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Clare: A Disruption to Irene's Idealistic Fantasy

The first time we see the two main characters in *Passing* by Nella Larsen interact with one another is when the two are adults and after our protagonist, Irene Redfield, was done walking about Chicago in disarray, trying to find a book for her young son, when she is overwhelmed by a man on the street having a heart attack. To help cope and get out the heat, Irene, a Negro woman in the 1920s, gets into a cab and the taxi driver suggests she go to the Drayton, a fancy hotel for white people go to cool off and enjoy some tea, because he thinks she is white. Irene agrees with the driver, knowing the Drayton was a place for white people, and he takes her to the Drayton. Once there, Irene feels at peace and well because she was able to be seated and served tea. Irene sees this woman that is later seated next to her, whom Irene perceives to be white, talking with the black male waiter and smiling at him. Irene finds this curious but soon forgets about her curiosity as she enjoys her tea. It is then Irene feels the weight of a stare on her from the other woman and she starts to feel panicked because she doesn't want to get caught passing, representing one self to be another race, and being ejected from the Drayton. It is then the white woman comes over to Irene's table and starts conversing with her, saying she thinks she knows Irene. Here is where Irene is reintroduced to and when we meet our depicted antagonist, Clare (Kendry) Bellew, though she is as much of a protagonist as Irene is.

Throughout the novel, Irene Redfield feels threatened by Clare Bellew in some way. Clare is a person that seems, and is portrayed, as being the person who doesn't have a care in the

world, much the opposite of Irene. Clare, a Negro like Irene, is passing as white; she has a wealthy white husband, John Bellew, a (half) white daughter, and the life of a white wife and mother. Irene, on the other hand, is the contrary; she is a self-defined/ portrayed black woman, she has a black husband, Brian Redfield, lives in the middle class, and has two sons. It is Clare's passing and living as a white wife with her own opinions of life and Irene's living as a black wife with opposite opinions than Clare that causes distress for Irene because she sees herself and Clare as two very different people and Clare is not right in what she says. The distress Irene feels towards Clare makes Irene start to see Clare as a threat to one of Irene's biggest desire. "In spite of [Irene's] searchings and feeling, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life" (Larsen 76). Clare fills the role of threatening the security Irene feels in her status as a mother and wife, her status in the black community, her passing, and her marriage.

Jessica Labbé, an assistant professor of English at Francis Marion University, discusses the importance of teaching *Passing* in her article "'Death by Misadventure': Teaching Transgression in/through Larsen's *Passing*". Labbé argues many different claims about Irene, Clare, Larsen, and *Passing* that converse with claims distributed by other critics of *Passing* but what is interesting is Labbé's mentioning Clare and Irene's meeting as adults after twelve years of not seeing each other at the Drayton and comes to the conclusion (after fully reading the novel) that seems to be so obvious and simplistic that it is a small detail in comparison to others. Labbé insists that the women "hold opposite philosophies of life"; Irene wants "safety at the cost of happiness" while Clare wants the "happiness over safety" (Labbé 122).

What Labbé states here in her article, Clare and Irene's "opposite philosophies", is the best and simplest way that I could put it myself. These two women are in the same boat as one another with passing as white but after that the two are as different as an apple is to a pear; they

are both fruits but there the two are different to the core. There are many places where readers can read and see how the two have opposite ideas of happiness and security, as Labbé points to the scene where Irene is reading Clare's letter and Irene can't understand Clare's writing but really it is a literal translation to Irene's "inability to understand Clare" (Labbé 126). A scene that Labbé doesn't point out that shows how opposite these two women are with their view of safety is the scene when Clare goes to Irene's house, uninvited and unwanted by Irene, after Irene does not answer Clare's letter. It is at this meeting the two females get into an argument over risk and safety (i.e. security), specifically Clare's continuous ignoring of safety while frequently visiting Irene and Harlem.

"What I really mean," [Irene] retorted, "is that it's dangerous and that you ought not run such silly risks. No one ought to. You least of all.".... Clare said, "Oh, me!" Irene touched her arm caressingly... "Yes, Clare, you. It's not safe. Not safe at all." "Safe!" [Clare said]... It was as if Clare Kendry had said... "Damn being safe!"(Larsen 46-47).

From this little snippet of the scene it may not be fully clear, but Irene and Clare are discussing the non-safety of Clare's passing as white and being around Black Harlem. It is in this scene that we see Irene's desire for safety in the community rise its head and how Clare does not care much for safety or community because Irene perceives Clare's words as if she had "snapped her teeth down on the word [Safe!]" and really meant "Safe! Damn being safe!" to Irene, "for whom safety, security, were [all to] important" (Larsen 47). The continuation of the scene demonstrates both of the women's differences and the threat Clare poses to Irene's safety in knowing her security she has, as both Labbé and Brian Carr explore.

As a PhD candidate in the 2004 Literature program at Duke University, Brian Carr asserts that Clare experiences *jouissance*, defined as meaning enjoyment, but Irene does not experience said *jouissance*. Carr insists desire and *jouissance* as being antagonistic because “desire is founded on the loss of *jouissance* as absolute pleasure” (Carr 286). I don’t agree that to experience desire you have to lose *jouissance*, or enjoyment, because usually most try to find enjoyment in reaching what they desire and possessing that desire. I can admit and agree with where Carr is going with his idea of *jouissance* and how it pertains to Irene and Clare in *Passing*. Irene, herself, has the desire of security, but she is not really enjoying the security she is experiencing. While Irene has her sanctuary, Clare has both what she wants, to be a rich and white, and as Carr points out, Irene sees Clare as having what she desires with the privilege of experiencing *jouissance* without “sacrifice[ing]” anything (Carr 286).

Clare’s experience with *jouissance* gets to Irene because she does not get that opportunity to have *jouissance* unless she gives up her heritage, her status as a black woman and her family where she knows her place. Irene feels comfortable in this position (a black wife, mother, and community member) and doesn’t doubt it until Clare came back into her life and made Irene see things in a different light. Much like how Irene sees Clare’s being around Black Harlem while having a white husband (who thinks Clare is white and dislikes African Americans) as being scandalous and being a risk because Irene would never do such a thing. Irene would be too afraid of getting caught for passing as white for that long length of time (i.e. Clare’s twelve years) and this interrupts Irene’s security in knowing how a black woman or white woman should act in society and creates a jealousy within Irene. Irene is jealous that Clare can have it both ways, being in the white and black community, because “passing enables Clare to close the gap between desire and *jouissance*” (Carr 286) and Irene can’t close that gap but every once in a

while. This jealousy is not something Irene is used to feeling, much like many other feelings, and this leads her to be vulnerable to many doubts she has about herself and about her place in the black community.

To further support Irene doubting herself when Clare and her are chatting is a scene in the book where Clare expresses her opinion on “children [not being] everything” and “there are other things in this world, though [Clare] admit[s] some people don’t seem to expect it” (Larsen 58). To which Irene has to refute and says aloud, “I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I *am* wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can’t help it” (Larsen 58). It is as though here Irene has to say aloud that she believes in being a mother and a house wife while Clare has the opposite view and would rather not be either. Irene has to say this aloud because there are cases, earlier in the book, where Irene doubted that she wanted to be a mother or wife and wondered what it would be like if she wasn’t. Only when Clare said her stand on it did Irene defend what she thought was what a mother and wife should say, what a mother and wife should think instead of agreeing with what Clare says.

Irene has to stand up for the knowledge stability being a wife and mother gives her and to not go against what she believes. Irene does not understand how Clare couldn’t be wrapped up in her daughter. Irene’s not being able to understand Clare’s not wanting to be a mother or Clare in general, an idea Labbé states in her article (Labbé 127), is something else that upsets Irene’s safety in knowing she can understand people and understand where they stand in comparison to her, especially in her community. Steve Pile supports the idea that Irene wants everyone in their place and wants to understand those people by stating that Irene “shores up” where “black people and white people are supposed to be” and that by “disguising one’s identity to live in the ‘wrong’ ...is...intolerable” and Irene can’t live with Clare’s “inhabiting both [communities] and

crossing them”(Pile 36). Irene feels she should be able to tell why Clare acts the way she does but she can’t say that she can and that causes a blow to Irene’s ego.

An argument could also be made the opposite though, that Irene’s inability to decipher Clare makes Irene take notice of things she never noticed before about herself. Jonathan Little, an Assistant Professor of English at Alverno College, looks at a different view than Labbé in his 1992 article “Nella Larsen’s *Passing*: Irony and the Critic” by describing Clare as openly defying “convention [by] returning so openly to the Black community while married to a white man” and her being a “colorful, vibrant character” with her “life and personality” (Little 176). This throws an “unflattering” light on “Irene’s own “pale” and “convention-bound life” (Little 176). Thus causes Irene to notice certain aspects of her life that she otherwise wouldn’t have noticed before. “It was as if in a house long dim, a match had been struck, showing ghastly shapes where had only blurred shadows” (Larsen). This line from *Passing* that Little uses to support the theory that Clare causes Irene to see things not seen before is interesting because it has multiple meanings within the novel, making it a very general quote to put as support for the theory. I want to take a closer look at a more specific issue that Clare Kendry helps Irene Redfield see that went unnoticed before: Irene’s lifeless, passionless marriage to Brian Redfield.

Irene never noticed before Clare that her and Brian lacked passion in their marriage, but rather she just thought that Brian was mad at her because she wanted to stay in the safety of race-defined America instead of moving to free Brazil, where people were not judged based on the color of their skin and where Brian could have gotten paid more than what he does in an poor American hospital. Once Irene saw Brian and Clare interact together, Irene noticed how “pitifully bare” Brian was and she wondered if he had always seemed that way (Larsen 65). Something else that came to a realization to Irene and readers was Irene and Brian’s bedroom life; they each

had their own bedrooms and didn't engage in any sexual relations. At a party Irene threw at her and Brian's home, Irene noticed Brian's interaction with Clare and the way he smiled at something Clare said; this made Irene think that Brian had a thing for Clare. This threw her into a frenzy because before Irene saw how Brian reacted to Clare, Irene thought they had a sound, safe marriage. Irene starts to doubt her marriage and the security that comes with it, but Perry L. Carter brings up the interesting point in his article "The Penumbra Spaces of Nella Larsen's *Passing*" that Irene is not in fear of Brian leaving her as much as she fears "the loss of social standing his leaving her will" bring her (Carter 235).

To help strengthen Carter's argument, I want us to look towards a scene where Irene is in doubt if she even loved, if ever, Brian at all in the time of their marriage. "Certainly not" Irene thought during the time Clare and Brian were waiting for Irene to get ready (Larsen 77). Though she thought this "she meant to keep him" to keep together the "outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain" (Larsen 77). In this scene Irene is determined to keep Brian because, and this is put subtly, to keep her life "fixed" which ultimately goes to Irene keeping her status in the black community as it is, a loving mother and wife. I think this is a good scene to look at to show that if Brian leaves Irene for Clare, Irene would be seen as a divorced mother whose husband left her for a woman who has passed and is in most every way white instead of being seen as the wife of a respectable doctor.. This would not be a good thing for Irene because it is not her ideal plan on how a marriage is supposed to act and she doesn't like to be thought of in a bad way in anyone's mind, like being a Negro at the Drayton. She fears what others will see her as instead of the carefully controlled image she has projected and this fear causes instability and doubt for Irene.

Mentioning image and communities, one of the many fascinating claims Josh Toth asserts, with the help from Jean-Luc Nancy, in his 2008 article “Deauthenticating Community: The Passing Intrusion of Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen's *Passing*”, is that Clare “deauthenticates” communities and herself when she passes through specific communities because she will not “align” herself with a specific community- white or black but she goes between the two (Toth 56). Where Toth is heading with his claims is that Clare upsets the balance of what the “norm” is by being able to go back and forth between the white and black communities. I’d agree with what Toth claims because Clare’s deauthenticating causes instability within those communities, which ultimately intimidates Irene’s security in what her status is in the black community and that makes her jealous. Irene is jealous because she can’t get out of the black community but only for a little while when it benefits her, a “*conscious episodic passer*” as Carter calls Irene- she identifies herself as black but passes whenever she is benefited (Carter 237), where Clare can go as she please and be whoever she wants to be. Much like how Carr describes Clare as having her desire without giving up her *jouissance*, Irene feels like Clare has it all. Toth goes on to suggest that by not choosing sides, Clare “provokes hysterical and violent reactions” (Toth 56-57). It is a fair claim to make because both *Passing*’s readers and Irene both have such reactions to certain events dealing with Clare. To give a specific example of a hysterical reaction would be Irene’s jumping to conclusion, or she at least entertained the thought for a long time, that Brian and Clare were having an affair.

Toth complicates things further when he claims that Clare gives Irene freedom. How can that be if Clare threatens Irene’s ideal of how a person, of color and a person of passing should act? Toth discusses *Passing* in the context of a critical approach and at the end of this discussion, he brings to the reader’s attention the idea that Clare not only acts as a “certain threat and a

certain freedom” towards Irene but rather “embodies the threat of freedom” because Clare’s passing is freedom and it “both attracts and repels Irene” (Toth 59). To explain what this means, what Toth is saying is that Irene is attracted at the same time repelled by the many different things Clare is “passing” for because these different items give Clare the freedom that Irene herself wants but won’t allow herself to have (Toth). This is because they are not what a black woman of the middle class in America should want. This is the threat that Clare forces Irene to face- or rather to not face- in *Passing* but instead of understanding that she already does pass like Clare, Irene spins all of these bad traits of Clare into an idea of what she should not be. Toth’s theory of Clare being a disruptor to the community and identity as well as causing a threat to Irene’s idea of freedom is extremely useful because it shed lights on the difficult problem of how Clare’s influence on Irene goes beyond the obvious and has hidden meanings. These hidden meanings, as Toth points some out in his article, go from small things like Clare’s disrupting Irene’s daily routine to Clare shaking up Irene’s sense of community and what that community should look like .

Irene is afraid of a lot of things that she never knew before because Clare came back into her life and disrupted how secure Irene was in the role she plays. There are many events that led up to Irene feeling this way. The only relief Irene felt was when Clare died at the end of the novel by falling/ being pushed by Irene/ John Bellew out a window. Did Clare’s disruption of Irene’s life, of her sanity make Irene push Clare out the window? Did Irene push Clare out the window? What would have happened if Clare and Irene hadn’t met up again? These are questions you, the readers, can explore while reading the book for answers can be varied. What can be unanimously agreed upon is that Clare upsets Irene’s sense of self, security, and safety.

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