JESSIE REDMON FAUSET

(1882 - 1961)

American editor, novelist, poet, and essayist.

Langston Hughes called Jessie Fauset one of "three people who midwifed the so-called New Negro Literature into being." As the literary editor of the NAACP magazine the *Crisis,* Fauset nurtured and launched the careers of several names now much better known than hers. She also edited and wrote most of the material for the *Brownie's Book,* a groundbreaking magazine for Black children overseen by her mentor, W. E. B. Du Bois. Fauset was also one of the most prolific women novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, penning four novels of Black middle-class life, and it is for her novels that she is most remembered by modern scholars.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Fauset was the daughter of an African Methodist Episcopal minister, Redmon Fauset, and his wife, Annie Seamon Fauset, who died when Jessie was still a child. She was born April 27, 1882, in Camden County, New Jersey, part of suburban Philadelphia. The Fausets were a large family: after Annie's death, Redmon Fauset married a widow with three children, then had three more children in the marriage. The size of the family kept them fairly poor, despite their father's middle-class profession.

Fauset attended high school in Philadelphia, where she was likely the only Black student. After graduating with honors, she applied to nearby Bryn Mawr College, which had never accepted a Black student. In order to avoid the controversy of either rejecting or accepting her, the school supported her acceptance at Cornell University, in upstate New York. She graduated from Cornell in 1905, possibly the first Black woman Phi Beta Kappa. According to some sources she also studied at the Sorbonne in Paris. After graduation, Fauset taught high school in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., then enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania to earn her master's degree.

She began contributing writings to the *Crisis* in 1912. In 1919, she moved to New York and began working with W. E. B. Du Bois as the literary editor of the *Crisis*; in 1920 they started *Brownie's Book,* which ran for only one year. Fauset was an editor at *Crisis* from 1919 to 1926, a short but crucial period. Through her reviews, her editorial critiques, and her choice of poetry, fiction, and essays for the magazine, Fauset introduced and guided the writing of Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and others. She became interested in the pan-African movement, contributing articles on the subject to *Crisis,* and representing the NAACP at the Second Pan-African Congress in 1921. She published her first novel, *There Is Confusion,* in 1924, and her last, *Comedy, American Style,* in 1933, after which she wrote little.

The Depression changed the landscape of the Black community in Harlem and elsewhere, and Fauset, then in her fifties, was no longer in the forefront of the New Negro movement. She had married Herbert Harris in 1929, eventually moving with him to New Jersey, where she lived until 1958. She struggled to find work after leaving the *Crisis*: her race prevented her from getting employment in white publishing houses, even after she volunteered to work from home, nor could she find a place as a social secretary. For a time she returned to teaching high school. After the death of her husband, she moved back to Philadelphia to live with her family. She died there, from heart disease, on April 20, 1961.

MAJOR WORKS

Though perhaps her most important work, in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, was as an editor, Fauset's four novels are the chief works upon which her reputation is based. Her novels focus on young women and their middle-class families; often the women are light-skinned Blacks who struggle with the dilemma of "passing" for white. Her first novel, *There Is Confusion,* tells the story of Joanna Marshall, who comes from a relatively wealthy family but struggles with the realization that her race is an obstacle to achieving her dream of being a dancer. It is also a love story, as Joanna falls for the medical student Peter Bye. Among her novels, *There Is Confusion* is the most like a straightforward romance, with the lovers finally overcoming their obstacles and living happily every after. Later novels are more complex. *Plum Bun* (1928), one of Fauset's most-studied novels, also features a young woman who dreams of becoming an artist, but the heroine, Angela Murray, decides to achieve her goals by "passing," and rejecting her family and friends. Angela eventually reveals her Black identity and finds love with a light-skinned Black man, but not before her attempts to enjoy the fruits of "whiteness" demonstrate the impossibility of finding happiness as a Black woman. Her third novel, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), also follows a romance pattern, but delves still more deeply into the issue of "bad blood," a condition of being of mixed race, but also of being poor or illegitimate. *The Chinaberry Tree* draws from Greek tragedy, a reflection of Fauset's love of the theater, in its portrayal of an incestuous romance that nearly leads to an abominable marriage. *Comedy, American Style* is Fauset's final novel, and the darkest in tone. The love story of Christopher Cary and Phebe Grant is overshadowed by the cruelty and self-loathing of the central character, Olivia Cary, Christopher's mother. Olivia prefers to pass for white and encourages her first two children to do so as well. Her third child, Oliver, is too dark to pass, however. Her abusive behavior finally drives him to suicide. Her daughter, who marries a Frenchman and tries to live "white" in Toulouse, lives in oppressive misery. Olivia finally abandons her family to live miserably, but "white," in Paris, leaving Chris, Phebe, and old Mr. Cary to live in relative happiness, muted by prejudice, as Blacks.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

When first published, Fauset's novels were generally well received. Though some critics felt that Fauset's perspective and characters were not "Negro" enough, many in the New Negro movement praised Fauset for depicting Blacks in a positive light, as educated, cultured, and even modestly economically successful. In 1934, William Stanley Braithwaite wrote in *Opportunity* that Fauset was "the potential Jane Austen of Negro Literature," a comment that encapsulated both the praise and the criticisms. Scholarship on Fauset has followed the same pattern ever since. One of the earliest assessments of Fauset as a Black novelist came from Robert Bone, in *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), who called Fauset conservative and "Old Guard." This has been a consistent thread in Fauset scholarship, described by Vashti Crutcher Lewis as "mulatto hegemony." Critics who have considered Fauset's work more broadly, particularly her work with *Crisis,* found fault with these criticisms. In an early article on Fauset and her role as "literary midwife" of the Harlem Renaissance, Abby Arthur Johnson observed that Fauset was in fact a great champion of Blackness, suggesting that while Fauset was no radical, she did offer trenchant critiques of color-consciousness and the status of Blacks in America. Fauset was eventually discovered by feminist scholars, who maintained that important facets of Fauset's politics were overlooked because they related to women. A significant study in this vein is Carolyn Wedin Sylvander's *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer* (1981), as well as Deborah McDowell's essay "The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset" (1985). Such scholarship revitalized the study of Fauset's work, and several scholars between 1990 and 2002 considered her among the first Black women intellectuals. Both Carol J. Batker and Carol Allen argue that Fauset's depiction of women and the domestic sphere presents a significant critique of American values. Such scholars as Kathleen Pfeiffer have also re-

evaluated the theme of "passing" in Fauset's fiction, suggesting that in linking "passing" to the motif of the marketplace, Fauset offers a sharper critique of color-consciousness in America than earlier critics realized.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

There Is Confusion (novel) 1924

Plum Bun (novel) 1928

The Chinaberry Tree: A Novel of American Life (novel) 1931

Comedy, American Style (novel) 1933

PRIMARY SOURCES

JESSIE R. FAUSET (ESSAY DATE 1922)

SOURCE: Fauset, Jessie R. "Some Notes on Color." *The World Tomorrow* (March 1922): 76-77.

Fauset discusses the nature of color in art, focusing on how the simple fact of being Black affects the art and literature of African Americans.

A distinguished novelist said to me not long ago: "I think you colored people make a great mistake in dragging the race problem into your books and novels. It isn't art."

"But good heavens," I told him, "it's life, it's colored life. Being colored is being a problem."

That attitude and the sort of attitude instanced by a journalist the other day who thought colored people ought to be willing to permit the term "nigger" because it carries with it so much picturesqueness defines pretty well, I think, our position in the eyes of the white world. Either we are inartistic or we are picturesque and always the inference is implied that we live objectively with one eye on the attitude of the white world as though it were the audience and we the players whose hope and design is to please.

Of course we do not think about the white world, we have to. But not at all in the sense in which that white world thinks it. For the curious thing about white people is that they expect us to judge them by their statute-books and not by their actions. But we colored people have learned better, so much so that when we prepare for a journey, when we enter on a new undertaking, when we decide on where to go to school, if we want to shop, to move, to go to the theatre, to eat (outside of our own houses) we think quite consciously, "If we can pull it through without some white person interfering."

I have hesitated more than once about writing this article because my life has been spent in the localities which are considered favorable to colored people and in the class which least meets the grossest forms of prejudice. And yet—I do not say I would if I could—but I must say I cannot if I will forget the fact of color in almost everything I do or say in the sense in which I forget the shape of my face or the size of my hands and feet.

Being colored in America at any rate means: Facing the ordinary difficulties of life, getting education, work, in fine getting a living plus fighting everyday against some inhibition of natural liberties.

Let me see if I can give you some ideas. I am a colored woman, neither white nor black, neither pretty nor ugly, neither specially graced nor at all deformed. I am fairly well educated, of fair manners and deportment. In brief, the average American done over in brown. In the morning I go to work by means of the subway, which is crowded. Presently somebody gets up. The man standing in front of the vacant place looks around meaning to point it out to a women. I am the nearest one, "But oh," says his glance, "you're colored. I'm not expected to give it to you." And down he plumps. According to my reflexes that morning, I think to myself "hypocrite" or "pig." And make a conscious effort to shake the unpleasantness of it off, for I don't want my day spoiled.

At noon I go for lunch. But I always go to the same place because I an not sure of my reception in other places. If I go to another place I must fight it through. But usually I am hungry. I want food, not a lawsuit. And, too, how long am I to wait before I am sure of the slight? Shall I march up to the proprietor and say "Do you serve colored people?" or shall I sit and drum on the table for 15 or 20 minutes, feel my anger rising, prepare to explode only to have the attendant come at that moment and nonchalantly arrange the table? I eat but I go out still not knowing whether the delay was intentional or not. The white patron would be annoyed at the delay. I am, too, but ought I to be annoyed at something in addition to that? I can't tell. The uncertainty beclouds my afternoon.

An acquaintance—a white woman—phones me that she can accept a long-standing invitation of mine for luncheon. We meet and I suggest my old standby. "Let's go somewhere else," she urges. "I don't like that place."

Ruefully but frankly I stammer, "Well you see—I'm not quite sure—that is—"

"Oh, yes," she rejoins in quick pity. "I forgot that. I'm so sorry."

But I hate to be pitied even so sincerely. I hate to have this position thrust upon me.

All of us are passionately interested in the education of our children, our younger brothers and sisters. And just as deliberately, as earnestly as white people discuss tuition, relative ability of professors, expenses, etc., so we in addition discuss the question of prejudice. "Of course he'll meet someone. But would they let it interfere with his deserts? I don't know. I guess I'd better send him to A. instead of B. They don't cater as much to the South as at B."

I think the thing that irks us most is the teasing uncertainty of it all. Did the man at the box-office give us the seat behind the post on purpose? Is the shop-girl impudent or merely nervous? Had the position really been filled before we applied for it? What actuates the teacher who tells Alice—oh, so kindly—that the college preparatory course is really very difficult. Even remarkably clever pupils have been known to fail. Now if she were Alice—

Other things cut deeper, undermine the very roots of our belief in mankind. In school we sing "America," we learn the Declaration of Independence, we read and even memorize some of the passages in the Constitution. Chivalry, kindness, consideration are the ideals held up before us—

> Honor and faith and good intent,
> But it wasn't at all what the lady meant.

the lady in this case being the white world. The good things of life, the true, the beautiful, the just, these are not meant for us.

So much is this difference impressed on us, "this for you but that quite other thing for me," that finally we come to take all expressions of a white man's justice with cynical disbelief, our standard of measure being a provident "How does he stand on the color question?"

I am constantly amazed as I grow older at the network of misunderstanding—to speak mildly—at the misrepresentation of things as they really are which is so persistently cast around us. Sometimes it is by implication, sometimes by open statement. Thus we grow up thinking that they are no colored heroes. The foreign student does hear of Garibaldi, of Cromwell, of Napoleon, of Marco Bozzaris. But neither he nor we hear of Crispus Attucks. There are no pictures of colored fairies in the story-books or even of colored boys and girls. "Sweetness and light" are of the white world.

Native Americans are "savages" owing their little knowledge of civilization to the kindly European traveler who is represented as half philanthropist, half savant. How much do we learn of indigenous African art, culture, morals? We are told of the horrors of polygamy without a word of the accompanying fact that prostitution in Africa was comparatively unknown—until the whites introduced it.

We are given the impression that we are the last in the scale of all races, that even other dark peoples will have none of us. I shall never forget how astonished I was to see in London at the second Pan-African Congress the very real willingness of Hindu leaders to cast in their lot with ours.

More serious still, we are constantly being confronted with a choice between expediency and intellectual dishonesty, intangible, indefinable and yet sometimes I think the greatest danger of all. If persisted in it is bound to touch the very core of our racial naturalness. And that is the tendency of the white world to judge us always at our worst and our own realization of that fact. The result is a stilled art and a lack of frank expression on our part. We find *The Emperor Jones* wonderful, but why couldn't O'Neill have portrayed a colored gentleman? We wish he had. *Batouala* [a prize-winning novel by the African, Rene Maran] is a marvellous piece of artistry, but we are half glad it is written in French so that the average white American won't insist that here is the true African prototype.

Some one will say: "These are trifles." What have I to complain of as compared with the condition of Negroes in South Africa, in Georgia, in the Portuguese possessions? I do not have to fear lynching, or burning, or dispossession.

No, only the reflex of those things. Perhaps it is mere nervousness, perhaps it is something more justifiable. Often when I am sitting in a crowded assembly I think, "I wish I had taken a seat near the door. If there should be an accident, a fire, none of these men around here would help me." Place aux dames was not meant for colored women.

I have not been dispossessed, but I have had to leave Philadelphia—the city of my birth and preference, because I was educated to do high school work and it was impossible for a colored

woman to get that kind of work in that town. So I, too, have assisted in the Negro Exodus which the student of Sociology considers in class-room and seminary.

And so the puzzling, tangling, nerve-wracking consciousness of color envelops and swathes us. Some of us, it smothers.

GENERAL COMMENTARY

ABBY ARTHUR JOHNSON (ESSAY DATE 1978)

SOURCE: Johnson, Abby Arthur. "Literary Midwife: Jessie Redmon Fauset and the Harlem Renaissance." *Phylon* 39, no. 2 (June 1978): 143-53.

In this essay, Johnson contrasts the middle-class world of Fauset's novels with the more radical literature she fostered through her work at Crisis, *suggesting that past evaluations of Fauset's politics have been inaccurate. Johnson suggests that in her fiction, Fauset struggles against stereotypes of urban Blacks, while in her nonfiction essays and her editorial work, she reveals support for nationalism and pan-Africanism.*

The career of Jessie R. Fauset (1885-1961) illustrates changing responses to the black middle class, as expressed by twentieth-century literary figures. Praised in the 1920s, she was essentially ignored in the 1930s and censured in the postwar years. Each generation of critics based its evaluation of Fauset primarily on her novels, all studies of the Negro middle class—***There Is Confusion*** (1932), ***Plum Bun*** (1929), ***The Chinaberry Tree*** (1931), and ***Comedy, American Style*** (1933). Most of the writers said nothing about her literary editorship of *Crisis,* from 1919 to 1926.

During the Harlem Renaissance, established black critics endorsed Fauset for the milieu recreated in her novels. All three major black periodicals heralded her initial book as a literary landmark. W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, in the February, 1924 issue of *Crisis,* agreed that the work would "mark an epoch." Locke elaborated, calling ***There Is Confusion*** "the novel that the Negro intelligentsia have been clamoring for." He thought educated readers wanted literature portraying "the race life higher up the social pyramid and further from the base-line of the peasant and the soil than is usually taken." Montgomery Gregory, Howard University professor and colleague of Locke, wrote much the same. In *Opportunity,* June, 1924, he congratulated Fauset for "interpreting the better elements of our life to those who know us only as domestic servants, 'uncles,' or criminals."[1]

George Schuyler applauded the novel in *Messenger,* also in 1924. "I started reading this book on a Sunday morning," he recalled, "and finished its 297 pages before I went to bed. I was never bored for an instant. Not once did I yawn." The novel revived his own past: "I was like a traveler returning to familiar scenes, nodding with satisfaction and approval at the recognition of familiar landmarks." Schuyler liked to read about successful blacks: "Here for the first time we are presented with a novel built around our own 'best' people who, after all is said, are the inspiration of the rising generation."[2]

Similar remarks introduced each of Fauset's novels, including the last one. ***Comedy: American Style*** appeared at the onset of a new period in Afro-American literature. As younger voices began to be heard, writers prominent in the 1920s defended their own earlier judgments and supported Fauset. In *Opportunity,* January, 1934, Locke commended her efforts, even though he saw weaknesses in her style: "Negro fiction would be infinitely poorer without the persevering and slowly maturing art of Miss Fauset, and her almost single-handed championship of upper and middle class Negro life as an important subject for fiction."[3]

Even as Locke wrote, the literary scene was changing considerably. The demands of those days, first with the Depression and then with the Second World War, drowned out the voice of Fauset and others. Some twenty years passed before critics turned again to her work. And when they did write of her, they showed that times had changed once more, and that other militant leaders were emerging. Robert Bone was not one of those leaders, but he did, in *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), discuss Fauset in a way that would influence later authors. He found her middle-class and old-fashioned and dismissed her with labels, calling her "Victorian," "Old Guard" and "Rear Guard." In the following years, readers remembered the labels but not, unfortunately, the complexity Bone sensed in Fauset. He found her "something of a paradox," largely because of her editorial work on *Crisis.* She had repeatedly, he noted, encouraged novels and poems by black radicals, such as Claude McKay. He did not explore this paradox, seemingly because Fauset fit sufficiently well into the "Old Guard."[4]

The reaction against the Negro middle class became more vocal in the 1960s, as Leroi Jones became a spokesman for young black artists and intellectuals. In an influential essay, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" (1962), he claimed that

writers identified with the black middle class had impeded the emergence of an American Negro literature. Wanting to be white, they had tried to express themselves as Anglo-Saxons and had failed to be either black or white. "In most cases," he asserted,

> the Negroes who found themselves in a position to pursue some art, especially the art of literature, have been members of the Negro middle class, a group that has always gone out of its way to cultivate *any* mediocrity, as long as that mediocrity was guaranteed to prove to America, and recently to the world at large, that they were not really who they were, i.e., Negroes.[5]

He thought black writers should celebrate the richness of their own traditions and experiences.

Jones never mentioned Fauset in his essay, but others applied his ideas to her. In recent years, the most specific of such discussion has appeared in an article written by Hiroko Sato and published in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (1972), edited by Arna Bontemps. Sato, a student of Bontemps, essentially reaffirmed postwar estimates of Fauset. She criticized Fauset for her middle-class outlook, shaped by her early experiences among old Philadelphians and her education at Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania and at the Sorbonne. Quoting from Jones' essay, she claimed that Fauset "does not have anything to do with 'the investigation of the human soul'." Quoting from Bone's book, she concluded that "the only thing she could do as an artist was to produce 'uniformly sophomoric, trivial and dull' novels. . . ."[6] Like other of her contemporaries, Sato considered only part of Fauset's effort. She never studied her work as literary editor, and she failed to see her as an individual, viewing her instead as an extension of a class. Fauset makes more sense when examined as an editor as well as a novelist and when discussed in relation to her particular environment.

Fauset had a long association with *Crisis.* From 1912, she contributed reviews, essays, poems and short stories to the journal. She served as literary editor from November, 1919 until May, 1926. Within that period, during 1920 and 1921, she acted as literary editor of the *Brownie's Book,* a magazine edited by Du Bois and directed towards black children. While on the staff of *Crisis,* she helped establish a literary climate favorable to black writers of varying persuasions, even to those who would never have come to her for assistance. In her reviews, which appeared regularly in the magazine, she seemed more open than was Du Bois, who said that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be" and that "whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy."[7] Fauset repeatedly claimed that literature should not overtly serve special interests. She sometimes acted upon other premises, however, and advanced propagandistic work.

One of her review essays, done early in her editorship, indicates much about her critical understanding and her sense of the 1920s. **"New Literature on the Negro,"** a review of several books, followed a pattern Fauset would use frequently. It opened with a general statement on the role of Afro-Americans in contemporary matters:

> That the Negro has come into Literature to stay is evidenced by the increasing number of books issued each year in which the Negro, or his condition, forms the main discussion. It is impossible adequately to take up the great matters of the day—economics, social welfare, labor, the whole question of national readjustment of post-war times,—without including his shadowed but persistent figure.

The review continued by distinguishing between politics and literature. Fauset commended *The Sword of Nemesis,* by R. Archer Tracy, because it was in "the realm of pure romantic fiction." The novel gave her "relief," primarily because "nearly" all the other literature "on the part of colored Americans seeks to set forth propaganda."

Fauset considered the more significant pieces towards the end of her review. She concluded with *Darkwater,* by Du Bois. As she warmed to her topic, she became emotional, as often happened in her essays. In such a mood, she adopted a rhetoric which does not square with the latest estimates of her opinions. This woman who was supposedly pandering to white society praised Du Bois for his depiction of the "terrible, grasping, raging white world." This woman who reputedly turned her back on her black culture urged readers to find satisfaction in their own heritage:

> In this darker world . . . there is ignorance and poverty and misery, but at least there are not hands dripping with another people's blood, hearts filled with hypocrisy, homes gorgeously outfitted but reared over the graves of helpless slaves. And so though they dare not become complacent, these dark folk are suddenly content to be black.[8]

Such statements suggest the complexity of Fauset. As a critic, she wanted to use objective literary standards, to judge novels as works of art. As a Negro writer, she felt the need to evaluate books in their relationship to black culture.

In subsequent reviews, Fauset gave special recognition to those who appeared to convey the

heritage of black Americans honestly and artistically. She found much value in *Harlem Shadows,* by Claude McKay: "He has dwelt in fiery, impassioned language on the sufferings of his race. Yet there is no touch of propaganda. This is the truest mark of genius." As an educated woman, she knew the importance of black scholarship. Among the studies she praised were *The History of the Negro Church,* by Carter Godwin Woodson, and the *Social History of the American Negro,* by Benjamin Brawley. The later particularly pleased her because "it presents American history as it must have appeared to black men." With many of her contemporaries, she recognized the importance of African history and culture to Afro-Americans. Natalie Curtis received her support for *Songs and Tales From the Dark Continent*: "Here then are evidences that a very real, backward reaching, finely developed civilization, one that is native and endemic, has been existing over a large part of Africa."[9]

While literary editor, Fauset also contributed informative essays to *Crisis.* She especially favored biographical sketches of blacks prominent in her day and in the past. Among others, she wrote about Jose Do Patrocinio, who fought for the "abolition of slavery in Brazil"; Robert Brown Elliott, who represented a South Carolina district in the forty-second and forty-third Congresses of the United States; and Henry Ossawa Tanner, prominent artist. She found Bert Williams an appealing subject because he, as a comedian, "symbolized that deep, ineluctable strain of melancholy, which no Negro in a mixed civilization ever lacks." She regretted the "eternal black make-up" Williams wore. "Why," she questioned, "should he and we obscure our talents forever under the bushel of prejudice, jealousy, stupidity—whatever it is that makes the white world say: 'No genuine colored artist; coons, clowns, end-men, clap-trap, but no undisguisedly beautiful presentation of Negro ability'."[10]

In an interview published in the *Southern Workman,* May, 1932, Fauset discussed biography. As she explained her theories, she talked about educating young blacks, not about impressing biased whites. "No part of Negro literature needs more building up than biography," she insisted. "It is urgent that ambitious Negro youth be able to read of the achievements of their race." She remembered the bewilderment of her own girlhood:

> When I was a child I used to puzzle my head ruefully over the fact that in school we studied the lives of only great white people. I took it that there simply have been no great Negroes, and I was amazed when, as I grew older, I found that there were. It is a pity that Negro children should be permitted to suffer from that delusion at all. There should be a sort of 'Plutarch's Lives' of the Negro race. Some day, perhaps, I shall get around to writing it.[11]

She never accomplished such a project, although her brother, Arthur Huff Fauset, did write *For Freedom,* a compendium on old and New Negroes.

In other of her essays, Fauset informed *Crisis* readers about important happenings in the black world. She sometimes suggested that an apocalypse was at hand, an ultimate struggle between black and white peoples. With such a feeling, she studied British colonialism. At the end of a detailed article on **"Nationalism and Egypt,"** she considered a dawning world: "Who doubts that Egypt is really speaking for the whole dark world? Thus is the scene being staged for the greatest and most lasting conflict of peoples."[12]

She became a fervent supporter of Pan-Africanism, representing Delta Sigma Theta Sorority at the second Pan-African Congress in 1921. At the meetings in Brussels, she spoke to the delegates about Negro women in America as a significant power in the struggle for emancipation. After all the speeches and meetings were over, she returned to *Crisis* and wrote her **"Impressions of the Second Pan-African Congress,"** which was published in the journal. As explained, she had gone to the meetings thinking that "the main thing, the great thing, was that Ethiopia's sons through delegates were stretching out their hands from all over the black and yearning world." At the conclusion of the London sessions, she had much hope: "We clasped hands with our newly found brethren and departed, feeling that it was good to be alive and most wonderful to be colored. Not one of us but envisaged in his heart the dawn of a day of new and perfect African brotherhood." Upon leaving Paris, she thought of the challenge ahead: "All the possibilities of all black men are needed to weld together the black men of the world against the day when black and white meet to do battle. God grant that when that day comes we shall be so powerful that the enemy will say, 'But behold! these men are our brothers'."[13] She ended her article with these resounding assertions.

Fauset had, admittedly, been caught up in the heat of the moment. As the months passed, her diction cooled. Never again would she write so passionately about African unity. She did not, though, forget the camaraderie she had felt with

other Negroes. In succeeding essays, she explored ground common to all American blacks. She reported on a YWCA conference at Talladega College in 1923 but spoke more movingly about the institution than the sessions. Talledega seemed a promised land to this woman educated at Cornell: "Imagine leaving the hot Jim-Crow Car which brings one from Anniston to spin along the rust-red roads of Talladega and suddenly to stop short before a stretch—an 880 acre stretch—of green campus and trees and fields, dotted with beautiful and picturesque buildings, an ivy covered chapel, residence halls, a Carnegie Library, lecture halls, and know that all this peace and quiet and beauty are yours!" Most memorable was Swayne Hall, "*built by slaves for white boys* in 1852." She made a symbol of that building: "What I like most to remember . . . was that troop of merry, efficient, striking girls filing in and out of Swayne Hall, built over a half century ago by slaves for the children of—free men."[14]

Other buildings occupied permanent places in her memory. One article, **"My House and a Glimpse of My Life Therein,"** showed readers a picture of Fauset's imaginary home, of life as she would have it. Searching for pleasant thoughts, Fauset sometimes occupied herself with dreams, using them as motifs in her literature. In most of her compositions, though, she varied the mood and returned to a consideration of the environment she knew, as a Negro in America. She best captured the bond she sensed with all Afro-Americans in a piece called **"Nostalgia."** American Negroes suffered, she wrote, from "spiritual nostalgia," which "arises from the lack of things of the spirit, a difference in ideals." They had given to the country and were of the land but had not been accorded full citizenship. For such people, the ideals of the American Constitution were "not here—just beyond, always beyond." "The black American is something entirely new under the sun," concluded Fauset. "Shall he ever realize the land where he would be?"[15]

Fauset did not limit her *Crisis* publications to essays. Before and during her term as literary editor, she contributed poems and short stories as well, extending many of the stories over several installments. In such pieces, she experimented with the themes and characters she would later use in her novels. She dealt with "passing" in the two parts of **"Emmy"** and the three sections of **"The Sleeper Wakes."** In the latter, Amy, with cheeks of "pearl and pink," establishes herself as Caucasian and marries a wealthy white man much her senior. When she later reveals her heritage, she loses her husband and gains her identity. "She wanted to be colored," she discovered.[16] With the two installments of **"Double Trouble,"** Fauset penned a first draft of ***The Chinaberry Tree.*** She developed the plot and characters, changing only a few of the names in the novel—Malory Fordham becomes Malory Forten and Angelique appears as Melissa. With the addition of the chinaberry tree, as unifying symbol, the novel became a more sophisticated rendition of **"Double Trouble."**

In all the stories, she portrayed black professionals, as she would in her novels. Her main characters were industrious physicians, teachers, engineers and business men and women. With the fiction published in *Crisis* and with the novels which followed, Fauset seemed preoccupied with matters far different from the concerns of her essays. She wrote of people who lived on the borderline of two races and who flirted with the idea of passing. She pictured structured and elite black communities, modeled after old Philadelphia. At times, she showed distinctions among Negro socialites living in Philadelphia, Washington and Baltimore. With such interests, she wrote to a small segment of the black population. Her essays, however, appealed to a wider audience. She discussed issues and events germane to the black community, such as Pan-Africanism. She applauded novels and poems written about ghetto life and Afro-Americans who were not formally educated. She used a rhetoric which modulated from enthusiasm to anger and which attracted the more militant young Negroes.

Robert Bone thought Fauset a "paradox" because he could not see a connecting link between her work as editor and as novelist. Fauset's work does, nevertheless, mesh into a comprehensible unit. As an educated woman, open to many interests, she could appreciate the changes and new expressions in the Negro community. She tried, while on the staff of *Crisis,* to encourage diversified interests and to attract large numbers of readers. When composing fiction, however, she could only write from herself, of the life she knew best. And that life merits brief examination, since it helps explain her literary record.

Fauset identified herself as the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. Raised in a parsonage in old Philadelphia, she learned to be a lady, in the conventional sense. As such, she naturally felt certain restraints. She could never have written in the vernacular about Harlem night clubs. Nor could she have frequented such establishments. As might be expected, her social diversions raised

few eyebrows. She suggested her extracurriculars in an autobiographical statement included in *Caroling Dusk,* edited by Countee Cullen: "Like the French I am fond of dancing, and adore cards and the theatre probably because I am a minister's daughter."[17]

The atmosphere of the parsonage remained with her. She contributed an essay on **"Sunday Afternoon"** to *Crisis,* during the tenure of her editorship. "Always Sunday afternoon has made me sad," she recalled. "But it is a sweet sadness. It must have been connected at first, I think, with the inhibitions which Sunday in a very conservative, not to say very religious household, placed upon the small child." In varied situations, she would recall lines from favorite hymns. While in a *pension* in Paris, she examined the "shabby" dining room and remembered "a line from a melancholy hymn of my Presbyterian childhood . . . 'Change and decay in all around I see.'"[18]

Writing from her memories, Fauset recreated Sunday afternoons and evenings in her stories and novels. Gwendolyn Bennett, of *Opportunity,* commended such portrayals in ***Plum Bun***: "I found particular pleasure in her apt, yet subdued, picture of Sunday afternoon in a middle-class Negro home." Fauset described quiet Sundays in most of her fiction. She knew another side to religious life, however. She understood a type of desperate humor evolving from Afro-Americans' dependence upon their religious institutions. In "Mary Elizabeth," a story included in *Crisis,* the maid mentions a friend of her sister—"gal she was riz up with. That gal married well, too, lemme tell you; her husband's a Sunday School sup'rintender."[19]

Fauset wrote about people positioned between two races because she often found herself in that situation. With many of her characters, she knew what it was like to be black in an environment primarily white. As a young girl, she went to school with white children, as Benjamin Brawley noted in *The Negro Genius*: "In school she was for several terms the only student in her class identified with the Negro, and this fact may partly account for the self-conscious air in her work."[20] She was the first Negro woman to attend Cornell University and to win Phi Beta Kappa honors. Undoubtedly, she felt proud of her accomplishments. She had no illusions, though, about the broader white society and its understanding of her. Just before leaving *Crisis,* she sent a letter to Arthur Spingarn, asking for his assistance in locating another position. She wanted to be a publisher's reader but comprehended the difficulty in finding such employment: "In the case of publisher's reader, if the question of color should come up I could of course work at home."[21]

She knew persons who had passed and considered such action wrong, as emphasized over and again in her novels and stories. She realized where her loyalty lay, and she understood the beauty of color. Sato has claimed that Fauset could not make a "positive affirmation" of blackness.[22] Fauset did in fact make many such affirmations in her essays and fiction. Joanna Marshall, of ***There Is Confusion,*** first recognizes Peter Bye for his "dark arresting beauty which first drew Joanna's glance to him across the other white and pink faces in the crowded schoolroom." Phebe Grant, in ***Comedy: American Style,*** loves the blackness of Nicholas Campbell: "His dark face with that Apollo-like look, which the sculptured waviness of his hair bestowed upon him, was finely silhouetted against the moonlight with the softness of the black night for an immediate background."[23]

Fauset had always wanted to recreate life from her vantage point in novels. The catalyst for her career came in *Birthright* (1922), a supposedly well-intentioned novel about Negro life written by T. S. Stribling. In a *Crisis* review, Fauset criticized the white author, saying "he does not care how many fallacies he introduces."[24] And the fallacies did abound. Stribling used the old formulas, alluding repeatedly to "the peculiar, penetrating odor of dark, sweating skins" and the "indolence inherent" in "negro blood." He thought mulattoes in a strange situation, ambitious and lazy by turns, dependent upon the predominance of either their white or their black blood. When they succeeded—got an education or a good job—the explanation was easy, to Stribling: "It was the Caucasian in them . . ."[25]

It was pride in her own Negro heritage that caused Fauset to protest over *Birthright* once again. In a 1924 book review, she criticized whites who tried to write about blacks. A novel like Stribling's made her wonder "whether or not white people will ever be able to write evenly on this racial situation in America." She saw Negro life as the province of Negro artists: "the portrayal of black people calls increasingly for black writers."[26] Fauset issued her first novel, ***There Is Confusion,*** shortly thereafter. In the 1932 interview, she recalled the emotions that had led to that novel. "Here is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us," she remembered feeling. "Let us who are better qualified to present that truth than any white writer, try to do so." She mentioned others who had experienced a similar response:

FROM THE AUTHOR

THERE IS CONFUSION

The complex of color. . . . every colored man feels it sooner or later. It gets in the way of his dreams, of his education, of his marriage, of the rearing of his children. The time comes when he thinks, "I might just as well fall back; there's no use pushing on. A colored man just can't make any headway in this awful country." Of course, it's a fallacy. And if a fellow sticks it out he finally gets past it, but not before it has worked considerable confusion in his life. To have the ordinary job of living is bad enough, but to add to it all the thousand and one difficulties which follow simply in the train of being colored—well, all I've got to say, Sylvia, is we're some wonderful people to live through it all and keep our sanity.

SOURCE: Jessie Redmon Fauset, excerpt from *There is Confusion,* Boni & Liveright, 1924.

"A number of us started writing at that time. Nella Larson and Walter White, for instance, were affected just as I was."

It took courage to write in the manner of Fauset. In her fiction, she was countering established ideas about Afro-Americans and about the nature of Afro-American literature. She was expending her energies on books which might never receive a fair hearing. As explained in 1932, the first publisher to see ***There Is Confusion*** exclaimed—"White readers just don't expect Negroes to be like this"—and rejected the manuscript. Publishers did not improve significantly as the decade went on. In considering ***The Chinaberry Tree,*** they repeated the same objection. Before the novel could be accepted, Zona Gale had to append a preface explaining the nature of her friend's art and affirming the existence of cultured blacks.[27]

Fauset commented on the bias of such readers when answering the seven questions Du Bois asked of many artists in the 1920s. Among the queries was: "Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?" With no hesitation Fauset replied: "I should think so. And what is more, it seems to me that white people should be the first to voice this criticism. Aren't *they* supposed to be interesting?" She elaborated in another answer: "I blame the publisher for not being a 'better sport'. Most of them seem to have an *idee fixe.* They, even more than the public, I do believe, persist in considering only certain types of Negroes interesting and if an author presents a variant they fear that the public either won't believe in it or won't 'stand for it'."[28]

As literary editor of *Crisis* and as a novelist, Fauset performed a valuable service in the Negro Renaissance. She was appreciated for such by her contemporaries, and not only those often believed conservative in matters of art. In *A Long Way From Home,* Claude McKay noted that "all the radicals liked her, although in her social viewpoint she was away over on the other side of the fence." He and others respected her freedom of expression: "Miss Fauset has written many novels about the people in her circle. Some white and some black critics consider these people not interesting enough to write about. I think all people are interesting to write about."[29]

Fauset was eased from the literary scene in the 1930s, along with many of her associates. The Depression changed the shape of the world she knew, as did the large migration of Southern blacks to Northern cities and the resultant instability in black communities. Newer Negroes appeared calling for a newer art. In "Blueprint For Negro Writing," published in *New Challenge,* Richard Wright deplored the chasm he saw between the Negro intelligentsia and the "Negro masses." "The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility," he admonished. "In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today."[30]

The times had changed and Fauset had neither the energy nor the will to change with them. She was forty-eight years old when her last novel was published, in 1933, and she felt an identity with a black community which was no longer fashionable. For some twenty years, she had worked diligently at her art. In the years to follow, she would write no more novels, nor would she edit any other magazines. Her retirement became

just one more sign that the Harlem Renaissance, with all its diversity, was indeed over.

One can feel mixed emotions over the passing of a period and the end of a career. In the case of Jessie Fauset, a certain pathos emerges, a sympathy for an idealistic woman who was bewildered and discouraged by the turbulence and demands of a new day. On the other hand, one can feel respect and admiration for the literary editor and novelist who helped shape black literature of the 1920s. Langston Hughes recognized the importance of Fauset. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea,* he advanced her as a significant figure in the renaissance: "Jessie Fauset at the *Crisis,* Charles Johnson at *Opportunity,* and Alaine Locke in Washington, were the three people who midwifed the so-called New Negro Literature into being."[31] Fauset was not a radical, by most estimates, but she did help to raise black consciousness, particularly through her work on *Crisis.* By choosing unpopular topics for her fiction, she challenged the preconceptions of the publishing industry and opened the way for literature which would appear in succeeding decades.

Notes

1. "The Younger Literary Movement," *Crisis,* XXVII (February, 1924), 161-62; "The Spirit of Phyllis Wheatley," *Opportunity,* II (June, 1924), 181.
2. "New Books," VI (May, 1924), 146.
3. "The Saving Grace of Realism," XII (January, 1934), 9.
4. (New Haven, 1958), pp. 99, 101.
5. *On Being Black: Writings By Afro-Americans from Frederick Douglass to the President,* ed. Charles T. Davis and Daniel Walden (New York, 1970), p. 294.

   For discussions of the black aesthetic see Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review,* XII (Summer, 1968), 29-39; Don L. Lee, "Directions for Black Writers," *The Black Scholar,* I (December, 1969), 53-7; Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., *Black Expression* and *The Black Aesthetic* (New York, 1969, 1971); Cecil M. Brown, "Black Literature and Leroi Jones," *Black World,* XIX (June, 1970), 24-31; Francis and Val Gray Ward, "The Black Artist—His Role in the Struggle," *The Black Scholar,* II (January, 1971), 23-32.
6. "Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1972), p. 80.
7. "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis,* XXXII (October, 1926), 296.
8. XX (June, 1920), 78, 80, 83.
9. "As To Books," XXIV (June, 1922), 66; "Brawley's 'Social History of the American Negro'," XXIII (April, 1922), 160; "On The Bookshelf," XXII (June, 1921), 64.
10. Jessie Fauset and Cezar Pinto, "The Emancipator of Brazil," XXI (March, 1921), 208-09; "Looking Backward," XXIII (January, 1922), 125-26; "Henry Ossawa Tanner," XXVII (April, 1924), 255-58; "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," XXIV (May, 1922), 12, 14.
11. Marion L. Starkey, "Jessie Fauset," *The Southern Workman,* LXI (May, 1932), 220.

    In the characters of her novels, Fauset recaptured the bewilderment she had experienced as a schoolgirl. Young Joanna Marshall, of *There Is Confusion,* asks her father, "Didn't colored people ever do anything?" Joel Marshall provides the answer Fauset herself would give: "He told her . . . of Douglass and Vesey and Turner. There were great women, too. Harriet Tubman, Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, women who had been slaves . . . but had won their way to fame and freedom through their own efforts"—(New York, 1924), p. 14.
12. XIX (April, 1920), 316.
13. "What Europe Thought of the Pan-African Congress," XXIII (December, 1921), 66; XXIII (December, 1921), 12-13, 17-18.
14. "The 'Y' Conference at Talladega," XXVI (September, 1923), 215.
15. VIII (July, 1914), 143-45; XXII (August, 1921), 155, 157-58.
16. XX (October, 1920), 273.
17. (New York, 1927), p. 65.
18. XXIII (February, 1922), 162; "'Yarrow Revisited'," *Crisis,* XXIX (January, 1925), 108.
19. "Our Book Shelf," *Opportunity,* VII (September, 1929), 287; *Crisis,* XIX (December, 1919), 55.
20. (New York, 1937), p. 222.

    The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center of Howard University holds Brawley's unpublished comments on Fauset's novels. See Jessie Fauset, General Clipping File.
21. Arthur B. Spingarn Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
22. *The Harlem Renaissance, op. cit.,* p. 79.
23. *Confusion, op. cit.,* p. 21; *Comedy* (New York, 1933), p. 62.
24. XXIV (June, 1922), 67.
25. (New York, 1922), pp. 4, 128, 98.
26. "The New Books," *Crisis,* XXVII (February, 1924), 177.
27. Marion L. Starkey, "Jessie Fauset," *Southern Workman, op. cit.,* 218-19.
28. "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed," *Crisis,* XXXII (June, 1926), 71-2.
29. (New York, 1937), p. 112.
30. II (Fall, 1937), 59.
31. (New York, 1940), p. 218.

    Hughes mentioned that Fauset, as literary editor of *Crisis,* accepted "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the first of his poems "to be published outside Central High School" (p. 72).

JOSEPH J. FEENEY (ESSAY DATE 1983)

SOURCE: Feeney, Joseph J. "Jessie Fauset of *The Crisis*: Novelist, Feminist, Centenarian." *Crisis* 90, no. 6 (June/July 1983): 20-22.

In this essay, Feeney gives an overview of Fauset's literary achievements, focusing on her work with the Crisis. *Feeney defends Fauset against earlier critics who called the author conservative, adding that many critics overlooked Fauset's pointed observations because she set them in the feminine, domestic sphere.*

In many ways Jessie Fauset belongs to *The Crisis,* since she wrote for it, helped edit it, and saw her novels reviewed in it. She first came to its pages in March, 1912, when the journal was sixteen months old and she was seven years out of Cornell and not quite thirty.

Arriving with a short column called **"What to Read,"** she showed herself restrained, angry, and practical as she praised a new novel: "At last a dispassionate presentation of color-prejudice—its baselessness and its shamefulness—has found its way into modern literature. And, behold! the book sells."

The poem **"Rondeau"** followed in April, and then for seventeen years she gave *The Crisis* poems, essays, stories, book reviews, and even a novelette all the way to 1929.

From Volume 3 to Volume 36 much of her life was devoted to *The Crisis,* and from 1919 to 1926 she served as Literary Editor under W. E. B. Du Bois. Fifty-eight of her 77 published works appeared in its pages, and the births of her novels were celebrated in its reviews and advertisements. And even in her fiction, in the novel ***Plum Bun,*** she had various characters avidly reading *The Crisis* each month. She was dedicated to writing, to her people, and to the Harlem Renaissance.

She had come to Harlem and Manhattan after early days in New Jersey and Philadelphia. Born, according to the Fauset family Bible, on April 26, 1882, in what is now Lawnside, New Jersey, she grew up across the Delaware among the integrated rowhouses of North Philadelphia. Her family, cultured though not wealthy, considered themselves "old Philadelphians," and a younger brother, Arthur Huff Fauset, later earned a Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Jessie Fauset, after graduating from Girls' High School, went to Cornell (the first black woman there, according to her brother) and won both an A.B. in 1905 and membership in Phi Beta Kappa. She taught high school for a while in Washington, D.C., and in 1919 completed her A.M. degree at the University of Pennsylvania. She then went to *The Crisis* for seven years as Literary Editor and, in 1921, attended the Second Pan-African Congress as an NAACP delegate.

In her desire to teach black children their heritage she also served from 1921-22 as literary editor of a children's magazine called *The Brownies' Book.* During these years, too, she lectured in America and traveled extensively in Europe; her knowledge of French (she had studied at the Sorbonne) also led to an interest in French-speaking black poets, and she translated their poems for the pages of *The Crisis* and *The Brownies' Book.*

After 1926 she returned to high-school teaching, this time in New York City, where she married Herbert Harris in 1929. The couple lived in Harlem and, later, in Montclair, N.J., where Harris was in real estate. After her husband's death, illness brought Miss Fauset back to her family in Philadelphia, and there she died on April 30, 1961, a few days after her seventy-ninth birthday.

Jessie Fauset is, of course, best known as the novelist who wrote ***There Is Confusion*** (1924), ***Plum Bun*** (1928), ***The Chinaberry Tree*** (1931), and ***Comedy: American Style*** (1933). With Nella Larsen she ranks as the major novelist of the middle class during the Harlem Renaissance, and—except for ***The Chinaberry Tree,*** which takes place in a small New Jersey town—she writes about black urban life in Philadelphia and New York from 1900 to 1930.

In her novels happy families enjoy Sunday morning in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia, and sophisticated artists and intellectuals talk and drink together in the Greenwich Village of the twenties. There are lively street cries in Harlem, successful doctors in West Philadelphia, trips to City Island in the Bronx. Bronze dancers cavort on a Broadway stage while black theatregoers have to sit in the balcony. Light-skinned young blacks "pass" but have to reject their families. A Du Bois-like leader speaks out for justice.

In short, Miss Fauset's novels picture a mixed world of romance and prejudice, success and humiliation. Sometimes the romance ends happily, other times prejudice stunts a career or drives a young black to suicide. In these novels one finds racial pride, proper middle-class English, Ivy-League educations, cultured "old Philadelphians"—but Miss Fauset's picture of her race's middle class hardly indicates unmixed optimism.

There is also a strong, underlying social purpose: to portray the educated black middle class and thereby uncover American racial prejudice.

The critics of Miss Fauset's novels generally dismiss her as a conventional middle-class novelist. Although in 1934 W. S. Braithwaite called her "the potential Jane Austen of Negro literature," most current critics—both black and white—consider her books as, at best, good examples of the conservative middle-class novel. At worst they consider her romantic, melodramatic, and excessively genteel.

Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* even calls her a dull "novelist of the Rear Guard" whose "literary aspirations were circumscribed by her desire to convey a flattering image of respectable Negro society." Only the rare commentator recognizes her social criticism and notes how her talent ranges from comedy of manners through romance to tragedy.

Yet—as I have argued in an article in *The CLA Journal*—her novels are not simply romances but have a twofold structure and a complex tone. What appears on the surface to be a conventional romance stands also as a novel of betrayed hope or near-tragedy or sardonic "comedy." And her allegedly pleasant pictures of the comfortable middle class mask a world of pain, prejudice, suicide, unfair choices, and stunted careers.

Miss Fauset is angry and disillusioned, as well as fastidious and cultured. "To be a Negro in America posits a dramatic situation," she wrote in the preface to ***The Chinaberry Tree,*** and her novels dramatize black anguish and indict White America. She does love romance and feel racial pride, but she also feels a "bitter peace" since blacks in America are not free to aspire.

"If you're black in America," says one character, "you have to renounce." Her fiction portrays this conflict between a black's just hopes and limited possibilities and, as a result, Miss Fauset's four novels are both angrier and more interesting than critics have recognized.

Miss Fauset is also interesting as an early black feminist—an aspect unnoticed by critics. Her principal characters are generally women, and either the narrator or her characters often discuss the role of women in America.

Speaking with the post-war freedom of the twenties, they indict the double standard of morality, criticizing the "typical male defense" of this standard and noting the black male habit of arrogantly demanding a ridiculously careful virtue of their women. Men have a much easier life, they argue, and Miss Fauset ironically describes a woman whom "her husband considered a perfect woman, sweet, industrious, affectionate, and illogical. But to her he was God."

Some men simply do not like a capable woman; others want a woman to surrender herself completely in marriage. A woman in the novel ***Plum Bun*** summarizes the female dilemma: "If we don't give enough we lose them. If we give too much we lose ourselves."

To cope with such prejudice and such demands, various solutions are offered: do not marry at all; have a profession which will offer a woman shelter in a storm; or simply refuse to let femininity stand in the way of what a woman wants. And in these novels women want much and accomplish much.

There are female dancers, singers, painters, teachers, even successful planners of a peace conference. Granted, some of Miss Fauset's women are quite happy and satisfied with motherhood and family life, and Miss Fauset and her characters enjoy clothes and beauty and the great diversity of skin shades among blacks.

But if a black woman wants to be different, she should not be limited to conventional feminine roles and tastes. She should not be subordinated to men. And in ***Plum Bun*** Miss Fauset expressly recognized the terrible parallel: being a woman is like being black, for opportunities and choices are grossly limited by prejudice.

Her novels spoke for the freedom of women as well as for the freedom of blacks.

It is surely time, on her hundredth birthday, to celebrate Jessie Fauset: her life, her work for *The Crisis,* her novels, her passion for the freedom of blacks and of women. This passion was usually expressed in a low-keyed voice in both her novels of romance and her smoothly crafted prose. But below the calm surface was genuine passion as well as breadth of vision.

Her *Crisis* articles indicate the breadth: Montessori education, Egyptian nationalism, the Pan-African Congress, H. O. Tanner, the Sorbonne. Her novels, when read carefully, show the passion. And her life, gently understated as it was, itself conveys the pain of being a black woman in America.

One example suffices: Ready to leave *The Crisis* in 1926, she wrote Joel Spingarn for advice on a new job. She would prefer, she wrote, to be a publisher's reader, a woman's social secretary, or a staff member of a New York foundation. Her

qualifications: she can type, speak French well, and do magazine layout. She prefers not to teach.

The letter closes: "In the case of publisher's reader, if the question of color should come up I could of course work at home."

She ended up teaching high school.

VASHTI CRUTCHER LEWIS (ESSAY DATE 1992)

SOURCE: Lewis, Vashti Crutcher. "Mulatto Hegemony in the Novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset." *College Language Association Journal* 35, no. 4 (June 1992): 375-86.

In this essay, Lewis focuses on the issue of racial hierarchy in Fauset's novels. Lewis is gently critical of Fauset's depiction of color-consciousness among light-skinned Blacks, noting that while Fauset naturally wrote about the class from which she came, her novels fail to break down the divisions between light- and dark- skinned Blacks.

The repressive nature of slavery spawned and supported a hegemonic color/caste hierarchy within African-American culture—one in which light-skinned mulatto slaves were often considered more intelligent and, certainly, more attractive than those of unmixed African ancestry. This racist social dynamic permeates nineteenth-century and most of twentieth-century African fiction, both black and white. The near-white female was depicted as beautiful and culturally superior to the racially pure but less attractive obese and passive mammy, the sexually promiscuous exotic primitive, and the cosmic Topsy. Images of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Eliza of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and William Wells Brown's Clotel, of *Clotel; Or, The President's Daughter* (1853) were copied and repeated so often that the near-white female had become a tragic archetype by the turn of the twentieth century.[1] It has proven to be an unfortunate archetype, since near-white women of African descent have never been representative of the majority of black women in this country in numbers or, perhaps, lifestyle. It was from this nonrepresentative class of black women that Jessie Redmon Fauset selected major female characters for four novels. She was, however, following a tradition set by black women novelists in 1859, with the publication of Harriet Wilson's recently discovered *Our Nig.* Without exception, Wilson, Frances Ellen Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Nella Larsen (a contemporary of Fauset) chose to fictionalize experiences of women who could, and very often did, pass for white.[2]

At the height of the Harlem Renaissance—when most African-American writers were metaphorically affirming their African heritage with dark images that informed a black aesthetic, and when they were making a valiant, albeit sometimes vain, attempt to capture the idiom and lifestyle of a wise but illiterate rural folk caught in the milieu of urban culture, Jessie Fauset was writing novels of gentility and class, and although it is not now popular to portray a genteel world in black fiction, Fauset's novels received much critical acclaim during her lifetime, from both white and black critics.[3]

Fauset was a popular and prolific writer; in less than ten years, she wrote ***There Is Confusion*** (1924), ***Plum Bun*** (1929), ***The Chinaberry Tree*** (1931), and ***Comedy, American Style*** (1933). During this same decade, she worked with W. E. B. Du Bois as literary editor of *Crisis* magazine and edited the *Brownies Book,* a monthly publication for children. Born into a very literary "old guard" Philadelphia family in 1886, she received a B.A. degree from Cornell and an M.A. degree from the University of Pennsylvania. She also studied at the Sorbonne and is the first black female novelist who was a college graduate.[4] Because her primary concern was to indicate the absurdity of an American caste system based upon race, she selected for her major female characters women who are ideally beautiful, by Western standards, and whose grooming and manners are impeccable but who, nevertheless, are denied social, economic, and educational access to opportunities taken for granted by white women. Fauset's novels inform white America that except for superficial differences of color, middle-class blacks are not unlike middle- and upper-class whites, and therefore deserve fair treatment. Resenting T. S. Stribling's notion of an African-American middle class portrayed in his critically acclaimed *Birthright,* she began her career as a novelist in response to it.[5]

Fauset's heroines and major female characters are variations of the popular tragic mulatto archetype of antebellum, antislavery fiction depicted by Wilson, Harper, and Hopkins. A significant difference in her presentations is in her more plausible portrayals of women who, although light in skin color, are not the children of mixed parentage; although they are not always light enough to pass for white, they are never more than "amber colored,"[6] and straight or wavy hair, aquiline noses, curly lashes, and highly arched feet are evidence of their Anglo Saxon heritage. Fauset subordinates skin color to the extent that an amber-colored heroine is not always presented less favorably than one with lighter skin; however, none of her major female characters are dark-skinned. More importantly, minor dark-skinned characters are servants to the light-skinned

women, and they speak a dialect that is more a caricature of black speech than it is authentic. Although a color/class hierarchy is prominent in all of Fauset's novels, she does, on occasion, recognize the precarious nature of color/class hegemony in the black community. In ***Comedy, American Style,*** her most provocative work, she evokes a devastating and pitiable image of a near-white female obsessed with maintaining mulatto hegemony in her family. While her earlier novels are written in the popular romance tradition of the late nineteenth century, ***Comedy, American Style*** is the first sustained and effective satirical novel authored by an African-American woman.

Class tensions in Fauset's first novel, ***There Is Confusion,*** is a result of Joanna Marshall's intrusion into the life of every other major character in order to maintain and protect her families' old-guard, Eastern-seaboard status. Maggie Ellersly, a "yellow calla lily," is pitted against Joanna, whose "unobtrusive nose," "hair that holds glints of light," "long curling eyelashes," and "exquisite feet" compensate for her "luminous brown skin."[7] The daughter of a reputable New York caterer whose wife has been a school teacher, Joanna detests lower-class blacks and is enraged that Maggie, an aspiring hair dresser, whose mother is a laundress, is involved in a love affair with her brother.

Because Maggie is not college educated, Joanna considers her unworthy of her brother, who intends to marry Maggie. She insults Maggie by sending her a letter which states emphatically that he "can not marry a hair-dresser"—to do so would hinder his career as a physician (p. 87). Maggie, not unlike popular romantic heroines of the period, looked to men as her economic saviors, and when denied the opportunity to marry into Joanna's family, she, like Theodore Drieser's Maggie, succumbs to the attention of a man of shady character.

Despite Maggie's fall, our sympathies are always with her—when she is stabbed by her gambler husband, after she divorces him, and then jilted by an upper-class, near-white Philadelphian whom Joanna loves. Ultimately, Fauset redeems Joanna, who experiences "a little private purgatory of remorse and guilt" (p. 286) over Maggie's tragedies.

Vera Manning, although a minor character, is in many respects one of Fauset's most compelling portrayals in ***There Is Confusion.*** She is a light-skinned African American who temporarily passes for white. Vera's parents are upper middle-class blacks. Her mother is Negrophobic in reference to her children marrying anyone darker that they,

Jessie Redmon Fauset, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston in front of a statue of Booker T. Washington.

and she aborts Vera's marriage to a dark-skinned man. Out of spite, Vera leaves home to live and work exclusively in white communities. While doing so, she learns of the intense personal racism of whites. Stunned by the insidious contempt that whites hold for blacks, Vera becomes an undercover agent investigating lynchings and the Ku Klux Klan; in this respect, she is reminiscent of Walter White's protagonist in the *Fire in the Flint* (1924).

Recognizing the dramatic possibilities of the passing theme examined in Vera Manning's characterization, which was not essential to Joanna's and Maggie's story, Fauset's second novel, ***Plum Bun,*** is a complex study of the passing phenomenon and its effects on both the near-white female who leaves home and the family whom she deserts.

Set in Philadelphia and New Jersey during the 1920s, the novel offers insights into racist America through its light-skinned protagonist, Angela Murray, who, unlike heroines of Harper and Hopkins, severs all ties to the black community in an attempt to live permanently as a white woman. Angela's experiences, like Vera Manning's, make the reader aware of the fierce racism that informs the personal conversations of whites—conversations to which only an African American passing

for white would be privy. Neither of Angela's parents is white. Her mother is a "mixed blood" whom whites often refer to as a "white nigger," and her father is very dark-skinned.[8] Angela discovers at a very early age that looking white has many advantages. When she shops with her mother in downtown Philadelphia, the two dine in white-only restaurants, and on one occasion they pass within arm's length of Angela's father and sister, but her mother makes no effort to acknowledge them. This occasion leaves a lasting impression on Angela, and after the death of both parents, she leaves her sister, Virginia, and the city of African-American elitism, to pass for white in New York.

Angela is obsessed with passing, and her sister is appalled by her calculated decision to completely disappear from her life. Fauset, herself light-skinned and solidly middle class, evokes her own voice in Virginia's condemnation of Angela. Virginia admonishes Angela to reconsider and contends that upper- and middle-class blacks are deserving of all benefits of American culture but should not abandon their families and communities to gain them.

A substantial element of Fauset's verisimilitude lies in her portrayal of women who in passing inform the readers of the depth of the personal animosity of whites toward blacks. Angela is involved romantically with a white male and learns that he detests black people and has "blackballed negroes [sic] in Harlem, aspirants for literary or honorary societies," and he has "successfully 'spoked the wheel' of various colored people" (p. 133). He supports the Garvey movement but for racist reasons. Ironically, his arguments in support of Garvey echo the sentiment of W. E. B. Du Bois, Fauset's mentor, whose integrationist philosophy was diametrically opposed to Garvey's nationalism.

Through the depiction of Angela's romance with a wealthy, Eastern-seaboard white male, Faucet examines class distinctions in white America. Angela's lover is not aware that she is of African descent, but because she has no social/class standing among the Eastern-seaboard noveau riche, he can accept her only as his clandestine mistress. Being white has not increased Angela's worth in the class of whites which she covets. It is ironic that she, as a refined white woman, qualifies only to assume the status of mistress, a role historically assigned to black women in white/black liaisons.

After several experiences that test Angela's racial pride and also expose her racial naiveté, Fauset completes Angela's metamorphosis from white to black and returns her to her sister and her Philadelphia roots. Implicit in Angela's return to the black community is Fauset's assumption that near-white African-American women should accept their own uniqueness and should not be concerned when whites discover their African heritage.

Later, in her depiction of Angela leaving the country to study in Europe (just as the author herself would do in the 1930s), Fauset offers the talented middle-class black woman, especially the marginal mulatto, an alternative to living under an American caste system that stereotypes and labels the best of the black middle class. In Europe, Angela decides to be whatever race people take her for. But again, Fauset creates color/class hegemony with the arrival in Europe of a star-crossed, near-white mulatto male of Angela's own "old guard" background who has joined her in anticipation of their marriage.

Heritage in ***The Chinaberry Tree*** is clearly defined as a product of miscegenation. Here, once again, the major female characters are fair or gold-skinned and, once again, one is used as a foil for the other. The lives of Laurentine Strange and Melissa Paul are always in a state of disaster. Laurentine, a 1920s variant of the archetypal tragic mulatto, has a "slightly foreign look"[9] and is the daughter of an African-American house servant and a wealthy white landowner. Melissa's mother is an unwed exotic primitive type, and her father is the mulatto husband of her mother's best friend. She is a "faithful reproduction" (p. 251) of her father's legitimate white daughters, while Melissa is a "high yellow" (p. 233) who just misses being "mariny"; unfortunately, her dark-red hair is crinkly, even nappy, "in its natural state" (p. 127). Fauset does not portray Laurentine's father married to her mother, although he provides well for them and visits regularly. She therefore differs from the archetype presented by earlier black women novelists in that the tragedy of her life does not result from the jarring revelation of her African ancestry after she is an adult. Because of her mother's clandestine relationship with her father, she experiences repeated rejections from both the black elite and whites in a small New Jersey town. Although upper-and middle-class black society does not initially accept Laurentine, Fauset gives her attributes of chastity, refinement, and beauty, all of which are a result of correct breeding.

Laurentine, a seamstress, refuses to sew for African-American women, but her reputation as a designer for wealthy whites finally earns her social acceptance among them. By depicting Laurentine

as a seamstress during the 1920s, Fauset historically represents a goodly number, but yet a select group, of black women during the first half of the twentieth century who earned a comfortable living designing clothes for white patrons; however, most women of African descent who engaged in making clothing along the Eastern seaboard during the decade of the twenties were employed in the notorious garment industry.[10]

Fauset does not give Laurentine much racial consciousness; however, she is the vehicle through which the reader experiences culture of the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset, a 1920s resident of Harlem, allows Laurentine and the reader to become acquainted with the famed Lafayette Theater, notable restaurants, and nightclubs of the era. Laurentine's uneasiness with an animated black folk culture in Harlem cabarets indicates Fauset's own rejection of it, as well as that of Du Bois, her mentor. Fauset provides Laurentine with thoughts that mirror some of the reasons why Du Bois was critical of Harlem Renaissance writers who depicted what he considered the exotic in African-American culture. Laurentine is puzzled over reasons why anyone would frequent clubs where a "drunken black woman . . . slapped a handsome yellow girl," and "where a dark, sinuous dancer, singing . . . making movements . . . postured . . ." (p. 181).

Although Fauset never implies that white is superior to black, she is cautious in her praise of mulattoes who do not represent the "best" of their race. This caution is seen in her characterization of Melissa, who is sympathetically portrayed but never completely measures up to the standards of the Eastern-seaboard black elite and what seems to be the author's image of the ideal mulatto woman. Her mother has been married three times, and none of those times to a man who is aristocratic, wealthy, or white. The elegant, proud, and beautiful Laurentine resents Melissa's intrusion into her cloistered life when Melissa comes to live with her mother and her. Laurentine takes great pride in the fact that she has inherited her white father's aristocratic bloodline, and, ironically, Melissa resents and chides Laurentine for her illegitimacy. Both have tangled love affairs because they are constantly maneuvering to marry the best in color, character, and family among black people.

A light-skinned black male who is even more class-conscious than Laurentine rejects her, and Melissa, ignorant of her own heritage, almost marries her half brother. Disaster is circumvented when both Laurentine and Melissa eventually marry men of their same class and skin color. Laurentine, with the good Holloway blood, is rescued by a mulatto, fair-skinned Harvard physician, and "mariny" Melissa with the "crinkly hair" finds contentment with a dark-skinned graduate of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute—the prototype for black industrial arts colleges which did not conform to Du Bois's, Fauset's mentor's, ideal for higher education for blacks. Again, there are no dark-skinned major female characters, and the yellow one, whose heritage is tainted, marries her cultural equal.

Although Fauset consistently supports mulatto hegemony, she does suggest in her fourth novel that obsession with color and class can, and does, lead to absurdity. This is the most salient comment of her novels, and it is revealed through the remarkable characterization of Olivia Carey, a Negrophobic near-white female, in ***Comedy, American Style.*** Although all major female characters in this novel are of practically the same physiognomy as Olivia, none is as obsessed with color as she. In this work, Fauset alerts the reader to the tragedy that results from complete denial of one's African ancestry and to the cruel nature of color/class hegemony that can exist in black families.

Physically, Olivia is a carbon copy of her mother, but her father is dark-skinned. Neither parent can understand Olivia's early ruthlessness fused by her desire to dissociate herself from them. With her father's death and her mother's remarriage to a near-white mulatto, and after the birth of her twin brothers, who are even lighter in skin color than she, Olivia discovers a solution to her racial dilemma: she vows to marry a light-skinned mulatto to assure that she will have children who will eventually pass for white and allow her the opportunity to enter their white world.

After her marriage to a light-skinned physician and the birth of her children, Olivia's ruthlessness intensifies. When she is shopping with her white friends, she ignores her youngest son because of his brown skin. She also passes him off as her colored butler when white women visit. Because of her many rejections of him, he commits suicide. Olivia's fair-skinned daughter is not allowed to play with girls of obvious African-American descent or to date boys who are not very light-skinned. She tells her daughter that she would rather see her "dead" than married to her "bronze-skinned lover."[11] Ultimately, Olivia forces the daughter to pass for white and to marry a Frenchman, who mistreats her, and she denounces the oldest son's friendship with a young lady who does not meet her requirements of color and class. Olivia's color obsession is ultimately

her undoing. By the end of the novel, she is psychologically broken and spends her days sitting by the window of her lonely Paris room, watching and waiting for an Anglo Saxon woman and her son, who sit in a courtyard reading and laughing together. This scene reminds the reader, if not Olivia, of the past—of the lost years when Olivia's dark-skinned son had sought-out his mother to confide in, and when he desperately needed her attention.

The image of Olivia is devastating, but the author does not deviate from the central premise of her previous novels—that mulatto hegemony must be maintained. Even those women who pull at the heartstrings of the reader because of Olivia's interference marry men no darker than themselves after her power over them is dissipated. Again, in ***Comedy, American Style*** there is that notion that wanting to be white is wrong and unnatural, although pride in color and class assuredly does not mean that one must "surrender a white aesthetic"[12] whose basic historical tenet has been "black, get back."

Fauset's portrayals of African-American women who are overly class- and color-conscious must be assessed against the stereotypical images that bordered on the caricature that white writers were using to depict men and women of African descent at the turn of the twentieth century and later. It is not difficult to understand her desire to reverse those images and to write with sympathy and understanding about an educated African-American middle/upper class to which she belonged. The real paradox of so much interest in class-conscious mulattoes is, as suggested earlier, that they depict a select group who have never been representative in number or lifestyle of African-American women. And just as important, the highly class-conscious mulatto has served to perpetuate a divisiveness within African-American culture since the genesis of a mulatto caste in the era of American slavery. Certainly the very images of black female arrogance so often depicted in Fauset's novels are ones that have caused "other Blacks to look at mulattoes as Greeks whose gifts should always bear watching."[13]

Notes

1. Catherine Stark, *Black Portraiture in American Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 89.
2. For an examination of the treatment of the mulatto female in the novels of Harper, Hopkins, Larsen, and Hurston, see Vashti Crutcher Lewis, "The Mulatto as Major Female Character in Novels by Black Women: 1892-1937," diss., Univ. of Iowa, 1981. The term mulatto in this manuscript is not used with biological precision but refers to individuals who would also be categorized as quadroon or octoroon. For a popular definition of mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon, see Judith Berzon, *Neither Black nor White* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1978), p. 54.
3. For an indication of Fauset's popularity among both black and white critics, see Amirit Singh, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 93.
4. Marion L. Starkey, "Jessie Fauset," *The Southern Workman,* May 1932, p. 219.
5. Ibid., p. 218.
6. Gerald Sykes, "Amber-Tinted Elegance," *The Nation,* 27 July 1932, p. 86.
7. Jessie Redmon Fauset, *There Is Confusion* (New York: AMS Press, 1924), pp. 20, 200. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number(s) only.
8. Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1919), p. 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number(s) only.
9. Jessie Redmon Fauset, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931; rpt. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number(s) only.
10. Lorenzo J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History), p. 41.
11. Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Comedy, American Style* (1933; rpt. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 143. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number(s) only.
12. Addison Gayle, *The Way of the New World* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1975), p. 121.
13. Arde Coombs, "Mulatto Pride," *New York,* 26 June 1978, p. 37.

TITLE COMMENTARY

Plum Bun

KATHLEEN PFEIFFER (ESSAY DATE 2001)

SOURCE: Pfeiffer, Kathleen. "The Limits of Identity in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun.*" *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 18, no. 1 (2001): 79-93.

In this essay, Pfeiffer explores racial, national, and cultural identity in Fauset's Plum Bun, *linking Angela Murray's efforts at "passing" to the artificial values of the marketplace. Pfeiffer also discusses the significance of the title, taken from a nursery rhyme.*

Jessie Fauset, the Harlem Renaissance's most prolific woman novelist, believed that good literature conveys "the universality of experience." In a 1922 letter to then fledgling writer Jean Toomer, she encourages him to read the classics in order to find "the same reaction to beauty, to love, to

freedom. It gives you a tremendous sense of fulness [sic], and completeness, a linking up of your life with others like yours" (Fauset to Toomer). She insists that literature crosses boundaries of space and time and creates communities of like-minded artists. But the cultural and social changes of the 1920s curtailed the possibility for the meaningful connection that Fauset advocates. Jessie Fauset wrote to Jean Toomer with optimism and conviction, believing, like her mentor W. E. B. DuBois, in art's potential for bridging political divides. Yet she encourages Jean Toomer to find community in a world that was fast becoming a place of alienation and estrangement. Fauset sent Toomer straight into the arms of that isolating world. "You've got personality and no prejudicing appearances," she noted. "Why not try to break into the newspaper game in one of the big cities?" As Fauset's fiction illustrates, the cut-throat competition and cynicism fostered by "the newspaper game" both caused and reflected the fragmented nature of urban communities.

Art's potential to link lives and form a common ground informs Fauset's most highly regarded novel, the 1929 bildungsroman ***Plum Bun.*** Critics have viewed the work as a novel of manners, as an investigation of racial liminality, as an analysis of gender roles that subvert or restrict female sexuality, and most often, as a pointed critique of protagonist Angela Murray's attempt to pass for white.[1] Yet many, if not all, of these analyses turn on presumptions about boundaries that the novel explicitly seeks to undermine. Of course, ***Plum Bun*** is shaped by the particularities of Angela Murray's identity and therefore grapples with the construction of race, class, and gender. But the novel also raises some of the broader philosophical questions that underlie Fauset's advice to Jean Toomer. Does absolute freedom aid or obstruct the development of meaningful identity? Do the values of a clearly defined community inform or limit individuality? The grandson of black Reconstruction politician P. B. S. Pinchback, Toomer was light enough to pass as white, and his racial complexity clearly shaped his own approach to writing. His lyrical treatment of African American culture accounts for much of the beauty of *Cane,* yet his steadfast rejection of racial categories was the subject of much of his autobiographical writing.[2] Acknowledging that the light-skinned Toomer had no "prejudicing appearances," Fauset knew well the conflicts he would face in finding employment and, more important, social and intellectual comradery when he relocated to New York. Can someone like Jean Toomer or Angela Murray—both of whom struggled to negotiate an organic sense of self apart from the (arbitrary) social categories assigned them—ever find a sense of "fullness" or "completeness"?

Plum Bun extends and complicates the analysis of identity, citizenship, and community life taking place in the public discourse of the 1920s and therefore represents a "linking up" of the Harlem Renaissance's concerns with those of American intellectual culture generally. Such a reading ventures to answer the challenge posed by Ann duCille, who insists, "Critics and theorists of African American literature must conceptualize race, class, culture, and experience, as well as tradition*s* and canon*s,* in terms far less natural, absolute, linear, and homogeneous than we have in the past" (148). To read Fauset in the context of her contemporary intellectual culture is to see that she was neither anachronistic nor marginal, as previous critics have charged. In ***Plum Bun,*** the trope of passing for white raises many of the same issues about the individual and society debated publicly by prominent intellectuals in this time period. More pointedly, Fauset's novel *racializes* those discussions and thereby reveals the role of race and gender in the debate. Angela Murray's passing reflects the multivalent transformations in which white American culture at large was then participating. Her particular movement from a black identity to a white identity invokes the larger movements—from Victorian morals to modernist ethos, from family to city, from community to individuality, from tradition to self-generation—that characterized the broader American culture.

This is not to diminish the degree to which ***Plum Bun*** conscientiously participates in an African American literary tradition in which a light skinned heroine negotiates the competing demands of race and gender. Fauset's literary predecessors made excellent use of such a protagonist to critique American racial hypocrisy. In William Wells Brown's 1853 *Clotel* and Frances E. W. Harper's 1892 *Iola Leroy,* both title characters literally embody the contradictions of characters whose light skin misrepresents their black identity. In *Iola Leroy,* passing for white is dismissed as moral weakness which would be "treason, not only to the race, but to humanity" and which makes one into "a moral cripple" (203, 266). Likewise, many of Fauset's contemporaries made use of passing and, like Fauset, they manipulated its meaning to far more nuanced and complicated ends than were possible for earlier writers. Charles

Chesnutt's 1900 *The House Behind the Cedars* and James Weldon Johnson's 1912 *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* for example, depict the psychological complexity of passing even as both novels offer pointedly ironic critiques of the very *need* to pass, of the segregated society's tendency to overdetermine race. Fauset's contemporary Nella Larsen examines such issues as well, as her treatment of passing in *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) is particularly attentive to women's experience. Larsen's treatment of passing, like Fauset's in ***Plum Bun,*** questions the possibilities for sisterhood in a modern world that increasingly values individual accomplishment.

Plum Bun focuses on Angela Murray, a light-skinned young painter who tries to pass for white. To do this, she leaves her darker, younger sister Virginia and moves to New York as the white Angèle Mory, ostensibly to study drawing. In New York, she meets two men: Anthony Cross (a quiet, passionate, and poor artist who loves her) and Roger Fielding (a rich white man whom she sees as her ticket to wealth and freedom). Eventually Virginia decides to move to New York as well, agreeing to keep Angela's racial secret, but on the day she arrives in the city, Roger Fielding unexpectedly appears at the train station and Angela pretends not to know Virginia, thereby abandoning her sister to protect her racial reputation and maintain Roger's affection. The sisters ultimately reunite, and in a show of support for a fellow art student, a black woman, Angela ends her passing by announcing her so-called true racial identity to a roomful of newspaper reporters. In the end, Angela travels to Paris to study art and in the very last line of the novel is reunited with Anthony, whose own multiracial identity has been revealed and who has long been understood to be her true love.

Even before Angela passes for white, numerous references encourage the readers of ***Plum Bun*** to view her as a quintessentially American individualist. She is born in Philadelphia at the turn of the century into a family whose sentimental relations are directly influenced by such encroaching industrial developments as washing machines and automobiles. Indeed, her problems of self-definition are exacerbated by the cultural transformations following the Great War, transformations which influence her status as black and as a woman. Thus, when Angela moves to New York as the white Angèle Mory, she cannot distinguish between her perceived absolute freedom and a more elusive meaningful liberty; and when Angela betrays and abandons her sister at the train station, Fauset explores the consequences of her protagonist's radical individualism. The implications for citizenship are clear; Angela discovers that a meaningful personal identity depends upon connecting to a sympathetic community. Clear, too, are the implications for literary production. Ann duCille has noted the instability of form in Fauset's novels, arguing that "Fauset is indeed writing neither realism nor naturalism; nor is she falling back on pure romanticism. She is interrogating old forms and inventing something new" (100). In ***Plum Bun,*** Angela's rejection of her sister and her race analogizes generic transition because she has left a home that vividly evokes nineteenth-century domestic fiction. In this evocation, Fauset simultaneously engages and critiques the racial dimensions of American literature's mythology and of its presentation of the American dream.

Even before the Great War destroyed white Americans' faith in their own inviolability, Walter Lippman's 1914 *Drift and Mastery* gave voice to the same sense of cultural ennui Angela experiences. "We have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves" (92), he writes in a chapter whose very title, "A Big World and Little Men," anticipates Angela's entrance to New York, where "Fifth Avenue is a canyon; its towering buildings dwarf the importance of the people hurrying through its narrow confines" (87). This is a world in which the "newspaper game" determines public opinion and mediates all communication. Lippman argues that religious authority has been undermined by the advent of scientific thought, that big business has rendered political systems inefficient, and that community has become increasingly fragmented. As a result, Lippman concludes, life's "impersonal quality is intolerable: people don't like to deal with abstractions" (93). For Americans in all regions—but most especially for those in urban centers like New York—the war exacerbated this alienation. Fauset privately encouraged Toomer to discover "the universality of experience" in a world where the sheer enormity of "the war to end all wars" demanded that nations recognize their membership in a global community. John Dewey's postwar analysis of *The Public and Its Problems* likened the war's spread to "an uncontrolled natural catastrophe. The consolidation of peoples in enclosed, nominally independent, national states has its counterpart in the fact that their acts affect groups and individuals in other states all over the world" (128). In shattering the boundaries

through which countries defined themselves, the first World War also ruptured the boundaries through which individual identities acquired clarity and stability.

The two decades following the Great War saw dramatic alterations in white American concepts of personal identity. Ann Douglas has recently demonstrated that the war created "the culture of momentum." Profound material, political, philosophical, and epistemological changes wrought by the war irrevocably quickened the pace of modern life. "As Gertrude Stein pointed out," Douglas notes, "in a period of immense change like that of the Great War, fast assimilation is a prerequisite for power; the country least hampered by past conventions and traditions, least subject to cultural lag, most oriented toward the future, most alert to incentives to modernize, will dominate" (186-87). The appeal of Herbert Hoover, elected just before ***Plum Bun*** was published, lay in his being an engineer and in his presentation of himself as a modern man who could control the technological forces at work. Modern technology affected not only the production of Henry Ford automobiles, but also the transmission of information and the reproduction of images. The increasing availability of telephones, telegraphs, newspapers, movies, and radios made communication cheap and easy. Likewise, the mass production of food, clothing, toiletries, household appliances, and entertainment made the material conditions of life less demanding. But at what cost, asked intellectuals and cultural critics. To what end? These unsettling development in material culture and religious belief converged in the Scopes trial of 1925, where science and religion battled for legal primacy. In the first jury trial publicly broadcast live on the radio, the drama of Clarence Darrow examining William Jennings Bryan demonstrated not only the power and the limits of rhetoric, but also the market appeal of philosophical debate. Such transition—from familiarity to uncertainty, from religious conviction to scientific skepticism, from community to individualism, from nineteenth-century values to twentieth-century promise—is metonymized in Angela Murray's passing for white.

In ***Plum Bun***'s opening section, "Home," home, race, and sisterhood have already lost their coherence. Angela finds herself disenchanted with her hometown, the city where the U.S. Constitution was ratified. Twenty-seven years old at the end of the 1929 novel, Angela's birth corresponds closely with that of the twentieth century. This motif of transition figures into her character, as Angela finds herself wholly disillusioned with the small, closed, rigidly restricted domestic sphere which represented, just one generation earlier, the epitome of comfort and success. But her sense of rebellion is determined by her innate character and not her chronological age, as we see in the contrast between Angela and her younger sister. Virginia's character is fully grounded in her acceptance of a black racial identity, and she identifies wholly with her parents' old-fashioned, sentimental, and parochial traditions. Her characterization recalls heroines like Clotel and Iola Leroy and connects her to earlier African American fiction. Her name evokes more than just her virginal innocence, though that evocation certainly resonates. Virginia's values derive from slave culture of the old South: her ostensibly sweet and gentle demeanor belies her deeper strength, and ultimately she reveals herself to be shrewdly cunning.

Different skin colors—Angela's whiteness and Virginia's "rosy bronzeness" (14)—may have predisposed the sisters to their different characters, or they may have simply reinforced what already existed. In ***Plum Bun,*** the racial significance of *why* the two sisters are so different is further complicated because Angela, the older sister, shuns the ideology of domesticity that Virginia, the younger sister, embraces. Their distinct character differences reject positivism, suggesting that some generational upheaval has ruptured the flow of progress. Older and introspective, Angela craves independence and looks forward; young and vivacious, Virginia craves domesticity and looks backward. Religious devotion binds Virginia to her family, and Christian faith binds the family to its community.

Allusions to literary traditions frame references to social traditions in the novel's first half, where it becomes clear that Virginia's belief in the power of family is deepened and sustained by her religious devotion. The hyperbolic language with which Fauset describes this attachment establishes Virginia's sensibilities as deeply entrenched in the sentimental tradition: "She loved the atmosphere of golden sanctity which seemed to hover with a sweet glory about the stodgy, shabby little dwelling" (20). This "sweet glory" calls Virginia to a life of domestic service rendered noble by devotion to God and family. The first page of the "Home" section describes how, by twelve years of age, Virginia had discovered the pleasures of house-keeping. She "had already developed a singular aptitude and liking for the care of the house" and she had fulfilled "all the duties of

Sunday morning"—housecleaning, cooking breakfast, waking and serving the family, entertaining them by playing the piano as they dress for church. In these chores she "found a nameless and sweet satisfaction" (20). Virginia is so deeply and continually affected by this ritual of servitude that when, following breakfast, she plays religious hymns which her parents join her in singing, the "little girl" experiences "a sensation of happiness which lay perilously near tears" (21).

Religious services conjure a reaction in Virginia so intense as to evoke sexuality. Virginia experiences communion services as spiritually sensual; the description of these services resembles orgasm:

> In the exquisite diction of the sacramental service there were certain words, certain phrases that almost made the child faint; the minister had a faint burr in his voice and somehow this lent a peculiar underlying resonance to his intonation; he half spoke, half chanted and when, picking up the wafer he began "For in the night" and then broke it, Virginia could have cried out with the ecstasy which filled her.
>
> (23)

Significantly, Virginia is too young to participate in this ritual of consummation, here rendered multifaceted and multiply suggestive, but she senses its importance. Taking communion seems to "transfigure" people; her parents, it seems, "wore an expression of ineffable content as they returned to their seats" (23). In this interconnection of religious fervor, displaced sexuality, and consumption, Fauset not only draws together the most powerful themes of her literary ancestors; she also delineates the cultural transition in which the authority of religion will give way to the emerging complexity and prominence of modernity.

Such an analogy problematizes literature's role in writing race and in creating ideological stereotypes by which we order the world. Certainly Virginia evokes the literary heroines of black women's fiction, the so-called "tragic mulattas," like Iola Leroy, who maintain race-conscious fidelity to "their people." But many of Virginia's literary ancestors are also white heroines of nineteenth-century romances and domestic fictions; therefore, ***Plum Bun*** cannot easily be located generically or in terms of its racial ideology.[3] While the narrative explicitly draws our attention toward Angela, the obvious protagonist, Virginia operates as a background foil who recalls, critiques, and at times deconstructs the literary tradition and social history against which Angela defines herself.

It is not only the black women's convention which operates in this polarity, but the canonical tradition as well. One could argue that Nathaniel Hawthorne's echo also sounds in Virginia's characterization. The romanticization of domestic labor by which Fauset defines Virginia was a strategy deployed in *The House of the Seven Gables* to reconstitute women's work as pleasure, not labor. In fact, Carolyn Wedin Sylvander sees Hawthorne's influence in the novel's form, which incorporates the nursery rhyme motif. "The pattern of the romance as Nathaniel Hawthorne developed it in *The House of the Seven Gables,* departure and return, or isolation to communion, is thus put into child's verse," Sylvander argues. "By adopting the freedoms of the American romance for formal structure, Fauset is able to accomplish a whole series of aims in ***Plum Bun***" (184). As a figure redolent of nineteenth-century ideology, Virginia also evokes the literary tradition in which, as Michael T. Gilmore has argued, the middle class emerged in all of its potential and confusion. "Nathaniel Hawthorne," he notes, "maps the emergence of middle-class identity and simultaneously reveals the self-contradictory and unsettled nature of the new configuration" (216). Through Virginia's traditional femininity, Fauset folds this class-consciousness into a gendered role: her middle-class virtue defines the community against which Angela rebels. In ***Plum Bun***'s opening "Home" section, then, Virginia's characterization locates several nebulous historical, cultural, and literary transitions. It evokes the middle class's formulation and simultaneous instability; it subsumes personal identity into a vacuous romantic stereotype (a critique of which will become evident in her move to New York and eventual cosmopolitanism); and it establishes—in order to critique—a dialectic of opposition as the paradigm through which Angela must assert her own identity.

The sentimental trope that Virginia seems to personify was often used by the generation of black women writers preceding Fauset; these women presented the domestic ideal to affirm community and family as sites where women have social and civic presence. Claudia Tate has argued persuasively that "the idealized domesticity in these novels . . . [functioned] as a fundamental cultural symbol of the Victorian era for representing civil ambition and prosperity as a nineteenth-century 'metonym for proper social order,' a symbol that black women writers in particular used to promote the social advancement of African Americans" (5). But for all of its appar-

ent and romanticized appeal, the ideology of domesticity, as it is incorporated into Virginia's young self, contains the elements of its own undoing. This "blessed 'Sunday feeling'" (20), which affects Virginia so deeply, has resounding political implications, for her sensibility portends cultural stagnation:

> She envied no one the incident of finer clothes or a larger home; this unity was the core of happiness, all other satisfactions must radiate from this one; greater happiness could be only a matter of degree but never of essence. When she grew up she meant to . . . marry a man exactly like her father and she would conduct her home exactly as did her mother.
>
> (22)

The incestuous undertones in Virginia's wish to marry her father hint at her desire to thwart social evolution by replicating her parents' lives rather than surpassing them. Notwithstanding her ambition "to invent a marvellous method for teaching the pianoforte" (13), Virginia feels none of the desire to succeed that fuels social change or political progress.

In ***Plum Bun*** explicit invocations of literary genre frame Angela's decision to pass for white, aligning her rejection of blackness with a rejection of the sentimental tradition of domestic fiction. Angela has little regard for the sentiments that define Virginia's world. "She did not like going to church, at least not to their church, but she did care about her appearance and she liked the luxuriousness of being 'dressed up' on two successive days" (21). In fact, being "dressed up" and attending to her appearance is Angela's single greatest pleasure. The narrator tells us that "Saturday came to be the day of the week for Angela" because on this day "Angela learned the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness" (20, 14). Angela associates the white world with a particular kind of freedom, however; she is happiest when idle and on display. Her most satisfied Saturdays consist of shopping, lunching, and attending orchestra concerts.

To Angela and her mother Mattie, "a successful and interesting afternoon" consists of making a virtue of their uselessness and of continual self-objectification: "They had browsed among the contents of the small exclusive shops in Walnut Street; they had had soda at Adams' on Broad Street and they were standing finally in the portico of the Walton Hotel deciding with fashionable and idle elegance what they should do next" (18). For Mattie, these afternoons offer an escape from class as much as race, and they teach Angela to embrace the luxuries of consumer culture. A romantic and an idealist, Mattie wants her daughters to become great artists; her sensible husband Junius overrides that wish and insists upon giving them "a good, plain education." But Junius also indulges Mattie's love for material culture. The demands of Mattie's work-week create the pleasure of her Saturdays: "[A]ll innocent, childish pleasures pursued without malice or envy contrived to cast a glamour over Monday's washing and Tuesday's ironing, the scrubbing of the kitchen and bathroom and the fashioning of children's clothes" (16). Angela experiences the public pleasures of the marketplace's gratification individually and selfishly, but she fails to see its broader communal effects; at the same time, she inadvertently learns to conflate an artistic sensibility with material comfort.

Angela's predisposition to view Fate, rather than God, as primarily responsible for her life's path most clearly distinguishes her as representative of nascent twentieth-century thought. By arguing that "merit is not always rewarded" (12), ***Plum Bun*** racializes the nineteenth-century mythology that popularized Horatio Alger's fiction. Angela frames her desire for independence—"Freedom! That was the note which Angela heard oftenest in the melody of living which was to be hers" (13)—wholly in terms of race. The family ties that Virginia treasures mean little to Angela. Her outright rejection of Virginia, the sharpest consequence of passing, is precipitated by "a faint pity" she feels "for her unfortunate relatives" with dark skin (18). Likewise, Angela finds nothing appealing in the company of neighbors and friends who make an essential community for Virginia. Angela finds Matthew Henson, a potential beau, to be "insufferably boresome and [she] made no effort to hide her ennui" (24). She responds to Virginia's piano playing "in sheer self-defense"—she leaves the room to eat supper alone rather than experience the emotions her sister's religious music might evoke.

Significantly, Angela experiences both her greatest satisfaction and her most painful racial rejection in her beloved art class. Even though her teachers assure her that she will "find artistic folk the broadest, most liberal people in the world" (65), they cut her coldly when they learn of her racial lineage. The novel conjoins this rebuff with a similar, more public humiliation at a movie theater, and Angela's bitterness about these rejections grows more cynical in the face of her sister's calm acceptance. Angela's decision to pass emerges from such moments of pointed confusion.

FROM THE AUTHOR

PLUM BUN

She thought then of black people. . . . And she saw them as a 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.

SOURCE: Jessie Redmon Fauset, excerpt from *Plum Bun,* Matthews & Marrot, 1928.

How can Fauset's personal advice to Toomer and her public advocation of an "Art" that serves racial justice be reconciled with these fictional depictions? In Philadelphia, Angela's development as an artist is continually circumscribed by the fact of her race—by her invisible "blood"—and not, importantly, by the appearance of racial difference. Angela utterly rejects the community-oriented, racially loyal, and sentimentally genteel realm wholly embraced by her sister. When a friend suggests that racial experience enhances artistic growth, she responds with brutal frankness: "'Oh, don't drag me into your old discussion,' Angela answered crossly. 'I'm sick of this whole race business if you ask me. . . . No, I don't think being coloured in America is a beautiful thing. I think it's nothing short of a curse'" (53). Angela's cynical realism countermands her sister's domesticity. Sharing more attributes with fictional contemporaries like Jay Gatsby and Lily Bart than the likes of Iola Leroy or Clotel, Angela strives to become the fully individualized product of her own imagination.

The racialized contrast between (dark) Virginia's embrace of tradition and (light) Angela's desire for freedom illustrates the impossibility of "linking up" the sisters' lives with each other. The "completeness" that Fauset's letter encourages Toomer to find proves elusive in a world specifically inscribed in America's postwar cultural transitions. The Murray household has been influenced—and its familial relationships altered—by the same encroaching tensions and technologically induced displacements that many intellectuals were then lamenting. More than just the "newspaper game" reshapes communication and communities; domestic traditions are altered as well. Washing day—once a ritual that reinforced the connections between home and work life, wherein Junius tried to work uptown "so that he could run in and help Mattie"—disappears as the girls grow up. When they were young, their father "used to dart in and out two or three time [sic] in the course of a morning to lend a hand." But this ceremony has been irrevocably altered by "the advent of the washing machine" (33). The workload, to be sure, has been reduced, but the communal chore has also been dissolved and reduced to a "pleasant fiction" (33). Leisurely Saturday afternoons also disappear. During the girls' childhoods, these were days of enormous pleasure when Mattie and Angela would go shopping while Junius and Virginia toured the city, but by their adulthood, the "Saturday excursions were long since a thing of the past; Henry Ford had changed that" (56). As the sisters grow older and begin working as teachers, the family becomes increasingly fragmented and communal time dissipates; eventually, not even church services bring them together.

Plum Bun thus records cultural instability and writes race into its account. The novel's structure underscores this dissonance through its unlikely juxtaposition of nursery rhyme and marketplace. ***Plum Bun*** the novel critiques the white bias in "Plum Bun" the nursery rhyme by removing it from the nursery and projecting it into an adult, market-driven sphere. Its five sections, "Home," "Market," "Plum Bun," "Home Again," and "Market is Done," reveal transactions not anticipated in the nursery rhyme.[4] By positing a nursery rhyme motif, Fauset critiques the literary form through which cultural indoctrination into class and race-consciousness occurs. Her use of "Plum Bun" highlights the nursery rhyme's assumption that selfhood finds expression—and, indeed, children find happiness—through acquisition and consumption. "Plum Bun" the nursery rhyme simplifies its manifestations of value and exchange; ***Plum Bun*** the novel complicates them. "Plum Bun" celebrates the movement linking homes and marketplaces; ***Plum Bun*** critiques it.

In the twentieth-century marketplace of values, Angela sells her family home in order to buy her freedom: "Her plan was to sell the house and divide the proceeds. With her share of this and her half of the insurance she would go to New York or Chicago, certainly to some place where she could by no chance be known, and launch out 'into a freer, fuller life'" (80). But with Angela's sale of real estate, Fauset invests in what duCille terms

"unreal estate," a fantastic fictional realm that combines the historically specific and the sentimental. In this "ideologically charged space" black writers ranging from William Wells Brown to Ann Petry have fictionally embroidered historical facts, duCille argues, "usually for decidedly political purposes" (18). Thus, even as Angela ostensibly rejects her African American *racial* heritage, Fauset arguably claims her African American *literary* heritage. ***Plum Bun***'s opening section, aptly titled "Home," concludes by depicting the real estate transaction in which Virginia purchases sole custody of the family's home and history from Angela, who gives up her name, her race, and her past. But in the second, equally well-titled "Market" section, Angela enters into a world of "unreal estate" where sculptor Augusta Savage appears in the disguise of Miss Powell and W. E. B. DuBois seems embodied in the fictional Van Meier.

When Angela moves to New York, she also encounters the pseudo-environment created by an increasingly volatile and mechanized mass society. New York is a city where, as Walter Lippmann argues, "what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him" (*Opinion* 25). Indeed, New York is a marketplace rather than a home, and Angela's familial irresponsibility translates into financial irresponsibility. The translation appears most evident in her housing decisions. Her new friend Paulette marvels at Angela's naive choice of lodging. "In a hotel?" she exclaims, as Angela blushes in embarrassment. "In Union Square? Child, are you a millionaire? Where did you come from? Don't you care anything about the delights of home?" (99). From the start, Fauset makes it clear that Angela's inability to negotiate the exchange rate of white skin parallels her bad miscalculation of the meaning of home.

In New York, Angela mistakes alienation for independence; moreover, she discovers that while whiteness imparts the kind of social freedom that comes from her newfound anonymity, such freedom does not guarantee a meaningful identity. Instead, because she views freedom as an end in itself rather than the means to an end—that is, as a means to establishing a rewarding identity—her experience of freedom is characterized by estrangement, drift, and alienation. Her aimless wandering—"she was being unconscionably idle" (91)—evinces this loss of subjectivity, and her idleness reinforces her lack of social connections. Angela's arrival in New York and her simultaneous passing for white thus reflect a transition from an identifiable community to an undifferentiated mass society, and thereby illustrates the consequences Dewey described in 1927 of a world in which "no amount of aggregated collective action of itself constitutes a community" (151). Angela's removal to New York also depicts the tensions identified by German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies, whose 1887 work on community and society demonstrates how communities grow from acts of will, rather than from organic, inherent conditions. Tonnies raises questions that Fauset engages through Angela, and both demonstrate that community, an extension of family, faces difficult challenges in a world where family life is decaying.

In New York, Angèle Mory wants to recreate herself by associating with a sympathetic and like-minded community. But first, she finds pleasant distraction at the movies, where she now "found herself studying the screen with a strained and ardent intensity" (91). Her attraction to performative entertainment reinforces both her new name and her claim to New York, for as Douglas observes, "Constructed identity is at bottom an affair of masks and role playing, part of the politics of theatricality" (344). Angela's easy access to movies and theaters reflects white New York's desire to be entertained and its lack of interest in politics. These readily available mass-produced movies sought profit over artistic merit, and genre pictures employed assembly-line strategies to keep audiences enthralled. The easy success of Angela's own performance—her passing for white—predisposes her to accept the cinema's formulaic fictions without question, and she loses "the slight patronizing scepticism [sic]" that characterized her previous critical judgment (91). But her loss of discriminating individuality is exacerbated by a terrible loneliness, and in her favorite theater, Angela often watches the audience more than the play, noting the intimate groups that create it. In this way, her experience demonstrates an emerging truth about mass culture: Angela can be a member simply by attending the performance, but as a member of the audience, she merely watches the show in the dark. Alienated and unconnected, her membership has no significant value.

But if Angela's experience as an anonymous spectator at the theater undermines her critical perceptions, her parallel experience as a spectator in the world explicitly nourishes her artistic growth. As a spectator in the world, an observer of human behavior and of the human face, Angela

becomes an artist. Fauset thus offers her protagonist the same opportunity for connection toward which she encouraged Toomer—"a linking up of your life with others like yours." Once independent, Angela finds herself drawn to the same sort of intimacy and security she rejected at home. Her expectation that whiteness and freedom would bring rewards gives way to the ironic realization that they only bring expense. Her initial weeks of residence in New York are marked both by her sense of adventure and by that adventure's cost: "[S]he had been in New York eight months and she had already spent a thousand dollars. At this rate her little fortune which had seemed at first inexhaustible would last her less than two years" (110). Friendships involve expenditure in New York: she is beholden to her comrades for lunches, teas, and gifts. Though the price of these socials adds up, the emotive rewards are less congruous: Miss Powell responds to her with an "attitude of dignified reserve" (108); Paulette "lived in a state of constant defiance" (112); and Martha Burden "was cool and slightly aloof" (112). These ostensible sisters share an understanding of the world, insights which are alien to Angela. Human interaction is regulated and commodified in this artificially constructed community, and the synthetic nature of Angela's friendships underscores the alienation of urban life.

Still, a clear sense does emerge that Angela is gifted with painterly insights. In Harlem, she sees aesthetic possibilities in a world shaped by art. "A man's sharp, high-bred face etched itself on her memory," Fauset notes, "—the face of a professional man, perhaps,—it might be an artist" (96). The language here—a formulation in which the man's face is the subject performing the action, rather than Angela's artistic eye beholding or perceiving the face—is language that posits the man's face as the agent of artistic etching, not Angela. The intimation that blackness inscribes itself as artistic vision onto Angela is underscored when Fauset tells us that Angela sees Harlem as "fuller, richer, not finer but richer with the difference in quality that there is between velvet and silk" (98). But still, she rejects the intense devotion and potential happiness in Anthony's love because it involves commitment: she "wanted none of Anthony's poverty and privation and secret vows . . . to REAL ART" (143).

The contrast between Roger and Anthony further underscores Angela's misunderstanding of the meaning of freedom. She believes that Anthony's poverty will restrict her, when in fact Roger's prosperity and the obligations to his father that accompany it bring the greatest demands. Contrary to Angela's belief that Roger represents freedom, his presence in her life proves far more inhibiting than liberating. In ironic juxtaposition to his wealth, she amasses "a little heap" of bills in the process of their affair because "she had had to dress to keep herself dainty and desirable" for him (151). Martha Burden advises Angela to manipulate Roger in order to extract a marriage proposal. Thereafter, the majority of her actions toward him are contrived; she views the relationship as a game in which she "decided to follow all the rules as laid down by Martha Burden and to add any workable ideas of her own" (146). Rather than allowing her to develop a full and meaningful identity, Angela's relationship with Roger only limits her growth. Roger's financial independence cannot even help him establish a meaningful identity for himself—for all of his advantages, he proves to be shallow, small-minded, and intimidated. His behavior in orchestrating the eviction of black patrons from a restaurant disproves Angela's belief that he "had no fears, no restraints, no worries" (129). He defers so wholly to his father's wishes that he has no independent character: "I'm not entirely my own master," he explains (185). Echoing the terms of Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery* (1914), Roger articulates the sense of dislocation characterizing much early-twentieth-century discourse.

Angela's sense of liberty is continually limited because she has accepted the restrictive classifications that govern society. Thus while her passing rejects narrow categories for herself, she easily and unself-consciously places taxonomic restrictions on others, paying a great deal of attention to social, ethnic, and national groups. In her effort to negotiate the urban community, she defines her colleagues through ethnic contrasts. This is evident, significantly, in her first art class. "She glanced about at the newcomers," Fauset writes, "a beautiful Jewess with pearly skin and a head positively foaming with curls, a tall Scandinavian, an obvious German, several more Americans" (95). Throughout the novel she sees very few Americans as "just Americans" (to employ the phrase later coined by Toomer). John Banky, the most sympathetic of the newspaper reporters, is described as "the young Hungarian" (352). Angela's heightened attention to ethnic or racial categories, in fact, misrepresents these people. As a result she misses the point about their identities: they are artists, journalists, intellectuals, and sociologists. Angela's belief that passing for white will reconstitute her racial identity similarly mis-

understands the nature of identity itself. Like the society of which she is a part, she embraces only one aspect of identity and overdetermines its significance. She participates in the very same cultural predisposition to stereotype that her passing wants to dissolve. Lippmann explains the consequences: "Real space, real time, real numbers, real connections, real weights are lost. The perspective and the background and the dimensions of action are clipped and frozen in the stereotype" (*Opinion* 156).

Angela's elaborately constructed white identity is doomed to fail precisely because, like the very racial distinctions it seeks to avoid, it depends on the sort of arbitrary distinctions her passing explicitly rejects. Her desire to maintain distinct personal spheres—to keep her romantic, professional and artistic selves separate—predisposes her to catastrophe. In a brief but foreboding scene, Angela shirks Miss Powell's friendly approach for fear that Roger might witness their comradery. This rejection of Miss Powell reflects her desire to keep Roger separate from the small community of art students constituting her only circle of friends. Nor was it only Miss Powell whose familiarity she sought to hide from Roger—she separates him from all her classmates, white and black: "[S]he did not want any of the three, Martha, Paulette, nor Anthony to see whom she was meeting" (148). Miss Powell had, in fact, become part of a meaningful community for Angela. Breaking out of her habitual reserve on that day, she hailed Angela, "pleased and excited. She laid her hand on Angela's arm but the latter shook her off" (148). These manipulations and elaborate orchestrations—maneuverings that anticipate her furtive meeting with Virginia—reflect the impossibility of establishing a meaningful identity without first establishing meaningful connections. The flaws in Angela's reasoning become increasingly and painfully clear: she mistakenly views Roger's money as the end that will secure her happiness and believes that only dependence will yield independence. She fails to recognize that her own love of art (and the company of others who share that love) is the means through which she can independently establish herself.

Angela's passing for white is doomed, too, because it demands that she separate herself from others on the arbitrary basis of race rather than the organic basis of sympathy; it renounces the "universality of experience" and thereby prevents Angela from discovering the sense of "ful- ness [sic] and completeness" that Fauset encouraged Toomer to discover. In a chapter significantly titled "Search for the Great Community," Dewey distinguishes between absolute freedom (the sort which demands Angela's elaborate manipulations and misrepresents her values) and meaningful liberty. Dewey's analysis summarizes the lesson of ***Plum Bun.*** "Liberty," he writes, "is that secure release and fulfillment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others: the power to be an individualized self making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association" (150). Even before Roger's ugly racism becomes evident, Angela realizes that "[t]here had been no touching point for their minds" (129). She admits to Virginia, "I'm not in love with him at all" (172). In pursuit of this single connection—which proves meaningless—she renounces the potentially rewarding intimacies of her classmates and cruelly rejects and endangers her sister.

Yet the scene in which Angela abandons Virginia at the train station not only demonstrates the negative side of Angela's individualism, it also illustrates the limits of Virginia's world. "I'm twenty-three years old," Virginia thinks, "and I'm really all alone in the world" (167). Her embrace of family, tradition, and race has left her no better able to establish a meaningful identity than Angela's rejection of those same values. The culture that alienates Angela also shapes Virginia's world. Likewise, when the closed self-contained romanticized sphere of domestic fiction fails to sustain her as an adult, Virginia decides to sell the family home. "There is such a shortage of houses in Philadelphia just now," she comments, "Mr. Hallowell says I can get at least twice as much as father paid for it" (169). Virginia changes too: when confronted with Angela's betrayal, "[s]omething hardened, grew cold within her" (167). While Virginia becomes "almost swamped by friendships, pleasant intimacies, a thousand charming interests" in New York (241), she also becomes cunning. "I'm trying to look at things without sentiment," she tells Angela (171).

Sentiment, however, is precisely what motivates Angela to announce her "true" racial identity to a room full of newspaper reporters. And because she makes this announcement in support of Miss Powell's right to study art—her right to "the universality of experience"—the scene at last aligns newspapers and art, the two cultural forces that have long interfered with Angela's ability to establish a genuine and meaningful identity. Newspapers testify to the subsumption of distinctive communities by mass society. They illustrate the sheer vastness of life: what was once gossip

and conversation is now commodified and mass-marketed. By "coming out" to a group of reporters, Angela contends with New York on her own terms for the first time, rather than shaping her decisions to suit its demands. In this transition, her renunciation of whiteness effects the goal she sought by passing into it, as she discovers that the true meaning of freedom lies not in unequivocal liberty, but in meaningful connection with others. As noted, white New York in the 1920s was much more interested in entertainment than in politics, but it is equally important to note that black New York believed that it could achieve political goals through artistic success. Angela's experience draws together both of these dynamics, celebrates their potential, and demonstrates their limits.

Once Angela allows art to become the one constant and stable factor in her life, she finds her truest and best self. Art structures her life economically: after Roger's rejection, she accepts a design job, and though the work "was a trifle narrow, a bit stultifying . . . it opened up possibilities" (235). Her attention to art gives her increasing purpose precisely because it creates a sphere of meaning where she can establish her identity:

> In the evenings she worked at the idea of a picture which she intended for a masterpiece. . . . But the urge to wander was no longer in the ascendent. The prospect of Europe did not seem as alluring now as the prospect of New York had appeared when she lived in Philadelphia. It would be nice to stay put, rooted; to have friends, experiences, memories.
>
> (240)

When Angela structures her life's decisions around her artistic goals, her actions become more consistent with her values. Roger returns to propose marriage and "she found herself hoping that he would not stay long. She wanted to think and she would like to paint" (317). Eventually, she realizes how strong the connection is between her art and her identity: "It both amused and saddened her to realize that her talent which she had once used as a blind to shield her real motives for breaking loose and coming to New York had now become the greatest, most real force in her life" (332). Angela's life is ordered by her art; in turn, her greatest work depicts "Life." Because Angela's art depends on images and not language, it affords her a means of expression free from the language of race but attentive to race's presence. Anthony cannot detect Mattie's race, for instance, based on Angela's sketch, but sees her instead as "a beautiful woman;—all woman" (280). Rather than generating a new self, painting permits her to uncover and enhance the self that already existed. By focusing thus on Angela's art as the key to her identity, ***Plum Bun*** celebrates an aspect of selfhood that neither ignores race nor depends on it.

At the novel's end, Angela explicitly articulates ***Plum Bun***'s central assertion. "Yet when I begin to delve into it," she explains to Virginia, "the matter of blood seems nothing compared with individuality, character, living" (354). Indeed, Angela and Virginia emerge at the novel's end as women who have incorporated the best of both black and white worlds. Moreover, because they ultimately define themselves wholly and individually, without regard for arbitrary or artificial barriers, they establish meaningful and successful identities. As Angela departs for Europe, the circle of friends who surrounds her at the dock testifies the quality of her character and offers a model for a genuinely multi-racial and multicultural society. Martha and Ladislas Starr, introduced specifically as "strong individualists" (113), are the liberal intellectual couple whose egalitarian marriage defies the expectations of their aristocratic families; they drive Angela to the dock. There she is embraced by Ralph Ashley, who had earlier demonstrated his open-mindedness, saying, "[I]f I met a coloured woman of my own nationality, well-bred, beautiful, sympathetic, I wouldn't let the fact of her mixed blood stand in my way" (325). Mrs. Denver, "a wealthy woman from Butte, Montana" (249), appears at the dock as well. "'I couldn't stand having you go,' she said pitifully, 'without seeing you for one last time.' And, folding the girl in a close embrace, she broke down and murmured sadly of a lost daughter who would have been 'perhaps like you, dear, had she lived'" (371-72). Walter and Elizabeth Sandberg are there also, and the latter "clung to her, weeping" (372). This circle of friends who, as Ralph Ashley explains, all love her, represents a blend of generations, classes, ethnicities, political ideologies, and sympathies. They depict as well the complexion of a multidimensional, nuanced, and complex sense of self, for their friendship incorporates the universality of experience.

By the end, Fauset has offered ostensible closure—Angela has embraced her Art, she has been reunited with Virginia, and she has renounced marriage to Roger as a path to happiness. Yet while we have the illusion of clear resolution, too many of the novel's troubling complexities remain unresolved, and Fauset never renounces the implication that they are unresolvable. Anthony's arrival in Paris indicates that marriage will shape Angela's future. Angela's celebrated portrait of her

mother defines her artistic development, yet this is a deracialized celebration of the woman who taught her to reject her sister. Similarly disconcerting is the fact that Angela declares her connection to Miss Powell by depriving her "sister" of those very things she held so dear throughout the novel—her privacy and her dignity. When Angela is finally reunited with Virginia, her sister tells her that she knew all along how Angela was suffering in her isolation. Virginia giggles at Angela's apology, admitting, "I'm a hard hearted little wretch. . . . I was just putting you through" (257). Virginia's admission offers one strategy for understanding Fauset's own intentions. For instance, it is worth noting that the novel's closure depends on Angela's expatriation. Her multicultural circle of friends notwithstanding, Angela and Anthony are the only two individual characters who embody—literally—the contradictions of arbitrary racial classification.

Has Fauset, in the end, been "putting Angela through"? Or rather, has she been putting *us* through, putting her culture through? In delineating the limits of racial experience, Jessie Fauset reveals much about the racial dimensions of postwar modernism. In this depiction, she shares the company of many Harlem Renaissance writers who use the trope of passing for white to interrogate the illusion of racial progress and the limits of segregation. Yet the bleak endings in both of Nella Larsen's novels, where the independent protagonist dies or nearly sinks beneath the impossibility of locating the individuality Angela finally achieves, suggests that Angela's ending is an optimistic one. So, too, do Charles Chesnutt's passing characters end in circumstances far less promising than Angela's. While James Weldon Johnson's Ex-Colored Man, by the end of his narrative, is materially and socially comfortable, the note of regret with which his tale ends suggests a psychological discomfort that will undo his peace of mind. Rather than maintaining a segregated fictional space where race circumscribes intellectual discourse, Fauset engages in her world fully and directly, in a pointed and precise analysis of the racial dimensions of early-twentieth-century American culture. In doing so, she offers a model of identity that recognizes the limits created by race, but also resists being curtailed by them.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Ammons; Wall, 73-79; McDowell; and duCille.
2. Toomer's most complex analyses of race have only recently been made available in Robert B. Jones's edition, *Jean Toomer: Selected Essays and Literary Criticism*. In "The Crock of Problems," included in the collection, Toomer argues, for instance, "It is evident that in point of fact none of the standard color labels fit me. I am not white. I am not black. . . . I have never lived within the 'color line,' and my life has never been cut off from the general course and conduct of American white life" (56).
3. Even among theoretically and ideologically like-minded critics, disagreement reigns. Hazel Carby argues that "ultimately the conservatism of Fauset's ideology dominates her texts" (167), whereas duCille finds criticism that dismisses Fauset for her ostensible celebration of light skin and interracial marriage to be "ahistorical in the degree to which [such critics] chide early African American writers for not being 100 to 150 years ahead of their times . . . [and condemn writers like Fauset] for writing through and against the dominant racial and sexual ideologies of their times, rather than out of the enlightened, feminist vision of ours" (18).
4. Numerous critics have noted the nursery-rhyme motif through which *Plum Bun* is titled and ordered, though they have read that motif to different ends. Joseph J. Feeney argues that the nursery rhyme offers an ironic counter-structure through which Fauset exposes "the anger, the tragedy, the sardonic comedy, the disillusioned hopes, the bitterness against white Americans" felt by black Americans ("Sardonic" 367). The "Plum Bun" nursery rhyme in particular, Feeney notes, resonates with the reminder that "only whites go to market, only whites enjoy a plum bun" ("Black Childhood" 69). In addition, Deborah McDowell's feminist reading of the fairy tale motif in Fauset's 1924 novel *There is Confusion* and her story "The Sleeper Wakes" offers a useful perspective. McDowell argues that "Fauset was aware of how folk literature—particularly fairy tales—served to initiate the acculturation of children to traditional social roles, expectations and behaviors, based on their sex" (35). Thus, enacting the fairy tale critiques the fairy tale. In McDowell's reading, Fauset summarily undermines the fairy tale's implicit ideology: "'Happily-ever-after' is not marriage to a handsome, wealthy prince but realization and acceptance of the virtues of the black cultural experience as well as a realization and rejection of conventional social relationships that are injurious to the growth of selfhood" (38).

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The Chinaberry Tree

GERALD SYKES (ESSAY DATE 1932)

SOURCE: Sykes, Gerald. "Amber-Tinted Elegance." *The Nation* (27 July 1932): 88.

In this essay, Sykes reviews Fauset's The Chinaberry Tree. *Although Sykes criticizes Fauset's novel for not reflecting a true Black experience, but rather mimicking white aesthetics, he also praises Fauset for her insight into the unusual status of light-skinned Blacks.*

Though faulty, [***The Chinaberry Tree***] is the work of a remarkable psychologist who can be congratulated not simply because her material is interesting but because she has understood so well the human factors involved in it . . .

The book attempts to idealize [the] polite colored world in terms of the white standards that it has adopted. And here lies the root of Miss Fauset's artistic errors. When she parades the possessions of her upper classes and when she puts her lovers through their Fauntleroy courtesies, she is not only stressing the white standards that they have adopted; she is definitely minimizing the colored blood in them. This is a decided weakness, for it steals truth and life from the book. Is not the most precious part of a Negro work of art that which is specifically Negroid, which none but a Negro could contribute?

We need not look far for the reason for Miss Fauset's idealization. It is pride, the pride of a genuine aristocrat. And it is pride also that makes her such a remarkable psychologist. However many her artistic errors, Miss Fauset has a rare understanding of people and their motives . . . Inspired by the religious motive which so many Negro writers seem to feel, she has simply been trying to justify her world to the world at large. Her mistake has consisted in trying to do this in terms of the white standard.

"To be a Negro in America posits a dramatic situation." Yes, and to be one of Miss Fauset's amber-tinted, well-to-do, refined Negroes—not having to deal much with whites, but surrounded on all sides by the white standard—posits a delicate psychological situation. It is for this reason that few white novels have anything like the shades of feeling to be found in ***The Chinaberry Tree.*** Every moment speaks of yearning. That is why, once it is seen as a whole, even its faults are charming, for the story they tell is poignant and beautiful, too.

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