

“Passing” Novels: An Examination into the Psychological and Emotional

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HONR248T: Reexamination of the Harlem Renaissance

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May 1, 2014

The '*tragic mulatta*' has been a symbol created by the collision of the black and white races since the beginning of their proximate relationship together. Conceived as a trope in literature, she has been mythicized and exoticized so much that we have forgotten that she is a real person. The idea that the *mulatta* is silly, overcome by the tragedy of her split identity that she simply cannot function, reduces real life individuals with mixed race heritage to a set of stereotypes. However, the triple burden of social constructions (race, gender, and class) created psychological turmoil and real difficulties within *mulattas* that are not as unfounded as once believed. Several "New Negro" women writers of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance attempted to create novels that portray 'passing' women in a way that carves out some humanity for them as well as highlighted the realities of being a black woman. However, most of these writers failed and the idea of the *tragic mulatta* persisted. In this paper, I will look at two of the most renowned passing novels: *Passing* by Nella Larsen and *Plum Bun* by Jessie Fauset. With the burdens of the three social constructions in mind, I will examine and evaluate how effective each authors' attempt was at bringing the *mulatta* to a human level.

Passing by Nella Larsen and *Plum Bun* by Jessie Fauset are two of the most prominent novels that attempt to subvert the *mulatta* image as well as to a larger extent, the stereotypes of black women. During the 1920s, women received college educations and had reached a point where they decided to write about themselves to "raise their voices to question the dominant racial *and* sexual order and to suggest alternative definitions of black female identity."¹ There was much incentive for them to tell what they perceived as the truth of the black woman's reality. However, as notable as these attempts are, they ultimately failed in bringing humanity to the *mulatta*. The fault was not all theirs, for their goal was very ambitious. In the structure of a

¹ Mar Gallego, *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003), 121.

novel, the character is faced with a challenge or obstacle that she must overcome to bring about resolution at the end of the novel which is infinitely easier if a character's problems are easy to solve or her environment allows her the room to grow. However, "the more deterministic the context in which the character operates, the more conflicted the realism becomes and the more narratologically clever the author must be in order to create a sense of self-definition and self-determination for the character."² Those three constructs boxed black women in; as characters, their settings are largely deterministic for little to no part of their lives appears to be under their control. They are generally powerless to overcome their race, gender, and social class, which in their cases, the environment becomes the obstacle. Steven Belluscio highlights the specific difficulties of resolving texts about black women, noting that "the complicating factor of female gender... when coupled with perceived and/or psychologically experienced "blackness," creates the unique set of deterministic circumstances that the logic of social realism seems no longer adequate to encompass."³

Many a history buff would be surprised by the faultful character Angela within Fauset's *Plum Bun*. Jessie Fauset was part of the "Six". She was the literary editor of *The Crisis* and was the literary midwife of many Harlem Renaissance poets and authors, notably Langston Hughes. Despite her considerable professional success for a woman, Fauset didn't consider herself to have succeeded in life. After her time as the editor of *The Crisis*, she had no other job options except to teach; "even with her degrees from Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, she had no other options."⁴ Fauset was one of the clearest examples of gender barriers at work. Her

² Steven J. Belluscio, *To be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁴ Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 35.

achievements meant nothing to others and proved useless for advancing herself. She was forced through her life experiences to view marriage as the only true option for a woman and her happiness. Fauset did not get married until age forty seven which heavily hints at a marriage for security than any marriage for love. Cheryl Wall believes that “after attaining a breadth of experience that her heroine craved and achieving a level of success far beyond that which she could realistically invent for any of her characters, Jessie Fauset might have sought for herself a little redoubt of refuge from the world.”⁵ Her story resounds of a strong woman whose ideals and ambitions were crushed and to whom the social barriers remolded into a passive receiver of all the world’s actions unto her.

Fauset imbued in her Angela, main character, a drive to find a husband as way to secure her happiness. In this *bildungsroman*, Angela left her home to be free from perceived shackled life to find her future in New York City. She longed to “live... on the crest of a wave of excitement and satisfaction which would never wane” as “free, white and twenty-one.”⁶ But not long after she entered the city, she fell prey to the enticing trap of marriage and forgot all her goals; “Forgotten were her ideals about her Art, her ambition to hold a salon, her desire to help other people.”⁷ She gave up the “sexual and social emancipation of the new woman [and] place[d] herself on the market, therefore ceding her authority as a consumer artist to that of a submissive romantic.”⁸ It appears that Fauset wanted for Angela to have some semblance of a happy ending when she was reunited with Anthony, a classmate from her Cooper Union art classes, in the last few pages of the novel, however the whole concept of love is poorly rendered

⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁶ Jessie R. Fauset, “Plum Bun” in *Harlem Renaissance: Five Novels of the 1920s*, ed. by Rafia Zafar (New York: Library of America, 2011), 487.

⁷ Ibid., 366.

⁸ Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 50.

throughout the whole novel. Even though Angela ended up with Anthony in the end of the novel, she did not appear to harbor genuine feelings of love toward him. Thoughts of Anthony came with thoughts of his dire economic status; “she wanted none of Anthony’s poverty and privation and secret vows.”⁹ He eventually carried meaning in the story for Angela because she thought of him as a symbol of the nobler ideals that she came to the city with but quickly shed, such as the passion to make art and the ability to “be her true self” whenever she wanted to.¹⁰ She cast Anthony aside for a considerable amount of time as she filled her head with adolescent-esque fantasies of love and created expectations that she may win the wealthy white Roger even though even most white girls had no chance of marrying him.

It was when she was abandoned by Roger, that her desperation became apparent as well as her shameless desire to obtain material security in an attempt to fill an emotional gap. In not just a passing thought, but a concerted soliloquy, she desperately tried to find a suitable partner, saying ““there must be someone else.””¹¹ Once her thoughts fell to Anthony, she immediately overeagerly convinced herself that there was love. She said to herself ““Anthony loves me, I know of it. Think of it, he loves me!””¹² Once she decided on her future husband, her next thoughts immediately went to his ability to provide for her; “There were many things to be considered. His poverty... she would do no washing and ironing, she would keep herself dainty and unworn.”¹³ There is scant evidence of true compassion and concern for Anthony; her desires to find a marriage are all selfish. Fauset also attempted to neatly couple Jinny and Matthew together. After approximately ninety pages of heartache that Angela experienced with Roger,

⁹ Fauset, “Plum Bun” in *Harlem Renaissance*, 525.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 527.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 605.

¹² *Ibid.*, 606.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Fauset still finds it logical to write that Matthew would suddenly love Jinny the way she wanted him to after clearly liking Angela his whole life. This simple arrangement at the end appears poorly thought out, as if Fauset's desire was to end the story as quickly as possible rather than figure out a true love dynamic to write about.

Fauset tried to tie the longstanding presence of race and color throughout all of Angela's experiences in the city. She tried to contrast Angela's safe black middle class hometown with the big scary white world. Gallego argues that "Fauset exalt[ed] African American virtues over the moral corruption and materialism characteristic of white culture,"¹⁴ however this statement is too riddled with stereotypes to pose a valid claim. Angela moved from a suburban town to a city. By the nature of her landscape, Angela would have felt radically misplaced. Cities naturally have more material characteristics, with the "jostling shops, the hurrying, pushing people... [who] liv[ed] at a sharper pitch of intensity than those ... in Philadelphia."¹⁵ In the novel, the city has little to do with transcending racial worlds because even "the few coloured people whom she saw were different too."¹⁶ To stereotype the wide white world as cruel and harsh is as hypocritical because then Fauset too stereotyped the white community in the same way the black community was stereotyped. The motive for Fauset's writing of novels was supposedly to denounce the falsely held assumptions about women and blacks, however her bigotry towards the white community detracts from her intended message. Angela's woes were ones of a young girl who grows up. "She was like any one of a thousand other pitiful, frightened girls thronging New York,"¹⁷ this depiction speaks to the frightening new reality that faces small town girls who suddenly must adjust to the city. It speaks nothing about how race was a factor in that

¹⁴Gallego, *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance*, 163.

¹⁵ Fauset, "Plum Bun" in *Harlem Renaissance*, 487.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 587.

experience. However, because of her positionality as a *mulatta*, the problems Angela faced are automatically assumed to be *mulatta* problems when they are actually ones of little girls growing up. It draws a wider conclusion that that *mulattas* mainly struggle with disillusioned love and surviving in a tougher world. It relegates *mulattas* to the same infantile image as before, for they are never portrayed as having a more mature sense of self.

Unlike Fauset, Nella Larsen was actually a *mulatta*. Her past is shrouded in mystery; very little was known about Larsen's past except for what Larsen herself claimed was the truth.¹⁸ She was born out of the "most-detested union in American society, a white mother and a black father."¹⁹ Throughout her whole childhood, she encountered alienation and ostracization from her German and Scandinavian schoolmates.²⁰ Her experience did not change even when she went to Fisk University, one of the most prestigious Black institutions at the time. However, "Larsen felt no more at home in the black bourgeois environment of Fisk than she had in her white working-class neighborhoods."²¹ Her upbringing resulted in the firm belief that *mulattas* could not belong in either black or white communities, which was reflected through Clare who left her black neighborhood to move into the white upper-class circles yet still felt displaced regardless of where she was. Unlike Fauset who was proud of the middle-class blacks and touted them in *Plum Bun*, Larsen's status as an outsider allowed her to become aware of the "limitations, of the hypocrisy and materialism that too often masked insecurity and self-hatred."²² She bypassed Fauset's mistake of portraying black bourgeois society as an oasis for the *mulatta*.

¹⁸ Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, 91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²² *Ibid.*, 117.

Larsen did more than create characters who fumbled through life. Her characters Irene and Clare were the vehicles through which she explored and expanded the images of black women and *mulattas*. The use of two *mulatta* main characters already speaks volumes to the fact that there is not just one type of *mulatta*; Just as it is for people of any race, skin color does not automatically subscribe a fixed set of personalities with no variation. Larsen however, did not fashion her characters as people, but as larger-than-life personalities that heavily contrast in an unrealistic way as to convey her views on *mulattas* and to a largest extent, black women. Irene and Clare stand on opposite sides of the virgin-prostitute dichotomy which allows readers to understand that it is better to behave moderately within these two spectrums rather than get trapped among the “suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other.”²³ Although Larsen’s efforts were notable, she left room for misunderstanding by the reader. Instead of perceiving the two female characters as symbols or icons of womanhood, the readers may misinterpret Larsen’s intention and believe that *mulattas* are truly wildly dramatic and volatile.

While Irene represents the *mulatta* who chooses to function within her social constructions, Clare is Larsen’s depiction of a women who has defied every single social barrier. The implications Clare brings to the novel are earth-shattering. According to Martha Cutter, “in a world of fixed identities, Clare is such a powerful presence because she denies all the boundaries that the other characters work so hard to establish and maintain; she denies divisions of race, class, and even sexuality.”²⁴ Among Irene’s feelings about Clare, fear and suspicion were the main descriptors. Clare essentially shattered the walls from which Irene has built her identity on.

²³ Ibid., 89.

²⁴ Martha J. Cutter, “Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen’s Fiction” in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. by Elaine K. Ginsberg (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1996), 89.

Clare's presence created the statement that none of the social constructions had to be real, which led to the terrifying question of "What is real? What part of identity is concrete?" Clare not only shook Irene's reality, she also threatened it by providing a sharp contrast that allowed the flaws of the typical middle-class black woman's life to come to light. According to Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, "Clare act[ed] as a mirror that illuminate[d] the cracks in Irene's manufactured marriage and social position by reflecting her suppressed desires."²⁵ All the inconsistencies of living the 'ideal life' are highlighted through the constant interactions of the polar opposite characters. Larsen emphasized the free will of *mulattas* by having Clare make her own choice to pass for her own motives, however materialistic they may be. In the past, the perception of *mulattas* had always been within the control of either blacks or whites but never with the *mulatta* herself. Larsen provided a much needed example of "a woman who makes a conscious decision to pass based on her desire for economical security and comfort as opposed to one who simply falls victim to the unfolding of inevitable biological events."²⁶

However, Clare is not a perfect woman who owns her path to freedom. Clare is portrayed as a flawed individual just as Irene is, simply because freedom for a *mulatta* was not an envisionable reality even to Larsen. Even though Clare had gained physical freedoms by passing, she became emotionally lost because she had dissolved any roots or security she ever possessed. That is why she desperately told Irene, "'you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh', [speaking with] something groping, and hopeless, and yet so absolutely determined that it was like an image of the futile searching."²⁷ The potential reality of a *mulatta* to ultimately belong to nothing and nowhere brought about a

²⁵ Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman*, 38.

²⁶ Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 96.

²⁷ Larsen, "Passing" in *Passing*, 51.

crippling fear that led Clare running back to reconnect with the black community. As faultful as her pristine middle-class structured life proved to be, Irene avoided that sense of self-loss. “The answer to Clare’s question of ‘why more coloured girls’ like Irene never pass is that Irene ultimately prefer[red] the perceived safety of her position as a race woman”²⁸; by staying within her social boundaries, Irene never had to question where she must go or what she must do. She did not suffer from a lack of stability, for that is the price of the *mulatta* who does try to surpass all the barriers. Ultimately, Larsen’s *mulattas* failed in their goal to find freedom. Larsen chose to end the novel by having Clare die without truly resolving her conflicts. The scene where her husband John Bellew found her spending time with black people is not only representative of the possibility of *mulattas* getting caught passing but also the possibility of *mulattas* getting caught trying to push past all the barriers society enforces onto them. Once again, Larsen did not write that ending because she did not believe in the inherent ability of *mulattas* to become more than their stereotype, but she saw no hope in the current society to allow the *mulatta* to flourish. Thus, *Passing* becomes another example of *mulattas* failing and dying rather than succeeding and paving the path for other *mulattas*.

Although both novels failed to provide a positive model for *mulattas* to navigate their journey, *Passing* was more effective than *Plum Bun* in broadening the scope and possibilities for black women and *mulattas*. It is true that Fauset’s characters and scenarios are physically more relatable to readers, while the dramatics of Larsen’s situations read more as tall tales. However, when considering the genre of the “African American women’s passing narrative where the logic of literary realism is stretched to the breaking point, ... in order for the author to create the obligatory sense of free will required by literary realism, but otherwise impossible in the ‘real

²⁸ Sherrard-Johnson, *Portrait of the New Negro Woman*, 37.

world,' she must render the character unknowable according to the conventional logic of the 'real world.'"²⁹ In the pursuit of creating that sense of free will, Larsen's characters are more suitable to face those more abstract social concepts. Although I have critiqued both novels' endings, Larsen's decision to have no resolution provided that option for *mulattas*; "More free of the realist's burden to create self-consistent, well-made fiction, Larsen le[ft] African American female identity an open question, making use of both the modernist's sense of subjective fragmentation and, arguably, the postmodernist's sense of the self as forever in process."³⁰ Although an untied ending, Larsen left questions open that ultimately inspire more thought in order to find the answers. Fauset's ending feels fabricated, as if Angela *had* to secure a mate and *had* to fulfill her dream by travelling to Paris to study art. Even though her whole novel was meant to highlight the realities of the black woman, such a happy ending, at least at that time period, is not realistic. Her message is diluted from the poor quality of her fiction.

The age of the characters provides much of the difference in the body of the story and ultimately, in the types of *mulattas* that are portrayed. *Plum Bun* is a *bildungsroman* where readers follow Angela from childhood up until young womanhood. *Passing*, on the other hand, is about two full grown women who are functioning in a society bearing all the flaws of a black middle-class woman's life. Angela's problems were a combination of racial, gender, class, and maturity issues. The issues of the social constructions were blended in with the childish problems of an adolescent girl which devalued the struggles that *mulattas* face. Along with the problems of passing and belonging to no race, readers must also read of Angela's extensive but obviously deficient love affair with Roger. It is assumed that as black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, the contemporary readers were well-versed with the human aspects of growing up

²⁹ Belluscio, *To be Suddenly White*, 53-54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

and did not need to be informed of how easy it may be for young girls to be misled by young men. Passing for economic benefits is one of the more obvious but shallower reasons for *mulattas* to pass. Even though Clare and Angela both begin in their stories with the intent of passing because they “want things,”³¹ Clare’s character matured quickly to the realization that material wealth will not give her the emotional closure she craves. Thus, the story of *Passing* was able to progress and explore the other issues plaguing *mulattas*. For Angela, only in the very end of the novel was she able to overcome her fixation with nice things, the “great rewards of life – riches, glamour, pleasure.”³² Fauset led the readers throughout the whole novel on the quest of a young girl whose goal was to stop lusting for material wealth, which unconsciously tied together the superficialness and inherent ungratefulness of Angela as traits of the *mulatta*.

Despite the clear flaws of both Harlem Renaissance works, Larsen and Fauset have become pioneers merely from the act of putting pen to paper and attempting to paint the truth of the real *mulatta*. Because of her positionality, the *mulatta* spends more of her time choosing to fit in one race or the other, or conversely hiding away from the public eye. Finding the *mulatta*’s truth will perhaps be an easier task once *mulattas* accept that they are not only one race but claim their uniqueness and simultaneously own their unique truths.

³¹ Larsen, “Passing” in *Passing*, 19.

³² Fauset, “Plum Bun” in *Harlem Renaissance*, 441.