

PASSING: Impasses and Ambivalences in the formation of an Identity

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This work focuses on Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*, taking into consideration the theme of the problematization of an identity, forged in a context of racial differences and the denial of blackness, a recurrent theme in the afro-American fiction of the first decades of the twentieth century. This analysis will approach questions of plot, characters and narration with the intention of stating that the narrative is permeated by *ambivalences* and *impasses* as result of the search for a dramatic solution to the existential situation represented in the novel.

Many critics developed a study of Larsen's novel *passing*, but not many of the approaches explore the *impasses* and the *ambivalences* that permeate the narrative. Martha J. Cutter identifies in the novel problems of identity caused by passing. Thadius M. Davis, on the other hand, has a different point of view towards Larsen's novel, her analysis rely on racial representation and its impact in Larsen's society. Besides, Deborah McDowell sees this novel as a lesbian representation.

In 1929, when Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* was published, passing was a common practice. According to Davis "passing is the movement of a person who is legally or socially black into a white racial category or white social identity."(THADIOUS M. DAVIS, 2003: viii). People pass to escape discrimination and obtain some benefits that are granted only to the white majority. This action was performed by many light-skin people and it took part of the imaginary of African-American writes for a long time. The novel portrays the drama of two beautiful mulattoes, Clare Kendry and Irene Readfield who pass for white, one permanently and the other one intermittently. As children they were friends, and after twelve years they meet each other by chance, and this reencounter change their

destinies. From this point on, their lives were reconnected again and it led them to a conflicting relationship that ends up in death. One denies the black race and marries a white man ignorant of her blackness. The other one is proud of being black, marries a black man, but sometimes passes for convenience. The *impasses* and *ambivalences* that permeate the narrative rely on the characters' dilemmas related to their race and origin. Clare and Irene do not share the same opinion about race and it discloses the conflicts that lead the dramatic narrative to a tragic end. The novel is divided into three parts: Encounter, Re-encounter, and Finale, "similar to a theatrical performance" in Davis opinion. We can say that in the first part we have the recognition of the characters, in the second one we have the conflicts and the climax, and in the third one we have the outcome.

Passing has two protagonists Clare and Irene, who is the narrator of the story, and some other characters such as Clare's husband, John Bellew, and Irene's husband, Brian Readfield. Their conflicting relation is essential to identify the *impasses* and *ambivalences* imbricate in the novel. The characters' conflicts happen in three axes, between the two protagonists, who have an ambivalent relationship; between Readfield and Irene because of stress in their relation that end up in *impasse*, and also because of Clare; and between Bellew and Irene because of a different conception of race that leads them to an *impasse* too.

The story starts with a letter that Irene receives from Clare. At first, Irene does not want to open the letter in fear of what its contents would reveal, and it gives us a clue of Irene's relation to its sender, her old friend. If she worries about the letter, there might be something suspicious in it, or in their relationship. With this letter Irene plunges into the past where she and Clare were two young girls and presents us Clare Kendry, the character that disturbs her way of life and sense of stability:

Catlike. Certainly that was the word which best described Clare Kendry, if any single word could describe her. Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive. And there was about her an amazing soft malice, hidden well away until provoked. Then she was capable of scratching, and very effectively too. (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 10 -11).

People in general fear cats, because they are unpredictable, and moody. It is possible to infer that Irene fears Clare because she is unpredictable, and moody, she does not know what to wait from her. Let's see how these characters differ in behavior in order to understand better their relationship. In Irene's point of view Clare is obstinate, cold and selfish. During Irene's look back into the past she remembers some episodes that shows Clare's indifference to her own father's death and her obstinacy to buy a new dress despite their lack of money. Such a passage demonstrates Clare's coldness and obstinacy. Moreover, Clare has a changeable characteristic that disturbs Irene's sense of stability. Since Irene is the narrator of this story, we only get to know about her by following her thoughts and actions. She is a character who thinks highly of stability. She is very conservative, for her, every thing should be in its right place, black people with black people, husbands with wives, and servants with servants. And Clare does not follow such rules. She marries a white man ignorant of her blackness; and has relations with other men. She likes to be kind with waiters at restaurants and maids at Irene's house. Such behavior is totally against Irene's conviction of what is correct, and although she disapproves of Clare's behavior she does not prevent Clare from doing these things, or shows her disapproval. It seems that Clare has a kind of power that prevents Irene from doing something. In fact, Irene has an ambivalent feeling towards Clare. She disapproves of her friend's behavior and attitudes, but at the same time she is attracted to her, and ends up

doing every thing Clare asks her to do. For example, despite being against Clare's return to black life, she invites her to her house and to parties in Harlem, putting her in contact with her own family and friends.

Other important characteristic of these protagonists is that both are being ambivalent toward their race. Clare crosses the color line, but is nostalgic of black people, on the other hand, Irene likes to state that she is proud of her race, however she passes for convenience to access some privileges granted only to the white ones. Their reencounter not only was permeated by *ambivalence*, but by *impasse* too. It was ambivalent because Irene was caught between two allegiances, her action and her colour, as this passage exemplifies: "It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or 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." (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 16). She was sitting at a hotel frequented by whites and when someone stared insistently at her, it led her to think she was caught in the act of passing. Then she gives that excuse displayed above. Thus, we can ask, if she is proud of being black, why she was passing for white. And it is possible to infer that the impasse relies on the fact that she does not know what to do before such a situation.

The second axle evaluates John Bellew's participation in the story; it is possible to observe that it is not extensive in size, but intense in representation. He represents the white racist society in the novel. And through his speech we grasp the white's opinion towards the black ones. First, Bellew calls Clare as Nig¹, then he expresses his hatred towards black people before Irene, and this situation causes a clash in the narrative.

¹ Nigger was a very harmful insult at that time. If you call a black person a Nigger you are offending to much this person.

Irene was caught by surprise because Clare did not inform her about her husband's bigotry. At this moment, Irene got a chance to reveal Clare's secret, but she did not do anything. In fact, the explanation that she gives to such an impasse is that "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it." (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 56). The underlying reason for this impasse might be that Irene is passing too.

The third axle aims at analyzing Irene's relationship with her husband Brian Readfield, and their relation with Clare. Their marriage is permeated by impasses too. By depicting some passages of the novel we can state that they live a life of appearances. They do not share the same opinion about their son's education, their home, and Readfield's profession. He is a frustrated physician, who hates his job. However, Irene does not want him even to think about abandoning it. She also disapproves of some subjects discussed by her sons and Readfield such as sex, lynching and racism. For her, Brian should not approach these subjects in front of the boys. In her opinion, if they are not in contact with such subjects they will not suffer. On the other hand, Readfield thinks the sooner they know about them the sooner they will learn how to deal with them. The scene below is a good example of this impasse:

At dinner Brian spoke bitterly of a lynching that he had been reading about in the evening paper.

"Dad, why is it that they only lynch coloured people?" Ted asked.

"Because they hate 'em, son."

"Brian!" Irene's voice was a plea and a rebuke.

Ted said: "Oh! And why do they hate 'em?"

"Because they are afraid of them."

"But what makes them afraid of 'em?"

"because-."

"Brian!"

"It seems, son, that is a subject we can't go into the moment without distressing the ladies of our family." (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 102-103).

When it comes to race, Irene gets stuck, it is a subject that disturbs her, she does not know what to make of it, and the way she finds to deal with it, is the same way she finds to deal with all her stuffs, she pretends it does not exist. And she wants her family to do the same. Such a passage does not only illustrate Irene's family relationship but it is also a root for what is going to happen. This episode is about lynching a criminal's death for racism, and the novel ends in death too.

Other divergent point between Irene and Readfield is the fact that Readfield would like to move to Brazil, and it is something with which Irene totally disagrees. This subject caused a great quarrel and it seems not to have been solved yet. They do not talk about it, but it still worries Irene. In fact, Irene and Readfield have a troubled marriage: they share the same house, the same friends, but do not share the same bedroom or even the same goals in life. She knows that there is something wrong with her marriage, but she pretends that there is not. Furthermore, for her, although Readfield does not show, he "was fond of her, loved her, in his slightly undemonstrative way." (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 61). Their relationship is constituted by *ambivalences* and *impasses*; they do not love each other, they disagree in almost every thing, but they maintain their marriage. It seems that there is something that prevents them from breaking up.

Irene lives a life of appearances; she pretends she is happy all the time, socially, before her friends; at home, in front of her family. She prefers not to raise a subject pretending that the problem does not exist. She is totally opposite to Clare. She does not dare do things in fear of losing them, on the other hand, Clare is "used to risks" (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 67). Clare challenges all the institutions: family, society, and even motherhood. She left her aunts' home to marry John without talking to them. She passes for white without worrying about the consequences. She returns to her black life without

thinking about her daughter's well being. Before Clare had appeared in Irene's life, everything seemed to be all right. But as she arrives everything goes up side down. Although Irene is aware that her husband does not care much about her, she is tranquil with her marriage. However, when Clare suddenly appears it completely changes, and she starts to worry about the stability of her marriage. Readfield changes and she cannot imagine what is bothering him. At first, she wonders if it might be because of his desire to move to Brazil, but then she starts to suspect that he might be interested in Clare, she does not have any facts or proofs just an unfounded suspicion. Although she is aware it is an unfounded suspicion, she does not forget it, and this ambivalent feeling leads her to commit a crazy deed. At first, Irene wonders if she could tell Bellew about Clare's real origin in order to be free of her, however, something prevents her from doing it, something that she does not know how to explain. Such situation can also be characterized as an impasse: she wants to be free of her friend has the instruments to do it, but she is stuck by an unexplainable feeling. Maybe, Irene has an instinctive loyalty with the race that prevents her from doing anything to unmask Clare's origin.

But it seems that Irene's dreams come true and one day, without intention, she meets John Bellew on the street, and she was with a black friend, thus the way Bellew looked at her she understands that he recognized her and Clare's blackness. However, she knew it was a dangerous situation she did not report that meeting to Clare neither to Brian. She seems to be a kind of God her dreams come true just with the force of her longings. Right after this episode of Irene's and Bellew's meeting, Irene starts to worry about Clare's freedom. What can happen if she is free from her husband, and she inquires Clare about this and Clare answers that "I'd do what I want to do more than anything else right now. I'd come up here to live. Harlem, I mean. Then I'd be able to do as I please, when I please."

(NELLA LARSEN, 2003:106). Such an answer lead Irene desires something worse for Clare's destiny, her death. And one more time, Irene's desire comes true. Clare dies, but at this time not only Irene's desire is sufficient, but her action too. She pushes her through a window. For Irene, Clare is a menace that she needs to get rid of. Following all the episodes that lead Clare to her death, it is possible to state that Irene killed Clare. When Bellew unmasked Clare in front of everybody in Irene's friend's house, Clare's reaction disturbs Irene because she displays an impartial feeling before this situation. Such a reaction leads Irene to loose her control and "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." (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 111). With such a description it is possible to infer that she killed Clare because "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone." (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 111). Irene did this in an impulse; she did not plan it, although she wanted it. Thus now she regrets it "If only she could be as free of mental as she was bodily vigour; could only put from her memory the vision of her hand on Clare's arm!" Irene did not kill Clare on purpose, as she states "It was an accident," she muttered fiercely. "It *was*." (NELLA LARSEN, 2003: 112). Clare's obstinacy not to step aside leads her to death, and Irene's determination not to let anyone disturb her tranquility leads her to commit a crime.

Taking into account all these considerations discussed above it is possible to conclude that Clare is the character that discloses a sense of instability throughout the novel; first she affects Irene's life, then her own husband's life. In fact, Irene and Bellew seem to be very similar in convictions, they think they can control every thing. Irene since the beginning wants to control her family, in the name of stability. When Clare appears, she

realizes that she never had the control. Bellew, in a way, is trying to do the same, he states that in his family, there is not and there will never be a black person, and when Clare's secret was revealed, he realizes that he never had the control of his family too.

Reaching to the end of the story it is possible to state that race is the motif of the story; it is the cause of all the conflicts in the novel. Even if it is not mentioned we can feel that it is under all the clashes between the characters. Clare destabilizes their lives because she is the only one who seems not to be affected by the race. She uses the race in her favor. When she decides to become white, nothing prevents her from crossing the color line. And when she decides to come back to blackness, she even manages to return, but this time, her action affects other people's conviction of what is right or wrong. And it prevents her accomplishing her objectives. Thus, we can state that when it comes to relationship it is constituted by *impasses* and *ambivalences*. As can be seen here: Clare, Irene, Brian, and Bellew have their lives intertwined, and their proximity provides the appearance of *impasses* and *ambivalences*. Some situations stop them from going further, others let them dwelling between two feelings. They love, they hate, they kill, they die and maybe they do all these things thinking they are doing the correct thing. Who is right or wrong is difficult to know. Life is like this, if we decide to follow Clare's steps we live a life full of emotion, it may not be long, but it will be intense. However if we choose Irene's way of life it will, for sure, be long, but probably without emotion. What is the best option, who knows?

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