

6-20-2023

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Recommended Citation

Casten, Sara (2023) "Nella Larsen's Passing: Ambiguous Symbology & Weather," *Anthós*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 8.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/anthos.2023.12.1.8>

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Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Ambiguity in Weather

Sara Casten

Nella Larsen's novella *Passing* has been critically acclaimed for nearly a century since its publication in 1929. Within its pages, Larsen explores the complex relationship between two women of both white and Black lineage; Irene, a mother who lives in what can now be defined as a middle-class Black society, and Clare, a "beautiful" woman who spends her days "passing" for white in 1920s America, including in front of her racist husband. However, many critics have overlooked Larsen's ambiguous use of weather as a correlating literary device within *Passing*. Throughout the novella, Larsen's depictions of weather via narrator Irene are intentionally paralleled with her psychological and emotional struggles regarding Clare's overall disregard for society's expectations for women of color. This atmospheric partnership has allotted numerous levels of comprehension within the reader in which a conscious understanding of Irene's narration is paired with a subconscious interpretation of the novella's enigmatic meaning.

Passing was not Larsen's first work that used weather phenomena as a backdrop for her writing. In her first novella, *Quicksand*—published the year before in 1928—Larsen established the techniques she used to convey her characters' emotional struggles to her readers. When taking a closer look at *Quicksand*, then Assistant Professor of English Kate Stanley, known for her work in *Modernism/modernity*, *American Literary History*, and *Women's Studies Quarterly*, saw a resonance between the novel's atmosphere and the characters within. In her chapter on Larsen, Stanley wrote:

Larsen's working title for the manuscript, *Cloudy Amber*, underlines her investment in modeling characters and narrative events after phenomena that change state... Clouds and amber also stand as more general emblems for transfiguring processes that are catalyzed by the rise and fall of temperatures and pressures. Just as shifts from air pressure and temperature form clouds from condensation and amber from sap,

[*Quicksand*'s main character] Helga's changes in mood and direction fluctuate between fluidity and fixity.¹

Stanley recognized the correlation between Larsen's narrator Helga and the backdrop of *Quicksand*'s fluctuating atmosphere, which, according to Stanley, worked as a literary device to parallel the narrator's emotional turmoil. Towards the novella's end, Stanley asserts that Larsen used "a textbook example of a literary device with a climactic storm that seems to straightforwardly reveal Helga's internal state as well as her fate."² This "textbook" literary technique highlights Larsen's ability to pair changes in atmosphere with character. Stanley develops this idea further in her interpretation of *Quicksand* by writing, "The weather doesn't so much reflect [the narrator's] internal state as appear coextensive with moods that likewise circulate aerily."³ Stanley emphasizes that Larsen's use of weather in *Quicksand* was not meant to be a direct reflection of the world but rather a subliminal correlating setting to the emotions the narrator was experiencing. The weather's complementing atmosphere in *Quicksand* highlights the narrator's emotional state in the reader's mind, manifesting a deeper and more intuitive understanding in the reader of the narrator's emotional struggles. Stanley's thorough analysis of *Quicksand* proves a deeper interpretation of Larsen's setting is necessary to appropriately comprehend her written works.

However, Larsen's second novella has not been treated with the same depth of analysis. Acclaimed literary critic Claudia Tate "Suggests that *Passing*'s social pretentiousness is not, as [other literary] critics have frequently said, a deficiency of Larsen's artistic vision but an intentional stylistic device."⁴ Having already practiced her hand at creating a literary atmosphere in *Quicksand*, Larsen's chosen descriptions and details in *Passing*'s atmosphere were thought out and deliberate. Tate furthered this argument by writing that Larsen was well "Aware of the novel's obvious artificiality, and therefore could not have intended

¹ Kate Stanley, "Nella Larsen's Novel Weather," in *Practices of Surprise in American Literature after Emerson* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 124.

² Stanley, "Nella Larsen's Novel Weather," 138.

³ Stanley, "Nella Larsen's Novel Weather," 127.

⁴ Claudia Tate, "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation," in *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 4 (Terre Haute, IN: Indiana State University, 1980): 597.

to pass off this fantasy land as a fictive replica of external reality.”⁵ Nor was Larsen trying to. Larsen’s deliberate depiction of her characters’ “social pretentiousness” was used as an intentional literary technique as a means to remind the reader of Larsen’s fictitious world. This is a world in which her writing was not meant to be taken literally but *literarily*. As Tate explains,

An understanding of *Passing* must be deduced not merely from its surface content but also from its vivid imagery, subtle metaphors, and carefully balanced psychological ambiguity ... Although the story has a realistic setting, it is not concerned with the ordinary course of human experience. The story develops from a highly artificial imitation of social relationships.⁶

These relationships, artificial in construction and intentional in execution, require a greater analysis of the atmosphere to truly appreciate the novella’s enigmatic complexities. Larsen’s calculated craft in word choice and atmospheric tone was designed to elicit a premeditated comprehension of the greater interpretations of the novella.

Therefore, as Stanley determined in her chapter analysis on *Quicksand*, “Once readers are alerted to this fluid and nonbinary system of uncertainty, the novel’s opposition turns at the level of plot, character, and narrative consciousness might be conceptually keyed to the impersonal forces of moods and weather—the novel’s primary manifestation of atmosphere.”⁷ It becomes crucial for the reader to understand the story as a whole is meant to be derived beyond the overarching plot, although many other literary fiction pieces are not given this courtesy. Rather, it should be derived from the combination of Larsen’s literary techniques throughout the entirety of *Passing*. This is a combination in which the specific inclusion of warmth, cold, and the world’s changing seasons instills within its pages a multi-dimensional comprehension of the story’s events from the perspective of the narrator.

⁵ Tate, “Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” 597.

⁶ Tate, “Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” 598.

⁷ Stanley, “Nella Larsen’s Novel *Weather*,” 120.

Through the eyes of Irene Redfield, Larsen's *Passing* comes to life before the reader, that is, in the way that Irene wants the reader to view the world. Lori Harrisoiiv-Kahan, who has taught as part of the English Department for several acclaimed schools, observed that "The novel's third-person limited narration places [the reader] squarely in Irene's consciousness, and the narrative uncertainties surrounding the major events of the novel ... depend largely on Larsen's ability to sustain Irene's unreliable narration."⁸ The artificiality of Irene's narration, like the weather in *Passing*, manifests a conscious atmosphere for the reader to experience. One in which the reader is led to question the atmosphere Irene presents. In her chapter on Larsen, Stanley reminds the reader that "When [it is] measured through the lens of determinism, weather represents predictable phenomena that can be prognosticated; when measured through the lens of indeterminism, it is a wholly unpredictable force."⁹

Hence weather, in a literary world described to the reader through the lens of a single narrator, becomes a predictable, and thus intentional, literary device. These techniques for how the changing seasons within *Passing*, when combined with Larsen's pre-determined ambiguity in her writing, were designed to work as a whole. Take, for example, the day Irene is meant to meet up with Clare at her home for tea. Reluctant Irene describes the morning to the reader as "A dome of gray sky rose over a parched city, but the stifling air was not relieved by the silvery mist that seemed to hold a promise of rain, which did not fall. To Irene Redfield, this soft foreboding fog was another reason for doing nothing about seeing Clare Kendry that afternoon."¹⁰ This "foreboding fog" complemented Irene's feeling of unease with a literary atmosphere of unease in the stifling air. Even indoors, the feeling of discomfort continues for Irene when she meets Clare's husband, a white man who is unaware of his wife's African-American lineage and confides extremely racist things to Irene and Clare. When Irene first meets Jack, she feels "a faint sense of danger brushed her, like the breath of a cold

⁸ Lori Harrisoiiv-Kahan, "'Structure Would Equal Meaning': Blues and Jazz Aesthetics in the Fiction of Nella Larsen," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 28, no. 2 (Tulsa, OK: University of Tulsa, 2009), 273.

⁹ Stanley, "Nella Larsen's Novel Weather," 141.

¹⁰ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 33.

fog.”¹¹ Again, a “fog” is present within Irene’s telling of the story, in which Larsen uses a weather element to depict Irene’s inner emotional turbulence. Furthermore, Larsen does not write that the waiting rain begins to fall until after Irene has finally left Clare’s home, signifying Irene’s regaining of her emotional control from the stifling dynamic with Clare and Jack.¹² These two literary elements paired together (Irene’s description of the scene with her description of the setting) manifested a complex understanding of the scene overall. Larsen characterized Irene’s feeling of unease by partnering it with the “foreboding fog” of the external atmosphere. Therefore, the combination of these literary elements imbues the reader with a deeper understanding of Irene’s “fog,” symbolizing an atmosphere of emotional unease both for Irene and for the reader.

Outside of this meeting with Clare and Jack, Irene continued to characterize her surroundings in subtle literary details in which Irene gave hints about her internal emotions. As Tate noted in her essay, “The real impetus for the story is Irene’s emotional turbulence, which is entirely responsible for the course that the story takes and ultimately accountable for the narrative ambiguity.”¹³ Ambiguity in which Larsen paired subtle references to weather to Irene’s internal emotional atmosphere within the novella’s external one. When focusing on a scene in which Irene describes Clare’s physical appearance, Tate observes, “[m]ore important to the story, though, than Clare’s beauty ... is its emotional effect on Irene... [As a result of Clare], Irene becomes more insecure.”¹⁴ Irene felt both intimidated and inadequate compared to Clare, which we see through Irene’s descriptions of Clare’s appearance. Clare was able to “pass” in society as the favored white woman, whereas Irene felt she could not. Tate rationalized that “Irene’s character, like Clare’s, achieves cohesion from the suggestive language Irene employs (especially when describing Clare), the psychological atmosphere permeating her encounters with Clare, and the subtle nuances in characterization.”¹⁵ This can be seen in partnership with the changing of the

¹¹ Larsen, *Passing*, 43.

¹² Larsen, *Passing*, 49.

¹³ Tate, “Interpretation,” 598.

¹⁴ Tate, “Interpretation,” 598.

¹⁵ Tate, “Interpretation,” 600.

seasons. Before Clare had become intimately involved in Irene's social life, Larsen used Irene's character to describe her setting as "...the middle of October. There had been a week of cold rain, drenching the rotting leaves which had fallen from the poor trees that lined the street on which the Redfields' house was located and sending a damp air of penetrating chill into the house, with a hint of cold days to come."¹⁶ For Irene, this explanation of weather is a sign of the seasons, as they should be for that time of year. This description of the setting is used to establish a sense of normalcy at the Redfield house. However, this normalcy in weather can be viewed as altered the next time Irene gives the reader an external description of the world outside her home.

Between these two passages, Clare had become more prominent in Irene's friend groups, social gatherings, and dinner parties than Irene herself. At the peak of Clare's popularity, Irene described this passage of time as follows:

October, November had gone. December had come and brought with it a little snow and then a freeze and after that a thaw and some soft pleasant days that had in them a feeling of spring... [Irene] didn't like it to be warm and springy when it should be cold and crisp, or gray and cloudy as if snow were about to fall. The weather, like people, ought to enter into the spirit of the season.¹⁷

Again, Irene's internal grievances toward this uncharacteristically warm December had been supplemented by her feelings toward Clare, or people whom Irene felt disobeyed what society thought they "ought to" do during what should be a cold time of year. This time, however, Irene felt that, just as the weather should adhere to the seasons, Clare should adhere to what Irene accepts as society's status quo. As Irene's irritation regarding Clare grew, so too had Larsen's metaphor for weather and Irene's desires for Clare. Unfortunately for Irene, Clare's actions were not as easily influenced as Irene's descriptions of the weather.

Clare's adverse effect on Irene is prevalent throughout the novella. Though the story is told from Irene's perspective, Larsen does more than just set the stage for Clare's entry. Tate acknowledges that "Long before we encounter Clare

¹⁶ Larsen, *Passing*, 72.

¹⁷ Larsen, *Passing*, 101.

Kendry, Larsen creates a dense psychological atmosphere for her eventual appearance.”¹⁸

The first time the reader is introduced to Clare is during an unforgettably warm August day. Irene recalls that it was “a brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun pouring down rays that were like molten rain... What small breeze there was seemed like the breath of a flame fanned by slow bellows.”¹⁹ Very much like Clare’s character, this heatwave is hard to ignore, demanding everyone’s attention with its warmth and light. Yet, it is simultaneously overpowering, similar to how Irene later feels about Clare’s involvement in her personal life. This heatwave drove Irene to seek refuge on the roof of the Drayton Hotel for a refreshing glass of iced tea, where she encounters Clare, described as a “sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days... Nice clothes, too, just right for the weather, thin and cool without being mussy, as summer things were so apt to be.”²⁰ Irene’s description of Clare goes beyond just the physical. Clare embodied the exact atmosphere that Irene was longing for. Clare’s presence during the heatwave became a symbolic representation of what Irene thought she desired. Tate furthers this symbolism in her observation that Irene’s “hyperbolic expressions [of Clare] are ambiguous. They create the impression that Clare is definitely, though indescribably, different from and superior to Irene and other ordinary people.”²¹ Twice, Clare had alluded to a spring day; welcomed in the heatwave toward the beginning of the novella but unwanted as the seasons should have been growing colder as the novella progressed. Ultimately, this seasonal interpretation of Clare reveals Irene’s evolving opinion of Clare throughout *Passing*. Clare was always described as the most beautiful or perfect thing in the room, whereas Irene never bothered to describe herself unless in direct opposition to Clare. At first, Clare is written as the enviable beauty Irene aspires to be. As Larsen’s story progresses, Irene still

¹⁸ Tate, “Interpretation,” 598.

¹⁹ Larsen, *Passing*, 9.

²⁰ Larsen, *Passing*, 12.

²¹ Tate, “Interpretation,” 599.

views Clare as an enviable beauty but later as one who puts Irene's social life and personal values in jeopardy.

Within the pages of *Passing*, it is rare to find a scene in which Irene and Clare do not coexist. Harrosoiv-Kahan clarifies this literary choice by saying, "although in this case Clare's voice is mediated by Irene, Irene's subjectivity is also determined by her identification with Clare."²² This analysis unveils a literary technique Larsen employs throughout the novella: Clare is not meant to be seen outside Irene's subjectivity. Clare is not meant to exist without Irene. It is Irene's interpretation, coexistence, and struggles with Clare that personify Irene's story. Harrosoiv-Kahan strengthens this co-dependency between the characters by writing:

Just as Larsen has given us a narrative from the first-person point of view but told in the third person, Clare's persistence in using the childhood nickname "Rene" for her friend mimes this narrative technique. Clare's nickname removes the "I" from Irene's name, replacing it with an apostrophe to remind us of its absence. One could go so far as to argue that Clare's name is similarly devoid of an "[i]" – though a lower-case one – since the more common spelling of the name is "Claire". Taken together, the women's names and nicknames suggest that Irene and Clare are dependent on one another for verbalization ... Without Clare, Irene loses her voice.²³

This dependence on one another literarily strengthens the polarization of the two characters' viewpoints, especially when analyzing the lack of "I."

Irene, who feels her skin is too dark to "pass," is in direct opposition to Clare, whose skin is light enough to be perceived as white in 1920s America. For Clare, her ability to "pass" as white freely in public spaces is a minor loss of identity, or lowercase "i," for she is permitted to cast aside her Black lineage in public when and if she sees fit. However, Irene does not have this same privilege. Although both share Black and white lineage, Irene feels that her skin is too dark for 1920s America to see her as anything other than a woman of color. For Irene, Clare's preferred nickname for her, in which her capital "I" is removed, can also symbolize Irene's inability to be as free with her identity as Clare. This lack of "I"

²² Harrosoiv-Kahan, "Structure," 274.

²³ Harrosoiv-Kahan, "Structure," 275.

or “i” subconsciously personifies an underlying perception of inequalities between the two characters. In his essay, David Blackmore, a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at the University of California, elaborates on these characters’ ethnic divide in their literary 1920s American society by writing:

White American culture tells [Irene] that [B]lack female identity centers around desire, that in fact an African-American woman is nothing but a beast driven by irrepressible sexuality. The key, then, to combating this stereotype lies in the repression of sexuality, in the confinement of desire to the constricted realm of the respectable marriage. Doing her part to dispel the Jezebel myth, Irene plays the role of the eminently respectable, asexual mother/wife.²⁴

Throughout the novella, Clare is seen frivolously casting aside her role as an asexual mother and wife in favor of living what Irene alludes to being a carefree life. In their conversations, it is implied that Clare cares very little about her daughter, is only dutiful when her husband is home, and spends as much time out of the house as possible when her husband is away. Clare’s way of life, by definition, contradicts Irene’s efforts to “dispel the Jezebel myth.” Expanding on Blackmore’s idea, Harrosiv-Kahan writes, “Clare’s fate is in direct opposition to that of the typical tragic mulatta, a figure found in literature by both [W]hite and African-American writers, whose aspirations to [W]hiteness or unwillingness to accept her [B]lackness are typically the source of her downfall.”²⁵ Clare’s direct opposition to what Irene believes to be society’s ethnic and proper values for a person of color is reflected in how Irene thematically paints the tragic story of Clare’s untimely death, partnered with Irene’s description of the setting using weather.

Shortly after Irene’s true lineage was revealed to Clare’s husband, Jack, Irene began to fret over the consequences of this outed secret and what it meant for Clare. Irene began to feel conflicted between her ethnic burdens and her moral ones. On the one hand, she felt she should warn Clare about Jack out of obligation

²⁴ David Blackmore, “That Unreasonable Restless Feeling’: The Homosexual Subtexts of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” in *African American Review* 26, no. 3 (Terre Haute, IN: Indiana State University, 1992): 478.

²⁵ Harrosoiv-Kahan, “Structure,” 276.

to the African race. On the other hand, Irene felt the situation was Clare's fault and that Clare deserved to lay in the bed she had made for herself. Larsen illustrated Irene's inner emotional turmoil by writing, "the next morning brought with it a snowstorm that lasted throughout the day... Though she continued to stare out of the window [at the falling snow], Irene saw nothing now, stabbed as she was by fear—and hope."²⁶ This snowstorm symbolized Irene's fearful, yet hopeful, plea that she would no longer have to keep secrets on behalf of Clare and that things would return to normal, just as the snow had returned to New York. Irene hoped that Jack's knowledge of Clare's true lineage would resolve itself and subsequently resolve Irene's ethnic/moral battle.

However, Clare still hadn't spoken to her husband about this encounter. Fighting feelings of growing discomfort, Irene later spoke aloud, "It seems dreadfully warm in here," and opens a window while at a party with Clare.²⁷ Also while at this party, Larsen made sure to note that the snow had stopped falling 2-3 hours before, which symbolized a degree of warmth in what should have been an otherwise cold, December day. Here, Irene had established a subconscious feeling of discomfort as Clare continued to act outside society's, and by extension Irene's, values for a woman of color. Inevitably, this came to a climax when Jack had crashed the party and demanded that Clare tell him truthfully about her lineage. At this moment, Irene narrated an incredibly vague scene in which, amid the chaos, Clare fell out the open window to her death. As reality begins to sink in for Irene, she feels "a cold perspiration drenched her shaking body. Her breath came short in sharp and painful gasps. What if Clare was not dead?"²⁸ Irene had become overwhelmed with the "cold" feeling that Clare may still be alive, allowing the weather to embody a wave of "cold" fear rushing through Irene regarding her emotions toward Clare. Here, Larsen used the elements of the winter's "cold" weather as literary devices to illustrate Irene's inner emotional turbulence regarding Clare's death and the symbolic death of Irene's conflicting viewpoints with Clare's "passing."

²⁶ Larsen, *Passing*, 125.

²⁷ Larsen, *Passing*, 135.

²⁸ Larsen, *Passing*, 139.

Larsen's clever depictions of weather in her novella *Passing* are intentionally inconclusive literary devices used to parallel Irene's psychological struggles throughout the novella. As she had first done in *Quicksand*, Larsen was able to ambiguously write the complexities of Irene and Clare's relationship to be coupled perfectly with the novella's changing of the seasons. Therefore, the literary use of weather expanded to resemble the emotional, ethnic, and moral polarities of the two characters as women of color, as well as Irene's viewpoints on the events that were taking place.

Between heatwaves, foreboding fogs, warm winters, and a final snowstorm, Irene's direct comparisons to people and weather, as well as her less clear ones as a means to convey her internal thoughts, manifested a more complex understanding of Larsen's overall weather metaphor. It was Larsen's ingeniously ambiguous use of weather that both altered and guided the reader's subconscious understanding of the world of *Passing*, marking Nella Larsen as an underrated writer of her time.

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