary manager asked “whether woman’s chances for matrimony are increased or decreased when she becomes man’s equal as a wage earner?” (21).<sup>2</sup> Through the unvoiced contemplations of the secretary, Dunbar-Nelson questions the very presumption that women innately need and desire marriage. The secretary wonders what

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Dunbar-Nelson’s conception of the working woman in this short story is the professional or significant wage earner—those working in “the office, school, factory or store” (22). These work sectors did not include black women in significant numbers; the closing decade of the nineteenth century marked an era in which the greater number of black women workers made their living as low wage domestics, washerwomen and farmhands.

benefits working women might find in marriage; she considers that working women are not burdened with the household obligations of wives, they are free to control their money matters, and they are free to pursue their interests in leisure time. At the end of the workday, working women go home where they meet with “no troublesome dinners to prepare for a fault-finding husband, no fretful children to try her patience, no petty bread and meat economies to adjust” (22). Working woman enjoys a freedom that she forfeits with marriage, so “why should she [working woman] hasten to give this liberty up in exchange for a serfdom, sweet sometimes, it is true, but which too often becomes galling and unendurable?” (*Violets* 25).

One might readily read “The Woman” through Claudia Tate’s critical look at late nineteenth-century black women’s fiction. In Tate’s groundbreaking work, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desires*, she explores black women writers’ use of the trope of domesticity as an avenue into political debate. “The Woman” clearly presents nineteenth-century black woman longing to move beyond domestic place and duty; however, woman’s desire here is not admission into the realm of the political that Tate finds for heroines in the fiction of Harper and Hopkins. Dunbar-Nelson’s narrator reveals instead a more personal longing—she desires detachment or separation from the effigy of female domesticity not for power on the political stage, but rather for self-satisfaction/indulgence. Dunbar-Nelson’s narrator challenges the supposition that woman is naturally bound to home and the private sphere. She suggests that woman harbors innate desires of independence and individuality that in late nineteenth-century American discourse are deemed masculine in nature.

While “The Woman” charges that marriage can take away woman’s independent spirit and her intellectual growth, this vignette ends on a lighter note. Dunbar-Nelson’s fictional secretary abruptly shifts from her criticism of marriage to a more conciliatory view of the

institution: she maintains that while marriage can be a trap for women, it can be a mutually rewarding experience when both parties enter the relationship with independent and worldly experience. She argues that this congenial relationship is gained when women work and become self-reliant before they marry. Her earlier criticisms of marriage were merely to demonstrate how woman would prove a better wife, and marriage a more sound institution if she is given the chance for personal growth.

In “Violets” and “Little Miss Sophie” Dunbar-Nelson did not couch her message in the kind of shifting narrative found in “The Woman.” In these stories she painted female heroines as victims and romance as an encounter that left women despairing and deceived. In contrast to “The Woman,” which draws no connection between male hegemony and Christianity, “Violets” and “Little Miss Sophie” manipulate Christian discourse and imagery to underscore the heroine’s suffering. In “Violets” Dunbar-Nelson alludes to Christianity to metaphorically represent the heroine’s suffering; however, in “Little Miss Sophie” she casts the dire circumstances of the heroine against the backdrop of the omnipresent but complicitous church. “Violets” does not suggest that the church lends a hand to the male lover in his deceptive manipulation of the fallen heroine; however, in “Little Miss Sophie” the church is clearly implicated in the ex-lover’s villainy. Perhaps it is Dunbar-Nelson’s interrogation of marriage and the church as institutions of sexism that compelled her to republish “Little Miss Sophie” in her second collection, *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. In this collection, “Little Miss Sophie” is one in a quatrain of short stories that echo interconnected images of love betrayed, male deception and the church as facilitator.

In *Violets and Other Tales*, Dunbar-Nelson clearly interrogates marriage and romance as failed institutions for women, but the vignettes in this collection do not indict the church with the

clarity and force of the four short stories in *The Goodness of St. Rocque. Violets and Other Tales* includes a number of sketches that highlight themes of lost love and unfulfilled desire, and again, in most of the stories we find that women fare worse in these failed romances. This is clearly the case in the opening story, “Violets,” the tale of a young woman who dies of a broken heart a year after being deceived by her lover. While not a story anchored in the tensions of race or class, “Violets” illustrates Dunbar-Nelson’s critique of romance and the myth of white male chivalry. This she accomplishes through the construction of her characters as white. Ultimately, she dismantles the prototype of the chivalrous and protective white male. In “Violets” this male icon does not exist—not even for the ideal white female heroine. The trusting and virtuous white heroine of this tale has been betrayed and failed by none other than the presumed symbol of male virtue and heroism—that is, the white male lover.

“Violets” opens on Easter Sunday and ends on Easter Sunday a year later. The opening Easter Sunday seems the promise and hope associated with Easter and springtime: “It was Easter evening, and the newly risen spring world was slowly sinking to a gentle, rosy, opalescent slumber, sweetly tired of the joy which had pervaded all day. For in the dawn of the perfect morn, it had arisen, stretched out its arms in glorious happiness to greet the Saviour and said its hallelujahs . . .” (13). This first of a three-part narrative concludes with a love letter obviously written by the heroine to her would-be lover. In the letter she explains the meaning of the mixed bouquet of violets and other flowers that she gives him. She invokes language and imagery that suggest a sacredness in their love that is almost indistinguishable from the love and divineness of Christ. She explains that she finds violets a representation of their love—human-like in their look and holding the depth of thought that passes between them unspoken. This idea of thought beyond words alludes to the biblical passage that refers to a peace beyond words, beyond

comprehension—i.e. “the peace that passeth all understanding.” She concludes the letter telling her lover, “Keep them [the flowers] always in remembrance of me” (15). These words echo Christ’s command at the last supper when he calls on his disciples to eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance of him. Christ promises his disciples that he will be with them, even after death, and Dunbar-Nelson’s heroine makes a similar promise to her lover: “if aught should occur to separate us, press these flowers to your lips, and I will be with you in spirit, permeating your heart with unutterable love and happiness” (15).

Divided into three sections, “Violets” tells a story of betrayal and suffering that likens the depth of the heroine’s suffering to that of the betrayed Christ. This is exemplified in the second section of the story which opens with the announcement that “it is Easter again” and “as of old, the joyous bells clang out the glad news of the resurrection” (15). Cast against this picture of new life and hopefulness is the body of the young heroine who has died of a broken heart. Here, the story reverses the standard tropes of Easter and springtime, giving instead a story of despair and death during Christianity’s season of everlasting life and love. The “sleeping face” of the broken-hearted young lover is “cold, pale, still . . . pressed against the satin-lined casket” (16). Although the narrator concludes this section affirming that the heroine now “kneels at the throne of heaven” (16), the story’s final section leaves a more disturbing picture. In section three, the narrator introduces the deceptive would-be lover denying that he knows the source of the faded violets discovered by his wife. His denial in this third section of the story is reminiscent of Peter’s three denials of Christ when he is interrogated. This lover has not explicitly denied the heroine as Peter directly denies knowing Christ; however, in the first two sections of the story the lover’s absence symbolizes his denial, and in the final third section, his open denial clearly marks his betrayal. Perhaps he feels some momentary guilt—this possibility is suggested in the

story's closing lines. The wife has demanded that he throw the flowers into the burning fireplace and as the flowers disappear into the flame, she wonders whether she has observed her husband "sigh,--a long, quivering breath of remembrance" (17). The lover's possible moment of remembrance seems inconsequential to the fate and the substance of the heroine's life. While her betrayal has been paralleled to that of Christ, the story offers no promise of a vindicated hereafter nor does it suggest a life sacrificed to affect good for others. Rather, the story suggests a life ruined and wasted.

"Violets" is a story of love betrayed, and the story seems to simply retell the age-old romance tale of the innocent victim falling prey to the untrustworthy lover. The religious allusions in this story do not seem especially critical of Christianity or the Church. This is not the case, however, when we consider the quatrain of short stories in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* that interweave romantic betrayal and religious complicity. Again, these four stories, "Tony's Wife," "Little Miss Sophie," "Sister Josepha," and "Odalie," suggest that failed romance is connected less to chance or individual failure, and more to a social and economic system that leaves woman the more vulnerable party in romantic encounters. This female vulnerability is then anchored in the church—an institution that maintains female subjugation and leaves woman at the mercy of man's arbitrary will and desire. This subjection of woman's fate to patriarchy and the church is drawn most poignantly in the story, "Tony's Wife."

In "Tony's Wife" Dunbar-Nelson again explores the church's facilitation of unchecked male corruption, and she maintains the failed white male protagonist as embodiment of this system. "Tony's Wife" is a rather straight-forward narrative that tells the story of a poor German immigrant woman who is the common law wife of an Italian immigrant. Tony is Herculean in stature, dominating and intimidating; his wife, Mary, on the other hand, is "meek, pale, little,

ugly, and German” (23). The two operate a somewhat lowly food shop in a neighborhood of would-be rising upstarts. Tony treats his wife cruelly, and she lives in constant fear of his violent rages. When Tony becomes sick with gout, Mary finds that life with him becomes less horrific. During his bouts with illness Tony does not have the strength to beat his wife as he does customarily when healthy. As years past, Tony’s illness becomes more grave. His physical state becomes consistent with his moral state. The doctor explains to Mary that ““he is completely burned out inside. . . empty as a shell” (26).

News of Tony’s grave prognosis brings a sparkle of hope to his wife. But this ray of hope is dimmed with the arrival of Tony’s brother and Tony’s refusal to legitimate his common law relationship with Mary. Tony’s brother makes clear that he will take possession of Tony’s shop and possessions at the time of Tony’s death. Even with the entreaty of the priest, Tony refuses to marry Mary and offers her no protection or provision. He finds satisfaction “at the prospect of her bereaved misery” (32). Despite his malevolence, Tony is glorified in death: while he will not allow his wife the benefit of the rite of marriage, Tony is awarded a church burial and “many honours by the Society of Italia’s Sons” (33). As for Mary, “since she was not his wife after all, they sent her forth in the world penniless” (33). Tony’s ill treatment of Mary may have much to do with a sense of ethnic superiority on his part. He harbors a deep disdain for Mary, and with their similar disregard for her, it is a disdain echoed by his brother and his ethnic fellows of the “Society of Italia’s Sons.” They are immigrants from an ethnic group commonly represented as devout Catholics; however, as they emerge into white identity in the American South, these new Americans demonstrate behavior exemplary of their “native” white male counterparts in successive tales of broken romance in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*.

In “Little Miss Sophie” Dunbar-Nelson portrays a heroine whose victimization, like that of Tony’s common law wife, is rooted in social and economic destitution that is facilitated by the church. The story opens with Miss Sophie “alone, crouching in a little, forsaken, black heap at the altar of the Virgin” (137). Throughout the story, the narrator presents this contrasting image of the broken and frail Miss Sophie cast against the persevering and smiling Virgin Mary. Miss Sophie’s broken image is not simply the result of her broken spirit; she is also clearly broken by poverty and social isolation. The narrator makes this apparent early in the story with the description of Miss Sophie’s living conditions: she lives in a “miserable little room in a miserable little cottage in one of the squalid streets of the Third District that nature and the city fathers seemed to have forgotten” (138). The narrator adds, “as bare and comfortless the room, so was Miss Sophie’s lonely life” (138). Miss Sophie is not an anomaly, but rather the example of a type. She is one among many “frail, little, black-robed women with big, black bundles” that they deliver across the city (143). The narrator considers it “one of the city’s most pitiful sights” (143). She lives in poverty, supporting herself with her sewing, but we learn later that Miss Sophie was not always a poor recluse. With the betrayal of her lover and the death of her father, Miss Sophie was left to make her own way, and sewing is not a means of comfortable economic sustenance.

In her impoverished condition, Miss Sophie is sustained by her regular prayer vigils at the Jesuit Church; here she stops in “to say her little prayer at the altar of the calm, white Virgin” (139). Later as she works herself into physical weariness to make the money to restore the ring to her former lover, she is strengthened by her daily visits to “the sweet white Virgin in the flowered niche above the gold-domed altar” (148). Miss Sophie finds herself in the midst of a self-imposed cycle of increased labor after overhearing a conversation during one of her daily



bus rides. On this particular day, she overhears two men talking about a mutual friend, Neale, who has met with recent hardships: his business has failed and his inheritance from an uncle is now uncertain as he is unable to come forward with a necessary family heirloom, a particular ring that was to confirm his identity as heir. It seems that in one of his many flings with young Creole girls, Neale thoughtlessly gave the young woman this ring. Although he needs the ring to claim his inheritance and assume the role of provider with his new bride, he cannot bring himself to face the poor Creole who, five years earlier, had taken his advances seriously. Miss Sophie recognizes that she is the young Creole subject of this conversation, that she is “the dusky-eyed fiancée” that Neale had wooed and abandoned in a month’s time (147).

In the description of Miss Sophie as dusky-eyed, the men reveal her racial identity: “To any reader knowledgeable about New Orleans culture, the words dusky-eyed would signify that Sophie was a quadroon” (Bryan 126). Her relationship with Neale further signals a custom common to New Orleans society dating back to the antebellum era. Her earlier expectations of Neale were rooted in the placage arrangement in New Orleans society, “whereby a white man had a liaison with a woman of color, set her up in an apartment or house, and provided for the children of their union, while also legally marrying a white woman and having a ‘legitimate’ family” (Bryan 126). Although Neale fails in his role regarding this custom, Miss Sophie remains loyal to him. She decides that she must retrieve the ring out of pawn and return it to Neale as a gift, thereby sparing his pride and returning him to good fortune. To determine how she should proceed, Miss Sophie goes to the church to the altar of the Virgin. In the aftermath of this discovery and her visit to the altar, Miss Sophie works with great fervor to earn the necessary money to offer the ring as a present to Neale on Christmas Day. The work takes a clear toll on her health: “The bundle grew larger each day, and Miss Sophie grew smaller. The

damp, cold rain and mist closed the white-curtained window, but always there behind the sewing-machine drooped and bobbed the little black-robed figure” (148).

Her neighbors notice the increased sewing bundles that she now regularly sets out to deliver, and they also notice that these long hours are not supplemented with sufficient meals. They decide that she is “starving herself to death to get some luckless relative out of jail for Christmas”(149). This rumor leaves Miss Sophie as a saint-like figure in the eyes of her neighbors who see her worn little body enveloped “with a kind of halo” (149). Finally, on Christmas Eve Miss Sophie retrieves the ring, and she is elated at the thought that she possesses something that is so dear to her lost love. She plans to deliver it to Neale on Christmas Day, but for one night she will hold the ring near and cherish it. Though it is the ring that Miss Sophie physically holds and speaks to, in her mind the ring has been transformed into her lover. She then speaks to the ring the words of affection that she would otherwise have spoken to Neale: ““Dear ring, ma chere petite de ma Coeur, cherie de ma coeur”” (151). Miss Sophie has her one final night with her love, and on Christmas Day the landlady and her son, Titiche, discover Miss Sophie’s dead body. They find the note Miss Sophie has left for Neale explaining that she is returning the ring, and they find the ring “clasped between her fingers on her bosom,—a bosom white and cold, under a cold happy face” (152). In death, the once “dusky-eyed” Miss Sophie (145) is transformed from her Creole/colored visage to the likeness of the white Virgin. The narrative concludes with the observation that “Christmas had indeed dawned for Miss Sophie” (152). In life, Miss Sophie was a “dusky Creole”; in death, she is transformed to the likeness of the Virgin—white and pure.

Miss Sophie’s sacrificial act, her death at Christmas and her smiling image in death after such suffering, likens her to martyrdom. Again, it seems the common romance tale of the

betrayed lover depicted as saintly figure. There is clearly this element to the story; however, Dunbar-Nelson takes the narrative beyond this trope. Miss Sophie's plight is more than that of the scorned and dejected lover. Having been rejected by her would-be lover, Miss Sophie, just as the heroine in "Tony's Wife," becomes a social outcast and one among the economically downtrodden. Here Dunbar-Nelson underscores turn-of-the-century paradigms of marriage and male-female relationships that oftentimes leave women systematic outcasts, particularly Creole women of color in New Orleans society. Thus, Neale's betrayal of the young Miss Sophie is more than just romantic dishonesty.

Having had his fling and having cast her aside, he has left her a spoiled commodity. Neale has traded his ring for Miss Sophie's virtue. It is a trade that would have resulted in marriage with a more honorable man, but Neale's intentions regarding Miss Sophie were never honorable. Miss Sophie is left without her virtue, and she is no longer marketable for marriage. The image of a destitute Miss Sophie cast against that of the unrepentant, unaffected Neale, underscores Dunbar-Nelson's critique of the symbolic white male protector. In the end, "Miss Sophie's sacrifice reveals Neale's moral failings and consequently the hypocrisies of a society that disguises difference within false images of moral and racial 'purity'" (Stouck 279). Miss Sophie is the product of the unspeakable racial legacy of the South and America in general—a legacy of rape and exploitation enacted by the very icons of American righteousness. America's emergence was shaped by a rhetoric that hailed the nation as respectful and protective of human dignity and rights. Slaves and Native Americans were outcasts in this noble vision, and whiteness, particularly in the form of white maleness, was the face of America's presumed moral superiority. Despite the reality of a mixed race slave population that was primarily the result of white male sexual exploitation, America's paradigm of whiteness as the embodiment of

goodness and superiority would prevail. In “Little Miss Sophie,” however, Dunbar-Nelson challenges this paradigm and suggests that it is the darker America that holds in earnest America’s claims of honor and moral superiority. Through Neale, she suggests that, in turn-of-the-century New Orleans, white male identity represents a claim of morality that undergirds systematic disregard of the colored “other”: “Far from protector, Neale represents heartless, white male dishonor. Sophie, on the other hand, is invested with Creole honor and dignity:” . . . In ‘Little Miss Sophie,’ whiteness and maleness are the culprits” (Menke 83).

In turn-of-the-century American culture, women still faced limited employment options; marriage still reigned as the ideal social and economic alternative for women—this was particularly the case for middle and upper-class women. As Dunbar-Nelson notes in the fictional sketch, “The Woman,” this was a time that required explanation for woman as professional. Despite the reality of masses of lower income working women across racial and ethnic lines—black domestics and field laborers, low-wage immigrant workers and poor white factory workers, for example—the nineteenth-century paradigm of ideal womanhood remained. Many women were in the workforce and living in poverty, but in literature and media, woman as keeper of the hearth remained the ideal of woman’s role and her place. The realization of this ideal depended on whether a woman could secure a husband with the means to maintain her as homemaker. In “Little Miss Sophie” marriage to Neale would have secured Miss Sophie into this cultural niche. However, abandoned by Neale and subsequently left alone with the death of her father, Miss Sophie has no viable economic resources to secure the ideal of middle or upper-class womanhood. Miss Sophie has no male provider or protector: she resorts to sewing, which provides meager economic means, and she makes her regular vigils to the altar of the Virgin for guidance and security.

A poor working class seamstress, Miss Sophie lives in poverty, seeking solace from the church. It is perhaps ironic that having been misled into relinquishing her virginity, Miss Sophie now seeks redemption at the altar of the divine Virgin. Her regular trips to the altar in the Jesuit Church serve as her only personal outlet. Even in the church, she assumes the role of outsider. Her trips to the church are not for regular communal ceremonies, but rather for private consultations with the Virgin. She is a shadowy figure, unwelcomed in the daylight world of the church. She has no meaningful social interaction with members of the community where she resides. When she learns of her ex-lover's plight, she has no confidant with whom she can confide. To determine what course she should take, Miss Sophie rushes to the altar of the Virgin, and this icon of the church inspires her to sacrifice herself once again for Neale.

Miss Sophie's indiscretion, that is, her affair with Neale, leaves her an outcast. In contrast, Neale suffers no public alienation for his indiscretion and deception. The loss of the ring might have served as punishment for Neale's reckless treatment of his trusting lover. However, with her divine instruction to Miss Sophie, the Virgin, as arbiter of the church, spares Neale the economic hardship and public humiliation that awaited him with the loss of the ring. Neale has sinned, but he will know marital bliss—the church has sanctioned his union with his white bride. The security of this sacred rite has been made possible by Miss Sophie's sacrifice—again, a sacrifice inspired by the smiling Virgin.

The church will again play prominently in the heroines' alienation in "Sister Josepha" and "Odalie." However, unlike the young Miss Sophie whose destitution results after she has been cast aside by her lover, Josepha and Odalie retreat to the convent before they become victims. Orphaned at age three, Josepha, then Camille, grew up a child of the convent. Josepha perceives the ill intentions of the husbands who accompany their wives to the orphanage

ostensibly looking to offer some poor young orphan girl a home. When the Mother Superior chides the teenaged Camille for rejecting the latest offer from a seemingly loving couple, she explains her apprehension: ““I could not help it, but that man looked at me so funny, I felt all cold chills down my back’” (161). She knows that men like these are not looking for daughters, but rather sexual prey. This alarming attention leads Camille to assert her desire to become a nun, so that she can stay in the convent. She takes on the name Josepha and prepares for the day of her ordination. Despite her fear of the outside world, Josepha longs to leave the convent walls: she grows tired of the mundane, lifeless existence there. She is prepared to escape until she overhears Sister Dominica explain to another nun that despite Josepha’s melancholy, it would be difficult for her in the outside world, “with no name but Camille, no friends, and her beauty” (163).

Hearing this, Josepha is reminded that she has no identity, no nationality, no connection to anyone outside the convent. While she finds the convent a “home of self-repression and retrospection,” offering only a “torturing life of inertia,” she has no where else to go (168, 169). It is Josepha’s ambiguous racial identity that threatens her safety even more in the outside world. Just as Dunbar-Nelson does not openly reveal Miss Sophie’s racial identity, she does not tell the reader that Josepha is Creole. Rather, she again discloses this significant information through coded language: “With a fleeting reference to Sister Josepha’s ‘small brown hands,’ Dunbar-Nelson indicates to the perceptive—and mainly local—reader that the protagonist of her story is a Creole of color” (Brooks 10). Knowing that Josepha is a Creole of color, readers better understand her decision to remain in the convent. At the turn of the century, single women dwelling in cities often faced harsh economic and social circumstances. In New Orleans this risk could be amplified for female creoles of color who often found themselves the prey of white men

seeking placage partners. Josepha and the nuns understand how readily this might be her fate if she leaves the convent.

The church becomes then the paradoxical institution of refuge and repression. Josepha's fate is sealed: over time life in the convent will draw the youthful life and vitality from Josepha, and she will become part of the morbid landscape of the convent that she so dreads. This will also prove the fate of the young Odalie. In "Odalie," the heroine—whose name also serves as the story's title—is raised in a sheltered environment by her father and aunt. Her father is determined that she will not be spoiled by any hawkish suitor; thus, he keeps her "in convent-like seclusion" (184). Her aunt dutifully marches her weekly to the Cathedral for Sunday mass, unaware of the affectionate glances exchanged between Odalie and her would-be suitor, Pierre. The two flirt discretely at church, escaping detection by the watchful aunt. This bliss is interrupted on a Mardi Gras eve when Odalie discovers Pierre with his arms wrapped around the waist of a young female reveler. Odalie is heartbroken, for "you see, when one is shut up in the grim walls of a Royal Street house, with no one but a Tante Louise and a grim judge, how is one to know that in this world there are faithless ones who may glance tenderly into one's eyes at mass and pass the holy water on caressing fingers without being madly in love?" (190).

While Odalie has deceived her father and aunt, she nevertheless believes that given the sacredness of the church and the Sunday ritual, the affection of her young lover must be genuine. She has been deceived in the holiest of places in the act of one of the holiest of rituals. In her disappointment, Odalie then reflected on these events during the holiest of religious seasons: "she sat at home in the dull first days of Lent and nursed her dear dead love, and mourned as women have done from time immemorial over the faithlessness of man" (190). In this tale, Dunbar-Nelson again draws on Easter symbolism to represent female suffering. In "Violets" the

story unfolds through the backdrop of the final three days of the Easter season, likening the heroine's suffering to that of the sacrificed Christ. For Odalie, the story's climax occurs through the backdrop of Lent, a period of religious sacrifice and reflection. Lent is a reminder to Christians of Christ's journey in the desert for 40 days and his triumphant emergence when this period of temptation and suffering ends. Odalie will not emerge triumphant, however. At the conclusion of Lent Odalie, unlike Christ who emerges out of the desert to take on the challenge of the world, does not emerge but rather retreats to the seclusion of a convent. Just as Josepha, Odalie responds to the threat of male deception and manipulation by escaping. Ironically again, while the church serves as an institution and edifice sanctioning the very male dominance they fear, it is the church to which these young heroines will flee.

With her depictions of Josepha and Odalie, as well as Miss Sophie and Tony's wife, Dunbar-Nelson weaves inextricable connections between unanswered female desire and white male authority. Again, it is in the fictional dialog sketch, "The Woman," in her first published collection, *Violets*, that Dunbar-Nelson more clearly wrestles with the question of woman's desire for independence and escape from domesticity. In the four short story sketches from the *Goodness of St. Rocque*, Dunbar-Nelson's heroines do not resist their prescribed gender role and place. Unlike the narrator in "The Woman," these heroines represent the more common nineteenth-century icon of the domestic female ripe for a male protector and provider. The failure of the men in these sketches suggest, however, that not only can woman not enjoy the worldly independence of man, but too often she is unable to bring to fruition those presumed innate desires of female domesticity.

Through her short fiction heroines, Dunbar-Nelson explores the shifting social world in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. She portrays a place where both secular and sacred structures



leave women—even white women-- subject to the arbitrary, self-interested will of white male rule. These stories challenge prevailing sentimental and romantic depictions of the heroic white male, particularly the self-generated myth of the honor-driven white southern male. This myth becomes especially perpetuated at the turn of the century with the rise of lynchings. In the south, lynchings were often justified with the explanation that the post-emancipation era had resulted in the unleashing of black male brutes, who now, combed the countryside unchecked by law, free to sexually assault white women. With this threat on white female chastity, those who justified the heinous and brutal lynchings of black men throughout the south ritually explained their acts as chivalrous. With this argument, lynching was simply an expedient means for white men to restore order in the south and to protect white women. In Dunbar-Nelson's sketches, white women and near-white women find themselves threatened, but not by a black male presence. The conspicuous absence of clearly distinguishable black characters paves the way for her conspicuous critique of the self-proclaimed white male hero. The absence of black male characters in the tales eliminates the chance that the reader might vilify black manhood. The absence of clearly distinguishable black female characters eliminates the possibility that readers might see the stories of love and scorn as mere examples of the black jezebel<sup>3</sup>. With their white or near-white heroines and their white male villains, these stories highlight the white male—not the newly freed black man—as the striking and immediate threat to white female virtue in the south.

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<sup>3</sup> The jezebel figure was a trope often employed in post-war racist discourse to explain the significant numbers of white men in the south who maintained sexual liaisons with black women. These indiscretions were said to be the result of sexually permissive black women who were in constant pursuit of white men. The relationships were then the result of white men submitting out of weakness but not because the relationship had been initiated by them.

In the gendered, Catholic-centered New Orleans in which they reside, Dunbar-Nelson's heroines cannot find material or physical security. They are betrayed by their white male lovers, leaving them alone or with the prospect of being alone outside the domestic world where they belong. For Miss Sophie, Mary, Josepha and Odalie, the church has proved central to their victimization. Through divine instruction Miss Sophie sacrifices herself in the interest of the lover who betrayed her, leaving her destitute and alienated. Miss Sophie exemplifies the economic destitution of women who must go out into the world to take care of themselves. Paradoxically, however, domestic space can prove no less harrowing for women. This Dunbar-Nelson illustrates through the household headed by the tyrant, Tony, and his ill-used wife. Mary lives in constant fear of Tony, even though he provides the means that keep her from having to make her own way in the streets of New Orleans. This provision ends, however, with Tony's death: church law, like secular law does not recognize common law marriage. Josepha and Odalie avoid a tragic death like Miss Sophie's, and they escape the horror of being turned out in the streets of New Orleans like Mary. However, they escape these horrible fates only by submitting to a fate whose horror is only less by degrees. At the height of their young lives, Josepha and Odalie turn away from the outside world and submit themselves to a life of isolation and misery. Josepha recognizes the likelihood that outside the convent she might fall prey to one of the many white men in New Orleans who establish unsanctioned relationships with Creole women. After being deceived by her lover over the holiest of sacraments, Odalie decides that the outside world is much too dangerous. Both women give their young lives to the church, ironically in exchange for protection from the practices that the church itself sanctions. As a narrative montage of late nineteenth-century New Orleans, "Little Miss Sophie," "Tony's Wife," "Josepha," and "Odalie" paint a world of overriding uncertainty and deception for

women. At the heart of this uncertainty is not some outside force, but rather forces rooted in the history and culture of New Orleans. The church and a prevailing white male hegemony facilitate not only the repression of female desire for extra-domestic experience, but ironically repression of female desire for domesticity. In this narrative montage, Dunbar-Nelson's white male villains undermine the myth of white southern honor: instead of protecting white female virtue white men are themselves the most immediate threat to white female virtue and domesticity.

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