

Black Motherhood and Freedom in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Abstract

In Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*, the character of Irene notes how "no one is every completely happy, or free, or safe," which highlights how social limitations in American society restrict access to freedom and safety from those who do not conform to standards as defined by American society— something especially prevalent in the history of black motherhood. While there has been discussion of the theme of black motherhood throughout Nella Larsen's works, it is important to also draw a connection between this theme and that of freedom. We see how the struggles of the characters in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* highlight the clash between black motherhood and expressions of the American understanding of freedom through the Pursuit of Happiness and property. The concept of freedom is one that is deeply baked into American national identity. However, there is a disconnect between the cultural definition of freedom and the reality of expressions of it. In reading more critically the nature of freedom as it relates to those underprivileged within American society, we can begin to deconstruct the limitations to freedom, and better understand the impact had on those who are unable to conform to established social and economic norms, and begin to seek reform and understanding.

Introduction

In Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*, there is a key scene where the character of Irene comments on how Clare should be more careful if she wishes to maintain her social freedom and

not be caught as passing as white. Irene somberly notes that “no one is every completely happy, or free, or safe” (Larsen 227). To Irene, if one wishes to express morality or any semblance of safety, they must conform to the expectations of their society and their assigned roles (be that racially or as a woman via motherhood). Therefore, they are trapped to never truly experience freedom unless they can conform to the expectations of white social norms. She cannot be both safe and free, as freedom is not something that someone in Irene’s position as a black woman and mother can access while also being safe, and this is made all the more apparent by the risks that Clare has to take in order to experience the small freedom that she cherishes rather than the safety that Irene values. Clare’s response to Irene is “well then, what does it matter?” (Larsen 227). To Clare, the nebulous nature of freedom and morality as something defined by some higher societal “other” is something that should be exploited and confronted, and that one should try to adapt rather than just accept what is assigned to them. If there needs to be a choice between either happiness, freedom, or safety, Clare would rather not have to choose at all. However, by the end of the novel it is this mentality that brings Clare’s downfall.

This examination of what it means to be free opens up a discussion of the meaning of “freedom,” and what exactly does it mean to be “happy or free or safe.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word freedom as “the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action” (Merriam-Webster). But does that really reflect the definition of freedom as we have come to understand it in American culture and society? The definition of freedom displayed by Irene in *Passing* correlates to the early American idea of “Pursuit of Property” as proposed by John Locke. In his definition of freedom, the right of Property affords one safety and security—financially and literally. The reason Property is capitalized is it’s emphasized meaning as

something beyond just land, but also one's right to a home; to a life; to person-hood. Inspired by Lockean ideology, this idea was later adopted and revised by Thomas Jefferson into the current understanding of the right to the pursuit of Happiness. Much like Property, Happiness isn't just being referred to the emotion of joy, but also the very concept of prosperity and the right to reach towards it— whether it be economical, social, and spiritual fulfillment. However, as noted in Hortense Spillers text "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," the rights to ownership and the pursuit of property – and thus the right to certain expressions of freedom – are carried by the name of the father, despite being generated through the act of motherhood. In the early days of slavery, it was through black motherhood that the designation of person verses property was historically carried through, thus driving the engine of slavery. Thus, in this passing over of the mother while at the same time motherhood being the force that grants life and carries on this designation of freedom to their children, we can understand how American rhetoric and understanding of both freedom and motherhood has overlooked the reality of the fact that black motherhood in American society has in reality been systematically defined by its peripheral lack of freedoms in comparison to expressions of masculinity and whiteness.

The expression of freedom as it is understood in American society is one that is defined by the right to property – a definition that, while being designated to the individual through black motherhood, is one that is simultaneously not afforded to black mothers. American's have come to define ourselves and covet this inalienable right to Happiness. It is the very backbone of our understanding of freedom, and it is this dream of Happiness is what inspires people like Clare to reach for and live this goal – being free from social limitations or pressures, and having the ability to live life to your own ambitions and desires. However, when one begins to deconstruct

that definition as it relates to the realities of American society, we begin to uncover the fallacy of its execution. The limitations of freedoms and security afforded to black women and black mothers who try to break from the socially upheld structure or norm shows that so long as there is a perception of an upheld norm, then there will always be a push to conform to that standard, whether due to personal will or the pressures of the society around us. As a result, the definition of the normal as it relates to the actions of specific group is very much contingent on stereotypes of that group that are defined by people in higher social standing – those who hold the rights to property (and therefore the American understanding of freedom), and by extension define those rights. It is through this that we can see how conformity – and thus freedom – is often defined by its exclusion of minorities that are perceived as “others.” Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* examines the ways that freedom has historically come to embody the goal and achievements possible through whiteness, and the pressures of conformity and expected roles of ones position in society. Furthermore, this definition of freedom differs depending on one’s societal expected gender role, and perceptions of morality.

Race and Freedom in *Passing*

The American vision of freedom can be translated into markers or gateways to certain standards of freedom – including masculinity and whiteness. In their essay “Freedom,” Stephanie Smallwood notes that “This understanding of freedom is paradoxical. The individual celebrated by the modern Western theory of freedom was male, and his purportedly self-produced economic independence derived at least in part from the labor of wives, children, servants, and other dependents whose political subjectivity was subsumed under his patriarchal authority”

(Smallwood 111). Because there is this upheld norm of white masculinity, society works to fuel and maintain the dominance and social hierarchy that perpetuates this standard. As a result of this, we see that what we understand as freedom to some comes at the cost of those who do not or can not conform to these standards of white masculinity, and thus can be seen encouraging the subjugation and exploitation of others.

“The understanding of freedom produced by the founding and early maturation of the U.S. nation-state thus turned on an understanding of possessive individualist freedom whose purported expansiveness was from the start circumscribed by gendered and racialized structures of exclusion and domination. Because it relied on the theory that some humans were categorically superior to others, its universalist rhetoric worked not to realize individual autonomy for all humans but to secure the particular interests of propertied white men by naturalizing those interests and the relations of subordination required to produce and sustain them.” (Smallwood 112)

These upheld beliefs lead to the exploitative subversion of freedoms for the sake of freedom that we see, and that Larsen goes on to dissect, especially in the way Irene and Clare understand the concept of motherhood as it relates to femininity by highlighting how their understanding of freedom as it relates to the role of black motherhood defines their understanding of morality and their security in society – whether that be economically or socially. For Irene, black motherhood provides the social security, and conformity to that role protects her while also working to define her. Meanwhile, Clare has decided to abandoned the role of traditional black motherhood in her expression of more economic and social freedom through her marriage.

This understanding of race and freedom is further explored in Ferguson's essay "Race," in which he notes that morality is intrinsically linked to one's ability to express certain types of freedom. He says that "[i]n classical social theory, morality refers to the social powers and privileges that come with political and civil enfranchisement, thus referencing a horizon of possibility rather than an ambit of restrictions and limitations [...] Morality was both the promise of freedom and the qualification of that promise through regulation" (Ferguson 208) Because a person or persons is afforded certain economic and social powers, they are thus able to define the meaning of the term "morality." Quite frankly, there is no power above them that can tell them that what they do is not "right." Thus, they are free, and able to establish what is considered to be the societal norm, as they embody what the "right" is. What this means for the definition of freedom is that conceptions of freedom become linked to one's ability to meet these defined moral norms. If one is able to meet certain "moral" standards, they are thus able to achieve freedom. Yet, because of this, freedom is then defined by the very things that it is not, and thus limits those who are able to achieve it based on their conformity to these established parameters.

We can see how both Ferguson's and Smallwood's understanding of freedom and its relation to race and morality are expressed in the contrasting characters of Irene and Clare. Clare and Irene are both mixed race women who are able to "pass" as white. However, both women have very contrasting ways that they express their race in favor of differing conceptions of freedom: economic and social. Clare differs from Irene in that she pursues Ferguson's description of freedom. She marries a wealthy racist white man, and thus is able to express far more economic freedom and security in comparison to Irene. However, in doing so Clare is also simultaneously trapped in other ways. She is forced to maintain this facade of whiteness in order

to maintain the status she has achieved, otherwise she risks sacrificing the economic freedoms that she has come by and losing her child and family she has established. This has come at the cost of her exploring her identity as a black woman, which we see in chapter 2 is something that according to Irene's understanding of race and black identity, Clare seems to hold no expressed attachment to. Irene even notes how Clare says it is easy for her – both literally and emotionally – to build the facade in favor of passing, and wonders why other women in similar positions don't follow suit in favor of adapting to the expected norm of society. “[...]I've often wondered why more colored girls, girls like you and Margaret Hammer an Esther Dawson and – oh, lots of others – never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve.” (Larsen 187) In the pursuit of freedom, does it not make sense to do what you can to conform to the expectations of society? Her sense of identity and culture is not something she particularly favors over the potential of freedom she can express. As Irene bitterly observes “Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it” (Larsen 213).

By contrast we see how Irene fears the social repercussions of her race. The character of Irene holds a very important position in society, as she is described as being a part of the rising Black middle class that was developing in America during the time of the novel. While Clare seeks further social freedoms via a white lifestyle, Irene is also in a position of economic power and security in the narrow vision of a middle class mother. However, despite this fact, we see how Irene still notes that this semblance of security she has been afforded in her role as a black mother is still not fully secure. From the very beginning of the novel we see how these notions of social security as they pertain to race are not a guarantee, as Irene notes walking past a black man dying of heatstroke on the sidewalk. “It was while she was on her way to a sixth place that

right before her smarting eyes a man toppled over and became an inert crumpled heap on the scorching cement. About the lifeless figure a little crowd gathered. Was the man dead or only faint? someone asked her. But Irene didn't know and didn't try to discover. She edged her way out of the increasing crowd, feeling disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with many sweating bodies." (Larsen 175). We see Irene note how no one stops to help him, and despite this being a middle class neighborhood with several well-off shops, he has found himself in a position of danger in which no one is willing to help him. In her noting this, we see reflected Irene's internal trepidation and fears with regards to her expression of freedom and the reality of her social security. While she may be afforded the same economic and social freedoms as this man, the reality of his helplessness reflects Irene's fears over her own, and the association between the two leaves Irene noticeably uncomfortable. Irene is in a position where she has to exchange liberty for security, and yet is uncomfortable in acknowledging this fact when confronted with it in the form of the dying man.

Black Motherhood and Femininity

In her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers examines the grammar and rhetoric that we have come to associate in American English and American culture as a whole with our understanding of black women. More specifically, she notes how our perception and value of black women's bodies as symbols of economic growth or foundations of power and status has been codified at the expense and deliberate dehumanization of black women. This can be seen in the way that a mother – while connected intrinsically to her child – holds no agency over that child, as their being is defined by things beyond the mothers reach and control. "One

has been ‘made’ and ‘bought’ by disparate *currencies*, linking back to a common origin of exchange and domination. The denied genetic link becomes the chief strategy of an undenied ownership, as if the interrogation into the fathers identity – the blank space where his proper name will fit – were answered by the fact, de jure of a material possession” (Spillers 76). During the slavery of America, children were born from the mother, and from there were born into the status of race, and it is the designation of ones race that is seen impacting ones class and social status, and from there the right to property, ownership, or other expressions of freedom. From this, we see that it is black motherhood that is the crux and the engine by which societal standards of race and patriarchy are maintained and perpetuated – regardless of the will of the mother. This thus shaped the post-slavery cultural imaginary with regards to the power of black motherhood, and become misrepresented in it’s nonconformity to the traditional American grammar for definitions of womanhood. Thus, the societal expected role of black motherhood that we see reflected in Larsen’s writings – particularly through the character of Irene in *Passing* and Helga in *Quicksand* – can be viewed as another layer of the societal and self-appointed subversion of personal freedom, as it becomes another system of the American machine that works to exploit black mothers at the expense of their person-hood and freedom, and perpetuate that status across generations.

This is a reality is also seen reflected in the discussion of perceptions of gender roles as explored by Ferguson. “In the nineteenth-century United States, black women’s bodies were similarly constructed as the antithesis of true womanhood” (Ferguson 209). Just like how white slavers were the ones to morally justify what are the standard of morality and the “norm,” it so became that the goal of female gender roles could only be described as “white femininity.” The

very condition of being a black women or a black mother was viewed as in direct physical opposition to standards of white femininity, and thus we see that the way Clare expresses her femininity as a white woman comes to clash with Irene's understanding of the role of a woman through black motherhood, and the survival she found through adopting that role. The result of this is that there is no way to truly conform to the expected norms that afford one the "freedom" of white men or white women. The way we act in the form of our gender is not entirely a process based on internal identity, but rather a result of different ideals impressed upon us by our social standards that we try and replicate. Because of this, the classic traits considered ideal of a woman are largely based around their social function, and thus women's sexuality is often only considered through the lens of being a mother or wife, which is even moreso seen in Spillers's definition of black motherhood. We see this internal pressure of conformity to expected gender roles engaged in the way Irene struggles with her understanding of women based on her relationship with her husband and her reflections of Clare, and how Irene values her role as a black mother as a form of social security.

One major aspect of the novel *Passing* is the relationship and dynamic between Irene and her family – namely her husband. Irene desperately seeks to find fulfillment in the role of a mother and a wife, and defines herself by this. This comes to a clash when her husband and son speak of potentially moving away from America due to social inequality, and thus challenging what Irene understands as the norm. As a result, there is conflict in how Irene and her husband view their relationship with their son, where Irene is viewed as overbearing, and being too dedicated to her defining role as the mother. This plays into the narrative style of the novel, as we see Irene try to reassure to herself of her position, despite her clear unhappiness:

“Then why worry? This thing, this discontent which had exploded into words, would surely die, flicker out, at last. True, she had in the past often been tempted to believe that it had died, only to become conscious, in some instinctive, subtle way, that she had been merely deceive herself for a while and that it still lived. But it would die. Of that she was certain. She had only to direct and guide her man, to keep him going in the right direction.” (Larsen 218)

This scene not only highlights an internal discourse within Irene, and her struggles with her husband, but also emphasizes Irene’s understanding and value of her role as a wife. Despite her malcontent, she tries to convince herself that through perseverance in this role of a good mother and wife, she will find the fulfillment that she so craves through the power afforded to her through her role as black mother.

This directly ties into Clare and Irene’s contrasting perspectives of motherhood, as the concept of motherhood can be seen as emblematic of Irene and Clare’s freedom and understanding of morality. We first see their different perceptions of motherhood addressed when Clare speaks about her view of children. “‘Children aren’t everything[...] There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don’t seem to suspect it.’ And she laughed, more, it seemed, at some secret joke of her own that at her words” (Larsen 240). This quote is in direct contrast with the very foundation of Irene’s perception of herself and her morals. We see that Irene defines herself by her relationship with her sons and husband, as seen by her response to this comment: “I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can't help it” (Larsen 240). With Irene, her motherhood is something that keeps her tied to her current structure of life, and that she defines herself by

this role as a traditional black mother. By contrast, Clare views motherhood as something that keeps her trapped in her marriage. This difference in views of motherhood is perfectly captured in a scene in chapter 2. Clare somberly notes that “being a mother is the cruelest thing in the world” (Larsen 227). To her, motherhood is a trap, and another societal role to be eschewed. Irene’s response to Clare’s declaration is “Yes [...] and the most responsible, Clare” (Larsen 228). Irene – while understanding and relating to Clare and her desires – cannot condone Clare, as being a mother (and by extension her role in society, both as black and as a woman) is a key that defines her and her morality.

This concept of the limited freedoms of women based on the nature of their respective gender roles is seen explored in greater depths in Larsen’s first novel *Quicksand*. In *Quicksand*, we follow the character of Helga as she struggles to find fulfillment in the world. However, everywhere she goes, she is always perceived and expected to live within certain preconceived stereotypes of what the society around her expects. When in Denmark, she is expected to be an exotic muse. In America, she is either not white enough or not black enough to fit into any culture. Towards the end of the novel, she believes she has found her long sought after fulfillment within her role as a wife and a mother in a small religious community. “It was a chance at stability, at permanent happiness, that she meant to take. She had let so many other things, other chances, escape her” (Larsen 144). However, the novel ends with the realization that this, too, was just an empty farce, and that she cannot be herself anywhere without conforming to norms and expectations – both as a woman and as a person of color. “She couldn’t endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking loathing were too great. Not to be borne. Again. For she had to admit that it wasn’t new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it

she had experience before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree” (Larsen 160). In the end, she finds herself trapped forever in her role as a mother, giving birth to her husband’s children and never able to experience real freedom. As is the case with Irene and Clare, Helga finds her personal freedom tied to her role and responsibilities intrinsic to her being a mother. Her struggle can be directly related to the limitations and subsequent toll of societal expectations put upon women, as well as the restriction of freedom through individual pursuit of property, as even her children are deemed to be for the father rather than the mother. These restrictions of personal freedom in favor of the standardized norm of gender roles that work to benefit those in a position of power, and who hold little regard for the suffering of the individual – the person in power in this instance being the father.

Internalized Limitations/Free Indirect Discourse

However, the pressures of conformity and the restrictions to individual freedom is not exclusively external. Following the Foucaultian understanding of self governance and the societal panopticon, much of our limitations – while based on the core ideas and morality perpetuated by our societal values – are maintained by our own internalized regulations of ourselves in our quest to conform to these standards and maintain social safety and homogenization. This idea of self governance is seen in the very way the novel *Passing* unfolds and is conveyed, and in how Irene understands her role as a black mother. We are shown the story of *Passing* through the perspective of the character of Irene, and thus we understand that the third person prose of the novel is her own internalized processing of the events of the story and her relationships with those around her. However, it is also very apparent that Irene is not a

wholly reliable narrator. The utilization of free indirect discourse belays a deeper restriction seen through Irene's perspective, as even within her own mind she is unable to find freedom to be herself. She warps the relaying of event in her mind to better conform to her understanding of social expectations of race and gender, and is thus constantly trying to rationalize her circumstances and suppress her interest and engagement with the ideas of nonconformity that the character of Clare causes her to reflect upon.

This is shown in how Irene reacts to Clare's passing. Clare acts as a narrative foil to the character of Irene. Where both women can and do pass as white, Clare embraces doing it more so than Irene. Meanwhile Irene can and does pass when she wishes to be accepted in certain social situations (such as the tea for the conversation during chapter 3), but she also wishes to remain attached to her acceptance of her role as a black woman as well. However, the primary tension between the two characters of Clare and Irene is that we see in Irene what seems to be a subtle and deeply repressed jealousy over Clare's choices. When learning of Clare's deception, Irene finds herself fostering a "fascination, strange and compelling" (Larsen 190). Furthermore, we see Irene indirectly note that others – and therefore by extension, herself – find the idea of passing to be exciting and admirable, but at the same time something shameful as it contradicts her upheld moral beliefs, as shown in how Irene internally defends Clare's choices from her own biases and judgments: "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it." (Larsen 216). It is for this reason that Irene holds such conflicting views of the character of their friend who also passes – Gertrude, as she has also seemingly "abandoned" her role as a black mother by marrying a white man. However, unlike Clare she has

done so without subterfuge, and owns her black identity while still defying the morals that Irene holds herself to in order to survive.

Furthermore, this defense of Clare and her passing, despite Irene's disapproval, is internally justified by Irene as defending Clare as a fellow black woman, despite her casting aside that attachment. Thus, in any scene where Clare disregards her black culture, we see Irene mentally doubling down on its importance, and instantaneously filled with annoyance and what she perceives as Clare's flippancy. However, we see this belief of Irene slowly be called into question, as Irene also is envious of the social freedom that Clare (and others who pass and pursue white freedom) is able to express, and that Irene cannot accept. It is for this reason that Irene's relationship with the two juxtaposed characters of Gertrude and Clare – two women who married white men in order to further their passing – is so fascinating. Irene is shown to be annoyed at Clare and Gertrude – specifically, Gertrude's" (Larsen 195). Irene interprets Gertrude's awkward silence as being silent judgment, which shows Irene projecting her own insecurity and defensiveness of her choice to adhere to the security of the role of black motherhood, as both Gertrude and Clare threaten Irene's understanding of her role. "Later, when she examined her feeling of annoyance, Irene admitted, a shade reluctantly, that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well" (Larsen 195). Irene's defensiveness can be traced to how her personal identity has its value tied to her that of her racial identity, as well as the family she has with her husband and son. Therefore, Clare represents a threat to Irene's own perception of the morality that she values and has sacrificed for. "Above everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the

pleasant routine of her life. And now Clare Kendry had come into it, and with her the menace of impermanence” (Larsen 262). For Irene to denounce her blackness as Clare has would also be a denouncing of the family by which she has ascribed so much personal value, has sacrificed so much personal freedom for, and has found so much security in the role of wife and mother. It would contradict her morality.

Almost every line in the novel where Irene is processing and thinking about the world is layered with this added internal regulation and judgment. This reflects the internal struggle of Irene to rationalize her own prejudices against herself and try and repress her own desires through the lens of social conformity. There is no scene that better highlights this internal struggle than the ending of the novel. Prior to this, Irene begins to be resentful of Clare’s perceived perfection, and suspects that she may be having an affair with her husband. The book ends with Clare falling from a window and dying. However what makes this ending so compelling is the fact that we the readers are unable to clearly tell who or what it was that caused Clare to fall because of the way Irene describes it. “Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene’s placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. Irene wasn’t sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost. What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backwards? Certainly one or the other. Not – But she mustn’t, she warned herself, think of that.” (Larsen 272)

We see coming to head all the turmoil and conflicting emotions Irene harbors for Clare. Irene is describing her as white, bright, and a torturing loveliness, thus highlighting the aspects of

Clare that conform to social expectations of beauty, but at the same time are the aspects of her that Irene most notices. The line between reverence and jealousy is so utterly blurred. This is further exemplified by the ambiguity over what caused Clare to fall. This is a crucial detail, as whoever or whatever responsible could be viewed as representative of the point of the novel. If it was an accident, then Clare's death can be viewed as a result of her own foolhardiness. If the husband who pushed Clare, then it's the abuse and manipulation of women, and the failure and struggle to express personal freedom within the limiting confines of societal norms of gender and race. However, if it was Irene who pushed Clare, we then see how Irene's internal identity became projected onto everything Clare had come to represent, and thus how Irene was unable to accept it, needing to destroy it to preserve her own understanding and rationalization of herself. Irene herself is vague about her own culpability, and in the end Clare and everything that she represents is dead.

Conclusion

Despite Clare's striving towards a reclamation of freedom, in a society like Ferguson describes – one that defines freedom based on “moral” conformity (an alignment of race and gender based on given societal roles) – social freedom as defined by the Pursuit of Happiness cannot be possible for those who do not already hold all the power. In the opening of W.E.B. Du Bois's collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, he states that:

“The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize

America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He 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)

Du Bois opens this book of essays with a very interesting view and statement of the dichotomy between blackness and being an American – one we see reflected in *Passing*. Being free is integral with the American identity, and being free means having opportunities. But if one does not have opportunity, can one truly be free? Can they consider themselves in alignment with the American identity without freedom?

This is a point that is even further explored through *Passing*, for while Du Bois acknowledges the dichotomy between blackness and the American definition of freedom through the Pursuit of Happiness, he does so through the perspective of being a black man and expressions of masculinity – which is defined as being able to express ownership, property, and freely pursue American Happiness. Larsen goes even further with her portrayed conflict and understanding of the role of black motherhood, and the unique limitations it entails. With Clare, we see an attempt to live the American dream of freedom, however this is done at the sacrifice of not only her own blackness, but also at the disregard of her role as a black mother and all the connotations and denotations that follow that role as outlined by Spillers. There is no way to be both a black mother and free in American society. This is especially made apparent in the way the subject of race is often approached from the perspective and benefit of men to the exclusion

and further oppression of women, who thus are unable to have their voices heard, unable to have property, and thus are limited from expressions of freedom that define America.

The American identity is one that is very much wrapped around the concept of freedom. However, it is done so in a way that serves to benefit those already in positions of social and economic power, and thus encourage this status quo through oversimplified expected societal roles that work to the detriment of minorities. We can see this idea of freedom and its paradox being engaged by Larsen through Irene and Clare, where two women have their bodies, futures, and womanhood being viewed and analyzed as if it were something apart from themselves – something that signifies their access to or restriction from certain freedoms. What is most interesting is that neither woman is really free. They both are trapped within their expected roles as American women. Nella Larsen's work isn't just a commentary on the fallacy and pitfalls of standards of freedom, and it is as much an internal struggle the characters face as it is an external. The pressures of maintaining the status quo and living to serve expectations placed upon them are so deeply ingrained into the mind of our focal character Irene that it's nearly impossible to read the novel without acknowledging her struggles. She battles to rationalize the irrational and the false, and come to an understanding of her place in society as a woman, a person of color, and an American.

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