

The ending of passing: making sense of chaos



**ASSIGN
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Nella Larsen's novella *Passing* tells a compelling story about two mixed-race women, Irene and Clare, from drastically different outcomes who shape contrasting perspectives on the notion of "passing" as one race over another, as Irene is content with being her black self while Clare grew up as a white woman. This crescendo narrative escalates exponentially towards its explosive yet abrupt finale in which Clare falls out of a window and dies and Irene suffers a mental breakdown. The narrative takes a drastic turn from realism to a bizarre hyperreality drenched in subjectivity and impressionism. The ending is stylized to be vague on purpose, and many different interpretations can exist of it. Many readers will come up with different ideas about who murdered Clare, or if she was "murdered" to begin with, and these various interpretations impose different messages on relations between the characters and what they represent as motifs. Larsen projects the sensation of passing on the reader through how fractured and fragmented this finale is, which shows readers how fragmented one who passes through different races feels.

One possible interpretation is that Irene pushed Clare out of the window to her death. This appears to be the most shared belief, and it's hard to see why once one gets past the shock of the protagonist, a seemingly sane and reasonable person, would commit such a tragic murder. Irene is seemingly the last person to touch Clare shortly before she falls out of the window. The scene leading right to Clare's fall is described as follows: "Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even

a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes. It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm." (Larsen 209) It is quite a sinister scene that Larsen paints. Irene's frenzied run across the room towards Clare succeeding a declaration of her being "maddened" imposes a disposition of malice or at least unfortunate circumstance. This passage feels at home with a noire novel describing how the murder attacks its victim, with Irene preying on Clare in a seeming fit of rage. However, there is one piece of detail that stands out amongst the rest, the fact that Irene "laid" her hand on Clare. "Laid" is a passive verb and, rather than add to a murder scene, appears to be a calming act. This would lead one to assume that there would be no way Irene could have harmed Clare, but before assuming so, one must consider the following events. After Clare's death, the narrative becomes broken and perplexing. Irene keeps reassuring herself that everything is okay. Irene, physically weak and dizzy, mutters fiercely "'It was an accident, a terrible accident.'" This reassurance signals the Kübler-Ross Model, also known as the Five Stages of Grief. These are stages that one goes through after a great trauma. The first stage, Denial, is described as the individual believing that their perception of the event is "somehow mistaken, and cling to a false, preferable reality" (Santrock). The reader knows Irene as a generally good person, and so this "preferable reality," should the reader choose to believe Irene killed Clare, is that Clare instead fell out on her own with no help from Irene. Not to mention how earlier, prior to this entire sequence, Irene imagines Clare dying before stopping herself, saying it was vile "to wish that" (187). With this in mind, it would make sense that by

saying she “laid” her hand on Clare, she really did something more drastic, such as “forced.”

The significance of this interpretation is that understanding this lens and viewing the novella under it transforms the entire work into something closer to a tragic romance. Throughout the novella, tension exists between Irene and Clare that suggests frustrated infatuation. Even in Irene’s last remarks at Clare, she wonders at her “soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness” that had been tearing at Irene (210). One of the primary factors in Irene’s frustration with Clare is her belief that she is stealing her husband, Brian, away from her. However, with this lens, it would be more accurate to say that Brian was stealing Clare from Irene. Irene is not shown to be particularly fond of Brian on numerous occasions, often getting into arguments with him and lamenting his habit of staring at other women. Irene, reuniting with Clare could have sparked a new desire, a breaking away from her husband to pursue this newfound lust. Irene in the entire final Part of Passing becomes flustered whenever Clare is present, despite her appearing cool and collected in every other instance in the novel. Irene’s constant frustrations with Clare could be not out of a disdain for her, but out of a desire for her to be a better person in her eyes as if she is wanting to idolize her. Irene is unable to articulate her feelings for Clare properly, perhaps due to those feelings being so alien in Irene’s society and life. Reading into the story not only with the frame that Irene killed Clare but also with the lens that Irene loved Clare flips the entire story and transforms it into a tragic romance of unrecognized love, and Clare’s death, ignorant of

Irene's feelings, shows how such a romance could not be prescribed in their time and place. Coincidentally, the novel titled *Passing* could very well be "passing" a queer novel as a race one. Due to this context and interpretation, the notion that Irene killed Clare is a significant one that radically alters one's perception of the novel. However, that does not mean there are other interpretations that aren't worth examining.

Another possible interpretation is that Clare committed suicide. During Larsen's time, there was a trope called the "tragic mulatto" which is an extension of what will be called her the "Other" character. The "Other" is a figure which does not belong in a society or world. The story consists of the "Other" coming into conflict with the world and the inability to assimilate into the world is the drive for conflict to the character in the story. As the "Other" does not have a place in its world, the typical end is a tragic death which causes the survivors to rethink their places in life. Examples of "Others" in literature include the Monster in *Frankenstein*, John in *Brave New World*, and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. The Tragic Mulatto is not much different. Per David Pilgrim in his essay *The Tragic Mulatto Myth*, the Tragic Mulatto is a mixed-race individual, typically female, who is depressed or even suicidal due to her inability to exist between two drastically different worlds, typically a "white world" vs "black world...fitting into neither, accepted by neither" (Pilgrim). The two main characters of *Passing* are mixed-race women, but Irene, the protagonist, is not a "tragic Mulatto" by any means. Though she is mixed, she is comfortable in her place and being and wholly identifies and connects to her black world. Clare on the other hand, while seemingly happy in her white world, still suffers from a loss of

identity. The killing of her black self could be a metaphoric suicide. However, with an interpretation of the ending being Clare purposefully falling out of the window, it makes her status as a tragic Mulatto literal. Clare killed her black self to preserve her white self, but when she realizes that social life is coming to an end due to the revelations preceding the finale, she sees no choice but to kill her white self. By doing this, metaphorically speaking, she loses all sense of identity and is no longer a human being. Thus, this suicide is a literal one, terminating her life once and for all. This interpretation works as a way of fleshing out Clare's character into an entirely self-tragic one, and making the novella *Passing* a defining tragic mulatto work.

Finally, another perspective is that Clare's husband, John Bellew, pushed her out of the window. Bellew, from his introduction, is established to be a radically racist man. It is not much of a stretch to assume he would kill Clare after concluding that she was black. When Clare rhetorically asks Bellew what he would do if he found out she was black, he confidently dismisses the notion, reminding her that there are "no niggers in [his] family. Never have been and never will be." (Larsen, 69) Bellew's realization of Clare's identity adds context to this exchange with him, and him putting the pieces together would serve as a complete mind break. For all these years, he had assured himself he was right, that such a revelation was too far out of notion. In such a moment, all that time spent intimately with Clare becomes to him works of devious seduction into a forbidden world. It would be impossible for Bellew to still love Clare since this would require backpedaling on a hardcore stance he held for his entire life, that he enforced so strictly upon every second of every day. As said in the quote above, Bellew had convinced himself that

there never would be any black people in his family. The only way to make that true since he had unknowingly married a black woman would be for her to die. This adds credibility to the idea of Bellew shoving her out of a window. Bellew, a proud man, would probably not stoop to having to commit murder with his own hands, and rather placing Clare into a deadly situation would, according to mental gymnastics, free him from blame. Think of when someone would say “ I didn’t break his arm, the ground did!” after pushing someone to the floor. Even if Bellew did not push her out of the window, his actions nevertheless lead to Clare’s demise. His violent outburst at the party upon realizing Clare was indeed part black is what causes Clare to run towards the window. No matter who pushed her out of the window, even Clare herself, Bellew is to blame to a degree. Clare’s demise therefore can be framed as a hate crime, and having Bellew be the one to directly cause her death it adds onto that perspective.

The end of *Passing* is significant because of how it fits into the narrative of racial passing and identity while translating into another medium its effect on an individual. Passing, for many, can cause them to develop a fragmented self-identity and perspective. The notion exists to some mixed race or cultured people that they do not fit nicely into one picture, like a jigsaw puzzle made from different brands. While the fragmented narration of *Passing* is literally due to the protagonist’s frantic state of being, this deconstruction of the narrative’s reality conveys such a feeling to the reader as one broken of a self-identity. Such individuals will ask themselves questions and constantly re-examine memories and events trying to fit them into different lenses to gain a greater and more cohesive whole. The lack of

closure could be a projection of the empty feeling created by dedicating a lifetime to pursuing the seemingly unachievable task of finding one's self, a task that is amplified the more fragmented a person is. Passing is a story that is ripe with conflict, both within the self and within the self vs the outside, as individuals in it are forced into situations where they must either relinquish their identity, don a false one, or pay the price for being an "Other" out of their world.

While the ultimate outcome of the ending is concrete, the way to get to that end can be seen in a variety of ways. No one way is "correct" and each possibility says much about the motifs controlling the characters and how they played out in Larsen's contemporary world. Irene killing Clare turns the novel into a queer tragic romance far ahead of its time, Clare killing herself paints her as the archetypal tragic mulatto, and John killing Claire feeds into the racial tension that exists in America and the rejection of the "other" within. Each of these interpretations speaks volumes about identity, and the way the finale is so split up conveys this feeling to those who may not have ever experienced such issues and illuminates the tragedy of race relations in Larsen's time.

Works Cited

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