

# Double or Dual-Natured?: Consciousness and Race in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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Nella Larsen's *Passing* explores the relationship between race and consciousness in the socio-political climate of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a period in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century whereby the great migration occurred as thousands of black people migrated from the South into the North and Midwest regions of the United States, inhabiting the neighbourhood of Harlem in New York. The notion of consciousness is embedded throughout the novel in exposing the duality of the black/white identity in relation to consciousness, notably centred on the Harlem Renaissance.

This essay will look into the philosophical reading of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* as the first philosophical theory. In Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, consciousness is explored in its individual state through the 'I', but also through a 'twofold significance' whereby there exists a 'double movement' between 'two consciousnesses' that communicate via the reciprocation of the 'I', therefore, recognising 'themselves as *mutually recognising* one another'.<sup>1</sup> This is explored through a bilateral relation which Hegel refers to as the *Lordship and Bondage* (Hegel, p. 111). Further in his *Freedom of Self-Consciousness*,

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<sup>1</sup> Georg W.F. Hegel, 'Self-Consciousness', in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 104–38 (pp. 111–12). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Hegel explores aspects of the *Unhappy Consciousness* suggesting that it is ‘the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being’ (Hegel, p. 126). Ultimately, Larsen’s *Passing* emphasises the significance of ‘racial passing’ as the catalyst for the ‘dual-natured consciousness’, as the novel is centred on the reunion of two childhood friends: Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. Both characters have a deep-rooted interest in each other’s lives, however, both lives are now distinguished by colour and race, as Clare becomes desperate to pass as white, to save her wealth and marriage. This concept is significantly important when discussing Clare Kendry’s conscious state, as Larsen proves Clare’s conscious state as one which is ‘dual-natured’. On the other hand, Larsen uses this ‘dual-natured’ mental state to highlight the irony and struggle of trying to claim to her black roots.

In addition, this essay will compare Hegel’s theory of the ‘two-fold significance’ and ‘double movement’ to Du Bois’s theory of ‘double consciousnesses’ in *The Souls of Black Folk*. W.E.B. Du Bois provides a much narrower theory of ‘double-consciousness’ in *The Souls of Black Folk*, whereby he racialises the black consciousness as one which is ‘born with a veil’, thus, similar to Hegel’s idea of ‘bondage’, generating a power relation as the ‘black consciousness is measured through the eyes of others’.<sup>2</sup> David Farrell Krell argues further in his philosophical article; ‘The Bodies of Black Folk: From Kant and Hegel to Du Bois and Baldwin’, whereby he compares the similarities of Hegel and Du Bois. Krell suggests that ‘one would like to study *The Souls of Black Folk* against the backdrop of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, not merely because of the *Phenomenology*’s famous dialectic of ‘lordship and bondage’ but also because of the doubling and the dawning of self-consciousness in both Du Bois and Hegel. For both thinkers, self-awareness is the gift of a redoubled sight, with the vision of the one filtered and refined by the vision of the other.’<sup>3</sup> Both Hegel and Du Bois

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<sup>2</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, ‘Of Our Spiritual Strivings’, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford University Press: 2007), pp. 7–14 (p. 8). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>3</sup> David Farrell Krell, ‘The Bodies of Black Folk: From Kant and Hegel to Du Bois and Baldwin’, *boundary 2*, 27 (2000), 103–34 (p. 105). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

explore the idea of race and colour in relation to a power relation; Hegel does so through his depiction of the mental battle of the ‘dual-natured’ conscious mind which in effect takes on the shape of Du Bois’s physical consequences of the black conscious being ‘measured through the eyes of the others’ (Krell, p. 105).

Larsen’s *Passing* follows a dynamic narrative of two characters living with conflicting yet similar thoughts with regards to the ‘colour line’. Through Larsen’s employment of the free-indirect discourse, the narrator dips in and out of the conscious minds of Irene and Clare who are presented as direct foils to each other, or in other words, they are female gothic doubles. Most significantly, the concept of ‘passing’ refers to the process of transcending from black to white in American society.<sup>4</sup> This idea of transcending from black to white in society is explained thoroughly by Alvin James Henry who addresses the notion of ‘mimetic relationship’ between Clare Kendry in *Passing* and the history of the black culture and community. Henry suggests that

Clare performs mimesis. She (must) pass for white and therefore must learn upper class femininity and its cultural performance. Unlike Irene, who, in the opening scene of the novel, forgets that she’s engaged in an act of passing, Clare remains incessantly self-conscious of her unstable racial identity and of her inability to represent wholeness/whiteness. She is the ‘semblance [that] is a promise of nonsemblance’. Clare flawlessly passes and provides the semblance of a white phenotype and culture, but she never embraces her own mimesis as the truth. Clare does not identify herself as white but neither is she one of the many other dominated black women who populate the novel. In marking Clare as occupying a limbo space—or possibly a space of abjection—Larsen crafts a mimetic relationship to the figure of the prehistoric black woman before her domination.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin James Henry, ‘Section 3: Traces of Freedom, or the Black Primitive Revised’, in ‘Nella Larsen’s Rogue Black Women: Anti-black Aesthetics and the Formation of the Minority Bildungsroman’, in *Through the*

However, this process of ‘passing’ in between the ‘colour line’ generates complex layers of hypocrisy, irony and a ‘dual-natured consciousness’ with a focus on the continuous recycling of the inescapable and inferior position of black people in society. Larsen indicates that this endless struggle occurred due to the compliance of following such a socially constructed hierarchy in the 1920’s, as “‘passing’ carries the connotation of being accepted for something one is not’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, using Hegel and Du Bois’s theories collaboratively, Larsen’s novel explores the relationship between the black self-consciousness which is projected differently by the two diverging self-consciousnesses of Irene and Clare.

Hegel argues that in order to attain ‘sense-certainty and perception’ of the self-conscious ‘truth’, self-consciousness is understood firstly through the pronoun ‘I’ as an ‘object’ and a ‘*being-in-itself*’ (Hegel, p. 104). However, it does not simply end there, as for one individual self-consciousness to survive and recognise itself, it must encounter another self-consciousness that is a separate consciousness of its own. However, this second consciousness is considered the ‘other’ as it immediately places a ‘twofold significance’ on the first self-consciousness as the first self-consciousness ‘has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being’, but also, ‘in the other sees its own self’ (Hegel, p. 111). Thus, the ‘other’ automatically becomes the ‘unessential negatively, characterised object’ which contains its own individual sense of consciousness while allowing both consciousnesses to validate each other’s existences, by ‘mutually recognising each other’ (Hegel, pp. 112–13). Consequently, both competing consciousnesses form an immediate power relationship as they form the ‘Lordship and Bondage’, as one becomes the ‘Lord’ and the other becomes the ‘bondsman’ (Hegel, p. 115). Therefore, this relationship concludes that the ‘*[s]elf-consciousness achieves its satisfaction*

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*Second Looking Glass: Inventing the Minority Bildungsroman* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, 2012), pp. 40–1.

<sup>6</sup> Corinne E. Blackmer, ‘The Veils of the Law: Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*’, *College Literature*, 22 (1995), 50–67 (p. 52).

*only in another self-consciousness*' (Hegel, p. 110). This recognition of the self-consciousness, however, leads to a question of its 'identity' and a 'true return into itself', therefore duplicating its self-consciousness within itself to form the 'Unhappy consciousness' (Hegel, p. 126). The Unhappy consciousness becomes the 'consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being' dividing itself into the 'changeable' and 'unchangeable' which are 'alien' to each other (Hegel, pp. 126–27). A similar sense of division between the one and same self-consciousness can be seen in Du Bois's theory. Du Bois narrows this division down to a racialised form of 'identity' which comes into conflict with itself. However, the conflict does not come from an 'other' competing self-consciousness, but it comes from accepting or recognising the black self-consciousness as letting 'him see himself through the revelation of the other world' (Du Bois, p. 8). Therefore, Du Bois identifies the black self-consciousness as a 'double consciousness' that has a 'two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls', with a perpetual sense of 'always looking at one's self through the eyes of others' (Du Bois, p. 8).

Hegel's theory of the 'dual-natured Unhappy Consciousness' and Du Bois's 'double consciousness' provides an insight into the conflict between an individual self-consciousness in relation to its 'identity'. Larsen employs Clare Kendry as a character who is in an endless competition between her African and American identity, resulting in her competing for one or the other. This Unhappy consciousness results from trying to form an '*immediate unity*' but with 'two opposites; the simple Unchangeable, it takes to be the *essential* Being; but the other, the protean Changeable, it takes to be the unessential' (Hegel, pp. 126–27). The contradiction arises from the inability to process both states as unessential, despite calling one the 'essential', and the other, the 'unessential.' The self-consciousness recognises that it needs both the 'Changeable and the 'Unchangeable' states as 'essentials' to form an 'immediate unity' properly. Consequently, it leaves the self-consciousness in a state of contradiction and in 'opposites' (Hegel, p. 127). Similarly, Du Bois argues that 'it is the contradiction of double

aims. The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan' (Du Bois, p. 9). Hegel might provide the psychological and spiritual notion of the self-conscious mind in relation to its duality, but Du Bois provides the socio-political explanation for such a conflict. Du Bois argues that the black self-consciousness carries its 'American Negro history of his strife' onto his back in order to access his 'truer self' (Du Bois, p. 9). This means that 'he would not Africanise America for America has too much to teach the world and Africa', but neither would he 'bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world' (Du Bois, p. 9). This inevitably leads to a competition, in an attempt to grasp both identities; one of the Negro souls which aims to carry on the strife of black people, and the other of the American, which aims to show off knowledge that is beneficial for the entire world. Yet, the black artisan fails to carry the burden of both identities in fear of rejection.

Du Bois further suggests that the black consciousness 'simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face' (Du Bois, p. 9). Larsen provides the dual relationship between Africa and America through the interaction between Irene and Clare, similar to Du Bois's theory of double consciousness as Clare asserts that 'it is much easier to [pass] with white people' (Larsen, p. 26). Yet, she contradicts this gloating tone with anger, irony and frustration as she immediately follows with 'I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass'. [...] 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' (Larsen, p. 27). '[...] they couldn't forgive the tarbrush. They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbours, or even to mention the south side' (Larsen, p. 28). Clare's tone of anger and irony is hinted in her use of the biblical reference to 'Ham'. Clare validates Du Bois's earlier argument of trying to carry the 'American negro

history of Strife' onto her back. Through her reference to 'Ham', she draws attention to the biblical narration from Genesis 9:20–27, to show how 'slave holders in the United States applied this Biblical account to Africans and used it as a justification for slavery as a political means' (Larsen, 'Explanatory Notes, p. 123). Likewise, the derogatory term 'tar-brush' was used by Clare ironically as an indication towards her African ancestry, derived from the descriptive saying, 'Black as tar' (Larsen, 'Explanatory Notes, p. 123). Furthermore, Paul Gilroy in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* argues that

[the] development of black culture in America and Europe is a historical experience which can be called modern for a number of clear and specific reasons. For Hegel, the dialectic of master and slave was integral to modernity, and Gilroy considers the implications of this idea for a transatlantic culture.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Gilroy approaches Du Bois's theory, agreeing that the 'concept of double consciousness with which *The Souls of Black Folks* commenced [...] was initially used to convey the special difficulties arising from black internalisation of an American identity'.<sup>8</sup> This can also be seen at the beginning of the novel through Larsen herself carrying over another African American identity as she quotes Countee Cullen's 'Heritage':

One three centuries removed  
 From the scenes his fathers loved,  
 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
 What is Africa to me?

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Gilroy, 'About this book', in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) <<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674076068>> [accessed 15 August 2020].

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 126.

This poem examines ‘the role of culture in the shaping of identity and questions the dialogic between an African past and a European-influenced present for African-Americans’ (Larsen, ‘Explanatory Notes’, p. 123). Consequently, Larsen reflexively puts herself into this cycle of carrying the African history which Du Bois suggests, as she continues this method into literature through the epigraph. By doing so, she highlights the socio-political influences which resulted in a mass identification of a sense of ‘double-consciousness’ amongst black-consciousnesses within the African American community.

Moreover, the significance of irony is central throughout the novel. Du Bois suggests that in order for one ‘to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another’ (Du Bois, p. 11). The irony springs from the unreliable narrator Irene herself who stands up for the middle-class lifestyle, secure in her position and observing those around her with judgemental eyes. Larsen uses Clare as a character who challenges the acceptance of this comfortable position in society by highlighting the challenges and sacrifices that a ‘true’ African American must undergo, in order to attain ‘self-realisation and self-respect’ (Du Bois, p. 11). Yet, Irene ironically has lost her sense of black heritage, focusing on her middle-class lifestyle with the security it brings, and her refusal to reject changes—‘in effect she has “passed” into the conventionalised, mechanised, non-humane white world’.<sup>9</sup> However, this attitude which Irene holds is ‘passed’ onto Clare, making her a scapegoat as a consequence of Irene failing to recognise her inability to ‘attain her place in the world.’ As a result, Irene validates Hegel’s ‘two-fold significance’ as she has ironically ‘lost her’ self-consciousness, and ‘finds itself in an *other* being’, and ‘in the other sees itself.’ Upon meeting Clare for the first time, ‘certain ineffaceable characteristics’ were noted by Irene in order to eugenically identify Clare as the

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Mabel Youman, ‘Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Study in Irony’, *CLA Journal*, 18 (1974), 235–41 (p. 236). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

African American woman.<sup>10</sup> Clare appeared to have ‘those dark, almost black eyes [...] against the ivory of her skin’ (Larsen, p. 16). Ironically, Irene points out that

white people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means. Finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. [...] No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn’t possibly know that she was a Negro.

(Larsen, p. 17)

Intriguingly, the shift in gaze is played around here as Larsen uses Irene’s narration to observe the African American characteristics of Clare. Contrarily, what happens is the ironical reversal of gaze as Irene’s employment of these ‘silly’ characteristics when identifying Clare is a ‘reflection’ of her own self-consciousness. At this point, unconsciously, the two self-consciousnesses, Irene’s and Clare’s ‘*recognise themselves as mutually recognising each other*’ in a power relation. This is explicitly made clear through the free indirect discourse as the narration exposes the thought of Irene being discovered a Negro as ‘Absurd!’ and ‘Impossible!’ which in turn resulted in Irene feeling ‘anger, scorn and fear’ (Larsen, p. 17). This was an emotional response to ‘the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do, that disturbed her’ (Larsen, p. 17). Du Bois argues parallel to this exact fear suggesting that ‘for the first time he sought to analyse the burden he bore upon his back, the dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem’ (Du Bois, p. 12). This ‘fear’ of ‘dead-weight’ or the apparently problematic issue of eugenics continues further down the generations as Larsen employs Gertrude Martin as another mouthpiece to expose such fears. Gertrude admits that she

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<sup>10</sup> Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 250.

was 'scared to death', in case one of her children 'might go way back and turn out dark' as 'it's awful the way it skips generations and then pops out' (Larsen, p. 37). Thus, Irene ironically identifies Clare through a eugenicist attitude without realising that she is further allowing 'social degradation' to continue as a consequence.

Furthermore, despite the '*mutually*' recognised black self-consciousnesses between Irene and Clare, a complication arises from this 'realisation' which poses a threat to both consciousnesses as Irene becomes a dominating figure in their relationship. Thus, the similarities in racial consciousness become blurred as there seems to be a deeper, personal problem which Irene cannot deal with. Clare is narrated unreliably by Irene as 'passing' from black to white and as someone who 'cared nothing for the race' (Larsen, p, 47). However, Clare uses this strategy to challenge the readers into reconsidering her method of fighting for her race as in fact; she is 'determined' to come back to her black heritage even under the façade of her white lifestyle with her racist husband. On the other hand,

Irene's major concerns in life are security, middle-class morality, and middle-class standing. Anything that threatens these values must be destroyed. In turn, Irene has lost her black heritage of spontaneity, freedom from convention, and zest for life. She is uneasily aware that her life lacks the highest goals, but she rejects changes - in effect she has "passed" into the conventionalised, mechanised, non-humane white world.

(Youman, p. 236)

Therefore, the irony in Clare's death is a cyclical continuation of the societal voices which exist in modern society; the preservers of an artificial, middle-class lifestyle who thrive and the continued degradation of the black heritage which diminishes through death as 'death is the natural negation of consciousness' (Hegel, p. 114). Irene foreshadows Clare's death earlier on as she had a 'thought which she tried to drive away. If Clare should die! Then-Oh, it was vile!

To think, yes, to wish that! [...] But the thought stayed with her. She could not get rid of it' (Larsen, p. 105). Clare had become a challenge for Irene as her 'independent' self-consciousness was against Irene's values of 'security, middle-class morality and middle-class standing'. According to Hegel,

Death certainly shows that each staked his life and held it of no account, both in himself and in the other; but that is not for those who survived the struggle. They put an end to their consciousness in their alien setting of natural existence, that is to say, they put an end to themselves, and are done away with its *extremes* wanting to be for *themselves*, or to have an existence of their own.

(Hegel, p. 114)

Hence, Clare exposes the 'two-ness' of Irene, the construction of a gender power relationship that she generates by not only deciding judgmentally how 'selfish' Clare is, but also when her life can be taken away. Ironically, Irene 'selfishly' balances Clare against 'her race', highlighting that 'it was enough to suffer as a woman, an individual on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well' (Larsen, p. 101). Thus, Irene's 'true' consciousness is exposed as she is unable to socially integrate both her race and gender within her society, resulting in her becoming 'selfish' and killing the only threat to her which is Clare who is able to play along and carry the 'burden of the black heritage' right under the eyes of the white men who have constructed "'higher" and "lower" races' (Du Bois, p. 12). As a result, both Irene and Clare remain each other's gothic doubles as 'strangers' to each other in their morals, attitudes and self-consciousnesses, despite the racial similarities they both possess (Larsen, p. 64).

Conclusively, Hegel and Du Bois provide similar notions of explaining the 'two-ness' of the self-conscious mind, or the notion of 'double consciousness' in discussion with the

individual consciousness and its relation to another consciousness. Du Bois racialises the theory further developing a gaze for the black consciousness, whereby the black consciousness is ‘born with a veil’. Both theorists encounter the ‘other’ self-consciousness as a ‘negative object’ either forming a power relation such as the ‘Lordship and Bondage’ or the powerless position of ‘seeing oneself through the eyes of the other’. Both types of ‘bondages’ can be seen in Larsen’s depiction of the black self-consciousness amongst her female characters Irene and Clare, who appear to be similar racially, yet completely different in their moral beliefs. Intriguingly, through Larsen’s use of the free indirect discourse, Larsen challenges the readers to question the socio-political climate of the Harlem Renaissance, as she fits herself into the cycle of ‘carrying the history of the black heritage’, both through this literary voice but also through her employment of another poem in her epigraph from a black poet. Thus, Larsen reflexively becomes an active participant in carrying on the history of the African American struggle for an independent unveiled identity, paving a way towards change for the community.

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