Sperlí, M. Angela

“To be happy simply, naturally” : Happiness for the New Negro Woman in Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun

In:

Susan Brähler und Kerstin-Anja Münderlein (Eds.), Diversity : Linguistic, Cultural, and Literary Perspectives ; Student Conference Proceedings 2024, Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, p. 91-106. 2025. DOI: 10.20378/irb-110940

Bookpart - Published Version

DOI of the Article: 10.20378/irb-111816

Date of Publication: 28.11.2025

7. "To be happy simply, naturally": Happiness for the New Negro Woman in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*[12]

M. Angela Sperlí, Ca'Foscari University of Venice

Abstract

This paper investigates the literary representation of the New Negro Woman, an ideal that brought together the claims of the 1890s New Woman and the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* by Jessie Fauset, published in 1928. It argues that Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* critiques the social and cultural limitations imposed on Black women during the Harlem Renaissance by portraying the protagonist Angela Murray's failed pursuit of happiness through whiteness, femininity, and marriage. Drawing on the ideals embodied in the historical figure of the New Negro Woman, the novel examines how the intersection of racial and gendered hierarchies compels Angela to pass as white and enter the marriage market to achieve social mobility. Angela achieves New Negro Womanhood through her rejection of the Victorian ideals inherited from her parents and by embracing her racial identity. However, the novel's ending, where Angela emigrates to Paris, suggests that her happiness remains unattainable within racist America.

Keywords

New Negro Woman, Harlem Renaissance, African American literature, racial passing, Jessie Fauset

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the New Negro Woman was a figure that populated the United States' sociopolitical and literary scene. This paper examines one of the many literary depictions of this figure that merged the values of the 1920s New Negro Movement and the New Woman ideal. Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928) features the New Negro Woman as its main character and her pursuit of happiness through passing as white while living in New York City as the driving force behind its plot. Eventually, this New Negro Woman, Angela Murray, sees her attempts at happiness in New York City fail, and she moves to France. In this novel, Europe is the "far-away land" where the protagonist finds her happy ending: the book's last pages see Angela happily reunited with her lover in Paris. This happy ending also implies that the intersection of patriarchal oppression and racial discrimination faced by the protagonist makes it impossible for her to exist happily in the United States, thus making her leave for Europe, where she believes she will be unrestrained by the limitations of racism. This paper argues that

[12] I am especially thankful for this research to my thesis supervisor at Ca'Foscari University, Professor Simone Francescato.

Plum Bun critiques the limitations imposed on Black women in the Harlem Renaissance by exploring Angela's failed attempt to achieve happiness through whiteness, femininity, and marriage. Ultimately, Angela can only embrace New Negro Womanhood by rejecting passing and taking on social responsibility. Nevertheless, the novel's ending suggests that doing this and being happy is impossible in the United States.

The term "New Negro Woman," coined by Margaret Murray Washington[13] in 1895, described "black women who promoted the middle-class ideals of home maintenance, etiquette, and 'neatness of dress'" (Patterson 50). The New (White) Woman,[14] "unmistakably 'modern'" (Ledger 5), was a figure that pushed the limits imposed by patriarchal expectations on women and actively rejected the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House, thus striving for radical societal change. Significantly, then, Margaret Washington did not "invoke" the New Woman's "association with an unsettling independence," but "rather [she] claim[ed] negro women abide by an 'old fashioned' helpmate ethic" (Patterson 65). The primary concern of this figure was the "racial uplift within the home" (58). Recalling the "cult of domesticity" of Victorian times, she argued that "because women and their homes reflect[ed] the moral status of a civilization, black women must be encouraged to create an ideal domestic space that reflect[ed] their race progress" (58). Washington's New Negro Woman was thus much closer to the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House, with its politics of respectability and the idealization of family and domesticity, than to the New White Woman. She assimilated white-middle-class ideals, morphing the Black bourgeoisie into "domestic middle-class ideals of uplift ideology" to render them white in attitude, as it was not possible in appearance (79).

By 1914, Washington's New Negroes became those of the rhetoric of the father of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke. His "New Negroes" were "spiritually emancipated, self-determined but with an international race consciousness and centered in [Locke's] 'prophetic' Harlem" (Patterson 184). The Great Migration[15] saw many educated young Black Americans finish their pilgrimage in Harlem, a New York City neighborhood that quickly became "the mecca of the New Negro" (Locke 36). In the already culturally brooding city, Black communities flourished, and the

[13] Margaret Murray Washington, third wife of Booker T. Washington, was one of the primary figures of the Black elite of the turn of the century and Lady Principal of Tuskegee University. There, she founded the Tuskegee Woman's Club and was elected President of the National Federation of Afro-American Women.

[14] Notably, although the term "New Woman" can be found in Sarah Grand's essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," the extrapolation of the term is to be attributed to Ouida, pen name of Marie Louise Ramè, an English novelist and essayist active from the second half of the nineteenth century until the first decade of the twentieth century.

[15] The Great Migration was an internal migration that started in 1910 and mostly involved African Americans who migrated from the rural South to urban areas in the North to escape racial persecution, slavery, and lynching.

Harlem Renaissance was born. Here, the New Negro Movement wished to establish an aesthetic that did not come "simply [as] a Black artistic movement but a movement to find a new aesthetic to project Negro identity and culture" (Stewart xxxvi). The cosmopolitan neighborhood gave Black people a community and Black intellectuals a voice: "Harlem was not so much a place as a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself" (Gates 27). Amid this cultural turmoil was the New Negro Woman: as she stood in the Harlem Renaissance, she merged the New Negro movement and the New Woman ideal. She inherited the New Woman's rejection of patriarchal expectations, rejection of Victorian values, and demand for a place in the public space, while also carrying the New Negro's racial pride. Therefore, this New Negro woman stood opposite to the assimilated white-middle-class ideals of Margaret Washington's rhetoric.

Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* is a crucial literary depiction of the New Negro Woman in the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset writes of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black uplift ideology, and the popularized European escape in her novel. In particular, she commemorates a "moment of transition in the literary development of black female identity" (Phipps 230). In his rhetoric, Locke endorses this New Negro generation as being the result of a clean break with the past, however, Fauset's writings show a transitional generation, as Meredith Goldsmith shows: "Fauset's characters establish themselves not so much as members of a 1920s cultural vanguard but as inheritors of a cultural history that lay only a few decades in the past: the Reconstruction era, African American migration to northern cities, and the entrance of black women into the labor market" (261). Goldsmith observes that this novel "addresses the possibilities that urban modernity seemed to offer African American women in the 1920s" (260). Angela, an "urban heroine" (260), attempts to figure out her place in the world and how to be happy in it, specifically as a middle-class Black woman in the United States.

Depicting the early twentieth-century Black woman, *Plum Bun* is an example "of the bourgeois novel of passing and protest in mulatto literature that reflect[s] this historical rise of the mulatto elite" (Watson 1). Additionally, the gendered themes in the novel make it "a novel of female and social development" (duCille 93). The novel's protagonist, Angela Murray, is raised in Philadelphia with her sister Virginia by their parents, Mattie and Junius. Although she grows up only casually "passing" in her hometown, when her parents die, she decides to move to New York and permanently pass as white. In the city, she goes to art school, makes friends with young (white) artists, learns about the ways of cosmopolitan living for women, the delight and distress of the dating game, and sexual pleasures. In the end, after having lived in poverty and understanding the deep loneliness that comes with "inauthenticity," she decides to live her life as a Black woman and moves to Paris, where she is joined by the man she loves. Angela's complicated journey to the other side of the color

line[16] brings her back "home," and she develops moral and racial pride, demonstrating "her protest against a color-conscious hierarchy" (Watson 7). Only at the novel's end, when Angela visits Philadelphia, does she accept her racial identity. Fauset dramatizes the complicated reality of a light-skin New Negro woman trying to negotiate personal freedom in racist America and drafts for her a fairy-tale-like happy ending in Europe. Telling Angela's story, *Plum Bun* portrays "the paradoxes of color prejudice in America" (McDowell 296).

Living in New York as Angèle Mory, her white pseudonym, Angela meets people across various cultural, generational, and racial lines, entering "into multiple communities, demonstrating in the process the flexibility and variability of her social identity" (Phipps 227). Fauset provides a rather diverse set of characters: Paulette Lister and Martha Burden figure as the progressive New Women, preaching women's emancipation and sexual liberation and rejecting feminine ideals of purity and submissiveness; conversely, Rachel Salting shows the cultural perpetuation of a conservative attitude in young women; Mrs. Denver, the rich white neighbor, and Elizabeth Sandburg, the socialite, show two different approaches to affluent white womanhood; and Miss Powell and Angela's sister, Virginia, allow Fauset to expose the heterogeneity of the New Negro Woman experience.

On the one hand, Virginia's joyful experience of Black Harlem displays a sense of community and racial pride. On the other hand, Miss Powell undergoes tragic experiences marked by repeated discrimination and culminating in her final exclusion from Harlem's artistic spaces. These diverse characters enable Fauset to capture various racial and social statuses in the narrative frame, making *Plum Bun* a comprehensive picture of late-1920s New York City. Fauset stresses the importance of her characters' direct family ties: Anthony's father's, Mattie's, and Junius's stories are chosen carefully to trace a racial history for these New Negroes.

In the novel, the Murrays live an ordinary, quiet life in a quiet Philadelphia neighborhood, which "while urban, has the feel and sensibility of a small town or suburb" (Rottenberg 268). A patriarchal order rules the Murrays' family; in the house, it is Junius who "possess[es] a charming wife and two fine daughters," making him a "patriarchal" and "almost biblical" father figure (Fauset 11). As patriarchal figures, Mr. and Mrs. Murray are enforcers of Black bourgeois morality; having known poverty and struggle, they both understand the importance of righteousness over pleasure. This family structure portrays Claudia Tate's idea of "domesticity" as a "tenuous medium for instructing black people in responsible citizenship and personal ambition" (228); particularly, in *Plum Bun,* her parents' difficult past is to Angela "a

[16] The concept of the color line perpetuated racial discrimination in Black communities so much so that "blue veins clubs" were created to perpetuate the idea that social hierarchy was to be decided in relation to the percentage of European ancestry, shown in the lightness of skin; these color-based beliefs caused discrimination and ostracization of darker people in their own families and communities.

manifestation of the sort of thing which happens to those enchained it might be by duty, by poverty, by weakness or by colour" (Fauset 5).

From the novel's first pages, Fauset emphasizes how Angela's understanding of color is deeply rooted in her mother's behavior. As she inherits her "mother's fair skin," it is from her "that Angela [learns] the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness" (Fauset 5). The author is careful to ground Mattie's habit of strolling through "Philadelphia's exclusive [white] Walnut Street seeking leisure-class consumer pleasures" in "her early experience of economic deprivation and her venture into the workforce in the early years of the twentieth century" (Goldsmith 262). Fauset stresses that Mattie "had no desire to be of these people" and that these "innocent, childish pleasures" were not more important than her housework, than her "black husband whom she had been happy and proud to marry" (5), than her daughters, or her community.

In the happy Saturday afternoons spent in the white part of town, Angela does not see small indulgences in an already happy life; instead, she sees these moments as flickers of a life she is prevented from having because of her Blackness. Little Angela observes that "coloured people were to consider themselves fortunate only in proportion in which they measured up to the physical standards of white people" (Fauset 8) and develops an understanding that whiteness can be used for social advancement; this belief will stay at the core of Angela's very being long into adulthood, shaping most of her life decisions. Fauset coordinates a particular episode to stress the misunderstanding of values between mother and daughter: while Mattie and Angela are standing on Walnut Street, Virginia and Junius walk by them, and while Angela's father and sister do not see them, she and her mother do; seeing her mother purposefully ignore the rest of their family teaches Angela that the passing masquerade is more important than familiar relations. After this crucial episode, where Mattie shows shame, regret, and guilt for ignoring her husband and daughter while "passing," Angela shows longing; at the end of the chapter, Angela dreams "excitedly of Saturdays spent in turning her small olive face firmly away from peering black countenances" (Fauset 9). Angela's childhood dream is a life of passing forever, where her Blackness and her relations to it would be forgotten. The Walnut Street episode is so striking that it will follow Angela throughout the novel, but it is a long time before she truly understands Mattie. When Angela later rejects and ignores her sister – "who was colored and showed it" (Fauset 114) – at Penn Station, in favor of not revealing her Black relations to the man she believes to be her soon-to-be-fiancé, she damages her relationship with her sister and she thinks back to the Walnut Street episode. Only then does she finally realize that her mother would have never made the same sacrifice.

The advantages of lighter skin are not the only thing Angela learns from her mother; Mattie's daughters grow up with her performance of Victorian femininity. Fauset

puts the Murray family in the tradition of the rising Black middle class's "adoption of Victorian gentility," which came "as evidence of its presumed superior civilization [...] because appropriation of gentility meant approximating racial equality" (Tate 59). The narrator tells Mattie and Junius's story, and "[t]hese origins of the Murray family form a necessary precursor to the novel's plot" (Goldsmith 263); when they meet, Mattie is working for an actress who "projects her own immorality onto [her]," and Junius "offers himself as her protector, and the two promptly quit the actress's household and marry" (Goldsmith 262-63). At the roots of this family's existence, Mattie's femininity and Junius's manhood, their relationship, and their parenting are the ideals of marriage, morality, and respectability – themselves firmly enforcing the patriarchal order. In her instrumentalization of whiteness and femininity, Mattie demonstrates to her daughters that if whiteness is an asset, then so is femininity.

Moreover, Mattie's and Junius's performative gendered dynamic is further stressed in Fauset's "depiction of Mattie's decline and eventual death" (Goldsmith 264). Junius gets sick while waiting for Mattie outside the hospital she is brought to when she faints on Walnut Street; standing in the rain, he develops pneumonia, and he dies in the role of Mattie's protector in a performance of manly strength.[17] Consequently, Mattie, letting herself get sick "to follow him" (Fauset 43), dies performing feminine frailty, evoking the "nineteenth-century trope of the beautiful death" (Goldsmith 265).[18] Mattie figures as the Angel in the House and acts as the author's "facetious image of a condescending Victorian depiction of women as helpless and yet as moral guide and companion, the domestic maternal ideal" (Moore 108). Notably, then, "Fauset anchors the problems of her contemporary New Negro Women in the previous generation's gender ideals as well as in the racial ideologies and conflicts with which her characters must contend" (Goldsmith 262). Through the Victorian characterization of Mattie's mothering, Fauset shows how the New Negro Woman, embodied by the end of the novel both by Angela and by Virginia, is heavily influenced by the long nineteenth century. Where the Harlem intelligentsia was arguing for a sharp break from the "Old Negro," Fauset stresses how small the distance between the Old and the New actually was.

The novel's title, *Plum Bun*, is taken from a nursery rhyme, "To Market, To Market."[19] The market that Fauset alludes to, with the title and sections of the novel, is the marriage market. Ann duCille notes that "[i]f *Pride and Prejudice* suggests the

[17] His death is also marked by racial discrimination, as the reason that he has to wait outside is that Mattie is at a "whites only" hospital where he (visibly black) is not welcome.

[18] Explaining the concept of Beautiful Death, Elizabeth Bronfen quotes Bram Dijkstra's exploration of the "dangerous fantasies" of nineteenth-century culture in which a "woman in a state of sickness unto death" became an "icon of virtuous femininity" (Dijikstra qtd. in Bronfen 59).

[19] The nursery rhyme, as quoted by McDowell, goes, "To Market, To Market, / To Buy a Plum Bun; / Home again, Home again, / Market is done." (292)

degree to which the gentry of Jane Austen's era was preoccupied with money and marriage," novels like Fauset's "suggest the extent to which black Americans have been similarly concerned with the social, economic, and erotic arrangement" of marriage (143). Moving to New York, Angela "believes she can escape her racialized body because her skin is white, [but] she is unaware of being also marked as 'other' because she is a woman" (McLendon 41); however, she eventually becomes conscious of these social differences – for instance, she thinks, "[i]f I were a man [...] I could be president" (Fauset 61).

As Angela learns to "discern that both whiteness and masculinity are external markers of privilege" (Phipps 234), she realizes that it would "be better to marry... a white man" (Fauset 62). Here, Angela identifies marriage as the means to achieve money, power, and status. The power she desires, Angela "knows, is related to economics" (Foreman 654); therefore, for her, marriage becomes merely a socioeconomic transaction, one through which "all that richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved would be doubly hers" (Fauset 62). Thus, Angela enters the marriage market; in it, the author "invert[s] the hierarchy: Angela would capture, in the form of a man, the sign of the 'power and protection' she wishes to possess" (Foreman 654).

In a patriarchal society, gender is intrinsic and decisive, and Angela develops the false belief that she can bypass this issue by marrying somebody who would open her "the doors to beauty" (Fauset 102) through money and status. Once on the market, Angela finds out the currency is sexuality: the "entire novel can be read as an extended sexual metaphor that raises critical questions about the relationship between power and passion, dollars and desire" (duCille 100). Angela, however, enters the market with no sexual or romantic intentions, as she believes that by "purchasing" a husband, she will acquire his privileges. Teaching gender performance to her daughters, Mattie teaches Angela to use femininity as a tool; however, while Mattie desires a protective masculine figure that she finds in Junius and passes this desire on to Virginia, Angela desires protection through money and status, and only incidentally through a man.

As she starts her quest to find a "white spouse," Angela learns from her white friends that "courting with a powerful man is nothing more than a game" (Harrell 195). Living in Bohemian Manhattan, Angela "observes the constricted ambitions of the young white women" she meets and "the compromises that define their personal lives" (Wall 70). Through the women who cross Angela's path the author shows the variety of approaches to gender issues: through Rachel Salting, Angela's neighbor, Fauset demonstrates "that moving to the city does not free women from the psychic effects or force of dominant norms" (Rottenberg 276), but through characters like Paulette Lister she shows awareness of gender performance and gender norms, as in the novel she is the most obvious portrayal of the New Woman: Paulette declares

boldly, "[t]here is a great deal of the man about me. I've learned that a woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants," leaving Angela astonished (Fauset 74).

Martha Burden, a student at Cooper Union, is another crucial woman in Angela's exploration of life as a white woman in the city; when she asks Martha for advice on men, Martha laughs at Angela's naivety, so rare in the realm she calls "Flapperdom" (Fauset 104). To win the "courtship game," Martha explains bitterly, women need to withhold their affection, not reveal their cards (104); like passing, courting also reveals itself as a game of inauthenticity. Martha herself is married and unhappily adds, "Think of loving and never, never being able to show it until you're asked for it; think of living a game every hour of your life!" (105). With these schoolings in mind, Angela thinks of her mother, who so openly loved her father, and reflects on how different her future will be by playing these games of inauthenticity; however, these sexual and romantic didactics reinforce her mother's teachings "regarding her body as a commodity because of its whiteness" (McLendon 41). In her experience as a white woman in New York City, Angela learns from "her white friends [...] that her body is also a commodity because of sex" (42).

Angela's white and rich man-to-marry of choice is Roger Fielding, whom she meets at a dinner at Martha's. She starts to date Roger as Angèle and is giddy with the knowledge of her swindling, not feeling any remorse as she thinks "stolen waters are the sweetest" (Fauset 88). Harnessing her femininity to win the dating game, she is proud of her deceitfulness and satisfied with the outcomes – "Here I am having everything that a girl ought to have just because I had sense enough to suit my actions to my appearance" (88). Even though between him and Angela there are "no touching points for their minds," Roger seems to be Angèle's perfect fit as he is "a boy who gets everything he wants," and "he [knows] nothing of life except what [is] pleasurable" (91-92). Although she does not love him, she pushes the fact aside as a non-determining factor: after all, for her, marriage is a socioeconomic transaction, and "most women learned to love their husbands" (93).

Things complicate between them when Roger is aggressively racist towards a group of Black patrons in a restaurant: triumphantly walking back to their table, he asks Angèle, "I could tell [...] that you had no time for darkies. I'll bet you'd never been that near to one before in your life, had you?" (95). Although shaken by the episode, Angela keeps seeing him – "[d]oubtless later on she could manage his prejudices" (100) – believing he will eventually propose. However, Roger does not propose, quite the opposite, "he ask[s for] everything else" (120). He proposes to her a life as his mistress, and Angela's fantasy of her future as Mrs. Fielding shatters.

Ultimately, Flapperdom is too foreign a kingdom for Angela, as she, ironically, "tries to 'buy' in a society that only allows her to 'sell'" (McDowell 294). Nevertheless, Angèle and Roger keep seeing each other. She ends up not accepting his

proposition, but sleeping with him regardless, helpless to her feelings. At this point, the socioeconomic contract she was looking for when she entered the market is farther away than ever. When inevitably Angèle and Roger end their relationship, "his tone [is] unbelievably insulting" (169): "'You knew perfectly well what you were letting yourself in for.' The phrase had the quality of a cosmic echo; perhaps men had been saying it to women since the beginning of time. Doubtless their biblical equivalent were the last words uttered by Abraham to Hagar before she fared forth into the wilderness" (170). Angela never truly escapes the "patriarchal [...] almost biblical" (11) system she was experiencing in Philadelphia: "the power of patriarchy is exhibited by its timelessness, alluded to in this reference to the Bible" (McLendon 46) in the goodbye scene with Roger and the stern morality and religiousness of her father. This episode leaves her burnt, and she abandons the courtship game: if whiteness and femininity are commodifiable, femininity is not as much of a valuable asset.

Alone, Angela thinks back to Anthony Cross, another friend from Cooper Union, and the afternoon in Van Cortlandt Park where he had admitted to being fond of her; in the park, he had asked how much she was willing to sacrifice for the sake of love, and, surprised, Angela had thought of her mother while pondering the question. She had thought back to the washdays, the tiredness, the "little, dark, shabby house, [...] the made-over dresses and the turned coats" (Fauset 102), and unable to see her mother's happiness, she had rejected Anthony, thinking, "I'm not going to live that kind of life" (103).[20] Now, enlightened on the realities of the marriage market, she thinks back to Anthony. With the new fundamental understanding that "the conventions, the rules that govern life [...] everything was for men, but even the slightest privilege was to be denied to a woman unless the man chose to grant it," Roger becomes for Angela "the symbol of all that was most futile" (168, 178), and Angèle exits the market. Having Angela develop more mature thoughts on women's sexual propriety, "Fauset teases out the individual and political potentials of New Womanhood" (Tomlinson 96).

At the start of the novel, Fauset has Mattie conclude the fairytales she reads to her daughters with "[a]nd they lived happily ever after, just like your father and me" (Fauset 20). In doing so, the author "focuses on the powerful role fairy tales play in conditioning women to idealize marriage and romantic love" (McDowell 292). Using these elements to satirize the connection between gendered expectations and fairy tales, the author builds a "fairy tale's ironic inversion" (McLendon 29). The cultural translation of the fairytale prince rescuing the princess evolves for Virginia in a "homey and comfortable" Black man (Fauset 274) and for Angela in the "dominant cultural fantasy in which women are rescued by wealthy men and secondarily

[20] In rejecting a life with Anthony because it would emulate the life her parents had, Angela refuses to inherit her mother's role of Angel in the House and rejects the "cult of domesticity" praised by Margaret Murray Washington and the Black bourgeoisie of the time.

share their power" (McDowell 293). Using elements associated with childhood – fairy tales and nursery rhymes – Fauset emphasizes how Angela's unattainable fantasies are rooted in her parents' teachings; it is only through the experience of the world that Angela is disillusioned. Melting together the teachings of her parents' fairytale-like love story and her mother's involuntary teachings on whiteness, Angela pathologically daydreams, fantasizes, and romanticizes, and becomes more and more determined to "beg, borrow, or steal for herself the 'happily ever after' fantasy marriage of which fairy tales are made" (duCille 101).

By the end of the novel, the tiny house on Opal Street is again a magical place, "full of secrets, of knowledge of joy," and she believes "that entering the house once more [...] would be a complete panacea" (Fauset 272), healing her suffering. At the end of the novel, Paris restores to Angela "her old sense of joy in living for living's sake" (281), and the narration ends in fairytale fashion, with everything magically resolved, and Prince Charming finally saving his princess. While she cannot enter the house on Opal Street and be healed, it will be "Anthony's reappearance [that] saves her from malaise" (Phipps 237), revealing that it is not her parents' fairytale anymore but hers and Anthony's, the new generation's.

Therefore, it is not while passing that Angela finds her happiness, but in willingly renouncing it and losing its privileges. In the first part of the novel, apart from the walks on Walnut Street, Angela is always discovered when she attempts to conceal her race. The first time Angela is caught passing is in high school: a new schoolmate mistakenly assumes she is white and Angela does not correct her. When it is revealed that Angela is colored, the girl is astonished by the revelation and, with an "accusing face" and "accusing voice," says, "Coloured! Angela, you never told me you were coloured!" (Fauset 25). Humiliated and hurt, Angela's answer to her accusation foreshadows her future choices: "Tell you I was coloured! Why of course I never told you I was coloured! Why should I?" (29). Angela's being hurt does not cover her bewilderment, as she does not understand why she should have given up that information voluntarily. This episode has her, for the first time, ponder the morality of authenticity.

Inauthenticity, in the form of Angèle Mory, Angela's white self, is the passe-partout to the life she desires: away from ostracization and hardship, and into a life of beauty. As they grow, Angela and Virginia move from being witnesses to the rhetoric of the race issue to discussing it with their friends. As they discuss the possibilities for Black people and racial responsibility, Angela openly retorts that she does not think that "being coloured in America is a beautiful thing," in fact, she adds, "it's nothing short of a curse" (37). To her, an artist who looks for beauty, color is a heavy, visible weight one cannot get rid of unless one can pass. The solution to be free of the race issue and to be "happy simply, naturally" (37) is to pass as white. As her sister and their friends discuss the importance of being examples of worthiness for the race,

Angela stays out of the discussion, establishing her own goals and aspirations as more critical than uplifting the race, and, thus, positioning herself outside of racial responsibility. Although she understands there is no intrinsic value in whiteness, Angela becomes "sick of seeing what [she] want[s] dangled up in front of [her] eyes" (54). She refuses to accept being defined by her color and the discrimination that comes with it, as she understands that "it isn't being coloured that makes the difference, it's letting it be known" (55), emphasizing the paradox of racist America.

Convinced that her racial relations will impede her emancipation, Angela moves to New York City, where the anonymity of the city will let her pass undisturbed, "burn[s] her bridges behind her" (58), and lives as Angèle Mory, a young white aspiring artist. Life as Angèle, with new (white) friends in a new city, makes her giddy; however, as time goes on "[r]epeatedly Angela, who believed that 'artists were noted for their broad-mindedness,' is disillusioned," as Miss Powell, the only "visibly black student," is "alienated by and from her peers; the honorific 'Miss' by which she is always addressed serves chiefly to mark her distance from the group" (Wall 69). While Angela chooses New York "to take advantage of the broad-mindedness and opportunity she thinks the city will provide" (Rottenberg 272), she does not take into consideration her new racial status: as a white person, she needs to comply with social expectations and become an accomplice in the ostracization of her colored peers.

When Virginia comes to New York, Angela commits the ultimate betrayal: she forsakes her sister to not reveal herself to Roger Fielding. Aggravated with guilt, finally, Angela understands she is wielding a double-edged sword. However, she seems to think that the hurt that will come from the decision to pass and to even associate with strongly prejudiced people will all be worth it in the end: the riches, power, and happiness she can acquire performing whiteness will be enough to make up for that hurt, to heal those wounds. She tries to excuse her actions with promises to amend and use her future power – status and wealth – to help uplift her people; she plans her expiation, imagining "a future moment when she will return to some version of her original community, bringing with her tools she can use for social amelioration" (Phipps 235). The episode with Virginia in Penn Station has Angela realize for the first time how immoral and hurtful her choices are and what real consequences they come with: if she is "forever passing," she also has to leave Blackness behind for good. Eventually, Virginia angrily asks the question what Angela has been running her life as Angèle on: "If you can get more out of [life] by being white [...] why, why shouldn't you?" (124). Confronted with the emotional contradictions of passing, Angela wishes "not so much that she had never left Jinny and the security of their common home-life, as that the necessity for it had never arisen" (Fauset 165).[21] Naively, she dreams of a life without racial labels, impossible in racist America.

[21] Jinny is the family pet-name for Angela's sister, Virginia.

As Angèle Mory, she cannot form meaningful relationships or find a community, and this permeates the novel with "ennui and loneliness" (Jerkins xi). Obstinately, Angela is still committed to reaching her goals; however, after her relationship with Roger ends, Angela is alone. Without real friends, not close to her sister, and without a wealthy future husband, Angela falls into poverty. Alone in the city she was convinced would emancipate her and make her happy, Angela thinks of marriage again only once she is stripped of her ambition for wealth, power, and status; by that point, Anthony Cross, who had only his bare heart to offer, is all she needs. As she thinks "it would be fun, fun to begin at the beginning, to save and scrape and mend," the idea of that pure, disinterested love brings her back to her life on Opal Street: "For a moment she was home again [...] they were at the table, her pretty mother, her father with his fine, black face" (Fauset 196-97). Thinking back to her father has her reflect on color: "Now what should she do, – tell Anthony?" (197). If her love for Anthony was pure and sincere, it had to be honest and authentic. While Angela starts to understand the importance of authenticity, she does not yet understand the importance of racial pride; she thinks of race as a personal matter and not as a political matter; the racial pride of the Harlem community and her hometown friends is not a priority: her priority is herself and her "right to live and be happy" (197); she is not yet willing to sacrifice her white life.

Angela speaks to Anthony with honesty: "I love you [...] I think you love me" (211). Here, Anthony admits that being colored as racial identity is "too vital, too important" to him although he thinks it will end their relationship (217), and his admission has Angela daydream about their future together and even romanticize renouncing passing: "she would label herself, if he asked for it; she would tell every member of her little coterie of white friends about her mixed blood" (220). Her daydreaming is crushed as a narrative twist breaks this not-yet-born relationship: when she confesses she is colored, Anthony confesses back that he is engaged. The truth is revealed: Anthony is engaged to Virginia. Angela takes a firm decision immediately: "I took her sister away from her; I won't take her lover. Kiss me good-bye, Anthony" (228), and renounces her dreams of a life with him.

Since *Plum Bun* is a critique on passing and sexual morality, Angela is not biblically punished for the extramarital sex she engages in. However, she is karmically punished for obstinately forsaking her race. By rejecting both Virginia (at Penn Station) and Anthony (at Van Cortlandt Park) and choosing whiteness, she pushes them into each other's arms. As the plot unravels, it is increasingly evident that passing does not allow the happiness she had hoped for. The cosmic punishment is even more evident when Virginia confesses, "I always wanted to marry Matthew!" (237).[22] As the irony of the facts strikes her, Angela realizes that authenticity is a key factor in

[22] Virginia is referring to Matthew Henson, a childhood friend from the neighborhood "whom Fauset proudly names after the first black man to reach the North Pole" (Moore 113).

emancipating herself while forming meaningful relationships and finally reaching happiness.

Notably, it is only after Martha Burden brings Angela to Van Meier's lecture[23] that Angela starts growing a sense of racial pride: "the peculiarly brutal terms which white America effects in the discussion of this problem made her blood boil" and make her wonder, "[w]ould it be worth while to throw away the benefits of casual whiteness in America when no great issue was at stake?" (250). As Angela's racial consciousness develops, she becomes less and less amenable and tolerant to these displays of institutionalized racism, and the boiling rage erupts with the Miss Powell incident: both Angela and Miss Powell, having won an art contest, are set to leave for France, but Miss Powell's prize is revoked because she is Black.[24] This injustice triggers in Angela a sense of racial responsibility, and she asks herself, "[j]ust what is or is not ethical in this matter of colour?" (254). Crucially, then, Angela has two different (antithetical) racial awakenings: the first when she realizes that her mother ignoring her father and sister meant she could virtually do the same and the second when she realizes that she cannot express racial pride without revealing her identity. These two episodes, which prod at her racial awareness, determine the start and the end of the passing plot.

When in the cruel scene in Miss Powell's room, Angela, motivated by racial consciousness, admits to being colored, she laughs at the journalist's shock, "Do you really think that being coloured is as awful as all that?" (261). She finally has an answer to "Why should I admit to being coloured?" (59). She now understands the importance of standing up for the race in the face of racism, and she feels "relief and contentment" when she recounts what happened to Virginia, who cries at having her "sister back again" (263). Post-revelation, Angela sends her (white) friends cutouts of one of the articles from the day at Miss Powell's, ending the masquerade with them as well. The title she sends – "Socially Ambitious Negress Confesses to Long Hoax" (265) – acts as a farcical obituary and, as she declares, "I am on the coloured side" (280), Angèle is dead.

As Angèle's time ends, Angela's body is renewed in a "postpassing narrative" (Wald qtd. in Harrell 196), and with it her desire to go back to Philadelphia one last time before leaving the US: "Fauset begins to restore [Angela] to her nonpassing and natural body and the black Philadelphia community" (Moore 107). The author, in fact, only "begins" to restore Angela as a Black body, as she is mistaken for white and, because of that, mistreated in her old neighborhood; however, it is metaphorically the Black Philadelphia community that re-embraces her through Matthew Henson.

[23] Van Meier, "a great coloured American, a *littérateur*, a fearless and dauntless apostle of the rights of man" (Fauset 153-54), is a fictionalization of famous Harlemite W. E. B. Du Bois, as is agreed among critics.

[24] Miss Powell's story is inspired by a real episode: Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage's scholarship for Fontainebleau was revoked in 1923.

The dynamic of the episode emphasizes that Angela's mistake was not leaving Philadelphia, but leaving her community by burning "her bridges behind her" (Fauset 58). Having Angela give up passing, "Fauset is successful in moving Angela away from the perception of the 'tragic mulatto' and frees her from her mental slavery and racial entrapment" (Harrell 207). To escape racial entrapment, Fauset arranges Angela's happy ending away from American racism in Europe, restoring her colored body. As she lives authentically as a New Negro Woman, although not in the United States, Angela is rewarded with her happy ending, a life of love, art, and racial freedom.[25]

In *Plum Bun*, Fauset concentrates on social, gendered power dynamics and criticizes "the norms of female socialization, and the social double standard" (McDowell 296). Since it closely treats the intricate and multiple dimensions of gender oppression, the "narrative's trajectory demonstrates that gender norms are always already racialized and, conversely, that racial norms are always already gendered" (Rottenberg 267). In doing so, Fauset endorses female independence beyond traditionalist views, making *Plum Bun* a display of progressiveness. Putting side by side the New Woman and the New Negro Woman, Fauset "provides insight into how acceptable black middle-class feminine behavior was being intensely renegotiated during the Harlem Renaissance" (267). New Womanhood, for Angela, is a transformative process: on the one hand, she has a seemingly innate inclination towards independence and naturally desires the public space; on the other, she has to learn self-sufficiency to grow into adulthood – into womanhood. Already having entered the public space as an independent woman, Angela's racial pride awakening cements her identity in New Negro Womanhood. When in the end she decides to leave for Paris, she does so as a New Negro Woman, understanding the hardships of life as a woman in the public sphere and that her identity cannot be separated from her Blackness.

To provide Angela with a happy ending, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* culminates in a European escape. The racial discrimination and hatred perpetuated in the United States make it impossible for Angela to be satisfied. In the novel, Angela lets herself engage with the liberties and expectations of New White Womanhood. Susan Tomlinson deems Fauset's union of "the New Negro and the New Woman" irreconcilable (90); however, the novel implies the irreconcilability of the two movements within the United States, as Angela is a New Negro Woman, independent and standing for racial pride in the public space, but is not happy within American oppressive racism. Fauset sees the resolution to the conundrum between racial pride and social mobility in a European escape, where Angela would be escaping racial prejudice. As she chooses to embrace her racial identity and renounce racial passing, Angela is

[25] Of course, the racial freedom promised to Angela when she emigrates to Paris is not congruent with the reality of the time (1920s France was hardly a racism-free haven), and authors like Nella Larsen, Fauset's contemporary, harshly criticized the idealization of the European escape.

rewarded with a happy ending in Paris, where, the reader assumes, she will live happily ever after with her New Negro Prince Charming.

Works Cited

Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. Manchester UP, 1992.

Dijkstra, B. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. Oxford UP, 1986.

Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Damnation Of Women." *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Indiana UP, 2001, pp. 58-70.

duCille, Ann. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. Oxford UP, 1993.

Fauset, Jessie Redmon. *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*. 1928. Beacon Press, 2022.

Gates, Henry Louis Jr. "Harlem on our minds." *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side: Narratives Out of Time*. State U of New York P, 2013, pp. 17-28.

Harrell, Willie J. "'I Am On The Coloured Side': The Rhetoric of Passing in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without A Moral*." *CLA Journal*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2008, pp. 187-208.

Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*. Manchester UP, 1997.

Locke, Alain. *The New Negro Aesthetic: Selected Writings*. Penguin, 2022.

McDowell, Deborah. "Afterword." *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*. Beacon Press, 2022, pp. 286-303.

McLendon, Jacquelyn Y. *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*. UP of Virginia, 1995.

Moore, Geneva Cobb, and Andrew Billingsley. "Antiblack Aesthetics: Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jim Crow America." *Maternal Metaphors of Power in African American Women's Literature: From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison*, U of South Carolina P, 2017, pp. 88-158.

Ouida, "The New Woman." *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930,* Rutgers UP, 2008, pp. 35-42.

Patterson, Martha H. *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915*. U of Illinois P, 2005.

Phipps, Gregory. "'The Deliberate Introduction of Beauty and Pleasure': Femininity and Black Feminist Pragmatism in Jessie Redmon Fauset's 'Plum Bun.'" *African American Review*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2016, pp. 227-40.

Stewart, Jeffrey C. "Introduction." *The New Negro Aesthetic: Selected Writings*. Penguin, 2022, pp. xxiii-liii.

Tate, Claudia. *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*. Oxford UP, 1992.

Tomlinson, Susan. "Vision to Visionary: The New Negro Woman as Cultural Worker in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*." *Legacy*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2002, pp. 90-97.

Wall, Cheryl A. "Histories and Heresies: Engendering the Harlem Renaissance." *Meridians*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2001, pp. 59-76.

Washington, Booker T. "The New Negro Woman." *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930,* edited by Martha H. Patterson, Rutgers UP, 2008, pp. 54-59.