

Passing: The Evolution of
Passing Constructs and Motivations
in American Literature

by

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This work seeks to examine the concept of passing and the evolution of the term as a construct, including the type, motivation, and means, and along with it, the changing significance of passing. This work does not seek to focus on solely racial passing, but instead how passing exists not only as a racial construct, but also in regard to social, cultural, or other areas of passing. While looking at the motivations and in what way individuals utilized passing to take on other identities, this work will also explore historical contributions to these evolving constructs and motivations for passing. Chapters of this work will look at historical events in order for readers to understand the impact those events had on individuals during the periods. The review of these historic events and their impacts allows an illustration of the causes for changes in why people were choosing, attempting, or successfully passing during a set period. This work serves as an exploration into not only the connection between works in American literature and correlating historical events, but also to illustrate that passing does not exist solely as a racial construct; instead, passing exists for individuals who are attempting, successfully or not, to take on a different identity.

Passing: The Evolution of Passing Constructs and Motivations in American Literature

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Introduction

Many times, passing is thought to be the simple act of a person of color, primarily of African American heritage, passing for white. Often, when passing is thought of in this context, it is labeled as a racial construct and only examined in terms of racial identity. However, over the years, there have been many conversations among scholars as to what this action fully entails, and what it truly means for not only an individual, but for communities, races, genders, and socio-economic social relations as a whole.

Through the years, many emotions and reactions have also been connected to racial passing, along with various reasons for committing such an act. As Allyson Hobbs states in her book *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing*, “racial passing is an exile, sometimes chosen, sometimes not” (Hobbs 4). For some, the decision is theirs to make, and for others, the decision is made for them by family or even society. While racial passing is a dominant part of what passing is, it does not define the term itself.

When first approaching the subject of passing, many are drawn to think of African Americans who attempt to identify, either successfully or unsuccessfully, as white. Works such as James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1927) have served as primary illustrations in American literature of select racial passing. In addition, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1854) and Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894) also enter into the conversation of African Americans passing for white. These works create the status quo of passing as a racial act, committed by African Americans and opening the door for conversation of how passing evolved from the Antebellum period to Reconstruction. Furthermore, the conversation can be expanded to include previous and later periods beyond the two previously mentioned.

The problem, however, rests in the fact that passing has become contained in most research to the area of African American passing for white. By confining passing to being only a racial concept, the full scope of passing has yet to be fully explored. Other forms of passing have not been addressed to the fullest extent. The connection between earlier periods and later periods are missing and unmade.

While passing can be traced to early European years, examining the span of periods in American literature consisting of the late colonial, Romantic, Realist, and finally modern periods, allows a beginning study of the evolution of passing. Studying selected works from these individual periods illustrates how the literature during each of these periods reflects different motives to passing as either a social, gender, or a traditional racial concept. Furthermore, these different forms of passing are reflections of the time periods in which the literary works were composed providing an in-depth understanding into the motivations as they changed.

Subsequently, in order to begin looking at the evolution of passing through the course of American literature, it is vital to understand the concept of passing itself. In the article "What is Whiteness?" Nell Painter proclaims that "our search for understanding in matters of race automatically inclines us toward blackness, although that is not where these answers lie." Instead, Painter states that while blackness and race have been observed as social constructs, by looking at whiteness as a social construct, instead of approaching from just the angle of blackness, one will find more answers.

Passing is not simply the racial act of black passing for white. Over the centuries, blacks have passed for white, but in addition, whites, Native Americans, immigrants, and various other classifications of individuals have used passing not only in racial contexts, but also social,

cultural, and other contexts as well. The reasoning behind the act of passing must be taken into account and a deeper examination must occur. As a whole, passing exists when an individual, classified as having one socially constructed identity, then attempts to hide that established identity by assuming the appearance of another, accepted identity established by social norms. By taking on this accepted identity, whether it be a variance in racial, social, cultural, or even further identities revolving around sexuality, citizenship or gender, the individual is committing an act of passing for a new identity.

Therefore, instead of choosing to look at blackness or whiteness, when dealing with passing, a broader scope of constructs should be thoroughly examined. The flaw in traditional ideas of passing rests in looking at blackness or whiteness at opposite ends of the spectrum without taking into consideration the various areas that exist outside the realm of just black and white¹. Religion, ethnicity, social class, social economics, and culture are often excluded from the discussion, but, in fact, contribute a great deal to the motivation behind various groups choosing to pass during a specific time periods, which is reflected in the same period's time. In limiting passing to one perspective, the broader understanding of this matter is not fully addressed. For that reason, passing cannot be restricted to one identity or another, but instead should encompass the wide range. By expanding the horizons, a more in-depth perspective can be obtained, especially when recognizing the evolution that has occurred in the area of passing as it pertains to the Realist period in American literature. The evolution of various forms of passing can be made apparent to readers by using literature from a specific time period as a primary source. In *A Chosen Exile*, Hobbs states that "literature is a crucial artifact that provides powerful evidence" and that "passing has been a dominant theme in not only African American

¹ For further reading on traditional ideas of passing in regards to other individuals see Allyson Hobbs' *The Chosen Exile*.

fiction, but other areas of fiction as well” (7). Instead of confining passing to strictly a racial concept, one must look beyond passing as simply what one is trying to escape, seeing it instead, as what a character is trying to accomplish by the act.

In the article “Inventing Whiteness: Cosmetics, Race, and Women in Modern England,” Kimberly Poiteven references Ruth Frankenberg’s definition of whiteness as “most often theorized as an ‘unmarked category’ against which other races are defined” (62). The definition of whiteness itself has actually had an unstable background, much like the instability of the black identity (Painter). Over time the shift in whiteness has come as a result of accommodating “the demands of social change” (Painter). Therefore, it is easy to see why passing has evolved over the years, depending on the social and cultural issues of the time period. Showing these overarching connections through different periods, the depth of passing will demonstrate how passing should not be confined to a racial construct, but instead has evolved over the years depending on social and gender as well as racial issues present during set time periods.

This work will examine the evolution that occurred within the field of passing, including the type, motivation, and means, and along with it, the changing significance of passing. Each chapter will examine a specific period in American literature, highlighting specific events during each period. The exploration of these events makes it possible to understand the impacts those events had on individuals in each period and causing this change to occur in regards as to why people were choosing, attempting or successfully passing at that time.

The first chapter will focus on the late colonial period and examine works that illustrate one category of passing. In this chapter, Susannah Haswell Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) serve as the primary works used to investigate the reasons for passing that were significant to the period. These pieces

written by narrators of different racial backgrounds allows the understanding to be made that individuals during this time were not passing in terms of passing for another race. Instead, these two works portray different experiences that similarly illustrate individuals wishing to gain social acceptance, which feeds into gaining their legal freedom from slavery or servitude.

Chapter Two examines the Romantic period in American literature by focusing on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Not only does this chapter address the traditional stereotype of passing for white, but it also explores the deeper motivation for slaves, specifically for women. While men typically only used racial passing, by examining these two specific narratives, the gender issue presented with the institution of slavery can be observed through contrasting female characters. Female slaves used passing to both maintain family relationships and to use it as a means of escaping sexual exploitation.

The third chapter moves into the Realist period with the Jim Crow era in American history. While many scholars hone in on passing during this period, this chapter examines specifically how the authors' perspectives influenced their written work and uses of passing in the work itself. Works such as Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), James Weldon Johnson's *An Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1927), and Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1933) together illustrate the variance in each author's perspective. In addition, this chapter looks at the concept of identity in relationship to passing and the question of intentional versus unintentional passing.

This works' final chapter moves into the modern period looking at Zara Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973). In this section, the concept of racial passing is expanded to look at other races besides African

Americans that used passing as a means of bettering their lives. The majority of literary scholarship tends to focus on navigating the black and white binary, and in the process excludes other races. Both *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Farewell to Manzanar* illustrate how individuals from minority groups used passing to combat daily prejudice and to gain social acceptance from peers.

While each of these chapters each addresses similar motivations, the evolution of passing can be seen through the cross-examination of the works with corresponding historical events. For example, while the first, third, and fourth chapters all show how individuals passed based on purely social constructs set forth by white English standards, the alteration comes in why and how each character who passes uses his or her ability to pass. In the colonial period, passing was done by illustrating religious standards set by society in order to rise in social circles and gain legal freedom. However, for an African-American in the Reconstruction period, one used social passing in order to secure safety from racial unrest after the end of slavery in addition to other motivations that will be further discussed in connection to the period. Alternatively in the fourth chapter, social passing is examined in connection to social prejudices that minorities faced partly due to war time stereotypes and propaganda. Additionally, these chapters explore other constructs of passing during each period. For this reason, each chapter begins with the relevant general history of the period that the works are written during in order to provide a sense of important historical events that occurred and affected individuals of that specified period. After establishing this historical overview, then the chapter will go into a literary critical analysis of the individual works to explore the literary history of passing along with the motivations to do so in each period.

In addition to the period changing with each progressing chapter, language and terminology will vary depending on the period being examined. Throughout this work, the language that is used will vary depending on the chapter. This is important to note because terminology correlates with the changing motivations of passing. Since the first chapter focuses on primary works that illustrate how individuals used passing outside of racial aspects but in regard to social status, and revolve around the coming to America experience, individuals should be referenced to by their native origin instead of racial classification.

Moving into chapter two, terminology will shift towards classifications of skin color since the move in passing shifts towards passing from one race to another. Since outward appearance is the heavy distinguisher in passing, naturally word choice when discussing individuals will center on black or white. While many are tempted to refer to someone of color as an African American, the term African American creates a problem when discussing the antebellum period. While they were no longer directly from Africa and were born in America, slaves did not enjoy rights that whites did, and furthermore, were not viewed as citizens, but instead as property. Thus, the problem with “American” in African American.

On the other hand, after the reconstruction period, Jim Crow laws restricted legal and social options for emancipated slaves and their children establishing the new generation. However, with the passing of the 14th Amendment in 1868, blacks became citizens, and, therefore, became Americans. Thus in this chapter, the language will shift to African Americans. This period focuses primarily on the legal status of African Americans at this time and the motivations for passing in order to establish their place during a time when many sought to limit their rights and freedoms. With this, it only seems befitting to refer to these individuals by their newly established identity, so African American is better applied here. However, white is still

the best term to use to reference someone of white physical characteristics, such as since Caucasian refers to genetic make-up, and passing for white appearance was the goal individuals were seeking to accomplish².

The fourth chapter terminology becomes even more distinguished and complex since the entire argument of this chapter, while still addressing outward appearance, primarily focuses on the integration the concept of cultural passing. With this and the entwining topic of ethnicity as it is related to identity, characters in *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Farewell to Manzanar* are reference by their cultural identity, Jewish or Japanese American. The chapter will further explain how the cultural language presents the new construct of cultural passing as it is reflected in American literature.

Overall, passing should not be confined to the concept of racial passing, where an individual of one race successfully or unsuccessfully passes physically for another race. Instead, this work examines a broader definition of passing, where instead passing is defined as an individual that has been classified as having one physical or socially constructed identity preset by society, but instead that individual conceals that predetermined identity by assuming the appearance of a socially accepted identity. Therefore, by adopting this accepted identity where it be of racial, social, cultural, sexual, gender, or some other construct, the individual is performing the act of passing. By highlighting significant historical events that affected specific groups of individuals, the motivation to pass by these individuals can be observed in works focused on in each chapter.

² See Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* for further discussion.

Chapter 1: Colonialism

Even to this day, many scholars still debate over the initial start date of American literature. While some scholars believe that it begins with the original inhabitants, Native Americans, and their literature, other scholars argue that colonists while still under rule of the British crown were the first “American” writers. On the other hand, there are others who state that American writers simply did not exist pre-American Revolution, excluding all prior works, such as Native American narratives. However, while different start periods affect the works that are classified as American literature, starting with the late colonial period of American literature, used here consisting of literature from and portraying the years just before and after the American Revolution, is an ideal period to begin examining the different concepts of passing because this period allows readers to see how English and African immigrants add to the conversation on passing. Therefore, when investigating the context of colonial passing, one must establish when the need to pass truly began on the North American continent.

First, one must look back at a brief history of enslavement on the continent in order to examine *Charlotte Temple* and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Since both of these works illustrate passing in the context of slavery and indentured servitude, it is important to make the connection with relevant historical events. Furthermore, each work illustrates passing outside the status quo. These works portray passing in the context of African slavery and indentured servitude.

Slavery in the Americas goes back to the early days of exploration and settlement. When first arriving in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Spanish conquistadors recognized the opportunity to begin taking Native Americans as captives and using them as the labor force on the new continent. The continents’ indigenous people endured extreme cruelty and hardship

with the arrival of these explorers. For years, the enslavement of Native Americans swept across North, Central, and South American continents under the guise of Christianizing the “savages”.

After witnessing the hardships that the native people faced, activist Bartolome de las Casas began advocating for the replacement of Native Americans with African slaves. With his proposal, the conversation about bringing African slaves to the New World became a dominant conversation and one that soon was acted upon. Around the time that Emperor Charles V named Las Casas bishop of Chiapas, a poor area in southern Mexico in 1544, Las Casas asked for permission to begin importing African slaves to the Americas (Knight xxx).

Similarly, the English started to bring African slaves soon after the settlement of Jamestown. In 1619, a Dutch ship arrived on the Virginia coast, with twenty African slaves (Frazier 22). Upon leaving the African coast, the ship was said to have been carrying slaves, but upon arriving on the Virginia shore, only twenty had survived the difficult, inhumane voyage across the sea (Parkes 52). Since slavery had not existed in the British colonies prior to their arrival, there was “no precedent in English law for slavery, [and] these Negroes and those imported later were ‘absorbed in a growing system [servitude based on English apprenticeship and vagrancy laws] which spread to all the colonies and for nearly a century furnished the chief supply of colonial labor” (Frazier 22). At this time, the institution of slavery did not yet have clearly defined parameters.

Over the years, more and more African slaves were brought to the Americas and West Indies from African shores, where they had been taken captive by other Africans and sold to Europeans for goods and weapons. By 1700, the number of slaves in the colonies had grown to 20,000 (Parkes 52). Over the course of the next seventy-five years, “shipowners from Great Britain and New England made a regular business of buying slaves from Negro chieftans along

the coast of West Africa and transporting them to West Indies and Southern colonies” (Parkes 52). In the years prior to the American Revolution, detailed legal codes were written in response to growing slave numbers and the need to keep slaves submissive. In addition, a small movement began before the American Revolution, primarily among the Quakers of Pennsylvania (Parkes 53). These individuals claimed slavery was an evil act that needed abolishing (Parkes 53). With this came the first steps towards abolition in America.

While African slaves endured many hardships, starting with the Middle Passage, a grueling voyage from the West African coast where slaves were taken from African slave traders, sold, and brought to North, Central or South America for purchase, there were other emigrants who made an equally horrendous journey to the colonies as well. During the same time that ship owners were exploiting the African slave trade for profits, ship owners also made a business of selling servants in the colonies. These indentured servants were not slaves, but instead came from England, Germany or other European countries. For example, many Germans who came to America could only do so as indentured servants. Ship owners’ agents would tour the Rhineland and made grand promises to potential emigrants. Afterwards these emigrants were loaded onto ships for transport to the colonies. During this voyage, that sometimes took several months, “at least a third of them often died from malnutrition, scurvy, or some infectious disease, while the remainder, after being put ashore in the colonies, were auctioned off to employers” (Parkes 51). The only positive outlook for indentured servants was that at the end of their contract they could look forward to being free and owning their own land (Parkes 51).

In England, servitude in its various forms was a widespread custom (Wood 14). Servitude typically began as a “relationship between servant and employer,” and “involved a contractual arrangement, which might be verbal or written” (Wood 14). Most established

contracts were for an annual period, but there were cases where contracts were written with a longer term of employment stated (Wood 14). While servants were viewed as “dependent,” they still preserved their “critically important legal rights with respect to their labor and their persons” (Wood 14).

In 1583, Sir George Pecklam was credited with introducing the same labor system to the New World (Wood 14). In the Virginia Company plans for its colony, the basic elements of servitude were apparent (Wood 14). Once established in the New World, this “extension of English theory and practice” became known as indentured servitude (Wood 14). Of the total number of people who left England for the Virginia colony during the seventeenth century, seventy-five to eighty percent of those individuals did so as indentured servants (Wood 14). The system grew to be labeled as one of the biggest businesses of the seventeenth century.

Once settled in the colonies, “unfree whites often worked alongside slaves in cities like Philadelphia and New York City and sometimes ran away with slaves” (Roediger 30). For instance, a Yorkshire newspaper printed a letter stating that “indentured servants to be ‘sold for slaves at public sale’ and ‘subject nearly to the same laws as Negroes [with] the same coarse of food and clothing” (Roediger 30). It is not a surprise that British contemporaries “likened this ‘infamous traffic’ to chattel slavery” (Roediger 30).

Indentured servants were “transported in abysmal conditions alongside convicts, often sick and always filthy on arrival” (Roediger 30). Upon arriving in the colonies, they were “sold at auction, sometimes after being stripped naked” much like African slaves taken to slave markets in the Caribbean and colonial ports (Roediger 30). Indentured servitude gained recognition much like the term kidnapping because it illustrated the harsh truths of the labor recruitment used in the colonies (Roediger 30).

Taking not only African slaves, but also indentured servants into consideration is a vital part of expanding the concept of passing from the traditional outlook of passing for white. By investigating works from the late colonial period, it is possible to establish a baseline for passing as it first appeared in American literature and as it pertains to these two diverse groups of people: slaves and indentured servants. Instead of passing for white, these two contrasting yet similar groups were using passing to gain legal freedom from contracts/servitude or bondage, and they were elevating themselves socially according to the standards established by the period's society.

Before the American Revolution, many poor whites were brought to the colonies under false pretenses, and upon arrival they lived in difficult conditions under the guise of servitude for years or possibly their entire lives. Many of these individuals died from inhumane treatment, starvation, and unhygienic living conditions. For the article, “‘As White as Most White Women’: Racial Passing in Advertisements for Runaway Slaves and the Origins of a Multivalent Term,” Martha Cutter researched various advertisements, specifically those that advertised for runaway slaves. Cutter's research argues that racial passing occurred earlier than the antebellum period when runaway slave advertisements became prevalent. Similarly, during the colonial period, there were many advertisements for runaway indentured servants. These advertisements illustrate that while passing has today become associated with passing for white as it would in future years that was not always the only meaning of passing in colonial American times.

In terms of indentured servitude, passing represented a free life and self-fulfillment for poor whites who had come to America essentially in bondage in order to obtain a better life than the one left behind in England. To pass was to be free. Instead of living a life of servitude, these runaway indentured servants could strike out and prosper for themselves. It was only years later during the antebellum period and with the introduction of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, as

advertisements for runaway slaves appeared, that passing became associated with “passing for white” and, therefore, linked with racial meaning.

As stated before, while passing may be thought of as always an act accomplished by those of African ancestry, this is not always the case. However, during the colonial period, individuals were coming from England to the colonies in search of a better life and a way to elevate themselves. Many of these individuals were too poor to purchase their own passage to the New World. Instead, those seeking passage sought employment in the form of an indentured servant. These people also sometimes attempted to pass, passing for being free rather than indentured.

The misconception lies in the base understanding of what life for an indentured servant consisted of. While many historians, rightly, examine the cruelty and inhumane conditions of the Middle Passage, history has failed to illuminate the same for others who came to the Colonies not possessing legal rights or status (Parkes). For these individuals, passing offered a means to gain legal freedom and become a free citizen.

Published originally in England in 1791 and then published again in America in 1794, Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*’s classification as American literature is questionable due to the fact that Rowson herself was considered to have “mixed nationality” (Douglas vii). Born in England but raised in America when her father was commissioned to the colonies before the Revolution, Rowson had first-hand experience with coming to and living in America, especially under circumstances of distress since her family was held under house arrest at the start of the American Revolution. Although she returned to England, Rowson re-emigrate to America in 1793 with her husband William Rowson (Douglas vii). Therefore, the author’s own experiences,

while not a harsh experience like those of indentured servants, it can be viewed as an insightful perspective of the narrator (Douglas vii).

When written, Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*'s intended audience consisted "mainly of middle-class young women and those concerned with their fate" (Douglas x). Literary historian, Cathy N. Davidson even argues that the work's intended audience was in actuality working-class girls, men of various ranks who would share the book with their daughters, wives, and fiancés of the period (Douglas x). These groups are marked by "class diversification and gender inclusion" with the common denominator being that they were all Americans, specifically Americans whose rights were questioned due to gender, race, or class (Douglas x). At the time Rowson's work was used as a tool to persuade these individuals in society to behave in a morally acceptable manner according to society's standards. Although *Charlotte Temple* does not have a specific example of indentured servitude in it, the novel itself serves as a metaphor of indentured servitude and an illustration of the coming to America experience that an immigrant would capability.

As a naïve young woman, Charlotte Temple is swept away by her emotions and finds herself eloping to America with a young man. These actions caused her to ruin her good name, and she becomes the "fallen" woman, the lowest place in society in which a young woman of fairly good breeding could find herself. Because Charlotte has paid for her voyage to America through her sexual liaison with Montraville, her character represents an immigrant traveling to America as an indentured servant. Like many indentured servants, Charlotte leaves her family behind in England under false pretenses, only to arrive in a new country with no rights or means to independently support herself. Charlotte defies the rules of being a socially acceptable young woman when she runs away with intent to marry but gets on board the ship to America before

the man she is traveling with marries her. Her role as a woman is to fulfill her filial duties; however, she shuns her duties when she allows her emotions to control her. Readers are then prompted to question why Montraville continued to pursue Charlotte if he knew he could not marry her.

Montraville “was the youngest son of a gentleman of fortune, whose family being numerous, he was obliged to bring up his sons to genteel professions, by the exercise of which they might hope to raise themselves into notice” (Rowson 39). At this time, it was expected that one would marry for financial security or to elevate one’s social status, and Montraville was no exception to this social norm. Marriage was typically not an action of love, but a financial arrangement and investment in one’s future; therefore, having *Charlotte Temple* use the character of Montraville and his background illustrates the theme of societal expectations and meeting those expectations in order to rise one’s social status. Montraville’s father pushes this theme that “success in life depends on entirely on yourself” (Rowson 39). With Montraville’s father, Rowson captures the drive to raise one’s social status.

Even La Rue through marriage is able to gain social acceptance. Her character also serves as a contrasting representation as to the outcomes for indentured servants. She becomes the one to “set the fashions, she was toasted by all the gentlemen, and copied by all the ladies” (Rowson 109). Gaining social acceptance is about becoming the favorite of social circles. While Charlotte was ruined, La Rue, now Mrs. Crayton, raises herself not only to gain political and legal rights through marriage, but also to gain favor with American social circles. Thus, establishing herself in Colonial America. Through LaRue’s character storyline, in addition to the previously mentioned Montraville, the connection to passing as a social concept is further developed in the work.

Illustrating a broad experience of the Atlantic Slave Trade, *The Interesting Narrative*, serves as an exemplary work of how even slaves during the colonial period were able to gain social acceptance despite the hindrance of not being able to physically pass for White. Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is a prime example of how passing in this period was more in regard to societal acceptance instead of the racial context in which it will become known for in periods to come.

Despite the fact that Equiano has grown up accustomed to slavery around his father's "many slaves," he is not prepared for the harsh experience when he is taken captive and becomes a slave himself (Equiano 57). After he is brought to the African coast and sold, he crosses the Atlantic in what came to be called the Middle Passage. Through his description of the slave ship, readers of *The Interesting Narrative* are provided a first-hand account of the Middle Passage. Besides their deteriorating physical states, the following passage also illustrates the diminishing emotional shape of those taken captive and loaded like cattle on slave ships:

This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (Equiano 67)

Equiano, a young child at this point, is fortunate enough to be on deck instead of crammed below in filth and disease, but he witnesses others being brought on deck, "some of whom were almost

daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries” (Equiano 67).

At this point of his narrative, Equiano is still socially unaccepted as he still clings to his African heritage; however, as the memoir progresses, Equiano begins picking up on life in white society. Equiano recalls how he had often seen his master reading, which ignited his “curiosity [sic] to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so, to learn how all things had a beginning” (Equiano 75). He is now eager to learn, and learning now is an opportunity that is within his grasp by gaining the trust and confidence of his master.

During his time as a slave, Equiano travels from the Caribbean to America, and then on to England. Upon his arrival in England, he “soon had the opportunity of improving” himself, “which he gladly embraced” (Equiano 84). Equiano is then sent to “wait upon the Miss Guerins, who had treated me with much kindness when I was there before; and they sent me to school” (84). He has now reached a point that he elevates himself even further in society’s eyes by receiving an education. Receiving an education, Equiano is molding himself to fit white standards. To further gain social acceptance, after servants inform him that he “could not go to Heaven” unless he is baptized, writes “[I] communicated my anxiety to the eldest Miss Guerin,” since he had “become a favourite, and pressed her” to be baptized (Equiano 84). When his master refuses to let him be baptized, Equiano has gained enough acceptance with Miss Guerin that she “insisted on it; and he being under some obligation to her brother complied with her requests” (84).

To be baptized in this period was significant because “according to the law of England . . . ‘a slave who had been christened or baptized became enfranchized’” (Frazier 23).

Therefore, by being baptized, despite not being legally free from slavery, Equiano was raised higher according to societal standards.

Although his narrative accounts the harsh realities of slavery, the work ends with Equiano obtaining enough funds to purchase his own freedom. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* not only depicts a contrast to Charlotte Temple's downfall at the end of Rowson's novel, but shows how through perseverance an African slave was able to not only gain legal freedom from slavery, but also establish one's self in society. Equiano is passing as a British member society, so while he cannot physically pass for white, he adopts the British lifestyle and mannerisms. Therefore, he is not racially passing, but instead passing in terms of social constructs.

As readers examine *Charlotte Temple* and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, the issue of passing is not directly addressed in either work, but yet is an underlying theme in both. While the character of Charlotte Temple falls in society's eyes, Equiano is raising himself. The fact that Equiano, a former African slave, builds himself, and Charlotte, a young white woman, succumbs to temptation and perishes due to her dramatic downfall, is a shocking twist. While passing often times is referenced as a racial concept, this contrast of characters' fates illustrates how passing also takes on social constructs when individuals such as African slaves like Equiano or indentured servants that Charlotte Temple represents are not physically passing but instead are either successfully, or unsuccessfully in Charlotte's case, passing according to societal expectations.

After looking at individuals using passing to gain social acceptance, it is practical to shift to examining the aspect of passing to gain legal and political freedom. By molding one's self into the expectation set by society, an individual of lower class and social standing can pass and

move up the social hierarchy ladder. Using this elevated status, individuals in colonial America could then gain political and legal freedom to further better their lives.

Gaining legal freedom was the goal for those who came to America either under contract of indentured servitude or in the bonds of slavery. While often a difficult task to accomplish, there were individuals, void of the issue of race, that were able to raise themselves enough to gain financial and/or legal independence. For women, this often meant a suitable marriage. For African slaves, this meant saving financially and purchasing their own freedom.

While *Charlotte Temple* itself does not contain any specific examples of indentured servitude or slavery, the novel is symbolic of the experience of coming to America and centers around the theme of man versus man, or more specifically man versus society. Rowson uses character development to establish a difference in experiences in regard to gaining independence.

The protagonist of the work, Charlotte Temple, is a fifteen-year-old girl who comes from noble blood. In the novel's introductory flashback, readers learn that Charlotte is actually born the daughter of a forbidden marriage. Charlotte's father, Henry, is the son of an earl, and with that birthright came certain filial duties. While titled, Henry's father sought to arrange marriages that would financially secure the family, and when Henry fell in love with a young woman who did not possess the financial means to be a suitable match, he is disowned for marrying her regardless. To establish a suitable character, Rowson provides Charlotte a reputable family of substantial means. Charlotte is provided the opportunity to attend a boarding school. However, being young and naïve, young Charlotte allows herself to be led astray by someone that she believes she can trust in and will not lead her astray.

Mademoiselle La Rue, a young, French teacher at Charlotte's boarding school, possesses a less than reputable background, having "eloped from a convent with a young officer, and on

coming to England, had lived with several different men in open defiance of all moral and religious duties” (Rowson 23). Despite this stain on her character, La Rue was able to establish herself at the boarding school, which allowed her to regain a resemblance of social standing in England. However, it was not long before La Rue found herself bored and possessing “too much spirit of intrigue to remain long without adventures” (Rowson 23).

Rowson establishes two contrasting characters early in her work that will each embark on differing experiences throughout the rest of the work. Charlotte’s experience begins by eloping to America with Montraville after he makes grand promises to the young girl. Upon arriving in America, Charlotte Temple as a woman and immigrant does not have political rights in the country. Not possessing legal rights in the country, Charlotte is bound to the abstract bonds of the American socio-economic ladder, one that she, unfortunately, is unable to climb. From that point of her arrival, her life continues on a downward spiral. Upon arriving in America, Charlotte finds herself abandoned by Montraville, pregnant and destitute.

All the while that Charlotte is sinking further into her despair, the former La Rue marries Colonel Crayton to pass as the respectable Mrs. Crayton. She “was the universal favourite: she set the fashions, she was toasted by all the gentlemen, and copied by all the ladies” (Rowson 109). After coming to America, she, like Charlotte, does not possess legal rights, but La Rue is able to use marriage to establish herself in social circles, gain political rights through her husband, and pass as a well-respected member of society. When Charlotte reaches out to her former acquaintance, Mrs. Crayton shuns poor, young Charlotte because she is a threat to the persona she has created for herself. Charlotte is a connection to the past that Mrs. Crayton is trying to disassociate herself from in order to maintain the position she has acquired for herself. Readers are left witnessing the despair of one character while another elevates herself through

the act of passing as a socially accepted individual. The narrator sways readers to feel, stating, “for Charlotte, the soul melts with sympathy, for La Rue, it feels nothing but horror and contempt” (Rowson 109).

Many who came to America sought to gain financial and legal freedom, but, as Rowson writes, “fortune is blind, and so are those too frequently who have the power of dispensing her favours: else why do we see fools and knaves at the very top of the wheel, while patient merit sinks to the extreme of the opposite abyss” (Rowson 110). While Charlotte’s experience coming to America only resulted in her ruin, Mrs. Crayton, or the former La Rue, illustrates how a woman who possessed no means or legal rights could elevate herself through a financially rewarding marriage, and does so by passing as a woman of a reputable background. Therefore, a theme emerges in *Charlotte Temple* that as metaphorical indentured servants, these women have two options upon finding themselves in a difficult situation. They can either survive by giving up their integrity by passing, or risk death by not passing but maintaining their integrity and good name. LaRue, disguises her immodest background, and passes as a respectable woman, therefore, ensuring not only her survival but her social elevation. Charlotte, on the other hand, having ruined her good name through her sexual liaison with Montraville, finds herself pregnant and unwed. This leaves her unable to pass like LaRue, which results in her downfall and death.

Similarly, one of the first autobiographies of a former slave and originally written as a protest to the slave trade in England and America, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself* was first published in London in 1789. It would go on to appear in nine English editions over the next five years, and also in French, Dutch, and Russian translations (Allison 7). In this narrative, Equiano, who was named Gustavus Vassa by one of

his early slave owners, describes his journey from slavery to freedom while traveling from Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe.

While in the West Indies, Equiano finds himself working on a ship under a captain, whom he has established a relationship with. Due to Equiano's honest and hard-working nature, the captain grows to trust him even to the point that when rumors arise that Equiano was attempting to run away, the captain believes the slave when he honestly and bluntly informs the captain that due to the amount of freedom his master has allowed him to have, this slave has had opportunities where he could have escaped, but chose not to.

While Equiano after being purchased by Mr. King receives better treatment than most slaves, he knows that in the Caribbean "the whole term of a negro's life may be said to be there but sixteen years" (Equiano 108). In his narrative, he recounts the experiences he has witnessed with slaves being bought or captured, tortured, and/or sold. During his time in the West Indies, he witnesses a free mulatto man named Joseph Clipson who was taken and made a slave. It is here that Equiano realizes that he will not be able to purchase and gain his freedom until he is in mainland British America. Eager to return to sea, Equiano knows that each day he is able to work is one more day that he is closer to his freedom (Equiano 130). Creating the image of a dutiful, hard-working slave, Equiano is able to sell items as a means of acquiring the funds to purchase his freedom. This is an opportunity not available to all slaves, only those who have been granted the opportunity by their masters.

As he continues working on the ship and enduring even more daunting tasks, Equiano finally finds himself the "master of about forty-seven pounds" (Equiano 134). At this point, weary of the best way to approach his master about acquiring his freedom, he turned to his "true friend, the captain" (Equiano 134) to gain insight. The next day, he addresses his master with the

captain's help about purchasing his freedom. With the assistance of the captain, reassuring Mr. King that Equiano gained the funds legally and through hard work, Equiano is able to purchase his freedom.

Compared to accounts such as Venture Smith's *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa: But Resident about Sixty Years in the United States of America Related by Himself*, Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* has been deemed a mild and brief experience in American slavery. Nevertheless, Equiano and Smith's works both illustrate African slaves who, through hard work and perseverance, are able to purchase their freedoms and, in Smith's case, is also able to accomplish purchasing various family members' freedom as well.

While race did matter in the colonial period, gender or class could and did matter as much or more than race. Furthermore, in the case of those like Olaudah Equiano and Venture Smith, in some cases, class began its social creation in race, even if the ultimate need was to pass as another social class. Therefore, after examining these works, it is evident that despite their differences in heritage, the characters, Charlotte Temple and Equiano, both share similar hurdles in their voyages to America. Through the works, the American experience and the elevation of one individual contrasted to the complete downfall of another can be witnessed. To add, Equiano and LaRue share similar experiences in their abilities to successfully establish themselves in British America, despite being hindered by either their race or gender. Equiano, disadvantaged in English society by his race was able to pass as an Englishman and accomplish his elevation through his work at sea. While he did not become an American citizen, but instead a British citizen, he used co-option as a means to pass for a socially white identity to elevate himself. Granted, his gender more than likely played a significant role in the opportunities made

available to him. LaRue, hindered by her gender, came to British America as an unwed woman. However, by using her gender, she procured a suitable marriage for herself that aided in raising her social standing and establish rights much like Equiano.

Nevertheless, “indentured servitude was not chattel slavery, and in the long run the differences contributed to a republican disdain for *slaves* as well for slavery” (Roediger 31). Despite having the same legal status as white servants, there is “evidence in the meager documents which have survived that” the slaves brought to Virginia “were treated differently from white servants” (Frazier 23). Furthermore, the reality that Africans were “an alien race bearing distinctive physical marks was, doubtless, the basis for differential treatment from the beginning and later facilitated their enslavement” (Frazier 22). From the horrors and knowledge of white servitude came the “creation of the white race” in America (Roediger 31). Due to the overwhelming economic factors, the need for “cheap and permanent labor supply,” the separation between white and black races began to grow moving into the antebellum period (Frazier 22). During the colonial period, all immigrants were seeking to use social passing to gain acceptance and move up in social status, and using this acceptance to gain legal freedom. Progressing into the next period, the population utilizing the concept of passing evolves into focusing on slaves.

Chapter 2: Romanticism / Antebellum

After the American Revolution, the United States entered a time of growth and expansion. While slavery had existed in the United States since the colonial period, as addressed in the previous chapter, the antebellum period brought with it a new meaning for the establishment. In the years following the Revolution, the cotton gin in 1793 and other technological advancements created a thriving economy, particularly in the South. With rising economic demands for cheap and long-lasting labor, slavery became instilled as a Southern way of life.

However, laws, such as the Slave Trade Act of 1807, also known as the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807, created complications for the growing need for free labor. Passed by Parliament in the United Kingdom on March 25, 1807, this act ultimately eliminated the slave trade within the parameters of the British Empire and specifically focused on the Atlantic slave trade (Gates 151). While the act did not bring an end to slavery, it did encourage the British to encourage other European countries to abolish their own slave trades. In addition, it gave slave traders nine months to end their business endeavors in the United States.

With this, the act possessed ramifications for the United States and the American slave trade. This act meant the end of new slaves arriving on American soil. Therefore, slavery continued in the states without new slaves being brought in to meet the supply and demand numbers that the Southern economy needed. In order to maintain slave numbers to preserve the work force, masters began to turn to the process of reproduction to do so.

Furthermore, due to westward expansion, the already tumultuous relationship between free and slave states reached a breaking point on the political front. The political issue, however, was not with slavery's inhumanity, but instead with which side, free or slave states, would retain

or gain the most political power in government. As a result, the Compromise Act of 1850, proposed by Henry Clay of Kentucky, was established. The Act included five laws “designed to preserve the delicate balance of power between the free and slave states” (Diller 19). Along with admitting California as a free state, organizing the new territories without clear mention of outlawing slavery, terminating the slave trade (trade from outside the United States), but not eliminating slavery, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which replaced the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, had one of the largest impacts on not only blacks, free or slaves, but whites as well (Diller 19). This new act not only required runaway slaves to be returned to their owners, but also left free blacks open to being accused of being fugitives as well (Diller 19). Possessing “free” papers did not guarantee safety for those who were either born free or granted freedom because the Fugitive Slave Act allowed “bounty hunters” to pursue anyone, which sometimes resulted in “free” papers being destroyed and people forced into slavery. The Act even left whites who assisted in helping fugitive slaves vulnerable to punishment as well (Diller 19). In this act, “a negro accused of being a fugitive was denied the right of trial by jury, and his status was to be determined either by a U.S. judge or by a commissioner appointed by a circuit court” (Parkes 332). These judges and commissioners were swayed by the payment of ten dollars for every black person returned to bondage to send runaways back to slavery (Parkes 332).

In response, many humanitarians and activist Northerners viewed this law as a “disgraceful violation of Christian principles and American ideals” and deemed it their responsibility to contest the Fugitive Slave Act (Parkes 332). On the other hand, remaining Northerners looking for a solution that would result in a settlement with the South simply accepted the law as it was, despite its unjustness and corruption. Therefore, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 eliminated much of the unrest between Northern and Southern states; however, this

law only presented a growing threat to the black population. Slaves who sought freedom from the bondage of slavery were deterred because of this new law that increased the odds of being brought back to the harsh reality they lived in. Furthermore, free blacks were often threatened with the possibility of being taken into custody and “returned” South as a slave. The opportunity of financial gain often promoted this illegal act of confining an individual to slavery, even if that person was, in fact, legally, a free person.

In regard to the literature of the American Romantic period, emotion, individualism, and glorification of the country defined the characteristics of writing during the time leading up to the Civil War. In much American Romantic literature, especially Southern literature, slavery and the Southern way of life were glorified; however, towards the end of the period, works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* began to take on more characteristics of Realism, illustrating the difficult and harsh life of southern slaves and ultimately causing social unrest and strife in the nation. Consequently, the literature reflected slavery’s harsh realities, and passing began to appear once more in the literature. Passing became a dominant theme in literature by and about African-Americans concerning the slave years leading up to the Civil War. For many blacks, living during the antebellum period, lighter-skinned complexions and the ability to pass often meant escaping the bondage of slavery. For those enslaved, “white skin functioned as a cloak in the antebellum America” (Hobbs 29). Many didn’t wish to be white, but instead simply desired freedom and safety. For these individuals, passing did not consist of changing their internal sense of identity, but rather expressing an outward identity different than the one they perceive of themselves. With this reappearance, though, different motivations propelled the occurrence of this act. While legal freedom as a motivation carried over from the previous late colonial and Revolutionary

War period, maintaining familial safety and the need to escape gender conflicts were also added as new constructs for passing.

The first publication of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came in the form of a serialization in the abolitionist newspaper *The National Era* on March 10, 1852. In book format, the novel sold 300,000 copies in the United States alone (Diller 14). However, the novel sold over one million copies, mostly pirated, in England, illustrating the demand for such a work (Diller 14). The novel sparked a fire in many pro- and anti-slavery readers and delivered an anti-slavery message to the masses. Stowe stated, "This is an age of the world when nations are trembling and convulsed. A mighty influence is abroad, surging and heaving the world, as with an earthquake" (Diller 15). The novel gave a voice to the unheard and created a storm across the literary front.

Many, including Stowe, credited the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 as the catalyst for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Diller 19). The novel itself acts as a vessel for the author to address the issues and concerns that arose from the establishment of the Fugitive Slave Act. Taking all aspects of Stowe's response into consideration, it is clear how the novel's plot and characters came to exist. Therefore, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* depicts the use of passing to acquire one's freedom based on the social and external influences created as a result of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Unlike the class-oriented passing discussed in the previous chapter, this period marks the shift in passing as a racial concept that focuses on outward physical features. Individuals transition from adopting social expectations and instead to manipulating their physical appearance to pass as one race rather than another.

Throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe was explicit in her physical descriptions of her characters. For characters like George and Eliza, the author makes a specific point to provide readers with family backgrounds, showing at the novel's start the mixing of black and white

racess. Although Stowe begins the novel illustrating Eliza's use in her ability to pass as a means of escaping with her son, the central focal point of passing to gain freedom comes in chapter eleven, where George Harris passes as a Spaniard. George, Eliza's husband, was a "bright and talented young mulatto man, who was a slave on a neighboring estate" (Stowe 57). Hired out by his master to work in a bagging factory, George became valuable in his work place and came to be "considered first hand in the place" (Stowe 57). With George's success, his master began to feel threatened by his slave and imposed restrictions in order to assert his authority over George. Unhappy with his new limitations, George chooses to run away north. In chapter eleven, readers have just been read the description of George as posted in the runaway slave advertisement by his owner; "my mulatto boy, George. Said George six feet in height, a very light mulatto, brown curly hair; is very intelligent, speaks handsomely, can read and write; will probably try to pass for a white man; is deeply scarred on his back and shoulders; has been branded in his right hand with the letter H" (Stowe 150).

The scene continues with Mr. Wilson, George's former freelance employer from the bagging factory, defending George to the other men in the tavern, when a newcomer draws their attention. Stowe describes this man as "very tall, with a dark, Spanish complexion, fine, expressive black eyes, and close-curling hair, also of a glossy blackness" (Stowe 151). He is further described as having a "well-formed aquiline nose, straight thin-lips, and the admirable contour of his finely-formed limbs," which "impressed the whole company instantly with the idea of something uncommon" (Stowe 151). This newcomer walks with an air of certainty about himself, directs the waiter in placing his trunk, confidently orders a drink, and nonchalantly reads through the advertisement Mr. Wilson had just finished addressing (Stowe 151). However, it is

not long until Mr. Wilson recognizes him and behind closed doors carries on a brief conversation with him (Stowe 152).

Stowe's focus on George's description depicts the social impact of passing in a white world had on reaching freedom. This passage is particularly important to note due to the language Stowe chooses to use when referencing the same character. The advertisement released to reclaim a fugitive slave refers to George as a mulatto, twice, in back to back lines. While his owner does credit George his accomplishments of speaking well and possessing the ability to read and write, the fugitive is still described as property, but able to recognize the opportunity of his being able to "pass for white".

This scene illustrates the correlation of freedom and the social aspect of passing as it pertains to the external influences that a black individual would encounter. In this passage, any physical description of George looking "black" is never directly mentioned. Prominent stereotypical physical traits are explicitly cut off in the description. Instead of specifics on his height, he is just described as "very tall," yet it is specifically pointed out that he has an "aquiline" nose, which provides readers the visual of a strong sharp nose compared to the contrasting stereotypical flat noses for Africans and black slaves. Stowe's word choice in "aquiline" to describe the "Spaniard's" nose is noteworthy due to the fact that the word itself means "like an eagle," which then provokes the thought that perhaps Stowe is comparing him to the United States' emblem, the bald eagle, and, therefore, equating him with American citizenship. Also, his lips' thinness is pointed out as, stereotypically, African-Americans are often described as possessing fuller lips. Descriptions such as these are vital because they create a disassociation from his African roots that are needed in order to successfully pass and gain freedom in the North.

Furthermore, the contrast in the two descriptions of these two men illustrates how external perception was key in passing for many fugitive slaves and freemen who were either freed from slavery or born free, but faced the threat from slave hunters of being returned to bondage. Many sought to pass in order to be treated as human beings, granted rights, and even the opportunity to make something of themselves. This was a time when what one looked like mattered much more than the abilities one possessed, as was George's case. Although he could read, write, was a strong worker, and even apparently invented a machine equivalent to the cotton gin, he was looked down on due to the fact he was mulatto.

However, while his skin color never changed, his passing brought a different reaction socially from his peers, except for Mr. Wilson, who possessed true knowledge of George's identity. In addition, the description of the same man is elevated when his peers perceive him as someone of proper breeding and unmixed European heritage. The external influences shaped his demeanor and appearance, not only in how he portrayed himself, but also how those around him perceived his appearance, allowing his true identity to never be called into question. This is a clear representation of how Stowe illustrates how one sees what one chooses to see.

Continuing the discussion on using racial passing in order to gain personal freedom, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* provides another male character who separates his internal identity from his outward perceived identity. When Linda, Jacobs' pseudonym, provides familial background information at the beginning of her narrative, she mentions her uncle Benjamin. Being close in age, Linda looks to Benjamin as more of a brother figure than an uncle. Benjamin makes his first effort at escape by way of passage on a ship. Unfortunately, due to a severe storm, the ship he was aboard was forced to port. Upon arriving to shore, the captain recognized Benjamin from the advertisement warranting his recapture.

Despite escaping the vessel he was aboard, he found himself “pursued, captured, and carried back to his master” (Jacobs 25). Captured and imprisoned, Benjamin was led in chains to the jail. In spite of his return to slavery, Benjamin does waiver in his efforts to escape. Eventually, he is successful in gaining his freedom because “for once his white face did him a kindly service” (Jacobs 29). His lighter-skinned complexion allowed him to pass and those around him did not suspect that he was a slave; “otherwise, the law would have been followed out to the letter, and the *thing* rendered back to slavery” (Jacobs 29). Like George, Benjamin’s complexion allowed him the opportunity for escape. Had those around him on his journey north known his true identity, then as this passage states they would have been forced due to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 to capture and return him to slavery.

As a result, individuals similar to George and Benjamin who possessed the skin complexion to pass as white, that is, as having European heritage, were able to move about openly in Southern crowds as they slowly crossed the Mason Dixon line, into free territory where they could safely unite with loved ones and escape the horrific life that slavery had always consisted of. However, for many gaining freedom was not simply just to elevate themselves from the status of slave to free, but more importantly, to escape the dangers that were a constant threat in the life for a slave.

With the antebellum period, a new motivation besides freedom arose. The need for safety was a constant in the unstable life of a slave. At this point in time, the demand for slaves and the cash “crop” slaves had become was extremely high. These individuals were viewed even less as human beings and even more as property to be sold and traded as deemed profitable by masters. The various aspects of safety became a focal point for freedmen and slaves during this time. For slaves, safety was not restricted only to one’s personal well-being, but oftentimes to

the safety of maintaining family relationships. For those who were either slaves or free, the constant worry of losing a family member to be sold to another plantation or, worse, sold “down river” motivated many to run away and use their lighter-skinned complexions to pass and escape.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Eliza was raised by her mistress from childhood and treated as “a petted and indulged favorite” (Stowe 57). She was “safe under the protecting care of her mistress” and “reached maturity without those temptations which make beauty so fatal an inheritance to a slave” (Stowe 57). Eliza was even permitted to marry George, “a bright and talented young mulatto man, who was a slave on a neighboring estate” (Stowe 57). In the realm of slavery, these luxuries were often not received by many.

The opening scenes of the novel have Eliza overhearing a conversation between her mistress’s husband and a slave trader where they discuss the slave trader’s desire to purchase her son. While the plantation owner, Simon Legree, believes himself to be benevolent towards his slaves, he finds himself facing financial troubles. In order to pull himself from his financial debt, Legree contemplates and discusses selling some of his slaves in order to do so. Overhearing this conversation, Eliza, fearing for her son’s safety, leaves her master’s plantation in an effort to evade having him sold “down river.” To do so, she leaves the plantation where she is favored and is relatively safe. While headed North with her only surviving child, she does not correct a woman who mistakes her for a white woman traveling (Stowe 98). Even though Eliza falls under the protection of her mistress, and her despite her mistress’s promise to never sell her child, her son is not protected under promises that are unable to be guaranteed. As a mother, she is willing to forsake her own protection and resemblance of comfort as a slave in order to ensure her son’s safety. Eliza’s action serves as a reminder that safety is never guaranteed for a slave, especially in regard to one’s family.

Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* opens with Eliza's experience passing and then readers finally see George able to manipulate his physical characteristics in order to secure his freedom, passing is restricted in Stowe's work to the opening parts of the novel. These two isolated incidents set up a contrast in the remainder of the novel and against characters such as Uncle Tom, who could never pass for white due to his own physical features. Tom is described as "a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a fully glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence" (Jacobs 67). Unlike George or Eliza, Tom is also barred from passing due to his speaking mannerisms as well. Along with possessing the physical characteristics that granted George and Eliza the ability to pass, the two runaway slaves, unlike Tom, the two runaway slaves also possess speaking mannerisms that additionally allow them to blend in and pass as whites. After Stowe provides her readers with a physical description of Tom, his first words are, "La sakes; now does it?" (Jacobs 68). The contrast not only in physical characteristics but also differences in speech illustrates the ability of some slaves to pass for white, while others did not possess the traits necessary to pass.

When writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs changes her name, along with will all of her characters' names and the names associated with the town, in order to protect anyone still in Edenton that may be at legal or other risks for their parts in her history. Linda, as she refers to herself, has a relatively happy childhood. As a child, she grew up in a home with both her mother and her father under the same roof since they were well-off slaves. However, for a slave, safety was never guaranteed, and Linda was no exception to this. After the death of her mother, Linda is sent to the home of her mother's mistress. Even so, Linda is treated well and even provided the opportunity to learn how to read, a luxury not often afforded to many

slaves at this time, especially after slave rebellions like Nat Turner's Revolt. Nevertheless, reality finally reaches Linda when her mistress dies and wills Linda to one of her relatives, a young niece.

As Linda grows older and matures, she eventually has children with a white neighbor, Mr. Sands, in order to avoid the advances being made by her new mistress' father, Mr. Flint. She has two children, Benny and Ellen, but with the love of a child also comes the pain and fear of potentially losing a child. Linda states "I had prayed for his death, but never so earnestly as I now prayed for his life; and my prayer was heard" (Jacobs 80). Here she illustrates the inner turmoil a slave mother constantly battled, for "what a mockery it is to be a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life" (Jacobs 80). Many mothers like Jacob believed that "[d]eath is better than slavery" because they were unsure of the life awaiting their children (Jacobs 80).

Since Linda had rejected "what he called his kind offers," Mr. Flint threatened to sell her children in order to "humble" her into submission (Jacobs 99). To strike at Linda for rejecting him, Mr. Flint orders Linda to be sent to his plantation as a field hand. While she accepts her own fate, when she learns that her children are to suffer the same fate, her motherly instincts surface and possess her to develop a plan to ensure their safety from life on the plantation.

Knowing that an effort to flee North, especially with two children, would result in a failed attempt, Linda decides to hide in the attic space of her freed grandmother's home. As a dutiful mother, Linda is willing to stay hidden in the attic, contributing to the further degradation of her body, and she forsakes her own well-being to avoid having her children sold into slavery. When the opportunity arises for her daughter to go to Washington, D.C., with Mr. Sands, her biological father, she is not freed but instead brought on as a servant to take care of his newborn daughter. This is the point where reality truly hits home for Linda, and she fears that her

children will never be free. However, Mr. Sands, using a slave trader to secretly represent him, purchases the children, and frees them. For Linda, this is a blessing, but one that rarely occurred for many slave mothers.

In examining Jacob's autobiography, readers can come to understand the emotional turmoil that a mother felt after giving birth to a child and even through its childhood into adulthood. For slaves, families were often ripped apart and sold to either different plantations in the same community or plantations that were miles or states away. Blood ties were not recognized in masters' eyes, only the profit that could be made by selling to the highest bidder. Under the pressure of separation from their children, mothers used their lighter-skinned complexions to evade slave hunters and escape north.

While mothers and family members often faced the threat of separation, another issue that weighed heavily on female slaves was the issue of gender within slavery. Male slaves were exposed to the harsher physical labor, while female slaves more often found themselves with milder duties, being either a yard slave, house slave, or nurse. Despite this, female slaves were presented with the dilemma of their gender. Women in bondage are "superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (Jacobs 100). Therefore, women were motivated to pass in order to escape the terrors of being a woman in an establishment where they were guaranteed no safety from any threat, especially sexual threats, including rape.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacob states, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (Jacobs 100). She makes such a statement after recently giving birth to her second child and is informed the child is a girl. This news leaves her with her "heart heavier than it had ever been before" (Jacobs 100). After her former mistress's death, Linda is

willed to another mistress, whose father, Dr. Flint, begins to take advantage of his position over her. Jacobs states that to her knowledge he was the father of eleven slaves (Jacobs 43). As a master of a plantation, he took sole advantage of the power he willed over his female slaves.

As she grew into a woman, Linda soon found herself the on the receiving end of what Dr. Flint's refers to as "kind offers" as she later refers to his sexual advances. Upon her fifteenth birthday, she entered what she deemed "a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl" (Jacobs 33). Dr. Flint "began to whisper foul words," and though she was young, she "could not remain ignorant of their import" (Jacobs 33). He constantly sought to remind Linda that she was his property and that she "must be subject to his will in all things" (Jacobs 34).

While she did not possess any rights or means to deny him, she did find a way to avoid the indignity of being forced against her will to have a sexual relationship with him and potentially have children by him. Instead, she turned to a neighbor white man, whom she names Mr. Sands. To escape Dr. Flint, Linda willingly gives herself over to Mr. Sands and soon finds herself the mother of his son. Linda describes her defiance as "something to triumph over my tyrant even in the small way" (Jacobs 71). For while Linda had sexual relationships outside of the sanctity of marriage, "it seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (Jacobs 70).

In addition to suffering sexual abuse at the hands of their masters, female slaves, like Linda, also found themselves receiving abuse from their mistresses as well. As slave masters took advantage of their power over female slaves, their wives failed to place blame where blame should have been placed. Instead of finding fault with their husbands, mistresses instead took issue with female slaves. As an alternative to attributing the fault with their slaves, mistresses like Linda's could have instead used the knowledge of their husbands' characters "to counsel and

to screen the young and the innocent” among their slaves, but instead they held no sympathy for the women (Jacobs 38). To a mistress, “they were objects of her constant suspicion and malevolence” (Jacobs 38).

Jacobs describes in her work that while she is young, a slave girl learns “why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves” (Jacobs 34). She must listen to “out breaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause” (Jacobs 34). Terror will fill her as she grows to “tremble when she hears her master’s footfall” (34). For any female slave who finds herself possessing beauty, she is cursed, because “which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave” (Jacobs 35).

Unfortunately though, the atrocity of sexual assaults on female slaves, while known to be an occurrence on plantations and in the communities, failed to be addressed due to the sinful nature of the acts. Wives continued to condemn their female slaves for the acts of their husbands, sons, and brothers, while neglecting to punish the men in their lives. By facing the possibility of living such horrific lives under tyrant masters, many slave women who possessed fair and lighter complexions were often motivated to use this to their advantage and pass for white in order to evade slave hunters and flee to the northern states or Canada. Linda herself could have used her own lighter-skinned complexion to flee, but her maternal instincts prohibited her from leaving her children behind to face the consequences of her escaping.

Throughout Jacob’s autobiography, her entire life is propelled by the desired to free herself from the grasps of her power-hungry master, Dr. Flint and the cruelty and neglect she suffered at the hands of Mrs. Flint. She is motivated to reach a better life for herself and her children, especially for her youngest child, Ellen, who could potentially suffer the same fate or worse as her mother if continued to be held by the chains of slavery. While she herself does not

use passing, her story illustrates the motivation to escape the horrors of sexual abuse that they faced while enslaved. The one instance of passing that is mentioned in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* comes at the end of Chapter Twenty-Two. As the first Christmas in hiding approaches for Linda, her grandmother invites two guests over for dinner. One of these guests was a “free colored man, who tried to pass himself off for white, and who was always ready to do any mean work for the sake of currying favor with white people” (Jacobs 153). Readers discover that Linda’s grandmother’s “motive for inviting them” was a way for her to show everyone in town that she was not harboring her fugitive granddaughter. By taking them all over the house and having “all the rooms on the lower floor... thrown open for them to pass in and out,” her grandmother openly invites the very men who are hunting her granddaughter in order to keep favor with them and end any suspicion in her aiding Linda’s escape.

With this scene, not only does Jacobs illustrate her grandmother’s passing as the dutiful freed woman that Southern whites desired, but also how slaves viewed those who pass in order to gain white acceptance, like this man. By using their lighter-skin complexions to pass, they could escape over the Mason Dixon line, and into Free states, much like Linda’s uncle and pass for white, gaining freedom and safety.

Therefore, the use of passing in antebellum works, such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, depicts the motivation to achieve freedom, maintain family safety, and escape the conflicts of gender. While it addresses these motivations, the occurrence of this topic also introduces a theme that will become prominent in future works of the Reconstruction period to follow. This theme continued long after these works and into future works as a reflection of events affecting and on-going in the day to day lives of many African-Americans, especially in the years following the Civil War. The Fugitive Slave Act

crippled and condemned many African-Americans, resulting in the decision to deny their heritages and families by passing as white or of pure European ancestry. This created much strife in those, like George Harris' character. By utilizing not only George, but characters such as Eliza or Jacob's Linda, authors were able to illustrate the full impact the Fugitive Slave Act had on America as a whole and how passing came as an outcome. During the antebellum period, passing was committed on a racial basis unlike during the previous, colonial period where passing was a social construct. While motivations were not racially based, racial passing assisted in reaching freedom whether it be individual, for one's family, or to escape sexual exploitation.

Moving forward, passing would still hold on to the issues of safety, but would begin to take a different approach as far as why an individual would need safety. Maintaining family relationships would be tested further and often times strained beyond the ability to remain intact.

Chapter 3: Realism / Jim Crowism

After looking at the motivations for passing in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the next period to examine is the Realist period. This period of literature correlates with the years during and immediately following the period also referred to in American history as the Reconstruction era. For the country, this was a time that was meant a time for rebuilding being ripped apart by the bloodiest war in America's history. For individuals, especially within the African American community, this was a time that passing began taking on different definitions and parameters.

After the Civil War, newly emancipated slaves and free African Americans were presented with a new life, yet not necessarily one that was better. This time brought many uncertainties. While slavery was a crime against humanity, it provided a structure and foundation for life. For those who were once slaves, they were now legally free, but they were not socially free. Once defined by the role of a slave, now the term "freedman" was loosely applied despite the fact that blacks during the beginning years of Reconstruction had no rights or benefits from the American government or in society (Downs). The downfall that came for many "freedpeople" after the Civil War was that while the abolition of slavery was accomplished at the close of the war, no one had planned for the aftermath.

Many African Americans found themselves homeless, jobless, and without healthcare, all commodities once provided by slave owners. Plantation masters provided shelter, food, and even health care for them. After all, slaves were property and masters invested in their property to ensure a positive return on their investment. With emancipation came freedom, but with it also came sickness and death caused by the unexpected problem brought about by the war and

dislocation afterwards. Despite their willingness and newly gained independence, emancipated slaves faced many obstacles that realistically could not be overcome.

In the years following, Jim Crow laws were established and enforced in Southern states. Threatened by the emancipated slave population, poor whites saw these individuals as a threat to their way of life. With employment opportunities already few in number, the addition of African Americans to the pool only increased tensions. Also, in 1900, African Americans numbered 8,834,000 or 11.6 percent of the total United States population (Parkes 393). Ninety percent of the total African American population lived in the South, and of that number 82.8 percent were involved in some manner of agriculture (Parkes 393). Taking that percentage of the population, only a quarter of this percentage of African Americans that made a livelihood in agriculture actually owned their own farms (Parkes 393). This meant that three-fourths of those working in agriculture were cash tenants or sharecroppers (Parkes 393). Ultimately, these numbers calculated to 55 percent of the entire African American population in the South did not own their own farms and were no better off than they were in 1860 (Parkes 393). These statistics were a clear representation that if an African American person “‘knew his place’ and remained dependent on a white landlord or employer,” the individual could “usually hope for a considerable measure of security” (Parkes 393). Consequently, any signs of “initiative or ambition was decidedly hazardous” (Parkes 393). To be a “freed” person still had its limitations and dangers even after the Civil War.

An increase in lynchings began to take place, with the total number of blacks lynched from 1889 to 1899 at 1,460. Although over the next ten-year period the number of lynchings dropped to 820, the number was eventually completely eliminated (Parkes 393). The Jim Crow laws, established in Southern states between 1900 and 1911, were meant to keep African

American in place by reminding them of their inferior status in society. These laws were a way to not only restrict African American rights, but they were also an outlet for white frustrations to be acted upon in a different way instead of violent lynchings, which could be a contributing factor to the decreasing numbers.

All of these laws built to the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which was created with similar motives as the Jim Crow laws. Not only did this law prohibit interracial marriage, but it was passed in order to protect “whiteness” against the threat of race-mixing. The act became also known for the “one-drop” rule since it stated that in order to be classified as a white person meant that one could not have “a trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian” (*Virginia*). With the passing of the racial integrity laws, along with the Jim Crow laws, one’s physical appearance no longer defined their identity. These legal documents signified the beginning of legal identification as well.

Previously, during the antebellum period, passing was a means of safety and gaining freedom for those bound by slavery. Moving into the Reconstruction period, passing was viewed in the same, yet different, terms depending on the author and his/her perspective. Therefore, the author’s background and perspective shaped the approach to passing that he/she took when writing his/her work. The examination of passing in literature during the American Realist period, it is evident that passing evolved from the previous Romantic period, particularly pertaining to authors’ perspectives on motivation, identity, and intentional and/or unintentional passing. During the Romantic period, passing was motivated by the need to secure one’s freedom from slavery, identity was not affected, and since children were classified by their mother’s legal status, intentional and unintentional passing did not occur as it would during the Realist period.

White author Mark Twain illustrated in his novel *Puddn'head Wilson* (1894) the lengths a slave mother would go to in order to protect her child from being sold “down river” and to better his quality of life. While set in the Antebellum South, Twain’s work was written during the American Realist period. The reflection back on the slave period is a thorough illustration of the uncertainty that was still a prominent and threatening part of black lives post-Civil War.

Twain opens *Puddn'head Wilson* by introducing readers to Roxy, a young slave woman who is only one-sixteenth black and belongs to Percy Driscoll. At the beginning of the novel, Roxy has just given birth to her own son, Chambers, who by birth is only one-thirty second black. Threatened by the constant worry that her son will be sold “down river” to a harsher life of slavery, Roxy makes a decision to switch her son, Chambers, with her master’s son, Thomas – Tom—Driscoll, in order to ensure that he will grow up living a safer and better life than he would ever have as a slave. Due to Chambers’ fair complexion and mixed heritage, the two young boys, close in age, have similar appearances, and Roxy is able to pass Chambers off as her master’s son simply by switching the boys’ clothing.

As the boys grow older, the false “Tom” grows up raised as a white plantation owner’s son, who is spoiled, selfish, and self-entitled. Upon his “father’s” death, Roxy is freed and “Tom” finds himself in the care of his Uncle Judge Driscoll, who constantly threatens to disown him and remove him from his will due to his ungentlemanly-like behavior and gambling addiction. Meanwhile, “Chambers,” the true Tom Driscoll, is raised as a slave, often taking punishments of some form at the hand of “Tom.” “Chambers” illustrates the role of a dutiful, well-behaved slave, who is bought by Judge Driscoll after the death of Percy Driscoll, his true father, when “Tom” threatens to sell him “down river.”

By choosing a prince and the pauper style plot line, Twain is able to illustrate not one, but two forms of passing in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. The first two examples of passing are obvious racial constructs in that the false "Tom" and "Chambers" both, while oblivious, are passing as other races than what they legally should be assigned by the "one-drop" rule. Many readers recognize "Tom's" passing because he is passing for white when he, in fact, is the son of a slave; however, often, "Chamber's" role in passing does not have much light shed on it. These racial aspects of passing show the psychological developments that occur within the children as they grow, taking on the characteristics of the racial roles they have been assigned by society. Furthermore, the characteristics and developments of each chapter open the door to the question of nature versus nurture. Readers must now wonder if "Tom" would have grown into a selfish, corrupted young man if he had been raised as the slave he was born as, or if "Chambers" would have grown up to be a good, honorable person had he been raised as a white heir. Therefore, readers must ask if racial constructs that each boy were raised under influence the person each became.

On the other hand, authors of other backgrounds also illustrated the new role passing was taking on in post-Civil War years. Authors, such as James Weldon Johnson and Charles Chesnutt, African Americans who both possessed lighter-skinned complexions, used their works to depict the evolving social and cultural roles passing began to encompass. Now that slavery was over, African Americans, while still limited, were free. The previous use of passing to escape slavery came with the rebuilding of the fallen South. Carpetbaggers and scalawags now flocked to the South in order to make a living and improve their lives compared to their circumstances living in the North.

During Reconstruction, African Americans were allowed for the first time in history to hold political offices. In the South, this was a large feat in itself, yet was perceived as being insulting to many white Southerners who had been socially or economically displaced by the Confederate loss in the Civil War. Nevertheless, for many African Americans this meant that they did not have to forsake their “birthrights” as people of color. However, passing still provided opportunities for social and economic advancements during such a tumultuous time in America. Lighter-skinned blacks, “including Charles Chesnutt, and Reconstruction-era political figures Blanch and Josephine Bruce, P.B.S., and Nina Pinchback, and Robert Harlan demonstrate that passing was not an automatic response to racial proscription; instead, it was a practice that corresponded to and depended upon historical contexts and circumstances” (Hobbs 75).

As Reconstruction started to come to an end, racial violence and social-economic factors highly influenced many African Americans into racial passing. Following Reconstruction and the establishment of Jim Crow and “one drop” laws, passing allowed lighter-skinned African Americans the opportunity to evade these laws and elevate one’s social status. These laws assaulted African American lives and created a prominent reason to pass for protection and safety, but also encouraged social rise.

By embracing their light-skinned complexions, African Americans could build a life void of racial discrimination and new obstacles that were starting to establish in the United States. Therefore, works such as *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* and “The Wife of His Youth” are prime examples of using passing to rise socially in American society. Chesnutt’s “The Wife of His Youth” and Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* each illustrate the narrators’ social rises within their respective communities.

Published originally in 1912 as an anonymous work, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* is a narrative loosely based on author James Weldon Johnson's own life as a lighter-skinned man of color and begins the story in the narrator's early childhood. Growing up Johnson did not pass for white himself. James Weldon Johnson, was born to parents that were never slaves. His mother was a school teacher at Staton School. After graduating, Johnson became the principal of the school, but in 1901 when the school burned down, Johnson found himself almost lynched by white men who mistook his female companion as being white, when instead she was actually a light-skinned African American. The year following this incident, Johnson left Jacksonville, Florida for New York City to live with his brother. Eventually, he moved abroad to Venezuela, where he held a diplomatic position and also wrote *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. From these experiences, he was able to write the scenes of his novel. By starting at this point in his life, readers can see a young boy who struggles to grasp the difference between himself and white children in his class. As he grows older, he begins to realize through different trials and unfortunate experiences that life outside of the community he was raised in is different and harsh for someone who is African American. Following the witnessing of a lynching, the narrator realizes that safety is not always guaranteed for a black man. Due to all of the negative experiences he has lived through as a black man, he is convinced that in order to secure not only his safety, but advancement in society, he must rely on his ability to pass as white in order to achieve the life he wants to live. Readers see him marry a white woman, whom he has children with, and after her death, for his children's sake, he permanently commits to living his life as a white man. This novel serves as a well-fit example that choosing to be white could elevate one's social status; however, in the attempt to do so, this motivation for passing can backfire, leaving the individual stuck trying to rise in the social ranks.

Johnson's work is an excellent representation at how the attempt to socially climb can stall for an individual, despite the attempt. Instead, Johnson's narrator is left wondering and regretting the social success he could have had as a black ragtime musician.

Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" is a short story about a light-skinned mulatto man, Mr. Ryder, who has become a well-respected member of the Blue Veins society in the city where he now resides after years before leaving the South at the conclusion of the Civil War. This social organization consists of people of color who have more European ancestry than African, therefore looking more white than black. As readers enter the story, the narrator is in the process of preparing to marry a light-skinned mulatto woman, when a woman of darker complexion arrives. This darker woman, Liza Jane, has traveled a great distance in search of her husband, Sam Taylor that she has not seen in twenty-five years. According to her story, she married Sam before the War when she was a slave, and he was a free man working as an apprentice for her master's family. In an attempt to keep Sam from being sold into slavery, Liza encouraged her husband to escape north. Despite Ryder's warning that Sam could have died or married another, Liza is certain that her husband remained faithful to her. Later, at a ball hosted by the Blue Veins, Ryder relays Liza's story to his fellow members, asking if the husband should acknowledge his wife. Upon hearing the members encouraging yes's, he brings Liza out, introducing them to the wife of his youth.

"The Wife of His Youth," similar to *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*, illustrates how fair-skinned complexions were used not for solely passing as a white, but also for passing as an elevated member of society. The Blue Veins are a representation of social and social-economic success that was accomplished during this period by the ability to look more white than black. Since the end of slavery, this group has risen socially, and upon the arrival of

his dark-skinned wife, Ryder's social status is threatened. Whether from his own personal experience as a lighter-skinned African American or simply the recognition of the new social hierarchy becoming established in the black community, Chesnutt's short story illustrates the separation between lighter and darker-skinned blacks, and that separation is as much a socioeconomic separation as it is a racial one.

The contrast between these two groups of authors clearly illustrates how the concerns of each racial group varied. On one hand, authors like Mark Twain from a white background continued the tradition of passing as a means of safety and escaping the bondage of slavery while not addressing the new obstacles arising in the black community. Alternatively, authors, such as Chesnutt and Johnson moved into social and economic reasons that African-Americans were beginning to pass.

In addition to motivation, passing evolved during the Realist period in American literature; the theme of identity also began to evolve as evident in Realist writings. During the Reconstruction era, the African American community began to look at passing as a betrayal of identity and an attempt to disconnect from the community itself. Allyson Hobbs states in her work *A Chosen Exile*, "to pass as white was to make an anxious decision to turn one's back on a black racial identity and to claim to belong to a group to which one was legally not assigned" (5). In the Reconstruction years following the Civil War, there were opportunities for the first time for African-American to prosper within their communities, so the act of passing was viewed with a negative connotation.

One of the most powerful lines in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* comes when the young narrator asks, "Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger" (Johnson 11). From that point, in the rest of the novel, similar to many African American

fictional works written during the American Realist period, the theme of identity emerges. When looking at passing, particularly in literature, the benefits of passing are often prominent, yet the loss created by this decision should, in fact, be explored as well.

Johnson's use of a dramatic lynching as the plot's climax in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man's* serves as an example of the threats that daily plagued an African American person's life during the Reconstruction era. When faced with the opportunity to pass, how could someone turn down the opportunity for safety? How could he/she turn down the opportunity to better his/her life or his/her children's lives? However, the results often times resulted in the loss of identity for the individual and a separation from the black community. While it can be said that one identity is traded for another, this was not oftentimes the case at hand. Hobbs points out that, "to be black was to be 'somebody' whereas to be white was to be 'nobody'" (Hobbs 75). For example, Johnson's unnamed narrator had an established place in social circles as an African-American musician, but as a white man, he is unrecognized and blends into the background of white society. For example, during his travels, the unnamed narrator finds himself in a smoking car surrounded by white companions, undetected as an African American. His companions instead believe him to be equal to them. All the while they are conversing, they are unsuspecting to his true identity.

There were two options for someone with a lighter complexion, either rise in social class in African American society, or pass in white society but fixed at the bottom level of the social class. The issue of one's social identity becomes a factor of passing that must be examined.

Johnson's unnamed narrator ends *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* with the closing lines, "I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (Johnson 125). While choosing to continue living

as a white man for his children's safety, he still lives with the regret of walking away from his culture, who he was as a person, and the contributions, especially as a musician that he could have made to his race. Because societal pressures pushed him into giving up his music, he feels that he has done a disservice to his race by not becoming an accomplished ragtime composer and bettering the African American race. Although his outward appearance appears white, his internal and subconscious identity is not to recognize himself as white, but unfortunately, he is no longer able to identify as African American either.

Before the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, those, similar to Johnson's unnamed narrator, who possessed a lighter-skinned complexion were visibly able to pass in social circles and elevate themselves. However, once the "one-drop" rule became a legal document classifying individuals and with world events like World War I, individuals were required to start legally classifying themselves on paper. One's identity now rested in checking one box or another on a piece of paper. Therefore, passing became an even more assertive act for individuals, often resulting in cutting ties to anyone who could potentially expose their heritage.

In works such as Fannie Hurst's novel *Imitation of Life*, the plot captures the turmoil caused not only internally, but within a family and community when making the decision to pass for white. One of the protagonists, Peola, emerges as one of the storyline's central characters due to the fact that she inherited her father's lighter skin and has the ability to pass as white. As Peola grows older, she takes advantage of her European features because of the privileges they offer her in American society; however, she struggles internally with her African American identity and her familial relationship with her mother. She resents and is ashamed of her mother because, unlike her, Delilah is of a darker complexion, placing her lower socially. Eventually, Peola leaves her home in New Jersey, and after living in Seattle for a few years passing as a

white woman, she severs all ties with her family/community and moves to Bolivia to live out her days while continuing to pass.

Illustrating the constant internal struggle, Hurst's character, Peola, embodies the emotional turmoil that someone passing is wrought with. The character's final separation of all familial ties illustrates the familial strains that come as a result of one individual's passing. Upon her daughter's departure, Delilah dies of heartbreak, further depicting the distress passing had during this time on the African American family.

As *Imitation of Life* depicts, the loss of the African American identity is lost, but is not replaced by a white identity because those who are passing for white do not become white. Instead, they simply try to become the embodiment of the façade that they are projecting without ever fully being capable of becoming white. For some, the loss of identity, family, and community was too much to bear, and in first-hand accounts she obtained in her research, Allyson Hobbs recalls that many African Americans abandoned their attempts to pass in order to return to the stability of the community.

Furthermore, themes concerning identity often appear in African American literature and prompt the debate about the similarities and differences between intentional and unintentional passing. To pass when society deems one black is a majority of the time a difficult and intricate act and requires "an awareness of the physical, linguistic, social, and legal protocols that create racialized identity" (Cutter 79). Intentional and unintentional passing can be called into question due to the limited abilities many slave owners were willing to admit the slaves possessed.

Again, works such as Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Chesnut's "The Wife of His Youth," depict the contrast of the internal struggle brought about by intentional and unintentional passing. The false "Tom" in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was placed in a position of passing for white

against his own free-will. While many literary figures know their true heritage and identities, there are those similar to Twain's false "Tom" who are deprived of the knowledge of their true identities. In many nineteenth-century passing narratives, the person passing does not know his/her actual racial identity, and, therefore, the person cannot be deemed as intentionally passing. If society deems a person white based on appearance, then the question becomes, should he/she be considered white at that point?

Unaware that he is in fact a black slave's son, "Tom" later was forced to deal with the ramifications of his mother's choice and with the predicament it left him in as an adult. In addition, this brings into question the eternal debate of nature versus nurture. Post-Civil War passing is based less on genetics, but more on cultural up-brining; therefore, illustrating that nurture contributes more to one's identity instead of their genetic make-up. In the realist period, genetics plays a less significant role compared to cultural upbringing. Readers must now question did "Tom's" racial heritage contribute to the corrupted man he became, or did his social identity shape the self-privileged person that became a gambler and murderer? Would he have grown into a man more like "Chambers" had he not been forced to pass against his knowledge. In other words, if the passing is unintentional, is there still a base identity that is being hidden that the character is has internally but is unintentionally covering up in order to pass as something else?

The role of intentional passing appears in Twain's work after Roxy reveals to "Tom" his true identity. At this point, the false "Tom" must decide to continue the façade of passing as the false "Tom" when, in fact, he now knows that he is Chambers, the son of a former slave, who legally still belongs in the bondage of slavery. Although he was already a deceitful and selfish individual, this young man who was raised, unknowingly, as the son of a plantation owner, must

now face the decision to remain the person he has always thought himself to be, or to embrace his true heritage, stripping away his former identity, and all racial and social advantages of being "Tom" Driscoll.

In "The Wife of His Youth," Chesnutt, in contrast, illustrates the intentional choice to pass, not for white, but simply as an elevated lighter-skinned member of the elite African American community established after the emancipation of slaves from southern slavery. At the end of the work, the narrator is left with the dilemma of choosing between the elevated social life he has built for himself and the possibility of marrying a more socially acceptable woman, or recognizing the darker-skinned woman, who loyally sought him out after years of separation, as the wife he married while still living in slavery.

In this work, the author clearly falls into the category of intentionally passing. Again, while he is not passing for white, he is choosing to categorize himself as a separate member of the African American community. He is choosing to pass in the terms of a social construct. The resolution of the short story's plot comes from the explicit decision he is left to make for himself. The lines of intentional and unintentional passing are not blurred within this work as in Twain's work.

Separately, these works each represent different aspect of passing. Twain's *Puddin'head Wilson* illustrates passing in regards to not only racial passing, but also cultural passing as it relates to upbringing. Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Hurst's *Imitation of Life* both represent identity and how passing shaped an African American's identity. During the post-Civil War era, passing evolved from motivated as a means of escaping from slavery, and instead to escape Jim Crow laws and establish an identity for one one's self. Looking at authors' perspectives on motivation, identity, and intentional and/or unintentional

passing, the new context that passing takes on during this period and how it is reflected in American literature can be examined on a deeper level. With events such as emancipation, the passing of Jim Crow laws, and the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, the concept of passing evolved from the previous period.

Chapter 4: Modern / World War II/Post World War II

After examining African-Americans in the Jim Crow era, one would expect to now move into the Civil Rights movement and address how passing became motivated as a defense mechanism to combat segregation. However, when the Civil Rights movement began to come about, many African-Americans felt that the works of Martin Luther King Jr. and other prominent activists provided many opportunities for the black community; therefore, it was believed that now was the time to abandon notions of passing and return to the community and one's family, along with his/her black identity. Passing was still considered as an act of turning one's back "on a black racial identity and to claim to belong to a group to which one was not legally assigned" (Hobbs 5). As a result, there was no longer a pull to pass and leave the black community. With strong African-American voices reinforcing individuals to be proud of their black heritage, passing was no longer needed and in most African-American communities was frowned upon.

As much or more than works about African Americans passing for white, passing becomes a theme in works by and/or about people from other minority communities. Instead of jumping to the late 1950's and early 1960's, the conversation should be directed to focusing on immigrants once again. The years following World War I set the stage for many changes in the country that would affect the way of life for many immigrant groups. Momentous events before and during World War II contributed to a new outlook in America. By the end of the Second World War, over twelve million men were overseas fighting in the armed forces, and the American work force was left lacking able bodies (Parkes 657). Women, boys under eighteen and retired men began to fill the openings left by more and more men being drafted to fight (Parkes 657). With these new factions stepping into the work force, the nation's total labor force

rose to sixty-four million individuals (Parkes 657). The strain from the war showed in the public's response to "outsiders."

At the conclusion of World War II, the balance of world power had shifted more significantly than it had at the end of World War I. The Austrian-Hungarian empire was the only established great power to end after World War I in 1919 (Parkes 669), in contrast, at the end of the Second World War, the power of countries such as Germany, Italy, and Japan were called into question. Even Britain and France, allies of the United States and on the winning side of the war, were weakened in the eyes of global power. Only the United States and the Soviet Union could still be classified as "first-class powers" (Parkes 670).

With the war leaving most of western Europe exhausted and weakened, European refugees made their way to America once more looking to better their lives as they had done decades before at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unfortunately for those seeking sanctuary in the country, the doors for immigrants were not entirely open for acceptance. After World War I, The Immigration Act of 1924 was established, limiting the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States ("The Immigration"). Despite this limitation, however, immigrants from Europe and Asia had been establishing numbers in West and East coast cities decades before the First World War.

On the home front, African-Americans, continued to face hardships and discrimination in the country, but at the same time other racial groups had been facing hardships of their own for decades. Regardless of America's nickname as a "melting pot" of individuals composed of diverse heritage, the WASP mentality was still prevalent in the country. To be an outsider was to be a threat, and the American public retaliated with verbal and physical assaults backed by laws that placed restrictions on the diversification of the United States.

One group in particular that was caught in this cultural diversification challenge was America's Jewish community. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were approximately one million Jews in the United States alone, making it the third largest Jewish population in the world, only coming behind Russia and Austria-Hungary (Sarna). In the United States, half of the Jews in the country lived in New York City. Only 50 years earlier, the country had been home to approximately 50,000 Jews with only 16,000 living in New York City (Sarna). By 1924, another 1.75 million Jewish immigrants would make their way from Eastern Europe to America. However, at the end of World War I, wartime conditions and restrictive quotas from the Immigration Act of 1924 brought a close to the former waves of Jewish immigration. This meant that the majority of American Jews were native born (Sarna). This second generation moved up to middle class and into more established neighborhoods, but with this social class rise, there was a downside. In the interwar years, anti-Semitism reached a peak in America and abroad due to the "economic and social challenges posed by the Great Depression of the 1930's" (Sarna). Even well-respected individuals such as Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin, participated in public attacks on Jews, impugning their character and American patriotism (Sarna).

In addition to verbal assaults, Jewish citizens also faced growing physical dangers. The economic hardships that were brought on by the Great Depression left the American people looking for someone to place blame on. Their solution was to place it on an ethnic group that had risen socially and still maintained financial security during such troubled economic times. In Europe, Adolf Hitler had used the German people's fear over his country's own economic woes and used the Jewish population as the scapegoat. While anti-Semitism was taken to a horrific, inhumane extreme during the war with Jewish ghettos, concentration camps, and mass murders

in Europe under the instruction of Hitler, the American public still accosted Jews on the American front.

Another group of individuals that faced discrimination and hardship in the United States were Japanese Americans. Decades before Pearl Harbor, Japan and America had suffered strained relationships. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Japan had seized sole control of the economic development in Manchuria and disregarded the Open-Door policy that had been established between the two countries. As a result, many white neighbors discriminated against Japanese neighbors in their fear of the “yellow peril” that they believed to be a threat to the American way of life. In 1906, this fear even led San Francisco Board of Education officials to implement the segregation of “Orientals” in their own schools. Japanese culture had always held rise to power in high regard, and this separation implied a sense of inferiority to the American Japanese community (Parkes 540). For these reasons, tensions were high regarding Japanese immigrants and their children.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the decision for America to enter World War II despite years of neutrality was forced on government officials when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (Parkes 655). In the attack, Japanese forces hit all eight battleships of the Pacific fleet that were stationed in the harbor, leaving many of the island’s inhabitants dead or injured (Parkes 655). Although a devastating loss for America, Pearl Harbor’s bombing resulted in uniting the American people for the most part, and finally bringing the United States into the Second World War that had engaged and ravaged the rest of the globe.

However, this American unity was exclusive and short-lived when President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed the Executive Order 9066, giving the War Department the authority to define military zones in western states (Houston xi). Consumed with fear that Japanese Americans

were agents working for the enemy, 110,000 individuals, many of whom were born in the United States and thus were citizens, were removed from their homes along the Pacific coast and relocated to other parts of the country (Parkes 659). In these military zones, Japanese-Americans, Italian-Americans, and German-Americans were rounded up and placed in internment camps. While milder than the concentration camps and ghettos in Europe housing Jews, politicians, homosexuals, and other groups that Hitler deemed a threat to the Aryan race, internment camps established in California and various other places in the United States were often not much higher of a step up.

Taken from their homes and stripped from their livelihood, Japanese-Americans faced discrimination in the interwar years and in the years following World War II. Over a hundred thousand Japanese immigrants had settled in California. However due to previously strained relations between Japan and America, these relations rapidly deteriorated at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In previous periods, African-Americans were able to use their lighter skin-complexions to pass as white and avoid the discrimination that came as a result of their race. While Jewish Americans were able to avoid anti-Semitism that swept the country due to the lack of physical traits that distinguished them from gentiles, for Japanese-Americans, along with others of the Asian race, physically passing was not an option. Therefore, passing during the interwar years and post-World War II era was motivated by yet one more addition to the growing motivations of the past. For many of these immigrant groups, prejudice was a daily aspect of life. Passing while still remaining in the realm of social construct was used to gain social acceptance to oppose the pre-existing prejudice that existed about the Jewish and Japanese communities. In

addition to combating prejudices, passing was a means of coping with their individual identities or the loss thereof in their lives.

Moving into this period, individuals were no longer looking at passing as a different race, per se, but instead looking to using passing to meet society's standards and expectations in order to combat the nature of prejudice that existed about their ethnic group. By conforming, they hoped to not be perceived as a threat. To be considered white was to be safe; to be Japanese was considered dangerous.

Written by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, along with her husband James Houston as a memoir of Houston's life, *Farewell to Manzanar* recounts Wakatsuki's childhood and growing into adulthood after the events of Pearl Harbor. For the purpose of referencing the author as the narrator, she is referred in this work as Wakasuki, her maiden name, instead of by her married name, Houston. As a Japanese family in America, the Wakatsukis were taken from their homes and, under the Executive Order 9066, forced to relocate to Manzanar Camp in Owens Valley, California,. On March 25, 1942, the first evacuees began arriving at Manzanar Camp, which was the first of the permanent internment camps to open (Houston xii).

Due to outward physical appearance, Jeanne is unable to physically pass, but uses passing as a social construct. While living in the internment camps, the true meaning of being Japanese in America begins to be revealed. The generation gap separated parents from children, and many children tried to embrace the American culture, such as Jeanne's older brother forming a band, Jive Bombers. Playing "Don't Fence Me In" during a camp school dance illustrates their desire to play popular music in America at the time. The kids want to be seen and pass as American not realizing the irony of their song selection as readers and the narrator do. After the internment camp, Jeanne's family moves into public housing, and although they do not see open signs of

public hatred, they still fear rejection. By gaining the approval of peers, this would put the fear of “yellow peril” to rest and relieve the prejudice that intruded on the Japanese Americans’ daily lives. Jeanne illustrates how even she views the American idea of beauty when she describes people, such as a young girl in her class when she enters sixth grade after the internment camp. The fact that a “pretty blonde girl” is the one who speaks out in disbelief that Jeanne can speak English symbolizes the prejudice that many like Jeanne experienced in America during this time (Houston 113). Before she even speaks, she is judged on her abilities based on her outward appearance. This is a pivotal moment for her because she is now “suddenly aware of what being of Japanese ancestry was going to be like” (Houston 113). During the earlier years of her childhood, she had been sheltered and unaware what it meant to be Japanese in America. However, from this point forward, she realizes that she would “be seen as someone foreign, or as someone other than American, or perhaps not seen at all” (Houston 113).

At the conclusion of this interaction with her classmate, Jeanne begins to see the true nature of prejudice. Despite being out of the camp and back among the public, she sees how she is now perceived. For her, she is judged on her capabilities before she is given the chance to prove herself. This moment as a young girl, defines what the rest of her life will be like growing up in a country that deems her an outsider because of her heritage. Years later she describes how in an effort to “please” her accusers, Jeanne tried “for the first few years after our release, to become someone acceptable” (Houston 133). Trying to cope for a way to become part of American society, she “sought for ways to live in Anglo-American society” (Houston 133).

During the war, racial stereotypes had peaked, and even after the war, these prejudices still lingered in the public mindset, tarnishing the image of those like Japanese Americans. Returning to Jeanne’s nomination as beauty queen Jeanne and her brother Kiyoko faced an

encounter with this type of prejudice one day not too long after they left the camp. While sitting on a bench, these two young children found themselves the target of unwarranted prejudice where an “old, embittered woman stopped and said, ‘Why don’t all you dirty Japs go back to Japan’” (Houston 134). To add to the insult, she then spat on the children, who did not say anything in return, but instead were shamed by the insult, never speaking of it through the years. Terms like “Jap” became an integrated part of American conversation, showing how prejudice was still embedded into the American mind even post-World War II.

Laura Z. Hobson’s *Gentleman’s Agreement* illustrates passing in a different light compared to using it as a social construct. Hobson’s work addresses American Jews’ ability, unlike Japanese Americans, to racially pass in order to combat anti-Semitism that plagued their lives in the country. Phillip Green, a writer who has taken on a new position for the magazine, *Smith’s Weekly*, first encounters anti-Semitism when he is assigned to write a piece about the topic. For him, this assignment first proves to be a difficult topic for him to approach. He struggles for the best way to go about writing such a controversial piece. The inspiration for living as a Jewish American comes when he thinks of his childhood friend, Dave Goldman. To Phillip, the man he knew his entire life “had no accent or mannerisms that were Jewish—neither did a lot of Jews, and anti-Semitism was hitting at them just the same” (Hobson 64). When Phillip realizes this, it becomes a crucial moment in the novel because this is the point where Hobson is using Green’s passing as Jewish instead of as white to illustrate that “Jews and Gentiles are essentially interchangeable” (Jacobson 94). Here, instead of a Jew attempting to pass for white, Hobson presents a protagonist that is able to pass as Jewish due to the lack of physical characteristics that define one as Jewish. As Matthew Jacobson presents in his article “Becoming Caucasian: Vicissitudes of Whiteness in American Politics and Culture,” Phillip

Green is able to pass for Jewish in order to experience anti-Semitism first-hand because “he can pass because, at the bottom, there is no ‘difference’ between Jews and gentiles” (93). Vice versa, Jews could use passing to escape anti-Semitism.

After he takes on a Jewish identity, Phillip’s eyes are opened to the world of anti-Semitism. When the muse of his undercover identity, Dave, moves to New York and begins to realize that for some Jewish individuals, like Dohen, a published writer, they are able to hide the fact that they are Jewish. During a conversation, Sam Goodman, a fellow writer, informs Phillip that he knows “a couple guys – they’re above changing their names, or denying anything” (Hobson 209). While they do not make efforts to hide their identity, they do not openly reveal that they are Jewish. Sam informs Phillip that “they can go through years without one single solitary mention of the word Jew or Jewish, antisemitism, Palestine, Zionism” (Hobson 209). Passing is possible because they are “Jewish-but-don’t-look-it-much, mostly of English or German-Jewish ancestry” and are able to escape antisemitism and elevate their lives by passing (Hobson 209).

Another case of passing in the work comes when Phillip’s new secretary confides in him that she too is Jewish. In order to be hired for the job, she changed her name from Estelle Walovsky, an undeniably ethnic name, to Elaine Wales. The name Wales in itself is a safe name to assume as it implies British heritage. Having already applied for the position at the magazine under her real name, Walvosky, her application was denied, but her same application under the name Wales was accepted.

After learning of Elaine’s experience with injustice, he informs his boss of the prejudice that his secretary encountered. As a positive response to the incident, Minify, Green’s magazine publisher, implements a new hiring policy to open the door for Jewish applicants. However,

instead of finding a sense of justice in this change, Elaine herself then illustrates her own prejudice when she voices her fears that this would invite “any type” to apply (Hobson 153). Unsure of her meaning, Phillip is astonished and irate when he discovers that she too is prejudiced against her own people, asking him if he hates “being the fall guy for the kikey ones” (Hobson 154). Although he is not truly Jewish, he has become so invested in his investigation of antisemitism that he erupts with anger, spouting, “You have the right to know right off that words like kike and kikey and yid and coon and nigger just make me kind of sick, no matter who says them” (Hobson 154). For Phillip Green, the use of derogatory terms such as these are still discrimination even if used by someone of the same race, class, religion, etc. Elaine’s defense is that the word “kike” is a term she uses to refer to a “type” of person, and that when disgusted with herself will say “don’t be such a kike” (Hobson 154). This scene illustrates not only the nature of prejudice towards Jews from Gentiles, but also serves as a prime demonstration of prejudice as it exists within a group as well. Phillip is left to questioning this usage asking:

Did she have so deep a hatred and fear of the word that she needed to fob it off as a light jest to exorcise it? Was it an unconscious need to beat the insulter at his own game by applying the epithet to oneself first?...Or did her impulse spring from an unconscious longing, hidden and desperate, to be gentile and have the ‘right’ to call Jews kikes?

(Hobson 155)

The conversation continues to take a turn when, in trying to discover her motivation in using such a term, he inquires if it is because they do not look particularly Jewish. Instead, they are perceived by society as “O.K. Jews; they were ‘white’ Jews;” (Hobson 155). This revelation explains to Phillip why Elaine is comfortable using the term *kike*. With this information, though, readers must question if Elaine’s walking out of the room “with complete dignity” is because she

is insulted or ashamed by Phillip's revelation (Hobson 155). Later in the novel, when Phillip sits down with his son, Dave, he finds out that his façade with being Jewish now has affected his child. For Phillip, this is a proud moment as a father because when Dave, who is being picked on by his schoolmates for being Jewish, does not reveal the truth that he is not in fact actually Jewish. Phillip explains to Dave, "Lots of kids just like you are Jewish, and if you said it, it'd be like sort of admitting there *was* something bad in being Jewish and something swell in not" (Hobson 190). As a result of this conversation and Elaine's prejudiced comments, Phillip learns a few lessons while disguising as Jewish. During this heavily anti-Semitic time in America, if one does not speak up against anti-Semitism, then Phillip sees that one is essentially condoning the prejudice.

Like African Americans in the previous period, Japanese and Jewish Americans suffered a loss of identity and felt a need to conceal their heritage with World War II and the following years. Individuals from such groups such as these were brought to question their identity due to the conflict that existed between heritage and culture and their identities as Americans. With war propaganda against Japan and Japanese citizens after Pearl Harbor and antisemitism that had existed in the country since at least the conclusion of World War I, citizens with foreign ancestry found themselves forced to decide on an identity to portray to others. For Jewish Americans, especially second-generation or later Jews, the question of identity became complex and problematic in their self-identification. One could identify as Jewish because he or she practiced the Jewish faith or because of his or her genetic heritage. For many who possessed Jewish heritage but did not remain connected to the Jewish faith, passing as white instead of Jewish would protect them from anti-Semitism. As discussed, physical characteristics did not expose one's true identity, so only legal documentation would expose one's identity.

In *Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeanne and her entire family struggle with the loss of their identity starting from the time that they first heard the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. When he first hears the news of the attack, Jeanne's father, Ko, takes all of his Japanese documents and flags and burns them before the police arrive at their home. However, since he is Japanese and a licensed commercial fisherman, the government feared that men in his position were making contact with enemy Japanese ships located off the West coast (Houston 6). Upon his arrest, "he is a man without a country" (Houston 6). Thirty-five years earlier he had given up his country and Japanese identity to come to America, but in the country where he worked and had built a life, he was prevented from becoming a legal American citizen. Ko Wakatsuki, like many Japanese American men of this time, was a man who longed to be an American citizen but who held "no rights" and "who looked like the enemy" (Houston 6).

From the time Jeanne's father is taken, she and the rest of the Wakatsuki family members struggle with their identities or loss thereof. After moving to Manzanar camp, Jeanne recalls how something so innocent as meal time was yet another representation of how the family failed to hold on to their unity and continued to lose the family ties they held. Before the war, the family had eaten meals with her father at the head of the table, but after a few weeks in the camp, they stopped eating as a family for various reasons. For her grandmother, the walk across the camp to the mess hall was too difficult, so food was brought back to the barracks for her. For the children, they experienced a new freedom and began to venture away from their families at meal times to eat with gangs of other kids (Houston 26). While small, this variation from their way of life before Manzanar illustrated how the family began to fall apart, and "whatever dignity or feeling of filial strength" they may have known before the events of December 7, 1941 was lost and unable to be recovered for years after the war ended.

While living at Manzanar camp, this was the first time Jeanne had ever lived among other Japanese Americans, and she found herself “terrified all the time” (Houston 8). Individuals like Jeanne were grouped together based off their common heritage, but after decades of living in the United States and efforts to acclimate to American society, living together was an experience for them.

Years after leaving the camp, Jeanne still struggles with her identity even though she desperately longs to be accepted by her peers. While Jeanne tells her parents about the dilemma of running for prom queen at her school, she manages to disgust her father who did in such things. To him, she has turned her back on her Japanese heritage, and in his eyes, she has become white by adopting a different style of dress and mannerisms that strip her of her Japanese identity. He states, “if you put a sack over her face, you couldn’t tell she was Japanese from anybody else on the street” (Houston 126). On the other hand, Jeanne does not view this in the same light. Even at seventeen, she knows that she will never physically pass for white, so she embraces her Japanese heritage. When presenting herself to her entire school, she decides “to go exotic, with a flower-print sarong, black hair loose and a hibiscus flower” behind her ear (Houston 124). By comparing the interpretation of father and daughter, readers can see how the generational gap and conflict of identity during this time manifests itself. Furthermore, this scene also illustrates her acceptance and rejection all at the same time by her school peers. Although her classmates discover a plot by the teachers to keep her from winning position of Queen, this does not gain her acceptance from her peers. When she wears a conservative dress to the coronation ceremony, whispers from her classmates remind her that neither the Japanese image nor the conservative American image represent her identity.

In Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement*, there are two issues of identity that come about either due to passing or as a motivation for passing. The first issue of identity that is presented early in the novel is Phillip Green's identity itself. When first trying to establish his story's angle, Phillip struggles primarily because he does not fully understand what differences create for someone who is Jewish. Growing up, his mother sheltered him from a life exposed to prejudice, much like the unnamed narrator's mother of Johnson's *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*. Particularly during the interwar years and the years following, prejudice passed from one generation to the next because children were prone to take on the tendencies of their parents. Phil's mother reminds him that she and his father made sure that he and his siblings did not grow up in a home where they heard prejudices, "even the disguised kind" (Hobson 36). By not even allowing conversations to hold any hint or reference to any kind of prejudices, they would not be inclined to "fall for it in school or anywhere" (Hobson 36). The message delivered in Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* is that prejudice is allowed to spread and escalates when no one speaks out against it. Therefore, here passing is driven by the nature to avoid and combat daily prejudices that occurred during this period.

From the stereotyping of Jewish doctors to his own experience in trying to make reservations at a hotel, Phillip is astonished by the emotional toil his new identity begins to have on him. The longer he continues the façade, the more perplexed he becomes in who he is. When he first began the assignment and struggled to establish an angle to approach, Phillip listed all of the instances in which he knew that antisemitism existed. He researched "antisemitism in Business; antisemitism in Labor; antisem – social; antisem—housing, hotels, clubs;" (Hobson 26). While he knew that all of these areas of society held prejudice against Jews, it wasn't until he assumed a Jewish identity that he became fully conscious of how deeply these prejudices ran

in American society. After assuming his new identity, he became sensitive and alert to anything anti-Semitic. After two weeks of passing as Jewish, he found himself overwhelmed by his emotions and changed (Hobson 119).

During a conversation with his Jewish friend, Dave Goldman, Phillip expresses being upset that in the books with Jews as primary characters, they are depicted in a negative light. While Phillip has a defensive response to these character's portrayals, Dave has a more rounded, open approach to the subject. Instead he prompts Phillip as to why shouldn't they depict "swinish Jews" when Christians write about corrupt and "swinish Christians" (Hobson 131). For Dave, the world should be depicted in an equal balance. Since passing as a Jew, his sensitivity to antisemitism has heightened, resulting in his forgetting his words earlier in the novel to his son, Tom. When Tom first inquired as to the meaning of *antisemitism*, the young boy also inquired as to whether people didn't like them because they were bad (Hobson 33). As Dave later points out, Phillip explains to his son before he begins his experience with passing that while some are bad, some are not, and most importantly they are just "like everybody else" (Hobson 33).

The First and Second World War created a new America, but not one that was necessarily more open to diversity. To be different was to be regarded as a threat. For Japanese and Jewish-Americans, passing offered relief from the adversity an individual belonging to either of these two groups faced in his/her daily life. While physical passing was an option for Jewish Americans, Japanese Americans were not permitted the same option. Instead, the concept of passing that was available for them was to integrate themselves socially and establish a sense of identity within their respective communities. Meanwhile, they faced the problem of establishing and understanding one's identity due to the passing; however, for many, passing offered a chance to establish a socially acceptable identity.

Conclusion

While passing is often confined to the conversation about African-Americans passing for white, by examining a broader scope of American literature, it is evident that passing is not simply a racial concept. Instead, by inspecting the literature of different periods in chronological order, beginning with the colonial period and ending with the modern period, the evolution of passing can be seen with the changing motivations to pass that came about. By looking at each of these periods, readers can see how specific events of the period affected the construct that passing took on, whether it be racial, social, cultural, or gender-based, and how the events that motivated an individual to use passing affected the construct as well.

Colonial works such as Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* provide an insight into how during this period, passing was not viewed as a means to simply escape slavery, but in the larger picture to establish a better life for one's self, whether white or black. While Africans found themselves coming to America's shores in chains, many white immigrants from England and other European countries found themselves in other bonds of servitude, such as indentured servitude. Reflected in both works, slaves, indentured servants, and even women under sexual exploitation used social passing in order to better their lives. While this social acceptance did not always result in legal freedom, for slaves, by conforming to the social precedents set by owners, these fortunate individuals were granted certain liberties that not all slaves were able to receive from their masters. For indentured servants and other European immigrants still confined to servitude contracts, this still allowed them to rise in social status. Both African slaves and indentured servants could use this to better their lives and gain legal freedom from slavery or servitude.

The antebellum period narrowed the discussion on passing in terms to racial passing, but the driving point was that different aspects of slavery motivated one to choose to pass for white. Whether it be to gain freedom, maintain family relationships, or female slaves' efforts to escape the assaults they faced due to their gender, racially passing to escape the classification of one race in exchange for another became embedded into antebellum literature. Works like Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* sparked a fire in the abolition movement through the illustration of characters like George and Eliza Harris, along with Harriet Jacobs' autobiographical character, Linda. Extreme, these motivations for passing are reflected in not only American literature but also in the historical events that followed and ripped the nation apart with the Civil War.

After the country's reunification following the Civil War, the Reconstruction period brought a different unrest to the country. While passing was still a racial construct, *Pudd'nhead Wilson, An Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, "The Wife of His Youth," and *Imitation of Life* each illustrate the continuous evolution in the motivation to pass. Twain's reflection on American slavery portrayed a time other than the Realist period; the work was effective in showing that safety was still a principle that drove the motivation for passing during the period. In addition, James Weldon Johnson's and Charles Chesnut's pieces each provide readers with insight into passing with the advantage that the authors themselves possessed African-American perspective versus Twain's white perspective. Additionally, these works provide understanding of the inner conflicts a person of color faced during a period that caused identity conflicts for many.

Finally, instead of staying in the realm of black and white races, more recent chapters in American history and literature move the discussion into a broader range of not only races, but

also cultures. *Farewell to Manzanar* and *Gentleman's Agreement* each provide discussion for those of Japanese and Jewish identity living during World War II and in post-war of America. With immigration for both groups beginning to increase at the beginning of the twentieth century, this period marked a beginning need for passing to occur. Due to propaganda and growing prejudice from war time fear, these two diverse cultural groups were motivated to use passing in order to gain social acceptance.

While the status quo for passing has always existed as a racial concept, the problem is that this line of thought limits passing to one construct. Instead passing should be looked at in its different forms. By studying works from various American literature periods, the connection can be made to the different motives for passing, whether passing be a social, gender, or a traditional racial concept. In addition, these diverse forms reflect the time periods in which they appeared, making the connection to why these motivations changed in correlation with major historical events of the period.

While this work incorporates all current periods of American literature, it does not include current works that also illustrate a continuance in the evolution of our understanding of passing even today. For instance, while Philip Roth's novel, *The Human Stain* follows a timeline starting in the 1900's and moving through the Civil Rights movement, it is still a representation of how passing is found in modern pieces. Published in 2000, Roth, a Jewish author, has found his work classified as African-American fiction due to the social and cultural conflicts captured in *The Human Stain*. Coleman Silk, the main character, serves as a representation at the losses connected with passing. Much like Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of his Youth," Roth's work illustrates a man willing to deceive those around him in order to continue passing for white. Living in New England America during the late 1900's, the sixty-five-year-old Nathan

Zuckerman recounts the story of his neighbor, Coleman Silk. Silk is a former professor at Athena College, who was accused of racism by two African-American students, which ultimately results in his resignation and loss of his job from the College (Roth). Through the novel, it is revealed that Silk is actually an African-American who has been living his entire life as a white Jewish man (Roth). Despite marrying a white woman and having four children with her, he never revealed this African ancestry to his family. Rather than reveal his true identity and be cleared of the accusations of racism towards his former students, he chooses a public scandal in order to protect the social identity he had worked his entire life to build.

Roth's work illustrates a modern publication of a piece spanning the past seventy years. With many racial and sexual controversies in the twenty-first century, passing will continue to be present in works. A prime example of this continued evolution of passing can be seen in works that move away from the concept of racial passing altogether and address societal issues regarding gender specifically. Instead of addressing gender issues like Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that illustrate motives such as maintaining family ties or escaping sexual assaults, modern works will begin to address issues related to gender identity. With social issues surrounding homosexual and transgender identities, fears from heterosexuals will motivate prejudices, just as fears of other groups and classes in previous periods have stemmed from previous prejudices; it can only be concluded that passing will continue to evolve motivated by the conflict of identity and as a means of establishing one's desired place in society.

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