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The Disguised Mask of Race, Gender, and Class

By Genesis Diaz

I | Introduction

Racism has occurred throughout American history from when the founding fathers decided that slaves were three fifths of a person to when African-Americans were segregated and categorized as ‘colored.’ Gender roles are often demonstrated to show which sex a female or a male belongs in. Nella Larsen writes about the issue of African-Americans “passing” in 1929 and the consequences of living that life in the story of Irene and Clare. In Larsen’s novel, *Passing*, the reader becomes familiar with the term, exploring what it is for an African-American being able to ‘pass’ as white. The color of someone’s skin was the prominent focus in the 1920s. This was a factor that often advanced those with white skin or limited the opportunities of black individuals. Throughout American society, there has been a general struggle of identity in issues of gender and race. Both Irene and Clare struggle with those same issues in the novel, further trying to fit into a mold and have their true intentions.

Passing takes place in 1929 during the Roaring Twenties and the Harlem Renaissance. The protagonists in the novel are Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. They both have hidden secrets about who they really are. Clare is a mulatto who is able to pass from her race and conceal her true black background. Irene is a black middle class female who is proud of where she is from but nonetheless desires and has feelings for Clare.

Irene struggles with her personal identity. Once Clare and Irene have their second encounter Clare is intrigued by Harlem—where Irene lives—and decides she is tired of living a lie. Clare spends most of her time in Harlem where the epitome of culture and art are emerging. Irene suspects that Clare may be having an affair with her husband Brian. Irene becomes jealous of Clare to the point where, when at a party, Clare’s husband finds out about Clare’s race. Clare later dies, but her death is unclear.

Larsen leaves the reader to wonder if Irene pushed her or if Clare committed suicide. Larsen demonstrates the limitations that an individual can have regarding the race, which factors on social status. Larsen also depicts the image of a woman and the gender roles that women needed to display in the 1920s.

II | Historical Context

The economy had been thriving due to the overproduction of goods. The prosperous use of credit and surplus of revenue was known to be the Roaring Twenties. Money and power became a huge factor for industry. The booming economy became the aftermath of the Progressive Era.

The Harlem Renaissance was a time period that brought in much art prestige to the black community. There had been a fluctuation of art, literature, poetry, and painting. There had been a negative cultural misrepresentation of black culture up to that point but art donors wanted to sponsor the authentic black image.

There had also been more employment opportunities in the North toward the urban areas while people living from the South were moving to the North—this was known as the Great Migration. There were racial and social tensions that were overflowing between black and white people. The influx of people moving to the North to the overcrowded urban cities increased competition for employment.

The North had been known to be less racist than the South; nonetheless, racism was still clearly visible. The actions became known as *de facto* segregation based on practice, not in the intent of the law. Even though the segregation was based on practice, actions that were displayed where colored sections were imposed and voting was not allowed for African-Americans. Larsen mentions the prevalence of Jim Crow Laws. The Jim Crow sections were emerging due to the *de jure* segregation. The sections that African-Americans were allowed to be in were labeled as “colored” or in some places it was exclusively for white people.

III | Race and Social Class

The environment of the early 1900s was often a hostile one to blacks, both in the North and the South. Even though the North was a symbol of progress, race was still an underlying issue. In *Passing*, Irene is in the Drayton Hotel of Chicago realizing people might notice she was from an undesired race: “it was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it that disturbed her.”¹ Irene is afraid that people will notice that she is black in a place that is strictly for the white race. She does not want to cause a scene and does not want to have to deal with people’s glances and judgments.

Irene reflects back to the significance of passing, “wishing to find about this hazardous business of ‘passing,’ this breaking from all the familiar...friendly to take one chance in another environment that is not entirely strange.”² The protagonist, Clare passes as white, further abandoning her black family and culture. Irene passing as white in the Drayton Hotel demonstrates a mask; she is hiding her true self—her skin color. Passing in black communities was frowned upon and not simple to do. Miriam Thaggert explains “the subject who passes can elide categories determined by race and clothes can ‘camouflage’ the body for those special times ‘we don’t want to be seen—or we don’t want our true selves.’”³ The masks that Irene and Clare portray are unique to what they are trying to hide. Both women demonstrate a conflict between themselves one on gender the other on class therefore they need that mask without people would see what is behind that mask—their true selves.

Irene explains about parties in Harlem that black folks, “will not be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections.”⁴ Segregation became a political issue; *de facto* segregation was committed. The Harlem Renaissance is described was a prominent movement in the black community that included music and art. Once whites began to arrive, the law stated that various races could not integrate. Therefore Jim Crow laws came from the South, and were being adopted in the North.

Race was a crucial and controversial issue in the 1920s; therefore, racial lines were deep and the race was a huge indicator of status. Clare was rumored to be associating with white people while *Passing* “there was one rumor about Clare Kendry’s having been seen at the dinner hour in a fashionable hotel in company with another woman, all of them white.

And dressed!”⁵ Irene is flabbergasted in Clare’s ability to pass, even though the primitive factor is skin color. Irene is a middle class individual who does pass and stays in the black culture. Clare decides to live in the white class and she does not care for the repercussions of her actions. Clare’s background was a lower class individual therefore she did not think passing would affect her as much. The reward to this way of life could be a better life with opportunities and wealth. Race no longer is a barrier for Clare.

While Irene, Gertrude, and Clare are discussing their life, Jack says racist comments. Irene thinks back to the scene saying, “it was hard to believe that even Clare Kendry would permit this ridiculing of her race, by an outsider though he chanced to be her husband.”⁶ Clare’s husband mentions all these demeaning comments and Clare laughs as if it were a nonchalant conversation. Clare cannot say anything because she is confused. She is supposed to have this white mask that demonstrates her being a white racist and the society of the 1920s praised that mentality. She cannot say anything because if she were to say something to Jack he would know Clare was black. Jack becomes suspicious of Irene’s comment: “caught between two allegiances. Herself! Her race! And Clare! The thing that bound and suffocated her Nothing was ever more completely sardonic.”⁷

Irene is conflicted between her race and Clare. Irene realizes that she cannot have the same opportunities and privileges that Clare has. The race that Irene is classified in limits her from doing things she wishes she could do. Clare has everything handed to her and it is due to the fact that Clare passed and Irene chose not to pass. Irene carries on this mask of appearance, demonstrating to others her composure and happiness with Brain, but deep down she is suffering.

IV | Gender/Sexuality

Another of Nella Larsen’s themes in the novel is sexuality, especially the sexual orientation of Irene and her feelings for Clare. Larsen clearly depicts Irene having sexual attraction to Clare, expressing her interest in appearance and personality.

In the 1920s the intrigue of the same sex was not unheard of; it was just not discussed. Larsen explains the attractiveness that Clare has on others to show a contrast between Clare and Irene. Clare is seen more attractive with gracefulness and femininity. Irene is much more detached and not as sweet in the eyes of the reader. Clare embodies a carefree individual who is desired by the male population.

Irene tries to fit into this mold of what society wants a female in the 20s to be. She tries to display her contentment her happiness, but deep down she is crumbling inside. Thaggert explains Fuss’ argument that the idea of a woman having an attraction with another woman is an “influential analysis about homoeroticism” and that Larsen achieves this with the lesbian relationship between Clare and Irene.”⁸ Irene is hurt that her race, her hopes, and dreams are impeded. She has an attraction to Clare that she has not even realized. Irene becomes obsessed with Clare to the point where Irene feels jealous of Brain even talking to her.

Gender has always been a conflicting issue of fitting into a mold based on the gender roles that society dictates for both men and women. Gender can at times be interpreted based on sexuality or personality. Irene describes Clare the first time seeing her at the Drayton as “an attractive looking woman, was Irene’s opinion with those dark almost black eyes, and that wide mouth of scarlet flower against her ivory skin.”⁹ Irene describes Clare

as feminine and quite beautiful even though women were subjugated to being housewives and pleasing their husband. In that time, a woman describing another as “attractive” seems peculiar. Irene could be attracted to Clare in her appearance. Larsen could have used another word to describe Clare’s character, but used “attractive.”

The idea of homosexuality is not unheard of in 1929; nevertheless it was not spoken about. Moreover, Irene thinks back to meeting Clare when they are out at a party when the “same thought that she had two years ago on the roof of the Drayton that Clare Kendry was just a shade too good looking.”¹⁰ This is the second time that Irene refers to Clare’s appearance even though Irene is married to Brian. Irene is confused with her sexuality even though she is married; Irene thinks about Clare more than friends. Irene is trying to fit into this mold that society has created, nevertheless she is having trouble fitting in. Additionally, Irene has an argument with her husband about Clare being invited to a party without Irene’s permission. Irene began to see, “her voice, she realized had gone queer. But she had an instinctive feeling that it hadn’t been the whole cause of Brian’s attitude.”¹¹ The issue of homosexuality is again mentioned by Larsen, choosing the word “queer.” Irene is conflicted with her gender; she wants to appear as a loving wife, but is attracted to a woman. Irene wants to fit the gender roles that society has issued, but her actions and thoughts impede her.

V | Historicity

The issue of “passing” has been a controversial issue that has allowed African-Americans to pose as white individuals. Prior to the early 1920s and after, it was common that blacks would be legally segregated.

Race was a contributing factor; the pigment of somebody skin was a clear indicator of which status one belonged to. Blacks were seen as an inferior race. They were undesirable and often suffered brutality. In the South, there was a terrorist group known as the Ku Klux Klan. This group was dominant figures that would display lynching and murders to instill fear in those who wanted to rebel. In the North, race was often shown with African-Americans having low paying jobs and being segregated based on skin color. Race often demonstrated limitations to the individuals such as Irene. She had to be in Jim Crow sections of a party. The idea of integration was a radical notion that would not be demonstrated until decades later.

The novel mentions the Rhinelander Case of a woman being sued by her husband for lying about her race. She passed and posed as a white person, but little did the husband know that his wife was of African-American descent. Thaggert in her analysis explains the case as a “complex dialectic of concealing and revealing is one of the novel’s central reversals of the Rhinelander trial in which ‘the full sustained look’ is imposed on Alice Jones Rhinelander.”¹² Clare is the embodiment of Alice Jones Rhinelander. Larsen refers to this case towards the end of the novel to demonstrate the similarity that Alice had with Clare in terms of concealing her true race. Both women are concealing who they really are; they believe that they could pass for better opportunities. Race often limited what a person could do or have. The constant concealing displays a mask that Irene and Clare have as both women hide and believe that a mask could hide their true needs and wants.

Gender roles have always been around they are social cues designated to show the differences between the opposite sex. Women in the Twenties were often seen as an object;

they could not demonstrate resistance to their own femininity because society would reject it. Women were often afraid and displayed what society wanted them to be. Larsen interprets this notion in Irene's sexuality. Irene, at a party, displays her happiness and socializes with the black community but deep down inside cannot contain her feelings for Clare. At the same time she is both jealous and in love with Clare Kendry. There is a mask that Irene displays when she is at a party or with people, but once people are gone and she is alone, her confessions are displayed. If she were to demonstrate any physical attraction toward Clare she would be more than punished by society; her status and respect would be gone and that is more important to her.

VI | Conclusion

The 1920s were a time of economic prosperity for some but racial segregation and racism persisted. Both characters Irene and Clare had to understand what their true identity was in race, class, and gender further symbolizing societies and individuals fitting into molds. The novel was an epitome of race in the Twenties.

Poor treatment of African-Americans would keep on occurring until the Sixties when lynching and the black terrorism group known as the Ku Klux Klan began to wane. The novel demonstrated the gap between wealthy and lower class individuals and how race can be an underlying factor that can determine an individual's way of life. In a time period when progress and economic prosperity arose, the issue of race is pervaded by the dichotomy of social racism toward African-Americans in the early 1900s.

Notes

¹ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

³ Miriam Thaggert, "Racial Etiquette: Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the Rhinelander Case," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, and Transnationalism* (5) 2: 1-29.

⁴ Larsen, *Passing*, 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸ Thaggert, "Racial Etiquette."

⁹ Larsen, *Passing*, 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹² Thaggert, "Racial Etiquette," 13.