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I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.

Race and Sexuality as Scapegoats for Irene Redfield's Jealousy

Nella Larsen's *Passing* presents the foil of two light-skinned African American woman who are able to pass as white: Irene Redfield, an intellectual, socially involved, family-oriented woman living in Harlem among the most educated members of the neighborhood, and Clare Kendry, a gorgeous, yet selfish and unpredictable woman who seems to do anything on a whim and always get her way. Clare, however, chooses to take advantage of her light skin and pass into white society, even marrying a man who detests her race. Despite Irene's disapproval of Clare, she cannot cut her out of her life, citing her constant persistence to get what she wants and her undeniable beauty as the reason why Irene cannot say no. These two traits of Clare's, her physical appearance and social callousness, are the root of Irene's jealousy throughout the story, manifesting in Irene's uneasiness about her race and sexuality, where her insecurities are seen in her unhappiness with her situation in life.

The first object of Irene's jealousy of Clare is her physical appearance as Irene provides vivid descriptions of Clare's appearance and comparisons to herself. Claudia Tate, in her interpretation of the novel, notes, "Clare makes Irene '[feel] dowdy and commonplace', thus making her constantly aware that she is comparatively mediocre in the light of Clare's sheer

loveliness, which is ‘absolute and beyond challenge’” (Tate, 598). Through the descriptions in the story through Irene’s perspective, Clare is portrayed as the supremely beautiful person, and Irene’s comparisons show that she sees herself as below Clare in physical appearance, which Tate notes is likely not entirely true. She says, “Though Irene is not referred to as a beauty, given her confidence and social grace, we are inclined to believe that she is attractive” (599). Irene, neglecting to describe or focus on her own appearance, clearly lacks self-esteem on that front, and hoists Clare on an unreachable pedestal. This affixation on Clare’s looks is furthered by Irene’s actions; it seems that every time Irene is about to refuse Clare, the sight of Clare makes Irene cave. For example, when trying to turn Clare away from coming to her home, “[Irene] meant to tell Clare Kendry at once, and definitely, that it was of no use, her coming, that she couldn’t be responsible, that she’d talked it over with Brian, who had agreed with her that it was wiser, for Clare’s own sake, to refrain—...Looking at the woman before her, Irene had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” (Larsen, 115). Irene is entranced, so much so by Clare’s appearance and person, that she almost loses all common sense and willpower. Putting Clare on this pedestal and regarding her as superior to her in appearance combined with her own lack of self-esteem is the foundation for her jealousy.

The second aspect of jealousy comes in Clare’s demeanor. Irene is quickly established in the story as unhappy with her situation, having to constantly worry about her children and have frustrating interactions with her husband. The first clue comes from her conversation with her husband regarding the children learning crude jokes in school. After her husband, Brian, completely dismisses Irene’s concern, Irene’s mood is bitter. “She got out, emphatically slamming the car’s door behind her. There was a piercing agony of misery in her heart. She hadn’t intended to behave like this, but her extreme resentment at his attitude, the sense of

having been wilfully[sic] misunderstood and reproved, drove her to fury” (Larsen, 106). Clare, on the other hand, has sent her child off to Europe for schooling and does not have to deal with her husband, John Bellew, who is constantly away on business trips. With no familial responsibilities and reputation to tend to, Clare’s lack of responsibility is most clear when Irene is trying to convince Clare that she should not associate with the black community anymore, where Irene thinks, “It was as if Clare Kendry had said to her, for whom safety, security, were all-important: ‘Safe! Damn being safe!’ and meant it” (118). Establishing Clare as one who does not care for responsibility, the jealousy manifests when she is determined to partake in the Negro Welfare League dance, as Irene, right before she is about to yield, thinks, “And in the look she gave Irene, there was something groping, and hopeless, and yet so absolutely determined that it was like an image of the futile searching and the firm resolution in Irene’s own soul” (129). Here it is most clear that Irene sees a version of herself in Clare that she longs for. She is envious of the ability for Clare to get what she wants, clued by the “futile searching” Irene sees in an image of herself. These freedoms that Clare enjoys, not bound by many of the limitations in Irene’s life, such as conscience, family, race, or status, is tantalizing for Irene, and watching Clare live it all through her household and community breeds resentment for Clare.

However, to address her jealousy, instead of looking outward and attacking Clare, Irene looks inward at her own situation and life to explain her shortcomings. Her first scapegoat is her race, centered around Clare’s willingness to pass compared to Irene’s disdain for the phenomenon. After questioning why she was unable to stand up to John Bellew at the party, she answers her own rhetorical question, saying, “She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever” (90). Irene believes she is bound to her by a racial loyalty, that she cannot do

the things she wants to do or say because it would impact Clare. However, she then makes it clear that Clare is not bound by those same rules due to her selfishness, saying, “Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it” (90). In this instance, she blames her own loyalty to her race to explain why she cannot speak out the way she wants. As a minority with lower social standing at the time, her allegiance to the black community means speaking out toward John Bellew would negatively impact Clare, as she would likely be outcast by the social circles she had been a part of and have to abandon her child as well. Despite all those reasons, to blame all this on race is short-sighted, and to sympathize with someone who has rejected their race so brutally is also confusing as a one-sided standard.

Irene’s glorification of Clare’s physical appearance also leads to inward resentment and dissatisfaction, in the form of insecurity about her sexuality. The constant mention of Clare’s beauty, her charm and ability to get what she wants, begs the question of the affect of Clare’s allure to others: if Clare could get Irene’s “heterosexual” female gaze to give her so much attention, it is unfathomable what kind of attention Clare could generate from the heterosexual male’s gaze. Irene then, due to insecurity in her own desirability, begins to suspect an affair between Clare and Brian. This is epitomized in the tea party at the Redfield’s home, where Irene begins by, again, giving a vivid description of Clare’s beauty, saying, “Irene couldn’t remember ever having seen her look better. She was wearing a superlatively simple cinnamon-brown frock which brought out all her vivid beauty... Yes, she was stunning” (169). Having established the female gaze and having noticed Clare’s ability to sway other married men at the party, she then looks inwards and degrades herself and her position in her marriage with Brian, saying, “A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn’t count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle” (171). Solely

based on paranoia and her own perception of Clare, Irene has reduced the view of herself in Brian's eyes to simply an obstacle to have romantic relationships with Clare. Just by talking to Clare at the party, Irene has extrapolated her female gaze's admiration for Clare to an undeniable desire for any male gaze, including the one of her husband. Without having any hard evidence of an affair, Irene believes Clare is a threat to uproot her whole household and livelihood.

The extent to which Irene believes this is a threat shows in the lead up and Irene's reaction to Clare's death. Right after John Bellew confronts Clare, as Irene is laying a hand on Clare's arm, Irene is said to have thought, "She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (209). Clearly, Irene is thinking about the possibility of a single, free Clare, and what chaos that might do for her own relationship, as well as the kind of insecurity and torment that might lead to should Clare have zero obligations to her family and child. Regarding the "accident", Tate talks about Irene's reaction, saying, "Irene wonders what the other people at the party may be thinking about the circumstances surrounding Clare's death...Irene wonders, 'What would the others think? That Clare had fallen?...' " (Tate, 600). While Tate is focused on Irene's motives and reaction in the context of Irene possibly murdering Clare, it is also clear here that Irene has no remorse for Clare's death: no shock, no remorse, only wondering what the other members of the party thought. Irene, through her jealousy, is almost dehumanized, lacking remorse or empathy for Clare, and her reaction to her death affirms her relief at Clare's passing.

Irene's jealousy toward Clare's physical appearance and social freedom manifests in the belittlement of her own race and sexuality. Her bottled introspection makes her own life miserable, making her resent her race based on her own loyalty to it, and suspect an affair with her husband based on her insecurity in her sexual appeal. While Clare and Irene are foils, they

are not complete opposites, both being light-skinned, both coming out of similar upbringings. If Irene had no regard for her family and responsibilities like Clare does, she could be as socially free as Clare, having the ability to “pass” like Clare does. If she was able to regard herself more highly in Brian’s eyes and acknowledge the intellectual strength she brings to the relationship, she may not suffer the same insecurities that she does before Clare’s death. Irene’s jealousy is the root of the problems in the novel, and she only uses ideas such as race and sexuality to scapegoat her lack of self-esteem.

Works Cited

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