

A Transparent Text - In Both Senses of the Word

Hiram R. Diaz III

A Transparent Text - In Both Senses of the Word

The psychological complexities of the finely nuanced characters presented in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* seem to stand at odds with their, at times, obviousness. Consider the title of the book: *Passing*. A book about *passing* which is named *Passing* is something that the hasty critic might want to dismiss as poor craftsmanship; however, the obviousness of the title is equally matched by the different meanings which *passing* receives in the text. At the most basic level of interpretation, *Passing* is about *racial* passing. Irene and Clare are black women who are light enough to be considered white, and who, therefore, take advantage of that erroneous assumption in their own ways when it is made by others. Yet the novel is also about socio-economic *passing* which, it must be remembered, entails racial passing in the novel. One could argue that the novel is itself attempting to pass for a chronological account of the events surrounding Clare Kendry's ambiguous death, for while the story book progresses linearly it is chronologically disjointed.

One could view these textual oddities as mistakes, as some no doubt have, or one could attempt to hear the whole of Larsen's argument. The problem is, in other words, one of finding the most representative model of passing to encompass all the other forms. The task is difficult, but it is not impossible. Ethno-socio-economic passing is, after all, primarily an *ethical* issue. Questions of group solidarity, transgression against the implied contractual undertones of social relationships, and whether or not *passing* is necessitated by real need or is merely a manifestation of greed, covetousness, etc are *all* ethical questions. Larsen's novel, then, can be read very effectively as a more thoroughly developed morality tale.

Racial Passing

Although some have argued that *Passing* "fails to exploit fully the drama of racial passing and declines instead into a treatment of sexual jealousy," and that "if...the novel is the best treatment of its subject in Afro-American literature, then the topic of blacks passing for white is dated and trivial,"¹ such criticisms do not at all seem warranted by Larsen's text. As Cheryl A. Wall notes:

In Larsen's novel..."passing" does not refer only to the sociological phenomenon of blacks crossing the color line. [...] Like "quicksand," "passing" is a metaphor of death and desperation, and both central metaphors are supported by images of asphyxiation, suffocation, and claustrophobia. Unlike "quicksand," "passing" provokes definite associations and expectations that Larsen is finally unable to transcend. Looking beyond these associations, one sees that *Passing* explores the same themes as its predecessor [*Quicksand*]. Though less fully developed than Helga Crane, the main characters of this novel likewise demonstrate the price black women pay for their acquiescence and, ultimately, the high cost of rebellion.²

Larsen's novel, however, cannot be thought of as simply presenting a case for racial solidarity as superior in nature to ethno-socio-cultural assimilation.

Irene and Clare both present themselves as committed to "the negro race." For instance, upon hearing the vile racism spewed forth by Clare's husband, the text explains that

In Irene, rage had not retreated, but was held by some dam of *caution and*

¹ Wall, Cheryl A. "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels," *Black American Literature Forum* 20.1-2 (Spring-Summer 1986): 97-111.

² *ibid.*

allegiance to Clare. [...] And all the while she was speaking, she was thinking how amazing it was that her voice did not tremble, that outwardly she was calm. Only her hands shook slightly. She drew them inward from their rest in her lap and pressed the tips of her fingers together to still them.³

Irene's anger, however, is hypocritical. For, as Wall notes,

...Irene is horrified that Clare, whom he jokingly calls "Nig," tolerates her husband's bigotry; but Irene herself listens to his insults. She even imagines that "under other conditions" she could like the man. Her attempt to excuse her cowardice by claiming to have acted out of loyalty to race and to Clare as a member of the race is entirely specious. Although Irene does volunteer work for the "Negro Welfare League," the race is important to her only insofar as it gives the appearance of depth to a shallow life.⁴

On the other hand, "Clare professes little interest in the welfare of her daughter, and she prides herself on her loyalty to the race."⁵ Yet this loyalty is contradicted by her nearly complete ethno-socio-cultural assimilation.

The extent to which these characters can be trusted as cautious and self-conscious critics of racism is, to say the very least, disheartening. That is, if one only sees the symptom without treating the cause of it. The tragic mulatto, i.e. Clare, and the "hero," i.e. Irene, are characters that cannot properly address the issue at hand. Irene's criticisms of Clare, in truth, are reflections of what Nietzsche would call *resentment* - an immoral and psychologically perverse jealousy of those who are more noble than oneself. Clare's ambiguity, on the other hand, eventually kills her.

³ *Passing*, 30. (emphasis added)

⁴ Wall, 109.

⁵ *ibid.*

What's in a Name?

This is not to say, however, that Larsen does not use these caricatures to serve her argument. Rather, it is precisely through these overt contradictions that she underscores the nature of the real problem. This is most evident in Larsen's purposeful creation of conflict between her characters' names and their moral character. Larsen manages to use names that are so familiar that their obvious meanings likely do not register in the reader's mind upon a first, or even a second reading. *Irene* means "happiness" or "agreeableness," two character traits that most certainly do not define her; *Clare*, on the other hand, whose name means "clear," is irremediably unclear.

These characters are at odds with themselves at the most fundamental level, and yet this, too, is a kind of passing. The woman who has destroyed her husband's dreams and who boils with hypocritical rage, *passes* for *Irene*; the woman who has no clear understanding of who she is, who cannot be unpuzzled, who is an exotic enigma among the otherwise plain and starchy Irene - this woman *passes* for *Clare*. *Brian*, Irene's husband, whose name signifies *strength* is a man who has succumbed to weakness; *Bianca*, the name of a black friend, signifies *white*, and so on.

The use of such names seems to be an overt renunciation of a simple morality tale where names perfectly correspond to their owners' character. Thus, in contradistinction to those who believe that "...the narrative representation of these conflicts...suggests...Larsen's repetition and working through of her own anxieties about the rejection she experienced as a result of her racial identity,"⁶ it is more plausibly the case that Larsen's characters help underscore the fact that *passing* (i.e. hypocritical self-deception) is a universal phenomenon and not restricted to *race* or *gender*.

⁶ Sullivan, Nell. "Nella Larsen's Passing and the Fading Subject." *African American Review* 32.3 (Fall 1998): 373-386.

Passing: Hypocritical Self-Deception

Despite its shortcomings, philosopher Lewis Gordon's phenomenology of racism as bad faith is a helpful heuristic in considering the complex web of moral relations presented in Larsen's novel.⁷ Underlying all *passing* attempts are two equal and opposite assumptions:

(i.)the passer is ontologically equivalent

(ii.)the passer is ontologically inferior

Assumption (i.) belongs to the passer; assumption (ii.)belongs to the privileged group opposing the passer.

In Larsen's book, Clare expresses assumption (i.) implicitly as well as explicitly. Implicitly, she does not want to be a social outcast; explicitly she asserts that she is "...beginning to believe...that *no one* is ever completely happy, or free, or safe."⁸ What is common to *all* humans, according to Clare, is an inability to ever achieve what Aristotle called *the good life*. Clare's words deny that *all* people *may* ever achieve the good life. Consequently, it assumes that all people esteem the values of happiness, freedom, and safety. These are universally shared desires, in other words, that Clare, now dealing with the psychosocial pressure of belonging to two cultures at variance, denies are attainable by *any* human beings.

Thus, the widespread internal division between a character's name and his character indicates that they all serve to give emphasis to a universal ontological equality. Larsen powerfully suggests this universal equality by presenting the case of Claude Jones, a

⁷ See, Van Leeuwen, Bart. "Racist Variations on Bad Faith," *Social Theory and Practice*. Jan2008, Vol. 34 Issue 1.

⁸ *Passing*, 48.

recent convert to Judaism.⁹

The idea that a black man could become a Jew causes the women at Clare's party to laugh almost uncontrollably. And in the middle of the uproarious laughter of the women, Irene says:

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.*¹⁰

Raising the possibility of Jones' conversion being authentic quiets the women down, because it reveals their bad consciences. Whereas Jones authentically wanted to be a Jew, these women hypocritically wanted to be white. Whereas Jones' association with the Jews opened him up to precisely the kind of ridicule observed in these women, these women hid themselves from persecution to save themselves and, ironically, chose to become the ridiculing upper class.

Claude Jones is, ironically, the one character in the book whose intentions in becoming other are not rooted in a desire to be accepted, become part of the upper echelon, or escape himself in general. Rather, his intentions seem to be rooted in something much more *clear*: Morality and Truth. Larsen does not explicitly spell this out for her readers, but her presentation of Claude seems to suggest that this is the case. Claude is a passing reference, someone to laugh at - but equally a person so transparent that one not only sees *through* him but one sees the real problem *clearly*, making Larsen's book a transparent text -- in both senses of that word.

⁹ *Passing*, 27.

¹⁰ *ibid.*