MALE PERFORMANCE IN NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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Most scholars' critiques of *Passing* focus on Irene and Clare. However, I want to highlight their spouses, inasmuch as they symbolize the acceptance and/or rejection of societal norms, including but not limited to patriarchal ideas about manhood. The spouses shed light on the limitations placed on individuals, particularly African-American men in the early portion of the twentieth century, highlighted greatly by Brian’s desire to leave this country for a more “exotic” land. It is my objective to bring a critical eye to these two men and how each is performing maleness in their own way, particularly Brian and John as they complicate the defining attributes of the husband in a racist and heterosexist society.

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Male Performance in Nella Larson's *Passing*

"We Wear the Mask"[1]

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

~ Paul Laurence Dunbar

Introduction

Nella Larsen's *Passing* is not only one of her most famous works but a remarkable representation of the movement of the Harlem Renaissance. Loosely biographically based on her life, Larsen dives into a subject matter that was relevant and important to her as well as fellow authors, black women passing for white in Harlem. The concept of "passing" or allowing public society to believe you are something you are not is tricky and sometimes quite dangerous. Whether that illusion is based on sexual orientation, racial identity, or socio-economic status, the idea of being something you are not is difficult. Imagine the complications behind the psychological difficulty of one's mind saying you are one thing and not having the physical appearance to match it as we see in our modern day transgendered community. Larsen's work has many rings surrounding its plot. First, there is the question of

[1] Excerpt from "We Wear the Mask", published by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) in 1896, appearing in his first work *Lyrics of a Lowly Life*.

identity and how one defines themselves and how does that identity work against society and the public's need to define? Also, the relationship of the main character Irene and her childhood friend Clare, one of whom is passing for white. As many critics have noted, there is the presence of underlining same-sex desire in the friendship of the main characters Irene and Clare. Often critics spend time disussing this apparent desire. In their interactions, many have argued that there is ambiguity, not only in Clare's racial identity, but in her gender identity and sexual orientation. Clare's lack of mothering skills and lack of attachment to her child is also often subject for discussion. Critics like Christopher Hanlon chose to focus on race and racial identity, specifically highlighting Clare and Irene, discussing the root causes behind Clare's reason(s) for passing. No matter the different critical opinions, it seems that most critical writers agree that Larsen works masterfully to blur the lines of sexuality, gender and race in order to develop strong female characters and highlight the reality and formation of racism in America. Despite the many articles discussing the main characters of this text, it is my desire to dissect the spouses of this novella. I argue that the relevance of the two male leads in the text, work as both driving and

restraining forces in discussing the significance of patriarchal society.

Changing the Focus

As alluded to in the introduction, due to the subject matter, literary, and cultural significance of Larsen's work, critics have been intrigued over the years and have dissected the author's overarching concept of racial and sexual identity. Critics such as Cheryl Wall chose to explore the aspects of identity relying heavily on the contrasts, similarities and behavior of Larsen's two female leads. Wall states, "for Larsen, the tragic mulatto was the only formulation historically available to portray educated middle-class black women in fiction" (97). That is the defining reason for Larsen choosing her subject matter, according to critics such as Wall. I do not disagree. It is arguable that Irene, Clare and even Gertrude all point to the difficulty of maintaining one identity and also the struggle of floating ambiguously between multiple identities, such as being both black and white simultaneously.

The men of this novel complicate the natural order for these women. With the exception of Clare, who rejects the concept of fear, these women become confined to their inner

circles and the thoughts within their own minds. This could be the underlying catalyst for Irene's ultimate instability. Having no outlet due to male forced restrictions causes most of these women to fear their own thoughts and most often their desires. Larsen's decision to construct two women as her main characters is no small accomplishment. In a time period when men were writing for both the male and female voice, female authors like Larsen were contributing to an otherwise male dominated profession. As Wall states, "In Larsen's novel…'passing' does not refer only to the sociological phenomenon of black crossing color line. It represents instead both the loss of racial identity and the denial of self required of women who conform restrictive gender roles" (102). Though controversial, Larsen's subject matter was not unique.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, "the light-enough-to-pass Negro (but usually Negress) would play a central role in the imagination of African American writers for the next fifty years" (Rottenberg 435). Since slavery, the mixed-race individual was a tragic figure, often the representation of the depravities of slave masters. Novels with bi-racial characters, such as Larsen's and many of her counterparts, illuminated the reality of how these individuals came into existence. For this and

many other reasons, race will always be a topic of intrigue.

However, not every critic applauded the second of Larsen's published novels. Some critique *Passing* in relation to its predecessor, *Quicksand*, as a lesser accomplished literary work. Wall states in regards to some of these previously mentioned critics, "response to Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, has been less than favorable. From one perspective, critics argue that *Passing* fails to exploit fully the drama of racial passing and declines instead into a treatment of sexual jealousy" (102). In other words, Larsen highlights, perhaps to an uncomfortable degree, the female need for competition in a male dominated society. The idea of patriarchy, a social system is run by male authority, is something I will return to while exploring the spouses in this novel. This oppressive structure explains many of the limitations facing these women. Their very financial survival seems dependent on men; that is a crucial reason behind Clare choosing to pass in the first place. As she states,

> It, they, made me what I am today. For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad looking and that I could 'pass'…You had all of

> the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others.
>
> (Larsen 17)

Clare even goes further, saying she has "everything…except, perhaps more money…In fact, all things considered, I think, 'Rene, that it's even worth the price" (Larsen 19).

But there are real consequences to this kind of behavior. As Wall argues, "though less fully developed than Helga Crane [*Quicksand*], the main characters of this novel likewise demonstrate the price black women pay for their acquiescence and, ultimately, the high cost of rebellion" (Wall 102). Clare's rebellion, in fact, ultimately caused the loss of her own life. She was not one to deny her own desires, which was dangerous in a patriarchal society. As she writes to Irene,

> …For I am lonely, so lonely…cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life…For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago.
>
> (Larsen 3)

There is clear affection and most likely attraction for Irene coming across in Clare's letter, which disturbs the heterosexual norm of male dominance. The destroying of the human race is the ultimate precursor of many of the fears revolving around homosexuality. This same fear could be

compared to the fear of mixing races as well, which seems to be a motivation of Larsen's, pointing out, or rather satirizing the racial fear of something that has been taking place for centuries.

I argue however that describing Larsen's novel in terms of Irene and Clare's sexual desire, in saying that this is strictly a novel dissecting the lives of women competing in a man's world would do a great injustice to the picture of oppression developed within the novella's few pages. Patriarchy controls the lives of men too. The relationships between these men and women form rather complicated dynamics as everyone seems to be identifying themselves or disguising their innate identity for various reasons, such as Brian's attempt to keep the peace between him and Irene regarding his extra-marital desires, or the presence of insecurity in the example of Irene's suspicions of her husband.

Passing, Performance and Unstable Identity

A major element of acting is embracing the characteristics assumed to be associated with a person's body. Simply stated a black person is supposed to act "black" (as seen in stating that black individuals can dance better than other races, Larsen 60) and white person

is supposed to act "white". Culture or "our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (Hall 223). These associations usually involve cultural similarities and differences, such as cuisine, manner of dress and speech. As Hanlon states,

> It is not enough simply to go through one's social ritual in a mechanical, dutiful fashion…rather, one must take the additional step of actually, 'really' preferring this cultural ritual…if one cannot make this psychic turn--one is nevertheless unable to close one's sense of distance -- this failure points to the fact that one is 'still passing'; the inability to enjoy the ritual wholeheartedly is indicative of a fundamental betrayal. (29-30)

So, it becomes disturbing when an individual goes against the attributes of their race. This is apparent in the text when Irene alludes,

> it wasn't she assured herself, that she was a snob, that she cared greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about; but that she had a natural and deeply rooted aversion to the kind of front-page notoriety that Clare Kendry's presence in Idlewild, her guest, would expose her to. (Larsen 15)

If Irene truly had no preoccupation with the categories of race, then she would have no apprehension with having someone like Clare, who has disposed of her race, accompanying her to a party in Harlem. Her fear of appearances is puzzling; on the page just before her previous statement she makes a clear declaration that "appearances, she knew now, had a way sometimes of not fitting facts…" (Larsen 14). Irene seems to know deep down that looks can be fooling; however this common sense notion provides her no support when she assumes that an affair is taking place.

There is also a secondary level when defining cultural identity. "This second position recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'" (Hall 225). When an individual chooses to identify as anything other then what they have been labeled socially, they become a rejected, often tragic figure.

> Punishment is an ever-present threat for subjects who attempt to identify differently…Identification can no longer be understood simply as 'an endless process of violent negation…Nor can it be understood as the

> psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute to the other and is transformed. For identification with blackness under white racist regimes has historically not only coerced, but it has also coed as undesirable.
> (Rottenberg 441)

There seems to be no other alternative given then to associate with your given identity. Irene seems to come to a similar conclusion. Realizing that she is not only identified as woman, but as a Negro woman, forcing her into two minority groups, forcing her association with both.

> Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children.
> Larsen 78

It seems that race forms a double punishment for a woman. Another important note is the reference to "Ham's children", meaning that this is somehow a punishment divinely ordered. As if, the black race is a casted lot by the hands of God.

This instability regarding identity is represented by the husbands in this novel as well. John is not being

identified as a white husband, but as a man struggling with how to identify himself in relation to his black wife. He so strongly attempts to paint himself as one who hates blacks; however he seems to possess a genuine desire for black women. Brian has the struggle of wearing the title of father and husband when it seems he prefers neither. He also must struggle against taboo desires and sexual preference in a society where men are characterized in relation to their attraction to women. Both of these men are trapped by the constraints of their environment and thus are in a constant struggle between what they desire and who they are forced to be.

John's Nig/Brian's Desire

One of the most important ways that unstable identity can be seen in this text with regard to patriarchy is through the characters of Brian Redfield and John Bellew, whom both embody the power of male privilege as well as work against it. The husbands and their relationships offer better insight into Irene and Clare as well. Exploring these two men also highlights a lesser, yet important, theme in the novel, setting or rather location and how that plays a role in character portrayal. An American location, specifically Harlem inherently contributes to Brian’s

desire for Brazil. John's upbringing in this very land helped greatly contribute to his feelings of hatred towards the black race.

I will begin with the character John Bellew, who by his own account absolutely despises African-Americans. However, he is the butt of an ever-present joke; he is unknowingly married to a black woman, Clare. Interestingly, unbeknownst to Bellew, he is surrounded by black women, all of whom are passing for white. He is further made into a fool as he explains his beloved nickname for Clare, "Nig":

> Well you see, it's like this. When we were first married, she was as white as-as-well as a white as a lily. But I declare she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger.
>
> (Larsen 29)

Bellew goes on and on explaining his hatred for blacks. He further makes the claim that there are "no niggers in his family" when in actuality even his children are partly black (Larsen 29). The question becomes, if John so clearly hates black people, how then did he end up married to a black woman? Was there some part of him deep inside that was actually hiding an attraction towards his counterpart, an embarrassing and perhaps dangerous desire for the "Other"? Some critics view Bellew as the major contributor

to Clare's death, or "textual expulsion" (Toth 67). According to one critic in particular, Judith Butler, "Bellew thinks that he would never associate with blacks, but he cannot be white without his 'Nig', without the lure of an association that he must resist, without the spectre of a racial ambiguity that he must subordinate and deny" (qtd. In Toth 67). This argument focuses on Bellew's existence in relation to that which he claims to hate. Or rather the lack of white existence without it's opposite, black. One can no longer exist (and maintain power) if the other is not identified (and degraded). That is what leads to race tensions, the very need to identify and usually oppress and show dominance. Bellew's blatant use of the word "nigger" reiterates his need for dominance. For some, "Bellew is the primary cause of Clare's fall from the window (and…Irene's exclusion from the world). From this perspective, the dominating power of the term 'nigger' effaces both Clare and Irene from the text" (Toth 67). Bellew's statements manage to subordinate all three women in his presence, but particularly his wife.

Also, John spends much of his time traveling abroad. One would think that would make a man more broad minded and open to other cultures. However, in the case of John, he appears extremely single minded. Larsen, I argue, portrays

him like this on purpose. He is a representation of society's immediate interest in singling out anyone who does not fit into its constraints and definitions and then forcing our own defining attributes (i.e. lazy, stupid or criminal). In fact,

> if we are to imagine Bellew--or someone like Bellew--faced with a black subject who does not exhibit any of these supposedly constant, particular qualities, we can also easily imagine how he would explain such a phenomenon without relinquishing his understanding of what blackness entails. His refrain would go something like this: 'Do you see how clever they are? Here we have one who carefully refrains from criminal activity, who manages to keep his sexual urges in check, who has learned to sound intelligent…In short, here we have a black who has learned to pass as white!'
>
> (Hanlon 28)

Larsen is highlighting the idiocy behind racism. The effects of blind racism is most certainly a life surrounded by ignorance. Here is one instance in which John and Brian differ. Brian seems to accept and embrace the idiosyncrasies of Clare, though not initially, while John chooses to disregard them.

It is also arguable, however, that Irene's insecurity was also the catalyst for Clare's undoing. Irene uses Bellew's apparent hatred for blacks to reveal Clare's true identity without ever having to verbally divulge the

information. Upon meeting Irene, Bellew assumed she was a white woman, as she was at that moment passing. However, towards the end of the novella, her true identity was revealed. Irene almost eerily runs into Bellew out on the street as she is walking with a woman who seems to have physical attributes mostly associated with black people, her skin color and hair texture. At first, Bellew was delighted to see Irene, as he removed his hat as a sign of respect and genteelness, however, "He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own…she was sure, now, of the understanding in his face, as he looked at her again and then back at Felise. And displeasure" (Larsen 79). An important note is that Irene said nothing to dissuade what she believed was now Bellew's understanding. She simply walked away, almost hoping that he would confront Clare and not divorce her, but kill her.

John is only aware of blackness in relation to whiteness, which seems to be a surface understanding at best. However, it seems perhaps that John was fighting against something he may have had a genuine attraction to. How else does one explain a man completely surrounded by blackness, yet seemingly unaware. It seems John was passing as someone ignorant to appearance and suppressing his

wife's identity. Subconsciously, it seems that John knew of his wife's difference in terms of her whiteness. He called her "Nig" due to her natural darkening, yet rejected the idea of her blackness. Like some of the women in this novel, the identity flaw that John hides is his own fear, fear of suppressed feelings. John fights so hard against the idea of even being around the black race, yet he surrounds himself in their company. As long, as they continue to hide their identity, John can continue to falsely hide his desire for them. The truth being revealed threatens John's ability to deny his knowing of the truth in the first place.

Speaking on the subject matter of fear brings me to Brian's apparent need for freedom, which is quelled by his wife's intense need for security. Irene is fearful of Brian's desires as they would disturb the status quo, her safety. As she states, "it was as if she had admitted to herself that against that easy surface of her husband's concordance with her wishes, which had, since the war had given him back to her physically unimpaired, covered an increasing inclination to tear himself and his possessions loose from their proper setting, she was helpless" (Larson 48-49). What was this strong force forever looming over

their marriage? The answer simply put is Brian's serious desire to live in South America, Brazil to be exact.

Brian despised his life as a doctor; he absolutely hated the idea of treating and being around sick individuals. His need is understandable if you look at his circumstances historically. There were serious constraints to anyone falling under the scope of "Other" in this country, specifically at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that Harlem in the 1920s was a space where creativity, particularly in the black community was being embraced, this creative society of people were still enveloped in an overarching community based on prejudice and racism. Harlem was one of the northern sites for the "new Negro" however, just a few years earlier in 1919, there were twenty-six racial massacres that occurred throughout the country, including the north (Gilmore 5). Due to the racial injustices happening across the country as well as the societal rejection of sexual freedom, Brian is forced to face a double dose of suppression being forced upon him by both society and his wife, respectively. Even before we encounter Brian, Irene speaks to a room of mostly strangers regarding her fears. "Brian doesn't care for ladies, especially sick ones. I sometimes wish he did. It's South America which attracts him" (Larsen 31). Larsen

it seems brings such desires to the surface before ever introducing the character of Brian as a way to draw the reader's attention to both his lack of desire for residence in this country as well as his repulsion to women. It's almost a form of foreshadowing.

As it turns out though, the issue would not be Brazil, but Irene's excessive fear and insecurity regarding Brian's desires. Irene's very survival is dependent upon her husband living as a doctor and ensuring her life continues in the fashion that she has become accustomed, she too plays the role of oppressor as she is being oppressed. As one critic states, "providing domestic power and economic security, her marriage to Brian is a social convenience, not an institutionalized love affair" (Blackmore 476). Brian makes a host of household decisions; however, his greatest decision is being made by his wife as she forces him into the roles of both husband and heterosexual. She so feverishly wants Brian to fulfill the obligations of both roles while also maintaining a physical attraction to her and other women. This may have been what led her to want to believe that Brian could even have an affair, which would at least prove that his desire for women was present.

However, the text suggests otherwise, that Brian lacked heterosexual desire and even encouraged the same in

his male children. The couple, "have separate bedrooms, and while Irene and Brian have produced children, they identify each other as co-parents, not as active sexual partners" (Blackmore 476). There is no evidence that the couple had any romantic dealings, just encounters for procreation purposes. Brian's sexual desires are further highlighted by his desire to expel himself to Brazil. Historically Brazil has never been sexually constraining, in fact "same-sex acts have never been criminalized in Brazil, and political persecution of gays and lesbians has never been widespread in Brazil as it has been in the United States" (Blackmore 478). The oppression that Brian faces regarding both his race and sexuality would not be of issue in a more freeing society such as Brazil. Arguably, "Larsen may therefore be capitalizing on [Brian's] affinity to Brazilian culture as a way to suggest his same-sex attraction" (Blackmore 478).

The destination of Brazil too is a residual effect of slavery, or the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to be exact. According to the slave voyages database, the Caribbean and South America received about 95% of all slaves arriving to the Americas. More specifically, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil was consistently an active port during the four centuries of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Approximately 80% of African labor (slaves) bound for the Americas were shipped

to Brazil (The Transatlantic 33). The slave trade was brought to an end by mid-1800s, probably for moralistic reasons as its profitability was at an all-time high according to historian David Eltis. Brazil in particular began to arrest slave ships as of 1850. Over 3.5 million Africans were brought to Brazil and thus settled there, which formed the rich culture of the country. This culture could be a driving force in regards to Brian's desire for Brazil as well. It may be one of the closest countries offering him direct ties to his heritage. Though there were many aspects of African-American culture that have been significantly influenced through cultural practice passed through generations, Brazil offered the richness that America, Harlem in particular just did not while simultaneously offering sexual freedom. Perhaps Brian did not want to be an African-American man; perhaps he simply wanted to embrace the Africa in his genetic make-up while pursuing a more freeing identity. "Perhaps ultimately it is Brian who envisions the only real possibility for unrepressed self-fulfillment: actual physical escape to a less inhibitive social environment…" (Blackmore 483). This was something that was not widely practiced as assimilation is often encouraged if not demanded in America. Even today

one is encouraged to speak English as their primary language and embrace the standards of American-ness.

Similarly to Clare, Brian is looking to "pass" into another country and society, perhaps arguably another life, ultimately transferring him somewhere where he can be another kind of man, where he can possibly be free. In this way, Brian is also passing, not as a white woman but as a happy heterosexual doctor, husband, and father of two. There are evident comparisons that Irene makes on more than one occasion highlighting the ways in which Clare and Brian are similar. "For Clare had come softly into the room without knocking" (Larson 49). In a similar scene before this one, Brian did something rather similar, "Brian Redfield had come into the room in that noiseless way which, in spite, of the years of their life together, still had power to disconcert her" (Larson 39). It forms a strange triangular relationship between Irene and her two "partners". Interestingly, critics often examine the relationship of Irene and Clare, but not the distinct similarities between Clare and Brian. Perhaps the leap that Irene makes, assuming that the two are having an affair was not that much of a jump, however misplaced as it is more of a relationship based upon mutual understanding and acceptance. Brian and Clare's attraction to each other is

not sexual but based on camaraderie as they both share similar characteristics, including their same-sex desire. Though Irene clearly sees the similarities between Irene and Brian, her understanding of them is limited. "Both her husband Brian (who makes a belated first appearance more than a third of the way through the book) and Clare consistently evade Irene's attempts to understand their motivations and their desires" (McIntire 783). This speaks to the fact that Brian is not the one who initially divulges his desires; Irene is simply attempting to read his body language, mood and most of all inner thoughts. Brian later blatantly makes a statement regarding leaving the country towards the end of the text, catapulting his wife into further irrationality. He states angrily after an argument about sharing the difficulty of race with their sons, "If, as you're determined, they've got to live in this damned country, they'd better find out what sort of thing they're up against as soon as possible" (Larsen 83). Brian goes on "I wanted to get them out of this hellish place years ago. You wouldn’t let me. I gave up the idea, because you objected. Don't expect me to give up everything" (Larsen 84). Irene, probably in error, takes the latter portion of Brian's statement as alluding to the affair she believes her husband is having with Clare when

perhaps he is gesturing towards his sexual desires. Brian and Clare are both passing, yet either disregard or resent the established order set forth by society. Irene's inability to understand the two individuals who are quite similar in mannerisms helps propel her into instability.

Irene seems to know her husband by way of identifying the things she does not know about him. As one critic states, "She had learned to take a certain comfort in his emotional withholding because until now she had known (or thought she had known) precisely how she did not know him. For Irene there has been a certain comfort at least in knowing the genre of the game of her unbelonging" (McIntire 785). In her own words, she even describes her knowledge of her husband being based on appearance.

> He was like a man marking time, waiting. But what was he waiting for? It was extraordinary that, after all these years of accurate perception, she now lacked the talent to discover what that appearance of waiting meant. It was the knowledge that, for all her watching, all her patient study, the reason for his humour still eluded her which filled her with foreboding dread. That guarded reserve of his seemed to her unjust, inconsiderate, and alarming. It was as if he had stepped out beyond her reach into some section, strange and walled, where she could not get at him.
>
> (Larsen 67)

Much of Irene's undoing is because she forms the role of

outsider in relation to her husband and Clare. In the end it is the "un-belonging" that brings her to madness, and forces her to live within her own thoughts. Brian it seems is quite unaware of his wife's unraveling, naturally as he would have to be a mind reader to know the inner thoughts of Irene as she has not disclosed them to him. Only the audience is privy to Irene's thoughts, feelings and ultimately her inner battles.

Fear of Freedom and the Defense of Security

Unfortunately, none of these characters have the freedom to be themselves out of their own innate fear, or due to the constraints of society. In regard to Brian and Irene, the desire for security is constantly pitted against Brian's desire for freedom. Brian "had never spoken of his desire since that long-ago time of storm and strain…when she had so firmly opposed him, so sensibly pointed out its utter impossibility and its probable consequences to her and the boys, and had even hinted at a dissolution of their marriage in the event of his persistence in his idea" (Larsen 43). Sadly, it seems Irene went against Brian's desires, not because she felt Brazil was dangerous in itself, but because it posed a threat to her familiar existence. You see, "Irene didn't like changes,

particularly changes that affected the smooth routine of her household" (Larsen 44). It was not that America had always been so welcoming to Irene, but its scorn was familiar, almost comfortable in its familiarity. Her known environment gave her a sense of security, though arguably false in its sentiment. There was a constant looming fear that Brian would succumb to his desires and fracture Irene's sense of security. Even Irene must question her motives. "Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things?" (Larsen 86-87).

The same fear was evoked in Irene due to the presence of Clare. Like Brian, Clare threatens to disturb Irene's status quo. "Clare…frustrates this struggle because she represents the ultimate terror and allurement of freedom, the freedom suggested by the fact that the self as 'Real' always and necessarily escapes complete (and/or final) symbolization…Clare's refusal to stop passing, then, forces Iren to recognize her assumptions about community and identity as fantasies (Toth 63)." This questioning becomes more dangerous than her immediate fear of being shaken out

of her simple existence. Clare causes Irene to question and then reject any notion against her known survival mechanisms.

Conclusion

Clare and Irene are often at center focus when discussing Larsen's *Passing*. However, the men, or male presence is intriguing in its own right. Larsen uses these men to express passing in more than one way. It is completely plausible to disguise more than just your race. In the case of John Bellew, passing can take on the formation of ignorance, or hiding in your own unknown, and seeing no reason to uncover secrets or the truth for that matter. Brian Redfield passing is done in a different manner. He has built his entire existence around a rouse, in which he pretends to be a happily married heterosexual family man. However, if you scratch beyond the surface, he is a broken man. His dreams have been dashed and he has been forced to live a life that is not fulfilling. He is truly stuck between his desires and his wife's fears. This is not to say that Brian does not love his wife; however, love on a romantic level is questionable. He certainly does not love his life in Harlem. All four of these characters work in line with each other, performing and constantly

pretending to be something that they are not, while secretly desiring other selves.

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