Passing the Boundary

At first sight, Nella Larsen's *Passing* seems to portray a typical story of the "tragic mulatto." The main characters, Irene and Clare, both come from a mixed racial background, and their experiences in the story, from Irene's psychological torment to Clare's death, seem to set them up as depicting the plight of mulattos in the white supremacist society. As numerous critics have pointed out, however, this reductionist interpretation fails to grasp the profound complexity that Larsen weaves into the novel. Deborah McDowell, for example, views the characters through the lens of their sexuality and homoerotic tension.[1] Judith Butler, too, points to the homosexual undertone of the novel and proposes that the text should be read as the "racialization of a sexual conflict."[2] Indeed, we cannot fully appreciate the richness of *Passing* without recognizing the inextricability of race, sexuality, and psychological turbulence in shaping the characters' experiences. Examining all these elements, this essay will attempt to decipher the complex relationship between Irene and Clare. Using race as a starting point, it will highlight the distinction between race and racial ideology in shaping Irene's identity, and from there, it will attempt to shed light on Irene's emotional contradictions—her simultaneous hatred and obsession towards Clare. Ultimately, the conflict between Irene and Clare is a conflict between their racial ideologies, but at the same time, it is also a conflict between Irene's ideology and herself.

Irene's racial ideology closely mirrors the racial binarism predominant in American society at the time. It allows for two choices: whiteness, which is the absolute norm, and

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[1] Deborah E. McDowell, "Introduction," in Larsen, Quicksand and Passing, edited by Deborah E. McDowell (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986), ix-xxxv.
[2] Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), 128.

blackness, which is the subjugated other. Dividing these two options is the racial boundary whose rigidity is carefully upheld by the society and upon which the stability of the whole system relies. For those of mixed heritage, regulations such as the one drop rule force them to identify as black, thereby ensuring that their existence does not obscure the absolute distinction between black and white. Building on top of such racial binarism, a racial hierarchy is then constructed. As Rottenberg points out, in order to establish white hegemony, the American society has created a distinction between identification and the "desire-to-be."[3] While black subjects are strictly prohibited from transgressing the color line in their identification, they are encouraged to desire those attributes associated with whiteness—a paradox that Rottenberg summarizes as "identify as black (or else) but aspire to be white."[4]

This ideology is the foundation upon which American race relations are constructed, and Irene Redfield also lives under its influence. While she identifies as black, her aspirations closely align with the norms of whiteness, and she strives to be "as prim, as proper, and as bourgeois as (ideals of) white middle-class ladies."[5] Socially, she performs her duty as a hostess of tea parties, putting a "well-balanced attention" into "pouring tea properly and nicely."[6] Domestically, she concerns herself with the wellbeing of her household, but as Cheryl Wall points out, her concern is less about love than about the "security and permanence" that the family provides her with.[7] To maintain such security, she actively seeks to police the words and actions of her husband and children. She prevents Brian from pursuing his dream in Brazil; she prohibits any discussions of racial violence in front of her children; and she plans to send her boys to boarding schools in

[3] Catherine Rottenberg, "*Passing*: Race, Identification, and Desire," Criticism 45, no.4 (Fall 2003): 442.
[4] Ibid., 442.
[5] Rottenberg, 445.
[6] Nella Larsen, *Passing*, ed. Thadious M. Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 1929): 90.
[7] Wall, 108.

Europe, just as Clare has done with Margery as a white middle-class mother. Overall, the Redfields' life is one that Irene has "arranged," modeled after the conventional expectations for white middle-class families.[8]

Irene is not alone in exalting such ideals of bourgeois whiteness—these ideals were critical components in the DuBoisian project of racial uplift at the time. Although designed to improve the African American community, this project carried with it heavily prejudiced notions, and not only did it extol whiteness as its ideal, but it also conscripted the bodies of black women into its service: in order to counter the stereotype of black women as hypersexual primitives, it encouraged them to repress any expressions of sexuality and to uphold the virtues of Victorian womanhood. Irene, in full compliance with the project, takes this doctrine to heart. Not only is her marriage a sexless one, with separate bedrooms for her and Brian, but she also forbids any discussion of sexuality in the household. When she finds out that her boys may have "picked up some queer ideas" about sex, she becomes "terribly afraid" and feels the need to intervene, and when her husband dismisses her worries and remarks that sex is just a "grand joke," she becomes overwhelmed with "extreme resentment at his attitude."[9] To her, sexuality is an unspeakable secret that must be kept in the dark, and to bring it into the open is to disrupt the morality of the family, which in turn disrupts the morality of the race as a whole.

By regulating the behavior of herself and her family, Irene has constructed a "stereotypically middle-class black life" which, as Walker puts it, embodies "the values of the conservative exponents of racial uplift—domestic, decorous, and *professedly* dedicated to the

[8] Larsen, 57.
[9] Ibid., 59-60.

race cause" (emphasis added).[10] The qualifier "professedly" turns out to be the key to understanding Irene's relationship with race. Although her work for the Negro Welfare League dance seems to validate her racial dedication, her guests include so many white visitors that Brian pointedly comments, "Pretty soon the coloured people won't be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections."[11] This irony casts doubt on the true nature of Irene's apparent racial commitment, and it brings to question whether her service to the race is genuine or just a matter of form and appearance. But regardless of her sincerity, she has indeed molded her entire life around the ideals of racial uplift, and as a result, race, or rather, the racial ideology, has become an integral part of her identity, the foundation upon which the purpose of her life is defined—remove it, her whole world would collapse. The stability of her life thus requires that she maintains at least an appearance of strong racial allegiance, but as Samira Kawash aptly puts it, her loyalty to the race "is less a loyalty to the dignity of her race than loyalty to the very *principle* of race, insofar as it is the condition of order, ability, and security in her life. The alternative is the uncontrollable, the irrational, the unpredictable" (emphasis added).[12]

It is precisely this chaotic alternative that Clare threatens to bring about. Contrary to Irene's rigid racial ideology, Clare's relationship with race is one of oscillation, or as Walker terms it, "oscillatory biraciality."[13] Not only does she pass as white and thereby subverts the racial system based on blood lineage, but she also rejects the expectations of racial binarism by shuttling between the two camps. Although Irene also passes at times, her internal identification always remains on the side of her African American heritage, but Clare, taking advantage of both

[10] Rafael Walker, "Nella Larsen Reconsidered: The Trouble with Desire in Quicksand and Passing," MELUS 41, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 176.
[11] Larsen, 69.
[12] Walker, 179.
[13] Ibid., 180.

her white identity and the Harlem black community, refuses to choose a side at all. Her "desire-to-be" is neither blackness nor whiteness but rather to transcend the racial boundary altogether. It is this blatant dismissal of the racial line that appalls Irene. While she never condemns Clare for her racial defection—in fact, she even encourages Clare to permanently return to the white side by asking her to "[t]hink of the consequences to [Margery]"—she cannot accept Clare's oscillation because it fails to fall in line with the binary system essential to her worldview.[14] Her trouble with Clare, then, is not that "[Clare] want[s] to have her cake," but that "she want[s] to nibble at the cake of other folks as well."[15] In other words, her condemnation of Clare is less about her betrayal of the race than about her betrayal of the *principle* of race, which directly undermines the integrity of the ideological system upon which Irene's life depends. As a result, Clare's threat is "virtually indistinguishable from the threat of complete chaos."[16]

But the real threat of Clare's racial liminality lies not in its subversive nature but rather in its irresistible attractiveness. Repeatedly, Irene finds herself entranced by those "dark, almost black, eyes…against the ivory of [Clare's] skin," as if the perplexing coexistence of black and white is what transforms Clare into "an attractive-looking woman."[17] As she sinks into Clare's mesmeric gaze, she tries to mask her enthrallment behind a shield of racial solidarity—"Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes!"—but she cannot deny the "exotic" appeal of those Negro eyes juxtaposed against the "ivory face under that bright hair."[18] Such exoticism carries with it an enticing lure, and in those "luminous" eyes, it takes on an erotic undertone.[19] Later on, as Irene watches Clare's conversation with Dave Freeland at a party, she takes note of the same seduction

[14] Larsen, 68.
[15] Ibid., 51.
[16] Walker, 180.
[17] Larsen, 14.
[18] Ibid., 29.
[19] Ibid., 29.

again: "Clare had a trick of sliding down ivory lids over astonishing black eyes and then lifting them suddenly and turning on a caressing smile."[20] It is not just Clare's physical beauty that seduces; rather, her true seduction lies in the "trick" of concealing her blackness with an ivory veneer, of suddenly unmasking her innermost secret, and of the "caressing smile" that follows the sensual revelation of the secret.[21] As Butler aptly describes it, "it is the changeability itself, the dream of a metamorphosis…that constitutes the power of that seduction."[22]

As Irene falls prey to Clare's seductive power, the homoerotic tension between the two characters begins to emerge. As McDowell points out, this homosexual undertone has been present since the opening of the novel, when Irene hesitates to open up Clare's letter, fearing that it would reveal "an attitude towards danger."[23] The "danger" here may simply refer to the danger of Clare's passing, but McDowell, viewing the envelop as "a metaphoric vagina," suggests that the true danger of Clare's letter lies in a deeper secret—the secret of Irene's sexual desire for Clare.[24] Naturally, Irene is frightened by such homosexuality, for it threatens to upset the placid façade of her life that requires an appearance of prim propriety and the restraining of any sexual passion. Despite the threat, however, Irene still opens the letter, simultaneously opening up a Pandora's box, and soon, with a heavy sexual connotation, the letter brings both characters to Irene's bedroom. There, as Irene tries to convince Clare of the risks of visiting Harlem, Clare immediately responds, "You mean you don't want me, 'Rene?"[25] Her murky logic here blurs the line between race and sexuality, and it stretches the subject of race into the realm of homoerotic

[20] Larsen, 93.
[21] Ibid., 93.
[22] Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), 125.
[23] Larsen, 9.
[24] Ibid., 9; McDowell, xxvi.
[25] Larsen, 65.

tension. Although Irene desperately tries to return to the topic of race, her words serve only as "a mask for the deeper, more unsettling issues of sexuality."[26] Eventually, as Clare's eyes welled up with tears, Irene finds herself overwhelmed with sympathy, and when Clare begs her to bring her to the Negro Welfare League dance, "She gave in."[27]

And her giving in would bring about dire consequences. For as Irene gives in to Clare's seduction, she is simultaneously giving in to the desire that Clare has evoked in her, the desire to also trespass the boundary of racial and sexual propriety. Here, we see a typical Girardian model of triangular desire at work. Clare, whose enticing appeal has captivated Irene's imagination, serves as the mediator for her desires. Of course, Irene's strict adherence to her ideology impels her to disclaim her imitation, and as a result, she finds herself torn between two opposite feelings towards her mediator: "the most submissive reverence" along with her homoerotic passion on the one hand, and "the most intense malice" on the other.[28] In Clare's absence, Irene easily conjures up the resolve to keep Clare out of her life—"The basket for all letters, silence for their answers"—yet as soon as Clare enters the room, she immediately succumbs to Clare's charm, and with a "sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling," she exclaims: "Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare!"[29] This state of confused passions further invigorates her hatred of Clare, and in her desperate attempt to suppress her imitation, she imagines a love affair between Brian and Clare. Whether this affair has actually happened matters little to herself. By depicting Clare as an intruder in her marriage, Irene has invented a perfect justification for her loathing of Clare. At the same time, the affair also allows her to deny her homosexuality by projecting her

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[26] McDowell, xxviii.
[27] Larsen, 72.
[28] Rene Girard, "'Triangular' Desire," in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), 10.
[29] Larsen, 62-65.

desire for Clare onto Brian. In Butler's words, Brian becomes the "phantasmatic occasion for Irene to consummate her desire for Clare," but simultaneously, he also serves to "deflect [her] from the recognition that it is *her* desire which is being articulated through [him]."[30] The love affair thus provides a perfect camouflage for Irene's homosexuality, and by portraying Clare as a rival for Brian's love, it conceals Irene's homoerotic desire under a facade of hatred.

But what Irene fails to recognize is that the imaginary love affair in fact aggravates her mediation. By establishing Clare as a rival, the affair in fact "strengthens the bond" between Clare and Brian, which, as Girard suggests, "increases the mediator's prestige" in the triangular relationship.[31] Meanwhile, by projecting her homosexual feelings onto Brian, the affair forces Irene to confront the reality in which she has to sacrifice a part of her authentic self in the name of security. She is tormented by the thought of her husband's infidelity, but as Butler points out, a part of that pain is her anger at the "legitimated sexual position" which Brian holds with respect to Clare but she does not.[32] Her attempt to conceal her homosexuality with hatred thus only serves to reinforce her desire for Clare, and consequently, she finds herself entangled in a vicious cycle in which her hatred intensifies her desire while her desire fuels her hatred, until she can no longer extricate herself from her confused sentiments. Desperately, she prays that some change would remove Clare from her life, but when she realizes that she can do that herself by revealing Clare's secret to John Bellow, she immediately shrinks away from that thought. She cannot tell that man, "[n]or could she write it, or telephone it, or tell it to someone else who would tell him"—she is "caught between two allegiances…Herself. Her race."[33] The conflict here can be interpreted in two directions. If we interpret "Herself" as the rational part of her that

[30] Butler, 133.
[31] Girard, 13.
[32] Butler, 133.
[33] Larsen, 98.

strictly adheres to her racial ideology, then the conflict becomes a self-contradictory paradox: in order to uphold the ideology, Irene must get rid of Clare, but it is precisely the same ideology that obligates her to protect Clare out of racial loyalty. The ideology thus proves a contradiction in itself, a paradoxical dilemma that "bound and suffocated" her.[34] But beyond Irene's ideological commitment, there is another side of "Herself," an authentic part of her identity that yearns to be freed from the repressive constraints of "Her race."[35] This part of her includes all those desires that stand directly opposed to racial and sexual propriety, all those passions that she has always denied but cannot fully eradicate. The conflict thus becomes a conflict between her ideology and her authentic self, and she struggles between Clare, who embodies her secret wishes, and her race, which represents the ideological foundation upon which her entire life stands. Clare, or her race—one of them has to go.

Clare turns out to be the sacrificial lamb. As she falls through the window to her death, she is the sacrifice that Irene has chosen. We do not know the exact cause of her fall, but it matters little here. All that matters is that Irene has wished for Clare's death, that she has run across the room towards the window, and that she has laid her hand on Clare's arm at that fateful moment. "One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellow. She couldn't have her free."[36] With Clare's death, Irene has finally broken the impasse, as if the shattering of Clare's body has also shattered the prison wall that has up till now kept Irene fettered. But is she free now? In choosing her ideology over Clare's life, Irene has freed herself from the influence of Clare, but she remains fettered to her ideology, chained to the principles of security and permanence.

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[34] Ibid., 98.
[35] Ibid., 98.
[36] Larsen, 111.

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