

2018

Tracing the ghost of "Black House" : Dickensian heteronormative proprietorship in Jessie Redmon Fauset's Plum bun : a novel without a moral

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ABSTRACT

TRACING THE GHOST OF “BLACK HOUSE”: DICKENSIAN HETERONORMATIVE PROPRIETORSHIP IN JESSIE REDMON FAUSET’S *PLUM BUN: A NOVEL WITHOUT A MORAL*

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This thesis focuses on Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* and its modification of Victorian textual antecedents to critique Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship. This proprietorship served as prevalent model for racial uplift in nineteenth and early-twentieth century African American culture, emphasizing Victorian bourgeois womanhood and the familial unit as essential markers of respectability. Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* depicts the formation of this ideology as a means for the titular character to redefine himself against socio-economic hardship and uncertainty. *Plum Bun* reconfigures this novel as a passing narrative, and introduces race as an additional socio-economic barrier which impedes Mattie and Angela’s shared pursuit of self-possession and autonomy. In doing so, *Plum Bun* emphasizes *David Copperfield*’s inherent contradictions, namely David’s participation in the same systemic oppression that he aims to escape. As another Victorian antecedent, Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” depicts the imposition of Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship on women, particularly through mandated domestic femininity, regulated female sexuality, and women’s exclusion from the public sphere, along with the male-dominated poetic tradition. Fauset’s novel,

originally titled “The Market,” employs the form and function of Rossetti’s poem, both in terms of its fairy tale frame and modification of textual antecedents (especially the Edenic imagery from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*). Through African Americanizing essential elements of Rossetti’s poem, *Plum Bun* illustrates this ideology’s power to impose itself on women across generational, geographical, and racial boundaries. *Plum Bun*’s reconfigurations of each text challenge traditional dismissals of Fauset’s work, illustrating its intellectual rigor, complex engagement with African American culture, and critique of the same elitism that critics often accuse it of perpetuating.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2018

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MORAL*

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Thesis Director:
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CHAPTER 1

THE GHOST OF “BLACK HOUSE”

While critics repeatedly discuss the Victorian qualities of Jessie Redmon Fauset’s works, they often cite these qualities as the central weaknesses within her fiction. Cherene Sherrad-Johnson argues that since its publication, Fauset’s novels have been dismissed as “sentimental and Victorian, primarily because she dealt with ‘women’s issues,’ centering on the marriage plot.” However, Sherrad-Johnson, along with many other scholars, criticize the dismissal of the Victorian elements of Fauset’s writing, and instead argue for their importance in her exploration of black bourgeois femininity during the Harlem Renaissance. Deborah McDowell repeatedly emphasizes the influence of Victorian heteronormativity on women writers within the black bourgeoisie, particularly in Fauset’s fiction as well as Nella Larsen’s. Ann DuCille notes Fauset’s frequent use of the Victorian marriage plot to critique the prevalent notion of marriage, family, and home ownership as essential components of racial uplift embraced by the emerging black middleclass throughout the Great Migration. McDowell and DuCille, among others, discuss Fauset’s Victorian hybridity as a vehicle for critiquing the culture she was immersed in, and the issues faced by black women within it.

Re-contextualizing this hybridity in Fauset’s second novel, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928), illuminates the text’s critique of the black Victorian womanhood inherited by two generations of women in the Murray family. For Mattie Murray, a young black woman in Philadelphia, her marriage and the black bourgeois familial unit function as a means of escaping oppressive reliance on white patronage, and the threat of sexual exploitation she faced as a result.

However, Mattie's light complexion affords her the ability to "pass" as a white woman, which in turn destabilizes her position as a wife and mother within the home she has created. Mattie's daughter, Angela, inherits not only her mother's complexion and ability to pass, but also the paradox of her commitment to her home and marriage along with her instability within them. While Angela's light skin affords her a certain degree of agency, she ultimately experiences the same oppression and sexual exploitation as her mother through her failed courtship with a white man named Roger. Angela and her mother reactively adopt a Victorian model of self-possession through marriage and homeownership, which fails to prevent, and even facilitates, the re-creation of oppressive and exploitative conditions experienced by black women during slavery.

This thesis will extend the current discussion surrounding *Plum Bun*'s engagement with Victorian culture and literary conventions by tracing its modification of specific Victorian texts. While some scholars continue to emphasize Fauset's Victorian sensibilities, the vast majority of critics repeatedly avoid establishing parallels to specific examples of literature from this period and her work. There are certainly legitimate reasons for avoiding these comparisons, such as preserving the autonomy of the black writer and the establishment of an independent African American literary tradition, as discussed at length by Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates. Gary Edward Holcomb and Charles Scruggs identify these arguments as the central obstacle for discussing the influence of white Modernism, specifically Ernest Hemingway, in Ralph Ellison's work:

The idea that Ellison's creative impetus may be located in Hemingway's modernism challenges the conviction that African American literature principally derives from the African oral tradition. The aim of Houston Baker's influential thesis in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1989) is to demonstrate that

the momentous contribution of the renaissance lay in the act of articulating an alternative to high or mainstream modernism. Baker's theory that black literary modernism developed independently from a majority modernism (or modernisms) is an essential component of the collective view, embodied in Henry Louis Gates's contention for an African American literary canon, that black literary arts issue from an ancestry different from that of western, textually oriented writing.

(6-7)

Houston and Gates advocate an Afrocentric approach to reading and discussing African American literature as a means of preserving important distinctions between black and traditionally white literary canons. However, as Holcomb and Scruggs illustrate, this model does not account for black writers such as Ralph Ellison, whose work actively engages with white authors and texts. There is certainly evidence that writers of the Harlem Renaissance were influenced by Victorian authors. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, cited Charles Dickens among her favorite authors (Lowe 36), and Hurston's familiarity with Dickens is by no means unusual. As Ann Douglas states, Victorian authors had a massive readership in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century: "In 1912, America's literary commenters devoted as much time and space to centennials of Thackeray and Dickens as the English did. Few students read American writers in school. The Modern Language Association of professors of English had no branch for Americanists" (159-160).

However, by the 1920s, many American Modernists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance alike began to reject Victorian influence. Douglas attributes this "cultural emancipation" of these two movements in part to perceived threat of a feminine Victorianism to the masculine sensibilities of Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (6): "There can be no

doubt that the Victorian matriarch was scapegoated by her descendants; the ills of an entire society were laid at the door of the sex whose prestige is always held expendable” (7). Fauset’s novels, as both explicitly feminine and Victorian, subvert this masculine artistic authority, which led to her work being criticized by prominent writers such as Alain Locke and Claude McKay, with the latter dismissing her novels as “prim and dainty” (qtd. in Sylvander 62).

Fauset’s Victorian hybridity and interest in a literary tradition that emphasizes women’s issues also made the publication of her fiction difficult, despite her many connections among black writers and artists. During the Harlem Renaissance, black writers were largely dependent on white publishers and audiences, whose expectations for black literature were largely based on the primitivism popularized and fetishized by Carl Van Vechten. The worlds and characters of Fauset’s novels consistently subvert these expectations, which often put her at odds with publishers. As Fauset herself states, “if an author presents a variant they fear that the public either won't believe in it or won't stand for it” (qtd. in Showalter 75). Dismissing or ignoring connections between Victorian texts and African American authors perpetuates problematic parameters for black writers. These parameters are rooted in expectations of primitivism by white publishers and audiences, along with the harsh rejection of female literary voices by black and white authors alike, which contribute to a limited reading of Fauset’s work.

This thesis, as means of avoiding the pitfalls of reading black writers within a Victorian context, employs the methodology established by Daniel Hack in *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Texts* (2017). Hack argues that nineteenth-century African American writers and editors were “immersed in the transatlantic literary culture of the day, and not only were they working with and against generic norms and conventions: in addition, they regularly cited and reworked and repurposed specific features of selected

Victorian poems and novels” (2). However, Hack argues that this tradition and these transformations remain “poorly understood and indeed largely invisible” (7) because critics avoid specific comparisons with Victorian texts:

The workings and implications of individual instances can only be determined on a case-by-case basis. And these cases often require—and reward—much finer-grained attention than has typically been paid by attempts to read African American literature in relation to British literature: attention not only to the borrowing or reworking or critique of generic forms and conventions, but also to the specific language, tropes, and narrative structures of individual texts. It is at this level of granularity that many African Americanizations of Victorian texts take place and become legible. (10).

Through this granular approach, this introduction will trace the development of what I call a Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship in African American literature, activism, and culture, specifically through African American engagements with Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853). These engagements illustrate the enduring influence of Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, particularly over essential conceptions of marriage and black womanhood. Fauset’s *Plum Bun* inherits this Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship, and ultimately critiques it by modifying two specific Victorian antecedents: Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862).

Dickens, as one of the most influential Victorian novelists, had a significant readership and impact on black writers and activists in nineteenth century America, as demonstrated by recent scholarship on *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. This novel written by a former slave named Hannah Bond (who used the pseudonym ‘Hannah Crafts’), repurposes large sections of Dickens’s *Bleak House* and reconfigures them within the context of a fugitive slave narrative. Elaine Showalter describes the role of Dickens’s novel within Bond’s text as “an influence so pervasive, detailed, exact, and deliberate that one critic has called the novel *Black House*” (74).

William Gleason argues that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* engages with Dickens's *Bleak House* as a means of addressing issues of sexual self-possession and social stability.¹ According to Gleason, "*Bleak House* helps Crafts activate a trope of self-ownership through home ownership that is unavailable through other sources," and that as a result, "Crafts wanted parallels to Dickens understood rather than overlooked" (166). While certainly distinct from an American slave narrative, Esther's class instability and bourgeois aspirations in Dickens's novel function as a framework which Crafts modifies to explore the commodification and sexual exploitation of female slaves under the authority of their white masters. As a result, Esther's acquisition of a home provides an essential model for Crafts's newfound self-possession at the end of her story. As Gleason states, "Like Esther, Hannah Crafts ends her tale not as a housekeeper but as a homeowner, happily ensconced in an independent cottage, a loving husband by her side" (166). Gleason's scholarship illustrates a clear example of an African American writer engaging with Dickens's text, and particularly a Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship, as a means of responding to race, class, and gender-based discrimination within the United States.

However, aside from its clear influence on *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Gleason also emphasizes the novel's impact on influential figures such as Frederick Douglass, who advocated for this Dickensian model of black proprietorship as a means of racial uplift. In fact, Douglass began reprinting *Bleak House* in his newspaper, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, before Dickens finished writing it (Hack 25). As Sarah Luria states, "Like Crafts, Douglass too, admired Dickens's *Bleak House*, which appears to have been a touchstone for African Americans in the

¹ For more on the parallels between *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and *Bleak House*, see Hollis Robbins's "Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Craft's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*" and Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig, and Dale Townsend's "Missing Intertexts: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and African American Literary History."

1850s and after” (167). Luria emphasizes the role of the home in Douglass’s activism as a vehicle for assimilation and respectability with white culture:

A home provided a second skin by which African Americans could define themselves by class, taste, and morality rather than by their skin color. A respectable home did more than any speech or law to establish one's social equality. If blacks could acquire middle-class homes, then the chances for social contact with one's white neighbors would be improved greatly and so too the chances for lasting social change. (27)

Hack, Luria, and Gleason establish the significant, if often overlooked, readership and social influence of Victorian literature within the greater African American community during the nineteenth century. However, the afterlife of this Dickensian model of black proprietorship and the activism it defines, which promises respectability as an extension of through adopting the “class, taste, and morality” of white middleclass culture, extends well into the twentieth century. The continued influence of Dickensian Proprietorship in the twentieth century is rooted in the model of racial uplift and Victorian womanhood promoted by the black women’s club movement. Christina Simmons argues that towards the end of the nineteenth century, black men and women faced intensified “attributions of sexual barbarity that whites used to justify lynching and segregation” (275). Once again, black sexuality became the crux of discrimination for African Americans, along with an essential path to respectability. As a result, black activism centered on redefining black sexuality, specifically female sexuality: “Members of the black women’s club movement that was organizing nationally in the 1890’s took the lead in campaigning against this sexual racism” (275). Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship, as a template for Douglass’s model of racial uplift, provided a clear avenue for establishing a respectable model of female sexuality, and therefore, respectability for the race as a whole: “African American leaders entered the twentieth century with an acute sense that marriage and Victorian sexual respectability were crucial to their struggles against this virulent racism, in

order to prove that African Americans were ‘civilized’” (275). This activism and ideology played a profound role in shaping the emerging black middleclass during the Harlem Renaissance, and as McDowell argues, profoundly influenced black women writers during this period: “They responded to the myth of the black woman’s sexual licentiousness by insisting fiercely on her chastity. Fighting to overcome their heritage of rape and concubinage, and following the movement by black club women of the era, they imitated the ‘purity,’ the sexual morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie” (5).

It is this influence, the ghost of Heteronormative Dickensian Proprietorship, which *Plum Bun* sets itself against by African Americanizing *David Copperfield* and Rossetti’s “Goblin Market.” *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*’s immediate predecessor, depicts the formation of this ideology as a means for the titular character to redefine himself against socio-economic hardship and uncertainty. *Plum Bun* reconfigures this novel as a passing narrative, and introduces race as an additional socio-economic barrier which impedes Mattie and Angela’s shared pursuit of self-possession and autonomy. In doing so, *Plum Bun* emphasizes *David Copperfield*’s inherent contradictions, namely David’s participation in the same systemic oppression that he aims to escape. As another Victorian antecedent, “Goblin Market” depicts the imposition of Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship on women, particularly through mandated domestic femininity, regulated female sexuality, and women’s exclusion from the public sphere, along with the male-dominated poetic tradition. Fauset’s novel, originally titled “The Market,” employs the form and function of Rossetti’s poem, both in terms of its fairy tale frame and modification of textual antecedents (especially the Edenic imagery from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*). Through African Americanizing essential elements of Rossetti’s poem, *Plum Bun* illustrates this ideology’s power to impose itself on women across generational, geographical, and racial boundaries. *Plum Bun*’s

reconfigurations of each text challenge traditional dismissals of Fauset's work; they illustrate its intellectual rigor, complex engagement with African American culture, and critique of the same elitism that critics often accuse it of perpetuating. However, more significantly, these reconfigurations demonstrate the power of literature to shape, preserve, and transport ideology between cultures, and therefore, the value of literature that acknowledges this process

CHAPTER 2

O AGNES, O JUNIUS: THE INHERITANCE AND MODIFICATION OF DICKENSIAN HETERONORMATIVE PROPRIETORSHIP IN *PLUM BUN: A NOVEL WITHOUT A MORAL*

Throughout Reconstruction and into the twentieth century, the model for respectable African American womanhood was inherently Victorian and contradictory, especially in terms of its reinforcement of the same gender, class, and racial oppression that it promised to safeguard against. Following the end of slavery, black women were plagued by what Deborah McDowell describes as a “heritage of rape and concubinage” under white masters (5). McDowell’s description illustrates the oppressed position of black women within slavery as a gender, class, and racial power structure. While this position was certainly commonplace for black women under slavery, these conditions persisted well beyond the time of slavery and the space of the rural South, both during Reconstruction and throughout the twentieth century. According to Gerda Lerner, “It was taken for granted during [Reconstruction] and well into the 20th century that working-class women—especially Black women—were freely available for sexual use by upper-class males” (43). In response to the threat of sexual and economic exploitation, black women adopted a Victorian model of naturalized femininity, which Paula Giddings argues was perpetuated by “women’s magazines and romance literature of the period,” in which “madness, sometimes death, and always tragedy were the fate of a woman who could not fulfill the ‘attributes’ of true womanhood” (48).

This Victorian ideology promised conditional respectability for women through marriage and adherence to the notion of separate spheres for men and women. However, these parameters

made this respectability virtually inaccessible for working-class black women who “worked outside of the home,” and therefore, “were outside the realm of ‘womanhood’ and its prerogatives” (49). As a result, Giddings argues that black women and activists alike were put in a precarious position:

On the one hand they agreed with the fundamental premises of the Victorian ethic. On the other, they opposed its racist and classist implications. At the same time they were conscious of the pressure on free blacks to prove they could be acculturated into American society . . . For Black women, *acculturation* was translated as their ability to be ‘ladies’—a burden of proof that carried an inherent class-consciousness. (49)

Within this model of racial uplift, self-possession for black women necessarily translated to bourgeois class aspirations, Victorian gender norms, and “*acculturation*” or assimilation into an “American society” that recognized these norms and this acculturation as extensions of a naturalized and respectable whiteness. Adopting Victorian womanhood through marriage and homeownership as a black woman meant participating in the same practices and ideologies that underlie social hierarchies formed on the bases of gender, class, and race. Black women labored under a model of social uplift that promised to provide refuge from the same oppressive conditions that it perpetuated.

Just as this ideology of “true womanhood” crossed the Atlantic by means of literature, Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun* adopts and modifies *David Copperfield* as a means of addressing the inherent contradictions of black Victorian femininity. Fauset’s detractors repeatedly accuse her of endorsing this ideology, along with promoting elitist bourgeois culture and values in her work. As Anthony Hale states, “Jessie Fauset, reared in the integrated middleclass, often comes under fire by her critics for what they identify as her inherited or acquired set of Victorian values which in their staid rigidity, divided this member of the Du Bois ‘Talented Tenth’ from what were known as ‘the folk’” (162). However, Hale’s observation also

points to the abstract and amorphous Victorianisms that critics identify when they dismiss her work. This chapter provides an alternative to this practice by grounding these abstract Victorianisms in *David Copperfield* as a textual antecedent. *Plum Bun*'s intricate reconfiguration of Dickens's novel reveals an essential critique of the black bourgeois values that it seemingly promotes. This critique often goes entirely unnoticed precisely because critics rarely consider specific comparisons between the novel, as noticeably Victorian as it may be, and influential literature from that period.

David Copperfield depicts the formation of a Dickensian model of Heteronormative Proprietorship, in which marriage and homeownership provide a resolution to the titular character's quest to find socio-economic stability and self-possession in an increasingly uncertain and exploitative Victorian class system. While this resolution is common throughout Dickens's work, *Plum Bun* adopts and accentuates contradictions inherent to specific ideas, passages, and episodes from Dickens's text that undermine the structural integrity of this resolution and the ideology behind it. While *David Copperfield* concludes with the formation of an ideology of bourgeois heteronormativity, it also depicts a protagonist whose journey repeatedly challenges the class and gender norms that provide its foundation. Fauset's Mattie Murray and her daughter Angela, like David, embrace Heteronormative Proprietorship as a vehicle for attaining the social status and privileges of the white bourgeoisie. However, each of them relies on the act of "passing" in order to achieve this socio-economic mobility, which ultimately reinforces the race and class-based hierarchies that actively prevent them from achieving the self-possession and respectability they desire. In their pursuit of what marriage and the home promise, Mattie and Angela are increasingly alienated from them and any sense of security they would ideally afford them. *Plum Bun* retains the complexity and contradictions of

Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship from *David Copperfield*, but complicates them further by situating them within an African American context, introducing race as an additional aspect of intersectionality, and demonstrating how this ideology is inherited from generation to generation, despite its perpetuation of the same social hierarchies that it seemingly opposes.

David Copperfield is fundamentally a novel about marriage as a refuge from class instability and the looming threat of economic hardship in an industrial society. David's dread over his uncertain class status is evident in the opening line of the novel: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (1). David's conception of his role as the hero of his own life is tied to his "station," a class-based status called into question following the death of his father, the disintegration of his family, and his subjection to poverty and exploitative labor conditions. David experiences a kind of class-based double consciousness: a division between the comfort and security of his parents' upper-class status, and his imagined role within it, and the material reality of the working-class living and labor conditions that challenge this imagined role.

David attempts to bridge this division through the act of autobiography, thereby recreating himself on the page and declaring, as the author of his own story, that he will provide an answer to this opening conundrum. Indeed, just as the end of David's parents' marriage functions as the catalyst for his loss of station and existential crisis, David's marriage to Agnes at the end of the novel provides this answer: "My lamp burns low, and I have written far into the night; but the dear presence, without which I were nothing, bears me company. O Agnes, O my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed; so may I, when realities are melting from me like the shadows which I now dismiss, still find thee near me, pointing upward!" (882). Agnes becomes the source of David's self-possession, an immutable source of stability capable

of guiding him through the uncertainties of life, and eventually, death. While the novel ends without resolving all of David's uncertainties, he has faith in the power of marriage to provide security in a Victorian class system that is becoming increasingly amorphous through industrialization.

However, more than just David's marriage to Agnes, the space of the home itself plays a fundamental role in securing his desired station. David writes the end of his story within his home, surrounded by his family. Indeed, most of the novel's conflicts and interactions between characters occur within the space of the home, which leads critics to classify it as a "Domestic novel." Mary Poovey goes as far as to equate David's work as a writer with the domestic duties of the women in the novel:

The literary man derives the terms of his ideological work from the idealized vision of domestic labor epitomized in Agnes. Like a good housekeeper, the good writer works invisibly, quietly, without calling attention to his labor; both master dirt and misery by putting things in their proper places; both create a space where one can retreat. (122)

The parallel that Poovey makes between these two kinds of labor illustrates the bond between the space of the home itself and David's work as a writer, with their shared aim to create order and stability or "put things in their proper place," and in doing so provide the individual a kind of refuge from the tumultuous public sphere or "a space where one can retreat." However, this parallel also calls the traditional gender boundaries that define the domestic space into question, and by extension how exactly it creates a retreat or refuge from the masculine public sphere. The subject matter of the Domestic Novel as a genre characterizes it as overtly feminine, which led many critics to pan *David Copperfield* as being "effeminate" at the time of its release (Rena-Dozier 812). However, Emily Rena-Dozier argues that "Dickens proposes an androgynous domestic space, in which masculine virtues such as Copperfield's work ethic and powers of

concentration infuse the domestic sphere with rigor and purpose, and feminine virtues such as Agnes's gentleness soften and humanize the realm of commerce" (814). For Rena-Dozier, David's marriage to Agnes transforms the home into the nexus point of Victorian identity, morality, and commerce, in which the masculine space of the market in which David operates as a writer and previously as an industrial laborer is morally regulated by the "gentleness" of his wife and the feminine space of the home.

However, Rena-Dozier's comments also illustrate the way in which the home, far from insulating its inhabitants from the tumultuous space of the market, essentially merges with it in the novel's conclusion. David's labor as a writer occurs next to his sleeping wife in the intimate space of his bedroom, whose face prompts him to write the final lines of the story: "I turn my head, and see it, in its beautiful serenity, beside me" (882). Certainly, marriage is not an institution immune to issues of class and commerce within the novel, as demonstrated by Aunt Betsy's failed marriage. Furthermore, if David's resolution is rooted in the form and function of distinct gender roles, the home space he envisions is "androgynous," thereby challenging the traditional ideology of separate spheres and the gender norms that this ideology reinforces. Through these contradictions, the form and function of David's home and marriage undermine the social stability that they promise to provide. This, in many ways, leads to the failure of his marriage to Dora, whose adherence to what Giddings describes as "true womanhood" or reliance on David as the sole laborer and source of income puts a strain on their relationship, emphasizing David's shortcomings as a provider and thereby challenging his masculine identity. In recognition of these contradictions, *David Copperfield* ends with the promise of a resolution to David's existential crisis instead of explicitly providing it; Agnes is not divine truth or

enlightenment after all, she merely gestures to it by “pointing upward” (882). This promise of resolution takes the form of ideology, a Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship.

Plum Bun inherits and modifies this model of Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship. Fauset’s story seemingly begins where *David Copperfield* ends, with Mattie Murray happily married to her husband Junius. Indeed, the novel characterizes this relationship with language and imagery remarkably similar to the closing lines of Dickens’s novel:

Death triumphant and mighty had no fears for her. It was inevitable, she knew, but she would never have to face it alone. When her husband died, she would die too, she was sure of it; and if death came to her first it would be only a little while before Junius would be there stretching out his hand and guiding her through all the rough, strange places just as years ago, when he had been a coachman to the actress for whom she worked, he had stretched out his good, honest hand and had saved her from a dangerous and equivocal position. (25-26)

Like David and Agnes, Mattie sees Junius as an extension of divine truth, extending his hand and guiding her through all uncertainties, even death itself. Mattie’s prophetic description of their shared lives and death also bears a striking resemblance to David’s prayer-like declaration at the end of novel: “O Agnes, O my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed” (882). The parallels between the imagery and language in both novels, as well as the fact that the marriage between Junius and Mattie serves a nearly identical function to the marriage between David and Agnes, even suggest that Fauset constructed *Plum Bun* as a direct dialogue with Dickens’s famous novel. Mattie, like David, laments the instability of her “dangerous and equivocal position” as a working-class black woman in the United States. The resolution to Mattie’s dilemma is her marriage to Junius, who offers respectability and security or “stretch[es] out his good, honest hand.” As this line illustrates, their union conforms to traditional gender roles, in which Junius plays the chivalric hero who rescues Mattie from poverty and the perils of the market, which as Giddings argues, pose a fundamental threat to “true womanhood.” The

economic security and social stability provided by Mattie and Junius's marriage also extends to the space of their home: "To Junius and Mattie Murray, who had known poverty and homelessness, the little house on Opal Street represented the *ne plus ultra* of ambition" (12). *Plum Bun* begins with the promise of Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship seemingly fulfilled, with marriage and the home granting its inhabitants self-possession and social mobility.

However, *Plum Bun* by no means naturalizes Mattie's adoption of her gender role in her marriage to Junius and the home they share. Instead, the novel depicts this adoption as a survival mechanism as a working-class black woman confronted with labor conditions and exploitation reminiscent of slavery. Mattie's contentment in the domestic space is rooted in her "ability to enjoy the satisfaction of having a home in which she had full sway instead of being at the beck and call of others" (22). Mattie enjoys her role as a wife and mother because it is preferable to the class and racial exploitation imposed on her as a domestic laborer. As she recollects, "poverty for a colored girl connotated one of three things: going out to service, working as ladies' maid, or taking a genteel but poorly paid position as a seamstress with one of the families of the rich and great on Rittenhouse Square, out West Walnut street or in one of the numerous impeccable, aristocratic suburbs of Philadelphia" (27). As a laborer, Mattie's color and class status force her to subordinate herself to the authority of rich white families. According to Lerner, Mattie's plight is by no means unusual: "There is always domestic work. The pattern has changed very little since the days of slavery. . . . Their hours are longer than those of any other group of workers, their wages low, their working conditions generally poor. As late as 1935, black women did house work and laundry for \$3 a week" (226). Lerner's comment points to the fact that domestic labor in northern cities such as Philadelphia, like sharecropping in the rural south, was largely a thinly veiled re-creation of labor conditions perpetuated under slavery.

These conditions are certainly evident in the treatment Mattie endures within the space of her employers' homes, such as the "patronizing indifferent family of people who spoke of her in her hearing as 'the girl' or remarked of her in a slightly lower but still audible tone as being rather better than the usual run of niggers" (27). Along with Mattie having to contend with this overt racism, she is simultaneously tasked with performing grueling manual labor, for which "she received four dollars a week with the privilege of every other Sunday and every Thursday off" (28). Mattie's duties and position as a wife and a mother in her home may feel liberating, but only to the degree in which they differ from the deplorable and racist conditions of her prior labor experiences.

While Mattie may have genuine affection for Junius, her marriage to him stems from necessity and the looming threat of sexual exploitation by white employers and authority figures. Following her stints as a laundrywoman and seamstress, Mattie ends up working for an actress named Madame Sylvio, who holds a firm belief in the natural promiscuity of black women or that they are "naturally loose": "Look at the number of mixed bloods among them; look at Mattie herself for that matter, a perfectly white nigger if there ever was one. I bet her mother wasn't any better than she should be" (29). Based on her belief in black promiscuity, perpetuated during slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, Mattie's employer indifferently establishes a working environment in which Mattie is at constant risk of sexual assault. A powerful white politician and friend of the Madame named Haynes Brokinaw becomes infatuated with her, and often asks her to make trips to his house. Although Mattie repeatedly expresses her concern about his intentions, Madame Sylvio repeatedly sends her anyway, stating, "How ridiculous! He'll treat you all right. I should like to know what a girl like you expects" (29). Mattie's blackness justifies

her sexual exploitation as far as her employer is concerned, and her inability to find better paying work elsewhere makes rejecting these terms very difficult.

Mattie's vulnerability under the authority of her white employers becomes painfully clear when Brokinaw invites her into his office and attempts to seduce her. While doing so, he repeatedly fetishizes her skin color and mixed race: "'Are you really colored? You know, I've seen lots of white girls not as pretty as you. Sit here and tell me all about your mother—and your father. Do—do you remember him?' His whole being reeked with intention" (30). These questions about Mattie's skin and parentage reveal that Brokinaw's intent is rooted in a kind of sexual roleplaying, specifically the re-creation of the sexual violence and authority asserted over black women by white masters. Disturbingly, Brokinaw's erotic fantasy is facilitated by the social authority that he possesses over her as a white, upper-class male in a society in which black bodies, especially black women's bodies, are routinely exploited and commodified. Gregory Phipps identifies this as one of the central conflicts of the novel, in which Mattie's "modern" and "bourgeois" aspirations are repeatedly undermined by the "figure of the southern, rural, and hypersexualized African" that is repeatedly inscribed on her (230). In response, Mattie flees Brokinaw's house and marries Junius, who affords her autonomy through a relationship in which her blackness is not equated with inferiority or a naturalized promiscuity, and the necessary financial support to reject the oppressive authority of her employer. Junius declares as much when he refuses the \$100 wedding gift that Madame Sylvio offers them, exclaiming, "She is to have only what she earned" (32). Like Agnes, Junius's role in their relationship is to bring morality to the market and provide social respectability for Mattie. For this reason, like Agnes in the final lines of *David Copperfield*, "to [Mattie] he was God" (33).

Both David and Mattie turn to Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship as a means of attaining status and respectability, but their social mobility undermines the authority of the class and racial hierarchies in which their desired statuses and respectability are rooted. Both *David Copperfield* and *Plum Bun* are *Künstlerromans*, narratives about the growth and development of artists. Sharon L. Jones argues that black female writers, such as Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West, adopted this genre throughout the Harlem Renaissance as an “effective vehicle for examining the black woman’s struggle for voice and artistic expression” (13). However, as David and Mattie develop as artists, they employ their skills to the ends of self-creation and disguise, or re-defining their own class, and in Mattie’s case, racial, identities. David’s art form is writing and autobiography, through which he tells and sets the terms for his own life story. Mattie’s art form, and the art form eventually inherited by her daughter Angela, is fashion, through which she employs her fair skin and expensive-looking clothing as racial and class signifiers, thereby manipulating how she is perceived by others. However, because David and Mattie’s identities are the sites for artistic creation, each story highlights the ways in which these identities are also artifice or constructions, along with the various social hierarchies that legitimize them. In this sense, each of these stories are “passing” narratives, which center on characters who both challenge and participate in the oppressive power structures imposed on them.

David’s writing and development as an artist is directly tied to class performance and distinguishing himself as a member of the Victorian bourgeoisie. While his story is framed by, and a product of, his growth as a writer, the language that David uses to describe himself as an artist is strangely un-artistic. David attributes his success to his productivity or industriousness: his craft improves “steadily with [his] steady application” (733). These descriptions imply, as

Irene Simon states, that industry is “David’s chief professional characteristic as an artist; this, hard work” (42). However, within the model for the industrious space of the home that David creates with Agnes, David’s industriousness as a writer is essential to his bourgeois masculinity and therefore his class status. Retroactively, David defines himself by this and other qualities of bourgeois masculinity through autobiography, in which his writing itself functions as a form of “passing,” of a class performance that sets him apart from the material conditions of the working-class labor and poverty of his childhood. While David may live and work among the lower classes at Warren’s Blacking Factory, David as the narrator is always determined to differentiate himself as “one on a different footing than the rest,” and to remind the reader that “While I was perfectly familiar with them, my conduct and manner were different enough from theirs to place a space between us” (172). David’s own narration demonstrates the fact that this “distance” or “different footing,” far from being passive and inherent, is instead constructed and actively maintained by his telling of the story and shaping of the events within. As David Theile states:

David conjures up the past in this way so that he may relive it in a controlled, stylized narrative environment. He wishes to *fix* the past, both in the sense of stabilizing it, thereby establishing his distance, and also in the sense of correcting it. Among other things, *David Copperfield* is a very writerly and revisionist confessional.” (202)

Indeed, David can say with certainty that “these pages must show” if he will be the hero of his story because he has written them, the uncertainties of his past are subordinated to his authority as the author of the text.

David reinforces traditional and oppressive class boundaries in his pursuit of social uplift, which make him strikingly similar to Uriah Heep, the chief villain in the novel. Heep shares David’s aspirations of class mobility through marriage to Agnes, but pursues them by

capitalizing on class stratification, as evidenced in his philosophy of “umbleness.” This philosophy, like David’s writing, functions as a method of class performance and social mobility, in which he employs a feigned humility to flatter and manipulate members of the upper classes. Through this performance, Heep illustrates that conventional class signifiers and relations can be manipulated, exploited, and are therefore mutable and, in many ways, arbitrary. Figures such as Heep, or Josiah Bounderby in *Hard Times*, function as agents of social disruption and instability within Dickens’s novels, invading the homes of the upper classes and assuming roles of social authority within them through marriage. While *David Copperfield* ends by punishing Heep for his transgressions, the parallels between his desire for upward mobility and David’s illustrates a clear contradiction: class boundaries concerning marriage and the familial unit are to be respected and reinforced, except of course by David. In this sense, the only thing separating Heep from David is the latter’s upper-class parentage, the legitimacy of which the central conflicts and trajectory of the novel repeatedly call into question. The parallel between these two characters exposes a fundamental flaw in the resolution of the novel: David’s marriage and home reinforce the same oppressive and unstable class system to which they aim to provide an alternative.

Passing by means of fashion, as Mattie’s art form, both subverts traditional class and racial boundaries while simultaneously reinforcing them. Despite Mattie’s seeming contentment within her home and marriage to a black man, “it amused her when by herself to take lunch at an exclusive restaurant whose patrons would have been panic stricken if they had divined the presence of a ‘colored’ woman no matter how little their appearance differed from theirs” (15). Mattie’s ability to infiltrate white society is in part based on the paleness of her skin, but Mattie’s passing relies on her use of fashion. The novel repeatedly emphasizes Mattie’s infatuation with

“pretty clothes,” along with her desire to always “be on the fringe of a fashionable gathering” (15). Ann DuCille argues that clothing plays a crucial role in *Plum Bun*, along with Fauset’s other work:

It is important to understand, however, that all this dressing and draping, primping and preening is not merely the frivolous fluff of which novels of manners are made—the affectations and petty preoccupations of bourgeois domesticity, as many critics have suggested. Rather, clothes function semiotically as sexual and racial signifiers. (94)

Clothing, along with signifying race and sexuality, also signifies class, which allows Mattie to enjoy the privileges of the wealthy white women she has worked under, who would be “panic stricken” if they had discovered she was a black woman. While DuCille downplays the connection between clothing and “bourgeois domesticity,” this connection is essential to Mattie’s aspirations for the Victorian womanhood exclusively enjoyed by wealthy white women. While Mattie dismisses these adventures in passing as a “mischievous determination to flout a silly and unjust law,” assimilating into white culture fulfills Mattie’s essential desire for respectability and self-possession: “[I]t amused and thrilled and kept alive some unquenchable instinct for life which thrived within her” (15-16). Mattie’s interest in passing and infiltrating upper-class white society is shared by Junius, who “preferred one of his wife’s sparkling accounts of a Saturday’s adventure in ‘passing’ to all the tall stories told by cronies at his lodge” (16). Junius and Mattie’s infatuation with white culture is indicative of their shared pursuit of a Victorian model of respectability that is defined by wealth and a naturalized whiteness. This model necessarily excludes Junius based on his overt blackness, and alienates Mattie from her marriage and family as she continues to operate within it.

Just as Uriah Heep plays an essential role in exposing the contradictory aspects of David’s class aspirations, Mattie’s daughter Angela exposes the inherent contradictions of her

family home and her parents' marriage. Angela inherits her mother's light skin and therefore her ability to pass. However, along with this ability to pass, she also inherits her mother's desire to assimilate into the white bourgeoisie. While Mattie repeatedly dismisses this desire, Angela fully embraces her light skin as a necessary vehicle for social mobility, or that "First, the great rewards in life—riches glamour, pleasure—are for white-skinned people only. Secondly, that Junius and Virginia were denied these privileges because they were dark" (18). Angela's two conclusions about the significance of her white skin illustrate the contradictory nature of her mother's passing. Mattie's desire to assimilate into white bourgeois culture through racial uplift underlies her marriage to Junius and the home they share, while simultaneously demanding that she participate in racism and class discrimination. As a result, the Murray home becomes segregated on the basis of those who can pass, Mattie and Angela, and those who cannot, Junius and Angela's sister Virginia. Even when they pass within feet of each other on the street, the social hierarchies that Mattie and Angela reinforce by passing prevents them from acknowledging one another. While Mattie expresses pity for having to hide from her husband and daughter, Angela voices the cruel reality of their shared adventures in passing: "It's a good thing Papa didn't see us, you'd have had to speak to him" (19).

While *David Copperfield* ends with an expression of faith in Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship, albeit a complex and often contradictory one, *Plum Bun* demonstrates its fundamental failure. Mattie Murray's adherence to this ideology leads her to subject her husband and each of her daughters to the very racism and class discrimination from which she believes it will insulate them. Angela inherits this ideology and her mother's desire to assimilate into the white bourgeoisie as a means of achieving autonomy and respectability, which ironically results

in her re-creation of her mother's "dangerous and equivocal position" as she pursues a white husband in the New York marriage market.

CHAPTER 3

MARKET DONE?: THE REVISITED GOBLIN MARKETS OF *PLUM BUN: A NOVEL*

WITHOUT A MORAL

Within the tradition of passing in literature, fair-skinned black women are routinely depicted as sexually and racially transgressive characters who stand in opposition to racial uplift and therefore must be reformed or punished. Valerie Smith discusses *Plum Bun* as an extension of this tradition, particularly in terms of the division between the two sisters in the novel: “While Angela develops an appreciation for material comforts from her light-complexioned mother, her darker father and sister (Junius and Virginia) are more concerned with using their talents to uplift the race. Angela is constructed as merely self-indulgent; Virginia is virtuous, diligent, and bold” (45). For Smith, this division within the Murray household is only bridged once Angela journeys to the marriage market in New York and is sexually exploited by Roger, after which she “recognizes the limitations of her desires” and “accepts her race” (44). Within this reading, Virginia is Angela’s moral compass, an exemplary model of black womanhood who guides Angela away from her social aspirations in the market and back to the domestic sphere, to a shared pursuit of racial uplift through sisterhood and marriage to a black man. In this sense, Smith argues that the novel participates in a passing narrative tradition where “antiracist and white supremacist ideologies converge, encouraging their black readers to stay in their places” (44).

Smith certainly recognizes *Plum Bun*’s participation in a moralistic tradition of passing narratives that promote racial uplift, but many critics identify the novel’s engagement with this

tradition as a critique of it. *Plum Bun*'s title derives from a nursery rhyme, which emphasizes the text's adoption of the moralistic passing narrative as a kind of fairy tale. However, the novel's subtitle simultaneously declares that it is a "Novel Without a Moral," which suggests that the text subverts the essential resolution that fairy tales promise. Deborah McDowell argues that this contradictory function of the fairy tale frame is essential for this text as well as Fauset's other work: "Continuing a pattern she began in an early novella, *The Sleeper Wakes* (1920), Fauset focuses on the powerful role fairy tales play in conditioning women to idealize marriage and romantic love" (xvii). McDowell identifies the novel's use of the fairy tale frame as a vehicle for criticism, particularly aimed at black womanhood and mandated heteronormativity. Mar Gallego also notes the importance of fairy tales in the novel, especially Mattie's stories about her tumultuous life as a young woman and the importance of marriage, in which she attempts to "become a model for her daughters" but ultimately "fall[s] into the temptation of idealizing her life and relationship to her husband" (165).

For Angela and Virginia Murray, the fairy tale in question is the traditional passing narrative as defined by Smith, and its resolution or moral is the model of Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship which they have inherited from Mattie and Junius. It is this dominant ideology as the moral destination of the traditional passing narrative that *Plum Bun* models and critiques. However, Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship reinforces the moral passing narrative, which makes both McDowell's and Gallego's readings of the novel's conclusion, and therefore the novel's larger trajectory, problematic. Angela ends the story by marrying Anthony, thereby perpetuating the same model of social uplift that facilitates racial, economic, and sexual exploitation of black women throughout the story. In response to this overwhelming contradiction, both critics underplay the marriage as a conclusion, and instead

insist on Angela's preserved autonomy. McDowell argues that this marriage is an insignificant compliance with genre conventions: "Consistent with the romantic conventions on which it draws, the novel ends as Angela is planning to marry. But she has developed an independence and autonomy that needs ratification neither from men nor marriage" (xxi). Gallego similarly downplays the potential danger of marriage to Angela's newfound freedom:

The fact that Fauset delays Angela's final encounter with Anthony, her true love, until the last page of the novel underlies her deconstructive aim. This love, therefore, 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. (185)

While each of these critics recognize and champion the subversive elements of *Plum Bun*, marriage, and by extension Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship, is inextricably linked with the essential moral of the traditional passing narrative, which as Smith states, encourages "black readers to stay in their places." Indeed, many critics, including Jürgen E. Grandt, have made this connection painstakingly clear in their assessment of the story's conclusion: "Finally forced to reassess her life, Angela musters the strength to pledge allegiance to her race publicly and, in the process, find her real self. Soon thereafter she decides to depart for Paris, where on Christmas Day she is reunited with the man who is her true love" (54).

Based on these competing readings of the text, undermining the significance of the marriage in the novel's conclusion or alternatively accepting the novel's endorsement of it jeopardizes *Plum Bun*'s critique of black bourgeois femininity. The marriage in the novel's conclusion, however, is significant precisely because it reinforces the power of the marriage market and Victorian femininity to impose themselves on black woman across generational, geographical, and cultural boundaries. *Plum Bun* illustrates this process by modifying the language, structure, and inherent contradictions of another Victorian antecedent: Christina

Rossetti's "Goblin Market." In doing so, Fauset's novel avoids steering black readers towards a virtuous path of racial uplift, or urging them to "stay in their places." Instead, Angela's pursuit of whiteness and marriage, as an extension and inevitable consequence of the model of racial uplift that both she and Virginia inherit from her parents, will inevitably be passed on to future generations.

On its surface, "Goblin Market" is a moralistic tale that emphasizes the dangers of exploring female sexuality and the importance of familial bonds, which is certainly in keeping with dominant attitudes about Victorian womanhood at the time of the poem's composition. As Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbot state,

As urbanization altered the agrarian landscape and countryside diminished, women gradually lost their once essential roles within domestic economies. Their decreased value to the economy made them less equal as wives, although they became more valorized as mothers. . . . In the meantime, myths of women as fragile and innately sick were used to keep middle-class women at home and to prevent them from challenging men for jobs and for control of the public sphere. (117)

Through urbanization, which coincided with the formation of the Victorian bourgeoisie, women were relegated to the home, and increasingly barred from participating in a dangerous and male-dominated public sphere. Rossetti's poem seemingly reinforces these values, particularly through Laura's dangerous journey into the market. Near the beginning of "Goblin Market," Laura ventures into the glen outside of her home and purchases the fruit being sold by the sinister goblin men, which makes her gravely ill. She is eventually saved by her sister Lizzie, who journeys to the market, confronts the goblin men, retains her virtue by refusing their goods, and saves her sister with the goblin fruit that once poisoned her. The final lines of the poem lend themselves to this moralistic reading. As mothers, Lizzie and Laura finish their telling of the story with a celebration of sisterhood and the importance of family:

‘For there is no friend like a sister
 In calm or stormy weather;
 To cheer one on the tedious way,
 To fetch one if one goes astray,
 To lift one if one totters down,
 To strengthen whilst one stands.’ (562-67)

Although Laura and Lizzie face the dangers and uncertainties of the market, in which the female body is commodified and exploited by men, they respond to these uncertainties through their devotion to familial bonds and eventually Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship. As David reflects on the uncertainties of his youth and his marriage to Agnes in the final lines of Dickens’s novel, Laura and Lizzie champion the power of sisterhood as they are surrounded by their children within the domestic space. While Laura, like Angela, may have “gone astray,” with Lizzie’s virtue and selflessness they have each become mothers and exemplary models of Victorian womanhood. On this level, Rossetti’s poem functions as a cautionary fairy tale, passed from generation to generation, which enforces the notion that womanhood *is* heteronormative domesticity. Within this fairy tale, female sexuality should be relegated to marital and maternal relations within the home, and as “sisters” women have a responsibility to preserve their virtue as well as police the virtue of other women, or as Smith might say, ensure they “stay in their places.”

While the poem seemingly endorses the virtues of Victorian womanhood, critics repeatedly identify the text’s many contradictions and inconsistencies that subvert this ideal, which makes it an essential antecedent to Fauset’s novel. Just as *Plum Bun* contends with the overwhelming myth of black female promiscuity, Rossetti’s poem was published within a theological discourse dominated by figures such as Edward Bouverie Pusey, who emphasized the “innate sinfulness of womankind” in his repeated preaching on Eve’s role in the Fall, and whose “teaching was possibly the most powerful single influence of his time on public attitudes towards

the morality of women” (Palazzo xiii). Edenic imagery pervades Rossetti’s poem, particularly in terms of the goblin fruit, but its contradictory uses and modifications consistently challenge Pusey’s model of Christian morality and the “innate sinfulness of womankind” instead of affirming it. Simon Humphries argues that “Rossetti’s writing repeatedly pivots upon contradiction and obscurity, and its intellectual rigor is nowhere more evident than in this determination to probe the uncertainties of Christian theology” (391). For Humphries, along with critics such as Mary Wilson Carpenter and Victor Roman Mendoza², these moments of reinterpretation and contradiction contribute to the poem’s strengths; they signal and subvert dominant cultural discourses about women that repeatedly exclude them, and provide new avenues for female engagement with male-dominated traditions and power structures.

This engagement with male-dominated traditions and power structures is evident in the poem’s engagement with canonical authors and texts, such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Catherine Maxwell argues that Laura’s journey into the market is representative of this process:

This reading sees the poem as an allegory of the woman writer’s negotiations with her male precursors’ texts, but it also charts how individual male-authored writings are absorbed into the body of the poem. While it shows that Rossetti was aware of the difficulties a woman might experience in relation to the work of poetic ‘fathers’ and ‘brothers,’ it also demonstrates that she sees women’s contact with men’s writing as a potential source of strength that can be appropriated and adapted to female use. (79)

As with the poem’s modification of Christian imagery and theology, “Goblin Market” inherits and critiques an extended tradition of “poetic ‘fathers’ and ‘brothers,’” which exercises the power to establish and preserve fundamental conceptions of womanhood apart from women themselves. Indeed, Roderick McGillis defines the space of the market within these terms: “In

² See Mary Wilson Carpenter’s “‘Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me’: The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’” and Victor Roman Mendoza’s “‘Come Buy’: The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market.’”

this world men are the rhymers, the speakers, the storytellers, the merchants” (212). However, Rossetti’s poem modifies these textual antecedents to expose their limitations and inherent contradictions.

Plum Bun, as novel written by a woman in the Harlem Renaissance, contends with a remarkably similar male-dominated cultural and artistic context, exacerbated by racial prejudice as an additional layer of exclusion. Fauset’s novel, therefore, modifies a Victorian antecedent that contends with an oppressive and contradictory model of nineteenth-century womanhood by modifying its own textual antecedents. Through modifying Rossetti’s poem, *Plum Bun* examines Victorian black womanhood within a white male-dominated public sphere, the ways in which women are sexually and economically exploited within this space, and how the home, which seemingly provides a refuge from this exploitation, ensures its inheritance and repetition.

In “Goblin Market,” the goblin fruit embodies the modification of biblical and literary imagery, as well as its exploration of female sexuality in the male-dominated discourse of the market. While the goblin fruit poisons Laura, it also functions as an antidote when she consumes it off of her sister’s body. While the moralistic surface of the poem warns of the dangers of exploring female sexuality, Lizzie’s curing of her sister is paired with a sexual invitation, comparable to the goblin men’s “Come buy, come buy”:

Come and kiss me.
 Never mind my bruises,
 Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
 Squeez’d from goblin fruits for you,
 Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
 Eat me, drink me, love me (466-71)

While Lizzie conducts herself as a model of female virtue in her encounter with the goblin men, her body becomes a new and regenerative site for the sexuality that Laura desires in the market. Lizzie does not represent a chaste opposition to Laura’s sexual exploration, but instead a

continuation or modification of it; a fellow woman who works with Laura to set the terms for their shared sexual desires apart from the male-dominated heterosexuality of the market. Laura and Lizzie's exchange of the goblin fruit is benevolent, as opposed to the commodified and regulated exchange of the goblin men.

Based on the multi-faceted qualities of the goblin fruit, critics repeatedly read the poem as a queer text, which challenges the heteronormativity and Victorian morality of its conclusion. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar compare the goblin fruit to the fruit offered by Satan to Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

[T]he Satanic serpent persuades Eve to eat the apple not because it is delicious but because it has brought about a 'Strange alteration' in him, adding both 'Reason' and 'Speech' to his 'inward Powers.' But he argues if he, a mere animal, has been so transformed by this 'Sacred and Wisdom-giving Plant,' the fruit will surely make Eve, a human being, 'as Gods,' presumably in speech as in other powers. Rossetti's goblin men, more enigmatic than Milton's snake, make no such promises to Laura, but fruit-eating scene parallels the *Paradise Lost* scene in so many other ways there may well be a submerged parallel here too. (567-68)

Gilbert and Gubar's Miltonic reading of "Goblin Market" illustrates the notion that Laura's journey to the market and consumption of the fruit is as much about her sexuality as it is about her autonomy, or her desire to possess herself sexually and socially within the space and discourse of the market. While this desire for self-possession leads to Laura's apparent fall from grace in the poem, it also mirrors Lizzie's triumphant acquisition of the fruit later in the poem. Lizzie successfully obtains the fruit from the market, and is able to cure her sister with it, because she opposes the goblin men's authority over her consumption: the male-dominated heterosexuality that they attempt to violently impose on her and the market in which she operates. The fruit itself is not dangerous, and instead empowers Lizzie and Laura in the queer space and sexual discourse they establish between themselves.

Within the context established by Gilbert and Gubar, the poem's conclusion becomes an ominous reassertion of the Victorian ideology that both women live under. While both the characters rely on familial bonds and the space of the home itself to create a queer alternative to the exploitative heterosexuality of the market, the home also imposes the same male-dominated heteronormativity from which Lizzie and Laura sought refuge. Lizzie and Laura end the poem by extolling the virtues of family and sisterhood to their children as they retell their story about their encounter with the goblin men. However, this retelling calls the satisfaction of their current positions as wives and mothers into question:

Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
 Their lives bound up in tender lives;
 Laura would call the little ones
 And tell them of her early prime,
 Those pleasant days long gone
 Of not-returning time (547-51)

Laura and Lizzie equate marriage and motherhood with being “bound up” or constrained. Laura may have experienced horror within the space of the market, but she refers to this period of her life as her “early prime” and “pleasant days long gone.” While the home functions as a refuge for both characters from the goblin market, the familial unit also mandates oppressive gender roles for both women, which Laura differentiates from her life before marriage. In this regard, if the security of the space of the home is rooted in marriage and the Victorian familial unit, it essentially functions as an extension of the male-dominated heterosexuality of the market. Both sisters share “mother-hearts beset with fears” because the home that seemingly provides an alternative to the exploitative marriage market instead perpetuates it.

Rossetti's poem ends with Laura and Lizzie's fear that their daughters will repeat their encounter with the goblin men and the inability of the home to shield them from it, which is exactly where *Plum Bun* begins. Mattie marries Junius and establishes a family as a means of

escaping the looming threat of socio-economic hardship and sexual violence under white employers as a working-class black woman. However, the opening lines of the novel characterize this security as artificial: “Opal Street, as streets go, is no jewel of the first water. It is merely an imitation, and none too good at that. Narrow, unsparkling, uninviting, it stretches meekly off from dull Jefferson Street to the dingy, drab market which forms the north side of Oxford Street” (11). Mattie and Junius view their house on Opal Street as respectability and a safe haven from poverty, but this imagined state of the home stands in sharp contrast with its material reality. Their house is not immune to the poverty and racial discrimination they face as black workers: the home is “unsparkling” and “uninviting,” which mirrors the “dingy, drab market” just down the street. The home and the market are connected, dependent on one another, and therefore challenge the legitimacy of Junius and Mattie’s marriage as genuine social status and stability. It is, after all, no “jewel of the first water,” but “merely an imitation, and none too good at that.”

Plum Bun’s opening lines bear a striking resemblance to the first lines of “Goblin Market,” which also depicts this connection between the space of the home and the market. No matter where Laura and Lizzie are during the poem, they constantly hear the goblin men selling their goods: “Morning and evening / Maids heard the goblin’s cry” (1-2). This connection between home and market created by the goblin cry draws Laura to the goblin men before she ever leaves her home, or as Terence Holt argues, “the separation between the two realms cannot conceal the home’s contamination by exchange” (54). Just as Laura is drawn to the market in her pursuit of social and sexual self-possession, Angela desires this same autonomy, a desire which functions like the goblin cry throughout the novel: “Freedom! That was the note which Angela heard oftenest in the melody of living which was to be hers. With a wildness that fell just short of

unreasonableness she hated restraint” (13). This desire puts Angela in direct opposition with her childhood home, which she recognizes as an extension of racial and class-based discrimination faced by her parents, not a deliverance from it:

Her father’s earlier days as a coachman in a private family, his later successful independent years as a boss carpenter, her mother’s youth spent as a maid to a famous actress, all this was to Angela a manifestation of the sort of thing which happens to those enchained as it might be by poverty, by weakness, or by color. (13).

Angela’s home is defined by constraints, by poverty and racial prejudice that she is capable of evading when she passes and distances herself from her family. Angela views her whiteness as a currency, capable of purchasing “the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure” (17), which she is only capable of spending within the market. This desire for freedom in the market sets Angela apart from her sister Virginia, who like Lizzie is tied to the space of the home and faith in the sanctity of the familial unit: “Father, mother, and children, well-dressed, well-fed, united, going to church on a beautiful Sunday morning; there was an immense cosmic rightness about all this which she sensed rather than realized . . . all other satisfactions must radiate from this one, greater happiness could only be a matter of degree but never of essence” (22). While Angela desires material satisfaction within the space of the market, Virginia is satisfied within the black familial unit established by her parents. Through the temptation of the market and its intrusion into the space of the home, the text establishes a moral/immoral binary between the Murray sisters based on their commitment to family, race, and class, which it repeatedly contradicts.

Despite their differences, Angela and Virginia are each defined by their desire to assimilate with white culture through the ideology of Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship inherited from their parents. This is certainly the case with Virginia, who desires to “marry a man

exactly like her father and conduct her home exactly as did her mother” (22). Yet, as established by Gerda Lerner and Paul Giddings, this Victorian model for womanhood is rooted in an upper-class status and a naturalized whiteness. Virginia’s inheritance of her parents’ ambitions illustrates her commitment to an ideology that excludes her on the basis of her blackness, and challenges her moral authority as a character committed to racial uplift. As for Angela, while she desires autonomy as a white woman within the space of the market, she is defined by the same inherited ideology as her sister. Angela explicitly establishes this ideology when she arrives in New York: “Power, greatness, authority, these were fitting and proper for men; but there were sweeter, more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too. Such power she would like to exert in this glittering new world, so full of mysteries and promise” (88). Angela desires to become a powerful white socialite, but pursues this end through marriage and home ownership:

If she could afford it she would have a salon, a drawing room where men and women, not necessarily great, but real, alive, free, and untrammelled in manner and thought, should come and pour themselves out to her sympathy and magnetism. To accomplish this she must have money and influence; indeed since she was so young she would need even protection; perhaps it would be better to marry . . . a white man. (88)

Angela’s desire to pass and assimilate into the white upper classes through marriage is an extension of the ideology of racial uplift that Virginia subscribes to, which ultimately illustrates its contradictory reinforcement of class and racial difference. This contradiction is apparent in Angela’s argument with Virginia when she makes her decision to leave for New York and cut familial ties. Virginia chastises Angela for her selfishness and refusal to declare her blackness, and Angela responds by saying: “What’s the matter? You certainly don’t think I ought to say first thing: ‘I’m Angela Murray. I know I look white but I’m colored and expect to be treated accordingly!’ now do you?” (79). Virginia would have Angela impose racial difference, and

therefore class difference, on herself despite the fact that each of them pursue an ideology that promises respectability through racial equality and economic mobility. Angela's immorality stems from her refusal to be "treated accordingly" based on her blackness, a position to which Virginia also aspires. Following this exchange, Virginia also comes to this realization, recognizing her own naivety and "feeling suddenly childish in the presence of this issue" (80). Rather than morality, the essential difference between these characters is Angela's ability to pass, which enables her to pursue the projected goal of racial uplift, namely assimilation into white bourgeois culture, in a way that her sister cannot.

Angela leaves her home and passes as a white woman in the New York marriage market, where she seemingly achieves the autonomy she craves by courting a rich white man named Roger Fielding. Angela succeeds in this courtship with the skills she has inherited from her mother, manipulating her "good artificial pearls" and white skin as signifiers of race and class privilege (122). By successfully passing and gaining the attention of a rich white man, Angela momentarily achieves the social and sexual self-possession that she craves:

[I]n addition to the excitement which she—a young woman in the high tide of her youth, her health, and beauty—would be feeling at receiving in the proper setting the devotion and attention which all women crave, she was swimming in the flood of excitement created by her unique position. Stolen waters are the sweetest. And

Angela never forgot they were stolen. (123)

Angela's pleasure in her courtship with Roger stems from sexual desire as much as it does from transgression and autonomy, or her access to a newfound social authority within the discourse of the marriage market. The language of this passage, especially Angela's desire for "stolen waters," mirrors Laura's Miltonic temptation in the goblin market. However, like Laura, while Angela's self-possession is potentially empowering, she still operates within the male-dominated discourse of the marriage market. Within the terms of this discourse, Angela is at a class, race,

and gender disadvantage in comparison to Roger, which forces her to commodify her body. When Laura arrives at the market, she confesses that she has “no coin” to purchase the goblin fruit (116), which the goblin men respond to by saying “Buy from us with golden curl” (125). Within this exchange, Laura feels empowered as a buyer whose body is an abundant currency that she controls. However, for the goblin men, Laura’s body is a product which they purchase and exploit through their gender and economic authority within the market, thereby diminishing the autonomy Laura seeks to purchase from them. In this regard, while Angela’s ability to pass seemingly empowers her within the marriage market, the power she wants is Roger’s power as a wealthy white man, which enables him to set the terms for their relationship and her role within it.

Under Roger’s authority, Angela is robbed of the autonomy that she initially feels in their relationship. While Angela is able to manipulate Roger through her body and his sexual desire, Roger refuses to marry her on the basis of her lower-class status and instead treats her as a mistress. As McDowell states, “For [Angela], the plum is power and influence attainable only through marriage to a wealthy white man. For [Roger], the plum is sex, to be bought and consumed . . . Angela tries to ‘buy’ in a market that only allows her to ‘sell’” (xix). When confronted by Angela, Roger confesses to taking advantage of her on the basis of her class throughout their relationship: “‘Oh, I was unspeakable! But I had it in my head,—you don’t know the things a man has borne in him about designing women—if he’s got anything, family, money—’ she could see him striving to hide his knowledge of his vast eligibility” (319). Roger justifies his sexual exploitation of Angela through an erotic fantasy about “designing women,” which is doubly erotic because it accentuates his own masculine authority. This erotic masculine authority is rooted in class privilege, or his awareness of his “vast eligibility” and access to

power through “family” and “money,” that he attempts to hide from Angela as he describes the terms of their relationship.

Roger’s sense of power almost directly mirrors the erotic role of the white master that Haynes Brokinaw fetishizes and embodies when he attempts to sexually assault Mattie. Although Roger is only conscious of the class-based authority he is imposing on Angela, he forces her to be complicit in his overt racism throughout their courtship. When Virginia arrives in New York, Angela is forced to ignore her because she is with Roger (159). While passing with Roger during their first dinner together empowered her, this moment of passing illustrates her helplessness within their relationship, along with her participation in the same class and racial discrimination that she fell prey to in Philadelphia, which plagued her parents and now her sister. As a result, Angela takes on the role of Lizzie as she confronts the goblin men: she rejects the exploitative terms of the New York marriage market, her role as Roger’s mistress, and eventually his marriage proposal. Angela comes to the conclusion that she desires a marriage among equals, both in class and race, which mirrors her mother’s decision to marry Junius after her encounter with Brokinaw. Indeed, Angela makes this connection abundantly clear when rejecting Roger: “Why is it that men like you resent an effort on our part to make our commerce decent? Well, it’s all over now. . . . Marriage was good enough for my mother, it’s good enough for me” (320).

Following this rejection, Angela momentarily commits to adopting the Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship of her mother, and therefore re-creating the black home and family that she felt compelled to leave at the beginning of the novel. Angela considers marrying Matthew Henson, a man who, like Virginia, is committed to the cause of racial uplift and would in many ways be as Junius was to her mother. However, like Laura at the end of “Goblin Market,” she comes to the realization that marriage would be constrictive, and that she still longs

for the independence and adventure of the market: “She was not happy, but she was not through adventuring, through tasting life. And she knew that life spent with Matthew Henson would mean a cessation of that” (362). Furthermore, Angela comes to the conclusion that the home itself is a vehicle for exclusion and discrimination, defined by the same unassailable class and racial boundaries that it supposedly provides refuge from. When she returns to the house on Opal Street, it appears as alien and unwelcoming as it was when she was a child: “Her heart quickened, tears came into her eyes as she turned that corner which she had once left behind her forever in order to taste and know life. . . . How small it was and yet how full of secrets, of knowledge of joy, despair, suffering, futility—in brief Life!” (362). Angela attempts to enter this space and access its secrets, its potential to provide the “Life” or autonomy that she left home to find. However, when she tries to go inside, the black woman who currently owns the house slams the door on her, saying that she wants nothing do with “poor white trash” (363). Angela comes to the conclusion that the house on Opal Street is the manifestation of an ideology that promises self-possession and security that it can never provide, which would elude her as it did her parents. Therefore, Angela makes the choice that Lizzie and Laura do not: she leaves Matthew and moves to Paris to become an artist, slipping the constraints of marriage and motherhood.

However, despite Angela seemingly breaking the cycle of female exploitation in the marriage market, the ideology of Dickensian Heteronormative Proprietorship imposes itself on her in the conclusion. Despite the fact that the final section of the novel is titled “Market Done,” the marriage market that Angela has left behind finds her in Paris. While waiting for a present from her sister, Anthony, a man she cares for but repeatedly refuses to marry, surprises her at her house on Christmas: “His eyes on her astonished countenance, he began searching about his

pockets, slapping his vest, pulling out keys and handkerchiefs. ‘There ought to be a tag on me somewhere,’ he remarked apologetically, ‘but anyhow Virginia and Matthew send their love’” (379). While marriage to Anthony is markedly different than the prospect of marriage to Roger, Mason Stokes argues that, as opposed to Fauset’s earlier novel *There is Confusion*, heterosexuality functions antagonistically in *Plum Bun* and therefore opposes resolution: “[I]f we take seriously *Plum Bun*’s representation of heterosexuality as a sign of incoherence rather than coherence, then we are also forced to rethink the power of heterosexuality as a norm capable of regulating and enforcing sexual commerce” (74). For Angela, marriage is not security, but a “regulating” force that ensures her continued participation in “sexual commerce.” While she has renounced her role as a buyer in the marriage market, Virginia and Matthew do her shopping for her by sending Anthony as a gift. In doing so, they ensure that the market is by no means done. If “Goblin Market” ends with “mothers’ hearts beset with fears,” *Plum Bun* ends with these fears confirmed through the power of Victorian womanhood and the familial unit to impose themselves on women across barriers of time, culture, and race.

CHAPTER 4

ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S BOOKCASE

While *David Copperfield* redefines the home as a space that empowers David as an artist, *Plum Bun*'s Angela, like her mother, is constrained by its authority and prevented from defining herself outside of an imposed role within it. Anthony Hale argues that Fauset's prescribed role in the Harlem Renaissance mirrors these constraints, citing the implications of Fauset's moniker as a "Literary Midwife": "The term 'literary midwife,' though apparently intended favorably, served to occlude her considerable abilities as a novelist, critic, poet and essayist, for having written four novels in less than ten years—she was one of the most prolific writers of her generation" (163). Despite her considerable contributions to the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset wrote in a male-dominated literary movement that, like American Modernism, actively excluded female voices and influence.

Given this inhospitable "home" for Fauset's work and career as a writer, it is not surprising that *Plum Bun* reaches out to other literary traditions and textual predecessors, such as Rossetti's "Goblin Market." These modifications and the dialogues they create provide avenues for black women writers to identify and critique sources of oppression within their immediate culture, while enabling them to experiment, innovate, and slip the limitations imposed on them by that culture and the values that define it. Therefore, *Plum Bun*, along with other novels like it, demand the critical flexibility and precision to explore these dialogues. In failing to adopt this approach, critics risk retroactively imposing and operating under limitations that authors like Fauset clearly did not abide by in their reading and writing: *Oliver Twist* likely occupied a spot

on Zora Neale Hurston's bookcase. This likelihood does not diminish her contributions to African American literature, and instead points to important transnational dimensions of her work. Being receptive to these possibilities can make the essential difference between empowering writers whose texts defy accepted or expected paths of influence as a means of countering racial and patriarchal oppression, and silencing them.

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