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## Challenging the Racial Dichotomy in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Nella Larsen's *Passing* introduces two African American women on a quest for an integrated identity. Irene and Clare are two pale-skinned, childhood friends who are light enough to pass for white. *Passing* is a work concerned with the representation and construction of race. Clare Kendry passes for white and she "whitens" her lifestyle by adjusting her clothes, behavior, gestures, and etiquette while resisting and denying any existence of her black culture. Irene on the other hand, lives as a black woman but remains a part of the black community only superficially. She occasionally masks her blackness and passes for white for her own convenience. Despite this racial divide, both women desire to achieve an integrated identity to live as both black and white. Irene attempts to achieve this integrated identity by accepting and practicing white standards while living as a black woman. Clare attempts to achieve an integrated identity by finding her way back to the black community. However, they ultimately fail at achieving this integrated identity as the novel reinforces the societal belief that a person can only have one race as either black or white, but not both.

### Disciplines

English Language and Literature

### Comments

Paper from Dr. Deborah Uman's English Senior Seminar course, Fall 2012.

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ENGL 420

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Challenging the Racial Dichotomy in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Nella Larsen's *Passing* introduces two African American women on a quest for an integrated identity. Irene and Clare are two pale-skinned, childhood friends who are light enough to pass for white. *Passing* is a work concerned with the representation and construction of race. Clare Kendry passes for white and she "whitens" her lifestyle by adjusting her clothes, behavior, gestures, and etiquette while resisting and denying any existence of her black culture. Irene on the other hand, lives as a black woman but remains a part of the black community only superficially. She occasionally masks her blackness and passes for white for her own convenience. Despite this racial divide, both women desire to achieve an integrated identity to live as both black and white. Irene attempts to achieve this integrated identity by accepting and practicing white standards while living as a black woman. Clare attempts to achieve an integrated identity by finding her way back to the black community. However, they ultimately fail at achieving this integrated identity as the novel reinforces the societal belief that a person can only have one race as either black or white, but not both.

Both women want different versions of an integrated identity where Clare would like to return to her birthright and Irene would like to adopt a white lifestyle. Clare has passed over to the white world but she wants to return to her former race. On the other hand, Irene believes that she is being loyal to her race by living as a black woman but she ironically upholds and attains white standards and morality even when she is not passing as white; thus, her double life and

double standards forces her to desire an integrated identity as well. Both women desire an integrated identity that incorporates white privilege while sharing the sense of community from the black culture so that they won't have to abandon or imitate the other race. The novel shows that an integrated identity is merely impossible. Passing doesn't only include an imitation of the behaviors, gestures, and etiquette of another race but it also involves the abandonment of that former race and neither woman want to do that. They try to avoid being placed on either side of this racial dichotomy but unfortunately, society constructs race to be divided into two hostile and antagonistic identities of black and white.

As both women try to migrate racially and culturally between two polar opposite races we can begin to see the failure of an integrated identity. The unsuccessful integration of black and white identities is the mark of this racial dichotomy coming into play within the novel. According to critical race theory, race is constructed by society and the social construction of race arranges people into distinct groups (Tyson 369-374). *Passing* presents these distinct groups to be between black and white and it doesn't present race as a choice but how race is assigned to a person based on their looks.

As a result, a lot of times, race is assessed based on skin color. If they look white, then they will be categorized among the whites and if they look black then they will be categorized to be black. Therefore, people are assigned to a race based on their looks and their performance (Rottenburg 492). Overall, Irene and Clare have performed different aspects of each race through a performative reiteration; this tells us that race doesn't only operate based on looks but, in addition to the behaviors, gestures, and etiquette of that race as well. Using skin color to assess race ultimately clashes because of people that racially pass for another race (such as, Clare permanently passing as white and Irene temporarily passing). Society is unaware of their true

identity and therefore they are assigned to the white race based on their looks but, if society knew that they had black blood running in them then, they would clearly be assigned to the black class. Larsen's novel suggests that race is not only manifested by skin color as Clare and Irene both racially perform white mannerisms despite that they are black. But what is important here is that their white performance with black backgrounds is another attempt to simply achieve an integrated identity, even though it is a failed attempt due to society's rigid racial structure.

More than anything Clare would like to experience being a part of the black community again. She has a black mother and a white father but she has passed over to the white world to obtain the white privileges that are granted with the white race. However, Clare begins to gain a strong thirst to return to her birthright, her former race. Being among blacks brings Clare a sense of liberation that she is unable to experience around white people. She feels comfort and an overall sense of community with blacks-- something that she has never been able to experience from whites. Unfortunately, Clare can't just abandon her identity as a white woman and return to her former race. She has passed as white and this puts her in danger due to society's fixed racial structure but, she is willing to attempt to achieve an integrated identity regardless of the consequences because the loneliness she experiences from passing as a white woman begins to overwhelm her. Clare openly admits that she lives in duplicity and isolation and she desires nothing more than to be among blacks again. She states, "For I am lonely, so lonely... cannot help to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; 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" (Larsen 7). Clare seeks freedom to redefine herself but she can only do this by being among blacks. The repetition of the word "lonely" reinforces her isolation and it adds conviction and certainty to what she's saying.

By repeating lonely, she is consciously indicating desperation to be among blacks again. Clare's simile expresses how she has never longed for anything as badly as she longs for Irene's company. Irene's company is a taste of the liberation that she feels when she is among blacks. This simile provides an idea of how incredibly Clare misses Irene. Her friendship with Irene reminds her of the lifestyle and relationships that she used to have with blacks. Clare's uses the word, "never", which has a profound effect of showing the true extent of how eager she is to renew their friendship by expressing that under no circumstance, there is nothing in this world that she would like more than Irene's company.

There is significance behind the statement, "in this pale life of mine" as it reveals Clare's neglect of the black culture as she now suddenly misses it. This is the beginning of Clare openly admitting that passing for white is not as great as it seemed to be even though whites are considered superior according to racial ideologies during this time period. She realizes that this need for belonging is just as strong if not stronger than having a higher racial status-- especially when it is a lie. She makes a metaphorical comparison of bright pictures in relation to the bright and cheerful culture of African Americans that she "once thought she was happy to be free of" (7). Here, Clare is admitting that her loneliness is taking over her life and she makes the comparison of living the white life to living with a constant ache. As Clare whitens her life, she is simultaneously losing pieces of her African identity. Consequently, her longing for blackness becomes a desperate craving to be a part of the black community. She is ultimately substituting Irene's company for the overall black culture that she misses. Clare passing over and having a deep desire to be among blacks again proves this unconscious draw that she has to her former race. She is attempting to reach out to both of her races; however, she expresses this juxtaposition as "a constant ache" suggesting that an integrated identity is unachievable.

Furthermore, it's not only achievable because of this rigid racial structure but because of status quo. Living as both black and white is simply not allowed. Society doesn't like it nor does society allow it. Society allows being either black or white, but not both. Clearly, then, we can see that Clare becomes stuck in the middle of this racial dichotomy, as she attempts to merge both identities by inviting Irene into her life because it is the one thing that sets her free from the white world that she is so eager to escape from.

Although Clare longs to be among the black community again, she would still like to uphold her appearance as a white woman because of the white privileges that she instantly obtains. Clare looks like a white woman and therefore she is granted certain rights, advantages, and benefits that come with the white race. This is because whites stand as the dominant race; consequently, they obtain the central role as they are placed as the norm, the standard, and as the superior race (Dyer 12). Therefore, due to white privilege, Clare would like to maintain her white identity. She lives much easier as a white woman because of these advantages that come with being white. This rigid racial structure has composed a "white supremacist society, where norms work by constructing a binary opposition between white and black in which white is always privileged over black" (Rottenburg 492). So, it is safe to say that being white secures a position of power and therefore, Clare feels compelled to maintain her white identity (in addition to merging her black identity).

The bottom line is that these black women attempt to integrate a mixed identity for the advancements, benefits, and material gains that come with the white race. Black females passing are simply attempting to make a way into America's white dominated society since it is structured on strict racial, class, gender hierarchies; however, a racial performance such as passing may be the only "way" they have to achieve some sense of socioeconomic mobility

during this time (Van Thompson 101). This was a typical dilemma that many mulattos and light skinned African Americans faced. This wasn't anything out of the ordinary. The concepts of passing and achieving an integrated identity that were presented in *Passing* were typical dilemmas that many African Americans encountered. Especially because they were offered the option to appear white with whitening cosmetics that lightened their skin color to be light enough to pass as white. These cosmetics were known as "Lucky Brown Cosmetics".

Lucky Brown cosmetics worked to enhance the appearance of blacks to seem white and they included objects such as bleaching creams and face powders. These cosmetics advertised skin whitening to suggest that skin whitening comes with a positive economic and physical lifestyle due to the newfound stability and satisfaction that is offered from white privileges. For example, Clare and Irene are both light enough to pass as white and therefore they both applied the privileges of being white to their life such as Irene having temporary relief from the hot sun at the Drayton hotel or Clare who marries a wealthy white husband for economic stability.

Larsen's novel in addition to these advertisements exposes an impressive historical importance: the racial ideology of being better off white but unable to be both black and white. The cultural moment during the time period of these objects reveal that fair skin leads to more opportunities as the cosmetics simultaneously reinforce racial ideologies and racial stratification. More importantly, these Lucky Brown Cosmetics from the early 1930s correspond to the New Historicist model of cultural hegemony by exposing white superiority ideologies. These racial ideologies affected the relationship, culture, and behavior of blacks; as a result, many of them decided to whiten their skin to appear whiter. There are two examples of advertisements that functions to persuade, promote, and influence others to whiten their skin. These posters serve as reality behind Larsen's novel as they display the impossibility of an integrated identity.



A “Lucky Brown: Instant Brown Brighten Cream” poster was advertising and promoting an immediate skin lightening cream to tempt blacks to look more white, exposing the racial ideology of white superiority and the white privilege that come with it. There is an image of a beautiful African American woman with African American features: big black eyes, a wider nose, full-sized lips, and short black hair (see Fig. 1). But what’s most important is the split in the middle of the female’s face. The left side of her face is a dark chocolate brown, while the right side is a bright, bronzed and fair tan. This split in skin color suggests the possibility of an integrated identity. It indicates a powerful pull advocating blacks to try to get closer to looking white, but it’s nothing but false hope. Even though the advertisement is implying that a black person can try to get closer to looking white it simultaneously implies that they will still be appointed to the black race. The advertisement is dangling white privilege right in front of the viewer by tempting blacks to change their appearance to seem white to retrieve white privilege but the ad specifically keeps her African American features the same to ultimately reinforce that even if a black person attempts to look white, they will never be white and they will be unable to fully achieve white privilege. Furthermore, this advertisement also uses the terms “lucky” and “instant”, to suggest that being a fair color is a privilege and it has its advantages. Simply put—a fair color is prized over a darker color; it is a fortunate and favored trait. Another key promotional strategy within this advertisement was done with the word “instant”. It differentiates the quality of the product by advertising that this cream works immediately. It is italicized to symbolically represent the speed of how fast this cream whitens as well as suggesting that the advantages that come with



*Fig 1* Lucky Brown Brighten Cream  
Source: Ferris State University

being white will also come immediately once this brightening cream is applied. Lastly, the word “brighten” offers a softer tone that indicates a vivid, lively, positive, and optimistic change rather than offensive words such as “whiten” or “bleach”. We see cultural hegemony present in the advertisement by exhibiting an image of an African American attempting to look like the dominant race but still maintaining black features to suggest that she will ultimately never be considered a part of the white race even when she tries to look white. Clearly from the novel and the advertisements, both items fail to show Clare, Irene, and the woman in the advertisement successfully achieving a fully integrated identity because it’s not accepted or wanted by society.

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* is an example of the identity crisis that many African American females faced and in the cultural moment that these Lucky Brown Cosmetics were sold, it reveals that racial differences became the catalyst to reinforce skin whitening to strengthen racial ideologies of white superiority. The Lucky Brown cosmetic products such as the brightening cream and the face powder are both products that helped blacks like Clare continue to live as a white woman in a white world with African American blood running through their veins. For example, she states, “You’d be surprised, ‘Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us. Maybe because there are so many more of them, or maybe because they are secure and so don’t have to bother” (Larsen 18). Clare feels that she lives an easier lifestyle by passing as white. Irene on the other hand, questions how she is able to permanently pass every day, all day without a problem? These artifacts from the 1930s contribute to a better understanding of Larsen’s novel by the images and language of the objects. These advertisements conveyed a negative connotation to darker skin making any African American conscious of their skin color and possibly influencing the way they may feel inferior due to their dark skin. These objects had a discriminatory tone without hesitation to push for skin lightening. Both objects showed the

easiness of skin whitening and how easy it may have been for Clare Kendry to make the decision to pass for white- seeing how there are products to help her maintain this image that encourage her and others to pass.

A “Lucky Brown Face Powder” advertisement again dangles white privilege on the product to push blacks to whiten their skin but secretly discriminating the buyer by refusing to allow the black person to truly be a part of the white race. This picture has a black woman, with black features but in white skin to reinforce the notion that buyer will still be associated with the black class. She had straight, silky, short smooth hair, wide nose, full lips, and she was holding a white powder puff to her chin and smiling (see fig. 2). She is inside of a soft blue heart within a pink border, surrounded by a heart and a bright yellow upward facing horseshoe with capital words stating: “LUCKY BROWN” on the horseshoe. By having a black woman in white skin still having black features reinforces the argument that this racial division disallows the integration of races. Having a yellow horseshoe with the words “lucky brown” can again prize lighter skin as a privileged trait. Furthermore, the presence of a horseshoe implies good luck; therefore, a horseshoe directly under the black female passing for white means that by using this product, there will be good fortune coming to the user, mainly because they are enhancing their skin color and a lighter skin color brings more opportunities. The woman is also placed inside of heart suggesting that romance will come along because she will be presumed to be more beautiful with a lighter skin color. Lastly, the bottom of the face powder box states: “face powder” in the color white directly



Fig 2 Lucky Brown Face Powder  
Source: Ferris State University

under the light skinned black female. The words in white connotes to the ultimate desired skin color. Yet again, the advertisement suppress the possibility of an integrated identity by having a black female with white skin be a part of both classes; instead, the advertisement still assigns her to the black race even with a white skin color reinforcing the notion that an integrated identity is merely impossible and unwanted in society. The existence of these artifacts indicates the societal belief of why the novel had to end with both women failing at achieving an integrated identity.

In addition to Clare, Irene also desires an integrated identity to fashion a sense of freedom from the suffocating restrictions of this racial structure. Irene would like to live as a black woman in hopes of adopting a white lifestyle. Irene is a light skinned African American woman who is light enough to pass as white but only occasionally passes for her own convenience to get a taste of white privileges as well. For example, the Drayton hotel doesn't allow blacks but it was so hot that day that Irene decided to racially perform as white so that she can have a break from the hot sun. Irene confesses that whites never pick up on her blackness but as Clare surveys Irene, Irene's fear of detection surfaces: "they always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know...But she looked, boldly this time, back into the eyes still frankly intent upon her" (Larsen 11). Irene's racial paradox is exposed by Clare's daunting gaze. Clare's gaze unveils Irene's insecurities about her invisible blackness when she decides to temporarily pass (Van Thompson 84). Irene affirms that no one ever picked up on her race when she was alone implying that she temporarily passes more than once. She tries to calm herself by telling herself that she couldn't possibly be detected but when she looks up again, Clare's still bluntly gazing at her, dissecting her physical traits, and trying to interpret her race. Clare's stare alludes to Irene questioning her

own attempt at passing for white. She fears the possibility of being caught since no whites suspect that she is ever black. More importantly, as Irene fears that this woman in front of her is detecting her true race, it never occurs to Irene if this woman is passing herself. This suggests that not only is race socially constructed to be divided between black and white but it is also determined and assessed based on skin color. Irene's attempt to temporarily pass and the fear of detection symbolize her failure of an integrated identity and the setting at the Drayton hotel displays society's rejection to an assimilated identity as well of a black woman living with a white lifestyle.

Ironically, Irene as a black woman only identifies with the white standards of life. She places white middleclass standing as her number one priority. Irene adopts white behavior even among her black community. We can see that she is really trying to achieve an integrated identity. For instance, she sees the Negro Welfare League as a social event rather than a fundraiser because she is more concerned with her middle class standing rather than the charity event itself (Youman 240). Furthermore, Irene increasingly becomes consumed with adopting a white lifestyle that she even degrades the lower class of her own race by exerting power over her own black servants (Brody 396). Clare talks and mingles with the maid and the cook to savor the black spirit; however, this to Irene is "an exasperating childlike lack of perception" because Irene believes one is not supposed to be friendly with the hired help (Larsen 144-145). Additionally, Irene even shelters her sons from race and avoids discussing racial terms and names. She states to her husband, "Just the same you're not to talk to them about the race problem. I won't have it" (Larsen 42). She assumes that discussing racial issues with her sons will ruin their youth so she avoids the entire discussion shielding them from racial consciousness (Ramon 47). Her attitude reflects her middle-class position and how much power it has in controlling her mind. Irene is the

epitome of a racial paradox in hopes of obtaining an integrated identity. Irene's dedication to her stable African American household with white upbringing represents the racial paradox that many face since they cannot achieve an integrated identity- they attempt to fuse both races together with different practices from each race; however, this becomes a life of irony as one stays loyal to a race that constantly clashes with the other destabilizing their identity as a whole.

Larsen's literature is not necessarily a representation of her life but it shows how the historical forces in her life effects the cultural content in her writing as they play out in her fiction. For example, Larsen embraces both aspects of her black and white identity; therefore, Larsen's fictional characters, Clare and Irene symbolize her wish for an integrated identity. George Hutchinson presents and analyzes Nella Larsen's biographical information with a New Historicist approach to reveal what Larsen means by her fiction through her biography. Hutchinson makes a compelling argument discussing how Larsen (and her fictional characters) are consumed with feelings of ethnic differences that results in a desire to "distinguish herself from other blacks to gain prestige...these biographies ends up buttressing the American racial ideology that renders biracial subjectivity invisible, untenable, or fraudulent" (Hutchinson 445). Hutchinson discusses how Larsen and her characters instantly detect racial differences that compel them to desire an integrated identity so that they can embrace aspects from both races. Feelings of ethnic differences force Larsen to distinguish herself from other blacks to get a taste of white privilege to gain prestige, respect, and a status--likewise to her fictional characters. Clare's return to the black community and Irene's acceptance of white standards are different versions of how both women attempt to achieve an integrated identity. However, America's racial ideology and its' racial dichotomy removes the possibility of having one in the first place.

Society's fixed racial structure eliminates interracial union by projecting it as untenable, unattainable, and shameful. Larsen and her characters have both sides of their mixed identity come out through their own character by their personal performances integrating black and white behaviors and mannerisms. However, Larsen can't write against the societal ideology that forces Clare and Irene to choose a race to align to. Hutchinson uses Nella Larson as his example of a racial hybrid/mulatto that lived within this time period suffering from "the bipolar structure of American black/white racial culture" (460). Therefore, Larsen and her characters' desire to share portions from two clashing races that results in problems and hesitations of which race they will choose to align to because society forces them to choose only one race to assimilate, identify with, and claim. Consequently, the ending of *Passing* isn't Larsen's wish but the social pressures and the hegemonic view of social beliefs are so strong that she couldn't end her novel on an optimistic view due to society's suppression of an integrated identity.

As the novel comes close to an end, Irene becomes increasingly frustrated that Clare was able to come close to achieving an integrated identity unlike herself, who finds it progressively harder to fuse both identities; consequently, her inability to achieve this integrated identity forces her to be angry at her racial paradox. She is a black woman but she identifies with white standards—this is unacceptable to society because she is sharing elements from both races and society proposes that one can only be either black or white but not both. As a result, Irene remains a part of the black world superficially because she secretly desires to be a part of the white world. She states:

“She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race... Irene

Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race...it was a brutality, and undeserved.” (Larsen 69)

This passage is essential in revealing some of Irene’s racial ideologies as she describes how the category of race is enforced upon her. First, let’s take a look at how she classifies this racial dichotomy as two “allegiances”; signifying that Irene illuminates this racial dichotomy as two competing races that forces one to choose where their loyalty resides. These two clashing races are polar opposites and due to society’s construction of race, we have created “blackness and whiteness to constitute two mutually exclusive and antagonistic forms of identity” (Hutchinson 444). Consequently, Irene becomes caught between the two races due to the impossibility of integrating an identity that merges black and white together. With this thought in mind, she is hit with the epiphany that they are “different, yet the same”. In other words, they are different in advantages but the same in that they are both linked to people. This epiphany of this racial dichotomy has Irene feel a rage of struggle. She expresses this rage with this one explanation point. This explanation point places major significance on the emotional turbulence Irene encounters from the contrast of races. Irene is desperate to find a solution to a non-achievable integrated identity. But, due to this impossibility, she now feels that race has “bound and suffocated her” (Larsen 69). This diction truly expresses the restriction placed on her from this racial dichotomy. Most importantly, throughout this entire passage, race is described as something imposed. Something she didn’t decide for herself but was unfortunately dealt with. She’s stuck in her black world with an artificial loyalty and she is confronted with the burden of race forcing her to regret being born black. According to Margaret Gallego, “this double consciousness eventually carries a dilemma of duality as one may reject African American



identity to merge into a better self” (31). We can see this start to take place in Irene as she regrets being black because she wishes she could achieve the advantages that comes with the white race. This is ultimately the beginning of Irene revealing her secret desire to be white. As she contemplates on her racial paradox, she comes across the consequences of passing as “something would be crushed. A person or the race” (Larsen 69). If Irene did pass, it would crush her black heritage, but she decided not to pass so now it’s just simply crushing her. By now, she just can’t help it and she openly admits that she wishes she “had not been born a Negro”. Once and for all, her version of rebelling is done through her ironic ways of living as an African American with stereotypical white middle class values, white morality, and aligning herself with bourgeois elements of society. We can conclude from Irene’s anger of being racially paradoxical that an integrated race is not only unachievable but simply, unattainable as well.

As Clare becomes closer to her black community while maintaining her white identity, Irene becomes threatened by Clare’s ability to use white power to her advantage because when Irene tries to adopt the white lifestyle, she destabilizes her black identity. Irene experiences tension between her identity and her racial performance of reciting white norms that in actuality destabilize her identity as an African American. Irene’s inability to refashion her subjectivity is reflected in her judgments and projections of Clare (Tsimpouki 100). There are several instances where Irene looks at Clare with a taste of bitterness as she prides herself on her loyalty to her race; for example, when Clare asks Irene if she has ever thought of passing permanently, Irene answers angrily, “no. why should I? And so disdainful was her voice and manner that Clare’s face flushed and her eyes glinted. You see, Clare, I’ve got everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money” (Larsen 20). The difference in their racial performance threatens Irene. Clare seizes white power to her advantage; however, she upholds and acknowledges her prior identity

and she achieves a stronger sense of double consciousness that helps her to remain perpetually aware of her own racial origin and her duplicitous positionality. While on the other hand, Irene remains black but utilizes white practices and white performances to attain a positive social status (Brody 397). In other words, Clare maintains a sense of her black identity during her individual performance but Irene becomes threatened by Clare's ability to imitate and denounce white society as Clare passes and adopts white power to her benefit.

Due to Irene becoming threatened from Clare becoming extremely close to achieving an accepted integrated identity, Irene needed to destroy Clare's potential of achieving one. Irene becomes intimidated by Clare as Clare slowly maneuvers her way back into the black community and into Irene's lifestyle, house, and family. Irene suddenly feels the need to stop Clare from achieving this integrated identity signifying that Irene is also ironically a part of this hegemonic view that one must choose one race to align to (this is ironic of Irene to be a part of this hegemonic view because she too desires an integrated identity of living as a black woman with a white lifestyle). As Irene feels threatened by Clare's closeness to achieving this integrated identity, Irene's cigarette uniquely foreshadows Clare's death: "Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below" (Larsen 78). This tiny spark symbolizes Clare falling to the ground. Clare is a spark of life. She is vivacious, beautiful, fiery, and lively -- likewise to a spark. This spark falling foreshadows Clare falling out of the window. As Clare suddenly "falls" out the window, Irene thinks: "Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. The beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! (Larsen 80). The exclamation point after "gone" demonstrates Irene's excitement. It indicates her happiness of eliminating the source of her problems. She admits to all the lovely

and graceful things that made Clare Kendry a threat to her life: her pale face, blond hair, red lips, pensive eyes, and her seductive smile. Clare Kendry's "beauty had torn at Irene's placid life" suggesting that Clare's spirit was so lively and vibrant that it intimidated and put pressure on Irene's ordinary, serene, and predictable lifestyle. Irene's life was set in an orderly fashion and Clare was capable of heights and depths of feeling that Irene had never known (Youman 238). As a result, Clare's vivaciousness threatened Irene's tiresome lifestyle. Irene was never able to experience the lifestyle Clare was exposed to nor was she close to experiencing almost accepted integrated identity that Clare was close to achieving. But Irene's loss of feeling is not as important as her gain; thus she will do anything to safeguard her position and keep her life fixed and certain. Consequently, when Clare became a threat to Irene's life, Irene acted. Clare was too close to achieving this integrated identity and Irene was not going to allow that. Irene's growing jealousy was a result of Clare's ability to use white power to her advantage and her jealousy was her motivator to destroy Clare Kendry.

Clare's death symbolizes the failure of an integrated identity; however, Irene's nervousness, fear, double consciousness, and aggravation with this racial structure also exhibit her own failure of an integrated identity as well. Irene temporarily passes when she is around whites proving that society wouldn't accept a black woman acting, pretending, and mingling with whites; when she passes as white or when she is in "white situations", her fear and nervousness surfaces as well as a powerful sensation called double consciousness. Double consciousness is this "twoness" that African Americans face as they approach the problem of the color line (Ramon 50). This cultural hegemony forces blacks to contemplate whether to stay loyal to their black community or to behave like whites. This sums up this "twoness" that blacks encounter. Many blacks realize that their complexion will be the reason behind a lot of

outcomes; consequently, they face the unfortunate realization of the power behind their skin color. This double consciousness is most evident with shifting relationships among blacks and whites. In other words, blacks instinctively move between this “twoness” of behaving either more like blacks or more like whites depending on who they are surrounded by. This instinctive movement demonstrates the non-existence of integrated identities that both Clare and Irene try to achieve since they have to maneuver between both races. Since Clare has to shift behaviors when she is around her white husband John compared to her behavior when she’s around Irene and her friends demonstrate this twoness that she must move through. Irene must move through this twoness as she contemplates on what standards and morality she will align herself to. Both Clare and Irene move between racial behaviors and attitudes. Their shift in behaviors and thoughts prove that they do not and cannot achieve an integrated identity. They tend to choose how to behave on the spot according to who they are around. This double consciousness theory encompasses a hybrid understanding and outlook to help define how African Americans and mulattos function. Clare and Irene lead double lives, double social classes, double thoughts, and double duties. The weight of their double consciousness reflect how important their race and culture truly is to them. Their desire for an integrated identity grows as Clare receives spiritual renewal from the presence of blacks while Irene feels restricted due to her race’s limited accessibility to society’s advantages; therefore, as they attempt to create an integrated identity, their double consciousness is constantly active on the account of that they are juggling different mannerisms from different races. The fact that they experience double consciousness and have to go through such measures signifies their own failure at being able to live with an integrated identity.

An example of how this double consciousness plays in action occurs in the scene where Irene suddenly and instinctively pretends to be white by laughing uncontrollably to John Bellow's racist joke after sharing with the ladies why he calls Clare "Nig:

Gertrude after another uneasy shift in her seat added her shrill one. Irene, who had been sitting with lips tightly compressed, cried out: "That's good!" and gave way to gales of laughter. She laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others subsided. (Larsen 29)

Gertrude's uneasy shift demonstrates how she felt uncomfortable. Her body language signaled her discomfort around John Bellow and the fact that he was a racist man mingling with three unknown African American women passing to be white. Irene who was sitting with her lips tightly pressed signaled her attempts at holding back from saying anything to John's racist joke. But her double consciousness suddenly kicked in as she realized who she was around and that she needed to pretend to be white; as a result, instead of getting mad at the joke, she laughs in tears about it. She laughed so hard that there are references to pain in her sides and how her throat ached from laughing so hard. She continued to laugh because it was her awareness of that duality that led her to scrutinize herself and who she is surrounded by. Her double consciousness kicks in whenever she is consciously hit with the idea that the white race is in the empowered position such as John Bellow. Irene's double consciousness reflect how she instinctively realized to abandon her emotions from John Bellow's racism and perform as a white person would because it is the double consciousness that is guiding her behavior when she decides to pass. In Irene's attempts to achieve an integrated identity, her intrinsic duality calls for a reconciliation of two polar opposite races that are impractical of union. Due to the impossibility of uniting this

racial dichotomy, this double life eventually leads to this racial performance. This performance proves society's disapproval of an integrated identity if Irene must perform white and enact the white race rather than being allowed to be black around whites. Clearly, Irene gets nervous around "white situations"; as a result, we can see that she ultimately fails at achieving an integrated identity. She still has to hide her true nature and identity even when she adopts a white lifestyle because she has to behave as whites' would behave. Evidently, she has to modify her behavior despite her resentment to John Bellow's racism but, if she achieved an integrated identity, she wouldn't have had to change her behavior in the first place. She could've said what she wanted to say instead of pretending to laugh at John's racist joke.

Irene's secret desire to pass and Clare's desire to return to her birthright are different attempts from both women to attempt to achieve an integrated identity. Clare made the decision to pass for the attractiveness of the lifestyle while Irene superficially remains loyal to her black race but upholds white standards. The difference in their racial performances proves that these women fail to achieve an integrated identity. Each race carries its own benefits but we can also see how artifacts from the 1930s present a cultural hegemony that exerts white power by dangling white privilege to a black buyer. Larsen's novel and the advertisements enforce the societal belief that suppresses interracial communion. Therefore, the women become stuck in between this racial dichotomy forcing them to achieve racial performances of deception due to their confusion of how to achieve an integrated identity that fuses both races equally and with acceptance from society; as a result, when their double consciousness surfaces, they modify their behaviors according to whom they are around. Despite their failure at achieving an integrated identity, their desire for one challenges this racial dichotomy even though the novel reinforces status quo of being only black or white, but not both.

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