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## Fade to Black: Effects of the White Gaze in Nella Larsen 's *Passing*

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In the novella *Passing*, author Nella Larsen rejects racial "otherness" by completely stripping race of its visual power. Forcing her audience to grapple with external and internal classifications of racial identity, Larsen explores unchallenged constructions of whiteness and blackness through the gaze of the prejudiced white world. Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of *double-consciousness*, Larsen confronts the humiliation and warped self-consciousness of being "born with a veil" of separation between the "correct" race and all others. Upon realization of one's blackness (inclusion in the "Negro problem") a split in identity occurs, in which the African-American begins to "see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 334-5). In *Passing*, Nella Larsen attempts to merge this "double self into a better and truer self" and "In this merging... *wishes neither of the older selves to be lost*" (335). Using light-skinned people "passers" to represent the conflict of "two-ness," the Negro and the American (here 'American' defined in *whiteness*), Larsen constructs the novella itself in a *masked* format – structured much like the three Acts of a play (335). Through the twinned relationship of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, Larsen illustrates the struggle to remain visible beyond the suffocations of internalized oppression. Dissatisfaction with their chosen identities leads these two characters to test the boundaries of racial identity, each comprising one-half of an incomplete whole, and ultimately fading beneath the scrutiny of the White gaze.

The audience is first introduced to the White gaze as light-skinned Irene Redfield *passes* for white (out of convenience) in order to escape a fainting spell in the stifling streets of Chicago. Upon her arrival to the upper-class Drayton hotel for a cooling glass of tea (and disguised as white), Irene feels the burning eyes of a white woman piercing her racial confidence. An intense fear of expulsion arises within Irene: "It was the idea of being ejected from any place... that disturbed her" (Larsen 16). The threat of Jim Crow instills fear of humiliation in connection to the disgusting *black* identity she currently rejects.

Carrying on the theme of removal (a loss of identity by force), Irene moreover reveals an intense preoccupation with manners and appearances. She begins to feel her "two-ness," second-guessing every aspect of her outward identity for blatant signs of exposure. Nervously returning the "attractive" woman's stare (in an attempt to address her rudeness), Irene alludes to the woman's desirable "dark... eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the *ivory* of her skin" (14). An obsession with social niceties and suppression of female sexuality is represented in Irene's returned gaze. She judges both the white woman's sensual nature as well as her evident lack of social graces in staring. With this Irene creates a reverse black gaze on

whiteness (though she is outwardly presenting herself as white). Bell hooks pinpoints the modern black gaze on whiteness as one of a similar terror, describing it interestingly as the prominent “representation of whiteness in the black imagination” (174). Irene projects those suppressed aspects of herself onto the white woman as improper, yet is simultaneously attracted to them.

Irene’s fear climaxes as the woman approaches, though her face is unthreatening. The two soon realize a shared *dark* past, that the “white” woman is really a childhood friend of Irene’s (*also passing as white*), and obviously shares a similar internal conflict. Clare Kendry is sincerely delighted to be in the presence of an old acquaintance, and openly presents herself – perceived by Irene to be her complete opposite in character. However, Irene continues to construct herself as the “blacker” one of the two as they converse and Clare reveals that she has permanently “passed over” into the white world. Literally reading Irene’s thoughts, the audience is led to believe that by externally remaining “within her race” Irene is somehow racially superior and secure in her black identity (through marriage to a black man and living in a black community). A *good black* would embrace their inherent racial identity, and limit themselves within a system that naturally limits them anyway. Irene’s actions in passing as white obviously prove otherwise. In a similar resolve to Du Bois, both women have decided to take advantage of their pallor (whether they admit it or not), that the white world “should not keep these prizes, some, all, [they] would wrest from them” (335).

During this first meeting, Clare describes “when the shadow swept across” her and the realization of her *two-ness* struck “with a certain suddenness” after living with her racist white aunts as a teenager (Du Bois 335). They enforced concepts of race as an internal inferiority, resulting in a serious loss of consciousness in young Clare: “to their notion, hard labor was good for me. I had Negro blood, and they belonged to the generation that had written and read long articles headed: ‘Will the Blacks Work?’” The hateful old women continually condemned Clare as daughter of Ham, cursed by God for all time. In rebellion against the objectified black persona, Clare sheds her black identity in order to be human, declaring that she is “determined to get away, to be a person and not a character or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham” (Larsen 26). In this way, Clare is less concerned with perceptions of the black world, but instead attempts to discover her humanity in the opposite identity than the one which was forced upon her in childhood. The “privileged” paleness these two women share leaves them in a racial limbo, cursed in their ethnic fluidity.

However, Irene only rejects external whiteness to maintain appearances, still living her life through white ideologies and judgments. Irene’s desire for the “security” she feels denied as a black proctors her white mentality and lifestyle. Irene is manipulative, deceptive, and most dangerous in her desire to “merge” her double self. Far too concerned with her facade as the “blacker” of the two, and judging Clare based on outward standards of blackness (ironically created through the White gaze), Irene suffers quietly within her slowly deteriorating mind. To admit insecurity in her black heritage would

shatter the walls of “safety” she has painstakingly built around her life. Larsen even alludes to Irene’s highly unstable identity through her inability to narrate the novella in the first person. Instead, the reader learns the story through the revelation of Irene’s denial and insecure thought processes.

She is in consistent denial of her white-identity, always thinking purely in terms of the external (much like the whiteness she claims to reject). Irene describes her relationship with Clare as “Strangers in their means of living...their desires and ambitions...even in their racial consciousness...the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if Clare did not run the strain of black blood” (Larsen 63). Here Irene demonstrates the depth of her white internalizations as she defines race internally, in Clare’s “strain of black blood.” Through Irene, Larsen illustrates the irreparable damage and self-hating effects of the white gaze, in line with Du Bois’ double-consciousness.

Irene’s physical attraction to Clare is perhaps an attraction to outward *whiteness* and all that it encompasses in lifestyle and opportunity. Clare’s enthusiasm in seeing Irene is similarly an attraction to the blackness her life lacks in the external realm. Both women reveal a masked dissatisfaction with their separate attempts to merge conflicting selves. A mirroring effect takes place in which each woman identifies the lacking whiteness or blackness within her life reflected in the other. So despite their “better judgment,” Irene (subconsciously) and Clare (openly) create opportunities to see one another again. Irene *outwardly* claims to hate Clare and her blatant rejection of her heritage, however Irene also finds herself unable to control her desire to keep Clare in her life. Clare becomes a necessary scapegoat for both Irene’s unwanted projections, as well as a link to whiteness – the white world that Irene cannot blatantly embrace, but instead follows in ideology and lifestyle.

Furthermore, Larsen underlines Irene’s internalization of white slants of black femininity as hyper-sexualized *temptresses*, an image rejected as extremely negative. She similarly *over*-mothers her children and husband in an attempt to refute stereotypes of black females as detached mothers. Because they are representative of the white lifestyle she desires, Irene finds stability in her “picture-perfect” marriage, children, and suppressed female sexuality. In an effort to achieve Hazel Carby’s “true womanhood” defined as “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity...With them was promised happiness and power” (23), Irene’s need to refute stereotypes of black women are an answer to those created in slavery. She models herself after the white ideal of “proper” womanhood during that time period by repressing and overcompensating for the “shortcomings” of her chosen external race. However, writer/poet Audre Lorde challenges Irene’s mode of handling racial and gendered oppression:

We have been raised to fear the *yes* within ourselves, our deepest cravings... for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, *externally defined*, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women...satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the

numbness which so often seems like the only alternative in our society. (57-58)

In suppression of her "deepest cravings" and caught in a sacrificial mentality (for all black women, *she alone* must suffer), Irene allows her needs to fester within her conflicted mind. She is completely swallowed up in her external identity, designating the internal as secondary. Continued repression of black female identity ultimately leads to the violent expulsion and disappearance of identity at the close of the novella, as Irene's loss of control becomes unbearable.

On the other hand, Clare embraces her black femininity wholeheartedly, empowered in her sexuality and aware of her affect on men of *all* races. In line with Lorde's analysis, Clare indulges in her desires as a black woman, but is unable to escape the grasp of a constricted white life. In contrast to Irene's over-mothering, Clare resents her only child as the sole factor chaining her to her marriage and white society lifestyle. When Clare claims that "children aren't everything," Irene's hasty response is in accordance with her fake identity – what she is *expected* to say (as a *good black mother*). Clare adopts the *actual* ideologies of white women of the antebellum period: "white women...were not living embodiments of true womanhood, but...paid little attention to the analysis of the function of the ideology" (Carby 25). Clare welcomes repressed concepts of blackness. Once again, just as Clare openly passes and honestly conducts herself (minus that one *big* secret), Irene always thinks in terms of disproving stereotypes of black femininity and masking her true self (Larsen 81).

While the Clare and Irene persistently claim their differences, Larsen goes one further stripping the two women of disparity in the economic circumstances of their lives. While Irene resides in bourgeois Harlem, she does not work to support her family, but leads a very comfortable life married to a successful doctor (as does Clare, but within the context of a white society). Irene is financially stable and socializes with elite black (and some white) societies, even employing black maids within her home (which Clare refuses to do). Furthermore, she willingly adopts white standards of beauty, often seen powdering her nose or thinking of her outfit for upcoming events. As Irene becomes absorbed in her white identity and disproves the prejudice of the white gaze, she is able to further distance herself from the blackness she so abhors. The two women truly are twins – *two halves to one whole* – both employing their racial ambiguity in a semi-permanent sense: "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 334). They are only separate in opposing racial ideologies and direction. However, this relationship proves too conflicted to survive being "torn asunder," an identity crisis on the brink of implosion. Clare is portrayed as the one *true* lover of blackness, trapped in her chosen white identity; whereas Irene reviles her unbalanced dark self, longing for the superficial white life she is denied as a black woman.

When first placed in Clare's white world, Irene plays the part of the "good black," yet is somewhat exhilarated by the experience, feeling the

imbalance of her two-ness shift in favor of whiteness. Lying to the reader, Irene claims "when she examined her feeling of annoyance...that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind...in the whole pattern of her life" (Larsen 34). Even as she is forced to embrace external whiteness, Irene disguises her guilty fulfillment in self-denial. Additionally, Larsen notes Clare's role as a racial "risk-taker," for which Irene jealously aches but simultaneously rejects. Clare is aware of those who reflect a similar racial conflict, purposely surrounding herself with women who are able to physically pass for white. She is similarly exhilarated in her racial ambiguity, enjoying her ability to temporarily merge her two selves—the white socialite and her black roots—functioning as both observer and concurrently inhabiting the "exotic" other. However, the "white" gaze is flipped on Irene as she feels ashamed of being associated with blackness when Gertrude and Clare discuss it openly and negatively. In the elitist company of externally "white" women, she is confronted with her own demons as the other two discuss their fear of birthing a dark child, and thus being discovered as black (36-7).

Upon Irene's first meeting of Clare's oblivious and blatantly racist white husband (John Bellew), Irene cringes as he shockingly greets Clare, "Hello, Nig," cheerfully explaining that when the two married "she was 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" (39). Bellew unsuspectingly cites the progression of Clare from whiteness to blackness, her initial split in identity to reclaim a "white" humanity, and present attempt to salvage her black roots and become *whole* once again. Irene is set into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, a sign of her internalization of Bellew's remarks. She begins to adopt the white gaze as her own, and an intensification of inner division takes place. Here begins Irene's mental breakdown which ultimately prompts the fading of identity in both women.

Parallel to Clare's white Aunts, Bellew becomes representative of white American racism – the white gaze – bell hooks' terrorist of the black world. When asked how he feels about African-Americans, he laughingly replies "I don't dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she's trying to turn into one" (40). The situation becomes ever more absurd with each ignorant word Bellew utters. In her "escape" to whiteness and rejection of black prejudice, Clare has ironically jailed herself in a similar environment to that of her Aunts, triggering a romanticized love of blackness through Irene. As the conversation progresses Bellew gets serious: "I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (40). His ironic and prophetic line perpetuates the concept of race as internal. In disregarding race through skin color, (much like the Aunts) Bellew also defines racial inferiority in blood. The source of Clare's identity crisis is revealed, as she is masked in "an expression so dark and deep and unfathomable that [Irene] had for a short moment the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart" (41). This fleeting fading of consciousness, an expulsion of sorts, is the only sign of Clare's loss of white identity within this environment. As the 'Nig' identity becomes prominent, Clare is reminded of childhood humiliations,

and removes herself from the situation – another escape, but this time into blackness (Sullivan 375). A similar fear of external humiliation builds within Irene as she witnesses Clare's separation.

A masked anger (probably out of envy rather than racial insult) overtakes Irene once she leaves Clare's home. However, she rationalizes the situation thinking that "She had to Clare Kendry a duty... bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever" (Larsen 52). This statement conceals Irene's true motives in maintaining the relationship, while portraying her still as the sacrificial character in the novella. The back and forth tug-of-war in Irene's thoughts leads her to later sarcastically claim that she has "no intention of being the link between [Clare] and her *poorer darker brethren*" (55). These are a clearer expression of Irene's honest opinion of her own race, rather than Clare's supposed "uppity" elitist mentality. In either case, the relationship is reciprocally structured, and manifests with greater strength in spite of Irene's professed martyrdom and phony whining.

As Clare becomes a more permanent fixation in her life, Irene finds a peculiar sense of completion in the relationship. She gives into the friendship to a certain extent, each woman partially achieving the wholeness they seek in the other. The merging of selves is somewhat solidified when Clare visits Irene after a long period of separation. Irene is clearly still dealing with conflicts in their relationship, ever-critical of Clare's blatant disregard for external heritage. Prior to Clare's arrival, Irene is obviously dissatisfied with her reflection in the mirror, but as soon as Clare enters the mirrored image, Irene's accepts the addition with an overwhelming enthusiasm. Clare is again confirmed as Irene's racial and sexual ideal: "Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden onrush of affectionate feeling... with awe in her voice: 'Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare!'" (64-5). Here Irene admits her desire for them to be one – her idolization of Clare. This is the reflection she wishes to see – the other half of her two-ness, her second self.

Clare's attendance to a "Negro Welfare League" event organized by Irene once again demonstrates her willingness to get caught in her passing, a risk-taker exhilarated in her ambiguity. She enjoys the experience of both being the "exotic" other (under the curious black gaze), and yet is allowed to view the "exotic" other through a white gaze on blackness. Irene comments on this contradiction of double-sight in passing: "I think what they feel is... a kind of emotional excitement... the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange... perhaps a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it's really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty" (Larsen 76). Irene speaks as much of her own perceptions of race as all other attendants to the event (her repugnance to blackness, her white gaze). She even admits that she knows "colored girls who've experienced the same thing—the other way round, naturally" (76). This statement is the closest that Irene ever actually comes to speaking the words she has so long repressed within herself, admitting her allegiance to whiteness over her chosen race.

When discussing methods of discerning the race of the racially ambiguous, Irene's developing white gaze becomes evermore prevalent. Chatting with white friend Hugh Wentworth, Irene claims that there are some things inherent to race that all "blacks" or "whites" possess, but cannot define or place this into words. However, based on this definition, Irene was completely fooled by Clare's passing at the Drayton, leading the reader to doubt her reliability of opinion. A belief in this imperceptible "feeling" is a belief in the inherency of race itself, rather than a definition of race as a social construction of white supremacy (77-8). Irene is quickly spiraling into dangerous territory as her internalized white gaze takes precedence in her life.

Tensions rise in the relationship as Clare begins to show "an exasperating childlike lack of perception" (79) spending her visits conversing with the black maids – confirming their humanity – and rejecting Irene's perceptions of *correct* conduct of white status. Clare is more concerned with racial sisterhood, rejecting the 'nig' identity in herself and others, and upsetting Irene's "ideal" image of Clare in whiteness. However, Clare "still remained somewhat apart," and their merging becomes obviously unfulfilling. The twinning effect continues as Irene's thoughts are reflected in Clare's willingness to "hurt anybody, throw anything away" to achieve her desires (81). When Irene begins to fear that her personal life and sources of stability are threatened by Clare (her marriage to Brian), similar thought processes cross her mind. She literally throws Clare away to maintain the security and repression of self that Clare represents in reflection. However, Irene fails to realize that she cannot survive without her other half.

With vengeful thoughts at the core of her mind, Irene runs into Bellew on the street with dark-skinned friend Felise Freeland linked on her arm. Felise immediately becomes Irene's dark mirror as well as recognition of Clare's black identity through Irene's literal linkage to Felise. Bellew's smile fades as the chain of connection between Irene to his "white" wife becomes apparent; the illusion is gone in proximity to Irene's dark friend. Moreover, just as Clare once retreated within herself through Bellew's racist spouting off, Irene also suffers a fade in consciousness. As recognition crosses his features, Irene withdraws inward: "her face had become a mask" (99). The white gaze connects her to his "Nig" character of blackness, and yet another split in identity occurs. Irene evidently "could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry" (100). They are forever linked, and Irene does not *really* want to be separate from Clare, hence her sabotage of every opportunity to break their connection.

Sexual tensions rise, and Clare's black identity begins to overpower her white identity (consequently Irene's white identity and ambitions become threatened). Irene hates to think of Clare being "free" (divorced) of Bellew, *free* to re-adopt a black identity, while Irene is to be forced to continue unfulfilled in her whiteness. Irene's only link to the pale world begins to pass back over the racial divide, and a terrifying awareness of her weakening control over Clare leads Irene to begin plotting her murder. "If Clare should die! Then—Oh, it was vile! To think, yes, to wish that!... But the thought stayed with her" (101).

Murder becomes the only alternative in order to completely remove the threat without freeing Clare to be an openly black woman. "Freedom" entails the unleashing of all of Irene's repressed projections on Clare, shattering the forced "stability" of her life. For the first time she hates her chosen blackness aloud: "Irene Redfield wished...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...Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children" (98). She has hit rock bottom, and is willing to "hurt anybody, throw anything away" to achieve her means. Little does she know that in killing Clare, she ultimately kills herself.

Clare is finally revealed at a gathering at the Freelands. Bellew's *bellows* break up the lively party, accusing his wife: "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" His words reaffirm the humiliations that Clare was unable to escape in childhood, as well as Irene's feared humiliations (which have yet to ensue if Clare is *freed*). Clare is once again the "exotic" other, standing by the window, the mask threatening to cover her face. However, she appears unaffected, "composed as if everyone were not staring...as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring" (111). A realization of her freedom from whiteness strikes all three concerned individuals – Bellew, Clare, and most of all – the unstable Irene. Liberated, Clare smiles faintly – Irene, running to her side, "couldn't have her free," and the final violent ejection (and the ultimate sacrifice) takes place as Clare is pushed out the open window. Clare's body disappears as Larsen exclaims: "Gone!...That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life" (111). Irene's white ideology overpowers her sanity as she hopefully and fearfully wonders if Clare is dead on the street below.

Driven down to the street out of a fear of exposure, Irene struggles against the blackness that overwhelms her, "pitching downwards" to Clare's mangled body. "How she managed to make it without fainting she never knew" (113). A psychological death is taking place as Irene begins to fade out of consciousness, both fighting the literal urge to faint (in shock), but also dying with the loss of her other half – an unresolved "two-ness" which is at last "torn asunder." Irene's fear of ejection that originated the first day in the Drayton comes full circle, resulting in the most cruel and blatant form of removal possible in death. The fainting which brought her to the uppity hotel is reiterated as Irene struggles against unconsciousness. Clare's removal is similarly attributed to a fainting spell, and Irene disappears, torn apart in her efforts to resolve her dual identity. Just as she attempts to assert the "I" she had so long been unable to confirm, Irene too is gone, engulfed in her own darkness (114). The curtain falls, and all fades to **black**.

By stripping race of its external power, Nella Larsen's rich novella *forces* her audience to grapple with inner conflicts of racial identity, while simultaneously wading through the thought processes of an unbalanced narrator. W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of 'Double-Consciousness' strengthens Larsen's arguments against race as internal, turning to destructive societal forces as the source of broken cultural identity. Ultimately, *Passing* illustrates the destructive

effects of this split in consciousness and resolutions to merge "two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 335). In an effort to reverse the damaging influences of the White gaze, bell hooks calls for a white Double-Consciousness in which "white people...shift locations...[and] see...the way in which whiteness acts to terrorize without seeing" (177). By reversing the direction of the gaze, the white world will (*hopefully*) become mindful of the power of racist oppression – the psychological impact of prejudice on the black imagination. Until a white self-awareness is achieved, the *passers* of the world will continue to fade out of consciousness, "looking at one's self through the eyes of others...measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 335).

## *We Wear the Mask*

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, ---  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!

--Paul Laurence Dunbar  
(1872-1906)

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