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Racial Identity and White Passing in N. Larsen's *Passing* and

J. Fauset's *Plum Bun*

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Závěrečná práce se bude zabývat rasovou problematikou, především pak tématem "white passing" ve dvou románech. Konkrétně budou analyzovány romány *Passing* Nelly Larsenové a *Plum Bun* autorky Jessie Fausetové. Studentka uvede téma do širšího historicko-kulturního kontextu rasové problematiky první poloviny 20. století v USA. Dále také představí literární kontext (především ženské autorky Harlemské renesance) a žánrově romány zařadí. V teoretické části pak autorka vysvětlí pojmy, se kterými bude pracovat (např. race, racial identity, white passing, whiteness, social class, gender apod.) v praktické části. Svě analýzy bude studentka opírat o vhodné sekundární zdroje a úryvky z primárních textů.

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ANNOTATION

Through the novels *Passing* by Nella Larsen and *Plum Bun* by Jessie Redmon Fauset, this bachelor's thesis investigates the relationship between white passing and racial identity. It delves into the novels' historical and cultural background as well as the topic of Black womanhood during the Harlem Renaissance and its representation in both novels.

KEYWORDS

African American literature, race, racial identity, white passing, racism, Harlem Renaissance

NÁZEV

Rasová identita a white passing v románech *Passing* a *Plum Bun*

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá vztah mezi pojmem white passing, jenž vyjadřuje skutečnost, kdy míšenec se světlou pletí je považován za bělocha, a rasovou identitou prostřednictvím románů *Passing* od Nelly Larsenové a *Plum Bun* od Jessie Redmon Fausetové. Zabývá se historickým a kulturním pozadím románů i tématem černošského ženství během harlemské renesance a jeho zastoupením v obou románech.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Africko-americká literatura, rasa, rasová identita, white passing, rasismus, harlemská renesance

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INTRODUCTION

According to Allyson Hobbs, a phenomenon called white passing, or passing, has been a common practice throughout American history. It is a strategy utilized by Americans of mixed race, both consciously and inadvertently, to pass for white and gain privileges in a culture that prioritizes whiteness above Blackness. Because they often had to decide which life they wanted to live, it had a substantial impact on their sense of self and racial identity.¹

This bachelor's thesis explores the concepts of racial identity and white passing within the framework of racial issues in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. It analyzes how it is portrayed in two novels: *Passing*, by Nella Larsen, and *Plum Bun*, by Jessie Redmon Fauset. Through their narratives, the authors sought to raise the issue of white passing among biracial Americans and explore its effects on their racial identity, shedding light on an often overlooked aspect of the African American experience. The main aim of the thesis is to analyze and compare in which way these two novels reflect the experiences of racial identity of mixed-race individuals navigating racial boundaries, and passing as white in a society that values whiteness and how they face pressures when they do not fit neatly into the racial categories assigned to them. Moreover, it seeks to examine the social, cultural, and political dynamics that shape racial identity in early 20th-century America.

Over the course of four chapters, theoretical concepts are combined with concrete examples from the novels. The first chapter establishes the context of the novels' setting by introducing the historical background of racial issues in the United States during the first half of the 20th century, including the explanation of key terminology, and is substantiated with pertinent examples from the novels, which are further compared. It explores how both authors address race, racism, and race relations and expose the underlying cultural norms of the time period. The realities of passing and racial identity are discussed in the second chapter within the setting of the two novels. Through their characters, it reveals the complexities of race relations and the effects of societal pressures on individuals and their identity formation. Additionally, the novels reveal the challenge of navigating racial boundaries and the social consequences of not conforming to racial expectations. The third chapter covers the cultural context of the Harlem Renaissance, its importance as a uniquely Black cultural movement

¹ Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 29-31.

emerging in the 1920s, and highlights how it influenced and shaped the Black identity and self-confidence. Lastly, the final chapter emphasizes the role of gender and womanhood in this period, including the themes of gender roles and gender bias as well as female friendship. It showcases their effect on the female authors of the Harlem Renaissance, revealing how they reflect the societal norms and expectations of their era.

The study of racial identity and representation is crucial in understanding the complex nature of race relations in America. The novels by Larsen and Fauset provide valuable insights into the experiences of individuals who navigate racial boundaries and challenge societal norms.

1. RACIAL ISSUES IN THE AMERICAN HISTORY

This chapter discusses the historical context of racial issues in the first half of the 20th century. The emphasis will be on terms such as race, racism, and white supremacy. Furthermore, extracts from both novels will be used to demonstrate the terminology.

Race can be briefly defined as a social construct that refers to the classification of humans into groups based on shared biological or social characteristics, as explained by Ernest Cashmore.² In both novels, it is portrayed as something that the protagonists cannot simply escape due to societal prejudice and discrimination, as well as something that binds them through shared experience. Irene, the protagonist of *Passing*, believes she cannot abandon her childhood friend Clare due to their shared racial background: “She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever.”³ Throughout the novel, Irene’s interactions with Clare serve as a metaphor for her own internal conflict between embracing her African American heritage and assimilating into white society. Ultimately, Irene’s ambivalent feelings about Clare mirror her unresolved feelings about her own race. As the story progresses, Irene’s internal conflict becomes more intense, leading to a dramatic climax that forces her to confront her own identity and the consequences of her actions. Angela, the protagonist of *Plum Bun*, mentions the immense impact race has on one’s life due to the discrimination present in US society: “But her thoughts skirted the subject verily for she knew how immensely difficult living could be made by this matter of race.”⁴ The topic of race and racial identity will be further discussed in the second chapter. Rattansi designates that by the end of the 19th century, the contemporary concept of race was thoroughly established in association with Jews and antisemitic beliefs. However, racial ideas can be traced as far back as the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Rome, and Greece.⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant claim that the concept of race originated in the 15th century, when the Europeans first started to settle in America. They argue that during this time, due to the growing market, humans began to be viewed as an object that could be utilized to generate greater riches, and this had a significant impact on the situation that developed there. As a result, individuals of color were enslaved, and a racial divide emerged.⁶ Slavery and the persistently

² Ernest Cashmore, *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic relations* (New York, Routledge, 1994), 267.

³ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 59.

⁴ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 146.

⁵ Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13-14.

⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 61-62.

unequal treatment of people of color are deeply embedded in American history. Black people were treated as property owned by white men, while being denied the majority of the rights commonly enjoyed by the free white population, such as the right to own property, vote, or simply maintain their identity, which had been taken from them, according to Rattansi.⁷ While the economy of the US thrived on slavery, it became more prevalent in the South than the North due to the rise of the sugar market there. Morgan points out that people of African descent were thought of as savants and inferiors, as animals, and the colonizers treated them as such. Such alienation from society is what allowed the slavery industry to flourish.⁸ Foner adds that it made the colonizers and government authorities believe that importing African slaves could solve the continuing shortage of labor they faced.⁹ Consequently, this resulted in a deeply entrenched system of oppression and discrimination against Black people. The legacy of slavery and its impacts are still felt by Black Americans today. Racism, the conviction that one race is superior to another, is founded on prejudice, discrimination, and oppression of marginalized groups. According to Ali Rattansi, the term was coined in the early 20th century in response to Nazi ideology that Jews were an inferior race that threatened the Aryan race, which was considered the authentic race of Germans with characteristically white attributes.¹⁰ Racism can have many forms. It can either represent racist attitudes held by an individual or the various repressive systems of society. Frederickson focuses on the individual aspect of racism and suggests that racism reflects: “the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or people toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes.”¹¹ To illustrate this notion of racism at the time, extracts from the novels *Passing* and *Plum Bun* will be used. In *Passing*, the issue of individual racism and prejudice towards colored people is mainly represented by John Bellew, the husband of Clare:

You got me wrong there, Mrs. Redfield. nothing like that at all. I don't dislike them, I hate them. and so does Nig, for all she's trying to turn into one. she wouldn't have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. Not that I'd want her to, they give me creeps the blacks scrimy devils.¹²

He is a wealthy white man who openly expresses his hatred and prejudice towards Black Americans. His character supports Irene's observation that some white Americans

⁷ Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 44.

⁸ Philip D. Morgan, “Slavery in the British Caribbean” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 379-380.

⁹ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2017), 160-163.

¹⁰ Rattansi, *Racism*, 4.

¹¹ George M. Frederickson. *Racism: A Short History* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2015), 10.

¹² Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 44.

often ignorantly think they can tell if a person is of white origin. Jack Bellew is so submerged in his beliefs that he cannot envisage that his wife could be Black. He calls Black people devils and racial slurs. He even uses a racial slur as a humorous nickname for his wife, mistaking her slightly darker complexion for a tan. His racism comes from a place of ignorance and an unwillingness to educate himself on the matter. He claims he has never met any Black people in his life while talking to three women of Black origin in his own house: “Had Bellew, Irene inquired, met any Negroes? [...] ‘Thank the Lord, no! And I never expect to! But I know people who’ve known them, better than they know their black selves. And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people.’”¹³ The media’s influence on many white Americans’ views of Black people may be observed in John’s attitudes, which are a manifestation of deep-seated, “mass-market cultural racism,” a term suggested by Franklin and Higginbotham. They claim that this form of racism became prevalent in the 1800s. They argue that through exaggerated art forms in entertainment, which ridiculed Black people’s speaking patterns and emphasized their lack of freedom, harmful stereotypes were formed and reinforced white supremacy. John’s views on Black people are indicative of the pernicious effects of mass-market cultural racism, which has a long history in the United States. This portrayal of Black people has persisted for centuries contributing to widespread discrimination and inequality.¹⁴

In *Plum Bun*, colored characters are shown to have faced discrimination and racism on multiple occasions. For instance, when Angela’s mixed identity is revealed at the art school she attends, she is suddenly expelled due to her skin color, despite being one of the top students at the school. This section demonstrates some white people’s ignorance, engrained in society, in associating Blackness with a lack of intellect and, when proved wrong, their inability to accept that a Black woman could ever achieve such results: “But I can’t think she’s really colored, Mabel. Why she looks and acts just like a white girl. She dresses in better taste than anybody in the room. But that little Wretch of a model insisted that she was colored.”¹⁵ The professor rather assumes he was lied to then to acknowledge Angela’s Blackness because she behaves in a way he associates strictly with whiteness. A similar situation occurs later in the book when Roger, Angela’s love interest, visits Harlem with her through a common friend, and he is rather skeptical about the intelligence of a lecturer due to his skin color: “Well,

¹³ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 44.

¹⁴ John Hope Franklin, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: The History of African Americans* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 163-165.

¹⁵ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 43.

I suppose it won't rub off. I've heard of him. They say he really has brains. I've never seen a nigger with any yet; so this bids fair to be interesting."¹⁶ He, like Angela's professor, believes that only white people can be intelligent and attempts to solve his theory by arguing that the man must be at least half white, once again connecting whiteness with cognitive ability: "I wonder what proportion of white blood he has in his veins. Of course that's where he gets his ability."¹⁷ The two novels draw attention to the widespread attitude of some white people at the time, who claim that they are able to tell when someone is colored. In *Passing* it is mostly pointed out by Irene:

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a Gypsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro.¹⁸

This notion is based on their racial prejudice and a white-supremacist belief that colored people are unable to be intelligent, socially aware, or possessing any positive characteristics because they consider them inherently white traits. This is demonstrated in *Passing* by Irene's observations of how others treat her, as well as Clare's husband, John Bellew, who claims he would never marry a Black woman, while being married to one.¹⁹ *Plum Bun* shows it through Angela's professor, who refuses to believe his student is colored for her intelligence, even when provided proof. Additionally, through Roger, one of Angela's love interests, who freely insults colored individuals while courting her. The novels highlight the ignorance and prejudice in their thinking.

The characters of John Bellew and Roger Fielding are similar in terms of social standing, sharing similar attitudes toward race and high social status. They are both wealthy white men who believe in the notion of white supremacy, illustrating individual racism. Clare, despite being unhappy, chooses to ignore John's overt racism so that she can continue to enjoy the privileges of having a white husband. Whereas Angela, although initially planning to marry Roger, does not tolerate his racism, and even when he proposes by the end of the novel, she refuses, deciding to no longer conceal her true identity. This contrast between Clare and

¹⁶ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 125.

¹⁷ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 128.

¹⁸ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 14.

¹⁹ Larsen, *Passing*, 43.

Angela's responses to racism highlights the complexity of navigating interracial relationships and the different ways individuals choose to confront or ignore systemic oppression.

While racism may not be as visible in modern American society as it once was, it has not vanished. Black Americans continue to face oppressive systems founded on racism. Society as a whole has yet to unlearn the harmful behavior and beliefs and make further steps towards equality. In 2006, the sociologist Joe Feagin proposed the term systemic racism, and pointed out its rootedness in the American oppressive history. He explained that systemic racism exceeds the notion of individual racism and bigotry, but it is tied to the major US institutions that have the power to control people's lives.²⁰ According to Joseph R. Barndt, these institutions have been structured to benefit the majority of Americans at the expense and oppression of the minority. He refers to it as "institutional racism" and underlines that white people benefit from the system even though they do not directly contribute to it, which is the reason why it is necessary to recognize this in order to fight against it. He differentiates direct and indirect institutional racism, both of which had been legal until 1990s. Direct institutional racism is openly practiced, while indirect institutional racism is disguised from the public.²¹

An example of direct institutional racism is portrayed in *Plum Bun*, where the characters raise the issue of racial inequality that unfairly dictates their life:

But that's not what I object to. I'm sick of planning my life with regard to being colored. I'm not bit ashamed of my race. I don't mind in the least that once we were slaves. Every race in the world has at some time occupied a servile position. But I do mind having to take it into consideration every time I want to eat outside of my home, every time I enter a theatre, every time I think of a profession.²²

They are restricted from exercising their freedom of choice in matters such as employment and choosing public places (such as restaurants and theaters) because of a system of discrimination that is institutionalized in American culture and claims that these places are reserved for white people only, openly demonstrating their racism. It provides a unique insight into what it really meant to be a colored person in this period. Subtly, direct institutional racism is also portrayed in *Passing*. At the beginning of the novel, Irene goes to the rooftop restaurant, and it is indicated that she is only able to enter because she is presenting as a white woman at the moment and gets startled when she suspects her colored identity might have been noticed

²⁰ Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

²¹ Joseph R. Barndt, *Dismantling Racism* (Minneapolis: Ausburg, 1991), 77.

²² Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 31.

by Clare. A similar situation occurs in *Plum Bun* as well, when Angela asks Miss Powell to save them a table at a restaurant, but Miss Powell is unable to do so because of concern that she may not be welcomed due to her skin color.: “‘Why on earth didn't you go in?’ asked Angela a trifle impatiently, ‘you could have held the table.’ Miss Powell answered imperturbably: ‘Because I don’t know how they would receive me if I went in by myself.’”²³ Although she can enter this particular restaurant, she is apprehensive because segregation and institutional racism prevent her from entering so many others. These extracts from the books portray the situation of American society in the first half of the 20th century, where Black people were forced to live in segregation from whites and were denied access to privileges associated with whiteness, resulting in stark racial inequities.

The root of this problem may be attributed to the Jim Crow Laws of the South, which commenced racial segregation, as Franklin and Higginbotham suggest. The laws reinforced white supremacy, separating Black people from the white population by denying them access to public spaces and limiting their rights.²⁴ Foner adds that it was more than just a method of separating people of different races from one another. It was embedded in a larger system of white dominance that sought to ensure that people of color fared worse than whites in a variety of contexts. These laws were in effect from the late 1800s until the mid-1960s and had a lasting impact on American society, contributing to the systemic racism that persists today. The legacy of Jim Crow can be seen in disparities in education, housing, and healthcare, among other areas.²⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois addresses white readers and speaks against segregation in his *The Souls of Black Folk* where he claims: “for the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.” He contends that the segregation of African Americans from white society creates a barrier that prevents both groups from fully understanding and appreciating each other’s experiences and perspectives. He believes that overcoming this color line is essential for achieving true equality and justice in America.²⁶ Ultimately, this sort of system is founded on the notion that white people are above other races and should thus be able to control them. According to Haroon Kharem, white supremacy benefits predominantly white individuals at the expense of colored people. Kharem discusses its history and development in early colonial America when the Puritan leaders first settled, claiming

²³ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 63.

²⁴ John Hope Franklin, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: The History of African Americans*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 261.

²⁵ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2017), 666.

²⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

the land as theirs and proclaiming Natives as primitives who had not used the land well. They preached about the superiority of white men and actively dehumanized any colored people, which had a grave impact on the racial situation in America.²⁷ It perpetuated harmful stereotypes and elevated white privilege to an exalted status.

The practice of lynching is an illustration of how institutional racism may manifest itself indirectly. As per Foner, this practice of mob violence against Black People, particularly men, who were accused of a crime and murdered without a trial, originated in the late 19th century in the American South and persisted throughout the 20th century. Some of these events were held covertly, while others were promoted specifically for white attendees. He claims that charges of harming white women were the most common leveled against them.²⁸ Franklin and Higginbotham elaborate that lynching remained an integral, if illegal, feature of the United States' system of punishment in the 20th century, regardless of the nature of the victim's offense.²⁹ Moreover, Foner highlights the prominence of this phenomenon in the United States in comparison with other countries.³⁰ Fauset and Larsen both address this extreme form of systemic racism in their novels, where the characters talk about their experience of it as Black individuals. Irene's Black husband Brian talks about it with his sons after reading about it in a newspaper:

At the dinner Brian spoke bitterly of a lynching that he had been reading about in the evening paper.

"Dad, why is that the only lynch colored people?" Ted asked.

"Because they hate 'em, son."

"Brian!" Irene's voice was a plea and a rebuke. Ted said: "Oh! And why do they hate 'em?"

"Because they are afraid of them."

"But what makes them afraid of 'em?"³¹

Black people in the States at the time were living in fear of being unjustly lynched, and there was little they could do to protect themselves. Brian wants his children to be aware of this problem because he knows he will be unable to defend them in the future, and he also understands that he cannot change the prejudice and fear that many white people harbor. He

²⁷ Haroon Kharem, "Chapter Two: INTERNAL COLONIALISM: WHITE SUPREMACY AND EDUCATION" *Counterpoints* 208 (2006): 26–27.

²⁸ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2017), 666-668.

²⁹ John Hope Franklin, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: The History of African Americans*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 283.

³⁰ Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, 668.

³¹ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 126.

believes that educating his children about the history of lynching and racial violence will instill in them a sense of caution and preparedness. On the other hand, Irene believes her sons are too young to hear about these issues. It highlights her privilege as a white-looking person, which she herself is not aware of. Her reluctance to talk about racism with her sons may stem from her own lack of understanding and experience with racism. In *Plum Bun*, an experience of lynching is shared by Anthony, Angela's love interest, who recounts to her what happened to his father. His father had been a victim of lynching, which he did not survive. This passage illustrates how these techniques were not only unethical but also degrading, demonstrating the harsh reality of racial violence and injustice in America. The practice of lynching was barbaric and horrible, and it did not advance the cause of justice. It did nothing but encourage more acts of violence and bigotry:

But he would go home. Besides once back in town he would have been taken anyway, perhaps mopped and burned in the public square. They let him get into his house; he washed and dressed himself for death. Before nightfall the mob came to teach this man their opinion of a nigger who hadn't taught his wife her duty towards white men. First they set fire to the house, then called him through the window. He stepped out on a little veranda; Haley opened fire. the body fell over the railing, dead before it could touch the ground, murdered by the bullets from twenty pistols. Souvenir hunters cut off fingers, toast, his ears, a friend of my grandfather found the body at night and buried it. they said it was unlike anything they had seen before, totally dehumanized. After I heard that story I was unable to sleep for nights to end.³²

Although it is now illegal and classified as a hate crime under US law,³³ its consequences are still felt in American society today.

³² Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 168.

³³ "Text - H.R.55 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Emmett Till Antilynching Act.," Congress.gov, March 26, 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/55/text>

2. RACIAL IDENTITY AND WHITE PASSING

Racial issues of the American history had a considerable impact on the racial identity of colored Americans. These issues have influenced the way colored Americans perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, as well as their social, economic, and political status in society. In this chapter the concept of racial identity, as well as its connection to the practice of white-passing, is explored. It further proceeds by discussing the terms of whiteness and Blackness, and discussing their impact on the life of individuals and their social class.

One's experience of racial identity is their sense of belonging to a specific race. Arroyo and Zigler described it as: "attempts to balance racial group membership needs and personal desires for positive relations with the larger society."³⁴ Because race is a social construct, the concept of racial identity is complicated, encompassing more than one's physical appearance, and is thus highly subjective. For example, a biracial person might appear white but associate themselves more with Black racial identity due to their origin. This case is demonstrated by Irene in *Passing*, who, despite being mixed and having a light skin, considers herself Black and identifies with the Black identity, whilst being able to pass for white. She is directly contrasted with the character of Clare, who, on the contrary, adopts a white identity and distances herself from the Black community. Similar to Clare is the character of Angela in *Plum Bun*, who adopts a white identity, while abandoning her colored family, even though by the end of the novel, she acknowledges her origins and embraces her colored identity once more. The dilemma that all of these characters share is that they are biracial with light skin color, which means that they do not entirely fit into either racial box, requiring them to choose which racial identity they want to associate themselves with. Ellis Cose addresses how Jim Crow laws historically impacted the racial situation in the US and the perception of Blackness with *the one-drop rule*, which maintained that anyone with any distant Black ancestry was regarded entirely Black and hence a lesser human being by society.³⁵ However, unless explicitly made known, there is no way for the white characters in the novels to discern whether the biracial characters are colored. This presents the multiracial characters with a choice: either reject their Black ancestry and live the life of a white person, as Clare does, or embrace it like Irene. This choice often comes with immense consequences and conveys the complexity

³⁴C. G. Arroyo, E. Zigler, "Racial identity, academic achievement, and the symbological veil being of economically disadvantaged adolescents." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69 (1995), 903. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.903>

³⁵Ellis Cose, *Color-blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race Obsessed World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 33.

of navigating identity for multiracial individuals. Ultimately, it emphasizes the pervasive nature of systemic racism and the limitations it imposes on those who do not fit into a neat racial category. Angela's character in *Plum Bun* is an example of a character who acknowledges both of her racial identities, rejecting the societal pressure to choose.

The concept of dual identity was further explored by W. E. B. du Bois, who in *The Souls of Black Folk* explores the struggle of Black Americans to preserve their culture while adapting to life in white society. Du Bois contends that this double-consciousness produces tension and conflict inside Black individuals, who are compelled to navigate between two worlds with radically different expectations and ideals. He points out the duality of the Afro American's identity, where one is a part of both cultures and one should not be lost on the other: "He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face." He believes that the African American's identity crisis is not just a personal struggle but a societal one, as society must recognize and accept the duality of their identity. He argues that only then can true equality and opportunity be achieved for African Americans in America.³⁶

The phenomenon that occurs when an individual assumes white identity while rejecting the Black identity simultaneously is called white-passing. According to Allyson Hobbs, white passing is the effort made by colored Americans with lighter skin to get better living conditions by taking advantage of their lighter skin tone.³⁷ As Larsen implies in *Passing*, it is a phenomenon that is more typical for biracial people in America: "It's easy for a Negro to pass for white. But I don't think it would be so simple for a white person to pass for colored."³⁸ The prejudice of a predominantly white American society towards African Americans made it easy for people of color to pass for white, whereas whites would never have a reason to pass for Black, as doing so would offer them no advantages. Irene also alludes to the specific experiences people of color have that white Americans simply cannot relate to. Hobbs emphasizes how biracial people have historically used white passing as a means of emancipation to escape slavery and unfair treatment. She also highlights that, although they passed, they simply wanted independence and did not want to become white. Hobbs further claims that many light-skinned African Americans living in the United States during

³⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

³⁷ Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 29-31.

³⁸ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 92.

the Antebellum period used the practice of white passing to their advantage during trials in which they claimed their white heritage. They argued that they had been wrongly accused of being colored and that they were not meant to be slaves and therefore should be freed. Allyson Hobbs asserts that by doing this, they were able to instill fear in the people who lived in the South by making them believe that the possibility existed that their white children may be sold into slavery against their will. She also discusses how passing was employed as a means of mocking white southern Americans and their rigid views, as well as highlighting that, except for their skin color, there was no discernible difference between the two groups of people as individuals.³⁹ Furthermore, Martha J. Cutter discusses the advertisements during that time seeking runaway slaves who could pass as white. Some of them were tenaciously clinging to the concept of the *one-drop rule*, rendering anyone with Black ancestry inferior. Some of them argued that if a person was thought of as white by the majority of people, then that person was white and ought to be thought of as such. She discusses the ways in which these adverts posed a question to the concept of racial purity.⁴⁰ An approach to passing that was historically utilized more frequently by those with lighter skin is described by Allyson Hobbs. She refers to it as tactical or strategic passing, which entails momentarily passing for a purpose that is specific to the situation. She offers illustrative examples such as shopping, traveling, educational chances, and even employment prospects.⁴¹ This kind of passing is illustrated by Nella Larsen in the novel *Passing*, in which the main character, Irene, makes use of it so that she can participate in typical day-to-day activities like taking a taxi, going to a restaurant, and even shopping for difficult-to-find gifts for her sons.⁴²

White passing is a major theme in both novels, in which light-skinned Black characters take advantage of their skin color for various reasons and pass for white. In *Passing*, There are two main characters, Irene and Clare, who pass for different reasons. The sharp contrast between these characters showcases the different issues of this concept. Irene uses tactical passing on occasion; however, she does not conceal her identity fully, being proud of her Black origin. She married a Black husband, and she is a member of the Negro Welfare League. On the other hand, Clare, conceals her Black identity completely, doing everything in her power

³⁹ Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 29-31.

⁴⁰ Martha J. Cutter, “‘As White as Most White Women’: Racial Passing in Advertisements for Runaway Slaves and the Origins of a Multivalent Term,” *American Studies* 54, no. 4 (2016): 73–97.

⁴¹ Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 29.

⁴² Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 9-12.

to retain the privileges that her light skin offers her. She married a white, racist husband who openly expresses his hate for Black people. While Irene values safety, Clare is quite reckless, enjoying the freedom passing provides her with. At the beginning of the book Irene briefly passes out of convenience in a restaurant. When she notices Clare, her childhood friend, who she does not recognize yet, staring intensely at her, she feels startled, fearing for her safety: “Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?”⁴³ Clare, in contrast, shows no regard for her own safety. Despite her husband’s hatred for the colored community, while being completely unaware of his wife’s true identity, she begins to slip out to Harlem with Irene. Irene reproaches Clare for her reckless attitude on multiple occasions: “Oh, the dollar! Don’t be a fool, Clare. I don’t care where you go, or what you do. all I am concerned with is the unpleasantness and possible danger which your going might incur, because of your situation.”⁴⁴ Although she does not approve of Clare’s risky antics but feels protective toward her as a fellow woman of color. Therefore, when Clare once persuades her to pay her a visit at her house, she is put in a position where she must pass in order to protect Clare, even though doing so goes against her own principles. She is extremely uneasy as Clare’s husband freely declares his racist opinions. He calls his wife a racist slur as a joke and boasts about his contempt for people of color.

In *Plum Bun*, Angela, learns about white passing from her mother, who passes to enjoy some luxuries in life, such as dining out and shopping with her light-skinned daughter. As a result, Angela understands whiteness as something that grants joy and freedom. However, Angela’s mother did not associate her happiness with the concept of race but with her Black husband, with whom she was happily married. Passing was merely something she did for fun. She enjoyed fooling white people and was amused by their ignorance. This contrasts her with her daughter, who sees whiteness as the only means by which she can achieve happiness in life. Angela often expresses her frustration when she is accused of lying about her colored identity: “Tell you that I was colored! Why of course I never told you that I was colored! Why should I?”⁴⁵ She knows her being colored will only hinder her social standing and she does not believe she is any different than her white peers. She builds her whole life around whiteness after she moves to New York following her parent’s deaths. She assumes a white identity, severing relations with her sister, who is unable to pass due to her dark skin.

⁴³ Larsen, *Passing*, 14.

⁴⁴ Larsen, *Passing*, 82.

⁴⁵ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 25.

In connection with white supremacy, whiteness came with certain connotations that were attractive to characters like Clare and Angela. It entailed better social standing and work opportunities, as well as other privileges denied to the colored population of America. The both pass to avoid discrimination by American society. Their attitudes toward whiteness are similar. Clare is more daring, whereas Angela is more cautious in her approach. Even though Clare proudly passes for white, she is shown to be longing for the Black culture: “You can’t know how this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of.”⁴⁶ She risks her safety and the safety of her own daughter, to be able to enjoy it while simultaneously passing as white. Angela, on the other hand, abandons her sister in New York City after agreeing to meet her because she fears that being seen with her would jeopardize her relationship with Roger.⁴⁷ As the novels’ plots progress, the women realize that passing has caused them to lose their sense of identity and has not made them happy. Clare escapes by visiting the colored community in Harlem with Irene, to find happiness again, Angela returns to her family. In the end, Clare pays for her lifestyle with a tragic ending to her story. In contrast, Angela eventually realizes that her happiness does not stem from her whiteness: “No sacrifice of the comforts which came to her from “passing,” of the assurance, even of the safety which the mere physical fact of whiteness in America brings, would be too great for her.”⁴⁸ and returns to her roots. Their stories demonstrate unequivocally how the concept of race divides people while maintaining power dynamics and social hierarchies. Miss Powell, Angela's classmate, appears to share the same beliefs about whiteness and its contribution to happiness, despite the fact that she is Black. She notices Angela's depression and wonders: “She looks unhappy, but how can she be when she has a chance at everything in the world just because she's white?”⁴⁹ Faucet underlines how whiteness is elevated, with white people made to appear better and superior due to the effects of systemic racism, perpetuating the notion that whiteness is a prerequisite for success and happiness, notwithstanding the reality that all individuals are struggling in their own way, regardless of their skin color. She stresses the importance of recognizing that privilege and opportunity are not distributed equally based on race, and that individuals of all races can experience poverty and unhappiness.

⁴⁶ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 6.

⁴⁷ Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 92.

⁴⁸ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 171-172.

⁴⁹ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 137.

The novels depict whiteness as something detrimental to passing people of color, a factor preventing them from embracing their culture and ancestry. This notion reflects the destructive impacts of institutional racism on individuals and their interactions with their own identities and communities. Nonetheless, whiteness comes with advantages, as Clare of *Passing* and Angela of *Plum Bun* are well aware. Clare tries to reason with Irene, who does not see whiteness as a positive quality: “You'd be surprised, 'Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us.”⁵⁰ Likewise, Angela argues with Anthony: “Going for white makes life so much easier. You know it, Anthony.”⁵¹ In *Passing*, Irene is upset with Clare for choosing whiteness in her life; it feels like a betrayal to her of the Black community: “Nor would she assist Clare to realize her foolish desire to return for a moment to that life which long ago, and of her own choice, she had left behind her.”⁵² She believes Clare does not have any right to long for the Black culture since she once abandoned it. Irene’s criticism of Clare’s performative whiteness is ironic, given that she herself benefits from her own whiteness on occasion, not realizing her privilege. Similarly, in *Plum Bun*, Angela’s little sister Jinny is upset with Angela for choosing whiteness and abandoning her family: “Perhaps you have more white blood than Negro in your veins.” Jinny associates whiteness with negative characteristics as a result of how white-supremacist society has treated her. Angela herself then speculates that selfishness may be a typical white characteristic: “Perhaps the selfishness was what the possession of white blood meant; the ultimate definition of Nordic supremacy.”⁵³ Moreover, as aforementioned, whiteness tended to be mostly associated with intelligence and superiority by many white Americans at the time due to their white-supremacist beliefs.

Blackness, like whiteness, had its own implications, which were not always positive. Due to its history, segregation laws, and terrible representation in the media, which fueled white people’s ignorance, negative stereotypes connected with Blackness have been profoundly engrained in American society. Blackness was commonly linked with poor intelligence, poverty, and aggressiveness. In *Passing*, Irene expresses her dissatisfaction with the system’s treatment of Black Americans, saying: “Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham’s dark children.”⁵⁴ She refers to the misinterpretation of the Bible in which one of Ham’s sons was

⁵⁰ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 25.

⁵¹ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 173.

⁵² Larsen, *Passing*, 6.

⁵³ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 159.

⁵⁴ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York : Berkley, 2021), 118.

cursed to become a servant for his two brothers.⁵⁵ This belief has been used to justify racism and discrimination against people of African descent. Angela in *Plum Bun* shares her sentiment: “I’m sick of this whole race business if you ask me. [...] No, I don’t think being colored in America is a beautiful thing I think it’s nothing short of a curse.”⁵⁶ But nonetheless, Angela is also shown to have a deep respect for Blackness:

She thought then of black people, of the race of her parents and of all the arts against living which a cruel, relentless fate had called on them to endure. And she saw them as a people powerfully, almost overwhelmingly in doubt with the essence of life. They had to persist, had to survive because they did not know how to die.⁵⁷

Despite living in a society that is fundamentally cruel to them, she respects the resilience of the Black community.

Blackness and whiteness coexist within the biracial characters of *Passing* and *Plum Bun*. As individuals of mixed race, they are never considered fully Black or white, and society pressures them to choose only one identity. Irene ultimately chooses Blackness over whiteness, while Clare does the opposite. Larsen emphasizes the irony of choosing only one racial identity while ignoring the fact that the characters are neither exclusively white nor exclusively Black. Larsen’s depiction of the nuances of racial identity both refutes the simplistic notion that there are only two types of people and demonstrates how identities can change. The experiences of the characters reveal that race is not a fixed or objective term, but rather a social construct that is continuously being negotiated and performed. In *Plum Bun*, Angela, like Clare, chooses whiteness in the beginning, but eventually she becomes proud of her dual racial identity: “[...]for she belonged to two races, and to one far more conspicuously than the other.”⁵⁸ She acknowledges she belongs to both races, simultaneously embracing her Black identity within her white one. With Angela’s journey towards embracing her dual racial identity, Fauset highlights the complexity of racial identity formation. The belief in duality of racial identity is further supported by Angela’s friend Martha:

Of course he doesn’t get it from his white blood; he gets it from all his bloods. It’s the mixture that makes him what he is. Otherwise all white people would be gods. It’s the

⁵⁵ Edward Ullendorf, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 6.

⁵⁶ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 31-32.

⁵⁷ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 181.

⁵⁸ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 154.

mixture and the endurance which he has learned from being coloured in America and the determination to see life without bitterness,—⁵⁹

She maintains that the man is who he is because his race does not define him; rather, it is his experience as a person of color in the American society that prompted him to speak out.

Passing and *Plum Bun* both portray individuals who attempt to pass but nonetheless fail in the end. Mullen suggests that this is the most common point in the literature of passing. She describes it as “a model of assimilation as the production of whiteness”, which in the literature is displayed by imagining how people decide whether to have white or Black children.⁶⁰ *Passing* highlights this situation when the characters discuss their children: “no more for me either. Not even a girl. It's awful the way it skips generations and then pops out. Why, he actually said he didn't care what color it turned out, if I would only stop worrying about it. But of course, nobody wants a dark child.”⁶¹ In this passage, Clare and Irene's mutual friend Gertrude expresses her concern about having a Black child because it would interfere with her passing and performative whiteness, emphasizing the characters' internalized racism as well as societal pressure to conform to whiteness. Furthermore, Mullen states that too many African Americans have passed over the years, having erased their Black ancestry in order to ensure their survival. Because of this, she claims, there was not any literature about passing until the previous century. She points out how the passing literature portrays biracial individuals failing to become “categorically white”, although their mixed race makes them white at least partially. She maintains it emphasizes the illogicalness of the binary racial categories, deeming people either as white or Black and no in between, failing to recognize the complexity and diversity within racial identities.⁶²

⁵⁹ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 128.

⁶⁰ Harryette Mullen, “Optic White: Blackness production of Whiteness” *Diacritics* 24, no. 2/3 (1994): 73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/465165>.

⁶¹ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 39.

⁶² Harryette Mullen, “Optic White: Blackness production of Whiteness” *Diacritics* 24, no. 2/3 (1994): 73.

3. HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance was an influential cultural movement in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. This chapter focuses on its depiction in the novels. It demonstrates the movement's significance for the American people of color, foremost its influence on boosting their self-confidence and identity.

The Harlem Renaissance is named after Harlem, the neighborhood above 110th Street in Manhattan, New York, where it took place, according to Hill. He explains that before Harlem, the Black community's hub was a ghetto in Manhattan known as Black Bohemia. Poor living conditions were typical in such a small and cramped area. In comparison, he describes Harlem as an almost paradise with wide spaces and an elegant demeanor.⁶³ Yet, as Fauset records, Harlem's sophistication was merely superficial. Angela in *Plum Bun* draws focus to the less opulent interior of real Harlem:

The street, like many others in New York, possessed the pseudo-elegance and impressiveness which comes from an equipment of brownstone houses with their massive fronts, turn ostentatious regularity and simplicity, but a second glance revealed its downed heel condition; gaping windows disclosed the pitiful smallness of the rooms at the crouched behind the pretentious outsides.⁶⁴

This portrayal challenges the idealized image of Harlem as a cultural hub and exposes the social and economic struggles faced by its residents. The European Renaissance, which began in Italy at the end of the Middle Ages and spread across Europe, is another source of inspiration for the name. According to Jerry Brotton, the term renaissance originates from French and means "rebirth." It was characterized by a renewed interest in classical learning and humanism, and Brotton explains that it represented the rebirth of the arts, science, and culture as a whole in the 14th–16th centuries.⁶⁵ Renaissance intertwined with the Humanism movement, labeled "the intellectual heart of the Renaissance" by Chris Wickham.⁶⁶ Similarly, the Harlem Renaissance symbolizes the rebirth of Black people's self-confidence, arts, and culture. While the Humanistic Renaissance concerned predominantly the European society of the 14th–16th centuries, the Harlem Renaissance was a uniquely colored people's artistic and intellectual movement that emerged at the turn of the 20th century. Hill emphasizes its

⁶³ Laban Carrick Hill, *Harlem Stomp!: A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York, Hachette Book Group, 2003), 69-70.

⁶⁴ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 160.

⁶⁵ Jerry Brotton, *Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 31.

⁶⁶ Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 54.

significant impact not only on the confidence of oppressed ethnic minorities in the United States, giving them the determination to fight for their rights and freedom and clearly demonstrating that they are not less than white Americans, but also helping to raise awareness of the Black culture among white Americans.⁶⁷ The Harlem Renaissance was a celebration of Black culture, art, and literature that challenged the stereotypes and prejudices of the time. It paved the way for future generations of Black artists and writers to express themselves freely and proudly.

Harlem is characterized by Alain Locke as a community of incredibly diverse individuals, despite not being the largest in America. He describes the location as a space that fosters a completely new fused experience and community unity. Moreover, he raises the issue of the erasure of Black identity, where Black people were regarded through the same lens despite having different lives and experiences, explaining that they shared a common problem but not the same life. He believed that Harlem could help create a diverse space for diverse experiences and perspectives to be shared and celebrated. He sees this as an opportunity for the Black community to come together and build a stronger sense of unity and solidarity. He stresses its importance as a race capital. Furthermore, he highlights the need for Black people to reclaim their identities and celebrate their diversity, rather than being defined by a monolithic stereotype. He argues that recognizing and valuing the differences among Black individuals is crucial to empowering the community and challenging systemic racism.⁶⁸ Fauset shares his beliefs in *Plum Bun*, where Angela describes the diversity of Harlem's residents, who do not share the same background, yet they are connected through shared experience:

Here were people of a very high intellectual type, exponents of the realest and most essential refinement living cheek by jowl with coarse or ill-bred or even criminal, certainly indifferent, members of their race. Of course some of this propinquity was due to outer pressure, but there was present, too, hidden consciousness of race duty, as something which if translated said: "perhaps you do pull me down a little from the height to which I have climbed but on the other hand, perhaps, I'm helping you to rise."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Laban Carrick Hill, *Harlem Stomp!: A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York, Hachette Book Group, 2003), 13.

⁶⁸ Alain Locke, ed. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Open Road Media, 2021), 24-25.

⁶⁹ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 191.

Angela's views help to illustrate Fauset's point that the Black community in Harlem is multifaceted and interconnected, regardless of socioeconomic condition or educational attainment, because of the common experience of being Black in the United States. This shared sense of duty to uplift one another is a testament to the resilience, strength and unity of the community.

According to Eric Foner, the Harlem Renaissance began in the 1920s, when the majority of Black people from the South immigrated to New York during and after World War I. He claims that, while Harlem was a center of Black culture, it was also a poor neighborhood with predominantly white businesses and low-wage jobs for people of color. Foner emphasizes that despite this, Harlem artists were able to establish themselves in New York's artistic as well as intellectual scene, which led to the creation of more opportunities for colored artists.⁷⁰ *Plum Bun's* Angela characterizes Harlem as a location of vibrant, vivid culture. In the following extract, she also underlines that, although having a thriving culture and artistic freedom, colored people had to endure poor living conditions as oppressed minorities:

But she was amazed and impressed at this bustling frolicking busy laughing great city within a greater one. She had never seen colored life so thick, so varied, so complete. Moreover, just as this city reproduced in microcosm all the important features of any metropolis, so undoubtedly, life up here was just the same, she thought dimly, as life anywhere else. Not all these people, she realized, glancing keenly at the throngs of black and brown, yellow and white faces about her were servants or underlings or end men. She saw a beautiful woman all brown and red dressed as exquisitely as anyone she had seen on Fifth Avenue. [...] In all material, even in all practical things, these two worlds were alike, but in the production, the fostering of those ultimate manifestations, this world was lacking, for its people were without the means or the leisure to support them and enjoy.⁷¹

Despite their notoriety, Harlem's prominent personalities struggled financially. Hill offers Langston Hughes as an example of an acclaimed author with works published in numerous popular publications who had to support himself by working as a busboy.⁷² Harlem's artists' and intellectuals' financial troubles were caused by the limited options accessible to them in a segregated society, where they were frequently excluded from

⁷⁰ Eric Foner, *Give me liberty!* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2017.), 807-809.

⁷¹ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 55.

⁷² Laban Carrick Hill, *Harlem Stomp!: A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York, Hachette Book Group, 2003), 116-117.

mainstream markets and experienced discrimination in employment. Yet, nonetheless, their artistic contributions have left an indelible mark on American culture.

The birth of the Harlem Renaissance was fueled by the birth of the “New Negro”, a theme proposed by Alain Locke. He distinguishes between the Old and New Negro, claiming that there was a transition from the Old Negro, who existed in the past and was a character whose identity was imposed on him by society. Locke claims that Old Negro was not seen as a living human individual but rather as a collection of traits and beliefs that had been the topic of debate in society for many years. He was regarded in a derogatory way and considered a social burden that needed to be controlled. He was pushed to share the beliefs of his oppressors, and this led to a form of internalized oppression in which he began to see himself as part of the problem, which undermined his sense of self-worth. As a result of constantly being subjected to unjust prejudices, he was unable to maintain his authentic self, and after being oppressed for generations, he became ashamed of his own identity. On the other hand, Locke implies that the New Negro was able to achieve spiritual freedom and self-understanding by rejecting the trappings of social discrimination and implied inferiority. He regained his sense of dignity and began expressing himself creatively again through various forms of art. According to Locke, this was the beginning of a bold new era in which colored individuals gained self-confidence and no longer felt the need to hide their true selves from the world.⁷³ Harlem is a symbolic manifestation of this newly found confidence.

Hill mentions many great Black intellectuals, artists, and musicians, who emerged during the Harlem Renaissance, including W. E. B. du Bois, a sociologist fighting for Black rights and against segregation and lynching; writers Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Zora Neale Hurston, Black nationalist Marcus Garvey, who led self-help institutions for African Americans, Claude McKay; a Black poet editing a white magazine, the *Liberator*; and Black actor Paul Robeson, opening opportunities for other colored actors, as well as musicians Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, who brought jazz to mainstream audiences and revolutionized the music industry. A major voice of the Harlem Renaissance was also the magazine *Opportunity*, founded by Charles S. Johnson, a sociologist who fought to bring recognition to Black Harlem writers.⁷⁴ The idea of rejecting social discrimination and embracing creativity as

⁷³Alain Locke, ed. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Open Road Media, 2021), 19-21.

⁷⁴Laban Carrick Hill, *Harlem Stomp!: A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York, Hachette Book Group, 2003), 13, 14, 45, 46, 115, 116, 117, 121, 189, 190, 210.

a means of self-expression was a common theme among the Harlem Renaissance artists and writers, who sought to redefine the image of African Americans in the public consciousness. Through their works, they challenged the prevailing stereotypes and advocated for a more inclusive and diverse society.

Whereas *Plum Bun* mostly describes Angela's perception of Harlem and its uniqueness on multiple occasions: "Harlem intrigued her; it was a wonderful city; it represented, she felt, the last word in racial pride, integrity, and even self-sacrifice." In *Passing*, it is merely incorporated as a place that the characters visit. However, it draws attention to Harlem's popularity, even among the white population of New York. Irene casually remarks the vast number of white people that often come to visit Harlem to entertain themselves with the city's cultural scene. Her husband, Brian, even jokes that soon people of color will have to sit in separate areas because of the influx of white people in the area. His remark highlights the effects of a white audience and institutional racism on Harlem's cultural scene. Although it had Black personnel and artists, one of the most popular jazz clubs, the Cotton Club, was accessible only to white audiences.⁷⁵ This policy maintained damaging stereotypes and reinforced the notion that African-American performers are exclusively intended to entertain white audiences. White audiences posed limitations on Black cultural expression, yet they were important for the financial support they provided, according to Hutchinson.⁷⁶ The expose allowed African-American performers to continue their work and pave the way for greater representation and opportunities in the future. Reasons for Harlem's widespread appeal within this group are articulated through Irene in the novel. When Clare asks why do they come, she elaborates by saying: "A few purely and frankly to enjoy themselves. Others to get material to turn into shekels. More, to gaze on these great and near great while they gaze on the Negroes."⁷⁷ *Plum Bun* depicts Harlem's popularity among white Americans as well. Angela's white friend Martha is a character who supports social causes and human rights, showing her support of the Black community. She plans a trip to Harlem with Angela and their other friends to hear her favorite Black social speaker, who happens to be delivering a lecture: "You know how crazy Martha is about race and social movements. Well, Van Meier is to speak tonight and Martha is determined that a lot of her friends shall hear him."⁷⁸ She finds herself

⁷⁵ James Haskins, *The Cotton Club* (New York: New American Library, 1977), 32-37.

⁷⁶ George Hutchinson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33.

⁷⁷ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 80-81.

⁷⁸ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 125.

captivated by his wit, knowledge, and charisma. The positive impact of exposing the Black cultural scene to the general white population is demonstrated by Martha's support for the Black community. White Americans who were receptive to learning about and appreciating the culture were able to fall in love with it, which consequently inspired them to support the rights of Black people. This increased awareness and support from white population helped to amplify the voices of Black activists and leaders, ultimately leading to greater progress in the fight for racial equality. However, a harmful effect of large white audience was noted by Steward, who claims that white Americans at the period made an effort to take Black culture and label it as the New American culture of the 20th century. They used this cultural appropriation to deny the contributions of Black culture to American civilization and to show their supremacy and control over Black people.⁷⁹ This cultural theft was not limited to music and dance but also extended to fashion, language, and other aspects of Black culture. Hence, the erasure of Black contributions to American society hindered progress towards true equality.

⁷⁹ Jeffrey C. Steward, "The New Negro as citizen" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17.

4. BLACK WOMANHOOD AND THE ROLE OF GENDER

The Harlem Renaissance was not just a Black cultural movement; it was also an important movement for women, especially Black women, who were given the chance to express their opinions and ideas. By challenging preconceived notions of what was possible for women of African descent, it helped to expand the scope of female artistic and intellectual expression. The movement also brought attention to the intersections of race and gender in the United States and set the path for subsequent feminist movements. This chapter covers the womanhood of Afro-American women at the beginning of the 20th century and the role of gender during this time.

The Harlem Renaissance intersected with the first wave of feminism, inspiring Black women authors as well. Feminism in the United States, as Estelle B. Freedman suggests, began as early as 1848 in New York, when 300 women and men commenced a major social movement to fight for women's rights and end centuries of oppression. This marked the beginning of the first wave of feminism in the US which continued to the 1920s. Freedman defines feminism as: "a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies."⁸⁰ With the newly found confidence in their Blackness and identity, Black women felt inspired and found the courage to challenge societal norms and fight for their rights, not just as women but as Black women. Nonetheless, combined with Harlem Renaissance it was the first time colored women were given opportunities and confidence to fight for a difference. But Caraway argues that postcolonialism contributed to feminism of the time being largely focused on white women. This sets it apart from Black feminism, a movement that emerged later and highlighted the unique challenges faced by African women.⁸¹ Yet, when the Harlem Renaissance was factored in, it ignited a spark, giving African American women real opportunities, encouraging them to fight for a difference.

Many female intellectuals emerged from this movement, including Regina Anderson, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Nella Larsen, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne

⁸⁰Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 7, 17.

⁸¹ Nancie Caraway, *Segregated sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 27.

Spencer, Gwendolyn Bennet, Helene Johnson, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Elise Johnson McDougald, Dorothy West, and several others. Regina M. Anderson Andrews was a pivotal female figure of the Harlem Renaissance movement, who enabled other intellectuals in the movement to hold meetings in her library, providing a space that became the birthplace of the Harlem Renaissance, according to Jessie C. Smith. Along with Ethel R. Nance, they were instrumental in the establishment of a Civic Club, which provided many young colored artists, such as Langston Hughes or Jean Toomer, with opportunities to connect with other influential figures who could benefit their careers like W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke or James W. Johnson. Regina was an inspiring Black Woman, who fought for women's rights. She became the second vice president of the National Council of Women,⁸² an organization that strives for a social and political change since its founding in 1888.⁸³ The ups and downs of a Black womanhood in the United States were depicted by Zora Neale Hurston in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, generally recognized as her finest and arguably her most significant contribution to the Harlem Renaissance, Davidson states. The novel explores the themes of self-discovery, love, and independence through the life of Janie Crawford, a Black woman who defies societal norms and expectations to find her own voice and identity. Hurston's use of vernacular language and her celebration of Black culture and traditions make the novel a powerful representation of the Black experience in America.⁸⁴ Jessie Redmon Fauset was another inspiring Black woman who, according to Varlack, was the first colored woman to attend and graduate university. She has written four novels, including *Plum Bun*, *There Is Confusion*, *The Chinaberry Tree*, and *Comedy: American Style*, all of which feature strong, empowered Black women who defy conventional gender roles and stereotypes. Her writing is an important critique of the ways in which race, class, and gender play out in the United States.⁸⁵ Davidson introduces Nella Larsen, a writer whose books explore the complexities of both female sexuality and racial identity. Through the protagonist Helga Crane, her debut book

⁸² Jessie Carney Smith, "Andrews, Regina M. Anderson" in *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 6-7.

⁸³ "About NCW/US," National Council of Women of the U.S., March 6, 2023, <https://www.nationalcouncilofwomen.org/p/ourhistory-developing.html>

⁸⁴ Adenike Marie Davidson, "Hurston, Zora Neale" in *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 122-127.

⁸⁵ Christopher Allen Varlack, "Fauset, Jessie Redmon" in *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 77-78.

Quicksand explores the concept of Victorian womanhood and female sexuality. The concept of female sexuality and female friendship is also present in her second novel, *Passing*.⁸⁶

While there are some women's issues apparent between the lines in Larsen's *Passing*, they are not the focal point of the narrative, leaving very little to analyze. The novel *Plum Bun*, on the other hand, clearly illustrates the connection between the two movements by addressing women's struggles, as well as their growing confidence, throughout the plot. As a result, the majority of this chapter will be devoted to analyzing *Plum Bun*, drawing comparison only in relevant concepts.

The growing confidence of Black women, whose perspective has clearly shifted and who have now begun to embrace their womanhood with pride, is articulated by Angela. She expresses her sense of empowerment and her admiration for Cleopatra, whom she views as a strong and powerful woman. She finds Cleopatra's African ancestry particularly intriguing: "She herself was power, like the women one reads about, like Cleopatra, Cleopatra's African origin intrigued her, it was a fitting comparison."⁸⁷ She becomes a woman who fully embraces her femininity and recognizes the power in her ancestry. Angela's quote demonstrates the concept of pride in Black sisterhood, which is based on the common ancestry of African and African American women, who were influential in shaping cultures of the world, mentioned by Caraway.⁸⁸ The anthropologist Sabine Jell-Bahlsen claims, that this influence was created because women in many African communities have been given more political and economic power, with a multidimensional female component balanced with a male counterpart.⁸⁹ This concept of pride in Black sisterhood is not only limited to African and African American women but also extends to women of the African diaspora. It highlights the importance of recognizing and celebrating the contributions of Black women throughout history. Caraway elaborates by stating that African women's achievements inspired pride in African American women despite the fact that men still hold authority in traditional African culture.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Adenike Marie Davidson, "Hurston, Zora Neale" in *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era* (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 144.

⁸⁷ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 88.

⁸⁸ Nancie Caraway, *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 40.

⁸⁹ Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "Female Power: Water Priestesses of the Oru-Igbo," in *Sisterhood, Feminism and Power*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998), 102.

⁹⁰ Caraway, *Segregated Sisterhood*, 42.

The issue of gender bias is addressed in different contexts throughout the novel. For instance, the character of Paulette is aware of the fact that society respects and values masculine traits more than feminine traits, and she utilizes that to her advantage: "I've learned that the woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants."⁹¹ She deliberately declares herself masculine, because she knows that doing so will earn her more respect than behaving in a stereotypically feminine manner. Paulette's actions reveal a larger societal issue of gender norms and biases. It highlights the pressure women face to conform to traditional gender roles in order to be taken seriously and succeed. Paulette embodies women's newly acquired confidence at the time, believing that women are deserving of greater respect: "I don't mind a man's not marrying me; but I can't forgive him if he thinks I'm not good enough to marry him. Any woman is better than the best of men."⁹² She believes that women, like men, are valuable human beings who should be free to choose their partners based on mutual respect and consent, without any gender-based discrimination or superiority: "Indeed, most women must be able to say as did men, "you are mine," not merely "I am yours."⁹³ Her statement reflects the time's fight for gender equality while fighting patriarchal traditions that limit women's agency and autonomy in relationships. Angela's character is very naive when it comes to men. Through Roger, she eventually learns that there are different societal expectations for a man and a woman. Although he calls her constantly himself, once she starts to call him regularly as well, trying to at least maintain a friendship, he accuses her of bothering and embarrassing him. When she points it out, he explains that it is wrong of her because she is a woman, but he can do it without shame because he is a man: "Of course I do, that's different. I'm a man."⁹⁴ His lack of respect for women is evidence of a deeply ingrained gender bias in society that persists even today.

Women have historically relied on men for financial support and career advancement because they did not have equal access to these opportunities, Freedman states. Since capitalism's emergence, women's roles have been reduced to those of midwives, resulting in their labor losing value and leaving them reliant on the support of men.⁹⁵ Fauset brings attention to the gender inequality in the process of marriage and how it affects women's lives.

⁹¹ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 60.

⁹² Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 74.

⁹³ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 159.

⁹⁴ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 153.

⁹⁵ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 36.

Women are expected to wait for men to choose them, while men have the privilege of actively seeking a wife: “How often had she heard the expression ‘he’s ready to settle down, so he’s looking around for a wife.’ If that were the procedure of men it should certainly be much more so the procedure of women since their fate was so much more deeply involved.”⁹⁶ Angela ponders this issue, considering men were usually the primary source of income, it matters more to women who they marry. The topic of gender roles is further brought up in relation to family life. Because women were primarily viewed as caregivers at home, as per Lindsey, it was deemed inconceivable for them to leave their families and pursue a life on their own.⁹⁷ Angela abandons her sisters at the start of the novel, feeling guilty for being selfish and leaving for New York after their parents’ deaths. Being a woman in a culture that prioritizes men over women has made her acutely aware of the constraints she faces: “if she had been a boy and had left home no one would have had a word of blame, it would have been the proper thing, to be expected and condoned.”⁹⁸ She imagines a man would never have to feel guilty for such things; in fact, he would be encouraged to do so without blame. Similarly, in *Passing* Irene points out how a male child is favored before a female child especially by men: “‘Isn’t it a bit unusual?’ Irene asked. ‘Most men want sons. Egoism, I suppose.’”⁹⁹ While not all men share these views, they are reflective of the norms established by patriarchal society, which prioritize men’s interests over those of others, particularly women.

Female friendship is a recurring theme in both *Passing* and *Plum Bun*. While *Passing* is concerned with the friendship of Clare and Irene throughout the novel in connection with racial identity, *Plum Bun* focuses on the importance of female friendship in a variety of contexts. The friendship of Clare and Irene in *Passing* began early in their childhood, when they were best friends. After not seeing each other for many years, they reconnect in adulthood, though Irene is not as enthusiastic about their encounter as Clare, after finding out Clare chooses to pass for white “socially.”¹⁰⁰ She blames Clare for distancing herself from the Black community. Despite Irene’s reluctance to reconnect with her, she still finds herself drawn to her and unable to completely sever their friendship. Their relationship represents Irene’s internal conflict with race and its complexity. Larsen also highlights the subject of female sexuality in the context of Irene’s relationship with Clare. Irene’s complicated feelings for Clare hint

⁹⁶ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York : Oshun Publishing, 1928), 152-153.

⁹⁷ Linda L. Lindsey, *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective* (New Jersey: Nancy Roberts, 2005), 214.

⁹⁸ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 180.

⁹⁹ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 38.

¹⁰⁰ Larsen, *Passing*, 20.

at deeper feelings for her friend. Clare is frequently described as a beautiful and attractive woman by her. She becomes jealous and paranoid when she assumes Clare is intending to steal her husband and family. But her jealousy does not seem to be towards Brian, as she admits that she has no romantic feelings for him: “Strange, that she couldn’t now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour she thought not.”¹⁰¹ This implies that Clare has suppressed her true feelings for Clare, which may not be purely platonic.

In *Plum Bun*, the protagonist, Angela, finds support and guidance from her female friends as she navigates issues of race and identity in early 20th century America. The novel also explores the complexities of friendships between women from different social backgrounds. One of Angela’s friends is Mary Hastings, whom she met at school after Mary joined in the middle of the term. Angela is initially very proud of their friendship, both because Mary is white and comes from an affluent family and because her friendship with her helps her become more involved at school. Aside from that, she appears to genuinely like Mary. She does not tell Mary, however, that she is colored, because she does not believe it is important and is concerned about Mary’s reaction. Mary begins to treat Angela differently after learning she is mixed, and Angela loses trust in her, and their friendship fades: “She failed me once, I was her friend, yet she failed me for something with which I had nothing to do. she’s just as likely to do it again. it’s in her.”¹⁰² Their friendship is used to emphasize the issue of racial prejudice and its impact on relationships. Next, while she is enrolled at an art school in New York, Angela makes a number of artist friends, including Paulette. Paulette is a white woman who exemplifies rising levels of confidence and values associated with feminism. However, despite fighting against gender inequality, she displays sexist values herself, associating men with only negative qualities. Her antagonistic attitude toward them may be reflective of the resentment that some women felt after being oppressed for centuries: “‘Men,’ she mused candidly. ‘Of course we can’t get along without them anymore than they can without us, but I get tired of them, they’re nearly all animals. I’d rather have a good woman friend any day.’”¹⁰³ She places a higher value on female friendships than male friendships because she believes that women can relate to each other on a deeper level and offer emotional support, which is not always present in female friendships with men: “When a woman is really your friend she’s so dependable and she’s not

¹⁰¹ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Berkley, 2021), 132.

¹⁰² Jessie Redmond Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 27.

¹⁰³ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 59.

expecting anything in return.”¹⁰⁴ As a result, she places a higher value on the emotional connections that can be made between women. In addition, she is of the opinion that other women are more likely to comprehend the specific difficulties and experiences that come with being a woman. Angela’s friendship with Paulette helps her gain confidence as a woman. Another female friend from the artist group is Martha. She is a white woman as well, described as having an even stronger character than Paulette, and does not care what others think of her.¹⁰⁵ Through her, Angela meets Roger. Angela seeks advice from Martha on how to secure his hand in marriage. She advises Angela to make sure she always has the upper hand in the relationship, never leaving the impression that she is more interested than he is. Angele suggests it is like a game, and Martha agrees: “you have to be careful not to withhold too much and yet give very little. If we don’t give enough we lose them. If we give too much we lose ourselves. Oh, Angele, God doesn’t like women.”¹⁰⁶ At this time, women often felt that they had to fight for a marriage with a man to secure their lives, whereas men picked and chose who they wanted. Although Martha is dissatisfied with the way things are because she believes women endure more hardship than men, she still perpetuates gender stereotypes through her statement. Nevertheless, Angela values their friendship and appreciates Martha’s enthusiasm about supporting the Black community. Later, Angela befriends a Jewish girl, Rachel, who lives in the same apartment complex. Angela finds Rachel charming. She seeks a female friendship in her loneliness, valuing the intimacies of a female friend: “She began then in her loneliness to approach Rachel seeking for nothing other than almost sisterly intimacies which sprang up between solitary women had often big cities from their homes and from all their natural resources which adds so much to the beauty and graciousness of young womanhood.”¹⁰⁷ For the first time in her life, Angela befriends someone for who they are, seeking a genuine connection, rather than thinking about the advancement their social standing could bring into her life: “‘If anything comes out of this friendship to advance me in any way,’ she told herself solemnly, ‘it will happen just because it happens but I shall go into this with clean hands and a pure heart merely because I like Rachel.’”¹⁰⁸ Angela has undergone a major character development from her previous self, who avoided spending time with her Black friends out of fear of how their race would affect her social standing, preferring to surround herself with wealthy white people, whom she only used to secure herself a better life. Yet she does not tell Rachel she is colored. When Rachel

¹⁰⁴ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 61.

¹⁰⁵ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 65.

¹⁰⁶ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 84.

¹⁰⁷ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 142.

¹⁰⁸ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 142.

confides in Angela about her difficulties in marrying her lover due to their religious differences, which are not supported by their parents, Angela encourages her to follow her heart and live her life as she wishes rather than following in her parents' footsteps: "Your parents have lived their lives; they have no business trying to live yours. Personally I think all this pother about race and creed and color, tommyrot. In your place I should certainly follow my own wishes"¹⁰⁹ Angela realizes how limiting society's rules are to a person, whether they are based on race, gender, or faith: "'Love,' she said the music to her soul for rather than to her friend, 'is supposed to be the greatest thing in the world but look how we smother and confine it juice mustn't marry Catholics; white people mustn't marry colored —'"¹¹⁰ Angela's younger self used to believe that friendships and marriage were ways to achieve wealth and happiness, but she now realizes that true happiness stems from the connections she makes with people. Although society does not approve, she no longer sees race as an impediment to her friendship. Her friendship with Rachel demonstrates how much she has matured as a person and a woman. In contrast to the female friendship between Irene and Clare in *Passing*, which represents the complexities of racial identity, Angela's friendships in *Plum Bun* demonstrate her growth as a woman of color.

¹⁰⁹ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Oshun Publishing, 1928), 183.

¹¹⁰ Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 183.

CONCLUSION

This bachelor's thesis attempted to shed light on the concepts of racial identity and white passing during the first half of the 20th century in the United States by conducting a detailed examination of the novels *Passing* and *Plum Bun* written by Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset. In addition to this, it aimed to investigate the social, cultural, and political forces that were influential in the formation of racial identity in the early 20th century in the United States.

In terms of historical context, in the first two chapters, this thesis addressed the concept of race, which has an important impact on the characters in both novels. It sheds light on how it divides people based on their skin color while also uniting them based on shared experiences as a result of the societal division. Because of centuries of slavery, which stripped African Americans of their identity and humanity, Blackness became associated with negative stereotypes, leading to discrimination and racism, whether individual or institutional, which had a negative impact on the lives of the characters. This situation influenced both internal and external perceptions of people of color, making some of them ashamed of their racial identity and the connotations it carried. As portrayed in the novels, people of mixed ancestry with lighter skin frequently passed because of it and tried to conceal their colored identity, such as Clare in *Passing* and Angela in *Plum Bun*. Because of society's binary division of race, they were forced to choose which racial identity they wanted to associate with, highlighting the concept's fundamental flaw of failing to recognize the complexity and diversity of racial identities. These novels focus attention on the negative consequences of societal pressure to conform to a specific racial identity, as well as the necessity for a more inclusive understanding of race.

As for the cultural-historical context, in the third chapter, this thesis demonstrated the cultural significance of the Harlem Renaissance and its influence on the racial identity of colored Americans. It analyzed that both novels exhibit Harlem's massive impact on the confidence of African Americans, who started to become proud of their own community and culture, leaving them more inclined towards celebrating their Blackness. It was a seminal movement in American history, showcasing the talent and creativity of Black artists and intellectuals while also challenging the racist attitudes and policies of the time. It provided African-Americans with a voice to express themselves and a reason to take pride in their Blackness and accomplishments. It created a sense of community and empowerment that they had never experienced before.

Finally, this thesis addressed the role of gender and Black womanhood in the novels in the final chapter. Because of the confluence of the first wave of feminism and the Harlem Renaissance, Black women gained confidence and began to fight for their rights as colored women as well, which later developed into Black feminism. Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset are just two of the many outstanding women of color who became respected intellectuals as a result of the movement's impact on educational and professional opportunities for Black women. Their contributions to literature and academia paved the way for future generations of Black women to excel in these fields and break down discrimination barriers. The novel *Plum Bun*, on which this chapter is primarily focused, reflects feminist views. This thesis assessed how it illuminated the issues of gender roles and gender bias deeply established in the society. It found out how women were discriminated against because of the patriarchal nature of American society at the time, having fewer rights than males and needing to accommodate men in many areas, including marriage, despite their equal engagement in the matter. Certain responsibilities had been stereotypically assigned to women as well, which were not expected of men. Furthermore, this chapter addressed the pride in Black womanhood connected with African ancestry, and the role of female friendship, which is present in both novels. It analyzed how Angela's connections in *Plum Bun* assist her in coping with various aspects of womanhood and propel her character development as a woman, in contrast to the friendship between Clare and Irene in *Passing*, which represents Irene's fear regarding her racial identity.

RESUMÉ

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rasovou identitou a pojmem white passing v rámci rasové problematiky ve Spojených státech amerických v první polovině 20. století. Práce definuje pojem white passing jako skutečnost, kdy Americký míšenec se světlou pletí, je považován za bělocha, ať už úmyslně či neúmyslně, a získává tím určitá sociální privilegia spojená s běloštvím. Pomocí románů *Passing* od Nelly Larsenové a *Plum Bun* od Jessie Redmon Fausetové analyzuje jeho dopad na rasovou identitu míšenců v americké společnosti, která upřednostňuje bělošství na úkor černošství. Jejím cílem je prozkoumat sociální, kulturní a politickou dynamiku, která formuje rasovou identitu v této době. V rámci čtyř kapitol tato práce kombinuje teoretické koncepty, které jsou následně zkoumány pomocí analyzované literatury.

První kapitola nastoluje kontext prostředí románů tím, že představuje historické pozadí rasové problematiky ve Spojených státech během první poloviny 20. století, včetně vysvětlení klíčové terminologie. Ta je dále podložena relevantními příklady z románů, které jsou následně porovnány. Zabývá se otázkami, jako je rasa, jež je vymezena jako sociální konstrukt, který odkazuje na klasifikaci lidí do skupin na základě sdílených biologických nebo sociálních charakteristik, a její vliv na životy míšenců v Americe minulého století. Zkoumá, jak se touto problematikou ve svých románech zabývají obě autorky. Věnuje se i tomu, jakým způsobem několik století otroctví ovlivnilo vznik rasismu, jež připravilo Afroameričany o jejich lidskost a svobodu, kdy na ně bylo pohlíženo jako na věc, nikoli jako na živou bytost. Rasismus se manifestoval v různých formách, které zahrnují jak individuální rasismus jedinců, tak i institucionální či systemický rasismus, páchaný například vládními organizacemi. Analyzuje navíc, jak se tato realita odráží na postavách obou románů, které zažívají tyto formy rasismu na denním pořádku. Individuální rasismus je mimo jiné reprezentován především postavami Johna Bellewa a Rogera Fieldinga, manželé Clare a Angely, zatímco institucionální rasismus postavy zažívají ve spojení s rasovou segregací způsobenou zákony Jima Crowa, jež jim odepírají práva a svobody jinak samozřejmé pro bílou populaci. V obou románech se objevuje příklad segregace v restauracích a podobných podnicích, které byly přístupné pouze pro bělochy. Přestože už ne v takovém rozsahu, práce zdůrazňuje skutečnost, že institucionální nebo také systemický rasismus přetrvává v americké společnosti dodnes. Zmiňuje i drsnou realitu lynčování, a jeho ilustraci v románech, které bylo legální po většinu 20. století, reprezentující nelidskou tvář institucionálního rasismu.

Rasová problematika americké společnosti ovlivnila koncept rasové identity, která je zkoumána v druhé kapitole. Rasová identita je popsána jako jedincův pocit příslušnosti ke konkrétní rase. Prostřednictvím románů odhaluje složitost rasových vztahů a dopady společenských tlaků na jedince a utváření jejich identity. Podtrhává složitý vztah mezi rasou a identitou a zdůrazňuje výzvy, kterým čelí jednotlivci, kteří se pohybují v hranicích rasových kategorií. Pojednává o problematice rasového dualismu, ve kterém jsou míšenci společností nuceni si vybrat, zda budou žít jako běloši nebo černoši, přestože jsou obojím. Tuto ironii vyobrazují autorky obou románů, jejichž postavy se přizpůsobují buď jedné identitě či druhé. Ve spojení s rasovým dualismem je zmíněn i pojem double consciousness, jenž byl představen sociologem W. E. B. Du Bois, který poukazuje na vnitřní konflikt Afroamerických jedinců, kteří se museli neustále přizpůsobovat většinové bílé společnosti. Je zde definován pojem white passing, který slouží k adopci bílé identity, jak již bylo vysvětleno. Práce studuje, jak postavy z románů tímto způsobem překračují rasové hranice, a zdůrazňuje tak komplexnost rasové identity. Upozorňuje také na různorodost motivací, které je vedou do této situace. Zatímco Irene ho obecně používá pasivně a v krajních situacích, Clare a Angela ho naopak používají záměrně, aby získaly všechny výhody spojené s běloštvím. Angelina matka zvolila jinou strategii a předstírá, že je bílá jen pro pobavení. Romány jsou také zhodnoceny v rámci literatury, která se soustředí na white passing. Nakonec kapitola definuje a porovnává pojmy bělošství a černošství a konotace s nimi spojené.

Třetí kapitola pokrývá dopad harlemské renesance jako kulturního a intelektuálního hnutí 20. let 20. století, jež představovalo oživení černošského sebevědomí, umění a kultury. Soustředí se na pozitivní vliv, který toto hnutí mělo na Afroameričany, jimž po dlouhé době poskytlo důvod k hrdosti na svůj původ. Uvádí, jak je tato realita zachycena v dobových románech, v nichž je Harlem zobrazován jako kulturně bohaté místo, kde se mísí různorodí jedinci a sdílejí mezi sebou své názory a zkušenosti, a oslavují kulturní diversitu. Práce dále pokazuje na chudobu, jež i přes svou honosnost mezi černošskými obyvateli Harlemu panovala, což zdůrazňují i autorky zkoumaných děl. Vyjadřuje se také k pojmu New Negro, uvedeným Alainem Lockem a jeho spojení s Harlemskou pýchou. Krátce tato kapitola vyzdvihuje také klíčové osobnosti harlemského hnutí a jejich přínos. Zároveň podtrhuje Harlemskou popularitu mezi bílým obyvatelstvem Ameriky, jež s sebou nesla pozitivní i negativní stránky. Na jednu stranu zvýšený zájem o černošskou kulturu posloužil k rozšíření ponětí o rasové situaci, což v některých případech vyústilo ve spojenectví, jako tomu je v případě Angeliny kamarádky Marthy, která jako bílá Američanka bojuje za práva Afroameričanů. Na druhou stranu zde

vyvstala otázka kulturní apropriace, afroamerická kultura začala být považována za kulturu celé Ameriky, což Afroameričany připravilo o jejich zásluhy.

Poslední kapitola se zabývá ženstvím Afroameričanek v průběhu Harlemské renesance vyobrazených v *Passing* i *Plum Bun*, spojeným s otázkami feminismu a genderu. Snaží se podat čtenáři hlubší přehled, co se týče komplexnosti genderových vztahů a rolí žen ve společnosti. Poukazuje na souběžnost feministického hnutí a Harlemské renesance, což se odrazilo na literatuře Afro-Amerických autorek včetně Jessie Redmon Fausetové a Nelly Larsenové. Významné ženské dobové autorky a jejich úspěchy jsou zmíněny, pro ilustraci pozitivního dopadu celého hnutí na sebevědomí i příležitosti afroamerických žen, jenž otevřel dveře ostatním ženám k dalším příležitostem. Jejich díla měla vliv na vznik černošského feminismu, který se vyvinul později, zahrnující boj za práva afroamerických žen. Práce se soustředí především na román *Plum Bun*, ve kterém je patrná inspirace feministickými ideály, ale zahrnuje i úryvky z románu *Passing*. Jsou tu rozebírána témata genderové nerovnosti a genderových rolí v převážně patriarchální americké společnosti. Značná část kapitoly se zabývá společným tématem přátelství mezi ženami a porovnává jejich význam v každém z románů. Zatímco román Nelly Larsenové zobrazuje přátelství mezi Clare a Irene v souvislosti s Ireninou nejistotou ohledně své rasové identity, *Plum Bun* se soustředí na to, jak Angelu posouvají vpřed a pomáhají jí se vyrovnat s různými aspekty ženství.

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