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# The Unheard New Negro Woman: History through Literature

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# The Unheard New Negro Woman: History through Literature

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Abstract

Many of the Harlem Renaissance anthologies and histories of the movement marginalize and omit women writers who played a significant role in it. They neglect to include them because these women worked outside of socially determined domestic roles and wrote texts that portrayed women as main characters rather than as muses for men or supporting characters. The distorted representation of women of the Renaissance will become clearer through the exploration of the following texts: Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*, Caroline Bond Day's "Pink Hat," Dorothy West's "Mammy," Angelina Grimke's *Rachel* and "Goldie," and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South*. In these texts, the themes of passing, motherhood, and lynching are narrated from the consciousness of women, a consciousness that was largely neglected by male writers.

Women, African American Women, Feminism, Harlem, Harlem Renaissance, The New Negro, Lynching, Passing, Motherhood, Grimke, Fauset, Day, West, Johnson

***Introduction***

During the Harlem Renaissance, artists were urged by W.E.B. Dubois, a major voice of the period, to create texts that uplifted the entire African American community. Women such as Dorothy West, Angelina Grimke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Caroline Bond Day, and Jessie Fauset took a different approach and sought to focus specifically on the lives of African American women during the Harlem Renaissance. The texts analyzed here, Fauset's *Plum Bun,* Day's "Pink Hat," West's "Mammy," Grimke's *Rachel* and "Goldie," and Johnson's "Safe" and *A Sunday Morning in the South* depict the consciousness of women as they deal with issues such as passing, lynching, and motherhood. The texts are read through race and gender lens because women's contributions to the literature of the Harlem Renaissance highlight both race relations during the period and the burden of being a woman. Anne Stavney states the following about the depiction of women in works by men: "She functions both as figure of speech and muse in their work, standing for and standing beside, if you will, rather than construed as a participant in the production of African American culture" (543). These works written by women oppose the male writers' depiction of them by positioning African American women as main characters instead of using them as supporting characters who assist with moving the plot along. In addition, the female writers add depth to the domestic and maternal roles of their main characters which had previously been missing from works written by men of the Renaissance who depicted them with no regard to their consciousness.

The female authors studied here have been historically ignored, and African American female authors associated with the Harlem Renaissance have generally been underrepresented. Their marginalization presents a distorted image of the Harlem Renaissance and makes women appear to be unessential members of the movement. We are then tasked with reading their letters,

diaries, and literature which mirror their experiences to gain knowledge about the lives of African American women during the Harlem Renaissance. Lerner argues, "Their culturally determined and psychologically internalized marginality seems to be what makes their historical experience essentially different from that of men. But men have defined their experience as history and have left women out" ("Placing Women" 158). Because men have excluded them, these women's stories and history have been overshadowed by those of their male counterparts.

While women were active participants of the Harlem Renaissance, their literature was marginalized because they discussed issues that were particular to the lives of other women rather than the African American race as a whole. Musser states, "Efforts to formulate a story that particularly addresses the needs and concerns of women and the attempt to create a narrative that allows different voices to be heard is strongly evident in the short fiction written by women of the Harlem Renaissance" (31). The literature I will analyze allows the voices of African American women writers of that period to be heard. During the Renaissance, many of their texts weren't published due to white publications' refusal to publish people of color and African American publications deeming their stories about everyday life from a woman's perspective to be unworthy of publication or, as in the case of the anti-lynching plays written by Grimke and Johnson, too gruesome. This exclusion can be seen in Alain Locke's groundbreaking anthology, *The New Negro (1925)*, which has 414 pages, only 35 of which are works written by women. One of those writers, Jessie Fauset had a novel and over seventy-six articles and short stories published by 1925, while Alice Dunbar Nelson had published a poetry collection, a collection of short stories, and a number of poems, sketches and plays. Locke's *The New Negro* only includes one of Fauset's critical texts and no works by Nelson.

Stavney explains that Locke only devotes one twelfth of *The New Negro* to women because he saw women as mothers, not as writers or artists: "She is constructed as mother, not writer; she occupies private, not public space" (Stavney 546). She goes on to explain that women were seen as those who gave birth to individuals while men were viewed as those who gave birth to thoughts. At the time of the publication of *The New Negro*, it was widely believed that women belonged in their homes even though few women had the luxury of being solely mothers due to African American men's struggle to secure employment. W.E.B. Dubois asserted, "The first and greatest function of [women's] lives was the duty of motherhood. Their second most important function was the 'spiritual' duty of homemaking" (Stavney 539). Women were tasked with uplifting their race through teaching the children of their community, and it was believed that a woman could only do so if she exerted all of her energy into her role as a caretaker and a mother. As a result of such views, women of the Harlem Renaissance pushed to redefine womanhood and to extend the definition of it beyond motherhood.

In addition to Locke's *The New Negro*, two notable anthologies of the period were James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) and *The Negro Caravan* (1941), edited by Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davos, and Ulysses Lee. *The Negro Caravan* included most of the women of the Renaissance, but its introduction belittles them and deems them as less pioneering than the men of the period. Their work was labeled as "delicate lyricism' while the other works were considered "more vigorous" and "socially aware" (Wall 11). Because of the prevailing patriarchal standards, literary works by women were considered simply delicate even though they reflected the real issues of women in the black community, which had not been previously explored in the works by men. In the literature by Grimke, Johnson, Douglas, Day, and Fauset we are given first-person accounts of the experiences of the women of the period,

which includes black women passing as white women, motherhood, and lynching in their communities.

The omission of these and other women's literature "causes serious misreadings, not only to the literary history of this era, but of the life of the African American women who lived during this time" (Musser 43). In their literature we see a break from the general focus on race that Locke believed the New Negro was supposed to have as a means of uplifting the African American race. The shift in focus in women's literature to a specific group in the African American community is effective because their stories are better explored through the illustration of individual experiences. The large question of race is rightfully narrowed to their personal experiences as African American women. Through these texts and others' we are able to explore the stories that are often not depicted in works by men. "In addition, they have demonstrated that black female participation in Aframerica's 1920s movement toward communal revitalization and self-determination went well beyond the supposed roles of 'prim, pretty, and well-dressed' salon hostess and 'midwife' and that their literature can no longer be dismissed as merely 'fastidious and precious" (Stavney 533).

***Passing: The Middle of the Color Line***

One of the issues that is often visited in African American literature is the tragic story of the mulatto, and it typically depicts a mixed individual who passes, either consciously or unconsciously, as a white person. Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Caroline Bond Day's "Pink Hat" portray biracial women who play on the commonly held belief that one's physical appearance would always reveal one's race. These works deal with a more complex mulatto woman than those who were depicted by the male writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Musser argues,

> African American men who wrote during the Harlem Renaissance tended to idealize the mulatto female in their works. Images of idyllic African American women in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, and Countee Cullen's poems and dramas are usually based on African American women who have manipulated their features to make themselves more acceptably white for African American men. (33)

The mulatto women depicted by Fauset and Day counter those that were romanticized by the previously mentioned men. Their characters use their mixed heritage to become racial hybrids who stand in the middle of the color line as they pass through society as both white and black. Their ability to naturally pass because of their mixed race and features reveals that race is a flawed social construct. "Robert Young argues that it is the double-voicedness of hybridity that makes it an effective challenge to race as 'pure, fixed, and separate" (Zackodnik 177). These mulatto women do not claim either race, black or white, and instead claim both while they allow the individuals that they encounter to assume their racial identity. Fauset and Day add complexity to the mulatto woman by showing that her identity is more than a matter of enhancing her inherited white features for men. She uses her features not to gain the attention of men, but rather to gain rights and a fulfilling life.

Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* chronicles the life of Angela Murray as she struggles with what she believes is the inconvenience of being black. She recognizes her ability to pass through her mother, Mattie. "Angela's mother employed her colour very much as she practiced certain winning usages of smile and voice to obtain indulgences which meant much to her and which took nothing from anyone else" (15). Fauset depicts Mattie as a woman who passes specifically to enjoy experiences unavailable to her if she proclaimed that she was a black woman. The

narrator states, “Her infrequent occupation of orchestra seats was merely to a mischievous determination to flout a silly and unjust law” (15). The laws that kept African Americans out of public spaces and/or forced their segregation were often solely based on the individual’s appearance. Since Mattie could not always be automatically identified as black because of her mixed racial identity, she was able to pass as white without much effort and she sees her ability to do so as a way to defy the “silly and unjust laws” which prohibited and limited the experiences of black people.

At the novel’s beginning, Mattie believes that her passing does not affect anyone, and it does not until she marries Junius and continues to pass as a means of entertainment. Her passing begins to have a direct effect on her family largely because she is only able to bring Angela with her on her Saturday afternoon excursions while her other daughter, Virginia, has to be accompanied by her father in other areas of the town. If the darker complexioned Virginia and Junius were to go with her and Angela, their access to shops, hotels, and restaurants would be limited. “It is true that Mattie accompanied by brown Virginia could not move quite as freely as when with Angela” (16). Angela does not realize that her mother’s delight in walking on Chestnut Street on Saturday mornings as a white woman is the same delight that she has when she goes to church on Sunday mornings and greets her friends as a black woman. Her mother enjoys both outings equally and does what she feels she should be entitled to as a mixed woman, which is enjoy the experiences of a black woman and a white woman. Angela’s inability to see her mother’s equal delight causes her to feel different about being black and plants the idea in Angela’s head that a life where she could pass as white would be simpler.

As Angela passes with her mother, rather than realizing that her mother passes as a means of enjoying the luxuries that she felt entitled to, she begins to associate power and the luxuries of life with having white skin. Her observations of her family are narrow, as the narrator explains:

> First, that the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure,--are for white-skinned people only. Secondly, that Junius and Virginia were denied these privileges because they were dark; here her reasoning bore at least an element of verisimilitude but she missed the essential fact that her father and her sister did not care for this type of pleasure. (18)

While it is true that Junius and Virginia were prohibited from the Saturday activities on Chestnut Street because of their complexion, it is also true that neither was interested in such outings. Mattie also points out that her children selected which parent that they would be accompanied by based on their preference of activities rather than their complexion; however, as an adolescent Angela begins to see a divide between black and white and sees being black as an inconvenience. Mattie unconsciously teaches her daughter how to disown her blackness as a means of fulfilling her desire for power and luxuries.

Angela's belief that being black is an inconvenience is reinforced as she matures and as she engages with other relationships. One example is her friendship with her white classmate, Mary Hasting. Prior to their friendship, Angela grows increasingly lonelier in high school due to the lack of other black girls in her courses. Mary temporarily alters this state of loneliness by becoming her companion. The narrator describes their friendship as "gratifying" and it enables Angela to be involved in activities that she had formerly been excluded from; however, their friendship is short lived when it is revealed that Angela is black. It is brought to Mary's attention when she announces that Angela will be her assistant after she is elected as the chief

representative of the school's magazine. Their classmate, Esther, reveals Angela's race when she says, "I don't know how it is with the rest of you, but I should have to think twice before I'd trust my subscription money to a coloured girl" (43) and Mary is astonished. She is the only one who did not know about Angela's race and asks her why she did not tell her that she was black. Angela responds, "Tell you that I was coloured! Why should I? Why of course I never told you that I was coloured! Why should I" (44). She did not proclaim that she was white as a means of gaining Mary's friendship and did not see a need to proclaim that she was black either. Mary assumed that Angela was white and believed her assumption to be true until she was told otherwise, which highlights that a person's race cannot be determined based solely on their physical appearance, especially when one is of mixed races. Just as white people assumed that her mother Mattie was white on her Saturday outings, Mary assumes that Angela is white, and in both instances racial identity is assumed by those around them rather than a direct attempt to pass by them.

Angela maintains her belief that she should not have to proclaim that she is black to people, and in her art courses her classmates do not doubt that she is white. She realizes that as long as her classmates are unaware of her sister and never visit her home, then they will continue to believe that she is white. "She had not mentioned the fact of her Negro strain, indeed she had no occasion to, but she did not believe that this fact if known would cause any change in attitude" (Fauset 63). Her neglect to mention her "Negro strain" marks her transition from naturally being perceived as white due to her mixed race and features to intentionally disclaiming her blackness. The instructors of the course, Mr. and Mrs. Shields, encouraged Angela and saw potential in her capabilities as an artist. Their adoration of her is further encouraged by her well-spoken and well-dressed presence. She is able to dress in such a manner because of her parents'

death, which allowed her to inherit several thousands in insurance money. Angela augments her fair skin by imitating her white classmates's manner of speaking and dressing so that she can begin her assimilation into their social and racial status.

Angela's assimilation is halted when she is confronted with the issue of her true racial identity by Mr. Shields. He begins to question if Angela is indeed white when her former classmate, Esther, refuses to pose for the students in his art class and proclaims, "I haven't gotten to the point yet where I'm going to lower myself to pose for a coloured girl" (71). The girl that she refers to is Angela, but Mr. Shields is unaware and insists that there aren't any black girls in his class. Even though he makes this declaration, his curiosity has been ignited. When he shares the day's events with his wife he states, "But I can't think she's really coloured, Mabel. Why she looks and acts just like a white girl. She dresses in better taste than anybody in the room. But that little wretch of a model insisted that she was coloured," and his wife insists, "Well she just can't be. Do you suppose I don't know a coloured woman when I see one? I can tell 'em a mile off" (72). This dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Shields farther establishes that race cannot be easily determined based on an individual's appearance and this idea is farther complicated when one is not of just one race, but a combination of both like Angela.

Mr. Shields remains unsettled after his conversation with his wife and, in an effort to determine her racial identity, he drives past Angela's house and observes Virginia entering it. This, is assumes, is sufficient evidence that Angela is black. The settling of racial identity moves beyond Angela's physical appearance to an examination of the people with whom she associates. His argument is that no white person would room with a black person, and Angela, therefore, must be black. Similar to the way that Mary felt deceived when she discovers that Angela is not white, Mr. Shield displays his frustration with Angela. For the second time in her life, Angela is

confronted with the importance of racial identity when someone asks her why she did not reveal that she was black. And again, just as she had done with Mary, she states, "Coloured! Of course I never told you that I was coloured. Why should I" (73). While Angela feels that she should not have to announce that she is black, those around her continue to show her that being black matters to them because their treatment of her is based on her race. In grade school, it did not matter that she was a good friend to Mary just as her being a good artist does not matter to Mr. Shields once it is revealed that she is black.

The altering of Angela's experiences and relationships because of people's realization that she is black pushes her to continue to believe what she expressed as an adolescent: all the good things and the experiences she desires belong to white people. She sincerely believes that as long as she is a black, she will continue to have failed relationships and a lack of experiences. This belief drives her to push her assimilation beyond the mere imitation of white language and dress to relocating to New York and leaving her sister behind in Philadelphia. She shares with Virginia,

> Why should I shut myself off from all the things I want most,--clever people, people who do things, Art,--"[…]"travel and a lot of things which are in the world for everybody really but which only white people, as far as I can see, get their hands on. I mean scholarships and special funds, patronage. (78)

Angela has transitioned from naturally passing because of her mixed race and features, to adapting her speaking and manner of dressing to mimic those of her white classmates, to a complete divorce from her blackness as a means of claiming only her white heritage. Just as her mother had done, she yearns for experiences that are only allowed to white people, but she opts to fully claim her whiteness so she can live a different life rather than occasionally passing on

Saturday as she had done with her mother. While her mother found the same joy in her Saturday activities as a white woman that she did on Sundays as a black woman, Angela does not see anything luxurious about claiming her blackness and views it as a curse.

Angela is forced to move to New York because as long as she remains in Philadelphia she will fear that someone will reveal her true identity. She has mastered the physical aspects of her whiteness, but as Mary and Mr. Shields have made known to her, her current associations prevent her from completely assimilating. Her ability to relocate to New York and take on a new identity as a white woman places emphasis on how race is a flawed social construct. Races categorize people and it determines which experiences a person can have, so in order to have the experiences that she desires, Angela has to simply fit into the racial category that is allowed such experiences. The last thing that is required of her to fit into this group is to separate herself from her associations, including her familial relations, that would reveal that she is black. "Fauset holds in tension the notion that identity is constructed, and therefore performable, and that it is essential; that identitarian categories can be subverted and played upon at will and that they determine our identities" (Zackodnik 179). By appearing white and only befriending individuals whom a white person would befriend, Anglea is presumed to be a white woman, which shows that an individual's racial identity can be altered as long as they take the measures to do so. Race is not a fixed identity because of one's ability to change it as they see fit.

Caroline Bond Day's "Pink Hat" depicts a mulatto woman who is not named and who passes as a means of exploring activities such as the arts just as Mattie and Angela do in *Plum Bun*. At the beginning of the story, she states, "This hat has become to me a symbol. It represents the respective advantages and disadvantages of my life here. It is at once my magic--carpet, my enchanted cloak, my Alladin's lamp" (79). Her pink hat enables her to pass because it hides her

frizzy hair that would have otherwise made her mixed heritage apparent. Through her hat, she is able to alter her black features and claim her white heritage. While Fauset only states that Mattie and Angela were a mix of black and white, Day's character is a mixture of several races. "My maternal grand-parents were Scotch-Irish and English quadroons; paternal grand-parents Cherokee Indian and full blooded Negro; but the ruddy pigment of the Scotch-Irish ancestry is my inheritance…" (80). Even though the character's actual racial identity is complex, the racial politics of the period was highly reductive. According to the one drop rule, if one had any fraction of African American in his/her blood, then the individual would be considered African American. Because of this rule, even though the narrator appears to be less than half African America, she is identified as Black.

Day makes sure that she continually reminds the reader that the narrator's passing is temporary and is used for leisure purposes. The narrator calls her world "hard and dry" (79) prior to her ability to pass, and the dryness of her world is entirely due to constantly being deprived of the experiences that she craves because she is black. Just as Mattie and Angela passed on Saturdays to experience luxuries, the narrator occasionally passes as a means of refreshing her world. The reader knows that the woman only passes to refresh herself because she tells us that she only did so "when it was impossible to correct any more papers or to look longer at my own Lares and Penates, to sit upon my magic-carpet and be transported into the midst of a local art exhibit, to enjoy the freshness of George Inness and the vague charm of Brangwyn…" (81). Her outlook on passing is very similar to that of Mattie who did not completely divorce herself from her blackness. They both use their white features as a means to enjoy the activities that they crave because as a black woman, these activities are shut off to them.

The narrator stops passing when she has an epiphany about the repercussions she could face if she was caught pretending to be a white woman. She has the realization while she is at a Greek play and simultaneously, as her dull life is being awakened by the magnificent play that tops all of the activities that she has experienced thus far, her fears begin to take a drastic toll on her. “I suppose I was nervous –one does have ‘horrible imaginings and present fears’ down here, subconscious pictures of hooded figures and burning crosses” (82). The “down here” that she refers to is the South and the images that she describes are associated with a lynching. These images shake her so much that she exits the play in hopes of returning to her true identity before her disguise is revealed by those around her. Her frenzy causes her to break her ankle-bone which pushes her to the realization that her race restricts her from not just the luxuries of life, but also from the necessities of life. This is seen when the doctor tells her that treating her would be against the rules of the osteopathic association since she is a Negro. Instead of her being discouraged by the prejudice that the doctor shows her, she reflects, “Health, a job, young minds and souls to touch, a friend, some books, a child, a garden, Spring! Who’d want a hat” (82). Her experiences push her to find pleasure in the things that she already is entitled to as a Black woman rather than yearn for those things that were for white people only. “My hat has grown useless” (82) is the narrator’s conclusion. The uselessness of the hat symbolizes how passing is now useless for her.

The narrator uses her ability to pass as a means of gaining an experience that has previously been foreign to her rather than to permanently assimilate into white society. She does not desire complete assimilation as Angela does because she desires experiences rather than a new identity. Arguably, by the story’s end, the narrator now feels as Mattie felt when she expressed that she had the same delight in her experiences as a white woman that she has as a

black woman. Race being based on physical appearance proves to be an essential aspect to these characters' ability to pass. The narrator's knowledge of this in "Pink Hat" allows her to recognize that her wearing the pink hat allows her to hide her frizzy hair which would reveal her mixed race while Angela in *Plum Bun* adapts her language and her manner of dressing to fit the physical characteristics of a white woman. These characters' awareness of the physical constraints of race assists them in their ability to pass and shows that as long as they could fit the physical features of a white person then they could pass. They take the idea that race can solely be determined based on a person's physical appearance and use it to their advantage. The decisions made by mulatto women that are depicted in Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Day's "Pink Hat" are also seen in Eloise Bibb Thompson's "Mademoiselle 'Tasie –A Story," Madelen C. Lane's "Black Mestiza" and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee,* which all depict the individual story of a woman who is of a mixed racial identity.

***The Duty of Motherhood***

What makes the theme of motherhood explored by women different from the way that men portrayed it is the male writers of the period lacked depth in their illustration of domestic roles of women. A mother's role went beyond raising children and maintaining a home. As a mother, one had to watch her children fear for their lives and struggle to be treated equally because of their race while also not succumbing to the oppression herself. Since mothers had to be the figure of strength for their families, their concerns were almost always internal. These internal thought processes make it important for their consciousness to be highlighted in literature because without it, readers do not have an adequate idea of what their lives were like during the Harlem Renaissance. By positioning them as main characters and allowing their thoughts to be displayed, we can began to understand their struggles. Musser states,

> Their public celebration of maternal presence and influence and their portrayals of strong and powerful mothers, on the one hand, combined with the relative absence of fathers on the other, makes this uniquely female tradition a particularly interesting one in which to explore issues of maternal presence and absence, speech and silence. (35)

Women writers depict the mothers as resilient figures who embrace their roles instead of characterizing them as objectified beings who are servants and caretakers. This was their way of breaking from the stock figures that Locke argues against in "The New Negro" while embracing their maternal roles. We see the theme of motherhood threaded throughout Dorothy West's "Mammy" and Angelina Grimke's "Goldie" which allow the reader to see into the lives of mothers during the Harlem Renaissance.

In West's short story "Mammy," we encounter a mulatto, Mrs. Coleman, whose passing affects her entire family just as Mattie's decision to pass on Saturdays affects Angela in *Plum Bun*. The difference between the two mothers is while Mattie unintentionally alters Angela's view of being black, Mrs. Coleman makes a direct attempt to suppress her daughter's knowledge that she is biracial. When the story begins, we meet an African American welfare worker who visits Mrs. Coleman to determine if her Mammy, Mrs. Mason's, relief request, which today would be similar to welfare, would be approved. Through the worker's conversation with Mrs. Coleman, we discover that Mrs. Mason has not been discharged of her duties, but has instead left on her own accord. This information puzzles the worker since she expected this case to be an easy one where the Mammy would be awarded her relief; however, the situation is more complex than originally anticipated. "A few hours ago there had been no doubt in her mind of old Mrs. Mason's eligibility for relief. With the surprising turn there was nothing to do but reject

the case for inadequate proof of need" (47). By the end of the conversation between the welfare worker and Mrs. Coleman, the worker concludes that Mrs. Mason will have to return to her job as a Mammy since Mrs. Coleman is willing to take her back.

The reader, until the story's end, is under the impression that Mrs. Mason simply works for Mrs. Coleman, but she is actually Mrs. Coleman's mother. This is revealed when the social worker returns to Mrs. Mason's home and hurriedly packs her belongings so that she can get off on time. She only slows down to admire a photo of a young girl that she discovers while assisting Mrs. Mason is packing and asks, "It's Mrs. Coleman, isn't it," to which Mrs. Mason replies, "That was my daughter" (52). Since Mrs. Coleman has crossed the color line and has been passing as white, she could not identify Mrs. Mason as her mother because that would reveal not only her identity, but the identity of her child also. "The granddaughter marries, becomes pregnant, and gives birth to a healthy child, but the child bears the color and physical features of its African American great grandmother" (Musser 37). Since it was widely believed that race could be determined based on a person's physical appearance, a child that had features similar to an African American's was unwanted. The infant's color and physical features, would have revealed the entire family's true identity. Because of this fear, Mrs. Coleman kills the infant and Mrs. Mason witnesses the murder which is why she chooses to live on government assistance instead of continuing to play the role of being a mammy to her own family.

By portraying Mrs. Mason as a mammy, West is characterizing the mammy figure differently from the manner in which the figure was typically represented in literature as negative and a self-imposed position. According to Collins, "Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought" (69). In this story, West uses the stereotypical stock figure to create a complex depiction of the relationship among three generations of women.

Mrs. Mason's role as both a mammy and a welfare recipient are imposed on her by her daughter. She humbles herself as a mammy to her own family to be close to them and is forced to request welfare when she cannot carry the burden of knowing the true reason behind her great granddaughter's death. The typical welfare recipient was depicted as dependent on the government and lazy, which Mrs. Mason contradicts. Musser argues, "It is not Mrs. Mason but Mrs. Coleman who is the uncaring mother-figure, who endorses the 'mammy-system' in order to ensure for herself the power of being white" (39).

While Mrs. Mason humbles herself as a mammy, she is not dehumanized as simply a worker in the private home of another. She is actually a mother who has placed her daughter's desire to pass before herself. Mrs. Mason is selfless in the manner that Angela's sister, Virginia, is in *Plum Bun* when she does not reveal Angela's true identity and accepts her departure to New York even though she is against it. Very similar to how Angela saw her blackness as a curse that prohibited her form experiences and a quality life, Mrs. Mason could have seen her acceptance of a lesser role and forced denial of her family as the opportunity for her to provide her daughter and granddaughter with a better life than the one that she has had the burden of living. These characters are similar to other women of the period who were children of freed slaves and living at a time where their children's opportunities for advancement were greater than theirs, but was not equal to that of whites. "These mothers, knowing so well their own past experiences of racial oppression, sought to improve the conditions of their daughters by de-emphasizing their African American racial heritage" (Musser 35). Mrs. Mason could have been under the impression that she was helping her daughter until the burden of a hidden racial identity became too much to bear.

In “Mammy,” we see the mother who plays a part in encouraging her daughter’s passing and the burden that is forced upon her by her daughter while in Grimke’s *Rachel*, we see a young woman, Rachel, who makes a stand to never become a mother because she does not want to carry the weight of motherhood as Mrs. Mason does. At the beginning of the play, Rachel appears to be ignorant about the injustices of society that can occur due to one’s race. We see this when she and her mother, Mrs. Loving, are discussing why Strong, a neighbor and close friend to the family, has settled for being a waiter even though he has a college education. Mrs. Loving says, “Three months he hunted for work that a college man might expect to get. You see he had the tremendous handicap of being colored” (193). Rachel is shocked by this and responds, “Just because he is colored! We sing a song at school, I believe, about ‘The land of the free and the home of the brave.’ What an amusing nation it is” (193). At this point, Rachel still believes that she lives in “the land of the free,” a land without racial prejudice. This dialogue also highlights the contradictions of the American society and its treatment of African Americans. While America is supposed to be “the land of the free,” the freedom mentioned in the song is not granted to African Americans. Here, we see the example of Strong who sought an education as a means of gaining more opportunities, but is still faced with prejudice because of his race.

Just as Rachel is naïve about the oppression that people were facing because of the color of their skin, she is also naïve about the role of mothers. She does not recognize the burden of the role and she tells her mother, “I think the loveliest of all the lovely things in this world is just being a mother” (194). Because she views motherhood as a role of prestige, she’s anxious to be one and plays the role with the children in her neighborhood. As the conversation between Rachel and her mother continues, she speaks about motherhood in a dreamlike manner. She believes that her purpose in life is to be a mother and says, “Ma dear if I believed that I should

grow up and not be a mother, I'd pray to die now" (195). She picks death over the idea of not bearing her own children and points out that she likes the dark-skinned children the most. She expresses, "I feel that I must protect them, they're in danger, but from what? I don't know…I pray God every night to give me, when I grow up, little black and brown babes –to protect –and guard" (195). She recognizes the danger that her babies would face, but she is not sure what kind of danger is in their future. This foreshadows the information that her mother will reveal to her and her brother, Tom, about the deaths of their half-brother and their father.

Grimke uses the theme of motherhood in *Rachel* to appeal to other mothers who believed that motherhood was a prestigious role as Rachel believed at the beginning of the play. "In *Rachel*, Angelina Grimke threw the image of idealized motherhood back at white women in an attempt to make them see what meaning this so called 'revered institution' might hold for black women" (Stephens 334). When she wrote this play, lynchings were daily occurrences that usually were the result of false allegations. She hoped that by relating lynching to a shared experience, motherhood, she could persuade white women to speak to their male counterparts about the injustices of lynchings. Judith L. Stephens argues,

> Grimke reveals a double standard of motherhood as applied to black and white women. She exposes white women's complicity in the white-male-dominating order when they accept the ideology which idealizes motherhood as sine qua non for all women, ignoring the plight of black women. (334)

The concerns associated with being a mother to a Black child that are depicted in *Rachel* was an actual concern of Black mothers. They recognized the burden of motherhood as Rachel eventually does and had to choose between carrying the burden or not having any children at all.

In this play, the theme of motherhood serves as a means of activism against the lynchings and oppression that were occurring in the Black community.

Grimke addresses lynching through Mrs. Loving revealing to her children that their father and half-brother were lynched. She has been burdened with keeping this secret to protect her children's innocence. Prior to this revelation, Tom and Rachel do not know how their father and brother died. Their father was as racially conscious as Tom is and displayed his consciousness in writing about it and publishing it in a periodical. Because of this publication, he was threatened and then lynched along with his son who tried to defend him. She replays the night to her children and says, "Your father was finally overpowered and dragged out. Into the hall–my little seventeen-year-old George tried to rescue him. Your father begged him not to interfere. He paid no attention. It ended in their dragging them both out" (201). After Tom hears the narrative from his mother, he expresses that he is proud of his brother and his father for attempting to stand up for themselves.

For Rachel, this knowledge serves as an epiphany and she tells her mother, "Ma dear, I am beginning to see –to understand –so much" (203). She then couples the way her mother feels about the lynching of her son to the feeling that other mothers have faced or will face. As she reflects on the innocence of children she states, "They will laugh and play and sing and be happy and grow up, perhaps, and be ambitious – just for that" (203). Her naïve attitude towards motherhood is no more. She now sees the oppression in her community as clearly as Tom does and cannot believe that such a fate is in the future of Black children. While in "Mammy" Mrs. Mason decides to hide her child's identity to protect her from the oppression that she would face as a Black person, Rachel decides to not bear children as her means of protecting them from a life of oppression. In Act One, she concludes, "And so this nation –this white Christian nation –

has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful the most holy thing in life –motherhood! Why –it -makes –you doubt – God" (203). Christianity in America is very similar to the notion of "the land of the free" that Rachel states earlier in the play and serves as a contradiction for the general American belief and it's actual treatment of its African American citizens. While Christianity preaches peace and equality, American Christians turn a blind eye to such practices as it unjustly lynches individuals like Rachel's father and brother.

In Act Two, motherhood continues to be threaded throughout the play with a focus on the children who share the burdens of their mother. Four years have passed since Act One and now Tom faces the same fate that Strong previously encountered when he had trouble finding employment. Tom expresses his frustrations: "Look at us –and look at them. We are destined to failure –they, to success. Their children shall grow up in hope; ours, in despair. Our hands are clean; -theirs are red with blood –red with the blood of a noble man –and a boy" (208). The man and boy that he refers to are his father and his brother which shows that Tom is struggling to understand how individuals who lynched innocent people can be more prosperous than him and other educated black people like him who have never harmed any one. He asks Strong, "Does it ever strike you –how pathetic and tragic a thing –a little colored child is" (212). He then goes on to compare the South to the North and concludes that, "Each year, the problem just to live, gets more difficult to solve" (212). After this statement, his concerns return to the unborn children of his race and how they are born into a society that limits their opportunities and keeps them stagnant. Tom describes colored children as "pathetic and tragic" because their destinies have been predetermined by their oppressor who stifles their opportunities for economic growth and kills them.

The reader sees the life of a Black child at every stage. We see their mistreatment at school as adolescents through Ethel, who confides in Rachel, and Jimmy, the child that Rachel has custody of, and their lack of opportunities as young adults through Strong and Tom. Tom's question, "How about these children –if we're fools enough to have any" (212) is answered when Rachel encounters Mrs. Lane, who explains to her the issues that her daughter, Ethel, has encountered because of her dark complexion. She tells Rachel that Ethel has now became mute because of the treatment that she endured after two weeks at a school where she was the only Black person. "She was made to sit there all alone –in the big room –because God made her ugly –and black" (216). Both the teacher and her classmates mock her because her complexion differed from theirs. "One boy boldly called her 'Nigger!' before the teacher. She said, 'That isn't nice,' –but smiled at the boy" (217). The mistreatment of Ethel has such a toll on her mother that when Rachel asks her if she has any other children, she replies, "Hardly! If I had another I'd kill it" (217). The burden of motherhood is so great for Mrs. Lane that she would rather kill her second child than suffer the additional burden of bearing another one who would be subjected to the same racist attitudes as Ethel.

Reflectively, at the close of Act Two, Rachel declares, "You terrible, laughing God! Listen! I swear and may my soul be damned to eternity, if I do break this oath –I swear –that no child of mine shall ever lie upon my breast, for I will not have it rise up, in the terrible days that are to be –and call me cursed" (220). Here, she denounces motherhood because she refuses to give birth to a child who has to face inequality because of their skin color. Rachel believes that the only way to surely protect her children is to not have any, so she denies Strong's proposal and she tells the children that she has been dreaming about, "You may be happy now –you are safe" (226). She realizes that the land of the free that she once sung about at school does not

include black people because their lives are fixed as less fulfilling than their white counterparts and not bearing children is her way to ensure that motherhood is not a burden that she has to bear. Through Rachel and Mrs. Mason in "Mammy" we see the decisions mothers had to make as a means of protecting their children from the oppression that they would face for being black.

***Everyday Lynchings***

Georgia Douglas Johnsons' play *A Sunday Morning in the South* carries the same family and everyday setting that is portrayed in *Rachel*. Stephens argues,

> The anti-lynching plays geographically depict lynching as both a violent crime and a pervasive influence in daily life. By giving their plays domestic settings and creating characters who are family members and neighbors, African American women recorded a view of lynching as a practice which impacted all aspects of life. (332)

The initial setting in *A Sunday Morning in the South* is at the family's home as they carry on their daily routines. The setting is intentional because of its familiarity to individuals from all demographics. The familiarity of the setting also enables readers, regardless of race, to relate to the family dynamic which was altered due to lynchings. The familiarity of family dynamics and routines that surround the plot allows the issue of lynching to not be illustrated in a vacuum.

In Scene 1, we are in Sue Jones' kitchen as she makes breakfast for her family and the first thing she says is, "Tom, Tom, you and Bossie come on out here and eat your breakfast" (130). Shortly after, her grandchildren enter and they begin to eat breakfast which creates the everyday setting that Johnson takes careful time to depict. Johnson's depiction of scenes such as this one which includes a family in the midst of their daily routine allows readers to recognize

that the family within the play is not very different from their own; however, the injustices that they face are directly related to their race. The Griggs family continues to converse over breakfast and this conversation reveals to us that Tom is the main provider for the family which is important to the plot because it shows the reader that Tom's role is similar to that of the head of any household. Such characterization of Tom continues to thread throughout the play a familiar environment and roles prior to his lynching.

The play begins to climax once Sue's friend, Liza, enters and replies to Sue's question, "Well, whut you know good" (131). Liza response is, "Good? I don't know nothing good, but I did hear as how they's got the police all out going up and down hunting another poor Nigger man who they says 'tacked a white 'oman right about here at the corner of Broad and 1st Street last night. If they git him, they'll lynch him sho-" (131). Sue then calls half of the stories of rape lies and tales. Liza follows up with an example of how a man in Texas was lynched after being accused of rape when a white man in black face was actually guilty of the crime. In reflection, Sue states, "I heard a lot of unbelievable things in my time that's been laid at the black man's door" (131). Here, she expresses how black men carry a weight that they cannot be freed from and this idea is shared with Tom in *Rachel*, who observes the clear and explicit inequalities that he faced whether he was educated or uneducated because he was Black. He angrily highlights how society allows the advancement of members of lynch mobs, but not the advancement of a person like himself whose hands were clear of blood.

The conversation that occurs between Sue and Liza foreshadows the eventual lynching of Tom who questions the possibility of being lynched and is reassured by his grandmother and Sue that it would not happen to him. Sue reassures him, "No, sir, it ain't your kind theyse after. Its them poor onnerry devels that does enough devilment to git things pinned on 'em –thems the

kind they picks on" (131). Liza and Sue believe that Tom is excused from this fate because he is an upstanding young man who does not get into trouble; however, their comments are immediately contradicted when officers arrive at their home and take Tom away because he fits the description of the person who has a raped a white woman. The officers exclaim, "He fits the description we got perfect. He's the only Nigger 'round here it could have been" (132).

Tom is hurriedly handcuffed and escorted out of his house as he reassures his grandmother that he is going to be okay, but just as the reassurance that she provided him with was short lived, his reassurance is also. Liza observes a mob of white men following the police and has heard them say, "She done 'dentified him, come on, we ain't a going to let no coat [court] house cheat us –let's git him" (133). The possibility of being lynched that Tom rhetorically asked about has become a reality for him. Any Black man, whether well behaved or not, had the possibility of being accused of something simply because of his skin color. In *Rachel*, Rachel recognized that no Black person was safe from oppression or persecution which is reflected in her decision to not bear any children of her own. She believed that the only way to protect them was to not bring them into the world and her brother, Tom, shares this belief that a Black child's destiny was already determined by their oppressor. The fears of both of these characters in *Rachel* becomes a reality for Tom in *A Sunday Morning in the South*.

In *A Sunday Morning in the South*, we see how a family's life is altered in the midst of its Sunday morning routine. "Within one act, the play portrays the accusation and death of an innocent black man, the disrespect shown to the courageous, resisting black woman, and the submissiveness of a white woman to the unjust order. The play shows how the dominant gender ideology for white women, which promoted the virtues of submissiveness, passivity, and reliance on dominate white males, supported the activity of the lynch mob" (Stephens 335). The play

reflects the stereotypes that were prevalent at the time, one of which was the belief that Black men wanted to terrorize white women by raping them. Such stereotypes were a means of continuing the oppression of the black community, especially the men since they were lynched more often than women. While most white women considered the lynching of black men on their behalf as an act of chivalry, it was actually a means for them to be controlled by patriarchy. Stephens refers to this as an extension of patriarchy's control. White women were being used as an excuse to lynch innocent black men and were ignorant to their role in the lynchings until the 1930s. Johnson plays on this belief in her play while also reminding readers that the families that these injustices affected were no different from their own.

Scene two opens with Sue outside of a church as she pleads with an usher to get the attention of Judge Mannin who she believes is going to help her save Tom from being lynched. As she waits outside of the church, she hears the sound of voices and an organ and the song begins, "Jesus Savior, pilot me, over life's tempestuous sea-" (134). The beginning of this scene is significant because it was common for anti-lynching plays to carry a religious aspect to them. Stephens argues, "The use of Christian imagery is common to many anti-lynching plays, because lynching was an issue which clearly exposed the contradiction between the country's professed religious values and the treatment of African Americans" (336). In *Rachel*, we see a similar religious tone in the way that Rachel constantly condemns God for allowing Black children to be born into a world that treats them unjustly and for cursing motherhood. America was supposed to be a country based upon religious values, but it treated an entire race of people unjustly which is not what the Bible teaches. Before Judge Mannin makes it outside of the church to speak to Sue, she overhears two white men say, "Well we strung him up all right. But when he kept hollering, 'Granny, Granny', it kinder make me sick in the belly" (136), which causes her to suddenly die.

Sue's death coincides with the music that is coming from the church which sings, "Going home, yes I'm going home" (136). Tom's lynching is just as unjust as the lynching of Rachel's father and brother in *Rachel*. In addition, the lynching of Tom alters the dynamic of the Griggs family which is relevant for families across racial and social demographics.

There was no way to escape the burden of being Black, especially for Black men which is seen in the characters Tom and the father and brother of Rachel. *A Sunday Morning in the South* and *Rachel* depict men from different backgrounds who could not escape persecution. Both plays show us that no amount of education or level of respectability could protect Black men. In Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe*, we encounter a woman, Liza, who embraces motherhood with the condition that she does not give birth to a boy as a means of not succumbing her son to oppression and injustices similar to n Tom in *A Sunday Morning in the South*. She recognizes the harsh reality that her child would have to face and prefers a little girl who she believes would have an easier life. Just as in the previous plays, this play's setting is placed within the family's home and while the family members are busy doing routine things such as sewing. The play intensifies once the family begins to discuss Sam Hosea who was slapped by his white boss and slapped his boss back, which was not a wise decision for a Black man. Liza's mother, Mandy, states, "Hittin' a white man, he better hadder made tracks far away from here I'm er thinking" (155).

Shortly after Mandy makes this comment, Hannah, their neighbor, knocks on the door and tells the family that in addition to wanting to check on Liza, who is close to her delivery date, she wanted to inform them about a lynch mob that was forming to lynch Sam. Liza sympathizes with Sam because he stood up for himself, but her mother and Hannah both explain to her that the white people are not going to allow for a Black man to retaliate against them even

if he is just standing up for himself. Liza asks, "What's little Nigger boys born for anyhow? I sho hopes mine will be a girl. –I don't want no boy baby to be hounded down and kicked around – No, I don't want to ever have no boy chile" (157). While Rachel made the decision to not bear any children at all, Liza's statement reveals that she believes that Black boys in particular are treated worst, which is why she prefers to have a girl.

Following this assertion by Liza is a gunshot that proceeds a mob which causes all of the women, especially Liza, to be on high alert. Her concerns increase as the mob draws closer to their home and her mother and Hannah make efforts to calm her, but their efforts fail. She is described as crumpled up in a chair as she shivers and her teeth chatter when she says, "Oh, my God, did you hear that poor boy crying for his mother –He's jest a boy –jest a little boy" (158). Sam calling for his mother, coupled with Liza's identification of him as a "little boy" plays into her fears of having a son who is "hounded." She reacts to what she overhears as if Sam was her son. This frenzy occurs simultaneously with Liza going into labor. As Liza gets closer to giving birth, she asks her mother, "Did you hear him cry for his mother? Did you" and says "Born him safe! Born him safe! That's what you got to do" (159). Liza hysterically repeats "Born him safe" because she knows there is no way for a Black boy to be safe in a society that aims to burden and oppress him. The idea of allowing a boy to be born into such a society haunts Liza and overhearing the lynch mob has intensified her fears of having one.

At the play's end when she gives birth to her child, her main concern is the child's gender, so she asks her doctor, "Is it a girl" to which he replies, "No child, it's a fine boy" (161). In a moment of desperation and disappointment, Liza kills her son. The doctor tells her family, "When I looked around again she had her hands about the baby's throat choking it. I tried to stop her, but its little tongue was already hanging from its mouth—it was dead. Then she began, she

kept muttering over and over again: 'Now he's safe—safe from the lynchers! Safe" (161). Very similar to Rachel who believes that the only way for children to be safe is by them not being born, Liza saw death by her hands as the only way for her son to be safe.

Men were more commonly lynched than women, which is why Liza desired a baby girl over a baby boy. Even though women were not lynched as frequently as men, they were occasionally lynched as well. In Grimke's short story "Goldie," readers are told a true account of a woman and her husband being lynched. It begins with Goldie's brother, Victor Forrest, returning home after being gone for five years. Goldie and Victor have a close relationship and Victor feels guilty for leaving her behind when he moved to the North. Even though he feels guilty, he believes that leaving the South was not an option but a necessity. He views it as something required for him to be a man. "Certainly a colored man couldn't do the things that counted in the South.—To *live* here, he had to swallow his self-respect" (176). This statement echoes that of Tom in *Rachel* when he tells his mother that he isn't going to forfeit his dignity to be a gentleman. These men were expected to be respectable at all times even though others did not reciprocate the same level of respectability to them.

As Victor is on his way to his sister's house, he recalls a letter that she written him which speaks about Lafe Coleman. While it is not clear about what Lafe did to Goldie, it can be assumed that he has done something unforgiveable to her because of the concerns that she discusses in her letter. "What she feared was Cy…She didn't believe that Cy would kill the creature—not outright—but it would be pretty close to it" (182). She feared that if she told Cy what Lafe had done to her, then Cy would retaliate and such an action would result in him being lynched. This letter was followed by another which read: "Cy knows and O! Vic, if you love me, come, come, come," (182) and is the reason for Victor's return home. When he finally reaches

his sister's house, he is initially ecstatic. "It made him feel suddenly very young and joyous and the world, bad as it was, a pretty decent old place after all. Danger!—Of course, there was no danger.—How could he have been so absurd" (183). He feels relieved that his preconceived fears were just a figment of his imagination; however, this feeling is short lived when he realizes that his sister's house is in disarray.

The freedom from danger that Victor felt when he arrives at Goldie's house is now gone, especially when he explores the inside of the house. "There was not in this room, one single piece of furniture" and "Every picture on the walls had been wrenched down and the molding with it, the pictures themselves defaced and torn, and the glass splintered and crushed under foot" (184). This image of ruin reminds him of Lafe's grin and stumps of teeth because he has the realization that Lafe could have something to do with the chaos around, but nothing points directly to him as the culprit.

After Victor has explored the disrupted house, he exits, observes a path that leads to the trees and he follows it. "Quite automatically he drew the branches aside and saw what he saw. Underneath those two terribly mutilated swinging bodies, lay a tiny unborn child, its head crushed in by a deliberate heel" (185). The sight of Goldie, Cy, and their unborn child is enough to put this lynching on Lafe, and Victor makes it a point to seek revenge. When he reaches the town, his demeanor has drastically changed from the energetic and enthusiastic one that the reader was greeted with to one of sorrow and determination. "His should have been a young face, but it was not. Out of its set sternness looked his eyes, and they were terrible eyes indeed" (185). His Aunt Phoebe tells him where he can locate Lafe while the rest of the town observes. Victor gets the revenge he sought and Lafe's dead body is described as the following: "There was no bullet in him—nothing like that. It was the marks upon his neck and the horror of his blackened

face" (187). As a result of his success in locating Lafe, he meets the same fate as Goldie and her family.

As Victor foreshadowed earlier in the story, there was no protection for a colored man, so it was inevitable for the story to end with his lynching. He moved to the North as a means of escaping such persecution, but his relocation only temporarily lessened his burden because as soon as he returns to the South, his burden of being a Black man greets him. This validates the concerns of the main characters in *Rachel* and *Safe* who both felt that motherhood was cursed because mothers knowingly brought their child into a society which would treat it unjustly, especially their male children. There was no escaping persecution for a Black man because his skin alone made him a target. Victor moved to the North, Rachel's father and brother were defending themselves, and Tom was an upstanding young man, but all of their lives ended in them being lynched. The only way to keep your child safe was to either not have one as Rachel declared she would do in *Rachel* or to kill it before a lynch mob could as Liza does in *Safe*.

The Harlem Renaissance literature that was written by women put the internal struggles that they endured in their homes and daily lives at the forefront. Prior to the women explored here and others, not much differentiation in regards to gender was made by the male writers of the period. The push for the general uplift of the African American race by voices of the period like DuBois was so great that the issues of gender inequality and women's attitudes about their everyday struggles were overshadowed. While none of the dominant essays or theories of the period spoke specifically about their experiences, they were the ones raising men, and in rare occurrences, women who were lynched, struggling with the burden of motherhood and trying to form their own identities outside of the stock characters that were usually used to depict them. Through their literature, Jessie Fauset, Angelina Grimke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Dorothy

West, and Caroline Bond Day highlighted the issues that the women of the Harlem Renaissance were encountering. These women along with the others who positioned women as main characters rather than reducing them to the role of a man's muse or objectifying them in their domestic roles created works that stand as reflections of the historical, Harlem Renaissance.

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