The notion of passing in American literature has an extended and complicated history. As one looks at the various ways American authors have dealt with the issue of passing and how this phenomenon manifests itself in literary characters, it is clear that passing—whether racial, cultural, religious, socioeconomic, or gendered—is a complex concept that lends itself well to explorations of identity issues and notions of American success. Reading Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* together offers a discourse on passing that presents an important teachable moment about issues of selfhood and marginalized identities in the United States.

In 2002, I was a graduate teaching assistant and PhD student at Texas Christian University, teaching undergraduates and working on my dissertation, which focused on working-class literature. When given the opportunity to teach a section of Major American Writers, I decided to focus the course on the issue of passing, a notion I had first become interested in after reading Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun* while a master’s student at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. The notion of passing was one that fascinated me in multiple ways. Having always been interested in the notion of the self as well as the representation of race in literature, passing was naturally something in which I took great interest. However, I also began to see important connections between the traditional notion of racial passing and the type of socioeconomic passing that I saw in so many narratives, both fictional and autobiographical, about the working class. It became clear to me that passing was something that happened not only in a racial context, but also in terms of socioeconomic identity and representation. Therefore, the section of Major...
American Writers that I taught was subtitled “Racial and Socioeconomic Passing in Twentieth-Century American Literature.” I felt that introducing undergraduates to the idea of passing and helping them work through issues of racial and socioeconomic self-representation would be important, particularly at a school like Texas Christian University. In 2002, when I taught this course at TCU, Ray Brown, dean of admissions, reported that “minority enrollment for incoming students [was] the lowest it ha[d] been in five years at an estimate of 14 percent” (Vega, par. 8). I also knew from my own experiences as an undergraduate at this school that social class was something rarely discussed and more often shrouded. While many students at TCU may have been on scholarship or financial aid, the perception all too often was that the university was a place for the wealthy and privileged. As such, I felt bringing issues of class and race to the forefront would make for an interesting course. For the reading list, students worked with Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Fauset’s *Plum Bun*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, and Roth’s *The Human Stain*.

Additionally, I supplemented these novels with outside readings from *Jet* and *Tan*, two popular African American periodicals that, particularly in the 1950s, published a number of confessional tales about passing. One example, “I Passed for Love” from a 1953 issue of *Tan*, tells the story of a woman who passes and then struggles with revealing her secret. The brief introduction to this story demonstrates the melodramatic nature that this genre often took: “When love came to Betty, she was gripped by the chilling fear that she would have to reveal her racial identity and thereby spoil everything. But Steve, she found, had a secret, too” (33). I used this selection from *Tan* as a way of helping students see that passing and its complications have long been a part of the popular psyche. While many of these stories tell of passing for various personal and communal reasons, a subset in this genre deals with the problems with and, in many cases, the rejection of passing. As Gayle Wald points out in *Crossing the Line*, “these articles, produced in an era of national economic prosperity and growing impatience with de jure segregation, deploy the trope of the refusal to pass (or to be passed, through the agency of others) as a means of giving voice to aspirations regarding African Americans’ economic, political, and social well-being” (118; emphasis in original). My hope was that, through reading these selections, students would begin to interrogate the complexity of passing (both in literature and in reality) and begin to form connections between constructions of racial and socioeconomic identities.

For purposes of this article, I will focus on Roth’s *The Human Stain* and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and the ways in which their authors complicate American identity and selfhood. When teaching this course, it became clear that both novels produced some of the most provocative and engaging class discussions. One reason that these two novels work so well together is because the two protagonists, Coleman Silk and Jay Gatsby, are quite similar in their acts of passing, motivations, and ultimate demises. Reading and teaching *The
Human Stain alongside The Great Gatsby presents two very different versions of passing, one based on race and the other on social class, yet both texts are united by the protagonists’ notions of and yearning for social prestige. Silk and Gatsby are motivated to pass because of their own quests for the American dream and their own yearnings for upward social mobility. Furthermore, Fitzgerald’s apprehensions about raced identity in America become quite clear in The Great Gatsby, and Roth’s main character, Coleman Silk, possesses many of these same complicated and self-directed feelings. Contextualizing the two protagonists provides a chance to realize the complexities of the American dream and consider the motivations and repercussions of shrouding “true” identity. Both texts also provide opportunities to speak in the classroom about American notions of race and marginalization. As Toni Morrison states, “To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (10). Silk’s passing in The Human Stain only reflects his own need to “silence” his true identity in exchange for achieving his American dream, and I will argue that this concept can be applied equally to Gatsby’s need to mask his own working-class roots.

W. E. B. DuBois stated in his 1903 treatise, The Souls of Black Folk, that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (878). This color line problem is one that many twentieth-century writers deal with in their novels, such as Larsen in Passing, Fauset in Plum Bun, and James Weldon Johnson in Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man. And, as is evident in more contemporary works such as Roth’s The Human Stain and Senna’s Caucasia, the boundary between black and white continues as a dominant theme. However, although discussions of passing have long focused on racial masking, passing can take on many different and complex connotations. With regard to The Great Gatsby and The Human Stain, socioeconomic passing occurs when characters from working-class origins attempt to pass themselves as members of wealthier socioeconomic classes. Within working-class studies, this is not a new concept. Both in fiction and in memoirs, such as Patricia Sullivan’s essay “Passing: A Family Dissemblance,” there is a prevalence of those in the working class who pass as a means to assimilate. So often those in the working class feel the need to mask their true identities as a means of achieving greater socioeconomic prosperity, just as those in the aforementioned novels passed racially for economic reasons. After all, with both racial and socioeconomic passing, the commonality seems to be a desire for greater social and economic success and freedom, and this is also the case with both protagonists in The Great Gatsby and The Human Stain.

The connection between passing and The Great Gatsby is not a new idea. When Carlyle Van Thompson wrote in his 2004 book, The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading in the American Literary Imagination, that Jay Gatsby was a figure who was passing, he meant this in a racial context. Thompson states that although Jay Gatsby advances himself in terms of socioeconomic subjectivity, he is more significantly characterized as a dangerous ‘pale’ individual,
culturally, socially, and legally designated as black, who attempts to pass himself off as a sophisticated, and very wealthy white individual” (77). In our class discussions, my students found this theory particularly interesting. It pushed them to think about Gatsby in new ways and reevaluate a very well-known literary icon. However, while Thompson’s theory is intriguing and relies on provocative evidence about race and selfhood from Fitzgerald’s text, there is another type of passing that proves more convincing in *The Great Gatsby*, one that is socioeconomically based. Living among wealth, privilege, and “prominent, well-to-do people,” Gatsby himself yearns for the prestige and financial extravagance that those in his peer group seem to possess so effortlessly (Fitzgerald 7). Furthermore, Gatsby’s hope is that the attainment of this wealth will be accompanied by the achievement of the American dream. And for Gatsby, that American dream has a very specific and endearing name: Daisy Fay Buchanan. Thompson addresses this quest for the American dream in his book: “By engaging in the self-negating Faustian phenomenon of passing for white, Jay Gatsby has tragically sold his birthright for Daisy Buchanan, an extravagant desire for the American Dream paid for in the human stain of ‘black’ blood” (103). However, the “stain” to which Thompson refers is not so much based on racial identity but rather socioeconomic status. The stain, the taint, the pollutant in Gatsby’s blood is his working-class status, his humble origins, his beginnings among “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” (Fitzgerald 104). These are the origins that Gatsby wishes to mask.

Gatsby thus realizes that his only shot at prosperity—that is, attaining the golden girl Daisy—will come through shrouding his class status. Throughout the text, we are introduced in great detail to Gatsby’s extravagance: his automobiles, mansion, decadent parties, and shimmering white suits. As our narrator, Nick Carraway, tells us, “the truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God [. . .] So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end” (104). In the Major American Writers class, we spoke often of Gatsby’s quest for the American dream, his Franklin-esque, self-made man mentality, and his failures to achieve true success. Gatsby’s self-conception might not be fully realized or developed, but it suits his purposes of appearing to be one of the wealthy and privileged. And, at least temporarily, this conception allows him a chance with Daisy.

Interestingly, too, there are numerous and complicated commentaries on race within Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* that provide further connections with the notion of passing. Of course, there are the many racist comments uttered by Tom Buchanan that point to a very problematic vision of race in the novel. However, it is also important to note how race plays perhaps a more nuanced, yet equally important, role in the text. As Meredith Goldsmith points out, there are “a series of ethnic and racial analogies” in the novel. At one point, Tom Buchanan dismisses any relationship that might have existed
between Daisy and Gatsby as miscegenistic. Furthermore, Goldsmith contends that “if the scandal of Gatsby’s success lies in his ambiguously ethnic, white, working-class origins, the success of his scandalous behavior resides in his imitation of African-American and ethnic modes of self-definition” (443). She continues, “illuminating the racial and ethnic subtexts of *The Great Gatsby* reveals the interdependence of white working-class identity formation with African-American and ethnic models, exposing an alternative genealogy” for Gatsby (463). Whether or not Fitzgerald himself had read the many passing narratives that were emerging in the modernist and Harlem Renaissance periods is questionable; however, it does seem that his text interrogates many of these same notions of identity and selfhood that writers such as Larsen and Fauset were also addressing contemporaneously, and this was a connection students in my class made, having just read both Larsen and Fauset. Although Fitzgerald, Larsen, and Fauset were all writing during the same historical moment, the contexts for their works were vastly different. Fauset and Larsen, both Harlem Renaissance writers, dealt with issues of self and identity in vastly different ways than did Fitzgerald. Still, discussing the Harlem Renaissance with my students, many of whom were unfamiliar with this literary phenomenon, provided new ways of contextualizing *The Great Gatsby*.

Roth’s Coleman Silk presents a very different version of passing. While Gatsby passes socioeconomically, Silk makes his way in the more traditional sense of the term: he passes racially. An African American by birth, Coleman Silk masquerades as Jewish American. And while the way he passes is different from that of Gatsby, his motivations are nonetheless quite similar. Like Gatsby, Silk is able to gain prestige and prosperity through his passing and by denying his true self. Ironically, though, Silk does not see his passing as means of denying selfhood. Instead, he views it as his only option. As Roth writes, “with both bulwarks gone—the big brother overseas and the father dead—[Coleman] is repowered and free to be whatever he wants, free to pursue his hugest aim, the confidence right in his bones to be his particular I. [. . .] If he chose to, he could lie about his race as well. He could play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose” (109). Yet the difference is that Gatsby and Silk desire two very different ends. For Gatsby, passing brings acceptance and, with any luck, Daisy; for Silk, passing brings freedom. As Roth reveals, “all he’d ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free” (120). So passing as Jewish for Silk brings about a freedom and lack of restriction that he was never able to enjoy as an African American man. Coleman realized early on that to acquire the things he wanted in life—the education, the wealth, even the women he was interested in—he would have to mask his real identity. As Coleman’s sister, Ernestine, mentions, “today, if you’re a middle-class intelligent Negro and you want your kids to go to the best schools, and on full scholarship if you need it, you wouldn’t dream of saying that you’re not colored. That would be the last thing you would do. White as your skin might
be, now it’s advantageous not to do it, just as then it was advantageous to do it” (326). This notion was one we interrogated multiple times in class: the motivations for passing and the acceptance of this move. Passing was something not so much accepted but at least understood at the time that Coleman was doing it because, for many African Americans, this was one of the few ways to achieve the American dream.

As with Gatsby, part of Coleman’s dream is connected to a woman. As the former sought to shroud his origins as a means to attain Daisy, Coleman becomes a “chameleon” and changes his racial identity for the sake of his beloved, Iris Gittelman. After meeting Iris, Coleman was

entranced by her comedy, her outrage, her hair, and by her flair for manufacturing excitement, by a frenzied, untrained adolescent intellect and an actressy ability to enkindle herself and believe her every exaggeration that made Coleman—a cunning self-concoction if ever there was one, a product on which no one but he held a patent—feel by comparison like somebody with no conception of himself at all. (129)

Even though he had been passing as Jewish off and on for some time, Coleman makes the choice to pass as Jewish completely for Iris. Her intellectual, avant-garde lifestyle is what Coleman yearns for himself and, as of that point, had been unable to attain. And when his unequivocal passing begins, he must consequentially break all ties with his family.

Yet interrogating Silk’s lack of freedom as an African American is necessary because his passing is multilayered and complex—just as Gatsby’s was. In his early years, when Coleman was still living life as an African American, he attended Howard University, a well-respected school that offered him many opportunities. Yet, ironically, it was at Howard that Silk’s differences became most pronounced. His discomfort came when he realized that there was something different about him compared to the other students in the dorms, those “who had all sorts of new clothes and money in their pockets and in the summertime didn’t hang around the hot streets at home but went to ‘camp’—and not Boy Scout camp out in the Jersey sticks but fancy places where they rode horses and played tennis and acted in plays” (106). For Coleman, the child of working-class parents—a nurse mother and an optician father who loses his business and must become a dining car porter—these socioeconomic differences are more problematic than any racial attitudes. Like Gatsby, Silk is embarrassed by his lack of wealth, prestige, and proper upbringing, and it seems these are the factors that eventually lead him to pass. Coleman makes choices that demonstrate he is trying to counteract all of the early years of discrimination he encountered. As Ernestine mentions after Coleman’s death, “as white a college as there was in New England, and that’s where Coleman made his career. As white a subject as there was in the curriculum [the classics], and that’s what Coleman chose to teach. To Walter [Coleman’s brother], Coleman is more white than the whites” (336). Silk’s attempts to pass go beyond just seeking a life of freedom for himself. Just as Gatsby could not stop just at pass-
ing and instead had to have the most extravagant lifestyle possible, wearing shimmering suits and living in a "colossal affair" of a house (9). Silk too takes his passing to new extremes in his attempts to distance himself from his family and origins. Both characters take passing to entirely new levels in futile attempts to prove to themselves and everyone else that they have, in fact, "arrived."

As we came to discover in the Major American Writers class, there are other interesting overlaps between race and class within *The Human Stain* that bear mentioning. First, of course, one cannot ignore Silk's relationship with the working-class cleaning woman, Faunia Farley. Many view Coleman's affair with Faunia as one full of inappropriate power plays and degradation. As Delphine Roux, one of Coleman's colleagues at Athena College, sees it, Coleman "settles on this broken woman who cannot possibly fight back. Who cannot begin to compete with him. Who intellectually does not even exist" (198). Faunia, with her supposed illiteracy, history of physical and sexual abuse, and traumatic personal story of two deceased children, seems the perfect woman for the egotistical Coleman to manipulate. However, viewing their relationship in just this context is too limiting. At times, Faunia's broken spirit gives way to a strength that equals Coleman's. Though it seems that Coleman wants to "save" Faunia by educating her, Faunia resists all these attempts and remains in control of her own life. As the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, realizes and reveals by the end of the novel, Faunia had never been illiterate:

The illiteracy had been an act, something she decided her situation demanded. But why? A source of power? Her one and only source of power? [. . .] She afflicts herself with illiteracy. Takes it on voluntarily. Not to infantilize herself, however, not to present herself as a dependent kid, but just the opposite: to spotlight the barbaric self befitting the world. Not rejecting learning as a stifling form of propriety but trumping learning by a knowledge that is stronger and prior. (297)

So while Farley and Silk's relationship may have appeared disproportionate to many, Farley, in fact, retained a great deal of control, which seems to have equalized any socioeconomic and educational differences.

Interestingly, it appears Faunia is passing in her own way with her claims of illiteracy and her work as a cleaning woman. As Silk tells Zuckerman, Faunia began life a rich, privileged kid. Brought up in a big sprawling house south of Boston. [. . .] She can be surprisingly well spoken if she wants to be. But she's dropped so far down the social ladder from so far up that by now she's a pretty mixed bag of verbal beans. Faunia's been exiled by the entitlement that should have been hers. Declasse. There's a real democratization to her suffering. (28)

Faunia was born into a privileged family; however, circumstances brought her to her current station in life. It began when "a stepfather undid her. Upper-bourgeois evil undid her" (28). Faunia's leaving home, her marriage to and divorce from Lester, and finally the death of her children cause her to pass both socioeconomically and even intellectually to escape her painful past and her even more painful present. Much like Coleman, Faunia passes as a means
of escape and to achieve a sense of freedom—freedom from her thoughts, her pains, and her sins.

While socioeconomic issues are at the center of The Human Stain, so too do socioeconomic distinctions become prevalent in ways beyond just Gatsby's passing in The Great Gatsby. The three working-class characters in the novel, Myrtle, Gatsby, and Wilson, are the only characters who meet unfortunate demises. As Goldsmith points out, “the deaths of Myrtle, Gatsby, and Wilson—the novel’s representatives of the white laboring class—foreclose on the possibilities of cross-class union or upward mobility” (463). The same is true of Faunia and Coleman. Both are guilty of ignoring preordained class and racial categorization. As Gatsby, Myrtle, and Wilson socialized with those of the upper classes when this was not really their station in life, Coleman and Faunia cross all social, economic, and racial boundaries. As Coleman points out, he should have been “paired off properly” with a woman equal to his age and education (Roth 152). Instead, not only is he passing racially, but he is fraternizing with a woman half his age, with little education and economic stability. Interestingly, all of these characters—Coleman, Faunia, Myrtle, Gatsby, and Wilson—meet with untimely deaths because they choose to ignore certain societal prescriptions. This became an intriguing point to interrogate in the Major American Writers class. When all of these characters—those who refused to abide by society's standards—meet their demises, it brings up complicated questions about identity and success. What do the deaths of these characters say about the American dream? Is this an inherent commentary on the part of both Roth and Fitzgerald about the desire for upward mobility? In a college classroom, where so many of the students were perhaps seeking some sort of upward mobility, how were we to analyze the “punishment” of these success-driven characters? All of these questions made for compelling classroom discussions and important examinations of the true nature of the American dream. For instance, many of the students in class were just beginning to understand and interrogate conceptions of “the American dream.” After reading Fitzgerald's and Roth's novels, and considering the complicated place of the characters who seek to achieve their lofty goals, the students began to question the very integrity of this idea. For many students, it was clear that this was the first time they had ever posed these kinds of questions.

After bringing out the connections between Gatsby and Silk, it is apparent that both characters pass in different ways but for very similar reasons. Both wish to ignore societal conventions in an effort to attain their visions of the American dream. For Gatsby, that dream is Daisy, the golden girl, the representation of all that is beautiful and exalted in his world. One even wonders if it is so much Daisy herself that Gatsby wants or more the illusion of Daisy, with her wealth and privilege. In The Human Stain, Silk's vision of the American dream is freedom, one that comes in the form of being able to pursue whatever education, aspirations, and relationships he wishes. Yet for both characters, their passing does not come without consequences. As Nathan
Zuckerman reveals in *The Human Stain*, “freedom is dangerous. Freedom is very dangerous. And nothing is on your own terms for very long” (145). This dangerous freedom is exactly what leads to the ultimate demise of both Gatsby and Silk. Both characters pass as a means of defining their versions of the “Americanness,” yet it is the very denial of self that leads to these characters’ failures.

It becomes clear, then, that there is much common ground between *The Great Gatsby* and *The Human Stain* in their treatments of race, class, and passing. As such, teaching these two novels together offers many opportunities to interrogate self-representation and identity. Having students compare and contrast both texts provides many important teachable moments. First, the many similarities between Silk and Gatsby demonstrate to students the connections between these novels and the various ways in which characters can pass. These novels demonstrate well that passing can have multiple and complex variations. Particularly with *The Great Gatsby*, a text so often assigned in American literature classes and one with which undergraduate students are usually quite familiar, teaching the text in the context of passing and providing comparisons with Roth’s writing offers invaluable ways to explore the intricacies of the novel in a new light. So many students come into college literature classes assuming they know all there is to know about Gatsby. Teaching the text as a novel of passing allows them to look beyond more traditional readings of the novel to understand some of Jay Gatsby’s motivations and intentions. Furthermore, the seventy-five-year difference in the publication dates of these two novels—*The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, and *The Human Stain* in 2000—suggests that passing and identity construction are ongoing concerns, even into the twenty-first century. The fact that Fitzgerald and Roth wrote their passing narratives in such different historical moments gives credence to the fact that many societal views of race, class, and identity have, in fact, not changed at all. This is an important point for students to realize. In the Major American Writers course that I taught, the most provocative discussions about race and social class were about these two books. At one point, one of the African American students in the class even brought in a photograph of his uncle, who was very light-skinned and who had passed at several points during his life. This artifact, along with the several “real-life” narratives of passing that we read in *Jet* and *Tàn*, confirmed to the students that passing was an all-too-real reality and one that, even in the twenty-first century, is not obsolete. Our class’s discussion of passing also extended to socioeconomic concerns, and it was interesting how many examples of passing the students could discern in their everyday lives on campus. Discussions on the need (or lack of need) of college financial aid, the types of cars that students drive, and other socioeconomic markers were all issues that emerged when discussing social class and passing.

DuBois originally theorized that the boundary of the “color line” is the problem of the twentieth century, and now, more than a century after DuBois
wrote those words, the themes of identity lines and boundaries continue to define our literature. For the protagonists in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Roth's *The Human Stain*, passing, while originally meant as a means of achieving the American dream, eventually leads to loss of self and even a loss of life. Pedagogically speaking, teaching *The Great Gatsby* alongside *The Human Stain* offers important teachable moments where students can discuss not only the formalistic similarities between these two novels, but also the implications of passing—both in fiction and real-life forms—and the impact such racial obfuscation has on our understanding of American identity.

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