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The Grass is Not Greener: Examining the Detriments of Passing in Johnson and Larsen

In James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the authors give insight into what it truly means to pass as a black person. In her book *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, Allyson Hobbs provides a general definition of what passing is: "to pass as white was to make an anxious decision to turn one's back on a black racial identity and to claim to belong to a group which one was not legally assigned. It was a risky business" (5). The benefits of passing outweighed the possibility of discovery, and the consequences associated with discovery, as racial passing persisted throughout the times of slavery and long after slavery had ended. Passing was seen as *the* way for a black person to leave behind the oppression they faced in every arena of life and move into the elevated and prosperous positions held by white people. However, this view of passing was in actuality a view that was extremely optimistic. In Larsen's and Johnson's novels on passing, we see that the grass was not greener on the other side. Larsen's *Passing* and Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* show that the black person, regardless of gender, never achieves the freedom and advancement that passing promises and they ultimately pay the cost of passing with their lives.

The permanently passing character in Larsen's novel, Clare, believes passing gives her freedom from the oppression of being black. Throughout the beginning of the novel, Clare's history is revealed, which sets up why she felt the need to escape the oppressiveness of being

black. As a child, she sat on a “ragged blue sofa” in a “shabby room” as her father, who we later find out is a janitor, curses and lunges at her for wasting money on fabric to make a dress for a school dance (Larsen 143-144). In this brief glimpse into Clare’s childhood, she is shown to have grown up in a poor lower-class background, a background that would have been impossible to escape from had it not been for her ability to pass. This inescapability is further shown after Clare’s father dies and she has to move in with her white aunts. Even though these women are Clare’s family, Clare would always be the black girl relegated to being the maid because “hard labour was good for [her]” (Larsen 158). In “‘Working Like a Colored Person’: Race, Service, And Identity in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” by Mary Wilson, Wilson explains that the society Clare lives in “. . . idealizes the release of the middle-class woman from domestic labor via the work of servants and simultaneously defines racial difference in a way that makes ‘service,’ often domestic service, a fundamental element of blackness” (984). This “fundamental element of blackness” confines black women to being servants, which is exactly what Clare is trying to escape from. Clare says “I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn’t bad-looking and that I could ‘pass’” (Larsen 159). The people that Clare grew up with always had more than she did because they were from a higher social class, and Clare believed that passing offered her a chance to attain a higher social standing and to gain what her friends had.

When the opportunity presented itself to Clare to pass and gain a life of freedom from the oppressive forces related to being black, she immediately took it; however, she only traded in one type of oppression for another: marriage and motherhood. Clare admits to Irene that

When the chance to get away came, that omission was of great value to me. When Jack, a schoolboy acquaintance of some people in the neighbourhood, turned up from South

America with untold gold, there was no one to tell him that I was coloured, and many to tell him about the severity and the religiousness of Aunt Grace and Aunt Edna. (Larsen 159-160)

The only option that Clare has to both prosper in society and to be free from being the black maid to white people was to surrender herself to a man. Jack offers Clare upward mobility and also freedom from the aunts who believed that her only use was to be a servant. By being married to Jack (also referred to as John) Clare trades in one enslaved position for another. In her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich explains how men are able to "command and exploit [female] labour to control their produce" by means of ". . . the institutions of marriage and motherhood as unpaid production" (290). Rich's article shows how marriage as an institution forces Clare to be like an unpaid servant for her husband. Just as she played the maid servant for her aunt's house, she continues to do so for her husband. Without her husband she would not be able to prosper in society, but, by being married, she is not able to be her own free woman. The novel makes it clear that Clare is not free when Irene asks her what she would do if her husband found out that she is actually black. Clare says, "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 please, when I please" (Larsen 234). Clare recognizes that her marriage holds her back from being able to freely associate with her own kind, and at one point she curses Jack saying "Damn Jack! He keeps me out of everything. Everything I want" (Larsen 200). Her marriage holds her back from being a free woman, independent from the will of others. Marriage becomes the way in which Clare is oppressed all over again.

While her marriage oppresses her and relegates her to the same position she had before passing, motherhood, as Rich notes in her article, also becomes a way that Clare is held back

from freedom. First, having children is always problematic for people who are passing because the child could be born dark, revealing that one of the parents is passing. Clare states that she "...nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again" (Larsen 168).

Margery's birth would have caused Clare to lose the position in society she has and it would have put her in danger of being seriously harmed by the white society she tricked. Though Margery turned out "all right" her very presence keeps Clare trapped in her role as Jack's wife, and therefore Jack's servant. Clare tells Irene that if it weren't for Margery she would leave Jack and live life in the way she wants to, saying that "[Margery's] all that holds [her] back" (Larsen 234). Her daughter is at once a source of anxiety and the reason why Clare cannot leave the oppressive forces of marriage. Marriage and motherhood, therefore, keeps Clare from actually obtaining the freedom that passing supposedly offers.

In Johnson's novel, *The Ex-Colored Man* (as he will be referred to here) uses passing as a way to move between the black and white worlds as freely as he pleases; however, it becomes apparent that *The Ex-Colored Man* is much like Clare in that passing does not offer him real freedom. Unlike Clare, the Ex-Colored Man comes from a well-to-do background. He also grows up believing he had all the privileges of a white child because his mother did not reveal to him his genealogy. Even after the shock of discovering he is black in elementary school, he is able to move through his primary school education with relative ease, becoming a piano playing prodigy. However, it is when he is faced with college that it becomes apparent that passing does not offer *The Ex-Colored Man* the opportunities he thought it would, in actuality, the very act of passing keeps him from prospering in society. Many of the big decisions that the Ex-Colored Man has to make in his life are decisions that make him come face to face with choosing

between being black or being white. His arrival in Atlanta brings him face to face with large numbers of colored people, and upon seeing “the unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people” he becomes almost repulsed at the sight of them (Johnson 25). Thus later, when he has to decide whether to tell the president of Atlanta University that his college tuition was stolen, he is unable to do so. He believes his story might “sound fishy” and that he would be placed “in the position of an imposter or beggar” (Johnson 29). The underlying meaning to what the Ex-Colored Man is alluding to is that he would come across as being no better than the unkempt black people he sees when he arrives in Atlanta. Also, if the Ex-Colored Man were to decide to attend school in Atlanta he would be publically declaring himself to be a black man. After seeing the lives of the black man in his short time in Atlanta, claiming to be black would be repulsive. When he decided to leave Atlanta University, he “slowly retraced [his] steps, and so changed the whole course of [his] life” (Johnson 29). Though the Ex-Colored Man cannot see it, leaving Atlanta University is the first way he limits himself from being able to be a prosperous man. Instead of being a college educated black man, he decides to go to Jacksonville and become a white man that works in a cigar factory. Here, the very act of passing forces the Ex-Colored Man to limit his prosperity, relegating him to the lower classes of society. Passing actually takes away the very thing that it promises the Ex-Colored Man: advancement in society.

Passing for the Ex-Colored Man not only forces him to limit what he can do in society — similar to how passing limits Clare from doing what she pleases in her society — but it lowers him even further in the social class structure to the point where he becomes enslaved by a white man. After spending three years at the factory in which he is careless with money, the Ex-Colored Man leaves Jacksonville upon the closing of the factory and heads to New York because

“all at once a desire like a fever seized [him] to see the North again” (Johnson 41). In New York, he uses his piano playing skills to learn ragtime music and earn his living by gambling and, eventually, playing at one of New York’s many nightclubs. Again, the Ex-Colored Man lowers himself socially as he goes from a working class man to a gambling man of the night. When he is working at the club playing ragtime music, he catches the attention of the White Man. The White Man comes to be The Ex-Colored Man’s patron, and the White Man gives him the best way to earn money and move up in society. In this way, the Ex-Colored Man becomes similar to Clare in how he has to rely on a white man to move up in society. Also like Clare, the dependence on a white man puts him in the position of a servant. The Ex-Colored Man’s relationship with the White Man begins to mimic the relationship between a master and slave as the White Man uses the Ex-Colored Man in whatever way he deems fit. The White Man would loan the Ex-Colored man to some of his friends effectively turning the Ex-Colored man into a commodity. He would also instruct him to play the piano until the Ex-Colored Man became “so oppressed with fatigue and sleepiness that it took almost superhuman effort to keep [his] fingers going” (Johnson 56). In Lisa Hinrichsen article “‘A Curious Study’: The *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Pedagogy, and the Post-Plantation Imagination,” she writes

The sovereignty [the Ex-Colored Man] has labored so hard to attain has resulted in self-institution and self-limitation, rather than self-creation and freedom. His aptitude for maintaining and conforming to— mastering, as it were— the dictates of whiteness ultimately becomes a form of carceral discipline that ensures loss. (184)

The Ex-Colored Man even becomes terrified by the White Man, who seems to be “some grim, mute, but relentless tyrant, possessing over me a supernatural power which he used to drive [The Ex-Colored Man] on mercilessly to exhaustion” (Johnson 56). The White Man is described like a

cruel slave master working his slaves until they break. As the quotation from Hinrichsen shows, the Ex-Colored Man limits himself by remaining the White Man's servant, forcing him to give up freedom for the hope of a white man's prosperity.

Clare and the Ex-Colored Man participate in the act of passing in hopes of advancing in society and gaining the benefits of being a white person; however, they not only fail to receive these promises of passing but they also give up their lives in order to pass. At the end of *Passing*, Clare's husband figures out that she is actually black and he crashes the gathering Irene and Clare are attending. This proves frightful for Irene who believes that Clare is having an affair with her husband and that Clare's freedom from John would allow Clare to steal Irene's husband. In the scene, Clare is standing near an open window, and as Irene watches the spectacle unfold she "[runs] across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and [lays] a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (Larsen 239). In the next instant, Clare goes hurtling out of the window to meet her brutal death as she hits the pavement. Irene's final thought before Clare falls out the window — either because Irene pushed her or a number of other reasons — reaffirms the fact that passing never allowed Clare to be free. This scene also shows that there is a cost to passing and in Clare's case that cost was paid at the expense of her life. She fell victim to what every passing person fears: being found out. The Ex-Colored Man also has to pay the price of passing with his life, though he pays it in a more figurative sense. Though he does not physically die at the end of the novel, he gives up the life of a prosperous black man and settles for the life of a mediocre white man. After witnessing the lynching of a black man in the south of the United States, he removes himself as far as he possibly can from the black race, which resigns him to being an "ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money" (Johnson 99). If he had

chosen to continue to pursue his passion of mixing ragtime with classical music — which is why he returns to the United States after gallivanting around Europe with the White Man— and therefore choosing to be a black man, he could have received fame and glory and *real* freedom. However, he is left with yellowing manuscripts that are “remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent,” and he realizes that he has “sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage” (Johnson 100). The very act of passing has limited the Ex-Colored Man from achieving greatness and it takes from him a life that could have been truly free and prosperous. Clare and the Ex-Colored man not only give up prosperity in society and freedom by passing, but they also give up their lives as they try to receive the false promises that passing offers.

Larsen’s *Passing* and Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* show that the institution of passing causes both males and females to suffer. Though passing supposedly offers freedom and advancement, Clare and the Ex-Colored Man are never free to do what they please in their respective societies. Clare’s marriage keeps her from being an independent woman and making relationships with colored people — something she desperately wants — and her daughter keeps her from escaping the oppressive forces of marriage. The Ex-Colored Man is held back by the very institution of passing. In choosing to be taken for a white man, he has to give up the freedom and prosperity of being *black*. As Clare and the Ex-Colored Man try to climb the wall to where the grass is greener, they find that there are just new problems they have to face. Through these two novels, passing becomes a comment on the human condition: there is no magical paradise that humans can escape into. People are going to find difficulties and obstacles no matter where they go or who they pretend to be.

Works Cited

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Grade: A

Commentary

- Solid thesis: passing is equally fatal for both genders
- Excellent use of quotations, especially from Mary Wilson, Adrienne Rich, and Lisa Hinrichsen
- Great point: Clare trades one type of oppression for another
- Very good development of the idea of the identity of the maid as what Clare wishes to escape
- Well established point that marriage and motherhood are sources of Clare's oppression

- Excellent point and well phrased: Ex rejects being an educated black man only to become an ordinary white man who works in a cigar factory. Passing doesn't actually elevate him, which is the point of passing
- Great argumentative development: Ex is actually enslaved to a white man
- Excellent point: both Clare and Ex are dependent on white men and are also relegated to servant status
- Superb interpretation of Irene's statement that Clare cannot be "free" and ultimately that Clare will never be free
- Query: Isn't this project of mixing ragtime with classical music also problematic? Isn't this selling out black culture? Doesn't this rest on the assumption that classical music is superior to black music?
- Great conclusion: both protagonists give up freedom and lose their lives
- Your conclusion is utterly convincing and totally successful
- Impressive phrasing throughout
- Writing: the only problems are some wayward commas (forgiven)