

The rise to motherhood in larsen's passing



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout much of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry are portrayed as polar opposites. Though they both occupy the role of a young African-American mother living during the prosperous 1920s, they define that role in intensely different ways. Clare is a vivacious, wild woman who rejects her "people" in favor of freedom and glamour, whereas her good childhood friend Irene is more subdued and tries to act proud of her racial background for the sake of her family. Their differences ultimately manifest in their approaches to motherhood, and much of the novel revolves around the choices they make with regards to racial passing and parenting. Maternity is central to the racial passing experiences of both Irene and Clare, because Larsen is suggesting that mothers are responsible for carrying on the honor of the race that they belong to. Clare's attitude towards her racial passing and Irene's beliefs against it are each shaped and affected subsequently by the ways they view themselves as mothers, and it is this friction that drives the narrative towards its inevitable tragic conclusion. The importance of the maternal figure is established early on in the novel, beginning with the free spirited Clare Kendry. Her own origins are tense and dramatic, with her "drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man" (p. 143) often asserting his masculine dominance over her. The lack of Clare's own mother - a Negro girl, who as "they say, would have run away if she hadn't died" (p. 153) - would later prove to be detrimental to Clare's development. After the death of her father leaves her orphaned and without anyone to help her deal with her interracial heritage, Clare continues to evolve into an emotional roller coaster, something Irene remembers more clearly while she scrutinizes Clare's character: "Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive"

(p. 144-145). Without a mother to properly nurture her feelings and sensibilities, Clare chooses to rebel against all expectations of her black race by passing for a white woman in order to compensate for her troubled childhood. In addition to lacking a nurturing mother, Clare is left under the care of her father's sisters, considerably the biggest influences behind Clare's passing. Her aunts serve as substitute maternal figures for Clare, and they basically teach her to ignore the ancestry of her biological mother. "For all their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced...a Negro girl. [...] They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbours, or even to mention the south side. You may be sure that I didn't," Clare explains to Irene while discussing her life with her aunts (p. 159). These women essentially condition Clare to deny the existence of her Negro blood, and with nobody else around to show her how to be proud of the African American race, Clare rejects her heritage and readily slips into the persona of a pure white woman. When Clare becomes a mother herself, she earnestly continues to pass as white and this leads to her neglecting even her own child.

Throughout Larsen's novel, Irene points out to Clare that she must remember the well-being of her daughter Margery. Clare laments over the prospect of leaving New York, and even when Irene reminds her about Margery, Clare is still daunted that she cannot stay and mingle with the rest of the Harlem society. "Children aren't everything... There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don't seem to suspect it," Clare complains (p. 210). Clare obviously admires the glamour of her white appearance, and to be reminded by her child that she still carries (and has passed on) Negro blood would set her back. Coupled with her husband John

Bellew's adamant rule that there be "no niggers in my family" (p. 171), Clare cannot be a good mother to her child without admitting to her true nature. She understands that within the white race, there is an expectation that the pure white blood will carry on in future generations. Rather than nurturing her child to atone for her own mother's absence, Clare continues the cycle by making herself as unavailable as she can for her daughter. With Margery around, Clare cannot be as vibrant and as exuberant as she wants to be. In contrast to Clare's rejection of maternity and family in favor of self-gratification and social status, Irene takes her own role as a mother very seriously. "I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can't help it. And really, I don't think it's anything to laugh at," Irene responds to Clare (p. 210). She believes it is her responsibility to instill proper values in her two sons, and wants them to be able to grow up and freely embrace their African American heritage. After young Ted inquires about why only colored people were lynched, Irene and her husband Brian feud over how best to approach the subject of their sons' race. Brian argues that if "they've [Ted and Junior] got to live in this damned country, they'd better find out what sort of thing they're up against as soon as possible" (p. 231). He wants their children to be equipped to handle racism, but Irene wants "their childhood to be happy and as free from the knowledge of such things as it possibly can be" (p. 231). Irene fears that if her sons are more aware of the harsh bigotry and prejudice that awaits them out in the real world, they will become ashamed of their African American heritage and will suffer for it. If she fails to make her children's lives happy and 'as free from the knowledge' of racism before they are ready for it, then Irene will not only have failed her position as a mother, but she will have failed her position as a mother of the

Negro race. Unlike Clare, who does not want to be discovered that she is secretly carrying on the blood of the slaves, Irene wants to see her race progress into a better social stratum. Irene's decision to remain within the confines of her race and not publicly deny it also relates to the fact that the rest of her family is of a darker tone: "Irene...now said in a voice of whose even tones she was proud: 'One of my boys is dark'" (p. 168). She has to be honored by her family's skin color for the sake of her children. Irene 'proudly' describes her son as dark, and she sees it as her duty to foster this darkness and show off to the world how great the African American man can be. As opposed to Clare - who, as a deserter, has "to be afraid of freaks of the nature" (p. 169) - Irene has to deny actively passing and embrace her black heritage, and she believes that by uplifting future generations into overcoming white racism and prejudice, she will have done her part superbly as a colored mother. The differences that separate Clare and Irene as mothers ultimately lead to their final confrontation and the tragic circumstances that surround them in the novel's conclusion. Clare wants to free herself from John Bellew, but Irene believes that she is being selfish in neglecting Margery. "I think...that being a mother is the cruelest thing in the world," Clare declares (p. 197). Clare believes that her child is holding her back from happiness and independence, and Irene tries desperately to explain to her that she has a duty to Margery. "We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children," Irene argues to Clare in response. As a fellow parent, Irene wants to stop Clare from ruining the lives of herself and her child. It almost appears as if she wants to take them under her wing as well and nurture their appreciation - or at least acceptance - of their African American ancestry. When at the end, it seems

as if Clare might have done the unthinkable and violated Irene's own family, Irene comes to see Clare as a failure of the black race. Though Clare may have openly denied her race by passing as white for her entire adult life, Irene still believed that there was a chance to reclaim Clare. In the end, Clare's lack of dedication towards her maternity and family holds steady and Irene is zealous at maintaining the visage of a happy, successful African American family unit. The themes of family and womanhood are constantly being questioned and refashioned by Larsen in *Passing* because Clare and Irene's passing - whether active or passive - experiences are deeply shaped by their maternal identities. These two radically different mothers interact with each other the entire novel, but their beliefs are too firm to be shaken. Mothers are expected to uphold the pride of her race, and since Clare could not do this for the white race she was a part of, she paid the consequences for it.