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Monica Latrice White
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This study investigates the phenomenon of "passing" for white and its effects on individuals, who "pass" or attempt to "pass." The effects of "passing" that the study examines are the loss of the historical identity and the constant trauma of the psyche. Furthermore, this study examines the importance of the spirit(soul) of the "passing" person in returning to the African American community.

The study is based on the premise that in order to gain the economic stability, education, and true freedom that are enjoyed by white society, persons have to "pass."

Therefore, African Americans who can cross the color line risk their lives and their sanity in hopes of capturing the American Dream. However, over time, these persons realize that the price of "passing" is too high, and thus, return to the African American community via the spirit. Thus, this
study concludes that although the person who "passes" relinquishes the history and suffers emotionally by way of the psyche, the spiritual connection plays an integral role of restoring him/her to the African American community.
A STUDY OF THE HISTORICAL, THE PSYCHOLOGICAL,
AND THE SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF "PASSING" IN
THE HOUSE BEHIND THE CEDARS AND PASSING

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS OF ENGLISH

BY
MONICA WHITE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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My old man died in a fine big house.
   My ma died in a shack.
   I wonder where I'm gonna die,
   Being neither white nor black?

Langston Hughes
   "Cross"
The phenomenon of "passing" has been a recurring theme in African American literature. This phenomenon can be characterized as being uniquely African-American and involves an individual who is "light," almost white in skin pigmentation, and who decides to secretly become a member of white America. Usually an individual decides to "pass" in order to obtain the riches, education, and success afforded those in white America. Furthermore, the individual believes that through passing he/she will finally gain acceptance in the eyes of society.

In fact, the phenomenon of "passing" and the psychological and emotional problems that transpire in the lives of individuals who do "pass," mainly mulattoes, have been examined by many authors, European American and African American. Indeed, Nancy Tischler, the author of Black Masks: Negro Characters in Modern Southern Fiction, writes,

The mulatto will persevere in Southern fiction for sometime to come. He is indispensable to a literature that reflects the area, its taboos and myths, its fears and lusts; its shame and its burdens. The mulatto is the only-too-obvious badge of white abuse of the Negro, of the hidden anguish of the system of slavery, of the
continuing hypocrisy in racial attitudes. (Tischler 101)

For example, the white writer Richard Hildreth's *The White Slave* appeared in 1836. The story portrays a mulatto who is proud of his drop of white blood. He decides to escape from his master who is also his father and vows to come back and lead his wife and son to freedom. He sets out for England believing that he can live a privileged life there. However, before he can reach that country the Revolutionary War begins and his ship is seized by the English. He joins the English crew and easily denounces his African American and American heritage and home because of the discrimination that he has lived through as a slave while in America.

Furthermore, the African American woman writer, Jessie Redmond Fauset, wrote novels treating the subject of "passing." Her novel *Plum Bun: A Novel Without A Moral* (1929) is a story about a young girl, Angela, who decides that she can only be content in life by "passing" for white. She successfully "passes" until her European fiancé discovers that she is indeed African American. Most importantly, Angela reclaims her African American heritage after a colleague is denied an academic award for her excellence because she is noticeably an African American.
In order to completely understand the phenomenon of "passing" it is necessary to know how "passing" is indeed possible. Persons who are the offspring of miscegenation or interracial relationships or marriages are primarily the individuals who decide to "pass." Edward B. Reuter, an esteemed, early nineteenth century historian, defines miscegenation as "whenever the members of divergent racial stocks have come into contact they have associated to produce a group of nondescript hybrid offspring" (Reuter 3). This means that when two persons of different races have intermarried, their children are mulattoes, "all those members of the Negro race with a visible admixture of white blood" (Reuter 11). Many historians such as Reuter and Franklin concur that this intermixture has been in existence since the first arrival of slaves in the Americas. The practice was advantageous to the slave masters for the more slaves they had, the richer they were since slaves were seen as property.

However, after being emancipated from slavery African Americans believed that they were free from the discrimination and racism that pervaded every aspect of their lives. They further believed that they would finally be accepted as equal and human not just mere chattel, but as
White 4

Bertram Karon in his work *The Negro Personality* documents, whether or not Negroes could have learned to interact as equals with whites, no real opportunity was ever given them to do so. Only a modicum of equality was allowed Negroes; the whites, from Emancipation on, kept placing block in the way of Negroes; he was not ready to deal with them on any basis of equality...The Emancipation brought only a partial change in statue. The white man had protected his own position by imposing restrictions on the Negro and the Negro then had to adjust to them. (Karon 10-11)

Thus, some mulattoes, realizing that white society would not accept them or their darker brothers and sisters as equals, decided to "pass" into white society to avoid blatant forms of discrimination such as the Black Codes, lynching, segregation, and unequal job opportunities. These mulattoes "passed" because they believed that being white permitted and ensured economic stability, education, and opportunities for happiness. Many believed that "the way to success for a Negro, to put it as plainly as possible, was to be as much a white as possible, to be something, in short, which he was not" (Arden 110).
The mulattoes who "passed," however, did not know that "passing" for white would take such a psychological toll on themselves. The first part of the dilemma the "passing" individual had to face was the decision to leave the familiar (family, friends, and community) behind and enter the unfamiliar world of white America. The other part of the dilemma was the decision to forgo dreams of success and happiness which are prescribed by white America, and remain loyal to the African American community which consistently endured racism/discrimination with little or no opportunity for upward mobility. The mulattoes who "pass" for white face historical, psychological, and spiritual problems while "passing." Both Chesnutt and Larsen examine the phenomenon of "passing" by looking at its historical and psychological effects, as well as the spiritual reemergence in the "passer."

To discuss properly the three aspects of the "passing" experience, an accurate and effective definition of these aspects is needed. For this purpose, the works of John Hope Franklin, William E.B. DuBois, Edward Reuter, Theo Lehmann, James Weldon Johnson, and Julius Waiguchu have been consulted to help develop such definitions. Therefore, based on the readings, the historical connection refers to
the aspect of the human being which is tied to the history of his or her people. For instance, for African Americans, the history would include accounts of the middle passage, the atrocities of slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation, the lynchings promoted by white hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, and other racially motivated crimes against the African American. Franklin in his work, *From Slavery to Freedom*, chronicles the life of the African American from slavery up to the Civil Rights Movement and documents the struggle of those who,

...went through the terrible ordeal of moving toward freedom. They suffered indignities and insults, legal disabilities and economic privations, violent physical and verbal calumniations. (Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* 241).

Moreover, due to the historical connection, African Americans identify with and are aware of the many accomplishments of the race. Thus, African Americans are connected to all the past and present abominations, and offenses, as well as the achievements that have occurred in the African American community since their arrival in the New World. In addition, the historical connection also
includes the relationship to immediate members of a family unit.

The act of "passing" takes a psychological toll on those who "pass" as it sets up conflict between the internal desires of the individual and the external attitudes and beliefs held by society. William E.B. DuBois discusses this conflict which balances the African American between two worlds--American and African American. He develops this double consciousness theme in his 1903 classic, The Souls of Black Folk, and states that "one ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body... (DuBois 215). Thus, DuBois believes that the African American, mulattoes included, has two desires-- one, to be acknowledged by America as a rightful citizen and, two, to embrace his heritage without being ostracized and discriminated against.

Edward Reuter in the book, Race Mixture, agrees with DuBois. Reuter states,

The mixed blood is thus an unadjusted person. His immediate group has no respected place in the society. In ideals and aspirations he is identified with the culturally dominant group; in
social role and cultural participation he is identified with the excluded group. (Reuter 216)

DuBois further implies that, "he[African American] wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (DuBois 215). The African American who "passes" believes that he can bypass his "twoness;" however, this usually is not possible and the "passer" endures historical disconnection and psychological trauma.

The third aspect of the "passing" experience is the spiritual which, among other things, may be reflected in the religion. Ironically, although many scholars, like Frederick Douglass, have documented that the religion taught to slaves by their masters was used to keep the slave in place, frightened, obedient, and at the master's mercy, the slaves "in contrast to the official teaching of their white masters and the Bible taught them[slaves] that every man had the dignity of a being created by God and that all men were equal before God" (Lehmann 128). Thus, "in the hands of the negroes themselves, the Bible became a dangerous weapon...the most powerful force in the negroes' fight for freedom" (Lehmann 127).

One weapon in the spiritual arsenal was the Negro
spiritual which not only reflected the spirituality but, also, the cultural retentions. Theo Lehmann in the article, "A Cry of Hope- The Negro Spirituals" documents,

At all times throughout human history, men who have lost their homeland have expressed their longing to return in song. It[song] led this oppressed people onwards in burning hope towards the "promised land" where all is peace. These negro slaves longed and hoped to find a homeland on earth and in heaven, to achieve freedom from the slavery imposed by men and by sin and to attain peace and justice here and now and in eternity.(Lehmann 125)

Furthermore, the author James Weldon Johnson also expounds on the spirituality of the "passer" in his work The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man. The narrator of the story who is a mullato describes the spirituality of the African American in terms of the "big meeting"(Johnson 489) which is a huge revival consisting of all the churches and denominations in an African American community. He states, "it is really a social as well as a religious function"(Johnson 489) because not only do African Americans gather to hear the great sermons of ministers but also to
interact with each other sharing in food and fashion. He observes,

On the opening Sunday the women are immaculate in starched stiff white dresses adorned with ribbons...Big meetings afford a fine opportunity to the younger people to meet each other dressed in their Sunday clothes, and much rustic courting, which is an enjoyable as any other kind, is indulged in. (Johnson 489-490)

Therefore, this social and religious aspect of African American life is what the mulatto who "passes" longs for. This, the social and religious interaction/communion, becomes the missing element in the life of the "passer" who attempts to erase his/her heritage. As Julius Waiguchu says further in his article, "Black Heritage of Genetics, Environment, and Continuity",

In spite of some five hundred years of cultural and physical genocide, the African peoples in the diaspora have trained the fundamental native cultural traits with which they were endowed by the creator and mother Africa. (Waiguchu 64-65)

Thus, as it has been observed, the spiritual connection is what preserves the African American who "passes." In spite
of "passing," the spiritual connection keeps the individual's sanity intact and may even guide him/her back to the African American community and the historical past.

The novels examined for this work are Charles Waddell Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* and Nella Imes Larsen's *Passing*. These novels are historical and literary landmarks that thoroughly examine the phenomenon of "passing." Accordingly, it is important to understand the historical periods from which these writers emerged as they were influenced by the politics of the eras in which they lived.

For instance, Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) precedes the renowned Harlem Renaissance and is categorized as a writer of the Reconstruction Era which follows the Civil War. During this time, because of the federal laws, the African American community shared in a few years of hope and racial freedom. However, this period was short lived and the literary works produced during the time of racial disruption reflect the conflicts of African Americans. According to Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon, editors of the anthology *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*, "the literature that the Black man produced from 1865 to 1915 was of a people systematically excluded from
the mainstream. It reflected the Black man's fears, his frustrations, his anxieties, his blighted hopes" (Barksdale and Kinnamon 316).

Chesnutt usually incorporated themes that examined "the problems and preoccupations of the near-white, such as strained family relations, intraracial prejudice, and passing..." (Barksdale and Kinnamon 324) into his fiction. These themes are prevalent in The House Behind the Cedars which portrays a family torn at the seams because of the blatant discrimination such as Jim Crow laws that surrounds every aspect of an African American's daily life. One character in order to succeed against adversity vows to "pass" for white and erases everything that represents being African American. Francis Keller, a critic of Chesnutt, suggests that because of his ancestral background, Chesnutt had a personal motive for writing The House Behind the Cedars.

Nella Marian Imes Larsen (1891?-1964), the author of Passing, is another writer who deals with the theme of "passing." She is associated with the Harlem Renaissance although her works really appeared at the end of this period. Ann Allen Shockley, the author of Afro-American Women Writers 1746-1933 documents that Larsen was the
daughter of a Danish mother and a Black Danish West Indian father (Shockley 432). Her father died when she was very young and her mother then married someone of her own race. Through this union Larsen gained a "white half-sister" (Shockley 433). Mary Helen Washington, the author of *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960* wrote that, "in the new all white family father, mother, and second daughter-- Larsen's blackness was an embarrassment" (Washington 161) to the total family. Thus, like Chesnutt, Larsen had personal reasons for writing about "passing."

The themes, therefore, that Larsen dealt with were those concerned with the African American middle class, "passing", and a new "tragic mulatto" (Shockley 407). In *Passing* Clare Kendry, one of the main characters, "passes" and her life is complicated further not only by racism but by sexism which makes "passing" even more difficult. In *Passing*, Larsen candidly explores the emotional trauma of Clare who is doubly discriminated against, and who is "unwilling to conform to a circumscribed existence in the black world" and "unable to move freely in the white world" (Washington 159) even though she "passes." Larsen also investigates what Clare will endure in order to gain
independence and/or economic stability, and an identity all her own.

Although Chesnutt and Larsen are associated with different time periods, they both explore the implications and effects of "passing" in terms of the historical context, psychological trauma, and spiritual redemption of the person who "passed." The first chapter will examine Chesnutt's main character, Rena, and her brother, John, in *The House Behind the Cedars*. The second chapter will deal with the examination of one of Larsen's main characters, Clare Kendry in *Passing*. 
CHAPTER I

CHESNUTT AND THE DILEMMA OF "PASSING"
In the novel *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt examines the characters John and Rena in relationship to the problem of "passing." He endeavors to create a world where mulattoes must handle the dilemma of "passing" in order to assimilate totally into white society. As SallyAnn Ferguson observes in her article, "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans",

[Chesnutt] illogically attempts to establish a color-blind, racially harmonious society through extreme color-consciousness. Thus, Chesnutt reveals an almost total disregard for the psychological needs and human aspirations of "genuine Negroes" living in a racist society...(Ferguson, "Charles" 116)

John is possibly the first character in American fiction who, "having been raised "black" decides on his own to pass for white and constructs a legal and moral justification for doing so"(Andrews 164). John arrives at this justification by reading the legal document about the mulatto which Judge Straight shows him. This document says,

The term mulatto,...is not invariably applicable to every admixture of African blood with the European, nor is one having all the features of a
White to be ranked with the degraded class designated by the laws of the State as persons of color, because of some remote taint of the Negro race. Juries would probably be justified in holding a person to be white in whom the admixture of African blood did not exceed one-eighth. And even where color or features are doubtful, it is a question for the jury to decide by reputation into society, and by their exercise of the privileges of the white man, as well as by admixture of blood. (Chesnutt 154)

After reading this document, John exclaims, "I am not black" (Chesnutt 155) and vows to "pass" because he believes that he is white since his skin color validates his desire and need to be white (Andrews 164). Thus, John is willing to shed his historical past. Ferguson states that, "John becomes the novel's standard for black success..." (Ferguson, "Rena" 76).

First, John leaves his history by physically displacing himself to Clarence, South Carolina, where the laws of ethnicity are more liberal. Second, he removes himself symbolically by changing his given name from John Walden to John Warwick which represents for him, the lineage of great
white men, his ancestors,

Only yesterday, it seemed to Warwick, he had sprawled upon the hearth, turning sweet potatoes before the fire, or roasting groundpeas in the ashes; or, more often, reading, by the light of a blazing pine-knot or lump of resin, some volume from the bookcase in the hall. From Bulwer's novel, he had read the story of Warwick the kingmaker, and upon leaving home had chosen it for his own. He was a new man, but he had the blood of an old race, and he would select for his own one of its worthy names. (Chesnutt 27)

This quote demonstrates how John removes himself from the African American community and shows that although John is an African American, he identifies not with such greats as Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner but automatically identifies himself physically and psychologically with the white race. This idea is conceded by Goodman, the author of "Evidence Concerning the Genesis of Interracial Attitudes," when she deals with the identity problems among children in the African American community. Thus, Goodman states,

It is possible that the relative inaccuracy of Negro identifications reflects not simple
ignorance of self, but unwillingness or psychological inability to identify with [black] because the child wants to look [white]. (Goodman 626)

Similarly, John does not want to be identified as African American because he has been taught that to be an African is the worst or lowest position in society. For him to accept his African American heritage, John has to reconcile his thoughts about discrimination, slavery, lynchings, and so on with his present life. However, if he convinces himself that he is white, he does not have to evaluate and acknowledge such horrible indignities and atrocities. He can attempt to live the American Dream that the members of white society seem to live. John thinks that there is no historical or psychological burden if he is, indeed, white. As a consequence, for John to assimilate into white society, he has to wipe the slate clean of all reminders of personal history and destroy the historical connection. This removal is essential for John because he cannot be both black and white.

Moreover, John erases his historical past by accepting his white wife's heritage and ancestry. Once he leaves home, he becomes a lawyer and sets out to achieve the
American Dream. Therefore, he moves into a white neighborhood to meet the most influential, wealthy, and secure white Americans he can find in order to come closer to his dream of being a self-sufficient, accepted, and respected American. John's removal from his past is symbolized by his new home,

Warwick's residence was...a fine old plantation house, built in colonial times...The furniture was old-fashioned and massive. The great brass andirons on the wide hearth stood like sentinels proclaiming and guarding the dignity of the family...The portraits of Warwick's wife's ancestors-high-featured, proud men and women, dressed in the fashions of a bygone age-looked down from tarnished gilt frames. (Chesnutt 58)

Thus, John's house further removes his need for racial retentions and allows him to reject his African American identity when he marries into a wealthy white family and inherits the plantation once his wife's father dies. He can now have a family lineage to share when whites inquire about his background in addition to validating his "absolute" right and destiny to be a European man and to be treated equally in society. This gives John the acceptance he
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thinks he needs to love himself as a human and not be "marked" for discrimination because of his African American heritage. Furthermore, his marriage and new found wealth herald John's arrival into white society where he absolutely believes he belongs. Through his wife he has obtained economic stability and happiness. Indeed, once John decides to "pass," he believes,

...he had certain rights, or ought to have them, by virtue of the law of nature, in defiance of the customs of mankind, he has promptly sought to enjoy them. This he had been able to do by simply concealing his antecedents and making the most of his opportunities, with no troublesome qualms of conscious whatever. (Chesnutt 72)

Thus, it is apparent that John, like some mulattoes, apparently did not fret over his secret nor did his subconscious mind cause him to agonize over his decision to "pass." According to William Andrews, "John Walden enters the white world unburdened by the ponderous psychological baggage which virtually all the mixed blood figures in the late 19th century American fiction consume their energies wrestling with" (Andrews 164). By this act of denying his ancestral roots, John severs his historical connection and
becomes a proud "functioning" member of the European race. "Walden[Warwick] has no qualms about passing for white to advantage himself socially and economically" (Andrews 148). He forgets home and his family and endeavors to succeed against the odds.

However, contrary to Andrews, though Warwick is able to ascend the ladder of success by white America's standards, he does suffer psychologically. This is expressed through his longing and his need for a relative to take care of his child. For instance, when talking to his mother, he says, Well, mother, happiness is a relative term, and depends, I imagine, upon how nearly we think we get what we think we want. I have had my chance and haven't thrown it away, and I suppose I ought to be happy. But, then, I have lost my wife...I'm troubled about my child...If I had some relation of my own that I could take into the house with me,...the child might be healthier and happier, and I should be much at ease about him. (Chesnutt 22,23)

Furthermore, his psychological state is evident when he thinks about the suffering of Rena,

The experience of his sister had stirred up a certain bitterness against white people- a feeling which he had put aside years ago, with his
dark blood, but which sprang anew into life when
the fact of his own origin was brought home to him
so forcibly through his sister's misfortune. His
sworn friend had thrown him over promptly, upon
the discovery of the hidden drop of dark blood.
How many others of his friends would do the same,
if they but knew of it? He had begun to feel a
little of the spiritual estrangement from his
associates that he had noticed in Rena during her
life at Clarence. (Chesnutt 164)

It is finally brought home to John that his rejection of his
history has had a serious effect on his psyche. This
"spiritual estrangement" that John suffers causes him to
wish to reattach himself to the African American community.
Warwick begins to have the same unsettling feelings as his
sister does of being unacceptable in the eyes of white
society. Thereby, through this realization of his unstable
position in white society he begins to think of his
"origins" (164) and comes home. John is saved through his
spiritual connection. John realizes after denying his
history and the American community that true happiness and
peace are not obtained through the pursuit of assimilation
and economic stability. In John's case, his true happiness
depends on having a relationship with or connection to his roots--the African American community via his sister.

Rena Walden, John's sister, another character in the novel who "passes" also experiences rejection of her history, psychological trauma, and is reclaimed through her spirituality. Unlike, John, Rena is a reluctant "passer" because John forces her into the life. Rena proves that the total removal from her historical background is impossible. For example, Rena is abruptly taken from the African American community by John and thrust into white society where he attempts to equip her with the necessities for "passing" such as proper manners, speech, and etiquette. However, John cannot remove the historical identity that is imbedded in Rena. In fact as noted in the novel,

> The brain-cells never lose the impressions of youth, and Rena's Patesville life was not far enough removed to have lost its distinctness of outline. Of the two, the present was more of a dream, the past was the more vivid reality. (Chesnutt 55)

Although Rena is a quadroon and has the "principles" of being a lady of white society, she still cannot take her mind and thoughts away from her historical connection and
her attention is fixed on home, in the house beyond the cedars. The "impressions of youth," particularly her memories of home, are still alive for Rena because she is connected and grounded in the African American community. Therefore, the community is more real to her than the European community into which she reluctantly "passes."

Rena never completely severs her historical past because she is unable to sever ties with home as against John's wishes and recommendations, she continues to communicate with her mother through letters. "By this simple means Rena had kept as closely in touch with her mother as Warwick had considered prudent;..."(Chesnutt 84). Ironically, this attempt to hold on to the historical past causes Rena to be psychologically tormented just as those "passers" who disregard the historical past. Her efforts to keep in contact with her mother demonstrate how Rena is historically and psychologically connected to the community.

Rena could not remove her mother from her mind and she is affected by the temporary loss of her historical connection as well as tormented by haunting dreams of her mother,

She could not for an instant dismiss her mother from her thoughts, which were filled to the
certain self-reproach. She had left her mother alone; if her mother were really ill, there was no one at home to tend her with loving care....and that she cried out with heart-rending pathos:-- "Rena, my darlin', why did you forsake yo'r pore old mother? Come back to me, honey; I'll die ef I don't see you soon". (Chesnutt 84-85)

Rena's psyche will not relinquish her historical connection. Unlike Warwick, Rena has been attached to her community longer since as soon as he was of age, he shed his history and easily and proudly became a member of the European race. Rena, on the other hand, spent her days caring for her mother, helping older African American women carry their groceries, pulling African American babies out of puddles, and befriending Frank Fowler, a dark skinned neighbor.

Thus, Rena realizes that a change in environment does not guarantee a psychological change in the "passer." F. James Davis states,

Being able to pass as white has constant potential for ambiguities, strains, and surprise...Those who pass have a severe dilemma before they decide to do so, since a person must give up all family ties and loyalties to the black community in order to
gain economic and other opportunities. Probably most of those who pass are white on the outside but black on the inside, and for them adjustment to life as whites must be extremely difficult. (Davis 143)

Rena, like many mulattoes, cannot contend with the forces that attempt to remove her from the African American community in order to "pass." She cannot give up her family ties, immediate or extended, as John seemingly succeeds in doing. She cannot psychologically remove herself from the African American community.

Rena suffers additional psychological stress when she becomes engaged to a European because she does not want to live a secret life as her brother does. She wants her husband to love, respect, and accept her as an African American; thus, against John's will Rena reveals that she is indeed an African American. Through this act, Rena shows that, for some, the price of "passing" is too high. Consequently, she reclaims her African American heritage by returning to the African American community. She throws away any opportunity of a "privileged" future as a member of white society and the wife of a young, wealthy aristocrat and relinquishes the belief that "passing" will bring
happiness, wealth, and equality.

SallyAnn Ferguson asserts, "left to her own devices, Rena shows strong emotional ties to her African American roots and a lack of total commitment to passing" (Ferguson, "Rena" 77). This "lack" is connected to Rena's spirit and it is her spiritual connection which brings her back to the African American community,

Her few months of boarding-school, her brief association with white people, had evidently been a mere veneer over the underlying Negro, and their effects had slipped away as soon as the intercourse had ceased. With the monkey-like imitativeness of the Negro she had copied the manners of white people while she lived among them, and had dropped them with equal facility when they ceased to serve a purpose. (Chesnutt 200)

Therefore, Rena wears a social mask while in white society; which, she is able to remove and become again, her own self. In other words, she could relinquish the façade that John had created for her. Critics such as Ferguson and Andrews agree that it is because Rena has not made the decision to "pass" on her own, that it is easier for Rena to walk away from that life. Certainly, Rena is aware of the status of
the African American community and those who dwell in it, but she is connected to the three aspects of herself, the historical, the psychological, and the spiritual. Thus, on returning to the African American community, Rena emphatically states, "God is against it; I'll stay with my own people" (Chesnutt 162). Consequently, "the final outcome of black advancement in a variety of political, economic, and educational fronts" (Andrews 142) is not be possible for Rena because she reconnects back to her roots. As Davis states,

In short, however little [a person] might be black genetically, he had been socialized to the black identity, so that his thoughts, feelings, and loyalties were those of a black. His appearance and actual genetic makeup were irrelevant, strange as that may sound to the rest of the world. (Davis 126)

Rena, validates this argument that no matter how far removed a "passer" is from her history, the heart of the African American is still alive. This spiritual essence breaks all barriers and exceeds all circumstances and status. Her innate strength and desire to hold onto her past are only reminders of the true self that outshine Warwick's
prominence and wealth. To remain loyal to the African American community as a mulatto takes more strength and love of self than to abandon the race and assimilate completely, historically and psychologically, into white society. Though Rena returns to the African American community, the struggle between two communities is too much to bear and Rena dies shortly after returning to the community.

Both characters, John and Rena, demonstrate the turmoil that surrounds the individual who attempts to "pass" into a society that is not his/her own. Therefore, both reclaim their heritage and realize that they are, indeed, regardless of color, African Americans historically, psychologically, and spiritually. In addition, John and Rena recognize that they may never reap the benefits of equality. Davis writes that, "...this path to equality is barred for blacks by the one-drop rule, since a person remains a black no matter how small the fraction of African ancestry" (Davis 168). However, the "one-drop rule" cannot sever the mulatto from the spiritual self. The following chapter will continue with the author Nella Larsen who takes a candid look at the "passer" and concedes that the spirit of a mulatto will not be denied and will lead the historically and psychologically, the dysfunctional "passer" home again to
the African American community.
CHAPTER II

LARSEN AND THE DILEMMA OF "PASSING"
Nella Larsen, like Chesnutt, examines the effects of "passing" on the individual. Thadious Davis, the author of Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled, suggests that Passing is a "structured study of the psychology of an African American woman committed to middle-class values and ideals" (Davis 308-309). The character Clare Kendry, demonstrates the difficulty a "passer" may have in attempting to harmonize the three aspects of herself, the historical, the psychological, and the spiritual while, at the same time, pursuing wealth and the American Dream.

In the novel, Clare, who is a mulatto, is portrayed as a person who is willing to give up her historical connection in order to gain economic stability and societal freedom. Davis documents, "In Clare, Larsen images a woman who has completely broken with her past, has refashioned herself, and feels no guilt about her decision and actions" (Davis 314-315). First, Clare is removed from her history by the sudden death of her father and her only stable connection to the African American community, "Bob Kendry had been brought home dead, killed in a silly saloon-fight" (Larsen 144). Therefore, Clare is historically displaced and she plants her roots into the white social stratum by moving in with
two white aunts who regard her, not necessarily with love, but as an experiment. These two women, in spite of being Christians, treat the young Clare like a servant, and in order to vindicate her own existence, she is driven to imitate white values and morals because she must deny her history, "her girlhood, her family, places with memories, folk customs, folk rhymes, her language, the entire long line of people who have gone before her" (Washington 164). Undoubtedly, Clare's situation caused her great psychological turmoil even at this late date when she discusses this period of her life with Irene. Her pain is evident even in her laughter, "She laughed and the ringing bells in her laugh had a hard metallic sound" (Larsen 159). Clare also uses her removal from the African American community to validate her "passing" although her resentment and anger are implicit, additionally, Clare is looking for her identity. Clare asserts,

They[aunts], made me what I am today. For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not charity or 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)
This statement demonstrates that she desires to "pass" because it is the only way in which she can gain wealth and erase the fact that African Americans are regarded as the children of the cursed biblical character, Ham, son of Noah. According to Biblical legend Ham looked upon his father's nakedness rather than covering him up. As a result, Noah, in his drunken state, cursed his son to be the servant of servant and this was to justify the enslavement of Africans to keep them in a subservient position. Therefore, Clare wants to ascend or remove herself from such a status. Her need to attain material wealth also illustrates Clare's adoption not only of a European American lifestyle but of a European American value system which insists that economic stability must be measured in riches and that forces Clare into "passing." In addition, Clare "passes" because she has been taught that such material wealth can only be gained in white society.

Thus, Clare further rejects her historic past and positions herself deeper into white society by marrying a white millionaire,

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, ... You can guess the rest... In the end I had no great difficulty in convincing him that it was useless to talk marriage to the aunts. So on the day that I was eighteen, we went off and were married... Nothing could have been easier. (Larsen 160)

Thus, Clare happily runs away from her home, leaving her two religious aunts, and achieves her goal of becoming economically stable and a person of status in her community. Clare uses her physical characteristics to marry "white."

"Thus she in this sense typifies the mulatto characters that pursue the comforts of the American Dream" (Joyce 70).

According to Mary Helen Washington, Clare "passes,"

... because it enables her to marry a man of means.

Because she, like most other black women of the 1920's if they achieved middle-class status, did so by virtue of a man's presence in her life, by virtue of his status. (Washington 163)

Although Clare gains material wealth, she, as other mulattoes, subjects herself to emotional and psychological abuse. For instance, Clare endures racial slurs such as being "affectionately" called "Nig" (Larsen 170) by her husband, John Bellew. Bellew also takes liberties when he
White 35

says,

When we were first married, she was as white—as—well as white as a lily. But I declare she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger...Oh, no, Nig...You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're not a nigger...No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be. (Larsen 171)

John also states, "I don't dislike them[African Americans], I hate them. The black scrimpy devils"(Larsen 172). These passages illustrate how Clare must, oftentimes, endure degrading comments about herself and the African American race. Therefore, no matter how far removed she assumes she is from the African American community her situation is precarious because at any time her husband can discover her ethnicity. In addition, this abuse coupled with the abuse of her aunts causes more psychological pain for Clare.

Furthermore, Clare endures psychological trauma while "passing" when she decides to become a mother. For example, her discussing her pregnancy with Gertrude and Irene, she declares that she will have no more children. She states,
I'm afraid. I 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. Never! The strain is simply too-too hellish...it might go way back, and turn out dark no matter what colour the father and mother are. (Larsen 168)

For Clare the ultimate joy of being a mother becomes "hellish" because she may be forced to recall or own up to her historical past which she has been strategically concealing in order to obtain wealth, happiness, and personhood. Gertrude supports Clare's feelings when she says, "it's awful the way it[the black gene] skips generations and then pops out" (Larsen 168). This statement confirms that the dominant culture has led African Americans to believe that because of their ethnicity, they are inferior and are, therefore, not worthy of the freedoms and privileges, including economic stability and happiness, that European Americans supposedly enjoy. Clare's desire is understandable, and as Frazier notes, "For they[African Americans] have been taught that money will bring them justice and equality in American life, and they propose to get money" (Frazier 85). Clare's concern for her daughter is
also understandable since she believes that if her child is African American in appearance, she will be doomed and will not have the opportunity to attain material wealth and obtain the same freedom as white children, as well as not being able to be her own person.

More specifically, if the child is African American in appearance, she will certainly affect the mother's future. African Americans contract what the writer David Littlejohn has labeled "mental paralysis," a state which condones the theory or belief that "white is right, yellow, mellow; black stand back" (Littlejohn 46). Thus, if the child is dark skinned, everything the mother has denied such as her history will be discovered, and this, in turn, will definitely change the economic status and lifestyle of both the mother and her child. Clare will be forced to return to the African American community and to re-examine her historical connection because, then, she will surely be an outcast in white society.

However, although Clare has removed herself physically and historically from the African American community, her childhood friend, Irene, in effect, serves as the spiritual bridge which reconnects Clare to the historical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of being an African
American. Vashti Lewis asserts that by "using their childhood friendship as an excuse, Clare imposes upon Irene's hospitality in order to mingle socially with Black people...(Lewis 41).

It is only through Irene that Clare revisits her history. According to Mary Youman in the article, "Nella Larsen's Passing: A Study in Irony", "clearly there is an insolvable conflict in asserting that Clare is renewed by the Black heritage while allowing her to see only this pallid middle-class society" (Youman 241). In other words, Youman asserts that Clare does not truly reunite totally with her historical past because she does not interact with the entire African American community, but only the middle class. But, after further consideration, Youman concedes, "since [Irene] is Clare's sponsor to return to Black life, she can only introduce her to her own class" (Youman 241). Regardless, Clare's friendship with Irene fills the spiritual void that Clare experiences while being estranged from her community.

Clare's reemergence into her historical past causes her to have serious doubts about "passing,"

It may be, "Rene dear, it may just be, that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely
happier one. I'm not sure just now. At least not as sure as I have been. (Larsen 178)

As a result, Clare demonstrates that once she is immersed in African American culture again, she is uncertain about her previous decision to "pass." "For Clare, passing cancels Harlem, sneaking into Harlem cancels passing, and she is invested in both" (Cooke 67). Clare, as many mulattoes who "pass," begins to question the price of her motives for "passing." Thadious Davis states, "after recognizing that she requires more than money and security for happiness, Clare returns to the African American community through her connection with Irene" (Davis 314). She states, "I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (Larsen 200). Thus, Clare's spirituality leads her to wonder if she has ultimately sold her soul, her historical identity, for economic power and freedom which are not prerequisites for happiness as she once thought. Vashti Lewis observes that "Clare finds material possessions are not a substitute for the warm feeling of community that she experiences with Black people" (Lewis 42).

According to Claudia Tate in the article, "Nella Larsen's Passing: A Problem of Interpretation", believes that, "Clare does not seem to be seeking out Blacks in order
to regain a sense of racial pride and solidarity. She is merely looking for excitement, and Irene's active social life provides her with precisely that" (Tate 142).

Nonetheless, the spiritual connection is still made, regardless of how Clare comes to reconnect herself with the African American community. Thus, Clare uses Irene as a means to return to the African American experience. Irene's presence in New York in the near vicinity of Harlem affords Clare the opportunity to rebaptize herself into the African American community and culture.

Consequently, since Clare cannot consciously return to white society after she has experienced the African American culture again, Clare, as Rena, dies. The deaths of these characters illustrate the difficulty and mental anguish of "passing." For instance, Clare's secret is discovered and John, Clare's husband yells, "so you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger" (Larsen 238). Clare's fall out of a window symbolizes transient nature of the pleasures of white society and how quickly they can be taken away. Davis notes,

A suggestive aspect of the text is that Clare apparently could not return to her race. Once Larsen develops the story line of a woman who
misses her race enough to risk the detection of her blackness, she has few options for resolving the tangled plot. Larsen cannot sufficiently motivate Clare to return, yet she cannot logically dismiss Clare's attraction to people of color and Harlem. (Davis 319)

This dramatic ending has many interpretations. For instance, Tate believes that "the most obvious interpretation is that Irene in a moment of temporary insanity pushed Clare out of the window" (Tate 145). Other critics believe that Clare's racist husband gets revenge by committing the violent crime of murder. However, Clare's death may be no accident but a deliberate suicide.

Jennifer Brody in the article, "Clare Kendry's "True" Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's Passing" seems to support this contention. She states,

Moments before her death, Clare is the epitome of composure. This last vision of Clare suggests that she went to her death knowingly and perhaps proudly as a Black woman. Thus Clare does not die a "sacrificial lamb on the altar of social and literary convention"... (Brody 1063)

Thus, it would seem that Clare commits suicide with a "faint
smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes" (Larsen 239) because she cannot imagine being away from her historical past, her psychological ties, and her spiritual connections any longer, "for Clare, a fall from her achieved position as upper-class "white" wife would be a desired fall into her past life as lower-class black Clare Kendry" (Brody 1061). Thus, she falls knowing that she is at peace with the three aspects of the self intact. Wall contends, "the tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition. Larsen's protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide" (Wall 98). Therefore, the character Clare confirms that "passing" does not always lead to a carefree life, economic power, or personal identity. Most importantly, her character illustrates that there is always a price to pay when "passing" and that price is oftentimes very high. Finally, Clare sees no alternative other than death because she has spent most of her life defining herself as white and living through her husband and she does not want to return to that horror of his psychological abuse. Michael Cooke suggests that "one goes out to a stifling emptiness if one "passes," but one returns to death if one returns" (Cooke 67). However, "the novel is clear that Blacks do have a
humane, spiritual birthright... Though Clare is the literal "passer" she returns to her birthright..." (Youman 241).

Thus, death ends the psychological trauma of a mulatto such as Clare who forfeits her history and the African American community to obtain stability and freedom, but who reclaims the community in the end.
This examination of the theme of "passing" shows that persons who reject their historical identity, may become psychologically traumatized, and can only "save" themselves by attempting to reconnect to the African American community. Chesnutt's characters, John and Rena, and Larsen's character, Clare, are representatives of the "twoness" or dual personality that African Americans, including mulattoes, must deal with during their lives. As Bertram Karon says being a mulatto that "passes" is a double consciousness because it seems as though, they live in a place for years or all their lives, but can never call this place home (Karon 1).

The theme of "passing" has been examined by many writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries. Thus, popularity of the subject shows that racism has not changed even after the Emancipation Proclamation. Therefore, people who "pass" realize that many of the old strategies used against African Americans are still in place. SallyAnn Ferguson in the article, "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans" notes, When the concept of democracy became entangled with the dictates of the postbellum democracy decreed by the Emancipation Proclamation, the ex-
slavemaster lived alongside his former hostage, while continuing to devise ways to suppress his new competitor for the economic, social, and political fruits of the land. (Ferguson 112)

Therefore, as it has been noted in this thesis, these "devised" plans appear as institutions such as Jim Crow laws, curfews, segregation, and lynching. Therefore, African Americans who possess the physical characteristics to "pass" feel that the only way to survive is to deny their historical identity and endure psychological trauma. By doing so, "passers" can elude the cruelty of white society and, in turn, enjoy the "fruits of the land".

Bertram Karon concurs when he documents that the Proclamation generates little change (Karon 11). As a result, some mulattoes believe that the only way to escape these atrocities that plague the community is to become white, "As aspirant for membership in the culturally advanced group, the mixed blood approves and upholds its ideals and standards" (Reuter 215). Accordingly, it may be maintained that John, Rena, and Clare choose to escape these burdens and successfully "pass" for educational gains, economic stability, equality, and the pursuit of happiness which are "standards" in white society. Similarly, these
characters believe as the author June Sochen states,

The mulatto lauded whiteness and deplored blackness because they lived in a white society that did so. They believed, based upon their experience, that the only way to advance was to become whiter; the thought that two races, one black and one white, could live side by side harmoniously was beyond their vision of possibilities. (Sochen 52)

These mulattoes, as demonstrated through John, Rena, and Clare set out to become accepted in society as white and to obtain "whatever" is defined or thought to be white. In other words, mulattoes decide to assimilate because they have been psychologically programmed to believe that white is always better and superior.

The psychologist Erik Erikson in the article, "The Concept of Identity" validates the mulattoes' belief in parts of his concept of negative identity which references African Americans:

1. Every person's psychosocial identity contains a hierarchy of positive and negative elements, the latter resulting from the fact that the growing human being, throughout his childhood, is
presented with evil prototypes as well as with ideal ones (by reward and punishment, by parental example, and by the community's typology as revealed in wit and gossip, in tale and story). ... Thus, the positive identity (far from being a state constellation of traits or roles) is always in conflict with that past which is to be lived down and by that potential future which is to be prevented.

2. The individual belonging to an oppressed and exploited minority, which is aware of the dominant cultural ideals but prevented from emulating them, is apt to fuse the negative images held up to him by the dominant majority with his own negative identity... There is ample evidence of "inferiority" feelings and of morbid self-hate in all minority groups; and, no doubt the righteously and fiendishly efficient way in which the Negro slave in America was forced into and kept in conditions preventing in most the incentive for independent ambition now continues to exert itself as a wide-spread and deep-seated inhibition to utilize equality... (Erikson 186)
Thus, as Erikson points out, African Americans/mulattoes are taught as children that they are different and are not equal to their white counterparts/siblings. This realization causes self hatred because in society's eyes the African American can never be equal to European American. Thus, internal conflict develops. In addition, the author John Mencke evaluates the "passer" and observes,

In the end passing represents the individual decision on the part of the person of mixed blood. When he sees whites in possession of privileges denied him because of his status as a Negro; when he is aware of the argument that blacks' physical differences from whites are proof of racial inferiority; and when he himself is free from these differences; it becomes an understandable response to wish to escape the burden of race inherent in being a Negro and to merge in the identity of the white group. (Mencke 164)

These mulattoes, of necessity, must forget or remove all memories, mannerisms, and values of their heritage. Moreover, they are required by their situation to take on a new identity and to imitate the members of the race they now reside with. However, the most difficult challenge that
these persons face is the concealment of their true ethnicity. There is the constant wondering whether they, will act in such a way as to bring their secret to light or whether they will haphazardly stumble upon someone from their historical past who will give away their secret and force them to reconnect to the African American community. For the "intense bigotry of whites make the move dangerous for the one who passes, and the exaltation of blackness marks passing as a betrayal" (McMillian 140).

However, the pursuit of equality for the "passer" soon becomes too much to handle. Thus, as John states, "If I had some relation of my own that I could take into the house with me..." (Chesnutt 23), Rena declares that, "I'll stay with my own people" (Chesnutt 162), and Clare asserts, "I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (Larsen 200). Regardless of the "passing" mulatto's endeavors to live as a white member of society, the soul(spirit) calls the individual back to the African American community.

The innate spirituality of the "passer" emerges when the psyche has been almost destroyed. The person realizes that the price of "passing" is too high and surrenders and returns to the community. Although, in some instances,
death follows when the "passer" returns to the historical past community, many mulattoes and character such as Angela in Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without A Moral* and Helga in Larsen's *Quicksand* do not die because of their temporary loss of history and psychological duress. These characters are able to reclaim their heritage and live enriched lives uplifting and supporting their own communities. Thus, Mencke incorporates,

> The prevailing racialism of the Harlem Renaissance led to the widely held conclusion that attempting to pass for white was a tragic mistake, both for the individual and for the race. (Mencke 161)

Therefore, the mulattoes who "pass" find spiritual relief and return to the community which will embrace them regardless of economic status. The "passer" returns to the community and discovers that it is only in the African American community that individuality may be embraced and the mask of assimilation removed. Finally, the disguise of "passing" can be replaced with the armour of truth.

Ironically, on the eve of the twenty first century, African Americans still hold the belief that to be white is advantageous and brings more opportunities in life. The African American community is still obsessed and overly
concerned with obtaining the American Dream which has been defined as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Interestingly enough, while researching the phenomenon of "passing" a serious question came to mind, if African Americans have to opportunity to "pass" into white society today, will they? Of an informal survey of twenty persons, only two refused to "pass" under any circumstances. They believe that too many in the African American community have risked their lives and gone to great lengths to secure equal opportunity. Of the remaining twenty eight, five persons say they will "pass" for white completely regardless of their heritage because they see great opportunity and freedom in white society. The largest number, twenty three, state that they will "pass" for white when the opportunity presented itself. These persons believe that they will have the best of both worlds; economic stability, freedom, opportunity, on one hand, and the freedom of expression such as Black English vernacular, and attending cultural functions, on the other. Thus, as small and as informal as this survey was, it suggests that as African Americans are nearing the turn of the century, hundreds of years away from slavery,

The color line has been a persistent factor in the
history of this country and especially in the African American's effort to become an integral part of American society. (Franklin, The Color Line 61)

In addition, this proves that the African American community is still psychologically burdened by a lack of racial identity. This also proves that although the community has produced successful individuals, there is still the psychological need to be accepted by the dominant group (white America). However, just as John, Rena, and Clare are able to reclaim the community, its values and traditions after being removed and traumatized by their experiences of "passing," African Americans and other mulattoes alike, must claim their heritage as well. This means the African American must continuously commune with the spiritual aspect of the self. Thus, both Chesnutt in The House Behind the Cedars and Larsen in Passing have demonstrated that it is only through the spiritual aspect that African Americans, especially mulattoes who "pass," can be in harmony with the historical past and cultivate a healthy psyche.
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