

Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Crossing Forbidden Boundaries

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My old man died in a fine big house.

My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm going to die,

Being neither white nor black?

“Cross”

Langston Hughes

Abstract

The present paper aims at analysing the theme of transgressions or the crossing of forbidden boundaries in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. Due to the fact that hers is the first novel to address the social practice of "passing" overtly and directly within a wider tradition of "passing narratives" its context is relevant. Larsen's novel became a canonical text almost sixty years after its first publication back in 1929. Moreover, it addressed a social practice, "passing", that was a consequence of and relevant against a very particular social and historic backdrop and literary tradition, therefore I have deemed it crucial to start by positioning it against its background. The text draws on many autobiographical details such as both women protagonists being of mixed race ancestry like the author herself and them being part of the vibrant Harlem social and cultural scene of the 1920s so a brief outline of Larsen's biographical details has been rendered.

After placing the text in a context that is so relevant to it, the actual boundaries crossed under scrutiny in this paper have been delimited. Racial boundaries linked to identity boundaries are the most relevant as already revealed by the title. In fact, it will be argued that other transgressions are subdued to the crossing of racial boundaries, thus more scope will be devoted to analysing this sphere. Notwithstanding, in view of the scholarly interest in issues of social class, gender and sexuality these spheres are considered too as racial identity is related to issues of class as well as gender and sexual identities. In this sense, racial "passing" is motivated by the need for social advancement but also linked to sexual transgressions. In turn, class issues of bourgeois respectably also linked to the characters restraint and respect of other boundaries.

Above all, the text questions racial definition in terms of visual perception, but racial boundaries are explored and exposed as both a physical essence and a social construct so both ambits shall be considered. Racial boundaries are revealed as ambiguous, permeable and arbitrary and their crossing results in individual and collective apprehensions that shatter ideas of identity and identity politics threatening a system of segregation in place in the 1920s America. The social practice of "passing" is exposed as a menace to the validity of the "colour line" as well as the characters ontological certainty raising the question of why a multiple and contingent identity should not be possible as opposed to binary categorisations.

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Background and Introduction

The act of “passing” is defined as the historical practice of “racial passing” by which individuals of mixed racial ancestry “passed” as White and were assimilated into the dominant white culture, which occurred primarily following the end of the American Civil War and during the Reconstruction Era in the US. Crossing the colour line by “passing” for White had long been a way for fair skinned African Americans to improve their social and economic status. During the late 19th and early 20th century, racial relations were at their lowest in the U.S, it was a time of lynchings, discriminatory “Jim Crow” laws and the Great Migration from the rural South to the urban North for African Americans. Institutionalized segregation had practically re-enslaved African Americans, and some saw “passing” as an escape from misery and as a viable route to a better life.

Passing is accordingly both the title and motif of the novella written by Nella Larsen, a Danish-African-American novelist who was born in 1891 in Chicago. Her biographical details are not clear, but we do know that her mother was Danish and that her father was West Indian. After her father’s death, her mother married Peter Larsen who was also Danish and she became the only mixed race member of her family, which led to her being isolated and rejected (Nelson, 1304). She was educated at Fisk University (after having previously attended its high school department) and later also attended the University of Copenhagen. She also trained and worked as a nurse in New York where Larsen met and married the prominent physicist Elmer Imes, but eventually the marriage ended. In 1921, she began to work for the New York Public Library's branch in Harlem where her interest in African American culture increased and led to her establishing literary and publishing contacts. Consequently, she started to write and also became aware of the African American artistic awakening that was taking place at the time. As well as several short stories, Larsen published her first novel *Quicksand* in 1928, and only a year after Larsen published her second, *Passing*. But after her divorce, she abandoned her promising literary career and went back to the nursing profession until her death (Nelson, 1305-6). In writing she discovered a female authority apparently free of race though in essence entrapped by it (Davis, 1994, 8).

Her prose is largely autobiographical as her two novellas portray mixed race women protagonists like herself, and she drew on multiple personal experiences to depict their stories. *Passing*, like *Quicksand*, addresses Larsen's constant and latent subjects of race, class and sexuality. Told as a third person narrative that focalises on Irene, it tells the story of two light-skinned women of African American descent, Irene Redfield (née Westover) and Clare Bellew (née Kendry) who are childhood friends and are re-acquainted by chance after a twelve year separation in a segregated Chicago hotel, both "passing" as White. They were separated when Clare's mixed race father died, and she went to live with her white aunts where she learnt she could "pass" for white as everybody assumed she was anyway. She later married the racist bigot John Bellew, who is a wealthy banker and permanently "passes" to live as a member of the white elite. Irene Redfield is a prominent black physician's wife, is well established in the new Black Middle Class in Harlem and works in the committee for the "Negro Welfare League" (NWL), but fears that her husband is less satisfied with their bourgeois life. The women renew their friendship and two years after the chance encounter in Chicago they are reacquainted in New York. Clare starts secretly participating in the Harlem life, but Irene grows angry and suspicious of an affair between her husband Brian and Clare. The latter's renewed contact with her race has tragic consequences when her African-American past is discovered by her husband, who accusingly storms into a Harlem Party and Clare dies as a result of a fall from a window. The novella has an ambiguous ending as whether she fell, jumped or was pushed out of the window by either Irene or her husband is left to the reader to judge.

During the 1920s Nella Larsen became a novelist in a historic moment when African Americans were poised for unprecedented literary accomplishment (Davis, 1994, 2): The Harlem Renaissance. This was, according to *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, a flourishing period of artistic and literary creation in African-American culture in general and among the "New Negroes" of Harlem in particular. The period is regarded as having begun with the increased militancy and racial pride symbolized by the 1919 parade of black veterans through Harlem and ended with the economic collapse of the Great Depression. Despite the various artistic contributions, most critics have focused on the writers who were drawn to Harlem: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and Claude

McKay, amongst others. They were supported and influenced by black editors such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, Charles Johnson, and Alain Locke and white patrons such as Carl Van Vechten to whom *Passing* is dedicated. The period can be understood as the forefather of later movements of African-American cultural autonomy and race consciousness (Childers and Hentzi). In the violent climate of the time, race proud publications by activists would begin to manifest cultural achievement that was thought would route social and political advancement for African Americans (Zafar, 290). “The New Negro, it was claimed, had thrown off the yoke of racial prejudice that equated blackness with barbarism and was proud of his and her race and heritage” (Dawahare, 23).

In spite of Nella Larsen’s active participation in Harlem’s dynamic social and cultural scene during the time, the Novelist died in oblivion after nearly forty years of literary silence, yet she is nowadays one of the movement’s most studied authors. The dedication of the novella to Van Vechten as well as the epigraph, with the inclusion of four lines from the poem “Heritage” by Countee Cullen overtly indicates Larsen’s connection with the Harlem Renaissance (Davis, 1986, 187) and discloses its underlying theme of racial affiliation and alienation from one's roots:

“One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?”

“Heritage” by Countee Cullen

Passing is concerned with Africa not as a geographical entity, but as a metaphorical racial landscape significant for African American authors in the Harlem Renaissance (Bernard, 421). Nevertheless, she distances herself from black folk culture and the world of poor southern Blacks in agrarian settings, as she unveils modern urban characters that do not only resemble whites in their looks but in their behaviour too. Their divided heritage and allegiance are a chief theme (Davis, 1986, 188).

As a literary theme, “passing” allows writers to focus simultaneously on race, colour and identity of the African American community and was of particular relevance as a literary motif during segregation and particularly at the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Major writers and works that use “passing” as a theme include, for instance, Frank J.

Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857); Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900); James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912); Walter White's *Flight* (1926); Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929); Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929); and Charles R. Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) (Ervin, 2004). The novella under scrutiny in this paper, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, can be seen not only the inheritor but as the perpetuator of a tradition of passing narratives that has managed to eclipse its preceding tradition (Rottenberg, 435) as it has become the most canonized text in this literary subgenre (Ramon, 46). She was the first author to address the practice of "passing" overtly by giving it this title.

At the time when it was written the assumptions regarding racial categories in the US such as the "one-drop" rule meant that a percentage of "black" ancestry rendered one "non-white". In 1920 the category of "mulatto" ceased to be contemplated in the US Census, so there is a temporal proximity to the time when those individuals of mixed race ancestry such as the author or the characters in the text would have started to be categorised as "Negro" for the first time (Jenkins, 146). African Americans had powerful reasons to "pass", even if temporarily, up until the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlawed discrimination based on race, unequal application of voter registration requirements and racial segregation.

In the novella, Irene's makes an indirect reference to the Rhinelander case¹ (Larsen, 238) which suggests that racial passing and the consequences of being discovered are a major theme. What Larsen seems to be drawing attention to, is the irrationality of forcing people to conform to superficial and binary notions of racial identity. Above all, *Passing* disputes the very concept of race, disclosing it as an arbitrary fiction but also interrogates other dimensions of the women protagonists' identities too. So even if chiefly, it explores the phenomenon of racial "passing", discussions involving the text show it is not limited to the matter of racial transgression and critics also turned the focus from race to class and other subjects. And last but not least, of lately, feminist studies have seen *Passing* as a coded exploration of homosexual desire worthy of attention too, and other critics draw our attention to the possibility that "passing" and

¹ The Rhinelander case was a much publicised marriage annulment proceeding in which a white upper class man, Leonard Kip Rhinelander sued his working class wife, Alice Beatrice Jones, for fraud as he claimed he did not know that his light-skinned wife was in fact of African American descent. The trial took place in the mid-1920s and Alice Rhinelander's "true" race was long debated, drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of race divisions and America's white elite's obsession with racial classification during that time.

Passing (both the act and the title) has multiple implications that encompass race, class and sexuality (Toth, 59).

The analysis in this paper aims at a threefold exploration of the transgressions (or crossing of forbidden boundaries) in this novella the exploration of crossing boundaries of race, class as well as gender and sexuality. As stated above, “racial transgression” is its most important motif and, as a result, more scope will be devoted to its analysis. Social boundaries are trespassed by means of crossing racial boundaries, so these transgressions will be analysed on a subsidiary level. Similarly, sexual and gender boundaries and their crossing are related to both social class and racial boundaries and will be explored in this regard.

Crossing Racial Boundaries

Race (i.e. the definition of racial boundaries), as well as identity are a major theme within narratives of “passing”, as characters shift both their racial definition as well as their identities and *Passing* is no exception. But as Ginsberg adds, it goes further than just identity as a theme as “both the process and the discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics [...] [and] discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent” (Ginsberg, 4). The act of “passing”, or crossing the boundary defined by “the color line”², was in the 1920s America a threat to a system of racial segregation. In this sense then, “passing” and *Passing* would challenge the social and political system of the time, identity politics and identity itself.

The novella’s main motif first and foremost questions racial definition in terms of visual perception that can obviously be deceiving. But apart from exposing this fact, the question of whether Larsen was using the trope as a subversive strategy or if she somehow subscribed to that same flawed logic that has long limited racial definitions in the United States, the one drop rule, remains open. The following section will analyse to what extent racial boundaries are exposed as an artificial social construct or as an inherent physical part of the individual’s essential identity.

² Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903 referred to it as an actual yet invisible barrier of custom and law erected between Blacks and Whites (Zadar, 296).

Some critics, such as Rottenberg, characterise race as a performative utterance, i.e. something that is constituted in the act of description. In this sense, *race* would be regarded as something that is enforced by certain “racializing norms” that institute racial difference as a condition of subjects. This would entail that racial identity is something that is “assumed or given” rather than something one simply “is” by nature, a physical essence in a subject. Accordingly, in white supremacist societies, racial and social norms coerce individual to assume one racial category or another. This binary opposition of white (privileged) versus non-white (black) compose artificial unities that are associated with certain attributes or traits which perpetuate power relations. This way, “the novella manages to reveal the paradox embodied in racist discourse, [...] [that] must constantly invoke and reinforce the “non-whiteness” of the other subject, whom it concomitantly encourages to live up to norms of whiteness” (Rottenberg, 441).

The “passing” subjects, in this case both Irene and Clare, are identified and identify themselves as Black due to the one drop rule imposed by a society that, contradictorily, asks them to act like whites. The racializing norm, the “one drop rule” is exposed as a social construct rather than a physical fact³. Clare’s permanent “Passing” thus reveals this contradiction and subverts the manmade boundary and the existing hegemony it perpetuates. This is why Irene is made to feel “a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of life as well” (Larsen, 166) as she refuses to permanently cross this boundary although she is comfortable with occasionally “passing” for convenience. But most importantly this proves that the forbidden boundary is permeable and that one racial identity or another can be performed in spite of what “racializing norms” have imposed.

It could be argued that what complicates Larsen’s representation of racial identity as behavioural or performative is the fact that certain characters in *Passing* still believe that race is physical (Nisetich, 351). Irene, the character whose perspective the story unfolds from, believes there is something essential about being Black and that this essence can be perceived. For example, Irene tells Hugh Wentworth at the Negro Welfare dance that while “It’s easy for a Negro to pass for white,” there remain “ways[...] not definite or tangible” for her to see through the passing of others” (Larsen, 206). In an earlier discussion on the same topic, Brian Redfield similarly remarks: “We know, always

³ An individual’s genetic heritage is obviously a physical fact. I am referring to rendering that as valid condition to decide somebody’s racial categorisation.

have. They don't. Not quite" (Larsen, 185). Irene claims there is some sort of sixth sense that African Americans have to identify race and mocks the alleged ability that whites claim to have to identify "passing" African Americans.

Nevertheless, on her chance encounter with Clare at the Drayton Irene was unable to tell by this reputed sixth sense as she initially assumed her to be white. She also exposes this so-called intuitive knowledge as being entirely subjective as Irene also tells Hugh that "nobody can [tell] by looking," (Larsen, 206). In this sense, what seems to be questioned is more the fact that African Americans can intuitively identify race rather than race itself being a physical fact. Race, then, seems to be regarded by Irene as a concrete physical fact but can only be identified by intangible means.

Along these lines Wegmann-Sánchez (148) warrants that *Passing* "focuses on exposing the logic behind the Black/ White binary as unconvincing" but Larsen "conveys these ideas of Blackness as racial [i.e. Biological] rather than cultural". Further to this, in the performative, behavioural or cultural sense, Clare who lived in a white community with her white aunts that never allowed her to even mention Negroes, could be regarded as much as White "passing" for Black as she is Black "passing" for White but this perspective is not portrayed by Larsen, her essential Blackness is not questioned (Wegmann-Sánchez, 148). So if Clare is being regarded as *essentially* Black, she could be interpreted as defending racial identity to be a physical essence and to adhere to the one drop rule.

But does *Passing* really then adhere to the "one drop" logic? Clare comes from a mixed-race family background that is not fully disclosed in the text. She reveals Irene that her aunts weren't "passing"; they were in fact white, which comes to Irene as a surprise (Larsen, 158). We know little of Clare's parentage, but we do know that her father was the dark offspring of a white man (her aunts' brother) and a "ruined Negro girl" (Larsen, 159) but Clare's mother's actual racial identity is unknown. As Nisetich (356) asserts "the omission of further detail is significant. If Clare's mother were black, it would be easy to interpret Clare as essentially 'black' too". By withholding this knowledge, Larsen further frustrates readers' attempts to assign an "essential" absolute or fixed racial identity to Clare. In spite of Irene having read her as essentially Black, Larsen's racial categorisation cannot be fully determined.

Clare is regarded as putatively Black by Irene (not necessarily Larsen) but also as traitor to her race “No, Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it” (Larsen, 182). As Nisetich (335) avows for Irene, adhering to the “one drop rule” is a device that allows her to view herself as a self-sacrificing race woman while Clare is the race traitor. She affirms there was “nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry’s idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire” (Larsen, 144) and had moreover “failed to take up the defence of the race to which she belonged” (Larsen, 182). Irene feels 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 sever” (Larsen, 182) and even when she eagerly wants to betray her to save her marriage still she cannot as she feels: “That instinctive loyalty to a race. Why couldn’t she get rid of it?[...] she could not change herself, could not separate individuals for the race herself from Clare Kendry” (Larsen, 227).

Nevertheless even if we accept Irene’s adherence as just a device to include Claire in the same racial category as herself which in turn allows her to be some sort of “race martyr” it remains difficult to discuss the act of “passing” itself without reinstating “race” as at least a social if not a physical construct given the fact that it requires placing people of mixed racial heritage in one category or another (Nisetich, 353-5).

In *Passing* racial boundaries in the 1920s America are not only exposed as a yoke on the individual and his or her identity but also primarily as ambiguous, permeable and arbitrary, hence hardly an absolute and *objective* fact. What most questions this blurring of boundaries and the instability of the criteria in categorisation is how the characters racial affiliations are perceived, changes. Larsen resorts to portraying characters of mixed race heritage who are not visibly Black and she sometimes seems to rest the “truth” about their racial identity on the observer making the judgement, hence an unstable and ambiguous “truth”.

Clare seems to be able to transition from being read as White to being read as Black depending on whom, how or when is observing her. Irene herself relies upon her perceptions and associations to determine Clare’s race when she first meets her, after twelve years, at the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel. Even after Clare approaches her and calls her by a childhood nickname, Irene is momentarily unable to place her or read her racial identity: “What *white* girls had she known well enough to have been familiarly

addressed as 'Rene by them? The woman before her didn't fit her memory of any of them. Who was she?" (Larsen, 151. Emphasis mine) as she believes her to be White as they have met in a segregated location that did not allow African American patrons and it is not until later, once she has recognised her childhood friend by means of her laughter, that she begins to expand her vision and change the perceived racial affiliation:

And the eyes were magnificent! Dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them. Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic.

(Larsen, 161)

The same eyes that had earlier been defined as "dark, almost black" (Larsen, 148) and were initially thought to be a white woman's have now become a *Negro's* and at the same time as "luminous", attribute which is seen in contrast to be a visual marker of Clare's "Blackness". Clare's appearance itself hasn't changed only Irene's perception of it. Thus Irene does in this sense adhere to the "one-drop rule" and regard race a physical essence because once she has recognised Clare as her childhood friend and identifies her African American ancestry she does regard her as Black. From Irene's perspective, her essential Blackness, once she is identified, is not questioned. So what is unstable is the way Clare's race can be read not her essence.

This is also illustrated in the passage when Bellew, Clare's husband is introduced to her friends Irene and Gertrude during tea. He assumes his wife's light skinned friends to be white and shows how he is a racist bigot, using her wife's pet name 'Nig' (short for "Nigger", ironically she has acquired this nickname in her new reality as a White woman), as he jokes about the fact that Clare is getting darker every day, and that she'll "wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger" (he foreshadows). Later on he asserts: "I know you are no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (Larsen, 171). He reads not only his wife but her friends Gertrude and Irene as white as they are the friends and guests of his wife Clare.

Larsen does support the idea of the racially ambiguous characters' affiliation being defined by association in other ways too. For instance, Bellew recognises Irene as black (and ultimately his own wife too) only when he sees her with Felise Freeland who has visible African American traits.

Surprise, incredulity, and—was it understanding?—passed over his features. He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own. She was sure, now, of the understanding in his face, as he looked at her again and then back at Felise.

(Larsen, 226)

When a character is not visibly of African American descent, his or her racial identity seems to be assigned by the observer by classing the character into one or another category depending on where or who they are seen with. Jenkins reasons that this ambiguity is both necessary and unsettling for black identity as it is “understood as a threat to the [...] boundaries of race” and she advocates that this is partly accomplished by constructing tensions between the notion of an intangible black ‘essence’ and a concrete black code of behaviour (Jenkins, 131-133). These ‘essence’ and code of behaviour would be embodied and violated by mixed raced characters Irene and Clare.

As a result of Clare’s “passing” back and forth, Irene’s own view on racial issues and her racial allegiance are challenged too as she initially regards racial matters as unspeakable, as illustrated in the passage when she learns that Brian has discussed lynching with their boys, and she says: “I want their childhood to be happy and as free from the knowledge of such things as it possibly can be” (Larsen, 231) yet Clare ultimately “forces Irene to see, to explore her African American-ness. By coercing her into an uncontrollable situation where Irene must look at race and racism directly, she can no longer ignore” (Wagner, 154) thus she finds herself “caught between two allegiances, different yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, of if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself or the race” (Larsen, 225). The same woman whose allegiance and loyalty to her race was stopping her from betraying her friend to stop the alleged affair with her husband, is seen later on grappling with this allegiance, now deemed a burden. For the first time, we see Irene, whose major worries were stability and comfort of her black middle class existence in Harlem struggle with the very idea of race:

Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, 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. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children. (Larsen, 225)

What Clare has done to Irene's psyche with her constant in between status and the exposure of "the menace of impermanence" (Larsen, 229) has been to make her realise that actually, there are no "ties of race" or "duty" as she realises that "[She and Clare were] strangers even in their racial consciousness. Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood" (Larsen, 192). In this regard, Larsen, by placing it in opposition to Clare's, has dismantled Irene's identity as a "race woman".

As a result, by questioning "passing" Larsen shows that perceptions of racial difference rely on assumptions that are unstable. In this way Larsen "insists that race operates as a physical, social, and psychical demarcation as well as a cultural fiction" and also warns against easy racial designations by creating an impressively tight formal structure that generates and maintains confusion (Macintire, 779). "Passing", which in informal language can mean to be deceased, must be regarded as definite and irrevocable, as if one's pre-passing identity were to die to be reborn into the new identity, yet Clare insists on passing back and forth and existing in both worlds, which is why she is made to cease to exist in the narrative. Clare is condemned to a tragic death just for being too liminal "seeking to stand perpetually on the in-betweens[...] in the name of choosing just one of the bifurcated racial categories available to her in 1920s America when identities were most often either/or rather than both or many" (Macintire, 783)

In a nutshell, *Passing* is about the boundaries established between identity categories and their ambiguity and permeability, along with being about individual and collective apprehensions caused by this boundary crossing. The question of whether Larsen used "passing" and *Passing* as a subversive strategy against the binary notions of race prevalent at the time and whether she supported the "one drop rule" logic has been addressed. The colour line's existence is not questioned, and it is not definitely defined as something social or physical either, yet its validity is interrogated as it is exposed as ambiguous permeable and arbitrary, and categorisations often dependent on the individual making the judgement. Clare's racial ambiguity leads her to embrace the

option that all identity categories are social constructions yet , Irene rebels against the broader ontological implication of “passing” as she needs to reassert the stability of her identity which encompasses being black, a mother, American etc... (Toth, 62). Finally, the most private and most unquestionable realm of racial affiliation, one’s psyche, is exposed by Irene, our race woman whose affiliation is made to quiver too, revealing racial affiliation as a fiction.

Crossing Social and Class Boundaries

Transgressions or the crossing of forbidden boundaries are manifold in *Passing*. On the surface, it is about racial identity definition of biracial characters in an America sharply divided by the colour line (Dawahare, 24) but inasmuch as wealth was linked to Whiteness, racial “passing” is motivated by the desire to progress socially and economically. Social class is related to both race and gender relations, as in the case of our female protagonists, in the 1920s America it would have been related to whom they married. Clare and Irene want to be identified with the upper classes and not the black working class (Dawahare, 24),h Hence social class is an important part of both Irene and Clare’s identities.

Clare is a character of many transgressions. Not only does she transgress the boundary defined by the “colour line” by “passing” for white, but she moves both above and away from the poverty line by marrying the rich banker Bellew too. Clare Kendry had grown up in poverty in Chicago as part of the Black community but later, once she started unconsciously “passing” whilst living with her white aunts, she was still poor. Clare escapes into great wealth with her marriage: “I was determined to get away, 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” (Larsen, 159)

However, at the same time by definitely “passing into the ‘White’ world in the most extreme sense [...] [she] must tolerate [her husband’s] continual degrading remarks about Blacks to reap the rewards of financial and social success” (Wegmann-Sánchez: 147). She explains that it is these remarks that cause her to feel lonely and want to go back to having contact with African Americans. Yet Cutter affirms regarding her need to partake in the Harlem life, “Clare initially passes from the black to the white race to

transcend her class position, but to flaunt this new class position, she must pass back from a white identity to a black one” (91-92).

In contrast to this Irene Redfield leads a seemingly happy middle-class life in Harlem, married to an African American doctor and surrounded by elite urbanites in a sense happily “passing” as bourgeois. As the “race woman” that she considers herself to be she “passes” throughout the narrative in her constant allegiance to, if not safeguard of, both white and middle-class values and standards addressing the “problem of the proper one of the two frocks for the bridge party that night” (Larsen, 149). Irene’s bourgeois “passing” could be interpreted as a social or psychological device of denial of a “social context rife with lynchings and Jim Crow laws” (Marren, 138), to which her husband refers to constantly as an argument to relinquish their relatively comfortable position and move to Brazil. Irene longs for domestic tranquillity and social status within the black elite in Harlem so strongly that she is willing to sacrifice her own happiness and her husband’s in order to achieve this. Brian is contributory to her status due to the fact that he is a doctor his profession gives Irene and her family social respectability and an affluent position.

It could be affirmed that the reader sees throughout the narrative that Irene passes just as much as Clare does, even if she does so more covertly. She lives committed to a loveless marriage defending a life that affords her and her children security, meanwhile she internally refers to her black servant Zulena as a “creature” when she is served breakfast formally in the dining room, in her adequate middle-class house with her suitable middle-class husband. That is, Irene passes as a happy, middle-class wife and mother which only shows “the depth of her self-deception” (John, 110). On this subject Scrubbs (161) manifests the house here is “an image of bourgeois aggressiveness and acquisitiveness, not an innocent image of family values”. It is, nonetheless, another pillar that affords her security, which is her most valued asset. Irene asserts her allegiance to her national identity by stating that she “belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted” (Larsen, 235). Although Irene claims to be loyal to the “race,” what she's loyal to is the American way of life, “the rising towers” as they provide security. She is also “depicted as desiring a civilised and cultured life” ironically attained by “attempting to approximate the norms of whiteness” (Rottenberg, 444).

Passing also explicitly complicates the association of blackness with primitivism and whiteness with bourgeois respectability that would have been presumed in the 1920s racist and segregated America. In *Passing*, it is Clare, the character whose name denotes clarity and who is permanently read as white who is the novel's most "exotic" (Larsen, 161) and sexualised character as she is defined as "catlike" (Larsen, 144); she writes in "purple ink", uses "foreign paper" (Larsen, 143) in a way that is "a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression" (Larsen, 182); she smiles in a way that "[i]s too provocative for a waiter" (Larsen, 152); she dresses conspicuously (Larsen, 203); and she wears "an expression so dark and deep and unfathomable" that Irene had "the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart" (Larsen, 172). She is also a more sexual character who we know has extramarital affairs as the "first thing that Irene noticed about him [Jack Bellew] was that he was not the man that she had seen with Clare Kendry on the Drayton Roof" (Larsen, 170). Yet promiscuity and being sexual and exotic were traits usually associated to African American women in the literature of the time. In opposition, Irene, the woman who boldly proclaims her loyalty to the race and asserts her African American-ness, is concerned with issues of sexual, social, and economic respectability that point to her bourgeois self-restraint (Godfrey, 134). She has repressed her desires at the expense of attaining bourgeois respectability and in opposition, Clare, who has sought to fulfil them, is condemned to a tragic death in the narrative.

According to Scruggs (161) Irene assumes a moral superiority over Clare because Irene was born and is established in the black bourgeoisie (whereas Clare's father was an alcoholic janitor) and has not married outside the race for "gain". Clare has married up but her world at the top is unstable and could cease to exist if the secret of her racial identity is revealed, and unlike Irene she is willing to risk it all with her "passing" and later returning to Harlem and further risking being discovered. She tells her friend that "You don't know you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (Larsen, 200). Her choices and desires show that she does not value security like Irene does, "It was as if Clare Kendry had said to her, for whom safety, security, were all important: 'Safe! Damn being safe!' and meant it" (Larsen, 195).

Scruggs (161) also draws attention to the scene early in the novel in which Clare invites Irene and a mutual friend Gertrude over to tea. Irene seems to be the most sympathetic

of the three. Both Gertrude and Clare have married white men for money, whereas Irene has married an African American doctor for position. When the story of someone they once knew who converted to Judaism is told, Clare and Gertrude assume that their mutual friend became a black Jew for advantage. Irene responds with deserving indignation: “It evidently doesn't occur to either you or Gertrude that he might possibly be sincere in changing his religion. Surely everyone doesn't do everything for gain” (Larsen, 169). Irene is asserting herself as superior in her morals and motivation. Notwithstanding, it could be argued that Irene herself is married for gain too, even if not so blatantly monetary as in Clare’s case, but for the status and security her marriage provides.

The interesting thing about Clare is not only how she transgresses and makes the reader question social constructs, ideas and boundaries but how she triggers the dismantling of Irene’s own identity boundaries as well. She does not only do this with regards to race, or (as we will see later) gender and sexuality but with regards to her social status too, as when they attend the Negro Welfare League dance after Irene reluctantly invites her she is described as “exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet,” and Irene feels “dowdy and commonplace” (Larsen, 203).

Moreover, Clare’s “utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others” (Larsen, 201), as Irene understands it, her indifference to social conventions, gives her an air of security that Irene desires for herself (Caughie, 529). Clare was “[s]tepping always on the edge of Danger Always aware, but not drawing back or turning aside. Certainly not because of any alarms or feeling of outrage on the part of others” (Larsen, 143) and by showing her disdain towards the opinion of others, makes Irene somehow question her choices.

Clare has realised she needs something else other than money and security to be happy and shows Irene how she is willing to risk losing it all, which is unbalancing for Irene, whom “[a]bove everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life. And now that Clare Kendry had come into it, and with her the menace of impermanence” (Larsen, 229), Irene’s deepest fear is realised as her whole identity is constructed on permanence. Irene finds herself “attempting to ignore and/or repress the feelings, wishes, dreams from her own childhood that Clare’s

presence has uncovered, Irene at last has a moment of introspection, mulling over the cost of holding security at the topmost of her list of priorities” (Wagner, 50). This reminds Irene of what she has sacrificed to have the bourgeois existence she has been so desperate to secure. She has prioritised class status as this is what offers her a sense of security. Crossing the boundaries of race is not the only aspect that Irene finds threatening about Clare as her presence, as the “menace of impermanence” (Larsen, 229), is related to other boundaries being crossed to.

To round up it should be mentioned that Larsen explores both the hypocrisy of the white elite when the crossing of racial boundaries is explored, however, when we relate the issue of “racial passing” to crossing class boundaries contradictions of the newly established Black Middle Class and the “New Negro” tenets are exposed. Even if not directly, *Passing* “implicitly challenges the social, sexual, and moral tenets of the New Negro movement, and she portrays the racially ambiguous Clare Kendry as she struggles to define herself outside of socially imposed racial and sexual parameters” (Nisetich, 355). In a sense those advocating being “race proud” individuals adhere and embrace white values of bourgeois respectability when blackness is associated with working classes.

Crossing Gender and Sexual Boundaries

The so called homosexual themed subtext to be found in *Passing* has long been a source of debate amongst scholars, especially since Deborah McDowell’s 1986 edition of the text and her introduction to it. Along these lines, she introduced a generation of critics that pushed the issue of “race” in the novella to the background distancing it from “passing narratives” or “tragic mulatto” type novels and widening the scope of subjects within the text worthy of study. However lately, the importance of the issue of race has been reinstated (Wagner, 144). The importance of racial identity issues cannot be underestimated in the novella, yet Larsen does seem to relate “racial transgressions” not only to social class shifting but to sexual transgressions too, as Clare, who has betrayed her race is also pictured as capable of being sexually promiscuous too. Nevertheless and on the face of disagreement amongst critics the relevance of the homoerotic undertones in the text is worthy of analysis, as well as other questions of gender identity presented.

So firstly, to what extent is *Passing* a homoerotic narrative “passing” as a racial one? McDowell, in her introduction, undermines the importance of the theme of race while focusing her argument around sexuality: “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). Toth infers a similar point: “Many critics, in fact, have suggested that the novel’s focus on race is a deflection of other much more troubling (or ‘unspeakable’) issues” (57).

The novella opens with a letter from Clare addressed to Irene, and in this letter, “a thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender” (Larsen, 143) she is being addressed in language more evocative of that used with a long lost lover, than a friend. As Ramon (53) asserts, “Clare expresses her wish to see Irene using a sexually charged tone” remarking that she is “so lonely” and has “never longed for anything before,” and has an “ache,” “pain” and “wild desire” for her friend (Larsen, 145). Ramon (54) continues to elucidate that “further underscoring this secrecy is Clare’s wish that Irene respond not to a specific address, but to the post office’s general delivery. We are unsure whether or not Clare even signs this letter”. Hence the epistolary introduction of the novella is inducing the reader, from the very beginning, to sense that this is a relationship comparable to that of furtive lovers later reassured by Clare hinting at this directly: “I am sure they [the people in the post office] were beginning to think that I’d been carrying on an illicit love affair” (Larsen, 194) .

Further to this, as Wagner (151) suggests “Irene instinctively recognizes that Clare is a danger, a threat to her racial ontology, and is repelled by her; but even as she is repelled, she finds herself sexually drawn to Clare as well.” Not only that but as she indicates, “[w]hen Clare is present, visible, Irene is placated, is charmed, is overwhelmed [...]she is mesmerized, fascinated[...]Irene is awestruck by her beauty and ambiance, often displaying an overt homoerotic desire for her friend”(151-2).

The reader can notice a sexual tension, maybe even longing, in the language used by Irene to describe Clare, who has a “wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin” (Larsen, 148) a “tempting mouth” and “arresting eyes” with a “loveliness [that] was absolute, beyond challenge”, eyes and mouth that that gave Irene “a sense of being petted and caressed” (Larsen, 161); she perceives Clare as “really almost too

good-looking” (Larsen,156) or as the “whole torturing loveliness that had been” (Larsen, 239). During the passage when they first meet on the roof of the Drayton, for example, when it is time to part, Irene thinks it is 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, 162).

In a later passage when Irene is in her bedroom debating whether or not to discontinue her friendship with Clare who comes “softly into the room without knocking” and drops “a kiss on her dark curls” (Larsen, 194) Irene’s distancing and rejection are transformed by the gesture, and she feels “a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” and cries “with something like awe in her voice: “Dear God! But aren’t you lovely, Clare!” (Larsen, 194). She is overwhelmed. moved by both emotion and admiration. She sees in Clare a woman “of heights and depth of feeling that she [...] had never known” yet at the same time disregards this capability of Clare’s as “that quality of feeling that was to her strange, even repugnant (Larsen, 195).

Ramon also highlights the fact that “the protagonists describe each other with sexually charged terms. As the novel unfolds, so does the erotic diction of the two characters” (56) and mentions Irene’s “desire” for “the appeal [and] the caress” of Clare (Larsen, 162); the description of Clare as “appealing, so very seductive” and facts like they greet “in the hall with a kiss” (Larsen, 165); and that Clare is “excitingly happy” to meet Irene and “ached to see more” of her (Larsen, 177); as examples amongst others as “the list of sexually charged lines from this novel is quite lengthy, but these few examples encapsulate the ways in which Larsen highlights[...] ‘the unexpected intimacy’ between same sex characters in passing narratives” (Ramon, 56). He concludes that by combining stealth and sexuality to expand the conventional definition of what “passing” means Larsen somehow projects that transgressing one boundary, namely race raises the question of crossing another, that of sexuality (Ramon, 56).

Nevertheless, as Labbe (128) illustrates, this controversial and “transgressive” reading that interprets the novella as a covert lesbian love affair is in a sense uncertain as she questions McDowell’s assertion that the “erotic subplot” is “hidden beneath [its] safe and orderly cover” claiming that “as the diverse range of interpretation of this novel attest *Passing* is anything but safe an orderly”. And she also states that critics Caughie,

Carr, Thadius Davis and Sherrad –Johnson also disagree with reading *Passing* as a distinctly lesbian text.

Despite the controversy about Irene's sexual orientation and whether or not she worries about Brian being unfaithful by having an affair with Clare due to the fact that she is projecting her own underlying desire for her, one thing about Irene's sexuality must be noted: she has superseded it for the sake of safety and "security" which she refers to as "the most important and desired thing in life" (Larsen, 235). There is no sexual desire between Brian and Irene anymore, as it is hinted by the fact that they sleep in separate bedrooms: "He slept in his rooms next to hers at night" (Larsen, 224). Irene "had [n]ever truly known love. Not even for Brian" (Larsen, 235) and as Scruggs (162) maintains, when the couple discuss their son hearing "dirty jokes" in school, Irene worries because she sees sexual desire as uncontrollable, something that threatens her design for her family. Thus she could imagine an affair between Brian and Clare not by projecting her own feelings but because Clare has said that she is "not safe," meaning she does not have "any proper morals or sense of duty" (Larsen, 210). Brian's response to the situation hints at him being sexually dissatisfied in his marriage too, as he affirms regarding the subject of sex: "And most certainly if he learns it's a grand joke, the greatest in the world. It'll keep him from lots of disappointments later on" (Larsen, 189)

Furthermore Clare does not only question and destabilise Irene's racial and sexual identities as Irene attempts to confirm their permanence, she makes her assert her identity as a mother too. Clare is equivocal and irresolute towards motherhood as she affirms that "children are not everything" (Larsen, 210) and that "being a amother is the cruellest thing in the world" (Larsen, 197) which unbalances Irene as she replies "We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children" (Larsen, 197) As Toth (61) concludes "like being 'black' and being 'American' Irene cannot help being a 'mother'. [...] she appears to be in danger of, and struggling against, becoming infixed for her heterosexual identity". And that *Passing* "is obviously interested in the issue of race, and racial ambiguity, [...] [but] evokes a more general ontological threat of transience and stability" (Toth, 57).

Contradictory as it may seem, Irene is both attracted to and appalled by Clare's desire to live on the edge and her liminal existence. On the one hand, Clare is portrayed as "some wild ecstasy that she has never known" (Larsen, 235) but at the same time she relates

Clare to the “menace of impermanence” (Larsen, 229), her biggest fear in her pursuit of what she values: safety, security, and permanence. In fact her resolution to maintain security is the driving force behind the plot and action of the novella. As Wagner reveals, Irene’s need for ontological certainty, i.e. definiteness about who she is, is what prompts for security in every aspect of her life. She has “meticulously defined and secured her concepts of race and sex [...] never to be revisited. For revisiting either of these ideas would surely breach the serene outlook she entertains about her life” (Wagner, 143). So Clare both undermines her security, her most valued asset and destabilises her identity at every level.

Conclusions

Above all, *Passing* highlights the instability, and in a sense the undetermined nature of several identity categories: racial, class and sexual as it exposes these categories as a fiction or a social construct by exploring the permeability of their boundaries. And apart from questioning the validity of such categorisations, “passing” and *Passing* challenged the social and political system of the time, identity politics and identity itself. We have analysed how this was achieved with regards to racial, social and gender or sexual identities. Even if Larsen does not explicitly criticize the racial, gender and sexual politics of her day, she does so implicitly as she draws attention to the destructive situations that they produce, especially for mixed-race and middle-class black women (John, 113).

In the world of permanent and forced identities which the 1920s America would have been, Larsen’s use of the trope of “passing” dissects the very concept of race, by subverting the binary notions of racial identity. So in this sense, she is critical with the principles defended by both the White supremacist elite and the tenets of the race proud New Negro movement. Ambiguity regarding racial is not the only thing uncertain in *Passing*, as it possesses a disposition for opacity: the unreliable narrator, the conflation of protagonist with antagonist, the shocking and uncertain ending (Wagner, 144) and transcends this murkiness to other spheres of identity categories too.

In *Passing* the racially indeterminate characters highlight both the uncertain nature of belonging as well as the limitations of the Black Middle Class. Class is closely related to race in a white supremacist society and it is the cause of the practice of “passing”. As

a novel of manners, *Passing* offers an articulate critique of the values of the Black Middle Class established in Harlem in the 1920s (Nelson, 1719) and Larsen refuses to depict race proud propagandistic representations. Although her characters value the comfort of an existence away from poverty, they do not celebrate the values of the newly established Middle Class either. Clare is willing to risk losing it all she lacks fulfilment in her life and Irene shows that holding her class position is oppressive and in doing so, our race proud woman is embracing white bourgeois values. The racial and class repression illustrated “makes for an uncomfortable reading of the New Negro (Zadar, 320).

And last but not least, the most audacious aspect might be linking racial transgressions to sexual ones are personified in the character of Clare. She embodies both a threat and a freedom that attracts and repels Irene (Toth 59). Her representation as an object of desire projected on third parties by Irene makes possible a homoerotic subtext in the novella.

On the whole, Clare is such a disruptive presence for Irene, and by extension, the reader, because she denies all the “boundaries that the other characters work so hard to establish and maintain; she denies divisions of race, class, and even sexuality” (Cutter 89). Clare disrupts Irene’s anchored definitions, blurring the boundaries and identity definitions that she so strongly established in her search for security and ontological certainty, and by extension would have questioned those of the 1920s reader.

To conclude I would like to mention that, although the aim has been to analyse the most relevant issues related to boundary crossing related thematic other text other avenues have been left unexplored, and they could be potentially worthy of analysis in future research. To mention a few, how and why *Passing* eventually crossed forbidden canonical boundaries, or stylistic boundaries, dwelling on its characteristics as a modernist text.

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