LIFE ON THE BOUNDARY: "PASSING" AND THE LIMITS OF SELF-DEFINITION

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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With the advent of various state laws that classified as black any individual with at least "one-drop" of African blood and the legalization of racial segregation enacted by the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision, the American post-Reconstruction era was a period in which the line separating races became more and more distinct. However, as the legal definitions and hierarchical categorizations of racial difference became more discrete, the physical basis of racial distinction became increasingly destabilized. Nella Larsen's *Passing* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* are novels from this period that depict the struggles of characters who suffer because of the social and legal distinction between "black" and "white." Because of the social imperative that these characters *be* black even though they have visibly white skin, the distinction between "black" and "white" actually becomes an arbitrary distinction between "white" and "not-white." The protagonists of both novels--Clare Kendry, Irene Redfield, and the unnamed Ex-Colored Man--all seek stable self-definitions that successfully integrate both their personal and social identities. However, because of their

inability to resolve the paradox created by their visible "whiteness" and legal

classification as "black," none of the protagonists are able to successfully negotiate the

threats posed by their racially and socioeconomically oppressive environment while

keeping their personal identities continuously intact. Unable to form stable, coherent

identities through the blending of mutually agreeable public and private "selves," Clare,

Irene, and the Ex-Colored Man remain in irresolvable positions with identities that are

permanently indeterminate.

"Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?"

--The Ex-Colored Man

INTRODUCTION

In the epigraph above, the Ex-Colored Man, a character in a fictional autobiography, seeks the comfort of self-definition, only the particular label of self-definition he seeks--that of a "nigger"--is anything but comfortable and represents a very complex dilemma. The product of a white father and biracial mother, the Ex-Colored Man is visibly "white," but, after a rude awakening, he realizes that, despite his coloring, society does not consider him so. He is cast into the "gray area"--when he looks in a mirror he sees a white man, but the outside world refuses to comply with that vision. Because of this, he spends his entire life trying to achieve self-definition through the negotiation of his existence on the racial boundary. He fails.

In spite of his failure, the journey was unavoidable. In his article "Who Are We? Africa and the Problem of Black American Identity," Tunde Adeleke argues that "the experience of slavery and discrimination impressed on blacks the necessity for self-definition (55). However, after the failure of Reconstruction, African American self-definitions were complicated by numerous legal statutes designed to forcibly impose a socially and economically inferior identity on anyone who had "one-drop" of African blood. The most significant of these statues was the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision that established the "separate but equal" doctrine and provided the legal foundation for Jim Crow segregation. Such laws seemed to create a clear binary (and hierarchical) separation between "black" and "white," leaving one to wonder how a biracial person embarks upon the necessary journey of establishing a stable and nurturing

identity, when such an individual's very existence violates the premise upon which

America's racial system is based. Given this question, I intend to explore three

representations of just such a journey in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and James Weldon

Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

The protagonists of both novels are in a unique social position, given that they are

all "black" Americans whose skin color is light enough for them to "pass" for "white."

Because of this, their journeys of self-definition are greatly affected by the combination

of several important factors, namely issues of ego identity development that apply to all

people, issues of racial identity development that apply to African Americans, and special

circumstances connected with the act of "passing." With regard to ego identity, scholars

and scientists have differing conceptions about what constitutes a person's "identity" and

how that "identity" is formed, but for the purposes of this essay I will focus on the

definition of "identity" as a person's "self-concept" that is formed through the mutually

dependent combination of that person's "personal" and "social identity." In other words,

"identity" is the result of the "triangulation" of a person's "private and public" selves

(Bosma 8). A person's "private" self arises from a sense of being uniquely distinct from

others, and forming a sense of personal identity involves differentiating oneself from

other people in a way that is continuously recognizable to oneself and others. A person's

sense of "social identity," however, is derived from his or her valued membership in a

socially defined group (Bosma 8-10).

How one goes about combining their private and public identities into a stable

self-concept is another widely debated issue, but the theory that sheds the most light upon

the novels in question is the "dynamic systems perspective." This theory defines identity

development as the process of ferreting out, molding, and firmly establishing certain self-

identifiers in response to external influences. These "identifiers" are characteristics that

should have both an individual and contextual meaning. In this way, identity development

is a "dynamic system" in which a person's personal identity is "threatened" by external

factors. That person then responds to these threats by interacting with these external

factors with the goal of establishing the mutually agreed upon "identifiers" that make up

his or her self-concept. In other words, achieving an identity involves "an equality, a

person-context fit" in which "both context and person play a role, 'negotiate' as it were,

which identifiers are relevant" (Bosma 6). The identity development "process," therefore,

is composed of repetitions of such "interactions" over time (Bosma 13). This identity

process is derailed, however, when there is a disparity between one's personal and social

identity. If a person is unable to negotiate the demands of his or her particular

environment, he or she will be unable to establish a stable and mutually agreeable

relationship between person and context, and the result is a self-concept that is

irrevocably unstable.

　　　　With regard to race, the "negotiation" between self and context necessarily

involves acknowledging and dealing with one's place within the established hierarchy.

For African Americans at the turn of the century, this meant establishing a sense of self in

the context of a nation that considered them naturally inferior and barely worthy of

second-class citizenship. And,   as Bailey W. Jackson, III points out, racial identity

transcendence is being able to define oneself "in terms that are independent of the

perceived strengths and/or weaknesses of White people and the dominant White

culture" (23).

As for the novels in question, their fictional context is a racially charged

environment that refuses to see the protagonists in ways they want and need to see

themselves. Racist laws and customs forcibly impose a negative social identity on the

protagonists and all other African Americans. Therefore, the protagonists are left with the

daunting task of trying to create a securely integrated self-concept using personal and

social identities that are fundamentally incompatible.

Along with straightforward ego- and racially-based identity development

obstacles, the issue of "passing" further complicates the self-definition process for the

novels' protagonists. The fact that the characters are visibly "white" but socially

identified as "black" indicates a disjunction--the supposedly clear distinction between

"black" and white" is actually an arbitrary distinction between "white" and "not-white."

The concept of racial difference based on visible physical characteristics is exposed as a

fiction, leaving the potential for boundary crossing that threatens the legally established

system of hierarchical racial categorization. In other words, the idea and act of "passing"

calls into question the legitimacy of identity categories and "forces reconsideration of the

cultural logic that the physical body is the site of identic intelligibility" (Ginsberg 4).

Therefore, "passing" represents a crisis of categorization that threatens the foundation of

white cultural and social dominance (Ginsberg 4-8).

However, besides endangering the social categorization necessary to maintain

hegemonic power, "passing" also jeopardizes the passer's ability to categorize him or

herself. Having undermined the dominant socially-defined basis of identification, "passing" doesn't leave the passer with any other options for creating a social identity. Being labeled merely as "not-white" leaves the passer in the position of having to negotiate a sense of self from within an arbitrary and impossibly unclear racial category.

Larsen's and Johnson's novels tell the stories of three individuals, Clare Kendry, Irene Redfield, and the unnamed Ex-Colored Man, who find themselves in the immensely complex position of trying to figure out who they are in a world where they exist on a racial boundary, caught between the physical suggestion of "whiteness" and the social imperative to be "black." The three of them all set out to find ways to affirm themselves in a discriminatory environment, and all of their journeys are beset by the challenges associated with developing and nurturing an ego that is threatened by their racial liminality and subordinate social status. The severity of this "triple-threat" is evidenced by the trajectories that their identity development processes take.

An examination of the nature of their identity development processes, including the progression of their self-concept, their relationships with others, and the social influences and mental processes that affect the way they see themselves and others, demonstrates that their attempts to carve out a comfortable subjectivity are ultimately futile. Their journeys are overwhelmed by the personal and racial challenges of identity development and all three protagonists' attempts at self-definition inevitably fail. Despite their attempts to alleviate this failure through "passing," their identities remain permanently indeterminate.

CHAPTER I

Nella Larsen's *Passing*, published in 1929, tells the story of two black women who are light-skinned enough to pass for white and who choose to do so in varying degrees. Clare Kendry abandons her "blackness" altogether and vanishes across the color line, while Irene Redfield chooses to base her identity around her "blackness," only passing for occasional comfort. These women are childhood friends whose sudden reunion later in life puts their life choices in the spotlight. Clare is faced with the possibility that her racial abandonment was a mistake. Irene must decide whether the life she's chosen for herself is as sustaining as she once believed it to be. However, both women find it difficult to deal with various threats to their personal identity that arise because of their liminal racial status; and, therefore, also find it difficult to achieve a cohesive self-definition.

As a result of their interactions, both women come to realize certain things about themselves, particularly the motives that drive their identity quests. However, as their self-realizations are minimal at best and their actual identity development virtually nonexistent, and in some ways regressive, both Clare Kendry's and Irene Redfield's identities can be said to stagnate throughout the novel. Their conceptions of themselves and each other are not significantly benefited by their sudden reunion, and given the tragic ending of the novel, it's easy to argue that they in fact hamper each other's ability to achieve or maintain a comfortable subjectivity. Instead of striving for any type of meaningful self-revelation about their liminal status as not-quite-black women, both

Clare and Irene inhibit their identity development processes with preoccupations that they engage in as means of avoiding the psychological pain of their social displacement. Both women face threats from their external environment that effectively diminish their chances of forming a positive self-concept, namely their socioeconomic and racial inferiority and their social vulnerability in relation to the dominant white society. Nevertheless, instead of positively working through these threats, they both retreat from them behind their comfortably crafted identity performances.

Often considered the central focus of the novel, Clare Kendry is presented as a woman who purposefully abandons her identity as a black woman to permanently cross the color line and live her life as the white wife of a wealthy, racist international banking agent. Clare's motives for passing seem entirely based on her relentless desire for social status and material wealth, and on the surface, her sudden desire to resume her former identity through clandestine forays into the world of Harlem's black elite seems based on her longing to "see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (71). However, the ultimate incompatibility of these desires culminate in Clare's racial "outing" and her mysterious death. Because of these circumstances Clare's character initially seems to be cast in the mold of the traditional "tragic mulatta" who, ambivalent about her biracial identity, decides to pass for white until the revelation of her "true" identity brings about a tragic end to her story.

Despite these ostensible similarities, a closer analysis reveals that Clare is anything but the passive victim implied by traditional conceptions of the passing female. Rather than being overwhelmed by it, Clare embraces her ambiguity by refusing to

adhere to any one subject position, and she exploits her indeterminacy in order to indulge her intense desires for wealth and excitement. Most of Clare's actions in the novel are largely fueled by a selfish preoccupation with excitement. Rather than experiencing psychological distress at trying to resolve her conflicting identities, Clare uses her liminality to feed her need for stimulation by treating her existence on the boundary between races as a type of game. Frank Hering makes a similar argument, claiming that, "refusing to renounce pleasurable identifications that unexpectedly overturn her identity, Clare instead recognizes contradictory identifications and pursues new identity positions that give her pleasure, even in the face of dangers" (47). In this manner she is able to effectively sidestep the issue of her racial ambiguity in a way that precludes any need to definitively identify herself.

Besides fueling her search for excitement, Clare's ambiguous identity is also reflected in the almost total lack of narrative detail about her inner consciousness, and in her complex relationship with other characters in the novel, especially Irene. One can argue that because Clare is unable to truly claim either race, she forsakes them both and instead takes pleasure in deliberately confounding other people's (particularly Irene's) attempts to ascertain her motives or place her within a firm racial category. This insistence on remaining enigmatic ensures that Clare constantly exists as an in-between figure who is unwilling (and therefore unable) to successfully negotiate the external challenges required for the development of a positive self-concept. Her unwillingness to resolve the complexities surrounding her unique racial position ensures that she doesn't engage in any significant identity development throughout the novel.

Clare is enigmatic because of her ability to manipulate her uncertain racial position, and her identity throughout the novel is characterized by a selfish indulgence that results from this ability. Both of these behaviors are ingrained in her from childhood--a childhood that is primarily characterized by a sense of lack, both emotional and material. Growing up Clare's sense of self was assaulted by several elements of her social environment, particularly her lesser racial, social and economic status in comparison to others. As a girl, she suffered emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her father and two white, racist aunts. After her father's death she is sent to live with her aunts who treat her like a maid and denigrate her black blood. Even her black friends are not a source of emotional support since, as Irene points out, "Clare had never been exactly one of the group" (20). Clare's sense of self is also damaged by her lack of material wealth in comparison with her middle-class friends.

Her difficult upbringing fosters in Clare a deep emotional insecurity that ultimately motivates her decision to pass permanently. Referring to her material lack, Clare tells Irene: "when I used to go over to the south side, I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others" (26). Her emotional insecurity is demonstrated by an encounter she has with a childhood friend while passing for white in a department store: "from the way she looked through me, even I was uncertain whether I was actually there in the flesh or not. I remember it clearly, too clearly. It was that very thing which, in a way, finally decided me not to go out and see you one last time before I went away to stay. [...] I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a

problem" (21, 26). Hungry for a sense of subjectivity and material wealth, Clare crosses the color line. However, she cannot erase the fact of her racial "twoness" and instead settles herself in the "gray" area.

Unable to resolve her paradoxical position, Clare takes comfort in her identic ambiguity. From the very beginning of the novel, Clare Kendry is presented as a figure that thwarts Irene's every attempt to firmly grasp the nature of her character or her motives for behaving so erratically. The novel opens with Irene describing Clare as simultaneously "furtive" and "flaunting" and insensitive to the feelings of others (9). Clare is determined, selfish, and has "no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire," but she also has "a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics" (10). For Irene, every aspect of Clare's being from her choice of clothing to her manner of writing letters seems to have an air of performance behind it. Irene also describes her as "catlike": "sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive" (10). Since the novel is told entirely from Irene's point of view it is difficult to assess Clare's true motives, especially given the woman's talent for modulating her responses on a continuum between emotional outbursts and stoical reserve.

After receiving a second letter from Clare expressing her wish to see Irene again after their initial meeting in Chicago, Irene claims that the letter "roused again that old suspicion that Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps--that is, not too consciously-- but, none the less, acting" (52). Despite Irene's ambivalence about whether Clare's "acting" is totally conscious, Andrew Radford argues that Clare actually "manufactures

herself through premeditated and rehearsed artifice so as not to be trammelled [sic] by any one signification" (34). Lori Harrison-Kahan echoes his argument by claiming that Clare resists stable signification by "constructing" her "ambiguity through performances of identity" (111). In this respect, Irene has such difficulty "placing" Clare because Clare herself refuses to be placed. Rather than strive to fit any one identity, Clare behaves as a type of "chameleon," adapting her "self" to fit various social situations in a way that satisfies her particular inclinations--she essentially sacrifices a stable and continuous "personal identity."

Existing as a racial and social "chameleon" does provide Clare with the opportunity to subvert typical expectations and manipulate people and social situations to her advantage. The primary goal of her manipulation of others in the novel is her own enjoyment. Throughout the story Clare derives enjoyment from confounding people's expectations of her, from injecting herself into Irene's black social circle, and from exploiting her sexuality.

From their first meeting on the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago, Irene develops a set of expectations for Clare's attitude and behavior as a "passer." From Irene's reactions to Clare's behavior, one can infer that she expected Clare to be hyper-cautious in her dealings with others to avoid discovery. However, rather than avoid risks, Clare seems to take almost every opportunity to indulge in risk-taking behavior. The first instance of which is Clare's inviting Irene to dinner at her home with her husband Jack, who she knows is a virulent racist. Clare seems to have a remarkable ability to intuit Irene's discomfort with the idea of passing, and she takes pleasure in inciting and

observing that discomfort. Clare's pleasure at Irene's uneasiness is demonstrated when, after inviting Irene to dinner, "she gave Irene a curious little sidelong glance and a sly, ironical smile peeped out on her full red lips, as if she had been in the secret of the other's thoughts and was mocking her" (23). Then later when Irene suggests that she come to the Idlewild resort, Clare immediately senses Irene's regret at the sudden invitation: "'I do thank you for asking me. Don't think I've entirely forgotten just what it would mean for you if I went. That is, if you still care about such things.' All indication of tears had gone from her eyes and voice, and Irene Redfield, searching her face, had an offended feeling that behind what was now only an ivory mask lurked a scornful amusement" (24). In this instance Clare recognizes that Irene is being insincere and uses that opportunity to mock her as well. Clare seems fully aware of Irene's distaste for her lifestyle, but rather than hide it, Clare flaunts her ability to take risks and treats her "balancing act" between her own white and Irene's black world as a challenge to Irene's presumptions--a challenge that greatly amuses her.

Along with her "cat-and-mouse" game with Irene, Clare's insistence on reinserting herself into the lives of black people is another important aspect of her pleasure-seeking. In more traditional passing stories the biracial figure suffers anguish because of her decision to sever ties with black relatives and acquaintances, and because of sincere longing she tries at some point to reestablish a connection with members of her "true" race. However, Larsen presents Clare's desire to "rejoin" the black race as nothing more than a means to assuage her apparent dissatisfaction with her current life. Clare herself tells Irene: "'You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the

bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of. ...It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases'" (11). In this statement the words that Clare uses to define her two "worlds" are important; she uses the adjective "pale" to refer to her white life while she uses the word "bright" to describe the impressions she has of the black life she has left behind. The contrast between "pale" and "bright" suggest that Clare is merely bored with her life as it is and is seeking the company of blacks as a way to liven it up rather than out some sort of deep abiding racial "connection." Then when she tells Irene that she felt compelled to see her again, she says that it's because she felt "lonely," "not close to a single soul" with no one "to really talk to" (67). Like these, there is no tint of racial longing in any of Clare's other explanations for suddenly desiring the company of blacks. Therefore, as Cheryl Wall suggests, Clare's "trips to Harlem involve more pleasure-seeking than homecoming" (105).

Clare uses her ability to self-identify as black as a tool in the same way she uses her beauty and sexuality. When Clare is first introduced, even before she is identified, she is described as flashing her "charming" smile that was "too provocative for a waiter" (15). It is also implied that Clare is having an extramarital affair, given the fact that her husband, Jack, is often away on business and the man that Irene sees her with at the Drayton is not her husband. The exchange between Clare and this man on the Drayton rooftop is also telling: "'See you later, then,' he declared, looking down at the woman. There was pleasure in his tones and a smile on his face" (14). Even Irene herself cannot help but notice Clare's beauty at several points in the novel. Irene also realizes Clare's skill at using her beauty to her advantage when she tells her husband Brian: "'[Clare's]

intelligent enough in a purely feminine way. Eighteenth-century France would have been a marvellous [sic] setting for her, or the old South if she hadn't made the mistake of being born a Negro'" (88). However, Irene's knowledge of Clare's sexual cunning is not enough protection against it, as it is assumed, by Irene at least, that Clare also has an affair with Irene's husband.

The precarious nature of Clare's existence on a racial boundary makes it necessary for her to seek a stable identity in some form or fashion. Paradoxically, Clare's "stability" comes from her commitment to maintaining an "unstable" identity--she *is* who she *needs to be* at any given social moment. The idea that there is a "radical instability, even nonexistence of a basic unitary self distinct from social personae" is a belief that Clare comfortably exploits (Radford 36). Hering concurs that "Clare's process of taking up, leaving, and returning to various positions [...] represents a way to live with the impermanence of identity" (46). Clare's identity as a perpetual "performer" represents one response to the social challenges of being biracial, but given the tragic end to her life, it's hard to argue that Clare's response is an effective one. Also, Clare's inability to craft a sense of self apart from her social context suggests that her identity is permanently unstable according to the definition of identity previously established. However, in the context of *Passing*, the main reason why Clare's identity choice is not effective, is that it comes into direct conflict with the identity Irene has constructed.

CHAPTER II

The other protagonist of Larsen's novel, Irene Redfield, is in the same racial

position as Clare Kendry, yet her response to that position is vastly different. As

previously mentioned, Clare's ambiguous identity manifests itself in her preoccupation

with risky excitement. Irene, on the other hand, is positioned as Clare's antithesis, and her

identity is based on maintaining a sense of middle-class safety and respectability.

Whereas Clare embraces and makes light of her racial indeterminacy, Irene seeks comfort

through maintaining an apparently stable racial subjectivity. Radford poses the same

argument when claiming that "Clare operates in a self-seeking, risk-filled existence"

whereas "Irene demands security in contained, self-sacrificing race and gender

roles" (35). Unlike Clare, Irene defines herself according to a singular, stable

performance--that of the middle-class "race woman." However, Clare's sudden

reappearance represents a significant threat to this carefully crafted subjectivity.

Reflecting on Clare's unstable identity eventually forces Irene to acknowledge the

inherent instability of her own identity performance. As Nell Sullivan argues, "desire is a

symptom of lack, so Irene's desire for security throughout *Passing* reveals the instability

of the *I*" (377). In other words, Irene's desire for a stable subjectivity actually proves how

unstable her sense of self really is, and through her relationship with Clare, Irene herself

comes to realize this. However, despite her realizations, Irene consciously chooses to

ignore the insecurity underpinning her obsession with stability and to continue

performing as she always has. Clare's influence fosters a sense of doubt and confusion in

Irene's mind, but Irene chooses to hide her crumbling subjectivity behind a veneer of

permanence. Like Clare, Irene is unable to effectively deal with the social threats that emphasize her racial and socioeconomic vulnerability. Also Like Clare, Irene's development as an individual stagnates as a result of her irresolvable racial position.

Irene, too, exists on a boundary between races (even though it is never stated clearly whether Irene is in fact biracial, she is light enough to pass for white), and similar to Clare, Irene seeks the firm sense of self denied by her racial "twoness." But whereas Clare seeks stability in instability, Irene chooses a more conventional path and constructs for herself a single identity as a "race woman." Her subjectivity is seemingly fixed, but throughout the novel it is gradually revealed as a performance that hides Irene's own precarious personal identity. However, in order for Irene's performance to succeed she must reject Clare's risk-taking, maintain her respectable social position, and strive for a sense of permanence.

With regard to Clare, Irene openly resents the woman's willful disregard for the dangerous position she has placed both of them in by insisting on returning to life she had been so willing to leave behind. Irene cannot understand why Clare would risk exposure by trying to embody her identities as both a white and black woman at the same time. Despite Irene's relative safety from racism within the confines of her black elite social circle, clearly she still harbors an intense fear of being the target of racist discrimination. The first indication of her fear occurs at the Drayton Hotel rooftop cafe when Irene begins to suspect that Clare, then unknown to her, has recognized her as a black woman passing for white. Even though she tries to suppress it, Irene still feels "a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar" (16). She also claims that she "felt, in turn,

anger, scorn, and fear slide over her. It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her" (16). Her reactions suggest that, her outward confidence notwithstanding, she is plagued by racism and its potential effects.

Irene also experiences intense fear when she, again passing for white, has tea with Clare and her racist husband, whose diatribe on blacks as "scrimy devils" sends Irene into a near-uncontrollable bout of nervous laughter. Her experience with Bellew reveals the extent of her latent racial insecurity, in that, she "retain[s] that dim sense of fear, of panic" a full two years after the incident (51). For Irene, the idea that Clare would risk having her racial identity found out by a man such as her husband is totally unconceivable. Irene cannot handle the idea of being racially vulnerable to white society and instead puts her energies into avoiding racial confrontations.

Irene's intense desire for safety also manifests itself as a need for socioeconomic security. In this instance she relies on her position as the wife of a prominent doctor and her and her husband's position among the Harlem elite. One of the implicit requirements of this position is that she acknowledge and fulfill her commitment to "uplifting" the race. In this capacity Irene works diligently arranging an array of charity and social events designed to help and empower other black people. However, in spite of this ostensible selflessness, Irene derives all of her social status and respectability from her position as a "race woman," and the real root of Irene's charitable behavior is the fact that

her social position is contingent upon it. Therefore, one can argue that like Clare, Irene too is "performing" and that her racial-uplift-based security is actually a fiction.

Irene's race loyalty is complexly bound up with her personal need for stability which severely undermines any potentially altruistic motives. Her self-identification as a "race woman" notwithstanding, Irene is angered by the idea that "she was bound to [Clare] by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever" (52). Even though her anger may seem justified on the surface, it's plausible to argue that Irene actually *needs* Clare to be black, because if Clare is not black then neither is she and her self-ascribed identity as a "race woman" would dissolve. Irene even goes so far as to claim that Clare doesn't care for the race and only "belongs" to it, but, given the fact that Irene's own sense of self is based on her membership in the race-conscious black bourgeoisie, one can argue that Irene herself only cares for the race insofar as it provides her with a stable social identity.

Another important element of Irene's middle-class image is its consistency. Irene has staked every aspect of who she is on her racial and socioeconomic position, and the continuance of her subjectivity is tied to the continuance of that position. Without her elite social circle, her socially prominent husband, and her bourgeoisie lifestyle Irene has nothing to base her sense of self on. Because of this, her obsession with permanence is another significant element of Irene's attempt to craft a fulfilling self-concept. Her desire for constancy is demonstrated in her confidence in her ability to definitively "know" people, especially her husband. Reflecting on her husband's mysterious attitude she claims that:

A feeling of uneasiness stole upon her at the inconceivable suspicion that she

might have been wrong in her estimate of her husband's character. [...]

Impossible! She couldn't have been wrong. Everything proved that she had been

right. More than right [...]. And all, she assured herself, because she understood

him so well, because she had, actually, a special talent for understanding him. It

was, as she saw it, the one thing that had been the basis of the success which she

had made of a marriage that had threatened to fail. She knew him as well as he

knew himself, or better. (58)

For Irene, being able to understand (and thereby manipulate) other people's behavior is

an important tool for ensuring the continuity of her "ordered" existence.

The main challenges to this existence that come up in the novel are her friendship

with Clare and her husband, Brian's latent desire to avoid the racially discriminatory

atmosphere in the United States by moving their family to Brazil. Clare's unstable and

unpredictable behavior are symbolically at odds with the way Irene lives her life and

Brian's desire to escape the racism of the United States would totally remove her from

the position she prizes. These challenges are a constant source of stress for Irene,

evidenced by her declaration: "Was she never to be free of it, that fear which couched,

always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of

permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired

so ardently to have remain as it was?" (57). Irene is so concerned with maintaining her

life as it is that she tries to thwart anyone's attempt to damage or challenge the picture of

hers and her family's life that she has envisioned. Irene expends much of her time and

energy trying to craft a personal identity that seems like a mutually agreeable fit with the demands of her particular social context, but the elements of the personal identity she creates are merely ephemeral bandages covering the wounds caused by her feelings of racial and socioeconomic insecurity.

Given Clare's insistence on remaining inscrutable and Irene's insistence on maintaining a lifestyle of racial and domestic security, it seems that neither of them undergo any significant development over the course of their story. However, despite their constancy, Irene does engage in a small measure of identity development. Despite her conscious choice to remain as she always has been, Irene does gain greater (though not full) awareness of herself as a result of her interactions with Clare. Larsen carefully constructs Clare's character as a type of "double" or "mirror" for Irene, and because of this Irene is able to gain a glimpse of her own "reflection" in her dealings with Clare. Clare is positioned as Irene's antithesis and her entirely "alien" racial position and state of mind serve to highlight those aspects of Irene's life that she has sublimated, but despite the insight from seeing herself in the Other, Irene's deeply entrenched racial insecurity will not allow her to reap the full benefits of her brief enlightenment. Being witness to Clare's ambiguous identity performance allows Irene to momentarily step outside her constricting racial and gender roles in a seeming rejection of the foundational elements of her identity established up to that point. Through Clare, Irene is able to cast off the mask of her own performance and experience sensations that had been formerly absent from her existence. This brief respite notwithstanding, Irene is ultimately unable to permanently doff the social and racial markers through which she self-identifies.

Irene's vicarious enjoyment of Clare's "floating" subjectivity conflicts with the "static" identity she has established for herself, and Irene's inability to resolve the two positions fractures her sense of self. Most of Irene's time in the novel is spent alternating between brief indulgences in the allure of Clare's lifestyle and longer reactionary periods where she more fiercely asserts herself in her traditional identity roles. However, it is when Clare's "dangerous" behavior threatens the foundation of Irene's selfhood--her marriage to Brian--that Irene makes the decisive step to rid herself of Clare's poisonous influence, a step that permanently ends her identity development and their story.

Throughout the novel Irene is both instinctually drawn to and repulsed by Clare. She is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by the elements of Clare's personality that are opposites of her own. Irene is repulsed by Clare's permanent passing and the seemingly careless way she engages in it. Irene is unconsciously resentful of what, to her, amounts to an abandonment of the race she works to "uplift." Despite her own occasional passing, Irene's instinctual race-loyalty makes it difficult to understand Clare's actions. She is able to understand Clare's obviously material motives for passing, but she cannot understand Clare's permanent disappearance across the color line. Irene's sense of racial loyalty is so ingrained that she is unable to consciously identify it as the underlying reason for her disapproval of Clare's lifestyle. When Clare is explaining to her that the material advantage gained by passing is worth the risk of exposure, Irene claims that "her reason partly agreed, her instinct wholly rebelled. And she could not say why" (28). The act of passing itself, although condoned by the black community, is such a cultural taboo that it is initially difficult for Irene to even think the word to herself: "Appearances, she

knew now, had a way sometimes of not fitting facts, and if Clare hadn't-- [...] 'She's really almost too good-looking. It's hardly any wonder that she--'" (22, 23). In these instances Irene stops short as if to even acknowledge the act is to violate an unwritten racial code.

However, in spite of Irene's innate aversion, she also exhibits "a fascination, strange and compelling," with the act of passing (27). On several occasions Irene expresses curiosity about passing, particularly about how Clare overcomes certain obstacles like accounting for her family history and conducting herself in the company of other blacks. She also expresses a keen interest in how her friend Gertrude relates to her white husband who is aware of her racial status: "For Gertrude too had married a white man, though it couldn't be truthfully said that she was 'passing.' Her husband [...] had been quite well aware [...] that she was a Negro. It hadn't, Irene knew, seemed to matter to him then. Did it now, she wondered? Had Fred [...] ever regretted his marriage because of Gertrude's race? Had Gertrude?" (33). One can easily argue that Irene is curious about the unknown details of passing that have subconsciously prevented her from passing on a more permanent basis herself. Therefore, Clare's seemingly effortless and brazen ability to successfully blend into white society is a skill that the self-conscious and self-doubting Irene decidedly lacks. Irene demonstrates this self-consciousness when, after Clare explains how she began passing, Irene responds: "'Yes, I do see that *for you* it was easy enough'" (27, emphasis mine). Regardless of her curiosity, Irene declares herself unable or unwilling to pass and instead falls back on her comfortable identity among the black elite, which is, for her, next best thing to "being" white.

Clare is also Irene's double concerning Clare's emotional abilities. Irene proclaims that Clare is "capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known. Indeed, never cared to know" (66). Irene often proclaims that Clare's enigmatic behavior is a source of frustration, but internally she can't help being attracted to the emotional freedom that Clare exhibits. Irene has created an existence for herself with limited opportunity for emotional expression and Clare's intermittent and unrestrained outbursts of feeling illustrate to Irene just how limited her existence really is. However, extreme emotions are incommensurate with her social status, so Irene immediately represses her instincts and later refers to that "quality of feeling" that Clare has as "strange, and even repugnant" (66). Irene even briefly acknowledges Clare as her emotional double only to almost instantly renege on the idea and assert Clare's irrevocable difference from herself: "in the look she gave Irene, there was something groping, and hopeless, and yet so absolutely determined that it was like an image of the futile searching and the firm resolution in Irene's own soul, and increased the feeling of doubt and compunction that had been growing within her about Clare Kendry" (71-2). Here Irene recognizes that her own instability is mirrored in Clare's alternation between "futile searching" and "firm resolution." However, her "growing doubts" about Clare indicate her attempt to distance herself from this reflection and her own growing "self-doubts."

On the surface Irene considers Clare a potential danger because her extravagant ways and passing are dangerous for the black community and because her sexuality represents a grave danger to Irene's marriage. However, Irene's reactions indicate that

Clare is most dangerous because of her ability to distract Irene from the performance of her stable identity roles and because of her "menace of impermanence" (101). Clare's dangerous passing, emotional expansiveness, and aggressive sexuality all threaten the foundation of Irene's ordered existence, and even though Irene is newly aware that her identity is dependent on social and economic stability, it is not something she is prepared give up:

> Yet all the while, in spite of her searchings and feeling of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband. [...] she still intended to hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain. (107, 108)

At the end of the novel, the only uncertainty that remains is whether Clare is having an affair with Brian. Irene resolves to keep her husband, so Clare is the one that must go. And as Hering argues, "Irene's attempt to sustain the fantasy of idealized domesticity's safety [is] dependent on 'enslaving' those whose conduct she must keep genteel and on exterminating those who create resistance to her plans" (Hering 38). This "extermination" comes to fruition in a highly debated final scene where Irene contributes (either directly by pushing her or indirectly by withholding the knowledge of Bellew's imminent discovery of Clare's race) to Clare's sudden fall from a six-story window. With Clare dead, Irene is free to continue living in a self-created fiction. In spite of her seeming "victory" over Clare, Irene only succeeds in strengthening her likeness to her.

Cheryl Wall puts it succinctly when she claims that "by the end of the novel Irene is indeed Clare's double, willing to '"do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away"' to get what she wants. A psychological suicide, if not a murderer, she too has played the game of 'passing' and lost" (109). Although her "performed" personal identity seems outwardly firm and consistent, it is a fictional creation designed to hide the fact that, like Clare, Irene is not capable of forming an identity undamaged by her social environment.

CHAPTER III

Originally published 19 years before Larsen's *Passing*, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* tells a similar story of a person struggling to come to terms with his ambiguous racial identity. However, in Johnson's story the protagonist is a man who traces his life story leading up to his decision to abandon his "blackness" in favor of permanent "whiteness." The unnamed protagonist narrates his story in the first person and traces his experiences and the evolution of his subjective identity as he repeatedly crosses racial boundaries. The son of a mulatto woman and white father, the narrator is visibly white and believes himself to be racially white for the first eleven years of his life. The sudden revelation of his "blackness" initiates his quest to achieve a unified sense of self. Feeling that his "blackness" is innate and inescapable the narrator sets himself to the task of defining himself as a black man, a task that proves immensely complex and difficult given his biracial status and upbringing. Like the ladies of *Passing*, the Ex-Colored Man's subjectivity is threatened by his perception of the racial and socioeconomic inferiority and vulnerability of "blackness." However, his story contains an added social threat--his alienation produced by the sudden revocation of a previous identity.

Prior to being identified as "black" the narrator enjoyed a positive self-concept born of his belief in his own "whiteness"--and identity that was free from social challenges for many years. Once his "true" race is introduced, the narrator's complex relationship to his own "blackness" is born of certain characteristics of his childhood and evolves through various stages over the course of his narrative. As a result of his initially

secluded childhood, the narrator feels a distinct sense of alienation that is intensified after his race is revealed to him. Once he embarks on his journey of self-discovery the narrator struggles to define his place within black culture and society all the while pivoting back and forth between romanticizing and feeling shame because of his "blackness." Along his journey he explores the multifaceted relationship between blacks and whites and tries to define for himself just what it means to be a black man living in post-Reconstruction America.

Even before his racial "outing" the narrator's identity is marked by a pronounced sense of isolation. When he is very young he and his mother move from Georgia to Connecticut where they live alone away from everyone except his mother's sewing clients. As a young child the narrator does not have any playmates and spends most of his time reading and playing the piano. His isolation is emphasized when, at nine years old, he is sent to public school and describes feeling like a "stranger" among "savages" (10). He is intellectually precocious and skilled at playing the piano from a very young age; both of these talents mark his difference from the average child. However, this difference is jarring since he doesn't even realize it until he enters preadolescence and is placed with other children. Therefore, one can argue that from a very young age the narrator is conditioned to view those around him from a rather distant, detached perspective.

This detachment is further illustrated by his relationship to other black children in his school before his revelation. Having nothing to base his identity on other than his visual difference, the narrator is instinctually drawn to the company of white children, and his relationship to the black children is distant and objective. He doesn't see himself

as one of them and therefore has no subjective interest in them, and because he doesn't

count himself among them he is able to view the discrimination against them

disinterestedly as well: "it did not take me long to discover that, in spite of his standing as

a scholar, [Shiny] was in some ways looked down upon. The other black boys and girls

were still more looked down upon. Some of the boys often spoke of them as

'niggers'" (14). Because of the narrator's unique position, his first direct experience of

racial prejudice is from the vantage point of the perpetrating dominant group. He later

describes an incident where he participates in the stoning of a black child who hit a white

child after being taunted with racial slurs. Before his racial revelation, the narrator is

conditioned to identify himself as white and distinctly separate from the black Other, a

conditioning that will inform his relationship with other blacks and himself throughout

the rest of his story. Samira Kawash concurs that "it is not the immediacy of a common

black identity ('we are the same') but an alienating distance between himself and others

('we are not the same') that is the condition for his understanding of blackness. Blackness

for the Ex-Coloured Man is always predicated on this alienating disidentification" (65).

Once the narrator's racial identity is revealed to him, his entire perspective

undergoes a painful, involuntary shift that throws him into emotional and psychological

chaos. His teacher tells him to sit down after he stood in response to the principal's

request that all the white children stand, and once he gets home he immediately confronts

his mother asking: "'am I a nigger?'" (17). His mother never responds affirmatively, but

the narrator gleans his own racial status from his mother's confession that she is not

white. After his mother's revelation that she is not white, the narrator then begins to

notice some of the visual differences between his mother and himself: "and then it was that I looked at her critically for the first time. [...] I could see that her skin was almost brown that her hair was not so soft as mine, and that she did differ in some way from the other ladies who came to the house" (18). It is as if the visual differences are only made visible (thus important) after the establishment of his and his mother's ideological racial difference.

Despite the sudden shock of his mother's confession, the narrator is never truly identified as being "black," only that he is "not white." With this incomplete identification, the narrator is left to decide for himself who he is. However, given the binary nature of America's conception of race and the fact that the narrator is given no other options, he involuntarily "becomes" black. The beginning of his life as a black man occurs when the "idea" of being black automatically and necessarily imposes constrictions on his way of looking at the world and himself:

> From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were coloured, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized in it a great, tangible fact. And this is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every coloured man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the view-point of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the view-point of a coloured man. It is wonderful to me that the race has progressed so broadly as it has, since most of its thought and all of its activity must run through the narrow neck of this one funnel. (21)

Even though the narrator seems to accept the idea that he is "black" without question, his white upbringing severely complicates his ability to form a unified racial identity and he spend the rest of the story trying to decide *how* to *be* that which society demands that he *is*. The revocation of his white identity produces a sense of alienation that, in conjunction with social demands, forces the narrator turn his attentions to creating a new self-concept as a black man.

His requirement to create a new identity combined with his previous alienation from blacks (and newly formed alienation from whites) both contribute to the difficulties of his ensuing identity quest. Over the course of his story that narrator travels to various places in the country and abroad trying to decide how to *live* as a black man in a society that views his "blackness" as a mark of inferiority. In doing so he is torn between romanticizing both his "blackness" and his role as a potential cultural leader of the race and being ashamed of his race. Soon after his racial awakening and his introduction to his white father, the narrator begins to think beyond the borders of his immediate situation: "the older I grew, the more thought I gave to the question of my mother's and my position, and what was our exact relation to the world in general. My idea of the whole matter was rather hazy" (40). He is evidently confused about how he fits into society given the fact that he, like his mother, sits on a racial boundary belonging totally to neither racial group. This question of his relationship to the world is a question that occupies him throughout his narrative and one that he never fully answers to his own satisfaction. However, at this initial stage in his development he falls back on familiar outlets for understanding--his books.

During his period of "self" education he claims that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gave him his "first perspective of the life [he] was entering," "opened his eyes as to who and what [he] was and what [his] country considered [him]" and "gave [him his] bearing" (41-2). At this point in his development some knowledge of who he is gives him some sense of stability; however, this is a temporary anchor since he hasn't experienced any of the problems or barriers he's read about firsthand. His knowledge of *who he is* has not yet come into conflict with *who he wants to be*. It is also important that he gains this perspective from a fictional (and arguably romanticized) book. His attempt to gain knowledge of himself from a book indicates just how detached his perspective on "blackness" really is. Referring to the narrator's choice of books, Martin Japtok claims that "This kind of initiation, of course, is likely only to deepen his tendency to see blackness through white eyes" (36). Later the narrator claims that he read "everything [he] could find relating to coloured men who had gained prominence," particularly Frederick Douglass (46). This admission illustrates that his education about "blackness" is very idealistic and that his ideas about "blackness" are mixed up with his own selfish desire for notoriety. Looking back on his childhood, the narrator himself even admits how naive his conception of "blackness" had been in this early stage of his life: "I dwelt in a world of imagination, of dreams and air castles--the kind of atmosphere that sometimes nourishes a genius, more often men unfitted for the practical struggles of life" (46). His words serve as a bit of foreshadowing of the circumstances that will plague the narrator throughout his journey and ultimately compel him to pass for white.

The romanticization of the narrator's racial identity extends beyond his reading choices and into his interactions with other black people. Despite his compulsory identification as black, the narrator still acts the part of an aloof "ethnographer" and many of his observations are stereotypical in nature. After graduating from high school he travels south to attend Atlanta University where he "caught [his] first sight of coloured people in large numbers" (55). His interest is greatly peaked by what he sees but his manner of appraisal is often distant and semi-scientific. He describes his journey of self-discovery as a sort of laboratory where he would be able "practice" his "theory of what it was to be coloured" (74).

He travels south excited to see a South that fits his expectations but he is initially disappointed and repulsed by the landscape and people he comes in contact with because they don't fit his idealistic visions. He describes the landscape as "impart[ing] a 'burnt up' impression" rather than the "luxuriant semi-tropical scenery" he had expected, and when he comes upon a large group of black people he asserts that "the unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in [him] a feeling of almost repulsion" (55-6). The only thing that restores his romantic vision of southern blacks is his companion's assertion that the people he sees are of the "lower class." His romantic vision is again challenged when he notices the raucous laughter of the blacks he observes. He initially seems put off by the fact that "these people talked and laughed without restraint" (56). Nevertheless, he again salvages his idyllic visions by adding that he had "since learned that this ability to laugh heartily

is, in part, the salvation of the American Negro; it does much to keep him from going the way of the Indian" (56).

Later, to his significant enjoyment, he realizes one of his "dreams of Southern life" during his stay at a local boarding house where he has a good southern meal and where the mistress "was addressing [him] as 'chile' and 'honey.' She made [him] feel as though [he] should like to lay [his] head on her capacious bosom and go to sleep" (59). Again Japtok is on point in arguing that the narrator's "observations of African Americans are those of an outsider and in their orientation towards stereotypes [...] they resemble the perspective of a patronizing white person" (38). His interest in black people thus far is akin to that of a white voyeur who is condescendingly fascinated, and his tendency to observe blacks as if they are specimens under a microscope suggests that he has no real innate connection to members of his supposed race.

An important component of his romanticization of "blackness" is his emphasis on the potential benefits being black will provide him. Namely, the narrator is interested in finding a way (absent his father's influence) to become the "great man" his mother had proclaimed he would be. Specifically, he gradually decides that he wants to use black people and culture as a means of distinguishing himself as a black composer of ragtime music. His objectifying and exploitative motives for wanting to ingratiate himself into black culture are made clear when he decides to leave Europe and return to the South so he can "live among the people, and drink in [his] inspiration firsthand. [He] gloated over the immense amount of material [he] had to work with, not only modern rag-time, but also the old slave songs--material which no one had yet touched" (142-3). In this sense

his connections to his cultural identity are reduced to bits of "material" to be worked with. The narrator himself even admits the selfish nature of his motives when he declares: "I began to analyse my own motives, and found that they, too, were very largely mixed with selfishness. Was it more a desire to help those I considered my people, or more a desire to distinguish myself, which was leading me back to the United States? That is a question I have never definitively answered" (147). A. T. Spaulding argues that "the narrator, in a moment of self-criticism and, perhaps, in an effort to foreshadow his final decision to pass as a white man, emphasizes his desires for notoriety and financial success over his commitment to his black identity" (236).

After his racial revelation the narrator's personal identity is challenged by the sudden erasure of his previous identity and by his equally sudden alienation from both blacks and whites. In response to this, the narrator's attempt to form a sense of self is first informed by his need to discover what it "means" to be black and be proud of that "blackness" at the same time. He travels south in hopes of fulfilling these needs but unfortunately ends up assuming a stereotypical and exploitative attitude towards blacks and "blackness" along the way. One can argue that his unfortunate attitude results from his not knowing how to accomplish the task of integrating his previously "white" way of looking at the world with the social and cultural demands of being "black." In this respect he is unable to achieve the "person-context fit" required for achieving an integrated identity.

Considering the distant relationship he maintains with blacks and his selfish aspirations, one can argue that despite his arduous journey the narrator has no more of a

meaningful connection to his "blackness" and black people than he had when he was a nine year old "white" boy. This idea is corroborated by the shame the narrator feels at being black which crops up from time to time during his journey and which ultimately hastens his permanent passing. Though not always direct, his feelings of shame can be gleaned through his perspectives about blacks and through some of his reactions to certain events.

His racial shame, whether conscious or unconscious, is the result of his internalized belief in the inferiority of blacks--an inferiority that is drawn along social and economic lines. One oblique manifestation of his racial shame is his unconscious acknowledgement of the economic inferiority of blacks. Although he does not express beliefs about blacks' economic status directly, his elitist and often materialist attitude frequently drives his perceptions of the worth of certain groups and individuals. His elitist and materialist attitude is ingrained in him from a very young age by both of his parents. His earliest memory of his father is of admiring the material possessions that come to symbolize the man himself--his watch and shiny shoes. Also, before he and his mother leave for Connecticut his father drills a hole through a ten-dollar gold piece and hangs it around the boy's neck. The gold piece then becomes a symbol of the father's materialistic presence throughout the narrator's life. While growing up the narrator has no real relationship with his father and only sees him a handful of times in his life. The father's absence is substituted by occasional letters containing money. The way in which his father uses money as a substitute for parental love only serves to further the narrator's already growing emphasis on the value of commodities.

While his father's influence helps to implant the idea that expensive things correlate with a person's worth and position, it is his mother's influence that instills in him an attitude of superiority over others. As a small child his mother grooms him to assume a sophisticated (read: "white") demeanor. She dresses him very neatly and is "very careful about [his] associates" (7). The narrator quickly develops a sense of pride stemming from this "aristocratic" conditioning. One can argue that his mother is trying to shield him from his "blackness" by directing the nature of his self-identification, and that "the way she initially rears the narrator seems to be geared toward avoiding the development of double-consciousness in him--at the expense of his African American cultural heritage" (Japtok 35).

This innate emphasis on wealth and superior social status bequeathed him by his parents translates into an elitist and materialist way of judging others that shows itself in several places in the novel. His emphasis on class has already been demonstrated by his negative reaction to "lower class" blacks upon his arrival in Atlanta. In Jacksonville, when he is first introduced into black "society" he calls it his first "entrance into the race" as if "real" blackness is conferred only on those with a certain amount of money and social status (74). His economic and social prejudice is most pronounced during his first visit to New York when, after spending all of his time in popular clubs and gambling houses, he apologizes to the reader for his inability to paint a picture of reputable black people:

> I regret that I cannot contrast my views of life among coloured people of New
> York; but the truth is, during my entire stay in this city I did not become

acquainted with a single respectable family. I knew that there were several

coloured men worth a hundred or so thousand dollars each, and some families

who proudly dated their free ancestry back a half-dozen generations. (114)

In this statement the narrator indicates that his judgment of black "respectability" is based

on monetary wealth and distinction from presumably "less respectable" blacks through

genealogical distance from slavery. The narrator's ideas about the social and economic

characteristics of "good" black people suggest that his estimation of his own race is

highly contingent.

The narrator's racial shame is also demonstrated through his reactions to several

important events in his narrative. There are several instances where rather than upholding

the racial pride he is endeavoring to acquire, he reacts in a way that indicates either his

prejudice or embarrassment. His prejudice against poorer lower class blacks is obvious,

but his prejudice extends to other areas as well. For one, he claims that artistic

advancements by blacks, while "original," are "lower forms of art [that] give evidence of

a power that will some day be applied to the higher forms" (87). Therefore in spite of his

attempts to understand and value black culture, he still views it as inferior and in need of

"improvement." Japtok aptly points out that the black cultural art forms that the narrator

describes "have to pass the test of a white American or European audience [...] Ethnicity,

for him, carries the mark of inferiority [...] and African American art, according to that

logic, can only disprove inferiority if it appeals to a white audience" (39). The narrator's

racial prejudice also surfaces in his reaction to seeing an interracial couple in a New York

club: "I shall never forget how hard it was for me to get over my feelings of surprise,

perhaps more than surprise, at seeing her with her black companion; somehow I never exactly enjoyed the sight" (109). On the one hand, the narrator asserts his racial membership, and on the other, he still seems to maintain a certain distaste for blacks and black culture.

His reactions that are the most indicative of his racial shame are his reactions to his European encounter with his father and the lynching he witnesses in Georgia. From his childhood the narrator's relationship with his father has been a source of discomfort. Soon after their first formal introduction he reflects on his connection to his mysterious parent: "I could not classify him. The thought did not cross my mind that he was different from me, and even if it had, the mystery would not thereby have been explained; for [...] I had only a faint knowledge of prejudice and no idea at all how it ramified and affected our entire social organism. I felt, however, that there was something in the whole affair which had to be hid" (36). Despite his youth and inexperience with discrimination, the narrator is still able to intuit the forbidden, taboo, and presumably shameful nature of his parents' relationship and his very existence. Therefore, when he sees his father and his white half-sister in a Parisian theater he never even entertains the idea of making himself known to them. The experience is jarring to him since it is the first time he is reminded of his race since coming to Europe, but rather than assert himself he slinks away, drowns his sorrow in alcohol and proclaims the whole situation a "real tragedy" (135). Instead of standing up to his father an asserting his right to existence, the narrator willingly accepts the mark of shame attached to his birth and erases himself from the scene.

His painful encounter with his father notwithstanding, the narrator still decides to return to the United States and pursue his dream of becoming a black composer that "voice[s] all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form" (147-8). However, when he returns to the American South his plans are suddenly and irrevocably derailed by his happening to witness a black man being burned alive for some unspecified crime. It is then his shame at being black reaches its peak and he declares: "A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with" (187-8). He also later admits that it was this shame, "shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals," that fueled his hasty decision to abandon his "blackness" and live the rest of his life without "a label of inferiority pasted across [his] forehead" (191, 190).

After the initial social threat represented by the narrator's racial revelation and ensuing alienation, the next idea that endangers his attempts to blend his personal and social selves into a coherent subjectivity is his internalized belief in the socioeconomic inferiority and demonstrated physical vulnerability of blacks. Elaine Ginsberg points out that "one of the assumed effects of a racist society is the internalization, by members of the oppressed race, of the dominant culture's definitions and characterizations" (9). Considering this, one can argue that due to influences from his parents and to his encounter with brutally racist whites, the narrator has been handicapped by an internalized shame that effectively inhibits his identity development process. This shame drives him to abandon his project to "become" black and instead seek solace in an

indeterminate, but essentially white, existence. The narrator returns to New York, begins

to earn money in real estate, marries a white woman and has two children. These

circumstances seem to suggest that the narrator has successfully embraced a self-concept

that incorporates his personal identity as a white man with the economic and social

demands of middle-class "whiteness." However, the narrator's final statement to the

reader that he feels he has "sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage," indicates that the

narrator is just as ambivalent about his identity as he was that day he first asked the

question: "'Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?'" (211, 17).

CONCLUSION

Despite their ostensible similarities invoked at the beginning of this essay, Clare

Kendry, Irene Redfield, and the Ex-Colored Man all end up in different places. Irene's

story ends with her still "performing" blackness, the Ex-Colored Man ends his story

"performing" whiteness, and Clare ends up dead. At the outset, "identity" was defined as

a person's self-concept that is formed through the mutually affirming combination of that

person's personal and social identities. However, the analysis of the identity development

processes that each character engages in on their "journeys" for self-definition has

indicated that none of these characters achieves a stable, affirming selfhood.

Clare fails to clearly define herself because she willingly sacrifices her personal

identity to suit the demands of her environment. While malleable, her identity is not

continuously recognizable to herself or anyone else; and, arguably, her "person-context

fit" is not mutually sustaining because of this. Some may claim that it's impossible to

know what Clare Kendry really thought of herself, given the fact that the novel is

narrated entirely through Irene's consciousness. But despite this, it's still reasonable to

argue that Clare's identity, as presented through Irene's interpretation of it, fails to

achieve any of the elements of stability laid out here.

Irene also fails to achieve a stable, positive self-concept, but her failure is the

result of her insistence on placing a "mask" of stability over her fragile and insecure

identity. Although on the surface Irene may seem like a confident black woman with all

the trappings of social and economic success--a wealthy husband, children, nice home,

and social status--she is left a broken woman who has lost the comforting belief in her

own security and will have to live with the knowledge of the role she played in Clare's death. Irene's personal identity is ultimately overwhelmed by the external threats of a discriminatory society that seek to negate her very being.

The Ex-Colored Man seems to have the most success in carving out an identity for himself, but his inability to shake the lingering doubts over his decision to live as a white man points to still existent holes in his sense of self. Unable to escape the social imperative to be "black" because of the small amount of African blood in his veins, the Ex-Colored Man ends his story still wondering whether he has betrayed his racial and cultural heritage. In the end, he, too, cannot clearly and definitively negotiate the demands of an oppressive society while keeping his subjectivity intact.

They all have visibly white skin, but are nevertheless caught in the arbitrary binary between "white" and "not-white." Their existence is a contradiction. But in a society whose whole hierarchical system of racial and social categorization is based on only two choices, they are forced to "pretend" to one side or the other. Irene Redfield "pretends" to be black while the Ex-Colored Man "pretends" to be white. Clare Kendry chooses not to abide by these "rules" and is punished with death. In the end, they and the reader are left to question whether "pretending" is enough.

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