

The „Old Longing”: Sexuality and Class in Nella Larsen’s Passing

Speakeasies filled with cigarette smoke, loud jazz music, women in sparkly fringe dresses—when we think of the Roaring Twenties, especially in New York City, that is the mental image we get. The post-World War I United States enjoyed an economic boom, elevated by the Nineteenth Amendment (1919) that granted women the right to vote. The morals about sexuality, especially female sexuality were loosening, which further helped create the Gatsby-esque parties we associate with the era.

Black American author, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) approaches this time period, which the general public has a lot of misconceptions about, rather intriguingly. The novel explores the unique intersection of sexuality, class, and race in context of the New Negro Black bourgeoisie, creating a multi-faceted, layered story. This paper focuses on how the novel explores the questions of sexuality and class specifically, as these two topics have received less attention than the more obviously explored topic of race, which has been analyzed by many African American studies scholars, including Jennifer DeVere Brody, Corinne E. Blackmer or Mark J. Madigan. However, contrary to African American studies scholar Claudia Tate's view of race being "at best peripheral to the story" (143), I believe race cannot fully be omitted from the analysis, considering it heavily influences both the characters actions, their perceptions and the unique situations created by the intersection of the explored identities and race; excluding it would hinder our understanding of the novel and its intentions. Through this paper I intend to show that the intersection of the characters' racial, class, sexual, and gender identities creates an environment where the perception of the characters is defined by their social groups. As such, my analyses employ an intersectional framework that recognizes the interaction of the characters' various identities and the resulting effect of this interaction on both their lived experience and their social perception.¹ Because of the complicated relationship between racism and misogyny², Black women had adopted an ideology that, while it aims to lift Black women up and eradicate the negative stereotypes about them, hinders the characters' transgression of class and sexual boundaries.

After a brief introduction of the plot, I will offer a brief socio-historical contextualization of Black women's place in the contemporary society depicted in *Passing*. Then, I will analyze the characters' intersectional identities in the context of the novel and its time period in order to argue that the gap between what the characters long for and what space is afforded to them

¹ See Kimberlé Crenshaw's formulations of intersectionality.

² The intertwining of racism and misogyny has prompted the creation of the word *misogynoir* "noting both a historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture" (Bailey 1).

is what drives the plot and leads to its *denouement*. Therefore, the “old longing” (Larsen 98) is present in the lives of the characters as a longing for a different society, one where their identities do not conflict.

The main character and narrator of *Passing*, Irene Redfield, is a white-passing middle-class Black woman who lives in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood. Harlem, the birthplace of the New Negro movement, was the center of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual period the ideas of which shaped much of the 1920s for the Black community in the United States. Irene’s physician husband, Brian, provides Irene with the comfort of the middle-class life she has grown accustomed to. She grew up in a middle-class household; it is the lifestyle that she knows best. Maintaining this privilege requires her to fully support and protect the very social hierarchy she is oppressed by—the clear boundaries of race, class, and sexuality—as she also heavily benefits from it; the upkeep of her social standing is her main priority as she faces the threats presented to her in the novel, including the appearance of an old friend, the possibility of infidelity, and even a mysterious death. Her status is directly linked to the New Negro ideals of womanhood, ones she intends to upkeep.

Socio-Historical Background

The emancipation of women was not complete by granting them the right to vote—as historian Lynn Dumenil put it, “once the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, the lines that divided women—class, race, age, ideology—became more significant” (24). White women’s racism and indifference towards Black women’s issues made it impossible for Black and white activists to work together, leaving several of the Black community’s issues unanswered, which combined with the anti-working class political and social climate of the era further put the majority lower class community into an unfavorable position. While Black women’s presence in politics was more organized than that of their white counterparts, their influence was limited by the “official channels that had been used since the late nineteenth century to deny suffrage to black men—tax qualifications, educational tests, grandfather clauses, and harassment” (24). The right to vote did not put an end to the segregation or Jim Crow laws of the South; if anything, it made the white population of these states further protect these regulations and help them be kept in place, fearing that the full emancipation of Black people would put their own privileged status at risk, or even be a source of harm for them (24).

Despite the slow change and death of Victorian ideals, the constraints of sexuality that a woman could express were not as flexible for Black women as they were for white women. In her 1925 essay *The Task of Negro Womanhood*, educator and activist Elise Johnson

McDougald notes that Black women have been “singled out and advertised as having lower sex standards” (434) compared to women of other races. McDougald continues by saying that “sex irregularities are not a matter of race, but of socio-economic conditions” (434), statements that labeled the working-class women of the community as ‘less than.’ Critic Elizabeth Dean believes that McDougald’s essay both draws on the feminist critique of the contemporary attitudes surrounding women’s sexuality and “enforces a bourgeois expectation of sexual respectability” (2), an idea that alienates lower class women from the rest of the community by establishing the Black bourgeoisie as the standard and creating an intra-communal hierarchy that Black women needed to adhere to. Dean continues by saying that “strict sexual morality became crucial to the elites’ claim to respectability, and thus the members of their own community who deviated from these norms were subject to intense community surveillance” (2). African American studies scholar Rafael Walker also notes that at the onset of the twentieth century, “female desire functioned as one of the principal factors shaping and reinforcing the racial binary” (167), and this reinforcement was supported by both the white majority and the Black community, especially the Black bourgeoisie, who “sought to eradicate the stereotype of black women as hypersexual primitives by depicting black heroines who exemplified Victorian womanhood” (168).

Similar observations were expressed by Evelyn B. Higginbotham in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church (1880-1920)*: “adherence to respectability enabled black women to counter racist images and structures, their discursive contestation was not directed solely at white Americans; the black Baptist women condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people” (187). The overbearing stereotype of the sexual, promiscuous seductress simultaneously dehumanized and sexualized Black female bodies. Respectability was tied to modesty and purity, to the New Negro idea of the ‘race woman’: a respectable, upper-class socialite who works toward the uplift of her people; that is, everything the public perceives Black women are not. According to this social construct, she uplifts her community, finds comfort in her heterosexual marriage and her privileges, and serves as a tool for dismantling harmful stereotypes and furthering an agenda rather than being her own person.

Distance from the perceived ‘undesired’ identities became a crucial point for many Black women, especially for those that wished to belong or belonged to the upper classes, and the upkeep of this ideology required the constant observation of everyone in the community, and interference by the elite (Dean). The Black bourgeoisie had to make sure that members of their community, members of their own upper classes and lower-class

individuals as well, follow the constant interference required of the Black elite entailed a self-policing as well: the self-surveillance exercised by these women created a vulnerable environment, one that focuses on societal structures and carefully constructed conversations more than the actual individuals themselves.

Analysis of the characters' intersectional identities

Irene herself also practices this self-surveillance. She makes sure that every description that she gives of herself fits the established ideology: she notes the sexlessness of her marriage multiple times, she makes sure to set her perception up not only as a Black member of the intelligentsia, but first and foremost, as a faithful wife and loving mother, countering the various racist and sexist stereotypes about Black women. The mixed-race characters of the novel are stuck between these two very different concepts of both femininity and female sexuality (Walker 168). On the one hand, the idea of the New Negro woman continues the Victorian ideals about womanhood, a conservative, respectable woman of her community, dedicated to her marriage and children, condemning anything deemed inappropriate, accepting and supporting the privilege of the Black bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the New Woman of the white majority rejects these Victorian ideals and creates a new, extended definition of femininity. Following simply one of the two expectations laid out for them would have negative consequences and leave them in a strange no man's land, stuck between these, often conflicting views. Interpreting the novel requires the knowledge of both sets of expectations, as they heavily influence these characters, and play a huge role in their everyday lives.

The novel utilizes these differences between the two expectations for women, contrasting them within the characters. The title of the novel, on the one hand, refers to the act of racial passing, where a lighter-skinned person of color (in the case of the novel, Black women) "passes" as white. To be able to pass as white, these women then need to be aware of the white majority's ideal of womanhood, while still adhering to the expectations of their own community, an incredibly demanding circumstance that requires constant attention from the person passing. Passing allows these people to experience life from radically different points of view: through it, they are able to enter whites-only spaces not only physically, but ideologically as well. Their teetering on the fragile borders of not only race, but of sexuality and even class, helps them gain insight into the different lives people live, and the privilege

that comes with belonging to the majority just as much by ideology as by appearance.³ On the other hand, I argue that it refers to the novel's passing as one solely about racial issues, as well as the characters passing as strictly heterosexual, and even their passing as a member of the upper class.

Sexuality

This aspect of sexuality is easily established as one of the main motivations behind the story of the novel. With the introduction of one of Irene's old friends, Clare Kendry, the reader can get an insight into Irene's thoughts and emotions as well as another aspect of sexuality, as she describes Clare using very detailed, sexualized expressions, such as "she's really almost too good-looking" (20), "her lips, ... were sweet and sensitive, a tempting mouth" (25), "appealing, seductive voice" (26), or a "smile... a shade too provocative for the waiter" (13). These descriptions do not only describe Clare: everything Irene deems worthy of mentioning also highlights her own appearance and personality, which the reader otherwise is only allowed to see through Irene's vague words about herself. Throughout the novel, Clare becomes a sort of "psychological double" (Little 177), through which the reader can not only see Irene's physical features but her deep desires and motivations as well. Tying her sexuality to and exploring it through another person, Irene is allowed to experiment with the aspects of her identity that do not fit into the New Negro woman mold. By characterizing Clare as the seductive one, Irene also explores her own sexual side, not only the expression, but the attraction as well, the details that are not proper nor appropriate for a woman of her social standing.

Interpreting the two women's relationship as just psychological or just sexual does not fully capture the nuances of it. They do not simply exist as, in Tate's words "external and internal" (144) complement portraits of each other, but they also share a more intimate, romantic bond with each other. A one-sided understanding that omits the multiple aspects of their bond does not fully account for Irene's obsession with Clare, since as the novel progresses, Clare becomes both the object of desire and identification. Irene's identity becomes inseparable from Clare: we see her as what Irene wants to have and wants to become. What she envies of Clare is rather unclear, but multiple theories exist, the most common among them is the one

³ These mixed-race characters in the novel are all women, but they do not serve as representatives for Black women. According to Walker, they are women who „threaten the categories of a racially polarized society and remain caught at the fault line of a faulty ideology" (166). Their experiences are unique to their race and social standing in this time period.

also vocalized by professor Mary Wilson throughout her essay “‘Working Like a Colored Person:’ Race, Service, and Identity in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*”: Irene’s jealousy stems from Clare’s social mobility and her ability to dissolve the boundaries of sexuality, class, and race upheld by Irene. Because Irene desperately clings to the Black bourgeois identity as well as to the class privilege and stability that come from this status, she is unable to transgress these boundaries, as her very existence depends on them: without the safety net of clear-cut identities, her grasp on reality would begin to loosen (Walker 182). She associates wealth and financial stability with the ideas most enforced by the white majority and her fellow middle class Black intellectuals, trapping her in bourgeois domesticity.

Looking at this unique relationship between Clare and Irene as a strictly queer one was rather neglected by critics in the past but has roots in contemporary analyses. Most of Irene and Clare’s conversations “pass” as ones about racial issues, therefore analyzing the otherwise seemed unnecessary. The double entendres of their conversations make it difficult to understand what they are referring to exactly, therefore it is easy to see how Irene could misunderstand them and reconstruct them the way she saw fit. This phenomenon is well-illustrated by a scene in Irene’s bedroom, a very intimate space—and a personal one as well, since she and Brian do not share a bedroom. As Clare enters and places a kiss on Irene’s hair, the latter is overcome by a “sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” (56). Clare had written a letter to Irene, one that she is seen reading in the first chapter of the novel, in which Clare says:

For I am lonely, so lonely ... cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life... . You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of... . It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases... (7)

The wording of the letter, such as the use of phrases like “longing to be with you again” is also rather erotic, causing “brilliant red patches” (8) to appear on Irene’s skin. The “pale life of mine” could be understood as a longing to be close to a Black community again, tired of the passing and the loneliness that comes with it. I believe that it could also be understood as Clare’s longing for Irene, her presence, and her affection. Even though Irene calls Clare “theatrical” (6), the intensity Clare’s words carry demands being taken seriously. Irene, however, does not write back, which prompts Clare to say that “Every day I went to that nasty little post-office place. I’m sure they were all beginning to think that I’d been carrying on an illicit love-affair and that the man had thrown me over” (57). The mention of the secrecy and love affair allows the reader to establish Clare’s longing to be with Irene as the topic of their conversation,

especially since later in the conversation Irene notes that she “hadn’t supposed that anyone could look so hurt” (58), referring to the expression on Clare’s face caused by the lack of reply from Irene. However, Irene understands Clare’s longing as not one for her, but rather for the Black community of Harlem. Because of Irene’s bias, the reader never finds out whether the actual topic of the conversation was the relationship of the two women or Clare’s presence in Harlem.

What the purely psychological reading of this relationship leaves out is perfectly worded by professor H. Jordan Landry: “the idea of black women having lesbian desire for other black women, specifically due to their embodiment of blackness and femaleness, is virtually incomprehensible in a society that repeatedly marks African-American women as victimized and blameworthy rather than touting their positive potentialities” (27-28). The idea that Black women are not only worthy of desire, but capable of looking at their fellow Black women as desirable is an uncommon and rarely explored one. In a community where no deviation from the carefully established norm or ideal is accepted, queerness, specifically lesbian desire is a radical form of rebellion from both the minority ideology and the behaviors accepted by the majority population as well. Denying the novel’s “flirtation” (McDowell, 371) with sapphic desire brings the denial of a specific, often overlooked and demeaned fragment of Black women’s sexuality, and the exclusion of a community vital to then-contemporary Harlem.

Harlem was perceived as a place where anything goes: many white people visited Harlem with the intention to, as the novel puts it, “see Negroes” (61), but also to “explore what was forbidden in the white world” (Faderman, 62), more specifically homosexuality. This phenomenon of looking at Harlem as a “synonym for naughtiness” (63), which historian Lillian Faderman considers to be a manifestation of sexual colonialism, heavily affected Harlem and its community—they needed the tourism for economic reasons, and were willing to serve as a playground for the white people of New York City who wished to “experience sexual expression that their middle-class milieu had kept from them” (62). However, the reliance on majority white queer ‘tourists’ did not guarantee total acceptance of them from the Harlem natives. While the white queer people thought that they were accepted as a fellow minority—the concept of queer people are a non-racial minority was gestating during this period in Harlem—“urban blacks in the 1920s did not all simply accept homosexuality as a ‘fact of life’” (63), despite the neighborhood’s reliance on the tourism of queer whites. While “tastefully concealed gay male intellectuals ... were tolerated” (Dean, 2) even among the Black community, the same cannot be said about lesbians: the willful ignorance of female queerness was another manifestation of the upkeep of the respectable identity so desperately sought after

and maintained by the Black upper classes. If a member of this class—a race woman like Irene—were to fully realize her own same sex attraction, she would risk losing that very fragile privilege that she has, which she simply cannot allow happening.

Because this unique relationship between the two women is shaped by desire, a psychological bond, and obsession, a full, extensive analysis of the novel and its themes is rather difficult. In her foreword to *Passing*, author Deborah McDowell established Irene as a “classic unreliable narrator” (372), not only because of this relationship, but also because Irene struggles to understand her own motivations and needs, her judgment clouded by her feelings for Clare and her devotion to the New Negro ideology, misunderstanding many interactions with the characters and even her reactions to these interactions. She constantly twists events to her liking and presents them in a way that they align with her ideologies and save her from humiliation or the need to face these uncomfortable happenings ⁴. Considering that she is the focalizer, the reader is compelled to believe her, since we never get actual confirmation whether the events Irene described actually happened the way she described them.

Irene is deeply and “aggressively devoted” (Dean, 4) to the New Negro ideology in every sense, and her heterosexuality is a vital part of her middle-class identity. Clare poses a threat to this, and rather than taking accountability for her own feelings, Irene blames them on Clare and restructures her attraction towards her in a way that allows the analysis of Clare as a seductress; an act that displaces the symptoms of Irene’s dissatisfaction onto people around her, specifically Clare, but fails to rid her of discontent (Little). Some critics, including Walker, Little, and Tate go as far as calling Irene “hypocritical” and “manipulative” for this habit of hers, labels I do not agree with—seeing Irene as anything other than a victim of the mentality of her environment risks her misinterpretation as someone embodying the trope of the devious closeted lesbian. Her main motive is the preservation of her comfortable, privileged lifestyle, a way of living that was hard to attain for the average person of color living in the Jazz Age. Her desperation to maintain this prestige requires the constant surveillance of both herself and people around her—therefore, it is understandable that she would reconstruct her obsession with Clare as jealousy or a desperation to keep the things most important to her safe.

Interpreting Irene as an envious woman⁵ and completely disregarding the sexual nature

⁴ Irene’s reluctance to look beyond her ideologies is most heavily present with Clare. When she talks about Clare in her youth, she believes that “there had been, even in those days, nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry’s idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire” (6), not being able to understand that Clare is not necessarily selfish, rather she has a harder life that required more determination. Irene completely belittles the struggles Clare is going through, as she had experienced none of them.

⁵ Irene and Clare both demonstrate envy of the other’s life to a certain extent: Clare believes Irene is “free, happy and safe” (51), everything she is not in her marriage with a racist white man. Irene envies Clare’s “slim golden

of her obsession achieves exactly what Irene wished to achieve: an appropriate reaction to a fellow woman, one that does not feature desire or hints of queerness at all and centers her heterosexual, respectable marriage. Nonetheless, reading Irene as “manipulative” would simply add to the countless negative stereotypes about Black women, furthering the “devious closeted lesbian” trope as well, all of which this paper wishes to deconstruct. Understanding the complexities of these characters entails examining characteristics that are unfavorable—however, none of these characteristics prompt the furthering of harmful ideas, including the villainization of queer women or the upholding of the Sapphire or Jezebel stereotypes.

Analyzing Irene’s husband, Brian can add to our understanding of the novel’s treatment of queer desire. On the one hand, he is a well-respected man in his community, a characteristic that Irene takes comfort in. He is obsessed with moving to Brazil, a topic that comes up quite often in his conversations with Irene. As she says to friends “Brian doesn’t care for ladies I sometimes wish he did. It’s South America that attracts him” (37). One could easily interpret his desire to move as wanting to live in a country with a more sizeable Black community, a place where his family would be safer from hate crimes and face less discrimination. South America was presented as a romantic paradise, and “Brazil symbolized a deflated and ironic hope for an alternative community that was more a romantic dream than a reality” (Little, 174). On the other hand, his indifference toward women, including his own wife, cannot go without mention. He even calls heterosexual sex a “grand joke, the greatest in the world” (52), so it is clear that his attitude towards heterosexuality and its constraints is rather negative. We know from Irene that they sleep in separate rooms, and have constant arguments, Brian’s attitude toward his wife makes that reading seem unlikely. Later in the novel, Irene describes Brian by saying that:

He too, had withdrawn. The house contained his outward self and his belongings. He came and went with his usual noiseless irregularity. He sat across from her at table. He slept in his room next to hers at night. But he was remote and inaccessible. No use pretending that he was happy, that things were the same as they had always been. He wasn’t and they weren’t. (71)

The physical distance between the Irene and Brian is paralleled with the emotionally distant characteristic of their marriage, as well. They stop living together as a family, as a married

feet, glistening hair” (55), her “lovely face” (17), her “exotic features” (18), and the treatment and attention she receives from the people of Harlem. With framing these two women as inherently jealous of each other, the risk of a misogynistic misinterpretation of their relationship is present. Their relationship is more intricate than the jealousy they feel for each other, but a nonetheless important fraction of it.

couple, and start existing next to each other.

Therefore, interpreting Brian's longing for Brazil as longing not only for a more racially accepting, but more sexually open society is also possible. Teacher and researcher David Blackmore believes that instead of being a specific place, Brazil simply represents "an alternate vision of an Afro-centric sphere in which a man need not provide for a woman and where men may love each other freely" (481). It would allow both Irene and Brian to live out their desires without having to conform to an "unsatisfying life in the segregated bourgeois Harlem community" (481). The absence of the binding ideologies of their community would create a healthier, balanced relationship between the two of them, giving them the space to explore parts of their identities that they had to keep hidden. Nonetheless, Irene's misinterpretation and misrepresentation of events around her makes it impossible to understand whether Brian's depiction and his perceived queerness is accurate or not, forcing the reader to rely on subtext and clues, as well as Irene's opinions and thoughts.

Brian's possible queerness threatens the wellbeing of the entire Redfield family. The "European school" (45) they want one of their children to attend, a status symbol more than anything, would quickly get out of reach if the financial and main societal support of the family—that is, Brian—were to either move to South America to live out his queer desires, or try to live his life to the fullest in Harlem. Irene's dedication is to the New Negro ideology rather than her husband, and her willingness to surveil and interfere compels her to come up with a solution to the issue of her husband's "unreasonable restless feelings" (54), no matter who or what the real subject of his desires is.

Irene's fear of her own and her husband's perceived queerness climaxes in her delusion⁶ that Brian and Clare are having an affair behind her back. Infidelity serves as an acceptable, heterosexual explanation of Brian's indifference towards Irene and his perceived interest in Clare; it also provides a reasonable answer to Irene's jealousy of Clare. Attraction and desire become obvious topics of the Redfield marriage; however, they are associated with Brian instead of Irene.⁷

⁶ The ambiguity of the book's finale is related to Irene's unreliability as narrator (McDowell 372). The true nature of Clare and Brian's relationship is unclear, leaving the reader to either understand Irene as delusional or even "hysterical" (Blackmore 482), or believe Irene and the possibility of infidelity. Irene's relationship and understanding of reality compels the reader to evaluate Clare's death at the end of the novel with the question of the accuracy of the infidelity accusations in mind. Infidelity serves more so as a symptom of Irene's bigger problems and her slipping grip on reality than as the cause (Walker).

⁷ Irene's delusion of infidelity helps reframe her as a victim: through her descriptions, she wishes to control the reader's perception of her (Little). If she successfully reconstructs herself as a victim of infidelity and presents Clare and Brian as people unworthy of trust and respect, she escapes the possibility of being recognized as a lesbian.

Drawing from Blackmore's interpretation, middle and upper-class marriages serve as tools for attaining that privileged, bourgeois status, neglecting the question of love. These marriages leave "no room for sexual or romantic attraction" (478), the two parties divert their attention towards the upkeep of their desirable, comfortable lives. By establishing the Redfields' marriage as loveless and done simply out of convenience and need, Larsen pokes fun at the hypocrisy of her Black bourgeois contemporaries, and their New Negro ideology that highly values propriety and the upkeep on conservative social values. We understand Clare's marriage with John Bellew, a white, rich racist, to be sexless as well—not because of the same reasons the Redfields' marriage lacks intimacy, but because Clare "nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for the fear that she might be dark" (28). She refuses to "risk" (28) pregnancy again for the sole reason that she fears her husband will find out her race.⁸

Both upper-class marriages present in the novel lack a certain affection or closeness that, according to Walker, is Larsen's way of critiquing her contemporary society (187). By making the two main marriages in the novel seem undesirable, she is essentially poking fun at the middle-class lifestyle through these unsuccessful, dissatisfactory marriages. The notion that the moral standards of the New Negro ideology, the members of the upper class are just as flawed as the average person they are perceived to be above by appearing traditionally righteous helps erase the negative opinions surrounding lower-class people.

Class

The dislike of the lower class, more specifically the need to separate oneself from the lower class is especially present in Irene's character (Wilson). She grew up in a middle-class household, her family home has maids, even as a child, she belonged to the more privileged group. In her adult life, she does not converse more with her household help than necessary, keeping her distance. She describes one of them, Zulena, as a "small mahogany-colored creature" (51), finding it important to mention her darker skin tone, presenting her as a creature rather than a human; even her name stands in contrast with Irene's, whose name is of European

⁸ With Clare's marriage, it is important to mention the Rhinelander case of 1924, in which Leonard Rhinelander sued his wife, Alice Walker, on the grounds of "racial fraud", saying she concealed her real race from him, tricking him into marrying her. Knowing this case, Clare's frustration of anxiety over pregnancy becomes much more terrifying. This case and *Passing* both raise an important issue for both their time period and our contemporary society: the categorization of mixed-race people, even though racial categories are socially constructed and do not take self-definitions into account (Nisetich 345). The same happens in the novel: the categorizations Irene enforces all have human-made borders, as in people are involuntarily grouped into them, a practice that Clare denies, which only adds that adds onto Irene's frustration with Clare.

origin. Skin color also means class privilege—women like Zulena are rarely presented as socialites, as race women like Irene. Because of her upbringing, Irene recognizes and respects the boundary that divides her from her servants; she is not willing to cross it.

Clare, on the other hand, is willing to do so. While Irene “secretly resented” (73) Clare’s visits to the kitchen and playroom, Clare was actively searching for the company of Irene’s servants. During Irene and Clare’s reunion in Chicago, the two women catch up on everything they have missed in each other’s lives. Unlike Irene’s father, hers was a “tall, powerfully built” (7), drunken janitor who did not provide Clare with the same quality of life Irene was provided with. After his death, Clare went to live with her poor, white, religious aunts, where Clare was “expected to earn [her] keep by doing all the housework, and most of the washing” (28), because she “had Negro blood and [her aunts] belonged to the generation that had written and read long articles headed ‘Will the Blacks Work?’ (28). She had a “hard life for a girl of sixteen” (28), but she is nevertheless thankful that her aunts took her in and raised her, but her experiences and upbringing had certain hardships that Irene, or most other members of Irene’s social circle never had to experience. Clare even says that

You can’t know, ‘Rene, how, when I used to go over to the south side, I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others. Do you, can you understand what I felt? (29)

Clare’s friends, all of them of a higher social standing with wealthier parents had a life from birth that Clare envied. The determination to get what she wanted, the comfort and stability of upper-class life led her to pass every day, not just occasionally. Through her marriage to John Bellew, a rich, but racist businessman, she is able to attain a place in the white bourgeoisie, going from a Black maid in her aunts’ home to a white housewife (Wilson). This class mobility is what is needed of her to catch up with her childhood friends in terms of social standing: now she is the one with maids, trips to Europe and a rich husband, for the price of giving up her racial identity and sacrificing her community.

Clare and Irene are relatively similar in the sense that they both consider belonging to the upper classes a necessity. Irene does so because it is the only way of life she has ever known: being in a position of privilege is not special to her, it is merely a condition she intends to maintain. On the other hand, Clare has never known privilege. In her point of view, her only chance at achieving it is if she marries well—she sees an opportunity in whiteness, in passing, in her marriage to John Bellew.

Irene’s stability is dependent on the clear definitions and boundaries of race and class, in accordance with the New Negro ideology: her mental state is heavily influenced by the

perceived threats to these definitions, and the ideology itself. Anything that she understands as a threat needs to be eliminated—whether that is the previously explored question of sexuality, or class boundaries. Clare’s ability to navigate social and economic boundaries the way she does scares Irene, because it makes Clare hard to categorize. Contrary to Clare’s humble upbringing and experience with financial struggles, in her adulthood, she is wealthy: she is the one wearing beautiful gowns, living a comfortable, upper-class life. When she visits Irene, however, she is friendly with Zulena and the other members of Irene’s help, having light-hearted conversations with them, treating them as her equals. Clare’s flexibility stems from her own personal experiences of both poverty and wealth—she understands the struggles maids go through, as she was one for her aunts. The stereotype of Black women thriving in the domestic sphere would dictate that Clare be stuck in that circumstance, sentenced to be a maid for her aunts forever. Clare, however, through her “determination” (29) to catch up with her childhood friends, is able to transgress the boundaries of class.

Through *Passing*, Larsen was able to poke fun at the materialism of the Black bourgeoisie, a trait that connected them with the white population more than they realized (Walker). When talking about passing, Irene says that “I’ve everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money” (26), unconsciously tying wealth to whiteness. Later, “her instinct wholly rebelled ... and she could not say why” (26) against the idea of passing, her subconscious desperately holding onto the loyalty for her race, as dictated by the New Negro ideology. To Clare, she denies having ever tried passing, but as she is sitting on the roof of the Drayton, a prestigious white establishment in Chicago, she is passing, just as she was hours ago at the store, and just as she says to a friend of hers that “I don’t believe I’ve ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean, except once” (99). We know her last sentence is untrue—not only because of the above-mentioned instances, but also because she first meets Clare’s husband while she is passing as white, which is the only occasion when her social status did not grant her the most privilege out of all the people around her.

At the core of the situation lies the fact that Irene is bothered by Clare’s rise through the social hierarchy. She believes “the essential authenticity of her own class position” (Askew 313), which believes the boundaries of class to be just as strict as the boundaries of race, both of which Clare considers to be merely performative. Clare’s unwillingness to adhere to the ideologies that are the foundations of Irene’s existence and stability is what threatens and annoys Irene the most—especially because Irene finds Clare’s way of life intriguing and is influenced by the “temptation” (Walker 183) Clare represents.

Clare's death

The final act of the novel ties these bases of analysis together perfectly. The Redfields and Clare are going to a party at one of Irene's friends' apartment, who lives "at the very top" (109) of their elevatorless building. When they get up, Clare's husband also arrives, and realizes that Clare is actually Black, and has been passing as white. Seeing her at a party full of Black people when she had previously expressed that she would not want to have a Black maid around her "for love nor money" (41) was a surprise to him. Sometime before the party, Bellew ran into Irene, who at that was not passing, realizing that she, who was introduced as an old friend of Clare—these two events combined solidified Bellew's suspicions. The tension rises, and eventually climaxes: "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (112).

The cause of Clare's death is ambiguous: the reader could understand Irene as the perpetrator, having been overtaken by her delusions and hysteria, seeing the murder of Clare as the only solution to curb the threat she presents. She believes getting rid of Clare will clear her mind from the obsession with Clare and restore the order of life around her.

It is also possible, that John Bellew, Clare's racist husband, pushed her out of the window as a *crime passionnel*. Angry at her lies, her betrayal, her meddling with the "damned dirty" (112) Black people, he pushed his wife out, out of anger rather than fueled by a need to punish her, as he "gasped of horror" (112), calling out for her, shocked by the events.

The third perception of Clare's death can be accessed by looking at her death as a suicide. In this uncomfortable state, the only way out she saw was by throwing herself out of the window, leaving her own frustrations and this very situation behind. We know from Irene that at Clare's father's death, she

had just stood there with her lips pressed together, her thin arms folded across her narrow chest, staring down at the familiar pasty-white face of her parent with a sort of disdain in her slanting black eyes. For a very long time she had stood like that, silent and staring. Then, quite suddenly, she had given way to a torrent of weeping, swaying her thin body, tearing at her bright hair, and stamping her small feet. The outburst had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. She glanced quickly about the bare room, taking everyone in, even the two policemen, in a sharp look of flashing scorn. And, in the next instant, she had turned and vanished through the door. (8)

She found herself in a position where she humiliated herself, and to escape both the

consequences of this action and the situation itself, she quickly left. She did the same thing here: she knew she could not escape the consequences of her lies, she could not protect herself nor her daughter from her husband's fury.

No matter the analysis, it is clear that the entire scene could be understood as a metaphor for Clare's life. Having to climb up the ladders of social hierarchy herself, raising herself out of poverty and misery to get to the very top. Her death, a quick fall of ambiguous cause comments on both the ease of falling from the grace of the New Negro Black bourgeoisie and the quick descent of the sparkly, grandiose Jazz Age into the Great Depression. Interestingly, the very ideas the novel seems to push—the objectivity of race, the fluidity of sexuality, the hypocrisy of the upper classes—are punished through the death of the character that best represents them, supporting the upkeep of the value system it intended to critique (McDowell).

Through the novel, the reader does not only gains insight of the glamorous parties and privileged way of living of the Roaring Twenties' upper classes, but also of the issues that influence their decisions and choices. Because of the misogyny faced by Black women both from members of their own community and from outsiders, as well, they adopted an ideology that—at the expense of alienating a few members of their community—granted them respectability and a sense of security. The New Negro ideology mostly supported by the main character, Irene Redfield, compels her to ignore and reconstruct her own sexuality and desires to maintain her respectability. She enforces the social boundaries she lives by, and wholeheartedly believes in on others, including her childhood friend, Clare Kendry. Because of Clare's mobility and fluidity, she is seen as a threat by Irene, her representation influenced by Irene's unreliability as a narrator. The two women's complicated relationships with their race and social standing leads them to view the act of passing as a means to reach the desired wealth they associate with whiteness. The novel climaxes with the death of Clare, which among its many interpretations, serves both as a metaphor for the life of Clare, and as the punishment of the ideologies she represents.

The “old longing” (98) in the novel refers to multiple types of longing: Irene's longing to protect her security and the ideology that she relies on, Clare's longing to belong to different groups all while maintaining the fluidity of her identity, and Brian's longing for Brazil, for a utopian society where his race and sexuality do not constrain him. Their “longing” for happiness, for the simple, superficial parties with jazz and contraband alcohol mentioned in the introduction—longing for a society that is different.

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