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Empire State of Being: Modern Women and the Literary Streets of New York City

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Empire State of Being: Modern Women and the Literary Streets of New York City

An Honors College Project Presented to
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College of Arts and Letters
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by Kristen Ann Greiner

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*Thanks Mom,
I owe you an ice cream cone.*

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	4
Introduction	7
Leaving to Come Back: Following Anzia Yeziarska's Female Protagonists as They Wander In and Out of the Lower East Side	21
Passing Through Racialized Spaces on the Way to Harlem: Examining the Works of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen	62
Bibliography	106

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Introduction

The city has a special significance in the works of women writers because—as women—they have a unique relationship to the urban environment, whether it is considered as an actual place, as a symbol of culture, or as the nexus of concepts and values determining woman's place in history and society. (4)

—Susan Merrill Squier, “Introduction,” 1984

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is one of the quintessential novels of New York City from the modernist era. Published in 1925, Fitzgerald's novel is told from the perspective of Nick Carraway, a Yale graduate and World War I veteran who has rented a house on West Egg, a fictional town in Long Island, for the summer in 1922. His home is next to the mansion of Jay Gatsby, an enigmatic millionaire who hosts elaborate and raucous parties. After moving in, Nick reunites with his cousin, Daisy Buchanan, and her husband, Tom Buchanan—whom was Nick's acquaintance in college—at their mansion across the bay in East Egg. They introduce him to Jordan Baker, a professional golfer. On a later date, Tom takes Nick to meet his mistress, Myrtle Wilson—a woman married to a gas station owner in the valley of ashes, which stands between West Egg and New York City; they spend a day engaging in debauchery in Manhattan. Nick eventually receives an invitation to one of Gatsby's notorious parties, where he and Jordan learn that Gatsby was in love with Daisy before he was shipped off to war, and dreams of reuniting with her, rekindling their love. With Nick's help, Gatsby and Daisy begin having an affair, which ultimately ends with catastrophic circumstances. Fitzgerald's novel implies that the women and adventures Nick experiences in *The Great Gatsby* could only be found in New York City, highlighting the importance of space in literature.

One of the most significant aspects of Fitzgerald's work is his contribution to the portrayal of women in the canon of American literature. As Rena Sanderson observes in "Women in Fitzgerald's Fiction," Fitzgerald offered modern society "an image of a modern young woman who was spoiled, sexually liberated, self-centered, fun-loving, and magnetic." In his eyes, "young woman represented a new philosophy of romantic individualism, rebellion, and liberation, and his earliest writings enthusiastically present her as an embodiment of these new values" (143). His novels feature the flapper, who "should be regarded as one of the great authentic characters in American history. A virtual emblem of American modernity, she and all she stood for were envied, desired, feared, and emulated throughout much of the Western world." Fitzgerald's depiction of the flapper is the model that women would strive for the next four decades, and he used her as "a symbol not only of a new order, but also of social disorder and conflict" (143). Through his writing, Fitzgerald tries to understand the new roles that women began to hold in society from his male perspective, using personal experiences to shade his characterization of the modern woman.

While Fitzgerald works to portray what he sees as the modern woman, his views of women are far from revolutionary. For instance, in *The Great Gatsby*, his characterization of Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson, and Jordan Baker "suggests that a woman has no identity except in the eyes of her beholder" (Sanderson 154). Fitzgerald turns his characters into female spectacles rather than fully realized characters, utilizing tropes that are common throughout his entire bibliography. Daisy Buchanan is "Fitzgerald's golden girl"—the object of Gatsby's love and his symbol of the American Dream (155). This label, used by Sanderson and other critics, references Fitzgerald's descriptions of Daisy, such as "High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl..." (Fitzgerald 133). Meanwhile, Sanderson also notes how the other

female characters follow tropes present in Fitzgerald's works: Myrtle Wilson is the "lower-class sexualized woman"—a fraud who tries to reach out of her social status, and Jordan Baker, a new figure, representing the "androgynous tendencies" of what Fitzgerald saw to be the New Woman (155). Daisy and Jordan are written to capture the male gaze, and as a result, they are expected to fulfill the dreams of the men who look at them. Fitzgerald creates women that lack the agency to make decisions for themselves, creating an extreme level of dependency on the men in their lives. His "exploration of 'the New Woman' was inseparable from his attempts to formulate the appropriate male response." As a result, Fitzgerald forges his male protagonists into romantic heroes, and the unfortunate outcomes for many of his female characters can be read as a condemnation of the modern woman for not living up to the hero's—or any male's—expectations (Sanderson 144).

Fitzgerald's novel offers one interpretation of the modern woman of the early twentieth century—a version of the New Woman. His reading of his female contemporaries paints a very different picture from other writers and scholars, past and present. While Fitzgerald's flappers and depiction of the New Woman are seen as the standard in modernist literature, there is a rich body of texts by women writers that feature the modern woman in a different light. Fitzgerald's women exist in urban environments, which enable the characters he portrays to live their extravagant lifestyles, but his female peers also offer images of the modern woman in the city, though conceivably in a more realistic and genuine way. These women writers gave a depth to the New Woman that Fitzgerald could not. As defined by Christine Stansell in *American Moderns*, the New Woman worked towards and fought for

not just a claim to the right to the vote or to making mothers' roles in society more honored but rather to economic independence, sexual freedom, and psychological

exemption from the repressive obligations of wifedom, motherhood, and daughterhood—a jettisoning of family duties for a heightened female individualism.

(227)

The New Woman was, first and foremost, interested in her own endeavors and advancement, and those of her fellow women. She wanted to live her life in the public sphere, away from the domestic roles as housewife and mother. The desire for freedom, to work towards professional achievements in the arts, science, writing, and education, in search of a sense of self that had been previously unavailable to them, and to an extent, still was, were born of the patriarchal society they lived in (28). In this case, patriarchy refers to a society that “is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered,” as detailed in Allan Johnson’s *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Society* (5). The New Woman wanted to fight back against a culture that dedicated its focus and energy on men, ignoring the ample capabilities of women. She was a woman of the early twentieth century and a product of moving to cities—modern and independent, striving to do more with her life than her predecessors.

The New Woman was the antithesis and direct result of the True Woman—the societal standard women were held to in the nineteenth century. During this era, women were expected to follow “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.” The maintenance of these qualities was judged by herself and “was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society,” according to Barbara Welter in “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” (152). The True Woman was told to focus on the workings of the private space of her home, raising children and maintaining the household. Society policed her into remaining in these private spaces, but women often did not reach the high standards that society set for them, causing disappointment and disillusionment. Everything started to change as families began to relocate to cities.

Cities offered women the chance to break away from the societal expectations of the past. Urban environments “tended to produce smaller families living in smaller quarters, both of which reduced the number of hours and years a mother needed to spend at home” (Marriner 127). As a result, she was afforded some freedom in urban spaces, able to participate in more activities outside the home. Women desired the opportunity to thrive, to have equality, to work, to learn. They craved to be seen as equals to their male counterparts, and their voices were going to be heard. In their new urban homes, many women “took to their pens to air their grievances” and “others took to the streets to pursue their individual talents, making a public statement by their dress and manners and by their increasing education, changing marriages, and agitation for suffrage” (Marks 22). It was the time for women to begin breaking free of the shackles of the past and forge their own paths forward, towards progress and freedom to make their own decisions in life, both in public and private.

Nancy A. Hewitt explores how white middle and upper-class women were not the only fighters for women’s rights and the later suffrage movement, which helped motivate the New Woman. Working-class, African American, and immigrant women also played huge roles in the advancement of equal rights. For instance, African American “women engaged in debates over women’s roles in both the black community and the larger society” (21) and women workers of the Ladies Industrial Association in New York City “sought better education, better jobs, and better wages for working-class immigrant as well as middle-class native-born women” (24). The city offered growing numbers of women from an assortment of backgrounds a chance to fight for emancipation from the oppressive society they lived in, and to do that, they took their fate into their own hands to strive for human rights, economic and racial justice, and individual autonomy (16-33).

American cities underwent a great deal of development in the nineteenth century as industrialization and urbanization swept across the nation, bringing technological advancements and transforming the American economic system. People moved to towns and cities, looking for work and joining the new industrial economy (Olson vii-xxvi). According to David Ward and Olivier Zunz, New York City also attracted “a more numerous and diverse flow of immigrants than any other city in the nation. The outcome was a rational and pluralistic metropolis of unprecedented scale” (3). These immigrants helped to diversify the city, allowing for different ideas to culminate in one space. The influx of immigrants also meant adding more workers and consumers to the growing market. The composition of the city was changing, ushering in the modernist era.

Societal changes caused a break from the past, requiring people to invent their identities in light of this new environment. Feelings of dissonance rang throughout the country, particularly in cities where it felt like landscapes transformed right before their eyes. These cities—New York in particular—became hosts to contrasting ideas, combining contrary images like “formal and informal economies, tall and small buildings, the service sector and industry, and the deeds of machine politicians and those of reformers” (Ward and Zunz 5). New buildings constantly emerged in an upward rush, reaching for the clouds and the open space of the sky, permanently altering the shape of New York and its trademark silhouette. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the New York City skyline came to serve as the symbol of American progress and modernity.

In literature, the feelings of uncertainty created by modernity came to life in the portrayal of *flânerie* on the page. *Flânerie*—the act of strolling—in modern literature “parallels with the idea of the search... not for place but for self or identity” and can be “interpreted as an attempt to

identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity” as Deborah L. Parsons notes in *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (41). Flânerie was typically viewed as an activity enjoyed by men alone, as the first portrayal of flânerie is often credited to Charles Baudelaire and his creation of the artist-poet in the modern city—the flâneur—in his 1863 “The Painter of Modern Life”. As Parsons describes in “Flâneur or Flâneuse?: Mythologies of Modernity,” the flâneur has “become a legendary icon of the architextual aesthetics of the urban novel, a figure who walks and listens to the narrative of the city, surfacing in different guises in the literary, architectural, social, psychological and geographical texts of modernity” (92). The flâneur was a trope used to understand the experience of modernity, and while some critics argue that he represented seeing the modern city through the male gaze, Parsons argues otherwise. Her analysis suggests that the portrayal of flânerie and “the flâneur motif is ambiguous in terms of class and gender,” meaning it can also be applied to metropolitan women (92). This interpretation allows for the creation of the flâneuse—the feminine equivalent of the flâneur. Utilizing this trope, urban environments could be read through a female gaze, and in the literature about New York City during the age of modernity, it can offer new interpretations about the effects of the New Woman and how she navigated city spaces. Authors were able to recreate the city through women’s imagined relationships to the streets and skyline, telling their own stories. Using historical and social contexts, Christoph Lindner and Jeanne Scheper offer examples of how the flâneuse was able to showcase the female experience in New York City, and the importance of her character.

The flâneuse is linked, on the one hand, to women’s new found social and spatial freedoms in the modern city, and on the other hand, to women’s symbolic recuperation back into the system of power and meaning being challenged. (Lindner 134)

Utilizing the flâneuse allowed authors to portray women wandering the streets in public, further separating them from the private space of their homes. In this manner, women were breaking away from their pasts through literature and other art.

The flâneuse used the art form of walking not only to stage an aesthetic revolution, but to stage a social revolution as well, opening up the city space to the movements of women, becoming author and object of a female gaze. Women and artists in a variety of media began to create unauthorized performances of femininity. Their movements in public space constituted a performance of resistance to social categories and in some cases, aesthetic categories. (Scheper 688)

The concept of the flâneuse in literature can be used to help contextualize the importance of new female experiences and empowerment. The flâneuse helps capture the transformation of women's roles in society, made possible by the women's rights movement and the New Woman. The New Woman helped transformed the city into a space where women could navigate on their own and interpret the streets in their own way.

The New Woman was partly made possible by the growing numbers of people in cities in the United States and around the world. She was not the only one drastically affected by New York's transformation into a model of modernity. The city's "explosive growth in the nineteenth century led not just to new spaces of affluence and leisure... but also to the increased ghettoization of historically poor neighborhoods like the Bowery, the Lower East Side, and Hell's Kitchen" (Lindner 146). Immigrants were one of the largest growing population groups in New York City at the turn of the century. They moved into the city's slums in the center of the city, where there was access to jobs, and "the presence of these outsider populations was essential for building, servicing, inhabiting, and vitalizing the everyday spaces of the modern

city” (146). New York became a beacon for immigrants, calling them from all over the world with its opportunities for change and a new life.

That being said, housing discrimination limited where many of these immigrant groups and others could live in New York, leading to the creation of ethnic neighborhoods. These sections of the city offered a chance to celebrate their identity and define who they wanted to be in relation to the city. They allowed for people to commune with others that had similar experiences in a new environment. For many, New York City’s streets also “presented a world of constant experience and action, where there was excitement at every turn and where the choices and sights could provide feelings of constant experience of the self uprooted from a stable past” (Erenberg 74). It was often a stark contrast from their previous residence, and the ethnic communities offered a sense of familiarity. Jewish immigrants, for instance, settled together in the immigrant ghetto on the Lower East Side, and later in the ethnic neighborhoods of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and upper Manhattan. As Mary Dash Moore observes in “On the Fringes of the City: Jewish Neighborhoods in Three Boroughs,” Jews created

in these city spaces an environment that fostered ethnic cultural pluralism. The political, social, economic, and cultural life of the streets, and of the organizations located in the area, rebounded off the buildings until the physical character of the neighborhood appeared to acquire a persona. Despite their different physical characteristics, Jewish neighborhoods on the fringes of the city shared a common ethnic ‘language’ of cultural pluralism. New York Jews came to inhabit a modern ethnic world whose plural landscapes spoke to and reflected Jewish cultural assumptions. (255)

Jewish neighborhoods, like the Lower East Side, offered a meeting place between the modernity of the city and the villages of the Old World. These communities combined the cultures of the

old and the new to create a type of pluralism that would not have been possible without the modernity of New York City.

Harlem, a neighborhood that African Americans flocked to in the early twentieth century, was also a result of modernity. The industrial jobs in New York City ushered in many African Americans from the South for new work opportunities, which allowed for the creation of neighborhoods that were predominately African American. For creators of black culture, the city offered more “protection for their cultural expressions” (Erenberg 73). In the 1920s, Harlem, while serving as the cultural capital for black America, was also becoming a slum. Due to low salaries and wages—a result of discrimination and prejudice in the work place—the neighborhood did not have the capital it needed to thrive like others. A majority of money went towards the expensive rent, and many needed to make their homes multi-occupation rooming houses in an attempt to afford the high cost of living. The city streets were filled with “poverty, overcrowding, health problems and high crimes,” creating a harsher environment than those often depicted in the literature of the era (Wilson 81). Harlem’s “vibrant, harsh existence” also “inspired black woman writers to record their lives in some of the most memorable novels” in the twentieth century (81). These writers worked to capture a realistic experience for African Americans in the city, and many created protagonists that were shaped by the time period and their location.

While Fitzgerald depicted one type of New Woman and offered one interpretation of New York City, using his personal experiences and relationships as models for the characters and stories he crafted, I turn my attention to other works. For my thesis, I have looked at depictions of the modern woman in New York City portrayed by female authors from ethnic neighborhoods in the city. Just as Fitzgerald’s women gallivant around New York, the authors I

study portray women that move around the city, but their ethnicities offer dissimilar experiences to those of the white women of *The Great Gatsby*. These ethnic female authors, however, offer incredibly different interpretations of the early twentieth century woman from their male counterparts, presenting them as more authoritative and strong characters. The female authors I have studied also offer their own unique portrayals of the city. To explain why I have decided to focus on works by female authors that take place in New York City, I offer a quote from Susan Merrill Squier's introduction to her compilation of essays by feminist scholars, *Women Writers and the City*:

Furthermore, in writing about cities, women reveal their response to culture itself: they consider the difficulties they face working in that cultural realm from which their gender has traditionally barred them, and they celebrate the immense pleasures of that new frontier. (5)

The city has been an integral part for furthering the development of women in society, and because they have witnessed it themselves, women writers are able to portray that experience with words on a page in ways that men cannot.

For my thesis, the works I have selected to analyze feature women from African American and Jewish backgrounds. I wanted to exemplify the diversity of New York City, leading me to select texts that showcase protagonists from different walks of life. In the following chapters, I hope to answer multiple questions, including: How do ethnic modernist women relate to the city of New York? How is identity influenced by geography and space, and more specifically, how does New York City shape the characters in these selected novels? How is New York City itself portrayed in the works of fiction? Are there distinguishing threads of

identity in each unique location in the city? These questions helped drive my analyses of the chosen works.

With a city as large and expansive as New York, I have centered my focus on two neighborhoods: Harlem and the Lower East Side. The communities in these neighborhoods are rich and filled with character and history, which are well portrayed in modern literature. The female authors from these spaces recreate New York City through the stories they write and by utilizing the notion of the flâneuse; they contextualize the city through the eyes of their female protagonists. The following chapters, though focused on different neighborhoods and different groups of people, are united in exhibiting the connection that female protagonists have to New York City in modernist American literature. Each novel has moments where the protagonist leaves either the Lower East Side or Harlem, but I argue that even though these women attempt to leave and exist in spaces that can offer more opportunity, they are eventually pulled back to the communities that forged their identities, because they are intrinsically tied to those spaces. The female protagonist in each novel defines herself through her movement in New York City spaces—she engages in flânerie to understand the environment around her, and as a way to represent herself. The portrayal of the city in each novel highlights its many differing, and sometimes contradicting, features, illustrating how it is a space for opportunity and independence, but also one of limits and community. Without the neighborhoods of Harlem and the Lower East Side in New York City, the female protagonists would not be themselves.

The following chapter focuses on the movement between spaces in New York City, especially focusing on the effects of moving in and out of the Lower East Side. For this section, I will look at *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and *Bread Givers* (1925): the works of Anzia Yezierska, a Jewish immigrant woman who settled in the New York neighborhood where her

stories occur. The selected novels feature young immigrant women who search for opportunity, as well as their sense of identity and belonging, on the streets of New York. The Lower East Side serves as a foundation for these women's identities, but they need to leave the neighborhood in order to return with a fully realized sense of self. On their journeys out of the downtown neighborhood, the protagonists enter spaces that offer lessons that will be useful in developing their identity to its maximum potential, but they ultimately celebrate who they are on the Lower East Side.

The chapter on Harlem focuses on the issue of how racialized spaces, particularly in New York City, affect the female protagonists that navigate through them. To do this, I will be analyzing Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928)—from this point forward, referred to as *Plum Bun*—and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). Fauset and Larsen were writers during the Harlem Renaissance, and they worked to elevate the stories told about African Americans in the early twentieth century. Both *Plum Bun* and *Passing* feature female African American protagonists that have fair complexions, which allow them to pass as white women when needed in spaces where their racial heritage would stand as an obstacle. In these passing narratives, the women traverse the streets of New York City searching for their identities, crossing across boundaries and racialized spaces, before ultimately settling in Harlem. The uptown neighborhood serves as the space where the women's individual identities are cemented and celebrated. Unlike other parts of the city, Harlem offers the protagonists the opportunity to be comfortable in their own skin.

This thesis studies the connection between women and space, analyzing how a woman's movement on the streets of New York City impacts her sense of self. The works of Anzia Yezierska, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen display the experiences of ethnic women often left out

of the American literary conversation. Their novels grapple with the importance of geography on a woman's identity, offering insights into the life of the ethnically diverse modern women of the Lower East Side and Harlem.

Leaving to Come Back: Following Anzia Yeziarska's Female Protagonists as They Wander In
and Out of the Lower East Side

New York City inspired Anzia Yeziarska to strike out on her own to change her circumstances. Likened by many critics to be the “Cinderella of the Ghetto” or the “Sweatshop Cinderella,” Yeziarska’s work brought her a moderate amount of success and fame, allowing her to escape the poverty she had endured with her family after immigrating to the United States. As a young Jewish woman in a world far away from the stricter patriarchal notions of the Old World, Yeziarska saw her new opportunities as a chance to do something with her life. She shared many ideals with the New Woman of New York City who worked to emancipate women from the limitations of American society. Yeziarska sought to assimilate in the new society that gave her more freedom, trying to contribute to the story. Yeziarska used her novels to reflect on her experiences as a young immigrant woman who was “desperate to escape the plight of other immigrants, the confinement of the ghetto, and the limitations of Orthodoxy,” as Evelyn Avery describes (29). Picking up the pen was Yeziarska’s method of navigating the new world she lived in. In America, Yeziarska was “caught between two cultures, and possessed a unique personality and strong will,” and her short stories and novels let Yeziarska play out her real-life situations with more desirable outcomes (29).

The protagonists of Yeziarska’s novels are strikingly similar to descriptions of the author as a young woman: bright, ambitious, and overflowing with convictions. Not only do the female protagonists strike back against the stereotypical views of women—particularly those of immigrant Jewish women—but they also forge a new path forward, both for themselves and readers of Yeziarska’s work. The novels, as Lisa Botshon points out, “bring a different sense of

the New Woman to popular fiction as they portray the struggles of the Jewish immigrant woman to achieve not only a sense of American citizenship, but also self-determination, independence, and creative and sexual fulfillment, ideals found throughout many strains of the varied New Womanhood” (234). The female characters that Yeziarska creates challenge societal norms, as they rebelled against male figures and worked towards goals that would allow them to be more independent. They were a combination of Yeziarska’s interpretation of the New Woman and her interpretation of the Jewish immigrant woman experience. This is especially true for Sonya Vrunsky of *Salome of the Tenements* and Sara Smolinsky in *Bread Givers*. These two young women, who both begin their American lives on the streets of the Lower East Side, wander around New York City—and in Sara’s case, the country—in the search for their sense of self and belonging. Ultimately, both return to the Lower East Side, realizing that their neighborhood of origin is the source of their identity. Yeziarska’s writing “captures contradictory values in ethnically diverse modern New York and the resulting ambivalence towards the emancipation and social rise of a Jewish immigrant woman,” and explores how those experiences affect her heroines’ identities, as studied by Ljiljana Coklin (154). In this chapter, I will explore how the female protagonists of Anzia Yeziarska’s novels navigate New York City, tracing their movements from space to space. These women leave the Lower East Side in search of greater opportunities to thrive, but they eventually return to the neighborhood that provided the foundation for their identities. The separation from the familiar space of the Lower East Side causes feelings of self-doubt and isolation, illustrating how foreign environments can have a negative effect on women. Each space also provides the protagonists with valuable lessons or insights into their identities, which will strengthen them in the end, displaying how location can assist in the growth and transformation of a woman.

The Old and the New: Contextualizing the Lower East Side

Between 1880 and 1924, the United States received a great influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Approximately 2.5 million Eastern European Jews entered during this period, voyaging to America to flee rising bouts of anti-Semitism and state-sanctioned persecution in their home countries. Jews sought out economic and social opportunities previously unavailable to them. Strict laws in countries, like Russia and Russian-occupied Poland, prevented them from holding certain professions, owning land, and participating in other capital investments. Restricted to working in petty commerce, Jews were kept in poverty, and they were only allowed to live in certain small towns after being exiled from major cities in Russia. Government-sponsored violence and pogroms—the Yiddish word for organized massacres—plagued Eastern European Jews at the end of the nineteenth century, pushing them to break from the “Old World” to seek a new start, and many came to the United States.

In America, Jews created a rich culture for themselves. Upon arrival, many settled in the Lower East Side, located in the southeastern part of Manhattan, which stretches from Canal Street up to Houston Street, bordered by the East River and the Bowery to the west. A downtown working-class, immigrant neighborhood, the Lower East Side has been home to many groups over the years, one of the most prominent ethnic groups being the Jews. While there had been a Jewish presence in New York City since the early nineteenth century, when Jews from German provinces arrived in lower Manhattan, it was nothing compared to the numbers that would arrive at the turn of the twentieth century (Kent 115-117).

The streets south of Fourteenth and north of Fulton overflowed with people from countless backgrounds and experiences, all united in their search for a better life. As Catherine Rottenberg notes,

Amidst the poverty of the crowded tenements and the seemingly omnipresent sweatshops, the hundreds of thousands of Jews who lived in this urban enclave espoused and developed diverse ideological and religious commitments: from anarchism and Zionism to Yiddishism and Orthodox Judaism. Moreover, these immigrants managed to build, within a relatively short time, an impressive array of visible and highly developed institutional networks, including trade unions, synagogues, and settlement houses.

(“Introduction” 2)

They carved out new lives for themselves in this filthy, overcrowded section of the city. The combination of horse manure, offal from slaughtered animals, and human waste created incredibly unsanitary conditions on the frenzied city streets. Despite this, many called the Lower East Side their new home. Families formed connections with other Jews that had come from nearby shtetls—villages—bringing aspects of the Old World into the New. Bonded through similar experiences and a shared language, Yiddish; they transplanted their culture to the United States and built supportive, close-knit communities. (Sternlicht 4-10)

Jewish women—adolescents in particular—experienced new opportunities previously unavailable to them. Like in their native countries, immigrant mothers were in charge of the affairs of the household. However, in the United States, in addition to the exhaustive chores of housework and child rearing, these women also occasionally helped earn extra income for their household. They managed boarders who would pay rent for a room in a family’s tenement and did piecework as workers in the garment industry (14).

Adolescent Jewish women, on the other hand, enjoyed the freedoms of being a teen in America. The efforts to Americanize by immigrant adolescents created a generational gap between them and their parents. Teens wanted to break away from the strict traditions of the past

and forge their own identities in their new world, attempting to find a balance between “ethnic specificity, adolescent solidarity, and national identity” (Chinn 81). Immigrant parents were left behind and powerless to an extent, unable to learn English as well as their children, who were taught at schools that also helped them assimilate into American culture. Parents felt alienated from their offspring and the new society whose customs they could not understand. As a result, “struggles over clothes, music, leisure, sex, and propriety” were common between immigrants of southern and eastern Europe and their American-raised children, because “the teenage children of immigrants had firmly established meaningful cultural distance between themselves and their parents” (79-80). A divide between generations was forged, separating the traditional values of parents from their children who embraced the modern American ideals.

Conflict between immigrant parents and their children also arose over adolescent desire for financial independence as another form of personal freedom. As adolescents worked outside the home, the income they received caused a shift in familial power structures, because families depended on these wages to survive. Adolescent females—who worked in factories for solid wages—were especially affected by this transformation, because they demanded that they be able to decide how to spend the money they earned, causing a rift between them and their immigrant mothers. They began to manage their own finances to an extent, which was greatly feared by both parents and the patriarchal society they lived in (Sternlicht 15-16). As Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy observed in a 1913 study for the National Federation of Settlements, the adolescent working girl

Chafes under authority, becomes impatient with narrow conditions, seeks freedom from home responsibilities, demands more in amusement and clothing, becomes dictatorial toward younger brothers and sisters. She begins to enter into hitherto forbidden

amusements, and justifies herself by the claim ‘I am earning my own living and can do as I please.’ (qtd. in Chinn 84-85)

While young single women fought for more financial independence, societal pressures often bombarded them as well. In New York City, a slight understanding of English and a demonstration of some skill set allowed young women to enter the industrial workforce, and their new positions garnered a steady income and some respect. However, fearing that economic freedom would result in more lax morals, these young women were warned against the “dangers of vanity, self-indulgence, and sexual freedom,” and bullied into marrying and having children (Sternlicht 15-16). The conflicting views between generations on the Lower East Side had an extreme impact on the neighborhood’s inhabitants.

The streets, dirty and filled with people, create the hectic environment that set the scene for Anzia Yeziarska’s novels. Born in the 1880s in a small town in Russian-occupied Poland, Yeziarska’s writings are influenced by her personal experiences. Her father, Bernard Yeziarska, was a Talmudic scholar, and the Yeziarska family was large and impoverished. The family came to the United States in the 1890s, settling on the Lower East Side with hopes of prosperity and security in mind. Yeziarska’s father remained devoted to his religious studies and tried to maintain the strict gender roles of the Old World, but she, like many others, rebelled, leaving home at seventeen to find her own identity in the New World. Yeziarska began that journey by receiving an education so she could become a writer, and then transferred her experiences to the page to share with the world.

Yeziarska’s novels portray American society as the ideal to strive for, viewing it as less limiting and less misogynistic than the traditional patriarchy she was raised in. This depiction, however, negates the patriarchal nature of the United States and ignores the gender-based

oppression that was ongoing, despite women's fights for equal rights. Yeziarska's novels portray the struggle to fight against traditional gender roles of the Old World, but by celebrating American society instead of highlighting its issues with gender oppression, she is complicit in allowing the power imbalance to continue. In Yeziarska's eyes, the promise to escape from traditional patriarchal values of the Old World was more important than holding modern society accountable for its sometimes problematic treatment of women. Yeziarska's protagonists are portrayed as less restricted than others because they live in a more progressive New York setting. While it is impossible for women to completely escape the omnipresent clutches of patriarchy in real life, Yeziarska's plots suggest otherwise. Her characters are able to break away from traditional patriarchal oppression and seem to be free, but they silently accept American patriarchy in the process. The fiction makes it seem like escaping from patriarchy is an option, but it really means choosing a source of oppression that is seen as less prohibitive. The women are portrayed as strong and independent as they are afforded the rights of the New Woman, but by still acting in accordance to American societal standards, they help maintain modern American gender roles.

Like the characters that she creates, Yeziarska was an independent, bold, and driven woman that strived to become an American, fully immersing herself in her new home. Yeziarska's desire to assimilate drove her writing, as she "described her efforts to write as her contribution to making an America that was not yet finished" (Kessler-Harris xxi-xxvii). She wanted to bridge her personal experiences with American society to integrate into the culture, attempting to find a space for herself with the stories she wrote. The short stories and novels Yeziarska published brought her moderate success, but she still struggled to find her place. The

writings portrayed the immigrant experience on the Lower East Side as she had lived it, featuring strong and resilient female protagonists that were reminiscent of Yeziarska herself (xxxv-xxxvi).

For Yeziarska, these novels also served as a form of wish fulfillment. *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), while based on a surprising marriage between a Jewish woman and a wealthy Protestant millionaire, also illustrates Yeziarska's relationship to her new home. Sonya, like Yeziarska, "wants to become 'an American' on her own terms" while maintaining her personal identity, instead of assimilating and conforming to the society around her (Botshon 235). Similarly, Yeziarska spent much of her adult life choosing to focus on her career, and she enjoyed success and fame from her work (Avery 29). The father-daughter relationship between Reb and Sara Smolinsky in *Bread Givers* (1925) parallels the relationship between Yeziarska and her father. The novel allows her to play around with real-life situations and create results that were more desirable for Yeziarska. *Bread Givers* allowed her to make sense of the conflict that drove a wedge between the bold Yeziarska and a father who wanted to adhere to the traditions of the Old World in America. While Yeziarska's relationship with her father remained strained, to the point that "she could only send her father a check, in *Bread Givers*, she, as Sara Smolinsky the youngest rebellious daughter, could return home, choose to make sacrifices with the old man, and be rewarded by marriage to an enlightened, traditional Jewish man" (37). Yeziarska dreamed of rebuilding the relationship with her father, but their personalities clashed too much. She found resolution for her real life problems in her writing, making sense of her experiences on the page.

Navigating the Streets and Identity in Yeziarska's Novels

The Lower East Side and New York City served as the backdrop for Yeziarska's works. In both *Salome of the Tenements* and *Bread Givers*, she paints a picture of the neighborhood that inspired her young protagonists to strike out on their own. In the opening pages of *Salome of the*

Tenements, Yeziarska emphasizes the “horrid poverty,” the squalor, and the loud and overwhelmingly crowded streets of the Lower East Side:

Oblivious of the squalid humans that swarmed about them, indifferent for the moment to the myriad needs that drove the crowds here and there from pushcarts to shops, from tenements to factories, restaurants and coffee stands, unaware of the raucous orchestra of voices, the metallic bedlam of elevated trains, the pounding of horses and humans scuttling through the middle of the street. (2)

Sonya Vrunsky lives among the “haggling pushcart peddlers, in the dirt and din of screaming hucksters,” embarrassed by the dingy neighborhood and her poverty (3). She focuses on the oppressive environment, only noticing the grime and noise of the city, and hopes that John Manning, a wealthy Protestant man who sees the neighborhood as a charity case, will be able to sweep her away from the grimy ghetto. Yeziarska and Sonya’s emphasis on the disorderly and boisterous sounds of the Lower East Side accentuates the neighborhood’s visceral quality. Its loudness and filth suggest that the area is uncivilized and untamed, as if it needs saving. This sector of New York City feels limiting to Sonya—she cannot initially see the beauty of her home and the people that live there.

The scenes describing the Lower East Side in *Bread Givers* portray a similar picture. As a young girl, Sara Smolinsky struggles to sell items on Hester Street, a busy street on the Lower East Side with a bustling market street. She has to fight to be heard, her voice “like dynamite. Louder than all the pushcart peddlers, louder than all the hollering noises of bargaining and selling, I cried out my herring with all the burning fire of my ten old years,” again emphasizing the sheer volume of the neighborhood (21). The conditions lead Sara to dream of making enough money to “run away from and never look on our dirty house again” (22). In both novels, the

deplorable conditions push the protagonists to dream of fleeing their homes and striking out on their own. The environment that Yeziarska creates in her novels does not necessarily encourage self-exploration and personal development, but the Lower East Side provides a foundation for the protagonist's identity. Both Sonya and Sara, however, must leave the neighborhood and then return home before that identity is fully realized and celebrated.

Published in 1923, *Salome of the Tenements* was Anzia Yeziarska's first novel. Much of the plot is based on the actual experiences of Yeziarska's friend—Rose Pastor—a Jewish working-class socialist who married the millionaire, James Phelps Graham Stokes, famous for his assistance with settlement homes on the Lower East Side. The novel parallels their story, as its protagonist, Sonya Vrunsky, a reporter for the *Ghetto News*, falls in love with John Manning, an American philanthropist that works with impoverished immigrants. The two form a seemingly deep connection, and eventually marry. The relationship is short-lived though, as Sonya and John Manning soon realize that they are highly incompatible, just as their real-life models did (Sternlicht 85). Sonya is driven by the pursuit of beauty, which pushes her to relocate in and out of the Lower East Side, and the desire for beauty influences how she navigates through different parts of the city. Every location that Sonya travels to also has an effect on her identity, showing how space can affect an individual.

Sonya's identity is intrinsically tied to location, and in particular, the beauty of environments that surround her. The office of the *Ghetto News* on the Lower East Side—the newspaper Sonya works for—is where she is first introduced to radical ideas and notions of grandeur, which push her to strive for higher standards of beauty and excellence. The newspaper office also represents the birthplace of Sonya's ruthless ambition. Through exposure to ideas and worldviews outside of her own, Sonya is able to conclude, “A woman should be youth and fire

and madness—the desire that reaches for the stars” (*Salome of the Tenements* 7). Her passion and high-reaching goals impress her co-worker, Gittel Stein, and Lipkin, her boss and editor of the newspaper. These two characters serve as contrasts to Sonya, because they are older and hold more realistic and cynical views of the world. On the other hand, Gittel’s rebuttals only push Sonya to work harder and become more steadfast in her beliefs, with the differing viewpoints give Sonya the chance to sharpen her mind and scheming abilities. Working in this Lower East Side environment encourages Sonya to dream freely and reach for goals that stretch far beyond the noisy, grimy streets outside the building.

For Sonya, the office stands for reaching higher; it shows how with a job and intelligence, an individual can make it in America. It is the land of opportunity on a smaller scale, because it provides Sonya with the chance to succeed through the exposure of new ideas and experiences, just as the United States offered a new life for other immigrants. The newspaper office, while a birthplace for Sonya’s passion and ambition, is also a source of opportunity for her to branch out beyond the Lower East Side. While Sonya is “a crazy nobody from Hester Street, a nobody from nowhere” with ideas of grandeur, she gets her big break after working on a story for the *Ghetto News* (7). The ghetto is only a starting point, and Sonya thinks that anywhere would be better than the Lower East Side. Sonya dreams of leaving the dingy neighborhood after she interviews John Manning—a Protestant millionaire philanthropist interested in uplifting the Lower East Side. She immediately becomes enamored with him because she sees Manning as her way out of the impoverished neighborhood. In Sonya’s eyes, the ghetto is her biggest obstacle, marking “her distance from higher truths, which she believes Manning can reveal to her” (Wald 64). In Manning, Sonya sees the opportunity to get out of the ghetto, to be led into a world with more beauty. Feeling exuberance at the thought of Manning sweeping her away from

the Lower East Side, Sonya declares, ““An end to darkness and dirt! I’ve found my deliverer! Already I’m released from the blackness of this poverty. Air, space, the mountain-tops of life are already mine!”” (*Salome* 5). The newspaper, though a concrete part of Sonya’s life downtown, also gives her the chance to leave, allowing her to begin her version of the American Dream: a life without poverty surrounded by beauty.

Despite her disinclination towards the neighborhood as a whole, the streets of the Lower East Side have had quite a powerful effect on Sonya’s identity. It has lit the flame that burns brightly inside Sonya’s soul. She makes her own rules. She lives in “her own world, bound by invisible laws of her own making,” and nothing will get in her way (*Salome* 8). Sonya is resilient and knows what she wants, not letting the “drab environment” of the Lower East Side block the pursuit of her desires, even as a child when “what she wanted dominated not only her family, but the tenement house, the whole block where she lived” (83). The neighborhood, while dirty and impoverished, gives Sonya a genuine sense of self; it offers a real sense of authenticity. The Lower East Side does not pretend to be something other than the dingy slum that it is, which allows Sonya to form her identity without fickle material distractions, even though she is open about her desires for them and dreams of leaving the neighborhood to live in a more beautiful environment.

While Sonya finds strength from her experiences in the Lower East Side, the neighborhood also represents the oppression of poverty. Navigating through Suffolk Street and Essex Street, Sonya feels out of place. She feels that she deserves a life beyond the decrepit slums of New York. The Lower East Side cannot offer her what she needs to prosper. ““I hate cheap feathers. I hate cheap stuff!”” Sonya declares, complaining about the poor quality of goods and lack of selection available to her at the only one-price store on Essex Street (14). The

neighborhood does not have the means to suit Sonya's more refined tastes. More importantly, the Lower East Side prevents her from portraying herself in a way that will be appealing to Manning and his uptown society, because Sonya knows that "attractive clothes are necessary to transform her into an image of purity, innocence, and refined simplicity," which were needed to win over Manning's affections (Coklin 144). She wants to be surrounded by more beautiful things, to lead a richer lifestyle. For Sonya, the Lower East Side is an ugly prison that limits mobility, which pushes her to leave the neighborhood.

The oppressive nature of the neighborhood presses Sonya to scheme so she will be able to leave the Lower East Side. She objectifies herself to become Manning's dream woman, placing an emphasis on her physical beauty and foreignness. Sonya's dress, emphasizes the "supple swing of her body," and this display of femininity and subtle sexuality will be some of the many tools used to seduce Manning, because it is unlike how uptown women present themselves (*Salome* 26). Sonya's willingness to objectify herself as a way to get ahead shows how, despite living in America, she is still subject to patriarchal standards and to making herself an object of the male gaze. Sonya will do whatever is necessary to win Manning over and leave her restrictive neighborhood, even if it means degrading herself in the process. For example, Sonya's confidence, developed on the Lower East Side, is her most compelling quality to the men around her. She is a "single vivid flame," ruthless, destructive, wild, and beautiful (32). Her personality serves as a great contrast to Manning, suggesting that she is more primitive than he is because she is an immigrant, marking herself as an "other". Sonya is in tune with her passions, emotions, and sexuality, able to express her desires and ambitions candidly. On the other hand, Manning, is a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and incredibly stoic, cold, and distant. Despite his name, which suggests ideas of masculinity and sexual innuendo, Manning is a rather weak

character, because he has been oppressed by his upbringing, making him unable to admit to his desires as a result. To Sonya, he represents “the best that the nation can offer—taste, culture, breeding, money, power, and the desire to help those less fortunate. His wealth and family origins lend him authority; his discomfort with them lends him kindness” (Botshon 245). Sonya fascinates his repressed personality, which extends back through his storied family history, because she is so different from any other ladies he has ever been in contact with.

In order to attract Manning with simple and beautiful fashion, Sonya flees from the cheap goods of Essex Street and marches up to Fifth Avenue—one of the wealthier areas of New York, which serves as a great contrast to the Lower East Side. It is in this space that Sonya first learns that beauty can come with a high price tag. With its “exquisite furnishings of the mauve-hung reception room,” the studio of Jacques Hollins—a famous Jewish designer, formerly known as Jaky Solomon, from Division Street—is nothing like the dilapidated Lower East Side that Sonya is accustomed to seeing (22). Jacques Hollins also represents that beauty can come at the cost of forsaking identity. While Hollins argues, “An artist transcends his race,” something changed in him when he took up his alias (28). He has lost an aspect of his principles in his attempts to find success, explaining, “I always dreamed of designing clothes that would express and reveal the human soul, but it was only bodies that came to me for gowns” (29). By using his art as a means of income instead of as an outlet for passion and talent, Hollins diminishes its value. His standards are compromised by the desire to be successful, leaving him feeling unfulfilled and distant from the art that used to inspire him. Hollins is lost, facing the consequences of his sacrifices for his art and beauty. His success is not satisfying, because he has to adopt a false identity to live in this beautiful new world. While he dresses people in styles that hide their true forms, his soul suffers as he aids in their deceit. Hollins can only be reawakened by Sonya’s

passion and unmarred spirit. His unhappiness is a foreshadowing agent for Sonya, suggesting that if she alters an aspect of her identity to win over Manning, her life that follows that will be unsatisfying and unfulfilling.

Instead of serving as a cautionary tale and experience to avoid, visiting the Fifth Avenue studio gives Sonya the idea and means to fake her own identity. Seeing the success that Hollins has brought himself after leaving the neighborhood, while failing to observe the negative consequences of his decision, pushes her to scheme to get her way. Sonya hypnotizes Hollins “with the impassioned earnestness of her voice” (22). She demands that he design her a simple yet elegant suit that will capture Manning’s attention and convince him that she is worthy of his time and affection. This form of friendly coercion is a consistent tool for Sonya, as she “uses men unapologetically in order to secure a way out of the immigrant ghetto,” utilizing her magnetism in a way that benefits her (Coklin 140). The neighborhood that she wants to escape gives her the means by offering her self-confidence and strength, which she can use to convince others to accept her viewpoint. Sonya is empowered by the potential to escape poverty, willing to use any means necessary to attain her goals. She ignores the adverse effects that this deceit could lead to, in her life and in the lives of others, because she is desperate to leave. The studio has made her even more driven, and blinder to reality and consequence.

Sonya must act in this manner if she wants to achieve her goals. It is more important for her to have the chance to be exposed to a more beautiful world, to flee the oppressive nature of the Lower East Side, to know that there is more to life than dirt and poverty. Her dazzling personality must draw the attention of others who will want to help her get out of the ghetto so she can truly thrive. Sonya “operates within the stereotypes of inscrutability, fatality, performative self-fashioning, and eroticized difference,” objectifying herself to men so she can

have a more beautiful life with a plentitude of opportunities (Coklin 142). Self-objectification was a common tool for women to advance in a patriarchal society, as she would display herself in a manner that would please the male gaze in an attempt to get her way. It is not progressive, and self-objectification perpetuates the stereotype that women need to be beautiful to get ahead while further enabling men to view women as objects, but Sonya's motives for using the tactic are not purely shallow and selfish. Once she is well off, she wants to give back to her old neighborhood, exposing a compassionate and kind facet of her personality. She envisions,

Through her luck the whole Ghetto is saved. The hungry and the homeless life their hands in blessing everywhere she turns. The ragged children scamper from hovels and tenements and cling to her in childlike affection as she scatters handfuls of money among them. (*Salome* 13)

She is still attached to her old neighborhood, and wants to help improve it so no one else has to suffer in an ugly place like she did. Sonya simply does not have the means to achieve this dream on her own. She is inspired by Manning's work in the Lower East Side, where he sponsors and donates funds to promote old-age pensions, the abolishment of poverty and want, playgrounds for children, and model tenements. Sonya believes if she puts up a façade, with new clothes and a simply designed apartment, she can capture John Manning's attention. Together, they could "make beauty shine from an Essex Street tenement," which is Sonya's true goal throughout the novel (57). She wants to bring a manner of exquisiteness to the Lower East Side that the neighborhood had not been previously afforded. The only way Sonya can do this is to marry someone outside of her class and leave the Lower East Side so she can save it.

After successfully winning the heart of John Manning, Sonya moves to his uptown mansion, but the space represents oppression in the name of beauty. This new world is foreign to

Sonya, but filled with expensive and beautiful “thick, rich carpets” and walls “entangled by mirrors, paintings and colored tapestries” that she desired (112). Sonya, however, fails to see the beauty in the mansion because of its lack of warmth and familiarity. She is overwhelmed with everything as she and Manning

entered the somber, majestic dining room. An enormous candelabrum hung over the table, and the massive furniture with its old carvings lent an antiquated air to the place. Sonya walked uncertainly about the room, trying to familiarize herself with the huge sideboard loaded with old silver, and the china-closet crowded with antiques. Stranger to herself in this strange world, she found her bewildered hands tracing the outlines of animals carved deeply in the back and arms of ancient chairs. Her fingers seemed caught in the mouths of these fantastic beasts. (112)

The distance that Sonya feels in her new home with Manning takes hold immediately upon entering the new space. Although the beautiful objects that she dreamed of for so long finally surround her, Sonya is not happy, because the environment is too sterile for her. It seems that Sonya has more kinship towards the animals carved into the furniture than with Manning or his butler, which again emphasizes Sonya’s primitiveness in the eyes of the upper class. With her fingers caught in the mouths of those carved animals, the animals seem to swallow her vibrancy and soul, her sense of self. Sonya becomes unsure of her decisions, wondering if she will transform enough to please her husband’s bourgeois cohorts, fearing a lack of acceptance in her new social circle. By having her self-confidence shaken in this new environment, Sonya begins to doubt herself, which is the complete opposite of how she acted in the Lower East Side. Despite the beauty and luxury that Sonya thought she needed to thrive, the mansion uptown is sapping away her passion and vibrancy.

The sterility and coldness of the mansion also explains Manning's personality. His home is "structurally and ideologically oppressive because it embodies an Americanization aesthetic," which is why he is a constantly aloof and repressed individual (Okonkwo 136). As a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Manning lives in "the strait-jacket of American civilization" (*Salome* 132). His upbringing in upper-class society requires a rigid lifestyle structure—being emotionless, distant, and controlled is expected of every member of this caste. They are oppressed by the societal expectations of wealth, and it can be reflected in Manning's uptown mansion. His coldness can be felt through the ghosts of the generations of stoic Puritans that roamed the halls before him. Although the mansion is filled with beautiful items, it lacks the warmth of genuine human interaction, and this ruins Manning's ability to connect with Sonya, who needs connections with others to thrive, like oxygen to a flame.

Sonya's oppression continues the longer she stays in the home, and it negatively affects her personality. Wealth is an incredibly foreign concept for Sonya, and she does not adapt well. She realizes how out of place she feels with Manning and outside the comfort of her familiar tenements. Sonya admits that she is only herself "in the crowded city among the tenements" very early into her days uptown, signaling the beginning of her oppression (109). She feels out of place in her new upscale home, "trying instinctively to break through the atmosphere of solemn dignity" (113). The space of the mansion begins to clue Sonya into the fact that she truly belongs back in the gritty Lower East Side, which is her true home, her source of life and personality.

The mansion uptown not only takes away Sonya's bright personality, but also her voice, showing how certain spaces can take away a woman's power and sense of belonging. Once a freewheeling woman who unabashedly shared her opinions, Sonya feels stifled in her new environment, uncertain of every action, even what she says, bemoaning the way she tells "out

everything in [her] the minute” she speaks (119). Unable to say what she feels or thinks, Sonya begins to feel very alone. Uptown, she “is not only distanced from experience by language, but she is distanced from the experience of language itself” (Wald 65). Manning’s friends—whom she only meets because she lives in this new world—also make Sonya feel like a foreign entity, commenting on all of her qualities that they deem uncouth. They do not understand her way of communicating with her particular way of speech and mannerisms, noticing her “gesticulating hands,” because they are from the oppressive uptown society like Manning (*Salome* 121). Sonya’s passion, though stifled in the beautiful, yet cold, mansion still comes off as foreign and out of place, just like she does. Sonya sees herself as “one real person in a sea of make-believes,” finding the Anglo-Saxons to be dull and painfully limited by their upper-class societal expectations (122).

Sonya cannot act naturally uptown because it is too different from her native world. Sonya feels uncomfortable acting as she would downtown, despite assurances from Manning that his friends would love her for that. He wants Sonya to be a spectacle for his wealthy friends, again establishing Sonya as an “other” in this strange environment. She only appears comfortable when her old friends from the ghetto visit, invoking fond memories of the Lower East Side, making Sonya homesick. Sonya realizes that the Jews of the Lower East Side are a much more exciting and lively bunch, crushing her “initial hope to be able to achieve "civilization" through a union with John is dashed as she finds that not only does she remain primitive, but also that it would be odious to become civilized” (Botshon 251). Interactions with the Jews from her old way of life remind Sonya that there was a beauty in the Lower East Side that she had not initially noticed. She learns that beauty is not only found in material objects, like fine clothes and furniture, but in connection with others and their passions—these are the qualities that make a

home cozy and beautiful—they are what makes it authentic and real. After the reunion with her own people, Sonya also realizes she would rather be a bright, fiery woman who is unabashedly proud of she is, than a wealthy member of the repressed society of uptown. She misses her people, her ability to read what others think and manipulate any situation to work out in her favor. When sharing a tender moment with Manning, Sonya realizes “her incapacity to meet him fully in his own world” (*Salome* 129). Uptown, she will never fit in properly. She needs to be back with her own people on the Lower East Side. Tired of lying to herself and her husband, Sonya declares,

“No more can I make myself over on another person’s pattern. I’m different. I got to be what’s inside of me. I got to think the thoughts from my own head. I got to act from the feelings in my own heart. If I tried to make myself for a monkey, I’d go crazy in a day.”
(131)

In order to break free of the oppressive standards of uptown, Sonya insists that she and Manning relocate back to the Lower East Side. She does not belong uptown, realizing that there is beauty in her old neighborhood. The people, passionate and expressive, are the neighborhood’s source of beauty, because they live in a genuine manner. They do not put on a front; they express what they are feeling and are in touch with their emotions, unlike the people uptown, who repress everything and control their passions to the point that they are frigid and callous. Additionally, the thought of returning to the Lower East Side begins to revitalize Sonya. She regains her vibrant spark. By demanding that she return to the source of her happiness, to a space that is authentic and real, Sonya reclaims the agency that was taken by her relocation uptown, and tries to return to the tenements of the Lower East Side with her husband. Sonya feels a strong connection to the neighborhood because she has struggled there and because her propensity for

passion is derived from that space. Yezierska uses difficulties and labor as a way to express the true nature of her characters through their response to hardship, and the strength developed from suffering creates more compelling characters and spaces. The tenements are seen as real and authentic because the streets are painted in vivid detail, and the people who live in the neighborhood struggle, which requires immense amounts of effort to change the situation. They carry the burden of living in the slums of the Lower East Side, but their difficulties strengthen them and encourage them to act in a manner that is more expressive, embracing notions of passion, hope, and emotion. Their way of living cannot be understood unless it is experienced, and the passion they emit from their souls is a result of a deep connection between the self and space.

When Sonya and Manning return, they choose to live in one of his settlement houses, a space that stands as a symbol of the repressive uptown nature that Manning is accustomed to in the middle of Sonya's wild Lower East Side, while also highlighting the disconnect between the married couple. The settlement house upsets the beautiful chaos of the Lower East Side. It is an island of inauthenticity and make-believe—it has no place in the downtown neighborhood, just as Sonya has no place uptown. There is no passion or bold emotion in this space, ignoring the neighborhood's struggles and what the people of the Lower East Side want. Upon arrival, Manning explains to Sonya that “social experts” made him a “scientific survey of the needs of the neighborhood,” and the goal is to satisfy those needs on the “plane of reason” (134). Sonya realizes that he has no understanding of how the people in her neighborhood actually operate, recognizing that his life of privilege will never allow him to truly help those that need it. The settlement house, with its seemingly logical approach to the Lower East Side, destroys the inherent beauty of the neighborhood that Sonya now recognizes. The programs of the settlement

house ignore that “the poor also got a palate in their mouth” and a desire for a nicer existence and beautiful things, infuriating Sonya, who knows how to assist the neighborhood (135).

Manning’s rational and distant evaluation of the neighborhood’s needs cannot comprehend what the Lower East Side needs, and as an extension, Sonya concludes that Manning will never be able to understand her, who acts based on her feelings and passions. Her vibrancy is synonymous with the liveliness of the downtown neighborhood. It is one of the final breaking points of Sonya and Manning’s marriage, as “the settlement had become a hideous mockery that she could no longer endure” (145). The pride for her people and her need to protect them causes Sonya to lash out at her husband, who cannot fathom how his ideas would help no one—that his social experiments are failures. Sonya “boldly rejects the strict ideologies codified in Manning: from his cultured self-restraint, inauthentic charity, and gender injustice to his anti-Semitism, ethnic stereotyping, upper-class affectations, and, importantly, his inauthentic aesthetics” (Okonkwo 137). Their marriage crumbles, but Sonya remains strong after the failed relationship because she is back in the Lower East Side.

With a final and permanent return to the Lower East Side, Sonya is able to define beauty in her own terms and form conclusions. She proclaims, ““There is no beauty for me unless I can express myself, unless I can be in the open about what I am”” (*Salome* 163). This characterization of beauty could only be made on the Lower East Side, because while it is not an aesthetically pleasing location, it does allow Sonya to be her authentic self. The return to the Lower East Side also helps Sonya draw conclusions about the Anglo-Saxon society that she had tried to join. After being rejected by Gittel and Lipkin, who see her decision, as a Jewish woman, of marrying a Christian man as an act of abandoning her people, Sonya finds a women’s hotel to stay in. Sonya notices the suffocating nature of the building and its lack of beauty, as it is

“devoid of any touch of individuality” (162). Sonya finds it repugnant, but as she is desperate, she stays in the building that lacks human warmth. In the dining hall, she observes the women around her, diverse, but “they had one thing in common—abnormal repression of femininity. Their faces were devitalized and ardor-less—the faces of women who have shut out of their lives” (163) Sonya goes on to realize that they are Anglo-Saxon women, and she cannot understand how the group can be so detached and unfeeling, sterile, while she is fueled by an internal fire. Again, Yeziarska creates racial essentialism in her novel, but in this case, it is a negative portrayal of Anglo-Saxons as bloodless and frigid, because they do not allow themselves to feel or give in to their emotions. She highlights that it is much better to be like Sonya, a product of the Lower East Side.

Sonya reinvents herself once again when she returns to the Lower East Side. Her experiences uptown, while harmful to her psyche, also provided Sonya with the opportunity to mature and transform. She has been humbled and grown appreciative of the world she left behind. With steadfast determination, derived from her original time in the Lower East Side, Sonya works hard until her efforts pay off. She is hired to work as a machine hand, with the ambitions of becoming a designer. Sonya impresses her new boss, “doing the work she loved, for the love of it” for the first time in her life (171). Sonya’s development into a successful designer brings her great joy and fulfillment in her life, and she celebrates the effect that work has had on her. After being disappointed for so long, she puts a great deal of effort into achieving her goals, tying back to the idea of how struggle offers a unique sort of strength that keeps Sonya moving forward. She earns her successes and accolades through dedicating her time to improving her craft. Sonya reunites with Jacques Hollins, rekindling their relationship, but not before she is confident in her talents and skills. She is now an independent woman that does not need to rely

on a man for either her sense of self or to find beauty. Sonya declares that she wants to use her creative talents to help the people of the tenements, bringing a little bit of beauty to the dingy slums, deciding that “Beautiful things should be for those who long for beauty. There are millions on the East Side dying for a little loveliness, and they *never, never* have it” (177). The egalitarian nature of beauty that Sonya desires to share is a tool of uplift for the Lower East Side, as she hopes to improve the neighborhood using lovely things. Rooted in beauty and passion, Sonya’s mission will allow for genuine improvement, whereas the settlement house, rooted in cold scientific analysis, attempted to improve the Lower East Side in a way that would have created a superficial existence. Sonya’s movement between different spaces in New York City allow her to discover her true identity and grow as an individual, from a self-absorbed, materialistic, arrogant young woman, into one who is compassionate and magnetic, looking for ways to help others.

While the experiences of Sonya Vrunsky and Sara Smolinsky are significantly different, their movement between spaces has similar effects on their sense of identity. They both leave the Lower East Side in search of a chance to thrive outside the neighborhood, but instead, they return downtown as a new woman. The movement between spaces and distance allows Sonya and Sara to appreciate the Lower East Side in a new way once they return. They use the spaces to understand their identities, and wandering the streets allows for greater contemplation and reflection on where they feel a sense of belonging.

Like any classic coming-of-age story, *Bread Givers* follows Sara as she grows and develops into a young woman. This novel mirrors aspects of Yeziarska’s life, as her protagonist has a similar family dynamic to what the author experienced as a child. The story watches Sara move “from poverty to economic security, from childhood to adulthood, from ignorance to

education, from rebellion against her father to acceptance of him” (Ammons 167). The narrative’s division into three sections: “Hester Street,” “Between Two Worlds,” and “The New World,” forecasts the transitions, highlighting how important space is for Sara’s development. The first section follows Sara’s early years, as she watches her sisters get married off to men that they do not love after they failed to find acceptable suitors of their own. After marrying off his three older daughters, Sara’s father, Reb Smolinsky, seeks out to become a businessman, moving his wife and youngest daughter to Elizabeth where he purchases a grocery store. Shortly after the investment, the Smolinskys find out they have been scammed, and Sara is pushed to strike out on her own and return to the Lower East Side, away from her father’s oppressive household. The second section follows Sara as she lives in New York City alone, working to receive an education so she can make something out of her life. She eventually leaves the city to attend university. The final section of *Bread Givers* traces Sara’s final return to the Lower East Side, watching her navigate the familiar neighborhood through a new lens. Sara goes from place to place to breakaway from the oppressive rules of the Old World that her father still adheres to, trying to live a life for herself as an American girl. Each space that she travels to gives her tools and insights that she needs to form an independent identity.

Sara’s childhood growing up on the Lower East Side gives her a solid foundation to grow into a strong and empowered woman. Her father gave her the name, Blut-und-Eisen, which translates to Blood-and-Iron, illustrating the steel will that runs through her veins. Sara is resilient and determined, always striving for more, and when “she begins to want a thing, there is no rest, no let-up till she gets it” (*Bread Givers* 20). This drive pushes Sara to care for her family when everyone else is out of work, peddling on the street to earn money so they can afford to put

food on the table. Although she is the youngest—only ten-years old at the beginning of the novel—Sara’s family depends greatly on her and her ability to bring money home.

The conditions of the Lower East Side, as well as her family’s reliance on her, force Sara to become self-sufficient—a very American ideal. Sara is proud of her economic accomplishments, “earning twenty-five and sometimes thirty to fifty cents a day made me feel independent, like a real person” (28). Through this experience, Sara develops a deep respect for working hard that she maintains her entire life. She also starts to resent her father, who benefits from her labor without contributing anything. Sara’s understanding that work is required to get by in America serves as a contrast to the Old World thoughts of her father, who “thought things cost nothing at all” in America, and opportunities were just handed out because they were so ample compared to in the homeland (34). Her initiative also sets Sara apart from her older sisters, who are largely passive when she goes to work. Sara’s actions assert herself as an individual who will fight to survive in the harsh world of Hester Street, and “her personhood becomes defined by her ability to do business like an adult” (Japtok 110). The birth of Sara’s rugged individualism early in life suggests that she will not be subject to the strict patriarchal society maintained by her father as her sisters were. Sara wants more from her life than the Old World expectation of marrying whomever her father chooses for her. By learning to work hard on the streets of the Lower East Side at such a young age, she understands what is required of her to make her dreams a reality.

Additionally, working on Hester Street gives Sara a sense of freedom, and she carries this desire for independence with her for the rest of her life, establishing herself as a New World girl—she follows American values instead of the traditions of the Old World. She is adamant about controlling her future, especially after seeing her sisters’ lives ruined by terrible matches

made by their father. Sara prescribes to notions of self-determination, because in America, “girls pick out for themselves the men they want for husbands” (*Bread Givers* 76). While her goal at this stage of her life is to still get married without any other real ambitions, it shows how she is willing to fight against the traditions of the Old World, even as a child. The strong sense of self that Sara begins to develop during her childhood on the Lower East Side only amplifies as she moves from space to space.

Sara’s first exit from the Lower East Side—the transition to Elizabeth, New Jersey—allows for the largest switch in her views of the future. Sara watches her father marry off his three oldest daughters, Bessie, Mashah, and Fania, to suitors they find undesirable. This is done essentially against their will, after Reb had rejected each of the suitors that the girls had selected for themselves. Sara’s older sisters’ fates show how the “home serves in one respect as the place where the lives of immigrants’ daughters pay a high price for being female. Their father denies them the learning he values, he pushes into them undesirable marriages and fails to offer comfort or help when his actions wreak havocs on their lives” (Raphael 443). Each of the daughters’ lives are filled with unhappiness after their marriage, and watching her older sisters’ fates pushes Sara to decide that she will not let her father do the same for her. Reb searches for new chances to find profit, as he can no longer depend on the wages his older daughters had brought in. He goes to Elizabeth to seek new opportunity, declaring, ““In America, there is no need to be poor, if you only got brains and money to begin something,”” after seeing an advertisement in the newspaper for a grocery store for sale (*Bread Givers* 112). Reb buys the store without consulting his wife, celebrating the bargain he had just received. His inability to discuss the opportunity with his wife shows how Reb does not value the thoughts of any of the women in his life. He oppresses them with his rigid, antiquated views on life, and by purchasing the grocery store; he looks to build a

profit for himself, which by extension also benefits his wife and Sara. The promise of a steady income allows for the entire family to experience a moment of sheer happiness, and Sara dreams about the future:

“And with seventy-eight dollars and eighty-nine cents coming in every day, we’ll soon be able to buy a piano and I’ll begin to take piano lessons. And if I were a piano-player instead of a shop hand, I wouldn’t have to marry myself to a common man like my sisters. I’ll try to catch on to a doctor, or to a lawyer, or maybe an actor on the stage. And if my husband were an actor, then I could go to the theatre free every night.” (118)

Sara’s fantasies, while still imagining the man that she will marry one day, still portray her as an independent being to an extent. She is clearly in charge of selecting whom she marries, and she also wants to develop skills so she can provide for herself. Living in Elizabeth, Sara is initially able to combine her desires of freedom with the societal expectations of settling down with a husband. With a focus still on finding a husband, Sara still lives in the mindset of the Old World, but her desire to make the decision for herself shows how she is beginning to break from its shackles. The dreams of success offered by the opportunity of a guaranteed income and an escape from the impoverished life that she is accustomed to combine to allow Sara to navigate between the two ideologies in her mind for the moment.

Alternatively, the move to Elizabeth also pushes Sara to strike out on her own when she is faced with reality. The family discovers that the grocery store is a scam soon after the purchase, thwarting Sara’s plans to live a comfortable life and learn how to play the piano. The previous owner had lied to Reb and taken all of his money, leaving the Smolinskys with almost nothing. While her mother fears that they will starve, Sara desires to return to the Lower East

Side, where she could earn money peddling, like she had before the family relocated to Elizabeth. She

wanted back the mornings going to work. And the evenings from work. The crowds sweeping you on, like waves of a beating sea. The shop. The roar of the rushing machines. The drive and the thrill of doing things faster and faster. The pay envelope. The joyous feel of money where every little penny was earned with your own hands.

(129)

The Lower East Side represents Sara's work ethic, and without it, she feels lost and incapable of solving problems. Her ability to work allows her to develop a connection with the neighborhood and gain feelings of independence and individuality. Working also gives Sara power because it grants her agency by making her someone that her family depends on to survive. Sara misses being able to take control of unfortunate financial situations to help her family, and she feels helpless in her current situation. The hustle and bustle of Hester Street and the Lower East Side fills Sara with the energy she needs to carry on, to fight back against the empty pockets that plague her. Although poor while living in the city, Sara was able to control the amount of money she had, and that power has been taken away in Elizabeth. She feels she lacks purpose when she cannot help provide for her family. The loss of her agency in this matter causes the resentment Sara feels towards Reb to grow to its boiling point, as his rashness puts the family at risk of financial ruin, and he and his daughter continue to see the world from vastly different and clashing perspectives. Sara eventually recognizes that any chance for her to thrive lies in New York City. To be successful in life, she must escape the "overwhelming patriarchy through the tyranny of Reb Smolinsky," whose Orthodox views attempt to bring the Jewish Old World culture to the Lower East Side and bring the family close to ruin several times (Rich 177). Sara

has witnessed her father oppress every female member of her family, and she decides for herself that she will not let her father control her. Growing up on the streets of New York City has given her the courage to stand up to her father and his archaic views. The traditions and values of the Jewish Old World will not hold her back.

Sara breaks from her father's control and his Old World traditions by returning to New York City, the city of modernity where women could find more chances for independence. Fleeing her parents' home in Elizabeth to return to the Lower East Side, with its familiar community that might offer support, is Sara's only option if she wants to be able to live a life free from her father's oppressive values. Sara wants to succeed on her own, showing that her "core value is possessive individualism: to break away from the collectivity of her working-class family and pursue her own self-determined goals" (Christopher 91). Growing up in America—seen as a shining land of opportunity because of its modern cities like New York—has taught her to focus on her own individual success, because her father's demands that everything be done for the family, while providing very little assistance, has been detrimental for Sara's development. It has further distanced her from the Old World and the mindset of collectivism that Sara does not fully comprehend. The idea of going back to New York gives her strength, and she proclaims to her father, "My will is as strong as yours. I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country. I'm American' ... The Old World had struck its last on me" (*Bread Givers* 138). Sara has established herself as part of a different culture from her father, and she makes the journey back to the city to begin her new life of independence, breaking away from the power structure of her old life. Running away from her family also signals a shift in her brain, as she turns towards working for a more individual success, rather than the collective success of her family.

Back in the Lower East Side, Sara struggles to find a way to re-assimilate into the world she grew up in, signaling a disconnect between her and the neighborhood still ruled by a patriarchal hierarchy. The Lower East Side is less welcoming because Sara has challenged the power structure that rules the streets of the neighborhood. With nowhere to live, she seeks the assistance of her older sisters, Bessie and Mashah, who are both shackled in their miserable marriages. Bessie praises Sara for having the “courage to break away” from their father’s control, while Mashah welcomes Sara into her home with the hopes that her younger sister will assist with the housework and raising her children (142). This plan is abruptly halted when Sara gets into a fight with Mashah’s husband while defending her sister’s honor, and she is ordered to leave the house. The dismissal from her sister’s home, a symbol of the oppressive patriarchy that Sara cannot tolerate, represents how she is rejected from the traditional hierarchy. She cannot fit into a society where she would be limited to only being in the domestic sphere. In turn, because Sara refuses to conform to societal expectations, she is stripped of her collective identity, causing her to enter a phase of loneliness.

Alone in the Lower East Side without a place to stay, Sara begins to feel the consequences of breaking from the collective identity. Initially, she embraces the situation with a surge of optimism and hope; welcoming the new opportunities that freedom from her father would offer.

I opened my arms, burning to hug the new day. The strength of a million people was surging up in me. I felt I could turn the earth upside down with my littlest finger. I wanted to dance, to fly in the air and kiss the sun and stars with my singing heart. I, alone with myself, was enjoying myself for the first time as with grandest company. (157)

Sara feels confident that she will find a place for herself, because she is a part of the New World, the land of opportunity. She eventually finds a room with cheap rent, though it is dirty and noisy, like the streets outside. For Sara, however, it means a new sense of freedom: “The door was life. It was air. The bottom starting-point of becoming a person” (159). This door represents Sara’s newfound independence—something that she never had, but always dreamed of in her old home on Hester Street. Free from her father’s household, Sara pursues an education—an opportunity that was limited to men in the patriarchal society. While her father’s learning tied “him to the lands where Jews have lived and written in the past, Sara’s learning earns her a place in America” (Raphael 442). She wants to enroll in a university and study to be a teacher, taking classes at night after she works during the day, illustrating the American ideal that hard work pays off. Her focus on her potential career, instead of looking for a suitor, also shows a more empowered female character.

The door to her dingy little apartment, however, also represents how Sara is closed off from the world this time around in the Lower East Side. The optimism and empowerment that Sara exhibits upon her initial return soon fades, and the isolation that Sara feels on Hester Street causes her to question if she made the right decision in returning to the Lower East Side. Overworked between her job and her studies, she has feelings of doubt, particularly because she has isolated herself from her family, as they would make her feel obligated to care for them. Sara’s acceptance of American individualism has come with adverse consequences. She is plagued with negative thoughts every time she meets failure, questioning if she is smart enough or even capable of going to college.

Outside in the street it was sunshine. It was spring in the air. Other girls were enjoying themselves with their young men. The whole world was alive. Only I was shut out of life.

Living people want to live and I'm wasting myself with something so inhuman as squares and triangles. That is why I've grown dead and inhuman myself. What's all this book-learning compared to a free walk in the sunshine?" (*Bread Givers* 186)

Sara envies the people outside of her apartment. They are not overwhelmed by the burden she has placed on her shoulders. The extreme loneliness that Sara soon experiences is a result of loss of identity, even though she remains on the Lower East Side, her source of her strength when she was younger. This moment of Sara's life also shows how her once positive personality traits have begun to negatively impact her—her independence has pushed her to an extreme: isolation, which almost results in her giving up on her ambitions.

In the grimmest days of her isolation, Sara is met with temptation to rejoin the Old World and patriarchal society, but the strength she has gained in her solidarity on the Lower East Side allows her to resist. In the guise of a suitor that arrives at her tiny and dirty apartment, the Old World knocks on her door to bring Sara home, but instead, it only cements the fact that she is doing the right thing for herself on the Lower East Side. Max Goldstein, a friend of Fania's whom she thinks will be a good match for Sara, shows up at Sara's apartment. Fania hopes that the two will form a connection that will result in a union so Sara can end her age of isolation and return to her family and their Old World ways. Sara and Max click initially, feeling like kindred spirits, as Max informs her, "You and I are so much alike, because I, too, wanted to make my own way in the world. And you remind me of my own beginning" (188). He had also run away to the city in the search of opportunities to thrive, but Max's experiences have made him too focused on possessions and gimmicks. He mocks people who think receiving an education will benefit them, which insults Sara, who is working and attending night school so she can go to college and make a better life for herself. Max is clearly of the Old World, having failed to gain

enlightenment in the modern New York City, and Sara rejects him so she can continue to pursue an education in her New World. This is a turning point for Sara because it reminded her of why she was pushing herself to work so hard, reminding her that she is worthy of love. The return to the Lower East Side, combined with her interactions with Max Goldstein, give Sara the strength to keep reaching for her ambitions.

Living alone on the Lower East Side has allowed Sara to gain some perspective on the ideas held by her father. Like him, she has chosen an education for herself over anything else, listening to the religious stories she had been imbued with her entire life. Inspired by the strength that she has exhibited with Max, Sara returns to her father in Elizabeth, thinking she finally understands him. When Sara reveals that she refused Max's marriage proposal, however, her father is furious. She notices "there was no use talking. He could never understand. He was the Old World. I was the New," (207) showing a permanent divide between Sara and Reb. He does not comprehend her actions and reasoning, and is even incapable of trying because he still clings to his Old World ideals. Reb sees Sara living without morals, but that is not true—she has the values that New York City has taught her. She tells Reb, "I have to live and die by what's in me," (207) rejecting his attempts to bring her back to his Old World ways. As a result, he disowns her, causing a final rift between Sara and her father. Sara's desire to lead a life that is desirable for her "and the position which she is required to fulfill as a daughter and a woman in the Jewish community on Hester Street are irreconcilable" (M. Levinson 7). Sara experiences independence and success as an individual because of her time in New York, which helped her build her strength and resiliency, and she will use those values to continue moving forward.

Learning all the lessons that it can teach her for that time, Sara leaves the Lower East Side to attend a college in the Midwest. It is a new frontier for her—a new place for her to

discover hidden parts of her identity. She feels “like Columbus starting out for the other end of the earth,” (*Bread Givers* 209) completely unaware of the experiences she will have away from the city. This is Sara’s own version of the immigrant story, with the Midwest serving as her own personal New World. As this is part of the second part of the book, titled “Between Two Worlds,” it signals that this is a temporary space for Sara, so it will not be her final destination. New York City is the “past from which its narrator must break...Sara’s past is not the *Old World* but *New York*” (Kent 148). With New York as Sara’s old world, and her eventual new world, this time in college serves as a voyage for her identity, allowing her to separate herself from her past, while simultaneously preparing herself for her future. Just like immigrants first arriving in America, Sara wants to assimilate into the culture of her new world. She thinks to herself, “If I could only lose myself body and soul in the serenity of this new world, the hunger and the turmoil of my ghetto years would drop away from me, and I, too, would know the beauty of stillness and peace” (*Bread Givers* 211). Sara hopes that the memories of her past will fade away and not define her anymore.

Sara struggles in college, like many immigrants do when they enter a new world. What she deemed to be her new land of opportunity is instead filled with more struggles. Sara stands out in this environment because it is so different from the world she grew up in, finding “herself marked as an Other, in terms of both class and race” (J. Levinson 103). Her classmates think she is bizarre, not understanding her ways and habits, leaving Sara in another space of isolation. She observes that she “felt stranger to them than if I had passed them in Hester Street,” showing how she is more comfortable in a space that she knows. (*Bread Givers* 214). Sara struggles to find her footing in the new location, feeling foreign in what seems like an entirely different country. She is plagued by doubt, just as she had been in New York. When Sara does not fit in and fails her

geometry class, she questions ever coming to university, feeling completely inadequate. She still carries the Lower East Side with her and she feels isolated like she had in the neighborhood, noting “Even in college I had not escaped from the ghetto. Here loneliness hounded me even worse than in Hester Street” (220). Sara’s loneliness and struggles have their merit though, as they push her to work harder. She admits that she had never “worked as hard as during the first term. I was not only earning a living and getting an education, I was trying to break into this new college world” (221). This effort is similar to the immigrant experience of working harder to blend into new society, and Sara’s own version of the immigrant narrative build her character.

Leaving the Lower East Side matures Sara and allows her to gain much-needed perspective on her upbringing. She “had learned self-control” and “was now a person of reason” (223). Sara maintains her strong work ethic and resiliency in college, again working and studying simultaneously so she could get ahead later in life. Through her courses, Sara is presented with new ways and approaches to think more critically and objectively as a means to understand the world better. She no longer operates on only “blind instinct and feeling” (226). College in the Midwest also gives Sara the ability to gain perspective on her personal experiences. As Sara is the only one of her classmates that has needed to struggle to get to where she is in life, the experiences she had on Hester Street are seen in a new light. The ones “she took to be privations and losses are suddenly revealed as the essence of human striving, and Sara becomes the authority on ‘reality’ in her class” (J. Levinson 104). Sara’s proximity to struggle on the Lower East Side makes her life feel more real, more visceral, because it is rich with unflinching details, while her classmates are portrayed to be flat characters that lived comfortable existences. Starting out with very little gives her a strength that her peers will never be able to develop and cannot comprehend, which highlights that her way of living is superior, despite its difficulties.

As a result, Sara grows an appreciation for how she grew up on the Lower East Side, because it allowed her “more of life as a ten-year-old girl, running the streets, than these psychology instructors did with all their heads swelled from too much knowing” (*Bread Givers* 231). Her newfound outlook on life allows her to return to the Lower East Side as a new person, more content and understanding than when she left her old neighborhood. By leaving her version of the world, Sara becomes enlightened in her New World. The opportunity for transformation would not have been possible if she had not left the Lower East Side—the birthplace of her identity. Leaving allows Sara to refine the admirable qualities of her personality, such as her independence and strong work ethic, and it gives her the tools to use these characteristics in a positive manner.

In the third section, Sara returns to the Lower East Side completely transformed, emboldened by her college success, and it is titled “The New World,” signaling how her time away has affected her. She is an individual, distanced from the traditions of her past, and Sara sees Hester Street from a new perspective; now able to appreciate how she grew up, understanding that her experiences pushed her to be where she is now. With her money, Sara allows herself to be comfortable, but refuses to lead an extravagant lifestyle. She dreams of transferring her success back into the neighborhood. After being in isolation for so long, Sara seeks “comfort among her own kind,” so “she chooses to return and teach in Hester Street” (Avery 33). She views herself as a success because of her achievements. Sara becomes a teacher and “had achieved that marvellous thing, ‘a place for everything and everything in its place,’ which the teacher preached to me so hopelessly while a child in Hester Street” (*Bread Givers* 241). She works to inspire the next generation of children in the ghetto, providing them with a success story. Sara wants to give her students “that better speech that the teachers in college had

tried to knock into [her],” bringing back the knowledge from her new world to her old world (271). This knowledge can be used to improve the conditions of the Lower East Side, giving the next generation better opportunities than those that Sara had. She returns to the ghetto with the intentions of uplifting it with tools forged from a new world, and her experiences are a testament to how location can make or break an individual. Space has transformative powers, and because Sara was able to grow in each place she visited, while also enduring feelings of isolation and doubt, she is much stronger when she returns to the Lower East Side.

Despite her successes, Sara feels a sense of isolation, still separated from the others in New York City because she broke from the collective identity of the Lower East Side. She feels distant and empty as she attempts to navigate between the old and new worlds, “because it is psychologically necessary for her to function in both the modern American world and her birth culture—the Old World Jewish community of Hester Street” (M. Levinson 7). Sara is an American girl whose roots are in Hester Street, leaving her with a foot in both worlds, but because she broke from that old world, she cannot stand comfortably in either. She cannot simply choose to live in one because she needs both to feel fulfilled. Trying to rebuild the connection between the two worlds, Sara tries reunite with her estranged family. Her parents have returned to Hester Street as well, “though on a different block. Father could never be happy unless he prayed in the same old synagogue, and Mother could never feel at home outside the block where we had grown in so many years” (*Bread Givers* 243). They are attached to the neighborhood because it brings them closer to the Old World, where their identities are tied. While her mother celebrates Sara’s accomplishments, the distance between their generations is tangible. Her mother, the bridge between Sara, her father, and their differing worldviews, is dying. It becomes clear that Sara is completely separated from the traditions of her father’s Old

World, particularly when she refuses to let the undertaker tear her clothes at the funeral. Without her mother, Sara's mind becomes a "petrified blank," both from grief and the lack of connection to bridge the gap between Sara's two worlds (255). Sara is conflicted over the loss of her mother, because although she did leave her mother to pursue her own interests, their relationship was never strained. Sara could always rely on returning to her mother if she needed to, like she could rely on her option to return to the Lower East Side after attending university. Both are sources of comfort to Sara, but she loses them after she leaves, because she cannot completely reconnect with either after gaining enlightenment away from the city. From this experience, Sara learns that she cannot live in the relationships from the past, which will allow her to move forward in her life.

After her mother's death, Sara overcomes the bitterness of the past that she has directed towards her father and gains compassion for the man. She honors her mother's memory, believing she "had failed to give Mother the understanding of her deeper self during her lifetime. Let me at least give it to Father while he was yet alive" (257). Leaving Hester Street has allowed Sara to grow understanding for her father and his traditional ways, because only when she "experiences the outside world does her resentment vanish and the ethnic world starts appearing in a different light" (Japtok 113). College clearly gave Sara the perspective to understand her family fully. She needed to leave New York and its influence so she could better grasp her family dynamics. Now, Sara navigates between her place in New York between her new life as a successful American teacher and her old life of being a dutiful daughter.

Sara's movement between spaces also allows her to find a new bridge between her two worlds. It leads her to Hugo Seelig, with his "Jewish face, and yet none of the greedy eagerness of Hester Street any more. It was the face of a dreamer, set free in the new air of America. Not

like Father with his eyes on the past, but a dreamer who had found his work among us of the East Side” (*Bread Givers* 273). Hugo is the principal of the school where Sara teaches. She would not have been able to meet him if she had not pursued her education by striking out on her own. She and Hugo fall in love, completing the cycle of the novel, as Sara is able to choose the man she wants to marry. From the same part of Europe as Sara’s family, Hugo also serves as the bridge between the Old and New. He “incorporates American success and the possibility of continuing Jewish learning without the trappings of immigrant status,” striking the balance between the worlds that Sara desperately needs (Raphael 442). He encourages her to pity her father, arguing, ““After all, it’s from him that you got the iron for the fight you had to make to be what you are now”” (*Bread Givers* 279). Pitying her father, Sara and Hugo take him in to show that she has moved on from the past, but her familial duties indicate that she still has ties to the Old World. Balance has been found. Sara is only able to comprehend her complicated family dynamic and existence because she left the Lower East Side, gained perspective, and then returned. Her identity as an inhabitant of both worlds has been strengthened by the valuable insights Sara has garnered through her journeys.

In *Salome of the Tenements* and *Bread Givers*, Anzia Yezierska created strong, empowered female characters to serve as the protagonists in her immigrant narratives. Both Sonya Vrunsky and Sara Smolinsky undergo extreme transformations in their respective stories, and the neighborhood of the Lower East Side assists them in their personal growth and development. Although they leave the familiarity of the New York neighborhood, they are both compelled to return to the birthplace of their identities. In order to appreciate newfound freedoms, they must be contrasted with the old, restrictive mores. They also return to the Lower East Side with tools to improve the neighborhood—Sonya brings beauty, and Sara brings

education. The women would not have been able to bring uplift to the Lower East Side without first leaving so they could fully understand their place of origin. The two texts sympathize “with the heroine’s struggle to overcome ethnic and gender biases, liberate herself from the patriarchal ethnic past, and transgress the boundaries of the immigrant ghetto” (Coklin 154). The immigrant struggle is combined with struggles of being a young woman in the strict patriarchal society of the early twentieth century.

The reason that New York City is where these women discover who they are, gain their independence, and assert their individuality is because, as a whole, the society of the United States offered women chances to become more than their traditions dictated. As Alice Kessler-Harris notes in the introduction to *Bread Givers*, “Life in America did not begin and end with marriage. It offered the opportunity to reject old roles” (xxx). Yeziarska herself saw the city as an “arena for confrontation between these widely diverse images” (Weinthal 13). For immigrants, the city stands as a culmination of American values; New York City is the land of opportunity for a new a start and the search for self-discovery. The New World brought a chance to question the practices of the past, especially for women who could enjoy life more in a somewhat less oppressive society. New York City allows young women to pursue their interests and become creators. It encourages new ideas, questions, strength, and courage in order for one to follow aspirations and dreams.

Passing Through Racialized Spaces on the Way to Harlem: Examining the Works of Jessie
Fauset and Nella Larsen

At the beginning of the twentieth century, African American writers took advantage of a new phenomenon in the American literary scene. Their white contemporaries had turned their pens in the direction of African Americans, publishing works that painted their new subjects in incredibly stereotypical fashions, far from the genuine voice and experiences that African Americans were actually undergoing. While works by African American writers had been published before this era, the shift in focus helped lead a group of young and relatively unknown black writers in Harlem—led by Charles Johnson, a sociologist and founder of the Negro Urban League’s magazine, *Opportunity*, and Alain Locke, a philosopher and writer—to begin a cultural movement now known as the Harlem Renaissance. They wanted their people portrayed in a manner that would allow them to rise above preconceived notions—present an image of the African American experience that was severely underrepresented, showing the “New Negro.” The goal, as Charles Johnson wrote was:

to encourage the reading of literature both by Negro authors and about Negro life, not merely because they are Negro authors but because what they write is literature and because the literature is interesting; to foster a market for Negro writers and for literature by and about Negroes; to bring these writers into contact with the general world of letters to which they have been for the most part timid and inarticulate strangers; to stimulate and foster a type of writing by Negroes which shakes itself free of deliberate propaganda and protest. (qtd. in Lewis 97)

Johnson and Locke gathered men and women to work for their noble cause of bringing African Americans to the forefront of American literature and art—adding their work to the nation’s canon. Using these forms, the young intellectuals were able to promote racial progress, or at least continue the conversation that their predecessors had started (Lewis 87-97).

Writers assembled in Harlem to craft works that they thought would best represent their race to the world and educate others about genuine African American experiences. As James Weldon Johnson wrote in his book, *Black Manhattan*, African American writers attempted to “express what the masses of their race were then feeling and thinking and wanting to hear. They attempted to make those masses articulate,” sharing experiences commonly unknown by the majority of American society (263). The 1920s offered the opportunity for freedom of expression, bringing the Harlem Renaissance into full swing and drawing in writers from around the world to contribute to the movement.

Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen came to New York City to add their chapters to the new story being written in Harlem. Fauset grew up in a well-off family, as a member of the African American bourgeoisie, while Larsen grew up with her white biological mother and white stepfather. These women lived lives far from the preconceived stereotypes of African Americans. Based on their upbringings, Fauset and Larsen’s voices added unique perspectives to the movement. Both were inspired to write after reading the stereotype-laden *Birthright*—a novel about a black Harvard graduate returning to his southern hometown, by T. S. Stribling, a white man. Fauset noted that the book had gained a large audience, as well as the growing trend in literature about African Americans, and observed, “Here is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us. Let us, who are better qualified to represent that truth than any white writer, try to do so” (qtd. in Wall “To Tell the Truth About Us” 82). In her eyes, creating literature and art “was

both the highest measure of a race's achievement and the most effective present tactic to advance her own race" (Lewis 123). Fauset was a gifted writer who could write in various genres, writing four novels and numerous essays. She used her writing to explore progressive ideas and travel around the world, learning about Pan-African political figures, which she then shared with readers of *Crisis* during her time as literary editor (Wall "To Tell the Truth About Us" 84-85). She was a fiercely independent woman whose fiction worked to satirize the common tropes of woman's romance and fairy-tale literature. Fauset also recognized the limitations that society placed on women, and especially women of color, insisting on the "equal importance of sex and race as systems of oppression and silencing in African American women's lives," and she comments on this dynamic in her writing as well (Ammons 142). Fauset saw the importance of literature to facilitate change, and she used her novels as a tool to present African Americans in a new light, while also celebrating the achievements of her race.

Nella Larsen also took up the call for African American writers to tell their stories, to diversify the canon of American literature. Her talents were first noticed and encouraged by Walter Francis White, a close friend who was also an author and civil rights activist with the NAACP. With White's encouragement, Larsen was "determined to write about cultured Afro-America from the inside" (Lewis 140). Her two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, focus on the psychological implications of African American women with fair complexions who move and navigate through different spaces. *Quicksand* considers the impact of being biracial, while *Passing* observes the effects of passing as white. The works also pay attention to sexual desire, racism, and sexism experienced by African American women. Focusing on issues of marginality and intersectionality—like race, gender, and class—Larsen's texts "show a self-consciousness about the spectacle of the urban and the negotiations that are possible within this scene"

(Balshaw “Black Was White” 314). Her novels, utilizing modernist principles, tended to be more macabre and used the classic trope of the “tragic mulatto/a,” but gave it a modern twist.

Both Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen crafted novels that focused on African American women searching for their identities in New York City, and more specifically, Harlem. In this chapter, I will trace how the female protagonists of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen's writings navigate through racialized spaces, particularly in New York City, in these passing narratives. Each protagonist tries to find a place where she truly belongs, hiding aspects of her identity—especially her racial identity—at times to live a life that that appears to be more comfortable and desirable. Each woman, however, finds that in Harlem, she is more able to express herself and feel comfortable in her own skin. The deep connection to racial identity, influenced heavily by the openly black space of Harlem, cannot be found in other areas of New York City.

African Americans in New York City: Contextualizing the Move to Harlem

Before 1900, Greenwich Village featured one of the largest African American communities in New York City, earning the name, “Little Africa.” Serving as a space for African Americans since the Dutch-colonial period, the Village offered sanctuary to former slaves, and welcomed black migrants from former Confederate states with low housing prices. The area was notorious in white depictions for its “debauchery,” as portrayed in the literature of Jacob Riis and Stephen Crane, who painted images of the black-and-tan saloon—a “drinking establishment with a mixed-race clientele of poor whites, black, and tans (mulattoes)” (McFarland 12). While Crane painted a picture of the colorful Minetta Lane and Minetta Street, describing the violence and murder that filled them, he did not show the full picture of the African American experience in the Village. The neighborhood was also home to stable and ambitious African American families, dedicated to their work and local church groups. Greenwich Village served as an

entrance into the New York scene, as people began moving further uptown for new and greater opportunities, eventually relocating the center of African American culture in the city to Harlem (11-24).

Harlem served as a beacon for the African American community in New York City after the turn of the twentieth century. The African American population in the city tripled between 1890 and 1910—a result of relocation in the Great Migration to northern urban areas from the South to flee racial violence and seek opportunities for a better life. They came to Harlem in the early twentieth century after the housing market collapsed following an economic depression that began in 1904. When the “need of a burgeoning black population for a place to live conspired with the overextended finances of some Harlem developers,” landlords were forced to drop their “White Only” policies, giving rise to Phillip A. Payton’s Afro-American Realty Company. Landlords opened their newly built upscale apartments to African Americans looking for their own place in the city to call home. Harlem quickly became the optimal choice for African Americans in the city who could afford to live in this section of uptown (De Jongh 5).

The neighborhood began to expand and thrive. Initially beginning with a few apartment buildings on 134th and 135th Streets, Harlem spanned more than ten blocks by 1914, extending from 130th Street to 140th Street between Seventh Avenue and the Harlem River. Church groups, fraternal organizations, newspapers, social clubs, and political organizations set up establishments in the area, which attracted even more African Americans to Harlem, and by 1919, it was a “firmly established, stylish black community in an attractive, well-built section of Manhattan” (6). Harlem was filled with opportunity and the potential to succeed. People from all over heard the siren song of the city, and Harlem welcomed both African Americans from the South, and foreign-born blacks, particularly from the Caribbean, as migrant workers came to the

city after the completion of the Panama Canal. They were dazzled with stylish clothes, tempting stores and restaurants, ample financial resources, and other indicators of success. The district also provided blacks with more protection and security than other parts of the country, where there were ritual lynchings and Jim Crow laws in the South and risks of race riots in other northern cities, which threatened their lifestyles (5-7).

For African American women, Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance presented opportunities that were previously unattainable for them, while also offering more challenges. Many women in this neighborhood were part of the new African American middle-class, allowing for more chances at education and prosperity than many of their predecessors. The city streets encouraged them to break from restrictive gender roles, pushing back against the notion that a woman's primary role was childbearing, though this more reflected the experiences of white, middle-class women. African American women often worked outside of the home out of necessity in addition to being mothers, but with their new social stature, the expectations for these women changed. With the increased prevalence of contraception, women were able to have more sexual freedom. That sexual liberation also came with consequences though, as African American women's bodies were policed in the name of racial uplift. They, like most Harlemites, were plagued with expectations of respectability in the capital of African American culture. African American women also needed to fight against stereotypes from the Civil War about their femininity, and "the stress on gentility amongst women as a mark of civility is inextricably linked with the need to escape the definition of African American femininity as sexuality" (Balshaw "New Negroes, New Women" 131). The demure behavior required of African American women presented its own issues of oppression and negatively affected their identities, but it was successful in dispelling the racial stereotypes they were forced to combat. The

demands for a more controlled conduct fell mostly on the shoulders of middle-class and upwardly mobile African American women, who tended to believe their “definitive role was to encourage racial advancement from the subordinate position of wife and mother” (Wilks 150). The expectations of the New Negro Woman, centered on racial uplift and stepping away from primitivism, separated her from the empowered New Woman of the 1920s, who enjoyed more political and personal freedoms, and the literature of the time reflects this distance (Balshaw “New Negroes, New Women” 130-132).

In addition to material appeal and safety, there was another aspect of Harlem that drew people in: the ability for blacks to celebrate their identity. The community allowed them to embrace who they were, creating an environment filled with “colorful and freewheeling individualists and eccentrics” (De Jongh 7). Artists, writers, musicians, and freethinkers gathered in Harlem, and it soon became the cultural center of black America. While Harlem was not perfect, James Weldon Johnson noted in *Black Manhattan*,

The Negro in New York still has far, very far yet to go, and many, very many, things yet to gain. He still meets with discriminations and disadvantages. But New York guarantees her Negro citizens the fundamental rights of citizenship and protects them in the exercise of those rights. Possessing the basic rights, the Negro in New York ought to be able to work through the discrimination and disadvantages. (284)

The ever-growing group of Harlem intellectuals fought for fair treatment and justice for their race, such as with the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), but they achieved limited success. Race riots shook and instilled fear in black communities throughout the country during the last six months of 1919, which Johnson later coined the “Red Summer.”

With the pursuit of a better life for their fellow African Americans in mind, the Harlem intellectuals turned back to their crafts, with the intent to “establish identity and acceptance for blacks through the arts” (O’Connell 164-166). This focus on art and literature in the 1920s ushered in what is now known as the Harlem Renaissance. The African American identity was embraced in the written word, and the setting of Harlem became just as important to a novel as the characters that drove the story. Just as their characters tried to discover who they were in regards to their home in Harlem, authors from all over flocked to the city to gain inspiration for their next great work (165-166).

Born in 1882, Jessie Fauset was raised in Philadelphia as a member of a respectable middle-class African American family. Highly educated, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and fluent in French, she studied at Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania. Fauset moved to Harlem in 1919 and became the literary editor of *Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP. She served under the leadership of W. E. B. Du Bois, where she selected and published the radical writings of other notable Harlem Renaissance writers. Fauset was one of the first people to recognize the talents of Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer, and worked to get their writings published in *Crisis*. She was also greatly interested in connecting other members of the literary movement, hosting parties with her sister in their Harlem apartment—soirees that featured lofty and sophisticated conversations (Wall “To Tell the Truth About Us” 82-84). The parties separated the young intellectual African Americans from the stereotypes of the time, and Fauset saw the movement as a way to improve the image of African Americans in the United States.

Fauset’s contemporary, Nella Larsen, was born in 1891 and raised in Chicago before moving to New York City in 1916. She was mixed race, as her mother was a white woman and

her father was a mixed race Danish West Indian. Larsen's father left her mother when Larsen was young, and her mother remarried a white Danish-American, with whom she had Larsen's half-sister. While her stepfather and younger sister were white, Larsen had prominent African American features because she was biracial, which made her a "dark presence in a White household, a presence that must have been difficult for the family to explain" as the only person of color (Carter 233). To receive her education, Larsen studied at Fisk University—a historically black college in Nashville, Tennessee—and at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. Before becoming a writer, she worked as a nurse and as a librarian in New York City. Larsen only published two novels in her lifetime, but she believed that "people of the artistic type have a definite chance to help solve the race problem," agreeing with the commonly held sentiments of the period (Berlack 149-150). Her novels feature themes of "racial identity, the state of black women, and the search for home," and these were based on her personal experiences (O'Connell 177). Like Fauset, Larsen used her writing to depict African Americans in a matter that distanced them from the stereotypes of the past.

Harlem and Other Racialized Spaces in Fauset and Larsen's Literature

Through the use of a passing narrative, both Fauset and Larsen depict spaces as racialized. Passing, as Perry L. Carter notes, is "a transgression, a move out of one's ascribed place, not only of racial boundaries but also of spatial boundaries; it is the ability to move across racial, social, cultural, and spatial boundaries" (228). Passing is intricately connected to place and movement, showing that space can be used to define and contextualize race. Both novels feature scenes in various places in the novel, but it is in Harlem—a predominately black space—where the true identity of the protagonist's is realized or embraced. In Fauset's *Plum Bun*, Angela visits Harlem and compares the neighborhood to her place of residency on Fourteenth

Street in Greenwich Village. She observes the differences between the two spaces, and how the environment of Harlem was like nothing she had ever experienced before.

Undoubtedly just as these people, for she already saw them objectively, doubly so, once with her natural remoteness and once with the remoteness of her new estate, just as these people could suffer more than others, just so they could enjoy themselves more. She watched the moiling groups on Lennox Avenue; the amazingly well-dressed and good-looking throngs of young men on Seventh Avenue at One Hundred and Thirty-seventh and Thirty-fifth Streets. They were gossiping, laughing, dickering, chaffing, combining the customs of the small town with the astonishing cosmopolitanism of their clothes and manners. Nowhere downtown did she see life like this. Oh, all this was fuller, richer, not finer but richer with the difference in quality that there is between velvet and silk. Harlem was a great city, but after all it was a city within a city, and she was glad, as she strained for last glimpses out of the lurching 'L' train, that she had cast in her lot with the dwellers outside its dark and serried tents. (Fauset 55-56)

At the beginning of *Plum Bun*, Angela views Harlem with distanced respect after her first visit to the neighborhood. She values the feelings of self-defined racial expression and character that seem to emit from the city streets, but she does not wish to stay in Harlem for long. In this moment, the expressions of racial pride—Harlem is resolutely a black space, and one where the freedom of expression is prevalent—are too overwhelming for Angela, because she has just begun her endeavor to pass as white while living in Greenwich Village.

The Village—a predominately white space—offers a more subdued way of life that Angela finds more desirable when she first arrives in New York City. The memory of Angela's visit to Harlem, however, stays with her throughout the novel, as it serves as a connection to her

past and her family, especially after her younger sister, Virginia, moves there. As James De Jongh explains, Harlem “is an impending—if often distant—presence, which Fauset employs to characterize her protagonist’s shifting state of mind in the larger portion of the novel, the portion set in downtown New York City” (40). Fauset’s description of Harlem also suggests a sense of racial essentialism. The description is celebratory, but also focuses on the plights of African Americans, which is why they are able to feel more joy. Angela should be able to relate to them because she has had similar experiences, but her decision to ignore and hide her racial identity distances her from people of her own race. African Americans, however, seem more real to Angela. This sense of genuineness foreshadows the decision that Angela will make at the end of the novel when she embraces her racial heritage.

Larsen, on the other hand, paints Harlem in a more complex tone. For the characters in *Passing*, Harlem elicits complicated perspectives. For Irene, it serves a place of social stature and security, but “Clare’s interest in Harlem brings an unwelcome turbulence to the bourgeois order, elegance, and prosperity of Irene Redfield’s Harlem, by tempting Irene’s domesticated husband to jettison his medical practice and run off with Clare to pursue old dreams of adventure in South America” (De Jongh 41). Irene feels threatened by the prospect of leaving Harlem behind her—she would be left with significantly less power than what she wields in the African American neighborhood. While Larsen does not spend much time describing the setting of her novel, she does illustrate the connection that Irene has to the city that she has made her home: “She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted” (Larsen 76). Irene has significant ties to New York City and Harlem—they are an extension of her identity onto a space. She demands to live among the skyscrapers and bustle of the city that gives her energy and strength. This connection signifies how important

a location can be to defining who someone is, and the different spaces in *Passing* tend to affect the mood of the novel, particularly in regards to Irene.

Harlem, with its self-defined identity as a black space, stands as the most important place in both Fauset and Larsen's works, though the two authors portray the neighborhood, and the larger metropolitan area, very differently. These novels could not take place in any other city, because the distribution of space and movement through New York City, as well as the social climate of the city, helps the women to make sense of their identities. The protagonists in both works travel to other places, but Harlem is portrayed as a space where people can express themselves more freely. The neighborhood does not require those that wander the streets to hide aspects of their identity, like race. Fauset's *Plum Bun*, first published in 1928, actually begins in Philadelphia—the city where Angela Murray and her younger sister, Virginia, are raised by their loving and doting parents in a comfortably middle-class family on Opal Street. Their parents, Mattie and Junius, teach them to embrace and celebrate their African American heritage, but Angela—who shares her mother's lighter complexion, which allows her to pass as white in public—only sees her racial identity as a burden. It is also an identity forced upon her by her peers at school, who know about her racial status and treat her poorly as a result, even though Angela proves to be a well-educated and talented student. The embarrassments flung on her by her peers make Angela despise her African American identity even more, which fuels her dreams to leave her hometown and all that she knows. As Angela leaves the world of her childhood to live in New York City, she navigates between black and white spaces. The experiences she has in her new home, as well as the new relationships she forges, teach Angela about the realities of gender and race, providing insights into her own identity along the way. In Harlem, she learns to understand the multi-faceted aspects of her identity, and finally accepts herself.

As the novel begins in Philadelphia, Fauset establishes parallels between the two cities. Philadelphia is the land of oppression that Angela must flee to be able to eventually accept her African American identity, whereas New York City is a land of opportunity and freedom. In Philadelphia, Angela is limited by her racial identity. The space is predominately and overbearingly white, as opportunities are dependent on the color of skin, rather than the merit of character. The African American blood coursing through Angela's veins even mars her relationships with others, like the one with her close friend, Mary Hastings—an affluent white girl from West Philadelphia whose family recently suffered from financial troubles. Angela and Mary quickly become friends, and Angela benefits from Mary's popularity, because Angela "was no longer left out of groups because there could be no class plans without Mary and Mary would remain nowhere for any length of time with out Angela. So to save time and argument, and also to avoid offending the regent, Angela was always included" (Fauset 24). Mary is Angela's ticket to acceptance by her peers, who had initially treated her as an outsider because she is an African American—the only one in her class. Though Angela's skin is similar to her peers, she is marked by her heritage, marked because her classmates see her as fundamentally different because she is black in a predominately white space. This friendship, however, does not last long, because Mary finds out the truth of Angela's racial identity when their classmate, Esther Bayliss, outs Angela. Esther announces that she does not trust Angela to be able to handle the money for her subscription to the school magazine because she is an African American, which shocks Mary; she had not realized that Angela was not white. The revelation ruins the bond that the two girls shared, because

Mary, who had never thought of speaking of colour, was suddenly conscious that here was a subject which she must not discuss. She was less frank, at times even restrained.

Angela, too young to define her thoughts, yet felt vaguely: “She failed me once, I was her friend, yet she failed me for something with which I had nothing to do. She’s just as likely to do it again. It’s in her.” (27)

The introduction of race into their relationship squanders the chance for the two girls to continue their friendship. Mary is afraid of saying something that will upset Angela, and as a result, feels like she cannot be open or completely herself around Angela. Angela, in turn, is hurt by Mary’s reaction to finding out about her racial identity, and finds that she is always on the defensive, prepared to defend an aspect of herself that she did not choose. The antiquated views that Philadelphia holds in regards to race destroy a friendship that Angela greatly cherished, increasing the disdain that Angela already feels for the racial identity that limits so much for her.

Philadelphia also serves as gigantic obstacle for Angela to achieve her dream of becoming an artist. Her mother, Mattie, dreamed of her daughters to be “school-teachers and independent,” because it was a respectable position for young women to hold, and it would offer them a sense of stability with a steady income (19). A job as a schoolteacher would also allow Virginia and Angela to take care of themselves, rather than relying on someone else to provide for them. Teaching jobs in Philadelphia, however, are hard to come by for African American women, because they are less desired than their white counterparts. The system is also filled with outdated rules and policies, such as the unwritten law that “although coloured children may be taught by white teachers, white children must never receive knowledge at the hands of coloured instructors” (28). The society in Philadelphia wants to maintain its white dominance, and it fears that will not happen if African Americans are given too much power and authority in the classroom. That being said, Angela, does not want to be a teacher, and she begins taking art classes at the Academy to improve her skills. Again, Angela does not openly admit her racial

identity until she is outed once more by Esther Bayliss, who is hired to pose as a model for the art class, but refuses to do so with Angela in the room. This is the breaking point for Angela, who realizes,

all the things which she most wanted were wrapped up with white people. All the good things were theirs. Not, some coldly reasoning instinct within was saying, because they were white. But because for the present they had power and the badge of that power was whiteness, very like the colours on the escutcheon of a powerful house. She possessed the badge, and unless there was someone to tell she could possess the power for which it stood. (44)

Angela understands that as long as power is based on the color of skin, African Americans will be disadvantaged in a white space. She also notes how she is privileged enough to escape the oppressive nature of Philadelphia if she finds the strength to break from her family and past. Philadelphia cannot be the place where Angela escapes the shackles of her racial identity in an effort to achieve her dream—it is too uncompromising, and there are too many people who know the truth about her. Instead, Angela will relocate to New York City, a place where she can start her life over by passing as a white woman, allowing her to reap the benefits and freedoms of being white in American society. As Catherine Rottenberg notes, the “anonymity of Manhattan allows Angela to pass successfully; however, Fauset’s protagonist decides to pass in New York—and not simply somewhere far away from her hometown—because she wants to take advantage of the broadmindedness and opportunity she thinks the city will provide” (“City’s Transformative Power” 272). In this move to the city, Angela leaves behind her sister, Virginia—who does not share the same luxury of being light-skinned—and sells her share of their childhood home to fund the move. By stripping herself of her obligations to the past in

Philadelphia, Angela creates a blank canvas for her identity, which she can reinvent in any way she desires in New York. Angela finds the means she needs to thrive on her own as an individual, rather than as a single representative of a race.

Plum Bun is a classic coming of age story, following Angela's evolution from a naïve girl to an independent and self-assured woman. This transformation of her female identity is directly dependent on her location in the city. Rottenberg observes that New York City "functions as a centripetal and liberating force in the text" ("City's Transformative Power" 267). When Angela first arrives in the city, she greets the world with a new sense of freedom. She can start over, creating a brand new life for herself "without restrictions or restraint; she was young, she was temporarily independent, she was intelligent, she was white" (Fauset 50). The relocation to New York City—a new space, allows Angela to embrace her fair complexion and claim her whiteness. Angela embarks into her new life, passing as a young white woman that goes by Angele Mory. With the money earned from selling her share of the home in Philadelphia, Angela spends the first few weeks taking in all that the city has to offer, visiting shops and watching theatrical performances. She quickly realizes that she cannot support herself or this lifestyle on her own forever, so she crafts a plan "to marry... a white man" for money, influence, and protection, thinking it would be "great fun to capture power and protection in addition to the freedom and independence she had so long coveted" (51). Influenced by her parents' marriage, Angela plays the scenario out of finding and capturing the attention of a male suitor in her mind like a fairy-tale, hoping to find a "happily ever after" just like her mother and father's (19). While Angela believes that all of her dreams will magically be realized when she finds a man who will support and cherish her, indicating a great naiveté, she also recognizes soon after moving to the city that her femininity can be used as a weapon, noting that women have "power

of a certain kind too” (50). She feels empowered in her new space; it seems to be a dream come true for her, because she can finally live the life that she has always desired. Angela wants a fairy-tale ending that allows her to keep her independence, and downtown Manhattan allows her to keep that dream alive. Angela’s combined desire of wanting to be independent, while also relying on someone to serve as a source of stability and protection, illustrates the complicated effect that the city has on her. The conflicting views are representative of how Angela also lives in two worlds: the black world of her past, and the white world of her present. While she tries to break away completely from her African American heritage, it is still buried deep within, and her experiences in the city will slowly draw it out of her.

Trying to find a place where she could plant her roots in the city, Angela discovers one of her favorite spaces in the city when wandering the streets: Fourteenth Street, a space on the northern border of Greenwich Village, a downtown neighborhood where Fauset portrays white people and people of color existing together without conflict. The Village served as a place where individuals of different backgrounds could connect, serving “as a location where boundaries of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality grow thin and become more permeable in stark contrast to the rigid limits of the ‘mainstream’ society that surrounds it” (Smethurst 125-126). Members of different races, classes, religions, genders, and nationalities were able to commune together in the Village, sharing ideas and creating art while blurring the lines of the strict social strata that American society tried so hard to maintain at the time. On Fourteenth Street, Angela notices “men and women were living at a sharper pitch of intensity than those she had observed in Philadelphia. The few coloured people whom she saw were different too; they possessed an independence of carriage, a purposefulness, an assurance that pleased her” (Fauset 50). Angela thrives on the hustle and bustle of the streets New York City,

exhilarated by the change in scenery. She also appreciates the city's more progressive views towards people of color, feeling that the environment is less oppressive than the one she grew up in. People of color in New York City have more opportunities than those in Philadelphia, which Angela notices, but it is rather inconsequential for her at the moment, because she is passing as a white woman without the threat of being exposed for the first time in her life. New York appears to be all that Angela hoped it would be and more.

Greenwich Village, the bohemian capital of New York City, fulfills Angela's dreams of living in a fairy-tale, because it is a space in the city where she can use her fair complexion as a tool to begin her career as an artist—a dream come true. She eventually settles in an apartment on Jayne Street in Greenwich Village, which is also known as the space for budding artists in New York City. In the early twentieth century, the Village was known for attracting artistic types, becoming a bohemian paradise. Fourteenth Street was “a modernist Mecca where the surrounding community of intellectuals and artists experiments with free love and the relatively apolitical aspects of scene painting” (Sherrard-Johnson 54). Fauset uses Greenwich Village because it is the ideal space to showcase the epitome of the white artist experience in the 1920s—the artistic scene that Angela would have been desperate to join after arriving in the city, because it could help drastically advance her art career. Angela's experiences that follow represent the artistic integrity of the neighborhood when she enrolls in art classes at the Cooper Union, which “she felt would be the real beginning of her adventure” (Fauset 53). One of Angela's main reasons for moving to New York City was to improve her art, and she meets new friends—Paulette Lister, Martha Burden, Anthony Cross, and Miss Powell—that are also in pursuit of artistic inspiration. Miss Powell is an African American woman, and she is much more reserved than her classmates, clearly unable to be herself in a room mostly surrounded by white

people. Angela wonders if Miss Powell “made a resolve to never let herself go in the presence of white people,” thinking “perhaps she saw in such encounters a lurking attempt at sociological investigations; she would lend herself to no such procedure, that much was plain” (63). Miss Powell’s discomfort shows that while she is able to remain in the white space of the Cooper Union, she is not and does not feel equal to her white peers, though she displays great talent in her artwork. Angela is well aware of Miss Powell’s mentality, which serves as a reminder to Angela’s true identity, because she cannot help but understand Miss Powell’s motivations based on her own past experiences. Angela understands that if her racial identity were known or visible, she would live like Miss Powell, uncomfortable in situations where she is one of the only representatives of her race. Angela’s other friends represent the intellectual and artistic minds of the avant-garde in Greenwich Village that were a prevalent part of the culture.

Angela’s new group of friends at the Cooper Union are models of what Angela could become if she follows the fairy-tale plot of Greenwich Village that she has imagined in her head. They represent Fauset’s interpretation of the white bohemian culture of the Village. This group uses the progressive ideas of Greenwich Village to help Angela foster an even stronger sense of female identity, and provide different examples for the kind of women Angela could be in New York. One of the first women Angela befriends is Paulette Lister, a bold, tenacious woman who knows how to get what she wants—a representative of the white New Woman that Angela could strive to be in Greenwich Village. She provides Angela with a brash outlook on life: “I see what I want; I use my wiles as a woman to get it, and I employ the qualities of men, tenacity and ruthlessness, to keep it” (60). Paulette, a nonconforming woman of the modern age, lives in a state of “constant defiance,” refusing to let her gender stand in the way of her goals (65). She rejects the societal expectations of marrying young, stringing along many suitors for as long as

they are advantageous for her. Paulette is unabashedly herself, and she “seems to exude all of the possibilities the city offers a woman interested in living life without the constraints of traditional gender norms or normative gender expectations” (Rottenberg “City’s Transformative Power” 274). Another role model for Angela is Martha Burden, a member of the Greenwich Village intelligentsia. Described as “cool and slightly aloof,” Martha is incredibly well read and has accumulated knowledge on a wide scope of topics, allowing her to be well versed in a great breadth of progressive ideas and philosophies (Fauset 65). She and her husband host dinner parties at their apartment filled with experts in an assortment of interests and specializations. Paulette and Martha offer models of white femininity that Angela can embrace and emulate in Greenwich Village to continue the façade of her new identity.

Angela’s decision to pass in New York allows her to engage with people that she never would have met otherwise. At one of Martha’s parties downtown, she is introduced to Roger Fielding, a wealthy and charming young man who immediately takes an interest in Angela. When Roger begins to court Angela, she sees him as her ticket to make all of fantasies come true—her fairy-tale prince. This fairy-tale is perpetuated by Angela’s view of the city as the promised land, especially Greenwich Village, where everything seems to be going perfectly for her. The romantic notions of Angela’s art appear to be coming to life in her relationship with Roger, which seems to be picture perfect at first. She realizes the power that she has over Roger is based on her attractive and charming appearance, noticing that she has ““everything that a girl ought to have just because I had sense enough to suit my actions to my appearance”” (72). Angela feels empowered by the spell she thinks she has cast over her suitor. Roger showers her with gifts and affection, and Angela thinks he is completely enamored with her. She imagines all of the steps she must take to win a proposal from him, not realizing that Roger only wants to use

her for sexual relations. Angela repels his lustful advances at first, not because of “morals, nor of religion, nor of racial pride; it was a matter of fastidiousness” (116). She wants to marry Roger to cement her social and economic standing, not because she loves him. Angela is also aware that if she does have sex with him, it would cheapen their relationship and make it less likely for him to propose, but she does not deny that she desires Roger in that manner. In a way, Angela’s perspective is more aligned with the repressive demands of the African American bourgeois on the New Negro Woman, rather than the sexually liberated New Woman that could be found roaming the streets in Greenwich Village. Angela’s viewpoint suggests that she still has ties—though subconscious—to the African American community of her past. She maintains her individuality by rejecting Roger’s advances, because she does not fall into the trappings of seduction, maintaining her freedom and independence for the moment.

Greenwich Village, which had once been Angela’s source of independence, has transformed into a space where she is ensnared by her passions. The influence of Greenwich Village and its notions of free love have taken hold of Angela. She gives in to her desire, while only “something quite outside herself, something watchful, proud, remote from the passion and rapture which flamed within her, kept her free and independent” (118-119). By doing this, Angela neglects all of her dreams and ambitions to satisfy Roger. During this chapter of her life, Angela’s identity becomes completely tied up with her relationship with Roger. The tryst teaches her “principle can merge with individual desire if she moves beyond her longing for fairy-tale endings and puts in its place a more mature and responsible pride that nurtures yet transcends the self” (Friedel 60). As a result, this moment is very transformative for Angela, though it may not all be for the better, because being with Roger also makes Angela more materialistic and

uncaring about other people, causing her to forget about her plans to give back to those less fortunate than her when she is in a greater position of power.

Greenwich Village causes Angela to lose her innocence and naïveté by shattering the fairy-tale ending she had imagined when first arriving in New York City. The consummation of Angela and Roger's relationship also causes a break between Angela and her past. By crossing over into a space of whiteness and beginning a relationship with a white man, Angela abandons the lessons of her childhood. She feels distanced from her memories, and that disconnect is a source of stress for Angela. At this point, her life in Philadelphia feels like it was lived by someone else, and her relationship with Roger makes Angela question every choice she has made up to this point in her life.

But sometimes at night she lay for hours thinking over her restless, yearning child hood, her fruitless days at the Academy, the abortive wooing of Matthew Henson. The Hensons, the Hallowells, Hetty Daniels, Jinny! How far now she was beyond their pale!
(Fauset 119)

Thinking of the people who knew her in Philadelphia, Angela realizes that her behavior has been unacceptable and completely out of character. Angela has lost her sense of self because of her relationship with Roger. She desires both Roger and the chance to cement her white racial identity. Angela is unrecognizable in this moment, and realizing this, she makes a massive change. The revelation prompts Angela to end her affair with Roger. She decides that she needs focus on herself in order to understand her identity again. Angela takes back control and regains agency in her life, as the relationship “sheds new light on her notions of individualism and nonconformity” (Friedel 62). Unfortunately, cutting Roger out of her life begins a long span of isolation for Angela. She lives alone, “sick of men and their babyish, faithless ways” and tries to

make connections with her neighbors, but Angela feels incredibly unfulfilled and excluded from the activities she used to enjoy (Fauset 134). This isolation, however, provides Angela with the time she needs to reflect on her actions since coming to New York City. She realizes what she needs is her sister, who now lives estranged from Angela in Harlem. Angela craves the deeper connection that can only be made with members of her family, her own race. Angela devises a strategy to win her sister back, planning to “acknowledge her foolishness, her selfishness; she would bare her heart and crave her sister’s forgiveness” (147). Distancing herself from Roger and her friends from the Cooper Union, and by extension limiting Greenwich Village’s influence on her, allows Angela to become much more self-aware than when first in the city; loneliness has taught her what truly matters in her life. She seeks out Virginia, reaching out to her in Harlem, and puts her life together in a meaningful way, forging stronger connections with her friends. For the moment, Angela remains in Greenwich Village, but the reconnection with her racial identity, her past, and her family allows her to walk the city streets with confidence and intention. With the recoupling of her past and her present, Angela feels a sense of belonging in Harlem that was absent in the Village.

Signifying that she has greatly matured, Angela becomes disenfranchised with the fairy-tale imaginings of love and marriage that she brought with her to New York. She no longer sees herself as the heroine of a magical story and she views marriage as an “end in itself; for women certainly; the only, the most desirable and natural end” (159). Angela acknowledges that it may never happen for her either, but she is comfortable with where her life has settled, “the ability for self-pity had vanished” (220). She can confidently decide where she wants to take her life on its next adventure, a smart and ambitious young woman, “finally able to strike a balance between individual development and a concern for that which is larger than the self” (Friedel 66). By the

end of the novel, Angela is self-reliant, traveling to Paris alone to pursue her goals of becoming a successful artist. After deciding to no longer pass, Angela needs to leave New York to advance her artistic career, because the city, though relatively progressive, still has limits for African American artists. She has learned to be a strong, driven, and courageous woman, which gives her the ability to do something much more difficult: embrace the racial identity that she used to view as a limitation.

Angela's navigation through New York City leads to an ideological evolution in her racial status as well. Her views of race, and particularly her own racial identity, are heavily influenced by the space she occupies. Growing up, Angela enjoyed passing for white with her mother on the streets of Philadelphia. Her peers at school knew of her racial status, and mocked her for it, pushing Angela to believe that being "coloured in America" is "nothing short of a curse" (Fauset 32). She resented the fact that she had to serve as a representative of her entire race, as suggested by the boys who would debate politics and ideologies in her living room. She feels enslaved by the African American blood that courses through her veins, particularly in Philadelphia, with its oppressive policies and social system. New York City offers Angela the chance to escape from the burden and curse of her racial heritage, a land of possibility and rebirth.

In New York City, Angela is not limited by her racial identity. She is "free to taste life in all its fullness and sweetness, in all its minutest details...able to master life," but that is mainly because she is passing, so she is assumed to be a white woman in predominately white spaces (79). Angela initially sees herself as courageous, like a heroine in a story, for breaking from the shackles of her racial heritage, but she is still able to relate to her race to a certain extent. She invokes the empowerment she feels from passing to say she "herself was power, like the women

one reads about, like Cleopatra,” whose African origin intrigued Angela, signaling a step towards celebrating her racial identity (88). She also feels compassion for the African Americans who were kicked out of a restaurant because Roger complained to the management. Angela’s connection to the three African Americans—especially the young woman—wills her to win Roger over so he can learn to care about African Americans and use his money to help them. She wants to transform Roger’s views of race so she can help improve the lives of other African Americans. Angela even tries to justify her relationship with Roger and her poor treatment of her own race by saying she’ll pay reparations once she has enough money: “I’ll be good to all sorts of people; I’ll really help humanity, lots of coloured folks will be much better off on account of me,” showing that she still tries to care while distancing herself from the identity (94). Angela’s plans to help less privileged African Americans who cannot reap the benefits of pretending to be white signal that she is frustrated by the inequality that members of her race feel. Although she has left behind the burden of her race by passing in white spaces, she cannot turn a blind eye to others who struggle more than her because of their skin tone.

Passing for white also provides Angela with the ability to view members of her own race in a new light. She notices that the African Americans in New York City are more proud and celebratory of their racial heritage than those in Philadelphia. Angela’s own attitudes towards her racial identity face a turning point when she goes with Roger, Paulette, and Martha to see Van Meier speak in Harlem—an unapologetically black space. Angela feels the pride emanating from the neighborhood, once again feeling the “fullness, richness, even thickness of life” that she can only sense in Harlem (126). Angela’s connection to Harlem intensifies as Van Meier preaches to promote the uplift of the African American race through “the acquisition not so much of a racial love as a racial pride...that enables us to find our own beautiful and praiseworthy, an intense

chauvinism that is content with its own types, that finds completeness within its own group” (127). Van Meier’s speech and display of racial pride, so eloquently and intelligently explained, is a wake-up call for Angela—she craves to a larger role in the community of Harlem. After hearing him speak, Angela is “conscious of a swelling pride,” slowly realizing that there is nothing wrong with being African American (129). Harlem allows Angela to celebrate her racial identity, which until this moment, she has either despised or kept hidden.

Angela’s self-imposed period of isolation, where she decides to focus on her art, allows her to reflect on her racial identity, away from the influences of Harlem and Greenwich Village. She compares her New York experience to Virginia’s, who “was established in New York with friends, occupation, security, leading an utterly open life, no secrets, no subterfuges, no goals to be reached by devious ways,” living a thriving and successful life, whereas Angela’s changed and deceitful life invites pain and unhappiness (141). Angela is tired of her constant lies and deception, and wants to break away from her life in Greenwich Village, because it is making her miserable. While reflecting on her experiences, Angela finds “betrayal in the white downtown world and discovering a cultural heritage in the black uptown world” (O’Connell 173). When she goes to Harlem to beg for Virginia’s forgiveness, Angela also decides to start occasionally embracing her racial identity: “when it seemed best to be coloured she would be coloured; when it was best to be white she would be that,” showing a true shift in Angela’s outlook towards race (147). Virginia’s apartment in Harlem becomes a space of acceptance—Virginia accepts Angela’s apology for abandoning her in Philadelphia and for leaving behind their race. Here, Angela also starts to fully embrace her African American identity, or at least in places where it would not be an inconvenience. While this is not the ideal viewpoint to hold towards an aspect of the self, it is a step in the right direction.

Time in Harlem gives Angela the opportunity to reflect and celebrate, because the streets' pride have transferred into her own being, allowing her to shift her identity away from the façade that she has been maintaining downtown. After her epiphany, Angela eventually does little to separate herself from racial matters. She channels her mother's mantra, repeating, "life is more important than colour" (154). The segregation that Angela once enforced upon herself has ended, and she begins to interact with other members of her race. She is no longer ashamed of her African American blood, but she still passes for white in front of her friends from downtown, which causes her to feel slightly uneasy "living in an atmosphere of falseness, of tangled implications" (157). The hesitation to let her friends know the truth indicates that Angela's identity is not yet completely formed. She still maintains her fake identity because she is worried about how her friends will react to her subterfuge. Angela does not want to be completely rejected from her comfortable white space.

With the increased exposure to Harlem, however, Angela also starts to look at Greenwich Village in an unfavorable manner.

Now indeed Angela was far removed from the atmosphere which she had known in Greenwich Village; the slight bohemianism which she had there encountered was here replaced by a somewhat bourgeois but satisfying sophistication. These people saw the 'Village' for what it was, a network of badly laid off streets, for the most part, uncomfortable, not to say inconvenient swellings inhabited by a handful of artists in the midst of a thousand poseurs. (155-156)

For so long, Angela has been portraying herself in an inauthentic manner. She has maintained a fake identity in order to gain acceptance in a space that would otherwise keep her at a distance, which is the experience that Miss Powell endures. The constant requirement to lie, while initially

beneficial, takes a negative toll on Angela's psyche. She becomes disillusioned with the Village, projecting her own inauthenticity onto the neighborhood to the point where she can only see it as fake in comparison to the streets of Harlem. To Angela, life feels more real, more visceral, more desirable uptown. Although her friendships from the Cooper Union prove to be genuine after Angela's racial identity is revealed, she prefers Harlem to Greenwich Village, restoring the connections from which she once separated herself.

The final step in Angela's total acceptance and celebration of her racial identity is when she receives the opportunity to travel to Europe to study art by winning a scholarship. Angela understands that the racial attitudes in the United States are not going to change anytime soon. Therefore, she does not see the point in revealing her true racial identity before she begins a new adventure in Europe. Angela does, however, realize that she does not want to continue masquerading as a member of a race that she is not a part of, so she vows to "speak of her strain of Negro blood and abide by whatever consequences such exposition would entail" once in Italy and France (198). Angela is content with this resolution, but this plan is thwarted when her African American classmate—Miss Powell—is denied the same scholarship because of her race, which she cannot hide. She goes to Harlem to talk to Miss Powell about losing the scholarship, and seeing the injustice and poor treatment of her classmate by a band of journalists, Angela reveals herself to be a woman of color as well, saying, "it's a great deal better to be coloured and to miss on scholarships and honors and preferments, than to be the contemptible things which you've all shown yourselves to be this morning" (202). This final act shows that in Harlem, Angela finally accepts and announces to the world her racial identity. There is a great deal of backlash directed towards Angela, but she is unfazed, maintaining that "the matter of blood seems nothing compared with individuality, character, living" (206). When asked if she is ever

going to pass again, Angela states that she is “now on the coloured side,” showing finality in her transformation into a race-conscious, proud African American woman (217). She embraces her racial heritage, accepting the connections to her family and the past that Harlem offers, and unafraid to express the pride that she feels in her identity.

Just as Angela Murray adventures in New York City trying to understand her identity— finally accepting the connection to her family and history in Harlem—*Passing*'s Irene and Clare also see the appeal and benefits of Harlem while experimenting with passing to varying degrees. Nella Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, published in 1929, was her second novel about fair-skinned African American women that navigate through different spaces. As Cheryl A. Wall notes, passing “does not refer only to the sociological phenomenon of blacks crossing the color line. It represents instead both the loss of racial identity and the denial of self required of women who conform to restrictive gender roles” (“Passing for What?”105). Larsen's novel explores this phenomenon in great detail, exploring the consequences of pretending and hiding aspects of identity. *Passing* follows the reunion of childhood friends Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, both women of mixed-race descent that have fair complexions that allow them to pass. The novel is divided into three sections: “Encounter,” “Re-Encounter,” and “Finale,” and each section follows Irene and Clare as they navigate through both their identities and the various spaces of the novel. Just as Fauset's novel begins in Philadelphia and then relocates to the streets of New York City, *Passing* predominately takes place in Harlem and other parts of New York, but the first section of the novel takes place in Chicago. The movement through different locations has a significant influence on both Irene and Clare's characters and their identities. Not only do these women navigate through different locations and spaces, but they also navigate between “black” and

“white” spaces, which have an even greater effect on the women. Although they wander around different parts of New York City, Harlem is the space where Irene and Clare are able to fully embrace and express their racial identities. Larsen, however, portrays Harlem more complexly than Fauset, with more severe psychological implications. The connections that her protagonists have to the neighborhood signify how it is not a perfect space. Irene and Clare sometimes cling to Harlem for the wrong reasons, which highlights the complicatedness of the space.

The first section of *Passing* takes place in a shopping district in Chicago, and the predominance of white spaces in Chicago severely limits many of the characters’ ability to express their true identity. By placing the first part of her novel in Chicago, Larsen illustrates how different Irene feels far from Harlem and New York City. Although she grew up on the south side of Chicago—an African American neighborhood—the city no longer offers Irene the comfort she now feels in Harlem, almost 800 miles away from her hometown. Irene uses her fair skin as a cover and passes as white in Chicago when away from the streets she grew up on, distancing herself from the African American identity she is not ashamed to promote in Harlem. This way, Irene cannot be limited in the various services available to her in Chicago, a problem she does not face in Harlem. Walking on the streets of Chicago stirs up feelings of agitation inside Irene. On the surface level, it seems to be the extreme heat that makes her uncomfortable, but something else causes her unease on the city streets. Irene feels out of place in Chicago, edging “her way out of the increasing crowd, feeling disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many sweating bodies” to avoid the attention of others (Larsen 8). She is out of her comfort zone when surrounded by a growing number of white pedestrians on the sidewalk, worried that they may discover her true racial identity, causing a greater scene. Irene would not have felt this way when walking on the streets in Harlem.

By going inside the Drayton, an upscale hotel, Irene escapes the scalding heat and snooping eyes of the crowd, but the new space also forces her to reflect on the discomfort that she feels on the streets of Chicago. The hotel is a “white” space, making Irene even more uncomfortable while sipping tea at the Drayton—a place for luxury and relaxation—because she feels anxious that her African American heritage will be recognized or revealed by another patron. That being said, Irene is not “ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being rejected from any place even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her” (11). Irene fears being exposed as an African American because it will mean embarrassment for her—an insult to her socially—but it would not be something that would affect her racial pride. She cannot bear the idea of being humiliated in public for her racial identity. Her musings signal discomfort and paranoia when not home in Harlem, where she is not required to pass to enjoy the opportunities in society.

In *Passing*, Chicago suggests notions of racial insecurity due to the focus on spaces for white Americans as opposed to spaces for African Americans. Irene is not the only African American woman to hide her racial identity in Chicago, seemingly because being an African American is not a universally accepted identity for others in the novel. When Irene bumps into Clare Kendry at the Drayton, they talk for a while to catch up—it has been over ten years since they had last seen each other. They bond over their mutual passing in the white space, and Irene learns that Clare always passes as white. She has been passing since she was a teenager, when she left the south side of Chicago and moved to the Westside to live with her white aunts in a white neighborhood after her father died. Clare was assumed to be a white woman because her physical attributes did not expose the truth of her identity, and no one asked of her background in her new home. Clare theorizes it is “because there are so many more of them [white people], or

maybe because they are secure and don't have to bother" (Larsen 18). Clare lived in a white neighborhood; her white neighbors did not anticipate that someone of a different race would relocate there, allowing for Clare to maintain the façade of whiteness. As she "possessed a body that could not be read by them as Black, Clare failed to disrupt their geographies of racial expectations, demonstrating that Whiteness is as much about physical location as it is about unmarked bodies" (Carter 238). Clare has been passing for so long that does not understand Irene's racial pride, perhaps because she has not yet been to its epicenter in Harlem. She even remarks to Irene, "You know, 'Rene, I've often wondered why more coloured girls...never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve" (Larsen 18). Clare acts as if pretending to be a member of a different race is a trivial matter, rather than a decision that could have severe impacts, both social and psychological. In this moment, Clare does not see the value in celebrating her racial identity, seeking comfort and security as white woman over her embracing her true self.

Irene's sense of racial pride stands out in Chicago. While she exhibits and possesses pride in her African American roots, it is not common in the company she keeps in Chicago, as she learns when having tea with two of her childhood friends: Clare and Gertrude Martin. Clare has completely forsaken the African American roots that made her upbringing more difficult so she could live a new life with John Bellew, her husband who is a wealthy businessman and incredibly bigoted. Bellew is completely unaware of his wife's true heritage. Irene and Clare's other friend, Gertrude, had also married a white man—Fred Martin, who was classmate of the three women—but he knows of his wife's African American roots. Irene feels outnumbered when meeting these women together, feeling "a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as

well,” because they have essentially rejected the identity that Irene bears so proudly (Larsen 24-25). Living successfully in Harlem has given Irene a worldview that conflicts with the perspectives of her peers, making her a minority among minorities. Gertrude and Clare’s attitudes towards their race continue to annoy Irene as they discuss how they had worried about their babies being born with dark skin, which would have forced them to accept a racial identity that their mothers were able to hide from. For Gertrude, Clare, and many others “across the entire spectrum of skin tones, Blackness is inferiority, something that no one in her right mind would want to be” (Carter 239). Even in a space filled with African American women—a black space—a hierarchy is created by the darkness of complexions, with a tendency for lighter shades on the spectrum to be valued over darker ones. Ironically, Irene also perpetuates the hierarchy, as she, a light-skinned African American, hires dark-skinned maids. Gertrude and Clare’s discussion is halted when they learn that Irene’s son has a darker complexion, and that her husband “couldn’t exactly ‘pass,’” (Larsen 27). Irene is unabashed in her declarations, displaying a sense of racial pride that appears to be absent from Gertrude and Clare. It is also evident in the “defensive tone of her voice” that she uses to challenge John Bellew’s racist claims, shocking Clare and Gertrude (30). Irene’s comfort with her race appears to be a foreign concept to African Americans outside of Harlem who share the ability to pass in white society.

It is also in Chicago that Clare begins doubting her decision to constantly pass as a white woman, suggesting that the security of racial identity cannot be maintained there—a white space. For Clare, this is especially true, because she is unable to interact with other African Americans in her daily life with John Bellew, as it may reveal her true identity. In a letter to Irene, sent to her father’s house on the south side, Clare admits, “It may be, ’Rene dear, it may just be, that after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one. I’m not sure just now. At least

not so sure as I have been” (34). After witnessing Irene’s strong sense of identity, Clare begins to question whether she made the right choice. While she has distanced herself from the “African American bourgeois culture” that she yearned to be a part of, now “free of its demands for conformity and social service and endless attention to familial and community uplift,” Clare also feels like something is missing (Ammons 191). Irene appears to be thriving in Harlem, and seeing that success triggers something in Clare—a desire to belong somewhere, a permanent space where she can express herself—something she currently lacks.

Her talk was of the change that Chicago presented to her after her long absence in European cities. Yes, she said in reply to some question from Gertrude, she’d been back to America a time or two, but only as far as New York and Philadelphia, and once she had spent a few days in Washington. (Larsen 25)

By constantly moving around, Clare lacks roots anywhere. She was unable to plant them when she initially lived in Chicago, as she was distanced from her peers as a member of a lower class, and then she moved to a different section of the city. Clare does not have a foundation in her marriage, as she married John Bellew for the opportunity to leave her old life behind her. In leaving her old life, she left her house, where she did not have a sturdy sense of home. With constant traveling, Clare has never been able to settle anywhere for too long. She is still wandering, looking for somewhere to land. Clare sees that chance in Irene and Harlem, where she can plant her own roots, and find a connection with her people.

For Irene, Harlem is where she is most powerful and influential. A woman of the 1920s, Irene is not just a housewife. She has her own ambitions and agendas, working for the Negro Welfare League to promote uplift for African Americans. Irene has influence and connections to important people, like the white author, Hugh Wentworth. When asked why she does not pass to

have more opportunities, Irene tells Clare that she has everything she wants, except “perhaps, a little more money” (20). With her husband—Brian, who is a doctor—and their two sons, Irene’s life is comfortable and ordered just the way she likes it; she is mostly content in the black space that does not require her to put on a mask to earn acceptance. Harlem offers a sense of security in a world where other members of Irene’s race—like her husband and children—are discriminated against for the color of her skin. The neighborhood also offers Irene a chance to speak up and make the changes that she thinks are helpful in “uplifting the brother,” as her husband says (39). Irene has the opportunity to cause change and make things happen, which is a great deal of power in a time when women were often looked down on and not able to make a difference in society. The power offers Irene a voice and security, which she values above all else.

In *Passing*, Harlem is also a space for racial pride. Irene is proud of her identity as an African American; partly because of the power it has given her in her neighborhood, but also because she is proud of her roots. The respect that she feels towards her heritage is part of the reason that she does not give Clare the introduction to Harlem that she wants. Clare’s disregard for her race baffles Irene. It frustrates Irene as well, leading her to refuse to serve as Clare’s liaison back into the African American world—the black space, because she has “no intention of being the link between her and her poorer darker brethren” (39). Irene looks down on Clare for neglecting her heritage, but also with a certain amount of pity. Clare’s African American blood soured her upbringing because she could not enjoy the privileges that were available to middle-class African Americans, like Irene. The disparities between Clare’s upbringing and those of her peers encouraged her to deny it completely, embracing her pale complexion as a tool to improve her situation. The decision to leave her heritage behind had deeply psychological impacts on

Clare though, leaving her with a gap in her identity—something she did not realize until being reunited with Irene. She writes a letter to Irene, explaining as much:

“ . . . For I am lonely, so lonely . . . cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life . . . You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of . . . It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases. . . .” Sheets upon thin sheets of it. And ending finally with, “and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. As least partly. For I wouldn't now perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago. (7)

Clare realizes that something has been lacking in her life for some time. For the first time in years, she is willing to accept and embrace the African American blood running through her veins. Clare sees her life as if it were as pale as her complexion, dull in comparison to the world that Irene has created for herself in Harlem. She desires the forbidden call of the neighborhood, looking for a sense of thrill while trying to forge a new relationship with people of her own race. The bright lights of the city, cabarets, and opportunity to find connections with people like her for the first time in her life acts like a magnet, pulling Clare closer to the black space where her heritage will be able to shine.

Harlem provides Clare with a sense of freedom that she has not experienced in years. Upon reuniting with Irene, Clare feels an affiliation to the race that she “had been unable to completely sever” when she first left Chicago with her husband (36). Being among her people in a space that is specifically for them allows her to forge new ties to the African American community. She craves a connection with someone or something, because she has rarely been close to anyone—not her father or the aunts who raised her after his death, not her peers, not her

husband, not her daughter. Harlem becomes the place where she can realize those hidden desires, showing that “places—spaces embedded in systems of meaning, value, and power—reflect themselves upon the bodies of those inhabiting them” (Carter 238). When she attends the Negro Welfare League’s dance, Clare witnesses all that she has missed out on by staying away from members of her own race. Clare yearns for interactions with others of her race, telling Irene, ““You don’t know, you can’t realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh” (Larsen 51). Clare feels like she is part of something more in Harlem, finally finding a place where she belongs in a black space. Her racial pride is restored, and she feels like part of a community. She declares that if she is freed from her husband, ““If I could have just a couple of months more in New York, alone I mean, I’d be the happiest thing in the world”” (58). Clare has finally found a place to plant her roots—the center of African American society. This newfound joy and sense of belonging, however, cannot be maintained forever.

Harlem is also a complex neighborhood in New York, because it represents freedom and oppression, safety and danger. Irene sees Clare’s entrance into the neighborhood as a threat against all that she has worked for. Irene views Clare’s intrusion not only as a risk to her status middle-class African American woman, through fear that Brian is having an affair with her, but also as a modern woman, because Clare represents the woman of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who was only valued for her looks. Clare throws a wrench in Irene and Brian’s already troubled marriage, throwing Irene’s stability and security into disarray. Irene lashes back, trying to convince Brian that Clare is a waste of time, giving her backhanded compliments when they are at their home in Harlem.

“She isn’t stupid. She’s intelligent enough in a purely feminine way. Eighteenth-century France would have been a marvelous setting for her, or the old South if she hadn’t made the mistake of being born a Negro. . . . Nobody admires Clare more than I do, for the kind of intelligence she has, as well as for her decorative qualities. . . . Take Bianca, for example, or to keep to the race, Felise Freeland. Looks *and* brains. Real brains that can hold their own with anybody. Clare has got brains of a sort, the kind that are useful too. Acquisitive, you know.” (61-62)

In Irene’s eyes, Clare is an affront to the type of woman that African Americans should strive to be. Clare uses her beauty to dazzle everyone she knows, and Irene believes that Clare’s powers of persuasion are derived from an aesthetic source, rather than a cerebral one. Clare is also wild, unafraid to give in to her desires, and she “represents for Irene the dangerous side of herself—foreign, outlawed—that she as a respectable middle-class black woman has successfully denied” (Ammons 190-191). She does not fit the model set out for her by society, which is admirable, but disastrous for Irene. Clare defies the expectations of the New Negro Woman—something that Irene will not tolerate because it has the potential to ruin everything for her in Harlem, anything to protect her black space. Ultimately, Clare is an outsider that is trying to find her place in Harlem, but Irene will ensure that her efforts are halted before they can cause further damage to the Redfield household and Irene’s sense of power and control.

The city streets of New York highlight the imperfections of Harlem and its effects on the characters. The streets are ambiguous spaces that the protagonists must navigate—it is unclear if they black or white spaces. The ambiguities and nebulous boundaries between races forged in other spaces do not exist as strongly in Harlem, and as a result, the city streets serve as places of anxiety for Irene. In this environment, she does not have the power and control that she exudes in

Harlem, which causes her anguish. The instability that the streets outside of Harlem create for Irene is especially present on Seventh Avenue, as she argues with her husband, Brian. Upon returning from Chicago, she fears “that that old, queer, unhappy restlessness had begun again within him; that craving for some place strange and different, which at the beginning of her marriage she had had to make such strenuous efforts to repress, and which yet faintly alarmed her, though it now sprang up at gradually lessening intervals” (35). Irene worries that Brian wants to leave Harlem, because everything that she has worked so hard for would be ruined. Mostly, she would mourn her treasured sense of stability, whose loss would leave her powerless.

Outside of Harlem, Irene is not in complete control of social situations, which is why she desperately clings to the uptown neighborhood. These ties to the city cause her to bristle at any threat to her source of power and influence. She is so desperate to stay rooted in Harlem that she has even ruined her marriage in the process. Over the years, Irene has manipulated Brian into staying in Harlem, using various excuses that make him stay, using the voice that Harlem has given her to maintain control of her marriage. Her fear of leaving behind Harlem and the strength it imbues in her has pushed Irene to extremes. She wants to quell the “strange, and to her fantastic, notion of Brian’s of going off to Brazil which, though unmentioned, yet lived within him; how it frightened her, and—yes, angered her!” (Larsen 40). Brian wants to relocate his family to Brazil, because it was a country known at the time for being accepting and tolerant to people of color. He dreams of living in a place where people do not have to transgress boundaries of black and white spaces, and he believes that South America would offer his sons, who do not share their mother’s privilege of being able to pass, a better chance at life, away from the racism prevalent in America. For Irene, however, this relocation would be disastrous, because she would be sapped of all the power that she maintains in New York City.

Irene's desperation to maintain her control and sense of power, which is derived from her connection to Harlem, has ruined her ability to effectively connect with the people in her life. As a result of their conflicting desires, Irene and Brian's marriage is distant and loveless. Irene's sexuality has been "replaced by her desire for safety and 'security'" that Harlem provides (Scruggs 159). The lack of intimacy between Irene and Brian culminates on Seventh Avenue, when she talks to him about their son, Junior, while driving downtown with Brian. Junior has been making sex jokes that Irene deems inappropriate, to which Brian responds, "The sooner and the more he learns about sex, the better for him. And most certainly if he learns that it's a grand joke, the greatest in the world. It'll keep him from lots of disappointment later on" (Larsen 42). As they are not in Harlem, where Irene has more control, Brian is able to vent his frustrations at her. He is angered by her unwillingness to let him venture out of the bubble that she has formed for their family. This frustration could be extended to the fact that she uses her fair complexion to escape the aggression that he faces, although she does not do it often. As an African American woman, Irene has more opportunities in New York City, especially with her social stature in Harlem, which she refuses to give up, even if it will allow for her husband and sons to have a better experience.

The city streets of New York also present dangers to both Irene and Clare. When wandering outside of Harlem in an area without a definitive racialization, it is generally unclear whether or not Irene needs to pass in these spaces. This lack of clarity is hazardous and can lead to harm though, especially when bumping into the wrong person on the street. While shopping along Fifth Avenue around Fifty-seventh Street—midtown Manhattan, quite far from the safety of Harlem—Irene bumps into John Bellew, Clare's racist husband who does not know the truth about Irene or his wife's true racial identity. That is, until he notices that Irene is shopping with

her friend, Felise Freeland, an African American woman who does not have the luxury of being able to pass. Bellew is able to conclude that Irene is actually an African American, and by extension, makes the assumption that his wife is as well. The situation leaves Irene distraught, trying to comprehend why she had not acted different:

That instinctive loyalty to a race. Why couldn't she get free of it? Why should it include Clare? Clare, who'd shown little enough consideration for her, and hers. What she felt was not so much resentment as a dull despair because she could change herself in this respect, could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry. (71)

Even away from the streets of Harlem, Irene feels a powerful connection to her racial heritage. She experiences a sense of kinship to the other members of her race, even someone like Clare, who does not seem to have an ounce of pride for her ancestry. Despite the strength and the bond that Irene feels for her African American roots, the ambiguously racialized space saps away from her ability to speak up and challenge Bellew. On these streets, Irene is caught off guard when bumping into the only person she has “ever met disguised as a white woman,” because she was unaware that she needed to maintain the façade in this area (70). Outside of Harlem, Irene’s voice is temporarily taken away from her.

Passing ends with a scene that is as ambiguous as the boundaries between black and white spaces in the city. After interacting with John Bellew on Fifth Avenue, Irene fears the consequences of his discovery that Irene is African American. She worries that he will hurt Clare, but also neglects to tell anyone about the encounter, suggesting that Irene subconsciously wants there to be retribution for Clare deceiving her husband and for encroaching on Irene’s territory in Harlem. Irene, Clare, and Brian attend a party at Felise Freeland’s apartment in Harlem, where John Bellew ambushes them, using racial slurs to accuse his wife of lying to him.

Bellew too is an outsider in Harlem—a white man in a black space. He disrupts the nature of the party, putting it on edge, waiting for something to happen. Felise Freeland and others stand between Clare and her bigoted husband, signaling that they have accepted Clare as part of their community. Clare challenges her husband by smiling at him, standing near an open window, and seeing how Clare is protected, Irene is sent into a rage. “It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (79). Irene sees this as her last chance to stop Clare upending everything, so she does the unthinkable—she shoves her out the window. The writing is intentionally ambiguous, leaving it up to interpretation whether Irene pushed Clare, or if Clare just fell out the window, but it is clear that this event only could have happened in Harlem; Clare has been forced out of a black space of safety. Irene needs to protect the space and reputation that she has worked so hard for, and eliminating Clare permanently seems like the only way. The ends that Irene will go to as a way to protect her territory and security in Harlem show that a connection to a location has powerful psychological effects on an individual.

The differing portrayals of Harlem by Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen exhibit how Harlem was a complex space. In *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, Harlem is a place for connection—a place to celebrate and embrace identity. The neighborhood, as a racialized space, allows each protagonist to embrace her racial heritage and gain empowerment from those roots. The black space of Harlem is where Angela, Irene, and Clare can all let down their façades, and feel linked to other members of their race. As Catherine Rottenberg writes, the two texts dramatize

how the city's emancipatory potential has been qualitatively different for black and white middle-class women. While urban space facilitated white middle-class women's loosening of traditional patriarchal control, urban middle-class black women faced additional challenges due to their lack of privilege on two counts—gender and race.

(“City's Transformative Power” 278)

The characters that Fauset and Larsen create are vehicles of identity that navigate between black and white spaces in an attempt to make sense of the various societal expectations to which they were subjected. They represent a different type of African American woman than those previously portrayed in literature—more empowered in new way involving self-definition, more active. These women have more chances to thrive in a city—especially New York City, with its incredibly diverse make-up—than they would in other parts of the country, or even the world. The unique opportunities that Harlem offers in regards to connection to history and celebration of identity are hard to find in other places in the world, and the close proximity to predominately white spaces allows for different ideas to be shared in the city. The black space of Harlem peacefully coexists near these white spaces, and the boundaries are blurred enough that the female protagonists can transgress with ease. Given the color of their skin, Angela, Irene, and Clare can be equally successful in both black and white spaces.

By offering different views of Harlem and its effects on women, Fauset and Larsen suggest different options for the New Negro Woman. *Plum Bun's* Angela illustrates how art can be used to celebrate racial identity and promote the success of African Americans, relating back to the philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance and Fauset's personal belief that art was a way to improve the image of African Americans in modern society. Fauset's novel also addresses the limitations that women, particularly women of color, feel because of gender and racial

oppression, while satirizing romance and fairy-tale tropes. Meanwhile, Larsen presents a much bleaker insight into the New Negro Woman. In *Passing*, the New Negro Woman does not end up well off. Irene, who clearly represents Larsen's understanding of the New Negro Woman, is repressed and unhappy, unless she is in control of the social situation in Harlem. She works on uplifting her fellow African Americans, as expected of her by modern African American society, but Irene has ruined her marriage and friendships in the process by becoming power hungry. Alternatively, if the expectations of the New Negro Woman are not fulfilled or conformed to, as is the case with Clare, life can be terminated because a woman is not working in accordance with societal expectations. These conflicting images of the New Negro Woman suggest that the authors saw the product of the Harlem Renaissance in different lights.

New York City has a rich history of presenting more opportunities for minority groups than other spaces in the United States, and for offering the chance to celebrate identities in a way that cannot be done outside of a metropolitan area. The city allows for self-exploration and self-definition, even if that can have outcomes that are less desirable in the end. The ambiguities of the city encourage individuals to break out and search for an understanding or sense of belonging. The complexities in the portrayals of New York City and Harlem in *Plum Bun* and *Passing* have a great deal of psychological effects on female protagonists, while still encouraging that women embrace their true female and racial identities.

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