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Color and Descriptors to see a Deeper Meaning in *Passing*

Dani Szafran

There are many different recurring themes and metaphors throughout Nella Larsen's *Passing*, and there are many different layers to this novel to be uncovered, but one important motif not to be missed is Larsen's use of descriptors. From the very beginning of the story, the reader is given what seems to be only a description of a letter but upon further reading, one learns it is also a description to be associated with the sender of the letter. These descriptors of everyday things that the reader "sees" from Irene's point of view, paint a picture of a hidden lesbian desire. As we follow Larsen's story, and the relationships that our narrator, Irene, shows us, it is clear how descriptors show her true desires. The novel *Passing* tells a story from the point of view of Irene Redfield, a Black woman from Chicago living in Harlem in the 1920s. She is active in the Black community and one of the major things coming up for her in the time of this story is running the ticket committee for the Negro Welfare League dance that happens once a year. Irene is married to Brian Redfield, and they have two sons of which she claims to be very proud and yet they take up a small role in the story. Her attentions are more driven toward the character of Clare Kendry, a childhood friend that she runs into in Chicago and weaves her way back into Irene's life. Clare is mixed race but is "passing" as a white woman in all aspects of her life, including her marriage. One might assume that this type of passing is what the title of the novel alludes to, but there are other forms of passing throughout the book. Irene's desire for security in her life leads her to be a sort of "fake it 'til you make it" kind of a person, adding pressures on herself that lead to something like a mental breakdown in the novel. This breakdown leads Irene to believe that Clare, who has integrated herself into Irene's life and community, is having an affair with Brian. Another aspect of "passing" is how much Irene focuses on ways to control different aspects of her life, including her husband, to keep up appearances and pass as a happy family. The story culminates with the death of Clare that leaves readers scratching their heads. The way that her death is told and explained from Irene's point of view, leaves one with no real known answer, only the reader's perception; a little mystery left to you by the author.

The story was written during a time where Black women were already looked down on enough, let alone queer Black women. Irene's obvious desire for security in her life is shown as she desperately tries to keep her marriage together and appear as a respectable, loving family despite the obvious distance between her and Brian. Any sexual desire she would hold for Clare would prove dangerous not only to her marriage but also to her precious social standing. Elizabeth Dean paints a good description of the dangers of being a homosexual during this time in her article "The Gaze, The Glance, The Mirror: Queer Desire

and Panoptic Discipline in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." The article makes clear that fictional Irene's social standing tied to "real-life peers" that would call the police to do raids on gay clubs and gatherings, as it was not seen as respectable to the Black elite.

So how does one see through Irene's determined grasp on her social standing and heterosexual marriage? I would argue that it is by taking a look at her descriptions and at the specific things that she chooses to let us see. As the story opens, Irene is contemplating a letter that has no return address; our first, brief mystery. Irene describes the letter using terms such as "a thin sly thing", "slightly furtive", and "a little flaunting", words we can later tie in with some of her descriptions of the sender, Clare Kendry (Larsen, 9). Even within the second and third paragraphs of the first chapter, we get the sense of "danger" that Irene associates Clare with, even from her reflection on a memory of Clare as a young girl. We are quickly introduced to Clare's carefree attitude, a thing Irene seems to be both jealous and wary of. Clare manages in the story to straddle different lives: one white, one Black, one in Chicago with her racist husband, and one where she flits around in New York City with Irene and her friends living a life her husband would never approve of. The "mysterious" letter leads Irene to contemplate the last time she saw Clare as an adult, the reader's first chance to glance into Irene's inner desires that she feels the need to suppress. Larsen writes of this happenstance meeting, giving colorful descriptors that give a vivid picture, even to a reader that has a poor imagination.

The reader is first introduced to adult Clare without knowing that she is the person that has caught Irene's attention, another one of Larsen's little mysteries she lets develop. Irene is having tea and thinking about her day on a hotel rooftop in her hometown of Chicago where, if she had not been doing some "passing" of her own, she would not have been allowed due to her race. Her thoughts are interrupted by a loud male and a "slightly husky" woman's voice. From here, Irene's colorful description of Clare begins: "sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled patterns of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days," a stark contrast to the hot, hazy weather of that day and their surroundings of the bustling city below. This is also the first of a few times the reader will be informed that Clare has a "caressing smile," which will be discussed more later on. She even finds her smile to be slightly inappropriate when Clare smiles at a male, a glimpse into the beginning of jealousy from Irene. We then watch as Irene becomes flustered as she gets lost in thought while watching this mystery woman, especially upon realizing that her gaze is being returned. As she feels this "attractive-looking woman" staring at her, Irene suddenly worries that something is amiss. However, her first thought is not that this woman has caught Irene's "passing", she worries instead that her dress or makeup is messed up and quickly

takes stock of her physical appearance (Larsen, 15). This, according to Elizabeth Dean, is due to Irene's constant awareness of respectability and social scrutiny (Dean, 99). And yet, even with this intense staring taking place, she does not recognize this person from her childhood, not even when she approaches Irene and calls her by her old nickname. It is Clare's laugh that triggers Irene's memory, a laugh that gets described as a "tinkling", similar to a bell, throughout the book. This laughter is further discussed in "Intimacy and Laughter in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" by Diego Millan.

As Millan points out, Clare's mouth has been identified by critics as something Irene shows desire for (Sec. III). Irene often seems to pay attention to and reflect on Clare's mouth, describing it as a "wide mouth like a scarlet flower" (14), "provocative" (15), "full red lips" (23), "her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red", "a tempting mouth" (28), "seductive caressing smile" (37), and "a caressing smile" (93). There is a real repetition of color here with red and shades of it being a prominent adjective used. Just by the descriptions of Clare's mouth alone, one could be led to think that there is an obvious attraction. Another feature that Irene focuses on is Clare's "dark, almost black" eyes (Larsen, 16). "Arresting," "mesmeric," "languorous," "secret," and then even "the caress, of her eyes" are some of the ways Irene describes them besides them being so dark, a mysterious color (Larsen, 28). While everything else about Clare is described in a vibrantly colorful way, with allusions to red and green, her dark eyes are part of what Irene finds seductive. Irene likens Clare to a "sunlight day" and her eyes to a "moonlit night" when watching her at the Negro Welfare League dance, colorful and poetic words that only seem reserved for Clare (76). Even at the end of the novel, amidst all of Irene's jealousy and paranoia that develops surrounding Clare, she sees Clare as a colorful, glowing "flame of red and gold" (111).

If you take just these small examples of how Irene sees Clare and compare them with how Brian gets described, differences become apparent. It is also important to note how long into the story we are when we meet her husband Brian, and to remember that Irene is the one "telling" the story. By the time we finally do meet him, in the second section of the book, we already have some understanding that he is unhappy and Irene fears his restlessness. Irene is looking upon her husband and thinking about his looks, noting how attractive he is and specifically that his nose and chin "save" him from being pretty or effeminate (Larsen, 54). That is simply it. No poetic words, no descriptors other than that he has deep copper skin, no words to paint a picture or stimulate the senses. It could be the description of a random attractive man she had seen walking down the street. "Colour, as well as being a matter of sensation, is also one of emotion" (Hutchings). So, where are the colorful descriptors for Brian, her husband? The marriage itself reads almost love-less, with the two not sharing bedrooms and often disagreeing over things including where they should live and how to raise

their children; yet, Irene makes clear her intention to keep the marriage together. Irene's main focus on Brian is his recurring desire to leave America for Brazil, a desire which she has stymied since early on in their marriage. One could even read Brian as being homosexual, with almost no obvious sexual attraction to women, a desire to move to Brazil (where it is known to be much more open in matters of sexuality), and no intimacy between himself and Irene, Larsen leaves yet another little mystery to ponder. To that note, there is an almost laughable moment when Irene is discussing her husband's job with John Bellow, Clare's white husband, when she tells him that "Brian doesn't care for ladies, especially sick ones....It's South America that attracts him" (Larsen, 42). This is a reference to his career, but it also seems to hint at more. From Irene's point of view, we see Brian as simply stated, while Clare seems to be painted like a vibrant picture.

Irene's spiral into deep paranoia, jealousy, and the possible homicidal ending can be seen in a few different ways. There is never any real indication that Brian and Clare have an affair, simply a moment of suspicion that crosses Irene's mind and then, like so many of her thoughts, consumes her. With the many years of keeping her family together by continuously repressing Brian's desires for happiness elsewhere, and then with the re-emergence of an old friend that stirs up many feelings Irene has not had in a long time, one could argue she was prime to crack. At the last tea gathering at the Redfield's house, Irene is consumed with the idea of Brian and Clare and the party itself reads as though someone is recalling a hazy dream. With clipped phrases and moments being relayed, the only clear moments we get are when Irene describes Clare in her usual way of beautiful descriptors and a moment where she drops a teacup, shattering like her thoughts. From here on out, the reader gets less and less of what is truly going on around her and receives more of her thoughts that are consumed with how to rid her life of Clare, a thing that Irene sees as the solution to all of her problems. Before the final party where Clare's death takes place, Irene found herself wishing for Clare to die, a thought that is noted she could not push out of her mind (Larsen, 101). Even in the moments just after Clare's death, the reader is privy to Irene's summation of her descriptors:

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. (Larsen, 111)

Here we see again words that are never used to describe her heterosexual partner, just the woman who she blames for her mad thoughts. In Dean's article, Elise Johnson McDougald is referenced for her work that encouraged Black women to

seem respectable by showing themselves as moral and heterosexuals (Dean, 98). “The ideal black woman was one who devoted herself to the betterment, modernization, and advancement of her people by exemplifying the ideal of race motherhood” (Chapman, 117) These were the kinds of real pressures that Larsen was trying to address with Irene’s character. The Black woman’s burden from white supremacy and patriarchy at the time went beyond race, it went into motherhood, marriage, jobs, social standing, and all of the things those topics could affect. Irene is caught in a dual desire: one for Clare, and one for her secure, safe life. The latter is the one she lives in, but the former is the one she gives the most colorful, beautiful descriptions of.

The idea of using descriptors to hint at the deeper meaning in the story was a brilliant writerly move by Nella Larsen. While such a simple thing could go by unnoticed, it struck me clear as day that there was something more she wanted to show. They are the kind of descriptions that stick with the reader when reflecting on the novel after reading. They give one the sense that Irene’s life without Clare is a little grey and dull, and that her life with Clare in it is much more striking and vivid.

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