Passing, Segregation, and Assimilation: How Nella Larsen Changed the Passing Novel

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PASSING, SEGREGATION, AND ASSIMILATION: HOW NELLA LARSEN
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PASSING, SEGREGATION, AND ASSIMILATION: HOW NELLA LARSEN
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THESIS

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Introduction

In 1892, Homer Plessy, a man who was seven-eighths white and one-eighth black, was forcibly removed and then jailed for sitting in the whites-only section of a railroad car in Louisiana.¹ Plessy disputed these events in the Supreme Court in 1896, where he argued that his black ancestry was imperceptible, and that he was by all definitions a white person. The Supreme Court ruled that Plessy’s exclusion from the white railroad car was not a violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment because while the amendment was created to ensure that all men are treated equally, it was never intended to eliminate social distinctions based on color.

However little a percentage of his ancestry was black, it was that percentage that mattered. Despite Plessy’s white appearance, the state of Louisiana viewed him as black and treated him accordingly, illustrating the illogicality of racial lines and the laws created to guard them. This left individuals who, like Plessy, were visibly white, but by definition still black, to either accept their position in society as inferior or to escape such oppressive markers by passing for white.

In 1929, Nella Larsen wrote *Passing*, a novel that delves into the lives of two African-American women living in segregated society. *Passing* portrays the reunion of two childhood friends, Clare Kendry and Irene Westover. The two had lost touch when Clare’s father died and Clare was forced to move in with her two white and racist aunts. When they meet again, Irene is living in Harlem with her two children and her husband, who practices medicine. Clare has married a successful businessman, John Bellew. Clare’s husband however, is a white racist who is unaware that Clare is in fact black. At first glance, the title *Passing* appears to refer to the
lifestyle that Clare has chosen. However, she decides early in the novel that she would like to rejoin black society and no longer cares for racial pretenses. Irene, who Clare has adopted as her guide into the black community, treats Clare with civility. Yet all the while, she is resentful of Clare’s cavalier attitude and wishes to prevent her reentry into the black community. In the novel, Irene’s identity will come into question, as she wears a particular visage for society while masking her true thoughts and feelings.

The relationship between Irene and Clare is at first one of fascination, as the two have lifestyles that intrigue one another. Things quickly start to change however, when Irene concludes that Clare and her husband Brian are having an affair. Irene’s suspicious attitudes toward Clare become hostile and she is more determined than ever to prevent Clare from joining her social circle and perhaps, from taking her place in black society. The novel takes an unexpected turn with a confrontation between John Bellew and Clare. She mysteriously falls to her death through an open window with Irene standing nearby. Clare’s demise is further muddled with a plethora of thoughts that run through Irene’s mind at the time, making her the lead suspect in Clare’s sudden death. Clare’s death is never resolved, leaving that event, like many others in the novel, open for interpretation. Irene, who prides herself on her honesty, has the most befuddled interpretation of how Clare died at the end of the story. The reader is left unsure of whether Irene’s bemusement is sincere, or if she is disguising her true knowledge. Her assertion that Clare’s death was an accident is marred by her hope that Clare is in fact dead. Irene’s fervent desire to be rid of Clare, even by death, reveals a troublesome element of her nature. It also draws attention to the drive behind Irene’s extreme loathing for Clare. The reader is left to consider what Irene may be striving to protect. Is it her husband, her position in society,
or racial boundaries that rouse such strong resentments in Irene? Without a suspect in place, the reader must shift his/her focus from Clare’s murder to the conditions that lead to her early death.

What makes *Passing* such an extraordinary novel is not only that it avoids the traditional conventions of the passing novel, which are typically concerned with the dire effects of leaving one’s race behind, but it calls those conventions into question. Clare does not redeem herself by returning to the black community; she dies, and possibly at the hands of a woman who was supposed to support her according to racial laws. The reader is compelled to sympathize with Clare while wondering what is wrong with Irene. The answer to that question is of course that Irene subscribes to the very ideas about race and ethics that the majority of Americans were invested in at that time. These racial edicts became far more pressing than the lives of individuals themselves, which Larsen recognized and set out to challenge.

Larsen’s *Passing* is important because it captures the subtlety and nuance of race relations and identity at this point in American history in a way that other novels of the time failed to do. Larsen did this by using the established genre of the passing novel to create a depiction that draws the reader’s focus to a point deeper than the act of passing itself, and directs it toward the more difficult underlying questions about race relations and racial identity.

In the next chapter I will look at the social environment that surrounded the passing phenomenon. I will discuss what social analysts and early authors of passing texts identified as motivations behind passing and examine what Nella Larsen felt actually led individuals to do so. Ultimately I will address what Nella Larsen argues all along: individuals cannot fit into social roles designated by racial categories, and the resulting tension leads to unwarranted racial violence.
In my second chapter, I will address two authors who influenced Nella Larsen to change the traditional passing novel. I will describe how one author, Charles Chesnutt, inspired Larsen to change the traditional passing figure in order to demonstrate that the race problem was not in passing, but adhering to racial constructs. The second author, James Weldon Johnson, inspired Larsen with his satirical take on passing, and motivated her to further challenge the racial restrictions on American society.

In chapter three, I will explore how Larsen uses mirrors, an unreliable narrator, and ambiguous situations to comment on the futile and dangerous affect segregation and assimilation had on American culture. Her use of an untrustworthy, but racially loyal heroine helped to reveal the pitfalls in allowing an entire civilization to be divided by racial and social roles.

Finally, I will look at two authors who succeeded Larsen, adopting her position on Americans’ dependency on racial and social roles, and what is lost in succumbing to assimilation. The first author I will discuss, Ralph Ellison, writes a novel that seemingly is not about passing at all, yet his exploration of assimilation illustrates that there is little difference between passing and assimilation to meet social expectations when both require performance and the severing of one’s identity. The second author, Danzy Senna, directly addresses both assimilation and passing as the same with a heroine that passes and assimilates at different intervals in order to avoid discrimination. Neither author offers a solution to the passing problem. Their message resembles Larsen’s in that though race is imagined, society’s dependence on racial divisions is not. To live separately from race is difficult, but possible, and worthwhile in the search for identity.
Chapter 1

Crossing the Line: Nella Larsen’s Take on Transcending Racial Boundaries

During the 1920s, media and literary portrayals of passing all served to warn against crossing the color line. Racial boundaries were closely tied to ethics, often drawing passers as impostors with no race loyalty. Larsen challenged these ideas with her two characters that despite having contradictory views on passing, transgress color boundaries at different intervals, thereby suggesting the inconsistencies in segregation. Moreover, Larsen demonstrated with her characters that the true threat to society’s well being was not passing, but rather the system under which it occurred.

One of the most dangerous times in history to disguise oneself as white was during the 1920s, when racially-biased groups were dominant and openly promoted ideas of an “all-American” non-immigrant nation. Carla Kaplan writes:

Refusing to act out one’s racial identity was particularly risky in the 1920’s, with the nation in the grip of especially violent attempts to regulate social and racial “types”. While other sexual and social taboos were falling by the wayside in this famously rebellious time, fixed racial lines were being drawn more sharply than at any other period of American history. Never before or since has the color line been treated with such hysteria. So called ‘Americanization’ organizations were hell-bent on holding people to strict racial categories and extending segregation’s legal and economic reach by making all movement across racial lines seem both undesirable and unnatural. (Xiv, xv)
Organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the American Legion promoted ideals of racial purity and segregation. In her incisive introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of *Passing*, “Nella Larsen’s Erotics of Race”, Carla Kaplan describes the dark side of the twenties, noting the dominance of naturalization ideology and white society’s preoccupation with maintaining racial lines. These groups were so anti-ethnic and anti-miscegenation, that more lynchings were perpetuated in the Twenties than at any other time. Fifty-one reported hangings occurred in 1922 alone.

The fear of miscegenation was so tremendous that it produced a steady stream of propaganda that only fed white anxiety. Newspapers printed stories reporting thousands of black individuals passing themselves off as white. These reports fueled concerns about the economic circumstances that were the cause of this phenomenon. The white community’s fears were exacerbated by descriptions reporting that these individuals were particularly difficult to detect.

In William M. Kephart’s 1948 publication “The Passing Question,” Kephart references a study conducted by Walter White, which indicated that every year approximately 12,000 white-skinned “negroes” were disappearing. Kephart refers to Rod Ottley’s “Five Million White Negroes” study which sets the number of passers at between forty and fifty thousand annually. While these demographic studies tell us little about why individuals primarily chose to pass during this time, the collection of these numbers is a reflection of the community’s primary concern that a large number of African Americans were infiltrating the white population. The types of reports that survive from this time show that the public’s attention was occupied almost solely by superficial details of the passing phenomenon, rather than its root causes. Therefore, the media reported possible numbers of passers, and printed stories of people that had passed or
crossed into white territory and met unpleasant circumstances as a warning to individuals who might consider doing so.

In *The New York Times*, the story of Ossian Sweet was widely publicized in June 1925.² Sweet had purchased a home in an exclusively white neighborhood that had been owned by an interracial couple. Because the previous owners had been racially mixed, Sweet did not anticipate any confrontation with neighbors. The neighborhood, however, was under the impression that the previous owner, Edward Smith, had been white.

When news spread of an African-American family moving into the community, the neighborhood formed The Waterworks Improvement Association, an organization intended to maintain a “whites only” environment. Within the first few days Sweet was forced to recruit several members of his family and friends to help defend his home, as an aggressive mob formed outside their home, determined to force the family out. Though Sweet and his family had requested police protection, the police only arrived after Leo Breiner, a member of the mob, was shot and killed by one of the defenders of Sweet’s home. Sweet and eleven members of his family were arrested and placed on trial for murder for attempting to protect their home and property.

Fortunately for Sweet, his family was acquitted of the crime in 1926 thanks to extensive assistance from the NAACP. However, their struggle sent a clear message of the dangers of crossing into white provinces, and proved that when it came to defending that right, African Americans were largely on their own.

There were also reports of the notorious Rhinelander case in 1925 in which Leonard “Kip” Rhinelander, a wealthy white socialite, secretly married Alice Jones, a light-skinned African-American woman.³ During the first week of the scandal, Rhinelander stayed with his
wife but he eventually left her, and filed an annulment suit, arguing that he had not known she was black. In the courtroom, Jones was painted as a wanton gold-digger who had lured Rhinelander into a sexual relationship. Rhinelander’s attorney, Isaac Mills read aloud Jones’ letters to Rhinelander, citing her comments of loneliness and a desire to be married as evidence of her plot to ensnare him.

He hoped the letters would prove Jones’ deception of Rhinelander, however his plan backfired as they in fact revealed intense love and affection from both parties. Two of Rhinelander’s letters to Jones were in fact so explicit in nature that the courtroom was cleared of women and children before their reading, illustrating that their passion was not one-sided. Ultimately, revealing the intimate details of their relationship served to make Alice Jones a more sympathetic figure than Rhinelander. Once viewed as the prince that had swept Jones from rags to riches, Rhinelander was viewed publicly as a scoundrel who had allowed his wife to be humiliated in court. Despite the elaborate tale illustrated by Rhinelander’s attorney Mills, the jury consisting of twelve white married men sided with Alice Jones, and upheld the marriage, refusing Rhinelander his annulment.

Despite Jones’ victory, her experience shed light on the circumstances for black individuals during this time period. Although Jones was able to cross race and class barriers, her upward climb in society was short-lived. Her depiction as a conniving seductress revealed a society still unwilling to accept a mixed race marriage, particularly one that crossed boundaries of both race and class.

The stories of Ossian Sweet and Alice Jones demonstrate a very hostile environment faced by people who dared to cross the color line. Sensational media reports of light skinned African Americans passing for white fed the white community’s fear that they might be
interacting with black individuals without knowing it. This fear is at the center of Larsen’s story *Passing*, particularly in her portrayal of the character Irene, who embodies the 1920s’ devotion to guarding racial borders.

Irene views racial boundaries and ethics as joined, viewing passers, and Clare in particular, as immoral. Larsen even refers to the Jones-Rhinelander case as Irene considers several possibilities for ridding herself of Clare for good. “There was the Rhinelander case. But in France, in Paris, such things were very easy. If he divorced her—if Clare were free—But of all the things that could happen, that was the one she did not want” (101). Irene’s reference to the Rhinelander case is ironic. Rather than feeling sympathy for Alice Jones, a mixed woman like herself, she views the case from the white male perspective. She views Alice as a woman who got what she deserved for her deception, and sees the potential for Clare meeting the same fate.

Kaplan describes Irene’s race ideology as being truly problematic, “Irene, race- woman, devotee of ‘security’, fixity, and a world of black and white, right and wrong—proves deadly. Nothing is worse, as it turns out, than the kind of race ‘loyalty’ Irene adheres to, one that can buck no gray areas” (xx). Irene’s position is said by critics such as Kaplan and Youman to strongly imitate the discourse of many well-known white racists of her time, particularly in her belief that the individual is intrinsically bound to their race and that these racial lines are real. Kaplan references Lothrop Stoddard, who wrote *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, as one of the “race men” that Larsen intended Irene to imitate in her continuous attempt to merge race loyalty with ethics. Throughout the novel, Larsen argues that is this very determination to join race and morality that promotes paranoia and violence at the color line.
Through her character Irene, Larsen makes her central argument, that protecting racial boundaries for reasons of ethics or pride can bring dangerous and even deadly consequences. Therefore, Larsen counters the media’s message that passing would only bring humiliation and even danger to the individual who dared to cross the color line. She demonstrates through her race loyalist (Irene) that adhering so strictly to racial segregation is just as dangerous. Irene’s devotion to social order has a blinding effect, as she is unable to see any of the characters for who they really are. Such is the problem with society, Larsen reveals. The public was so preoccupied with finding out who was crossing over, that there was little concern over what impelled some to do so.

Segregation was a concept so strongly reinforced in the media that it seemed pertinent to find probable causes for crossing over racial boundaries. Never was it taken into consideration that perhaps passing was a natural reaction to drawing impossible racial lines in society. Rather, the public strived to find the reasons why individuals would not stay on their designated side. Several writers and even social analysts have worked to identify motivating factors behind the passing phenomenon. These ranged from passing to escape persecution, to gain acceptance, or to benefit economically. In 1963, one researcher, James Conyers, attempted a scientific approach to determining the reasons behind racial passing in “Negro Passing: To Pass or Not to Pass.”

Conyers created a survey that listed a variety of motivators for individuals to pass. The survey was given to both white and black respondents and included several responses to the question, “Why do you think a Negro would want to pass?” The provided responses were:

1. Lack of identification with other Negroes
2. Fallen in love or married into the white race
3. To secure economic advantages
4. To hide one’s past life
5. To secure equal, social, cultural and recreational advantages  
6. To have something to feel important about among other Negroes  
7. To obtain some psychic thrill in fooling the white man (217).

“To secure equal cultural, social and recreational advantages” was ranked as the top reason to pass by both white and black respondent groups.² William M. Kephart stated that the social preference for lighter skinned African Americans caused African Americans to choose lighter skinned mates and to take steps toward lightening their own skin using skin bleaches advertised in magazines such as *Ebony* (337). To secure the advantages of living as a white person is by far the most reasonable response. This option should have raised the question however, as to why it was imperative to cross over into other racial territory in order to gain social acceptance and economic benefits.

Naturally if one race is faced with oppression while the other enjoys social and economic gain, individuals who can would certainly want to cross over into such beneficial territory. Why would those people be perceived as traitors for pursuing what all Americans want? Nella Larsen references this issue through her heroine Clare, who passes in order to gain what she wants in life, “For, of course, 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. Then, too, I wanted things” (26). That Clare refers to her passing experience as an instinctive response to her circumstances, without shame or repentance, illustrates that the problem is not in what she has done, but the circumstances that left her no other choice. Irene’s negative reaction to Clare’s story is reflective of the view of passing during this time period. As Clare reveals her passing story, Irene regards her with suspicion and distrust, “There followed that trill of notes that was Clare Kendry’s laugh, small and clear and the very essence of mockery” (21). The reader receives no other evidence of Clare’s deceitfulness, other than Irene’s assessment of her. Irene only truly begins to suspect her
once she has learned that Clare has been passing. Her judgment of Clare is characteristic of how passers were perceived by white and black race loyalists.

This brings us back to Conyers’s study which states that some individuals would want to pass because they might gain some satisfaction out of pulling the wool over the white man’s eyes, painting black individuals as tricksters and passing as a transgression of sorts. Another option states that individuals would pass in order to escape from their past life, insinuating that passers are criminals to begin with. Conyers’s study itself reveals a deeply rooted prejudice towards passers, allowing for no respectable causes for crossing over.

Another motivator Conyers reveals is that African Americans might pass because they fail to identify with members of their own race, a logical observation on Conyers’s part. However, the complexities of racial identification go deeper than Conyers’s list of possible motivators. The question should not be if individuals are passing because they do not “fit in” per se, but what exactly they trying to fit into. Should it be believed that if individuals do not fit into their particular racial group, the problem lies within them, instead of the system? Conyers failed to ask why individuals struggled to identify with members of their own race, and why it was perceived as important to do so. Race loyalty was a phenomenon that was deeply ingrained in American society; it caused individuals who passed to be perceived as deserters, tricksters, and even criminals.

For many African Americans, the act of passing was as contentious as it was among whites. In America on Film, cinema analysts Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin discuss the desire to pass in African Americans. “People who pass are sometimes accused of ‘selling out’ their racial or ethnic heritages. However, people who can pass often choose to do so precisely because whites are still afforded more privilege and power in our national culture, and those who
pass often want to share in those opportunities” (57). M. Giulia Fabi makes a reference to Langston Hughes’ 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in which Langston Hughes warns against the “‘urge to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization’” (115). During this time, writers feared that passing was a form of assimilation and separation from cultural identity. Fabi also discusses Robert A. Bone’s *The Negro Novel in America* (1958) in which he describes literary accounts of passing’s resemblance to “assimilationism” and its implication of “an unconscious desire to be white” and “unconscious self-hatred” (126). Bone goes further to argue that passing for white is not only a demonstration of self-hatred, but it is an admission of white superiority (Fabi 126).

In addition, Fabi mentions Bone’s description of passing as a racial strategy that is not intended to explore the interconnections between black and white people, but instead served as an example of “psychological assimilation” in which the passer is severed from their past and adopts the mentality of their adopted race (126). Though Fabi criticizes the passing novel in itself, typically the passing story sanctioned his argument with characters that were portrayed as traitors to their own kind, only finding redemption in their return to their true race. This is what set Nella Larsen’s *Passing* apart from previous novels that endorsed racial categorization. Larsen works to change perceptions about race, sex, and identity altogether, disputing the belief that an individual can find their identity by fitting into social roles.

In fact, Larsen’s most poignant argument throughout *Passing* is that the individual does not lose her identity in passing itself; but in her attempt to meet social expectations. We see this in the person of Irene, who is confident about her values and her status early in the novel, when her position in society is secure. In one of the first scenes, Irene sits with Clare and Gertrude, feeling out of place due to her superior class and loyalty to her race: “it arose from a feeling of
being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern in life as well” (34). As the novel progresses, it becomes evident that Irene’s social confidence derives from her husband’s medical position. Without Brian, Irene is lost and insecure. Close to the end of the story, Irene realizes that she is not bound to Brian by love, but by what his status means for her, “Strange, that she couldn’t now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more?..[…]..Nevertheless, she meant to keep him.[…]..Better, far better, to share him than to lose him completely” (107-108). It becomes evident through Irene’s internal dialogue, that she has sacrificed her family’s happiness and her own in order to achieve and maintain social prestige. Irene has not chosen to pass for white as Clare, but she has still lost her identity in her attempt to keep her position in society. Larsen’s argument is opposite to Bone’s in that “assimilation” takes place when individuals attempt to fit into their social roles and not for those who have decided that they cannot be held by restrictions of race.

This is what gives Larsen’s portrayal of the passing individual such undeniable value. While some authors felt that it was necessary to illustrate the dilemma of the mixed race individual in choosing between what is ethical and what is desired, Larsen broke that pattern as well. Larsen felt that the choice in whether or not to pass was not parallel to deciphering between right and wrong. She demonstrates that the ethics connected to race categorization were just as complex as ethnicity itself. Some authors played an essential part by defending passers in demonstrating that there was more to passing than simply trying to get ahead economically, and that perhaps passing is the result of humans existing in a society that allowed no alternative.
Larsen takes this argument further with wealthy characters that can choose to pass or not to pass and yet are still forced to wear a disguise, be it racial or sexual.

Larsen thereby suggests it is not the act of passing that has individuals wearing masks, but rather a society that allows only for people who are black, white, straight…etc., but nothing in between. Even her narrator, who strongly upholds these roles, does not fit into them herself, which increases her feelings of anxiety and feeds her need to defend the world of categories she has subscribed to.

In Larsen’s *Passing*, Irene serves as the embodiment of society itself, dependent on stereotypical roles and racial categorization disguised as what she believes is “loyalty.” Meanwhile, her childhood friend Clare cannot be held by racial restrictions. She not only crosses the color line, but flaunts doing so. Clare even resists the traditional role of the passing character, in which the passer guards her true race as a deep secret and regards his or her act of passing with shame. Clare laughs at the rules tied to race, feeling no need to swear allegiance to any side. Irene regards Clare as irresponsible for posing as white, yet Larsen sets up many scenes in which Irene appears to be the individual tied to appearances. In watching how Irene and Clare behave in the same social and domestic situations, Clare begins to appear not reckless, but free from racial ideology.

Yet, just like the environment she lives in, Irene is not willing to accept Clare’s forward-thinking and perceives her as a threat to the life to which she is accustomed. There lies the true racial dilemma. Progressive thinkers like Clare cannot survive in a society with such strictly guarded racial lines. Regardless of how evolved Clare is in her disregard for racial boundaries, the environment in which she lives is not hospitable to those who will not “stay on their side.”
Thus, Irene’s reaction to Clare is not simply her own, but evocative of how society would deal with the likes of Clare.

   Carla Kaplan comments that individuals who adamantly protect racial categories “are most likely to increase the violence that surrounds racial categorization” (xxi). Clare’s tragic death at the end of *Passing* reflects not the rivalry between two women, but is symbolic of a society that promotes racial allegiance to such great extremes that it becomes harmful to those within it.

   Through her representation of two women living on opposite ends of the passing argument, Larsen shows the detrimental effects of sustaining a society built on laws of segregation. Ultimately, she argues, the inconsistencies that come with “separate but equal” classes will push many to cross the color line as they are denied the privileges that come with being white. Despite what the media and literary sources identify as motivators for abandoning one’s history, it is the present state of inequality that drove individuals to pass. In a society where individuals must choose a classification, regardless of whether or not they truly fit, most are by default, passing.

   Larsen’s novel changes the pattern of the previous passing novel that presented passing as the problem and returning to one’s roots as the solution. Nella Larsen was not the first author to challenge the passing novel however. In my next chapter I would like to look at two authors who clearly influenced Nella Larsen. One of the authors, Charles Chesnutt, wrote the passing story in its traditional form, in which the passing individual must return to his roots or forever bear the burden of his transgression on his conscience. The other writer, James Weldon Johnson, perhaps Larsen’s inspiration for *Passing*, wrote a more satirical passing novel in which the protagonist wears several disguises before choosing to pass. One of these writers represents all
that Larsen felt should change about passing in literature, while the other opens the door for Larsen to change the face of the passing novel altogether.
Chapter 2

Shroud of Ethics: Nella Larsen and the Traditional Passing Novel

Nella Larsen’s literary influences wrote their work during a time when racial lines were most strictly drawn in American society. The white community often perceived those who crossed the color line as tricksters; the black community viewed them as traitors. “Staying on your side” was delineated as a moral responsibility by the media and writers emphasized the importance of maintaining racial boundaries. In the traditional passing novel, returning to one’s roots was often regarded as the solution to the passing problem. In her novel *Passing*, Larsen demonstrates that passing was not a problem in itself, but instead a symptom of the greater ills of a racial structure that separates two races, privileging one and restricting the other. Sustaining racial margins was particularly problematic when one race was quite often indistinguishable from the other.

In *Passing*, Larsen allows her characters to pass freely over the color line, demonstrating the simplicity of the act, and thereby proving the impossibility of maintaining true racial separation. Concurrently, Larsen illustrates the absurdity of tying morality to something as ill defined as race. By looking at Larsen’s predecessors we can gain a better understanding of what she felt literature should say about passing. Unlike many of her predecessors, Nella Larsen’s novel shifts blame from the passing figure and illustrates the societal causes of the phenomenon. Ultimately, Larsen argues that creating such restrictions on race and placing them under the guise of moral responsibility only creates hostility and even violence among those who would vehemently guard these imagined lines.
In this chapter I will closely look at two authors that influenced Nella Larsen to write the novel that would change the passing story tradition in order to reveal her take on passing. One such author, Charles Chesnutt, prompted Larsen to challenge the ethics of race and the existing color caste within the African-American community. The other writer, James Weldon Johnson, challenges existing concepts of passing incentive, race loyalty, and identity, opening the door for Larsen to rework the passing novel.

Charles W. Chesnutt is best known for his short stories “The Wife of His Youth”, “The Conjure Woman”, and *The House Behind the Cedars*. Chesnutt has received criticism for portraying a type of caste system in the African-American community, a feature of his writing that Larsen would alter in her own version. Larsen would also challenge Chesnutt’s romanticized depiction of passing. Her story would turn the traditional passing story over on its head, arguing that when it comes to race, there is no “right choice” to be made.

Chesnutt’s tale is an example of the traditional passing narrative in which racial adherence was entwined with ethicality. His protagonist is perceived as culpable by all, including himself, until he confesses his transgressions and reveals his identity as a married ex-slave.

In his story “The Wife of His Youth,” Charles Chesnutt depicts the wealthy light-skinned Mr. Ryder, who serves as the dean for the exclusive Blue Vein society, a group of fair-skinned African Americans who pride themselves on the prosperity of their organization as well as the lightness of their skin. When the story begins, Mr. Ryder is planning a ball set for the occasion of his impending proposal to the highly educated and lighter skinned Miss Dixon. The event is interrupted by an unexpected guest, Liza Jane; an ex-slave who has traveled a great distance to find her estranged husband Sam Taylor. Mr. Ryder denies knowing Sam Taylor and dismisses
her, telling her he will be in contact should he hear of her husband. On the night of the ball, Mr. Ryder addresses the Blue Vein society and relays the story of a young light-skinned slave who was separated from his dark-skinned wife during his escape. At the end of his tale he asks the Blue Vein society if they believe that Sam Taylor should acknowledge his wife. The room is silent until Miss Dixon speaks, “She had listened, with parted lips and streaming eyes. She was the first to speak: ‘He should have acknowledged her” (23). In response to Miss Dixon’s outcry the crowd reiterates her statement and agrees that yes, Liza Jane should have been acknowledged by her husband. In response to the uproar Mr. Ryder reveals to the shocked assembly that he is Sam Taylor the ex-slave and that Liza Jane is his wife.

The story ends with Sam Taylor’s astonishing admission. The abrupt conclusion implies that Sam has done the right thing in revealing his history and in acknowledging his dark-skinned wife. Sam Taylor’s dialogue at the end of the story bears resemblance to a public confession in which he is casting off the sins of his past, determined to live a righteous life. The outcry that he receives from the crowd only validates his decision to come out of hiding and live as Sam Taylor. It is not certain whether Sam Taylor or his wife Liza will be happy together as there is an air of dubiety in their final scene together, “leading by the hand his visitor of the afternoon, who stood startled and trembling at the sudden plunge into this scene of brilliant gayety” (24). However, it is conveyed that Sam has made the most laudable decision in finally ending his charade and claiming his true identity. Chesnutt’s conclusion is reflective of the traditional passing novel, in which the passer is viewed as a transgressor that can only be redeemed by returning to his roots. The notion that living righteously lies in one’s loyalty to their race is an idea that Nella Larsen set out to challenge. In a culture that connected race loyalty to morality, Larsen set out to prove that segregation was far more detrimental to society than passing.
Passing had the appearance of the traditional passing novel, yet worked to break conventions that reinforced rather than challenged racial barriers in society. Larsen’s story borrowed several components of the passing story from her forerunners. The primary element that remains constant is her portrayal of the mulatto character that takes on the persona of a white person before feeling remorseful and returning home to the black community. However, Larsen’s heroine Clare’s story will not end with her decision to return to her roots. Larsen’s story begins with Clare’s return rather than ends with it; encountering antagonism from her peers before meeting an untimely death. By preventing Clare from finding salvation in her return to her true race, Larsen demonstrates that ethics are not so cut and dry as choosing the right race.

In “Nella Larsen’s Passing: Irony and the Critics,” Jonathan Little discusses Larsen’s break from the traditional passing ending in which a passer is rightfully reunited with black society. Larsen’s permanent passer Clare, has a far less romantic conclusion in that her return to the black community is not only unwelcome, but also leads to her mysterious death. “Larsen does not depict any ‘freeland’ or supportive community that will embrace Clare in her process of returning. Larsen undermines romantic convention, substituting ironic tragedy where there had been joy” (Little 174). Furthermore, Little states that Larsen intended to expose the idealistic endings of previous passing novels through the distorted perspective of Clare, who views her return to the black community as a sort of romantic homecoming. “When she confesses her desire to return to Harlem, her vision of Blacks is clouded by romantic sentiment and stereotype.[…] her ‘hopeless’ sentimentalism and romanticism ill-prepare her to deal with the reality of the worst aspects of human behavior, including Irene’s escalating resentment, envy, jealousy, and paranoia” (177).
Little’s interpretation of Passing highlights an important element in Larsen’s writing. Her complex storyline is a reaction against stories such as Chesnutt’s “The Wife of His Youth,” and reveals that passing is not something that can be summed up with a virtuous ending. The cultural ties Clare imagined between herself and other members of the black community are not there. Unlike Mr. Ryder, Clare does not receive validation that she is doing the right thing in returning to the black community. She is viewed as an exotic outsider, and Irene, whom she considers to be her connection to black society, is determined to push her out again.

Larsen takes the traditional passing ending, in which the prodigal passer chooses the righteous path by returning to their roots, and begins her story with the passer’s return to black society. Unlike Chesnutt, and passing authors before him, Larsen explores the passing figure’s return from a more realistic point of view. She considers a society that places more emphasis on the act of passing itself, than on the plight of the individual. Larsen considers the possibility that perhaps black society would not be so welcoming to a member that had already betrayed their race. What happens to Clare, Larsen argues, is far more likely in a society that values racial laws over the lives of those residing under them.

By preventing Clare and Irene from truly becoming friends, Larsen draws the reader’s focus to what separates these two women who are in many ways, quite similar. The rift between them is of course Irene’s racial ideology, and her belief that Clare is a traitor to this set of values. In a scene where Clare hears of the Negro Welfare League dance, she pleads with Irene to take her. Irene lists a number of reasons why Clare should not attend, among them being that Clare might be exposing herself as black or that she might be mistaken for a prostitute, “All sorts of people go, anybody who can pay a dollar, even ladies of easy virtue looking for a trade. If you were to go there alone, you might be mistaken for one of them” (70-71). Though Irene assures
Clare that she is only thinking of her safety, she perceives Clare as being “selfish, willful, and disturbing” (73). Irene’s hostile behavior towards Clare undermines the traditional return of the prodigal passer, eliminating the cultural ties often illustrated in the passing novel. Larsen demonstrates that Clare’s greatest error is not passing, but trusting in doctrines of racial allegiance, or other ideologies that might argue that Clare’s rightful place is within the black community. Clare was mistreated by the very person she had placed her faith in, a black woman like herself. Clare’s attempt to return to the black community is compromised, shifting the reader’s focus to Irene and prompting the question as to why she reacts so maliciously toward her.

The answer lies in Irene’s racial integrity, which is much more fixed to racial codes and what she believes is racial uprightness. The irony of Irene’s attitude is how much her ethics are increasingly compromised as she attempts to prevent Clare’s return. Irene’s hostility towards Clare is a reflection of how dominant ideas of racial allegiance can become in society. Despite the fact that Clare is of the same race, Irene feels she must prevent her re-entry into black society because she has violated racial codes. Such codes, Larsen argues, quite often become more important than individuals themselves, rendering ideas of racial allegiance absurd.

Another element typically present in the passing novel that Larsen addresses in her story are the levels of status defined by lighter and darker-skinned African Americans. The racial hierarchy based on skin color within the black community was a definite problem that writers like Charles Chesnutt worked to address. Nella Larsen would delve deeper into this argument, urging readers to identify the hierarchy of skin color at its origin. In “The Wife of His Youth,” Mr. Ryder speaks about the social position of people of mixed race, “I have no race prejudice…[...]…but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether
millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one doesn’t want us yet, but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step. [...] we must do the best we can for ourselves and those who are to follow us” (7). In the beginning of “The Wife of His Youth,” Sam Taylor argues that individuals of mixed race have a social responsibility to uplift themselves by creating distance between themselves and the darker black community, suggesting that lighter African Americans gain status as they move closer to the white race.

Clearly Chesnutt does not share the same perspective as his protagonist when he ensures that his character chooses right in acknowledging his wife. When Sam Taylor acts ethically by revealing his marriage to a darker black woman it is an indication that Chesnutt may have felt segregation within the black community was wrong. While Larsen would have agreed that the black community should not be divided by difference in color, she argues that this too was a result of segregation and privileging white individuals over black.

It is possible that Nella Larsen was thinking of Chesnutt’s short story and his creation of the light-skinned Blue Vein society when she constructed her own passing novel. In *Passing*, Larsen creates a society that is similar in class and culture, but differs in the color of its members. The upper class society that Irene and her husband Brian belong to is composed of wealthy, dark-skinned African Americans.

Thadious M. Davis writes, “In creating characters like Irene, her physician husband and their designer-dressed, college-educated friends, Larsen reduced the material difference in lifestyle between blacks and whites of the middle class and freed her narrative of the more obvious markers of racial identity. This lack of visual difference between blacks and whites in the text creates a fluidity of similarly constructed bodies and colors which in a group cannot be
assigned wholesale to racial otherness” (5). Larsen blurs the lines between black and white upper class citizens, making the differences between them virtually indistinct.

Larsen’s novel differs from previous passing novels in that earlier novels depicted dark-skinned black people as uneducated and poor, with only a few educated and wealthy individuals to serve as examples of what black people can achieve with hard work and dedication. Prior passing novels provided almost no alternative to passing for their characters. “To remain black for them is to be a maid, washerwoman, or menial laborer of some sort, and not have access to white-collar jobs or higher education.[…]. Though she (Clare) might not have the wealth of an international banking agent like her husband John Bellew, she would not have to be consigned to the status of a janitor, as was her father” (Davis 16). Larsen depicts a large class of black people who are educated, well-spoken, and equal to whites in their level of class, education, and lifestyle. In Larsen’s Passing, African Americans don’t have to pose as white in order to enjoy the benefits of wealth and class.

By illustrating the upper middle class society of African Americans, Larsen provides her characters with more agency in the choice to pass. Her characters do not have to decide between ignorance and education, between poverty and wealth. Her characters can choose to pass temporarily like Irene and only obtain the benefits of dining in an exclusively white restaurant, or pass permanently like Clare, who enjoys all the benefits of being a white person. Larsen’s story evolves beyond the character that passes in order to escape poverty or persecution. Irene, who is far wealthier than Clare, also chooses to pass. In creating a civilization in which “separate but equal” is not simply a doctrine, but a reality, Larsen is able to ask the question, “If people no longer need to pass to enjoy a better life, then why does it still happen?” This demonstrates that
passing is not an action propelled solely by need, but it can be viewed as a behavior propagated by an environment that strives to exclude an entire culture.

While Charles W. Chesnutt made very valid points about the divided culture in which African Americans are forced to live, some of his arguments did not go far enough. As Larsen demonstrates, it was essential to note that while the caste system within the black community was wrong, that it was important to address it at its source, in segregation itself. It was segregation that led to a preference for lighter skin in the black community. To recognize that could change perspectives on the benefits of lighter skin, as these preferences only exist as long as whites are privileged over black. But in Larsen’s novel, even when lighter skin was not necessary to achieve success, individuals continued to pass. For as long as one race has advantage over the other, Larsen argues, individuals will permanently or occasionally cross racial lines in order to gain the same benefits afforded to white citizens. Larsen felt that passing was a natural reaction to racial borders that were so poorly defined. However, to attempt to attach ethics to this precarious set of rules in the form of race loyalty is not only illogical, but also dangerous as these racial laws often took priority over the lives of individuals. Larsen felt it was more important to address the racial environment that propagated passing, rather than paint passing itself as immoral.

James Weldon Johnson is another author who was a key predecessor for Larsen. He takes on the concept of passing by portraying an unnamed protagonist referred to as the “ex-colored man.” One writing method that Larsen borrows from Johnson, is his use of an unreliable narrator that he utilized to challenge racial stereotypes and highlight racial discrepancies of the time period in which he wrote. Larsen also uses the voice of an untrustworthy narrator to emphasize how these racial issues penetrated both sides of the racial population. Larsen revisits
Johnson’s exploration of identity through a narrator that wears several identities, experiencing wealth and poverty at different intervals. In the end he finally chooses to pass— not to gain economically, but as a reaction to the trauma he experiences in a society divided by prejudice. The ex-colored man’s journey through a variety of identities depicts race as performance, particularly when racial categorization is given such importance in society. His final decision to pass is made out of his desire for survival, yet he is plagued by his racial convictions even in the end. He ends his story with his admission that despite the reasons for his actions, he has betrayed his kind, giving us insight into his anonymous self-title.

James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* depicts the life of the mixed child of a wealthy white southerner and his light-skinned African-American mistress. The narrator is so light in color that he believes that he is white until a schoolteacher informs him that he is in fact black. It is from this point that the narrator’s point of view completely changes in what he describes as a “dwarfing, warping, distorting influence” (21). The narrator states, “He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the view-point of a colored man” (21). The narrator experiences several changes in his disposition; he becomes reserved and suspicious of how others perceive him.

The ex-colored man’s story truly starts to develop after he is robbed of his inheritance. The ex-colored man opts to leave Atlanta College and pursues a life of labor in the black community. His initial surprise at the ability of his fellow cigar makers is ambiguous in its meaning. It can be interpreted that he was kept so long from the black population that he is truly surprised at their level of intelligence and skill. Simultaneously, it can be interpreted that the narrator has continued to harbor his previous notions of white superiority and continues to view black people in a stereotypical manner. Heather Russell Andrade writes, “*The Autobiography’s*
manifold positions create a writerly tension that is inherent and identifiable in the text, a tension that serves, finally, to undermine the integrity of the first-person narrative voice” (257).

The ex-colored man’s unreliability in the novel is intentional, as it reveals the ignorance generated by an environment that feeds racial propaganda and racial stereotypes. We see this use of a variable narrator once again in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, in which her narrator is prone to ideology that reflected the racist views of her time period. “Larsen condemns Irene’s racial ideology, in part, by having Irene’s language mimic ‘to a surprising degree’ the discourse of some of the most notorious white racists of her day. In her insistence that race is real and that one is ‘bound’ to it, Irene’s language resonates not as much with the ‘race men’ of the Harlem Renaissance like Locke and DuBois, but rather, with racist men like Lothrop Stoddard, author of *The Rising Time of Color against White World Supremacy*” (xx,xxi Kaplan). Irene’s set of values coincides with ideals of maintaining racial divides and treating those who would cross that line as deserters. Therein lies Larsen’s depiction of Irene, a self-proclaimed race woman, who regards Clare with a suspicion that appears only perceptible to her.

Irene reacts to Clare with mistrust that coincides with the concept of “pulling the wool over the white man’s eyes”. She perceives Clare as a trickster, passing to gain the satisfaction of fooling others, “she gave Irene a curious little sidelong glance and a sly, ironical smile peeped out on her full red lips, as if she had been in the secret of the other’s thoughts and was mocking her” (23). Irene’s wariness of Clare is initiated from the moment she is aware that Clare has passed as white.

Irene often regards Clare with feelings of distrust due to her disapproval of Clare’s carefree take on passing. She feels that Clare’s refusal to recognize racial boundaries indicates such a difference between them that she envisions a new boundary amidst them, “Actually they
were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness. Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood” (63).

Irene’s devotion to honoring social roles becomes so significant that she is willing to discount Clare as one of her own and perceive her as an imposter, despite the similarities between them. Yet, Larsen intends for her reader to survey how alike Clare and Irene are in their passing performance in order to observe the hypocrisy of Irene’s skewed critique of Clare. Through Irene’s biased point of view, the laws of racial boundaries appear absurd and then hazardous as Irene’s feelings of resentment increase toward Clare. Like the ex-colored man, who is hindered by his negative preconceptions of black folk, Irene’s misguided racial ideology creates a barrier between her and Clare where it otherwise would not exist. In *Passing*, Larsen borrows the unreliability of Johnson’s narrator, in order to give more importance to her character’s circumstances than to her opinions.

Larsen’s critique of the detrimental effects of the importance of racial categorization is an extension of an argument made by James Weldon Johnson. In his portrayal of the ex-colored man, his narrator wears several personae in his attempt to assimilate into society. Unlike previous passing novels, in which the protagonist will return to his origin in his search for racial identity, the protagonist of *The Autobiography* experiences black identity along with several other identities. In actuality, the ex-colored man fares better as a Spanish-speaker, a gambler, a ragtime player, and a white businessperson than he does as a black man. In chapter eight, the narrator changes from a bankrupt gambler to a famous ragtime player who gains success to the level of receiving the title “professor.” When the chapter begins, the narrator is at his lowest point, scarcely able to pay for his meals, “Some days found me able to peel ten- and twenty-
dollar bills from a roll, and others found me clad in a linen duster and carpet slippers” (114). Within a few pages, the protagonist becomes a famous rag-time player in New York and is soon accompanying a millionaire throughout Europe as his personal musician and friend. The ex-colored man’s easy transition through a variety of identities depicts the volatility of race while demonstrating the absurdity of restricting an entire race that could change and adapt as quickly as the ex-colored man does. The meaninglessness of racial restrictions becomes most evident when the ex-colored man leaves the United States and travels through Europe with his benefactor.

The narrator experiences freedom from race and class restrictions as he accompanies the millionaire through cities unbound by segregation. As the ex-colored man travels through cities such as Berlin, Amsterdam, and Paris, he finds that he not tagged with inferiority, as he would be in the United States.

There comes a point in the novel in which the narrator has grown tired of Europe, despite its freedoms and expresses a desire to return to the United States. His benefactor relays his reluctance to allow the ex-colored man to a society that he feels would waste his potential as he would always be treated as less:

you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man. Now why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle of the black people of the United States?..[…].This idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment; and you do not realize the fearful import of what you intend to do. What kind of Negro would you make now? Es-
I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured, and refined colored man in the United States (144-145).

The millionaire goes on to describe prejudice and how it has not disappeared, but evolved in the United States culture, originating with slavery and progressing into segregation, “unjust laws, unfair and cruel treatment” (146). The millionaire ends his tirade with the assertion that there is no cure for ignorance, which will always materialize in other forms. The narrator acknowledges the wisdom in what his benefactor is saying and realizes that though the millionaire is without prejudice, “he recognized that prejudice was a big stubborn entity which had to be taken into account” (145). Through the millionaire, Johnson argues that though the concept of race may be imagined, the reality is prejudice.

Many authors, including Nella Larsen, would follow in Johnson’s argument that segregation has a noxious effect on society as it renders an entire class of people inferior. In addition, it affirms ideas of difference, feeding racial clichés and discriminatory behavior. By placing his protagonist in an almost utopian atmosphere, in which he is treated with equality, Johnson provides his readers with an example of what he feels society could resemble. Though the representations of Paris and London may appear a bit too polished at times, it demonstrates the possibility of living without social boundaries. To counteract this utopian atmosphere, Johnson pegs his narrator against the most extreme nature of racism when he returns to the United States. It is this experience that forever pushes the ex-colored man over the boundary line to live as a white citizen.
Close to the end of the novel, the Ex-colored man narrates the experience that led him to abandon his identity and pass for white. The narrator witnesses a mob of white men capture and burn a black man who had committed some terrible yet unknown crime.

The crime the captive committed is secondary to the way he is executed, the narrator relaying his death in grim detail, “He squirmed, he writhed...[...].then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear” (187). It is in this section of the novel that Johnson emphasizes the cruelest nature of humans driven by the force of racist propaganda.

Rather than react with hatred toward the mob of Southern white men, the narrator is overcome with shame. “Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with” (Johnson 188). For a moment it might appear that the narrator is feeling antipathy for the black race. However, he goes on to say, “shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive” (188). The narrator then relays that he can now see how his people will sympathize with even their worst criminals, as human nature urges to them to protect them from the dangers present in their society (188). Ultimately, the narrator argues that he cannot hold an individual responsible for wanting to pass in a country that treats him with such injustice otherwise:

I argued that to forsake one’s race to better one’s condition was no less worthy an action than to forsake one’s country for the same purpose. I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a moustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary
for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted on my forehead (190).

Therefore, as the narrator argues, passing is not a form of desertion, but of self-preservation in a society that treats African Americans with inferiority and contempt. Johnson urges his readers to ask not “why do individuals pass?” but, “how can anyone not pass?” in a country where African Americans can “with impunity be treated worse than animals” (191). Though the narrator states that he will claim neither race, ultimately he will be taken for a white man in society. He marries a white woman that knows his true race, but like his mother at the start of the novel, keeps this knowledge from his children. In the end, the narrator is torn between feeling as though he was never truly a black man, and feeling like a deserter to his people (210). The novel ends with the implication that passing is somewhat unethical, but those who do cannot be held responsible, for society leaves them little other choice. Nevertheless, in the end the narrator feels as though he has lost his heritage, “I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (211).

In spite of the justification for his actions, the ex-colored man is still remorseful of his decision to pass. It seems that in the end, Johnson argues that passing could be perceived as immoral, but justifiable in a society that treats its second-class citizens with such barbarity.

In response to Johnson’s penitent passer, Larsen introduces Clare, the antithesis to the remorseful passer who flaunts her passing and treats racial lines with indifference. Larsen maintains Johnson’s argument, however, that society is not welcoming to those who would cross the color line, and therefore Clare’s transgressions will be short lived. In other words, Larsen argues that racial lines are not sacred, and therefore passing is not immoral. Yet, as long as
society is not ready to part with social roles and levels of class, passing will continue to be dangerous business.

Writers like Charles Chesnutt and James Weldon Johnson allowed Nella Larsen to re-explore concepts of race while broadening and sometimes challenging their perspectives on passing, society, and ethics. Larsen opposed Chesnutt’s romanticization of the repentant passer, arguing that returning to one’s descent would not be a resolution to the greater race problem. Yet, Chesnutt’s condemnation of a color caste system within black society coincided with the views of Nella Larsen. She would approach this issue from a larger viewpoint however, arguing that the boundaries between white and black society led to segregation within the black community. In response to Chesnutt’s story, Larsen creates a utopian society in which darker and lighter African Americans live prosperously within their own community. Yet, one of the wealthiest (Irene) still passes in the first chapter, illustrating that as long as society is divided into unequal classes, those who can pass, will.

Much of James Weldon Johnson’s critique appears in Larsen’s most famous novel as well. Her two characters, Irene and Clare, demonstrate the fluidity of race and identity. Clare resembles Johnson’s narrator in her ability to cross color lines with ease. Irene mirrors Johnson’s character as well, as she too passes occasionally, but is bound by ideals of morality intertwined with race. For just like Chesnutt and Johnson, Larsen too felt that morality and race were interconnected in society. Yet her novel would explore how perilous this concept can become, particularly when the color line is guarded with violence disguised as moral obligation. In the next chapter, I will discuss Nella Larsen’s greatest strength, which is her writing style. Her ability to evade interpretation by use of ambiguous language truly sets her apart from previous writers who targeted their readers with a distinct agenda. Larsen’s avoidance of
definition is flawless, as she will leave every character, motive, and action open to question. She leads her readers to ask themselves who these characters are, what do they want and most importantly, what is passing?

In this next chapter I will look exclusively at Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*, and how Larsen utilizes her unreliable narrator to break barriers in racial thinking. I will look at how Larsen’s character Irene determinedly strives to assign roles to herself and those around her only to find that she is unable to. Finally, her fallible heroine Irene will demonstrate through her actions and mental downfall the dangers in subscribing to race loyalty and giving those ideas priority over individual rights.
Chapter 3

Mirror on the Wall: What Nella Larsen’s Ambiguous Novel Reveals About Passing

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* is a deceptively simple text that appears to put race in the background as two childhood friends reunite and attempt friendship despite their competing ideologies on race. Unlike writers before her that dealt with matters of race, Nella Larsen does not put her personal convictions at the forefront. Instead her principals, like everything else in this novel, are subject to interpretation by the reader as she will declare nothing herself, but instead reveal her ideas on race through the third person perspective of an unreliable narrator. It is no surprise that Larsen would disguise the underlying message of her story, as she is writing about the futility of racial categorization during a time period when race was at its most important. Yet, this allows for her story to be subject to much misinterpretation. This is apparent in its reception as several critics give conflicting evaluations on her characters and intent.

This may have been Larsen’s objective all along however, to allow multiple interpretations of her story. Like race itself, the story Larsen tells cannot be placed into any quintessential category. Many critics argue that Larsen created such an ambiguous passing narrative in order to prevent her story and any of her characters from falling into conventional roles in which characters committed the reprehensible act of passing, but found redemption in their return. Nella Larsen avoids the moralistic overtones of her predecessors by keeping her personal agenda well hidden. In order to do this, she uses two components to maintain the ambiguous atmosphere in her novel. Larsen’s use of an unreliable narrator and her literal and
symbolic use of mirrors create an obscure but telling narrative dealing with both segregation and passing.

The reader only receives Irene’s perspective in the story, but doubt her as her interactions with others discount her credibility. Because Irene’s opinions on passing are quite clear, her unreliability confounds the logic of her convictions.

Another tactic that Larsen utilizes to avoid direct interpretation is her multifarious utilization of mirrors throughout the novel. A mirror is used to create ambiguity in how Irene views herself and others several times in the novel. The mirror is also used as a means of reflecting certain truths. For example, the mirror is used to demonstrate likenesses between Irene and Clare, and again to reveal Clare’s identity as black when a darker woman’s similarities are reflected onto her. Finally, the reader is not provided with any absolute truth, only a reflection of how Irene sees the world. In this way, the novel functions as a mirror in the sense that any conclusions that the reader will make about the text are based on what they see in the text and how they interpret the details that are revealed to them.

Larsen’s use of mirrors and a capricious narrator collaborate to reveal the complexities of her characters, and therefore provide commentary on the futility of racial characterization. Individuals are far too multi-faceted to be categorized into types, and yet society is dependant upon these roles. Her protagonist Irene serves as the primary example of this, as she is a strong supporter of race loyalty and social roles. As the novel progresses, Irene’s self-image and mental stability will slowly disintegrate, as she is unable to maintain appearances based on social expectations. At the end of the novel, the reader must ask who is passing? Is it Clare, who decides early on, that she cannot be held by social restrictions, or Irene, who’s dependency on social and racial appearances take precedence over the well being of her relationships, her
family, and herself? By portraying a character that thrives on social and racial segregation while continuously falling short of the set of guidelines herself, Larsen reveals that passing is not so much an issue, but a symptom of the greater race problem. Larsen’s ambiguous setting indicates the illogicality of racial segregation while her dubious narrator Irene reveals the severe consequences of prolonging this practice in American society.

One of the tactics Larsen uses to prevent Irene from influencing her readers is by telling her story through the perspective of the third person. Though the narrative is Irene’s, she never speaks to the reader directly. Nell Sullivan explains that Larsen writes the story in the third person because if Irene had been given a stronger voice she would have been too powerful a character and might have had more of an influence over her reader. “The first person would be inappropriate for Irene’s story because the I as an empowered, integrated subject position eludes Irene. She always defines herself in relation to the desire of the Other, and thus an unmediated representation of her voice would be incongruent with her essential lack” (377). Because Irene’s self image is so dependent on how she is viewed publicly, it would not make sense for her to speak for herself. Her character is revealed through how she interacts with others and how the reader interprets this. This gives the reader the ability to evaluate her character along with the other characters in the story.

Irene further loses credibility with her readers as she scrutinizes Clare for her performance as white, and yet puts forth a false persona of her own. Though Irene is a self-proclaimed race woman who devotes herself to black uplift, she shuns members of her own race, such as Clare and their school mate Gertrude. In addition, her commitment to black uplift programs goes so far as to appear at elegant social events. Through close scrutiny it becomes evident that Irene’s priorities are mostly delusional and self-serving, which coincidentally, is
how she views Clare. Irene’s critique of Clare’s lifestyle as a passer only emphasizes the fact that she passes as well. As Irene observes and disproves of Clare’s behavior throughout the novel, the similarities between Irene and Clare become more apparent. The likeness between Irene and Clare bears much importance in the story, for it raises the question as to what separates these two women who are in looks and lifestyle, very much alike. As the story progresses it becomes evident that they are only separated by Irene’s prejudice that is rooted in her devotion to maintaining social and racial divides.

Irene may not be directly passing as a white person as Clare does, but she lives a life based on white social values. For Irene, appearances often take precedence over the race environment that they currently face. This is evident in her lifestyle choices and her interactions with her family. Claudia Tate addresses the picture of sophistication that is offered in Passing, “Set in a romanticized region of Harlem’s Sugar Hill in 1927, where beautiful Black socialites swirl about in designer gowns, sip tea from antique china cups and jaunt between home and resort, the world of Passing is, as Hoyt Fuller says in the Introduction to the 1971 edition, as unreal” (142). Tate makes the argument that Larsen’s representation of an elite social setting is an intentional device that helps to reveal the tenuousness of Irene’s narrative. Regardless of the cause that has brought these upper crust African Americans together, it is the prestige of the event that appeals to Irene.

Though Irene participates in African-American uplift programs, it appears that she is far more committed to her participation in these events than to actually assisting others.³ As Irene interacts with other characters in the novel, it becomes clear that nothing is more important to Irene than appearances, even if it means alienating those closest to her. This is evident through her exchanges with those who would know her best, specifically her husband Brian. Though
Irene believes she is devoted to her sons, her arguments with Brian reveal a stronger devotion to promote a positive public image.

Irene and Brian argue twice in the novel about subjects such as race, sex, and Irene’s desire to protect her sons from both ideas altogether. Irene would prefer to ignore matters of sex and race than to educate her sons on these matters. Irene’s husband Brian accuses her of overprotecting their sons from matters of sex, “‘And you needn’t think I’m going to let you change him to some nice kindergarten kind of a school because he’s getting a little necessary education’” (60). Brian’s comments imply that he views Irene’s desire to protect her sons’ minds as absurd and unrealistic. Cheryl Wall writes, “She has spun a cocoon around her sons, forbidding discussion of racism and of sex as too disagreeable” (108). Irene has formed an idealized notion of herself and the environment around her. She works hard to include her sons in these delusions. Her husband Brian implies on more than one occasion that he feels that she fails to protect her sons from the real world. “‘He’ll stay right where he is. The sooner and the more he learns about sex, the better for him. And most certainly if he learns that it’s a grand joke, the greatest in the world. It’ll keep him from lots of disappointment later on’” (60). His bitter tone indicates that their marriage is an unhappy one and that he feels that Irene’s point of view is skewed.

Though the reader is only presented with Irene’s feelings on the matter, her point of view begins to appear increasingly irrational when she strives to protect her sons from gaining essential knowledge on the current racial environment. During a scene in which Irene is having dinner with her family, Brian indignantly speaks of a reported lynching in the newspaper. Irene is infuriated, remarking that, “‘There’ll be time enough for them to learn about such horrible things when they’re older’” (102-103). This angers Brian further, igniting his belief that Irene’s
determination to protect her sons from matters of race is far more dangerous than preparing them for it. “‘You’re absolutely wrong!’” Brian argues, “‘If, as you’re so determined, they’ve got to live in this damned country, they’d better find out what sort of thing they’re up against as soon as possible. The earlier they learn it, the better prepared they’ll be’” (103).

Brian’s reading of a lynching illustrates the precarious environment in which they currently reside. Keeping his sons informed about the possible dangers of racism is the best way he can fathom to protect them, “‘I’d feel I hadn’t done my duty by them if I didn’t give them some inkling of what’s before them’” (104). Irene’s sole reason for guarding her sons from this knowledge is that she finds these matters “ugly” and “horrible.” By disregarding these issues however, Irene prevents her sons from making any progress in their understanding of race.

Irene’s determination to protect her sons from “a little necessary education” is self-serving. It is not her sons whom she strives to protect, but herself, as she is fearful of acknowledging the race problem. She has grown comfortable with the way society is divided, though she belongs to the less advantaged class. Irene’s ability to idealize her surroundings allows her to accept the divides in society. Yet, Clare and Brian both indicate that they find the existing race situation unacceptable and that they cannot be satisfied with the way things are. Through her character Irene, Larsen is likely commenting that individuals in American society who prefer to ignore these issues are more dangerous than those who question them.

Through Irene’s closed-mindedness, Larsen is perhaps making a statement on how shutting the door on matters of race can be viewed as unethical, particularly when society (Irene) is more willing to ignore these issues than to address how individuals are affected by it. As the reader learns more about Irene, it becomes evident that she gives little thought to matters of race, finding it too unpleasant to think about, “For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she
was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was...[...]...enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account, without having to suffer for the race as well” (98). Because Irene finds race issues distasteful, she wants to repress them. Brian however, feels that not being open about race issues is immoral, creating an obvious rift in their relationship and further revealing to the reader that Irene’s point of view is problematic.

Irene’s principles appear to be centered in denial. She values her marriage, but not necessarily out of love for her husband. She likes the social status that Brian’s occupation brings to their family; so much so that she becomes angry when Brian articulates a desire to move to Brazil and expresses his unhappiness as a doctor. Not because Brian’s feelings are important to her, but because his discontent is a threat to the life that she has dreamed up for them or more importantly, herself. Brian’s resentment disturbs Irene because it endangers the perfect order in which she views her life. “It was only that she wanted him to be happy, resenting, however, his inability to be so with things as they were, and never acknowledging that though she did want him to be happy, it was only in her own way and by some plan of hers for him that she truly desired him to be so” (61). Irene’s inner dialogue illustrates her desire for Brian to be happy as long as it coincides with the life she has determined for herself. Larsen demonstrates Irene’s selfishness throughout the story, calling into question her likeability as well as her authenticity. In addition to compromising her character’s reliability in the novel, Larsen challenges her set of values, particularly in how she behaves toward a member of her own race.

The concept of morality is omnipresent in Passing as it was in those of her predecessors’ novels. However, Larsen does not argue that morality is jeopardized in the act of passing itself. Instead, Larsen indicates how devotion to racial roles can weaken one’s morality. In contrast to James Weldon Johnson’s treatment of passing itself as immoral in The Autobiography of an Ex-
*Colored Man*, Nella Larsen demonstrates how Irene’s morality is increasingly compromised in her attempt to prevent Clare from crossing back over into black territory.

In an early scene in the novel, Irene is invited to Clare’s home for tea. They are surprised by the appearance of John Bellew, Clare’s racist white husband, whom does not hesitate to share his opinions on what he refers to as “‘The scrimy black devils’” (40). Irene listens in horror at his tirade in which he describes the doings of black folk as he reads about them in the newspaper, “‘Always robbing and killing people. And...[...].worse’” (40-41). Though Irene feels revulsion at the encounter with Bellew and his distorted opinions on African Americans, she ultimately sees opportunity in their encounter.

At two different intervals, despite her opinions on Bellew’s open racism, Irene feels compelled to expose Clare’s deception to him in order to free herself of Clare. “She had only to tell John Bellew that his wife—No. Not that! But, if he should somehow learn of these Harlem visits.[...].It would be enough to rid her forever of Clare Kendry” (98). As Irene entertains thoughts of revealing Clare’s visits to Harlem, she can’t condone the idea of revealing her as black, at least she cannot admit the inclination to herself. However, at her second opportunity to jeopardize Clare, she hesitates again when she encounters John Bellew on the street, “‘I had my chance and didn’t take it. I had only to speak and to introduce him to Felise with the casual remark that he was Clare’s husband. Only that. Fool. Fool.’” (100). Irene’s internal dialogue at this point takes into consideration the possibilities for why she has continued to protect Clare from exposure. “That instinctive loyalty to a race? Why couldn’t she get free of it? Why should it include Clare?” (100). Irene’s internal argument implies that she is somehow forced to shield Clare, through some natural inclination to protect members of her own race. This rationale is immediately contradicted by her reasoning that Clare might not count as a member and so might
not deserve her help. Because Clare passes on a permanent basis, Irene chooses to view her as “disloyal” to the race, thereby excusing any antagonistic behavior towards her. Yet, despite what Irene tells herself about her consideration for Clare’s safety, the reader can see that she has viewed her with suspicion from their first encounter. Irene’s thoughts and feelings are atypical to what she says and does, making her a suspicious character as well as she frequently casts doubt on her own integrity. Though Irene often views Clare as immoral, it is her own code of ethics that will appear doubtful for the reader as she considers multiple ways to eject Clare from her life.

Larsen bases Irene’s suspicion toward Clare on her inability to classify her in a familiar category. Clare repeatedly resists definition and worse, she doesn’t care. As Irene and Clare interact with one another, Irene attempts to categorize her as a typical passer and mother, failing to do either. Finally, she endeavors to mark her as promiscuous, which is never proven, but justifies her own hostile attitudes toward her. Ultimately, Irene fails to see the futility in striving to force individuals into “types,” but the reader does not. Through Irene, who has already been proven unreliable, Larsen demonstrates the impossibility and the irrationality of trying to force individuals into social roles.

One of the social roles that Larsen addresses is motherhood. Irene, who feels that certain traits of maternity are inherent, uses these traits as a basis for critiquing Clare as an unfit parent. Yet, her own shortcomings as a parent cast doubt on the intrinsic nature of motherhood, challenging public convictions that mothers are naturally inclined to think a certain way. On one occasion Irene tells Clare that she should be happy about Margery’s return from her boarding school in Switzerland, to which Clare replies, “Children aren’t everything. […]...there are other things in the world, though I admit some people don’t seem to suspect it” (81). This statement
angers Irene who responds, “‘You know you don’t mean that, Clare. […] I know very well that I take being a mother very seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of the house. I can’t help it’” (82). Irene’s fervent reaction to Clare illustrates how she feels a good mother might respond. Kahan explains Clare’s comment, “Although it appears that Clare is rejecting her gender role as a mother, she also resists motherhood out of fear that her children’s color will reveal her ‘true’ race” (125). Kahan argues that Clare’s statement is not a declaration of her rejection of motherhood, but a means of protecting herself from exposure. Still, her comment shocks Irene who feels a mother should be protective and self-sacrificing. Of course, Irene is protective of her children only as far as shielding their minds from truth and ugliness. Irene consistently places her own needs above the needs of her sons and does not think of preparing them for the world. Furthermore, the reader sees little evidence that coincides with how Irene describes herself as a mother as there is little visible interaction between Irene and her children.

The unfairness of Irene’s critique of Clare is intentional; it is indicative of how society attempts to sort individuals while treating those who resist segregation with enmity.

In an attempt to discourage Clare’s appearances at black social events, Irene asks Clare what she would do if her husband discovered that she is in fact black herself. She is surprised to find out that Clare is not very afraid of being exposed. “‘I’d come up here to live. Harlem, I mean. Then I’d be able to do as I please when I please’” (106). Clare’s statement leaves Irene feeling “cold and tense.” She inquires about how it would affect Clare’s daughter, to which Clare responds, “‘She’s all that holds me back. But, if Jack finds out, if our marriage is broken, that lets me out. Doesn’t it?’” (106). Though Clare’s actions appear self-serving at times, she takes into consideration how her behavior could affect her daughter. Even Irene does not imagine how she disables her sons from surviving out in the world. It becomes evident that
Clare is not discarding her daughter, but perhaps protecting her from a lifetime of persecution. By keeping Margery and her father John Bellew apart, she prevents her husband from discovering his daughter’s race and ultimately rejecting her.

Larsen uses Irene to articulate what she feels a mother should be, yet illustrates Clare as the wiser, more protective mother who at least knows what her daughter is up against racially. However, Clare has sent her daughter away and hidden her identity from her. Therefore, neither mother can be viewed as ideal, demonstrating that even the virtues of motherhood are not inherent. These two women that fall short of the expectations for motherhood, raising the question as to why society dictates such roles that no individual can meet. Larsen’s portrayal of Irene’s expectations for Clare, remarks on the demand for individuals to consistently meet social expectations. Larsen illustrates this through race, sex, and in this case gender, to demonstrate that Americans have attached roles to all facets in public life, forcing persons to assimilate in one way or another.

Larsen challenges her reader’s expectations of sexuality as she places her three characters (Irene, Clare, and Brian) in a love triangle diffused with the distraction of mirrors. Larsen’s use of mirrors in her novel is particularly original as she utilizes it at times to reveal truths to characters. Concurrently, the mirrors create uncertainty for the reader as to what is truly taking place in the novel versus what is revealed by a most untrustworthy narrator.

Larsen’s dubious heroine scarcely seems to comprehend her own motivation for repeatedly allowing Clare to disrupt her life. Despite her feelings of mistrust towards Clare, Irene continuously lets her in, driven by a desire to see her that not even she is able to understand. The relationship between Clare and Irene is equally difficult for the reader to decipher. Irene seems ready to rid herself of Clare several times in the novel, yet she is always
drawn back to her somehow. “Irene tries to repress, or bury, her interest by refusing to see Clare, but then, in the next sentence, requests that her friend be brought up to her bedroom” (Kahan 116). The most notable instance of this is when Clare comes to see Irene at her home. Irene tells Zulena to send Clare away, but then quickly changes her mind and tells Zulena to send her in. Irene sees Clare and is in immediate awe of her beauty “Reaching out, she grasped Clare’s two hands in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: ‘Dear God! But aren’t you lovely, Clare!’” (65). Many critics have interpreted Irene’s reaction to Clare as evidence of her attraction to Clare. What prevents this from being an expression of sexual interest, is that Irene sees Clare in her bedroom mirror. Larsen places a mirror between Irene and Clare in order to sway the audience from making the immediate assumption that Irene’s attraction reflects her desire. She in fact sees Clare in the mirror at the same moment that she is seeing herself.

Nell Sullivan claims that this scene does not necessarily express Irene’s desire, but her narcissism. “However, Irene is looking in the mirror when Clare enters, and the mirror’s presence makes ambiguous the phrase looking at the woman before her, is that woman Clare or Irene herself?” (378). Irene is fussing over her appearance, smoothing out her dress and applying powder to her face. At the sight of Clare she becomes overwhelmed with affection, she “sees in Clare an image superior to the one she nervously fussed over before Clare’s entrance” (Sullivan 378). Clare’s beauty is reflected unto Irene’s perception of herself. At the Negro Welfare League Dance, Irene asks Hugh Wentworth if he believes Clare to be beautiful. She also asks Brian if he didn’t “‘think Clare was extraordinarily beautiful?’” (79). Often when Irene asks others if they agree with her that Clare is lovely, she is comparing herself to Clare. Sullivan states that Irene is fond of Clare’s beauty because she feels that somehow that beauty is reflected onto her. Yet, that “loveliness” is destroyed when Irene sees that she does not control it at all.
“As Irene becomes more and more incapable of controlling either Clare or herself, she experiences a diminution of the “loveliness” in the mirror. The image is no longer one of mastery, but one of impotence and fear” (Sullivan 379). Irene’s admiration for Clare’s beauty changes suddenly as she begins to believe that her husband Brian is romantically involved with Clare.

The mirror represents how Irene sees herself. How Irene is regarded by others strongly affects her self-image. When Irene suspects that Clare and Brian are having an affair, the vision she has of herself in the mirror becomes clouded. “The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind” (90). When Irene initially claims Clare’s beauty in the mirror, she expresses awe and delight at the reflection she sees. When Irene feels that Clare has betrayed her, her reflection is altered, and she is completely blinded. When a beautiful woman like Clare is interested in her, she feels a rush of affection. When Irene believes that Clare has fooled her, she becomes a blur, a nothingness. However, it is not Clare’s betrayal that has skewed Irene’s vision, it is Irene’s inability to decipher who Clare is. Irene’s well-being is dependent on designating roles for the people in her life; when she is unable to, she loses her ability to see clearly.

In the novel, Irene’s voice is very strong when she can easily define who they are. When she perceives Clare as a simple-minded beauty, her observations of her are more secure, “Beyond the aesthetic pleasure one got form watching her, she contributed little.[…]Nor did she object to appearing a bit pathetic and ill-used, so that people could feel sorry for her” (80). However, this image begins to fall apart when she discovers that Brian does not share her point of view, “She said; ‘It just happens that Hugh prefers intelligent women.’ Plainly he was startled. ‘D’you mean that you think Clare is stupid?’ he asked, regarding her with lifted eyebrows, which
emphasized the disbelief of his voice” (88). Their argument ensues; Irene stating that Clare possesses a “feminine” intelligence, to which Brian becomes offended and accuses Irene’s observations of being particularly “feline.” Suddenly Irene’s voice falters and she is unable to express herself. “But she’s not—she isn’t—She hasn’t—Oh, I can’t explain it. Looks and brains. Real brains that can hold their own with anybody. Clare has not brains of a sort, the kind that are useful too” (88). Irene continues to falter over an explanation of how she can define Clare, but cannot. Instead she somehow comes to the conclusion that because Brian has defended Clare, he must be in love with her. However, her conclusions are without merit. There is no evidence that Brian and Clare are actually involved. Because she is still unable to categorize Clare, she interprets her complexity as betrayal. Irene decides that she has not been able to define Clare so far, because Clare has been deceiving her, “Clare Kendry! So that was it! Impossible. It couldn’t be” (89). Though Irene appears to be disturbed by the idea of Brian and Clare’s supposed involvement with each other, she appears simultaneously relieved to have found an answer for Clare’s unpredictable behavior.

Irene’s understanding of those around her never evolves. When her interpretation of Clare proves false, she finds another way to classify her. Irene’s perpetual desire to define could be representative of how Larsen viewed society, in which individuals are often wrongly stereotyped when they are too complex to fit into conventional roles. If categorization did not take such precedence in American society, perhaps individuals would be more widely accepted for who they are and not for whom they are expected to be.

In *Passing*, the mirror is also used to represent how much Irene and Clare resemble each other. By illustrating Irene’s likeness to Clare, Larsen is able to demonstrate that Irene’s prejudices towards her are completely unwarranted. Irene unfairly critiques Clare’s behavior
while resembling her in her lifestyle and selfish demeanor. This resemblance is significant, as it is only Irene’s ideals about racial laws and social decorum that prevent the two women from being friends. Therefore, Larsen is able to illustrate the tension created in a community when racial ideals take priority over individuals themselves.

Lori Harrison-Kahan describes ways in which the two characters resemble each other, “Irene passes by mimicking white ideals in leading a middle-class life” (129). Kahan argues that in this sense, Clare and Irene are both “passing.” Clare is passing as a white person, and Irene is living in a world that imitates the white community. “Irene ‘passes’ not by adopting a white identity…but by adopting white values, including white standards of beauty” writes Nell Sullivan (374).

Mary Mabel Youman writes, “Thus, Irene Redfield, the true protagonist, who could (but rarely does) ‘pass for white’ has more truly lost her heritage than Clare who literally removes herself from Black life and lives as a white among whites. The title Passing is thus ironic, for it is Irene who ‘passes.’ The theme of the novel develops this irony” (337). Irene is proud of her black heritage, as long as she is able to live comfortably in the sophisticated society in which she was wrought. Clare however, lived in poverty and oppression before deciding to pass. Clare’s passing is of necessity to her, so that she may live freely and to finally “have things” that Irene and her friends have always had (26). Thus, Clare’s decision to pass is somewhat justified in the novel; it is the result of being reared in the lower classes and consistently made to feel inferior. Irene, never having experienced either poverty or subjugation, passes albeit unwittingly, for very different reasons. She has adopted white notions of assimilation and therefore passes to gain or maintain acceptance.
Cheryl Wall argues that Clare is Irene. Clare is simply an exaggerated form of Irene. “Each of these characters, like Clare, relies on a husband for material possessions, security, identity. Each reflects and is a reflection of her husband’s class status.” (107). When reflected upon, the similarities between the two characters become more apparent. Irene, however, feels she is superior to Clare because she views Clare as a traitor to her race. As the novel unfolds it is revealed that Irene’s loyalty is much like Clare’s in that she is truly only loyal to herself.

Therefore Larsen demonstrates the hypocrisy in Irene’s prejudice towards Clare in proving their likeness to each other. The difference between Irene’s way of passing and Clare’s is that Clare is aware that her white identity is a costume that she may cast off at will. Irene however has truly internalized the white standard of living, and is completely unaware of it. Clare does not strongly believe in racial categorization, and therefore can move freely between races. Irene however, believes these lines cannot be crossed, and therefore Clare’s behavior antagonizes her. Despite Clare’s early classification as a passer in the novel, Irene’s actions identify her as the true passer as she projects a particular image in public and is far more protective of her appearance. Furthermore, Irene has internalized white ideology to the point of accepting racial barriers, viewing Clare as dangerous for crossing them.

Irene’s resemblance to Clare is essential to the novel in that Larsen is able to magnify the hypocrisy that emerges as a result of racial categorization. Irene consistently draws a line between herself and Clare, citing that they are separate due to Clare’s lack of racial allegiance. Yet, her selfish attitudes, her desire to live opulently, and the counterfeit persona she puts forth make her almost identical to Clare. Carla Kaplan writes in “Introduction: Nella Larsen’s Erotics of Race”: “Larsen’s use of passing, the, while it may seem familiar, is both original and complex. Rather than a trope that reinforces an ethics of race, as passing usually does, Larsen uses passing
to critique a tradition of treating racial ‘allegiance’ as a moral dilemma rather than the matter of preference, longing, and choice that Larsen imagines it could be” (xxv). Despite the flaws in Irene and Clare’s characters, which are almost indistinguishable, the actual underlying problem in *Passing* is the social system in which they reside. Irene’s constant inner turmoil, her turbulent relationship with her husband, and her deep resentment for Clare are all tied to her belief that racial allegiance is tied to morality.

Until the end of the novel, Larsen uses mirroring solely between Clare and Irene. She places the mirror between her two characters to prevent the reader from making easy assumptions about their relationship. When she reflects Irene’s likenesses to Clare, this mirroring effect is not as obvious. Though her mirroring of Irene and Clare is not explicit, it is evident that she intends to reveal their similitude and thereby pinpoint what divides them. In either case, the mirror has thus far made two points. The first argument is that things may not always be as they appear, particularly in the way that Irene views and critiques Clare. Second, is that persons are often more alike than they are willing to believe, such as Irene’s likeness to Clare. Both situations are reflective of society and the tendency to make assumptions about or categorize persons that may be very much like themselves.

Larsen also uses the mirror reflection metaphor to reveal certain truths to characters. Clare’s husband John Bellew is a racist who is unaware of his wife’s racial identity. He is like Irene in that he is blind to his surroundings until the truth is revealed to him through the mirror’s reflection. Up until the end of the novel, Clare’s appeal to her husband is somewhat ambiguous. He notices that she is growing darker and even teases her regarding her likeness to African Americans. Yet, his intolerance does not manifest until her true race is actually named. Clare’s revealed identity is a crucial point in the novel as it raises the question as to what is more
important in this racial climate, race or emotional ties. Clare’s changing appearance will only become significant to her husband when she is revealed as a member of the race that her husband has resolved to abhor. Once again Larsen demonstrates that race categorization creates a detrimental divide in society that feeds antipathy on either side and in John Bellew’s case, hatred.

Initially, Bellew fails to recognize Clare’s ethnicity because he cannot compare her resemblance to other African Americans as Clare purposely does not employ black servants. When Bellew meets Irene he perceives her as white as well. This image is shattered when Bellew sees Irene on the street with her darker skinned friend Felise and sees Clare’s likeness to them. “The tea in Chicago is limited to her “passable” friends Irene and Gertrude, and she adamantly refuses to employ black servants. But when Bellew perceives Felise as Irene’s dark mirror, he in turn ‘recognizes’ Clare, too, reflected in Felise’s face” (Youman 379). Upon recognizing Irene’s identity as black, the geniality he offers to Irene changes to displeasure. Bellew “didn’t, however, withdraw his outstretched hand. Not at once” (99). Bellew is frozen in this scene as he appears to struggle with an internal turmoil. He is confronted by a woman that he wished to receive warmly, but must now associate with the race that he commonly refers to as “black devils” (40).

Larsen indicates however that Clare’s husband was at least unknowingly conscious of her ethnicity. Bellew makes a comment in the Chicago apartment about how dark Clare is getting, and that he will one day wake up next to a black woman. Judith Butler addresses Bellew and his reference to Clare as “Nig”, “Before he knows that Clare is black, he regularly calls her ‘Nig,’ and it seems that this term of degradation and disavowal is passed between them as a kind of love toy…That he calls her ‘Nig’ suggests that he knows or that there is a kind of knowingness
in the language he speaks…And yet Clare is a fetish that holds in place both the rendering of Clare’s blackness as an exotic source of excitation and the denial of her blackness altogether” (171). Though it appears that Bellew is ignorant of this wife’s racial past, he seems to be unconsciously aware of her difference and that difference is what draws him to her. Larsen uses Clare’s exotic appeal to demonstrate that when Clare’s race goes unrecognized, its exotic nature is appealing. Once her race is identified, it is accompanied by all of the negative connotations that come with it. In other words, Clare’s difference only becomes important once it has been named and Bellew must recognize it and follow through with the meaning he has associated with it. However, his determination to hate Clare is challenged at the time of her death in a scene that Larsen weaves with doubt. Larsen’s purpose in this scene is not to accuse Clare of passing, or Irene of murder, but to confront society’s dependency on racial restrictions. The final scene of *Passing* works to illustrate the inner turmoil, the sense of betrayal, and the extreme hostility that emerges from a culture that is contingent on racial difference.

Clare’s death is a mystery that no amount of readings will answer. Irene’s point of view is more ambiguous in the final scene than in any other throughout the story. This is especially because Larsen gives the reader reason to believe that Irene would prefer to step aside and allow Clare to have Brian, than to confront the two of them. Larsen seems to be setting up a scene of Irene’s acceptance of the affair in the last chapter of the story. “Better, far better, to share him than to lose him completely. Oh, she could close her eyes, if need be. She could bear it. She could bear anything” (108). It appears that Irene will turn a blind eye to the affair in order to maintain the financial and social security she has established with Brian.

In the final chapter of the novel, Irene’s inner dialogue is laced with inconsistencies. Irene appears to be filled with self-doubt as she argues with herself, unable to grasp her true
feelings. “‘I’m human like everybody else. It’s just that I’m so tired, so worn out, I can’t feel anymore.’” “But she did not really believe that” (107). Irene’s emotions become irrational to the point that Irene doubts her capacity to feel like a human being. “As the story unfolds, Irene becomes more and more impulsive, nervous and insecure, indeed irrational. She tends to jump to conclusions which discredit her credibility as a reliable source of information” (Tate 346). In the final chapter of Irene’s narrative, her integrity begins to break down as her thoughts become increasingly contradictory. In this last chapter, Irene’s every thought and action is meant to cast suspicion on her character. Her hostile attitude toward Clare, her terror at the thought of Clare being “free,” is all motivation for Irene to take action and put an end to Clare once and for all. Before Clare’s actual fall, Larsen provides two instances that insinuate that Irene has ominous intentions for Clare.

As Brian, Irene, and Clare enter the party, Irene observes the two looking at each other with what she interprets as an “expression of wistful eagerness.” As she contemplates this, Brian notes that Clare’s shoes are too thin and warns Clare to mind that she doesn’t fall down the stairs. Irene turns and “snaps” at Brian, “‘Don’t be silly!’” (109). Irene’s immediate anger could be indicative of her jealousy at observing their intimate gaze. At the same time it could believed that Irene does not want Clare to be warned about falling out the window.

Following this scene, Irene walks across the room to open a window at the party, claiming that she feels warm even though it is noted that it is cold enough to be snowing outside. What is notable about this scene is how Irene walks over to the window, pitches out her cigarette and watches it fall. “Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below” (110). This image is very powerful as it illustrates Irene in deep thought as she watches the bright light of her cigarette fall and snuff out in the
white snow. This bit of imagery serves as foreshadowing for the final fall of Clare. It also gives a small glimpse of what Irene could be plotting as well.

Soon after this scene, John Bellew barges into the party and confronts Clare. Irene rushes to Clare’s side and it almost seems that Irene is coming to her defense when she takes Clare by the arm. This is contradicted however by Irene’s thought process. As she comes to Clare’s aid, her most prominent thought is that Clare could be emancipated. A faint smile on Clare’s lips pushes Irene over the edge as she rushes over to grasp Clare by the arm, “One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have her Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (111). The next moment Clare has fallen out the window and Irene’s reaction is even more vague. “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly” (110). It is not that she cannot remember, but that she will not permit herself to rethink the moment when Clare falls. While Irene strives to comprehend Clare’s fall, a very similar conflict is taking place in another character standing next to her. This character’s thoughts are not open to the reader as Irene’s are, yet his actions mirror a struggle very much like her own.

An important factor to note is that Irene’s reaction to Clare’s fall is not the only conflicted response to her death. Larsen intentionally creates a mirror image of Irene’s turmoil to demonstrate the toll that racism, segregation, and prejudice takes on American culture. This does not only affect Irene, it is universal and to varying degrees. The other character who is as emotionally torn at the time of Clare’s fall is her husband, who has just discovered her true ethnicity. At the time that John Bellew confronts his wife, Larsen is careful to note that he stands there not only in anger, but also hurt, “His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain” (111). When Clare falls out the window, Bellew’s reaction is the most
poignant, “There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. “‘Nig! My God! Nig!’” (111). Though Bellew’s fury at the discovery of Clare’s race is certain, the anguish he conveys at her fall is twofold. Bellew’s horror stricken proclamation is convoluted however, by his use of the pet name “nig.” Should Bellew have called Clare by her name at the time of her death, his cry might have resonated his repentance at having rejected her for her race. His utilization of the derogatory “nig,” reiterates his resolve to name her as “other” than himself.

Finally, as the crowd gathers around her, it is noted that John Bellew has disappeared. Bellew’s departure is vague as it could be emblematic of his guilt or distress over her death. Regardless of his evident grief at the time of her death, ultimately Bellew has left her. The underlying reason for his desertion is uncertain, but his earlier lament suggests that though he felt betrayed, he most certainly did not want Clare to die. This leads to the assumption that what prevents Bellew from staying with his wife is her race, a distinction that he is determined to recognize. Thereby Larsen determines through Bellew, the hate that derives from ideas of racial difference and how strongly these beliefs are ingrained in society. Bellew has subscribed to hate so completely that nothing can move him to accept his wife, not even in death. Bellew’s decision to leave his wife suggests that he will hold on to his convictions with more devotion than he had his wife. The vagueness in which Bellew’s actions are carried out signifies the irrationality of his decision as he appears torn between his beliefs and how he truly feels about Clare.

The uncertainty that Larsen consistently portrays in her characters is an intentional device used to attest the unfeasibility of living in a culture with fixed racial lines. More importantly, she demonstrates how dangerous this practice can become. When people give racial laws more
importance than people, they compromise their own humanity. Through her characters John Bellew and Irene Redfield, Larsen shows her readers that morality is not compromised when racial lines are crossed, but when they are more strictly guarded than persons. Unlike previous passing novels, in which the passer is liable to be critiqued for their failure to treat racial laws with loyalty, in *Passing*, those who treat racial categories with more importance than individuals are prone to be judged.

Irene’s relation of Clare’s death is the only account the reader receives. It is also the most convoluted. While Irene’s thoughts give no answer as to how Clare died, they reveal much about her character. It is through her thoughts that Irene will demonstrate her self-centeredness and fearsome desire for Clare to vanish. The manner in which Clare dies can never be known for sure, yet at the end of the novel it becomes apparent that this is not a novel about passing or murder.

*Passing*, in its final chapter, becomes a story about hate and its roots at guarding the color line. Irene, who operates as emissary for the current race environment, illustrates a greater willingness for an individual to die, than to accept someone who rejects the rules of racial allegiance and categorization. In the final scene of the novel Irene, through her contradictory thoughts, will reveal quite clearly that she does not want Clare to live. How Clare dies is uncertain, but why she *must* has been reiterated throughout the novel. Clare openly mocks race loyalty, and sees no point in assimilating to any preordained roles in society. Her presence would only interfere with the position in society Irene has set out for herself. Therefore, Clare “must not be freed”.

Claudia Tate discusses the turmoil that Irene experiences after the fall of Clare. “Larsen seems to have deliberately avoided narrative clarity by weaving ambiguity into Irene’s every
thought and expression” (348). Tate makes note of Larsen using ambiguous statements to sway the reader from making any clear assumptions about Irene’s involvement in Clare’s demise. Irene commits to no certain beliefs or emotions as she hesitates to descend while everyone waits downstairs. Irene’s thoughts are conveyed through a flood of questions passing through her consciousness, “What reason could she give for her dallying behind?”; “Even she didn’t know why she had done that.”; “There had been her hand reaching out towards Clare. What about that?” (112). The most pressing question in Irene’s mind is, “What if Clare was not dead?” (113).

Irene’s most urgent thoughts are fixed on her public appearance. She is not as concerned with having lost Clare in the accident as she is in what others might be thinking about her. Social pretenses have become so important to Irene, that even when faced with death, she can think only of herself. Most importantly, Irene is mostly terrified that Clare might still be alive. Irene’s fear that Clare might impose on her social life and her resentment of Clare’s freedom from racial restrictions, have poisoned her integrity. As she feared, Irene has truly lost her humanity as her prejudices allow her to dehumanize Clare and to rationalize her untimely death.

When Irene sees that Clare has not survived, she cries from relief, a seemingly telling event in the story. “Irene struggled against the sob of thankfulness that rose in her throat” (113). This reaction however cannot be used as evidence that Irene did in fact push Clare to her death. Though Irene’s joy at the news of Clare’s death is somewhat shocking, it cannot be used to implicate her as Clare’s murderer.

The ambiguity of the novel’s ending is integral to Larsen’s purpose. Should Larsen have portrayed Irene as Clare’s killer, the novel would have lost its focus. Irene would have been named the story’s antagonist and Clare would be the passing victim after all. Nella Larsen has
taken great care to illuminate Clare’s resoluteness and Irene’s faltering voice throughout the
novel, to deter readers from interpreting Clare as the tragic mulatta and Irene as her executioner. In the end, both of her characters have avoided definition, and cannot be placed into any recognizable role in society. This demonstrates that individuals are too complex to be categorized, a point that Larsen makes throughout her novel. More importantly, if the characters cannot be neatly categorized, then the story becomes not about them, but about the circumstances in which they live. We can never know for certain if Irene is in fact a killer or if Clare is a victim. But, we can very well see that Irene and Clare have suffered a tragic fate at the hands of a society bent on intertwining race and morality.

Consequently, in this divided society, Clare’s carefree attitudes toward race are unacceptable. Her murder, albeit mysterious, is a deliberate scheme used by Larsen to show that those unwilling to conform ultimately do not survive. Of the two, Irene endures the more tragic fate. Irene’s determination to maintain racial and social restrictions compromises her rationality and sentiment. Ultimately, Irene has traded her humanity in an effort to maintain a set of rules. Her futile efforts to maintain these laws eventually compromise her mental well being as well. When the novel ends it is evident that Irene can no longer tell what is real from what she has imagined. She cares for nothing else but maintaining her public innocence, though it is evident that even she doubts her credibility. That Irene’s vagueness seems unintentional is even more significant, for like many others in American society, she has truly internalized the idea that race loyalty is intrinsic to morality. Through Irene, Larsen depicts a more dangerous practice than passing itself. Irene’s devotion to racial allegiance proves not only illogical, but dangerous as it ignites hostility and hate between two women who are in every other sense very much alike.
Larsen’s ambiguous passing tale elucidates the futility of maintaining racial divides while her untrustworthy narrator reveals the consequences of continuing this practice in society. Her narrator’s unreliability is not so much intended to illustrate her deceitfulness, as it is indicative of the chronic state of perplexity in which Americans live as they insist on maintaining racial divides. This is illustrated in Irene’s incessant need to categorize individuals into roles that even she is too complex to conform to. Irene’s failure to sort the individuals she encounters demonstrates the absurdity of continuing this practice in society, as her growing hostility depicts a danger too monumental to ignore. Through Irene’s indirect point of view, Larsen is able to prove that prejudice does not stop at whites treating black citizens with inequality. It can occur within the same race, as long as racial allegiance is viewed as a matter of morality. The danger rises when it becomes justifiable to treat those outside the expectation with hate. Larsen illustrates how unmerited this discrimination is, by proving the likenesses between characters using mirrors. By depicting characters that are almost identical to each other, and yet still treat each other with intolerance, Larsen is able to highlight the hypocrisy behind their abhorrence for one another. Irene’s mental collapse at the end of the novel demonstrates that the prolonging of race categorization in society is dangerous to all parties. It compromises the individual’s ability to think logically, to accept others, and in Irene’s case, robs her of compassion as her values take precedence over human life. Irene’s fervent adherence to race loyalty, followed by her mental and moral decline indicates the impossibility of maintaining such conflicting ideas in society. The fall of Clare demonstrates how perilous these ideas can become.

Parallel to her depiction of racially reliant figures, Larsen employs a variety of mirrors in order to prevent her readers from making the same mistake. These mirrors are used to prevent direct interpretation, allowing her readers to consider alternative views for the situations they are
presented with. Her utilization of mirrors prevents her readers from placing her characters into social categories, as we are apt to do. This works to indicate that this is not a novel about the characters, but the hostile racial environment in which they live. That none of the characters can survive in this environment without making some grand sacrifice (e.g., Brian’s happiness, Irene’s moral compass, Bellew’s wife, Clare’s identity) only further proves Larsen’s point. Individuals do not lose their identities when they cross the color line. They lose when they succumb to ideas of race loyalty and defend those distinctions with more vehemence than the rights of individuals. Maintaining these racial divides only furthers the advantages of one race over another, while igniting feelings of contempt for those who dare to cross the color line. It is the hate rooted in so-called racial allegiance that destroys the community, not the possibility of dishonoring those racial codes through passing.

Nella Larsen’s novel ends in a state of confusion, offering no solution to the existing race problem. This could indicate that perhaps there was no simple answer for society’s incendiary racial setting. However, Nella Larsen possessed an unmatched ability for speaking to her readers by seemingly saying nothing. It is unlikely that Larsen would conclude her artful approach for communicating with her audience, with an admission that even she does not possess the answer. It is far more probable that Larsen, with her affinity for allowing the reader to interpret what she has presented to us, would argue that she has shown us where the true race problem lies. The answer is in what we do with it.
In addition to changing the face of the passing novel, Nella Larsen opened the door for other novelists to introduce alternate passing stories. Larsen’s revolutionary novel *Passing* shifted blame from the traditional passing figure and redirected it unto the society that promoted passing by dividing individuals into lower and upper castes determined by race. In addition, Larsen demonstrated through her racially devoted character Irene, that when individuals are compelled to assimilate into racial and social categories, most are passing by default. What Nella Larsen established in her writing was that there really was no difference between passing and assimilation in an environment that requires individuals to conform to racial and social roles. Both require for the individual to perform in order to gain acceptance. When individuals choose not to perform, they are subjected to scrutiny, prejudice, and even violence. *That is* what makes racial categorization, and American devotion to these categories, objectionable and even dangerous to society and those within it. While Larsen was among the first writers to recognize and argue the dangers of segregation and assimilation, her message stops there. Two writers, Ralph Ellison and Danzy Senna would take *Passing*, and continue Larsen’s message from a more contemporary perspective.

Ralph Ellison created a novel in which his protagonist is physically incapable of passing. Yet, his willingness to discard what he knows about race in order to gain acceptance in the white community illuminates Larsen’s perspectives on assimilation and what is lost in the process. Danzy Senna writes a novel about a young girl who is physically able to pass for white, and yet tries desperately to adapt her appearance and behavior to what she considers to be black culture.
Ellison and Senna both argue that by assimilating, individuals are susceptible to losing their identity in the pursuit of acceptance into a culture divided into racial roles. In both novels, these authors continue Larsen’s effort to demonstrate that not only are racial categories imagined, they are detrimental to the society that subscribes to them. They write to prove that passing is not a transgression against one’s race group, but instead an indicator of what is wrong in a society that upholds one race while subjugating another.

More importantly, is how the authors uphold Larsen’s argument that though racial lines are an imagined concept in American culture, they still bear a strong significance in our society. Though the racial barriers in society are imagined, the consequences for breaking them are very real indeed. Just as Larsen’s Clare is perceived as a social pariah for her carefree attitudes towards race, Ellison and Senna illustrate the hardships her characters encounter in their efforts to break away from racial tradition.

In this section I will discuss how both authors address and expand on matters that Nella Larsen conveyed in her novel *Passing*. I will discuss how both novelists explored such concepts as identity, social expectations, assimilation, and finally independence from racial and social roles.

Nella Larsen demonstrated how social and racial roles forced many to assimilate and therefore, lose their identity in order to gain acceptance in the black community. Ralph Ellison illustrated the hardships that African Americans encountered in the white community, and how black individuals were forced to adapt and perform in order to gain any sort of status in the working world. Danzy Senna’s novel has a more modern take on the novel *Passing*, where the characters face less racial oppression, and yet continue to assimilate in their attempt to gain social acceptance. Both novels ultimately carry the same message as *Passing* however, that
social and racial conventions are so ingrained in our society that they cannot be subdued or ignored. Yet, when an individual can recognize the falseness of these roles, they can find their identity in terms free from racial categorization.

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* portrays the life of a man who falls victim to a society that will not integrate him unless he assimilates to their culture. Ellison introduces a character who compromises his identity in order to gain acceptance in white society, only to discover that he has sacrificed his own individuality and self worth in order to perform as a tool for the means of others.

Ellison’s depiction of his narrator takes a more realistic look at the black individual’s struggle for success in white society in order to show how much is lost in the pursuit of acceptance outside of the black community. His narrator, unlike Larsen’s, does not function within the familiarity of black society, but steps out alone into white civilization and encounters more barriers and hostility than he ever imagined.

One of the first issues Ellison explores is at the heart of Larsen’s discussion of identity and how it is often lost in the pursuit of racial acceptance. The invisible man is aware early in his life that to exchange his identity in favor of gaining acceptance in white society would make him a traitor, if only to himself. Nevertheless, Ellison’s unnamed protagonist believes that he is capable of uplifting himself and helping other members of black society. Unfortunately, the only routes toward success he is aware of exist in white culture. Time and time again, the invisible man attempts to obtain his desires through white power figures. What he discovers several times is that he is in fact losing his own agency to more dominant white figures.

The battle royal scene in the novel is one of the most significant examples of this, because it sets up so many of the struggles that our narrator will face in his quest for acceptance
in white society. In the battle royal, the boys are pushed into a boxing ring and forced to fight each other, which functions as a concept that will reappear several times throughout the novel. So few opportunities are made available for black individuals, they are often pitted against each other in order to compete for the few positions that are offered to them. Furthermore, the battle royal serves to foreshadow later events in the novel in which powerful white parties lead the black community to self-destruction.²

This scene is reflective of how Nella Larsen demonstrates racial association in *Passing*. Like Larsen, Ellison shows that the imbalanced racial atmosphere helped to create hostility between members of the same race, as white culture would allow only so many black members through to obtain success. Even then, any type of success black individuals could hope for would be based on white conditions.

After the battle royal, the invisible man is rewarded with a brief case and a scholarship to the local black college. He thrives at the college until Dr. Bledsoe, the school administrator, places Mr. Norton, a white founder of the college, in his custody for a day. The narrator takes Mr. Norton on a tour of the grounds, where they happen to run into Jim Trueblood, a black sharecropper known for his incestuous affair with his daughter. The Trueblood episode reveals the acceptance that black citizens receive when they validate the stereotypical beliefs existing in white society. Trueblood is basically ignored by white society until it surfaces that he has impregnated his own daughter. Trueblood states, “‘Fore they heard ‘bout what happen to us out here I couldn’t git no help from nobody.” Trueblood then talks about the events following the rape of his daughter, “‘White folks…took to coming out here to see us and talk with us[…]..Asked me lots ‘bout my folks and the kids, and wrote it all down in a book’” (52,53). Trueblood’s testimony about how he happened to impregnate his own daughter is received by the
white community with acceptance and financial support. Trueblood gains status in society when he confirms white society’s negative conception of black society. Knowing this infuriates the narrator who knows that Trueblood’s story is detrimental to the black image. “How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows that they’ll say that all Negroes do such things? I looked at the floor, a red mist of anguish before my eyes” (58). The narrator’s regret at exposing Mr. Norton to Trueblood lies in his fear that Trueblood’s image could reflect poorly on his own.

The Invisible Man fears the negative connotations associated with being black. This fear feeds his desire to uplift himself and the image of the black man in society. The invisible man’s interest in changing his, as well as the black individuals’ public image, pushes him to put himself in the employ of a white association created to help black society. Without realizing it, he is once again in danger of losing his identity in the process of assimilating to the demands of white society. The invisible man’s association with the Brotherhood demonstrates how strong and deceptive society’s lure into racial roles is. The invisible man’s unsuspecting fall into a submissive role mirrors that of Nella Larsen’s character Irene, who succumbs to social roles without even realizing it. The invisible man finds himself assimilating to the Brotherhood’s needs before he can fathom what is happening to him.

The Brotherhood has the narrator give his first speech at a rally in which the crowd responds positively, but the Brotherhood becomes angry. The Brotherhood’s objection to the narrator’s speech is primarily driven by their fear of him speaking as an individual, rather than addressing objectives that the Brotherhood has in mind. The invisible man’s involvement in the Brotherhood resembles Irene’s involvement in the Negro Welfare League. Irene’s husband remarks that so many white people attend black uplift events in Harlem that soon the black attendees will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections (69). Both uplift programs are largely run by
white power figures, raising the question as to how much power these white individuals have in these programs intended to empower black people. Just like Irene however, the invisible man is motivated to participate in the Brotherhood’s programs, not just to uplift black citizens, but for the social prestige he believes his involvement will bring him.

It doesn’t take long for the Brotherhood to become threatened by the narrator’s public popularity. Once the narrator’s name becomes more visible to the public than the Brotherhood is comfortable with, the Brotherhood begins to take action towards moving the narrator elsewhere and begins to exclude him from group assemblies (429).

Upon discovering the Brotherhood’s intention to eliminate him from their meetings, the narrator leaves angrily and finds Todd Clifton, a black Brotherhood member, peddling black Sambo dolls on the street. Todd makes the little black doll dance for a crowd as he sings about how the doll will make them laugh and that it can be stretched by the neck without being broken (431,432). Soon the police arrive and become involved in a scuffle with Clifton in which he is shot dead in front of the narrator (436). Initially, the invisible man is irate at the sight of his colleague selling dolls that promote racist values. Eventually, he comes to recognize that Clifton’s dolls represented his observations on the “good” slave or the Uncle Tom figure that smiles and obeys their white possessor. Clifton is far more advanced than the invisible man in his ability to recognize his role in society as an obedient black man. His interaction with the police officer signifies his refusal to continue obeying white figures, which unfortunately ends with his death. Todd Clifton’s use of the black Sambo doll works to point out to the narrator that he has continued to fall into the “good” slave stereotype. Until he sees Clifton’s performance on the street he is still unaware of the subservient role he has been playing all along. What he also comes to understand through Clifton is that breaking out of those stereotypes could be dangerous
and possibly fatal. In his portrayal of Todd Clifton, Ellison corroborates Nella Larsen’s argument that despite the fallacies in racial restrictions, individuals cannot step outside of these expectations without facing severe consequences. Clare Kendry and Todd Clifton meet a premature death for their transgressions against racial rules. The invisible man is forced to choose between exile and assimilation.

Here the invisible man has severed himself not only from the Brotherhood, but from his faith that a black man can work safely within the system and maintain his own identity. “After moving to New York and becoming the leader of the Harlem branch of the Brotherhood, finds his work sacrificed in the interests of the dictates of the ‘committee.’ It is at this point that he realizes his invisibility, that he has no personality of his own but is, in fact, shaped by the needs of others” (Bloch 1019). When the invisible man realizes that he has never been his own agent he finally begins to see clearly, particularly when Brother Jack informs him of his true purpose, “‘Only you haven’t been in prison, Brother, and you were not hired to think. Had you forgotten that?’” In response to Brother Jack, the invisible man replies, “‘So now I know where I am…and with whom…[…].Things have been so brotherly I had forgotten my place.’” (469, 470).

The narrators reference to his “place” mirrors the beginning of the novel, when the white men at the battle royal remind him to know his place. At this moment in the novel, it becomes apparent that the invisible man’s position in society has not changed very much. He is still being told what to do and say; his desire to be prosperous in white society blinded him to the oppressive state he was in. He is still no closer to finding his identity.

The invisible man finds out from another Brotherhood member, brother Hambro, that the Brotherhood has given up its interest in Harlem in order to pursue other political goals. The narrator finds out too late that the Brotherhood has incited a riot to break out in Harlem in order
to destroy the black community. The violent riot drives the narrator underground in which he stays as he sorts the events of his life out:

I’m an invisible man and it placed me in a hole—or showed me the hole

I was in, if you will—and I reluctantly accepted the fact...[...]. I was pulled this way and that for longer than I can remember. And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man (573).

The invisible man’s attempts to represent the black community are as futile as his efforts to be successful in the white world. His attempts to connect with black individuals are equally fruitless as he finds himself just as lost among individuals of his own race. The invisible man does not gain clarity until he has withdrawn from society underground to think for himself. The invisible man ultimately ends his search for visibility, for he finds he is unable to be visible on his own terms.

Eventually, the invisible man leaves his sanctuary no longer concerned with how to make himself visible to the world. Fully aware of the dangerous and deceitful world he is returning to, he decides to take responsibility for society, not as the “good” student or as the marionette for a political organization’s twisted intentions. This time he will emerge as an invisible individual. The invisible man’s conclusion is similar to that of Clare, as he finds himself cast out of both groups; instead of meeting death as Clare does, the invisible man is faced with exile. Unlike Clare, the narrator has the ability to choose neither race and reenter the world on his own. Like Passing, Invisible Man ends with an air of ambiguity, as what will happen to the invisible man is
uncertain. This coincides with Larsen’s conclusion that the future remains uncertain for individuals who choose not to adapt to racial categories in a society that is structured around class and racial grouping.

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* does not appear to be a novel about passing, as his narrator never attempts to pass as white. Yet, like Nella Larsen, Ellison seems to suggest that passing was not limited to passing for white and was not a transgression against one’s racial group. While Larsen illustrated how detrimental these racial categories became when they took precedence over individual rights, Ellison showed the effect racial roles have on black individuals in the white world. Ellison stepped outside of Larsen’s discussion of morality and refocused on the greater issue at hand, that African Americans were being savagely oppressed and were only allowed entry into society if they obligingly performed in their appropriate racial roles. That the invisible man always appears to be teetering on the edge of danger indicates the precariousness in which African Americans lived while trying to survive in the white world. In the end, the narrator is uncertain of what his fate will be, as he is knowingly re-entering the world on neither side of the racial environment. That he is still willing to risk a life of uncertainty reveals to his readers that he feels it is worth the risk to live in ambivalence, than to gain visibility by losing his identity.

Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* is another novel that portrays the effects of a race-driven society’s effect on the lives of African American individuals. Danzy Senna’s novel is a modern take on both Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Instead of subtly suggesting through her character’s actions that racial lines are imaginary as Larsen does, Senna presents free-thinking characters that make this outward claim consistently through the novel. Yet, their actions contradict their assertions as they encounter social restrictions stemming from
their upbringing as well as their surroundings. Senna also addresses the desire felt by African Americans to assimilate into society, yet in her racially inverted tale, her light-skinned protagonist, who could easily pass for white, tries desperately to assimilate into black society. With this alteration of the passing formula, Senna extends the argument made by previous authors that passing is not just about promoting oneself through society, it is an indication of what society demands. Much like her predecessors, Senna argues through her protagonist that passing occurs when society places far too much importance on racial differentiation with an emphasis on racial belonging.

Her young heroine Birdie Lee’s mixed ethnicity causes her much confusion as to what ethnic group she belongs to. Her difficulty in finding an identity for herself mirrors that of her parents and their desire to fit within a specific social construct, even though they spout feelings of wanting to destroy those constructs. Unlike her parents, Birdie becomes conscious of the part that she is playing when she is forced to pass as white. Birdie’s movements between racial and cultural lines indicate that the social constructs are social creations and that people are not inherently connected through their ethnic backgrounds. This is also demonstrated when Birdie encounters other girls that are mixed like herself, and is still unable to establish a connection. Birdie is on a constant search for “wholeness” when she sets out to find her father and sister. Tired of passing, she believes that the other half of her family will be the key to her self-identification.

When she does find them she does not receive the answers she is looking for, but she does realize that she no longer needs to search for the role that she fits within, because it does not truly exist. Birdie’s unsatisfying journey can in fact be viewed as a mirroring of Clare, who attempts to leave the white world behind and rejoin the black community. Rather than ending
Birdie’s return with tragedy like Clare’s, Senna allows her protagonist to recognize that there will be no joyful homecoming to black society. Unlike Clare who receives the literal message that she is simply not welcome, Birdie and her sister Cole are able to find out why. The ethnic roles they are eager to play are not real. These roles, however, are continually perpetuated in society and because of this, they will never truly be free from racial expectations. The most important lesson for Birdie and her sister to learn are that despite social expectations, they cannot rely on racial interconnectedness and so must find their own identity within themselves.

Senna’s depiction of Birdie’s discoveries is reminiscent of Larsen’s portrayal of the gravity placed on racial roles. Unlike Larsen’s Irene, Senna allows her characters to recognize the fictitiousness of race. However, despite the fact that her characters realize that race is a manufactured component of American culture, it does not make these expectations any less real in a society that has been built on racial difference. Like Larsen, Senna demonstrates the difficulty in addressing the race problem by introducing two characters determined to raise their daughters free from racial expectations. This proves more difficult than either parent anticipated, and to the girls’ detriment they are soon caught in their parents search for identity, sometimes through passing and sometimes through assimilation. Birdie makes multiple attempts to connect with individuals in the black community, as well as endeavors to find her father and sister, to whom she believes herself to be racially connected. What she finds is that she will not be able to find her identity by connecting with others racially like herself, but on her own terms, and separate from the conventions of race. Senna’s protagonist makes the same claims as Nella Larsen and Ralph Ellison: racial lines are imagined, but that does not make them any less real to society. Therefore, the journey away from racial expectations is a difficult endeavor that the individual must undertake on their own.
Birdie and Cole’s upbringing is an essential part of Birdie’s story. Birdie and her sister are home schooled by their parents, who believe they can create a family free of racial boundaries. Birdie recalls her mother’s desire to raise them apart from racism and violence (26). She quotes her father’s statement, “He liked to joke to his friends that Cole and I were going to be proof that race mixing produced superior minds, the way a mutt is always more intelligent than a purebred dog” (26).

The intentions of Birdie’s parents are good, but as they are still reinforcing stereotypes in their cultural analysis, they are not truly separating themselves from them. Daniel Grassian gives his observation on Birdie’s parents:

Senna portrays Birdie and Cole’s parents, Deck and Sandy Lee, as well-intentioned, but ultimately naïve Baby Boomers, products of the 1960’s, who believe that they can raise their children free of racism, possibly even divorced of an ethnic and racial identity as well. In a sense, the intellectual Deck and Sandy become involved and have children to disprove accepted theories of ethnicity and to prove their own rather than out of genuine love (Grassian 322).

When the girls are very small, they create an imaginary language called “Elemeno” that they use as an escape from their parents’ constant arguing. Cole tells the story about The Elemenos that change from one color to another in order to appear invisible. Cole explains that their ability to change color is used as a form of self-defense, though Cole never makes it clear what they need to find protection from. The Elemenos come to represent some significant situations that take place in the novel. The Elemenos appear to be an imitation of the world that
the girls’ parents are trying to create for them, a world free of race and difference. At the same time, they are representative of the need to survive, and the possibility of survival through invisibility. Cole understands that just like some animals, people also need to disappear in order to survive the hostility in the world. Birdie begins to see some of the negative effects of standing out in her childhood. She witnesses the racism that is directed towards her father by a police officer in the park. Birdie also sees this when her mother attempts to place her and her sister Cole in a white school together. “They shoved Cole into the rack of bras and one of them stuck some chewed bubble gum in her hair. They hurried off then, laughing, but not so fast that I didn’t hear what they said: Go back to the jungle, darkie. Go wash your ass. Go, you little culahd biscuit” (40).

After Cole is bullied at South Boston, Sandy places both girls at Nkrumah, a predominately black school, with the assumption that Birdie will not be discriminated against as Cole was. Sandy’s racial ignorance can be viewed as negligence in a sense because it inhibits her ability to protect her daughters. Senna’s depiction of how Sandy neglects to prepare both daughters for the possible dangers of the world reflects Larsen’s portrayal of Irene’s failure to inform her sons about the dangers of racism. Their children’s safety is contingent on what they learn from their parents. When Cole and Birdie’s parents preach about their separation from social expectations, the girls adopt their ideology, creating their own race-free environment. When their parents abandon this idea and attempt to assimilate to racial and social constructs, their children follow suit and mimic their actions. The girls’ mirroring of their parents’ behavior conveys how social and racial expectations are passed on to children from their parents.

The fact that Deck and Sandy are unable to survive the social pressures of having a mixed family shows that neither of them were as devoted to each other as they were interested in
demonstrating their ability to break away from social roles. They decide to divorce and continue their social activism separately. Deck attempts to reconnect to his ethnic roots while Sandy takes off with her political rebellion. Sandy takes her mild acts of mutiny to extremes in order to assert her self identification as a radical, while Deck’s revisit to the African-American community resembles role playing rather than an actual return to his ethnic background.

Deck’s reconnection to his ethnic background seems false and exaggerated as he switches between his regular way of speaking, and the slang that he uses with his friends. “My father always spoke differently around Ronnie. He would switch into slang, peppering his sentences with words like “cat” and “man” and “cool”. Whenever my mother heard him talking that way she would laugh and say it was his “jive turkey act” (10)

When the girls start school at Nkrumah, their act to assimilate is almost identical to their father’s. Aside from trying to dress like the girls at the all black school, the two sisters attempt to learn how to “talk black”, using an issue of Ebony that Cole steals from school. “‘They have examples in here. Like, don’t say, ‘I’m going to the store.’ Say, ‘I’m goin’ to de sto’. Get it? And don’t say, ‘Tell the truth.’ Say, Tell de troof.” (53).

The adjustment to Nkrumah is far more difficult for Birdie, who can only change her clothes and behavior. Cole finds it much easier to adjust with her ethnic appearance. Birdie is only able to escape racial hostility from the other school girls when Cole comes to her defense and claims her as her sister (48). “Even before she flees with her mother and passes as white, Birdie learns the “art of changing” when she and her sister Cole are sent to the Nkrumah school” (Boudreau 62). Birdie learns how to erase herself in order to become accepted by others. Yet, unlike Larsen’s Irene and Ellison’s invisible man, Birdie is conscious of the act she is performing.
Soon after Birdie’s acceptance into the Nkrumah school, Sandy and Deck split up, each taking one daughter with them. The pains that each parent took to prevent their daughters from being defined by their race is destroyed when the girls are separated and defined right then and there as being separate; one is white, the other is black. When Sandy gives Birdie a false identity to represent, she disables Birdie’s ability to create her own identity. “Birdie’s body image is constantly changing as she moves from black to white, leaving Birdie distanced from her body and thus from any clear sense of self-identity” (Boudreau 60). Sandy’s actions also demonstrate the invalidity of race, and how a person can become another race by simply performing certain characteristics of that race. Birdie’s performance demonstrates that the concept of race is kept alive by society’s promotion of stereotypes. What she begins to see in New Hampshire is that race is an act, while racism is a real threat.

While passing as with her mother, Birdie is witness to the discrimination Samantha, the only other racially mixed girl in the school receives. This ignites a fear within her to further conceal her racial identity. Because Sandy views Birdie as being white, she fails to see why Birdie avoids the only other mulatto girl, Samantha, that goes to her school. Sandy only sees that Birdie is trying to ignore Samantha and questions her, believing that Birdie is becoming racially influenced by her friends, “‘A loser? Jessie Goldman, I never thought I’d hear you talk about another human being in such terms. What…have I been trying to teach you all these years? That girl is no different from you. Do you hear me?’” (237). Sandy doesn’t understand that Birdie avoids being near Samantha because she is afraid of being recognized by others as she recognizes Samantha to be like herself. In Nell Sullivan’s essay “Nella Larsen’s Passing and the Fading Subject,” Sullivan discusses how the two characters Irene and Clare recognize their likeness in each other. “Later in the novel, when Irene and Clare meet before the mirror for the
last time, Irene experiences fear and guilt over her sin of omission; she knows but fails to tell Clare that Bellew, having seen Irene out with the brown-skinned Felise Freeland, probably suspects Clare’s racial identity” (Sullivan 379). Simultaneously, Clare Kendry chooses to avoid the company of African Americans in order to prevent her husband from identifying her ethnicity. Birdie Lee’s avoidance of Samantha is very similar, in that she is fearful that the other students will make the connection between Samantha and herself. Birdie’s reluctance to befriend Samantha is similar to her father’s desire to assimilate as a means of self-defense against racism.

When Birdie sees Samantha at a party, she decides that she is more interested in connecting with a person like herself than in being discovered. Perhaps Birdie believes that Samantha will be like her sister Cole, or that she would automatically form a bond with her because they shared an ethnicity. What she learns is that Samantha is not as eager as she is to make a connection, “Samantha looked bored now, like she wanted to get back to the party…Just as we reached the lawn before the house, I pulled her to a stop and said, ‘One more question.’ She looked impatient now. She didn’t want to be popular this badly. ‘What?’ ‘What color are you?’ There was a prolonged silence, then she smiled sideways the way she had in the woods. She said so softly that I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right: ‘I’m black. Like you’” (286). Birdie’s suspicions of being recognized by Samantha prove to be true. Just like in Passing, the two girls are able to recognize their own ethnicity in each other’s appearance. Yet unlike Birdie, Samantha does not have the ability to “pass” and blend in with the other white students. Samantha’s isolation from the social group has enabled her to act more independently and she does not try as Birdie does to “fit in”. Samantha does not share in Birdie’s belief that because their ethnicity is the same, they must be similar to each other. Samantha’s indifference to
Birdie’s confession also foreshadows Birdie’s eventual understanding that ethnicity does not bear the importance that Birdie consistently gives it.

In this section of the novel, Senna truly explores the racial bond that people imagine to exist. Just like Birdie imagines that she and Samantha are joined somehow, she also imagines that she is racially bound to her father and sister. She is cruelly disappointed when she finally enters Deck’s apartment and sees him again. Birdie finds out that her father had not been searching for her at all during her absence. Deck has gone on with his life and more importantly his theories about ethnicity. When Birdie confesses to her father that she has been “passing”, a disclosure that she believes will shock him, he is unmoved. He says that there is no such thing as passing because race is an illusion in which people are wearing costumes as if they are playing a game. Only Birdie does not see her life with her mother as a game. Birdie has felt as though she was in constant danger. She has been unable to act as herself and has felt trapped in a world of racial hatred. Her high esteem for her father comes crashing down when he is unable to see what it is that she has been going through.

Birdie’s reconnection with her father is a disappointment because he has not longed for her as she has longed for him. His ideas take precedence over his love and he is not emotionally connected to Birdie even if they are father and daughter and of the same race. Dissatisfied with her reunion with her father, Birdie asks to see Cole.

Birdie’s reunion with Cole proves to be more satisfactory. The sisters are able to understand each other in a way that no one else can. Because Sandy and Deck are too wrapped up in their own ideas, they are unable to grasp the enormity of their actions in their daughter’s lives. “Although Birdie is the narrator, both sisters suffer from the cruelty their parents are all too eager to pass on” (Gomez 364). As it turns out, the sisters, though separate, lived a very similar
life away from each other. They grew older feeling as though they were missing something, and felt as though they were always waiting. Just like the resentment Birdie feels for her father, Cole is burdened by thoughts of her mother. “I believe Mum, I do. But mantras, Birdie? That wasn’t enough. She should have done more to find me. To contact me” (407). Birdie also finds Cole’s ideas about race more helpful and realistic than her father’s. In response to Deck’s comment about race not existing, Cole says to Birdie, “‘He’s right…about it all being constructed. But…that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist’” (408). What Birdie and Cole find separately, though together, is that their parent’s ideas about race could not match up to their own experience. Birdie thinks about other mixed people she has known in her time “passing”. Birdie thinks of Samantha, who survived by acting amused by her friends’ racist remarks. She thinks of Cole, who adopted black behavior in order to fit in with her peers. Birdie then thinks of herself, who pretended to be someone else altogether in order to feel safe. “Senna’s book suggests that it’s not simply the treatment of mulattos but the treatment of children that indicates how badly whites and blacks have failed in finding a way to live together with dignity” (Gomez 364). The girls represent their parent’s serious misunderstanding of what it would be like for their daughters to grow up belonging to neither race. Because they cannot rely on their parent’s ideals about race, they must dig their own way through the muck created by the multitude of racial ideologies. Finally, Birdie tells her sister that there are consequences in not changing to meet the expectations of others. To which Cole replies, “‘Yeah, and there are consequences if you do’” (408).

“Birdie advocates disregarding the consequences of ‘not choosing.’ Her adolescence validates this choice because having tried to blur or ignore all kinds of societal boundaries, she knows that freedom comes in abiding by one’s own self-image, not through conformity to social
codes and color laws” (Dagbovie 107). During their meeting, Birdie finds that her sister Cole has progressed more in her perception of race and personal identity. Birdie learns from Cole that assimilating in order to survive will keep a person safe, but will prevent them from finding their true identity. “It is a choice she is willing to make, however, knowing that she will now speak for herself rather than allowing her body to do all the talking. No matter what the consequences” (Boudreau 69).

The story ends with the final scene in which Birdie sees a girl on a bus of mixed children and starts to wave to one that she recognizes as being half black and half white. “One face toward the back of the bus caught my eye, and I halted in my tracks, catching my breath. It was a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl, and she was watching me from behind the dirty glass. For a second I thought I was somewhere familiar and she was a girl I already knew. I began to lift my hand, but stopped, remembering where I was and what I had already found” (413). Birdie catches herself from waving to the girl in time. She realizes that even if they are of the same race, they are not connected to each other in any way. This recognition symbolizes Birdie’s acceptance of the reality that she will not find a particular cultural construct to live within. At the same time, Birdie knows that she is closer to finding her own identity, by not buying into the socially constructed boundaries of ethnicity. “We cannot let race ossify and become an unmoving monument to either the past or the future; rather, we must move with the times and try to remember that” (Brody 744).

The final image in the story is of the bus pulling away, leaving a blurred effect, which reflects Birdie’s life in itself. It is a haze of race, ideas, and sexuality that reveal the non-existence of racial communities. The book ends with this scene that solidifies what Larsen and Ellison implied but never fully expressed about race, passing, and identity. Though Deck, Cole,
and Birdie change the way they talk and dress, they are never able to fully assimilate into what should be their own race. By allowing Birdie to realize that she has evolved past the belief that she is somehow related to other mixed individuals and that she can discover her identity through race, Senna creates closure for Birdie that Clare and the invisible man never achieve.

The ambiguity in which Passing is written is part of its legacy. By seemingly making no commitments as to what passing is and who individuals are, Larsen reveals more about the passing phenomenon and race than any writers before her. Larsen’s ambiguous character Irene becomes the embodiment of her message that morality and racial allegiance do not go hand in hand and that race is not at the root of self-identification. This message is continued at the hands of her predecessors who like Larsen feel the urgency to reveal the truth about passing, race, and identity. As Senna’s characters reveal at the end of their journey, there is no “safe” choice. Whether they choose to imitate another race or conform to the expectations of their own, they are still acting and striving to take on the characteristics of a particular social role. While Larsen’s protagonist Irene is inhibited by her dependence on social roles, Senna’s and Ellison’s narrators find freedom in determining these expectations false and therefore are able to begin forming their identity on their own terms, free from social expectations and the pressure to pass.

The fact that Ellison and Senna allow their characters to begin the pursuit of self worth beyond race and passing illustrates the authors’ desire to extend Larsen’s story past the detriment caused in a culture divided by racial categories. Larsen indicated that these divisions became more important than individuals’ rights, and therefore justified hostile attitudes and actions against persons who chose not to adapt to society’s expectations. Ellison took Larsen’s argument out of black society and into white society to demonstrate how dangerous these expectations can become. Ellison argued that not only were African Americans subjected to
racial divides, but also made to live in constant fear of white power figures. Ellison urges his readers to not consent to a society that only accepts black individuals under the condition that they perform in roles that are often humiliating and degrading to them. Like Larsen, Ellison understood that these social conventions are not so easily challenged. But, if they are recognized, perhaps some individuals can choose identities for themselves, and not allow their personas to be orchestrated for them by more dominant citizens.

Danzy Senna delivers the same message in her novel, *Caucasia*. However she depicts a more modern representation in which her characters are all aware of racial roles and social conventions, but still struggle to find their identity in a society built on difference. Her narrator knows from childhood that racial roles are false, and yet she finds herself adapting to expectations several times in her life in order to gain approval. Though her narrator realizes early on that racial lines are imaginary, her exposure to racism is very real. In spite of what she knows, she finds herself performing in different racial roles. She does this not only for acceptance, but to survive in an environment where she faces racism recurrently, and cannot bear the thought of falling victim to it. But, as she learns from her sister Cole, there are consequences for changing oneself to the satisfaction of others. Like Irene and the invisible man, Birdie’s future is uncertain. However, Senna’s intent is to demonstrate how tightly individuals are bound to racial conventions, even when they know of their existence and their irrelevance. Her purpose is to explain that to separate oneself from these expectations is not easy, but necessary for individuals that choose not to hide in racial constructs, but to find their own identity outside of race.

These two authors took Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, and did what Larsen did for the passing novel. They did not rework her approach to passing because they found her message to be
limited, but deemed it necessary to illustrate how much power these racial conventions had over society. They wanted to show how difficult it is to escape racial expectations and why it was necessary to do so. Both authors portray characters that fight against racial categories, in spite of the difficulty they face in doing so. Therefore, these writers show that it is worth the struggle for self-identification and that belonging is not worth the risk of losing one’s distinctiveness.
Epilogue

Despite its simple appearance, *Passing* has proven to be a highly innovative novel due to its fearless ability to challenge those social, racial, and sexual categories that were ingrained in American identity. Larsen candidly portrays two individuals, one who passes as white and one who does not, and yet both are destroyed by racial restrictions. This was more telling than passing novels before hers, in which passing was depicted as a crime against one’s race and that one could be saved simply by re-claiming one’s heritage. Larsen changed the passing novel forever by depicting race itself as the true performance, and passing as a side effect of our devotion to racial categories.

That Larsen was willing to speak out against fixed racial categories during a time when it was considered dangerous to do so illustrates her devotion to bringing truth to her readers. Though it would bring her much criticism, Larsen felt it was necessary to convey the impossibility of maintaining racial laws in a society where race is so elusive. Moreover, Larsen wanted to express how damaging racial categorization itself was, rather than identifying passing as the sole contributor to the race problem.

Therefore, *Passing* became less about the act itself, and more about its underlying source of racial segregation. Her use of Irene, as the racial devotee, strengthens the rationale for breaking away from social protocol. Her character repeatedly demonstrates how often racial conventions took precedence over human life, while propagating racism and hostility on both sides of the color line. Her narrators’ final state of moral and mental perplexity illustrates the toll that racial categorization takes on individuals that have invested their lives upon maintaining such impractical expectations. More importantly, these impossible expectations only helped to
justify hate and violence against those whom would not conform to racial laws. Her novel ends with a feeling of uncertainty, which Larsen uses to convey her belief that there is no simple solution to the existing problems caused by race. However, Larsen felt that by knowing that these racial conventions were false, and what they do to our society, change becomes possible.

Later, Larsen’s successors would take her message and demonstrate its truthfulness as well as the necessity to continue Larsen’s message in a society that continues its dependency on race as a source for identity. Like Larsen, these authors would agree that breaking away from racial conventions is an uphill climb, even for those aware of its negative hold. Yet, if more individuals are made aware of race as an invented concept and character as separate from social expectations, many can find their identity outside of race.
Endnotes

Chapter 1

1 See Barton J. Bernstein “Case Law in Plessy vs. Ferguson.”

2 See Victoria W. Wolcott “Defending the Home: Ossian Sweet and the Struggle against Segregation in the 1920s Detroit”.

3 See Earl Lewis and Heidi Ardizzone. “A Modern Cinderella: Race, Sexuality, and Social Class in the Rhinelander Case.”

4 “Their passing is, however, of a segmental and temporary nature. It consists of riding in the less crowded front sections of a bus or on ‘white’ Pullmans, eating in restricted restaurants, attending picture shows, patronizing drugstore soda fountains, or in other ways making an opportune, but temporary use of the Caucasoid characteristics to avoid unpleasantness or inconvenience”(22 Burma).

Chapter 2

1 Sylvia Lyons Render writes, “his frequent intrusive allusion to color, 4) his characterizations of darker blacks, and 5) his repeated association of light color with genuine intelligence or intellectuality. His very insistence on the term caste stemmed from his consciousness that he was forced to identify with men from whom he was, in fact, racially distinct” (210)

2 See Jane Caputi’s “Specifying’ Frannie Hurst: Langston Hughes’s ‘Limitations of Life,’ Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘Their Eyes were Watching God,’ and Toni Morrison’s ‘The Bluest Eye’ as ‘Answers’ to Hurst’s ‘Imitation of Life’.”
Chapter 3

1 See Kathleen L. Wolgemuth “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation”.

2 W.E.B. Du Bois writes of Larsen’s *Passing* in July of 1929, “If it did not treat a forbidden subject—the intermarriage of a stodgy middle class white man to a very beautiful and selfish octoroon—it would have an excellent chance to be hailed, selected, and recommended”(97).

Aubrey Bowser comments on Larsen’s character Clare on June 5, 1929, “She leaves her race and marries a white man without telling him she is colored…[..]…she wants clandestine relations with colored people. She gets them to; serpents like her get everything they want”(95).

Alice Dunbar-Nelson commented about *Passing* in 1929, stating, “Of course, the author was wise in hanging the situation onto a color complex: the public must have that now. But the book would have been just as intriguing, just as provocative, just as interesting if no mention had been made of color or race. Clare might have been any woman hungry for childhood friends; Irene and her brown skinned friends any group of the socially elite” (90).

3 “Even Irene’s work with racial uplift programs, such as the Negro Welfare League, reveal her true value orientation. Although she deludes herself that this work is a barometer of her racial consciousness, it is actually self-serving, not undertaken for the good of the race. The social functions that Irene arranges, supposedly designed to aid the unfortunate black masses and to give them a sense of belonging, are so heavily attended by prominent whites that her husband, Brian, fears, “Pretty soon the colored people won’t be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections””

(McDowell 373).
“In Irene’s view, Clare is very much at fault, racially. From the very beginning of the novel, Irene judges Clare as having ‘no allegiance’ and being ‘selfish, and cold, and hard’ (6). Clare, she insists repeatedly, ‘cared [not] at all about the race’ nor had any ‘great, or even real affection’ for it”(Kaplan xx)

“Besides, to their notion, hard labor was good for me. I had Negro blood and they belonged to the generation that had written and read long articles headed: ‘Will the Blacks Work’”(Passing 26).

“Clare is right to scoff at what Irene considers the ‘right thing’ (46) or the ‘safe’ thing to do in terms of race. It is Irene’s racial ideology, not Clare’s, which is truly problematic. More than problematic, Irene—race woman, devotee of ‘security,’ fixity, and a world of black and white, right and wrong—proves deadly. Nothing is worse, as it turns out, than the kind of race ‘loyalty’ Irene adheres to, one that can buck no gray areas, no complications, no messy desires, no instabilities, slippages, or contradictions, a ‘loyalty’ which insists, in Bowser’s words, that people be ‘either one thing or the other.’”

Tragic mulatta often refers to an African American of light complexion who suffers difficulties as a result of their bi-racial background. Often the tragic mulatta is portrayed as vulnerable, as they are in the middle of a culture split by race.
Chapter 4

1 James B. Lane writes, “Ellison’s fundamental assumption in Invisible Man was that black people became recognizable only when they suppressed their real self and conformed to emasculating parodies of the white man’s self-contradictory image of them. In their twisted psyches, white Americans had defined black men as violence-prone yet childlike, docile yet unpredictable, oppressed yet happy…and supermasculine yet impotent in contact with whites” (66).

2 Per Winther writes, “The men at the smoker allow the invisible man to play the role of animalistic bacchant (with the nude blonde), violent brute (in the fight), and good student (through his speech), and in the Brotherhood the role assigned to him is yet another traditionally accepted “good n----- role”, that of orator” (116).

3 “Race appears to be in the eye of the beholder, reflecting the desires and identifications of the one who looks. But race can also reflect the desires and identifications of the one who is looked at” (Kahan 35).
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Vivian Maguire was born Viviana Cervantes in El Paso, Texas. The second child to Miguel and Blanca Cervantes, she graduated from The School of Educational Enrichment, in El Paso, Texas, in the spring of 1997 and entered The University of Texas at El Paso in 1999. She completed her degree at New Mexico State University in December of 2004 with a bachelor’s degree in English Literature. Vivian completed certification for teaching with Teachers for the 21st Century in 2005, before beginning a teaching career at Socorro High School in December 2005. In 2006, Vivian elected to pursue a Master’s degree in English Literature. During that time Vivian also became a Teaching Consultant for the West Texas Writing Project and participated in the Word Weaver’s writing camps, an extension of the WTWP. Following her participation in these events, she married Randy Maguire and relocated to Austin, Texas, where she now continues to teach at Fulmore Middle School. At Fulmore, Vivian has founded Girl’s Club, an after school program for young women seeking guidance towards making better life choices. Her and her students continue to pursue new writing experiences using Thennewyorktimes.com and Twitter as venues for their responses to articles.