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Passing Down: Nella Larsen's Questioning of Eugenic Ideology
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This article looks at Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* and examines how the eugenic ideology of the time is explored and critiqued through the story and characters. The novel follows two light skinned black women who grew up together and are reunited as adults. This reconciliation takes place under the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance where the expectations of New Negro womanhood mix with a growing wave of eugenic thought and practices. In the 1920's many influential thinkers, including black leaders such as W. E.B. Du Bois, were convinced that the only way to move the human race forward was to dictate or control who could and could not have children. In the novel *Passing* Nella Larsen uses the characters of Irene and Claire to demonstrate the contradictions inherent in eugenic thought. Though *Passing* illuminates the problematic nature of eugenics, it ultimately leaves no solution or fix in the mind of the reader.

Though too often ignored, eugenic practices shaped US history and art in many subtle ways. In the first few decades of the 20th century, many novels reflect the influence of eugenics on the cultural consciousnesses. One such novel is Nella Larsen's Passing. This influential novel from 1929 tells the story of two light-skinned Black women who knew each other in childhood and are reunited as adults. Irene is disciplined and proper traveling in Black elite circles, whereas Clare is married to a racist white man, unaware of her true heritage. In this essay, I attempt to look at Nella Larsen's *Passing* to better understand how a middle-class Black woman such as Larsen was influenced by the eugenic ideology of the day. First, I will look at two distinct framings of eugenic thought, one interpreted by Black men such as W.E.B. DuBois and the other from the perspective of white women such as Margret Sanger, to investigate how these ideological positions may have affected Larsen in her writing and life. Then I will narrow in on Larsen's novel *Passing,* reading into the characters of Irene as a manifestation of racial uplift. Next, I talk about the nature of Clare, who serves as a foil to Irene but also embodies an impossibility within the confines of eugenic thought. Finally, I will reflect on what the ending of *Passing* says about the overall outlook that Larsen was attempting to present.

Passing is the second and ultimately final novel written by Nella Larsen. A woman part of the Harlem Renaissance and the 'New Negro' movement, Larsen would likely have encountered Eugenic ideology that was becoming commonplace during this era. As Daylanee K. English writes in her book *Unnatural Selections*, a broad coalition was forming in the United States that supported Eugenic practices, writing that "few challenged the notion that modern nations, especially those beset by immigration, must improve their human stock in order to remain competitive, indeed viable, in the modern world" (10). English lists Larson among the few outspoken protestors of this ideology (10). While Larson's novel *Quicksand* is discussed more frequently to illustrate Larsen's anti-Eugenic sentiment, I think that many instances in *Passing* illuminate

the complicated and sometimes contradictory stance that many Black women of the era took in response to eugenic ideas.

One of the more prominent voices in the Black community who expressed pro-eugenic views was W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of *The Crisis*, a periodical published by the NAACP. Du Bois promoted the idea of "racial uplift," a class-based version of eugenic principles that centered on elite blacks forwarding the race (English 34). As English and other scholars have pointed out, Larsen directly admonishes racial uplift through the character of Helga in *Quicksand* with an often-cited exchange where Helga's response to a plea for her to have children is simply, "I don't intend to contribute any to the cause" (English 34 *Quicksand* 132). At the same time, Larsen's friend and fellow author, Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven* was repeatedly criticized by Du Bois for what he saw as an unfavorable portrayal of Black culture because of its sexual and artistic content (Bernard 126). In an opinion column, Du Bois writes that "birth control is science and sense applied to the bringing of children into the world, and of all who need it we Negroes are the first. We in America are becoming sharply divided into the mass who have endless children and the class who through long postponement of marriage have few or none" (248). This sentiment isn't that ideologically dissimilar from the prominent white women who advocated birth control as a tool for a eugenic end, even including some of the thinly veiled classist and white supremacist notions that underpinned the movement. Margaret Sanger was a contemporary of Larsen's and a well-known advocate for birth control who also espoused eugenic views. In a literary account of American contraception history, author Layne Parish Craig details the similar paths that Larsen and Sanger would have taken. Craig notes that:

> Nella Larsen trained as a nurse in the Bronx in 1916, only a few years after Margaret Sanger began attending to destitute young mothers in Manhattan and developing her birth control advocacy; she would have dealt with many of the same social and medical issues that inspired Sanger to focus on birth control activism (Craig 82).

Craig speculates that since Larsen was married for 14 years and never had children, Larsen likely used contraception for an extended period of time (82). As a middle-class Black woman, Larsen occupied a peculiar place concerning eugenics. Regardless of her choice to have children, she would either be uplifting the race by passing on her "good stock," or if she chose birth control, then she was promoting the version of eugenics that focused on white supremacy and furthering the white race. Either way, her choice was ultimately simultaneously aligned with eugenic ideals and thoroughly subverting them. This paradoxical ambivalence comes through in *Passing,* where each character relates to eugenic concepts in different ways, but ultimately all of them suffer for their beliefs. Though Nella Larson may be known for her opposition to the racial uplift doctrine, the broader eugenics movement seems to be something that she wrestled with through the pages of *Passing* without ever resolving it for herself or the reader.

The novel *Passing* is told from the perspective of Irene Redfield, a woman wealthy enough to afford hired help who organizes charity balls for the Negro Welfare League. Irene embodies the DuBois notion of "racial uplift." Her husband Brian has a respectable job as a doctor, and together they have two sons.
Irene rarely interacts directly with her children over the course of the novel, but her children are constantly present in Irene's words and thoughts as a symbol of her status. In the following passage, Irene speaks directly about how she perceives the duties of motherhood. When Clare, Irene's long-lost childhood friend, questions the devotion to motherhood, Irene projects to the world by saying that "children aren't everything." Irene gives a response that opens a window to her beliefs about motherhood:

> Irene replied: You know you don't mean that, Clare. You're only trying to tease me. I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can't help it. And, really, I don't think it's anything to laugh at." And though she was aware of the slight primness in her words and attitude, she had neither power nor wish to efface it. (*Passing* 101)

Irene's "rather serious" approach to motherhood makes it sound like her full-time job, despite Irene employing full-time caretakers for her home. Irene believes strongly in the conception of herself as a dutiful mother entirely "wrapped up" in the running of her home. Throughout the book, we witness how Irene pushes down any complications to the narrative she has constructed about her life. She thinks of herself as a respectable woman and mother, squashing any doubts or counterfactuals. As the book progresses, the weight of years of suppression and pushing away starts to unravel Irene. She begins to suspect that her husband is having an affair, creating a narrative with little evidence to back up her suspicion. Even as she unravels internally, she puts great effort into maintaining her persona as a respectable race mother. When hearing that Brian and Clare had spent time together without her knowing, Irene runs into the bathroom. The following passage shows the lengths that Irene takes to hide her internal anguish:

> She closed her unseeing eyes and clenched her fists. She tried not to cry. But her lips tightened, and no effort could check the hot tears of rage and shame that sprang into her eyes and flowed down her cheeks; so she laid her face in her arms and wept silently.
>
> When she was sure that she had done crying, she wiped away the warm remaining tears and got up. After bathing her swollen face in cold, refreshing water and carefully applying a stinging splash of toilet water, she went back to the mirror and regarded herself gravely. Satisfied that there lingered no betraying evidence of weeping, she dusted a little powder on her dark-white face and again examined it carefully, and with a kind of ridiculing contempt. (*Passing* 107-108)

Because Larsen tells this story from Irene's point of view, we are able to glimpse the "betraying evidence" of Irene's instability. We witness the agony that Irene frequently feels when confronted with cracks in the narrative she has constructed about herself and her role as a mother. Irene desperately contorts her identity so that she may come across as the definition of an intellectual, upper-class Black woman that is raising the next generation of elite Black men. By writing Irene in this fashion, Larsen may have had in mind the Du Bois theory of the "Talented Tenth," a class of bourgeois intellectuals that would carry the race forward, a trait Du Bois believed to be a biological phenomenon (English 38). In other words, a class of people whose inherent nature was incredibly refined, making them superior to the other nine-tenths of the Black population. The character of Irene externally is a shoo-in for membership in this elite class, but internally, she is far from aspirational.

If Du Bois was under the impression that the Talented Tenth had identifiable characteristics, then Irene's suppressed interiority casts doubts on this biological assertion. In *Passing*, the attributes of the Talented Tenth exist only as a mask that Irene wears to obscure the messiness of her more innate whims. As a reader, we understand the artifice of Irene's disposition. Still, the constancy of her outward presentation renders this disguise undetectable within the external gaze that was characteristic of eugenic practices at the time. Her character thus illuminates the internal instability of racial uplift doctrine.

Where Irene projects the perfect embodiment of race motherhood, the character of Clare acts as a foil to Irene as a character and the ideals that she holds about her racial identity. Clare and Irene share identities as light-skinned Black women whose ambiguous complexion opens the door for them to pass as white if they choose to do so, and their fathers even went to college together. Still, the two women's life paths are in stark contrast despite their initial similarities.

Clare's upbringing is marked with violence, addiction, and domestic labor. Irene describes her father, Bob Kendry, as a "janitor, and a very inefficient one at that." A drunk man who dies in a "silly bar fight." This description comes during an era when modern medicine was starting to explain alcoholism through genetic terms and, in turn, became a focus of eugenicists. Lisa Mendelman has theorized that since Bob Kendry is the product of a raging white man and a poor Black woman, Larsen implies that any biological passing down of alcoholism is on the part of Bob's father. It seems as if Larsen could, in that decision, subvert negative narratives that paint addiction in Black men being a hopeless cause or permanent state and the white addict being a salvageable community member that has temporarily lost their way (Mendelman). Though Mendelman does not explicitly make the connection that by portraying Bob in this way, Larsen oddly aligns with Black eugenicists, including DuBois, who thought of alcoholism as a specifically white disease and generally an inheritable disposition. If Bob Kendry is tainted by his father's alcoholism, then logically, Clare is equally tainted from the standpoint of eugenic lineage.

Yet, Clare as a character does not fit neatly into any paradigm, Black or white: recovering alcoholic or unsalvageable drunk. Instead, Clare transcends

binary identity and thus, as Sami Schalk posits, serves to embody an impossible figure within the eugenic worldview (149). This push and pull of identity expression between class and race in her childhood creates a character that feels distinctly othered within the text. Clare occupies a subliminal space in-between worlds where she is never entirely in one place or another. Where Irene is the chaste race mother who will sacrifice anything for racial uplift, Clare's unwillingness to conform, in contrast, is interpreted as selfish and individualistic. Irene herself, remarking on Clare, describes her as having "nothing sacrificial in [her] idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold, and hard" (*Passing* 33). Clare is a mother whose life does not revolve around her child. She marries a wealthy white man but still desires to be a part of the Black community she left out of necessity. These traits are seen as individualistic by Irene and the world around Clare, but in actuality, Clare is more aligned with the wants and desires of the real New Negro Women in this period. Many of the narratives about racial uplift through better breeding or race motherhood come from Black men prescribing what Black women's behavior ought to be. Erin Chapman, studying the first-hand accounts and private correspondents of New Negro Women, summarizes the conundrum these women faced:

> They struggled to reconcile [a] sense of solidarity and the obligation of race motherhood with their quest for individual self-determination and personal fulfillment. This struggle, this retention of individual desire and therefore hesitation or even refusal to completely submit oneself to the demands of the larger racial good, and, what is more, the audacity to voice an incomplete satisfaction with one's assigned role, is a hallmark of New Negro womanhood. (Chapman 117)

Clare's individualistic wants that exist simultaneously with her strong desire for community speak to the contradiction that many women of the era were forced to contend with. Though many of the New Negro Women felt trapped and confused in this paradox of individualistic wants and community sacrifice, eugenic practices offered an easy solution to reconcile these forces. When attempting to proliferate "desirable" traits in the collective gene pool, eugenics must rely on the reproductive decisions of individual people to fulfill their intended goals.

The type of eugenic doctrine that Larsen rebelled most strongly against in her life and work was the expectation that women who were viewed by society as desirable should be the ones to reproduce. Between Larsen's own (likely voluntary) choice to not have children and Clare's indifference toward motherhood, Larsen provides an alternative potentiality to the exact path circumscribed by eugenic ideology and racial uplift. The choice to forgo or devalue motherhood despite having "desirable" stock is a choice that still exists within the same eugenic construction of individual decisions dictating the contours of a broader community. In this regard, Clare isn't transcending the eugenic binary structure but simply serving to represent the opposite side within

the parameters that the binary dictates. Ultimately, in the book's final pages, we see a literal manifestation of how the gravity of this binary overpowers Clare's ability to transcend spaces. When her racist husband discovers her, her two universes collide, and within moments her final transcending act is from the top story apartment to the ground below. Though who is responsible for her fall is left ambiguous, Irene seems the likeliest candidate. After Clare has fallen, Irene walks downstairs alone in contemplation:

> Amid her wonderings and questionings came a thought so terrifying, so horrible, that she had had to grasp hold of the banister to save herself from pitching downwards. A cold perspiration drenched her shaking body. Her breath came short in sharp and painful gasps.
>
> What if Clare was not dead?
>
> She felt nauseated, as much at the idea of the glorious body mutilated as from fear. (*Passing* 130)

This liminal state between life and death that Irene contemplates is the most horrifying thing. At this moment Irene could be a stand-in for the society around them and the pressure to choose conformity or death. To imagine Clare alive but mutilated would place her once again at odds with the ableist notions at eugenics core (despite any biological explanation for the disability).

When she finds out that Clare is dead, Irene chokes down "a sob of thankfulness" to hide her relief. As if Irene has been freed from the moral ambiguity that Clare brought into her world. Regardless of blame, society has dealt with the freak of nature that is Clare Kendry. But as a reader, there is no catharsis in Clare's death; Larsen gives the reader a eugenic ending, and all we can do is sit in the discomfort it elicits.

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