CHALLENGING THE RACIAL DICHOTOMY OF BLACK & WHITE
IN NELLA LARSEN’S PASSING
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SUMMARY

- Nella Larsen’s Passing introduces two African American women as they encounter a search for identity while one lives in the white world and the other, who lives in the “right” world—according to Irene Redfield.
- Clare dies a mysterious death as she falls out of an open window with no clarification of whether she was pushed or not—making Clare’s death an unsolved mystery.
- In the cases of Clare and Irene, Clare successfully passes for white while ironically, Irene masks her blackness even when she is not passing as white.

PASSING

- Passing carries a special twist unlike many other traditional fictions of the “tragic mulatto”.
- Larsen’s novel goes against the literary tradition of illustrating racial, gender, and economic oppression. Larsen “mocks the tragic mulatto paradigm” (Van Thompson 83).
- Instead of presenting a typical, tragic mulatto who faced suffering—Larsen presents the attractiveness of passing and the more erotic and dangerous aspects of the racial masquerade.

ARGUMENT

By looking at Clare’s decision to pass and Irene’s decision to pass temporarily with invisible blackness, we can see that both women try to challenge the racial structure of black and white. Both women try to show race as an option, but the novel ultimately reinforces status quo—you can only be either black or white in society. An integrated identity can not be achieved; therefore, this fixed racial structure results in this racial performance of deception as passers and temporary passers face constant denials of their true identity in their attempts to achieve an integrated identity.

OBSERVATIONS: LUCKY BROWN FACE POWDER
- Picture of an African American female in Caucasian skin
- Yellow horseshoe with the words “lucky brown”
- The words: “face powder” in white connotes to the ultimate desired skin color.

OBSERVATIONS: LUCKY BROWN BRIGHTEN CREAM
- Bright, soft yellow background
- Image of a beautiful African American woman with African American features: big black eyes, a wider nose, full-sized lips, and short black hair
- Split in color tone
- Terms: “lucky”, “instant” & “brighten”

ARTIFACTS
Lucky Brown cosmetics such as bleaching creams and face powders were objects from the early 1930s that revealed crucial racial ideologies that impacted the relationship, culture, and behavior of blacks.

PASSING

“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 was glad to be free of... it’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases” (Larsen 7).

SOURCEs