

# The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

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Volume 19

Article 5


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9-12-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Shue, Emily C. (2017) "A Fine Line: Conflicting Interpretations of Homoeroticism and Self-Love in Nella Larsen's Passing," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 19 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol19/iss1/5>

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## A Fine Line: Conflicting Interpretations of Homoeroticism and Self-Love in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

### Keywords

Fine Line, Conflicting, Interpretations, Homoeroticism, Self-Love, Passing

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A Fine Line: Conflicting Interpretations of Homoeroticism and Self-Love  
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Though identity is fluid for many in the post-modern world, we have not fully left behind many pre-conceived, static definitions of race, sexuality, class, and gender. Hence the importance of “passing”—a way of hiding in the semblance of one identity while also occupying another that is not seen— as a type of non-binary, ever-changing mobility between different identities with which we still struggle. “Passing” is destructive to the stable order of codes and definitions that denote our place and purpose in the world.

Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* interrogates identity within the context of race, gender, and sexual identity, and examines the consequences of failing to remain within the pre-existing structures of these identities. By “passing” as a white woman, Clare Kendry's identity is already unfixed. When she rekindles her childhood friendship with Irene Redfield, who has remained a member of the black community since their schooldays in Chicago, she defies the binary definitions of whiteness and blackness. Clare's attempt to reclaim her own, self-denied blackness occurs through Irene, as she attempts to “pass” through her friend, almost as a portal, to a world she left years ago. Irene's attempts to justify her own identity as “correct” in comparison to Clare fail when it becomes clear that Clare represents something seductive and absent in Irene's own life. This desire is often read as repressed lesbianism, but their relationship can also be read as the result of each woman's complex, sometimes contradictory attempts at self-love and validation. While Irene wishes to be rid of the increasingly complicated presence of Clare in her life, something holds her back from cutting ties completely, some intangible quality both tempting and abhorrent. As Clare becomes more and more a part of Irene's world again, the identities of both women shift and blur. Clare's marriage to a white man who despises “black scrimy devils” (Larsen 40) seems almost forgotten, and Irene's identity within her own marriage to a black doctor begins to lose the stability and permanence she is so fiercely determined to keep.

Many critics claim that Larsen's rendering of the relationship between Irene and Clare is ripe with deliberate homoerotic subtext. Deborah McDowell argues that Larsen's use of the erotic in *Passing* serves to "reopen the question of female sexuality" by placing both Clare and Irene in heterosexual yet passionless marriages, in order to safely "flirt [...] with the idea of a lesbian relationship" (88). While McDowell chooses to make lesbianism her focus, Judith Butler insists that the separation of race and sexuality is impossible because such identities overlap. Privileging sexual difference over race prioritizes sexual difference as both "more fundamental than other forms of difference," and a jumping off point from which other differences, such as race, gender, and social class are derived (6). To gain a better understanding of texts, we must understand race and sexual difference as intersecting components. To separate the two is to fail to acknowledge the historical, cultural, or linguistic intersections between sexuality and race. While Butler builds on McDowell's argument and enriches it by focusing on racial difference, both critics still believe that the erotic in *Passing* is purposefully homoerotic.

In exploring the differences between sexual desire and the desire for a different self, I do not attempt to discount entirely McDowell's interpretation that Larsen's writing had homosexual undertones. Instead, I intend to build on Ann duCille's theory that "homosexuality is often encoded textually as self-love or narcissism" (106). Larsen was one of many prominent female writers during the Harlem Renaissance, a time of artistic liberation for the black community. McDowell claims that by constructing a subtext of homoeroticism, Larsen is "exploring the Catch-22s of black female sexual desire and expression" during a time when expression of female sexuality, especially black female sexuality, was "strangle[d] and control[led]" (McDowell 94-7). The literary representation of black women with sexual passion was severely limited, steeped in both sexism and racism. The feminine in black women was confined to sexist and racist stereotypes, denying agency or freedom. There was the hyper-sexual and promiscuous "Jezebel," seductive and dangerous; "Mammy," a figure incapable of any sexual appeal or desire, mother and nurturer of white children and adults alike; and "Sapphire," whose only desire was to emasculate and control men. "Jezebel" made rape or sexual assault against a black woman acceptable, due to her alluring nature, "Mammy" robbed black mothers of sensuality or desire, and "Sapphire" was an angry, savage black woman (Bennet and Yarbrough).

While McDowell's reading translates Larsen's lesbianism into a representation of black love and sexuality, as though she only "flirt[s] with the idea of female sexual passion" (McDowell 94), I believe that this homoeroticism is a more complex representation of female black self-love and sexuality in a doubly oppressive society. While the Harlem Renaissance was indeed a time of inspiration, love, expression, and beauty for the black community at large, it occurred in a time and space in which love for blackness was condemned, and women of any race were forbidden from complex identities beyond patriarchal norms. Larsen's subtext of homoerotic desire between Irene and Clare is not, therefore, a textual strategy to convey lesbian desires, but a textual strategy in which "loving blackness becomes inextricable from loving femaleness" (Landry 27). The forbidden desire of *Passing* is not merely a disruption of mandated heterosexual identities, but rather a critique of societal restrictions on ethnic and feminine pride, told through the desires of two women.

Each woman serves as the other's passage to a more satisfactory "self," in the sense that Irene reaffirms her selfhood through Clare, while Clare attempts to construct an entirely new selfhood through Irene. However, their attempted transcendence of sexual and racial boundaries ends in the death of their new identities, and in the literal death of Clare. Irene's identity as a woman relies heavily on her status as a mother, wife, and active member in the black community. She is married to a black man, Dr. Brian Redfield, who, along with one of their two sons, is too "dark" to pass (Larsen 36). She maintains that "to her [...] safety, security, were all-important," but her charmed life is plagued by Brian's desire to move to Brazil, a desire which she does not share. He is "stealing away the sense of security [...] and] permanence" in her life, agitating the "fear that crouched, always, deep down within her" (57). Nell Sullivan writes that it is this "problematic *I*," or unstable identity, that causes her to "seek(s) an idealized image to represent herself" (377). Irene's image of this transposed identity is shown through Larsen's use of mirrors, since the "key scenes between Clare and Irene happen [...] before [Irene's] mirror" (378). In one scene, Irene is seated "at the mirror," brushing her hair. Sullivan points out that "Irene is looking in the mirror when Clare enters" (378), and Larsen's narration states that Irene is "looking at the woman before her" when she experiences "a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling," which drives her to clasp Clare's hands and remark in awe, "Dear God! But aren't you lovely,

Clare!” (Larsen 64-5). This scene shows Irene’s confusion of their two identities, as “the woman before her” could, due to the mirror, refer to either Clare or Irene (Larsen 65). Sullivan goes on to claim that when Irene cannot “master” the “superior image” she sees in Clare the dual identities Irene has constructed and merged become “more problematic” (378). While Sullivan’s deconstruction of Irene’s projection onto Clare is valid, I suggest that Irene does not only see Clare as the idealized image which she herself longs to embody, but rather subconsciously attempts to justify and protect her own identity through what she sees as Clare’s “shortcomings” as a black woman.

While Irene herself is capable of passing, she does so very rarely. Her reunion with Clare takes place at the Drayton Hotel, a place which Irene is sure she would be “ejected from,” if they somehow knew she was “a Negro” (Larsen 16). To Irene, her own, rare occupation of white space is based solely upon necessity. Her presence at the Drayton is merely an escape from the “brutal staring sun,” while Clare’s passing is, to her, an “abhorrent thing” (28). Immediately, there is a clear distinction between the two women which defines Irene’s passing as positive, while Clare’s passing is deemed negative. Although both women are passing, and therefore denying identity as a singular, impermeable truth, Irene’s passing is temporary under specific conditions. To Irene, Clare’s passing destroys the notion of community, while hers is merely a short rebellion, undertaken only when potentially beneficial. Clare embodies all that which Irene does not have, and, furthermore, she embodies all that which Irene claims so vehemently to disapprove of. Irene’s identity, then, as a good mother, wife, and black woman is secured by Clare, who represents both the “other” and the “self.” By personifying negative aspects of the “other” to Irene, Clare establishes and strengthens the positive aspects of Irene’s identity. She is able to better “[identify] with the communities that define her” through Clare’s “difference from those communities” (Toth 63).

Despite her numerous resolutions to be “through with Clare Kendry” (Larsen 31), Irene finds herself drawn back again. Through this closeness she is able to compare her place in the black community, which confirms her blackness, to Clare’s absence from it. Irene’s denunciation of Clare’s “downright selfishness” in allowing her husband to use racial slurs is followed immediately by Irene’s sense of “duty” to Clare through “ties of race,” which she claims Clare attempted to “sever” (52). This

designates Irene as within and Clare as without. Likewise, Irene is quick to deny her own acquiescence to Clare's views of motherhood. During a tearful outburst, Clare laments her loneliness, saying while Irene is "free," "happy," and "safe," she is not. Moreover, Clare admits to being "used to risks," and a risk or two has little effect on her life if she's "not safe anyway" (67). However, Irene reminds her that she is a mother, and there may be "consequences" for Clare's "little girl," a reminder that Irene refers to as a "weapon" she uses to "assail" her friend (68).

Larsen's choice of words hints that Irene harbors a concealed aggression. By likening the conversation to a battle in which a "weapon" is needed, Clare is labelled an enemy against which Irene must defend herself. But defend from what? When Clare is at her most vulnerable, recovering from tears, their conversation is raw and personal: Clare admits her selfishness, her fear, her loneliness. Irene, meanwhile, answers with "impatience" and "cool formality." She feels a "resentment" that is eventually "swept aside." Clare is not the enemy, but a projection of the real enemy—Irene's own resentment towards the limitations of motherhood and marriage. Irene does not quell these feelings; instead, her resentment is "swept aside" by some outside force, while "her voice held an accent of pity" (Larsen 66-7). While her voice sounds piteous, she does not feel actual pity. When Clare replies that motherhood is "the cruelest thing in the world," Irene's initial reaction is to "agree" with what was "so often in her heart of late," which suggests that Clare's ability to "put [it] into words" has touched some concealed desire or thought in Irene (68). But she represses this agreement with the words that a "good" mother would speak, and reminds Clare that "mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of [their] children" (68). Once again, Irene carefully separates herself from Clare's "selfishness," despite sharing similar thoughts. However, these attempts ultimately fail. What began as justification of her own identity in contrast to Clare uncovered the possibility that they are, in fact, very much alike. These similarities suggest that Irene desires something "other," and therefore desires Clare, Sullivan's idealized "other," in a manifestation of eroticism.

Irene's first reaction to Clare, even before they became reacquainted, was mild disapproval. Clare's interaction with the waiter, Irene decided, was "too provocative" (Larsen 15). Clare is continuously defined by her physical features, which Irene describes with a combination of envy,

admiration, and contempt. Not only is Clare “too good-looking,” with her “tempting mouth,” “mesmeric” eyes, and a smile that leaves Irene feeling “petted and caressed,” but she is liberal with her sexuality, and Irene is not the only one who falls under her spell (4, 9, 10). When visiting Clare, Irene reproaches herself for allowing Clare to “persuade” her to come with a “voice that was so appealing, so very seductive” (32-3). However, under the spell of Clare’s smile, “Irene’s annoyance with herself fled,” and she is reminded of how much she enjoys simply being in Clare’s presence (33).

This open and constant sensuality, according to duCille, is Irene’s “alter libido” (105). Brian Redfield calls sex a disappointment and “a grand joke,” showing no physical desire or affection towards his wife. Although their marriage is devoid of passion, Irene insists that it is a happy one—a self-deception that is disrupted by Clare’s sexuality. She admits that Clare is “capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, has never known” (Larsen 66), and suspects an affair between Clare and Brian, regardless of her own admitted lack of evidence. Irene’s obsession with Clare’s physical beauty is easily understood as latent lesbian desire, but it is also a manifestation of Irene’s repressed insecurities with regard to her own failed sexuality and her desire to have a forbidden sexual identity as a black woman. Having a sexual identity at all as a black woman was to exist in the double bind of sexism and racism, and to embrace black female sexuality was to embrace female blackness. Larsen’s critique of societal perceptions of black self-love, specifically a black woman’s love for herself, is clear just “because she gave her characters sexual feelings at all” (McDowell 94). The focus on Irene’s physical obsession with Clare is not meant to show Irene’s desire to be with Clare sexually, but her desire to *be* Clare, to possess the sexuality she herself seems to lack, to “wear the experiences of Clare’s fetishized body” (duCille 104), and harness the sexual freedom she has denied wanting or needing. Irene can no longer use Clare’s shortcomings to validate herself when her own husband desires Clare.

In writing a possible relationship between Irene, Clare, and Brian, Larsen also “reconfigures the triangle of desire and women’s roles within the triangle” (Landry 26). Clare’s sexuality is a vital part to her transition from the white community to the black. Clare describes herself as “lonely,” in a world in which she is “not close to a single soul” (Larsen 67). Her desire to re-enter the black world conflicts with her presentation as a white woman married to a white man. Clare cannot be seen as a black woman



while still conforming to the conventional ideals of white beauty and white happiness—more accurately, beauty and happiness through whiteness. A large part of Clare’s passing is her appearance: the color of her skin, her physical whiteness, is only a part of her presentation of whiteness. If she is, by all accounts, visibly white, she is also visibly privileged. Wealth, confidence, grace, and charm are all signifiers of her whiteness. Her marriage to Jack Bellew and his acceptance of her whiteness is what holds this in place, and merely confirms the idea that whiteness is not only synonymous with, but also a prerequisite to, beauty. In order to re-enter the black community, Clare must reject herself as beautiful in relation to whiteness, and regain beauty in relation to blackness. By acknowledging the black female body as beautiful, she does not only love blackness in an aesthetic sense, but find value in her reclaimed identity as a black woman.

This reclamation is possible only through creating and inhabiting an identity aligned with and existing within blackness, something made possible through Irene. Clare consistently displays her affection in intimate, sometimes physical ways. In their first encounter, Clare stares unabashedly at Irene with an “intense interest” and with eyes that “were ready to smile” (Larsen 16). Both Clare and Irene begin their rekindled friendship on the basis of physical attraction. Regardless whether this attraction is sexual in nature, it is undeniably strong. Clare’s flirtatious nature is not merely a tool, but also a means of expressing warmth. Her effect on Irene is often comforting, and she displays what Irene calls an “obvious gladness at their meetings” (30). Upon meeting Clare again, Irene’s irritation vanishes after Clare greets her with a smile and a kiss (33). Later, her resolve to ask Clare to leave is immediately forgotten after “a kiss on her dark curls” (65).

This display of physical affection, while short, is significant. The deliberate mention of Irene’s “dark curls” is a signifier of black female beauty, and Clare’s kiss is not only for Irene, but specifically for her hair, a sign of black womanhood. Clare’s hair is a “pale gold” (Larsen 161), another physical trait that holds no sign of blackness, while Irene’s curls are “a sign of beauty tied to a distinctly African-American and female identity” (Landry 41). Irene’s mixed racial identity was “always” interpreted as “an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy” (Larsen 16). Before recognizing Clare in the hotel, Irene reminds herself that she had “never [...] even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro” (16).

It is clear that her skin is not dark enough to signify blackness. By kissing Irene's curls, Clare chooses to bestow an act of intimate affection on the most prominent physical symbol of Irene's blackness. After their first meeting, Clare tells Irene to send affection "to your father," giving her "this kiss for him" (30). Clare later greets her "with a kiss" again. The only time Irene does not receive a kiss hello or goodbye is in the presence of Clare's husband. Bellew, believing he is in the presence of a white woman, punctuates his conversation with racial slurs and stereotypes. Unable to hold in her "anger, mortification, [and] shame" (42), Irene parts with a simple handshake, a neutral gesture that lacks physical intimacy or affection. It is not until two years later that Clare and Irene meet again, and "before Irene could greet her," Clare kisses Irene's "dark curls" (65). Estranged for years after a conversation about hating blackness, Clare's first gesture is to kiss these curls, showing "her longing for a woman of mixed ethnicity who consciously allies herself with the black race" (Landry 39). The curls have always represented "Irene's desire to align herself with African Americans," and now, with a kiss, "Clare's desire for that desire (40).

Later, when Irene asks her husband, Brian, what he thinks of Clare's beauty, he denies any attraction to her solely based upon her whiteness, claiming he likes his "ladies darker" (Larsen 80). This changes later in the novel, when Clare has become a regular attendee of parties and social events in the black community. Brian's interest in her, as a man who prefers "darker" women, shows that she is becoming "darker," if not literally. This moment implies that she has successfully found self-love through Irene, and succeeded in her construction of a new identity.

However, Clare's life as a newly black woman is short. Her ties to whiteness are not easily broken, and the unclear, unforgiving line between black and white will not allow Clare to exist without a fixed identity as white or black. Josh Toth writes that the possibility of a "self" is reliant upon "a stable community [...] that encompasses and defines the individual" (55). While Irene's "self" is defined by motherhood, marriage, and blackness, Clare's "self" is depicted as fluid, undefined, and inaccessible. She attempts to find her "self" in blackness through Irene, but the space she attempts to occupy in the black community is unable to contend with her unfixed "self," which leads to her death. By moving back and forth between blackness and whiteness, and simultaneously belonging to two communities at odds

with one another, she threatens to perform what Toth refers to as “deauthenticating community” (55). Clare’s shifting identity “provokes hysterical and violent reactions [...] that speak to our [...] potentially dangerous need to maintain the illusion of [...] stable identities” (57).

While Toth claims that Clare’s death is not, as bell hooks argues, a “punishment” for loving blackness in a white supremacist society (Landry 27), but a demise necessitated by the social order to restore balance to a divided world, I would argue Clare’s death is a combination of these two interpretations. Clare’s ability to love blackness in a white supremacist society was dangerous. The very idea of a white and black society is derived from absolute, unchanging definitions of the self and the community to which that self belongs. Because her “self” was not derived from adherence to such social standards, but from another black woman, Clare’s selfhood was deemed inauthentic. Her attempts to define herself as a black woman through Irene challenged both the white supremacist ideals of society and the foundations of identity politics within that society (Landry 57). Clare Kendry was guilty of choosing to identify as a black woman over a white woman, and she was guilty of obtaining this identity in blackness by appropriating a fellow black woman in order to obtain her identity. Clare’s relationship with Irene, in which she has access to the black community without being a literal part of it, becomes a transgression against the race she refuses to fully embody. Clare Kendry’s death alludes to the fact that a love for blackness is not only discouraged, but deadly. Likewise, her attempt to transcend “self,” and therefore definitions of self that support racial divides, serves as an example of the consequences of nonconformity.

Larsen does not resolve the question of identity in *Passing*. Rather, she constructs a text that renders the very question itself dubious. Is it truly possible to pass through the definitions of race, sexuality, and gender? Does Clare’s death signify that this is truly impossible, or simply that we make it impossible by demanding strict, boxed-in identities? Can the “self” only exist as what society dictates it should be? Is “passing” an act of denial, or an act of survival? Clare Kendry’s death is two-fold. By successfully passing through multiple, contradictory identities, she threatened the laws of identity necessary to maintain order. It is not the act of passing that disrupts the social order. Rather, it is a refusal to pass: the visible non-conformity of multiple selves, and the inability to perform those selves

correctly. Failure to present a cohesive identity suggests that there are no stable definitions of identity or self, which endangers hierarchal power structures disguised as “natural,” and threatens to render them obsolete.

The “finale” is death, not answers. DuCille argues that Larsen’s lack of finality puts Clare and Irene in a position to hold these questions up to “scrutiny, if not ridicule, as signs of *the times*” (108). Larsen forces readers to examine black self-love, female sexuality, and nonconformity through homoeroticism as a textual narrative, which represents a forbidden identity in and of itself. By producing a text so complex and rich, Larsen reminds us that even within a time of free-thinking and revolution such as the Harlem Renaissance, black women were silenced and their femininity regulated. Clare’s and Irene’s attempt to disrupt this narrative by refusing to conform to a singular identity again and again alludes to the presumed safety of whiteness and security, and the dangers of blackness and disruption of the social order. In *Passing*, Larsen asks how, if at all, black women are to exist in a culture with such strong ties to white supremacy and sexism. She shows the intimate struggles within a culture that assigns “selves” produced through a social order contingent upon racism, sexism, and control. Through Clare and Irene, Larsen explores the possibilities of passing through and beyond those limits to transcend social regulations and reclaim black femininity.

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