

## **RACIAL PASSING PRACTICED BY MULATTOES: A NEW HISTORICIST READING OF NELLA LARSEN’S *PASSING* AND JESSIE FAUSET’S *PLUM BUN***

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### **Abstract**

Racial passing practice is the act of passing or disguising as white by mulattoes, and it became a phenomenon during Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance is an era when African American culture related to arts, literature, and music were greatly celebrated. This era can also be said as the most glamorous and happiest moment for African Americans since the antebellum era. Using two of the prominent racial passing narratives during Harlem Renaissance: *Passing* by Nella Larsen and *Plum Bun* by Jessie Fauset, this research aims to find the depiction of racial passing practice in the two narratives in order to get deeper understanding of the issue. This research is under American Studies paradigm of Post-nationalist to take into account the minorities’ perspective in understanding America. The minorities’ perspective in this context is from African American’s mixed raced descents (mulattoes). As the focus of this research is historical phenomenon, this research also applies New Historicism as an approach. Based on the analysis, racial passing practice was a reaction from white’s domination through Jim Crow laws, and African Americans considered racial passing practice as a form of both “fooling the white folks” and a betrayal to their “true people”.

**Keywords:** Racial Passing, Mulattoes, Harlem Renaissance, Jim Crow, New Historicism

### **Introduction**

Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* had long been considered as two of Harlem Renaissance prominent racial passing narratives. The authors were mulatto women who lived during Harlem Renaissance and stayed in Harlem. Both literary works also depict the vibes of the era and racial passing phenomenon clearly. *Passing* tells about a light skinned mulatto woman named Clare Kendry who moves to Chicago and passes as white. She marries a white man, and have a rather fulfil life among the “white folks”. She

never tells her husband and others about her African ancestry until her tragic death. *Plum Bun* tells about a light skinned mulatto woman named Angela Murray who moves to New York. In order to have better job opportunities and be happy, she passes as white. She never tells her white boyfriend and her white friends about her racial status until she “comes home” to her African family.

Most critical analysis on both works have focused on the struggle of African American in getting the acknowledgment from the whites by using their African

Culture and Arts. Many also use feminist perspective either in seeing the limit of identity as an African woman in society or seeing gender and sexuality of the main characters. However, best on the researcher's knowledge, at the time of which this researched is conducted, there is no critical analysis which explore both works using new historicism as an approach yet, to inspect the issue regarding the power relation in society during the era.

Harlem Renaissance is the moment of extraordinary flowering in African-American culture. The Harlem Renaissance spanned from the 1920s until 1930s. Harlem, in New York City, was the principal location or the center of activity associated with the Renaissance (Brown, 2006: 218). This era is said as the flowering of the African American culture because they started to recognize the richness of their African culture and then explored it.

Hakim (2003) explains that during the era, more people in America had more money than ever before, and "hardly anyone seems to worry that some people are being left out of the prosperity boom" (p.264). Most people lived well, particularly in Harlem as the center of the era where all activities occurred. Based on

that prosperity condition, this era then, can be said as the most glamorous and happiest moment for African Americans since the antebellum era.

Harlem Renaissance was not only about having the best moment in the prosperity boom, but was also an important moment and turning point to show the pride in being African American, as according to Hutchinson (2007), also "...the need to disengage from and overcome an old Negro stereotypes" (p.3). During this era, African Americans showed their existence and pride by using their black culture and arts. It was as a way to overcome the negative stereotypes towards them that had been adhered to them for decades.

Unfortunately, aside of being the most glamorous, happiest, and the time in taking pride in their African heritage, Harlem Renaissance was also famous with racial passing practices where many mulattoes decided to pass as whites. Mulatto is a mixed blood (white and black) individual. According to Reuter (1928), the term mulatto includes individual whose parents is black and the other one is white. It is also includes individual whose parents, or both, is of mixed blood (p.1). Mulattoes are born from one of those parents. As their descendants, they usually

have lighter skin than any of the pure Negroes. If both parents were also mulattoes, usually the children's skins would be even lighter.

Belluscio (2006) explains that racial passing involves crossing the boundary that separates usually between the dominant and marginal culture, racial, and/or ethnic groups in which done by the member of either group (p.1). In the context of this research, this practice is about the act of crossing the racial boundaries to be in the dominant race, as seen in the way mulattoes were passing or disguising themselves as whites.

Seeing from the historical perspective, Du Bois (1986) argues that "...the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (p.359). It is because there was a massive migrants of African Americans who moved from the South to the North, beginning in 1890 until 1914. During this period, roughly 500,000 African Americans left their southern homeland (Wintz and Finkelman, 2004: 438). Following the Great Migration, the racial passing practice increased. Historians Thomas and Dorothy Hoobler (2003) record that between 1910 and 1930, more than 1.5 million African Americans moved to the Northern and Western cities (p.139). The migrants were mostly blacks

from the south, as Allyson Hobbs (2014) further emphasizes, it was "blacks with "no connections" and they brought nothing but themselves..." (p.118) to start a new life as whites.

This great migration gives chance for those migrants who happened to be light skinned mulattoes to take the opportunity and pass as whites. They then live in "the other side" and blurred the "color line" or the racial boundaries in society, in which never happened significantly before. Belluscio (2006) argues that "passing has traditionally treated as an exclusively African American phenomenon" (p.1). The sum of this "passers" during the great migration and following through the Harlem Renaissance makes this practice as one of African American phenomena in which would be interesting to study.

### **Methodology**

This research is under American Studies, a discipline which focuses on the study of America from many aspects such as social, cultural, historical, political, economy, literature, popular culture, and many others. Carlos Rowe (2010) mentions that many scholars of American Studies should lead the way in developing new methods of inquiry to be able to see

America in a broader context and to better suited to global condition (p.1). Regarding the Global condition, scholars of American Studies is demanded to create new ways to see America. Nowadays, understanding America is not only from the perspective of European descents or whites (myth and ideals) anymore, but also from the perspective of minority groups. Post-national American Studies is a result of this thinking because it takes into account the minority groups' perspective.

According to Rowe (2002), post-nationalist values the work, from both recent and historical, of "scholars whose concept of the nation and of citizenship has questioned dominant American myths". Post-nationalist also treated racial and ethnic issues as problem specific to the multicultural America (pp. 3; 9). Therefore, this research is under post-nationalist paradigm in American Studies because it deals with the issue in the minority group, in this context is African Americans which includes their mixed-race descendants (mulattoes). The issue is about racial passing practice phenomenon during Harlem Renaissance from the mulattoes' perspective. Accordingly, in *Plum Bun*, Jessie Fauset uses first person point of view from a light skinned mulatto woman who "pass". On the other hand, in

*Passing*, Nella Larsen uses first person point of view from light skinned mulatto who observe the "passing". Both works combined give deeper understanding of this practice during the era.

As the object matter is a historical phenomenon, this research uses new historicism as an approach to gain both the historical and the author's perspective of racial passing practice during Harlem Renaissance. Furthermore, new historicism is not only about using historical context to understand literary works, but also inspecting the power relation within the society, as Mojdegani (2016) describes, using Michael Foucault's work as a starting point, new historicism aims at interpreting literary works as an expression of or reaction to the power relation in the surrounding society. In other words, new historicist seeks to find examples of power within the text, and "power is a means through which the marginalized are controlled, and the thing that the marginalized seek to gain" (p.14).

New historicism is also about looking at "how the text represents power and comparing that to social power at the time a text was written" (Vizan, 2017: 202-203). In that process, historical records are needed greatly. Therefore, as racial passing practice which depicted in the two

narratives is a historical phenomenon, the analysis will relate to the actual events of mulattoes who passed as whites during the era. Lastly, as racial passing is also a reaction of whites' power in controlling African Americans through Jim Crow Laws, the analysis will relate to Michael Foucault's power relation theory.

## Discussion

### The Classification of Mulatto

A Harvard Antropologist, Caroline Bond Day published her master thesis entitled *A Study of Some Negro-White Families* in 1932. She classifies mulatto into three groups: 1. a recessive type, leaning towards the Negro ancestral line; 2. an intermediate type; and 3. a dominant type emphasizing the European characters (Hobbs, 2014: 144-145).

The first group "a recessive type" belong to mulattoes with darker skin. Day describes them as "...leaning towards the Negro ancestral line" because the African traits are more dominant. The second group "the intermediate type" can be said to have both the same amount of blacks and whites' traits. The mulattoes who belong to this type could have brown or tan skin. Both African American and European American traits can be seen clearly. And lastly, "the dominant type"

emphasizing the European characters, refers to mulattoes who have the chance in doing the practice of racial passing because of their light skinned.



Fig. 1. Illustration of three types of mulatto. The dominant type (left), the recessive type (middle), the intermediate type (right).

<https://cdn.brainpop.com/artsandmusic/musicalgenres/harlemrenaissance/screenshot1.png>

In *Plum Bun*, from the way Angela describes her sister's bronzed skinned and great wavy black hair indicates that her sister, Virginia, belong to the intermediate type. Virginia have both black and white characteristics, and the black characteristics still can be seen clearly for people who see her will still be able to recognize her African heritage. On the other hand, Angela belong to the dominant type emphasizing the European characters because of her light skin or "creamy complexion and her soft cloudy, chestnut hair chestnut hair,..." (Fauset, 1929: 14). Other people who see her will thought of her as white, and cannot recognize her

African heritage right away which proves beneficial in her passing. In *Passing*, Clare Kendry also belongs in the dominant type. She is described as “an attractive looking woman, ...with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin” (Larsen, 1929: 15-16). Aside from her dark eyes which indicate her “black” appearance, Clare Kendry also has ivory skin and blond hair, “Clare fair and golden, like a sunlit day” (Larsen, 1929: 137) which indicate her “white” appearance. However, using only her ivory skin and her outstanding blond hair, Clare successfully pass as white.

Mulattoes who undergone racial passing, of course, had to have lighter skin than the other common African Americans. Their skins are light enough which make other people find it difficult to detect their African heritage in just a glance. Based on the three types of mulatto as mentioned, the only mulattoes who are able to pass are “the dominant type” emphasizing European characters. It is because mulattoes who belong in this type really resemble the whites. They usually have light skin, and other physical traits in which they got from their European ancestors are more prominent. Their dominant European traits made it easy for

them to pretend and be whites. Therefore, in this research, the researcher will only focus on these light skinned mulattoes (Angela Murray and Clare Kendry) who undergone “passing” as depicted in the two narratives.

### **Mulattoes’ Status in Nineteenth Century until Early Twentieth Century America**

According to Reuter (1928), the term mulatto includes individuals whose parents is Negro and the other is white. It is also includes individuals whose one of the parents, or both, is of mixed blood (p.1). As the descendants from those parents, mulattoes usually have fairer skin than any of the pure Negroes. If both parents were also mulattoes, usually the children’s skins would be even lighter. Moreover, the family then is known as biracial family.



Fig. 2. Example of Biracial Family.  
European American and African American  
Parents. Vanessa William (bottom left) family  
portrait. Vanessa has light skin and blue eyes, the  
first African American who win Miss America  
Pageant in 1984.

<http://www.arogundade.com/is-vanessa-l-williams-black-white-biracial-mixed-her-ethnicity-nationality-ancestry-heritage-blue-eyes.html>

On March 4<sup>th</sup> 1815, in his letter to Francis C. Gray, Thomas Jefferson proposed mathematical equations to answer the question, "What constitutes a mulatto by our law?" He proposed that having 1/4 (quadroon)  $\rightarrow h/2 + B/2 = a/4 + A/4 + B/2$  of Negro blood is a mulatto. Meanwhile, having 1/8 (octoroon)  $\rightarrow C - q/2 + C/2 = a/8 + B/4 + C/2$  of Negro blood or even less than that, is no longer a mulatto, but is considered as white because the dominant white blood washes away the African's blood (Jefferson, 2015: p.1; Hobbs, 2014: 10).

Seeing the equations, even inspecting it carefully, is quite confusing to understand. The equations made it hard for common people to fathom which made it more difficult to be applied in daily life. How can people detect right away if someone they just met have either 1/4 or 1/8 Negro blood? or were they even a mulatto or not? The answer is very impossible. The purpose of the equation might be to facilitate the judge in defining the whiteness of a person, to make their job easier. It helps a lot in categorizing a person as legally white or not back in the day. Having only 1/8 of Negro blood

makes the person no longer a mulatto, which means the person can live legally as white. Meanwhile, having 1/4 of Negro blood defines the person as a mulatto, which means the person is black.

The application on this equation in daily life turned out to be impossible, because in order to get the result from this equation, of course, the family tree would need to be traced back too. Therefore, the process of this equation to find its result will take too much time. According to Nobles (2000), the categories of "quadroon" and "octoroon" did not survive beyond the 1890 census, and "mulatto" had a brief hiatus in 1900 (p.68).

It is interesting that after years, whites found it difficult to keep up with their own equation in categorizing the mulattoes, and the equation was left eventually. Given the difficulty in defining where they belong, these mulattos even had been considered as the tragic mulatto. Davis (1955) says that tragic mulatto refers to mulattoes who suffer because of difficulties arising from their biracial background (p.195). Thus, mulattoes were called as tragic individuals because they did not belong and were not really accepted by both blacks and whites.

Prof Dugas in his article, *The American Colton Plator* 1860 gives a

comparison of physical qualities of pure Negro and mulattoes. He argues that mulattoes are generally much shorter lived than pure Negroes or unmixed blood. He says that “it is so because God made it so; and that he made it so because it was not pleasing to him that the fruits of such an unnatural and unholy commerce should remain long on the earth” (Frazier, 1933: 12). It can be seen that the existence of mulattoes during nineteenth century was undesirable. The negative stereotypes towards blacks were already bad, and apparently, the negative stereotypes towards mulattoes were worse than that.

In the following years, people found the equation from Thomas Jefferson about  $1/4$  or  $1/8$  Negro blood to define a Negro, more difficult to be applied. According to Saperstein & Gullickson (2013), “this perceived lack of reliability in the counts, along with the eventual widespread adoption of the one-drop rule prompted the Census Bureau to remove the category of “mulatto” after the 1920 count” (p.4). Along that time, whites simplify their difficulty in defining these mulatto by adopting a new rule, the one-drop rule.

The term mulatto was not included in the census anymore, as seen in the 1920 count. Apparently, even for whites, the equation proved to be difficult and was not

efficient. Based on the one-drop rule, there were no longer mulatto, as any person who had even one single drop of African blood was considered black. Since then, the one-drop-rule make categorizing became easier. According to Wald (2000), the one-drop rule is a fundamental law which stated that “a drop” or even a preponderance of “white blood” does not make that person “white” (p.12). It emphasizes that even a person who has dominant white blood than black blood did not make that person become white. On the contrary, even one single black blood in a person makes that person completely black. Therefore, no more equations needed.

The rule then became important as it had been used in the US for decades. The rule allowed government to categorize only whites and blacks, with nothing in between, which means they did not regard mulattoes at all. If then, a mulatto who had only  $1/8$  Negro blood and less can be considered as white and be legally white, this one-drop rule defined every mulatto as blacks because of their African blood. The term mulatto is still used, however, there were no longer white mulattoes or black mulattoes, only mulattoes as Negro, regardless of the white traits and white blood they have. Therefore, it can be seen



that this rule exist not for the sake of equality between blacks and whites, but for the sake of whites who want to maintain their dominant and superiority over blacks.



Fig. 3. The Jhonstons Family Portrait. Light Skinned Mulatto Family during the twentieth century. The whole family passed as whites.

<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/passing-is-the-caste-system-real-or-fiction-among-tamils/>

During Harlem Renaissance, regardless of this rule, many mulattoes still took risk by doing racial passing practices. As long as no one found out, light skinned mulattoes took as much as advantages from their appearance. The Jhonstons family as seen in the historical portrait above, was one of the real examples of racial passing practice. Having the dominant European traits, the whole family passed as whites to have better life. In *Passing* and *Plum Bun*, the one-drop-rule also affected light skinned mulattoes, Angela and Clare, in choosing their life path as whites.

### **Whites' Domination over Blacks through Jim Crow Laws**

As Mojdegani (2016) states, using Michael Foucault's work as a starting point, new historicism aims at interpreting literary works as an expression of or reaction to the power relation in the surrounding society. In other words, new historicist seeks to find examples of power within the text, and "power is a means through which the marginalized are controlled, and the thing that the marginalized seek to gain" (p.14). Furthermore, new historicism is also about looking at "how the text represents power and comparing that to social power at the time a text was written" (Vizan, 2017: 202-203) by using historical records.

During Harlem Renaissance, despite the glamor, the happy vibes, and the pride of being African Americans, racial passing still happened. It was because racial discrimination towards blacks still lurking throughout the nation, as seen in the existence of Jim Crow laws. The laws segregated whites and blacks in daily life. Although blacks and whites lived side by side, blacks were placed in the not so comfortable places with many limitations in many aspects in life such as: occupations, social, economy, education, and many others. From these laws, it can

be seen that whites maintain their power and superiority over blacks.

The segregation between blacks and whites existed in America for quite a long time. According to Axelrod (2002), racial segregation of Jim Crow effected roughly from the 1880s through the 1960s (p.156), which means, Harlem Renaissance during the early twentieth century also experienced this segregation life and got the impact from it. Seeing as segregation still existed in all states in America at that time, “passing” as whites was a promising path. Accordingly, this segregation then can also be said as the main cause of racial passing practice which done by many light skinned mulattoes during the era.

In *Plum Bun*, every Saturday, the white Angela usually go with her white mother, and the brown Virginia with her black father. Angela and her mother usually go downtown to white-only places to enjoy its services indoor. It is so easy because of their light skinned. On the contrary, the only pleasant place for Virginia and her father, Junius, which they could really enjoy were outdoors doing outdoor activities or sports. Whereas, if they went downtown, there were only few choices of place that gave access to people with dark skin like them. Since their early age, the brown Virginia and the white

Angela learn the difference of their skin color, what it means, and what it entails. Unconsciously, the brown Virginia started to follow her father’s step which is taking pride of being Negro. Indeed, they only have that choice because of their physical appearance. Meanwhile, the white Angela follows her mother’s step which is enjoying the advantages of having light skin in every chance.

While Fauset in *Plum Bun* introduces the segregation life in Philadelphia, Larsen in *Passing* introduces the segregation life in Chicago. Early in the narrative, Larsen introduces the segregation life in an interesting way. She starts her story by describing her character Irene Redfield, who went out of her town on Harlem to Chicago. Irene was shopping in when she decided to take some rest in the middle of that sizzling day. Her taxi-driver then drove her to Drayton, one of the finest ‘white-only’ café in Chicago. As a mulatto, and having light skin herself, she calmly enters the café and have the waitress serviced her a tea. Later she thought, “It was not that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would

probably do it, that disturbed her” (Larsen, 1929: 19).

Irene decision to use her light skin to pass as a white woman to enjoy her afternoon tea in the most respectable place was unplanned. Supported by her white appearance, she did that effortlessly. However, Irene still cautious that people in the café would know about her African's blood, would know of her passing, and that she will be ejected from the place. From this narrative, it can be seen that in segregation society, the best of public privileges were served only to the whites. The whites as the dominant groups have access to the nicest, finest, and respectable places of all. Meanwhile, the black as the marginal groups have to be satisfied enough for whatever they were given by the whites. Just as depicted in *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, whether it was in Philadelphia or it was in Chicago, the segregation was the same. During this era, the segregation really separated the whites and blacks activities in daily life. The separation was really more beneficial to the whites than to the blacks. Whites maintain their power and superiority over black through this segregation of Jim Crow.

### **White for Freedom**

This segregation arose the idea that white was the color of freedom. As depicted in the two narratives, being white means easier life, prosperity and respect (Larsen, 1929: 37; Fauset, 1929: 82). Accordingly, in the segregation society, being whites as the dominant group of race means having freedom and was better than being blacks as the inferior group of race with many limitations. It is because whites as the dominant groups have access to the nicest, the finest, and respectable places of all. Meanwhile, blacks as the marginal groups have to be satisfied enough for whatever they were given by the whites.

In *Passing*, Clare Kendry declares to Irene in the early narrative that it was easier to be white than to be blacks. “You’d be surprised, Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us.” (Larsen, 1929: 37). According to Clare, it was so much easier to live among white people and be white rather than to live among blacks with all the racial discrimination towards them, “... or maybe because they [whites] are secure and so don’t have to bother. I’ve never quite decided” (Larsen, 1929: 38), she said. The way Clare Kendry describes her easy life as a white woman during her “passing” depicts that to be white as the

dominant and marginal ones in the segregation society means that you were more secure, free and could get whatever you need easily. On the other hand, being black as the inferior ones in the segregation society means the opposite.

As depicted in the two narratives, the passers, Angela Murray and Clare Kendry think that white people were free to choose their own path and free to use all the best privileges that the government offered, which means life would be easier and fulfillment in life can be reached. Meanwhile, being blacks means there were no freedom as life would be harder to live in with the limitation from Jim Crow laws. Thus, it means no fulfillment in life, because African Americans as the inferior ones during the segregation and through Harlem Renaissance lives under the white's control.

Being African Americans who lived during the segregation was unpleasant experiences. Kennedy (1999) explains that Jim Crow is social and economic segregation (p.19). It is not just keeping the barrier between whites and blacks in daily life, for instance, separated access on public services, this segregation also creates difficulties for African Americans to be better individuals economically

because they often deprived of the best job opportunities.

In *Plum Bun*, to her sister Virginia, Angela shares her experiences of often being regarded as a white woman because of her light skin. "But as long as they didn't know it didn't matter" (Fauset, 1929: 78). People treat her nicely and with respect, yet when they know about her African's blood, people starts to treat her differently. Her instructors Mr. and Mrs. Shields in the academy where Angela took her course in painting often praised her works by saying that she would be a great artist someday, and they also offered her many recommendations to choose. However, when they know that Angela was actually a "colored" girl, they retreated themselves from her and kept their distance. It can be seen that during the segregation, having African blood or just being African Americans decrease the opportunity to be a successful individual. Despite Angela's skill and talents in painting, she was deprived of the opportunity of success after her African blood is known.

During this segregation, whites were given better job opportunities than blacks. The choices of job opportunities for blacks were limited by Jim Crow Laws. Thus, for blacks to be a successful individual were

difficult to achieve. In *Plum Bun*, Angela says, "...all the things which she most wanted were wrapped up with white people. All the good things were theirs" (Fauset, 1929: 74). The depiction of difficulty regarding black occupations in which depicted in *Plum Bun* is very similar to the real life. From the narrative, it can be said that many racial passing narratives which created during this era were a reaction from writers to the whites' domination over blacks through Jim Crow Laws.

In *Plum Bun*, when Angela went to the theater with her black friend Matthew, the security guard restrained Matthew from entering the theater and not Angela. Angela was save because the security cannot see her African blood through her light skin. If the security knew that Angela was also "colored", he would definitely restrain her from entering the theater. Accordingly, in the segregation society, it was not the matter of individuals' quality that made them special, it was the matter of belonging in the dominant race or not.

It is very often for light skinned mulattoes to be mistaken as white in daily life, just like Angela, and experience the disappointment. Ironically, as long as people thought they were white, they would be treated nicely, yet when their

African heritage was known, they were treated differently. "...it isn't being colored that makes the difference, it's letting it be known", Angela said (Fauset, 1929: 78). As a result, for those light skinned mulattoes, hiding the African heritage is a better option for them who desired to be treated better and to be free to choose better opportunities. Based on this view, it is not surprising that during the segregation and following through Harlem Renaissance, many light skinned mulattoes hide their African heritage to pass as whites not only temporarily, but also permanently. They moved out of their hometown, hide their past, and live in a new world full of promises of being white.

Using the famous saying from Alyson Hobbs (2014) "What you don't know won't hurt you", she further explains that in a segregation society, "as long as race was invisible or unknown, it did not matter" (p.11). When white people did not aware of the African's blood in the mulattoes, they treated them like they treated other whites. They treated them nicely and with respect. Only when they were aware of the African's blood that the barrier started to go up and the color line redrawn. Thus why in *Plum Bun*, during her passing and staying in New York, Angela often wonders what would

happened to her if people around her knew about her. “If she were to say to this next woman for instance, I’m colored, would she refuse to sit by her or make complaint to the usher? ... I wonder what he’d say if he really knew?” (Fauset, 1929: 92;102). She was afraid that the color line would be redrawn, and that she would be divested of her achievements once her African blood is known.

In December 1926, *Opportunity* magazine published a semi autobiographical story by Caroline Bond Day. The story was about Sarah, a Negro woman of mixed blood, who enjoys limitless courtesies while wearing a pink hat. The hat is said to be plain and made of straw, but it metamorphosed into her “enchanted cloak,” it re-creates Sarah’s life into more possibilities and adventure as a white woman. Because of the hat, her life changes. “A gentleman offered her a seat on the train, a young man helped her off of a railway car and retrieved her lost gloves, and a salesgirl addressed her as “Mrs.”, a respectful title reserved for white women only”. All of that happened because Sarah allows the hat to conceal her curly Negro hair (Hobbs, 2014: 124). From this issue, it can be seen that by acting and dressing the part of being white, mulattoes can get more possibilities and

opportunities in life. By wearing the pink hat and act like a white woman, Sarah’s life became better.

Sarah realization that she could use her light skin for better opportunities in life mirrors Angela in *Plum Bun*. Angela often stressed to Virginia and her black friends in the neighborhood, that every individual deserved to be happy, and it was no use to deny something that would create happiness, “doesn’t anyone think that we have a right to be happy simply, naturally?” (Fauset, 1929: 54). Even during her passing, Angela was proud of herself that she let her appearance helped her in getting the happiness she deserved. She realizes that her appearance is the key to her happiness, “here I am having everything that a girl ought to have just because I had sense enough to suit my actions to my appearance (Fauset, 1929: 124).

When Angela shared to her sister that she intended to go away and pass as white, she said, “...after all I am both white and Negro and look white. Why shouldn’t I declare for the one that will bring me the greatest happiness, prosperity and respect?” (Fauset, 1929: 82). Seeing that her happiness would only come by using her light skin, Angela saw it as no need to reject the opportunity anymore.

Angela reckons that "...all the things which she most wanted were wrapped up with white people. All the good things were theirs" (Fauset, 1929: 74). Therefore, she went to New York to pass as white and started a new life as a white woman. She believes that being white would bring her "...the greatest happiness, prosperity and respect". She welcomes the freedom to be able to choose her own path, and also welcomes the unlimited opportunities by being white.

### **Fauset and Larsen's Views about Racial Passing Practice**

Greenblatt (1989) in his essay, entitled "Towards a Poetic of Culture" proposes that the new historicism will view the work of art itself as "the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators" and practices of society (p.12). It can be concluded that the work of art, was socially and historically determined by the "practices of society". In the context of literary works, there was a negotiation between the author and the society where the author had lived and stayed. That negotiation gave birth to the literary works of the era. Therefore, it can be said that literary works can be used in understanding a particular issue in history

using the author's perspective, and vice versa.

Greenblatt (1989) shows the possibility of understanding history not only from historians, but also from the author's perspectives in literary works (p.12). It is because both are interconnected. Tyson (2006) further argues that historical analysis is unavoidably subjective (p.289). It further supports that understanding history need more perspectives, and cannot only focusing on the historians' perspective. In the context of literary works, the author's perspective could add more understanding on particular issue in history.

Regarding the author's perspective, both authors view the racial passing practice for those who pass temporarily as depicted by Angela and her mother in *Plum Bun* and by Irene in *Passing* as an entertainment or a joke. The act of "fooling the white folks" was very common during the era. Light skinned mulattoes found it was fun to fool the whites by using their appearances. It is interesting to know that what Irene Redfield did in *Passing* also happened in Larsen's real life. In her letter to Carl Van Vechten in 1932, Larsen described her real-life experience. In the company of her friend Grace Nail Johnson, James Welden

Johnson's light-skinned wife, and without her own identifiably black husband, Larsen and her friend easily passed as white. They "walked to the best restaurant in a rather conservative town called Murfreesboro and demanded lunch and got it, plus all the service in the world and an invitation to return" Larsen wrote (Hobbs, 2014: 175).

The "stunt" that Nella Larsen and Grace Nail Johnson pulled off in a restaurant called Murfreesboro mirrors Irene Redfield's "passing" in the white-only café called Drayton in Larsen's narrative. Irene disdains the practice of "passing" as depicted in the way she dislike Clare's passing. She also states that she was not ashamed of being a Negro. However, away from her neighborhood on Harlem and unaccompanied by her black husband and son, she took the elevator up to the Drayton's roof, which she describes as "...like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quite, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below" (Larsen, 1929: 13) and passing as a white woman.

The description of the condition of Irene mirrors the condition of Larsen and her friend in real life. Both Larsen and her character in *Passing*, Irene Redfield, disdain the act of "passing". However,

when the opportunity present itself, Larsen and Irene did not hesitate in using their light skin to their advantage. Larsen finds it quite entertaining and satisfying that she and her friend succeed in, as Langston Hughes would say as "fooling the white folks". By doing that, it shows that the racial boundaries, the color line, which was created by Jim Crow laws were useless for light skinned mulattoes like them.

The act of fooling the white folks was famous among the mulattoes because it is actually depicted in many racial passing narratives during Harlem Renaissance, and *Passing* and *Plum Bun* were just two of them. Langston Hughes (1950) illuminates it in his essay entitled "Fooling Our White Folks", he argues that, "as long as white folks remain foolish, prejudiced and racially selfish, they deserved to be fooled. No better for them!" (p.41). It can be understood that regarding racial discrimination towards blacks, as seen in Jim Crow laws, Hughes saw it as a selfish act of the whites, and for that whites deserved to be fooled. Furthermore, the act of fooling the white folks is also depicted in *Plum Bun*. The success of Angela and her mother in enjoying themselves every Saturday in the "white-



only” places also mirrors the way Larsen and her friend succeed in their “stunt”.

The act of “fooling the white folks” by the mulattoes could also be seen as challenging the racial boundaries or color line from Jim Crow laws. The temporary passing done by Nella Larsen and Grace Johnson, Irene Redfields as depicted in *Passing*, and also by Angela and her mother as depicted in *Plum Bun* suggest that the segregation of Jim Crow is the main cause of racial passing practice. If there were no segregation at that time, which means there were no racial boundaries between the whites and the blacks, the mulattoes during this era did not have to pretend to be white.

In the ending of both narratives, both authors also view the practice of racial passing as a betrayal. It is depicted by Angela in *Plum Bun* and by Clare in *Passing*. In both narratives, the words “my people” is often emphasized to further support the writers’ preference, which they prefer their protagonist who undergone passing started to take pride in being a Negro and “come home” to their people. Moreover, the way Larsen and Fauset depict Harlem in both narratives also invites their readers during the era, especially African Americans out there, whether they are passer or not, to come to

Harlem and feel its vibes and its pride. Both authors might also hope that the readers can see the possibility of living happily, and proudly as African Americans in Harlem.



Fig. 7. African American lived in Prosperity in Harlem

Howes, K. King. *Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Christine Slovey. Boston: UXL Publishing, 2001. Print.

## Conclusion

As depicted in *Passing* and *Plum Bun*, whites maintain their power and superiority over black through this segregation of Jim Crow. The way Jim Crow laws drew the racial boundaries between whites as the dominant group and blacks as the inferior group placed blacks in a disadvantage position. Therefore, the racial passing practice can be said as a reaction of blacks to the laws. Furthermore, the existence of one-drop rule during Harlem Renaissance further arose the need in mulattoes to pass. Many light skinned mulattoes who passed during

the era saw that there was no need in denying the prospect of having freedom and having better life from the use of their light skin anymore.

In both narratives, Larsen and Fauset view the practice of racial passing both as fooling the white folks (a joke) and as a betrayal. For those who pass temporarily like Angela with her mother in *Plum Bun* and Irene in *Passing*, both authors view it just as an entertainment or a joke for the fools (white folks). Somehow, it was fine to do that. However, for those who pass permanently as did by Angela in *Plum Bun* and Clare in *Passing*, both authors view it as an act of betrayal to “their true people”. Somehow, it was a wrong thing to do. In both narratives, the words “my people” are often emphasized to further support the authors’ preference. It is clearly seen that both authors prefer their protagonist who undergone passing started to take pride in being a Negro and “come home” to their true people.

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