

ES.269: Passing: Flexibility in Race and Gender

Class 7-April 2, 2009

This week's reading:
Nella Larsen's *Passing*

[Read the synopsis of *Passing* on Wikipedia](#)

Questions Raised

Passing seems to create more questions to the reader than it answers. Here a few that came up in our discussion:

Is this book about Clare or Irene?

Larsen presents passing as dangerous. What was her agenda for writing this book?

The ending: Did Irene push Clare? Did she fall? Or kill herself? The class felt it was implied that Clare was pushed, because they don't see Clare as suicidal. They wondered if she wanted to get caught at passing? We are intended to suspect that she was pushed.

Which lives are seen as tenable?

Is Clare transgressing gender boundaries?

What does it mean that Irene is educated?

What caused Irene to be crazy? Tension in her marriage? A constrained life?

How do the characters construct authenticity in identity?

Did Clare construct a scene because wanted to be found out so she could be free and live in Harlem.

Was there an implication that there was some sort of relationship between the two women? Not romantic necessarily, but they were drawn and repelled by each other.

What statement is Larsen making about sexuality and desire?

Background and History

Many critiques of the novel acknowledged the Larsen utilized the literary stereotype of the "tragic mulatto" in which stories often depict characters of mixed-race coming to torturous and untimely deaths. (Reminds of the tragic gay and lesbian characters in books and films, in which they are miserable and then die a sad and lonely death).

Does this relate back to Sandy Stone who felt that passing precludes the ability to have authentic relationships?

During the Harlem Renaissance women writers were largely ignored until the 1970's, when there was renewed interest in discovering the works of such writers as Zora Neale Hurston. *Passing* had resurgence in the 1980's and 1990's, when sexuality and gender were studied in conjunction with race. *Quicksand* by Larsen is about a character who is a black woman in New York City. She was tempted by jazz music, sexuality, and parties. Meant to be seen as "primal" temptations. In the end, she gets married and has children, but is not happy.

Modernism Movement

Before modernism, was the Romantic period. And writers such as Whitman flourished. Themes had to do with idealism, spirituality. There were Romantic books in the African American discourse with writers such as Charles Chestnut, Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins (*Of One Blood*).

Since ancient times, war was not good, but was seen as a glorious, a noble cause. It reaffirmed notions of Greek/Roman masculinity. Then WWI happened. Technology for killing had advanced and now millions of people died. This changed people's perspectives and engendered war writers and poets with books such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and writers like Hemingway, which subverted Greco-roman tropes. Joyce, Eliot, Pound became prominent. Religion crumbled. After this time period is known as post-modernism.

As a mixed race woman, Larsen is not in a position to write like James Joyce. Part of her motivation to write *Passing* was to make it big. She even had a patron who supported her. She created a character that mirrors him.

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