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The Intricate Relationship Between Racial Passing and Masculinity

In the contemporary world of men, certain variables are often considered in the assessment of a man's masculinity. While these variables range in complexity—from simple physical indications such as muscle size to complex ones, such as his speaking mannerisms—they can quite reasonably be deemed primitive in general. Yet, in racially polarized societies with overwhelmingly-privileged races such as the United States, products of the abyss in racial preference have created new implications for masculinity. Racial passing in particular has an intricate relationship with perceived masculinity, as certain societal and personal conditions grant racial passing to both amplify or suppress one's manhood. In Pauline Hopkins's novel *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest*, the supporting protagonist Judah exemplifies these complex ways in which racial passing influences outward and inward perceptions of manliness. James Weldon Johnson, in his semi-fictional work *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, relates to readers the relationship between his racial passing experiences and his masculinity, and the literature of Nye, Plath, and Lussana casts light on the complicated historical interconnection between African Americans and whites in the United States, disclosing the ways in which perceptions of masculinity have developed as a direct consequence of this relationship. In their respective literature, Hopkins, Johnson, et al. demonstrate that ignorance of racial passing or its termination and the embracing of one's true race can enable a man's masculinity to reach its height.

When a man successfully and unknowingly passes racially, he behaves normally, and his masculinity will remain completely intact until his conscious revelation of his passing. Passing enables men to stand on equal footing with other, more racially-privileged men. While Winona and Judah are African American, both initially pass for Native American; Winona wears "moccasins" (Hopkins 3), and Judah "might have been mistaken for an Indian at first glance" (2), indicating that the two children are equal racially. Hopkins's relaxed diction in her description of Judah suggests that pinpointing Judah's ethnicity is not of great importance, and his masculinity thus remains intact. As Judah feels "a strange sense of pleasure stir his young heart as he involuntarily glanced form the flowers to the childish face before him" (5), Hopkins implies that in the future—and under current racial conditions—Judah and Winona will have sexual parity. His attraction to Winona is beginning to bloom, and because there is no obviously-superior race into which Judah might pass, his masculinity is replete. To Winona, Judah has the essential qualities of a man: He is knowledgeable in the Native American way of life, he is strong, and from her perspective, he is intelligent. Winona reinforces this attraction through her statement that Judah is "so tantalizing; [he'd] make a saint lose her temper" (6), demonstrating that Judah's blackness is insignificant to her at this point in time. Her teasing hints that she and Judah might quite likely become intimate partners one day; she sees in him the irresistible charm and playfulness of a young man, and through these means he might seduce her. Until Warren's debut, Judah remains an unobtainable object of her desire, but upon Warren's transformation into her idol, Judah becomes fully cognizant of his blackness and becomes too 'achievable,' while Warren becomes infinitely more tantalizing than Judah ever was. As long as the distinctions between black, Native American, and white are unimportant to her, Winona accepts Judah's passing as Native American, but with Warren's entrance comes the delegitimisation of both

Judah's Native American ethnicity and his masculinity. The revelation of his blackness and his incapacity to retain any Native American identity robs Judah of both his masculinity and his future with Winona. Similarly, Johnson's masculinity of his early years remains intact as long as he achieves racial passing. Since his racial identity has never been questioned—neither by other children nor by himself—young Johnson "was on fairly good terms with most of the boys" (Johnson 7). Johnson suggests that the other white boys saw him as an equal, and the correlation between whiteness and manhood during this time period can only increase his masculinity. Whether his whiteness suggested that his family was powerful and that young Johnson was consequently due the respect of other whites, or whether his whiteness alone served as a social cue for the other boys, Johnson's perceived race does wonders for his elevation in his school's hierarchies of both general social stature and masculinity. Of course, Johnson was also "shy of the girls" (7) at this age. Although Johnson might have been shy around the girls, he implies that they regarded him as 'just another' white boy who seemed as if he would make a good potential playground bodyguard or, in the far future, a potential partner they could marry. Johnson is completely unaware of his racial passing, yet it is accomplishing so much for him, elevating him and giving him the equality required to be able to flourish in the white-dominated community. Thus, Johnson's racial passing allows him to retain his early form of masculinity until the public disclosure of his 'true' race, which confounds both his attempt at passing and his masculinity. Until exterior forces interfere and reveal Judah and Johnson's racial passing, both characters seem adept at blending into their respective societies and retaining their senses of manhood. Yet, upon the discovery of their true races, their masculinity will vanish as society drains it from the outside and as Judah and Johnson—through their own self-doubt and preconceived notions of race and masculinity—destroy it from within.

The disclosure of a man's passing and his 'real' race results in the full depletion of his masculinity. The inability to pass—at that specific moment, at least—reduces the potency of men's masculinity, emasculating them. Johnson writes that the violinist had "dark hair wildly framing her pale face" (Johnson 20) which excited his "imagination and [his] heart with a passion" (20), employing the word "pale" to suggest whiteness. While Johnson is younger than this girl, he asserts that he is "at the budding dawn of manhood" (25). He indicates that he is mature enough as a man to court the young violinist, and because his obsession with her occurs after his racial passing was disclosed to society, his African American blood stands out in stark contrast to this girl, who is evidently white; through this contrasting of imagery, Johnson foreshadows that he will never be able to date her. Johnson later writes that she eventually "dealt me a crushing blow by getting married" (35). The violinist may have never discovered Johnson's longing for her, but the reader infers that with an obsession as strong as Johnson's, she was fully aware. Thus, the fact that she never considers giving Johnson an opportunity to date her suggests that he could never be her potential partner; although never explicitly stated, her racial preference prompts her to ignore him and focus on other—presumably white—men with whom she feels socially compatible. She debars Johnson's masculinity from potential development and deals him a "crushing blow" (35), leaving him wallowing in both disappointment and half-hearted satisfaction that he was "partially avenged" (35) by her loss of violin-playing skill. Johnson's utilization of the word 'avenge' indicates Johnson's vanity and portrays him as a man who wishes malice on those who do not accept him. The violinist's racial preference deprives Johnson of masculinity at first, but it is Johnson himself who later exposes his lack of manhood and his petty grasping of whatever misfortune he can to avenge his failure to woo her. Further on, the ceasing of Johnson's passing as white robs him of masculinity and his wife to-be. After

she becomes distraught by his passing, Johnson "blurted out incoherent words of love" (149), and when he "left her, she was still weeping" (149). Johnson's frantic diction, established by "blurted" and "incoherent," portrays a man who has control over neither himself nor the people around him. Before his blackness was revealed, Johnson—like men of the time period in general—acted as a force of stability in her life (147). After the revelation, however, he has lost his ability to support her through hardship, making the situation worse with his "words of love" instead, and reducing the masculine, relative self-confidence of old into a faint and detrimental echo of what it once was. Johnson's manliness is further depleted in the theater. Johnson states that she "sat in company with a young man" (151), indicating that Johnson has been—at the least, temporarily—replaced by another man, and in the world of men, there are few fates worse than being discarded for a rival. Johnson accentuates his pitiful state as he remarks that she never before appeared "more beautiful" (115), emphasizing the continuous longing he still has for her. It tortures him and hints that he has not moved on, and ultimately it proves that he can do no better than this girl. Yet, Johnson's racial passing-induced loss of masculinity is never demonstrated better than by his assertion that she "seemed a trifle paler" (151). He is cognizant of the enormous, newfound divide between his blackness and her whiteness, which sentences him to torturous inaction as he sits through the performance. Staring at her "melted down the strength of [his] pride" (151), or whatever pride he has left after the realization that she has apparently found a suitor more agreeable than he. Johnson wraps up his moment of emasculation with his admittance that he felt "weak and powerless" (151). His disclosure of his racial passing incites him to doubt his ability to talk to her and improve the remains of their relationship. Johnson's 'real' race—his blackness—hangs over his head, acting as a contrived cloud that impedes his judgement and his full potential as a man.

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