

# Du bois' theory of double consciousness in "passing"



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In W. E. B. Du Bois' manuscript *The Souls of Black Folk*, he explores the social construction of race and the view of racial identity among black folks by presenting the philosophy of double consciousness. The concept which refers to the sense of observing oneself through the eyes of others with the desire to fuse the double self into a better self is also explored in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. The character Irene is illustrated as a personification of the notion's influence in that she possesses twoness due to the conflicting societal identities as mulatto. Du Bois declares that black identity in America is dependent on how black people imagine the white populace perceives them. Irene's main concern is the security of her family as she is aware of the external racial threats that loom upon an African American household. Hence wavers between racial identifications in order to achieve a safer and better unified identity. As the focus of the story, she is molded by this concept in several junctures in the narrative in both her personal identity and the perception of others. Thus, due to her double consciousness, Irene undergoes racial and identity contradictions influencing her perception of her own identity, others identity and her attitude towards racial passing.

Owing to her double consciousness Irene's African ancestry makes her black before the white society hence strives to satisfy her role in the black community. Irene self-identifies as a black woman in society for respect, socioeconomic security, and in pursuit of racial stability. Larsen states that "she was aware that...security was the most important and desired thing in life" (Larsen). She therefore bases her identity on the sense of bourgeois safety and respect as a New Negro woman, inhabiting the role through activism and domesticity. Irene takes pride in progressing the black race

through her involvement in the black community among the elites. As Du Bois states in his theory that the wish of their older selves not be lost and not whiten their Negro soul, simply wish to make it possible to embrace the twoness without prejudice from their fellows. Contrary to Clare, Irene strives for the ease of sustaining a seemingly stable racial identity avoiding the uncertainty and implications of abandoning her African identity. Irene's awareness that she is considered black in contempt according to her racial heritage by the white America despite fair skin prompts the pursuit for the bourgeoisie lifestyle for security.

Similarly, double consciousness is observed in Irene's inclination to integrate whiteness in her black identity to always feel in control and safe from contempt and external racial threats. Irene states about racial passing that "We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt...yet we...admire it. We shy away from it...but we protect it." (Larsen). She is shown as displaying white racial and moral values in her stereotypic bourgeois lifestyle and elitism, wishing to integrate into the white-society to prevent her family from racial prejudices. In his manuscript he states black folks seek to escape the contempt of the white society and avoid the accesses for opportunities from closing (Du Bois). As Irene is occasionally passing for white to enjoy the convenience, her fears and doubts reflect the impact of double consciousness that involves the knowledge of the negative perception white people have of black folks. In spite of Irene's security from racism in the margins of her black elite community, she still has proclivities towards embracing whiteness to ensure the true sense of security from the white society. Moreover, the internal

conflict she experiences regarding protecting Clare's black identity is fostered by her double consciousness. The precarious dynamic with Clare contradicts with Irene's aim to sustain a sense of safety, stability, and permanence.

Consequently, her wariness and perception of Clare's identity are driven by her double consciousness, as it makes her unable to reconcile Clare's self-identification with her own sense of self. On Irene's decision to either expose Clare, the author narrates, " She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race" (Larsen). Her attempts to place Clare on one or the other race fosters Irene's internal conflict and insecurities regarding her own race and class. The quandary of her duality arises from deceiving her own race by abiding to white standards of identity while also trying to be loyal to her race, asserting her double consciousness. Her lifestyle represents the racial contradiction of double consciousness as she attempts to fuse distinct practices of each race in order to achieve an integrated identity. However, it is ironic, as an individual will remain loyal to a single race or else undermine their generated identity. As Du Bois states the double-aimed struggle, attempting to satisfy unresolved ideals has nurtured misplaced loyalties making some even ashamed of themselves.

Du Bois' theory of double consciousness molds Irene through its influence on her perception of her identity, her opinion on racial passing, and subsequently her views on others identity. Her conscious awareness of how she is perceived by society prompts her to racially identify as black for a sense of permanence, security, and respect. Although the idea that Irene and her family will always be vulnerable to contempt and pity fosters the

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need to integrate white racial and moral standards to her lifestyle.

Considering her main concern is a sense of security, Clare as a threat to that raises Irene's jealousy and the unresolved perception of Clare driven by her double consciousness. Her external and internal conflicts regarding the complexity of integrating different races due to the question of identity, security, and racial loyalty is double consciousness in action.

Works Cited  
Du Bois, W. E. B. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." *The Souls of Black Folk*. Bartleby. com, 1903. Web.

Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. New York: Modern Library, 2002. Web.