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Passing Women's Race and Sexuality: the Loss of Innocence and the Veil of Performance in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Saya Matsushita

Introduction

Nella Larsen published her second work, *Passing*, in 1929, which she set in Harlem, New York City in the 1920s mainly, and in which she made two protagonists, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who are mixed-race women and have white appearance. Harlem from the 1920s to mid-1930s was the center of the Harlem Renaissance, and black people tried to establish "black identity" with artistic intelligence such as art or literature. Larsen took part in the movement, and she published her first novel, *Quicksand* (1927), which received a good reputation from both black and white people. Her second novel was also praised highly. "Passing" means that black people pretend to be white, and some novels containing this conception existed before *Passing*. However, Larsen put this conception on her title and stressed the ambivalence of race, which must have been influenced by her experience. She was born to a Danish mother and black father, and her mother remarried a white man after Larsen's parents divorced. Hence, she spent her childhood surrounded by white people. After that, she entered Fisk University (a private black university), and she went through an environment surrounded by black people. This experience must have directed her works.

The racial ambivalence of these characters provokes the question: "Who am I?" Therefore, knowing their own race is the great crisis for them, and it can be read as the "loss of innocence"; they lose their innocence by being incorporated into their society's framework or norm which creates racial difference. After recognizing their own race, they must choose how they live, or which race they should choose. "Passing"

characters have two sides: one is “black” which is decided by the American society, and the other is “white” which their skins embody. No matter which they choose, their words or behaviors are in a sense performative. In this sense, gender and identity are no exception. For example, as Beauvoir says “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (267); after losing the innocence of their childhood in which they do not notice the difference between male and female, human beings apply to themselves cultural construction of “gender” or “sex” according to the manner of society.

One of the main characters in *Passing*, Irene Redfield, has a light enough skin to be able to “pass,” but she desires her “security” above all. She lives in Harlem with her husband, Brian, who is black and a doctor, but she makes use of the whiteness of her skin to “pass” temporarily at a restaurant or a theater. One day, when she goes back to her hometown, Chicago, she encounters Clare Kendry, who is Irene’s childhood friend, at a white-only hotel’s tearoom. Clare’s skin is lighter than Irene, and she conceals her black blood to live as a white woman because she lost her father when she was a child. To get what she wants, she decides to marry a white man and always “pass.” Two years after their encounter in Chicago, they re-encounter in New York and their relationship begins again. It causes Clare’s envy toward Irene, who lives as a black woman, and Clare starts to enter Irene’s life in Harlem. Irene does not like Clare’s intervention because Irene’s most important thing is “security,” and she starts to suspect of adultery between Clare and Brian. In the last part of this story, Clare takes part in the black-only party. Suddenly her racist husband breaks into the party and he says that he knows she has black blood. In the end, Clare falls down to the ground from a sixth-floor’s window and she dies, but we cannot know whether she commits suicide or is killed.

When we pay closer attention to this plot, the factor of race is emphasized. Moreover, it is possible to interpret Clare’s death as a parody of the “tragic mulatto” or as a morality punishment for Clare who betrays her own race by passing as a white.¹ However, the plot of *Passing* is not so simple because of Clare’s characteristics of “[a]

¹ For detailed arguments for this point, see Konomi Ara, p.122.

having way” (182), which means that Clare always follows her desire, and she does not hesitate anything to get what she wants. We should not regard a character like Clare as a tragic mulatto who can fit neither black nor white and finally dies. In addition, if this story describes a moral punishment, Irene, who recognized herself as black can take the role as punisher for Clare, but given the fact that Irene herself passes to white temporarily, *Passing's* race plot will be more complicated.

Passing, which was praised in Harlem Renaissance, was driven to the shadow of literary history at the same time that the movement began to decline. This work had been forgotten for about forty years, but in the 1970s when the feminist movement flourished, feminist critics started to give a new interpretation to *Passing*.² They interpreted the relationship between Irene and Clare as that of lesbian and showed a connection between race, gender and sexuality. There is no definite statement about the relationship between Irene and Clare as lesbianism, but sexual attractions which Irene and Clare feel each other are worth considering.

In this thesis, at first, I will reconsider the “loss of innocence” as a traditional concept in American literature from the perspectives of performativity and sexuality. Then, the race and sexuality plots are focused on from the perspective of the “loss of innocence” and “performance,” which shows the interaction between race and sexuality. Finally, I will show the interpretation of the ambiguous ending of this novel.

I The Loss of Innocence and the Veil of Performance

“The loss of innocence” reminds us of the image of Adam and Eve in the Old Testament, and their Fall. In Sollers' *Neither Black nor White yet Both*, the first chapter “Origins, or, Paradise Dawning,” he begins with the declaration that “Adam and Eve were a black-white couple” (32). Then he gives three examples: an eighteenth-century door panel of a pharmacy in Germany by an anonymous painter, Hugh Henry Brackenridge's novel, *Modern Chivalry*, and Charles Chesnutt's “The

² About this detailed discussion, Dorothy Stringer comments, “[m]any commentators, building on Deborah McDowell's and Judith Butler's foundational readings, have identified an occulted lesbian desire in Irene's curiously intense attention to Clare, her personality, her physical beauty, and her willingness to express strong desire” (98).

Fall of Adam,” and he goes on to say:

All three interracial paradise scenes also contain elements of white-black hierarchy: in the painting only the white man is seated; in Brackenridge the suspiciously Irish-looking Adam is presumed to resemble God more than does the black Eve (who is also described at much less detail); and in Chesnutt, Adam’s turning black is ironically associated with the fall, and the original human color is imagined to be a prelapsarian white. (34)

This citation shows the representation of Adam as a white man, Eve as a black woman, and the interracial paradise; it means the Fall has a connection with race. Thus, knowing race can be considered as a kind of the loss of innocence.

After the moment of the “loss of innocence” in which mulatto characters recognize race, they change their performance following the requirement of the world they live in. Let us consider the following quotation by Yuichiro Takahashi, a performance theorist.

Not only the act mediating the bodies but also the conceptual act of how we recognize the world and how we represent are considered as performance. In other words, every trial to perceive and explain the reality as well as to represent selves is performance. It is not exaggeration to say that the reality is not given but performed, and constructed by the performance. (29)

The same observation applies to the connection between performance and identity or gender.³ For example, Takahashi gives an example of an announcement of the sex of a new-born infant, which is a kind of “loss of innocence,” and he continues to say that as soon as the sex is announced, adults begin the performance of making the baby “a

³ Yuichiro Takahashi states, “the way of thinking that a reality is performed or a reality is constructed by performance foregrounds the relationship between performance and identity as a target of performance research” (29).

man” or “a woman” (30). Moreover, Judith Butler, a feminist theorist, points out that gender itself has the structure of imitation (137), and claims in her book, *Gender Trouble* that the subject is constructed in performative ways by the repetition of standard action (137). Butler’s theory, denying the traditional one that gender is constructed by sex, can apply to race. Especially, for mixed-race people who have light skin, given how they internalize the dichotomy between “black” and “white,” and that they don’t represent the biological characteristics of race, race is constructed in performative ways along social norms. As both gender and race are social constructs, there is a strong interrelation between them; therefore, race is associated with gender. Butler also suggests that even sex is a social construct and “the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (7). Sex, gender, and race are performed to represent selves, and these performances make identity. In short, there is a strong interrelation between not only race and gender but also between race, sex, gender, and identity. Mulatto characters who have light skin make us think about these connections.

Several observations in this chapter have shown that the “loss of innocence” and “performance” of mulatto characters are important points to consider. When and how do they recognize race? What performance do they give? As for the second question, I will refer to their clothes as their performance; the word, “the veil” is used in the title of my thesis. Thus, “the veil of performance” means not the veil to conceal characters’ performance but their performance using the veil.

In the following chapters, I will analyze both plots of race and of sexuality using this perspective of “loss of innocence” and “performance,” and make clear racial and sexual relationship between Irene and Clare.

II The Plot of Race

Other works treating mixed-race characters who have light skin often describe the moment of “loss of innocence” as knowing *their own* race. However, in *Passing*, Irene and Clare have already known their race since birth, and they choose their performance: Irene lives in Harlem with her black husband as a black woman, and

Clare decides to live as a white woman. Therefore, we cannot decide the moment of their “loss of innocence.” The moment of starting to change their performance as a black woman or as a white woman hiding her own blackness must be the scene in which Irene and Clare know which race they choose each other when they meet in the white-only hotel, the Drayton, in Chicago. Irene uses the hotel to take a rest and encounters Clare Kendry. Irene knows that Clare has married a white man, was raised after her father’s death by her white aunts who are pious Christians, and she chose a life as a white woman to get away from the rigid life. At the same time, Clare knows about Irene’s life with her black husband and two sons in Harlem.

In the first place, the action of “passing” contains a quality of performance to disguise race. The different way of thinking for “passing” between Irene and Clare shows the difference of their performance of race. Clare says to Irene that “I’ve often wondered why more colored girls, girls like you . . . never ‘passed’ over. It’s such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve” (187). This statement shows Clare’s way of living following her desire not her race. Irene is a more complicated example. She says to Brian that “It’s funny about ‘passing.’ We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it” (216). While Irene is proud of her life as a black woman, she “passes” temporarily. Thus, Irene’s complicated construction of race appears from this quotation.

Irene strongly shows her obsession with black middle class society in America for keeping her security. She wants her son to enter some European school, holds parties to improve positions of black people with a white patron who comes to Harlem, and rejects her husband’s proposal of moving to Brazil. Konomi Ara picks up the word, “mask,” which can be the means of performance, and points out “Irene ‘masks’ to keep her identity in front of white people who only know her as a ‘social white’” (123). Ara continues:

The problem is that, in the case of mixed-race people who have light skin like Irene, they have to “mask” no matter which race they disguise when

they have contact with white people. In the case that mixed-race people who have light skin choose to perform as blacks, their "mask" appears with a mentality which is conscious of "one-drop." . . . Mixed-race African Americans sway mentally on the border of "mask." (123-24)

Irene's "mask" appears with a mentality which is conscious of "one-drop" in front of a white patron, Hugh Wentworth, who knows that Irene is black. However, if Irene considered this mentality negatively, she would not take part in dance parties for black people. Irene should not reject to move to Brazil, which has a bigger black population and less racial discrimination,⁴ because if Irene went to Brazil, she would be just a black woman, and she could not feel the superiority of her light skin. She is able to make use of her skin's whiteness only when she is both in a racial discriminatory society and in the black middle class. Her racial identity is established by the American society which hold "one-drop" rule.

After the "loss of innocence" of Irene and Clare in Chicago, they move to New York. I want to pay attention to the meaning of "New York" because the city's nickname "the Big Apple" reminds us of the idea of a "forbidden fruit" which is the cause of the Fall. After the "loss of innocence," Irene and Clare move to New York, and the two protagonists driven from the paradise put on their clothes. Meredith Goldsmith insists that, "[f]ashioning identities through the material apparatus of clothing makeup, and décor, Larsen's heroines appear to embrace wilfully inauthentic, performative selves" (97), thus, the change of their clothes must be focused on.

When Irene leaves Chicago, she wears "her black crepe de chine" (208) in the train bound for New York. This color of her dress represents a kind of mourning for Clare, who Irene decides never to meet again, and reflects Irene's decision that she lives as a black. On the other hand, Clare begins to notice that her life is not happy, and she writes a letter to Irene: "It may be, 'Rene dear, it may just be that, after all,

⁴ David L. Blackmore points out, "[s]ame-sex acts have never been criminalized in Brazil, and political persecution of gays and lesbians has never been so widespread in Brazil as it has been in the United States" (477).

your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one. I'm not sure just now. At least not sure as I have been" (208). Two years after the encounter in Chicago, Clare starts to enter Irene's life in Harlem. Clare is "in a stately gown of shining black taffeta" (233) to participate in Negro Welfare League dance party with Irene and Brian, as if she claims that her race is black. Besides, her beauty steals the spotlight from Irene in "her new rose-colored chiffon frock" (233-34). Irene feels as if Clare robbed Irene of "the position in the black middle class" and "superiority of a black woman who has light skin" which Irene values above all. In another party, Clare puts on a "cinnamon-brown frock which brought out all her vivid beauty, and a little golden bowl of a hat" and "amber beads" (253). Clare uses the color of "cinnamon-brown," "golden," and "amber" to dye herself brown like mixed-race person, and Clare changes her "mask" of race.⁵ On the other hand, Irene's clothes are like "the second gravedigger" (252), which shows that Irene is exhausted by Clare's wilful performance. Irene's performance is shaken every time Clare changes her race.

These changes of performance lead the enigmatic ending, but we have to pay attention to the sexuality plot between Irene and Clare before concluding the ending.

III The Plot of Sexuality

Passing started to be picked up as a story about a lesbian relationship between Irene and Clare forty years after this novel's publication as I mentioned before, and critics have shown the strong connection between race and sexuality. To be sure, there are some descriptions which express lesbian connection between Irene and Clare, which cannot be explained only by "ties of race" (213). For example, Clare 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 "[b]rilliant red patches flamed in Irene

⁵ Meredith Goldsmith points out Clare's clothes in this scene, and she says, "Clare is clothed in colors that recall her racial liminality" (113). Besides, she also points out "cigarettes," and comments, "[c]igarettes also lend themselves to Larsen's poetic of color: the smoke in which Irene and Clare wrap themselves blends both light and dark, metaphorizing their passing and veiling their mutual attention" (111).

Redfield's warm olive cheeks" (174). Moreover, Irene describes Clare's appearance, especially her lips, in a way that makes us sense their erotic feelings: "Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouse" (190-91). Irene then feels as if she received a "caress" (191) by Clare's gazing. These are only some examples, and we can find other descriptions which seem to show their lesbianism in the text.⁶ In addition, their clothes express not only their racial performance but also their sexual fascination, and the word "clothes" can be associated with the image of "closet" which intimates homosexuality.

However, there is no conclusive statement of lesbianism in *Passing*. Irene calls sex "queer idea" (220) ("queer" may suggest the meaning of homosexuality). She will not allow her son to talk about sex, and she escapes from discoursing on sexuality. The third-person narrator of *Passing* narrates through Irene's point of view. Therefore, the relationship between Irene and Clare is ambiguous. To interpret the sexual fascination Irene and Clare feel each other, we should consider gender and sexuality. Yuichi Takeda points out that a "queer" mind opposes the heterosexual system in that it does not "hypostatize identities" and it "deconstructs the subject" as more than one identity (32).

Moreover, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick shows the conception of "homosocial," and she says,

For instance, the diacritical opposition between the "homosocial" and the "homosexual" seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men . . . Thus the adjective "homosocial" as applied to women's bonds . . . need not be pointedly dichotomized as against "homosexual" . . . (2-3)

In addition, Kazuko Takemura claims that women's "homosocial desire appears in the

⁶ About the lesbianism relationship between Irene and Clare, Thadious M. Davis comments, "Larsen frequently associated with a literary and theater crowd that included lesbians, homosexuals, and bisexuals who were open in their sexual preferences" (324).

aperture—the one between men and women, heterosexual and homosexual, and mind and body, and it is a personal and private ‘phenomenon’ which does not have support from a society contrary to men’s homosocial relationship” (311), and “this personal and private quality leads to the succession of women’s ties and erotic relationships” (303).

Let us return and consider the “loss of innocence” scene. The performance of “passing” at the white-only hotel seems to have a negative meaning of betraying the black race, but it can be Irene and Clare’s free action without restriction of society, race, or husbands, and “passing” is given a positive interpretation. In the hotel’s tearoom, Irene notices that “someone was watching her” (178). The narrator continues,

Very slowly she [Irene] looked around, and into the dark eyes of the woman [Clare] in the green frock at the next table. But she evidently failed to realize that such intense interest as she was showing might be embarrassing, and continued to stare. Her demeanor was that of one who with utmost singleness of mind and purpose was determined to impress firmly and accurately each detail of Irene’s features upon her memory for all time, nor showed the slightest trace of disconcertment at having been detected in her steady scrutiny. (178)

Irene’s and Clare’s eyes crossing is the “women’s homosocial desire” which appears in the aperture among social systems.

After the “loss of innocence,” however, race decides Irene’s and Clare’s performances. Clare puts blackness on herself, and she never hides her desire for Irene and “kiss[es] on her (Irene’s) dark curls” (224) because Clare is a “queer” woman who never fixes her identity and performs as she likes. On the other hand, Irene must keep her “security” by belonging to black middle class and being under her husband’s protection. Once she returns to Harlem, she needs the American social system which gives her superiority as a black woman who has light skin, and she has to eliminate Clare from her life.

IV Passing the Border in the Final Scene

At the ending of this novel, Clare's racist husband, John Bellew, breaks into the black-only party which Irene and Clare take part in, and he abuses Clare. After that, Clare falls from a sixth-floor's window and passes away, but the narrator does not make clear whether her death was suicide or murder. Because of this ambiguous ending, there are many interpretations,⁷ but the most convincing one is that Irene pushes Clare out of the window. Before Clare's death, Irene thinks that "[s]he couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (271). Moreover, she thinks "[w]hat if Clare was not dead?" after Clare's death. Given that the person who opens the window is Irene (270), it is logical to regard that the murderer is Irene Redfield.

When we look at this ending from the perspective of race, we know that Irene kills Clare because Irene's performance of race will be broken by Clare if Clare still continues to enter her life. From the perspective of sexuality, the danger of homosexuality must be eliminated for Irene because she has to keep her "security."

Irene pushes Clare from "the window" to the ground covered with snow, and she makes Clare "pass" to the world of white from the black one. At the same time, she also makes Clare "pass" out of the house, that is, the closet because she herself must be in the closet. After Clare's "passing," Irene thinks:

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking darling, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. (272)

She accomplishes eliminating Clare who has "torn at Irene's placid life." At the same

⁷ For further detailed arguments for these interpretations, see Noboru Yamashita, pp.215-22.

time, she holds a memorial service for Clare as Irene grieves the loss of Clare's beauty which fascinates but bothers her. *Passing* consists of two plots, race and sexuality.

The Harlem Renaissance was an artistic movement for establishing black identity, and the movement accepted lesbians and bisexuals as "modern women" (Blackmore 479). However, Larsen did not express absolute factor which defines race identity clearly; rather we can read fluid race from *Passing*, and she only indicated lesbian relationship, not declared. This question may be solved by Larsen's "silence." Larsen published her third work, "Sanctuary," but a reader suspected her of plagiarism. She was cleared of the suspicion, but she never came back to the literary world. Thadious M. Davis wrote Larsen's biography, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*, and she points out:

During the thirty- four years between the publication of "Sanctuary" and her death, silence replaced Larsen's voice, but in that silence is the story of an African-American woman writer unable to create in the face both of complex race and gender obstacles in society operating against her needs and of psychological dualism in her own personality fragmenting her responses to those needs. (460)

That is, Larsen made the "silence" hold various possibilities. The ambiguous race, sexuality, and the ending do not restrict the protagonists' performance, especially Clare and this makes the novel pass the categories of a parody of "tragic mulatto" or moral punishment story.

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