THE TROPE OF PASSING AND THE RACIAL IDENTITY CRISIS IN NELLA LARSEN’S *PASSING* AND JESSIE REDMON FAUSET’S *PLUM BUN*

By

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ABSTRACT

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Thesis under the direction of Mary DeShazer, Ph.D., Professor of English

THE TROPE OF PASSING AND THE RACIAL IDENTITY CRISIS IN NELLA LARSEN’S *PASSING* AND JESSIE REDMON FAUSET’S *PLUM BUN*

This study compares Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun* in terms of their treatments of the trope of passing and racial identity. This comparison demonstrates that Fauset is an emblematic writer of the Harlem Renaissance, whereas Larsen is an atypical writer within this milieu. Further, although it is conventionally asserted that the Harlem Renaissance writers view race as a cultural contrast by embracing cultural pluralism, this study delineates that they do not completely eschew essentialism, which they repudiate.
INTRODUCTION

W.E.B. Du Bois truly captures the political atmosphere of the modern age, as he asserts that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1). In 1920s with the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Jim Crow legislation was institutionalized in America, and a solid line between the races was drawn by the one-drop rule. The decision relied on the fact that the demarcation of races was principally determined by the law of nature, namely by racial essentialism, which designated the concept of race in scientific terms, referring allegedly to the innate, immutable hereditary and biological particularities of the groups of people. However, the white essentialists in America considered black people not only “different,” “alien” and “the Other,” but also “inferior.” In other words, the color line “continually both produce[d] and maintain[ed] social order and hierarchy” and therefore, “it must be addressed doubly, as both the origin of an absolutely real division and as the product of an utterly false and impossible distinction” (Kawash, 20). On the other hand, as an opposition to racial essentialism, which granted whites political power over blacks, cultural pluralism emerged with the slogan of “Difference, Not Inferiority” (Benn Michaels, 63). As Hutchinson states, “by the end of the 1920s, partly because of Boas’ influence, ‘culture’ would replace blood and spirit as the effective category of group identity” (78). In other words, according to the cultural pluralists, race was not a biological phenomenon; it was rather a social and cultural construct.

The Harlem Renaissance took place in the milieu of these racial debates. The black intellectuals unsurprisingly embraced cultural pluralism as their agenda of celebrating the uniqueness of each culture/race perfectly suited to the ideals of the
Renaissance. The New Negro was marked by his strong racial consciousness. As Alain Locke affirms, the new “race radicals” were known for their call to “race co-operations,” namely racial uplift (7, 11). Despite the fact that the Harlem Renaissance writers are divided into two groups—the “Harlem School” and the “Rear Guard”, in Robert Bone’s terms—and they pursue different paths, ultimately they both serve what I am calling Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which reflects the two contradictory aspects of the racial discourse of the Renaissance (98). On the one hand, the Harlem intellectuals fought against the stereotypes attached to their “black blood” by repudiating essentialism. As observed in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*, they defined themselves in cultural terms. Locke states that, “the American mind must reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro” (8). In order to mark a fundamental difference between the Old Negro and the New, race must be conceived as “culture,” apart from heredity and biology. Hence, regarding their notion of race as a self-determined cultural construct and their recurrent call to race duty, racial allegiance, racial uplift, it is not viable to claim that the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals supported racial essentialism. They instead equated race with culture, as a “distinctive array of beliefs and practices” (Michaels, 133). On the other hand, the racial discourse of the Renaissance was ironically nourished by racial essentialism at two levels. Firstly, the black intellectuals could not entirely eschew essentialism when they referred to race as observed in many novels, articles and poems of the Renaissance. Secondly, as Walter Benn Michaels astutely observes, the ideology that they adopted and adapted, namely cultural pluralism, is implicitly essentialist. Although cultural pluralists “represent difference in cultural instead of political racial terms” (11), they cannot establish a racial discourse that eschews essentialism, as is manifested in
their “anticipation of culture by race” (125) and their commitment to “identity essentialism” (140). Therefore, the Harlem Renaissance racial discourse, though founded on the cultural aspect of race, is practically, if not theoretically, essentialist. Hence, I name this Renaissance discourse Harlem Renaissance essentialism—a racial discourse unique to the Harlem Renaissance, and marked by its contradictory nature.

Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset, who have conventionally been considered to be Rear Guard writers of the Harlem Renaissance, published their novels *Passing* and *Plum Bun* in 1929 within this given milieu. Both novels are passing narratives. Racial passing along with issues of racial identity was a controversial topic in the 1920s within both white and black circles. Fauset’s *Plum Bun* conforms to the basic tenets of the traditional black passing narrative as it was shaped by Harlem Renaissance essentialism. On the other hand, Larsen’s *Passing* is unique as it attacks both white racial essentialism and Harlem Renaissance essentialism.

In *Passing*, the trope of passing is manifested and complicated at various levels. It emerges as a device for interrogating essentialist racial discourses and the concept of racial identity, as it blurs the conventional color lines. It neutralizes not only white racial essentialism, but also Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which struggles over the nature of the self to shape its identity. Her harsh critique of Harlem Renaissance essentialism distances Larsen from the dominant ideology of the Harlem Renaissance. Larsen underlines that racial discourse is politically constructed and imposed on the self. The trope of passing then also collapses the social hierarchies that the politics have imposed. As it results in the disillusionment of racial essentialism, passing displays the failure of the essentialist attempt to shape personal identity in racial terms. Larsen delineates the
instability of identity with reference to its performative nature through her representation of passing. She also links passing with contemporary gender and class issues. She asserts that passing is mainly motivated by the desire for socioeconomic advancements. She also displays gender dynamics in her society, along with her criticism of women’s blind attachment to marriage. She further uses passing to signify the transgression of gender boundaries as Clare Kendry, the passer, transcends prescribed racial and gender roles.

The novel also analyzes the psychological effects of and personal approaches to passing.

Fauset’s *Plum Bun* also attacks white racial essentialism and white hegemony based on it. Other than this shared criticism of white racial discourse, however, Fauset differs from Larsen in her treatment of passing. Unlike Larsen, she is an ardent member of the Rear Guard school. As she embodies Harlem Renaissance essentialism, she condemns passing, labeling it as the loss of identity. Unlike Larsen, she commits to “identity essentialism,” and thereby, she promotes the adherence to racial identity. She depicts the “inevitable” homecoming as an “affirmation of racial loyalty” (Bone, 98). While she, like Larsen, illustrates the socioeconomic drive behind passing, she never justifies it for this reason as Larsen does. Besides, while she similarly links passing and gender, in contrast to Larsen, she idealizes and promotes marriage for women.

As we shall see in the chapters to follow, a comparative analysis of *Passing* and *Plum Bun* demonstrates that Fauset and Larsen, in contrast to the conventional categorization, do not belong to the same school, namely to Rear Guard. While Fauset emerges as a typical writer of the Renaissance with her embodiment of the Harlem Renaissance essentialism, and her reflection of the ideals of racial consciousness, allegiances and race duty, Larsen is a deviant and defiant figure within the Harlem
Renaissance circle with her criticism of Harlem Renaissance essentialism, and the discourse of racial uplift, racial pride and consciousness. Accordingly, their treatment of race in general, and racial passing in particular in *Plum Bun* and *Passing* can be demonstrated to be dissimilar.
Passing & Racial Essentialism

As Cheryl Wall says, Larsen’s “novels explore the ambiguous meanings of race” (137). “Race,” in Donald Hall’s terms, “refers specifically to the ways that physiological characteristics (such as skin tone) are combined with distinctions in social history (such as region of original habitation) to distinguish and identify groups of people” (265-66). However, the official definition of race in the USA in the 1920s does not refer to “social history,” and/or culture, but solely to biology. The Supreme Court asserted in its decision in 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* that a person with one-eighth Negro ancestry would be legally defined as Negro. The decision was based on “a commitment to the biology of race” (Benn Michaels, 130). The essentialist decision that reduced race into a single drop of blood was absurdly magnifying this drop to designate the major “essential” boundary between races—namely between whites and blacks. In other words, with the decision, the all-white judiciary essentialized the color line as the races were considered inherently different from each other. This racial essentialism links racial identity to external physical features. As Elaine Ginsberg asserts, “cultural logic presupposes a biological foundation of race visibly evident in physical features such as facial structures, hair color, and texture, and skin color-what Franz Fanon has called the ‘epidermal schema of racial difference’” (4). Larsen attacks these essentialist notions of race by depicting black women passing for white, whose physical appearances do not give a clue of their race. In other words, their “epidermal schema” does not “distinguish or identify” them. Therefore,
the trope of passing ultimately portrays those essentialist notions as an illusion. Gayle Wald stresses that the narratives of racial passing have the “ability to demonstrate the failure of race…to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner” (ix).

When we see Irene at the roof of the Drayton Hotel passing for white, she suspects the possibility of being exposed as a black woman. Then she says:

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted hat they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro (150).

Larsen ridicules the “blood tells” theory with Irene’s confidence in her appearance, which does not reveal her race. The one-drop rule is proved to be inefficient as nobody can trace that drop of blood by any means in the body of the passer. Irene does not care even if “the woman did know or suspect her race” since she knows that “she couldn’t prove it” (150). Ironically enough, as a Negro, Irene fails to discern that the woman sitting near her in the cafe, Clare, is also a Negro passing for white. Larsen explicitly illustrates that biological characteristics do not speak for the race. Therefore, the one-drop rule draws the color line only to repudiate it by racial passing, which, Ginsberg asserts, “forces reconsideration of the cultural logic that the physical body is the site of identic intelligibility” (4).

In another situation, Jack Bellew, the racist white husband of Clare, in the tea party at the hotel expresses openly his bigotry, while he fails to see that his wife and the other two women he is addressing are black. He ironically assures that he calls his wife “nig” for fun, as he is so sure that she is not a Negro:
‘Oh, no Nig’ he declared, ‘nothing like that with me. I know you are no nigger, so it’s all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I’m concerned, since I know you’re no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be’ (171).

Jack and supporters of the one-drop rule believe that “the black blood makes a difference to the intrinsic identity of the person, even if this difference is ordinarily invisible” (Benn Michaels, 130). Larsen deconstructs this fictive notion by depicting Clare who is “legally” categorized as a Negro, but who has no Negro characteristics that might raise even a little suspicion in Jack. As Mae Henderson asserts, it is “the discrepancy between the visible markers and the legal definition of race that leads to a ‘crisis of representation’ in the social construction of the miscegenous body,” that is seen in the marriage of Jack and Clare. (lxii). The failure of a traditional essentialist notion of race is also challenged at the Negro Welfare Dance. Hugh Wentworth, the white novelist, asks Irene about Clare: “What I am trying to find out is the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairy-tale.” (205). Although she is a Negro, Clare is taken ironically for a blonde beauty. Hugh Wentworth, who can easily tell “the sheep from the goats,” fails to identify her race (205). Watching her dancing with a black man, he comments that it is a “nice study in contrasts” (206). Thus, Clare, as a passer, appears to be the epitome of the collapse of the essentialist racial norms in the dance. As Martha Cutter says, Clare refuses “easy racial categorization, and [shows] that race itself is unknowable, mysterious, and even unstable” (93).

**Passing & White Hegemony**

Having demonstrated the ineffectiveness and absurdity of the one-drop rule, the failure of the racial essentialism, and the futility of seeing the body as “the ultimate
location of the identity,” Larsen questions the real motivation behind racial categorization (Wald, 17). Elaine Ginsberg asserts that “racial categories have throughout history been created for the deliberate purpose of exploitation, domination, or persecution of one group by another” (6). Larsen shows that the discourse of racial identity is socially constructed and imposed on the self in order to create a hierarchical system in which whites can justify their superiority and their exploitation of blacks. As Catherine Rottenberg states, “series of traits linked to whiteness (civilized/ intelligent/ moral/ hardworking/ clean) and blackness (savage/ instinctual/ simple/ licentious/ lazy/ dirty) have been concatenated in the service of specific social hierarchies” (437). She further affirms that “race performativity compels subjects to perform according to those fictitious unities, thus shaping their identity and their preferences” (437).

Larsen, in Passing, demonstrates what today the American Anthropological Association officially states; that is the “inequalities between so-called "racial" groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances” (http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm). She uses the trope of passing to collapse the white hegemony, which is based on the stereotypes consciously shaped by the racial essentialists. Accordingly, Jack Bellew explains his hatred toward “the black scrimy devils” by claiming that they are “always robbing and killing people…and worse” (172). He does not get these ideas from his experiences, but through hearsay and biased media. When Irene inquired if he had ever known any Negroes, he replies:

    Thank the Lord no! And never expect to! But I know people who’ve known them…And I read in the papers about them (172).
He would come to terms with the deception of such knowledge about blacks, if he knew that his beloved and adored wife is also black, who has no connection with those crimes associated with the blacks. Larsen here reminds us of the famous theory of Michel Foucault, which asserts that there is an intrinsic link between power and knowledge, and therefore knowledge is never neutral. Foucault affirms “knowledge as perspective” ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 156). He says:

> We are obliged to produce the truth by the power that demands truth and needs it in order to function…We are judged…destined to live and die in certain ways by discourses that are true (“Society Must Be Defended” 24, 25).

Hence the whole discourse of race, which presupposes that whiteness is “equated with goodness and purity, as well as intellectual and spiritual superiority” while “darkness is associated with evil and debasement” is politically fabricated to grant the white hegemony and exploitation over blacks (Hall, 268). In the novel, Clare’s white aunts make her work for them to earn her “keep by doing all the housework and most of the washing” (158). They justify their exploitation by claiming that as a Negro she is destined to work hard, and she deserves it as a cursed daughter of Ham:

> Besides, to their notion, hard work was good for me. I had Negro blood and they belonged to the generation that had written and read long articles headed: ‘Will the Blacks Work?’ Too, they weren’t quite sure that the good God hadn’t intended the sons and daughters of Ham to sweat because he had poked fun at old man Noah once when he had taken a drop too much. I remember the aunts telling me that old drunkard had cursed Ham and his sons for all the time (158-59).

The essentialist one-drop rule functions for granting whites an excuse to exploit black people. “Intrinsically, skin color and hair texture have no meaning” asserts Carlyle Van
Thomson; it is the essentialists who have given them “political, psychological, and economic significance,” and once “skin color and hair texture are rendered meaningful, a hierarchical order is established” (13). Throughout the history the social Darwinist, evolutionist, and essentialist whites have always justified their colonization and exploitation of blacks by claiming that blacks are inherently inferior. The trope of passing then breaks down the hierarchy based on those assumptions by proving the lack of essence in them. Racial passing, as Ginsberg says, “not only creates...a category crisis, but also destabilizes the grounds of privilege founded on racial identity” (8). Thus Larsen uses passing, in Martha Cutter’s terms, as a “subversive narrative strategy” for creating a self that can avoid ideologies. (75).

**Passing & Harlem Renaissance Essentialism**

*Passing* was published during the Harlem Renaissance, in which black culture, literature, and art flourished, and an overt pride in blackness, and a racial consciousness was forged. While Larsen takes advantage of the rising attention to the black writers in the era for her fame, her novel hardly supports the Renaissance ideas of race. Henderson argues that “like other Harlem Renaissance black writers, Larsen seems to support an essentialist view of blackness” (lvii). However, I argue that she collapses what I call Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which stands for the racial discourse that the black community constructed for itself, via the trope of passing. Larsen uses passing as a device to prove the fraud of racial categorization. By doing so, she not only criticizes the white hegemony for its racial discourse, but also criticizes Harlem Renaissance essentialism that arouse remarkably during the Renaissance. Thus, as Thadious Davis states, “in the
race-conscious Harlem in which New Negro racial pride was a distinguishing characteristic, [Larsen] appeared to be aberrant” (11).

What is Harlem Renaissance essentialism, and why does Larsen critique it? Against racial essentialism which views “human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences,” “cultural pluralism,” as Horace Kallen terms it, or “American cultural nationalism” emerged as a consequence of the anthropological assertion that “human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups.” (http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm). As Walter Benn Michaels says, “two important shifts in racial logic” took place; “one that emphasized not the inferiority of ‘alien’ races but their ‘difference,’ and a second that began to represent difference in cultural instead of political racial terms” (11). Franz Boas, who is considered as the father of American anthropology, transformed the concept of racial identity into the concept of cultural identity. By attacking the “scientific” racism with his studies in anthropometry, Boas refuted the essentialist argument of explaining human behavior in biological terms. Boas argued, as Hutchinson states, that “the formation of racial groups [was] a social rather than a biological phenomenon” (65). According to him, culture, which is not shaped by heredity but by social experiences and historical conditions, must be promoted and celebrated rather than race, in order to avoid the injustices that stemmed from the essentialist discourse of race (70). Thus, in the beginning of the twentieth century, with the influence of Boas, “cultural pluralism,” in which the concept of culture “replaces blood and spirit as the effective category of group identity” emerged (Hutchinson, 78). Horace Kallen defines “cultural pluralism” as “the right to be different” (85). Once, he told Alain Locke, who “insisted that he was a human
being and that his color ought not to make any difference,” that “it had to make a
difference and it had to be accepted and respected and enjoyed for what it was” (qtd. in
Hutchinson, 85). According to cultural pluralism each culture had its own distinguishing
characteristics. While emphasizing and glorying the “difference,” cultural pluralism
rejected a “hierarchical ranking of the races” (Benn Michaels, 65). Thereby, its slogan
was “Difference Not Inferiority” (63). Kallen asserted that “environmental influences”
could not take “different races and remold them into an indifferent sameness” (78).
Hence, cultural pluralism was against the ideals of “Progressive assimilationism,” and
“melting-pot,” the projects of “Americanization,” which categorized races “by degree”
instead of “by kind” (66). Benn Michaels delineates the difference as follows:

Where the commitment to white supremacy required that
races be different from each other only insofar as one had
more or less of what the others also had, the
antisupremacist and pluralist commitment to difference
without hierarchy made races essentially different rather
than more or less like each other (66).

The Harlem Renaissance, as a “striking experiment in cultural pluralism,”
observes black “cultural” differences and promotes pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism
led by Marcus Garvey, folk experience, dialect as black vernacular language, racial
consciousness and racial pride (Hutchinson, 90). I call this project of highlighting and
celebrating the differences and “uniqueness” of black culture “Harlem Renaissance
essentialism.” My term is based on the contradictory nature of the racial discourse that
the Renaissance produced. First of all, cultural pluralism that the Renaissance embraced
is implicitly essentialist as observed in its fierce preservation of cultural difference. As
Benn Michaels asserts, “the commitment to difference itself represents a theoretical
intensification rather than diminution of racism” (65). Secondly, as is seen in Passing and
*Plun Bun,* although they try hard to associate race with culture rather than heredity, most of the Harlem Renaissance writers cannot entirely eschew racial essentialism, which they critique.

Harlem Renaissance intellectuals try to depict themselves in terms of their cultural distinctiveness, rather than of racial inheritance. Their attempt to redefine Negro with the adoption of cultural pluralism is a reaction against the prevalent essentialist stereotypes of blacks. In other words, “culture,” for them, functions “as a way of preserving the primacy of identity while avoiding the embarrassments of blood” (Benn Michaels, 13). Alain Locke states that the New Negro is “rehabilitating the race in world esteem” (14) with “self-expression,” “self-portraiture,” “self-respect” and “self-dependence” (4, 5) unlike the Old Negro, who is more of a “myth” or “formula” than a human being (3). The adaptation of cultural pluralism in the Harlem school is manifested in two ways, though not in a contradictory but in a complementary way as they both embody Harlem Renaissance essentialism at the core of their arguments. On the one hand, there is the Afrocentric wing of the Renaissance, the Harlem School as Bone terms it (98), which “stresses and sometimes glorifies certain characteristics of the race they believe to be uniquely Negro” (Singh, 13). On the other hand, there is the Rear Guard wing, which accuses the former wing for “glorifying the lowest strata of Negro life, pandering to sensationalism, and succumbing to the influence of white Bohemia,” which looks to black life as a source of primitivism and exoticism (Bone, 95). The Rear Guard school, led mostly by W.E.B. Du Bois, attempts to “show that the black American was different from his white counterpart only in the shade of his skin” by pleading “their case by presenting black middle-class characters and situations in their fictional works in order
to demolish the prevailing stereotype” (Singh in Kramer, 37). Although they take a different route, they are headed to the same destination with the Afrocentric wing. The main difference is the Rear Guard’s emphasis on the “double-consciousness” of the African American. Du Bois states that:

One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (194).

Unlike the Afrocentric intellectuals such as Marcus Garvey, the father of the Black Nationalism, Du Bois stresses the American aspect of the black culture as well as the African aspect. His adaptation of the cultural pluralism in the agenda of the Harlem Renaissance is not “in opposition to, but in conformity with, the greater ideals of the American republic” (Du Bois, 197). Thus, he is a cultural pluralist who also favors assimilation in order to achieve true democracy in America. His assimilationism does not suggest orienting black culture into the white both in “degree” and in “kind.” He is only advocating a mutual understanding between the two races in order “that some day, on American soil, two world races may give each to each those characteristics which both so sadly lack” (197). His assimilationism is pluralist:

He does not want to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa; he does not wish to bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he believes—foolishly, perhaps, but fervently—that Negro blood has yet a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of development” (195).

Du Bois, along with the other members of the Rear Guard school like Jessie Fauset, advocates the distinctiveness of each culture. Therefore, his assimilationism supports not
the melting-pot, but the cultural pluralist ideology. He envisioned a society that would “transcend racial hierarchies—if not racial differences” (Rhodes, 436).

Consequently, what unites both wings of the Harlem Renaissance is their call to the concepts of racial-allegiance, racial pride, race loyalty, and racial uplift. In spite of the fact that they emphasize the Americanism of the Negro beside his Africanism, that they represent the middle class rather than the “folk,” that they use standard English instead of vernacular, the Rear Guard writers “in most essentials” conform to the “canons” of the Harlem Renaissance by embodying Harlem Renaissance essentialism (Bone, 97).

Nella Larsen is atypical writer in the Harlem Renaissance, since she dismisses Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which is shaped by the adoption of cultural pluralism. While “many black Harlem intellectuals urged notions of racial allegiance and race loyalty which insisted that the races were, and should remain, fundamentally distinct,” she believes in the folly of any racial categorization either in essentialist form, or in cultural pluralist form (Kaplan, xviii). Both forms, according to Larsen, do not necessarily differ from each other; but they overlap. In other words, she delineates the fact that the Harlem Renaissance ideals of race loyalty do not create an anti-essentialist racial discourse, but emerge as another form of essentialism. Walter Benn Michaels, in his controversial book *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism*, criticizes the cultural pluralists for the same reason. Since cultural pluralism views “one’s difference from others as essential,” Benn Michaels concludes that pluralism is an “essentialized racism” rather than being an alternative to racial essentialism (“American Modernism and the Poetics of Identity” 45; *Our America*, 64). Michaels affirms that there is no way to develop “an anti-essentialist account of race” (134). Therefore, he suggests giving up “the
idea of race altogether (134) by ceasing to treat “race as a category of analysis” (135). Likewise, in *Passing* Larsen attacks not only racial essentialism but also cultural pluralism as reflected in Harlem Renaissance essentialism. Irene echoes cultural pluralists like DuBois and Alain Locke when she lists what are needed to be a member of a race. She says one should care “about the race or what was to become of it,” and have “for any of its members great, or even real, affection,” and have “artistic or sociological interest in the race” (182). Then, Clare, who, Irene thinks, lacks all those qualifications, is not supposed to be a Negro according to these criteria. Yet, Irene nonetheless declares that “she only belonged to it” (182) [emphasis added]. Larsen shows that Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which ideally advocates to describe race in cultural terms rather than biological, cannot entirely avoid racial essentialism. As Benn Michaels affirms, “any notion of cultural identity that goes beyond the description of our actual beliefs and practices must rely on race in order to determine which culture is actually ours” (“Response,” 121). In order to designate Clare as a Negro, Irene has to refer to biological essentialism, as culturally she is not one. Benn Michaels asserts that if culture is "separable from one’s actual behavior, it must be anchorable in race" (121). On the one hand, cultural pluralist Harlem Renaissance writers remain implicitly essentialist by accentuating cultural differences not in a different way than racial essentialism's demarcating biological differences; on the other hand, the Renaissance writers explicitly endorse to racial essentialism when culture turns out to be insufficient to back up their racial discourse. In *Passing*, Brian and Irene, who embrace the racial ideals of the Harlem Renaissance with their constant reference to racial allegiance, are ironically depicted as
racial essentialists. As he underlines twice the “instinct of the race to survive and expand,” (186) Brian echoes Darwin who remarks that:

He who believes in the struggle for existence and in the principle of natural selection, will acknowledge that every organic being is constantly endeavoring to increase in numbers; and thus if any one being vary ever so little, either in habits or structure, and thus gain an advantage over some other inhabitant of the country, it will seize on the place of that inhabitant, however different it may be from its own place (217).

Irene, on the one hand, says that “white people were so stupid” as they try to figure out the racial identity “by the most ridiculous means” such as looking at the physical features, but on the other hand, she depicts Clare essentially as a Negro throughout the novel (150):

Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under the bright hair, there was about them something exotic (161).

As a racial essentialist, she links Clare to black culture by addressing to her “epidermal schema”, and then, as a cultural pluralist, she links Clare to herself by addressing racial allegiance, “duty,” and “instinctive loyalty to race.” Yet, she admits that those connections are essentially worthless, as she declares:

Actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness. Between them the barrier was just high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood (192).

Clare, as a passer, deconstructs Irene's notion of race. Not only has her mulatto body dismantled the ideals of racial essentialism, but also her life as a white woman literally contradicts the ideals of cultural pluralist Harlem Renaissance. As a result, Irene’s
insistence on categorizing Clare as a Negro turns out to be a futile endeavor. Ironically, in
the end, she cannot determine what race is, and how one’s racial identity can be tracked:

…not by looking… I’m afraid I can’t explain. Not clearly. There are ways. But they’re not definite or tangible… Just—Just something. A thing that couldn’t be registered (206).

Kaplan astutely observes that “it is Irene’s racial ideology, not Clare’s, which is truly problematic” (xx). Brian is also confused as he cannot interpret the nature of racial passing and homecoming. He declares that “If I knew that, I’d known what race is” (185). Consequently, Larsen displays the hypocrisy of Harlem Renaissance essentialism as it ostensibly condemns racial essentialism but intrinsically clings to it. Besides, she demonstrates the insufficiency of the ideally cultural pluralist, practically essentialist Harlem Renaissance racial discourse. Clare Kendry ultimately renders all possible interpretations of race meaningless, “absurd,” “impossible.”

Larsen also attacks Harlem Renaissance essentialism in her treatment of the trope of “homecoming.” The traditional passing narratives written by black writers “emphasize the uniqueness and particularity of black culture” by the “homecoming” of the tragic mulatto (Henderson, xxxi). Robert Bone affirms that the Rear Guard authors, in their passing narratives, project the desire of passing “only to repudiate it, thus fortifying [their] racial loyalty” (98). According to him, they are faithful to the Harlem Renaissance ideals, since they evidently condemn passing by “homecoming.” He says:

This concerted attack upon passing by the novelists of the Rear Guard is a good index to their central values. It represents, in the first place, an affirmation of racial loyalty…Since the moral of these novels is to accept one’s racial identity, they represent an important manifestation of Renaissance nationalism (98).
Bone, like many other critics, inaccurately places Larsen into the Rear Guard school of the Harlem Renaissance. She does not offer an “attack upon passing” by using “homecoming” as a way of “an affirmation of racial loyalty.” It is interesting that, unlike most of the passing narratives, Larsen depicts Clare’s problematic and incomplete return to the black community rather than her process of passing for white in *Passing*. Her treatment of “homecoming” as “a primary site of interrogation” is a subversive narrative strategy to criticize Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which presupposes that passers eventually come back to the Negro society with a renewed racial consciousness (Wald, 47). According to Wald, “the focus of Larsen’s text” is, therefore, “the very status of racial ‘community’” (47).

Clare’s coming back is not to hail the black culture over the white, as, “unlike that of virtually every other passer in the tradition,” hers is not “the outcome of a crisis of conscience” (Kaplan, xix). She does not reunite with the black folk to reclaim her allegedly authentic racial identity. It is not what Henderson calls as her “essentialist notion of identity based on atavistic yearnings or racial fealty, [that] inevitably returns this character to the racial fold” (xxxi). The motivations of Clare’s return to Harlem are more complicated than a mere problem of racial discourse, which occupies most of the passing narratives. She becomes eager to join the black folk in Harlem after she encounters Irene after twelve years. Firstly, her husband’s evident bigotry makes her embrace the black folk who have nothing to do with all the prejudiced accusations. She says:

It’s Jack…that has made me want to see other people. [His racism] just swooped down and changed everything. If it hadn’t been for that, I’d have gone on to the end, never seeing any of you. But that did something to me (196).
Her desire to see Negroes and join them occasionally is partly a reaction to her husband’s unjust remarks. Clare’s rebellious soul takes action whenever she feels need to, such as passing for white and marrying Jack without informing her aunts who have exploited her. Irene calls this “a having way” (153). In other words, for Clare “passing becomes a mechanism to get what she wants” (Cutter, 84).

Secondly, she is fed up with the dullness of her white middle-class marriage, as she says “You can’t know how in this pale of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that I once thought I was glad to be free of” (145) [emphasis added]. In other words, as Henderson says, she “returns only to escape, in the excitement and gaiety she discovers in Harlem, the sterility of a staid white environment” (xlv). Booker T. Washington asserted that “white folks don’t really have a good time, from the Negro point of view. They lack the laughing, boisterous sociability which the Negro enjoys” (qtd. in Kaplan, xvii). Carla Kaplan states that:

> There is a recurrent tension in black novels of passing between the option of a white cultural identity that lacks essence or substance, but promises more freedom and mobility, and a black cultural identity that has real meaning, vibrancy, and substance, yet entails significant constriction and curtailment of freedom and mobility…And the black idea of culture…emerges--generally after an agonizing, messy struggle--as finally the more appealing (“On Modernism and Race,” 163).

Although Larsen is against any kind of essentialism, she is nevertheless aware of the fact that there are differences between the black and white modes of life. However, as seen in Clare, she neither creates a “tension” for her passer protagonist, nor resolves the conflict as Kaplan stated. Rather, she reflects the differences of the Negro society as enchanting for the white people. This is not surprising when we take the fact into consideration that
the white people in 1920s were flowing into the Harlem night clubs to see the life on the “other” side; Clare is only one of them.

It is significant to note that Clare does not completely pass back for black. She is taking advantage of Harlem, where whites and blacks integrate and socialize together freely. Therefore, as Wall says, “her trips to Harlem involve more pleasure-seeking than homecoming” (124). Clare is so excited on her way to the Negro Welfare dance and she says:

I feel exactly as I used to on the Sunday we went to the Christmas-tree celebration. I knew there was to be a surprise for me and couldn’t quite guess what it was to be. I am so excited (204).

Her remarks imply that she is not going to something familiar, but something unknown, strange or unusual. Her interest in the Negro folk is hardly different from the white people’s attraction to the Other during the Harlem Renaissance. The language Clare uses reveals her stance in the matter. She says to Irene: “you can’t realize how I want to see Negroes…to talk with them, to hear them laugh” (200). Irene explains the general white attraction in Harlem in the same way, when Clare asks why they are coming there:

Same reason you are here, to see Negroes…A few purely and frankly enjoy themselves. Others to get material to turn into shekels. More, to gaze on these great and near great while they gaze on the Negroes (198) [emphasis added].

Larsen highlights the fact that white people come to Harlem out of curiosity, to see the blacks’ primitive character. The word “gaze” evokes the idea of voyeurism of white people for the “exotic” Other. Clare is looking at the Negroes almost as the exotic Other, while ironically her own presence, too, is depicted as the exotic Other throughout the novel. In other words, she both perceives and is perceived as the Other in the black
Community. Irene asserts that Clare is not literally coming “home,” but just “visiting” as a guest. She underlines that Clare remains as an exotic Other, rather than being and/or becoming one of them:

Beyond the aesthetic pleasure one got from watching her, she contributed little, sitting for the most part silent, an odd dreaming look in her hypnotic eyes... And, no matter how often she came among them, she still remained someone apart, a little mysterious and strange, someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity (209).

Both the “host” and the “guest” are estranged from each other. Consequently, Clare’s stance in Harlem is not so different from the white people, for whom blacks are literally the Other. Irene explains whites’ attraction to Harlem as such:

I think that what they feel is—well, a kind of emotional excitement. You know, the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it’s really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty (205).

Clare’s interest in Harlem is not different than “a kind of emotional excitement... in the presence of something strange” as she has been away from the black folk long enough to identify herself more with the white. Therefore, she is not exactly “homecoming” to celebrate the uniqueness and superiority of black culture over the white, as the traditional tragic mulatto does in most of the passing narratives. Henderson states that “unlike the mulatto characters of earlier abolitionist and black protest fiction, Clare is devoid of race consciousness... She manifests neither signs of racial self-hatred nor a deep-seated desire to be white” (xliv).

Besides her treatment of Clare’s “homecoming,” Larsen also uses Irene to critique Harlem Renaissance essentialism. Rather than stating her opinions directly, Larsen
tactically uses Irene as a mouthpiece who unconsciously speaks for the failure of the black status quo, which she is a vehement member of. Larsen implicitly delineates the dichotomy of appearance versus reality by the modernist tools of narrative such as the unreliable observer narrator and her flawed subjective interpretations. It is a great narrative strategy to attack Harlem Renaissance essentialism that Irene, an insider, holds up a mirror to her own existence and reflects the handicaps of it. Ironically, the reader gets low opinions about Irene, not from her “opponent”, Clare, who actually praises Irene throughout the novel, but from herself, while she is trying hard to assert the perfection of her life in her “perfect” black world. Irene sees herself as the epitome of Harlem status quo. Ann DuCille affirms that Irene, “with her race work, literary salons, and house parties, signifies the propriety, the manners, the social and racial uplift, and especially the security with which the black bourgeoisie of the 1920s was preoccupied” (104). As Pfeiffer asserts, Irene is “a creature of her community in precisely the ways that Du Bois promoted” as her “exaggerated gentility, her attention to social propriety, her desire for safety in the service of race loyalty satirizes the Du Boisian idea of “soul”—blackness as an internalized and constant identity” (142-143). Irene’s approach to racial passing is also marked by essentialism. It is significant to note that passing is not only condemned by the white essentialists as it refutes the ideals of racial essentialism and white hegemony, but also by the Harlem Renaissance essentialists as it represents “the possibility of race annihilation” (Balkun,123). Disloyalty to race is outrageous for the Harlem intellectuals who fervently call for racial allegiance. Kaplan asserts that “crossing race lines under such social conditions” is “self-hating and dangerous at best” and “treasonous at worst” (xviii). As a Harlemite, Irene judges Clare throughout the novel. Irene, like the rest of the
Renaissance followers, condemns the “hazardous business of passing,” “abhorrent thing,” as the passer is a betrayer of the race (157, 160). She underlines the “disidentification” that refers to “the psychic alienation and social dislocation” of the passer (Henderson, xxvii). She defines passing as “breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly” (157). She questions “how one did about background, how one accounted for oneself” (157). However, for Larsen alienation is a positive drive, as it makes one discern the reality of the things that one has taken for granted so long. Carby affirms that in Larsen’s fiction, “alienation is often represented as a state of consciousness, a frame of mind” (169).

Passing is an individual action as opposed to a communal one. The passer escapes the burden of the black race by breaking away all the ties with his/her community, rather than fighting against the stream with his “dark brethren.” Due to the ‘disidentification’ of the passer, Mary Helen Washington describes passing as “an obscene form of salvation” (50, 354 in Kaplan). Likewise, Langston Hughes, Gayle Wald states, “critiques passing as an individual practice that fails to address the collective nature of racial discourse, which derives authority from its ability to unite people of disparate origins and identities under a single ‘badge’ of color” (7). It is not surprising, then, that Irene frequently accuses Clare for being selfish throughout the novel. She says that Clare has “innate lack of consideration for feelings of others” (177); that she “counts as nothing the annoyances, the bitterness, or the suffering of others” (181); that she has “downright selfishness” (182) and “selfish whim[s]” (197). The surprising thing is that Irene, too, turns out to be selfish in her dedication to the black bourgeoisie. Larsen shows that Irene does not align
with Harlem Renaissance essentialism, racial pride and racial uplift because she is an idealist activist, who “addresses the collective nature of racial discourse.” Her motivations are not communal, but entirely personal. As Larsen suggests, in Irene’s case, the “appearances...had a way of not fitting facts” (32). We read her hypocrisy in her approach to the Negro Welfare dance, which is organized as a part of racial uplift. Though she works for the organization, the dance is actually not important for her. She says: “Thank heaven it comes off tomorrow night and doesn’t happen again for a year” (197). During the dance, no major thing happens in terms of racial uplift, or at least not that Irene knows:

The things which Irene Redfield remembered afterward about the Negro Welfare Dance seemed, to her, unimportant and unrelated...Except for these few unconnected things the dance faded to a blurred memory, its outlines mingling with those of other dances of its kind that she had attended in the past and would attend in the future (203, 207).

As Wald asserts “the discourse of racial uplift provides Irene a ready vocabulary for establishing the authenticity of her self through a series of racialized oppositions to Clare” (48). However, the passages cited suggest that she is merely acting her role that is written for her. Youman accordingly observes that:

Her activities are restricted to her own class and include teas, shopping expeditions, parties, and helping the poor. This last, however, is not a personal effort based on humanitarian feelings, but a solidifying of her own middle-class position. She belongs to the Negro Welfare League because it is expected of one of her class. She does help organize and attend the League’s annual dance. But she is obviously considers it a social event rather than a fund raises for less prosperous Blacks...It is class, not race, that motivates Irene (339).
In other words, Irene is doing everything for the sake of bureaucracy; to secure her place in her community. Balkun asserts that for Irene “maintaining the status quo is more important than race” (186). At home race is not an issue for Irene. She treats her black servants in a way a white master would treat. She keeps an “aloof distance from her dark-skinned servants” (Pfeiffer, 143). She criticizes Clare for socializing with them:

…she would descend to the kitchen and, with—to Irene—an exasperating childlike lack of perception, spend her visit in talk and merriment with Zulena and Sadie (208) [emphasis added].

Apparently racial uplift does not include her black servants for Irene. Her concept of race loyalty is not functional at home. Furthermore, she does not even let her family talk about racial issues at home. She wants to prevent her children from discussing racial conflicts, and she warns Brian severely “not to talk to them about the race problem” (232). Larsen displays that Irene does not internalize black racial discourse, but solely embraces it conveniently as a bourgeois person. Larsen concludes that the whole racial uplift is an illusion. Everybody lives for their own sakes, rather than for the community’s; especially Irene. Jennifer Devere Brody asserts that she “desperately desires to be free of the burden of race-consciousness and to join…capitalist American society” (397). Irene does not internally believe in pan-Africanism, though she belongs to the Harlem school. She underlines that:

She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American (235).

Consequently, Carby states that Larsen attacks the black bourgeoisie “on many levels:” for its “hypocrisy”, for its “articulation of the race ‘problem,’” and for its “moral and aesthetic code” (173). Irene claims that “Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps—that
is, not too consciously—but, none the less, acting” (182). However, it turns out to be that she is the one acting. She is performing her racial role for her convenience.

Irene does not pass, first of all, because she is wealthy and secure enough in her black society, and secondly, she is not brave enough to take the risks, the prices one needs to pay to gain its privileges. It is frightening for Irene to take such an enormous action of starting a new life in an unfriendly environment by herself alone. That’s why she prefers to hide behind the bars of her reserved life, namely as a middle class black women who believes and works for racial uplift. Even when she is passing occasionally for convenience, she is scared of its risks of being exposed. Wall stresses that “transgressing racial boundaries means running the risk of being turned out of public places and being out of house and home” (126). Irene considers being exposed as a Negro at the Drayton, and says:

It wasn’t 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 (150).

To Irene, for whom “security was the most important and desired thing in life”, the idea of living with the “dark secret for ever crouching in the background of [one’s] consciousness” is almost out of the question (235, 201). Clare asserts that “if one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve” (158). Irene does not have “nerve” and does not think of passing because she calls it “hazardous,” dangerous, not safe and secure for her.

Irene implicitly blames Clare for passing as white and avoiding the burden blackness brings. Unlike Clare, she enjoys the safety of acting together with the collective as opposed to taking action by herself; however, she also suffers from her ties to the race, from being “under a single ‘badge’ of color.” When her racial identity entraps
her, she asks herself “why couldn’t she be free of it,” the “instinctive loyalty to race” (227). She believes that Clare and Brian have an affair, but she cannot do anything ostensibly because of this loyalty:

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her...Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham’s dark children (225).

The fact that Irene attaches herself to the unique black culture of Harlem, to the racial uplift agenda and to her marriage with a wealthy black doctor ostensibly secures her. However, she eventually comes to terms with the burden of race; burden of being associated and defined with the “concept” of race, rather than being an autonomous person, without any strings attached. Larsen attacks Harlem Renaissance essentialism as it imposes on people superfluous burden with its call to racial allegiance, race loyalty and racial uplift. Irene reflects the racial discourse of the Harlem Renaissance when she declares that “she had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race” (182) [emphasis added]. However, towards the end of the novel these “ties of race” evidently suffocate her:

That instinctive loyalty to a race. Why couldn’t she get free of it? What she felt was not so much resentment as a dull despair because she could not change herself in this respect, could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry (227).
Unlike Clare, she does not “roam free of [African American bourgeois culture’s] demands for conformity and social service and endless familial and community uplift” (Ammons, 113). Therefore, she actually remains ambivalent toward passing:

It’s funny about ‘passing.’ We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it (185-86).

The ambivalence toward passing was indeed prevalent among blacks in the 1920s. For instance, while they condemn the idea of passing for life, they approve occasional passing. They are not against fooling whites who unjustly deprive them of many opportunities by the one-drop rule. Langston Hughes reports that, “most Negroes feel that bigoted whites deserve to be cheated and fooled since the way they behave toward us makes no sense at all” (Wald, 7). He observes that African Americans look at passing narratives as “sources of enjoyment and gratification…in the prospect of “fooling our white folks” (7). Brian echoes Hughes when he tries to alleviate Irene’s anger toward racist Jack Bellew who does not know that Irene is a Negro woman:

…you, my dear, had all the advantage. You knew what his opinion of you was, while he—Well, ‘twas ever thus. We know, always have. They don’t. Not quite. It has, you will admit, its humorous side, and, sometimes, its conveniences (185).

Irene passes for white occasionally “for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that,” but, she assures, “never socially” (157, 227). Larsen indicates that, as Corinne Blackmer says, “racial identification is a matter of context and social convention” (60). Irene does not hesitate to pass whenever it is “needed.” The first time we see Irene passing is at the Drayton Hotel. She herself asserts that the feeling is liberating:
It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one she had left below (147).

The “world below” refers to the streets of Chicago where she has been a black woman. As Cutter states, she enjoys “the sensation of leaving her habitual racial niche” as she recognizes the relief passing provides (87). Despite her insistence on “safety, stability, and social fixity, she does have a fascination with that which transcends the limits and refuses to stay stable and fixed” (Cutter, 87). Larsen uses Irene, who seemingly condemns passing, but still is fascinated by it, to criticize the blind adherence to Harlem Renaissance essentialism, not in a different way than she criticizes white essentialism in defining the self. She also displays the hypocrisy of Irene in particular, and Harlem Renaissance essentialists in general, as they do not hesitate to pass when it comes to their own convenience, thus contradicting their own notion of passing as race disloyalty. It is ridiculous for Larsen that they are justifying occasional passing and having teas in luxurious hotels as a way of fooling whites and mocking the unjust rule, while harshly condemning marrying a white man and passing for good.

Consequently, Larsen does not only “refuse essentialism,” but also “social constructionism” which is seen in the racial discourse of the Harlem Renaissance (Kaplan, xxiii). Her repudiation of Harlem Renaissance essentialism proves that she does not belong to the Renaissance. In *Passing* she does not treat the trope of passing in the way her contemporaries such as Jessie Fauset does; namely as a way of racial affirmation. Kaplan observes that:

Rather than a trope that reinforces an ethics of race, as passing usually does, Larsen uses passing to critique a tradition of treating racial “allegiance” as a moral dilemma
rather than a matter of preference, longing, and choice that Larsen imagines it could be (xxv)

**Passing & Identity Politics**

Passing is intrinsically related to identity politics. It questions the ontology of identity. Some critics claim that it deconstructs identity, while others assert that it “highlights the simultaneous instability and instrumentality of categories of identity” (Wald, 52). Their interpretations are certainly based on their definition of identity itself. Traditional readings of racial passing, which rely on modernist notion of fixed and immutable identity, underline that passing is, by definition, to disguise one’s authentic identity. As Samira Kawash asserts, they “dictate that passing plays only with appearance and that the true identities underlying the deceptive appearance remain untouched” (126). For instance, Carl Van Thomson indicates that passers attempt to “make their blackness invisible” by “chronically imitat[ing] white mannerism” (15, 16). According to him, those “impostors,” who wear “the mask of whiteness,” are “self-exiled within whiteness;” and they accept an “unstable identity” (16, 130). He claims that passing ultimately results in the “destruction of the self” (18). Likewise, McLendon puts forward that:

...passing may be regarded as any form of pretense or disguise that results in a loss or surrender of, or a failure to satisfy a desire for, identity...Implicit in the concept of passing is the insecurity, the lack of permanence...indeed a loss of place in a racial and cultural community and thereby a loss of personal identity (96-98).

This traditional reading of passing is based on modernist concept of identity, in other words, as Benn Michaels terms it, on “identity essentialism” (140). Benn Michaels postulates that cultural pluralists “commit themselves to the primacy of identity” because according to them, “instead of who we are being constituted but what we do, what we do
is justified by who we are” (140). Modernism, which theoretically depends on cultural pluralism, “makes identity itself into an object of cathexis, into something that might be lost or found, defended or surrendered” by “deriving one’s beliefs and practices from one’s cultural identity instead of equating one’s beliefs and practices with one’s cultural identity” (141, 16). Cultural pluralists presuppose a discrepancy between the passer’s “real” racial/cultural identity and his/her new assumed identity. Thus, many passing narratives “focus on the experience of disconnect between a character’s inner (supposedly black) self and his or her outer (ostensibly white) self” (Pfeiffer, 3). By doing so, many black writers inevitably align themselves with Harlem essentialism, which is empowered by the commitment to the modernist and cultural pluralist notion of identity.

In Passing, Larsen, for whom “validating of a personal identity” was more “essential” than the “general objective of the New Negro Renaissance,” which is “the forging of racial identity,” once again distances herself from the tenets of the Renaissance by her treatment of the concept of identity and passing (Davis, 242). Henderson states, “By rewriting modernist notions of a constative, immutable, unified notion of selfhood with a conception of identity that is fundamentally performative, the narrative of passing interrogates the idea of a transcendent or essentialized identity” (xxxxix). Both white racial essentialism and Harlem Renaissance essentialism associate an individual identity with the whole race/ culture. Such a reading lacks attention to the particulars of an individual identity, by conceptualizing it. Passing is about individuation as it offers the individual a chance to define herself independently, denying the innate and imposed factors. Pfeiffer asserts that “one can clearly feel the urgings of self-reliant individualism
in this wish to move out of a historically defined identity and into a freer and fuller expression of selfhood” (6). It definitely provides Clare an opportunity be an individual self rather than a predetermined concept, as she says: “I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham” (159). Elaine Ginsberg asserts that:

In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress (16).

Benn Michaels attacks passing for reinforcing the realm of the boundary, and thus justifying the cultural pluralist’s commitment to “identity essentialism.” He defines passing as “the imagination of a racial identity that must be affirmed or denied as well as embodied” (113). According to him, if it were “a distinctive array of beliefs and practices” that determines who you are, then there would be no passing as “what you passed for would of necessity be what you were” (133, 167 n 158). His observations are legitimate if applied to passing narratives written by writers dedicated to Harlem Renaissance essentialism. However, he inaccurately places Larsen among them. On the contrary, Larsen is ahead of her time in her postmodern treatment of identity. First of all, she does not assume that one is passing for something one is not. Such an assumption would be based on an essential concept of identity that can be lost, repudiated and re-embodied. In contrast, she sees identity as produced through performance. According to Judith Butler identity “is not fixed as immutable essence but created through repeated acts and therefore multiple and open to change” (Ahlin, 28). Thus, Clare does become a member of the group that she passed for. She is never depicted as a “mimic” who
“chronically imitate white mannerism in [her] desire for a feeling of similarity or closeness to whiteness” (Thomson, 16). The performance perspective on identity counters “the notion of an essence, a stable core on which personal identity is based” (Ahlin, 27). Accordingly, Ginsberg affirms that:

...presumably one cannot pass for something one is not unless there is some other, prepassing, identity that one is...For both the process and the discourse of the passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics, a challenge that may be seen as either threatening or liberating but in either instance discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent (4).

Denying both white and black racial identity to define her self as she passes back and forth between the races, Clare has a plural, shifting and unstable identity. She is performing multiple identities rather than entrapping herself in a single one, delimiting herself in a racial identity. Therefore, “avoiding the enclosures of a unitary identity,” she shows the contingency of identity (Cutter, 75). Her problem is not, then, “the impossibility of the self-definition,” as Wall suggests (89). Her sense of identity does not “correspond to a theoretical inner self,” but it is an identity that can “escape the enclosures of race, class and sexuality” (Cutter, 84). Racial passing grants her freedom in terms of defining her self autonomously, with complete agency, without any political restraints of the racial discourses. Consequently, as Kawash confirms, “for both black and white, the chaos embodied in Clare disrupts the certainty of identity, interrupts the mutual recognition and obligation of community, and thus calls into question the stability of identity” (168).

While “Clare’s trajectory dramatizes how dominant norms can be misappropriated and how disidentification is always possible,” Irene, who believes in the
fixity and stability of identity, “represents the subject who appropriates and internalizes the hegemonic norms of race” (Rottenberg, 435-36). She is a conformist as she submits to the social taboos of the black middle-class patriarchal society, and defines herself within the racial discourse. Ironically, rather than Clare’s passing, it is Irene’s identification with Harlem Renaissance essentialism that results in “destruction of self.” Everything she says about herself and her life style turns out to be problematic because she is not essentially happy with her self-imposed identity, though she persistently denies it. Her commitment to racial identity is contradicted by herself when she declares that “She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race” (225). Her juxtaposition of self and race in terms of identity is ironical. She used to perceive racial identity coherent as her ultimate identity; but now it renders into an oxymoron. Irene confronts the dilemma: “Where does race end and the self begin?” (Balkun, 121). Balkun astutely observes that:

After all, it is only when [Irene] begins to find race a burden- when she starts to acknowledge some of the feelings she has long since buried or ignored- that Irene also begins to wonder who she is and what it is she truly wants (121).

In Passing, not only “race identification is ultimately described as something imposed,” but also the modernist concept of immutable and racialized identity is attacked for delimiting one’s actual personal identity (Rottenberg, 442). Irene’s identity, that is shaped by her “adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of life,” lacks essence, even to her own husband: “She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing” (166, 221). Thus, Irene stands for the failure of the embodiment of racial identity as the ultimate indicator
of the self’s identity. In Clare’s words, Irene remains as “a charity or a problem” rather than a “person.” In other words, as Wall suggests, she “assumes false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide” (89). As she passes for white now and then, racial passing only provides her occasional release from her absorption into the black patriarchal racial discourse.

**Passing, Class & Gender**

Racial passing is also a tool for transcending the class system in the novel. It provides one way of attaining the material comfort that the passer previously has no access to. Clare’s motivation for passing is not merely to avoid the social white oppression, but also the economic oppression she has been through. She passes for white by marrying Jack for material comfort, as she says to Irene: “I wanted things…You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others” (159). Thus, the trope of passing is perceived as a vehicle to provide wealth. Clare decides to pass not because “blackness as such represented victimization and powerlessness, but because of the class dynamics of social mobility in a racially segregated world” (Hutchinson, 300). Irene’s response to Clare that she has never considered passing because, she says, “I’ve everything I want” (160) reinforces passing as a device for sustaining a wealthy decent life.

Gender and class norms are intrinsically linked to racial discourse in the novel. As Kashinath Ranveer says “the black women in America were made victims of triple jeopardy: racism, sexism and classism” (1). Accordingly, Barbara Smith in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” asserts that “the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers” as we
see in *Passing* (170). Clare and Irene are not delimited only by race, but also by being women. They both depend on their husbands for their comfortable middle-class lives and have “their husbands’ success written on their female frames” (Thaggert, 7). They both make their racial choice according to their welfare as women. Clare’s marriage to Jack is her passport to the white world, whereas Irene’s marriage to a wealthy black physician is her guarantee to achieve upward mobility in the black community.

However, Clare and Irene have different attitudes toward marriage as Clare sees it as a means to an end while Irene sees it as an end in itself. Clare’s marriage to Jack Bellew brings her position and wealth, which she has passed for. “Money’s awfully nice to have” she declares; “In fact, all things considered, I think ‘Rene, that it’s even worth the price” (160). She evidently does not regret her decision to pass. However, she is not blindly attached to her marriage. In fact, there is an implication of disloyalty. Clare first appears in the novel with a man at the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel. Irene realizes that, as he says goodbye to Clare, “there was pleasure in his tones and a smile on his face” (148). Later on, she would notice that Jack Bellew “was not the man she had seen with Clare Kendry on the Drayton roof” (170). As the novel proceeds, there is another implication of an illicit affair between Clare and Irene’s husband Brian. However, neither implication is proved to be factual. Yet, Clare herself makes it clear that she does not care about jeopardizing her marriage, as she reunites with her black friends without apprehension. She states to Irene that:

It’s just that I haven’t any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do...to get the things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away (210).
She does not even consider her daughter enough to keep her marriage safe. She declares that, “children aren’t everything” (210):

Margery...Just this, ‘Rene. if it wasn’t for her, I’d do it anyway. She’s all that holds me back. but if Jack finds out, if our marriage is broken, that lets me out. Doesn’t it? “

(234).

Although she claims that Margery holds her back, she can express the probability of the “risk” definitely—not anxiously, but coldheartedly. In spite of her unfaithfulness, Larsen does not place any blame on Clare. She at least eschews self-deception. She conducts her actions truly according to her feelings.

On the other hand, Irene has a blind attachment to her marriage as well as to her race. Larsen depicts Irene as someone who lives in a self-created illusion and denies the reality underneath for the sake of convenience. Irene’s marriage is perfect on the surface, and she is content with it. In reality, ironically, it lacks love and happiness—the most important prerequisites of marriage. They sleep in separate bedrooms, they cannot communicate well, and they disagree on almost everything. Brian views sex as “a grand joke, the greatest in the world” (189). Taking all these things into consideration, we see that Irene is criticized by Larsen for keeping up with appearances while denying the fact that her marriage is falling apart. Even when she is suspicious about an affair between Clare and her husband, she is determined to keep her marriage intact for the sake of convenience, “security,” and “tranquility;”

Strange, that she couldn’t now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? has she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour, she thought not. Nevertheless, she meant to keep him...True, she had left off trying to believe that he and Clare loved and yet
didn’t love, but she still intended to hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain (235).

On account of her hypocrisy, Larsen subtly critiques Irene’s blind attachment to her marriage as well as her race. Although Irene would be hailed by Harlem Renaissance Essentialist writers for her “noble” posture in her adherence to her race and family, Larsen elucidates that Irene is insecure inside and thereby, hides behind the bars of the tradition.
CHAPTER 2

JESSIE REDMON FAUSET & PLUM BUN

Passing, Racial Essentialism, and White Hegemony

Many arbitrary and fictitious beliefs about race, which were anchored in the essentialist racial discourse, were institutionalized in America by the twentieth century. The one-drop rule derived from such a racial worldview, which “with its emphasis on assumptions of innateness and immutability, makes it possible to interpret all forms of human behavior as hereditary” (Smedley, 697). As Samira Kawash states, “in the Court’s opinion, racial segregation merely reflected the natural order of the universe: to preserve the distinction and separation of the races was to preserve order” (94). Jessie Fauset, like her contemporary Nella Larsen, is an anti-essentialist. She attacks racial essentialism via the body of the mulatta and the trope of passing. The one-drop rule’s inefficiency is depicted throughout Plum Bun. Deborah McDowell observes that Fauset “challenged the irrationalities of the American attempt to classify races biologically… [as] the figure of the mulatto who could pass for white exposed the basis of that irrationality in prejudice” (xxiii). Angela Murray’s physical appearance does not display any trace of “Negro blood.” Rottenberg postulates that “melanin, it seems, is not the manifest truth of race, although it has played a crucial part in the construction of racial thinking in the United States” (439). Even before Angela passes for white in New York, she is taken for white in Philadelphia. Her art teacher at the academy, Henry, refuses to believe that she is black, as he believes in racial essentialism. He says:

But I can’t think she’s really coloured, Mabel. Why, she looks and acts just like a white girl. She dresses in better
taste than anybody in the room... Well, she just can’t be. Do you suppose I don’t know a coloured woman when I see one? I can tell’em a mile off (72).

Fauset, like Larsen, refutes the idea that race will manifest itself in physical traits. Henry’s remark reminds us of Larsen’s criticism of white people who believe in the “blood tells” theory: “White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot” (150). Both writers delineate that the theory does not reflect the reality; it is merely an illusion of white essentialism.

Angela, like Clare Kendry, renders inept the one-drop rule, which requires that a single drop of Negro blood will make inherent differences that will easily be discerned. Even Mary Hastings does not realize that her best friend Angela is coloured, not only because of the fact that there is no evident sign of it in her appearance, but also because her “black blood” makes no difference in her personality, intelligence, and humanity. Angela is so shocked that Mary accuses her for not telling that she is a coloured person:

And then her own voice in tragic but proud bewilderment. ‘Tell you that I was coloured! Why of course I never told you that I was coloured. Why should I?...I’m just the same as I was before you knew I was coloured and just the same afterwards. Why should it ever have made any difference at all?’ (38, 45).

Throughout *Plum Bun*, certain white characters are critiqued for their blind attachment to essentialism. The attendant at the theatre ironically welcomes Angela but refuses Matthew as they are not selling tickets to coloured people. Roger, Angela’s racist date, fails to discern that his beloved is also black when he proudly kicks three coloured people out of the restaurant, and expresses his bigotry:
Well I put a spoke in the wheel of those ‘coons’! They forget themselves so quickly, coming in here spoiling white people’s appetites. I told the manager if they brought one of their damned suits I’d be responsible. I wasn’t going to have them here with you, Angéle. I could tell that night at Martha Burden’s by the way you looked at that girl that you had no times for darkies. I’ll bet you’d never been that near to one before in your life, had you? Wonder where Martha picked that one up (133).

This scene reminds the reader of the scene in *Passing* in which Jack Bellew makes racist comments, being unaware of the fact that three women in the room including his wife are blacks. It is telling that both Angela and Clare end up having racist partners who cannot determine their racial identity. Hence, both Larsen and Fauset suggest that there is nothing essential about race, as one’s racial identity cannot be discerned even by her/his dearest and closest partner. Jacquelyn McLendon affirms that these incidents are basically “ironic inversions of the concept that ‘blood tells’” (97).

The climax of those incidents happens when the two lovers, Anthony and Angela, both of whom are passing, fail to detect that they are both Negro. After Anthony reveals his racial identity to Angela, she shrinks from him due to her “bewildered relief” (285). Anthony ironically storms out:

“Yes, that’s right, you damned American! I’m not fit for you to touch now, am I? It was all right as long as you thought I was a murderer, a card sharp, a criminal, but the black blood in me is a bit too much, isn’t it?...What are you going to do, alarm the neighbourhood?...You are a white American. I know there is nothing too dastardly for them to attempt when colour is involved” (285-86).

Anthony’s ignorance of Angela’s racial identity proves that passing deconstructs racial essentialism. In this “farcical scene,” according to McLendon, “the larger purpose of the parody, of inverting the racial sign system, is to call attention to Angela’s and Anthony’s
positions of indeterminacy, thereby subverting the body’s potential as signifier of socially constructed representations of race and stressing the complex interplay of issues of identity” (48). Anthony’s remark also embodies the critique of the white essentialists who treat a black worse than “a murderer, a card sharp, a criminal.” As Angela declares that “they were based and rooted in the same blood, the same experiences, the same comprehension of this far-reaching, stupid, terrible race problem,” Anthony curses the essentialist social system that makes passing possible, and almost necessary (294):

You in your foolishness, I in my carelessness, ‘passing, passing’ and life sitting back laughing, splitting her sides at the joke of it (298).

Fauset underlines that “the unspeakable depths of acquaintance with prejudice” lead most of the mulattoes to pass (286). Thus, although she condemns racial passing, she sympathizes with the passers to some extent, as she puts the blame on white essentialism for the miseries passers go through. As McDowell asserts, “the passing plot affords Fauset a subtle vehicle through which to critique the naïve act of passing, but also to analyze the paradoxes of color prejudice in America” (xxii). “A sick distaste for her action” arose within Angela “but with it came a dark anger against a country and a society which could create such an issue” (162). Alain Locke states that “for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden” (3). Fauset condemns the “social system which stretched appearance so far beyond being” (58).
It should be noted that it is not only their “badge of white skin” that allows Angela and her mother to pass; it is also the fact that they are not different from whites in terms of “being.” Angela asserts that, “no one could have dreamed of their racial connections” while passing;

And if Jinny were here...she really would be just as capable of fitting into all this as mother and I; but they wouldn’t let her light (58) [emphasis added].

Fauset inverts the stereotypes of blacks, which have been created by the essentialist ideology, in every opportunity she gets in *Plum Bun*. Her portrayal of Jinny’s “light” contradicts whites’ association of blacks with darkness and evil. Fauset, like Larsen, delineates in her novel that the essentialist racial discourse is socially constructed to exploit the Other. She uses the trope of passing to call the entire social order into question. Elaine Ginsberg states that;

...allowing the possibility that “whiteness” or ethnicity can be performed or enacted, donned or discarded, exposes the anxieties about status and hierarchy created by the potential of boundary trespassing (4).

The one-drop rule, as a manifestation of the essentialist racial discourse, serves to the exploitation of blacks. The purpose of insisting on a fictive “knowledge,” namely racial essentialism, is to provide the white race the “power” over the black. As Foucault suggests, “The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power...It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (“Prison Talk,” 52). Angela perceives the truth behind the white racial discourse:

All the good things were theirs. Not, some coldly reasoning instinct within was saying, because they were white. But because for the present they had power and the badge of
that power was whiteness, very like the colours on the
escutcheon of a powerful house…a lot of things which are in the world for everybody really but which only white people, as far as I can see, get their hands on (73, 78).

It is the fabricated essentialist racial discourse that provides whites all the privileges. Smedley asserts that “‘race’ was a form of social identification and stratification that was seemingly grounded in the physical differences of populations interacting with one another in the New World, but whose real meaning rested in social and political realities” (694).

Like Clare’s white aunts in *Passing*, many essentialist characters, who believe that blacks are innately doomed to be servile, frequent Fauset’s novel. For instance, Madame hires Mattie as a servant on the basis of her race:

She knew that in spite of Mattie’s white skin there was black blood in her veins; in fact she would not have taken the girl on had she not been coloured; all servants must be negro…she felt dimly that all coloured people are thickly streaked with immorality. They were naturally loose, she reasoned, when she thought about it at all (29).

Whites imposed “social meanings on physical variations among human groups that served as the basis for the structuring of the total society” (Smedley, 693). Fauset criticizes the portrayal of blacks throughout the history as inferior, “culturally backward, primitive, intellectually stunted, prone to violence, morally corrupt, undeserving of the benefits of civilization, insensitive to the finer arts, and aesthetically ugly and animal-like” (Smedley. 696). She displays the working of the stereotypes in the minds of white essentialist characters in *Plum Bun*. Roger declares, “I’ve never seen a nigger with any [brains] yet” (216). The nurse at the hospital in Broad street “did not believe that black people were exactly human” (59). According to her, “there was no place for them in the
scheme of life so far as she could see” and “the niggers [should be] burned” (59-60). Her prejudice, which stems from the stereotypes, has dire consequences. As she does not allow Junius Murray to wait for his wife inside the hospital, she causes his sickness and death, which yields Mattie’s death as well.

By focusing on the physical features, “magnifying and exaggerating their differences,” whites have concluded that “the Africans and their descendants were lesser forms of human beings, and that their inferiority was natural and/or Godgiven” (Smedley, 694). This is highly reflected in the story of Anthony’s father. The bigoted white neighbors insult his wife, ruin his property and eventually kill him. However, they do not stop there; they also mutilate his dead body:

Souvenir hunters cut off his fingers, toes, his ears…They said it was unlike anything they had ever seen before, totally dehumanized (289).

They cannot even bear to see him in human form. According to their notion, God created only white man in His own image (Genesis, 1:27). Taking the mob into consideration, it is ironical that they associate savagery with blacks and civility with whites. Fauset inverts the stereotype by depicting the savagery of white essentialists. Anthony states that:

I’m not ashamed of my blood. Sometimes I think it’s the leaven that will purify this Nordic people of their cruelty and their savage lust of power (291).

In *Plum Bun*, contrary to the stereotypes, it is not blacks, but whites like Roger, Haley, Madame, Henry, the nurse and the reporters Miss Tilden, Mr. Paget and Banky who are cruel and savage. Throughout history, any means, such as colonizing and enslavement, is justified to realize the ends of racial essentialism, which are to keep the white race pure and to maintain power over the Other. Smedley asserts that “as an ideology structuring
social, economic, and political inequality, ‘race’ contradicted developing trends in England and in Western European societies that promoted freedom, democracy, equality, and human right” (694). The committee withdraws Miss Powell’s award based on her racial identity, as they are allegedly “acting in accordance with a natural law” (346). One of the reporters speaks “of mixed blood as the curse of the country:”

...a curse whose “insidiously concealed influence constantly threatens the wells of national race purity. Such incidents as these make one halt before he condemns the efforts of the Ku Klux Klan and its unceasing fight for 100 percent. Americanism” (352).

McDowell asserts that Fauset “comprehends the extent to which social hierarchies are color-coded...a coding that interacts America’s basic attitudes toward racial intermixture” (xxii). Angela acknowledges that in America “colour or the lack of it meant the difference between freedom and fetters;” likewise, Anthony affirms that, “in America it could make or mar life” (137, 291). Thus, in this milieu, the trope of passing emerges as a tool to subvert the white hegemony. Angela decides to pass after experiencing the victimization under the social hierarchy created by white essentialism:

I’m sick, sick, sick of seeing what I want dangled right before my eyes and then of having it snatched away from me and all of it through no fault of my own (77).

Once she passes for white, she not only ridicules the one-drop rule of white essentialism, but also thwarts the white hegemony over her. Samira Kawash affirms that:

While the mulatto challenges the myth of racial purity, the figure of the passing body goes a step further, challenging the stability of racial knowledge and therefore implicitly the stability of the order that has been constructed on that knowledge (131).
Passing & Harlem Renaissance Essentialism

In contrast to Larsen, Jessie Fauset is quintessentially a Rear Guard writer of the Harlem Renaissance. As the editor of Crisis, the Negro magazine of the Rear Guard school, she promotes Du Boisian assimilationism, which proposes that blacks should be treated as Americans, as opposed to Africanism of the “Harlem School” (Bone, 95). She accuses the writers of the Harlem School, the Afrocentric wing of the Harlem Renaissance, of presenting black life as exotic and primitive. She dedicates her writing career to demolishing those established stereotypes.

Alain Locke states in The New Negro that, “the decade that found us with a problem has left us with only a task” (4). In her writings, Fauset realizes this task, which is namely “a mission of rehabilitating the race in the world esteem from that loss of prestige for which the fate and conditions of slavery have so largely been responsible” (14). On the other hand, Larsen is not motivated by such a task in her fiction. Thus, McLendon inaccurately places both writers in the category of “a politics of resistance”:

…they wrote from a political need to counter representations of blackness and female black sexuality created by racism, as Barbara Christian has argued, as well as from a need to affirm racial pride (4).

McLendon’s observation is only valid for Fauset. She does “challenge precursory white writers, especially T.S. Stribling, whose Birthright, Fauset argued, depicted blacks who “just did not act and react in the way he described” (9). “Let the Negro speak for himself” says Locke (ix). Accordingly, In Plum Bun, Fauset successfully fulfills the task of “self-portraiture” of blacks by depicting “truest social portraiture” (ix) with a “fuller, truer self-expression” (9). As a Rear Guard writer, she “wished to apprise educated whites of the
existence of respectable Negroes, and to call their attention…to the facts of the racial injustice” (Bone, 97). Along with subverting racial stereotypes and depicting the factual portraits of the black community, she also promotes the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance such as racial pride, racial allegiances, racial sacrifices and uplift in *Plum Bun*. Besides, in her treatment of ‘racial identity,’ she embodies what in Chapter One I refer to as Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which is the cultural pluralist racial discourse of the Renaissance that allegedly treats race as a cultural construct as opposed to biological, and yet fails to eschew essentialism. Consequently, her employment of the trope of passing is marked by the racial discourse of the Harlem Renaissance. Thereby, she differs from Larsen by being a dedicated Rear Guard author.

As Alain Locke frequently emphasizes, the most significant achievement of the Harlem Renaissance was subverting the fictitious portrayals of blacks:

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Liberal minds to-day cannot be asked to peer with sympathetic curiosity into the darkened Ghetto or of a segregated race life. That was yesterday. Nor must they expect to find a mind a soul bizarre and alien as the mind of a savage, or even as naïve and refreshing as the mind of the peasant or the child. That too was yesterday…The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the boeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts (x, 5).
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Throughout *Plum Bun*, Fauset dispels the erroneous white assumptions about blacks. To begin with, by the 1920’s, African Americans were not treated as Americans. They were not even on the agenda of the Progressive assimilationism, the Americanization project that Benn Michaels describes as “nationalist,” which “concerned with eliminating sectional differences and deploying racial identity on behalf of both the nation and the state” (67). He asserts that:
...campaigns to Americanize the immigrant could have no parallel among African Americans, with respect to whom the very goal of the Americanization programs—assimilationism—was unthinkable. The point of Americanization was to make immigrants more like native Americans; the point of Jim Crow was to erect impassible barriers between African and native or European-born Americans (152 n. 62).

In *Plum Bun* such barriers are evident when Gertrude Quale, one of the white classmates of Angela in the art academy, looks at the sketch of Hetty Daniels and says, “What an interesting type!...What is she, not American?” (70). She is surprised at Angela’s response; “Oh coloured! Well, of course you would call her an American though I never think of darkies as Americans” (70). Fauset, along with W. E. B. Du Bois, critiques whites who see blacks as aliens rather than Americans. Du Bois insists that the existence of blacks is “not in opposition to, but in conformity with, the greater ideals of the American republic, in order that some day, on American soil, two world races may give each to each those characteristics which both so sadly lack” (197). Unlike the Afrocentric Harlem School, the Rear Guard promotes the idea that the Negroes should insist on their American identity. Underscoring the “doubles-consciousness” of black people, in *Crisis* (August 1921) Fauset states that:

> It is from the spiritual nostalgia that the American Negro suffers most. He has been away so long from that mysterious fatherland of his that like all the other descendants of voluntary and involuntary immigrants of the seventeenth century,—Puritan, pioneer, adventurer, indentured servant,—he feels himself American. (qtd. in Lena, 55).

What Fauset expresses is that “Africa does not mean anything in terms of home to the African American of the 1920s” (Lena, 56). For the Rear Guard, home is America, and the “race capital” is Harlem (Locke, 7).
Larsen’s treatment of America is different from Fauset’s, as she does not promote a dedication to American identity. She even implicitly disparages such a commitment. In *Passing*, Irene Redfield vehemently roots herself in America: “she belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted” (235). It would be a natural and reasonable desire, if it were not fulfilled at the expense of ruining her marriage and her husband’s happiness. Therefore, it can be asserted that Larsen critiques blacks’ blind attachment to America, which discriminates against them.

On the other hand, Fauset obviously situates blacks within the realm of America by challenging the myth that blacks are alien. To undermine the prejudiced portrayals of black people as an exotic, strange and alien community, she painstakingly depicts their world as an insider, the “truest social portraiture,” especially in the milieu of Harlem. Alain Locke asserts that in Harlem “Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination” (7). Fauset contributes to this “group expression” with her illustration of Harlem, which contradicts the prevalent images of the city as a source of primitivism and exoticism. First of all, she elucidates that it is not a dark and mysterious “underground” world as it is often depicted in many works such as *Nigger Heaven* by Carl Van Vechten. It is not merely populated by lower class people, workers, and/or criminals. Locke stresses that “with the Negro rapidly in process of class differentiation, if it ever was warrantable to regard and treat the Negro *en masse*” (5-6). Accordingly, in *Plum Bun*, Angela realizes that “not all these people…were servants or underlings or end men” (96). Fauset subverts the stereotypical images of Harlem as a
strange, mysterious and exotic place by repetitively asserting that it is not so different from the white parts of the city:

But she was amazed and impressed at this bustling, frolicking, busy, laughing great city within a greater one. She had never seen coloured life so thick, so varied, so complete...so undoubtedly life up here was just the same, she thought dimly, as life anywhere else. She saw a beautiful woman all brown and red dressed as exquisitely as anyone she had seen on Fifth Avenue...In all material, even in all practical things these two worlds were alike...[this stream of life] was deeper, more mightily moving even than the torrent of Fourteenth Street...She watched the moiling groups on Lenox Avenue; the amazingly well-dressed and good-looking throngs of young men...Nowhere downtown did she see life like this. Oh, this was fuller, richer, not finer but richer with the difference in quality that there is between velvet and silk. Harlem was a great city (96-98) [emphasis added].

It is ironical that Angela is surprised by what she sees in Harlem. She has not expected to see such a great city since evidently she has embodied the essentialist white attitude toward blacks and Harlem. Fauset’s descriptions deconstruct the illusion of Harlem in the minds of white people, and ironically of Angela. In other words, Fauset asserts that Harlem is not a “circus” full of bewilderment, or a place that should be “gazed at” as the exotic Other. As a Rear Guard writer, Fauset minimizes the differences between the two races. She indicates that even if there is a “difference in quality,” it is only “by kind” rather than “by degree;” two “kinds” which are almost mutually exclusive. If the white world is “silk,” then the black is “velvet.” Therefore, it is a vain attempt to look for primitive and exotic material in Harlem. Rather, Fauset calls attention to the educated and respectable black people:

There sat the most advanced coloured Americans, beautifully dressed, beautifully trained, whimsical, humorous, bitter, impatiently responsible, yet still
responsible...They are quoting all the sociologists in the world, Ladislas Starr told his little group in astonishment (217).

Fauset’s effort to “rehabilitate the race in the world esteem” by challenging the fictive stereotypes and restoring the truths about Harlem is contradicted by Larsen in *Passing*. Larsen underlines that even though Harlem is a place of liberation for blacks since they find their voices to express themselves, whites are not willing to hear those voices. They do not change their ideas as easily as Angela does. They continue to see what they want to see in Harlem. As Irene asserts, they are in Harlem “to see Negroes:”

A few purely and frankly enjoy themselves. Others to get material to turn into shekels. More, *to gaze* on these great and near great while they *gaze on the Negroes*” (198) [emphasis added].

Larsen highlights the fact that white people come to Harlem mostly out of curiosity, to see the primitive character of blacks. The word “gaze” evokes the idea of voyeurism of white people for the “exotic” Other. Larsen stresses that whites’ motivation to visit Harlem is “purely predatory” (206):

I think that what they feel is –well, a kind of emotional excitement. You know, the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it’s really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty (205).

It is not that Larsen is unaware of the other side of the medallion, which Fauset eagerly displays, but that she has no sense of Lockean “mission” to recuperate the images of Negro, to strive to depict Harlem’s “real” face as Fauset does. An anonymous reviewer of *The New York Times* states on April 28, 1929 that Larsen “is not especially concerned with presenting her milieu; apparently she is willing to take for granted that her reader
knows that negroes live in Harlem” (qtd in Kaplan, 86). Unlike Fauset, Larsen is not motivated by the discourse of “racial duty.” On the other hand, as a Harlem Renaissance author, Fauset fundamentally promotes the ideals of racial consciousness. Harlem, as the “laboratory of a great race-welding,” welcomes not only African Americans, but also Africans, West Indians and all other coloured people who share the same racial consciousness (Locke, 7). Fauset strikingly echoes Locke who states in *The New Negro* that “proscriptions and prejudice have thrown these dissimilar elements into a common area of contact and interaction” (6):

Harlem intrigued her; it was a wonderful city; it represented, she felt, the last word in racial pride, integrity and even self-sacrifice. Here were people of a very high intellectual type, exponents of the realest and most essential refinement living cheek by jowl with coarse or ill-bred or even criminal, certainly indifferent, members of their race. Of course some of this propinquity was due to outer pressure, but there was present, too, a hidden consciousness of race-duty, a something which if translated said: “Perhaps you do pull me down a little from the height to which I have climbed. But on the other hand, perhaps, I’m helping you to rise” (326).

The debate on racial sacrifice frequents *Plum Bun*. The nature of racial consciousness and pride along with the obligations of the race-duty and racial sacrifice is clearly delineated by Dr. Van Mier, who is a “thinly disguise of WEB. DuBois” (Sylvander, 173). He promotes “sacrifices made for the good of the whole:”

We must still look back and render service to our less fortunate, weaker brethren. And the first step toward making this a workable attitude is the acquisition not so much of a racial love as a racial pride. A pride that enables us to find out our own beautiful and praiseworthy, an intense chauvinism that is content with its own group; that loves its own as the French love their country, because it is their own. Such a pride can accomplish the impossible (218-219).
Unlike Larsen, Fauset sincerely believes in the ideals of the Renaissance, namely racial sacrifices and uplift. While Larsen’s Irene Redfield hypocritically supports racial uplift for the sake of convenience, Fauset’s Virginia deeply internalizes it. Fauset displays that “this deep feeling of race is at present the mainspring of Negro life” in Virginia’s remark (Locke, 11):

We’ve all of us got to make up our minds to the sacrifice of something…for the sake of some principle, for the sake of some immaterial quality like pride or intense self-respect or even a saving complacency; a spiritual tonic which the race needs perhaps just as much as the body might need iron or whatever it does need to give the proper kind of resistance. There are some things which an individual might want, but which he’d just have to give up forever for the sake of the more important whole (69).

Virginia echoes Locke who asserts that “each generation, however, will have its creed, and that of the present is the belief in the efficacy of collective effort, in race cooperation” (11). Consequently, it is candidly reflected in Plum Bun that one of the utmost significant cultural traits of blacks in the 1920’s is determined to be the belief and practice of “racial duty.”

Although the Harlem Renaissance embraced cultural pluralism by viewing race as a cultural construct, it failed to eschew references to biology and heredity that it rejects. Accordingly, Benn Michaels asserts that the transformation of the concept of racial identity into the concept of cultural identity is never completely realized. He states that “the transformation is never complete because culture, imagined not as our actual beliefs and practices but as the beliefs and practices that are appropriate for us, can never free itself from race; the transformation is always implicit because race presents itself from the start as a kind of ideal, something we must not only embody but live up to
Undoubtedly, Fauset, in contrast to Larsen, embodies Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which is proved to be fundamentally essentialist, as implicit in its adaptation of cultural pluralism and explicit in its insistence on "negro blood." On the one hand, Fauset criticizes the one-drop rule, which theoretically if not practically renders mulattoes as blacks; on the other hand, she herself ironically treats mulattoes as blacks. In other words, Fauset observes the one-drop rule in determining racial identity, which aligns her with the white essentialists. As Benn Michaels astutely observes, "mulattoes vanish by being made black" by both sides of the color line (64). Virginia, Fauset’s mouthpiece in *Plum Bun*, condemns Angela’s passing because, according to her, mulattoes belong to the black race:

…in this country public opinion is against any infusion of black blood it would seem an awfully decent thing to put yourself, even in the face of appearances, on the side of black blood and say: “Look here, this is what a mixture of black and white really means!” (80).

In the implicit juxtaposition of Angela and Dr. Van Mier, Fauset reinforces the necessity for mixed blood people to remain within the black realm. While Angela’s passing is depicted as pathetic by Fauset, Van Mier’s accomplishments as a black leader are underlined:

Of course he doesn’t get it from his white blood; he gets it from all his blood. It’s the mixture that makes him what he is. Otherwise all white people would be gods. It’s the mixture and the endurance which he has learned from being coloured in America and the determination to see life without bitterness (221).

Fauset unconsciously justifies what she repudiates, namely racial essentialism and the one-drop rule, as she imposes the same meaning on Angela’s white skin. Traditionally, both white and Harlem essentialism presuppose that a mulatto’s white skin is a matter of appearance and has no relevance in his racial identity, while his black blood constitutes
his real “being.” Fauset claims that there is no difference between two sisters as appearance does not count; blood does. Virginia asserts of Angela that “the same blood flows in [her] veins and in the same proportion” (79). In her notion, if any advantage has been granted to Angela for her white skin, then, she must certainly employ it in the service of her race:

Only I don’t think you ought to mind quite so hard when they do find out the facts. It seems sort of an insult to yourself. And then, too, it makes you lose a good chance to do something for—for all of us who can’t look like you but who really have the same combination of blood you have (79).

Fauset, like Irene Redfield of Passing, does not hesitate to refer to “blood” as the ultimate signifier, especially when the “culture” of the passer turns out be insufficient to determine his/her racial identity. Further, she employs the same tools as those of white essentialists, in order to subvert the racial stereotypes. She criticizes white essentialists for attaching fictive meanings to the black blood; however she ironically does the same thing in her fiction. In other words, instead of asserting that blood has no agency in determining one’s character, she reversely imposes negative implications on the white blood. On the one hand, Fauset criticizes Roger, the antagonist, who assumes that Van Mier has some “proportion of white blood…in his veins,” as to his notion, “that’s where he gets his ability” (221); on the other hand, she associates all of Angela’s insensitive and cruel behavior with her white blood. Virginia asserts that it is the white blood in Angela’s vein, which makes her shamefully abandon her sister and pass for white:

she remembered that it had been possible in slavery times for white men and women to mistreat their mulatto relations, their own flesh and blood, selling them into deeper slavery in the far South or standing by watching them beaten, almost, if not completely, to death. Perhaps
there was something fundamentally different between white and coloured blood after all...Perhaps you are right, Angela; perhaps there is an extra infusion of white blood in your veins which lets you see life at another angle (168).

Consequently, unlike Larsen, who treats race as a cultural construct that can be performed voluntarily, Fauset’s notion of race is embedded in the Harlem Renaissance essentialism in terms of its promotion of race duty and its embodiment of racial essentialism.

In a decade when racial allegiance was promoted, racial passing was evidently viewed as racial self-hatred and disloyalty. Carlyle Van Thomson describes passing as “the Faustian bargain in which the black protagonists make a devilish deal and tragically sell their souls to whiteness” (19). Fauset, along with most of the Harlem intellectuals, condemns passing. While Mary Helen Washington views it as an “obscene form of salvation,” Fauset, more bitterly, depicts it as an “obscene” act, yet with no promises of “salvation” (354). According to Fauset, racial passing is a kind of crime that will eventually be repented. Although Plum Bun is often associated with the fairy tale genre by many critics, Angela’s passing story emerges more as a kind of Aristotelian tragedy, in which the hero has hamartia, a “tragic flaw,” that leads to his downfall. In Aristotelian tragedy, the flaw is often the hero’s misjudgments and his lack of perception. The punishment generally exceeds the crime, but it is implied that the misfortune is not wholly deserved. At the end, the fall of the hero turns out not to be a total loss, as it brings a renewed self-knowledge, awareness, and insight to him, which he previously lacks. The parallelism between an Aristotelian tragedy and Plum Bun elucidates Fauset’s posture on the matter of racial passing as a Harlem Renaissance essentialist. She stresses that Angela is erroneous in her decision to pass, because the white world is not as
promising as she thinks, and the black world is not as wretched as she thinks. Angela’s tragic flaw is her misperception of both white and black worlds. Her crime is breaking away from her familial and racial milieu for an “illusion.” Her downfall comes with loneliness, heartbreak and ultimate longing for “home.” Her fall brings positive disillusionment, as she gains a renewed racial consciousness and appreciation. She finds happiness only when she comes back “home.”

Indisputably, Fauset’s treatment of the trope of passing remarkably differs from Larsen’s. While in *Plum Bun*, the passer, Angela, is the object of criticism for her misjudgments and deeds, in *Passing* it is Irene, the non-passer, who is criticized. Besides, Fauset painstakingly depicts the “fallaciousness” (18) of Angela explicitly, in an almost didactic way, whereas Larsen implicitly delineates Irene’s unreliable perceptions. The reader empathizes with Clare, as she passes for white to avoid victimization particularly by her white aunts. It is also significant to note that, “to Clare, there is nothing tragic about being black. She makes no profound sacrifices, no deeply ethical choice for one race over the other” (Hutchinson 299). However, in the way Fauset depicts Angela, it is hard to sympathize with her. Unlike Clare, she does believe that the white race is unique, while the black is doomed. Unlike Clare, she has a family that loves and cares about her. Moreover, she is neither poor, nor in a servile position like Clare was after her father’s death. On the contrary:

Angela possessed an undeniable air, and she dressed well, even superlatively. Her parents’s death had meant the possession of half the house and half of three thousand dollars’ worth of insurance. Her salary was adequate, her expenses light. Indeed even her present mode of living gave her little cause for complaint except that her racial affiliations narrowed her confines. But she was restlessly conscious of a desire for broader horizons (64).
Fauset suggests that it is Angela’s fantasy of “broader horizons” in the white world that causes her to take the “unspeakable” action of passing (165). As McLendon asserts, she “(mis)perceives her ‘black’ body as a limiting force and therefore passes in an attempt to erase difference and achieve selfhood” (9). To Angela, “colour or rather the lack of it” seems “the one absolute prerequisite to the life of which she was always dreaming” (13), and therefore, passing seems to be “the path which lead to broad thoroughfares, large, bright houses, delicate niceties of existence,” which are allegedly found in the white world (12). Fauset underscores that it is not Angela’s passing, but rather her misperception of the white and black world is her “tragic flaw:”

Little Angela Murray…never realized that her mother took her pleasure among all these pale people because it was there that she happened to find it. It never occurred to her that the delight which her mother obviously showed in meeting friends on Sunday morning when the whole united Murray family came out of church was the same as she showed on Chesnutt Street the previous Saturday, because she was finding the qualities which her heart craved, bustle, excitement and fashion. The daughter could not guess that if the economic status or the racial genius of coloured people had permitted them to run modish hotels or vast and popular department stores her mother would have been there. She drew for herself certain clearly formed conclusions which her subconscious mind thus codified: First, that the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure—are for white-skinned people only. Secondly, that Junius and Virginia were denied these privileges because they were dark; here her reasoning bore at least an element of verisimilitude but she missed the essential fact that her father and sister did not care for this type of pleasure. The effect of her fallaciousness was to cause her to feel a faint pity for her unfortunate relatives and also to feel that coloured people were to be considered fortunate only in the proportion in which they measured up to the physical standards of white people (17-18) [emphasis added].
As McLendon affirms, Angela “has learned to pity people with dark skin, to know false shame” (39). She is so “immersed in the discourse of fantasy, pretense, and disguise that she is unable to recognize reality” (41). She misinterprets the nature of the “little excursion” to the white world with her mother, and fails to “take them at their face value” (16).

Fauset demarcates the distinction between lifetime racial passing and occasional passing by juxtaposing Mattie and Angela. Like most Harlem essentialists, to Fauset, it is acceptable to pass for convenience, to ridicule essentialist white people along with their unjust one-drop rule, as long as no disloyalty to race is involved:

Angela’s mother employed her colour very much as she practiced certain winning usages of smile and voice to obtain indulgences, which meant much to her and which took nothing from anyone else. Then, too, she was possessed of a keener sense of humour than her daughter; it amused her when by herself to take lunch at an exclusive restaurant whose patrons would have been panic-stricken if they had divined the presence of a “coloured” woman no matter how little her appearance differed from theirs. It was with no idea of disclaiming her own that she sat in orchestra seats which Philadelphia denied to coloured patrons…her infrequent occupation of orchestra seats was due merely to a mischievous determination to flout a silly and unjust law…She had no desire to be of these people, but she liked to look on (15-16) [emphasis added].

Fauset echoes Langston Hughes, for whom “the bigoted whites deserve to be cheated and fooled” (Wald, 7). To her, it is harmless to pass for convenience. Since “the world was made for everybody,” it is very justifiable to take advantage of it every now and then by not observing the “unjust law.” She draws a thick line between occasional passing and lifetime passing—a line, of which Angela is “unhappily, unaware” (19):

Her mother…was perfectly satisfied, absolutely content whether she was part of that white world with Angela or up
on little Opal Street with her dark family and friends. Whereas it seemed to Angela that all the things she most wanted were wrapped up with white people (73).

Fauset didactically and repeatedly underlines that Angela is mistaken from the beginning, and, thereby, foreshadows her downfall. In other words, racial passing would not bring her happiness, firstly because she passes for an illusion. Secondly, in contrast to the “essential harmlessness” (19) of occasional passing, racial passing is harmful at the personal and social level, since, after all, it means abandoning the familial and racial environment, which results in loneliness and anxiety. Accordingly, Angela passes for white with great expectations. However, disappointment is all she gets out of it. She has lost more than she has gained in the white world. Unlike Clare, she feels guilty toward her race. She continually asserts that she will compensate her “betrayal” by doing “lots of good among coloured people,” especially by helping Virginia, Anthony and Miss Powell (131). If, by passing, she accomplishes her dreams, namely marrying a wealthy white man and being a successful artist, she “can atone for it all” (162):

It should be very useful. Perhaps she’d win Roger around to helping coloured people. She’d look up all sorts of down-and-outers and give them a hand…I’ll really help humanity, lots of coloured folks will be much better off on account of me. (144, 162).

She neither fulfills her dreams, nor can help anybody including herself merely by becoming white. She gradually starts questioning her action:

Minutely, bit by bit...she went over her life; was there anything, any overt act, any crime which she had committed and for which she might atone? She had been selfish, yes; but, said her reasoning and unwearied mind, “everybody who survives at all is selfish, it is one of the pre-requisites of survival.” In passing from one race to the other she had done no harm to anyone. Indeed she had been forced to take this action. But she should not have forsaken
Virginia…There remained then only the particular incident of her cutting Jinny on that memorable night in the station. That was the one really cruel and unjust action of her whole life (308).

Washington states that, “the woman who passes is required to deny everything about her past—her girlhood, her family, places with memories, folk customs, folk rhymes, her language, the entire long line of people who have gone before her” (354). Unlike Larsen, Fauset presents this alienation as the most outrageous outcome of racial passing. Angela comes to terms with the “harm” that passing requires in the denial of things that matters, at least for Fauset:

> The method thereof might come in perhaps for a little censure. But otherwise her harshest critics, if unbiased, could only say that instead of sharing the burdens of her own group she had elected to stray along a path where she personally could find the greatest ease, comfort and expansion (332).

Ironically, Angela fails to find “ease, comfort or expansion” in her preferred path. Besides, “she had long since given up the search for happiness” (333). Due to the complications she has been going through, she starts to realize her wrongdoings. “Granted” she says, “but does that carry with it as penalty the shattering of a whole life, or even the suffering of years? Certainly the punishment is far in excess of the crime” (308). Fauset reflects that Angela’s misery is her downfall, which has resonance with the pattern of fall in an Aristotelian tragedy. According to Fauset, punishment should exceed the crime, in order to discourage passing. Moreover, she solicits some sympathy for Angela from the reader, underlining that the fault does not solely rest on her, but also partly on the social system that “forces” her “to take this action.” As it would be in an
Aristotelian tragedy, Angela’s downfall is not a complete loss. It brings “racial awakening” and “a dramatic flowering of a new race-spirit” (Locke, xi).

Along with her illustration of racial passing, Fauset’s treatment of “homecoming” conforms to the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. “The invariable outcome” of the passing narratives written by the Harlem Renaissance authors is the “disillusionment with the life on the other side of the line, a new appreciation of racial values, and irresistible longing to return to the Negro community” (Bone, 98). Thereby, the whole idea of writing a passing narrative is to bring the passer back “home” with a renewed racial consciousness. As Kaplan asserts, homecoming “signals racial pride” (xvii):

The passing narrative could underscore this ethic of allegiance and loyalty by representing the moment of regret—the passer’s awareness that the privileges and benefits of whiteness are nothing but a “mess of pottage”—as an ethical and moral crisis, a growing consciousness of “crossing the line” as betrayal (xix).

In Plum Bun, the reader is informed from the beginning that the protagonist will eventually reunite with her “family,” by the epigraph “that gives the novel its title and that structures its five sections” (McDowell, xvi):

To Market, To Market,  
To Buy a Plum Bun;  
Home again, Home again  
Market is done.

Fauset uses this nursery rhyme as the epigraph of her novel, firstly to demonstrate the childish naivety of the act of passing which seems promising at the outset but is brutal in reality, and secondly to hint at the disillusionment and the inevitable homecoming of the passer. On the other hand, Larsen uses a stanza from Countee Cullen’s famous poem “Heritage” as her epigraph:
On three centuries removed
From the scenes his father loved
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree
What is Africa to me?

In contrast to Fauset, Larsen implies that the passer has long been disconnected from her former racial milieu and has no inclination to return. Taking this opposition into consideration, it is inaccurate to claim, like Amritjit Singh, that both *Passing* and *Plum Bun* “reflect the same pattern in their octoroon heroine’s life” which is:

...yielding to the temptation of passing as white, living as mistress or wife to a bigoted white man, and *finally returning* to the fold of black life when she begins missing the warmth, the color, the vivacity of black life. (Singh, 93).

It is not Larsen, but Fauset who conforms to this typical arrangement of the passing narratives, which has been shaped by her Harlem Renaissance essentialism. The passer, Angela, eventually awakens to the harsh realities lying beneath her fantasy-world. While Virginia “without making an effort, seemed overwhelmed, almost swamped by friendships, pleasant intimacies, a thousand charming interests” (241), “life which had seemed so promising, so golden, had failed to supply [Angela] with a single friend to whom she could turn in an hour of extremity” (234):

Virginia was established in New York with friends, occupation, security, leading an utterly open life, no secrets, no subterfuges, no goals to be reached by devious ways. Jinny had changed her life and been successful. Angela had changed hers and had found pain and unhappiness (243).

As Pfeiffer asserts, Angela’s passing, her ostensible “experience of freedom,” is “characterized by estrangement, drift, and alienation” (119). Fauset implies that passing does not provide “salvation,” as Angela only finds in the white world “lurking horrors of
homelessness, negation, loneliness, confinement” (Sylvander, 174). After a series of disappointments, Angela starts longing for “home:”

Her *roots*! Angela echoed the expression to herself on a note that was wholly envious. How marvelous to go back to parents, relatives, friends with whom one had never lost touch! The *peace*, the *security*, the companionableness of it! This was a relationship which she had forfeited with everyone, even with Jinny...To this Angela would make her appeal; she would acknowledge her foolishness, her *selfishness*; she would bare her heart and crave for her sister’s forgiveness. And then they would live together...And once again she would know the *bliss* and *happiness of a home* and the *stabilities* of friendships culled from a certain definite class of people, not friendships resulting from mere chance...The main thing was she would know once more, the joys of ordinary living, *home*, *companionship*, *loyalty*, *security*, the *bliss of possessing and being possessed* (241, 252-253) [emphasis added].

As Kaplan asserts, in traditional passing narratives written by black writers, “the black idea of culture, partly because it *is* coded black, emerges—generally after an agonizing, messy struggle—as finally the more appealing” (“On Modernism and Race,”163). Ironically, Angela echoes Irene Redfield who is blindly attached to her race for the sake of “security,” “peace,” “bliss and happiness of home,” and “stabilities.” Clearly, unlike Larsen, Fauset would never condemn “the Irene types” for their conformity to Harlem Renaissance essentialism, since they serve to uphold her ideals of race and middle-class morality. As Hazel Carby astutely observes, while Fauset “represented in her fiction a middle-class code of morality and behaviour,” Larsen, “in direct contrast to Fauset, did not feel that the middle class were the guardians of civilized behavior and moral values (167, 171). Adopting an “Irenean” attitude, in order to avoid more “complications” and to find “peace” and “bliss and happiness of home,” Angela reclaims her “black blood.”
Sooner or later I’d have been admitting—‘confessing,’ as the papers say,—my black blood. The truth of the matter is, the whole business was just making me fagged to death...All of the complications of these last few years—and you can’t guess what complications of there have been, darling, child—have been based on this business of passing” (354).

Although Angela’s homecoming is due to those “complications,” Fauset ironically reflects her moment of homecoming as a reaction to unjust racist attitudes prevalent in her white environment. As she witnesses the cruel racist remarks and insults of the reporters toward Miss Powell,

Some icy crust which had formed over Angela’s heart shifted, wavered, broke and melted. Suddenly it seemed as though nothing in the world were so important as to allay the poignancy of Miss Powell’s situation (346).

Beside her disillusionment of the alleged promises of the white world, the reporters’ racist attitudes turn out to be the final straw:

I mean that if Miss Powell isn’t wanted, I’m not wanted either. You imply that she’s not wanted because she’s coloured. Well, I’m coloured too...Can’t you see to my thinking it’s a great deal better to be coloured and to miss scholarships and honours and preferments, than to be the contemptible things which you’ve all shown yourselves to be this morning? Coming here baiting this poor girl and her mother, thrusting your self-assurance down their throats, branding yourselves literally dogs in the manger? (347).

Mary Helen Washington asks; “where does the woman who passes find the equanimity to live by the privileged status that is based on the oppression of her own people?” (354). Fauset thinks even the most selfish ones like Angela cannot find any equanimity in such a milieu. Consequently, Angela’s downfall—the contradictions she has been going through—is compensated for by her “renewed race-spirit” and her “spiritual emancipation” (Locke, ix, 4). The real transformation of Angela is realized not by her
passing, but by her homecoming, in which she discerns the “truth” by repudiating her tragic flaw, namely her misperceptions. It should be noted that her transformation is paralleled with the transformation of the Old Negro into the New Negro depicted by Locke, since the outcome of her homecoming emerges as “the development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance” (10), “rejoicing to be delivered from self-pity and condescension” (8) and “rising from social disillusionment to race pride” (11).

In consequence, Fauset’s disapproval of racial passing as well as her treatment of homecoming as “an affirmation of racial loyalty” thoroughly conforms to the tenets of Harlem Renaissance essentialism. By being a Rear Guard writer of the Harlem Renaissance, and by adopting Harlem Renaissance essentialism systematically, Fauset differs from Larsen in terms of ideology.

**Passing & Identity Politics**

Fauset, unlike Larsen, embodies a modernist notion of essential, fixed and immutable identity, instead of a postmodernist performative concept of identity. Her approach is undoubtedly shaped by Harlem Renaissance essentialism, which promotes adherence to the racial identity of the New Negro. In contrast to Larsen, as a member of the Rear Guard, Fauset conforms to the traditional patterns of black passing narratives. Although Robert Bone accurately observes that, “since the moral of these novels is to accept one’s racial identity, they represent an important manifestation of Renaissance nationalism,” he fails to see that unlike Fauset, Larsen does not fit into this scheme (98). Larsen never portrays passing as one’s masking her/his ostensibly authentic identity, since she does not believe in “identity essentialism” (Benn Michaels, 140). Fauset, on the other hand, believes in the demarcation of races, reflects it as a form of disguise, in which
there is a discrepancy between the passer’s authentic and apparent racial identity. The common understanding of passing is “to disguise oneself, to simulate whiteness, to conceal the truth under a false appearance:”

The one who passes is, in this common understanding, really, indisputably black; but the deceptive appearance of the body permits such a one access to the exclusive opportunities of whiteness (Kawash, 125-26).

Accordingly, in *Plum Bun*, Fauset emphasizes that Angela is inherently black although she is masking her “essential” racial identity by the act of passing:

Stolen waters are the sweetest. And Angela never forgot that they were stolen. She thought: “Here I am having everything that a girl ought to have just because I had sense enough to suit my actions to my appearance.” The realization, the secret fun bubbling back in some hidden recess of her heart, brought colour to her cheeks, a certain temerity to her manner (123).

According to Fauset, racial identity is an essence, which may be camouflaged but never be eliminated by passing. Thomson reflects this general attitude of Harlem Renaissance essentialists as he asserts that passing “fundamentally means accepting an unstable identity” (130). On the one hand, Harlem Essentialism postulates that race is not an essence but a cultural construct, on the other hand, it ironically portrays racial passing not as a practice of another racial identity, but as the “destruction of the self” (Thomson, 18). As Benn Michaels affirms “any notion of cultural identity that goes beyond the description of our actual beliefs and practices must rely on race” (“Response,” 121).

Hence, the racial discourse of the Harlem Renaissance turns out not to be cultural but essentialist. To Fauset, accordingly, “the question of who we are continues to be understood as prior to questions about what we do” (*Our America*, 15). Angela’s authentic racial identity is always described as black; passing does not change it. In an
instance, Angela asserts herself that, “she belonged to a tragic race” (143). While passing for white for many years, in a moment of distress, she associates herself with the black race again:

‘I’ll keep on living.’ She thought then of black people, of the race of her parents and of all the odds against living which a cruel, relentless fate had called on them to endure. And she saw them as people powerfully, almost overwhelmingly, endowed with the essence of life. They had to persist, had to survive because they did not know how to die (309).

Unlike Clare Kendry, who embodies a plural and shifting identity without internalizing one racial identity over the other, Angela always remains black inside. She performs whiteness by passing, but she never claims it as her real racial identity. In Plum Bun, Fauset implies that there is only one inherent identity, which can be lost by passing and reclaimed by homecoming. Her understanding of identity politics, which is aligned with the racial discourse of the Harlem Renaissance, ironically conforms to essentialism, because, as Benn Michaels affirms, “in order for a culture to be lost, it must be separable from one’s actual behavior, and in order for it to be separable from one’s actual behaviour, it must be anchorable in race” (121).

**Passing, Class & Gender**

Like Larsen, Fauset underlines that socioeconomic factors motivate mulattoes most to pass for white. McLendon notes that:

In an interview after the publication of Plum Bun (1929), she stated that there were some twenty thousand blacks passing in New York, explaining that “near-white Negroes” did not “love their dark relatives less, but…they desired the advantage of the white race more” (9).
Likewise, Mary McAleer Balkun affirms that the passer “embodies a very recognizable
desire- the uniquely American dream of success and social mobility- while also
subverting any possibility of using race as a signifier” (123). Angela singlemindedly
seeks wealth as she passes for white:

She saw her life rounding out like a fairy tale. Poor,
coloured—coloured in America; unknown, a nobody! And
here at her hand was the forward thrust shadow of love and
great wealth (131).

Passing is the tool for Angela to her ends of wealth and success. As Steven Beluscio
asserts, the passer’s “means are largely racial, his or her ends are at least in part
socioeconomic” (16). Angela rejects Anthony just because of his “poverty:”

She was sick of tragedy; she belonged to a tragic race. God
knows it’s time for one member of it to be having a little
fun (143).

Ironically, she can find “fun” as long as she is passing for white. In other words, “a racial
transformation must take place before any other transformation becomes remotely
possible” (Beluscio, 16). The price of passing should be worth the complications.
Thereby, Angela prefers Roger to Anthony, not because of love, but because of his
wealth. Accordingly, she finds, at least for a while, with Roger what she passes for:

Hers was a mixture of materialism and hedonism, and at
this moment, the latter quality was upper most in her life
(207).

Gender and class are intrinsically related in *Plum Bun*. Fauset’s treatment of
gender issues is different than Larsen’s. In *Passing*, it is telling that both Irene’s and
Clare’s marriages are suffocating. It may or may not mean that to Larsen all marriages
are eventually fated to fade away or ultimately become a burden on women’s shoulder.
Yet, it is obvious that she criticizes women’s self-deceptive, blind adherence to a rotten
and overwhelming marriage. On the other hand, Fauset fervently promotes marriage. As Hazel Carby astutely observes, in Fauset’s fiction, “women ultimately had to be saved from the consequences of their independence and become wives” (168). Angela cannot attain material prosperity merely by passing for white; she needs to find a white husband also:

She was young, she was temporarily independent, she was intelligent, she was white. She remembered an expression “free, white and twenty-one,”—this was what it meant, then, this sense of owning the world, this realization that other things being equal, all things were possible... To accomplish this she must have money and influence; indeed, since she was so young, she would need even protection; perhaps it would be better to marry a white man...People would say “I’m going to have my portrait done by ‘Mory.’” But all this would call for position, power, wealth. And again she said to herself...“I might marry—a white man. Marriage is the easiest way for a woman to get those things, and white man have them” (88, 111-12).

Deborah McDowell asserts that in “the Freudian 1920s, the Jazz Age of sexual abandon and ‘free love’—when female sexuality, in general, was acknowledged and commercialized in the advertising, beauty, and fashion industries—black women’s novels preserve their reticence about sexuality” (Passing, xiii). It should be noted that, in Plum Bun, marriage is valued by blacks, while “free love” is promoted by whites such as Paulette and Roger. As McLendon asserts, Fauset “effectively displaces the alleged sexual promiscuity of black women onto the bodies of these white women” (37). After Angela repents and repudiates her relationship with Roger, and develops a “self-sufficiency, uncovered and sustained by work,” she reclains Anthony (McDowell, Plum Bun, xxi):
For by now he was representing not only surcease from loneliness but peace and security…now she saw [marriage] as an end in itself; for women certainly; the only; the most desirable and natural end. From this state, a gifted, ambitious woman might reach forth and acquit herself well in any activity. But marriage must be there first, the foundation, the substratum (274).

Fauset does not favor the “new woman” that has emerged in her period. Unlike Larsen, whose representation of both Clare’s and Irene’s flawed marriages reveals that she does not idealize this institution, Fauset thinks that even the most successful and self-dependent women should get married.

Hence, it is ironical that she entitles her novel as *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*. The novel is the mouthpiece of the status quo of the Harlem Renaissance, not only with its promotion of middle-class morality, and marriage, but also with its glorification of racial identity, pride, and allegiance. As a Rear Guard author, a typical New Negro, and a follower of Du Bois, who famously asserted “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists,” Fauset writes *Plum Bun* in a propagandist way to attack the prejudiced white society, and the supremacist essentialists, to subvert the stereotypes, to promote race consciousness among blacks, and to condemn passing as race betrayal (Walden, 288). On the other hand, Larsen has a disparate posture in *Passing*, as she does not idealize but critiques the tenets of the Harlem Renaissance. She attacks not only white racial essentialism, but also Harlem Renaissance essentialism. She seems to be against shaping one’s life, identity and/or writing career according to an ideology.
CONCLUSION

In the 1920s, “when the Negro was in vogue,” the concept of race was one of the hot debate topics in America (Hughes, 227). On the one hand, white supremacists were still vehemently advocating racial essentialism, which categorized races referring to their biological and hereditary differences. On the other hand, initiated by Franz Boas, in many circles the concept of race was replaced by the concept of culture, which was shaped by “experience and historical conditions” rather than biological racial inheritance (Hutchinson, 70). The most renowned group that supported the Boasian tenet was the cultural pluralists. In this milieu, the Harlem Renaissance emerged, and played a significant role in attacking racial essentialism and white supremacy by adopting cultural pluralism. It has been conventionally asserted that the Harlem Renaissance was “a striking experiment in cultural pluralism, with pervasive connections to Boasian anthropology” (Hutchinson, 90). As the “Boasian concepts became bedrock assumptions among New Negro authors,” they advocated the idea that race was not a biological phenomenon, but a cultural construct (Hutchinson, 62). In their writings, they dedicatedly represented black culture in order to “rehabilitate the race in the world esteem,” and subvert the prevalent stereotypes (Locke, 14).

However, in this thesis, I argued that, although it repudiates essentialism in theory, the racial discourse of the Harlem Renaissance, adopting and adapting cultural pluralism, turns out to be essentialist as well. Walter Benn Michael’s reading of cultural pluralism as “essentialized racism” in his controversial study *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* informed my reading of the Harlem Renaissance (64). He
underlines that cultural pluralism is a commitment to “identity essentialism” (140). He further asserts that:

Culture, put forward as a way of preserving the primacy of identity while avoiding the embarrassments of blood, would turn out to be more effective...as a way of reconceptualizing and preserving the essential contours of racial identity (13).

Accordingly, Harlem Renaissance writers like Jessie Redmon Fauset demarcated and celebrated the “distinguished” black culture in a way that conforms to the slogan of cultural pluralism, “Difference, Not Inferiority” (Benn Michaels, 63). The Renaissance writers’ fervent call to racial allegiance, racial consciousness, race duty and uplift reflected their modernist attachment to racial identity. However, their recourse to racial essentialism was not limited to their methodological conservation of their racial/cultural identity. They also sporadically referred to “blood” in their characterization of race, as observed in *Plum Bun*. Consequently, I coined the term Harlem Renaissance essentialism to underline that, in contrast to a mainstream reading of the New Negro, certain Renaissance writers failed to embody the Boasian theory of replacing the concept of race with the concept of culture, and they ironically employed racial essentialism, which they repudiated.

Secondly, in this thesis, I delineated the fallaciousness of the traditional categorization of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen under the Rear Guard school of the Harlem Renaissance. Although they were rooted in the same environment, they embodied different postures in terms of racial ideology. Jessie Redmon Fauset, employing Harlem Renaissance essentialism, emerged as a pioneer writer in the Renaissance. In contrast, Nella Larsen remained aberrant in the black intellectual circle, as she did not assume, but questioned, Harlem Renaissance essentialism. In *Passing*,
Larsen criticized almost everything Fauset promoted in *Plum Bun*. Therefore, many critics, such as Robert Bone, Amritjit Singh, Carlyle Van Thomson, Jacquelyn McLendon and Thadious Davis, have inaccurately schooled both writers together as the Rear Guard of the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, it is only George Hutchinson who observes the fact that they are “ideological antagonists” to each other. He criticizes Davis, who claims that Fauset serves as a role model to Larsen:

Indeed, many of Fauset’s attributes match those of women Larsen attacks in her fiction. One role of Fauset in Larsen’s literary career may have been to serve as an ideological antagonist—someone whose vision of racial identity, especially for mulattoes, Larsen consciously rejected and may have written her fiction to refute. In Fauset’s novels, mulatto characters overcome their weakness by repudiating their links to white people, being welcomed into the black bourgeoisie, and becoming whole-hearted “race” men and women, committed to uplifting the race. No doubt at considerable cost, including a certain amount of ostracism, Larsen rejected this option in both her writing and her life (“Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race,” Kaplan, 458).

In agreement with Hutchinson, this comparative study of *Passing* and *Plum Bun* demonstrated that Larsen and Fauset had blatantly different notions of race and racial passing. On the one hand, dramatizing race as “performative reiteration,” Larsen refuted essentialism in the characterization of race and racial identity (Rottenberg, 436). On the other hand, Fauset viewed race and racial identity as predetermined essences, “an object of cathexis,” as “something that might be lost or found, defended or surrendered” (Michaels, 141). Hence, the trope of passing is manifested in different and often conflicting ways in *Passing* and *Plum Bun*.

As Hutchinson suggests, Larsen desires “a world in which races would not exist and women’s bodies would not be mortgaged to them” (Fabre and Feith, 178). In
Passing, she demonstrates the failure of essentialist notions of race, the oppression of the socially and politically constructed and imposed white racial discourse, and the futility of Harlem essentialism and racial pride. The trope of passing not only collapses these notions, but also provides self-creativity in terms of personal identity, and gives one a chance “to be a person,” along with the economic freedom it may bring.

In Plum Bun, Fauset employs the trope of passing to subvert the stereotypes attached by white essentialists to “black blood.” She also reflects the socioeconomic drive behind racial passing. However, she never justifies the act of passing, even if it is “forced” by this prejudiced and unjust milieu (308). It is depicted as deception, race betrayal and loss of identity. Thus, she condemns passing by promoting racial allegiance and “race co-operation” in the given adverse environment. Consequently, she conforms to the Renaissance racial ideology, with her embodiment of Harlem Renaissance essentialism, her disapproval of passing, her celebration of racial consciousness, and her commitment to racial identity.

Consequently, this comparative study contributed to the field of African American modernism with its unconventional reading of the Harlem Renaissance racial discourse as essentialist, and its assertion that Nella Larsen, unlike Jessie Redmon Fauset, was an atypical writer in the Renaissance circle.
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