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THE TRICKSTER IN NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING* (1929)
PERFORMING AND MASQUERADING AN AMERICAN IDENTITY

by

RACHAEL MILLER BENAVIDEZ

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

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This thesis examines Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) and the performative nature of 'passing' as white through the perspective of the archetypal trickster myth. I read the novel as a trickster tale that challenges gender roles and the construct of race in defiance of the dominant power structure that defines the American identity. I position the character Clare Kendry Bellew as a trickster figure, who performs an identity to defy race and gender roles. My argument challenges the general theory that black passing novels are solely tragic, and the perception that humor is not a pedagogical tool or representation of culture. My analysis focuses on the trickster as a universal figure, on American opportunism, and on the necessity of performance to attain upward mobility. A trickster reading of the novel and its protagonist provides a method of perceiving the irony and absurdity of racial, gender, and socio-economic constructs.

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Introduction

This thesis examines Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance novel *Passing* (1929) and the performative nature of 'passing' as white through the perspective of the archetypal trickster figure. I examine the novel as a trickster tale that challenges gender roles and the ambiguous concept of race in defiance of the dominant power structure that defines the American identity. I position the character Clare Kendry Bellew as a trickster figure, who performs an identity to confront a power structure. In addition to a close reading of the novel, my research includes characteristics of trickster tales and of the trickster trope; historical context of the era, the practice of passing, and interracial literature; and performativity and its role in identity formation. My argument challenges the general theory that black passing novels are solely the tales of a 'tragic mulattas,' and the dominant perspective that humor is not an appropriate pedagogical tool or representation of cultural and hermeneutical information. My analysis focuses on the trickster as a universal figure that challenges an authority through performance, on the American identification with the opportunism of the literary archetype, and on the necessity of performance to attain upward mobility. Reading the novel as a trickster tale and its protagonist Clare as a trickster provides a method of perceiving the irony and absurdity of racial, gender, and socio-economic constructs.

Passing is a narrative of the interaction between dual protagonists, childhood acquaintances Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew. Its first section, "Encounter," opens with a letter from Clare to Irene, regarding "that time in Chicago" that occurred two years prior to Irene receiving the letter (Larsen 7). Clare states in the letter that she seeks to reconnect with Irene, who lives in Harlem. However, we learn that Irene has no desire to see Clare again due to

the rage and humiliation she continues to harbor from that previous interaction. The events are related in flashback by Irene, the novel's third-person narrator.

The women were childhood acquaintances on Chicago's South Side, a historically mixed race neighborhood. Irene's family is a traditional middle class one, while Clare's family is a 'broken' one. Clare's mother is dead. When she is a teenager, her mulatto father is "killed in a silly saloon-fight" (Larsen 6). She is then taken in by her white aunts, who forbid her from "mentioning Negroes" (19). Larsen's novel begins years later when Irene and Clare meet as adults at the exclusive rooftop restaurant of Chicago's Drayton Hotel. Seated at different tables, the women exchange glances. Irene, who is black, is passing as white. She does not immediately recognize Clare, and is somewhat nervous that this unknown woman staring at her may have recognized her as a Negro. Should Irene be discovered, it could lead to her ejection from the restaurant. The mysterious woman who is staring at her approaches her table. It is her childhood acquaintance, Clare, who is also passing.

The two of them get reacquainted over tea. We learn that Irene racially 'passes' on occasion in public places, while Clare always passes in public and in her private life. Irene relates the events of her life to Clare, but out of a sense of discretion does not ask about her life. Irene implies that following Clare's life with her father's white aunts, she became a prostitute or a kept woman. Irene, however, is unable to resist learning more about the "hazardous business of passing," (Larsen 17). Irene persistently alludes to the financial rationale for passing. However, Clare's reasons for passing are more ambiguous and complex than financial gain alone.

Having vowed to herself after their encounter to never see Clare again, Irene evades Clare's invitation to tea. However Clare persists, telephoning her repeatedly the following day "The telephone. For hours it had rung like something possessed" (Larsen 23). Irene is angered

that Clare, who has not provided her with her address, doubts her loyalty and discretion in concealing her passing. With a “sense of foreboding,” Irene relents and attends the tea (22, 23). It is one of many times that Irene breaks a promise to herself not to see Clare.

Their encounter at the Drayton and the tea scene at Clare’s home set the tone for the novel. Gertrude Martin, another childhood acquaintance of the two women, is also present at Clare’s tea. As Irene is set to leave, Clare’s white husband John Bellew enters the room and affectionately refers to Clare as “Nig” (Larsen 28). Bellew does not know that his wife and her friends are passing as white. He makes numerous racist comments during their meeting. When Irene and Gertrude finally leave Clare’s, they both claim to have been shocked by John’s comments. Irene is noticeably more angry and humiliated. Once again, Irene vows never to see Clare again.

In the second section, “Re-Encounter,” the story returns to scene of Irene reading the letter from Clare. It is Harlem two years after the tea at Clare’s home in Chicago. We become acquainted with Irene’s bourgeois existence and family. Despite Irene’s misgivings, Clare re-enters her life. Clare phones her, appears at her home unannounced, and invites herself to social functions. Irene is unable to resist Clare’s charms, and Clare insinuates herself into Irene’s every space. She socializes with her children, her maids, and even on occasion accompanies Irene’s husband Brian to social events. Irene’s need for safety and security become very apparent as she questions Clare’s lack of anxiety about being discovered by her husband John.

In “Finale,” the final section of *Passing*, we witness the deterioration of Irene’s mental and emotional state, and the end of the passing masquerade for Clare. Irene becomes convinced that the only way that she can maintain her perceived security brought by her marriage to Brian is to remove Clare’s presence from their lives. She has begun to suspect that her husband Brian is

having an affair with Clare. A chance encounter between Irene and Felise Freeland, who is obviously black, and John Bellew serves to set in motion the unraveling of Clare's passing performance. At a party at the home of Irene's black friends the Freelands, Clare's husband John Bellew demands entry and calls Clare on her deception. Clare, perched on a windowsill and wearing a calm amused look, plunges to her death. She is possibly pushed by Irene, though Larsen's text is somewhat ambiguous as to how exactly Clare dies. Irene's thoughts and behavior display a pronounced guilt. However, emotionally repressed and self-deluded, Irene will not allow herself to admit that she killed her friend—or the possibility that she might still be alive. Larsen's novel ends with a sense of mystery that is as debatable as the practice of passing.

The novel is “a virtual encyclopedia on the theme” of passing and “refers us *out* of the novel” (Sollors 25, 276, author emphasis). It provides a window not only into the shared experiences of the two women, but life in Harlem, particularly bourgeois black social norms of the Harlem Renaissance era. For example, Irene is a member of the Negro Welfare League (NWL), an obvious reference to organizations like the Urban League and the NAACP. One of her duties is to organize the NWL dance, which is attended by blacks and whites alike. An attendee at the dance is the wealthy white man, Hugh Wentworth, a clear homage to Larsen's friend Carl Van Vechten. We also gain insight into some of the etiquette and risks of passing. With its historical context and cultural mores, knowledge of the era's history and customs is imperative in understanding the novel.

The American Identity, the New Negro, and the Novelist

Passing is set in 1925 and 1927, in Chicago and New York respectively, during the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age. At this time in the United States, segregation laws and social practices, along with immigration laws, created racial and social boundaries that restricted social

and economic agency. Racial nationalism was defining the country (Gerstle 114). It was an era in which anti-immigration laws were aimed at non-Nordic immigrants, a sensibility that fueled and intensified miscegenation laws in the South, including eugenically-based marriage laws that forbade intermarriage between blacks and whites and between whites and those excluded from the ‘desirable’ groups of immigrants (Great Britain, Scandinavia, and Germany) (Gerstle 114). The period that we might normally think of as the ‘easygoing Jazz Age’ was actually a moment in which racial nationalism, championed by Theodore Roosevelt, persisted and would continue to shape the nation during the 1930s and 1940s, restricting the socio-economic freedoms of those outside of the male Nordic group (97, 114, 126-127). Ethnic and racial groups outside of the American ‘normative’ identity of the Nordic white male sought to position themselves within the American nationalist identity and common experience (Levering Lewis 120). There was a great shift in the literary landscape as education enrollment multiplied drastically and literary work greatly expanded. In this period of American nationalism and modernism, “The cultural imagination—most particularly the literary imagination—would be faced with the challenge of ‘representing’ and interpreting the meanings of these social developments and the lives people lived amidst them” (9).

Following World War I, large Northern cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York were destinations for migrating African Americans, who were leaving the Jim Crow South for work in the North. Prior to 1920, it is estimated that 300,000 or more African Americans migrated to the North, in what is referred to as the ‘Great Migration’ (Levering Lewis 20). The South’s agricultural economy was devastated by various natural disasters in 1915 and 1917, which caused the mass evacuation by blacks and poor whites (21). Blacks “poured into” cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York to work the factories that saw a dwindling immigrant labor

force and to fill the positions vacated by union strikes (22). Strikebreaking African Americans were able to turn their exclusion from labor unions to their advantage and gain wages that far exceeded what they would earn in the South (21-22). Black soldiers, who fought discriminatory practices to be included in the military, returned home from service at the end of the War in 1918, where the democracy they had been defending was practically non-existent for them. The United States War Department “was determined to do its best to hide them from history,” and they were met not only inequality but with violence to ensure that the inequality would be maintained (140).

Racial violence was widespread in the United States. In 1918 alone, “seventy-eight Afro-Americans had been lynched. Southern newspapers editorialized ghoulishly about the fate awaiting any Afro-American veteran daring to come home uniformed, bemedalled, and striding up main street like a white man” (Levering Lewis 14). By 1919, “lynching was being pursued with a relish that approached that of the 1890s” (18). From Texas to Washington, D.C., Chicago and throughout the country, race riots flared in what became known as the “Red Summer” (20). While the South had its Jim Crow laws, the urban North, with its labor conflicts, had its own brand of racism. David Levering Lewis notes of the Chicago riot “The radical showdown there was the culmination of a classic conflict between labor and capital” (20). One cannot comprehend the period of the Harlem Renaissance without viewing it in the larger context of the transformation of the American economy and its shift to “corporate capitalism” (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* 8). However, gone was the “fear of the white man . . . among demobilized Afro-American soldiers or peasants who had braved the unknowns of migration” (Levering Lewis 24). “The time for cringing [was] over” and with it the ‘Old Negro’ who would accept a second-rate democracy.

Enter the ‘New Negro’ of the Harlem Renaissance (1925-35), the black intellectual who would serve to define black culture as an integral part of American culture. Deemed the “Negro capital of the world,” Harlem, the New Negro’s ‘City of Refuge’ had become a largely black neighborhood by 1905 (Levering Lewis 25). It was home to an arts movement that sought to portray blacks as they wanted to portray themselves, the arts being the one arena that did not seek to maintain the inferiority of blacks (27, 48). Alain Locke’s 1925 anthology *The New Negro* was a compilation of works by essential writers such as Walter White, Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes, amongst others. It was an exploration of the intellectual migration from the old to the new that mirrored the physical migration of African Americans from the South to the North, from oppression to freedom and equality. It included not only modern works but folktales as well as essays on music and visual art, historical information on educational institutions, the roles of women, and the American identity of the Negro. Literature was especially significant to the development of a black American identity. As observed by Hutchinson, “The literary renaissance was in part an attempt to augment the national and cultural field—to accrue what Bourdieu terms ‘cultural capital’ as *one* aspect of the struggle for social power and justice. . . . [The Harlem Renaissance writers] believed that their specific contributions would be essential to the development of a modern ‘native’ American literature” (author emphasis, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* 12). Harlem was *the* Mecca for black intellectuals, visual artists, musicians, and writers.

Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen (1891-1964) was encouraged to write by Walter White and Carl Van Vechten and ran in, or at least on the margins of, many of the social circles of what Zora Neale Hurston termed the “Niggerati” (Levering Lewis 98) Like her characters in

Passing, she grew up in Chicago and was an expert at creating a personal myth (Davis 22). Her mother was of Danish descent, and it is believed that her father may have been West Indian, though biographers agree that his identity is difficult to fix. She was raised by her mother Mary Hanson Walker (later Larsen) and stepfather, Peter Larsen (27). It is not known whether Peter Larsen was actually her stepfather or her actual father Peter Walker who was able to pass as white (27). Larsen's complexion was light enough that she could have passed as white and did on occasion as an adult. However, she was darker than her parents, and her birth certificate gave her the racial designation of "colored" (21). Following the 1919 Chicago Race Riot and the birth of her sister Anna, who claimed to be unaware of her existence, Larsen was sent away to school (42, 47). She was isolated from her family and a family identity. In effect, her relationship to her family, specifically her mother, and her identity transformations mimicked that of a person who passes.

Throughout her life, and following the acclaim she received for her first novel *Quicksand* (1928) and for *Passing*, she would alter her ancestry to suit the occasion and audience. "At times during the 1920s, she fostered a fiction that she was a native of the Virgin Islands or Danish West Indies not only for whites eager to hear about cultural primitives, but also for blacks curious to learn about an instant celebrity" (Davis 23). In her novels, Larsen attacks "the black bourgeois and the white elite for the subtle cruelties and intended slights [and] exposes their hypocrisies. Simultaneously, however, she evidences a longing to be a part of both groups and a desire to find acceptance within them. Because her anger is partly irrational, Larsen cannot adequately explain its presence within her women characters; neither can she sufficiently manipulate their motivations to make sense to a reader. Each of the heroines engages in destructive behavior, just as Larsen did. Each heroine is also distanced from the culture of black

America” (323). Also similar to her characters, Larsen experienced an attraction and repulsion toward black people, and was, like many urban intellectual African Americans, somewhat concerned at the possibility of being associated with the unsophisticated Southern blacks who migrated from the South (340-1).

A feeling of apartness was a predominant theme in Larsen’s life and work and thematic for many writers during the Harlem Renaissance. The New Negro arts movement was not without its own form of elitism and conflicts on the purpose of artistic expression. While Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, who maintained the notion of the black aristocracy of the ‘Talented Tenth,’ viewed art as a genteel means of racial propaganda, poet Langston Hughes saw that to accurately portray African American life and culture, intellectual and common African Americans must both be portrayed—without fear of pleasing or displeasing whites or blacks (Levering Lewis 191). Writers had the choice to be part of the ‘club’ or be independent.

Inasmuch as Harlem was a location of cultural uplift for African Americans, it also became a place for spectatorship on the part of sophisticated whites. While there were “Negrotarians,” as Zora Neale Hurston called them, whites such as Clarence Darrow, Sinclair Lewis, and Carl Van Vechten, who were loyal to the cause, there were also various whites—cultural voyeurs—who followed the “stampede to the exotic” (Levering Lewis 98, 165). Van Vechten was regarded by some as a friend to the cause, and by others a “cultural vampire, or at the very least a pathological voyeur” (Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen* 194). Harlem was home to numerous performance spaces such as the Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington performed, where blacks were not allowed to enter as spectators, only as performers. In other words, blacks were not permitted to gaze upon themselves in a performance arena. Jazz grew into one of the country’s most popular music forms, but its public performance was often

restricted to mostly whites. Black culture was again gazed upon by whites, who exoticized, objectified, racialized, and appropriated it—with or without intention of doing so.

As is the case with effective analysis of most any novel, it is indispensable to read *Passing* within its historical context. In reading the novel today, it requires a suspension of a contemporary perspective and its basis of the totality of racial segregation. Another essential factor of the novel is the setting of Harlem with its performative characteristics.

The Trickster Myth and the Trickster

The trickster figure is prominent in many non-Christian traditions and is often employed as a messenger of social inequality. A consummate performer, the trickster lives between the world of the divine and the profane and acts as the messenger of the gods (Gates 6). “Trickster is a boundary-crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure that there is commerce. [S]he¹ also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life” (Hyde 7). From the basest needs of obtaining food, to social behaviors, to the basic human right of dignity, the trickster is present, challenging distribution laws, social mores, authority, and convention with irony and humor (13). Her jokes or tricks can be at the expense of the oppressor or of an ally, and are often at her own expense (13). The trickster “needs at least a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions that can manage the odd double attitude of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveliness depends on having those boundaries respected” (13). When trickster crosses social boundaries, she elucidates their fraudulence.

¹ The trickster can be either female or male and is often androgynous. Hyde has noted that most tricksters are male (8). In my analysis, the trickster is embodied by a woman, Clare Kendry Bellew, so I will refer to the trickster using feminine pronouns.

Trickster tales are prevalent in many societies, from Ancient Greece and Egypt, to African, African American and Native American (pre- and post-colonial), Norse, and Asian, to name a few. The trickster and her tales are as varied as the societies in which her stories are told. What they generally have in common is that they are often tragi-comic parables that relate and often challenge social convention and the resulting consequences should they be challenged. Should people of any class be permitted to eat the choicest cuts of meats (Hermes)? Is it immoral to swindle a swindler (Coyote)? What color is a two-sided hat—black or white (Eshu)? The American folk identity is an amalgamation of various cultures and their stories, and the trickster embodies the opportunistic nature of the American ‘pursuit of happiness².’ As noted by Ellison, “For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, it gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past that clings to the mind. And perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man’s creation, not God’s” (53-54). For Americans, survival and upward mobility are intrinsically linked. Although the United States declares itself a democracy ‘with liberty and justice for all,’ the supposed democracy experienced by disenfranchised blacks was anything but equal. Trickster serves to expose hypocrisy and thereby affect social change. Trickster, with her pragmatic outlook, is as old as humanity and as American as apple pie.

Determining whether or not a social norm should be challenged is often left to the reader to decide, meaning that trickster tales require that we become active readers. “The active reader implies the author, imagines narrative voices, inspires characters, and salutes tribal tricksters in a

² In the Declaration of Independence “happiness” is analogous to “property,” as in John Locke’s natural rights of “life, liberty, and property.”

comic discourse; an erotic motion under the words absolves the separation between minds and bodies” (Vizenor 20). Is the trickster, and thereby the reader, correct to challenge social norm? Is it worth the probable risk to the trickster? Is she a heroine or a villain? Or perhaps both? Why do we need for her to be one or the other? Trickster challenges our binary view of the world, our need to cast everything in black and white.

The Passing Masquerade

Passing can have many meanings, including mimicry and death. One can pass as a man or woman, as heterosexual, as another race, or to the other side, meaning to die. “Passing, an Americanism not listed in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, may refer to the crossing of any line that divides social groups” (Sollors 247). The term ‘passing,’ as it is commonly used, and in the context of this study, refers to a black person who is consciously identifying him- or herself as racially white. It seems to have first appeared in “notices concerning runaway slaves” (255). A notable instance of passing was that of the slave Ellen Craft. She not only passed as white, but also passed as a man, as it would have been socially inappropriate for a ‘white’ woman to be accompanied by ‘her’ black male slave, who was actually her husband William (260-261). Another prominent case of situational passing was that of Harlem Renaissance figure Walter White, who investigated race riots and lynchings for the NAACP in the 1920s. On a trip to Georgia, White was approached by a black man, who White believed had been sent as a warning, and told that “something would happen” to him should he remain in the town overnight (White 3). The townspeople had begun to suspect him as a “government man” who might reveal the identities of the ‘prominent’ citizens who participated in the 1918 lynching of a heavily pregnant black woman (2-3). Should they have had any inkling of his racial identity, his fate would likely have been violently and fatally sealed. White notes

with some irony that his ability to pass for white nearly cost him his life during the Chicago Race Riot when a “Negro shot at [him], thinking [him] to be a white man” (3). Passing was a means to freedom for some slaves, can be a method of spying, and always carries with it the danger that one might be caught in the act.

Passing as white “. . . was particularly a phenomenon of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century” that decreased proportionately to the increase of civil rights for blacks (Sollors 247). The practice of passing unsurprisingly reached a peak as white supremacy reached its own in the 1920s, a period Thompson notes as the second phase of three significant phases of black and white violence in which the violence was generally initiated by whites (*Tragic Black Buck* 5). One offense that could instigate violence such as a lynching was “acting like a white man” (5). It could imply passing as white, but more likely means asserting basic citizenship rights. Passing was generally a violation of accepted racial etiquette, a threat to the social order that maintained separate rights and identities for black and white.

The performance of passing can be viewed as a “masquerade” because of its illusory qualities that require one to conceal one’s identity, “may be defined as psychologically adaptive behavior and a performance that responds to America’s systematic prowhite and antiblack ideology (Thompson, *Tragic Black Buck* 5). In essence, passing is a strategy for survival and even socioeconomic advancement in the face of racial hegemony,” a practice that “encompasses both aggression and repression” (3, 5). Blacks who pass as white may be viewed by others and themselves as “cowards, race traitors, or losers” (Sollors 252). Those who pass on a more permanent basis often experience a feeling of isolation from all that is familiar, as passing customarily requires that one cut ties with family and anyone else who may reveal their racial origins (252). It can be the source of anxiety and conflict, but can also be a source of amusement

for the person who passes and any co-conspirators since it is a deception aimed at an oppressor for whom an illusion that appears real.

Passing may even lead an individual who succeeds in it to a feeling of elation and exultation, an experience of living as a spy who crosses a significant boundary and sees the world anew from a changed vantage point, heightened by the double consciousness of his subterfuge. Thus persons who pass may enjoy their roles as tricksters who play, as does the [James Weldon Johnson's] "ex-colored man," a "capital joke" on society, or who, as Langston Hughes puts it, "get a kick out of putting something over on the boss, who never dreams he's got a colored secretary." . . . Passing may lead to the higher insight of rising above and looking through the "veil" of the color line, to an experience of revelation, to seeing while not being seen—learning about the freemasonry of whiteness, surreptitiously joining an enemy camp for a while—like a Trojan horse. The secretive way in which information was obtained could make passing a vivid reminder of the absurdity of racial divisions. (Sollors 254)

Passing is a complex process that involves emotions as ambiguous as the passer's identity and race. While it is often a means of gaining socio-economic mobility, it can also serve to shift the gaze from that of outsider to insider and demonstrate contempt for the construct of race.

The performance of passing is often seen as a betrayal of race, a form of validation of the hierarchical structure created by the dominant white culture, a self-objectification. Passing can represent "the internalization of beliefs and values associated with ingrained tenets of white

supremacy” and “an acceptance and attachment of the symbolic representation of [white male] power” (Thompson, *Tragic Black Buck* 5, 6-7). Thompson describes the ambiguous nature of passing:

The phenomenon of passing for white is a kind of Faustian paradigm that represents a profound paradox that both challenges the doctrine of white supremacy (the essentialism of whiteness) and requires a denial of one’s blackness at the same time that it reaffirms the existing racial hierarchy of white power and white privilege. Personhood is whiteness, and whiteness means possibility and privilege. Paradoxically, within racist constructions, whiteness defines blackness and blackness defines whiteness.

. . . Passing embraces possibilities of advancement and allows movement away from racial socioeconomic restrictions. Passing fulfills the desire for the power and possibility of blackness being cast in a predominant white role. Consequently, passing epitomizes the paradox between the reality of blackness and the appearance of whiteness; *passing is the trick or the joke*. Because of the inherent disadvantages and advantages in this masquerade, this racial subterfuge has *both tragic and comic dimensions for the black individual and especially for the dominant white society that targets black people with systemic racial intolerance*. (3-4 emphasis added)

As with any skillful performance, the performance of passing is a complex one. Attempting to establish a definitive motivation for passing can be as problematic as the practice of passing

itself. The assumption of camouflage involved in passing can just as easily be seen as a “warlike process” (Lacan in Thompson, *Tragic Black Buck* 9). As noted by Sollors: “Social rules [that place people who pass as ‘impostors’] have sometimes sanctioned a moral condemnation of passing on the grounds that it is a form of deception, hence dishonest. *Yet this only works as long as it is taken for granted that partial ancestry may have the power to become totally defining. . . .* It runs against the notion that ancestry (after all, an aristocratic concern) should not matter in a true democratic society” (emphasis added 249). Color is perceived visually. When the legality of race as it is visually perceived is interrogated, questioning the validity of the racial construct is a natural progression for the active reader of a trickster tale.

Passing in the context of Larsen’s novel is an ambiguous interplay between the performer-spectator relationship, one that blurs the lines between the two. Clare’s ambiguity in regards to race, gender roles, and sexuality reflects the trickster’s unwillingness to be defined in black and white terms. What exactly are we gazing upon if Clare *appears* white? Our need to label and classify each other is defied by the trickster as she plays with language and plays at roles. The performance of passing can serve to blur the validity of the racial construct, through the shifting of the gaze from a white to black gaze to a black to white gaze. Passing’s shifting of the gaze provides a means to “interrogate racial boundaries” (Thompson, *Tragic Black Buck* 9). As noted by Vizenor:

Jacques Lacan reasoned that what arises in language returns to language; words are ambiguous. “The word never has only one use,” he said at a seminar. “Every word always has a beyond, sustains several meanings. Behind what discourse says, there is what it means. . . and behind what it wants to say there is

another meaning, and this process will never be exhausted.” Words, then, are metaphors and the trickster is a comic *holotrope*, an interior landscape “behind what discourse says.” The trick, in seven words, is to elude historicism, racial representations, and remain historical. The author cedes the landscape to the reader and then dies, the narrators bear the schemes, bodies are wild, and the trickster liberates the mind in comic discourse. (Vizenor 12, author emphasis)

Gazed upon by Irene, Clare is at once black and white, at once poor and wealthy. Without the financial security offered by her marriage to a wealthy white man, she is the poor girl of her childhood with Irene. If we, through Irene, attempt to gaze upon her as a black woman, we see a white woman. With our gaze upon her as a passing black woman, we know that she is legally black.

“Generally speaking,” said Jacques Lacan, “the relation between the gaze and what one wishes to see involves a lure. The subject is presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see. . . . In any picture, it is precisely in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear.” The tribal trickster eludes our common gaze, a lure in a comic *holotrope*; she is neither blessed nor evil, neither real nor a transformation, but in wild trceries he wavers on the rim, a warrior on a coin that never lands twice on the same side. (Vizenor 19, author emphasis)

There is no question that the idea of race exists in the United States. However, it remains a construct, a fabrication, one that was created and can therefore be destroyed. The performativity of passing can serve to reinforce racial constructs and reinforce racial hierarchy, but it also shifts the gaze of the racial construct. As noted by Harrison-Kahan,

[Passing] also offers the opportunity for spectatorship. African Americans who passed in(to) the white world were able to gaze upon whites in a reversal of the typical Harlem Renaissance scenario where whites sought out the spectacle of black life. The performative culture of the Harlem Renaissance engendered a new conception of the gaze as simultaneously sexualized and racialized. In using passing and spectatorship to refigure female subjectivity and resist stereotypical representation, Larsen's novel draws specifically on the cultural themes of its time, which have particular resonance in contemporary theories of sexual and racial difference (111).

While blacks were already gazing at the white world from the outside, passing provided an insider's position of spectatorship of which whites were unaware. Passing as white allowed blacks to see the white world from 'behind enemy lines.'

The Passing Novel

The mixed-race or mulatto figure became significant as a Western literary representation in the nineteenth century and "represented a testing of boundaries" (Sollors 239, 241). However, the performance of passing as a literary theme is, perhaps much older:

Passing as a literary theme may go back further than to the uses of the word or to the early literary adaptation of racial cross-dressing in the United States. One might say that it developed from the motif of the *parvenu* and the migrant as it combined with the age-old one of role-playing of dressing up as a member of another group—so well exemplified in *Thousand and One Nights*—thereby being able to see things that only the camouflage reveals; but this theme was affected in very deep and particular ways by racial caste. (Sollors 256)

The appearance of the first character who is passing was likely a minor character in Victor Hugo's 1826 novel *Bug-Jargal* (Sollors 257). Charles Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) was one of the first passing novels written by a black person that explored migration, a physical boundary crossing, as a means to pass (258). Thompson notes that the structure of passing novels are reflective of slave narratives: "bondage, flight, and freedom" (*Tragic Black Buck* 6). Much like slaves who escaped to the anonymity of large cities in the North to gain their freedom, blacks who passed as white often moved to cities where they would not be recognized amongst the masses. The knowledge of their black origins represents their bondage, their migration their flight, and their freedom is achieved through passing as white.

The 'tragic mulatto,' a figure that looks white but is legally black, is a recurring theme among early mixed-race novels. Abolitionist Lydia Marie Child is "honored as the inventor of the 'Tragic Mulatto,' " due to her 1842 *Liberty Bell* short story "The Quadroons" (Sollors 231). "The Quadroons" establishes the mixed-race woman as a victim of the miscegenation of slavery, who fits in neither black nor white society. Sollors observes that Sterling A. Brown was probably the "first to call attention to the 'stereotype' of the tragic mulatto and who critically defined the

concept (223). Brown's elements of the tragic mulatto complex include a character who is unrealistic, nonindividualized, and unoriginal; the avoidance of more serious social issues and absence of representative characters of black culture; a gender differentiation—the mulatto men were more tragic than their darker brothers and the women were “beautiful but often doomed;” an “underlying racialism” that attributes the character's desirable qualities to his or her whiteness and less desirable qualities to his or her blackness; and the stereotype's existence is owed to racial prejudice (223-225). Brown also asserts that “white American readers were more likely to employ the stereotype” (225). On Brown's final point, Sollors, however, notes that the tragic mulatto “was also at home in, and perhaps central to, black writing in the United States before World War II. It was not just a white idiosyncrasy” (226). Conversely, Sollors warns against utilizing the term “tragic” inaccurately (242). It is a stereotype, which has automatic negative implications. He asserts that tragic mulatto tales might be more aptly named “Warring Blood Melodrama” (243). The characters whose racial origins were not easily identified presented a challenge to the social boundaries of the racial construct:

Biracial characters could also be anathema because their representation (indeed, their very existence) has always challenged, and still challenges, the notion that there is an obvious and easily definable boundary between black and white. This is upsetting to a right-wing segregationist's as it is to a left-wing relativist's need for contained cultures—since mixed-race figures have so vividly illuminated the fact that—if such a boundary exists at all—human beings are eminently distinguished in being able to traverse it (Sollors 241).

The tragic mulatto that crossed racial boundaries continued its role as a trope in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance in the form of passing tales. As previously noted, passing as white was viewed by whites as a form of aggression against the accepted social dividing line between the black and white races. Passing tales of the Harlem Renaissance written by black writers ranged from the ‘melodramatic’ (as Sollors asserts), as in Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928), to wildly satirical, as in George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931). The prevailing stereotype of the *tragic* mulatto may cloud our ability to detect the comical aspects of passing novels and disregards the clever irony of their authors.

Comedy in Tragedy

It can be difficult to see the humor in a tragic situation. There is nothing comical about oppression. Laughing at someone else’s pain is an exercise in cruelty. Laughing at our own pain, however, can be a powerful expression of protest because it reduces its power over us and provides us with relief and the ability to endure hardship. Lawrence Levine notes in his observations on black humor: “Laughter was a compensating mechanism which enabled blacks to confront oppression and hardship” (299). Irony and satire directed at whites supplied subjugated blacks with a mastery over their own minds.

Laughter, of course, springs from many sources. Central among them is the desire to place the situation in which we find ourselves into perspective; to exert some degree of control over our environment. The need to laugh at our enemies, our situation, ourselves, is a common one, but it often exists the most urgently in those who exert the least power over their immediate environment; in those who have the objective reasons for feelings of hopelessness. . . . No inquiry into the

consciousness and inner resources of black Americans can ignore the content and structure of Afro-American humor. (Levine 300)

Humor is not simply frivolous diversion. It can also be a form of aggression and destruction, an unmasking of the absurdity of social constructions—spoken or unspoken—and a subversive challenge to authority (315-316, 321). The magnificent irony is that the humor of the oppressed may be completely lost on the oppressor, making it all the more amusing: “A substantial percentage of Negro humor, even had it been revealed to whites, would simply not have struck them as funny. The experiences, the perspective, and the needs of many black Americans so often diverged from those of the majority of white Americans that their humor with its incisive commentary upon reality from the vantage point of black consciousness was not easily comprehensible to whites” (313). Comedic perspective can provide consolation to those who require it most. For those for whom it is not a necessary consolation, it is at times irreverent and inappropriate, and, at others, incomprehensible.

Irony and humor can also be an effective psychic shield against dominance. Levine notes that humor provided a sense of authority and a relief from the hardships inflicted upon blacks. He asserts that this humor is directly connected to trickster tales modified by slaves from African folklore: “A good deal of twentieth-century Negro humor, then continued the process familiar to us from the trickster tales: the outer world was reduced to pygmy proportions; the situation was dwarfed; and the joke-tellers and their audiences were allowed to set aside, or at least to minimize, the pain and defeat imposed upon them by the external world” (Levine 343). The animal tales were the most popular and widely-told tales among slaves. Most Americans are, at least familiar with the trickster tale of B’rer Rabbit. Eventually, the animals became humanized

(103). Whether divine, human, or animal, in African and Afro-American trickster tales, “the primary trickster figures of animal tales were weak, relatively powerless creatures who attain their ends through the application of native wit and guile rather than power or authority” (103). The extraordinary subjugation experienced by slaves and by their descendants under white supremacy made the ironic humor of the trickster essential to survival: “Because of their overwhelmingly paradigmatic character, animal tales were, of all narratives of social protest or psychological release, among the easiest to relate both within and especially outside the group” (102). There is no humor that can combat the physical reality of oppression. However, it offers a potent stratagem for mocking an oppressor, a characteristic skill of the trickster that weakens the power of the oppressor on the psyche. It allows one to ‘other’ those of a dominant culture. If you don’t get the joke, the joke may be on you.

Just as black humor may be lost on the non-black outsider, problems arise in interpreting the trickster if the archetype is not present in the culture gazing upon her, as is the case with dominant Western culture that is heavily influenced by protestantism. A binary perspective that sees the world in black and white further limits the ability of many Westerners to understand the trickster’s purpose. Yes, she steals and plays tricks, as well as profanes what is held sacred. However, the question is not so much about *what* the trickster is doing but *why* she does it. Trickster’s qualities are amoral, but are often distorted by the lens of Christian morality, one that has historically imposed itself on indigenous societies. We must guard against a “Western cultural bias against allowing humor to represent serious and important cultural information, and several hermeneutical (interpretive) issues” (Hynes and Doty 26, 42). Humor is a valuable social tool, one in which trickster is an expert. Dominant Western culture may not only fall short of an accurate interpretation of the trickster, but of trickster’s humor as well.

In their approaches to the trickster, Western scholars, both in anthropology and in the history of religions, have tended to impose their own terms on the trickster narratives instead of attending to the terms set by the narratives themselves. In this respect the discourse of Western scholarship on the trickster, as on so many other aspects of [indigenous] culture, has been a discourse of domination, in two senses of the phrase. First, it is a discourse that analyzes the conquered civilization in terms of the conquerors, and it is therefore, secondly, a discourse of conquest, a discourse that continues to express and accept an ideology sanctioning the domination of one culture over another. In this discourse, Western conceptions of the sacred and profane, of myth and literature, and of origin, evolution, and degeneration, are used to frame the trickster particularly, and [indigenous] culture generally, so that Western civilization can see the primitivity or degeneracy of the Other-and so justify its own domination and its own discourse.

In other words, they make of him a hypothetical figure invented to fit a theory and having little relation to the trickster of the stories. In all these theories, the trickster is bounced back and forth, stretched and twisted, so as to fit within the framework staked out by the discourse of domination by means of which the Western world, scholars included, distorts and suppresses its Other. (Doueih 208-209)

In the manner of Gates' analysis of Bakhtin's "double-voiced" word, the trickster has different meanings in the dominant society (negative) than in the societies in which her tales are prevalent (useful) (Gates 50). Additionally, John W. Roberts notes the concept of the African American

folkloric outlaw trickster figure as opposed to the dominant discourse of the Anglo Saxon outlaw (188). The trickster's humor and the meaning of her tales are often lost on the reader who subscribes to dominant discourse, and her heroic qualities are often read as that of a villain.

The semiotic play of defining the gazer and the gazed upon as black or white blurs the lines that permit us to define race. As the trickster breaks the rules, so does the novel *Passing*, in the traditional sense of the tale of a tragic mulatta. 'Passing' from what—black to white or white to black? If she appears white, then is she? What does Larsen tell us about the ocular nature of race if we can't tell what color Clare is unless she tells us? What, then, does that tell us about the concept of race in general? "The features commonly ascribed to the trickster—contradictoriness, complexity, deceptiveness, trickery—are the features of the language of the story itself. If the trickster breaks all the rules, so does the story's language; it breaks the rules of storytelling in the very telling of the story" (Hynes 213). *Passing* may seem on the surface, by nature of its title alone, to be a stereotypical tale of a 'tragic mulatta' who passes as white. However, reading the novel as a trickster tale provides insight into the possibilities and impossibilities of creating one's own individual identity—highly-valued in Western society— and the various constructs and confines of society that apply to non-dominant groups.

When we begin to see the passing figure as an Esu/trickster, we begin also to realize three things: first that the passing figure always functions to explode dualities, whether they be sentimental ("good" vs. "evil") or racial ("white" vs. "black"); second, that the passing figure, once imagined, is capable of exploding these dualities even in spite of the author who creates him/her to reinscribe them; and finally that the *subversive* nature of the act of passing itself means that our

reading of passing characters is always double—we must read them as fundamentally capitulative to both moralistic and racial dualisms. (Sheehy 408)

In order to analyze the novel in the context of the trickster, it is necessary to understand what defines a trickster tale. Trickster tales are as diverse as the societies in which they are told, but do have some general commonalities. I will utilize some of these commonalities as parameters for analysis of the work, selecting the specific qualities of a trickster myth as outlined by Hynes and Doty. “They are deeply satisfying entertainment [and] ritual vents for social frustrations” (219). “They reaffirm the belief system” (220). “Tricksters are psychic explorers and adventurers agents of creativity who transcend the constrictions of monoculturality” (221, 224). “Tricksterish metaplay dissolves the order of things in the depth of the open-ended metaplay of life” (227). A trickster tale, naturally, includes at least one character who can be defined as a trickster. A few shared traits of tricksters that I will use to discuss Clare as the archetype include the “fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster. Flowing from this are such other features as deceiver/trick-player, shape-shifter, situation-invertor [*sic*], messenger/imitator of the gods, and sacred/lewd bricoleur” (Hynes 47). Note that not every trickster necessarily has all of these characteristics (47).

Passing engages numerous trickster tale and trickster character attributes, in both its narrative and in its protagonist Clare Kendry Bellew. In contrast to the novel’s other protagonist, Irene Redfield, Clare is conscious of the irony of the social constructs that subjugate them both, while Irene denies and often subscribes to them.

The Gaze and Power Reversals

In the “Encounter” section of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, the visual interaction between Irene Redfield and Clare Bellew demonstrates the gaze as a form of power. The text suggests that the ocular nature of race, like the two-side hat of Eshu in the Yoruba tale that one friend sees as black and the friend on the other side sees as white (Gates 21-22). Though a construct, race can be powerful enough to be internalized by those against whom racism is directed. The novel’s third person narrator, Irene, projects her views of the financial motivations for passing onto Clare because security and stability are what is most important to her. Through textual reading of the character that gazes versus the one who is gazed upon, I am going to look at parallel scenes that enable the reader to see that Irene and Clare function in multiple facets of the gaze that are reflective of their level of power.

In the first chapter of Part One of the novel, entitled “Encounter,” Irene receives a letter from Clare Kendry Bellew. Clare is a childhood friend who seeks to reconnect with Irene, and through her, with black culture “that life which long ago, and of her own choice, she had left behind her” (Larsen 17). The text of the letter refers to “that time in Chicago,” which causes an intense emotional reaction from Irene. The second chapter begins with “This is what Irene Redfield remembered,” clearly indicating that the point of view of the text is that of Irene (7). Throughout the novel, there is hyperbolic use of “Irene remembered,” which suggests that there may be substantial details that she does not remember. Nearly faint from a sweltering Chicago August day, Irene seeks refuge in a taxi, the driver of which suggests that she relieve her distress at the tea room on the rooftop of the exclusive Drayton Hotel. Through the point of view of the taxi driver, the reader is initially unaware that Irene is a black woman who is temporarily passing as white (8-9). Had she not been passing, she would not have had access to the restaurant.

As Irene ascends to the Drayton rooftop restaurant, so ascends her social status. “It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world; pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one she had left below” (Larsen 8). For Irene, the world of white privilege is “pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote” and like heaven above (8-9). In contrast, the “sizzling” world “below” without the economic advantage and the indispensable white skin color, is like hell from which she must escape (8-9). From Irene’s vantage point of an exclusive hotel rooftop, she “surveyed the room about her or looked out over some lower buildings” (9). Larsen’s use of “surveyed” and “lower buildings” provides Irene with a visual position of power (8-9). Initially, Irene examines and inspects her environment and those “she had left below” with a dissecting gaze of a buyer or appraiser, indicating that she believes them beneath her socially and economically (8). Access to luxury and relief from the heat that common people below are experiencing is available to her because she is passing as white.

Alone at her table on the roof, her gaze is directed downward: “She had been gazing down for some time at the specks of cars and people creeping about in the streets and thinking how silly they looked” (Larsen 9). The people on the street are not able to see her as she “gazes down” on them, and though only a moment before she was one of the “people creeping about,” she thinks about “how silly they looked” (9). Jennifer DeVere Brody observes “Irene mimics middle-class culture which often tries to isolate itself from poverty and perversion by situating itself above and beyond the lower class” (1055). Larsen’s text provides a metaphor for the elevation of the economic and social agency available to a person who passes for white through Irene’s ascension to the Drayton Hotel’s rooftop restaurant. Irene’s middle class status allows her to ‘Other’ the people ‘beneath’ her.

The narrative voice, seen through Irene's often "unseeing" eyes, points to her as an unreliable narrator (Larsen 10). Can we, then, trust Irene's perspective of Clare? Claudia Tate asserts that Irene's unreliability propels the novel:

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 narrative ambiguity. The problem of interpreting *Passing* can, therefore, be simplified by defining Irene's role in the story and determining the extent to which she is reliable as the sole reporter and interpreter of events. We must determine whether she accurately portrays Clare, or whether her portrait is subject to, and in fact affected by, her own growing jealousy and insecurity. (Tate 143)

The ambiguity of the narrative makes the novel more entertaining and forces us to be active readers in order to determine what is occurring beneath the surface of Irene's perception.

Passing as a white woman, Irene reverses the relationship of the gaze as her eyes turn from the people below to those in the rooftop restaurant. As noted by Harrison-Kahan, "Irene has come to this whites-only space not only to gaze upon others, but specifically upon white others. Irene exercises her subjectivity in becoming a spectator. Riveted by both a desire for and an identification with whiteness, her gaze finally rests on what she takes to be a white woman" (121). As a 'white woman,' her gaze takes on a cultural authority not available to most black spectators. After Clare arrives, Irene momentarily maintains her visual power as her gaze shifts to Clare, and Clare's disadvantage is further emphasized by her being looked down upon by her male companion, who remains standing though she is seated (Larsen 9). Irene assesses Clare's

clothing: “Nice clothes too, just right for the weather, thin and cool without being mussy, as summer things were apt to be,” (9-10). She continues to watch her, noting her interaction with a waiter, her beauty and features until she becomes “conscious that she had been staring and quickly looked away” (9-10). Having subscribed to “bourgeois morality,” Irene pays “obsessive attention to seemingly minuscule distinctions of caste and class” (Blackmer 52). Clare’s gaze being turned on Irene, whose eyes then become “unseeing,” signals a shift in power that privileges Clare: “by some sixth sense she was acutely aware that someone was watching her” (Larsen 10). Her weapon of vision now unavailable, Irene relies on another sense to become aware that she is being watched. Irene attempts “to treat the woman and her watching with indifference” (10). However, Clare’s ‘watching’ is too powerful for her to ignore because Irene, who is passing, is being looked at by a white woman, or at least so she believes.

Clare, at whom Irene “stole another glance,” has reduced Irene’s power level to that of a criminal who ‘steals’ a valuable commodity from another, presumably innocent individual (Larsen 10). Larsen’s phrasing alludes to the criminal nature of passing as white (Thompson, *Tragic Black Buck* 5). The reader is still unaware of Irene’s race. Suddenly, Irene’s “eyes flashed” in indignation at the possibility that the woman—Clare—might have guessed that Irene is a “Negro” (Larsen 10). Irene’s anxiety in this passage about the possible discovery of her race is the first mention in the novel of her race. Irene is passing as white. It is the possibility of the embarrassment of being thrown out of the restaurant that motivates her anxiety, not loyalty to race (Larsen 11). No such anxiety is apparent in Clare’s behavior.

The reader views the world through Irene’s eyes. She is both performer and spectator. However, as the gaze shifts from her to Clare, she becomes the spectator and Clare the performer. Here, we see the ever changing performer-spectator relationship of the theater of all

social interaction: “The spectator of the moment will be a performer the next. The gaze directed at the Other is returned by the other. There are no stable positions, no nonreturnable gazes” (Fischer-Lichte 231). Irene then describes the “ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot” by which white people are able to visually identify people as “Negro” (Larsen 10). Fingernails had long been believed to be an indicator of blackness for whites (blue half-moons, vertical lines, etc.) (Sollors 142). In Lydia Marie Child’s “The Quadroons,” it is the character Xarifa’s eyes that indicate her blackness (203-204). Irene, who believes the means of determining race are “ridiculous,” will later identify Clare’s eyes as “Negro eyes,” indicating that she subscribes to the ‘ridiculous’ views as well (Larsen 10, 21, Blackmer 52). Additionally, “The image of Clare’s eyes provides a metaphor for our reading of ‘race’ in the novel: an optical illusion, it enables two contradictory meanings, depending on whether we read whiteness or blackness as negative space” (Harrison-Kahan 117). When reading the novel, what color are we seeing through the sensibilities of the characters—the color perceived by the eyes or by the law? “Irene and Clare never ‘are’ black or white, and their desire cannot be defined solely in terms of heterosexuality or homoeroticism. Instead, they are constantly negotiating multiple positions. Their identity is a continual, rather than finished, process. Instead of passing as white or as straight, they pass between binary positions. In using twin protagonists, one who chooses to live her life as black and the other as white, the novel appears to be a testament to the duality of black identity, the DuBoisian ‘double-consciousness’ ” (118). Here, we see the duality of passing and race, along with its trickster-like characteristics.

The characters’ interaction also symbolizes the tragicomic nature of the performance of passing—Irene believes herself to be scrutinized as a commodity. Irene is again uneasy that she is being viewed as an object. Despite Irene’s anxiety about the possibility that she will be asked

to leave the Drayton rooftop because of her race and her awakened visual defenses, she too accepts the ocular nature of race. As the woman approaches her, Irene's initial alarm is soon replaced by recognition—the woman who has been staring at her and who she initially did not recognize, is Clare Kendry Bellew, with whom she was acquainted in childhood. Clare, it turns out, is also passing (Larsen 12). Irene's not recognizing Clare is further demonstrative of her lack of visual power. Trickster Clare's shapeshifting performance is convincing enough to paradoxically fool someone she knows: "Irene studied the lovely creature beside her for some clue to her identity. Who could she be? Where and when had they met? And through her perplexity there came the thought that the trick which her memory had played on her was for some reason more gratifying than disappointing to her old acquaintance, that she didn't mind not being recognized" (12). "Passing epitomizes the paradox between the reality of blackness and the appearance of whiteness; passing is the trick or the joke" (Thompson, *Tragic Black Buck* 3-4). Clare's performance is symbolic of the theater of passing and social performance. The trickster narrative calls attention to their illusory qualities.

Clare is able to achieve the appearance of a white identity so well that her childhood friend initially does not recognize her. Reading this entertaining, yet uncomfortable scene as part of a trickster tale, we see the ironic hilarity of the situation and Irene experiencing one of the common hazards of passing—fear of discovery. Confronting the legal definition of race, the trickster narrative deconstructs the accepted social construct while simultaneously reaffirming it. The relationship of performer-spectator is an unstable one, one in which the power structure is constantly redefined. The spectator, who gazes upon the performer objectifies and others her. However, the response of the spectator also turns her into a player who is gazed upon by the performer. The metaplay of life dissolves the power structure of the women's gazes upon each

other as power is inverted and transposed. In other words, by examining power as a performance relationship and its metatheater, trickster points to it as a fiction that is perceived as reality.

The Trickster Clare's 'Having Way'

In modern American society, the pursuit of happiness necessitates socio-economic agency, but how can one attain that agency when one faces restrictions such as race, gender, or social position? Trickster questions that position and the appropriation of survival mechanisms. She may appear to reaffirm that belief system with a tongue-in-cheek irony. Hermes questioned the apportioning of sacrifice to the gods, to which he was not a beneficiary because of his uncertain status as a god, as did Prometheus, who wanted to save some of the meat for humans (Hyde 33, 35, 321-22). The distribution of food to the gods paralleled the distribution of food to humans in ancient Greece: those of high economic status such as priests received the choice cuts of meat sacrificed to the gods, while those of low economic status received the less desirable cuts, such as the intestines (35-36). Hermes is eventually brought before Zeus for his crime, though he is forgiven due to the sound of his lyre, and Prometheus brings painful death upon the mortal world. Additionally, in a later story, having stolen fire from the gods, Prometheus gives it to humanity but pays the price by having his liver eaten by an eagle each day, only to have it grow back overnight and have the process repeat itself. He is eventually freed by Hercules, but he endures great suffering for many years. Was the trick of Prometheus, which gave survival tools to humanity, worth the price he paid, that humanity pays in the form of painful death?

Clare Kendry Bellew is a trickster performer who masquerades as white. I argue that while Irene's telling of the story demonstrates the primary reason for the trickster performance of passing as white is socio-economic agency, it is Clare's childhood command performance by her aunts that is her greatest and most compelling motivation to pass permanently. Through direct

discourse, Clare conveys her tale directly, which has heretofore been related through indirect discourse of Irene's memories. Direct discourse from Clare provides a deeper and more disturbing reason for the performance of passing: the desire to obtain the human rights denied by her race, her "personhood" as observed by Thompson (*Tragic Black Buck* 3). Though there is persistent use of financial terminology to rationalize the performance of passing as white, the trickster within the narrative voice encourages the reader to go beyond the surface and the obvious material reasons for passing. It challenges a society in which one can be deprived of her social dignity and human rights based on race, gender, or class. Why should Clare be denied her right to pursue happiness because she happens by law to be black or because she is a woman? Should she accept her oppression without any form of protest?

Irene, though she has the desire to escape from Clare and their chance encounter on the Drayton Hotel roof tea room, is rooted to her chair by her curiosity about "this hazardous business of 'passing' " (Larsen 17). Larsen's diction in describing of passing as a "hazardous business," points again to economic agency as the most commonly perceived reason for passing (17). For Irene, Clare's "having way" is her sole motivation (14). As Clare recounts what transpired while in the care of her white aunts following the death of her father, her reasons for permanently passing that extend beyond material gain become apparent. Passing permanently as an adult is a practice initially created for Clare by her aunts, who were "poor as church mice," the phrasing of which provides insight into the aunts' religious reasoning behind Clare's racial inferiority (Larsen 18, 19). Because of her race, while living with the aunts, she is viewed as a commodity, and is "expected to earn [her] keep by doing all the housework" (18). "Hard labour was good for me. I had Negro blood" (18). According to Clare's aunts, hard labor should be left to the "sons and daughters of Ham," a reference to the biblical text (*The New American Bible*,

Revised Edition, Genesis 9.20-27) in which Noah curses his son Ham's son Canaan. The curse of Ham is "the religious paradigm that her white aunts use to keep Clare's 'black blood' and 'black body' in check, keeping her in her inferior place" (Thompson, "Makin' A Way" 8).

Clare is her aunts' domestic servant, a job commonly held by black women in the era in which the novel takes place. Ham, however, was not cursed into servitude by God but by his father, a mere human being who stated the curse upon awakening and was likely still intoxicated. As a result of Noah's curse, Ham's skin turns black, as does that of his offspring. The narrative encapsulates the shift from white's theological references to race identity to the scientific racialism and subsequently law (Sollors 111-112, 168). Sollors refers to the latter in Chapter 4 as "The Calculus of Color" in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, in reference to a complex and absurd nineteenth-century mathematical equation that can be performed to determine the amount of black blood a person possesses, and therefore the person's 'color' (Sollors 111-112). Appearance becomes irrelevant, and instead, law and blood are significant. At home with her aunts, Clare is black regardless of appearances. She is black by law.

Clare's defiance of viewing herself as a "daughter of Ham" becomes apparent as she relates the tale of how her aunts devalued her because of her blackness (Larsen 19). However, the concept of race seems inane to the trickster:

To Clare, whiteness in itself is really rather banal. Having lived with whites on intimate terms, she has a less mythic view of them and of her relations with them than does Irene. One corollary of that different structure of feeling is a relative nonchalance (not unlike Larsen's own) about the racial barrier that most Americans religiously sustain. Clare is irritating in large part because she does not

have the proper feelings about racial difference; she flouts the protocols of race.

(Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen* 300-301).

She is forbidden by the aunts to “mention Negroes to the neighbors” as if any reference to the race would somehow tarnish them and Clare (19). Hence, her performance as a white person begins at an early age as she is socialized as white. As noted by Thompson, the aunts “become the ‘bridge’ in the process of Clare assuming a permanent white identity” in her reinvention of herself (“Makin’ a Way” 86). While they privately remind her of her blackness, they publicly corroborate her whiteness (88). The aunts are ashamed of her and her father who “soiled—no ruined, they called it—a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn’t forgive the tar-brush” (Larsen 19). Clare’s statement implies that white society accepts the rape of black women but will not accept any resulting offspring as the father’s responsibility—not because they are the product of rape, but because they are ‘tainted’ by black blood. Clare becomes practiced at passing; she is black inside the house and white outside, which functions as an appropriate model for passing in general. Her role playing provides her with an impressive ability to “utilize the mask to great effect” and with an understanding of the metaplay of racial performance (Blackmer 256). Though Clare eventually severs contact with her aunts, as is characteristic of many who pass, it is not Clare who cuts off her blackness—her blackness is cut off from her when she is forced to pass by her aunts. As noted by W.E.B. Du Bois in his review of *Passing*, Clare is “kicked to the white world” (Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen* 331). Clare’s joke, however, is on the aunts, as she tells Irene, “I’ll bet they were good and sorry afterwards” (Larsen 19). Clare reveals that continuing to pass is a secret form of retaliation against their maltreatment of her. She fights racial oppression in the seemingly regressive way of passing, one that may appear

to reinforce the racial construct. Her revenge on the aunts is symbolic of a broader revenge on white oppression in general as her upward mobility, and therefore happiness, has exceeded theirs.

The trickster Clare rebels against the demoralization to which she is subjected by her aunts. Here, her awareness of the need for performance as a white person as a means to achieve not only financial security but her 'personhood' is apparent: "I was determined to get away, *to be a person* and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham" (Larsen 19 emphasis added). Clare has no solid foundation in racial or class identity, which allows her a unique trickster perspective. Tricksters do not contemplate right or wrong because they are amoral, beyond and between the binary (Hyde 10). As noted by Hutchinson:

Clare grows up betwixt and between—on the lines dividing black and white, as well as the middle and lower classes. This position has helped her to develop an extraordinary awareness of the hypocrisy around her (an awareness she has to muffle in order to get by), a furtive insight into other people's thoughts and actions, and a lack of allegiance to the kind of collective wisdom that cements group identities. As a result, Clare is essentially amoral, apolitical, and mysterious, lacking reference to the world around her. (*In Search of Nella Larsen* 296)

Clare's childhood perspective on Irene further demonstrates both her shallow and deeper motives for passing: "You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others. Do you, can you understand what I felt?" (Larsen 19) "Clare

lacks the class pedigree that Irene possesses whether or not she passes for white” (Thompson, “Makin’ A Way” 88). Here, Larsen is critical of the exclusivity of black bourgeois society.

As a child, Irene and her middle class family with concerned parents represented the achievement of the American Dream for Clare, standing in stark contrast to her own father, as she indicates by her description of Irene’s father as a “dear sweet man” (Larsen 6, 20). That she wants to surpass Irene’s financial and emotional security is suggested by “and others” (19). Clare seeks a community that embraces her, a family: “Somehow, good as all of you, the whole family, had always been to the poor forlorn child that was me” (15). Another motivation for Clare’s passing, then, is “her desire for Irene’s appreciation: for approval from her black bourgeois neighbors” (DeVere Brody 1056). It is also ironic that through the assumption of her repertoire of roles that she comes closer to being the “person” that she desires to be (Larsen 19). Closer, but not quite. She is an insider among whites when she is passing, but she is still performing a role. “The social performances of Larsen’s characters prove an important insight into the split between agency and social construction that theorists have described as characteristic of performativity (Goldsmith 97).” In other words, performing carries with it a paradox: if one is assuming a role, how does one construct a ‘self’ if one must conform to the restrictions of the proscribed role?

Clare, as trickster, is aware of the restrictions stemming from racial and gender identities and exploits what has been used against her by her aunts and by the black bourgeois to advance her position. Looking beyond the veil of double consciousness, she refuses to see herself solely through the eyes of others. She considers using her fair skin as the means to provide her with the material benefits and human rights of white privilege and wealth to be no crime against her race. Instead, it is a trick on the system. She wants the economic and social freedom that is available to

a bourgeois white woman, which she accomplishes through her marriage to John Bellew, a young neighborhood white man with “untold gold” (Larsen 19). Bellew’s “untold gold” makes apparent the financial security made available to Clare when she is passing as white. Her performance pays off financially and socially. She has surpassed the black middle class of her childhood to which she once aspired.

Clare asks Irene, “Tell me, honestly, haven’t you ever thought of ‘passing’?” Irene’s answer makes clear her contempt for Clare’s decision to pass permanently: “Irene answered promptly: ‘No. Why should I?’ And so disdainful was her voice and manner that Clare’s face flushed and her eyes glinted. Irene hastened to add: ‘You see, Clare, I’ve everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money’ ” (Larsen 20). Irene’s “disdainful” response indicates that she is unaware that through her temporary passing and leisurely middle class life, she is just as much a performer (20). “Clare accepts while Irene denies, the relationship between these terms [passing, upward mobility, and self-commodification]” (Goldsmith 110). In contrast to Clare, Irene is not conscious of the mask she wears and the role she plays. Additionally, Irene’s answer that she has all she wants “except, perhaps, a little more money” points to *her* view of the motivations for passing for white as economic and that she appears unable to understand Clare’s psychological reasons for passing.

By denying her own passing, Irene is able to distance herself socially from Clare, to other her. As noted by Blackmer, “Larsen establishes a dialectic between Clare Kendry, who embodies the ethos of the ‘New Negro’ and the non-mimetic, modernistic, and kinetic aesthetic principles of the African mask, and Irene Redfield, who erases her own racial difference and exoticizes Clare,” placing Irene and her chaste housewife stereotype in contrast to Clare’s hypersexual African American woman (253). The desire of money is not unique to Clare who, due to her

impoverished and neglectful upbringing by her father and, later, her aunts, has sharpened her survival skills and given her an astute concept of what is necessary to achieve the American Dream. “That’s what everybody wants, a little more money, even the people who have it. And I don’t blame them. Money’s awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think ‘Rene that it’s even worth the price” (Larsen 20). The American pursuit of happiness and the status that goes along with it is a never-ending one. It requires the trickster to make difficult decisions as to how far she is willing to go to obtain her goal. Clare’s statement foreshadows the tea scene, in which we will see that her “price” of passing is not simply a denial a race, but one that requires her to endure anxiety of discovery from various sources and repeated anguish at the hands of her husband.

Clare does not place “blame” on anyone for wanting more money, which is an expression of her trickster amorality and sense of entitlement or ‘having way’ (Larsen 14). Achieving financial success through passing and marrying a white man, she deems “worth the [psychological] price” of her trickster performance (20). Is it worth the price of Clare’s dignity a second time—the first time being through her aunts, the second self-imposed when she decides to pass permanently? Reading the indirect discourse of Irene’s memories, it may appear straightforward that the reader should judge Clare as a shallow and ambitious woman who will stop at nothing, including the betrayal of her race to achieve her goals. However, through the direct discourse related by Clare, it becomes apparent that her upbringing by her aunts and isolation from the black middle class contributed greatly to her performance of passing as white. Here, the narrative holds a mirror to society, reflecting the same inequity evident in respect to race, gender, and class. The trickster shows us what is uncomfortable, but what we most need to see. Should any of us accept the stamp of inferiority imposed upon us by a dominant culture

without challenge? Passing can be a reaffirmation of white superiority that simultaneously and ironically challenges race. Clare's direct discourse suggests not only her financial motivations for passing but also her unwillingness to live without social dignity.

The Joke's on You: The Tragi-Comic Nature of Passing

Mocking the oppressor's system through charm and laughter is an effective trickster technique, as we have seen in Levine's analysis of black humor. In the tea scene of *Passing*, Clare Bellew demonstrates her tragic-comic trickster nature in her awareness that her performance of passing as white is as much hoax as a survival mechanism, as indicated by Larsen's hyperbolic use of language that relates to humor. In the manner of the trickster, she has no respect for boundaries. Through passing as white, the trickster Clare defies and mocks not only her white husband but, symbolically, the construct of race in general. Clare is a trickster engaged in the performance of passing in order to achieve not only social and economic agency, but the equal rights denied by her gender and race. "Tricksters achieve their objectives through indirection and mask-wearing, through playing on the gullibility of their opponents" (Harris). In the Tea Scene, John Bellew represents the white male dominant culture that is the butt of an ironic joke, one that stands in direct opposition to his cherished views of white supremacy.

Following their reacquaintance at the Drayton Hotel, Clare invites Irene to tea in her Chicago home. Irene reluctantly attends, despite having pledged to herself that she would never see Clare again. The subject of passing and having children is reviewed somewhat heatedly by Clare, Irene, and Gertrude. Gertrude can also pass as white but has no need to actively do so. While she is married to a white man, Fred Martin, he is aware of her race (Larsen 24). Despite Fred's feelings about his wife and her race, Gertrude experiences anxiety during her pregnancy and tells Clare and Irene that "nobody wants a dark child" (26). To conceal her passing Clare

was also greatly concerned about her unborn child being dark: “I’m afraid [to have more children]. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I’ll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too—too hellish” (26). Clare, in contrast to Gertrude, has everything to lose if her daughter is born anything but white in appearance. Irene, to the shock of Gertrude, states: “One of my boys is dark” (26). She is offended by the discussion, particularly Gertrude’s assumptions that she feels the same about having a dark child, and is further angered by Gertrude’s questioning of the color of her husband’s skin (26). Clare, seemingly noting Irene’s offense, “turned on her seductive caressing smile and remarked a little scoffingly, ‘I do think that coloured people—we—are too silly about some things. After all, the thing’s not important to Irene or hundreds of others. Not awfully, even to you Gertrude. It’s only deserters like me who have to be afraid of freaks of the nature. As my inestimable dad used to say, ‘Everything must be paid for.’ ” (27) Clare makes a point of placing herself as an outsider with “coloured people” and as an insider with “we.” She calls attention to the heightened danger she experiences as a woman who has deceived her husband through passing and the possibility of a child exposing her deception. Quoting her father and alluding to the cost of one’s actions, she suggests the apprehension of having children is one of the prices she must pay as someone who passes. Furthermore, the hint of sarcasm in Clare’s tone mocks Irene’s smug attitude toward her.

The conversation turns to Claude Jones, a childhood acquaintance of the three women who has “become a Jew” (Larsen 27). Gertrude is highly amused by Jones’s new identity and undertaking of religious rituals and beliefs (27). Clare is only politely amused, and is not critical of his decision: “It certainly sounds funny enough. Still, it’s his own business. If he gets along better by turning—” (27). In response to Clare, “Irene, who was still hugging her unhappy don’t-

care feeling of rightness, broke in, saying bitingly ‘It evidently doesn’t occur to either you or Gertrude that he might possibly be sincere in changing his religion. Surely everyone doesn’t do everything for gain’ ” (27). Here again, we see Irene, for whom security is imperative, projecting her own economic motives for passing onto Clare *and Gertrude*. Gertrude does not purposely pass; she happens to be *able* to pass. She is married to a man who knows that she is black and therefore has no financial cause to pass in comparison to Clare or Irene. Irene’s meaning is not lost on Clare: “Clare Kendry [Bellew] had no need to search for the full meaning of that utterance. She reddened slightly and retorted seriously: ‘Yes, I admit that might be possible—his being sincere, I mean. It just didn’t happen to occur to me, that’s all. I’m surprised,’ and the seriousness changed to mockery, ‘that you should have expected it to. Or did you really?’ ” (27). Quite perceptive, Clare is tuned into Irene’s judgment of her as being motivated by gain alone.

With polite conversation exhausted, Irene makes ready to leave, but as she takes up her gloves, Clare’s white husband John Bellew enters the room (Larsen 28). He affectionately calls her “Nig” (Larsen 28). *Nig*, an homage to Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, was Larsen’s original title for *Passing*, but Knopf deemed the title “too inflammatory” and pressured her to change it (Davis 287, 306-7). Her guests are angered and confused by his nickname. Is he aware of Clare’s race and using such an offensive term? Clare, who notes her guests’ alarm, asks John to explain his comment, her mocking smile, “a jeer, it might be called,” directed at Irene (Larsen 28, 29). Clare reveals her trickster nature with her smile that mocks her husband, who, with racist attitudes, is ironically married to a woman who, despite her physical appearance, is legally ‘black.’ She knows what John’s response will be and believes that it will be humorous to Irene, as indicated by her gaze at her.

Bellew tells the ladies that when they married, Clare was “white as a lily” but “gets darker every year. . . . I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger” (29). His comment creates a level of legitimate discomfort on the part of the characters and the reader. As an outsider and observer of this scene, the reader cannot help but again ask if Clare’s passing is worth the price. The comedic quality of the metatheatrical interaction between the characters is created by Clare’s dual role, that of a white wife to Bellew and that of a black woman who is passing as white. The text calls attention to the artificiality and illusory nature of race as well as the necessity of Clare’s performance to maintain her role as Bellew’s wife.

The characters laugh, hysterically on the part of Irene, who has difficulty restraining herself, which endangers Clare (Larsen 29). “As Irene’s long laughter signifies this joke represents the greatest paradox in the novel: Clare is what she is not—a ‘nigger’ ” (Thompson, “Makin’ A Way” 21). Irene protects Clare’s racial identity, despite her desire to “shout at the man beside her” and despite not fully understanding her own actions (Larsen 30). Larsen utilizes Bellew to increase the tension and initially create sympathy for Irene: “The suspense, the danger, hilarity, suppressed indignation, and barely controlled hysteria of the scene all hinge on the potential revelation of the marriage as a mixed one, with both Irene and Gertrude cooperating to keep the secret. Larsen deliberately develops the scene to make the deception as difficult as possible” (Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen* 297). However, enduring Bellew’s racism is difficult only momentarily for Irene and Gertrude, whereas for Clare, it is continuous. In contrast to most passing novels in which we feel sympathy for the passing black character who maintains racial allegiance, Larsen instead encourages sympathy for Clare, whose loyalty to race is practically non-existent, reasons for which were previously explored (298). Gertrude and Irene

are insiders and are in on the joke. As they witness Clare's performance, we see a tragic aspect of her passing: she must endure racist tirades by her husband. However, we also see that the trickster's joke is on him. He has been fooled and ironically loves that which he hates the most.

Clare's response to Irene's exaggerated mirth grows darker when John Bellew says to Clare, "I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have and never will be" (Larsen 29). Controlling her urge to laugh, Irene casts a sidelong glance at Clare encountering "her peculiar eyes fixed on her with an expression of dark and deep and unfathomable that she for a short moment had the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart. A faint sense of danger brushed her, like the breath of a cold fog" (29). Yes, Clare desires Irene's amusement, but not at the expense of exposing her performance. In theater, timing is everything. Clare will reveal herself in her own time. In this moment of her performance, she is seeking the adoration of her audience in Gertrude, and especially Irene, as if to say 'Look at what a brilliant performance I have pulled off.' Only a master thespian could accomplish such a performance. However, Irene's perspective is one of fear of discovery and of superiority toward Clare. Irene's reference to Clare as a "creature" indicates that she views her as the 'other.' She believes that her socio-economic status is above that of Clare, who often appears to continue to view as the poor black girl whose father was a drunk (5). Her sense of elevated status is further reinforced as she refers to Clare as "Clare Kendry" throughout the novel, though Clare identifies herself as Mrs. John Bellew after their meeting at the Drayton Hotel, early in the narrative (23).

Irene, Clare's coconspirator, audience and supporting cast understands the consequences Clare would suffer should her performance be revealed. She also has her own fear with which to contend. Having left Clare's residence, Irene later ponders "that look on Clare's incredibly

beautiful face,” which seems “defiant,” along with something else she cannot identify (Larsen 33). Clare is daring Irene to say something, anything, to John Bellew to reveal her race and at the same time demanding that she not do so—the ambiguous nature of the trickster performer. For Clare, this is an entertaining game. She seems to delight in her trickster role and is defiant of the dominant society, personified by her husband, that creates the necessity of her masquerade. She simultaneously suffers for her performance. While it cannot possibly be pleasant for her to be called “Nig” by her husband, it surely has an ironic hilarity that such a racist man is not only married to but father to persons of the race he so despises. Like any trickster, Clare is irony embodied, inhabiting both worlds, one of a white woman in her performance with her husband, and the other as a legally black woman with Irene and Gertrude. She is also aware of the necessity of not revealing the masquerade to those for whom the mask is worn in order to ensure her economic survival. Clare’s performance in the tea scene is one of tragedy and comedy perfectly intertwined, an exemplification of metatheater, and of trickster’s mocking the oppressor.

It may be tempting to view Irene’s contempt for Clare as some noble loyalty to her race. However, Irene views herself as the superior chaste mother, the opposite categorical label of Clare as something primitive and exotic—the archetypical virgin and whore. As noted by Blackmer, “Larsen explores the crucial distinctions between Clare’s highly self-conscious rhetorical deployments of the fictions of race and Irene’s unself-conscious internalization of *Plessy [v. Ferguson]*” and Irene’s belief that “she can gain security and meaning solely through marriage and ignore the larger implications of living in a racially divided and segregated society” (59). Irene is unable or unwilling to discuss the violence of race, as is evidenced late in the novel when she chastises her husband for discussing lynching with her sons (Larsen 73). Irene’s

perspective of Clare is one of mocking superiority. She sees Clare not only as playing a joke, but as a joke. However, Irene's marriage is as much rooted in security as is Clare's. Passing compels its performer's and co-conspirators' to secrecy, a characteristic of the trickster. Irene's lack of acknowledgement of her own insecurities makes it impossible for her to see the brilliance of Clare's performance. "Clare's ability to accomplish this feat [be a private American citizen] is dependent on her unique position as a black woman who can wear the mask of mimicry (quite literally she looks like a beautiful white woman) and at the same time, unmask the performative nature of such dominant identities. Clare does pass; but with an altogether different sensibility than does Irene. . . . 'Play passing' is acceptable but principled passing is not. The problem comes in distinguishing between these two modes" (DeVere Brody 1058). DeVere Brody reads Clare as the 'playful passer' and Irene as the 'principled passer' (1058). She notes that "Clare uses her 'ivory mask' as a decoy to distract her adversaries and to allow her to infiltrate hostile territories" (1058). Whereas Clare "infiltrates a particular segment of dominant American society," "Irene yearns for assimilation" (1059).

Clare taunts her husband and Irene, playing with the situation, but Irene, her supporting cast member and audience whose anger is growing with each word, is unaware of the ironic humor in the situation: "This wasn't funny" (Larsen 30). Irene finally seems to sense the danger she is causing Clare and believes she is "held by some dam of caution and allegiance to Clare," who steers the conversation away from race (30). It is more probable that Irene is again afraid that Bellew will realize that she is passing as white. Later, in a discussion with her husband Brian about the tea party and John Bellew's racial tirade, Brian reminds Irene that she too has passed and of the trickster nature of passing: "You, my dear, had all the advantage. You knew what his opinion of you was, while he—Well, 'twas never thus. We know, always have. They don't. Not

quite. It has, you will admit, its humorous side, and sometimes, its conveniences” (38). Brian sees the humor of the encounter at the tea party, along with the “conveniences” afforded to those who pass, including his wife—so long as he, her darker skinned husband, is not present. Brian’s use of “advantage” indicates the power structure of the situation created by Clare, of which Irene is ignorant, her perspective clouded by her emotions and fear. “Clare has never been afraid of being ‘found out’—that is Irene’s fear. Indeed, Clare might have looked forward to the moment when Bellew would realize that he had been duped by his wife. Such is the natural culmination of Clare’s tea in Chicago (Chapter Three, Section I); but Irene never understood that even fully nor is she able to grasp Clare’s role as a triumphant trickster. Irene is much too myopic, too literal, too far removed from a certain class of her race to understand” (Tate 1064).

Conversely, Clare, with her trickster qualities, is aware of her husband Bellew’s atypical position of disadvantage and the hilarity of the irony of the situation. Bellew does not actually know the race of his wife, his daughter, or that of her friends, which allows Clare to amuse herself at his expense, and is especially scathing when one considers his nickname for her, a hateful word used to degrade African Americans. Irene eventually agrees with Brian: “‘It’s funny about “passing.” We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it’ ” (Larsen 39). Irene, while analyzing her contempt of Clare’s passing, evades analysis of her own behavior. The humor illustrated by Levine as being lost on the outsider, is therefore lost on her as she sets herself apart from Clare. The narrative illustrates the comical aspect of passing, of pulling a joke on the oppressor. Irene’s conflicting opinions about passing are also suggestive of Irene’s conflicting feelings about Clare, a woman she despises and desires concurrently. Clare is the trickster cultural hero, challenging the racial construct through

metaplay. She is trickster Coyote who swindles the wasichu (white man) who brags about cheating the Sioux at his trading post (Erdoes and Ortiz 342).

They Always Come Back

Clare continues to insinuate herself into Irene's life on her quest to re-enter the black world. As Brian relayed to Irene earlier in the novel, "[People who pass] always come back" (Larsen 38). In the majority of passing novels, the character who passes longs for the familiarity of the black family and culture that they left behind, as is the case with Clare. In contrast to the 'tragic mulatta,' Clare is not returning out of race loyalty or to a community that accepts her as black:

Ostensibly, *Passing* conforms to the stereotype of the tragic mulatto. However, many factors make such an interpretation inadequate. The conventional tragic mulatto is a character who 'passes' and reveals pangs of anguish resulting from forsaking his or her Black identity. Clare reveals no such feelings; in fact, her psychology is inscrutable. Moreover, Clare does not seem to be seeking out Blacks in order to regain a sense of racial pride and solidarity. She is merely looking for excitement, and Irene's active social life provides her with precisely that. An equally important reason for expanding the racial interpretation is that alone it tends to inhibit the appreciation of Larsen's craft. Larsen gave great care to portraying the characters; therefore, the manner of their portrayal must be important and ultimately indispensable to interpreting *Passing*'s meaning. Thus, the 'tragic mulatto' interpretation not only is unsuited to the book's factual content, but also disregards the intricately woven narrative. (Tate 142-143).

Clare is in for a bit of fun, of amusement, when she returns to black social life. However, Irene is not interested in bringing her back into the fold: “Well, Clare can count me out. I’ve no intention of being the link between her and her poorer dark brethren” (Larsen 39). As noted by Hutchinson, “When she [Clare] decides later that she wants to rejoin Negro life as a result of her encounter with Irene, her white identity walls her off from this; Irene will not let her return” (*In Search of Nella Larsen* 301). Clare’s return threatens Irene’s security, that which she holds most dear. Irene attempts to pressure Clare with the possibility that it is not safe for her to “run the risk of knowing Negroes,” that it would endanger her child (Larsen 46, 48). Clare tells her “I’m beginning to believe that . . . no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe” (48). She reminds Irene that she is “used to risks,” but Irene continues her protest (48). Clare, however, is determined to persist in her return to black life: “I haven’t any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do. . . . Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, ’Rene. I’m not safe” (58). Not only does the trickster Clare challenge the social norms as a woman who passes as white, she also defies the secretive conventions of passing.

The novel’s title is not only in reference to Clare’s permanent passing as white, and Irene’s temporary passing, but also to the ‘passing’ of Clare back into the black world from which she has been apart. In addition, the title refers to the sexual tension between the women, the lesbian subtext of which has already been explored at length by Deborah McDowell and Judith Butler. It can also be read as a metaphor for the historical era of the Harlem Renaissance in which black performance was an object of observation by whites (Harrison-Kahan 118). Fashioning one’s own identity shifts the gaze as “Larsen specifically privileges the trope of passing to examine how her female protagonists depend upon performances of identity to

constitute their subjectivity and to resist representation as objects to be looked at” (Harrison-Kahan 120). Blackmer observes that “the title of the novel serves as a metaphor for a wide range of deceptive appearances and practices that encompass sexual as well as racial ‘passing’ ” (52). Like the trickster, Clare effortlessly passes between worlds, traveling through all like a ‘native,’ but permanently belonging to none. The line between the worlds of black and white is blurred for Clare. For Irene, the lines are distinct. When Irene asks Brian why people who pass always return, he tells her that he doesn’t know, “If I knew the answer, I’d know what race was” (Larsen 38). Brian’s astute observation points to the absurdity of the racial construct. His experiences with race are sharply different from Irene and Clare’s. He is limited by his skin color in ways the two women do not experience.

Gone! Death of a Performer

As is characteristic of most tricksters, Clare meets a dramatic end. Her insinuation into Irene’s life has begun to fragment Irene’s security and emotional stability. Irene contemplates how to free herself of Clare. Irene’s desire to be rid of Clare is exacerbated by her suspicion that Clare and Brian are having an affair (Larsen 62-64). Her thoughts turn to the unthinkable: what if Bellew should discover that his wife is black? She cannot be the one responsible for this disclosure, believing herself to be loyal to Clare because of race:

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic.

Sitting alone in the quiet living-room in the pleasant firelight, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children. (Larsen 69)

Larsen points to the existential impossibility of passing as a solution, of creating one's own identity through disguise, be it that of a woman, black woman, straight woman, or an independent woman who exists outside of the domestic sphere—for both Clare and Irene. Whereas Clare recognized these impossibilities early in life, Irene appears to just now acknowledge them. Clare's early identification of societal restrictions upon her allow her at times sidestep them, at least in the realm of performance. Irene, on the other hand, feels trapped by them. Additionally, should John Bellew indeed learn that Clare has “a touch of the tar-brush,” Clare would return to Harlem and black life, which is the greatest possible threat to Irene's security (19). If Clare is free, all is lost for Irene (71-72). Again, as throughout the novel, Irene is faced with contradictory choices and emotions. She is damned if she does and damned if she does not.

The following day, Irene is shopping with Felise Freeland, and collides with John Bellew, “as if in answer to her wish” to be rid of Clare (Larsen 69-70). Bellew greets her politely, but quickly realizes, as a result of Felise's darker skin tone, that Irene is not who he first believed her to be (70). Irene's reaction to Bellew's “displeasure” is, perhaps, her first conscious performance

in the novel: “Instinctively, in the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask. Now she turned on him a totally uncomprehending look, a bit questioning. Seeing that he still stood with hand outstretched, she gave him the cool appraising stare which she reserved for mashers, and drew Felise on” (70). It is now Irene who performs, who reverses the gaze. However, Irene is no trickster. She is not only caught in the act by Bellew, but by her friend Felise: “Been ‘passing’ have you?” (70). Irene responds to her, quickly stepping back into her familiar role of denial: “I do, but not for the reason you think. I don’t believe I’ve ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean, except once. You’ve just passed the only person that I’ve ever met disguised as a white woman” (70). Irene differentiates between public and private passing, the latter of which she views as less of a betrayal of race and identity than the former.

Irene conceals from Felise how she is acquainted with Bellew, safeguarding Clare’s secret from the black community as she does from the white (Larsen 70). Is her concealment out of loyalty to race, to Clare, or to herself? After much deliberation, Irene makes no mention of the encounter with Bellew to her husband Brian or to Clare, convinced of the probability that Clare’s independence would mean an end to her marriage (71-72). A “vile” thought occurs to her: “If Clare should die” (72). Foreshadowing Clare’s death is not the only literary device employed by Larsen in Irene’s “vile” thoughts; she is also establishing the possibility that Irene may be responsible for it.

That evening Irene and Brian attend a party given by the Freeland’s, to which Brian has invited Clare, despite Irene’s purposeful omission (Larsen 73). Prior to the party, Clare arrives at the Redfield’s home and discusses what she would do if Bellew were to become aware of her race and she were free of her marriage (and daughter) (75). Irene perceives Clare’s desire to live

in Harlem to be “intended as a warning [that] take[s] possession” of her (75). Her conviction that she has done the right thing (for herself) in not revealing her encounter with Bellew is strengthened as she determines how it would weaken her power in her relationship with Brian (77). At the Freeland’s party, Irene continues to be disturbed by Clare and Brian’s possible affair (78). The arrival of John Bellew at the party seals the fate of the three of them.

He 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.

Clare 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.

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. (Larsen 79)

Always the trickster, Clare is seemingly not phased but amused by this devastating discovery. She falls to her death from a window into symbolic white snow. Irene may have pushed her, but she will not allow herself to remember, leaving the reader unsure of what actually occurs. She does not regret Clare's 'passing' into the next world, though her physical attraction to Clare is again clear in her thoughts of her: "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" (80). Clare represent a threat to Irene's conventional life in the exposition of her passing, to her marriage because of a suspected affair with Irene's husband Brian, and to her unconscious mimicry of the upper middle class white woman in her attraction to her (Blackmer 258). The trickster Clare has made her final dramatic performance and an equally dramatic exit. Clare's performance ending means that Irene's can continue. Irene is unaware that her conventional life enforces "the very social constraints that limit all women" (261). While Clare unabashedly uses her sexuality to attain her wants, Irene represses her desires, emulating the middle class white woman for whom she passes. Mar Gallego notes that through her categorized characterizations of Irene and Clare, Larsen "delves into the more serious work of exploring the diverse stereotypes ascribed to African American women" (122). Her characters are not merely stereotypes—Larsen is challenging the few roles available to early twentieth-century African American women, that of sexless mother and domestic servant as well as the sexual servant roles of African American women. Reading *Passing* as a trickster tale points to the impossibility of creating one's own identity with the confines of stereotypes surrounding race, gender, and class.

Conclusion

Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* utilizes protagonists Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew, who masquerade as white—Irene publicly and Clare privately and publicly—to confront the concepts of race, sexuality, and gender stereotypes. Though the novel on the surface may appear to judge those who pass, it actually provides a social commentary on the characters' limitations imposed by race and gender, which are parodied and defied by Larsen through the trickster performance of passing. One character, Irene, passes sporadically and is oblivious to the restrictions she encourages, while her counterpart Clare knowingly manipulates the system to her advantage. Larsen utilizes a trickster narrative, as she tempts the reader to judge the individuals for their passing and morality when her character Clare is simply using the tools available to her to survive and thrive in a society that is indifferent to, and even hostile toward, her social equality. While passing as white is no longer so prevalent among African Americans as it was when the novel was written, Larsen's work continues to be relevant for women in their awareness of and challenge to the roles they play in the theatre of society and the performances they must maintain in order to survive and thrive. Trickster appeals to us to ask ourselves not only what masks and camouflage we wear, but to challenge the society that demands that we do so in order to achieve own socio-economic agency. What mask are you wearing right now?

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