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Dignity, Respect, and Freedom

Lindsey Abercrombie

This paper looks at Irene Redfield, a character from Nella Larsen's *Passing*, analyzing how dignity is prioritized above all else in her life. Viewing Irene through the lenses of race, sexuality, and class, this paper delves into the intricacies of Irene's mind, attempting to contextualize her by her overt and repressed desires. *Passing* is a nuanced novel with complicated characters. Many scholars have attempted to understand the symbolism Larsen has imbued the novel with, producing insightful works to challenge the reader's initial perceptions of the novel and the characters. By taking a deep dive into Irene's mind, readers can become more familiar with the importance of race, sexuality, and class as Larsen viewed them at her time of writing the novel. This paper claims that dignity and respect are Irene's main motivations throughout *Passing*, and gives insight into the consequences this had for Irene as a character.

Passing by Nella Larsen is a charged, meaningful novel filled with race, class, gender, and sexuality nuances. Many scholars have published pieces delving into different areas and characters of *Passing,* providing their interpretations and trying to chip away at the incredible amounts of symbolism Larsen imbued within the novel. In this essay, I want to discuss the theme of dignity throughout the book, looking specifically through the eyes of Irene and her environment. Dignity is an incredibly important value to Irene; many of her decisions are based on the idea of dignity, whether regarding race or sexuality. Irene's attachment to dignity may serve her well in many circumstances but, in the end, only worked to trap her in a prison of her own making.

Before delving into the analysis of Irene, let us first explore *Passing*, when it takes place, and the political climate at this time. *Passing* centers around the character Irene Redfield, a young Black woman who occasionally utilizes her lighter complexion to "pass" for white. Throughout the novel, Irene's main conflicts revolve around her childhood friend Clare Kendry. Unlike Irene, Clare chooses to pass consistently as white, rejecting her African American identity any time she is in public. Though this essay explores many facets of Irene's identity and story, the concept of "passing" is one of the most important central themes of the novel due to its relationship to respect, dignity, and the New Negro movement. *Passing* takes place in a tumultuous 1920s New York City, ridden with racism and overwhelmed by the emerging idea of the "New Negro”—the idea that each African American person should consider themselves single-handedly responsible for representing the entirety of their race night and day, and that every action was taken by the "New Negro” would reflect on the dignity of Black people as a whole. Furthermore, the New Negro movement emphasized respect and had exacting standards for poise and grace. Understanding the pressure placed on Black people through the New Negro movement and the other political conflicts of the time, such as suffrage and a general fight for civil rights, will be insightful as we progress throughout this essay and attempt to understand Irene more deeply.

To understand Irene's actions, it's first essential to understand her, who she is, and what she stands for. At the beginning of the second chapter of the novel, Larsen introduces us to Irene when the story starts. Throughout the rest of the book, though we view the story in the third person, Irene's thoughts and eyes guide us and give us internal insights into other characters. In the beginning scene, Irene is shopping in the downtown heat and begins suffering from heat exhaustion, almost falling unconscious. This scene is depicted in the novel when the narrator says, "For a moment she stood fanning herself and dabbing at her moist face…Suddenly she was aware that the whole street had a wobbly look, and realized that she was about to faint…" (4). Next, Irene waves down a cab, and, immediately upon entering the taxi, "Irene made some small attempts to repair the age that the heat and crowds had done to her appearance" (5). Though this is a small and seemingly inconsequential gesture, this is the first introduction we have to Irene—that even when faced with potential heatstroke, she is still worried, first and foremost, about how she looks and how others will see her. This detail was not an "accident" on Larsen's part but rather a very purposeful introduction to Irene, showing the reader where her priorities lie and how she views herself.

Once we begin to understand Irene and what is important to her, we can then analyze how this theme of being outwardly perfect affects other aspects of her life. Throughout this essay, I want to look into two specific areas in which Irene prioritizes dignity over everything else, including race and sexuality. Given that the novel is titled *Passing*, race is something that comes up often. As mentioned earlier, Irene is Black with lighter skin, choosing only occasionally to pass, while her friend Clare is of a similar complexion but chooses to pass full-time. Even though this lifestyle has many advantages, such as not having to submit to the incredibly rampant racism present in the 1920s novel, Irene finds it to be a shameful, cowardly decision void of dignity. Reflecting on Clare's decision to fully pass and debating to protect Clare and endure racist remarks from her white husband or expose her secret identity, she expresses, "Why, simply because of Clare Kendry…had she failed to take up the defence of the race to which she belonged? ... She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those same ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever" (38). Irene's way of thinking about this issue is very telling about her beliefs on passing and race. Even though Clare continually puts Irene in harm's way, she still chooses to protect her purely because she feels responsible for protecting those of her race. She is also somewhat scornful when referring to Clare's choice to pass, which we can see through her addition of "for all her repudiation of them."

We see in many ways that Irene feels a tremendous responsibility to be a "race mother"—to unapologetically embrace her Blackness and be the change to end racism. While a few of her childhood friends have chosen to pass as white, like Clare, or support the idea of passing even if they are not able to pass, like Gertrude, Irene does not back down from her stance that being Black is not something to be ashamed of and that denying one's Black identity is a dishonorable practice. In one scene, Irene is at tea with Clare and Gertrude, talking about how dark their children's skin tone is. Clare and Gertrude take for

granted that Irene is supportive of passing, like them, and begin talking about how grateful they are for giving birth to light-skinned children. In response to this, Irene was "…struggling with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger, and contempt…" (26). From Irene's response to the topic, we can see that she felt very indignant at and disrespected by the blatant shaming of darker-skinned people, especially given that her husband and sons are both Black and unable to pass. This discomfort is a general theme of the rest of the tea conversation in this scene—Irene holds firm ground in defense of her race.

The idea of "race-motherhood" was not uncommon in the 1920s, as introduced earlier through the New Negro movement. According to "Solidarity, Sex, Happiness, and Oppression in the Words of New Negro Women," a scholarly article authored by Erin Chapman, a scholar of African American studies, the "New Negro" woman was very focused on the idea of race motherhood—that Black women were personally responsible for defending their race and living every moment as a representative of Black people. Incredible sacrifice was expected from every Black woman if she were to call herself a race mother. According to Chapman, one particular essay released in 1925 by Elise McDougald served to clearly outline the expectations placed on Black women during the times of racial upheaval. To quote McDougald, "the New Negro woman is courageously standing erect, developing within herself the moral strength to rise above and conquer false attitudes. She is maintaining her natural beauty and charm and improving her mind and opportunity. She is measuring up to the needs of her family, community and race, and radiating a hope throughout the land" (Chapman 114-115). There was immense responsibility placed on the shoulders of Black women in the 1920s, and undoubtedly Irene, who already considers herself a woman of dignity and poise, would feel these pressures more than most women around her. It makes sense, then, that dignity would be of high priority when it comes to the appearance of race in Irene's life, and we can see how much incredibly taxing pressure Irene has placed on herself to be a dignified woman in unsavory surroundings.

Another way in which we can see Irene's desire for dignity is by viewing her relationship with her sexuality. We learn very early on that Irene is married to a man, being her husband, Brian. However, throughout the novel, we can see an evident sexual tension between Irene and Clare. One example of this can be seen in Irene's thoughts after speaking on the phone with Clare. The subject of the phone call was Clare begging Irene to come to tea with her and her husband—a date that Irene had tried many times to get out of attending. Irene is displeased with Clare's insistent nature and outwardly wishes that Clare would leave her alone. Following the phone call, Larsen allows us a window into Irene's mind, saying:

> Irene hung up the receiver with an emphatic bang, her thoughts immediately filled with self-reproach. She'd done it again. Allowed Clare Kendry to persuade her into promising to do something for which she had neither time nor any special desire. What was it about Clare's voice that was so appealing, so very seductive? (22)

When we are forced into doing something that we do not want to do, our thoughts towards our persuaders are negative, thinking of them in dark light and painting them as a villain. However, despite her annoyance, Irene describes Clare as appealing and, even more, sapphic in nature, *seductive*. To reinforce the infatuation that Irene has with Clare, we see when she arrives at Clare's house, "Clare met [Irene] in the hallway with a kiss…under her potent smile a part of Irene's annoyance with herself fled. She was even a little glad that she had come" (22). Once again, we see that, under the power of Clare's beauty and affection, Irene is completely brainwashed, rendered incapable of anger towards her. Throughout the text, Irene describes Clare in a distinctly sexual light many times, beginning with the scene in which they first meet as adults, where Irene says that Clare's smile is "caressing," and her lips were "like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin" (6). Irene continues to comment on Clare's beauty throughout the novel, showing an infatuation with her that goes beyond the boundaries of friendship and is very inconsistent with the thoughts one would have towards someone who is an annoyance.

Why, then, would Irene not allow her feelings towards Clare to be public? If she was so clearly infatuated with Clare's beauty, why did Irene repress her feelings, and why were her feelings written into the novel vaguely? The answer lies in the culture of the time in which the story is written. During the time of *Passing*, being queer was not acceptable—and certainly not something that a dignified woman like Irene would admit publicly. According to "The Gaze, The Glance, The Mirror: Queer Desire and Panoptic Discipline in Nella Larsen's *Passing*", "Queer women sat at the bottom of the hierarchy of respectability. Indeed, these queer Black women…drew crowds of white women whose exoticizing, desiring gazes threatened the optics project of New Negro leaders…" (Dean 99). Being queer during the New Negro movement was not only a trait to be shunned but a potential threat to the works of both voting and civil rights activists. Irene, who considers herself a respectable and upstanding race mother, would certainly not admit something so disastrous to her image as same-sex attraction towards Clare. Furthermore, the nature of the time in which *Passing* is both set and written gives us insight into why Larsen may have been so vague with her writing of Irene's queerness. Not only would it have been impossible for Irene to declare openly, but it would have been impossible for Larsen to write an openly queer character in a time unaccepting of queerness. Later in her article, Dean writes, "Because of Irene's immediate attraction to Clare, she reads her interactions as full of sexual potential, but at the same time, her participation in a panoptic gaze that disciplines the optics of sexual respectability attunes her to the potential inappropriate sexual behavior of others…Her queer desire and her urge to control optics of respectability are terminally incompatible" (Dean 99). While Irene feels undeniable sexual attraction towards Clare, she understands that her desires cannot live in the same world as her respectability. She is stuck having to deny some part of herself to please the other. Irene's choice to prioritize her dignity, ultimately resulting in Clare dying under mysterious circumstances that may or may not have been at the

hands of Irene, shows how truly ingrained her desire for respectability is—Irene would sooner deny her deepest longings than give up her control on how others view her.

Lastly, we can view Irene's connection to dignity through her relationship with class and her fixation on her own perceived position within her surrounding social stratification. When we are first introduced to Clare, Larsen takes us through a brief history of Clare's childhood via Irene's recollection. When remembering the rumors that Irene and her friends heard and spread about Clare when she was a teenager, "…[I] had had something more than a vague suspicion of [the nature of Clare's behavior]. For there had been rumors…such circumstances could only mean one thing" (10-11). In this memory, Irene and her friends believe that Clare was prostituting herself to white men for money. Reflecting then on the dialogue her friends would have around their speculations, she recollects, "There would follow insincere regrets, 'Poor girl, I suppose it's true enough, but what can you expect. Look at her father. And her mother…'" (11). Though Irene does not explicitly say that she finds Clare's actions disgraceful, her words and thoughts, both now and as a child, are incredibly judgmental and demeaning. Not only are Irene and her friends taking no consideration of Clare's position in their assumptions, thinking only that she must be an unfortunate product of bad parents, but this half-baked "regret" is even labeled insincere by Irene. How can something so callous and hurtful be *insincere* as well? Clearly, Irene had no consideration for the intricacies of Clare's situation, and though only in black and white—dignified and shameful. No matter the reasoning for Clare's supposed choice, Irene feels that taking advantage of one's sexuality is inherently disgraceful.

Later in the novel, Irene interacts with Hugh Wentworth, a wealthy white businessman. From the perspective of both Clare and Brian Redfield, Irene's husband, we see that Hugh is a callous, self-centered man. In a conversation with Irene, Brian says," 'Well, Hugh does think of himself as somewhat of a God, you know" (68). Though Hugh is demeaning and egocentric, Irene seems not to care—something that, on the surface, goes against her standard of respect. Why would she allow someone patronizing and demeaning, absorbed in his own rich white privilege, around her and her family? The answer lies in the service that Hugh does for her. By befriending Hugh, Irene involves herself with someone of wealth and high social status—traits that we know, through how she views Clare, are synonymous with respect. Irene even goes as far as to express anger at Clare being invited to a party Irene was throwing for Hugh, despite, as discussed earlier through Irene's queerness, desiring to be around her. When questioned on why she was upset with Clare's presence, she says, "It just happens that Hugh prefers intelligent women" (69). Not only is Irene insulting Clare and showing her genuine opinion of Clare's dignity and intelligence, but she is also complimenting herself in turn, saying that Hugh favors intelligent women and, as we know, Hugh seems to favor her. Even though it requires the insulting of her friends and the acceptance of demeaning and patronizing behavior from Hugh, Irene still chooses to remain by Hugh's side simply for the boost to her respectability and poise.

Irene is not a simple character. She cannot be reduced to one motivation, one mode of thinking, or one way of acting. Yet, despite this, Irene places herself in a box of her own making by prioritizing dignity so strongly in her life. By forcing herself to fulfill the role of race mother, she denies the side of her that engages in white-passing and shuns those around her who do the same. She puts immense pressure on herself in every area of her life to uphold the standards of a dignified lady, even to the point of denying her own sexuality, which we see through her repudiation of any homosexual feelings towards Clare. Though dignity and respect are positive attributes to strive for, Irene's attachment to dignity tortures her, eating her alive. Irene may have been the one who lived, but she lives in a prison of her own making. What is better—to be alive or to be free?

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