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“Self-Derived Happiness, Defamiliarized: Ambiguity and Agency in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*”

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Abstract

In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Clare Kendry plays a dangerous game. Only a little over half a century removed from the end of the American Civil War, in a time when white supremacy still defined the nation's social, economic, and political life, Clare Kendry has agency. Though free from the confines of slavery, American white supremacy maintained that Black independence and narratives of Black happiness be dictated and authored solely by whites. Passing as a white woman, Clare derives her own happiness and builds her identity, marriage and livelihood on the basis of her deception. When her trickery is uncovered, Clare suffers an ambiguous fate and an untimely death. In writing an ambiguous end for Kendry, Larsen provides Clare an even greater sense of agency by forbidding traditions of white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness from determining her fate. Critical condemnations of *Passing's* conclusion establish that Larsen successfully defamiliarizes the Black psychological fiction novel and rejects southern antebellum models of white supremacy and Black self-determination.

KEYWORDS: Nella Larsen, passing, identity, agency, ambiguity, defamiliarization, psychology

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Like many of her contemporaries, Nella Larsen illustrated that post-emancipation racial subjugation and subsequent Black-white social disparities were inseparable from the African American narrative experience in the aftermath of the American Civil War. In 1929's *Passing*, Larsen surveys contemporary responses to the prejudice, segregation and violence indelibly tied to the notions of white supremacy still embedded in the American enterprise in the early twentieth century. Larsen's novel primarily encapsulates the experiences of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, however—two Black women who forgo the normative practice of cultural isolationism in order to “pass.” Each woman's decision to pass invokes unique physical and psychological perils: by carefully manipulating the American racial hierarchy, each risks discovery and the corruption and irreversible subversion of their own self-concept.

Existing scholarship has thoroughly examined Nella Larsen's careful use of irony and ambiguity to construct a narrative that intricately illustrates the psychological torments of passing. Authors like Jonathan Little, for example, have explored at length Larsen's use of irony as a means to “help her explore the complex psychological dynamics of denial, transference, and self-justification” (173) while others like Martha Cutter have described Larsen's use of ambiguity as the “ultimate mechanism for creating a text that refuses to be contained, consumed, or reduced to a unitary meaning” (77). Chiefly, it is the comparative dynamic that Larsen creates between the two characters at the forefront of *Passing*'s thrilling narrative that most clearly illustrates Larsen's talent for balancing these dynamics of denial and consumption with those of self-justification and liberation.

Larsen masterfully juxtaposes the apprehension of the meticulous Irene Redfield with the negligence and ambition of the incalculable Clare Kendry. When Clare's obsession with passing as a white woman devolves into a desperate longing for Irene's carefully sustained Black identity, this dynamic becomes blindingly apparent. John Sheehy's “The Mirror and the Veil: The Passing Novel and the Quest for American Racial Identity” perhaps best illustrates how this comparative character dynamic so brilliantly depicts the psychological toll of passing. In an article published in 1999 in the *African American Review*, Sheehy examines a scene from James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in which a young mulatto boy looks into a mirror and realizes that, because his reflection bars any “sign or mark which might brand him indisputably as either *black* or *white*,” he may *choose* his race. This choice, Sheehy explains, “is not an uncomplicated one, entailing as it does either the denial of his own history, on one hand, or the acceptance of an unjustifiable but undeniable economic and social subjugation, on the other” (401).

Larsen incorporates irony into *Passing*'s overarching narrative by presenting Irene's contradictory lust for Clare: while Clare Kendry longs for a return to the native identity that Irene exemplifies, Irene idolizes Clare's ability to “secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any

oppression, and in utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others” (74). In doing so, Larsen’s *Passing* repurposes the struggle of Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man*: while Irene lives in awe of Clare’s ability to sever her ties with her heritage, Clare envies Irene’s talent for balancing an appeasement of racial subjugation with a more calculated, retaliatory deception—allowing her to maintain access to an identity long since lost to Clare. This dynamic provides a clear justification for Larsen’s use of an ambiguous ending as a means to achieve a defamiliarization of her novel. Specifically, in the traditions of white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness, a conventional ending for the irresponsibly deceitful Clare Kendry would affirm a “white assertion of supremacy,” while even Kendry’s theoretical receding into patterns of a more deliberate deception or suicide would culminate in a dismissive “self-affirmation” of Kendry’s Blackness.

In “Self-Derived Happiness, Defamiliarized,” I will first dissect and define “traditional, white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness.” Then, I will examine how Larsen presents Clare Kendry’s agency as a product of her deception and how Irene and Clare’s comparative dynamic advocates for the validity of the latter’s autonomy. After exploring how Kendry uses her agency to pursue and achieve a self-derived happiness, I will define the models of assertion and self-determination referenced above. Ultimately, I argue that Nella Larsen’s use of an ambiguous ending helps her to achieve defamiliarization via its rejection of both of these “conclusive models”—thus casting doubt on these models’ historical preeminence. Finally, I will explain how critics’ condemnation of Larsen’s conclusion demonstrates a critical desire to uphold these traditions of white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness, which further supports my argument that Larsen successfully defamiliarizes her Black psychological novel.

White-authored narratives written during the American Civil War relied heavily on the “enormous influence of the myth of the ‘happy slave’ in arguments against the abolition of slavery” and for the justification of slavery in the immediate aftermath of the War Between the States (Gurton-Wachter, 521). Incorporation of this myth into narratives featuring elements of Black joy and agency established a “passive ideal of empathy,” which further perpetuated the idea that slaves and non-enslaved African Americans alike were always meant to be thankful and appreciative of white sympathy and that their senses of joy and independence were wholly dependent on the graciousness of their white oppressors. In the half-century or so following the Civil War’s end, these “traditional” white-authored narratives moved toward an even greater dependence on narratives of pity to obscure the existence of a self-derived Black happiness. Though free from the confines of slavery, these narratives continually depicted Black joy and agency as mere products of empathetic whites’ allotment of happiness and independence to the select oppressed they deemed “deserving” of it (539).

This common theme of whites presenting themselves as sole providers of Black happiness and agency is born out of a desire to assert white supremacy and dominance even in the aftermath of the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery in the late 19th century. Naturally, narratives of a self-derived Black happiness and sense of agency conflict with this idea of the “empathetic and gracious white savior.” Lily Gurton-Wachter’s article, “Happiness and Injury in the Age of Slavery,” examines William Blake’s 1794 poem “The Chimney Sweeper,” (*Songs of Experience*) as a clear illustration of how these concepts of the white savior and self-derived Black happiness come into conflict. Looking closely at Blake’s poem, told from the perspective of a young chimney sweep sold into labor by his father, Gurton-Wachter writes, “if this poem is working to expose and critique the creation of woe, then there is one line that does not seem to fit, namely, the ninth: ‘and because I am happy, & dance & sing.’”

Gurton-Wachter goes on to explore more thoroughly why Blake's "I am happy" line creates a tension between narratives of pity and those of a self-derived happiness:

If we read "The Chimney Sweeper" assuming, as most of its readers have, that the poem is meant to elicit the reader's sympathy for the injured child laborer, then the child's assertion of happiness throws a wrench in that emotional exchange and skirts the self-satisfaction that pity would have produced. As Vivasvan Soni has shown, happiness was central to eighteenth-century theories of sympathy and moral sentiment, but only when it was properly narrated. (522)

Though Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" was published nearly a century before the end of the American Civil War, its depictions of a Black child's happiness (not explicitly a gift from any gracious white provider), demonstrate how this child's self-derived happiness upsets the fragile narrative dynamic the entails the establishment of pity for a helpless Black child and a white savior's subsequent graciousness to provide a gentle compensation in response. Therefore, when I use the term "traditional" to describe "traditional narratives of a self-derived Black happiness," I refer to these narratives in the context of white-supremacist and white-authored narratives of self-derived Black happiness—narratives which tend to discredit and denigrate the possibility of a "self-derived Black happiness" as the existence of such conflicts within those southern antebellum-era narratives which suggest that Black happiness is only permissible when it is granted to those deserving of it by capable and empathetic whites.

There are three ways in which Clare Kendry achieves self-derived happiness, thus upsetting the fragile narrative, social and racial dynamic I discuss above. The first is through Clare's reconstruction of her identity on the basis of her deception. In *Passing's* first act, Irene Redfield initially finds it impossible to put a name to her childhood friend Clare Kendry when the two reunite after more than a decade on the rooftop of the Drayton. When Clare presses her, asking, "Don't you know me? Not really, 'Rene?'" Irene vainly attempts to:

recall where and when this woman could have known her. There, in Chicago. And before her marriage. That much was plain. High school? College? Y. W. C. A. committees? High school, most likely. What white girls had she known well enough to have been familiarly addressed as 'Rene by them? The woman before her didn't fit her memory of any of them. Who was she? (18)

Irene isn't simply a negligent acquaintance: after laying her eyes on Clare Kendry for the first time in twelve years, *Passing's* central character realizes that it's more than just Clare's pale skin and more affluent style of dress that makes her so unfamiliar. In the opening scene of *Passing's* second chapter, it becomes clear that Clare has assumed a completely new identity when Irene attempts to part ways with her after their discussion at the Drayton. Unfulfilled by their initial conversations, Clare hopes that the two can catch up further over dinner that same night. As such, Clare invites Irene to join her and her husband Jack for supper. Sensing a connection between Clare's sudden affluence and her newly developed identity as a white woman, Irene refuses. However, despite sensing the danger of Clare's "breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment" (24), Irene cannot help but be drawn to Kendry and impulsively counters Clare's invitation with one of her own.

Clare returns the favor and politely rejects Irene's invitation to join her in Idlewild: "There's nothing I'd like better. But I couldn't. I mustn't. It wouldn't do at all" (25). The regret Irene subsequently expresses in inviting Clare to Idlewild in the first place coupled with the

two's inability to establish a common ground beyond the confines of the Drayton's rooftop distinguishes Clare and Irene's identities as two completely separate entities. Despite Irene's self-assurances that she doesn't, she does in fact "care greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about" (25). Meanwhile, Clare's reluctance to readmit herself to a culture to which she has relinquished her access in exchange for an identity as a white woman demonstrates that she has completely assigned herself to a culture "definitely and deliberately divergent" from Irene's (31). When Clare laments that "all things considered, I think, 'Rene, that [passing] is even worth the price'" (29), Larsen makes it ever obvious that Clare's decision to reconstruct her identity on the basis of her ability to pass was a conscious, entirely self-serving choice. As a woman apprehensive about defying the "petty restrictions and distinctions" of the Black community in which she lives, Irene's subsequent jealousy and admiration of Clare's recklessness and agency work to further supplement the latter's validity.

The second way in which Clare achieves self-derived happiness is through her marriage. Clare's marriage to Jack Bellew, a racist white man with a violent temper is a product of her established identity as a white woman. Clare reveals her marriage to Irene on the Drayton's rooftop in *Passing's* second chapter as a power move meant to supplement Kendry's appearance as a gorgeous, well-to-do woman. Davida Pines' *The Marriage Paradox: Modernist Novels and the Cultural Imperative to Marry* explains that, particularly in the aftermath of slavery, "marrying, like voting, demonstrated newly won freedom, citizenship, and equality; marriage confirmed and showcased black civility and morality within a racist society" (76). Because Clare possesses an acute awareness of Irene's loyalty to her race, her reference to husband Jack undoubtedly means to instill in Irene this image of a newly won freedom and to glorify her own civility, affluence and morality. This has two effects on Irene: it informs her that even while passing as white, Clare has affirmed to herself her own civility and morality as a Black woman while, secondly, it causes Irene to crave Clare and the sense of satisfaction that she gleans from her deception of whites even more.

Again, Irene's jealousy lends validity to Clare's agency. Just as she languished over Clare's ability to construct an identity undefined by the "petty restrictions and distinctions" of her own "Negro community," Irene struggles to come to grips with Clare's ability to use passing to acquire what Pines above labels a symbol of a "newly won freedom." According to Brian Carr's "Paranoid Interpretation, Desire's Nonobject, and Nella Larsen's *Passing*," "Clare's attitude toward danger takes [an] epistemological toll on Irene... she is 'wholly unable to comprehend it'" (286). Later in the novel, Irene conflates and idolizes Clare's ability to "secure the thing that she want[s]" (74) until she convinces herself that her husband Brian and Clare are engaged in an extramarital affair. As Carr notes, "Irene's paranoid interpretation of the situation between Clare and Brian is not based exclusively on an empirical, evidentiary claim. She knows at some level that her knowledge is founded on nothing, but this does not render it meaningless" (291). Irene's paranoia concerning Clare's ability to seduce her husband *isn't* meaningless – her conviction in Clare's capacity to secure her desires via manipulation affirms the power that Clare Kendry possesses and that Irene Redfield craves.

Irene eventually uncovers the cracks in Clare's marriage to racist Jack Bellew: the latter refers to Clare by the nickname "Nig" and declares in the company of Irene and friend Gertrude that he knows Clare's "no nigger... I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (41). Bellew's admission and blatant racism understandably paralyze Irene and Gertrude, but, nonetheless, the significance of Clare's marriage is not lost on Irene.

While Clare's marriage is very much a façade – one that she uses to supplement her appearance and identity – her opulence and affluence are tangibly apparent to Irene. This is the third way in which Clare is able to achieve a self-derived happiness: by savoring the livelihood that her deception unquestionably augments.

On the roof of the Drayton, Irene recalls rumors of Clare's splendor endlessly circulating in the years since she'd last seen her childhood friend. Specifically, Irene remembers hearing whispers of Clare's

having been seen at the dinner hour in a fashionable hotel in company with another woman and two men, all of them white. And *dressed!* And there was another which told of her driving in Lincoln Park with a man, unmistakably white, and evidently rich. Packard limousine, chauffeur in livery, and all that. There had been others whose context Irene could no longer recollect, but all pointing in the same glamorous context (20).

Irene, in the presence of Clare Kendry herself, cannot discount these rumors or the capacity of Kendry's "having way:" "Well, Irene acknowledged, judging from her appearance and manner, Clare seemed certainly to have succeeded in having a few of the things she wanted" (21). Again, Irene reacts defensively to Clare: when the latter interrogates Irene, wondering whether she's "ever thought of 'Passing'," Irene answers promptly, "No... You see Clare, I've everything I want" (29). Irene's defensiveness again thinly veils her intrigue and jealousy. Even in the novel's first act, readers can begin to see that Irene's envy manifests itself as a physical longing for Clare. Even in her projected indignation at Clare's interrogation, Irene cannot force herself to leave the Drayton and break visual contact with Clare, describing her as having:

A tempting mouth... Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them... mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was something about them exotic. (30)

Irene's desire for Clare's agency continually presents itself as a homoerotic longing for Clare's physicality. Larsen's presentation of Clare's sexuality as a physical manifestation of Irene's desires is not unsurprising: in 2016, Rafael Walker noted that "the fictions of Nella Larsen have long been understood as daring explorations of black women's sexuality and subjectivity" (165). Irene's jealousy inspires her fascination with Clare's independence, her obsession with Clare's opulent physical appearance, and her subsequent delusion that Clare has somehow managed to seduce her husband Brian into an extramarital affair. Again, Irene's obvious conflation of Clare's agency and influence undeniably suggests Clare's seemingly limitless power as a woman undictated by "race! The thing that b[inds] and suffocate[s]" Irene (101).

By *Passing's* final act, however, audiences are meant to have garnered a sense of sympathy for Clare. Specifically, by this point, Irene has discovered the superficiality of Clare's appearance and marriage, the latter of which ensnares Clare just as tightly as fear grips Irene and Gertrude in witnessing Jack Bellew's racist ranting and nicknaming of Clare in the quartet's first assembly. Only a few short scenes before Larsen's novel concludes, Clare wonders what she might have to do to free herself from her marriage to Bellew (111), and Larsen permits readers to realize how Clare's situation mirrors Irene's: Clare is ensnared not only in an unhappy marriage, but she is also restricted by her choice to assume a new racial identity and shun the identity to which she now desperately wishes to revert.

Like the subject of Blake's "Chimney Sweeper," Clare "subverts a sentimental convention... in which only sighs, tears, and groans can really prove that something is wrong and thus elicit... sympathy" (521). Instead of eliciting sympathy for Clare in this way, Larsen, as discussed above, cues readers into Clare's plight by narrating her downfall through Irene's eyes. Clare's subversion of the tears-eliciting-sympathy trope is blindingly apparent as *Passing's* finale rolls around, as—even in the face of death (116)—Clare still appears uncaring, much to Irene's ire. Up until the very end, Clare is unapologetic and shows few signs that she regrets forging her identity, marriage and livelihood on the basis of her deception of whites.

Based on what I've already discussed, according to traditions of white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness, Clare's own unbothered reactions to her plight, along with her continued willingness to pursue self-derived happiness at the expense of whites means that there could only be three appropriate endings to Clare's story, two of which would work to affirm a "white assertion of supremacy" while the other would maintain a proper "Black self-determination." To that end, I will first contextualize the two ways in which traditional, white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness often uphold these "white assertions of supremacy."

Historically, "anti-racist rhetorics each strategically negotiate colorblind common sense, mainstream discursive expectations for race evasion, and the normative affective circulation of white fragility by rearticulating more extreme formations of racial consciousness into rhetorical formations more palatable to mainstream audiences" (Hartzell, iii). By this definition, Langston Hughes's 1933 narrative collection *The Ways of White Folks* works as a piece of anti-racist rhetoric largely due to Hughes's satirization of the tropes that have tended to define white-authored narratives of the African American experience in the half-century following the conclusion of the American Civil War. Though Hughes is a Black author, his *White Folks* manages to comprehensively spoof these two tropes characteristic of white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness, making the novel an excellent source for contextualizing these two traditional methods of affirming "white assertions of supremacy."

This first method of affirming a "white assertion of supremacy" in traditional, white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness is to conclude with a white character or characters shunning the narrative's central Black figure back to the "security" of their "native" community. In Hughes's "Slave on the Block," the second story contained in Hughes's *White Folks*, white characters Michael and Anne rescue young Luther, a Black child, from poverty and decide to "keep him" (27) as a muse for Michael's music and as an inspiration for Anne's artwork. In 2001, Darryl Dickson-Carr wrote that these characters "best embod[y] Hughes's cynicism toward the exploitative white liberal" (76). Unsurprisingly, Hughes brilliantly paints Michael and Anne as ignorant: their knowledge and understanding of Luther are framed exclusively by conceptualizations of Black men from the American antebellum period and the age of slavery. When Luther begins to develop what the couple sees as self-serving tendencies in his visits to Harlem and his developing romance with Black housekeeper Mattie, Michael and Anne are less interested in pitying Luther and kick him out of their home once they realize that Luther's newfound happiness is self-derived, rather than an exclusive product of their grace or charity. Upon his rejection, Luther happily assimilates into a culture more readily accepting of his independence and his personhood.

The second method of maintaining a "white assertion of supremacy" in white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness is to conclude with the death of the narrative's central Black figure, typically at the hands of a white character or characters. This method of

upholding a “white assertion of supremacy” is exemplified by Hughes’s “Home,” the short story that succeeds Hughes’s “Slave on the Block.” “Home” tells the story of jazz musician Roy Williams, who returns to Harlem after a stint in Paris. Upon his return, when “a half-southern voice drawl[s] from the edge of a baggage truck,” asking, “What’d yuh come back for?” Roy answers, ““I wanted to come home”” (36). From the moment Roy returns, the white men of the town harass him and he finds himself increasingly swamped by a mysterious illness that causes him to grow “thinner and thinner all the time, weaker and weaker” (47). Despite this, Roy continues to practice his craft and develops a friendship with Miss Reese, a music teacher at a local white high school, who invites Roy to play piano for her senior music appreciation class. In establishing this friendship with Reese, Roy begins to achieve a self-derived happiness, one that isn’t afforded to him by any “white savior” figure. Soon after, however, a group of “white young ruffians with red-necks, open sweaters and fists doubled up ready to fight” assault Roy after they falsely accuse him of trying to rape Miss Reese. The crowd beats Roy nearly to death and “Home” concludes with the young men leaving Williams’ naked body hanging “from a tree at the edge of town” (49).

Dickson-Carr synthesizes Hughes’s *White Folks* as a collection of stories “connected by one overarching problematic: the condescension, paternalism, and hypocrisy of whites nationwide” (74). Dickson-Carr also notes that, like many of his contemporaries, Hughes’s writing “embodies a critique” and comprehensive satirization of the racial politics of his time period (74). His “Slave” and “Home” pieces are no exception— each expertly parodies the two traditional methods of affirming white supremacy in white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness discussed above: either this central Black figure is required to assimilate into a native or otherwise “othered” culture (and thus affirm their “acceptance of an unjustifiable but undeniable economic and social subjugation” (Sheehy, 401) or they are brutalized and murdered for deriving happiness from sources other than their white oppressors.

Though Irene preoccupies herself with fears that Clare Kendry’s story could conclude in either of the two manners mentioned above, the second “traditional” ending to white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness also referenced above— “Black self-determination” – differs slightly from the conclusions previously referenced but nonetheless accomplishes the same effect as conclusions championing a “white assertion of supremacy.” Therefore, its incorporation into Larsen’s narrative would likewise have contributed to an automatization of Larsen’s narrative of a self-derived Black happiness.

When I use the term “Black self-determination,” I am referring to Clare’s option to commit suicide when husband Jack Bellew’s “angry arrival at a Harlem party precipitates Clare’s death by defenestration” (Mendelman, 736). Margaret Higonnet’s ““this winged nature fraught’: Suicide and Agency in Women’s Poetry” argues for the productivity and validity of suicide in poems like Mary Robinson’s “The Negro Girl” and Felicia Hemans’ “The Bride of Greek Isle” as a means of achieving liberation. In the case of Robinson’s “Negro Girl,” Higonnet claims that the slave Draco and his beloved Zelma’s double suicides liberate:

both figures to reach “that celestial realm, where Negroes shall be free!” (12.6). Both break their chains to become companions in death. The familiar play of identity between the figure of the abandoned woman and the enslaved peoples of Europe’s colonies not only draws upon a rhetoric of disempowerment but invokes the opposite of disempowerment, in the paradoxically sublime gesture of taking control of one’s life. (685)

Higonnet argues that suicide, for the women of Robinson and Hemans' poems, serves as an avenue for liberation and agency and illustrates the tradition of suicide in helping narrative figures achieve (in Robinson's case, Black) self-determination (686). By choosing to commit suicide, Clare Kendry would be liberating herself from her husband's wrath as he charges at her, blinded by rage as he snarls: "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" (116). However, in the paragraphs that follow, I will argue for the unproductivity of Kendry's theoretical suicide by examining how her suicide would work only to ultimately affirm a "white assertion of supremacy" given the historical inclination of white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness to see characters like Clare face punishment for deceiving or deriding whites in the pursuit of a self-derived Black happiness.

As John Bellew storms toward Clare Kendry, she "back[s] a little from his approach... Yet she otherwise remains "composed . . . seem[ing] unaware of any danger or uncaring" (Larsen 79). "Ultimately, though," Lisa Mendelman explains, "it is not Bellew's movement that occasions Clare's death" (736). Instead, Larsen leaves the cause of Clare's tumble and subsequent death ambiguous. Larsen does provide several hints, however. She identifies Irene, who "never afterwards allowed herself to remember" what exactly caused Clare Kendry to fall, mumbling incessantly in the aftermath that "'it was an accident, a terrible accident... It *was*'" (117). Later, she also identifies Bellew as a possible suspect: when a crowd forms around Clare's corpse, Larsen notes Irene's awareness "for the first time... that Bellew was not in that little group shivering in the small hallway. What did that mean?" Though another bystander remarks that Clare must have "fainted, I guess!" (119), the spotlight Larsen means to shine on Bellew and especially Irene is obvious. Regardless, *Passing* refuses to come to any definitive conclusion: Larsen never explicitly discloses who or even *what* precipitates Clare's fatal fall. Ultimately, Larsen writes that, even "Centuries after, [Irene] heard the strange man saying: 'Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window'" (119).

Now I would like to examine how the ambiguous nature of Larsen's ending specifically defies the three traditions of a "white-authored narrative of a self-derived Black happiness" discussed above and thus achieves a defamiliarization of the Black psychological novel in her rejection of these southern antebellum models of white supremacy and Black self-determination.

As discussed in the context of Hughes's *White Folks*, the first of two "suitable" endings to Larsen's novel that would maintain an "assertion of white supremacy" would entail the manifestation of one of Irene's greatest fears: Clare's husband Jack is benevolent enough to grant her emancipation. By the time Bellew confronts Clare in *Passing*'s final scene, Irene's anger and anxiety have risen to a boiling point: she is eager to see Clare punished after she so easily turned her back on her community and native identity. Furthermore, Irene fears that Clare's freedom will allow her greater access to her husband Brian, who Irene imagines may already be spellbound by Clare's allure.

Clare makes it obvious that she sees emancipation as one possible outcome of her revelation to husband Bellew. Just prior to *Passing*'s conclusion, Clare remarks to Irene that, should her true identity be uncovered, "I'd do what I want to do more than anything else right now. I'd come up here to live. Harlem, I mean. Then I'd be able to do as I pleased, when I please" (111). It is because Kendry's emancipation would come at the hands of her white husband, however, that this conclusion would signify an affirmation of a "white assertion of supremacy." Because traditions of the classic, southern antebellum narrative of a self-derived Black happiness would be inclined to see Clare face punishment for her conscious deception of whites as a means to achieve her own agency and happiness, emancipation at the hands of her

husband Jack would merely read as another example of a “gracious” white figure providing a gentle reprieve to Clare by allowing her to escape death and his control.

As discussed above in the context of Hughes’s “Slave on the Block,” Clare’s emancipation at the hands of her husband wouldn’t come without punishment, however. In the context of traditional, white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness, Clare still loses out. Just like Michael and Anne see Luther’s banishment from their home and their extinguishing of his presence in white society as a “punishment,” Bellew’s emancipation of Clare and her subsequent return to Harlem in order to reassimilate into a culture she’s long since abandoned would read as an affirmation of white supremacy: such an ending affirms Bellew’s position as a figure capable of permitting and rejecting Clare’s acceptance into white society as well as his ability to relegate Clare back to the “safety” of her native community. As Jonathan Little’s “Irony and the Critics” suggests, Larsen’s ending does not offer “any final messages or final Truth(s) that will clear away racial and social difficulties. This [ambiguous] orientation prevents Larsen from portraying a triumphant character or social utopia” (175).

The second of these endings that would affirm an “assertion of white supremacy” entails the death of Clare by her husband’s hand. Irene and the crowd of onlookers that surround Clare’s corpse at the conclusion of *Passing* openly speculate that perhaps Clare’s husband was responsible for Clare’s fall and subsequent death. Immediately in the aftermath of her plunge, Irene recounts Bellew omitting “a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony” (116) and later, a “strange man, official and authoritative” addresses Irene: ““You’re sure she fell? Her husband didn’t give her a shove or anything like that, as Dr. Redfield seems to think?”” (119).

In the context of traditional, white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness, this conclusion seems the most obvious that Larsen would employ to uphold an automatized narrative tradition. Like Roy Williams, the main subject of Hughes’s “Home,” *Passing*’s Clare Kendry (though much more deceitfully) derives her own happiness. Just as the white “red-necks” of “Home” see Williams’ deriving of his happiness as an infringement on their supremacy, Bellew’s killing of Clare would exhibit a similar concept: a white man asserts his supremacy by killing the Black woman guilty of deceiving him and undermining the notion of white supremacy and the disposition of whites as the sole providers of Black happiness. Because Larsen never details Clare’s true cause of death, however, readers and critics cannot definitively say that Larsen’s novel belongs to either of these narrative traditions which affirm “white assertions of supremacy” (i.e., those of emancipation or those that depict Clare’s self-derived happiness and subsequent death as simply a matter of crime and punishment).

On the other hand, as discussed in the context of Higonnet’s “Suicide and Agency” piece, a “Black self-determination” by Clare would entail her committing suicide when husband Jack Bellew confronts her. Clare’s suicide at first seems like a viable way for Clare to “underscore her agency” (Higonnet, 686) and to liberate herself as a Black woman by rejecting submission to either her white husband’s empathetic emancipation or his homicidal rage. However, though Higonnet argues for the productivity of suicide in its ability to help women like Clare achieve liberation, looking at *Passing* in the context of traditional narratives of a self-derived Black happiness demonstrates that Clare’s suicide would only work to again affirm a “white assertion of supremacy.”

As discussed, traditional narratives of a self-derived Black happiness would maneuver to see Clare Kendry punished for her deliberate and consistent deception of whites as a means of achieving her own happiness. Because of this, regardless of Clare’s intentions in committing suicide, if Larsen concluded *Passing* this way, it would have been inevitable that readers should

interpret her suicide as merely a “surrendering” to her white oppressors and as a subsequent reinforcement of the “white supremacy that defined the nation’s social, economic, and political life” (Stupp 61) in the early twentieth century. However, in making use of an ambiguous ending, Larsen avoids presenting Clare as being at the mercy of a white man’s empathy or anger or as suicidally submissive to an insurmountable oppression. Subsequently, Larsen avoids concluding her masterclass in irony and ambiguity in any way that affirms a “white assertion of supremacy.”

Finally, there exists critical evidence which also attests to Larsen’s successful rejection of the automatized conclusive models discussed above. A meta-examination of critics’ responses to *Passing*’s conclusion demonstrates this, particularly in critics’ condemning of Larsen’s ambiguous ending as a mere product of Larsen’s supposed inability to wrap up her narrative in the same satisfying manner in which it was written, given the “organic, internal logic” of her novel (Little, 173). Jonathan Little’s “Irony and Critics” explains that much of this criticism was conceived on the basis of critics’ regular dismissal of Clare Kendry as a “dishonorable” character coupled with Larsen’s awareness “of the traditions before her” and her subsequent decision “not to depict... serene returns for her characters in *Passing*” (174). Little argues that because critics often “miss some of the insights that Larsen’s pervasively ironic vision offers” (176), they tend to view Clare Kendry as reckless and negligent solely based on Irene’s paranoid perceptions and subsequently are disappointed by Larsen’s refusal to adhere to traditions of punishment and judgment for Kendry at the conclusion of the novel.

Specifically, Little writes that “Irene’s problematic influence has been underestimated as a power in shaping readers’ interpretations of Clare as an unsympathetic character” (175). Evident throughout the novel, Little continues, is Irene’s “escalating resentment, envy, jealousy... paranoia,” and, most tellingly, her “snobbish class bias towards Clare” (175). Little goes on to suggest that Irene “projects the most dangerous aspects of herself onto Clare” (178): while Irene admonishes Clare’s supposed divorce from her native identity, it is Irene who embodies the snobbery and senses of entitlement and racial superiority she senses in Clare. Moreover, it is Irene who follows a “script of social conformity and classism” – one that has been “disrupted by Clare’s actions” (178). Because Irene projects an image of herself as being a class above Clare’s obvious disregard for the social dicta of the era, it is not a stretch to say that, by the end of the novel, Irene is the one who has adopted the classist perspective of white America, not Clare.

Because Clare “disrupts” Irene’s classist “script of social conformity,” according to Little, Irene “should reprove her” (178). While Irene doesn’t do so immediately, she comes to believe, as discussed, that there are only a select number of ways that Clare’s story could conclude, given the latter’s disruption of America’s racial dicta. This is why Irene can only envision conclusions customary to white-authored narratives about self-derived Black happiness for Clare: because she has come to assume this classist perspective of white America. As Little notes, this is the pervasive irony that critics tend to miss in their dismissal of Larsen’s ending and of Clare’s character: that Irene’s pointed and problematic narrative voice and classist perspective are what unfairly and unconsciously paint Clare as dishonorable and deserving of punishment in the minds of Larsen’s readers. Little concludes by arguing that “While *Passing*’s ending may seem abrupt and evasive to those looking for triumphant characters or affirming political messages, it [ultimately] remains consistent with the internal logic and organic design Larsen sets up in the rest of the novel” (173).

In their dismissal of Larsen’s ambiguous ending, critics thus demonstrate an adoption (or at least an indirect approval) of Irene’s classist perspective and an implicit desire for authors like

Larsen to uphold “a white-authored narrative of... [supremacy] and freedom” (Stupp, 61), wherein Clare’s self-derived liberation, which casts doubt on the preeminence of American white supremacy, is met with the punishment that inherently succeeds any disruption of the American racial hierarchy. In this same vein, critics further showcase Larsen’s successful defamiliarization of her Black psychological novel in her conclusion’s rejection of southern antebellum models of white supremacy and Black self-determination.

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* demonstrates an effective defamiliarization of traditional narratives of a self-derived Black happiness. During a time when white supremacy continued to define the nation’s social, economic and political life, it was common for narratives like *Passing* to be authored solely as affirmations of white power and dominance, wherein women like Clare Kendry’s happiness and agency were presented as contingent solely on the graciousness of whites. Larsen presents Kendry’s happiness as one that is self-derived on the basis of her deception of whites, however, making Kendry’s narrative one that stands in obvious contrast to white-authored narratives of piteous Black Americans and charitable white providers. Larsen, in writing an ambiguous end for Clare Kendry, upholds her commitment to avoiding any sort of affirmation of white supremacy by refusing to present Clare at the mercy of either her husband’s empathy or anger or as left with no choice but to commit suicide as a means to desperately assert a sense of self-determination. In combining examinations of Larsen’s narrative with critics’ dismissive reactions to Larsen’s conclusion, I have demonstrated on both a textual and meta-textual stratum Larsen’s successful defamiliarization of *Passing* as a Black psychological novel unfettered by traditions of historically white-authored narratives of a self-derived Black happiness.

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