

Yaroslava Kuzina

Professor Christina Walter

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### The Barrier of Race

It is without doubt difficult to discover, establish and accept one's identity- this is a conflict that is extremely evident during the teenage years when children are grappling with the idea of growing up. However, it becomes even more difficult to establish one's identity when one clearly belongs to two different entities. This is clearly demonstrated in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*, in which the two main characters- Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry- who are both light skinned mulattoes, struggle to find a balance between their white and black genes and to establish who they really are. The idea of "race" is explored throughout the novel with the aid of the black-and-white binary- blackness versus whiteness, and whether skin color truly represents one race and can be used as the one identifying and deciding feature. A binary is a system that is composed of only two factors which are usually oppositely related. Throughout the novel, Irene and Clare try to figure out what their race is by comparing and contrasting whiteness and blackness. It turns out that being white can only be defined in contrast to what being black is, but when one tries to decipher what being black is, one sees that being black is just not being white. Thus, blackness describes itself as not being white, and whiteness describes itself as everything that is not black. Sadly, there is no middle ground, and no way to blend the cultures or races, in the society that the novel describes. Irene and Clare must choose one race because trying to be of both races leads to a mental dissonance and makes both women suffer. A similar example that can, perhaps clarify, my assertion is Edward Said's essay on Orientalism which claims that the West (Europe) used the East (the Orient, Asia) in order to define itself. Europe was seen as being

the polar opposite of the Orient. Similarly, in *Passing*, the white and black races are seen as polar opposites and no middle ground is possible.

Irene Redfield has established herself as a stay-at-home mother and a housewife. She has chosen to remain with the black society that she grew up in and uses her ability to pass only for convenience, in order to avoid the negativity that the whites showed to the blacks. While sitting in the café on top of the Drayton and feeling Clare Kendry, whom she has not yet recognized, look at her, Irene haughtily states that “she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her,” (16-7). It would be humiliating for any person to be forced to leave any establishment and Irene passes in order to avoid humiliation- her behavior is completely natural. This is why I disagree with Jennifer DeVere Brody’s assertion that “It is she [Irene] who harbors a secret desire to be white and not Clare,” (Brody 1055). Brody builds her assumptions by reading

“Irene [as] mimic[king] middle-class culture which often tries to isolate itself from poverty and perversion by situating itself in a relationship above and beyond the lower-class. Irene Redfield desperately desires to be free of the burden of race-consciousness and to join those who reside in the rising towers of capitalist American society,” (1055).

Irene does not want to be white- she is perfectly content in living within her African American community. Or, she would be perfectly content, if her husband, Brian, did not want to move from Harlem to Brazil. What Irene values in life the most is a comfortable, safe home, she is not an adventurous person, she does not need risk and adrenaline to be happy. While Brody claims that Irene’s desire to be white is shown in her structuring of her household as a white bourgeois household, this is not true. Just because someone enjoys sushi does not make them Japanese.

Similarly, having a household that is in “imitation of whites” and having a routing that “consists of maintaining the appearances of white middle-class prosperity,” or “striv[ing] to be as prim, as proper, and as bourgeois as (ideals of) white middle-class ladies,” does not decidedly and beyond all doubt prove that Irene wants to be white (Rottenberg 444-5. After all, if she really did desire to be white, she would have followed in Clare’s footsteps, married a white man and would have been integrated into white society without a problem.

In the first chapter of the first part of *Passing*, called “Encounter”, Irene drops into meditating about what the essence of Clare Kendry is. After some thought she comes to the conclusion that “Catlike. Certainly that was the word which best described Clare Kendry, if any single word could describe her. Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive,” (6). Irene struggles to find one word to define Clare, just like she and Clare struggle to find a single race to which they belong. A human is multi-faceted like a diamond and it is impossible to describe all those facets with one single word. Clare and Irene clearly have characteristics from both races and it is impossible for them to be classified as only white or as only black- though both have tried to do that by assuming lifestyles within either the white (Clare) or black (Irene) societies. While some people who only have blood of one race and find it easy to just belong to that one race, Clare and Irene are biracial and will always belong to both races. Even Clare’s husband, John Bellew, subconsciously recognizes the black aspects of Clare’s race, he says that ““When we were first married, she was as white as – as – well as white as a lily. But I declare she’s getting’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger,” (55). Clare’s African American genes shine through even though she is white. However, her husband is alright with her getting “blacker” because he is convinced that she is actually white and

therefore her “blackness” is just a funny, cute eccentricity. In her essay “Beautiful White Girlhood? Daisy Buchanan in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*”, Sinead Moynihan mentions “the illegibility of Clare’s writing reflects the illegibility of her white-looking black body” (Moynihan 39). Everything in Clare’s life represents how obscured and unreadable her identity is.

In the end, this ambiguity of their racial identities led both Irene and Clare to ruin- Clare irreversibly, because she died. The bonds to their African American race held them tight and even “Clare had been unable to completely sever [them]” despite “all her repudiation of them,” (75). Irene finds her race a burden to her and she is angered by the fact that Clare does not feel the same way. She angrily proclaims that “Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it.” (76). It is true that Clare tried to get away from her race, tried to push it aside, on her road out of poverty and on her quest to get “all the things I [Clare] wanted and never had had,” unlike Irene (34). To Clare, passing was a tool that she could use to make her way out of the slum that she grew up in. She was not intellectual, she was just a smart, manipulative woman. Irene correctly states that Clare is “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,” (135). This manipulative characteristic is in part what drove to Clare’s mental dissonance because although she could manipulate some things around her, she could not completely manipulate every little thing in the world to suit herself. Thus, Clare’s egotism is demonstrated because egotistical people want everything in the world to be made their way and they want everyone else to only care about their well-being and not their own.

Now transferring my attention from Clare to Irene, I would like to focus on refuting the fact that Irene wanted to actively hide her blackness. As already addressed a few paragraphs above, Irene’s household – which mirrors a white American bourgeoisie household – does not

signify that she wanted to be white herself. Similarly, I disagree with Moynihan's claim which I cite below:

“In *Passing*, the character with recourse to powder is Irene, an indication of her own desire, upon which she occasionally acts, to pass as white. Indeed, as Jennifer DeVere Brody asserts, Irene secretly covets Clare's position as a white, upper-class wife, a suggestion supported by Nell Sullivan's contention that it is Irene who passes, “not by adopting a white identity as Clare does, but by adopting white values including white standards of beauty” (Brody 1055; Sullivan 374). On three occasions, Irene is depicted at her morning or evening toilet, applying powder to her face (.*Passing* 183, 193, 218). Face powder symbolizes Irene's desire to lighten her “warm olive skin” (183) and “dark white face” (218) and is thus closely connected to the novel's central theme of racial passing.” ( Moynihan 44-5).

Moynihan is making a big deal out of a small detail which is make up. The use of make-up may be another point of evidence towards the fact that Irene lives more like the stereotypical white housewife and stay-at-home mom, however it does not show that Irene rejects her black heritage. The powder has been read as a sort of mask that Irene uses, however, in *Passing* itself, it is Clare who is described as having a face that is “only an ivory mask” behind which “lurk[s] a scornful amusement,” (30). Scorn- that is how Clare views the whole world- more proof of her egotism. Another aspect of Clare that differentiates her from Irene is the fact that Clare is decidedly “unsafe”. Her whole venture of passing for a white woman, without even telling her husband, and living that way for twelve years is extremely dangerous. However, more dangerous is the fact how she decides to come back to the black community under her Negro-hating husband's nose. It is her egotism in part which allows Clare to be so daring because she cares for no one but herself, so she will do anything to make herself happy. Clare could have been happy, had she not met Irene again, Irene reminded Clare of Clare's unhappy childhood and of her childhood's

wishes and aspirations- to be like Irene and to have what Irene had. Clare states that ““it’s your fault, ‘Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn’t now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn’t seen you that time in Chicago...””(8). Irene has always stood for EVERYTHING that Clare wanted- both the happy, comfortable childhood, material needs and ability to get all of this without rejected her African American race.

Overall, the struggle for discovering one’s identity is perfectly shown throughout this novel. However, not all identity struggles are as deadly as this one was. The lack of acceptance from a white supremacist society was what drove Clare to unhappiness, and her desire for safety and comfort, which bordered on boredom, were the reason for Irene’s unhappiness. In the novel, it is shown that it is impossible to straddle two chairs at the same time and one has to choose and then live life without looking back- something that Clare was unable to do and this was her doom. And although Clare does want to return to the African American community, she only does it as a white woman and does not open up about her black heritage. Race is seen as an insurmountable yet slightly ambiguous, indescribable and even strongly restrictive barrier throughout the novel and neither Clare nor Irene are able to scale it.

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