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DESIRE, FULFILMENT AND RACE IN JESSIE FAUSET'S *PLUM BUN: A NOVEL WITHOUT A MORAL*

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Jessie Fauset's most famous novel, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, has engaged critics and readers for over a century now. The book's conventionality and focus on propriety have led to a number of negative critical treatments and its almost complete obscurity in the American literary canon. The current examination is an attempt to re-visit the novel and trace the manifestation of desire. This may open alternative avenues of understanding the effect of storytelling on the way black women formulate their desires and pursuits. Additionally, it may counter critical opinions which find the novel unremarkable and too traditional.

Key words: desire, race, gender, marriage plot, Jessie Fauset, storytelling

The beginning of the 20th century transformed the societal and cultural landscape of the U.S.; women in particular found themselves in a new constantly shifting position. Women (and women writers by extension) became more visible in the public sphere and their image evolved rapidly (as Gibson Girls in the 1890s – 1900s, as suffragists and New Women in 1910s, and as flappers in the 1920s). Said image became even more complex in the context of raised awareness regarding race, class and ethnicity[1]. Literature produced by black women can be traced further back in time, but it is the 20th century that afforded a greater number of those women the opportunity to use writing as a way to support themselves.

[1] For more, see: Patterson, M. H., ed. *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008; Sherrard-Johnson, C. *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007; Floyd, J., R. J. Ellis, and L. Traub, eds. *Becoming Visible: Women's Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*. Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2010.

Jessie Fauset may be considered one of the early examples of a black female success story. She had an interest in the written word from an early age and later pursued it academically and professionally, managing to become the editor of the acclaimed publication, *The Crisis*[2]. Her high intellectual achievements were praised but also used as a way to denigrate her fictional endeavors. Langston Hughes famously named her the 'midwife' of the Harlem Renaissance in his autobiography *Big Sea* (1940) – somebody who supported other talent, rather than develop their own. In *Plum Bun*'s afterword, Deborah McDowell comprehensively explains the issues that arise around the term *midwife* as a profession that "assists at a birth but is otherwise considered inessential to it" (McDowell 2022: 286). In other words, if viewed in such a light, then Fauset helped established male authors and disappeared. Although this is far away from the truth – she published four novels (*There is Confusion* [1924], *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* [1929], *The Chinaberry Tree: A Novel of American Life* [1931] and *Comedy, American Style* [1933]) and a number of short stories and poems – her name was almost completely forgotten at the dawn of the Renaissance. It was a footnote to other writers' successes. Half a century later, during the second and the third wave of feminism when feminist critics and writers started rehabilitating the long tradition of African American female writing, they paid little attention to Jessie Fauset or viewed her literary publications in a negative light[3], which further pushed the novelist into oblivion. It was through the efforts of scholars such as Deborah McDowell and Ann Ducille that Fauset finally received a more

[2] *The Crisis* was founded in 1910 by a group of young African American intellectuals that included W. B. Dubois, among others. In 1918, he invited Fauset to become its literary editor and she accepted. She was quite successful as an editor and managed to further the careers of many now well-known writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. She recognized talent and was not afraid to highlight it – she prepared the first officially published part of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, as well as the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," considered by many to be the most famous text of the Harlem Renaissance – even if a certain writer's ideas were at odds with her own pursuits and literary choices. For more see: Wedin, C. *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer*. New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1981.

[3] Barbara Christian, for example, suggests that "because she was so conscious of being an image maker and because she accepted wholesale American values, except on the issue of race, her novels hardly communicate the intellectual depth that some of her articles do" (Christian 1980: 43), while Hazel Carby adds that "the conservatism of Fauset's ideology dominates her texts" and she never manages to "transcend the form of the romance" (Carby 1987: 167 – 168). Both critics consider Fauset inferior to other novel writers of the period.

nuanced treatment. Both argued that there was more to her writing than primness and propriety. As a result, nowadays there is a variety of articles examining predominantly her novels and more specifically *Plum Bun*, as well as a new edition of the book in a series that celebrates black female writing[4]. Having said that, there are still a lot of aspects to be explored in Fauset's fiction to strengthen her place in the canon and with the general readership. Morgan Jerkins, who wrote the foreword to the recent edition of *Plum Bun*, reveals that, even though she was very keen on the Harlem Renaissance, going as far as moving to the famous neighborhood, she hadn't heard Fauset's name until the middle of the 2010s (Jerkins 2022: ix). The following examination of her sophomore novel not only focuses on the entanglement between race and desire but is also an attempt to further the important task of elevating the novelist to the status she deserves.

Plum Bun appeared at the end of the 1920s, a decade characterized by the climax of the Harlem Renaissance. It tells the story of Angela Murray, a black woman who relocates from Philadelphia to New York in search of better fortunes. In her attempt to attain a more fulfilling lifestyle, she decides to pass for white and erase her past identity and family history. In the span of a couple of years, she has a relationship with a suave white racist, Roger Fielding, participates in an art course, and finds happiness with her sister, Virginia, and Anthony Cross, a fellow artist who also occasionally passes. The book has been called a novel of passing, a typical romance work and a Künstlerroman[5], and it does carry the features of all three narrative designations. As a novel of passing, it joins a remarkable tradition, particularly dominant in the 1920s. Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), published in the same year, was considered a superior example of the genre for a number of years – it never went out of publication and it enjoyed a larger group of readers. *Plum Bun*'s heroine's general pursuit of marriage and her entering one at the end, for many attests to the conventionality of the novel and its firm place in the existing stilted tradition of romance writing. Last but not least, as a Künstlerroman, the fictional world not only familiarizes us with Angela's story as an aspiring artist, but it transforms itself into a space receptive of artists in general, their ideals, difficulties and struggles across the color line. The familiarity of the plot structure is

[4] Beacon Press started the remarkable series in 2019 and continue to revitalize black women's writing.

[5] Her exploration of the life of a female artist in that day and age has been particularly praised. Of this decision, Cheryl A. Wall writes: "Fauset modernizes the oldest plot in the tradition of the novel in English not only by adding the aspect of race, but by giving her protagonist artistic ambitions" (Wall 2007: 88).

deceptive: even though Angela pursues marriage, her end goal is not love, but security for her and her race; her passing has a more complicated character and origins than a superficial glance suggests. As an artist, she has a clear vision, which she is unable to develop completely. Amritjit Singh succeeds in explaining her duality: "Fauset is of more than historical significance, her subject alternates between the safe formulas of a genteel fictionist and the exploration of challenging themes such as incest and self-hatred" (Singh 1976: 73). Her strength lies in her ability to reformulate issues related to identity behind the accepted models of literary expression. This did not endear her to her contemporaries but it has helped modern critics and readers to understand the strain black female writers were working under during the years of the Renaissance. The aim of the present paper is to examine desire both as sexual desire and as a concept related to the presence of self-fulfillment and acceptance, through a closer look at one of the dominant plots of the novel – the marriage plot. Some of the questions that need attention include: To what extent does Fauset manage to subvert the expected rules of sexuality and romantic stereotypes? How is desire represented in the novel? How does it affect the main heroine?

From an early age, Angela's existence is predetermined by storytelling. Her mother fills her days with stories of great damsels who become happier through their relationships and marriage to eligible men. The novel itself starts as a fairytale: "In one of these houses dwelt a father, a mother and two daughters" (Fauset 2022: 3). Instead of royals living in a castle, the main characters are ordinary black people who have managed to achieve a comfortable status in society through sheer hard work and perseverance. The reader quickly learns that the father Junius was orphaned and spent some time homeless in the past, while the mother Mattie worked a variety of low-paid jobs to support herself and survive. Thus, classic fairytales merge with stories of black experience: "The stories which Junius and Mattie told of difficulties overcome, of the arduous learning of trades, of the pitiful scraping together of infinitesimal savings; would have made a latter-day Iliad, but to Angela they were merely a description of a life which she at any cost would avoid living" (Fauset 2022: 4). Angela is not inspired by her parents' past to replicate their independence of spirit and fight to survive – an effort comparable to a modern epic in its proportions – rather, she is determined not to participate in a similar story. She chooses to identify with the discourse created by mainstream Western fairytales. For better or for worse, this path would lead her to a new city, a new identity and a constant search of marriage.

A clear connection may be uncovered between Angela's desires and the stories she memorizes as a young child. Bronwyn Davis suggests that female desire "may well be the result of bodily inscription through metaphors and storylines that catch her up in one way of being/of desiring from which she has no escape" (Davis 1990: 508). In other words, desire (in this case female desire) has a deep connection to storytelling and existing discourses. Body and mind bear the mark of cultural practices, expectations and accepted narratives. In Angela's case, desire for security, fulfilment and love is equated with marriage, more specifically to a white man, but to reach this goal she has to become the damsel in those fairytales in terms of appearance and behavior. It is very telling that the only subject she enjoys besides drawing is French. "There was an element of fine ladyism about the beautiful, logical tongue that made her in accordance with some secret subconscious ambition resolve to make it her own" (Fauset 2022: 24). The heroine's preference for the language does not issue from a desire for intellectual pursuits, but is deeply entrenched in her understanding of appearance and propriety. One way that Fauset does point to a hidden second incentive is mentioning Angela's ambition. As an artist, the character frequently presents herself as a person capable of actions and thoughts that cannot be neatly ascribed to a dominant discourse. In her acquisition of languages and her paintings, she manages to represent emotions similar to sexual passion that is sorely lacking from almost all of her romantic escapades.

Fairytales and the expectations they create continue to overshadow Angela's choices in New York City, especially those that concern her encounters with Roger Fielding. When she is to go to dinner with him for the first time, she takes a lot of time getting ready. She picks her accessories and clothes with the greatest of care as if donning a new persona. "Some vanity, some vague premonition of adventure, led her to linger over her dressing for the dinner" (Fauset 2022: 87). She considers herself a character in an adventure story and that makes her prepare for it according to the narratives she is already familiar with. She has to select the correct attire that would transform her into somebody who is desirable, but at the same time difficult to charm. It is interesting then that the dress she wears is flame-colored, which means that she is not content to blend in and be conventional. The description of her hair further balances between propriety and wildness: her hair is likened to a halo that cannot be completed because some wisps and curls will not sit still. Once more Fauset subtly utilizes liminality to suggest that Angela hides her real identity and desire behind the mask of contemporary appearance.

Roger himself receives a detailed description from Angela's perspective. "She had never seen anyone like him: so gay, so beautiful, like a blond, glorious god, so overwhelming, so persistent […] He had no fears, no restraints, no worries" (Fauset 2022: 92). Roger is presented not as a typical hero, but as a figure similar to a God; it seems as though his looks elevate him to that position and define the relatively leisurely lifestyle he leads. It is not surprising that Angela strongly emphasizes his physicality, aware that her own color and features have regulated most of her existence. Even though she never completely lets go of her community and family, she still views the world in a binary way, where whiteness entails dominance and comfort. Following the already familiar plot, Angela believes that she has seen "her life rounding out like a fairy tale" (Fauset 2022: 94). She is as far away from reality as possible, as Roger does not intend to marry her because she is not part of his class and her background is not pristine enough. The heroine, though, is not deterred in her quest for her happily ever after and continues seeing Roger to fuel his sexual desire so he would pay for it with marriage. Angela does not let go of stories in books after her initial disappointment at her thwarted plans with Roger, and even imagines herself as somebody who has found another suitor only to avenge her hurt pride (Fauset 2022: 133). This is evidence of Angela's inability to transcend her position as well as time and space. When an avenue closes, rather than indulge in subversive emotions and desires, she chooses to re-fit her pursuits to follow a new path with the same conservative and inhibited end goal. However, she does not give up on her art and later pursues a career in this field as a testament to her undisclosed passions, which appear at odds with said end goal. While examining the complexity of black sexuality following slavery, Robert Staples maintains that middle-class African Americans "placed an exaggerated emphasis upon moral conduct and developed a puritanical restraint in contrast to the free and more liberated sexual behavior of the dominant Black population" (Staples 2006: 20). For historical reasons, black sexuality has been considered more devious and promiscuous; as a counteraction, the newly arisen black middle class prefers the other extreme of reserve and prudence. Jessie Fauset as a member of the middle class is aware of the negative effect of dominant stereotypes[6], so she tries to present the most

[6] As an intellectual and a writer, she opposed the newly popular genre of primitivism that displayed African Americans' exotic features and sexuality. Her "novels attempt to complicate the portrait of the African American experience, moving beyond the simple tragic mulatto or gin-chasing primitive explored in other Harlem Renaissance works" (Varlack 2014: 78). The most famous example of a novel utilizing primitivism

virtuous possible version of her black female characters in all of her novels. Angela is a case in point because she has formed her understanding of marriage and intimacy from fairytales that show her the progression of a relationship but not the depth of passion and desire that may ensue. Even though Fauset upholds propriety, she frequently hides clues as to the real personalities and needs of her female protagonists.

Loneliness overtakes Angela in the second half of the novel; she searches in vain for closeness and warmth. Devoid of other options, she turns to Roger for intimacy. In time, their closeness and shared solitude make her question her values, morality and the importance of the marital union. "The world was made to take pleasure in; one gained nothing by exercising simple virtue, it was after all an extension of the old formula which she had thought out for herself many years ago" (Fauset 2022: 141). By "the old formula," she might mean two things: the discriminatory black existence she abandoned and the prospective marriage she was refused. In both cases, she is unable to fulfil the expectations of society and of her community. As a result, she decides to indulge herself. "Her weapons were those furnished by the conventions but her fight was against conditions; impulses, yearnings which antedated both those weapons and the conventions which furnished them" (Fauset 2022: 145). Her desire is embodied and predates civilization; it is part of her innate characteristics as a human being, untainted by civilization and its established rules. Though presented as natural, her impulses make her feel ashamed, as if she is transgressing invisible lines from which she cannot return. In Mason Stokes's analysis of Fauset's life and works, the critic demonstrates the dangerous climate women inhabited in the 1920s in the field of love and sexuality. He claims that for Fauset and "her female characters, no enjoyment was free; everything must be paid for, and the price was usually too high" (Stokes 2011: 80). Angela severely damages her relationship with her sister, stops meeting up with Anthony and puts her artistic endeavors in a secondary position so she could continue with her infatuation with Roger. The highest price she pays for these pleasures is the loss of her privacy and her artistic and familial identity. Desire may be natural, but as becomes evident, it does have a price.

Thoughts about transgression in time lead to action; on a fateful, stormy night, Angela eventually succumbs to Roger's advances, torn

is Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928). For more see: McCabe, T. The Multifaceted Politics of Primitivism in Harlem Renaissance Writing // *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1997, № 80: 4, 475 – 497.

between passion and social expectations. "A terrible lassitude enveloped her out of which she heard herself panting: 'Roger, Roger let me go! Oh, Roger, must it be like this? Can't it be any other way?'" (Fauset 2022: 148). While there are no explicit sexual scenes in the novel, the text is interspersed with hints and innuendos. In the given scene, Angela's pants and gasps suggest not only the culmination of her dilemma, but also the intense desire waiting to find a physical outlet. Roger, on the other hand, finally succeeds in taming Angela bodily and psychologically and in turning her into a mistress. Her body as a material object bears the marks of their conflicting motivations and intentions. When she examines the scene, Ann Ducille makes a very interesting comparison to poker: sex is "a consumable commodity and the female body [operates] as a bargaining chip in a high-stakes game of strip poker, which lays the characters bare without the textual removal of a single piece of clothing" (Ducille 1993: 101). If we continue with the metaphor of Angela's body being a bargaining chip, then she should be able to gain something in return when she relinquishes it into Roger's hands. This does not transpire, meaning that she was not able to negotiate a more lasting arrangement and the value of her body becomes void. Once Roger takes possession of it, it loses its worth not only in their relationship, but in her future romantic endeavors as well. This may well be the reason why until the last second she is trying to bargain for marriage in exchange for the female body. Another metaphor might be proposed: the body operates as a treasure that is well hidden and locked, and Roger acts as a person who has uncovered it with a lot of effort and is intent on plundering and discarding it. Finally, yet importantly, the body drives the plot not only due to its sexual connotations, but also because it is marked by color. Angela gradually denies its appearance by passing as well as its desires by searching for an eligible husband rather than a lover, until the end of the novel when she finally accepts her body and identity.

When the affair commences Angela changes her identity completely: she replaces her activities related to art and society with thoughts about Roger's everyday life. "Now for the first time she felt possessive; she found herself deeply interested in Roger's welfare because, she thought, he was hers and she could not endure having a possession whose qualities were unknown" (Fauset 2022: 149). Angela frequently mentions the fact that she has not managed to experience love as an emotion. Even at the end of the book when she actively pursues Anthony, her motivation is vague. Her lack of affection is best pronounced when she has a relationship with Roger; as if the author is trying to emphasize his unfitness as a partner. In

the excerpt above, the feeling of being possessive is fleshed out in an elaborate way, though it never mixes with deeper emotions. Angela, who for most of her life has been unable to own anything – friends abandoned her, her teaching profession and art do not satisfy her and she willingly lets go of her family – perceives Roger as the one thing that belongs to her and that she is able to belong to. Possessiveness further increases the desire she feels for him; she is ready to merge herself with him and his environment. Roger is not prepared for such an "invasion" and attempts to call the affair off. On the topic of desire, Luce Irigaray suggests that female "desire is often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole" (Irigaray 1985: 29)[7]. The moment Angela pays more attention to her partner, she almost becomes the hungry monster Irigaray is describing – somebody who would swallow the other person whole. At least this may partially explain Roger's fear of being possessed. More than anything, the delicate 'lady' transforms into the famished 'beast'. This change shows us the repercussions that follow when a woman indulges in her desires. Further in the story, Angela argues with Roger about her behavior. His defense is that such actions are acceptable for men, but not for women (Fauset 2022: 167), drawing a clear demarcation line between masculine and feminine gender identities.

A number of romantic tribulations culminate in the heroine's expected marriage. A case of misplaced testament of affection complicates the final denouement but does not prevent the supposed happy conclusion. Anthony, who has courted Angela since her arrival in New York, becomes her chosen suitor after she goes through a process of self-realization connected to her race and gender. She learns the hard way that even though she is able to pass as white, she would never become equal to people like Roger and she would always have to hide a great part of her identity. "From the very beginning she had liked Anthony, liked him as she had never liked Roger – or himself, for his sincerity, for his fierce pride, for his poverty, for his honest, frantic love. "And now," she said solemnly, "I believe I'm going to love him; I believe I love him already"" (Fauset 2022: 196). Angela claims to have liked Anthony from the beginning but she does attest to it predominantly retrospectively – his poverty has been a point of contention in many instances throughout their friendship and it is usually viewed as a handicap. Her present emotional state continues to be

[7] Irigaray's idea of desire has been criticized by some for being too essentialist. For a number of critics, she is attempting to oppose female and male desire, which leads to the creation of an additional binary model. For more see: Gorton, K. *Theorizing Desire: From Freud to Feminism to Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

unfixed and ambiguous; her pursuit of love seems more individual and self-oriented than aimed at a specific person, real or imaginary. Besides everything else, her choice of Anthony is her final negation of the white Western fairy tale plot: she embraces a poor black person and replicates her parents' strong connection. She manages to rise above difficulties. She terminates her search of Prince Charming and his magical wealth and position. The return of the heroine to her roots and communal identity is not untypical for the genre of novels of passing or for that matter for later African American writing as well. What makes Angela different is her parallel pursuit of art as a serious occupation. According to Mar Gallego Durán, Anthony as a love interest "is obviously depicted as secondary to Angela's real passion, her art, and her need to work out a valid concept of identity on her own before going back to him" (Mar Gallego Durán 2003: 185). This may be taken a bit further by considering Anthony as a plot necessity – Angela's story could have ended with her individual artistic journey to France, but that most probably would not have been a rewarding ending for the targeted audience. Anthony appears out of thin air to amend all romantic mishaps and to present the heroine with a textual happy ending; their final meeting seems rushed and unauthentic as a result. Having said that, it should be noted that his presence does not act as a deterrent to Angela's artistic endeavors and self-expression. It remains unclear whether she would follow the stereotypical path of women in the early years of the 20th century: becoming a wife, then housewife, then mother, etc. That may be seen as an attempt to leave the door open to interpretation and subversion of "standard" narratives. A question that remains unanswered is whether she actually loved any of the men that she was associated with or just settled for them as the author succumbs to the expectations of the genre.

Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral continues to be Jessie Fauset's most well-known and examined work. The novel received a mixed critical reaction in the 1920s – 30s and this trend continued during its revival in the 1970s – 80s: some praised her deconstructive aims, while others perceived her as a writer of conventional romantic books. In the 21st century the interest in her life and publications has only increased, which has led to diverse critical treatments. The present paper is an attempt to further these examinations by focusing on desire in a broader sense (sexual or otherwise). Angela Murray passes through a process of first only hearing about desire in stories to actually experiencing it and getting disillusioned with it. At each step, Fauset has attempted to rework the idea of propriety and virtuousness

available to black women at the beginning of the 20th century. The traditional ending in marriage may be one of her greatest riddles.

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