

# Nella Larsen's *Passing*: More than Skin Deep

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## Abstract

Nella Larsen's novella *Passing* focuses on Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry-Bellew, two female Mulatto characters who pass into white communities; however, two white male minor characters, Hugh Wentworth and John "Jack" Bellew reveal an irregular definition of passing. Wentworth and Bellew challenge our assumptions of where the racist resides within the United States. Because of this, Larsen asks the reader to broaden the definition of passing. As Larsen applies passing on a deeper lever, she manipulates these characters to live in regional boundaries that are counterintuitive to our ideas of the Northern liberal and the Southern racist. What we find, however, is the passing of characters that are true to their borders. In this way, Larsen suggests passing is more than skin deep.

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Before delving into the reading, I must first give the origins and definitions of passing. According to Perry L. Carter, "'passing' is derived from the 'the pass,' a slip of paper that granted permission to slaves to move about the countryside without being mistaken for runaways" (231). Elaine K. Ginsberg's *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* defines passing as "a fraudulent 'white' identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as 'Negro' or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry" (3). Ginsberg pushes the definition further by stating, "'passing' has been applied discursively to disguises of other elements of an individual's presumed 'natural' or 'essential' identity" (3). Using this broadened definition, we can draw a conclusion that Wentworth and Bellew are "passing" through the reader's assumptions of the "natural" or "essential" identities of the racist and the geopolitical boundaries they represent within the United States. In other words, Wentworth and

Bellew are not true to their audiences' preconceived ideas about identity. To further illustrate this point, Kate Baldwin's article, "The Reoccurring Conditions of Nella Larsen's *Passing*" states, "*Passing* asks us to read the 'error' of identity to acknowledge that when talking about passing we are also talking about the story that passing enables us to tell, the story of identity as necessarily always displaced" (52). The "error" in this case is Wentworth and Bellew's displacement of racist attitudes and where Larsen places these men in the United States.

I need to make one more note before moving onto the reading. There are many critiques of *Passing* that focus on racial and sexual politics shared by Irene and Clare.<sup>1</sup> I contend that critics have missed another, subtle dimension of the novel's concept of "passing" that Wentworth and Bellew illustrate. These characters play a significant role in defining racism as well as challenging the reader's assumptions of the physical location of the racist within the United States.

The main theme of *Passing* is the Mulatto's ability to mingle within both black and white communities. Irene Redfield, a Mulatto married to an African American doctor, makes a conscious decision to pass even though she claims to detest it. She is close friends with Wentworth (who is modeled after Carl Van Vechten),<sup>2</sup> a trendy white gentleman who appears to want to help with racial uplift. Clare Kendry, on the other hand, is a Mulatto as well, but joins the white community on a full-time basis. She is married to Bellew, an overt racist.

It looks as though Larsen made a conscious decision to pattern Wentworth after Van Vechten. In Wentworth, she creates a character that appears to favor the African American plight during the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> Like Van Vechten, Wentworth is an accomplished author who frequents African American community-building events such as the Negro Welfare League (a fictitious label for the National Urban League) dance. Also, as Van Vechten did, Wentworth resides in New York City, and often takes short cab rides north to visit with the communities of Harlem. The distance between New York City and Harlem compliments the idea of Wentworth's emotional distance between his outward appearance and his true self. Looking at an aerial view of the state of New York, the gap between New York City and Harlem is too small to quantify in mileage; however, when looking at a map of Manhattan, New

York, the space between is noticeably larger.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, at first, Wentworth's true self and his actions seem closely related, yet upon closer examination, we see that there is a great divide between the two.

We know that Wentworth lives south of Irene, and discover, in his final appearance, that his ancestors are Southern. In his last scene, Wentworth accidentally bumps into Irene causing her to break a cup. He apologizes profusely. She excuses it when she says, "It was the ugliest thing that your ancestors, the charming Confederates ever owned" (Larsen 94). The image evoked is of Irene smirking, along with a slight bow or curtsy as she says, "charming Confederates." The sentence is full of irony and sarcasm. It is easy to see that she is doing two things—acknowledging Wentworth's superior attitude, as well as taking an intellectual punch at him. Nevertheless, he seems to ignore it. If he responds, both may risk losing a friendship that allows Irene direct access into the white world and gives Wentworth an up-close look at African Americans.

Irene's attitude towards Wentworth is first revealed during a one-sided telephone conversation. Irene declares, "Wait! I've got it! I'll change mine with whoever's next to you, and you can have that . . ." (Larsen 68). In this conversation, not much can be deduced about his personality or his racial attitudes. All that can be observed is Irene's willingness to comply with whatever he is requesting. If this had been anyone else, would Irene have been as accommodating? It is my opinion that she might have suggested rearranging other guests' seats, but not her own. Irene's deference to Wentworth implies that Wentworth is someone of great importance and that we should view him the same. Larsen sets us up to ignore the blatant racism we encounter the first time we meet Wentworth.<sup>5</sup>

In the same scene, Larsen offers another point of view: Clare's. When Irene hangs up the telephone, Clare's attitude toward Wentworth is cynical. She calls Wentworth's books "sort of contemptuous," and makes a comment about how "he more or less [despises] everything and everybody" (69). Irene retorts that he has the right to be unpleasant because he "has been through every danger in all kinds of savage places" (69).

In the same paragraph that Irene is excusing Wentworth's behavior, she makes a comment that causes the reader to wonder if Irene considers Wentworth an honorary African American: "It's no wonder he thinks the rest of us are a lazy self-pampering lot" (Larsen 69). If we take the words "the rest of us," it is the "us" that suggests Irene's inclusiveness of Wentworth into the black community. If we also take into consideration that she is talking with Clare, we may conclude that it is not only the black community that she is implying. A further suggestion is that she is saying that he is Mulatto, but only in the sense that what he projects to the world does not coincide with his words. That is, Wentworth has a surface at odds with his substance, just as Irene and Clare do.

Irene is the only one who perceives Wentworth as a humble, forward-thinking Southern white gentleman. Her husband, Brian, has a different attitude. During a conversation between Irene and Brian, he states, "Hugh does think he's God, you know" (Larsen 87). Everyone around Irene seems to see Wentworth as he truly is—a white male with Southern roots who comes into Harlem to gawk at African Americans. Readers, however, may want to side with Clare and Brian, but because Irene's perspective dominates the novel we are more inclined to ignore his racism in favor of her point of view.

The scene that we actually get introduced to Wentworth is at the Negro Welfare League dance. Irene makes her way over to Wentworth and he inquires about Clare, "But what I am trying to find out is the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairytale" (Larsen 75). This question prompts another question from the reader: why does he need to know what Clare's race is? If he is truly a fighter for equality of African Americans, Clare's race should not matter. It is understood that Wentworth is sensitive to the game of who's who, and we should not be surprised or taken aback by it. The question he asks, however, is hard to ignore. When we confront the question of why does it matter, we find the answer may not be as simple as Wentworth's curiosity; race does matter to him. This is important because it further sets the stage for Wentworth's racism to come through a little later in the conversation.

Continuing the same conversation, Wentworth makes several comments that confirm his racism. The first is, "All the others, these – er – 'gentlemen of [color]' . . ." (Larsen 76). The "Other" is a classic design

in literature that distances, in this case, the white from the black. Irene points this out when she states, “You know, the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you” (76). The insight Irene reveals does more than state the obvious; she is signaling to the audience that she knows Wentworth is a racist by her use of “repugnant to you.” She acts unperturbed by it because as much as she may be involved with the African American community; she organizes events that allow the white community to participate in ogling at blacks.

In the same sentence, Wentworth causes the reader’s loyalty to falter when he pauses and uses the “er.” Why would he need to search for the right words if he is sensitive to the African American plight? The feeling is that he is looking for the correct expressions to use, but there is something more. He knows that Irene is a smart woman, but he also thinks that he can deceive her. Or, perhaps, he feels that if he uses politically correct terms in Irene’s company, she will have no reason to distance herself from him, causing him to lose the opportunity for being a participant in these events.

The next admission happens during the same conversation. Wentworth is talking about his wife, Bianca, not dancing with anyone that is African American when he reduces all African Americans to “some Ethiopian” (Larsen 76). Is he simply being glib? It may be that he is trying to show that he is hip and has a certain privilege with Irene. He may be trying to suggest that he is funny and this is a play on words, but another interpretation is that he is being racist. It may have been trendy to say these things in the 1920s, but to ignore it is to participate in Wentworth’s passing and Irene’s willingness to allow it.

It is possible that he feels he has a privilege to express himself in this way because Irene allows him to do so, and this can lend to his superior attitude, but it is in line with his overall attitude as the racist. The final comment is perhaps the most powerful in illustrating how deep his racism runs. He asks Irene, “what happens to all the ladies of my superior race who’re lured up here[?]” (Larsen 76). The tone can be interpreted as sarcastic, but Wentworth’s character is sardonic. If Wentworth believes himself to be anything other than racist, he has successfully fooled himself. He announces clearly that he believes whites

are superior to any and all other races. How Irene, as an African American woman, ignores this is inconceivable.<sup>6</sup> Wentworth is a Southern racist who has been geographically misplaced in the North, and is passing for someone or something he is not: a white man passing as race-sympathetic and who is supposedly trying to promote racial uplift. Irene, however, unintentionally discovers him as entrenched with racial unease.

Wentworth's true self is in contradiction with his outward appearance. He is not the gentleman that is forward thinking; he is a racist. I believe that Larsen wrote Wentworth to convey a simple and quiet message about racism. It does not matter if the racist pretends to want to participate in racial uplift if all he does is question the race of others, and call attention to the color differences when his true intention is to make comments about his race being superior. Larsen was, indeed, clever to hide in the open a man such as Wentworth.

Bellew, on the other hand, is hard to ignore; he is loud, shocking, overtly racist, and not a character we would expect to find representing Northern attitudes. However, as we survey Bellew, we find that he has simply never been exposed to the African American community and has bought into the media's portrayal of blacks. As the reader follows Irene's memories, we discover that she allows him to pass as a bigot.

Many critics who respond to Bellew's character often cite him as an afterthought, but do seem to notice his blatant racism or his contrasting roles. In "Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytical Challenge," Judith Butler asserts that it is Bellew's desire—be it conscious or not—to deny as well as accept that Clare is indeed of African American ancestry. Butler believes he does both, but for different reasons; both of which are erotic.<sup>7</sup> Catherine Rottenberg looks to Bellew to explain how whiteness is defined, but she also acknowledges Bellew as a racist in her article, "Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire." George Hutchinson's *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* states, "White racism in *Passing* is blatant—up close and personal in the figure of Jack Bellew" (297). Even though there are many accounts of who and what Bellew is, there is no significant discussion about whether he is truly racist or if he is simply ignorant.

When Irene first meets Bellew, she describes him as “a tallish person, broadly made” with “dark brown and waving” hair and “steel-grey opaque eyes” (Larsen 38-9). There is nothing in the description of Bellew that sets him apart from anyone else, and Irene thinks about as much. However, when he greets Clare with, “Hello, Nig” (39), Irene is appalled. She decides right then that she does not like him. From this point on, Irene’s opinion of Bellew is darkened. The reader has no chance at getting to know Bellew as anything other than a racist. Moreover, he seems to advocate that he expects a surface can be different from the substance of a person. He believes that he knows and loves Clare’s substance.

Clare asks Bellew to explain why he calls her “Nig” to Irene and a fellow friend, Gertrude Martin. He states, “Well, you see, it’s like this. When we were first married, she was as white as – as – well as white as a lily. But I declare she’s gettin’ darker and darker” (Larsen 39). In the opening of this line, his speech is awkward. It is almost as if he is teetering from one foot to the other. Also, whenever someone starts with “you see,” he or she asks the audience to see it his or her way, almost as if they know that the argument is not valid. Then the stammer over the word “as” is another indication that he is uncomfortable with his own thoughts about race.

As the conversation continues, Clare asks, “What difference would it make if, after all these years, you were to find out that I was one or two [percent colored]?” (Larsen 40). His body language seems stern to Irene as the narrator describes, “Bellew put out his hand in a repudiating fling, definite and final,” but we can imagine the tenderness of his voice as he says, “ Oh, no, Nig. Nothing like that with me . . . You can get as black as you please as far as I’m concerned, since I know you’re no nigger” (40). If he were a racist this sentence would not even exist. He would argue that she is not to get any darker because it might get in the way of his beliefs as a racist.

After this comment, Irene asks, “So you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew?” (Larsen 40). He answers with “a short denying laugh” and replies, “You got me wrong there, Mrs. Redfield. Nothing like that at all. I don’t dislike them” (40). This is a hopeful beginning, but he follows up with, “I hate them” (40). The contradiction between his actions and his

words relay something deeper. He reveals that he has perceptions of African Americans, but he uses many more words to say that Irene is wrong, and only three to try to convince the audience of his disdain.

The conversation does not stop there. Something curious happens during his response; he states, “And so does Nig . . .” (Larsen 40). Apparently, Bellew believes this because Clare refuses to have a black maid. Outside of the obvious reasons for not having an African American maid (that she might be discovered by the maid as Mulatto and have to deal with someone else knowing and possibly telling Bellew), she seems to hinder him from getting to know any person of color. Their relationship feeds into Bellew’s perceived racism. To illustrate this point, Irene argues with Clare, “I can’t see that you’ve the right to put all the blame on him. You’ve got to admit that there’s his side of the thing. You didn’t tell him you were [colored], so he’s got no way of knowing about this hankering of yours after Negroes . . .” (71). Irene places the full blame of Bellew’s ignorance on Clare. Irene hints at Bellew’s ability to not be racist if he had known about Clare all along. Moreover, he is capable, even now, of opening his mind to the possibility of change.

As the conversation continues, Irene asks Bellew if he has “ever known any Negroes?” (Larsen 40). His response is, “Thank the Lord, no! And never expect to . . . I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people” (41). This part of the conversation gives a complete view of Bellew and his lack of interaction with African Americans. He does not seem responsive to the idea of getting to know anyone of color; however, given the opportunity, he could have a different outlook. Larsen, being a thoughtful writer, includes such a scene.

On a winter’s day, Irene and her friend Felise Freeland are downtown shopping when Bellew and Irene accidentally run into each other. In response, “his hat came off. He held out his hand, smiling genially” (Larsen 99). Then he notices that she is arm in arm with Felise and Irene notes, “But the smile faded at once. Surprise, incredulity, and—was it understanding?—passed over his features . . . He didn’t, however, withdraw his outstretched hand” (99). Bellew displays a normal reaction to the unexpected situation, but what is striking is that he does not retract his hand. Perhaps, he is too shocked to think about it. I believe, however, that his open hand is a gesture inviting Irene to explain



to him what is going on. He wants to know, he desires to know that Irene is a Mulatto. He wants Irene to take his hand, prove all that he has ever heard about African Americans is wrong. Irene decides to ignore it. She walks away from him. Why she walks away from him is unclear exactly, especially after she “concede[s] that under other conditions she might have liked him. A fairly good-looking man of amiable disposition, evidently, and in easy circumstances. Plain and with no nonsense about him” (42). A little after their chance meeting Irene finds herself thinking, “I had my chance and didn’t take it. I had only to speak and to introduce him to Felise with the casual remark that he was Clare’s husband. Only that. Fool. Fool!” (100). This suggests that if she had made Felise aware that Clare had a white husband, then the way Felise and the rest viewed Clare would change. However, there is a different way to view this. Irene knows that Bellew’s heart is not full of hatred, but of ignorance. She has an opportunity to change his knowledge, but she chooses not to. This is a conscious decision on her part. If she allows Bellew to get to know anyone that is African American, he will find out that Clare is a Mulatto. She believes he will do something drastic; freeing Clare to play out the fantasies in Irene’s imagination. Therefore, she continues to allow him to pass as a racist.

In the end scene, Bellew follows Clare to a party at the Freeland’s home. He barges in. The expression on his face is “of rage and of pain” (Larsen 111). He accuses her of nasty things regarding her race, yet I do not think that it is her race that he is upset with. Instead, it is the fact that she lied to him about it. The narrator notes: “Before them stood John Bellew, speechless now in his hurting and anger” (111). Rage and pain give a clear picture of Bellew seething, but then, we are confronted with the hurting and anger. The latter convey that even within seconds, Bellew is changing into a man who is a Northern that reads as a caricature of the Southern racist. Larsen has shown us that we cannot trust the evidence that is supposedly in plain sight; he is not just a picture of a Southern bigot mapped on to a geographically Northern white man. Once Larsen peels back the façade, Bellew is revealed as a man whose feelings of betrayal are more intense than his preconceived ideas of what African Americans are.

The last effort that Larsen uses to expose Bellew as an assumed

Northerner is when Clare mysteriously falls out of a sixth story window. The narrator states that Bellew is “like a beast in agony” as he says, “Nig! My God! Nig!” (Larsen 111). His loathing of African Americans is gone. He returns to calling her his pet name. All of the anger and hurt disappears as she goes out of the window. There is remorse within the reader because we allowed Irene to guide our perceptions of a man who simply did not know any African Americans and allowed himself to be directed toward a racist attitude via the media. Even in the end, Irene admits that he would never kill his wife; she was passing him off as a racist from the North.

By redefining these white men right before our eyes, is Larsen playing with another layer of audience assumptions about identities? The conclusion is that she is. She has cleverly masked and portrayed Wentworth and Bellew as being misplaced across geographic boundaries. Larsen has called attention to ideas of racism that need closer examination. Once we look at what our preconceived notions are, we can take the two characters and situate them in the spaces they belong. Just because someone can take a short cab ride out of a community does not place them outside of embedded belief systems. Moreover, because we can place someone in an area that predetermines our impressions does not mean that the perception is always going to be true.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cheryl A. Wall and Ann duCille are two of the main authors for these critiques. Wall’s article “Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen’s Novels” focuses on “the psychological costs of racism and sexism” (97) as explored by Larsen in *Passing*. In duCille’s chapter “Passing Fancies” in her book *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* is a counterargument to Deborah E. McDowell’s introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing*. McDowell’s argument is that *Passing* is full of sexual suggestions, but duCille counters this with “placing [the language] within the blues/bohemian/bourgeois” (104). The result is semantics and perception.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Van Vechten’s family had close ties to the South. His father cofounded Piney Woods School for all black students in Mississippi. Raised with racial sympathy, Van Vechten created close relationships with African Americans. He was a photographer, author, and a mover for racial uplift during the Harlem Renaissance (Jonas 1-82).

<sup>3</sup> Most critics discuss Wentworth only in passing and acknowledge that he is based on Van Vechten.

<sup>4</sup> Carter notes, “the New York portion of the story takes place in two Manhattan locations—one south and one north of Central Park in the community of Harlem” (234).

<sup>5</sup> In “Her ‘Nig’: Returning the Gaze of Nella Larsen’s ‘Passing’” Lori Harrison-Kahan briefly remarks that Wentworth is racist, but concentrates, instead, on Wentworth’s sexuality. This follows a pattern of readers and critics alike who have identified, but under explore Wentworth’s racism.

<sup>6</sup> However, as Emily Bernard points out in her article “Unlike Many Others: Exceptional White Characters in Harlem Renaissance Fiction,” Irene would “rather [not] criticize Wentworth for desiring access to black spaces. . . because she values Hugh’s celebrity, [and she] encourages Hugh’s racial speculations because they allow her to share privileged information.” (419).

<sup>7</sup> It is the Other that fascinates Bellew. By denying it exists, he keeps his life normal. By accepting it, he has to realize that he is in a perverse relationship. Denying and accepting Clare as the Other have their charms.

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