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## **Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences**

### **Title**

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### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6mw26539>

### **Journal**

Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 16(0)

### **ISSN**

2639-6440

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

2019

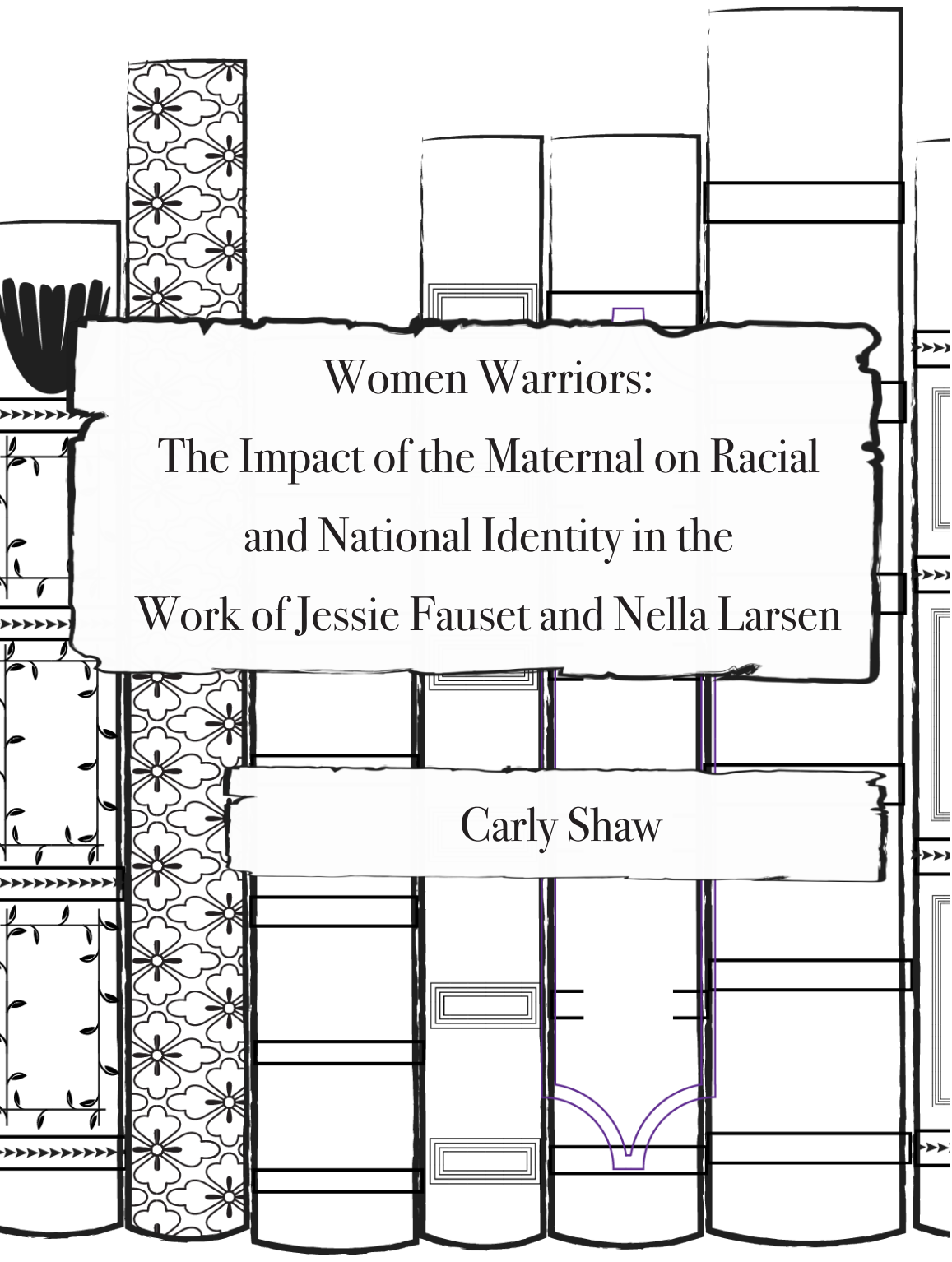
### **DOI**

10.5070/L6161045561

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The background features a stylized architectural drawing of a building facade with windows and columns. A vertical column on the left is decorated with a repeating floral pattern. A horizontal band with a leafy vine pattern runs across the middle. The text is presented on two white, torn-edge banners. The top banner contains the title, and the bottom banner contains the author's name. There are some purple ink-like marks on the right side of the page.

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Carly Shaw

# Women Warriors: The Impact of the Maternal on Racial and National Identity in the Work of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen

Carly Shaw



**Abstract:** During a time in which African Americans fought for civil rights, many African American writers rose to literary prestige. Many of these authors' works address the search for identity — both individual and national — as a way to cope with their lack of societal rights. Two novels exemplify this theme by exploring the impact of the maternal on an individual's identity: Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*. This paper argues that these works stress the importance of motherhood in finding one's place in a hostile environment, focusing particularly on the way in which mothers stand as warriors for the maintenance of their cultural communities. Although many scholars have argued that the characters presented in these narratives are negatively impacted by family and community, the novels show the positive impact maternal figures can have on the upkeep of African American culture. By presenting this impact in their works, Fauset and Larsen exhibit how African American identity can be fostered through maintaining a connection with one's family, culture, and community.

**Keywords:** *African-American Literature, Family Dynamics, Racial Identity, Cultural Connection*

Conflict of identity for African Americans — racial, individual, and familial — is a struggle rooted in history. Two contrasting definitions of motherhood emerged from the antebellum sentiments prevalent throughout the system of slavery. According to Hazel V. Carby, these sentiments note that the “codes of sexuality operated in the antebellum South” produce “opposing definitions of motherhood for white and black women which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress” (20). In noting the “opposing definitions,” Carby’s explanation begins to complicate the notion of motherhood. Carby communicates the way in which the views set forth by a system of African American oppression deeply influence the social values of the white elite in the following years. This explanation is further developed through Barbara Berg’s exposition that the dominant view of white women in the antebellum South painted them as “the best mothers, wives, and managers of households” primarily because they “know little or nothing of sexual indulgence. Love of home, children, and domestic duties are the only passions they feel” (84). This explanation of white women being the “best mothers” in tandem with the fact that this “code of sexuality” brought about “opposing definitions” of motherhood debilitates the humanity of the oppressed and marginalized group through a maternal standpoint.

Undermining humanity by these means paved the way for maintaining the oppressive system of slavery. In support of this notion, Carby notes that the slave falls under the condition of the mother having “necessitated the raising of the protective barriers, ideological and institutional, around the form of the white mother, whose progeny were heirs to the economic, social, and political interests in the maintenance of the slave system” (31). By this definition, motherhood specifically and familial roles in general were thus used for means of continuous oppression of the African American community within the system of slavery.

Though both time and law changed over the next several decades, the sentiments set forth by the system of slavery continued to formulate the white elite’s views held about African American individuals. In order to illuminate the consequences of these views, Carby discusses how the narratives of African American

women writers “embody the tension between the author’s desire to privilege her experience and being able to speak only within a discourse of conventionally held beliefs about the nature of black womanhood” (22). The tension that stems from the opposing views of the “nature of black womanhood” and the respective position that these women take within the familial structure lead to an understanding of the importance of narratives in reinstating the humanity of African American individuals and work toward racial uplift. In this way, the narratives that embody these tensions serve not only as art or culture for a racial community; they also uplift a marginalized people.

Much of the present-day literary criticism regarding these works brings into question the contrasting definitions of women and mothers in relation to a community. Jessie Fauset, whose work rose to prominence with the shifting of America’s social and political climate, addresses the tension in these contrasting views of motherhood and family. She uses these tensions as the basis for arguing the importance of maintaining a connection to others of the same race by presenting readers of her novel *Plum Bun* with the major themes of passing and family. Fauset’s exploration of these themes places her text in conversation with a multitude of prevalent authors and their equally canonical works, including Nella Larsen’s novel, *Passing*. Through the use of these themes in *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, the authors highlight the complexity of defining socially constructed concepts such as identity, race, motherhood, and familial structures.

The passing female figure is seen as having “important repercussions for maternal discourses of the 1920s.” When working in tandem with the previously mentioned scholars, this definition adds new complexities to the passing and motherhood themes in Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (Löffler 127). This novel draws on the hostile climate between the white elite and the oppressed African American community of the time, creating a strong vision of race, culture, and society. In addressing these ideas, Fauset complicates the notions of motherhood and racial identity through the beliefs and actions of her protagonist, Angela Murray. Angela is introduced to the concept of passing through her mother, Mattie. Passing allows Angela and her mother to immerse themselves

in a white society, making them more aware of the differences in the treatment of white and African American individuals. Licia Morrow Calloway notes that Fauset's representation of motherhood enables the author to configure "the reproduction of class consciousness and the transmission of cultural ideas as well as the cultivation of character traits and personal values" (62). This "reproduction" effectively demonstrates the impact of the mother figure on Fauset's protagonist, and it illuminates Angela's mother's decision to teach Angela what can be accomplished if they embrace the act of passing.

The mother in *Plum Bun* acts as the catalyst for the "cultivation of character traits and personal values." This further expresses the deep influence Angela's mother has on the way she views herself as a woman, particularly in regard to her racial self, her role in racial society, and her role in the predominantly white society she inhabits. The actions and beliefs of Angela and her mother subvert the negative view of what it means to be an African American woman within a society of the white elite. This continues as the text further develops the relationship between mother and child.

Through the first part of the novel, Angela's mother holds a strong presence in the lives of her children while providing a complex view of one's racial group. Early on, a precedent is set "that Angela accompanied her mother and Virginia her father" (Fauset 17). This division stems from the fact that Angela and her mother can "pass" as white individuals, while her father, Junius, and her sister, Virginia, do not have such an ability. This clear separation of family based on appearance and ability to "pass" introduces the nuances of race, specifically within a close and interconnected family. The separation presented early in the lives of Angela and her sister lays the foundation for Angela's view of her racial heritage and her choice to present herself as a white individual.

The effect on Angela's view of these concepts is clearly expressed when she "saw her mother's face change—with trepidation she thought. She remarked: 'It's a good thing Papa didn't see us, you'd have to speak to him, wouldn't you?'" (Fauset 18-9). Angela develops an apathetic view of her family members

and moves further away from the racial community that she was raised in. Kathleen Pfeiffer notes that Angela “utterly rejects the community-oriented, racially loyal, and sentimentally genteel realm wholly embraced by her sister” (79). Angela sees her mother as the means of escaping the apathy of white individuals, which aids in the creation of a character who rejects a “racially loyal” nature and attempts to blend into elite society in order to escape hostility.

The passing of Angela’s mother stands as a model for the choices Angela makes throughout the text. She notes that the color of her skin is “nothing short of a curse” (Fauset 53). Angela’s view of her race as “a curse” indicates a rejection of her racial character thus undermining the positive impact of the mother figure on what Calloway previously referred to as the “transmission of cultural ideas” (62). Angela is aware of the difference in treatment between the different racial groups in her society. With this newfound awareness, Angela questions her ability to “live the way I want” if she stays with her sister (Pfeiffer 80). She makes the decision to leave “her darker, younger sister Virginia and move to New York as the white Angèla Mory,” fully immersing herself into white society and completely cutting herself off from her familial connection (Pfeiffer 80). Through this action, Angela expresses the importance she puts on her place in society and the way she is treated by others, situating it above even her familial connections. Angela’s actions explicate a movement away from racial identity and the way she lives her life:

She had burned her bridges behind her, had resigned from school, severed her connection with the Academy, and had permitted an impression to spread that she was going West to visit indefinitely a distant cousin of her mother’s. In reality, she was going to New York. (Fauset 82)

Fauset’s explanation of this severing effectively speaks to the extent of Angela’s abandonment of her race, an abandonment that is arguably brought about by the benefits of passing she

learned at a young age. Angela's act of burning "her [community] bridges behind her" is represented in the smaller but no less emotional abandonment of "her sister to protect her racial reputation" (Pfeiffer 81). The representation of the family as a more concentrated symbol of the community communicates the emotional connection and the profound impact each has on an individual. Despite Angela's fixation on her mother's initial lesson in passing and immersing oneself in the society of their oppressors, she eventually begins to understand her mother's later-life decision to anchor herself to others who share her race.

The actions of Angela's mother and the effect that these actions have on Angela arguably support the notion that Fauset's novel upholds the idea that motherhood acts as an anchor to one's race. Fauset weakens a "specific" definition of race early on in the text by introducing a protagonist who gains access to comfort and societal acceptance through the act of passing as a white individual. Fauset herself states that it is through the fact that her mother teaches her to "pass" as white "that Angela learned the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed inherent in mere whiteness" (14). The benefits of passing outlined by Fauset suggests that this text supports one's shedding of his/her racial identity. However, as this paper continues to explore the themes of passing and motherhood, it will become clearer that maternal figures in these texts have a deep and positive effect on maintaining a racial connection.

Although Angela's mother, Mattie, may seem to undermine the concept that mothers uphold strong connections to their racial backgrounds for their families, she ultimately shows her children the importance of returning to one's racial society despite the occasional removal from it. Mattie understands the value of maintaining her connection with both her family and her racial community. In coming to this understanding, she attempts to set a new precedent for the way her children view their position in society, even if Angela does not initially follow it. To display the impact that these surroundings have on Mattie, Fauset writes that she attributes her "happy, busy, sheltered life" to "her black husband whom she had been glad and proud to marry" (14). Mattie expresses her deep love and connection to her African American



husband, a representation of her race, showing a deep pride that her act of passing did not originally display. She explains that she finds happiness not in living a life of luxury and escaped hostility but in her relationship with her family and the culture that it represents.

The themes of motherhood and family in conjunction with the notion of passing continue to communicate the strong connection Angela's mother has to both her family and her community. This can be seen when she states that she would rather "live in the smallest house with you, Junius, than be wandering around as I have so often, lonely and unknown in hotels and restaurants" (Fauset 32). Fauset portrays a maternal figure who establishes a strong foundation for a connection between her children and their African American heritage — a maternal figure who places her love for family above her comfort or ability to fit in with the white elite.

As a mother, Mattie takes on the responsibility of guiding her children while they sculpt their identity and their place in the world. Mattie understands the impact her passing has on her daughter's view of the world and, when given the opportunity to maintain her white identity in a predominantly white society, she makes the ultimate choice to embrace herself as an African American individual. Mattie comes to realize the negative impact of the lesson she has taught her daughter; thus, she undermines her act of passing by asking her daughter to "forgive me, but I must go to him. I can't live without him" (Fauset 62). She pleads for her daughter to understand the importance of placing her family, community, and background above her comfort in hopes of anchoring her children to their roots. This acceptance establishes the groundwork for her daughter's future.

Angela immerses herself in a predominantly white world throughout the majority of Fauset's text, shedding her own race in favor of comfort and safety. However, as time passes, she comes to realize the importance of maintaining a connection with one's racial community, a sentiment her mother exhibited when embracing her husband who cannot hide his African American identity through passing. While engaging with her non-African American companion Martha, Angela begins to envy Martha's

close connection with her family, questioning “how marvelous to go back to parents, relatives, friends with whom one had never lost touch! The peace, the security, the companionableness of it! This was the relationship which she had forfeited with everyone” (Fauset 241). Some may argue that because Martha does not share Angela’s race, this connection may not have a significant impact on the way Angela views her position in her cultural community and American society as a whole. Angela notes that accepting her place as an African American individual allows her to gain “safety” — not from the hostile world around her but from the world of isolation of those who understand what it means to be an African American individual in a predominantly white society.

Kathleen Pfeiffer explains that this sentiment of envy is what “motivates Angela to announce her ‘true’ race to a room full of newspaper reporters. And because she makes this announcement in support of Miss Powell’s right to study art—her right to ‘the universality of experience’” (90). Pfeiffer notes the importance of allowing everyone, no matter their race, to pursue their desired field of study. Once Angela comes to the realization that she desires a deeper connection with others of her racial background, she is further motivated to accept herself as an African American individual. Angela states that if “Miss Powell isn’t wanted, I’m not wanted either. You imply that she’s not wanted either. You implying that she’s not wanted because she’s coloured. Well, I’m coloured too” (Fauset 347).

Miss Powell, one of Angela’s fellow students and an individual of African American descent, acts as a physical representation of Angela’s inner racial identity. In supporting Miss Powell and calling for her acceptance in a room full of reporters, Angela is herself accepting the race she declines throughout the majority of the text. Pfeiffer further explains that “Angela’s passing for white is doomed, too, because it demands that she separate herself from others on the arbitrary basis of race” (89). Passing, according to Pfeiffer, becomes a negative action that requires one to disown his/her personal background. As a result of this acceptance, passing becomes a means of hiding for Angela, thus becoming unimportant once her true identity is revealed. This separation of individuals based on race is ultimately undermined

by the fact that Angela looks white yet newly identifies with her African American heritage. This brings into light the fact that the physical nature of one's race is arbitrary; one must fully accept his/her own racial identity in order to fit into his/her cultural community.

The notions set forth in the novel work to show the way in which Fauset's representation of a maternal figure aids in the development of the protagonist while she comes to terms with her characterization as African American. In providing a text that primarily follows the point of view of the child, Fauset is able to express the deep impact of a mother's actions on her child's views of society and the deep emotional impact of this connection to one's racial heritage. Fauset strives to reconstruct the definition of African American womanhood that threatened their ability to have equal rights and opportunities during this time. Fauset's use of these themes begins the work for the racial uplift of African American women, further supporting the immense impact that motherhood has on one's ability to maintain a cultural connection with one's racial background and community. While this provides Fauset with the ability to display the interconnected nature of emotion and beliefs set forth by the white elite in a racist society, her contemporary, Nella Larsen, addresses similar ideas that paint passing and motherhood in different lights.

The ideas of motherhood and passing are heavily examined in Larsen's work, specifically in *Passing*. However, Larsen chooses to focus her narrative on the maternal figure's point of view, introducing a new perspective on the relationship between her prominent themes. This choice allows Larsen to further convey how the view of African American motherhood undermines the humanity of this marginalized group primarily through the notion that motherhood acts as means for the "cultivation of character traits and personal values" and connection to one's racial community (Calloway 62).

The different points of view employed by Fauset and Larsen highlight the complexities within the notions of motherhood and passing. Fauset and Larsen debase the definition of true womanhood through their ability to undermine the popular view of motherhood in different yet equally effective ways.

While the definition of womanhood for African American women argues that it is “evil” for African American women “to play the lady” and take on a role that is strictly maternal, these works of literature fight against this notion through the use of contrasting views, adding more weight to the conversation (Higginbotham 260). The ability to fight against this argument creates a strong yet complex connection between *Plum Bun* and *Passing*.

Nella Larsen addresses the way mothers often uphold strong connections to their racial backgrounds for themselves and their children. As Andrea O’Reilly explains, those who hold the position of the mother often “serve as ambassadors for their people, bringing the past to the present and keeping African American culture in the community of black people” (23). Throughout the text of *Passing*, Larsen uses her protagonists, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, to evoke this idea of the maternal figure’s silent yet strong power in upholding the importance of one’s racial community. Irene and Clare take on contrasting notions of what it means to be a mother and one who maintains these racial connections. While Irene embraces her African American heritage, Clare decides to “pass” as white and accept a life within the hostile white society. This contrast allows Larsen to explore the complexity of the relationship between each mother and her respective children.

The narrative focus of Larsen’s text lies in her protagonists’ decisions to take on two differing racial identities that complicate their views of motherhood and the racial climate at the time. Irene’s decision to marry an African American man who cannot pass *and* to pass herself when necessary expresses a certain acceptance of her racial identity and culture. Her entrance into the domestic sphere further allows her to enter into the space of motherhood, and her choice in husband ultimately informs the way that she raises her children. This contrasts with Clare’s use of her ability to “pass” and assimilate into the world of the white ideal through her marriage. Such a marriage stands as an acceptance of the oppression of African American people in a predominantly white society. These decisions craft the protagonists’ interactions with their children in addition to their reactions to the segregation and hostility they face. Irene chooses to immerse herself in the lives of

her sons and holds the very real knowledge that she takes “being a mother very seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can’t help it” (Larsen 1122). This absolute dedication to her children not only shows the fact that she finds her identity in her role as a mother but also mirrors the way in which she is dedicated to maintaining her connection with her racial ancestry. Irene’s choice not to pass is physically displayed through the family she creates for herself. Irene is fully aware of the racist world she lives in and the effects that it will have on her children later in their lives. She attempts to hide the hostility of the racist society they inhabit because she wants “their childhood to be happy and as free from the knowledge of such things as it possibly can be” (Larsen 1133). This supports the claim that Clare wants to maintain her children’s racial identity and cultural connection by shielding them from occurrences that may lead to renouncement of their African American heritage.

Irene’s family further mirrors her firm stance towards the hostile treatment of African American people within her society. Her beliefs are articulated through her response to her interaction with Clare’s husband, Bellew. Lori Harrison-Kahan explains that although Irene’s physical reaction to Bellew’s racist comments are not visible to those around her, it is still evident that she is “deeply troubled by the unexpected epithet,” and she “vows to end her friendship with Clare, for fear of also encountering the racist Bellew” (110). Irene further expresses her aggravation at the abhorrent behavior of the racist white individuals through her muddled retorts regarding her disbelief that “even Clare Kendry would permit this ridiculing of her race by an outsider” (Larsen 1098). Irene chooses to condemn Clare’s choice to pass and Clare’s allowance of the racist and segregation-fueled hostile treatment of her true racial community. However, Irene’s ability to condemn Clare is somewhat complicated by the very fact that Irene chooses to pass when it proves convenient. While this complication may skew the importance of this particular concept within the text, Harrison-Kahan explains that the act of passing “offers the opportunity for spectatorship” (111). Passing permits Irene to access the hostility behind segregation and oppression; it allows the African American population to “gaze upon whites

in a reversal of a typical Harlem Renaissance scenario where whites sought out the spectacle of black life” (Harrison-Kahan 111). Irene uses her passing as a way of turning the tables on the society in which she lives, directly contrasting the choices made by her childhood friend, Clare.

In contrast to Irene, Clare makes the choice to pass as white and marry a highly racist, white individual. Her complete acceptance of a new identity as a white woman aids in the growth of Clare’s belief that she must “look like the white society matron she pretends to be” (Larsen 107). This image of the perfect woman is supported by the choices she makes in her role as a mother. The ambiguity of her race is even further complicated by the fact that she is “afraid. [She] nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But [she’ll] never risk it again” (Larsen 1096). Clare sees her entrance into motherhood as a potential means of unmasking her true self. Her fear of discovery coupled with her passing in the first place expresses her submission to the powers of segregation and her inability to uphold a connection to other individuals of her race. This is further supported by the fact that Clare sees being a mother as “the cruelest thing in the world” (Larsen 1114). Clare’s animosity towards the system of motherhood further expresses her early dedication to the new life she gained by passing as white. Clare’s relationship with the title of mother subverts the definition of “true” womanhood for both white and African American women. Clare’s fear that her child may expose her as an African American individual further complicates the idea of motherhood; she “passes” as a white individual, yet she does not uphold the definition of womanhood placed on white women at the time. In subverting the popular opinion among the white elite through Clare’s relationship with motherhood, Larsen sets the foundation for the change brought about through these works. Furthermore, passing complicates the idea of race as it presents the idea that racial identity is not necessarily a physical attribute, contrary to the popular belief of white individuals in 1920s American society. Larsen notes that “it’s easier for a Negro to ‘pass’ for white. But I don’t think it would be so simple for a

white person to ‘pass’ for a coloured” (1136). This explanation, given by Larsen’s protagonist Irene, introduces readers to the idea that race is a complex aspect of society and that people with the ability to pass can use this subversion of race to promote racial uplift. In providing complication, Larsen attempts to further the racial uplift of African American individuals through her works of literature.

This notion is further expressed as the novel progresses and the views of the characters shift. Despite Clare’s early dedication to being a white individual, the concept of motherhood expresses the complexity within one’s reaction to the idea of “keeping African American culture in the community of black people” (23). This is expressed through Clare’s desire to return to her racial group through Irene’s family. Clare develops a strong connection to Irene, her husband, and, more specifically, their children. This is expressed when she was discovered standing “in the doorway of the boys’ playroom, her shadowy eyes looking down on Junior and Ted” (Larsen 1117). Clare attempts to re-establish her abandoned connection to her race through a maternal figure position. She tries to connect with the life that she left behind when she accepted a position in the racist, white society of her husband, Bellew. While trying to create a connection with the children of Irene and her husband, Brian, Clare explores the possibility of reconnecting with her racial roots. Her decision to pursue this connection leads Clare to the realization that she wants “to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh” (Larsen 1116). By accepting her growing desire to reconnect with others that share her racial background, Clare realizes the importance of her link with those who understand her personal background. Spending time with individuals like Irene, Brian, and their children allows Clare to establish a new, complex definition of family and one’s ability to assimilate into a specific racial group. Although Clare’s new family lacks biological connections, there is a deeper connection to a racial community that arguably transcends the basic definition of family. This evolving definition aids in Larsen’s work on racial uplift.

While Irene and Clare see what it means to be a mother in different lights, both women explore the complexities of

connecting to their race. The connection between the women and their roles as mothers aids in expressing their ability to maintain a connection to their past and background (even when they have chosen to depart from it). As Larsen continues to support this concept, she introduces certain ideas that help to inform the literary criticism surrounding works written by many of her contemporary writers (e.g., Jessie Fauset). In introducing these ideas, she aids in the creation of the groundwork for views on one's racial community within the society of the text and the society at the time of the novel's publication. Larsen brings about the argument that maternal figures play a large role in cultivating the upkeep of one's bond to racial heritage.

This essay argues that the connection between passing and family directly affects the way women are viewed by the hostile elite of white society while continuing to maintain a bond with others of their race. Through the use of passing and family themes (specifically in regard to the texts' female characters), African American women writers are able to address the complex and contrasting definitions of womanhood and motherhood that further fractured American society. The complications of the definitions explored in texts add to the complexity of the socially constructed concepts of the 1920s' predominantly white, racist American society that authors like Fauset and Larsen were exposed to. Through their heavy use of the above-mentioned themes, these authors explore the important aspects of African American individuals' lives, displaying the deep way in which literature mirrors life. The act of passing as white allows individuals to shed their racial identity. Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Larsen's *Passing* demonstrate how this complicates the idea that motherhood acts as way to maintain a close connection to one's racial culture; however, despite giving into the act of passing, the protagonists in these two texts ultimately return to the African American community due to the influence of their respective maternal figures and their own positions as maternal figures. This deep racial connection maintained through motherhood supports the notion that, through their literature, these writers re-establish the humanity that was stripped from them by the white elite.

According to Cheryl Wall, both *Plum Bun* and *Passing*




argue for “a revised racial *and* gender identity for black Americans.” Therefore, these texts provide readers with a complex view of what it means to be both a mother and a member of a hostile society (44). The fact that this view stems from both “racial *and* gender” ideologies influences Wall’s explanation of the way in which the dynamics of marginalized groups (including race and gender) lie at the heart of both of these prominent texts. This further supports the importance of motherhood in aiding the definition of womanhood. Wall’s description of the argument present in these texts heavily influences their prominence in the conversation of literary works that lend to the uplift of disparaged groups (in this case, both women and African American individuals). The introduction of this notion paves the way for the concept set forth by future literary critics.

Angelyn Mitchell and Danielle K. Taylor begin to explore this new purpose by articulating the fact that “African American women writers sought to understand the self in relation to society, historically and politically, as well as the interior self, often through personal experiences, like motherhood and marriage” (8). Mitchell and Taylor note that in attempting to understand the “self in relation to society,” African American women are seeking to situate themselves as individuals within a predominantly white, highly racist society. This concept is more easily found through a woman’s position in relation to the family. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) explains that “larger society deemed it ‘unnatural,’ in fact an ‘evil,’ for black married women ‘to play the lady’ while their husbands supported them” (260). Higginbotham notes the complication in America’s perception of African American women, subverting the common perspective of the mother. In doing so, society dehumanizes African American women by expressing their disconnection from motherhood. Furthermore, in using motherhood for dehumanizing purposes, the white elite is undermining motherhood’s true function of fostering a deep connection with one’s race for oneself and one’s family as presented in the works of Fauset and Larsen. The tension between the views of white individuals and African American individuals regarding motherhood opens up the idea of race to a differentiated definition, particularly when presented through the

concept of passing. Marie-Louise Löffler's aforementioned idea that passing has "important repercussions for maternal discourses of the 1920s" takes into account that, by passing, the function of the mother figure is skewed through its complication of the definition of race (127). In turn, this creates tension for what it means to be a mother and a member of different societies. This definition of passing notes the connection between this idea and the idea of motherhood that both Fauset and Larsen effectively convey.

*Plum Bun* and *Passing* begin the work of subverting the definition of "true" womanhood set forth by the white elite to dehumanize those whom they were trying to oppress, primarily African American individuals. In using this definition to subvert, Fauset and Larsen work to reinforce the humanity of the oppressed. This work is done through the relationship of motherhood and the bond to one's race, aiding in the ability to reinstate the humanity lost by racism. By reinstating the humanity of a marginalized people, these two authors illuminate the importance of using their voices despite the fact that others were attempting to oppress them. These texts brought the truth about the African American experience to the forefront of a racially centered conversation and, in turn, opened the door for future African American women writers to share their own experiences. Hazel V. Carby notes that any "analysis that measures literary stereotypes against an empirically proven 'reality' is motivated by the desire to find correspondences or noncorrespondences between literary figurations and actual social behavior" (22). Carby's explanation of the "correspondences" between literature and social beliefs sets the foundation needed to support the notion that the fictional works of Fauset and Larsen strive to uplift a marginalized racial group. This sets forth the sentiment that the literature of these African American women writers works to influence and change the view of motherhood in their racial society. Carby further notes that "black women, in gaining their public presence as writers, would directly confront the political and economic dimensions of their subjugation" (32). This explanation of literature's power further supports the ability of these novels to work towards the racial uplift of a marginalized group. With their newfound ability

to “directly confront” the political and racial oppression prevalent at the time of each novel’s publication, Fauset and Larsen set the precedent for future social work that fights against injustice and oppression.



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