

‘passing” by nella larsen essay sample

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Nella Larsen's book Passing examines the role of African American females and their identities in society. The way in which these identities mutate, shift, become a camouflage in society is something that is intriguing on both a sociological as well as psychological level. In Brody's examination of these elements of Larsen's story in her article Clare Kendry's " True" Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's Passing is a revelation into not only Larsen's narration technique but also her characterization.

The psychology of a character can lead to situation grace or tragedy: in Larsen's account of Clare Kendry, she is the epitome of the idea of Africa. This idea is further extolled by Brody as she writes, "...I argue that readings of race or more accurately, definitions of Blackness are indeed central to *Passing*. (Brody 1054), thus it is this ' definition of Blackness' that not only allows the characters to have identities but also allows the plot to progress toward how these identities are fathomable inside the constructions of a racist society.

In the character of Clare, Larsen is trying to bring forth this juxtaposition of race with society, yet in so placing the two next to one another what Larsen truly creates is a type of parasitic relationship that race and society have with one another. Inside these two elements of the story the reader finds Clare's identity, her struggles with these two identities of her race and her race inside of society as expressed by Brody, " Clare is not a member of the rising Black bourgeoisie nor was she ever a member of the aspiring middle-classes. She rose rapidly, readily " passed" and in so doing surpassed Irene in terms of class and material wealth. Yet in shifting her class status, Clare maintains a clear sense of her prior identity. Her Gatsbyesque ascendance to

the upper-echelons of white society is undercut by her patriotic (not patronizing) racial sympathies. She occupies an extremely precarious position" (Brody 1056). Due to Clare's ambiguity at times in the novel, the reader is never really positive of her position in either class (society) or her culture (race). It is this ambiguity that allows the tragedy of Clare's story to read almost sanctimoniously.

Although Brody presents the reader with the ideas of identity as a pass through which either color can 'walk in the shoes' of another race, she also gives the reader a viewpoint of Larsen's work that harkens back to other works dealing with similar situations such as The Blacker the Berry by Wallace Thurman or Native Son by Richard Wright. In the story of African Americans, there is prejudice involved with how dark or how light an African American's skin is; thus, there is racism that exists even within the dynamics of that culture, a point which Larsen makes but briefly in Clare's encounters with other blacks who are trying to 'pass' for white in order to move up in society or to gain access to certain clubs or diners.

In conclusion, it is purely a fundamental choice of two wrongs that the book Passing is based; the wrong of prejudices in race and society. While one black person may pass as white, they may be criticized for doing so, but they may also be criticized for being too dark. In a society whose basis of acceptance is on an uncontrollable gene factor, there is bound to be dogmatic reasoning that eventually leads to tragedy. In Clare's case, or in Larsen's case, this tragedy is the lack of growth in the protagonist alongside this obviously transmogrifying time in society.

Works Cited

Brody, Jennifer. Clare Kendry's " True" Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's Passing . *Callaloo* , Vol. 15, No. 4. (Autumn, 1992), pp. 1053-1065.

Larsen, Nella. Passing. Penguin. New York. 1989.