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Shared Shame and Affect in Nella Larsen's Passing

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SHARED SHAME AND AFFECT IN NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*

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ABSTRACT

This project focuses on the negative affect of shame in Nella Larsen's 1920s American novel, Passing. While shame is a universal feeling everyone feels, the project argues that Larsen's two main characters, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, feel a specific type of invisible shame that pulls on them differently. For Irene, this shame is reactive and aggressive, but for Clare, this shame is passive and often ignored. The project details where and how the shame manifests for each character, particularly focusing on how shame can be seen visibly and invisibly in and on the body. Because no other character recognizes both characters' pain, the two form a sort of 'shared shame', or allyship, in the face of distressing circumstances.

However, as the novel progresses, the shame bond weighs more heavily on Irene Redfield, manifesting in extreme bouts of paranoia and self-destructive tendencies. At the novel's end, these distressing emotions are released with Clare's death, as though Larsen keeps Clare's murderer ambiguous, the project argues that Irene could be read as the 'invisible murderer.' With Clare's absence, all of the pain and shame is transferred to Irene, who is freed from Clare's constant presence but reduced to a miserable shell of herself. The project concludes with a larger understanding of the historical context in which Larsen was writing, i.e., why she would be motivated to address the topic of shame given her upbringing. It closes with a broader understanding of shame and how it affects modern readers.

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Although shame is a universal experience, Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* presents a particular, almost specialized idea of shame, unseen by the rest of white society but shared between Irene and Clare. While it is clear that Larsen wishes to address all sorts of shame in her novel, the scene in which Clare brings Irene over to visit her husband, John Bellew, is especially crucial. In this scene, the specific type of shame that Larsen utilizes throughout the novel emerges in both characters; it is no longer a broad sense of distress but a collective, seemingly reluctant bond that Clare and Irene share. For Irene, this sense of shame is reactive; it blossoms from a sense of rebellion, rage, self-destruction, and paranoia, which she attempts to quell because of her sense of allyship with Clare. But for Clare, this sense of shame is passive, bizarre, and almost otherworldly; it is apart from Irene yet dependent on her simultaneously.

For instance, when John reveals his 'nickname' for Clare, Irene reacts immediately, laughing uncontrollably. Larsen notes that she

> laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided. Until, catching sight of Clare's face, the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke, and for caution, struck her. At once she stopped (29)

At this moment, Irene is confronted with many different feelings. For one, Larsen's emphasis on the laugh communicates Irene's frustration, humiliation, and anger with the situation.
She sympathizes with Clare, acknowledging that she "hadn't the mortification and shame that [Clare] must be feeling," but also focuses on the "rage and rebellion" that she is repressing (31). She covers these feelings with a bizarre laugh because she cannot describe them.

Yet the laugh also seems to communicate the absurdity of Clare's passing — that though she has tried to pass as white, she has not actually escaped being black. Although John may be oblivious, Irene cannot help but recognize and gaze upon who Clare is, which leads her to ponder how Clare must be feeling. At one point in the meeting, she looks at Clare and

> encountered her peculiar eyes fixed on her with an expression so dark and deep and unfathomable that she had for a short moment the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart….Another glance at Clare showed her smiling (29)

This look, "partly mocking" and "partly menacing" (33), alludes to Clare's invisible distress. While she does not want to reveal her passing, it is clear that it weighs on her to the point where she seems, to Irene, not human anymore but like a "creature" (29). She may not be as reactive or rebellious as Irene, but her feelings are just as potent and sometimes maddening.

In this way, I argue that both characters' reactions to their collective shame, the way they carry and handle it throughout the novel, is what Larsen is trying to communicate. It is their best-kept secret and the foundation for their interactions. Moreover, what begins as a seemingly shared kinship/allyship in the opening Drayton Hotel scene quickly diverges, shifts, and manifests differently for each character. I would also argue that every person does not feel this collective shame; instead, it is shame specifically felt by Irene and Clare. Because John and, by extension, white society do not know how to look for this frustration, they simply ignore it, leaving those affected to suffer.

Although my reading of *Passing* borrows from other scholars' readings, such as Deborah McDowell's, Rafael Walker's, and David Blackmore's, it is unique because it focuses on the

invisible yet shared bond that shame creates between Irene and Clare. As a large portion of the project focuses on the visible and invisible facets of shame, it will be helpful to bring in affect theory to illustrate where and how shame is visibly communicated on the body.

For Clare, her sense of shame is most often ignored or unspoken; instead, her innocent and, oftentimes, frivolous personality covers the turmoil underneath. Just as Clare is a catalyst for shame for Irene, so too is Irene the catalyst for shame in Clare. Every time the two look at one another, they see the shame that they are both hiding. I would argue that Clare is not, as Sinéad Moynihan states, a figure to be read parallel to Fitzgerald's Daisy Buchanan (41); she is her own person and, thus, experiences this sense of shame differently. Moreover, Clare's dependency on Irene, relying on her for advice, continually visiting and bothering Irene in her home, and relying on her for invitations into black spaces illustrates that Clare cannot be without Irene's support or allyship.

Conversely, Clare's dependency wreaks havoc on Irene, who feels torn between their allyship and her own desires for freedom and power. When she looks at Clare, she recognizes the struggle they are both experiencing, but she also comes face to face with freedom and power that she cannot attain, which Clare gains by her passing. Or, put another way, every look she receives from Clare begins to distress her, and she finds herself caught between her 'good black white woman persona' and her burgeoning feelings of desire for Clare.

Irene's proclivity for self-destructive paranoia torments her, as she is torn between protecting Clare and punishing her all at the same time. While Irene, on the surface, insists that she refuses to let Clare be 'discovered,' her actions throughout the novel suggest otherwise. While I borrow from McDowell's assertion that Irene "manifests all that she abominates in

Clare" (89), I also want to insist that Clare is not an apparition that Irene made up; she may symbolize Irene's lack of freedom, but she is still very much real.

My reading of *Passing* is dependent on the shameful bond that the two characters share, and as such, also asserts that the novel itself only works because both characters exist to 'pull' on one another. I suggest their fates are irrevocably and painfully intertwined until the end when Irene feasibly breaks this allyship and possibly murders Clare. With this break, their shame stops being a collective experience and shifts entirely onto Irene, who is left to carry the burden by herself.

Although Larsen does not ever explicitly confirm that Irene is Clare's murderer, I choose to read Clare's death as an 'invisible murder.' Or rather, the shameful act of murder is erased by Larsen not confirming who, if anyone, did the act; Irene is neither exonerated nor praised by the end. If anything, she is truly alone; she may be free from Clare's influence or her proximity to power, but she has lost their shared bond of camaraderie and pain.

In my thesis, I explore more of these bittersweet, complicated feelings in both characters and focus on what I read as Irene's betrayal by the novel's end. I maintain that the shame in the novel is so acute, so specific to each character, that Larsen forces her readers to pay attention to it. In this way, Larsen's assessment of shame is complicated. While shame can bring camaraderie and acceptance where there seemingly are none, it can also lead people to potentially retaliate against one another. The pain that Irene and Clare share unites them, but it also seemingly causes Irene to, as I read it, selfishly cast Clare aside when Irene has deemed them too close. Larsen's assessment of collective shame suggests more than the apathy of the human condition; it forces

the reader to consider if loyalty can survive in the face of shared distress, particularly under white society's racist and exclusionary standards.

However, before considering this type of twisted loyalty, it is essential to consider the scene at the Drayton, when both characters meet. This first meeting, though brief, establishes several key factors that play into their relationship across the novel. For one, it illustrates that Irene's relationship with Clare was not always volatile; in fact, it demonstrates that, given their shared history, their kinship seems almost inevitable. If anything, the audience knows very little about who Irene would be without Clare and vice versa, so examining this scene can show us more about how events unfold throughout the novel. Indeed, when Clare's gaze falls upon Irene, both characters' lives are irrevocably changed.

At first, Irene believes Clare's gaze is punitive — as if she is doing something wrong and Clare just happened to catch her. There is an air of mystery about who Clare is before she reveals herself; Larsen only refers to her as a faceless woman whom Irene fears. Indeed, when she feels this person's gaze, she "feels her colour heighten" and thus slides her eyes down, checking her clothes and makeup for incorrect application (Larsen 10). She recognizes that she may not be the perfect example of femininity but should be "encouraged to be respectable" in public (Harris 213). Although Irene tries to ignore this woman's gaze and "treat [her] with indifference," she realizes that "all her efforts to ignore her, it, were futile" (Larsen 10). As such, a few hints of Irene's paranoia surface here, as this gaze seems to define her; she cannot help being seen, and she cannot help but recognize that this person may have the power to see her.

In response, she immediately feels

> anger, scorn, and fear slide over her. It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, of even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her. (11)

At this moment, Irene's shame is swift and reactive. She believes that this simple gaze from a stranger will remove her from a place where she belongs and, thus, seemingly prepares herself for a fight. Even though she assures herself that this mystery person "couldn't possibly know" her true racial identity, she still looks back at them "boldly this time" (11), almost daring them to challenge her.

But when Clare approaches Irene and insists that they know each other, Irene is filled with relief. For a moment, she forgets her hostility and instead basks in Clare's company, letting her "radiance" wash over her. Larsen even notes that "for an hour or more…they sat there smoking and drinking tea and filling in the gap with twelve years of talk" (15), wherein Irene revels in Clare's company. Clare, too, intently listens, admitting that she is glad she has "found" Irene once more (16).

Moreover, Irene's "colour heightening" at this moment is not coincidental. Her inclination to move her eyes away is not the only way of communicating her shame to Clare; she also involuntarily blushes in Clare's presence. The blush is especially interesting because, as the most universal and apparent indicator of embarrassment or shame, it also betrays several of Irene's emotions. It not only indicates that Irene realizes she has said something wrong but that she has possibly said something wrong and embarrassed herself in front of Clare, the person she finds attractive. It can also signal Irene's complicity in their shared passing — she knows what they both are doing but cannot voice these feelings for fear of discovery. After all, the sign of

reddened cheeks is instantly recognizable and communicates emotions clearly without the individual having to voice them.

Further, ugly feelings are often provoked by a "spectrum of colour change," and the blush mollifies any audience — the person in question has assured their audience that they acknowledge their social transgression and regret it (Crozier and Jong 19, 185). Simply put, the blush can be seen as a form of societal acceptance of folly and a humbling gesture. Though involuntary, it assures its audience of the person's goodwill or willingness to behave differently, i.e., correctly.

However, these reddened cheeks are only accessible and recognizable on a whiter body, and in Irene's case, there is seemingly no indication that Clare could recognize them. While it could be argued that Clare is too wrapped up in herself to notice Irene's distress, it is seemingly impossible to recognize reddened cheeks when one's body cannot flush in that specific color. This is why, when the two are chatting at the Drayton, and Clare presses Irene to see if she remembers her, Irene feels "the telltale colour rising in her cheeks" (Larsen 15), but Clare ignores it. Instead, Larsen notes that there was a "trill of notes," indicating Clare's laugh, "small and clear and the very essence of mockery" (15). Here, it seems Larsen is trying to illustrate Clare's carefree, seemingly ignorant attitude. More specifically, her "mocking laughter" could indicate that she relishes Irene's embarrassment.

Yet, while Irene's paranoia and embarrassment can physically manifest, Clare's invisible turmoil surfaces soon after. She may have been quick to laugh at Irene, but this laugh only seems to cover tears, as Irene wonders if "it was tears that made Clare's eyes so luminous" (15). In this

way, Clare's perceived ignorance is, in fact, the opposite; it is her way of sympathizing with Irene.

In these moments, their connection is seemingly reestablished; they bond over their shared connection with pain and distress. Things only seem to go south when Irene attempts to depart, wherein Clare's invisible distress is revealed again at her mention of passing. Even though Irene insists that she has "'everything [she could] want'" (20), Clare turns the conversation to passing and sparks Irene's interest.

Here, Irene's shame begins to diverge from Clare's — as soon as she realizes that she does not hold the same power as Clare, she begins to regress. Indeed, Clare does not simply symbolize the world that Irene cannot enter; she is also seen in a way that Irene herself is not. Clare's freedom to move through different spaces, both unharmed and acknowledged at the same time by the people in those spaces, is what Irene wants.

To this extent, Irene's perceived Otherness and fear of exclusion are synonymous with shame and the notion of passing, as both are difficult to resolve or assuage. Essentially, passing is defined as an individual who passes through "a racial line or boundary" to "assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other" (Ginsberg 2). Passing is "pretending or being taken to be what one is not" (Harrison and Cooley 13). It is a method of concealment, but not a malicious one; it is merely the mask an individual wears to avoid societal scrutiny. As such, any trait that white, straight society deems as ugly, unacceptable, or incorrect is seemingly removed from the passing individual's public identity (see Appendix A).

For Clare, passing brings power, a sort of "polite insolence" that fascinates and compels Irene (21). The notion itself separates and conjoins the two characters, as both are complicit in each other's passing, but both are at two different levels from one another. Once Irene recognizes this 'barrier' between them, it permeates her relationship with Clare.

Though Clare's passing could signal a "servility to society" or a notion of assimilation (Harrison and Cooley 17), Irene feels the opposite effect, feeling suffocated and unlike herself. While their friendship is amiable, Irene feels an enormous sense of discomfort that begins manifesting in her body. While Clare enjoys what Irene perceives to be the privileges of her successful pass, Irene's frustration escalates, further exacerbating her shame. In this way, Clare's gaze influences Irene — once Clare reveals that she has no ill intentions, Irene recognizes Clare's power and freedom, which she does not have. She realizes that she does not belong, and Clare, in her passing, does. This assertion could be why Larsen refers to it as "hazardous" and "not entirely friendly" (17) for Irene; it reinforces the barrier that has formed between them. Clare's gaze may "not seem to her hostile or resentful" (11), but it still promotes a sense of societal preference: what is accepted and what is not.

While it is true that the notion of passing is entirely a construct of societal creation, it still serves to limit Irene's freedom and brings her distress. Passing, at least in the context of the novel, is the very thing that Irene cannot do (at least, as effectively or seamlessly as Clare can), and therefore, serves as one barrier between her and her happiness. Her race and her inability to enter white society are the things that bind and suffocate her, the thing that allows Clare to move freely. At the same time, Irene feels "caught between two allegiances," herself and her race (Larsen 69). In other words, this distinction between races seemingly defines both characters'

identities, whether they want it to or not. It is not just that Clare can be somewhere Irene cannot; these ideals (even if they are nothing) have prevented Irene from being seen or acknowledged.

As such, Irene almost becomes a vessel for understanding why such ideals are formed in the first place. Alternatively, as Rafael Walker notes, Irene serves as a symbol for "exploring the stranglehold racial binarism exerts on social thought in the United States" and that, in Larsen's view, this "color line" also dictates "norms for the expression of sexuality and class status" (176). Carr argues that although the novel insists that something passes for nothing, Clare can still take advantage of it, and Irene cannot.

Indeed, the "success" of any pass is measured by how unnoticed or unremarkable an individual can be within a particular group (Harrison and Cooley 22). As such, it is fair to say that Irene is most distressed by the social barriers that separate them. Alternatively, because Clare can successfully pass, she can cross barriers that Irene cannot. More specifically, Clare is "capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known" (Larsen 47). Once Irene recognizes the "barrier" between them in the novel, it permeates her relationship with Clare. When it is clear, for instance, that the pressure to "uphold standards of temperance, sexual restraint, and neat appearance" to gain "equal rights" (Harris 214) does not seem to affect Clare, Irene becomes increasingly irritated and focused on her safety. She maintains that Clare can "secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others" (Larsen 52). Clare's carefree attitude bothers Irene; she does not have to worry about being discovered, unlike Irene. As such, she begins to feel she bears a weight that Clare does not.

Nevertheless, while Clare may be complicit and, from Irene's perspective, smug in her successful pass, her pain is revealed when the two visit her husband, John Bellew. When he is first presented, Irene notices that "in Clare's eyes, as she presented her husband, was a queer gleam, a jeer, it might be" (28). However, in response to his ludicrous 'nickname,' Irene notes that "the black eyes fluttered down" and that Clare would not meet her gaze again. At this moment, Clare has effectively communicated her shame — by turning her eyes away.

Although it should go without saying that shame lives in the body and is seemingly invisible, several shame markers alert an onlooker to its presence. One of these is the eyes, used to "repress, receive, and share experience of every kind of affect" (Sedgwick and Frank 147). When the eyes are averted or withheld, it is an involuntary indicator that the body does not wish to be perceived or gazed upon; the body asserts that pain or discomfort has been received.

Thus, Clare's notion to 'look away' from Irene subtly tells her that she does feel the pain that John's nickname stirs in her; she just does not want to communicate those feelings. Instead, Clare sees Irene in a way that John cannot, so Irene defers to her. While John is "undisturbed" (Larsen 31) about his words or actions, Clare understands precisely why they would be hurtful for Irene and herself. When Clare looks at Irene, she sees through Irene's 'good black white woman' persona. Alternatively, Irene's attempts to look and be as respectable as possible are lost on Clare; instead, there is a sort of reluctant camaraderie when they look at each other.

While Irene notes that she "hadn't the mortification and shame that Clare Kendry must be feeling, or, in such full measure, the rage and rebellion that she, Irene, was repressing" (Larsen

31), her suppressed rage speaks to the unseen pain of each character, including Clare's, and ultimately further establishes the power Clare has over her, even if it is just a tiny amount. If anything, this is one instance where Clare is in the same boat as Irene, unacknowledged and secretly suffering. It illustrates the perilousness of Clare's situation, that even her position, as all-powerful as it may seem, is still fragile if she were ever to be discovered.

While the eyes are one necessary aspect of conveying shame, it is essential to mention the importance of Clare's glance more than any other character's. Indeed, the way Clare looks at Irene is entirely different from how John Bellew might. More specifically, Clare's gaze stirs several emotions and subtexts.

For one, Irene's attraction and fascination with Clare seemingly put Clare at the forefront of her mind; she is most concerned with Clare's actions and, thus, is more apt to pay attention to what Clare is doing. Even if this desire is, as David Blackmore asserts, masked "behind a shield of racial solidarity" (476), Irene still feels an "allegiance" (Larsen 30) to Clare that she does not feel for John, and not simply because he is generally unlikeable and often frightening.

But more than that, as an "affect auxiliary," shame serves a dual purpose; though it is a negative affect, it also requires the prior activation of another, more positive affect. It is thus triggered by the "incomplete reduction of a positive affect like interest or enjoyment, leaving the self suspended between longing and despair" (Frank and Wilson 66). It also cannot exist independently, for as soon as it manifests, the afflicted will almost always seek confirmation, usually through social interaction or public attention (See Appendix B). For Irene, once she sees Clare looking, she "[steals] another glance" and marvels at "what strange and languorous eyes"

Clare has (Larsen 10). While she wants to treat Clare indifferently, she cannot help but continuously seek Clare's attention.

In this way, Clare's gaze and Irene's shame go hand in hand; Irene only gains attention when she is sure Clare is looking. Irene's instinct to look away, far beyond Clare, away from her "arresting eyes" (21), is essential; it is her body's way of communicating that she is uncomfortable. Irene's body seemingly does not want Clare to realize how she is feeling, so she physically prevents Clare from recognizing those feelings and vice versa.

Moreover, these moments do not change Clare's position of power over Irene until the novel's end. Clare's dependency on Irene does not hinder her position in society; if anything, it allows her to continue living as before. More specifically, she does not seem to realize the pain she is causing and, in turn, becomes increasingly desperate for Irene's time and attention. While Larsen occasionally frames Clare as someone who does not know any better, I would argue that Clare's desperate bid to stay near Irene indicates her reliance on their shared bond. Since Irene is the only one who truly understands Clare's struggle, it would make sense that Clare would stay by her as often as possible to lean on their shared pain.

When Irene does try to refuse Clare, as she does when Clare visits her to beg for an invitation for a dance Irene is hosting, Clare only doubles down on her goal, relying on her innocence and insistence to win over Irene. For example, although Irene implores Clare to "be reasonable" (51) and not attend, Larsen writes that:

> Clare, it was plain, had shut away reason as well as caution…And in the look she gave Irene, there was something groping, and hopeless, and yet so absolutely determined that it was like an image of the futile searching and the firm

> resolution in Irene's own soul, and increased the feeling of doubt and compunction that had been growing within her about Clare Kendry. (51)

At this moment, Clare's gaze is inescapable; she takes advantage of their shared pain to gain what she wants. Her reliance upon Irene is apparent; she knows that Irene feels the same hopelessness and preys upon that feeling. In the case of affect theory, this phenomenon seemingly has an explanation. Frank and Wilson assert that when one is ashamed of the other, "that other is not only forced into shame but also reminded that the other is sufficiently concerned positively and negatively to feel ashamed of and for the other" (66-67). Simply put, Clare's actions here are not malicious; she only leans upon Irene because she knows no one else understands. They both see one another as two halves of a broken ideal of race and societal correctness.

Despite their camaraderie, Clare's constant accessibility and 'pulling' weighs heavily on Irene. She begins to drastically regress following the incident, with Clare wanting to attend the dance, and to make matters worse, Clare's presence in the novel also increases. She visits more frequently, often showing up unannounced and becoming further entrenched with Irene's family. Here, Irene begins to question their shared bond because Clare is no longer an old friend to be kept at a distance; she is now always accessible and threatens Irene's way of life and, more importantly, her security.

Until Clare's re-entrance into her life, Irene prided herself on living carefully, relying on her 'good black white woman' persona and portraying an unruffled, firmly heterosexual wife. While she questions her love and motives for being with Brian, wondering if he is "anything more" than just the father of her children (77), she still stays with him out of obligation. But,

when Clare visits more often, Irene becomes conflicted about her feelings for Clare and the reality of her marriage to Brian. She begins craving the safety and security of that life.

Indeed, after one fight between them, Irene convinces herself that keeping her security is the "most important and desired thing in life" (76) and that she would not exchange it for anything. In this way, Irene's conflicted emotions over Clare and the distress of her constant presence become a basis for a sort of shameful paranoia; she begins to tell herself that Clare is only nearby to steal Brian away from her.

She convinces herself, after another visit in Part Three, that "Brian, too, had withdrawn" and that he was "remote and inaccessible" (68). In turn, she becomes fiercely protective over herself, confirming:

> Now that she had relieved herself of what was almost like a guilty knowledge, admitted that which by some sixth sense she had long known, she could again reach out for plans….She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted. Not even because of Clare Kendry, or a hundred Clare Kendrys….Brought to the edge of distasteful reality, her fastidious nature did not recoil. Better, far better to share him than to lose him completely. Oh, she could close her eyes, if need be. She could bear it. She could bear anything. And there was March ahead. March and the departure of Clare (76-77).

Though there is seemingly no foundation for these delusions, Irene convinces herself that they are there to ignore the pain of her own distress. She looks away from her shameful feelings for Clare, believing that it is reasonable to be angry with her instead. She does not want to admit that Clare's presence makes her uncomfortable, so she refuses to 'see' that possibility. As such, Irene

treats Brian almost like a trophy or lucky charm that will prevent the destruction of her mental state. She does not have to face herself as long as she has him.

Beverly Haviland argues that this desire for security stems from Irene's repressed homosexual love for Clare, insisting that her paranoia is based on a "delusional jealousy" and other "delusions of grandeur" (298). These delusions, as Haviland puts it, seem to be a subconscious barrier for Irene, a way to deny her love for Clare, but also as a way to funnel her anger and frustration into what she perceives to be a viable reason. In this way, Irene's psyche is trying to preserve itself; it leans on what she creates instead of reality.

It would seem, too, that her anger at Brian has transformed into this sort of 'paranoia' so that she can "see herself as the victim and not the aggressor" and so she can be "dissociated from all responsibility for this self-destruction" (301). Rather than face Clare or her own emotions, she "closes her eyes," removing her ability to see the truth of her delusion. In this way, it is as if she acknowledges that nothing is going on between Clare and Brian but refuses to believe or 'see' any other explanation. She gives herself over to her self-destruction and ends up hurting herself in the process.

In addition to hurting herself, Irene begins to crave saving her own skin over saving Clare's. While it is true that she refuses to 'out' Clare's passing, she argues with herself over "sparing" Clare (Larsen 69) from any backlash and ultimately gives herself over to her delusions. As soon as she separates herself from Clare and begins prioritizing herself, she sows the seeds for her betrayal.

Additionally, Irene, "not always full aware of the import of what she reveals to the reader," subconsciously turns to protect her security "with a cold, hard, exploitative, and

manipulative determination," as McDowell mentions (89). Though she seemingly never explicitly wishes for Clare to die, she does seem to long for any misfortune that could come Clare's way, just as long as she is not involved with it. Larsen writes, for example:

> She wanted to be free of her, and of her furtive comings and goings. If something would only happen, something that would make John Bellew decide on an earlier departure, or that would remove Clare. Anything. She didn't care what. Not even if it were that Clare's Margery were ill, or dying (Larsen 69).

Indeed, Irene's mind begins separating itself from Clare, believing that "whatever was in store for [her] had already overtaken her" (71) and that, as such, she is no longer involved. In this way, Irene's "destructive and self-destructive actions" (Haviland 301) are turned elsewhere; as long as she tells herself she does not care about Clare, she can buy into her delusions.

At this moment, Irene seemingly unconsciously recognizes that the two can never be together and thus resigns herself to her fate of being married to Brian. Indeed, the "more her unsettling feelings develop, the more she fights them, for they threaten the placid surface of her middle-class existence as a doctor's wife" (McDowell 91). Although she notes that she "couldn't now be sure that she had ever truly known love, not even for Brian" (Larsen 76), she still intends to "keep" him. Instead of embracing the shameful feelings of loving Clare or even being free to acknowledge those feelings, Irene sinks deeper into her shame, which no other character recognizes. She puts on a happy face and, resigning herself to being finished with Clare, tries to move forward.

CHAPTER THREE: Invisible Murder

Furthermore, with her quiet resignation to turn away from Clare and be rid of her, comes Clare's death and, as I read it, her invisible murder. Alternatively, Irene's decision to "hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain" (77) solidifies her betrayal, as Clare's death physically separates them forever. With Clare dead, Irene is left to bear all of the pain and shame alone; their bond becomes hers alone to bear.

When Clare ultimately dies, though, several things happen simultaneously in an almost poetic sequence, beginning with John Bellew's violent reentry into the story. What began as an uncomfortable meeting at the beginning of the novel morphs into a beastly confrontation on John's end, with Clare at the center. His purpose is more than just trivial here; he is the first domino to fall. More specifically, Larsen writes, for instance, that:

> [Bellew] pushed past them all into the room and strode towards Clare. They all looked at her as she got up from her chair, backing a little from his approach. 'So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!' His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and pain. Everything was in confusion. The men had sprung forward. Felise had leapt between them and Bellew. She said quickly: 'Careful. You're the only white man here.' And the silver chill of her voice, as well as her words, was a warning. (79)

At this moment, John's presence has several implications; he has not only discovered the truth of Clare's deception but has also begun to realize where she has spent all her time: among people he claims to despise. Here, it seems that Larsen introduces John to free Irene and deliver the final blow against Clare; after all, his confrontation realizes Irene's fears that Clare would be

discovered. Larsen also entertains this possibility, frequently referring to John as a "beast" (79) who can seemingly snap at any moment.

Despite his anger at her so-called deception, we then see the resolution and release of Clare's pain with her expression. While John has thrown the room into chaos, Clare merely

> stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes. (79)

At this moment, Clare sees that her game is over and that no matter how much she wishes to be free of her pain, her husband's reaction is seemingly inevitable. It is as if she recognizes that her dependency on Irene did not prevent these events, and her "faint smile" signals that she is almost relieved that she does not have to lie anymore. Larsen notes that her life may be in "fragments before her," but she can find peace in some way.

Yet, while Clare may find peace and acceptance, Irene does not. More specifically, Clare's resignation from the situation maddens Irene and pushes her to her limit. In this way, John's anger can almost be read as contagious, as Larsen notes:

> It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free. …What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. (79)

At this moment, Irene physically breaks their bond and, as I read it, pushes Clare out of the window. Overcoming the "maddening" thought that Clare may not have any consequences, Irene almost subconsciously enacts consequences upon her. In this way, Irene ensures that Clare will never be free of their bond of pain; by possibly killing Clare, she has tried to ensure that Clare will continue suffering as she has.

Moreover, viewing Clare's death as an invisible murder allows the audience to see two distinct sides of Irene: what she claims to want and what she actually (and perhaps unconsciously) seeks to gain. She may claim that she wants to resign herself to the fate of a loveless marriage, but her body rejects that sentiment to keep Clare from being "free" (79). In this way, Irene's envy leaks through her pious, almost martyr-like attitude; if she cannot enjoy power, love, and freedom, then Clare cannot either. She may pretend to enjoy being the 'good black white woman,' but in reality, her body has subconsciously communicated otherwise. It is as if it recognizes, for better or for worse, that she cannot live in an unbalanced allyship where she suffers more than Clare. By enacting this sort of revenge, it seems as though she is hoping to be freed herself.

This so-called freedom, though, is short-lived; as soon as Irene registers that Clare is gone, the reality of her death echoes through Irene's being. She feels the relief of Clare's absence but also realizes that with Clare's death comes the death of her friendship, possible love, beauty, and gaze. She recounts, for instance, that Clare is

> Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking

daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. (80)

Clare can no longer tear at Irene's life but will no longer be around for Irene to admire or talk to. She can only sit in this moment and mourn her death, completely powerless.

Irene's body, too, begins to feel the weight of Clare's absence because she admits to feeling "too tired, and too shocked," "utterly weary," and "violently staggered," with "icy chills [running] up her spine and over her bare neck, and shoulders" (80). In a panic, she wishes she "could be as free of mental as she was of bodily vigour; could only put from her memory the vision of her hand on Clare's arm" (80). Here, Irene experiences the complete and utter destruction of her 'good black white woman' persona and is shackled with all of the pain and shame she has been sharing with Clare. More specifically, Irene's sense of self-worth and societal purpose is gone and is entirely replaced with doubt, paranoia, and misery.

Most of the novel would have one believe that Irene is the picture of beauty, security, and societal 'correctness.' But, now that she has stepped out of the lines that she has been given, she is forced to sit in a "moment of stark, craven fear," where she is praying for help and "shaken with another hideous trembling" (82). In other words, since the carefully crafted, 'respectable' facade she wanted Clare (and likely the rest of white society to see) has crumbled, the profoundly flawed, insecure Irene, radiating with jealousy, uncertainty, and fear, emerges. Although the novel seemingly insists that it wants to focus on Irene's ability to pass for white, her reaction to Clare's death suggests that, before Clare entered her life, she was passing for happy or well-adjusted. In order to free herself from such mental torment, though, it is possible that Irene's body acted out of pure panic and self-preservation, ridding itself of Clare's gaze and physical presence.

Nevertheless, Clare's death does not simply sever the shared shame; it also seemingly benefits Irene, for it returns her security to her. Not only does it free Irene from Clare's gaze, it also frees her from considering her feelings for Clare. If anything, Clare's death could be viewed as a "double burial," where any erotic subplot can be safely hidden beneath a "safe and orderly cover," and any other radical implications of that plot are "put away in disposing of Clare" (McDowell 93). Clare's death reinstates the status quo of Irene's life, and as such, her extreme reaction to the news — i.e., her entire body heaving with convulsive sobs, almost to the point of making herself sick (Larsen 81) — can be passed off as typical shock or grief.

At the end of the novel, Larsen almost calculates Irene's absence from the scene, noting that

> Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sunk down, and moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything went dark. (82)

Here, Irene seemingly gives herself over to this "great heaviness"; her body erases any of her final thoughts. While the audience could assume that the "strong arms" that lift her are meant to be Brian's, it could also be read as Irene's own symbolic death. Now that Clare is gone, she realizes that she is alone in her pain and that there is no real way out.

Clearly, Irene does not die; in fact, Larsen notes that "centuries later" (82), she can recount the final words of the piece, which an unnamed strange man speaks. He concludes that Clare's death was "'death by misadventure'" and insists that where she fell from should be inspected again (82). This assertion, while bizarre, inadvertently draws the reader back to the window from which Clare fell, bringing the idea of her 'gaze' to a cyclical close. Just as Clare

closely monitors Irene during her husband's confrontation, now that she is physically out of it, she can no longer look or gaze in or upon Irene; her life is permanently closed to Clare.

Moreover, with Irene's fainting spell and proposed memory loss, Irene's brain has seemingly erased any feelings of shame, envy, guilt, or love. It cannot access any of these memories until an indeterminate amount of time later. Essentially, Irene becomes nothing without Clare; the audience can assume that the "centuries later" (82) refers to Irene finally remembering only in retrospect. Since we have no more information about Irene's life, it is safe to assume that, with her symbolic death at this moment, she got what she wanted and resigned herself to a life of quiet misery.

CHAPTER FOUR: Larsen's Influence and Closing Thoughts

Despite this misery, it is essential to note that these feelings do not appear out of nowhere; they are deeply rooted in Larsen's own perceptions and experiences. If anything, the novel itself could be seen as a sort of escape, as it was likely written as a way for Larsen to confess her shameful emotions — which likely went unrecognized in dominant white society. In order to understand the type of distress that Irene and Clare shared, it is essential to consider Larsen's life as a confession and a reflection of that distress.

Indeed, most of her early life is defined by a profound sense of isolation and exclusion - a sense of not belonging anywhere and, thus, not finding safety and identity anywhere. It was not just that "she had no entree into the world of the blues or of the black church," it was more specifically that she could never be black "in quite the same way that Langston Hughes and his characters were black" (Hutchinson 359). In the eyes of Hutchinson, "hers was a netherworld, unrecognizable historically and too painful to dredge up" (359).

Furthermore, Larsen's mother, a Danish immigrant, faced particular ostracization in Larsen's childhood community for several reasons. For one, Larsen's father, Peter Walker, an Afro-Caribbean immigrant from the Danish West Indies, disappeared from the household shortly after Larsen's birth, causing Larsen's mother, Marie, to remarry another Danish immigrant. Her upbringing can be described, at best, as the "resented step-child, the darker-skinned daughter whose existence perhaps burdened her otherwise loving mother" (Pinckney 27).

However, it was because of her mother that Larsen got into writing, as Marie would "inform her fiction about women too dark to be white and too light to be black, about black women living between white and black and culturally not entirely at home anywhere" (27).

Indeed, the sense of home and acceptance seemed to follow Larsen for the rest of her career, as she felt a "need that could never be met, a relation that could not be publicly affirmed," that never left her (Hutchinson 167). This sentiment, too, can be seen in the novel, as Irene's desire for acceptance and a way out of suffering is prevalent. Or rather, Larsen would have intimately understood Irene's need to "shock people, to hurt them, to make them notice her, to be aware of her suffering" (Larsen 64).

Larsen's place in Harlem at the time of *Passing*'s publication — at the height of the New Negro Movement — was especially bizarre, as Larsen's upbringing had excluded her from the resurgence of black literature and culture. Her feelings of exclusion were almost in direct contrast to the New Negro Movement, where artists "felt free to tell what they considered to be the truth about the Negro or black experience" (Varlack 135). Up until this Movement, many African-American writers wrote narratives protesting the institution of slavery and the brutal treatment they still faced post-emancipation, so there was a resurgence in new literature, voices, and experiences.

Although the society in which Larsen published sought to capture the attention of Harlem's New Negro Movement, she would likely still be under some scrutiny for publishing queer-friendly literature. Michael Cobb even notes that queer literature during this time could be purposefully coded as a "racially-rude and inflammatory gesture" or "the fire producing and burning up inadequate and oppressive literary conventions" (332). Perhaps that is why Larsen likens Clare to a "vital, glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold" (79) — she wants to ensure that the audience is focused on her or perhaps take a second look at her role in the novel as a whole.

But more than that, it was this resurgence in black literature that Larsen gained the confidence in herself to write, focusing on stories that featured issues about racial identity and class (Varlack 135). While this Movement would not stop illustrating the horrors of segregation and slavery, it allowed Larsen to subtly address her own experiences of feeling between communities and the strife her mother faced during Larsen's childhood years. Believing that "blacks needed greater faith in themselves, independent of white approval or 'white standards' of beauty and custom" (Hutchinson 166), she could craft a text that spoke to her and many generations to come.

Larsen's unique perspective, too, allowed her to "work out essential motifs and narrative strategies," which eventually became her signature (Hutchinson 196). Her "cloak of invisibility" (196) permitted her to view and write about the world objectively in a way that would appeal to a wide range of readers. She was no longer passing for any of her readers; she deftly crafted stories centered around her truth.

Nonetheless, while we are enduringly lucky to have Larsen's truth (or at least a sanitized version) available to us in our modern time, the ideas expressed within the text are still prevalent. This is not to say that *Passing* is dated or only influential for a specific period; instead, the text is perhaps more needed and relevant now than it was when it was first published, as the ideas of shared pain and invisible distress are still prevalent. It is easy to read the text as a product of its time; it is much harder to realize, for any reader, that Irene's struggles may be familiar.

It is more apt to note that the text can serve as a shame factory. Although readers can sympathize with Irene and Clare's struggles, they are also aware of their helplessness to change their circumstances. They can never put themselves in Irene's shoes — and even if they had the

words to describe what Irene or Larsen were both feeling, they would not be able to understand or fully voice them because the experience is centralized and locked to Irene. The audience may recognize their pain but cannot reach inside the novel (or back to 1920s America) to save them. As such, the text has a powerful way of making its readers feel helpless; they may retrospectively wish to help but also recognize that they cannot change the novel.

In this way, the text is permeated with a sense of hopelessness, as the concept of passing and the feelings of shame, exclusion, guilt, frustration, and anger within the text have yet to be eradicated or addressed in modern society. *Passing* draws in its readers and scholars; it passes as usual or unassuming, but it is full of despair, hatred, and hopelessness. It implores one to help but knows the reader can do nothing, leaving them with an "unreasonable, restless feeling" (Larsen 52).

To be more precise, this hidden, shameful cycle is at the forefront of Larsen's work; it is not just an exploration of 'things unsaid' in 1920s American society. It can instead be defined in many ways: a searing call-to-action piece, a cathartic expression of Larsen's emotions, or an exploration of two tortured characters. I believe Larsen wants to illustrate the comfort of shame, of being seen and recognized, but also use her voice to demonstrate the absurdity of such feelings and experiences. Her type of shame is multifaceted; it speaks to both Irene and Clare but drives them to become the worst versions of themselves, with Clare being entirely codependent and reliant on Irene to the point where Irene is driven mad with paranoia and self-destruction. Everyone can recognize shame, but the turmoil it brings cannot be easily seen; the novel makes us question who we, as readers, are to others and teaches us to look closer.

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APPENDIX A: Contemporary Coverage of Passing and Race

For more information concerning Contemporary Coverage of Passing, specifically discussing Race, the Norton Critical Edition of Nella Larsen's novel, edited by Carla Kaplan, can be beneficial for readers. In this section, from about page 105 to page 148, readers can learn more about what the societal perception of passing was during the 1920s, including fictional short stories written for newspapers, various newspaper articles, and a full description of the Rhinelander/Jones case. The Rhinelander/Jones case is essential because gives a judicial or governmental approach to the topic of passing, which could be crucial to future readings. Indeed, the concept of passing and race was not a new one in Larsen's time; there were many conflicting perceptions of it, depending on which space one entered.

Although the project itself focuses on passing as a fluid concept, not solely constrained to the topic of race, readers should consult these pages for further, outside of the novel information.

APPENDIX B: Further Reading and Clarification on Affect Theory

In the case of Affect Theory, this project relies heavily on Silvan Tomkin's idea of Affect, but any and all references to the theory were taken from Sedgwick and Frank's book, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. For further information about Affect, specifically the negative affect of shame and the way that Tomkins delineates it, readers are encouraged to consult Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's book, *The Affect Theory Reader*, or any of Tomkin's three theory volumes.

This is not to say that Sedgwick and Frank's reading of Tomkins' work is incorrect or not specific enough; rather, the information presented for the argument is a specialized, focused aspect of affect theory.