

Pardoning Passing in *Comedy: American Style*

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Abstract

This article examines Mary Condé's work, "Passing in the Fiction of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen," and the validity of its claim that Fauset and Larsen supported African American females' decisions to pass in order to gain the rights they were entitled to as citizens of the United States (with "passing" being a term for the conscious decision by a non-white individual to pretend to be white because their skin is light enough that this is believable). Though Condé focuses on multiple works by both Fauset and Larsen, the present article focuses only on those claims in relation to Fauset's *Comedy: American Style*. Condé's claims are compared with another theory regarding Fauset's view on passing, namely that *Comedy: American Style* condemns passing in general, only finding it pardonable for brief periods of time and only when it is done for the right reasons (with the right reasons being related to the individual's economic status). Both theories are compared through extensive textual evidence found in *Comedy: American Style* that relate to passing, specifically focusing on the portrayal of passing in terms of the characters Janet, Phebe Grant, Marise Davies, Nicholas Campbell, Dr. Cary Sr., and Olivia Cary. Finally, it is argued that Fauset's view can be explained by the theory that passing should be supported only as long as it is economically necessary.

Poverty and race are interconnected issues that Jessie Redmon Fauset brings to the fore in *Comedy: American Style*, a novel in which several characters pass their way into a destructive hell and can only be pardoned if they are passing to secure their economic state. Mary Condé, in her essay “Passing in the Fiction of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen,” has read a different argument into these authors’ novels. Condé sees Fauset as arguing against the belief that “blacks were oppressed not because they were black but because they were poor” through her “depictions of prosperous black middle-class families”ⁱ and portrays her as an author apparently universally sympathetic to women who pass (though not to women who leave America and thus leave the racial struggle entirely). While Condé’s assumptions about ‘sympathy’ and poverty may be true within Larsen’s work, they read false against the destructive nature of passing which is displayed in the text of *Comedy: American Style*, where characters are only excused for their attempts to deny their true selves and communities when it is an economic necessity, and then the pardon is only momentary and fragile.

Condé begins from the assumption that Fauset is less concerned with socio-economic status than with the race issue, and views *Comedy: American Style*, along with Fauset’s *There is Confusion*, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, and Larsen’s *Passing*, through a lens that does not see them as the naturally connected issues that they are. Though she does admit that many of the characters in their novels come to points where their personal growth is stifled because they are unable to enter into the kind of work that best suits them, Condé mainly connects this issue with the stifled dream of chosen work during the years of slavery, something that is often solved in black novels by sojourns to Europe if it cannot be solved through passingⁱⁱ. It is instead the “sympathy” these authors show to the characters, specifically the women characters, who pass that leads Condé to believe Fauset and Larsen advocate passing as a productive and healthy way to seize “those rights to which all American women, black or ‘black’ or white, are entitled.”ⁱⁱⁱ Condé ends by citing real, successful women who chose to pass in the place of characters she cannot find in Fauset’s work.

In the discussion related directly to *Comedy: American Style*, Condé focuses on Olivia Cary’s and Teresa Cary’s move to France as the thing which ultimately breaks the characters. She sees the move to France itself as the “punishment” of these characters, a move which no longer allows Teresa to do “worthwhile work”^{iv}. In this way, Condé does not recognize or disregards the importance of the fact that it is because Teresa attempted to pass after absorbing her mother’s damaging ideas that she becomes trapped in the first place, while it is poverty, which Condé assumes is not one of Fauset’s main concerns, which keeps Teresa in France after she realizes the horror of her situation and desires to leave. Condé is working under the assumption that Fauset’s “punishment” of these women, and the tragedies that occur because of the characters’ attempts to pass (like Oliver Cary’s briefly mentioned suicide) are meant to evoke sympathy for them and women in general who have to go through the difficulty of choosing to pass. Condé reads into the novel that it is only when characters leave America that they lose something essential—that it is not passing in America that is the destructive thing, but leaving America, and pulling yourself out of the ‘struggle for rights,’ which she assumes is the goal of the characters who pass.

Condé does not seem to recognize the myriad motivations for passing, other than in her brief mention of Olivia as “the ‘confirmed Negro-hater’”^v. This failure to understand the diversity of individual motivation is why she does not seem to notice Fauset’s ongoing, unsympathetic critique of the characters who choose to pass. Fauset presents passing generally as a destructive act that breaks apart communities, families, and individuals. However, she does allow that there

are multiple motivations for passing, some of which are more legitimate or less harmful than others. Throughout *Comedy: American Style*,^e it is the characters who do not choose to pass whom the reader is invited to praise; though there may be some pity for those who have lost things and people because of their choice to pass, as readers we are generally invited to be critical of those who take that route to ‘success.’ Olivia Cary, the central figure of the novel, chooses to pass for all of the wrong reasons (whether she is conscious of those reasons or not is a separate issue), which Fauset makes clear through every character that is pardoned for passing—none of them hate their ‘inherent’ racial qualities, they are all passing at least partly to secure their economic status, and some are themselves critical of their decision to pass.

Beginning at the beginning, we are immediately presented with Janet, Olivia’s mother, who chooses to pass for white for a short amount of time for distinctly different reasons than her daughter. Janet, presented as passing exclusively for economic reasons, is pardoned for her choice (not praised, but not condemned either), a choice Fauset makes clear is a necessity for (economic) self-preservation and does not carry with it any initially obvious, personally destructive consequences. Janet passes for white in order to keep her job at the factory, and the reader is told that “she would have little chance to earn even this pittance, she knew, if her color were guessed at”^{vi}. This sets up her decision to pass as a necessity for life (even when passing, all she can earn at first is a “pittance”), something that, while it was a conscious decision, was not a real choice given the alternatives. Her decision to pass allows her to advance to the position of assistant forewoman at the factory and eventually gives her “not only better hours but an appreciable difference in wage”^{vii}. Janet, would not have been able to see passing as a negative if it allowed her this economic security and increased standard of living. We as readers are invited to feel the same way, as we are told that it was “not only” better hours and pay, but an “appreciable difference” in pay. The emphasis given here highlights the dramatic difference between Janet’s former and current states, and it cannot be read as a criticism of her decision to pass in these circumstances.

Though she is not criticized for her decision to pass when it means increased economic security, Janet is praised when she ceases to pass. This distinction is brought out clearly in her honesty about her true race with Professor Inness, when she seeks his assistance in beginning an ambitious housing project for colored Harvard students. Instead of becoming a barrier, her forthrightness about her race “assures [him] that [she] may be foolish” but that she is also “honest”^{viii}, giving him reason to trust that she is worthy of his assistance. In this case, honesty is rated higher than race, and in this instance and throughout the novel honesty is praised over passing, even when the decision to pass could be excused due to its connection with economic necessity. That honesty would be rated higher than race by Fauset can be read two ways. First, Fauset might be advocating a kind of black solidarity, *not* passing in order to “seize those rights to which all American women...are entitled”^{ix} truthfully and thus irrevocably. Second, Fauset may be arguing that honesty is the more important trait than race, or to take it another step, that honesty is the inherent trait within the individual that should be praised and cultivated, while those traits connected with race, not being inherent but instead being socially created, are unimportant because they are fictions. Both of these explanations allow for passing to be pardoned when economic well-being is concerned, as it is impossible to be a productive member of any race if you are homeless, starving, and unable to find work because of your race, and it is forgivable to cover a fiction with another fiction if it means you can provide your family with a meal.

Phebe Grant goes through a situation similar to Janet’s, and is treated by the novel in a very

similar way when her decision to pass and her desire to be honest are brought up in the text. Phebe makes no conscious effort to pass (meaning that, unlike Olivia, she has not accepted, perhaps not even been touched by, the destructive white ideals), and is generally very forthcoming about her race to the point where she stands up in class and tells her teacher that she is colored in front of everyone (a “foolish” but honest act that is praised by Phebe’s childhood friend^x). She passes by default only when working at the dress shop, and even then only because she is advised by Mrs. Rogers, the white store owner, “not to let anybody know you had Negro blood in your veins” because “she knows her own people”^{xi}. Phebe is so internally “honest” about her race that it takes a white outsider to recognize the potential (business) problems and propose a potential ‘solution.’ Others, who know Phebe’s honest character state that they could not be made to believe that she would pass “except for business reasons”^{xii}, which is indeed the only reason Phebe is induced to pass. The continued connection of passing and economic necessity underscores Fauset’s critique of passing in general. There was nothing except “business reasons” which could induce someone who “think[s] it’s all right to be what you are”^{xiii} to deny her ‘true race’ and her personal understanding of her self. It is only “business reasons” that make it pardonable (though never encouraged).

It is not only those characters who attempt to pass for white (and those types of people they represent) whose motives Fauset analyzes and critiques. Marise Davies ‘passes’ for black(er) to heighten her (exotic) appeal as a dancer in order to enjoy greater *economic* success. She, like Phebe and Janet, passes for “business reasons” by “giv[ing] it out that she’s from New Orleans, that she never associated with white people, and that’s how she’s kept her art intact”^{xiv}. Her success as a performer, possibly heightened because of her decision to ‘pass’ (implied, but never explicitly stated), is mentioned throughout the novel and can be seen directly through the clothes and car of her kept husband Nicholas. But her passing is not presented as clearly and distinctly an economic necessity. Though there is little direct evidence in the text that invites the reader to judge her decision to ‘pass,’ the and the dissatisfied existence of her wayward husband can be read as a signal, however small, that passing, even for potentially pardonable economic reasons, is still destructive.

The economic necessity of passing and the racial barriers to economic success are brought up even by those characters who generally disapprove of passing. Nicholas Campbell is not able to pass, but finds his work opportunities threatened by the ‘Race Question’. Because of Phebe’s apparent whiteness (her default passing, if you will), Nicholas finds that his association with her is harming his academic career, as he is being failed by a professor who believes he has not “stayed in [his] place” and is “chasing about after white women”^{xv}. It is only after this racial stumbling block is revealed to him that he begins to wonder “if, perhaps, Mrs. Olivia Cary might not have had some justification in trying to steer her domestic ship away from the shoals of the question of color in America”^{xvi}. The “justification” Nicholas sees for Olivia’s actions is that of “business reasons,” the same “justification” that Fauset finds pardonable. Without Phebe’s accidental passing, academic life (and later, economic life) would be easier for Nicholas, the conclusion he comes to in the novel and the excuse he uses as the cover for his rejection of her. As readers, we are invited perhaps to be critical of his dishonesty when dismissing Phebe, but we are also invited to understand his rejection of passing, even when it is accidental, just as he begins to ‘understand’ Olivia’s motivations.

Dr. Cary, Sr. also has “business reasons” to pass, yet chooses to remain “foolish but honest,” something that is praised (though the “foolishness” is not hidden from the reader). Though he is a good and established doctor, he still struggles sometimes to make ends meet, something that

the text implies is due, in part, to his honesty about his racial identity, and that the text explicitly states is exacerbated by “the heaviness of his wife’s hand when she dipped into the family purse”^{xvii} in her attempts to keep up with white society. He cannot move his practice to another city or leave it for a few months vacation, even if it would help his family in the long run, because it would be too difficult for an honest, black doctor to re-establish a patient base. To cease practicing, for the shortest time, would “[let] another man get a thumb-nail hold on [his] practice,” which, in the strained economic times within the novel, would greatly harm “your colored professional man”^{xviii}. Through this, it is implied that his color means greater economic hardship, and that he would be “justified” in passing if it would better secure his economic position.

These characters are all presented in opposition to Olivia, the character whose action and portrayal grate most against the ‘sympathy’ Condé reads into Fauset’s novels. Olivia’s obsessive desire to pass is initially sparked when she is rejected as something lesser by her peers in childhood when they realize that she is not white, and is continually fed throughout her life by the white racist beliefs she has absorbed and her desire to secure a position beyond question through social ascent. Her decision to pass is never presented as pardonable (except when misread by Nicholas as something economic), as Fauset makes the connection between Olivia, her views, and almost every personal tragedy in the novel abundantly clear.

When the destructive nature of passing is revealed, however slightly, it is always in connection to personal relationships. It is not always the person passing who is hurt by the act; instead it is others connected to that person, through family ties or friendship. Though seen clearest in Olivia’s case, the thread of her destructive decision can be traced through almost every single character’s personal miseries (the allusion to Marise’s unhappy marriage;- the trouble Phebe’s unintentional passing causes Nicholas;- Teresa’s various relationships, which fail because of her decision (or suggestion) to pass; and Janet’s decision and failure to properly explain the why of her passing, which fans the destructive flame of Olivia), working to underscore Fauset’s general critique of passing and her understanding of its destructive nature, no matter how good or forgivable the reason.

Olivia’s passing is so extraordinarily destructive because it is founded on the idea of negation, as “Olivia’s teachings had urged not so much: “Be white,” as “Don’t be colored””^{xix}. This push for negation implies that Olivia understands she never can actually ‘be white’ but it also implies that Olivia believes it is better to be nothing at all than to be ‘colored,’ relegating ‘colored’ people to an even lower social position than they would hold in the usual hierarchy. Even when she is young, before she begins to teach her children the hatred of color, Olivia “was daily cherishing within herself the idea of emerging into a world which knew nothing of color”^{xx}, with “knew nothing of color” meaning forever devoid of ‘color’ and thus devoid of anything that would make her “looked down upon”^{xxi}, and not the healthier ‘color-blindness’ that is often promoted as a means for equality.

Olivia seeks this erasure of race because, to her, ‘color’ is “a hateful disgrace”^{xxii}, something which she believes of its own power makes one’s life “narrow and stultified and stupid”^{xxiii}. She clearly sees hierarchies at play, with the novel’s repeated use of the phrase “looked down upon” emphasizing this understanding, making clear (to the reader) that Olivia’s desire to erase her race is connected to her desire to rise in the established hierarchies, or to rise above them. However, she does not see clearly the distinctions between the different hierarchies she is involved within. This confusion emphasizes the connection in Fauset’s work between race and social class—Olivia wants to be a member of the upper-class so she and her family will never be “looked

down upon,” however, she has mixed race and class together so thoroughly that she sees only her unhealthy attempts to pass as the way to rise. In her focus on race alone as the problem and not the hierarchies themselves as the barriers to economic freedom, Olivia is presented as having the wrong motivation for passing, the consequences of her decision to pass are all presented as destructive, and the reader is not invited to pardon her for her choice.

While Condé reads a separation between socio-economic class and the decision to pass in *Comedy: American Style*, Fauset’s goal seems to be to highlight the extent to which the decision to pass is connected to economic security. According to Condé, Fauset’s female characters do not need to ask for pardon for their decision to pass—they are sympathized with and praised for finding a way to claim their rights as Americans. The emphasis on the destructive nature of passing and the continued analysis of the characters’ motivations for passing, in the novel itself, seems to imply a deeper message, arguing instead that the only time it is remotely acceptable to deny your internal, true self and hope for pardon is when that self is in danger of destruction. The strain of, “for a life-time, to be on account of color, in jeopardy of one’s peace of mind, of one’s pride, of one’s life in some places in this democratic country”^{xxiv} makes the denial of self a possibility, while the direct threat (physical, or economic) makes it acceptable or pardonable, though never encouraged.

ⁱ Mary Condé, “Passing in the Fiction of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 24 (1994): 95.

ⁱⁱ Condé, 102.

ⁱⁱⁱ Condé, 104.

^{iv} Condé, 102.

^v Condé, 101.

^{vi} Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Comedy: American Style* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 12.

^{vii} Fauset, 13.

^{viii} Fauset, 16.

^{ix} Condé, 104.

^x Fauset, 30.

^{xi} Fauset, 171.

^{xii} Fauset, 81.

^{xiii} Fauset, 42.

^{xiv} Fauset, 121-2.

^{xv} Fauset, 182.

^{xvi} Fauset, 184.

^{xvii} Fauset, 109.

^{xviii} Fauset, 118.

^{xix} Fauset, 65.

^{xx} Fauset, 13.

^{xxi} Fauset, 15, 31.

^{xxii} Fauset, 8.

^{xxiii} Fauset, 31.

^{xxiv} Fauset, 188.