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Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Color Theory: Beyond Black & White

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The conversation about racial tension in the United States is returning to the forefront of national attention. A disproportionate number of dark-skinned peoples are incarcerated, holding public office, and not being given access to the tools of social mobility necessary to achieve success. For the privileged and underprivileged groups to understand each other it is still necessary that we continue to look back to around when the voice of the marginalized people started to get a chance to take shape.

The Harlem Renaissance was a period in which the free voices of the children and grandchildren of slavery in America were picking up speed in developing the conversation that would eventually breathe life into the notion of equality. Education was being made more available to African-Americans and the ability to express internal struggles as a response to inequality were being articulated across a larger spectrum. The voices of the newly freed people were being carried across the world. *Passing* is a novella written by Nella Larsen. It reflects on the act of passing, a loose term used to express the actions of an alienated group who are treated differently when they are forced to alter their fundamental selves and/or behavior in order to reach some semblance of equal treatment from groups who have cultural power and authority. By analyzing the text of *Passing* and being changed by the perspective it gives, the conversation today can be more easily understood from a historical context. The notions of equality have changed a little bit in America since the Harlem Renaissance.

It is important to consider what Irene gave us with her novel and how others have received her work. A reading of *Passing* to determine the points that foreshadow Clare's death and Irene's unreliability can give us a larger picture of why this novel is important. A focus on the scene of her death are the most important because it gives us many clues as to how Irene decided to handle the events and why. It is important to recognize how the confluence of

characters at the moment of her death actually plays into the spatial consideration of their appearing in the same psychic (in the mind of the reader) space when her narrated death occurs.

Passing is the story of Irene Redfield, who is introduced after receiving a letter from her childhood friend Clare Kendry. Through a flashback, Irene recalls seeing Clare years earlier during a trip to Chicago at the Drake hotel. Irene describes having been afraid of ejection from the hotel for passing as a white woman. When she notices a woman giving her looks from across the room. Irene hears her laugh and remembers her as Clare, whom Irene mentions is also passing, and as a child having had issues after her father died. After they meet and speak a little agreeing to meet up again, Irene rejects a second meeting with Clare while she tears-up and scatters pieces of Clare's invitation off the back of a train.

Back in the present, Irene meets up with Clare and a woman named Gertrude as they discuss the dangers and intricacies of the act of passing from three starkly juxtaposed social positions. When Clare's husband John Bellew comes home he exposes himself in what he believes is the privacy of his home, as a white supremacist unaware of Clare's African-American heritage. After the odd meeting Irene discusses Clare and Bellew with her husband Brian Redfield.

Brian has his own take on the issues of racial tension. As an African-American doctor he doesn't want his children shielded from the harsh realities of the world, and is at odds with Irene about how much their boys should be aware of the color-line. There is also a history of tension between the two over Brian having wanted to live in South America and Irene refusing to leave. Irene hosts a social gathering for the NWL (Negro Welfare League), and feels pressure to invite Clare who turns out to be a hit at the party. Clare starts spending more time around the Redfields which makes Irene suspect a romantic relationship between Brian and Clare. As revenge after

Bellew sees Irene with a friend who is African-American, Irene doesn't inform Clare of the meeting wherein he possibly identifies Irene as African-American. At a party Bellew arrives to confront Clare, who apparently falls out of a sixth-story window to her death. The narrative is shaky during the scene of Clare's fall as described through Irene's observations, because Clare leaves the window under mysterious circumstances. The story ends with everyone down on the sidewalk near Clare's fallen body, but nobody knowing how she fell.

When considering the contemporary discourse of *Passing* scholars Deborah McDowell's article "Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*" is often cited as a turning point in the conversation. McDowell came in during the reemergence of *Passing* in the 1970's and 1980's when today's established arguments for the novella as a valuable literary artifact for critical analysis were being developed. She interpreted the novel with a new layer of complexity by asserting sexual tension between Clare and Irene, and McDowell put a new face on a novel that was already overflowing with previously established racial antagonism. "Having established the absence of sex from the marriages of these two women, Larsen can flirt, if only by suggestion, with the idea of a lesbian relationship between them." (Larsen 371) The focus of McDowell's argument is on the relationship and subtext between Irene and Clare in the novella.

In the same year Deborah McDowell established her argument Cheryl Wall formally initiated the discourse of gender tension in *Passing*. "[In the novella *Passing*, the act of 'passing'] represents instead [sic] both the loss of racial identity and the denial of self-required women who conform to restrictive gender roles." (Larsen 358) So along with the explicit racial tension the novella is arguably a trifecta of intersectionality. She identifies the novella as having a strong undercurrent of rhetoric that is ahead of its time. It plays with male and female identity,

heteronormative or homosexual behavior, and at what point the color-line determines social value and how that affects one's behavior.

McDowell's new complexity behind the interactions of Irene and Clare open the novella for even deeper academic analysis. Martha Reinke works through in her analysis of *Passing* as a text developed for the privileged audience to approach their dominance. In her article "Mimetic Violence and Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Toward a Critical Consciousness of Racism," Reinke further analyzes the effect this relationship has on the analytic process of identification. "Because Clare and Irene are doubles and because the circumstances of Clare's death remain ambiguous, *Passing* eludes white readers' ready grasp." (Reinke 21) White readers are unable to put Clare or Irene into a racial category, so *Passing* becomes a revelatory catalyst for anyone who tries to pin these women down into an identity they instead reveal their own assumptions or prejudice towards race.

The conversation about the complex relationship between these two women revolves around a conversation of who they are and what they represent. Conflict in the analysis arises when anyone tries to dissect the depth of Clare's character who eludes identification due to Irene's fallible observations. Irene's unreliability as a narrator has an unknown level of influence on the presentation of the story. The point of view in the novel is third-person limited through Irene's lens, and this narration becomes unreliable as Claudia Tate points out in her article "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation" when she says that, "Although [Irene] is further portrayed as possessing an acute awareness of discernment she tends to direct this ability entirely toward others and employs hyperbole rather than exact language for its expression. Her perceptions, therefore, initially seem generally accurate enough, until she becomes obsessed with jealousy." (Tate 4) Since the novel is being recalled in past tense and Irene has a motive behind

Clare's death it can be ostensibly assumed that Irene's potential control of the narration alongside her recognizable jealousy make the narration unreliable and her observations questionable of intentional manipulation.

It is important to consider Irene's unreliability because it is directly representative of the narration itself. During Clare's death we are not given a description of the event in any fashion. It is narrated that Clare is there one moment and gone the next. This is a temporal impossibility, because someone cannot disappear. What we have is an occurrence (Clare's death) without someone to blame, and Irene very possibly manipulates the narrative to remove everyone, including and especially herself, from being responsible. The unreliability comes to play into when the text is received by others and provoking a response from a hole in the narration, we want to blame someone, but who is to blame and why? What does an individual's argument about that incident say about their own perceptions of race/gender/sex?

McDowell also refers to Irene's unreliability as a narrator. "As is often typical of an unreliable narrator, Irene is, by turns, hypocritical and obtuse, not always fully aware of the import of what she reveals to the reader." (Larsen 373) Irene isn't exactly the narrator, but her influence over the judgments in the narration make it seem as though her subjective characterization is present in the third-person limitation.

Gabrielle McIntire continues on the path of trying to interpret Clare through unreliable narration in the article "Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." McIntire also describes the general problems with the narration in accord with Irene's unreliability. "As with so many other ambiguities of the novella it is unclear whether Irene "seemed to see" Clare because Irene's memory is flawed, or because Irene is imagining the scene rather than remembering it." (McIntire 4) It is an important

foundation to the interpretation of the narration to call Irene's point of view into question by considering her influence and subjective inconsistencies in the details of the story.

An interpretation of Clare and her death under the circumstances of unreliability is nonetheless important. Whatever information is provided by this type of narration we have no choice but to try and develop Clare as a character under certain tensions that need to be taken into account. Martha Cutter describes an interpretation of Clare in the context of unreliability in her article "Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen's Fiction." She asserts that, "In the galaxy of signs that is the novel *Passing*, Clare functions as a signifier whose meaning cannot be stabilized, fixed, confined, limited; and "passing" becomes the ultimate mechanism for creating a text that refuses to be contained, consumed, or reduced to a unitary meaning." (Cutter 76)

McIntire takes a direction similar to Cutter with the interpretation of Clare. "The rather unclear Clare though, remains an indecipherable sign of herself, as unreadable as her "illegible scrawl" that begins the text." (McIntire 7) Clare seems to be a character who avoids identification, but the analytic request to try and formulate her under a signifier is unavoidable.

Claudia Tate takes a similar view of being unable to fully determine Clare's place in the novel in her article, "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation." She also references the importance of the letter in the beginning of the novella. "[The letter] foreshadows Clare's actual arrival and characterizes her extraordinary beauty. It also suggests abstract elements of Clare's enigmatic character which evolve into a comprehensive, though ambiguous portrait. Furthermore, it generates the psychological atmosphere which cloaks Clare's character, rendering her indiscernible and mysterious." (Tate 4)

Alongside Clare, her death also carries conflicts of narration and identification. McIntire approaches the subject of Clare's death with the same interpretation as her narrative characterization. She argues:

Just as the book repetitively thematizes the limits of knowledge and its status while it hints at the contiguity of phantasy, reality, and paranoia, and just as Irene can never adequately know even her own husband, or the symbolization at play within her desires, we can never know for sure whether Irene murders Clare, if Clare jumps, falls, or faints, or if John Bellew pushes her. (McIntire 13)

The inability to settle on solid ground with Clare's death makes interpretation elude even the most critical reader. Cutter recognizes, "Having used Clare to destabilize the universe of her other characters, Larsen removes Clare from the novel before she can become enclosed by one meaning. For with her death, no one will ever know the "truth" about her: what she really was, what she really wanted." (Cutter 97)

The current discourse on *Passing* focuses on the relationship between Irene and Clare, but their husbands also play a vital role in the interpretation of the novella. How these women are received by their own husbands, and each other's husbands is also vital to the discovery of these struggles. The men represent levels of established normalcy for the women and are constructed by the environment around them. Critical discourse has not taken into account many important variables that arise in the narrative when Brian and John are brought in alongside the women as their own symbols of constructed power and reactions to a larger social structure.

The first thing that struck me when I started reading *Passing* was how names phonetically resemble colors and the interesting ways these colors interact. Irene is changed to 'Rene which has a single syllable and rhymes with green, John Bellew's last name can be pronounced in a

single syllable like the color blue, and Irene's husband Brian has last name Redfield which obviously has the color red. Clare is similar to clear, and has Bellew as her last name.

My initial thought about the colors was that I recognized the combination of red, green, and blue. A quick Wikipedia search reveals the RGB color model and trichromacy otherwise known as the additive color spectrum. The Young-Helmholtz theory, started by Thomas Young in 1802 and continued by Herman Von Helmholtz in 1850, deals with trichromatic color vision. It describes the way photoreceptor cells in the eyes of humans and certain primates work to give us color vision. Helmholtz's theory in 1850 coincides with The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which declared that all runaway slaves were, upon capture, to be returned to their masters. Many consider this legislation to have been the spark that lit the fuse of tension leading to the Civil War because it brought the responsibility of slavery to the north, and made the north legally complicit in the industry of slavery. The responsibility of slavery came with the responsibility of determining who was black and who wasn't. At one point there were over 80 'designations' of how the lightness or darkness of skin determined blackness. When held legally responsible, a cultural discomfort was imposed upon the north to determine who was black. This created a conflict because race is indeterminable. Due to the Fugitive Slave Act, residents of the north finally felt the sting of racial perception on their doorsteps.

In 1861, the first color photograph was taken by James Clerk Maxwell using red, green, and violet-blue filters. As lights, when the three colors are mixed they create white, or visible light. Color television was first demonstrated in Russia using the trichromatic color model one year before *Passing* was published in 1929 so it is possible that this was a conversation going on around Larsen while she was brainstorming this story. What is the significance of these three colors together in the novel? What does the combination of these colors that give us visible light

symbolize in the three characters that represent the colors? Is their combination leading to visible light a metaphor for the visible systems of oppression or repression represented by each of the characters?

There aren't many colors mentioned in *Passing*, but one color sticks out at the beginning and the end of the novella. When the story opens, Irene has received a letter from Clare and we are given the description "Purple ink" as its own sentence. At the very end of the novel, Brian's lips are purple as he stands, presumably near Clare's dead body, down on the sidewalk in the cold. What is the significance of the color purple in the novella? Purple is a mix of red and blue, which coincides with the last names of the two main married couples in the story. So it is possible that Clare and Bellew coming into Irene's life is signaled by the color purple, and also signals their leaving at the end. But the color purple also has a relationship with the RGB color model.

The compliment of additive color is subtractive color, and for my argument, its best described in Wikipedia:

The color that a surface displays depends on which parts of the visible spectrum are not absorbed and therefore remain visible. Subtractive color systems start with light, presumably white light. Colored inks, paints, or filters between the viewer and the light source or reflective surface subtract wavelengths from the light, giving it color. (Subtractive)

The entry continues with, "Conversely, additive color systems start with darkness. Light sources of various wavelengths are added in various proportions to produce a range of colors. The subtractive colors are cyan, magenta, yellow, and in printing the color black is added. (Wiki: subtractive color

Interestingly, Irene describes Clare as having black eyes at least 7 times throughout the story, and when Clare comes down the stairs when leaving for the NWL dance, she is wearing a “gown of shining black taffeta.” (Larsen 53) Subtractive color was introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The time subtractive color was being introduced, the African-American exploration of identity was beginning to be explored. After the civil war, the freed slaves as a group were able to finally begin exploring themselves and developing a sense of national identity. My exploration of *Passing* at this point allowed me to make a rough connection to Irene, Brian, and Bellew being representative of pre-Civil War ideology and Clare being representative of the exploration of the unknown depths of human potential that erupted in the African-American community during the Harlem Renaissance. If Clare is a representation of the color black or even shadow or darkness, is she designed specifically to reveal Irene, Brian, and John for what they are in comparison to the audience? Is she the darkness used to reflect them back upon themselves to create unknown antagonisms in all three of them similar to those we see in Irene? Is Irene seeing *herself* in the black of Clare’s eyes? Are Clare and Irene not just doubles as Claudia Tate points out, but actually two parts of the same person? Irene’s fainting, described as being her centuries away on what seems to be a psychic level at the end of the novel, might support a deeper, more binding connection between the two women when Clare’s death and Irene’s faint are directly correlated. I couldn’t help but start to notice that this inquiry into color was having quite a few connections to the novel.

Then I found a potential connection to Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe and his work *Theory of Colours* published in 1810. Goethe's concern was not so much with analyzing colors, as with how phenomena are perceived. If this concept is transferred symbolically to intersectionality, perception is everything. David Seamon, in his article “Goethe's Way of

Science: A Phenomenology of Nature” he describes the overall goal of Goethe’s theory. “The crux of his color theory is its experiential source: rather than impose theoretical statements, Goethe sought to allow light and color to be displayed in an ordered series of experiments that readers could experience for themselves.” (Seamon 1998)

Goethe’s explanation of boundary conditions has an eerie connection to the tensions in *Passing*. Goethe worked with prisms (which are clear, giving us a connection to ‘Clare’), and the orientation of a light-to-dark boundary at a prism’s axis is significant to Goethe’s work. When viewed through a prism, white above a dark (or black) boundary allows us to observe light extending a blue-violet edge into the dark area; whereas dark above a white boundary results in a red-yellow edge extending into the light area. Goethe felt that this extension of color at the light–dark boundaries was fundamental to the creation of the spectrum. So Clare may be considered that boundary, and it can be interpreted that depending on how someone perceives race, and by proxy Clare’s race, is going to reflect upon their perception of her actions. As a boundary she establishes restrictions on behavior based on subjective perceptions of race and passing.

I think it is very possible that Irene, Brian, and Bellew and what they are or represent become symbolic representations of the visible light spectrum being confronted by their own darkness through Clare’s prism of unknowable/misunderstood characteristics. I think the notion of passing is being confronted in the same way Goethe analyzed light and dark boundaries. The act of passing occurs on the boundary of African-American identity and white identity. Through the characters Larsen gives us we are able to see what these boundaries are and what they represent as opposed to what they might potentially be, represented by Clare. Clare becomes a catalyst for exposing assumed identity signifiers. It is necessary for the audience to be confronted on their perceptions of the characters in order to give themselves a critical inquiry into their own

assumptions of intersectionality and their place in it. Clare is the prism of clarity the audience requires to view themselves in relation to the ‘other’ represented on a spectrum by Irene, Brian, and Bellew.

A close reading of the novel supports a grouping of putting Irene, Brian, and Bellew into separate conditions from Clare. Irene is aware of the assumptions or assertions of her whiteness when we are introduced to her on the roof of the Drake Hotel. The roof of the Drayton is a perfect representation of privilege, it is cooler and up off the heat of the sidewalk. Irene enjoys the finer things, even if they come with utilizing her assumed privilege for the purpose of comfort. When the woman (later identified as Clare) notices her from across the room and keeps looking at her, Irene is afraid of being ejected from the hotel and reveals her consciousness of racial tension enforcing the assumption of her passing. When Clare is revealed, Irene also asserts Clare’s passing. Since the narrative is limited to Irene’s thoughts, we never get to see how aware Clare is of her identity from a more subjective narrator. All we get a glimpse of is her conversation and actions being filtered through Irene’s recollections.

Since we are given Irene’s thoughts, and they reveal racial knowledge within Irene, Clare is passively bringing Irene and the audience into the conflicts of Irene’s identity. Irene is the supposed protagonist, and Clare is the catalyst that reveals the antagonism of race. Clare is an initially perceived problem for Irene because Irene seems to consciously choose to subvert her own racial identity when convenient as per the example of the roof of the Drake Hotel. Over the course of the conversation, Clare doesn’t appear to actively force conflict upon Irene, but simply by default, forces Irene to confront her own identity.

“The truth was, she was curious. There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of “passing,” this breaking away from all

that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly." (Larsen 17) This is our first glimpse of Irene's contradictory nature. Irene doesn't believe that she is passing while on the roof of the Drayton, though earlier she was afraid of being ejected for the same thing. There is an air of delusion around Irene's development of her identity when she reveals to us that she is both aware and unaware of her racial position. She considers passing hazardous, which would explain her fear of ejection, but she seems to genuinely not understand the position she has actively placed herself in up on the roof of the hotel. The perception of her passing is entirely up to the audience's assumptions. Since she has revealed a full spectrum of potential in her contradiction of both oblivious passing and aware passing the audience is left up to their own assumptions about race to interpret Irene's position. Clare is not only a catalyst/prism for Irene to explore her assumptions of identity, but for the audience as well.

When Irene goes to Clare's house, she meets with Gertrude, a woman Irene describes as a Negro also having married a white man. (24) But Gertrude's husband is aware of her African-American heritage and accepts her, although Gertrude explains that she was worried her child would come out a "dark child." (26) The three women in the room all represent different forms of racial tension around the subject of racial perception. All three women have African-American heritage but have chosen to utilize their perceived whiteness in different ways. Irene purports to be proud of her heritage, though secretly uses the perception of her whiteness to utilize privilege. Gertrude seems almost ashamed of her African-American roots, and Clare has been removed from the African-American community in all ways. The conflicts these women face with the racial divide comes full-force when Clare's husband John Bellew comes home.

Bellew introduces himself with a greeting to Clare saying, “Hello, Nig.” (28) Bellew is completely clueless of Clare’s African-American background, and has a running joke with her that she seems to be getting darker. Bellew is representative of the typical xenophobic mentality of many whites towards the Af-Am community. He views them as a lesser peoples, and that his family would be made less if married to a person of color, “I know you’re no nigger, so it’s all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I’m concerned, since I know you’re no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be.” (29) Bellew is rejecting even the mere possibility that his family would ever be connected to the Af-Am community. It almost seems as if, even the reality of her heritage came to light Bellew would still reject it. Even if only to ensure that he would never have to admit the consequences of such a reality, that race exists in perception.

On the color scale, Bellew sits alongside Irene in the assertion of the necessity of race. Earlier, Irene both accepted and rejected that she was passing. On the roof of the Drake, Clare showed no qualms about having ‘passed’ into whiteness and that it is a “frightfully easy thing to do.” (18) For Clare, ‘passing’ is a matter of survival to traverse socially imposed boundaries. This is a foreign idea to Irene who both understands and enforces racially imposed boundaries because she can traverse them with deniability as she did at the Drake, which is in juxtaposition to Clare who outright rejects the need for intersectionality throughout the novel. Gertrude’s ‘racial’ heritage is accepted by her in-laws, but she still fears having a dark child. Gertrude rejects her African-American identity outright. The confluence of the three women and what they represent is interrupted by Bellew, a representation of the very dominance that has forced them into their conflicting identities, and keeps the racial tension of the novel dynamic and fluid.

There is always a need for these women to keep up their guard to their racial identity and Bellew is the perceived, potentially dangerous reason for it.

The tension is very high when Bellew unknowingly outs himself to the women in the room. The tension is still restricted though, because Bellew is unaware of all three women's Af-Am connections. In a repeat of the Drake hotel roof, identity is hidden and assumptions pour out from all directions. The scene is described by the narrator as having the appearance of 'congeniality' to a potential onlooker, but the subtext screams discomfort from the three women. The narration describes "The defensive tone of her voice brought another start from the uncomfortable Gertrude, and, for all her appearance of serenity, a quick apprehensive look from Clare." (30) The 'secret' of the women is kept which causes the tension in the room. This is the first moment that three of the four main characters are in a single room at the same time, and the tension is palpable, but kept safe from potential volatility by keeping the 'secret.' Even Gertrude picks up on the potentially dangerous game she sees Clare playing. After Irene tells Gertrude that Clare thinks passing is worth it, Gertrude replies, "She'll find out different," was her verdict. "She'll find out different all right." (32)

During Irene's confliction to see Clare again, we are introduced to Brian. After an ambiguous use of 'they' referring to 'passers' like Clare, Brian expresses his discontent for the activity. "It's an unhealthy business, the whole affair. Always is." (39) Brian disapproves of either the act of passing or when people who have fully passed, try to return to their subverted identity. Either way, Brian recognizes the act of passing and its danger. Brian is interpolated by the novel as an African American and holds his place on the spectrum of racial tension in juxtaposition to Bellew. He verbalizes his misunderstanding of what race is when he tells Irene, "If I knew [why passers try to return] I'd know what race is." (38) Yet, Brian comes back in the

same conversation to assert race. He says to Irene of passing, “Instinct of the race to survive and expand.” (39) So Brian has a general assumption of race, but can’t seem to put a solid face on it. Where Bellew is firm about what race is, and has absolutely determined value in racial classes. The tension that has revealed Irene, Bellew, and Brian’s interpretation of race comes from their confusion applied by Clare’s indeterminacy about it. She has catalyzed them all into revealing their inner prejudices.

The tensions are further applied when Brian and Clare begin to spend time together. Irene first appreciates Brian and Clare’s time together, even when she is dancing with him more ‘frequently’ than other men at Irene’s party for the NWL. Irene feels that it is good Clare gets a chance to “discover that some colored men were superior to some white men.” (54) But soon Irene’s acceptance of their time together starts to turn on her when she starts to analyze her perception of Clare’s beauty. Irene even goes so far as to ask Brian if he thought Clare was ‘extraordinarily beautiful.’ When he replies that he doesn’t particularly find her attractive, Irene says, “Brian, you’re fooling!” (57) Irene has a hard time believing Brian isn’t attracted to Clare, therefore her seeds of doubt had already been planted and she was following a hunch.

Another conversation full of conflict happens between Brian and Irene when he invites Clare to a party after Irene intends her absence. When Brian apologizes to Irene for inviting Clare, Irene erupts on Brian for a moment crying out, “But, Brian, I—“(62) without any evidence, Irene suddenly finds herself questioning Brian’s fidelity. Clare’s presence has brought Irene to a state of irrationality, revealing her innermost fears about Brian. The conversation about moving to Brazil that Brian clearly settled on for Irene’s sake, the way each of them wish to expose their boys, or not, to the harsh realities of the world, and other potentially hidden conflicts in their relationship are being brought out under a single umbrella fear of Clare. Clare is

a catalyst of truth in an otherwise already strained relationship. The realities of Irene and Brian's relationship are being confronted by Irene, but through an irrational fear with no basis in truth. It is through her irrational assumption that Irene chooses to endanger Clare.

On a trip downtown with her friend Felise, Irene runs into Bellew and sees the expression on his face change. "But the smile faded at once. Surprise, incredulity, and—was it understanding?—passed over his features." (70) The only reason Irene and Bellew know each other is because of Clare. The narrative portrays that Bellew 'gets' that Irene doesn't fit into his definition of white because of Irene's company. There is a dialogue happening in this scene that proximity and context determine racial boundaries. Because Clare is not present with Irene, Irene's perceived whiteness by Bellew is questionable because he perceives Irene outside of his predetermined assumption about Clare. If Bellew had caught Irene and Clare with Felise, this scene may have gone down differently because Clare automatically carries Bellew's assumption of whiteness which would carry into his discernment of the situation. Clare's absence, or passive presence in this scene becomes the revelatory catalyst, not her active presence. This passive presence has disastrous consequences for Clare who cannot defend herself or maintain control over the situation through more 'deception.'

Irene consciously chooses to allow Bellew's potential assumption to ride out with the intent to do harm to Clare's position with Bellew. When she considers telling Brian about seeing Bellew, she is stopped because mentioning it "sounded too much like the warning she wanted it to be." (71) There is interpretable malicious intent from Irene towards Clare in this statement. Irene understands the possible consequences of letting the meeting go without warning Clare, and her purposeful omission of the information secures her relationship with Clare as one without virtuous intent. At this point in the narrative, Irene has made herself the antagonist to

whatever Clare's protagonist is. Clare hasn't actively done something to undermine Irene, but Irene perceives it as much, and it is reflected in the narrative.

When Irene, Brian, and Clare go to the party at Felise's sixth floor apartment, all the tensions in the novel come to a climax with Clare's death. After Bellew barges into the room and Irene runs over and grabs Clare's arm, Bellew is positioned between Irene and Clare and the crowd. It is at this point that the tension is at its highest. We have all four characters in the same room for the first time in the novel and the racial tension is fully out in the open. Then Brian steps out of the crowd. Now all four characters are in the same space with Irene and Clare at the window, Bellew in front of them, Brian behind Bellew, and the rest of the people are behind Brian. In that moment, after Brian steps out from the crowd, the tension is suddenly too high and the narration completely changes to reflect this overwhelming tension. Whatever reliability we had in the narration is lost in the next paragraph. "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly." (79) Aside from the obvious connotation of clearly and 'Clare-ly' being a reference to Irene's unreliable narration, but up to this point in the novella we have had very definitive narration of the moments This narrated paragraph puts us directly into Irene's mind and gives her full control of the moment. We aren't given the most important part of the novel because of Irene's discretion. Up until now, Irene's control of the narration has been suspect, and the narrator left ambiguous. By relying on Irene's memory for the scene, the third person limited narration takes on a first-person quality of blatantly subjective power over the moment. We get: "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone." (79)

There is no description of how the fall started, Clare herself tumbling six stories which would take at least a couple seconds to observe, and we don't even get the sickening thud of her

body hitting the ground. As a matter of fact, Clare's physical existence itself isn't mentioned again through the end of the novel. After Irene gets downstairs to the crowd which is supposedly standing around Clare's body there is no description of the body. It is as though "The next she was gone" is the last moment of Clare's literal existence itself, as though like a flame, she actually just disappeared. There is no more Clare after Irene grabs her arm, she is gone. It is almost as if she has been negated out of existence entirely like a light switch being flicked, she simply blinked out.

How this is to be interpreted, I just don't know. But to claim that Clare falls, as every author who references this moment says, is fundamentally wrong. There is no fall, there is no body, and there is no Clare. I feel that this is a very important change to the discourse. It puts the narration into a different state of being, out of the physical. I don't mean to say necessarily metaphorical or ethereal, but that Clare becomes an abstract. She transforms into something that isn't a physical or objective person, but an unknowable subjectivity, an idea.

It is possible that when this is put alongside the color spectrum, Clare is the prism that reveals the other characters, and once she has done her job, she is cast aside to leave them stewing in their identities. It can also be interpreted that the overwhelming presence of the characters in the additive color spectrum actually negate Clare who may be in the subtractive color spectrum. Returning to the light flicking off metaphor, if Clare is the darkness of the psychic unknown, then the known of Irene, Brian and Bellew overwhelm her by their combined presence, like the light of a bulb negating the darkness.

I feel that this is an important point to the current discourse on *Passing*, because the conversation is always about the relationship of Irene and Clare. Whereas the conversation needs to be about the four characters that make up the novella. Each represents something that interact

with each other, and in the end, all four are present and necessary to the climax. Their names link up in strange ways, and Clare does not have a narrated death, or even existence at the end of the novella. These are significant details left out of all literature I have had a chance to go over.

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