Subversive Themes and Dangerous Sub-plots in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*

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Abstract

This paper explores Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), a Harlem Renaissance fictitious work that displays its author’s avant-gardism in her approach to race and gender issues of the 1920s segregated America. Larsen’s novel centers on the theme of passing, as a social phenomenon that was in vogue during the 1920s. Larsen’s critically tackles this complex subject by juxtaposing two passing figures, namely, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Whereas the former passes for convenience (situational/function passing), the latter’s passing is a life commitment (pathological passing). Many critics suggest that biracial authors’ identification of two sorts of passing articulate their pardoning of the situational passing, perceiving it as a mechanism of resistance to the economic and social oppressions, they were subject to during this era, while indicting the other form. The power of Larsen’s *Passing* lies in its depiction of a multi-layered passing that turns out, as we closely read the novel, to include five tropes of passing. Clare's passing for White is to attain the social and material privileges of the White world. Second, Irene's attraction to Clare; hence Irene's passing for a heterosexual. As a matter of fact, the plot is passing for a racial one covering its sexual sub-plot. The following form of passing is the narrator’s. In fact, many textual clues reveal that Irene is attracted to Clare, but the narrator never mentions it explicitly. The narrator’s disguise is another form of passing. Last but not least, Clare's death finds its symbolic correlate in passing, for death signifies the ultimate crossing over. Accordingly, the complexity and real challenge of this novel lies in the revision of the definition of passing, rather than in having a sexual sub-plot, as many critics went on to explain. Larsen’s use of passing-as-structure suggests that the most compelling and pertinent aspects of her characters’ lives are to be found in imaginative constructs, in the subtext rather than in subplots. Both Queering and passing, major themes of the novel carry a subversive potential. While queering challenges White heteronormativity, racial passing constitutes a veritable laugh at the color line. Both subversive narrative strategies destabilize the White Other’s expectations and, therefore, help subvert the existent locus of power, as later revealed by identity politics theorists. It is along these lines, that I came to qualify Nella Larsen as an avant-garde author.

Keywords: Passing, Black Feminism, Queering, Woman-to-woman Bond, Harlem Renaissance Literature.
One of the most important topics in the study of race and gender in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) is the curious phenomenon of passing that will be the main focus of this paper. Probing this subject needs to sort out, first, what passing means. The term “passing” designates a person’s being regarded as a member of a social class other than his/her real or actual one, such as a different sex, race, or disability status, generally, with the purpose of gaining social acceptance or comporting with the person’s own cultural or gender identity. Etymologically, the term is simply a clipped form of the phrasal verb ‘pass as’ or ‘pass for,’ referring to an impostor passing for another person. Critic and Scholar Kelby Harrison defines passing as a successful self-presentation in line with a socially-favored identity at the expense of an “authentic one” such as passing for White when Black¹, passing for “heterosexual” when “homosexual,” or passing for “cisgender”² when one is “transgender” (1). Thus, passing is an option for only those who inhabit a “minimal space between a favored identity and a minoritized identity” (Harrison 1). Passing for white implies “wearing a mask, stimulating whiteness, hiding one’s true identity under a false appearance” (Kawash 126). It can be, thus, conceived as a performance or a practice that can be judged with moral disdain or “as a necessary act of self-defense/accommodation in a vicious reality” (126). Passing dismisses our ‘traditional’ understanding of authenticity and ‘natural’ identity. It, unavoidably, functions at two levels: the individual and the social (Harrison 33). The act of passing implies necessarily the presence of, first, an actor (the one who passes), a spectator who is fooled by the white appearance of a black s/he takes for white, a witness who knows that the first actor is not white but passing for white. This term has been in use since at least the 1920s but the phenomenon certainly existed much before.

Samira Kawash suggests in her influential book, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (1997) that the passing theme is a textual strategy that allows the destabilization of the rigid binarization of Black and White, by foregrounding the collapse of the continuity between representation and identity, appearance and being, as they are supposedly determined along the color line (Kawash 133-4). Unlike in mulatto fiction, where there is always a telling mark that reveals the truth of the drop of Black blood (no matter how faint the bodily mark) to assure that appearances are, in fact, not deceiving, the passing theme insists that knowability and visibility may diverge in unsuspected and uncontrollable ways. Although the one who passes is technically a mulatto, it is not his or her "mulattoness" that is the issue in passing narratives; rather, the issue is the problem of “reconciling identity to appearance; an epistemological problem of restoring order and certainty when the condition of certainty fails to hold” (Kawash 134). Thus, what is unique in passing narratives is the fact that, unlike the so-called tragic mulatto who is ultimately revealed to be truly Black, the passing figure evades any singular judgment, suggesting the possibility of an irrecoverable chasm.

¹ ‘Black,’ ‘Negro,’ ‘Colored’ or ‘African American,’ all are different words that define the same essence. However, because the use of Negro is generally regarded as offensive, as it is a color-based term that bears racist connotations, I prefer the use of African American or Black, even though the latter is a term that has been more in use since the sixties. Indeed, after the Civil Rights Movement, Blackness was consciously meant to designate Blacks’ sense of pride and self-esteem after a long struggle. I capitalize ‘Black’ as well as ‘White’ because I share the belief that it is not simply a skin color but a cultural, personal, and political identity (Humm 26).

² ‘Cisgender’ (def.1) describes someone whose sense of gender corresponds to the sex the person was identified with at birth in contradistinction to transgender which refers to a person whose internal sense of gender is opposite the sex he/she was identified with at birth.
between appearance and an unreachable truth (134). Larsen's dealing with passing is challenging for two reasons. First, Larsen's tackling of the issue of passing sheds light on the psychic complexity of the novella. Second, her novel revises the definition of passing, generally restricted to passing for White because this trope of passing was a sizeable phenomenon during the Harlem Renaissance (though it certainly existed much before). Larsen, however, reveals that passing has other forms in addition to passing for White.

The present paper will study the psychological dimensions of this phenomenon by investigating the causes lying behind it, and how its consequences are manifested, using Larsen's characters as a case study. Passing is the central theme of this novel, but, in addition to Clare's passing for White, this paper will explore other forms of passing in the novel, including Irene's passing for a heterosexual, the author's passing, and the plot's passing for a racial novel.

Passing for White constitutes the surface plot of this novel. Larsen's dealing with this phenomenon reflects the influence of the social context, in which she produced her novel. Indeed, during the Harlem Renaissance, the passing phenomenon and the passing novel were in vogue. By 1929, it was estimated that there were some twenty thousand African Americans passing for White in New York (McLendon 9). Some of them passed just for fun or convenience (functional or situational passing), while others made passing a lifetime commitment (pathological passing). But, their stories remained strictly private. Passing for White might have been the subject of familial debate or anecdote but it was not publicly registered or recognized (Kawash 128). Larsen's text provides a definition of its central theme. Passing, Larsen defines, "is the breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly" (Larsen 186-7). Irene uses this definition to describe Clare's passing, but it might just as easily describe her own. In fact, in this novel, there are two sorts of passers for White: Clare who passes permanently in her life and in her marriage, and Irene who passes casually for convenience. They both meet after a long separation passing as White in a rooftop of a café.

Larsen’s juxtaposition of two passing figures, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, aims at revising the very definition of passing by presenting two sorts of passing. Irene Redfield, who passes occasionally, but resorts to other kinds of disguise and erasure to escape the difficulties of being Negro and female, and Clare who passes permanently (McLendon 96). Jacqueline McLendon suggests that the juxtaposition of the two characters makes it clear that passing is, as much a state of mind as a physical act, which imparts a parodic thrust to the received social meaning of the term. The title, then, is ambiguous in that it refers both to Clare's actions, retaining the usual meaning of the word, and to Irene's actions, implying psychological passing or “escapism” (McLendon 96). As such, Larsen broadens our definition of the term ‘passing’ to be "any form of pretense or disguise that results in a loss or surrender of, or a failure to satisfy a desire for, identity, whether racial, cultural, social, or sexual" (McLendon 96). "Tell me honestly," Clare asks, "haven't you ever thought of passing?" Irene answers, "No, why should I?" (Larsen 190). In this scene, Irene's insistence that she has no desire to pass is given the lie by the fact that at the very moment, she is in fact passing, enjoying her tea in a segregated Chicago hotel. Accordingly, Irene Redfield, in her strict adherence to bourgeois ideological codes, strives
to mask any feelings or behavior that appear to be uncivilized or unladylike, measures herself by White standards, and lives in constant imitation of Whites (McLendon 97). Accordingly, some people do not pass physically, but adopt the values and attitudes and mimic the mannerism associated to the White culture (McLendon 9). Along these lines, Irene is, in a sense, passing for not being a passer.

Let us, now, switch our focus to the reasons that drive light-skinned Negroe to pass. One of the direct and most common push factors is the search for social and material privileges. Indeed, despite the fact that Clare claims that she was compelled to pass as "they [her aunts] forbade me to mention Negroe to the neighbors or even to mention the South Side" (Larsen 189), her passing for White is a choice. Clare sought to belong to the White community in order to be "[. . .], a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass.' [. . .] You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others" (Larsen 188-9). African Americans pass for White in order to enjoy many social and material privileges they are not allowed, like having free access to segregated hotels. Irene justifies the act of passing for White as follows, "[i]t wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton [hotel] would probably do it, that disturbed her" (Larsen 179). Besides, passing for White grants non-Whites many material opportunities. Clare's passing, for instance, offered her a wealthy husband who procured her a beautiful house with "[. . .] a sitting room, large and high, at whose windows hung startling blue draperies which triumphantly dragged attention from the gloomy chocolate-colored furniture" (Larsen 194). Clare's luxurious house reflects her material comfort, as do her clothes: "Clare was wearing a thin floating dress of the same shade of blue, which suited her and the rather difficult room to perfection" (194). "Near White Negroe" would explain that they did not "love their dark relatives less, but. . . they desired the advantages of the White race more" (Vincent 1-2). To put it brief, what drives light-skinned African Americans to pass for White is their search to surpass the disabilities of being Negro.

On the other hand, it would be misleading to plunge into a simplistic unproblematized dealing with the issue of passing as a current social phenomenon during the 1920s, without addressing what we might term the 'psychology of passing,’ what drives the passing figure to lead a disguised life and how does he/she deals with his/her isolation and alienation. Blacks, having come to believe that they were inferior simply because they did not measure up to the physical standards of Whites, Negroe passed if they could; and if they could not, they otherwise assimilated into mainstream society (McLendon 9). Clare's decision to become White is, of course, partly based on a similar need not to be humiliated, her need "to be a person and not a charity or a problem [. . .]" (Larsen 188). But, escape often led to “suicide” or “death-in-life existence” (McLendon 15). The need to be part of the White world is clearly manifested in Irene's following statement: "[i]t was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below" (Larsen 176). The accumulation of positive adjectives attributed to the White world, in Irene's discourse, points to her yearning for the comfort White people enjoy, which is not only material but also psychological. The White world was, like the cup of tea she was served, "all what she had desired and
expected” (Larsen 176). Besides, the choice of the adjective "below" to describe the place, where she was, reflects her inner conviction that the White world is superior. Very significant, as well, is the symbolic link between her need for security when she sought refuge from the accident's crowd: "[w]ith a quick perception of the need for immediate safety, she lifted a wavering hand in the direction of a cab parked directly in front of her," and the destination she chose "['. . .]. I think the Drayton'll do nicely." she told him" (Larsen 175). Correspondingly, passing for White is a proof"[. . .] that nothing was worse than possessing black blood, that no action was too extreme in order to escape it" (McLendon 15). Thus, Negroes' passing for White stems from their need for the security that the privileged White world provides. The assimilation into the American mainstream is no less beneficial. Clare's eventual death, however, is both a warning and an indictment of American society's racial discrimination.

Critics’ attitude via passing narratives vary from one standpoint to another. Some critics believe that the negative aspect about passing is the metaphor of wearing the mask, which refers to the distorted and stereotypical image imposed upon African Americans, a metaphor that produces a self-destructive duplicity engendered by the discrepancy between ‘appearance’ and ‘being.’ The positive thing about passing, on the other hand, is the notion of the "third self," which results from the union of African American ethnic identity and an American national identity, building a nation where the Africana and the Americana can co-exist. What is most important, however, is that this ironic discrepancy between appearance and reality proves that the order, on which Bellew, Clare’s White racist husband, has staked the purity of his familial line, is de facto illusory. As revealed by Clare, the very possibility of passing challenges the divisions established by the color line.

Despite the fact that the passing figure is a mulatto, the idea of miscegenation, in itself, did not alter strict racial divisions, for mulattoes are, none the less, in social and legal practice returned to the Black side of the color line according to the hypodescent doctrine (called variously the one-drop rule). The one-drop rule states that one is White if all one's ancestors are White; one is Black if any of one's ancestors is Black. The term 'mulatto,' in itself, was, initially, coined to refer to "the sterile mule, the progeny of a mating between two diverse species" (Kawash 133). Thus, "the mulatto's presumed sterility was (tautological) evidence of the assertion that White and Black were indeed, separate and distinct" (133). Although crossing was possible, as evidenced by the undeniable existence of mulattoes, White racist thinkers insisted that these mulattoes were doomed to disappear and, thereby, posed no real threat to the continued separation of the races.

The exclusiveness of Whiteness, according to White essentialist hegemonists is based on the fact that Whiteness qualifies “more than a racial division; it is a culturally-constructed ethnic identity,” in contradistinction, it is implied, to the less privileged “subalternal minorities, who have been subjugated, or silenced” (Cashmore 357). The modern definition of ‘White' began to crystallize in the 1850s and came to be characterized in terms of the one drop rule, which, in subsequent decades, prevailed socially throughout the United States, and in many states stood as the legal definition of Negro (Kawash 132).

It must be reckoned, however, that miscegenation results in the gradual blurring of the line between the black and white races, for blackness and whiteness are inevitably
losing ground to a “third space,” to borrow Homi Bhabha terms, that of the mixed-race. In fact, due to the phenomenon of miscegenation, Blacks and Whites “lost visibility,” so much did color and physical features overlap between those who were mixed and those who were purebloods (Kawash 132).

The possibility of passing for White destabilizes the stability of racial hierarchy. Mulattoes’ ability to cross over the color line disturbs the very idea of racial divisions, as it points to “the arbitrary, contingent character of the law of race, which raises an empty mark, one drop of black blood, to the sign of difference” (Kawash 157). The following passage, which is an extract from Bellew's discourse concerning miscegenation, is a veritable laugh at the color line:

I draw the line at that. No Niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be.” Irene's lips trembled almost uncontrollably, but she made a desperate effort to fight back her disastrous desire to laugh again. [ . . . ] She [Irene] had a leaping desire to shout at the man beside her: “And you're here surrounded by three black devils, drinking tea. (Larsen 201-2)

In this scene, Clare's White husband proclaims his hatred for Negroes, while being, unknowingly, in the company of three Negro women, his very wife included. Another episode of the text displays his racist attitude when he responds to Hugh Wentworth’s -a White friend- admission that he found it impossible to distinguish light-skinned Negroes from Whites. To this, Irene sarcastically adds, "Nobody can. Not by looking" (Larsen 236), suggesting that appearance and essence do not necessarily coincide. The aforementioned episodes are, in this sense, ironic inversions of the common belief that "blood tells" (McLendon 97).

The text even goes further by suggesting that even Blacks cannot, sometimes, distinguish a passing figure from a real White person. Consider, for example the following scene, in which Irene meets Clare after a long separation, and does not realize that she is, like her, a Black passing for White.

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means: fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally sillyrot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a Gypsy. Never when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. Not the woman [Clare] sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know. (Larsen 178)

Irene, in the passage above, affirms to the reader that no White person is able to distinguish her from other White persons, not even the (supposedly White) woman in front her, who turns out to be Clare. Accordingly, race becomes a “difference that cannot be described, located, seen, or distinguished, in any "definite or tangible way” (Kawash 155). Race, we can conclude, "is not nothing-at-all, but a something that says nothing" (155).

The gap between appearance and essence is also demonstrated by Larsen’s satiric portrayal of the bourgeois class. In fact, Larsen satirizes the bourgeois class and finds in it a correlation with the concept of passing, for, characteristic of the members of such a class, is their propensity for behaving in ways designed to disguise the truth. As such, the Black
bourgeois' hypocrisy and pretensions exhibit another form of 'wearing the mask.' Larsen, therefore, explores the sociological and psychological dimensions of passing, and does not solely deal with it from the racial perspective.

An in-depth examination of Larsen's text discloses another form of disguised identity. Many clues in the text suggest Irene's attraction to Clare. Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare adds another dimension to psychological passing: that of passing for a heterosexual. When Irene, first, muses over Clare's boldness, Larsen states, "she wished to find out about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly" (Larsen 186-7). This statement hints at passing in a double sense, and not only on racial passing. In effect, a close scrutiny of the relationship between Irene and Clare reveals the former's concealment of her attraction to Clare and, thereupon, Irene's passing for a heterosexual. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the two major characters in the novel are females, while both the Black subaltern and the White male other are marginalized.

Borrowing the "analyst-as-detective" metaphor in our study of the language in use, the next part of this chapter will detect the different clues that display Irene's attraction to Clare and the author's "involvement" in making us aware of this, while showing no signs of knowledge about it (Triki and Sellami 184). In this respect, Professor Mounir Triki and Akila Sellami put it:

[. . .] Literary criticism is essentially a highly inferential and necessarily interdisciplinary act of interpretation. Each text is full of clues indicating the strategies and intentions of the writer. It is important to identify these clues, to piece them together in order to uncover the writer's strategy or plan, and from there on to make calculated guesses as to the possible motives behind such choices. (183)

So, in order to detect Irene's attraction to Clare, two potentially seminal areas in the text are likely to yield interesting clues, useful in making inferences, namely the strategies of Description and Narration (Triki and Sellami 183).

Focusing on narration in Passing, we notice the unreliability of the narrator. Indeed, the narrator in Passing makes us aware of Irene's attraction to Clare, while she espouses a narratorial position that shows no awareness of this fact. In effect, Clare and Irene's re-encounter is full of suspense and starts with eye contact, described in details in the text that reads:

Very slowly, she looked around, and into the dark eyes of the woman in the green frock at the next table. But, she evidently failed to realize that such intense interest as she was showing might be embarrassing, and continued to stare. Her demeanor was that of one who with utmost singleness of mind was determined to impress firmly and accurately each detail of Irene's features upon her memory for all time, nor showed the slightest trace of disconcertment at having been detected in her steady scrutiny. Instead, it was Irene who was put out. Feeling her color heighten under the continued inspection, she slid her eyes down. [ . . .] Again, she looked up, and for a moment her brown eyes politely returned to the stare of the other's black ones, which never for an instant fell or wavered. [ . . .] Oh well, let her look! She tried to treat the woman and her watching with indifference, but she couldn't. All her efforts to ignore her, it [sic], were futile. She stole
another glance. Still looking, what strange languorous eyes she had! They did not seem to her hostile or resentful. Rather, Irene had the feeling that they were ready to smile if she would [. . .] the feeling passed, and she turned away with the firm intention of keeping her gaze on the lake, the roofs of the buildings across the way, the sky, anywhere but on that annoying woman. Almost immediately, however, her eyes were back again. (Larsen 178-9)

An alert reader-analyst is not only invited to pay attention to the content of the passage above but also to the space devoted by the author to record the eye contact between Irene and Clare. The length of the passage and Irene's inner thoughts contradict the author's claim that her staring at the woman in front of her is solely triggered by her fear that the latter finds out her true racial identity. Irene's gaze, in reality, suggests an admiration for the beautiful woman in front of her and a search for a response. Thus, the text above suggests that Irene's gaze at Clare is not innocent despite the fact that the author does not explicitly acknowledge it.

The text also shows us that Irene's feelings for Clare, like her feelings about passing, are paradoxical, wavering between attraction and repulsion: "We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it" (Larsen 216). This analogy is suggested by the fact that Irene's attraction to Clare originates from her fascination with her as a mysterious passing body: "It was as if the woman sitting on the other side of the table, a girl that she had known, Who had done this rather dangerous and, to Irene Redfield, abhorrent thing successfully and had announced herself well satisfied, had for her a fascination, strange and compelling" (Larsen 190). As the text reveals, Clare's seduction works through the daring of putting into question both the "sanctity of marriage" and the "clarity of racial demarcations" (Butler 169). As Kawash rightly states, Irene's encounter with Clare was “like an explosion sending shock waves into her placid existence” (Kawash 155). There is something about Clare or, more precisely, there is something about Clare, as a passing figure, which makes her simultaneously dangerous but attractive, desirable and derisible. For Irene, Clare's passing body becomes “the site of rupture in the orderly structure of transparent identities” (Kawash 157-8). Determined to push Clare away, Irene always succumbs to the temptation to draw her closer, despite herself. Following the episode with Bellew in Clare's drawing room, Irene receives a letter from Clare. At first, she is determined to "tell her at once, and definitively, that it was no use, her coming" (Larsen 224). Her resolve dissolves in an instant, when Clare enters and "drops a kiss on her dark curls. Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling" (224). Irene is "possessed," she is ruled by "uncontrollable," "inexplicable" feelings (224).

Irene's attraction to Clare can also be deduced from the narrator’s description of her paradoxical feelings in the tea party episode, in which we see Irene "pouring tea properly and nicely" (Larsen 218), all the while feeling "the impulse to laugh, to scream, to hurl things about. She wanted suddenly to shock people, to hurt them, to make them notice her, to be aware of her suffering" (219). Paradox is also omnipresent in Irene’s “extravagantly phrased wish to see her again. Well, she wouldn't and needn't, Irene told herself, accede to that" (Larsen 173). Larsen justifies Irene’ confused feelings towards Clare and her willingness to take a distance from her by the latter’s disavowal of her
color. So, she refuses to respond to her letters, and tries to close her out of her life. Larsen also suggests that Clare embodies a certain kind of sexual daring that Irene defends herself against. Unable to confront the potential attraction to Clare, Irene resolves repress this feeling but she constantly "finds herself drawn by Clare, wanting to be her, but also wanting her" (Butler 169). Accordingly, Irene’s willingness to distance herself from Clare is due to the potential danger she represents to Irene, being a threat to her stability and safe conformity to the heterosexual norms.

Larsen’s narrative provides also textual evidence that demonstrate that Clare turned Irene’s life upside down. Before she meets Clare, "Irene live[d] in a carefully controlled oblivion, wanting what she has, having what she wants" (Kawash 15). Irene's meeting with Clare deeply unsettles her, for she “ruptures her satisfied, if illusory feeling of wholeness by disrupting her carefully constructed correspondence between her own desire and what she has" (Kawash 158). Clare's letter destabilizes her: "[s]he was wholly unable to comprehend such an attitude towards danger as she was sure the letter's contents would reveal; and she disliked the idea of opening and reading it" (Larsen 172). When Irene receives a note from Clare as she is leaving Chicago, she becomes frightened and annoyed by Clare's attempted intrusion into her life. The arrival of Clare's letter sends Irene into a state of panic that totally paralyzes her. Significantly, for the entire first section, Irene sits frozen at her desk. She tears "the offending letters into tiny ragged squares" and "drop[s] them over the railing of the train" (208). A few sentences later, the text reads: "[s]he dropped Clare out of her mind and turned [. . .] her thoughts to her own affairs" (208). For Irene, meeting Clare produces a wedge between desire and satisfaction because, all of a sudden, she realizes the possibility of wanting something she does not have. Clare asks her, "haven't you ever thought of passing?" Irene answers promptly: "No. Why should I? . . . You see, Clare, I've everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money" (Larsen 190). This "except" exposes "a fissure in the continuity between having and wanting" that forms the basis of Irene's sense of stability (Kawash 158).

Bellew’s physical absence until very near the end, when his wife dies, consolidates the hypothesis of Irene’s attraction to Clare. Thus, although Irene's fear is partly the result of her belief that Clare's tendency to risk danger might, in some way, impinge upon her own safety, it is also stimulated, the text tells us at the beginning of section two, by the letter's being a strong reminder of Bellew and his hatred for Negroes. Irene attempts to convince herself that her fear, her silence, and her paralysis, stem, indeed, from her need to protect Clare (McLendon 102). This is an episode that illustrates Irene's tendency to deny reality and also an indication that the fear goes much deeper: "She couldn't betray Clare, couldn't even run the risk of appearing to defend a people that were being maligned, for fear that deference might, in some infinitesimal degree, lead the way to the final discovery of her secret" (Larsen 101). But, the question here is: "Is it Clare's secret or her own that needs to be protected? The ambiguous pronoun in the phrase, "her secret," could signify either, or both, in the same way that the title of the book and the definition of ‘passing’ signify at both Irene’s and Clare's forms of passing (McLendon 102).

Paradoxical as it may seems, Larsen's text clearly points to Irene’s attraction to Clare, but the narrator never mentions it explicitly.
What is concealed by narration was bluntly exposed by description and the language in use. Part and parcel of our study of the narrator's unreliability is the scrutiny of her description. "[. . .] conventional criticism has particularly explored the importance of diction in descriptions, - whilst other more recent critical trends have emphasized the connotative level of lexis" (Triki and Sellami 1985); this section will explore both. The examination of description strategies in this text will consider two areas: the physical profile as well as the mental and psychological profiles of Clare as projected by Larsen’s narrative (Triki and Sellami 190-1).

The study of Clare's physical profile reveals both the author's involvement and her unreliability concerning the issue of Irene's desire to Clare. As stated by Triki and Sellami:

The physical profile of a given character is part and parcel of the overall strategy of portraying that character from a certain angle. Physical description covers a variety of traits pertaining to appearance, facial expressions, attire, gestures and postures that cumulatively create a pattern that activate the readers' own stereotypes through culturally determined connotations (189-90).

In *Passing*, the author's adjectival use denies her unawareness of Irene's attraction to Clare. Notice, for instance, the choice of adjectives in the following passage: "[. . .], her *bright* lips slightly parted, her whole face lit by the radiance of her *happy* eyes" (Larsen 184, emphasis added). Irene's desire is more obvious in the description of Clare's mouth as "[a] *tempting* mouth" (191, emphasis added). The use of the adjective "tempting" indulges the author in the very act of temptation, because we, as readers, can assume that Irene, herself, is tempted by Clare's mouth. The use of the adjective "beautiful" to qualify the term "mouth" could have conveyed the same meaning without indulging her in the desire implied by temptation. Now, consider the use of similes in this sentence, "[t]he woman laughed, a lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was *like* a trill and also *like* the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling" (Larsen 180, emphasis added). Irene describes Clare's “lovely laugh” poetically; she assimilates it to a “delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal.” This simile articulates her allurement and confirms our previous analysis of her discourse at an earlier stage of this text-based analysis.

At the modal level, the abundance of evaluative modalisers to describe Irene's description of Clare is very telling. The use of intensifiers in the following passages: "Irene wondered if it was tears that made Clare's eyes so luminous" (184, emphasis added), or also: "[s]he's really almost *too* Good-looking" (185, emphasis added). The accumulation of intensifiers to describe Clare exposes Irene's fascination with the latter and divulges what is obscured by narration.

We also notice the presence of the flame imagery and lexical items related to desire; together they contribute to the creation of an erotic mood in many instances of the novel. Consider, for example, the use of the flame diction in the following passage, in which Irene recalls the last time she met Clare:

Chicago. August. A *brilliant* day, *hot*, with a brutal staring sun pouring down *rays* [. . .] a day on which the very outlines of the buildings shuddered as if in *protest* at the *heat*. Quivering lines sprang up from baked pavements and wriggled along the *shining* car tracks. The automobiles parked at the curbs were a dancing *blaze*, and the
glass of the shop windows threw out a blinding radiance. Sharp articles of dust rose from the burning sidewalks, stinging the seared or dripping skins of wilting pedestrians. What small breeze there was seemed [sic] like the breath of a flame fanned by slow bellows. (Larsen 174, emphasis added)

Larsen’s recurrent utilization of the flame diction and the fire imagery hints at Irene's desire when she thinks of Clare. Likewise, the term "protest," highlighted above, reflects, Irene's attempt to conceal and control her desire to the latter. More significant, the flame diction connotes danger, mirroring thereby the fact that Clare represents a threat to Irene's stability and certainty about her sexual identity.

In addition to the flame imagery, some passages eroticize Clare openly. Irene's desire and yearning for physical contact with Clare is apparent in the text that reads: "Irene touched her arm caressingly, [...]" (Larsen 226), or also in this passage: "[I]nto those eyes there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed" (Larsen 191, emphasis added). Irene's wondering: "[w]hat is about Clare's voice that was so appealing, so very seductive?" (Larsen 191, emphasis added) and the accumulation of intensifiers in her statement reflect, in fact, her being seduced. More illustration can be provided by this passage, "[a]t that moment it seemed a dreadful thing to think of never seeing Clare Kendry again. Standing there under the appeal, the caress of her eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn't be the last" (Larsen 191, emphasis added). "There was no mistaking the friendliness of that smile or resisting its charm. Instantly, she surrendered to it and smiled too, [. . .]" (Larsen 179, emphasis added). In the light of what has been assessed so far, we can deduce that the narrator's use of fire imagery, a recurrent use of terms pertaining to the diction of desire, and the erotic mood created by both of them, expose consistently what the narrator attempts to conceal in narration.

Irene's fascination with Clare is not limited to her physical beauty; it also extends to her mental and psychological profiles. Irene's assimilation of Clare to a cat in the following passage is very significant:

Catlike. That was certainly the word which best described Clare Kendry, if any single word could describe her. Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive. And there was about her an amazing soft malice, hidden well away until provoked. Then, she was capable of scratching, and very effectively too. (Larsen 173)

In this passage, Irene attributes to Clare the “smoothness” and “danger” that a cat typically evokes in the mind of the reader. Similarly, Clare's personality is attractive because of its complex association of extremes, an amalgam of pure femininity and "soft malice."

By insisting on the appealing aspect of Clare's beauty and the uniqueness of her personality in description, the portrait of the latter shows the narrator's involvement in revealing Irene's desire for Clare to the reader and leads us, thereby, to make the following observations: First, Irene may be passing for a heterosexual in order to conform to the bourgeois ethos, to which she is proud to belong. Second, the narrator strongly suggests this fact to the reader, but chooses to never acknowledge it. The narrator's subjectivity indicates, all considered, his unreliability.
By the same token, we can conclude that the author is passing. To further examine this hypothesis, it is helpful to go back to Roland Barthes' method of establishing a text's point of view, as outlined in *Image-Music-Text* (99). Barthes argues that narrative "knows only two systems of signs: personal and apersonal" and that they "do not necessarily present the linguistic marks attached to person (I) and non-person (He). Barthes suggests rewriting passage of the text using a first-person pronoun to replace the third- person, as a way of making the distinction. If the only change is a change of grammatical pronouns, we can identify a "personal system" (112). For instance, the text that reads: "But she looked, boldly this time, back into the eyes still frankly intent upon her" (Larsen 179) might easily read: "But I [Irene Redfield] looked, boldly this time, back into the eyes still frankly intent upon me." This substitution of grammatical pronouns may be made easily for most of Irene's discourse throughout the text but not for Clare. Conspicuously, this is Irene's narrative, since much of the text surfaces in her mind through these "narrative episodes [. . .] which though written in the third person nevertheless have as their true instance the first person" (112). This narrational mode creates a disguised "I," as it were, emphasizing Irene's repression and the use of passing as structure (McLendon 99). As a matter of fact, readers, who believed what they saw, that is read at the surface level, certainly missed the point. Larsen, under the sexist and racist forms of oppression she was subjugated to while writing this novel in the 1920s and, "lack[ing] the daring of... the black female blues singers," who "sang openly and seductively about sex and celebrated the female body and female desire," chose to pass, as an author, by hiding behind the disguised "I" and the "safe plot" of race (McLendon 2).

Critics were right, then, to claim that the "safe" theme of passing is a "protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous sub-plots," particularly the implicit story of "Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare" (McDowell xxvi). Indeed, the story has often been misconstrued as Clare Kendry's tragedy, since she is the character who crosses over the color line, conceals her racial origins, and whose past is eventually discovered by her White racist husband (Larson xv). Critic Deborah McDowell was the first to detect the complex erotics of the novel in terms of a "protolesbian" relation between the two female characters. McDowell also ascertains that, by making the dominant point of view that of a woman who represses all her true feelings, Larsen invites us to explore the very emotions Irene seeks to conceal. In this respect, McDowell writes, "though, superficially, Irene's is an account of Clare's passing for White and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story -though not named explicitly- of Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare" (xxvi). McDowell also believes that Irene effectively displaces her own desire on other people like Brian and the waiter (xxviii). Accordingly, Irene's suspicion that Brian might have a love affair with Clare is but a projection of her anxiety vis à vis her own desire for the latter. The same thing happens with the Drayton hotel's waiter: "[a] waiter was taking her order. Irene couldn't quite define it, but she was sure that she would have classed it, coming from another woman, as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter" (Larsen 177). In this scene, Irene communicates her belief that Clare is a provocative woman, but, in reality, she is the one who is provoked, because detecting the exertion of an act of seduction over other people implies necessarily one's subjugation to it.
To thoroughly discern the “muteness of homosexuality” in this text, and thereby, the displacement, the jealousy, and Irene’s pushing of Clare out of the window in the closing scene of the novel to ensure the death of her destructive feelings for her, it is primordial to read this repression in terms of the social constraints that defined the representation of black female sexuality in the 1920s (Butler 175). In this context, Hazel Carby puts it:

Larsen's representation of both race and class are structured through the prism of black female sexuality. Larsen recognized that the repression of the sensual in Afro-American fiction, in response to the long history of exploitation of black sexuality, led to the repression or denial of female sexuality and desire. But, of course, the representation of black female sexuality meant risking its definition as primitive and exotic within a racist society...Racist sexual ideologies proclaimed the black woman to be a rampant sexual being, and, in response, black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displaced sexuality onto another terrain. (174)

The total rejection of issues related to the flesh in African American literature has a historical explanation. The repression of sexuality is not only a characteristic of Larsen's fiction, but rather part of a literary reaction that aims to redeem the racist sexual prejudices that "proclaimed the Negro woman to be a rampant sexual being" and to dispel the Jezebel stereotype circulated by the White media, depicting the loose Negro woman who must be controlled sexually, which are propagated by the White media. The virgin/whore dichotomy which was imposed upon White and Negro women has deeply affected their images of themselves and of each other (Gwin 5). It is hardly surprising, then, that African American women writers sought to construct a respectable image of the Negro female, that of the pure and virtuous woman, a mere projection of the White Victorian values.

In psychoanalytic terms, passing is a phenomenon that "postulates violence as a consequence of the failure to merge personal desire and societal expectations" (McLendon 12). Butler reads passing as the occasion for something else to emerge, namely "queering" (Butler 176). Queering can be defined "as a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, 'queering' works as the exposure within language -an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language- of both sexuality and race" (176). In Passing, for instance, homosexuality is "mute," "repressed," "a powerful presence that is struggling to come to the surface" (Kawash 160), but "[i]n the last instance, queering is what upsets and exposes passing; it is the act by which the racially and sexually repressive surface of conversation is exploded, by rage, by sexuality, by the insistence on color" (Butler 176), which explains why, the woman-to-woman bond theme is very current among succeeding African American women writings like Sula (1973) by Toni Morrison and The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker that, similarly, deal with queering, with varying degrees of explicitness. These works are characterized by woman-centeredness, and thus aim to dismantle the central pillar of the patriarchal institution. By glorifying a Black female culture, Larsen shares many of the values championed by Walker and her theory of “Womanism.” In Search of our Mothers' Gardens (1983). Walker outlines four features of defining features of Womanism, namely, "Black feminism," "women who love other women sexually or none sexually and appreciate and prefer women's culture," "emotions and strength; women who love music, dance and themselves;" and "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (Humm 305).
Making the dominant point of view that of a woman who represses all her feelings and, to borrow from Deborah McDowell, "deludes herself," is a strategy Larsen consciously uses to explore the psychological dimensions of passing, its causes, and effects (McLendon 101). In effect, Irene's passing for a heterosexual stems from her constant repression of subjects deemed unladylike like sexuality. Irene's references to "ideas about sex" as "queer ideas about things" and "dreadful jokes" indicate her discomfort in broaching the subject of sexuality. Of course, her own class ideals are also partly responsible for her discomfort in dealing with this subject. Thus, sexism plays a large part in Irene's feeling that she must "discipline" her body (101). After an attempted conversation with Brian about sex, "her extreme resentment at his attitude, the sense of having been wilfully misunderstood and reproved, drove her to fury" (Larsen 189); an emotion that, of course, she represses. For while the text implies that, for males, sexuality is a "necessary education" (Larsen 219), it also implies that, for females, it is a taboo subject. It is, indeed, this repression of topics deemed unladylike that drives Irene to pass for a heterosexual.

McDowell suggests that the passing of the novel's title implies "false, forged, or mistaken identities" (xvii). So, in addition to the issue of racial passing for White, Passing can be read as a narrative of Irene's passing for a heterosexual. Irene's consideration of the narrator's of sex as a taboo explains the reason why Larsen repressed the sexuality of her female characters. As Judith Butler explains in her book, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex, "[t]he muteness of homosexuality converges in the story with the illegibility of Clare's blackness" (175); and the novel "takes the form of the act it describes;" that is, the dangerous "sex plot" is passing as a "safe race plot" (Butler 175).

It must also be reckoned that Irene's passing for heterosexual and her attraction to Clare is one among other possible interpretations of Larsen's text. Critic Lauren Berlant, for instance, looked at the relationship between Irene and Clare from a different angle. She suggests that Irene's desire for Clare is an articulation of her need to be unchained from the social and spiritual codes that have controlled her life so far (166). Berlant maintains that ":[. . .] Irene's xenophilia isn't indeed a desire to occupy, to experience the privileges of Clare's body, not to love or to make love to her, but rather to wear her way of wearing her body, like a prosthesis, or a fetish" (166). What Irene wants is "relief from the body she has: her intense class identification with the discipline of the bourgeois body is only one tactic for producing the corporeal 'fog' in which she walks" (Berlant 165). This idea is confirmed by Irene's acknowledgement that she feels "a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind" (Larsen 195). Yet, even though Berlant agrees with Hortense Spillers’ in that "American genders are always racially inflected," her own argument assumes a separation of race and gender, or, more specifically, of race and sex (166). It is as if one can "cast off the visible [racial] body while simultaneously flaunting the sexual body, which, Berlant argues, is what Clare does and what Irene would like to do” (166). Thus, Irene's passing stems to a certain extent from her need to be “disembodied” (McLendon 102).

Looking at Passing as a counter response to the prevailing sexism and racism of the 1920s America helps decode Larsen's intentions behind the limitation of the male presence in her novel and the total exclusion of White females in her novel. By the same token, the
strong presence of Black female characters in Larsen's novel must be conceived as a celebration of Black women's power and a subversion of the ideology of "man-as-the-norm," the only recognized human frame of reference so far (Klein qtd. in Humm 9). The women-centeredness of Passing is, thus, one of the often obscured subversive textual strategies of Larsen's approach, in addition to the woman-to-woman bond theme that display Larsen's avant-gardism, pragmatism, and feminist orientations.

Identity politics theorists identify the woman-to-woman bond theme as "an in-your-face rejection of the proper response to heteronormativity, a version of acting up" to patriarchy (Hennessy qtd. in Hernandez 244). The theme of woman-to-woman bond in literature, as in theoretical studies, is a reaction against androcentrism (or male centredness), since it attacks both the institution and the ideology of heterosexuality, being the center of patriarchy (Humm 149). Lesbian feminism believes that women-identified women, committed together for political, sexual and economic support, provide an alternative model to male/female relations that lesbians see as oppressive (Humm 149). Theorists Charlotte Bunch, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Adrienne Rich and collectives such as The Furies believe that lesbian feminism involves both a sexual preference and a political choice because it rejects male definitions of women's lives (149). In statements like "feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice," The Furies and others made lesbian feminism a primary force in a radical women's culture. Accordingly, the very use of the woman-to-woman bond theme is one of the pivotal feminist textual strategies that aim to subvert the patriarchal social order by countering sexist stereotypes and male-centredness in literature.

The writings of self-identified Lesbian women, such as Gloria Anzaldua and Audre Lorde, have provided crucial literary basics for the more abstract theoretical discussions of American queer theorists, such as Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, and others, who critique the notion of stable, autonomous identities and advocate an understanding of lesbianism in literature "not as an essence . . . but as a critical space within social structures" (Phelan qtd. in Hernandez 245). In their insistence on multiple, "fluid identities" and on a "coalitional politics" that transcends racial, ethnic, religious, and other barriers, Anzaldua and Lorde use their personal stories as antiracist, radical feminist political weapons (Hernandez 245). In their autobiographical texts, Borderlands/La Frontera and Zami: a New Spelling of My Name, Anzaldua and Lorde subvert the normative space of autobiography by turning it to their own radical purposes. They use the traditionally conservative masculine mode of sublime writing to inscribe a lesbian sublime that, as Biddy Martin suggests, "works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, not to dissolve them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible" (qtd. in Hernandez 245). In their subversive use of the normative categories of autobiography, identity, and the sublime, Anzaldua and Lorde engage in a textual form of acting up, creating the kind of "public scandal" that queer theory both champions and describes (Hernandez 245). In Gender Trouble, Butler argues that identity can be "proliferated" subversively, in a way dismantles binary oppositions; her privileged example of such a subversive identity is the lesbian (Hernandez 253). She calls for "a thorough-going appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest 'sex,' but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of 'identity' in order to render that
category... permanently problematic" (Butler qtd. in Hernandez 253). Anzaldua and Lorde take Butler's oppositional strategy even further, proliferating identity not only in terms of gender but also in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and other even more marginalized affinities (Hernandez 253).

In short, identity politics bases political strategies on “humanist notions of stable, unitary identities that fragment groups from within” (Keating 36). Pratibha Parmar asserts that, when feminists "rely on a language of 'authentic subjective experience'" derived from restrictive self-definitions, they "develop hierarchies of oppression" that prevent "the establishment of alliances across differences" (Keating 36). Yet, the solution is not to abandon all references to personal experiences, but rather to take experientially based knowledge claims even further by redefining identity (36). Thus, the essence of identity must not be restricted to mere conformity to heteronormativity; instead, we must believe in the relativity of the 'normative.' Accordingly, to establish healthy alliances, we must leave behind us the safety of “unitary, insular conceptions of identity” by acknowledging, articulating, and accepting both the differences and the similarities among ourselves and others (Keating 37).

Larsen's dealing with the theme of passing, both for White and for heterosexual, does not solely aim at indicting racism and countering sexist stereotypes, it also seizes to explore the psychological costs of being non-White. Dealing with the pathologies of passing is beyond the scope of this dissertation, though it must be noted that Larsen managed to show to the reader that passing is a self-destructive option that implies leading a disguised life and co-existing with the constant fear of being exposed.

To conclude, we can say that this chapter studied one of the most important elements in Larsen's approach to race and gender issues in the 1920s America: that of passing. Larsen’s superior craft added new meaning to the subject implied by her title, and revised the definition of this phenomenon. In Passing, we find five tropes of passing. The most explicit one is, of course, Clare's passing for White in order to attain the social and material privileges of the White world. Second, using the analyst-as-detective strategy, we could detect many clues that suggest Irene's homosexual tendency; hence Irene's passing for a heterosexual. The plot thereby is passing for a racial one while there is a sexual sub-plot in the novel. Besides, because the narrator provides many indications that reveal to the reader that Irene desires Clare, while showing no signs of knowledge about it; then, we can conclude that the narrator is disguised: her disguise is also a sort of passing. Last but not least, Clare's death finds its symbolic correlative in passing. Death signifies the ultimate "crossing over," to borrow from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "in that ironic double sense of 'passing' and 'dying'" (109). Accordingly, the complexity and real challenge of this novel lies in the revision of the definition of passing, rather than in having a sexual sub-plot, as many critics went on to explain. Larsen's "use of passing as structure suggests that the most compelling and pertinent aspects of her characters' lives are to be found in imaginative constructs, in the subtext rather than in subplots" (McLendon 104). Perceived from this angle, Larsens’ narrative strategy intensify rather than obscure possible readings because readers are invited to examine the text more closely. On the other hand, Larsen's addressing of the issue of racial passing reveals also her talents in the communication of the psychic dilemmas confronting her Black female characters. Clare manifested a desire for access to...
power connected to wealth, to middle-class comfort, to public life, to male privilege, to White people, and to artistic communities. Yet, Larsen interwove the more complicated results of such desire for a woman of color: the ravages of racism; the penalties extracted by patriarchy; the hypocrisies of the elite; the false promises of the American dream; and the female's ultimate breakdown (Davis 6). Larsen's work has also critical dimensions. Indeed, no passing novel can be regarded as anything other than a strong indictment of American life; people are driven to such drastic measures because of White American's racism and Blacks' need for economic survival (Larson xv). Having come to believe that they were inferior, simply because they did not measure up to the physical standards of Whites, Negroes passed if they could; and if they could not, they otherwise assimilated into mainstream society (McLendon 9). Larsen, in a sense, warns the reader against the disruptive consequences of passing. Indeed, through their "literal and/or psychological passing, Larsen's heroines behave in ways that ensure movement away from rather than toward selfhood and freedom" (McLendon 12). Moreover, the tragic end of Clare, when her husband found out all about her racial identity, demonstrates that there is no escape from the discipline and order of racial knowledge (Kawash 155-6). As Clare, herself, anticipated "'Everything must be paid for'" (Larsen 198). Despite the fact that the very possibility of passing points to the absurdity of the concept of race, Larsen's text suggests her agreement with the ideology of the racialized body. None the less, this writer managed to impose her own critical version of the consequence of not escaping, in an effort "not to finally assert "blackness' as a negative essence" (McLendon 20). Indeed, the book provokes complex racial and gender issues that Larsen, restrained by her socio-cultural context, could not eventually transcend. However, later identity politics' writings further explored the subject of identity definition and emphasized the importance of flexibility in that regard. Allen, Lorde and Anzaldua destabilized the very criteria set in order to define the boundaries of difference; skin color classification becomes elusive and thus worthless. By destabilizing pre-established concepts of ethnic, cultural, and gender identity in literature the limitation of any fixed socio-cultural or ethnic inscription is demonstrated.
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