

[연구논문]

# Internal Desires, Questions of Identities and External Outcomes in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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## Introduction

Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) addresses the practice of passing primarily in the lives of her two main characters, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, and shows how each of the women is affected by this practice. Elaine K. Ginsberg defines passing as “a fraudulent ‘white’ identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as ‘Negro’ or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry” (3). This practice of “passing” became so widespread that by the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, it had become a familiar theme in writings by African-American writers.<sup>1)</sup> Jonathan Little observes that “by the

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1) Passing narratives in the nineteenth century traditionally depict, or are read as depicting, the story of the “tragic mulatto.” These narratives depicted people who attempted to pass in order to escape their “blackness” and enjoy the privileges of white society only to inevitably come to a tragic end.

time Larsen wrote *Passing*, the passing-for-white plot had already been well established in African-American fiction” (173). He continues by explaining that this type of plot depicted characters who learn that the practice of passing comes at a tremendous cost, regardless of their motivations. However, Larsen did not follow the conventional passing-for-white plot put into place by previous writers in her work but instead introduced two black women who observed the practice of passing while firmly standing on opposite sides of the color line.<sup>2)</sup>

The novella opens on Irene considering the last letter in her pile of morning mail as she knows full well that the sender is her childhood acquaintance Clare. Told from her point of view, Irene recalls the events that surrounded her renewed acquaintance with Clare through a chance meeting one hot summer’s day in Chicago two years ago. She recollects how difficult Clare’s childhood used to be and how she now lives married to a white man who has no idea of her racial identity. As Clare re-enters Irene’s social scope, the differences between the lives they lead become more apparent. Through their repeated encounters, Irene reluctantly reintroduces Clare to black society and the story culminates when Clare’s husband comes to the realization that his wife was black all along. Amid the chaos, Clare tragically ends up falling out the casement window to her death. Clare’s race accidentally and ultimately brings about an untimely end to her own life.

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2) See Ramon’s “‘You’re Neither One Thing (N)or The Other’: Nella Larsen, Philip Roth, and The Passing Trope” for more on the development of twentieth century passing narratives as a multi-faceted phenomenon.

However, Claudia Tate argues that “race [. . .] is not the novel's foremost concern, but is merely a mechanism for setting the story in motion, sustaining the suspense, and bringing about the external circumstances for the story's conclusion” (143). She moreover states that Clare simply seeks excitement out by socializing with Irene and her Harlem friends behind her husband's back, because she is weary of her monotonous domestic life (142). As a result, Tate depreciates the idea of race and identity, whereas the idea of identity and race are, in fact, at the center of nearly all human struggles. While race is arguably not the main focus of the work, its significance should not be undervalued. It is not “merely a mechanism” that advances the plot, as Tate maintains; however, the idea of race presents the underlining driving force of the story. It is race which ties the two protagonists together and binds them to their true identities. While Clare is able to pass as a white woman, she still secretly longs for acceptance into black society. Her counterpoint, Irene, while having been accepted into black society, disparages the very notion of passing. Despite her claims of black pride, Irene's actions negate her own intentions of and for her black identity. In the end, she betrays her internal desires to be accepted into white society. Clare is, likewise, unable to fully pass due to her inclination for the society that she had outwardly rejected. Through these two female characters, Larsen poignantly illustrates that pervasive internal desires are the predominant determiners of external outcomes, regardless of established outward behaviors, opinions, or beliefs.

## Black Identity

The Harlem Renaissance was a period in America in the 1920s and early 1930s when African-American literature and arts developed significantly and started to cultivate black pride among African Americans. This movement was centered in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York City because it had developed into the political and cultural center of America after the Great Migration where “hundreds of thousands of black Americans moved from an economically depressed rural South to industrial cities of the North to take advantage of the employment opportunities created by World War I” (Appiah 151). Also known as the New Negro Movement, black literature and arts blossomed to the extent that it even garnered the considerable attention of white Americans. Bourgeois Harlem was *the* place “where the black and white elite gather for charity dances, teas, and cocktail parties” (Harrison-Kahan 111). It is evident in the text of *Passing* that Irene is a member of this elite black upper-middle class. She is shown to take part in bourgeois social customs like tea parties and benefit dances, even being appointed as a member of the ticket committee for the annual Negro Welfare League dance (209, 218).

As the Negro Welfare League dance is considered to be a major event for and by the African-American society of the period, Clare is surprised that an important person such as Hugh Wentworth would be interested in going to a Negro dance when she is told so by Irene. Irene answers by telling her that “this [. . .] was the year 1927 in the city of New York, and hundreds of white people of

Hugh Wentworth's type came to affairs in Harlem, more all the time" (198). When Clare asks for the reason why they come, Irene replies that they come with various motives: "'A few purely and frankly to enjoy themselves. Others to get material to turn into shekels. More, to gaze on these great and near great while they gaze on the Negroes'" (198). Irene's answer indicates that while the primary reason for black Americans to attend the dance may be to enjoy themselves, white Americans attended cultural events in Harlem for reasons as diverse as simply taking part in the festivities, to making money for themselves off of the current social sensation. It seemed that the majority, however, attended these events in order to see who else in white society was attending while watching the Negroes dance as a form of entertainment.<sup>3)</sup> Similar to the "Jim Crow" shows of the past, where white men painted their faces with charcoal before singing and dancing a jig in a caricatured imitation of black men, in the eyes of white society the events of Harlem black society were often nothing more than amusing diversions or quaint imitations of their own societal affairs. From their perspective, black society could never measure up to the higher and better standards held by their own white society.

Fully aware that this was the opinion white society had formed about her and her social circles, Irene Redfield is nevertheless fiercely proud of her black identity. Married to a man who "couldn't exactly 'pass'" and mother to two young boys, one of whom is also

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3) See Harrison-Kahan's "Her 'Nig': Returning the Gaze of Nella Larsen's *Passing*" for more on the idea that racial passing offers the opportunity for spectatorship that was simultaneously sexualized and racialized.

“dark” (168), Irene is a committed member of black upper-class society and deeply involved with the people who move in those circles and the affairs that concern it. She calls white people “stupid” for the absurd and nonsensical ways they believe that they are able to tell if a person is a Negro including: “finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot” (150). She uses herself as a valid example of their ignorance, as not a single white person had ever guessed that she was in fact a Negro, instead assuming that she was an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gypsy. She tells Wentworth, when he attempts to tell the “sheep from the goats” at a Negro Welfare League dance, that nobody can really tell if a person is white or black simply by looking, but that the ways one can tell cannot clearly be explained because “they’re not definite or tangible” (206). It was something that a member of the Caucasian race could never understand because they were not, nor could they ever be, a Negro. As an outsider looking in, no member of the Caucasian race could ever fathom what that indefinite and intangible thing was that allowed one constituent of the Negro race to recognize another constituent of the Negro race, no matter how convincingly that constituent of the Negro race passed themselves off as a white person in white society.<sup>4)</sup>

When Irene is invited to have tea at Clare’s accommodations in Chicago, she is surprised and displeased to find that Clare has another guest in the form of Gertrude Martin, another Negro who

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4) Jenkins points out that in both Larsen’s novels, “putatively black, middle-class characters express what appears to be racial essentialism, as well as a reliance upon rigid codes of moralist behavior, as markers of their own blackness” (136).

had married a white man and currently passed in society as a white woman. When Irene later examines the reason why she feels annoyed by Gertrude's presence, she admits that "it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, 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" (166). At this small gathering Irene was the only one who had married a Negro man, the only one to associate freely with black society, and the only one who had chosen to live a life that was markedly different from the others. While taking tea, Clare and Gertrude share their common fears of bearing a child with dark skin, an act which would undeniably betray their own racial heritage. Hearing Clare and Gertrude vehemently agree that the birth of a dark child was something that was both terrifying and horrifying to them, Irene struggles with a flood of resentment, anger and contempt at their rejection of their own black culture and bristles when they agree that "nobody wants a dark child" (168). She pointedly reveals to them that one of her own sons is, in fact, "dark" and that she does not share their opinion that a dark child is something "nobody wants." She is further incensed by the arrival of Clare's husband John Bellew who greets his wife by nonchalantly saying "Hello, Nig" (170). The ridiculing of her race by an outsider, and her inability to act at that moment, arouses such rage and rebellion within Irene that she can barely repress it. She takes the insult personally, as if Bellew had called Irene a "nigger" instead of his wife, and allows his bigoted speech that niggers are "black scrimy devils" who are "always robbing and killing people" and "worse" (172) to perturb her thoughts even late into the night

when she lies awake in bed unable to sleep because of it.

### **White Aspirations: The Inner World of Irene**

While Larsen clearly outlines Irene's pride in being a black woman and a member of black society, she nonetheless shows in her an inner desire to be a member of white society and a curious fascination with the whole concept of passing.<sup>5)</sup> When Irene and Clare reunite for the first time in twelve years on the rooftop of the Drayton, Irene is astonished to find that Clare is passing herself off completely as a white woman. Although she has to leave, Irene cannot seem to tear herself away from Clare and acknowledges to herself that:

The truth was, she was curious. There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. But she couldn't. She was unable to think of a single question that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious,

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5) Corrine Blackmer argues in "The Veils of the Law: Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" that there are multiple reasons why a person might decide to pass. She writes: "Since the term 'passing' carries the connotation of being accepted for something one is not, the title of the novel serves as a metaphor for a wide range of deceptive appearances and practices that encompass sexual as well as racial 'passing'" (52).



if not actually impertinent. (157)

Irene betrays her avid interest in the idea of passing to herself and is curious about the details that must be accounted for when one chooses to do it not just for the sake of convenience, but as a committed and steadfast lie that must be repeated and upheld for the remainder of one's life. Irene herself had only used the act of passing for the sake of convenience thus far and had only taken refuge at the Drayton in the first place because she had felt faint in the sweltering summer heat of Chicago. She later matter-of-factly states to her fellow Negro friend Felise that she doesn't believe she had ever passed in her life "except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that" (227).

In spite of Irene's perceptible and professed pride in being a part of the black bourgeoisie, there are also several small indications that she unconsciously looks down on her own black society. On that same sweltering summer day that she finds herself on the cool rooftop of the Drayton, she makes a seemingly off-hand observation upon stepping out of the elevator that "it was [. . .] like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below" (147). Her ostensibly off the cuff thought here masks her unconscious desire to rise up out of the "sizzling" world of the black bourgeoisie and join the wholly different world of white society that was "pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote" from her previous world. Only through the "magic carpet" vehicle of passing could she ever hope to enter this world of calm refinement and escape the scorching

discomfort that defined the black bourgeoisie for her. This is evidenced by her own train of thoughts as she sits at the Drayton among the white women taking their tea which turn to the bridge party she must attend that night with her black friends “in rooms whose atmosphere would be so thick and hot that every breath would be like breathing soup” (149). When she later attends a party at Mrs. Freeland’s, Irene again finds herself thinking that the party is “dreadfully warm” and pushes open one of the long casement-windows in order to gain some fresh air (237-38). The hot and sultry world of the black bourgeoisie threatens to smother and suffocate Irene leading her to search for, and surprisingly find, this world which seems to float right above it. Not only does black society unconsciously asphyxiate Irene, it also slightly irritates her with “the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about” (157). At Mrs. Freeland’s party, she finds herself aggravated by the noise of the music, and the talking and laughing created by the party. When at the Drayton, in stark contrast to the Freeland party, the ambiance is quiet enough that she can absentmindedly look out over the city that is sprawled out below her while she drinks her tea and allows her thoughts to wander. She gazes downward “at the specks of cars and people creeping about in streets, and think[s about] how silly they looked” (148). In the same way, Irene unconsciously considers herself above the society she currently associates with and thinks of them as silly creatures from her detached vantage point.

However, Irene begins to be seriously panic-stricken when she finds herself under the gaze of a woman she thinks is white. She

feels “her colour heighten under the continued inspection” and “makes a quick pass over [her face] with her handkerchief” (149). The word choice here is telling as under the gaze of a woman Irene believes is white, her “colour heightens” resulting in a flushed face instead of a pale one, her body betraying her by revealing “colour” when she wishes to stay white. Irene also makes a quick “pass” over her face with her handkerchief, an unconscious but careful attempt to conceal her true nature. Irene tries to treat the woman who is staring at her with indifference but fails to do so, just as she fails to convince the reader that she doesn’t particularly care that she is seen as someone less significant when she is recognized as a black woman. Irene becomes angry when she suspects that the woman somehow knows that she is a Negro and tries to reassure herself that “the woman sitting there staring at her couldn’t possibly know” (150). She feels anger, scorn and fear in turns and tries to convince herself that “it wasn’t that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place [...] that disturbed her” (150). Irene tries to convince herself otherwise, but the fact that her emotions turn from anger to scorn to fear reveals her true feelings. Her feelings rotate from anger that her true self was discovered, to scorn that she would even care what a white woman thought of her, and finally to fear that her perfect façade when she attempted to pass was not *quite* as perfect as she had believed after all.

Irene shows outward disdain for the social act of passing, but her actions betray her true feelings of compelling curiosity about it. When Clare asks if Irene had ever considered “passing,” Irene

promptly and disdainfully answers, “No. Why should I?” (160). However, it is clear that this is not the case as Irene immediately is faced with her own subconscious fascination with the practice of passing:

Her reason partly agreed, her instinct wholly rebelled. And she could not say why. And though conscious that if she didn't hurry away, she was going to be late for dinner, she still lingered. It was if the woman sitting on the other end of the table, a girl that she had known, who had done this rather dangerous and, to Irene Redfield, abhorrent thing successfully and had announced herself well satisfied, had for her a fascination, strange and compelling. (161)

For Irene, Clare is a window into the world of passing and for that reason alone Clare holds a draw that both attracts and repels Irene. Here was a woman that succeeded in passing herself off as a white woman to her white husband and the rest of white society, and this feat fascinates Irene and allows her a seed of hope that perhaps passing perfectly into the white world that strangely draws her was indeed possible. As an outwardly proud black woman, the idea of passing herself off as white repulses her, yet as a woman who follows and emulates white social customs, passing as a white woman allows her to enjoy social comforts usually only extended to white women. She explains later to Wentworth that it was “easy for a Negro to ‘pass’ for white” but not “for a white person to ‘pass’ for coloured” (206). When Wentworth says that he had never thought of that, Irene replies, “No, you wouldn't. Why should you?” (206).

While it might be “easier” for a Negro to pass for a white person, a white person would have no real need or desire to pass for a coloured person. Indeed, why should they? It was white society which was considered the “superior race” and propagated by privileged white men like Bellew and Wentworth (205). On that searing day in Chicago, Irene’s feelings of faintness had been brought about after shopping for gifts for her sons. She had felt annoyed with one of her sons for wanting “something that was difficult or impossible to get[.] Like his father. For ever wanting something that he couldn’t have” (148). Yet Irene herself wanted something even more difficult and impossible to obtain, something that she thought was denied to her as a Negro woman; entrance and acceptance in white society.

Nell Sullivan argues that “Irene ‘passes’ not by adopting a white identity as Clare does, but by adopting white values, including white standards of beauty” (374). As a wife of another Negro, she can never cross over into white society as Clare has done. Instead, Irene emulates white society in a different way; by the way she subtly conducts herself. One example of this is when Irene is frequently seen dressing herself in her bedroom. She regularly arranges her hair, touches up her make-up and puts on dresses for meals and social events like tea parties, social visits and dances. Lutes in “Making Up Race: Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and the African American Cosmetics Industry” postulates that Irene can control the impression she creates and the race she “wears” as a successful consumer of the beauty culture. Through the application of cosmetics, Irene consequently transforms her skin tone reinventing her racial image.<sup>6</sup> Even at the

Drayton, she spends a fair portion of her time deciding in her mind on a proper frock for a bridge party (149). Dressing for a social event is a distinctive European custom followed by white society for centuries and it is interesting to note that Irene is repeatedly depicted following it. Another point to be aware of is the fact that she employs as servants one black woman with an “ebony face” named Liza in Chicago (164), and another black woman named Zulena in her house in New York. In the face of the long history of white Americans reducing black people to slavery and servitude, it is somewhat surprising to see Irene doing the same to a degree by employing women with darker skin tones than herself as her servants. While one might argue that Irene could be attempting to help a fellow Negro of unfortunate means through employment, it is important to take note of how Irene views her maid. She unconsciously refers to Liza as “a small mahogany-coloured creature” (184). Just as white Americans had historically treated black slaves as nothing more than livestock to be bought and sold, Irene is seen to be unconsciously of the same mindset when she refers to her maid as a creature instead of a person. The subjugation and dehumanization of a fellow black female show in Irene a separation from the race she purports to take pride in. In addition to all this are the social customs that Irene adopts from privileged white society, including: a need for tea when feeling faint, a trip to Europe, going to Idlewild, a summer resort in Michigan, because it’s “quite the thing now” (156), and taking pride

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6) See Lutes’ “Making Up Race: Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and the African American Cosmetics Industry” for more on how a racialized beauty culture paradoxically both integrated and isolated women of colour (98).

in knowing influential white friends and acquaintances such as Hugh Wentworth.

### **Black Yearnings: The Inner World of Clare**

On the other hand, Clare, in spite of having successfully “passed” into white society, cannot help wishing to rejoin black society.<sup>7)</sup> Even though she has clearly fulfilled her childhood ambitions entering such an elite world by passing as a white woman in white society by re-inventing her past and marrying a white man, Clare cannot let go of her identity as a black woman or her place with black society. Irene admits to herself that although Clare cared nothing for the race, she still belonged to it (182). Though she looked and acted like a white woman, and was accepted as one by white society, Clare still belonged to the Negro race. Clare made her choice to join white society because she couldn’t manage both going to the south side to connect with her Negro past and going to see Bellew behind the backs of her white aunts (160). Knowing that Bellew hated Negroes, and wouldn’t have married her if he knew she was one, she buried her Negro identity with her dead father and persuaded Bellew to elope with her in order to sever all of her ties with her past life, which had been especially difficult. Clare has a clear understanding that she runs a dangerous risk of being found out, especially since

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7) See Toth’s “Deauthenticating Community: The Passing Intrusion of Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” for more on the issue of passing in twentieth-century American literature as inextricably linked to the issue of community and the possibility of communal stability.

her husband wholeheartedly despises Negroes, but it is in part due to Bellew's vehement hatred of Negroes that she longs to re-connect with that aspect of her past life (196). Having been raised since childhood in an atmosphere where much of her wants had been denied, Clare's determination to obtain anything and everything she desired had increased with her years. In "The Gold Standard of Racial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*," Dawahare states that "Passing is a way to circulate like money, to become acceptable everywhere. It allows Clare to transgress the color line to acquire more [things]".<sup>8)</sup> Since her marriage to Bellew, Clare had hoped to encounter someone from her past and tells Irene that she had thought of her often during the twelve years that they were apart (153-54). Although she had considered the black community to be her family, she neglected to see them one last time before she had cut her ties with them twelve years ago, claiming she couldn't have borne it if any of them had shunned her for it (155). As the daughter of a notorious alcoholic, Clare had keenly felt and understood even at a young age all the things which had separated herself from the other black children in the community. She tells Irene that she envied them all for having "all the things [she] wanted but never had had" and that it had "made [her] all the more determined to get them, and others" (159). Jennifer DeVere Brody describes Clare's ascendance to the upper-echelons of white society as "Gatsbyesque" and although Clare achieved her goal by marrying Bellew, she still finds that she is dissatisfied with her life because

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8) See Dawahare's "The Gold Standard of Racial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*" for more on how Larsen's novels represent racial identity as unavoidably shaped by the modern political economy of capitalism and how wealth equals whiteness for Larsen's protagonists (35).



she lacks that link to her black roots. She “drinks in” everything that Irene tells her about what had happened since she had left, “these things which for so long she had wanted to know and hadn’t been able to learn” (155) yet declines Irene’s invitation to join her and everyone at Idlewild because she “couldn’t”, “mustn’t” and because “it wouldn’t do at all” (157). Although she yearns for the company of other Negroes, she stops herself from pursuing it on account of her husband. The farthest she dares to go in the beginning is to make contact with Gertrude and Irene, two of the girls she knew as a child who could convincingly pass for white women. After Irene’s visit to her accommodations in Chicago she writes “it may be, ‘Rene dear, it may just be, that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happy one. I’m not sure just now. At least not so sure as I have been” (178). Clare envies Irene for being free, happy and safe because she is not weighed down by the secret of passing herself off as a white woman and is free to associate with the black bourgeoisie as much as she wishes and for however long she wants. Claire declares to Irene that she longs “to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk to them, and hear them laugh” (200), but knows that it is next to impossible for her because of her husband. After she gains the courage to reconnect with black society behind her husband’s back, she persuades Irene to take her to the Negro Welfare League dance and allow her to join the black bourgeoisie that she had longed to be a part of since her starved childhood.

## Clare as a Tie to the White World

By the final section of the novella, Irene makes the realization that Clare poses a threat to her because should Clare be cast aside by Bellew, it would be irrefutable evidence that Irene herself could never truly pass into white society. She finds that just as she “could not separate individuals from the race,” she could not separate “herself from Clare Kendry” (227). If Clare fails to pass, there is no possibility that Irene ever could. In Irene’s eyes, Clare’s accomplishment of leaving her Negro past completely behind her and making a new identity for herself as a white woman is a success story beyond measure. When Wentworth catches sight of her at the Negro Welfare League dance, he describes her as a “blond beauty out of the fairy-tale” (205). Indeed, Clare’s life could almost be considered thus, starting from her earlier days as the daughter of the drunken janitor, to his sudden death and then adoption into a white home where she was successfully rescued by a rich “prince” by the name of Bellew. In Irene’s first encounter with Clare after their long interval apart, she sees in Clare’s face an “ivory mask” (157), an indication of her assumed persona of a white woman. She finds it hard to sympathise with Clare with her avowed yearning for “[her] own people” (182) when she has everything that Irene secretly desires by living as an accepted member of white society. When her husband Brian Redfield tells Irene that people who pass always come back because they aren’t satisfied and scared enough most of the time (185), she rebels at the idea that he could be right and that no one can truly perfectly pass for the duration of their entire life. It is because of this that

Irene is “caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race” (225) and this causes her to suffer and rebel simultaneously. If Clare is cast aside by Bellew, Irene’s only true link to the white world is broken because the possibility that she might be able to pass herself like Clare does would be completely shattered. Irene conceals her own race from Bellew because she tells herself that “she had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever” (182). Irene doesn’t realize that it is these very ties that keep her from doing the same. Irene doesn’t want to be Clare’s link to the black community and tries her utmost to convince her not to reconnect with it because it isn’t “safe” (195). In spite of her attempts to keep Clare from going to the Negro Welfare League dance, she is seized by Clare’s look:

And in the look she gave Irene, there was something groping, and hopeless, and yet so absolutely determined that it was like an image of her futile searching and the firm resolution in Irene’s own soul, and increased the feeling of doubt and compunction that had been growing within her about Clare Kendry. (200)

She sees reflected in Clare’s eyes, her own hopeless yet determined resolution to make contact with a society that had been denied to her and grows displeased and irritated at Clare because of it. When Bellew eventually comes to the conclusion that his wife was a Negro after all and Clare tragically falls from the sixth floor casement window of Mrs. Freeland’s apartment to her death, everything ends for Irene.

The novella concludes with Irene's final thought process as the words "then everything was dark" (242) flashes through her mind. Again, the word choice here is deliberate for everything was indeed dark for Irene after the death of Clare. Her only link to her shining white world was gone and as a result, she would forever be surrounded by her "dark" community.

### The Tragic Conclusion for Both Irene and Clare

Like a tragic play, the final curtain falls on *Passing* with Clare's loss of life and Irene's loss of consciousness.<sup>9)</sup> Clare's broken body lies on a bed of freshly fallen snow and Irene's world was "dark," illustrating where each woman is placed on the colour line. In spite of Irene's white aspirations and Clare's black yearnings, the novella ends with each woman standing exactly where they were when the story began. However, regardless of the tragic manner of Clare's death, she should not be seen as another example of the "tragic mulatto" in conventional tragic mulatto fiction. In fact, Larsen never refers to Clare in this way. Hutchinson points out that:

Clare undergoes no tragic struggle over a discovery that she is black, nor is she tragically prevented from marrying a white suitor because of the unbreachable barrier separating the races. To Clare, there is nothing tragic about being black.

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9) See Thompson's "'Makin a Way Outta No Way:' The Dangerous Business of Racial Masquerade in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" for more on how "passing for white is essentially a tragic performance of deceiving others while simultaneously, and even more tragically, deceiving oneself" (80).

She makes no profound sacrifices, no deeply ethical choice for one race over the other. Her choices are entirely selfish and epicurean; she does what pleases her. (299)

What is tragic about Clare is simply her untimely death. Larsen makes it clear that she is no tragic mulatto heroine.<sup>10)</sup> As Wentworth had pointed out, Clare is more of a fairy tale beauty than anything else and had more or less been living a fairy tale life with Bellew for the past twelve years. It is Irene who ultimately puts an end to Clare's fairy tale by somehow pushing her out of the casement window and allowing her to fall to her death. It is because Irene cannot accept the idea of Clare not being able to completely and perfectly pass into white society which drives her to unconsciously end Clare's life the moment that she is discovered to be black by her husband.

For into her mind had come a thought, strange and irrelevant, a suspicion, that surprised and shocked her and driven her to her feet. It was that in spite of her determined selfishness the woman before her was yet capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known. (195).

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10) See Moynihan's *Passing Into The Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing* for more on the passing trope being historically linked with death. In addition to the tragic mulatto of traditional passing narratives typically dying themselves, Moynihan also points out that they usually lose one or both parents as well because "the death of a visibly black or mixed race parent facilitates the protagonist's decision to pass." He continues by writing that, "Alternatively, passing is imagined as symbolic death, the death of blackness as the passer melts into white society. To say a loved one 'passed' can mean that s/he died or that s/he passed as white" (44).

If Clare could not pass fully into white society with her white aunts, white husband and daughter, there would be no chance for Irene herself to do so with her visibly dark husband and children. If Clare failed to pass, there was no hope for Irene.

## Conclusion

Both Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry possessed enough Caucasian features to pass undetected in white society, but Larsen suggests that their white appearance does not necessarily reflect a white identity. Clare is in possession of everything she could ever want from white upper-class society and evidently seems to be satisfied with her life. However, underneath the surface, she cannot repress her longings to slip away and reclaim her place in black society. Irene is an active member of the bourgeois black society and outwardly looks down on Clare for her social passing. Inwardly, she structures her life around white ideologies, values and customs and appears to be passing herself to a greater degree than Clare ever did as a result of it. When first meeting Clare again in Chicago, Irene tells her "I'd never in this world have known you if you hadn't laughed. You are changed, you know. And yet, in a way, you're just the same" (152). Although the passing years change a person's outward appearance and experiences shape their character, it is that person's essential identity that stays constant throughout the course of their life. Irene remarks "'It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but

we protect it” (185-86). In the same vein as the white teacup that Irene drops which leaves dark stains on the rug (221), so too are people unable to hide their identities without some areas “spilling out” and revealing them. Internal desires, stemmed from root identities, are like stains which can be seemingly hidden, but forever remain inherently evident, betrayed by the circumstance of our lives.

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## Abstract

# **Internal Desires, Questions of Identities and External Outcomes in Nella Larsen's *Passing***

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In *Passing*, Nella Larsen explores the general themes of “passing,” that is, one race attempting to be taken as another, through the actions of her two protagonists, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. While Clare is able to pass as a white woman, she still secretly longs for acceptance into black society. Her counterpoint, Irene, while having been accepted into black society, disparages the very notion of passing. That being said, Irene's actions appear to negate this belief and betray her internal desires to also be accepted into white society. Furthermore, Clare is unable to fully pass due to her inclination towards the society that she had outwardly rejected. Through these two female characters, Larsen poignantly illustrates that pervasive internal desires are the predominant determiners of external outcomes, regardless of established outward behaviors, opinions, or beliefs.

## Key Words

African Americans, Caucasians, cultural identity, racial identity, passing