
Beyond Bourdieu: Rethinking Taste, Race, and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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Abstract

Nella Larsen's *Passing* revolves tightly around Irene Redfield, whose chance encounter with her estranged childhood friend, Clare Kendry, awakens in her a destructive fixation. Light-skinned enough to pass as white in the 1920s, Clare lives an extravagant life with her racist husband, John Bellew, who remains unaware of his wife's racial ancestry till the end of the narrative. Though *Passing* has received considerable scholarly attention for its exploration of racial identity, gender, and sexuality, there remains a gap in the attention paid to the novel's proposition that fabrication of taste appropriate to the prevailing social standard could mask and transcend racial boundaries.

In "The Aristocracy of Culture," the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposes that taste is shaped by and confined to what he refers to as "the cultural capital", which comprises both one's social origins and education level. I argue that Larsen's *Passing* disrupts this Bourdieusian treatment of taste by presenting Clare, who, despite being born into a working-class family with no prominent education, manages to cultivate a facade of taste that lives up to the expectations and standards of the upper echelons of white society.

Keywords: Nella Larsen, *Passing*, Pierre Bourdieu, Race, Taste

Introduction

"The Aristocracy of Culture" by Pierre Bourdieu has established itself as the starting point for discussing taste and its social determinants. While vastly read, applied, and discussed, few critics paid enough attention to how whiteness is intrinsic to Bourdieu's concept of taste. He draws his analysis based on the observation samples that include men across various classes in a stratified society but neglects to consider the influence of gender and race on the formation of taste. In this context, women of color experience a *double exclusion* from his analysis. Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) is a prime example that could address Bourdieu's racial blind spot. I argue that Larsen's *Passing* disrupts the Bourdieusian

treatment of taste through Clare Kendry, who-despite lacking the traditional ‘cultural capital’ that Bourdieu emphasizes- actively cultivates a facade of taste that lives up to the expectations and standards of the upper echelons of white society. Larsen, therefore, makes the case that racial anxieties compel individuals to construct a carefully crafted persona as an “outer shell” and, therefore, challenges the notion that taste is solely determined by one’s educational background and family origins.

Bourdieu’s Distinction: Taste as a Tool of Social Classification

“The Aristocracy of Culture” is the second chapter of Bourdieu’s larger work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979), which comprises his studies of French culture and political taste in the 1960s. The book has been hailed as the single most crucial monograph of post-war sociology published worldwide. Traditionally, taste has been viewed as a product of personal whims and fancies, making it difficult to discuss its formation and implications. Bourdieu rejects the notion that taste is a natural, innate gift or idiosyncratic. His observation instead concludes that the judgments of taste are, in essence, acts of social positioning. In his surveys, Bourdieu found a strong correlation between cultural practices (or the corresponding opinions) and educational capital (measured by qualifications), as well as social origin (measured by father’s occupation) (Bourdieu 13). As a result, he proposes that our taste is shaped by and confined to what he describes as ‘Cultural Capital’, which encompasses our educational background, cultural knowledge, and exposure to the arts.

Believing music to be “the pure art par excellence,” Bourdieu built his survey on musical works in relation to class partitions. He further expanded his research to include a variety of areas including movies, sports activities, literary prizes, paintings, and subjects that would create aesthetically beautiful photos. In his documentations, activities like “listening to the most ‘highbrow’ radio stations, [...] visiting art galleries, and knowledge of painting-features [...] are strongly linked to educational capital, [and] set the various classes and class fractions in a clear hierarchy” (Bourdieu 14). His surveys led him to identify three zones of interest, which roughly correspond to educational levels and social classes. “‘Legitimate’ taste, i.e., the taste for legitimate works; ‘Middle brow’ taste, which brings together the minor works of the major arts; and finally, ‘Popular’ taste, represented here by the choice of works of so-called ‘light’ music or classical music devalued by popularization” (Bourdieu 16).

Bourdieu concludes that the upper class is capable of imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products by dictating its ‘pure gaze.’ People of higher social standing, often benefiting from better education, generally enjoy greater exposure and access to “legitimate” art forms. As he asserts, “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish

themselves by the distinctions they make” (Bourdieu 6). Within this framework, taste becomes a class marker, whereby the music one listens to or the material they choose for their clothing, separates the gifted minority from the undifferentiated masses. Thus, inclusion in the dominant upper-class circle, the gatekeepers of what is considered beautiful and refined, requires mastery of a cipher or code that remains inaccessible to those who lack the proper cultural knowledge and exposure.

Racial Omissions in Bourdieu’s Theories of Taste

Bourdieu’s surveys predominantly focus on a seemingly homogenous male experience in which whiteness operates as the unmarked category. How gender affects his classification is difficult to figure out as he often considers categories based on an individual’s education, occupation, and class of origin. Thus, he overlooks the role gender plays in how particular objects, activities, or trends are received by women versus their reception among men. He occasionally acknowledges gender differences in areas like cinema-going, reading of sensational weeklies, or the judgment of photogenic objects where he notes that statistically “women are much more likely than men to manifest their repugnance toward the repugnant, horrible or distasteful object” (Bourdieu 39). However, these isolated observations fail to address the broader influence of gender on taste formation and perception across various cultural domains.

While gender receive somewhat limited attention from Bourdieu, his studies suffer a near-total absence of any analysis regarding race. This shortcoming persisted when Bourdieusian concepts were imported into the United States. Retaining this focus, scholars often prioritized “social class as the stratifying factor in society and ignoring race as an equally important and intersecting dimension”—either omitting it altogether or reducing it to a secondary factor (Richards 279-280). Consequently, his innovative research could be marked as “color-blind, or more precisely, race-evasive” (Richards 281).

Bourdieu’s blindness to race could be particularly problematic when considering artistic movements like Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement, which centered on Black experiences and their engagement with arts, beauty, and refined taste. Archival records demonstrate how, among black people, observing “the fashion of mainstream society” and replicating them in their own ways has long been a mode of traversing race and class (Way 540). Fashion and appearance played a significant role during the Harlem Renaissance. Knowing that “the right look” held immense power as a “mediator between the self and the larger social environment,” black women used “dressing up to negotiate passing across class and race” (Way 541). Spaces like Seventh Avenue in Harlem and events like “theater, church, clubs, and parties” became stages for fashionable displays, where women found the opportunity to expand their cultural competence as well as their social circles (Way 543).

Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), a product of Harlem Renaissance literature uses the tropes of women's engagement with fashion and their attention to social events to problematize Bourdieu's racial blind spot. Her novel proposes that the racial anxiety of Black women under a dominant white gaze could disrupt Bourdieu's theory of taste formation since -despite their weak cultural capital- characters like Clare and Irene strategically "calibrate their [appearance, style and] clothing when negotiating the white urban gaze" (Way 543).

The Performance of Taste and Appearance in *Passing*

Passing revolves tightly around Irene Redfield, whose chance encounter with her estranged childhood friend, Clare Kendry, leads to dramatic turns. Light-skinned enough to pass as white in the 1920s, Clare lives a seemingly glamorous life with her husband, John Bellew, a virulently racist "international banking agent" who remains unaware of his Clare's race throughout the narrative (Larsen 35). While Larsen critiques the common practice of passing as a means of racial uplift by sending Clare down a dangerous path toward her tragic death, she carefully delineates the strategic performances required for successful passing. One such strategy that Irene and Clare both employ is cultivating the persona of bourgeois women by learning how to dress and what social and cultural activities to take part in. Their carefully constructed image emphasizes social refinement and stands in stark contrast to a Bourdieusian perspective on taste, which suggests that the absence of 'Cultural Capital' would render such successful assimilation for Black women of this background highly improbable, if not impossible.

Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield both engage in passing, albeit in different ways. Occupying an extremely precarious position, "Clare is not a member of the rising Black bourgeoisie nor was she ever a member of the aspiring middle classes" (Brody 1056). "She rose rapidly, readily 'passed' and in so doing surpassed Irene in terms of class and material wealth" (Brody 1056). For Clare, racial passing guarantees a lavish lifestyle away from the poverty she grew up in. Her passing, therefore, is a matter of both race and class mobility.

Meanwhile, Irene, who grew up in the same neighborhood as Clare, "consistently aligns herself with conservative and bourgeois elements in American society and views her friend Clare as an 'exotic other'" (Brody 1055). Although she occasionally passes as white "for the sake of convenience" in a few public places, her primary aim is to achieve upward class mobility within the black community (Larsen 104). Both women, however, meticulously construct and maintain the appearance of bourgeoisie refinement to guarantee their desired form of passing: Clare by learning how to dress and act like the upper echelons of white society, and Irene, by mastering the social behavior of a bourgeois woman. Their performances directly contradict Bourdieu's analysis of working-class taste, which emphasizes the "subordination of form to function" (Bourdieu 4). Clare and Irene prioritize aesthetic and social displays over practicality. Adopting the trappings of the bourgeois class

is their primary means of moving up the social ladder in a society stratified by race and class.

Larsen's descriptions of these women's world are elaborate and exquisite- what Claudia Tate believes to be "obvious artificiality" arguing that the novel's "social pretentiousness is not, as critics have frequently said, a deficiency of Larsen's artistic vision but an intentional stylistic devise" (Tate 597). However, the exaggerated description of the materialistic aspects of their lives is Larsen's way of showing how, despite lacking proper educational background and social origins, Clare and Irene need to go the extra mile to put on a convincing "outer shell" whereby they gain acceptance into the race and class they desire to (Larsen 113).

Of Clare's childhood and her parents, we know very little, however, enough to prove the absence of any adequate education or a fine household environment that would typically cultivate sophisticated taste. Her white grandfather, once well-off, had a scandalous relationship with a black woman, leading to her father's birth. There might have been an inheritance at some point, but somehow, it disappeared, leaving her father without the social advantages her grandfather once held. Irene gives us an account of what Clare's childhood was like by describing how she remembers Clare as "a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her" (Larsen 4). Bob Kendry had gone to college but had wound up a janitor, and "a very inefficient one at that" (Larsen 21). There is no mention of how or when Clare's mother passed away. We just know that she "would have run away if she hadn't died," which suggests that it happened in Clare's childhood before her father got killed. (Larsen 27).

The early death of Clare's father moved her away from the predominantly Black neighborhood in Chicago. Her upbringing was then taken over by her father's aunts, who strictly forbade her from disclosing her race to others. Upon her reunion with Irene, Clare recounts how she had to suppress her past and conceal her race when she was in Aunt Grace and Aunt Edna's custody. In her words, the aunts "didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced—ruined, they called It—a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn't forgive the tarbrush. They forbade [her] to mention Negroes to the neighbors or even to mention the South Side." (Larsen 41).

However, Clare states that the omission was of great value to her when the chance to get away came. When her husband, then a schoolboy acquaintance of a neighbor, "turned up from South America with untold gold, there was no one to tell him that [Clare] was colored" (Larsen 42). By the time she eloped with her husband at eighteen, she had cut ties with the South Side and gradually integrated herself into the exclusive social circles reserved for the upper class in the 1920s. Given Clare's history, the elegant appearance, style, and

dresses defy the expectations of Bourdieu's analysis. Her case demonstrates how economic, social, and racial factors, beyond Bourdieu's class-centered framework, can construct taste and manipulate it.

For Irene, and by extension for other characters, Clare's clothing is the first thing registered, and like other black women of the time, it is used "as a barometer of acceptance or rejection" (Way 565). The first time Irene sees Clare after twelve years, on the roof of the Drayton, on a scorching hot day in Chicago, she describes her as a "sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days" (Larsen 15). Throughout the novel, Larsen repeatedly draws attention to Clare's appearance, elaborately detailing her features and attire.

This image of opulent elegance is a stark contrast to Irene's childhood memory of Clare, who had to take money out of the dollar that was her weekly wage "to buy the material for that pathetic little red frock" to wear to her Sunday school's picnic. (Larsen 10). Thus, appearance has always been Clare's priority, as though she had learned, from a young age, the power of constructing a visual identity to achieve what she desires in life. Her later appearance in luxurious places with white companions, which fueled rumors about her lifestyle, further solidify this pattern. Irene herself recalls a specific rumor about Clare being seen "at the dinner hour in a fashionable hotel in company with another woman and two men, all of them white. And dressed!" (Larsen 20). These rumors, with their implications of Clare's lifestyle and relationships, provide a clearer picture of the impact of appearance on her.

Irene, too, understands the significance of appearance, even when acknowledging that "appearances had a way sometimes of not fitting facts" (Larsen 28). The skillful manipulation of appearance that Clare embodies is her key to successful passing. If appearances may not fit facts, then Clare, who is an artist, and in Emily Bernard's introduction to the book "perhaps a con artist," can forge appearance and construct a persona, as masterfully as she can forge her background (xiii). While she admits she never had to say much about her family, Clare supposes that having had to provide some plausible tale to account for herself, she "could have done it quite creditably, and credibly" (Larsen 26). Larsen further emphasizes the performative nature of Clare's appearance when Irene notes that "about her clung that dim suggestion of polite insolence with which a few women are born and which some acquire with the coming of riches or importance" (Larsen 29). The word "acquire" calls attention to a conscious adoption of this air-something Clare was not born with yet had to fake due to the pressure of race and class.

In *Passing*, both smoking and drinking tea are the hallmarks of upper-class circles and receive special attention from Clare and Irene. Irene escapes the extreme heat in Chicago

by getting herself into a cab and asking the driver to take her somewhere she could drink tea. On the roof of Drayton, she unexpectedly meets Clare, and both women drink tea and smoke cigarettes while speaking about their lives. Larsen contrasts this with the character of Gertrude, the middle-class light-skinned woman who is married to a butcher. To Irene, Gertrude's "over-trimmed georgette crepe dress [being] too short [...], her plump hands [being] newly but not competently manicured" mark her as an outsider. On top of this unflattering description, Irene emphasizes that "she isn't smoking", which contributes to Gertrude's inability to perform the social codes that Clare and Irene have mastered. (Larsen 36).

Larsen remains committed to a distinguished description of the stylish tea-drinking ritual, emphasizing its social importance. Tea consumption rose during the 1920s with Prohibition, when the American socialites "began looking for alternatives to wine, beer, and other alcohol" (The History). Both Clare and Irene treat tea drinking with elegance and class. When hosting Irene and Gertrude, Clare pours "the rich amber fluid from the tall glass pitcher into stately slim glasses, which she handed to her guests, and then offered them lemon or cream and tiny sandwiches or cakes" (Larsen 37). Also, to Irene, "pouring tea properly and nicely was an occupation that required a well-balanced attention" (Larsen 92).

Larsen's emphasis on Clare's appearance culminates in the scene where she joins Irene and Brian for the Negro Welfare League dance. Irene remembers Clare as "exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn smoothly back into a small twist at the nape of her neck" (Larsen 75). Before her Irene felt "dowdy and commonplace" (75). Clare's "decorative qualities" always draw Irene's, and by extension, everyone else's attention (90). She is always over the top, a bit too something for Irene's judgment and taste. She has a trick men would fall for, a trick that has seen her rise through class. When Brian invites Clare to the tea party that Irene is hosting for Hugh Wentworth, a move that sparks suspicion of Brian's affair with Clare, Clare's appearance embodies beauty and class. "She was wearing a superlatively simple cinnamon-brown frock which brought out all her vivid beauty, and a little golden bowl of a hat. Around her neck hung a string of amber beads that would easily have made six or eight like one Irene owned" (Larsen 94). In the final part of the book, "radiant in a shining red gown," Clare shows up to the Redfields to accompany them to Freeland's party- an event that marks the last moments of her life. (110)

Conclusion

Passing traces, the lives of middle-class black families in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City at a time when the one-drop rule and the principle of invisible blackness were at their highest. Clare transports herself by appropriating a white identity, which goes

hand in hand with constructing the kind of taste that would seamlessly integrate her into the role she opts for: the wife of a prosperous upper-class white man living an opulent lifestyle. In this context, fabricating taste becomes a tool for Clare, allowing her to move the color line, reshape her racial consciousness, and gain access to a world otherwise closed off to her.

Larsen's *Passing* confronts the race-evasive approach of Bourdieusian scholarship through Clare, and Irene. Despite lacking the 'Cultural Capital' Bourdieu describes, they cultivate the tastes and behaviors that would facilitate their integration into the racial and social circles which they desperately seek inclusion in. While taste is undeniably linked to educational background and social origin, Larsen invites us to consider the complex ways in which racial anxieties and societal pressures would compel black women to adopt the taste of the dominant class as a survival strategy. This perspective remains relevant today, as marginalized individuals constantly have to employ assimilative strategies - from adopting specific styles of dress to modifying speech patterns and altering self-presentation- so as to safeguard their social and professional standing.

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