

Abstract

Defining or delineating any notion of identity is always problematic. American identity has invariably been complicated by issues of race and the hurdles of negotiating America's multifaceted culture and history. A single glimpse at a newspaper exposes unresolved issues of racial discrimination and prejudice still evident within society.

In this study I examine two classic American novels, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Invisible Man* and their authors—nineteenth-century Mark Twain and twentieth-century Ralph Ellison—from a cognitive-scientific and cognitive-literary perspective. I recategorize the genre of “passing” as the genre of “passing performances.” The application of the emerging cognitive literary approach to the texts studied here facilitates an exploration of their themes from a new angle. It also enables a (re)addressing and redressing of the American quandary concerning race as evidenced in literature and in life.

The model I propose suggests that human consciousness, memory, Theory of Mind, pretend play, and performance theory all contribute to the identity construction and reconstruction of both fictional and real life passing performers. Reconceptualizing the concept of passing into what I call “a passing performance” may allow the reconsideration or even the erasure of the negative connotations usually attached to passing. Rather than understanding passing in American literature as the deceptive behavior of an individual who misrepresents or disguises him or herself as a member of a more privileged group in society, I postulate that this reconfigured performance is the constant readjustment of individual identity, that is, the standard way fictional protagonists self-propel themselves through a narrative. In this way,

passing becomes a continual process of modification that allows humans as well as fictional characters to go on re-negotiating the world. My argument is grounded upon the texts and lives of authors Twain and Ellison, who not only create complicated passing performances for their fictional characters, Huck Finn and Invisible Man, but enact deeply involved nonfictional passing performances themselves.