

Constructing identities in a  
segregated society in Nella Larsen's  
Passing: The importance of teaching  
literature in an EFL classroom

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## **Abstract**

This essay discusses the main characters Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry and how their identities are constructed in the novel *Passing* by Nella Larsen. The purpose for this essay is to examine how the main characters construct their identities in a segregated society by using intersectionality theory as a critical analytical tool. The essay argues that the tragic ending in the novel as the culmination of how Irene and Clare's identities are constructed as African American women through the power structures of class, sexuality and race in a segregated society. The essay not only discuss the complexities of the protagonist identities, but it also has a didactic component which discusses the beneficial factors of using the novel *Passing* as a resource in an EFL classroom, as well as the novel gives students an intercultural awareness. The findings of this essay infer that the ambivalence of defining their identities culminates in this tragedy.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.1 Aim and scope.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.2 Background.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. Previous research.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. Theoretical framework.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4. Analysis.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4.1 Intersect of race, class and sexuality.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4.2 The ending.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>5. Implication for education.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5.1 Lesson plan.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>6. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>7. Works cited.....</b>	<b>24</b>

## 1. Introduction

Nella Larsen's critically acclaimed novel *Passing* explores the outcomes of the consequences of racial 'passing' for main characters Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. The practices of a person crossing the colour line attempting to claim recognition in another racial group than the one they are believed to belong to, undetected, is known as 'passing'. The story revolves around how their identities are constructed in the segregated Harlem, New York society of the 1920s. Arguably, the 1920s in America was a period of serious discussion of the racial boundaries or so-called colour line between whites and black. This discussion was triggered by the migration of blacks from the south to the northern parts of America. During this period, black artists mostly made up of poets, novelists and essayist as well as other artist congregated around Harlem in a bid to promote black culture and arts. This congregation gave rise to what is known as The Harlem Renaissance (1006, Mays).

Larsen's novel is a part of the Harlem renaissance and was written in the Jim Crow era, an era that marked another epoch in the discrimination against African Americans. (Carter, 228). In the late 1870s during the reconstruction era the southern states passed the Jim Crow law which separated whites from people of colour in schools, transportation, etc. These laws regulated and shaped the segregation between white Americans and African Americans (Carter, 228). This law enforced stereotypes, racism and power structures, which led to African Americans to be discriminated in society but also a race debate on who is considered coloured. This was determined by if there was an inkling on having a black ancestor (Carter, 228).

Larsen's novel, *Passing* narrated in third person portrays two African American women and their struggle with the complexities of skin colour and racial identity, for instance, both women are very light skinned. However, whereas Irene rarely uses the privilege of passing as white, her friend Clare would not even acknowledge her black heritage at all. For instance, Irene is married to a black complexioned man and live in a predominantly black neighbourhood while her childhood friend Clare is married to a white man and live in a predominantly white neighbourhood and would rather pass off as a white woman in the white

society of New York. Clare's husband too is completely unaware that she is black or coloured because she has carefully hidden that aspect of her heritage from him. He is also racist in his dealings with black people and denigrates Clare when her skin shows any signs of darkening under the sun.

These two women had grown up together, yet they have taken radically different paths in their lives, as they rekindled their friendship after meeting at a bar which essentially is only for white folks. At first Irene is somewhat fascinated by Clare's reckless lifestyle particularly how she passes herself off as a white woman, not only to her racist husband but also the society. Furthermore, both characters deal with the experience of passing as white but whereas Irene does it rarely, she still embraces her African American background.

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that literature and specifically postcolonial literature has a place in the EFL classroom. Therefore, it will focus on the main character's construction of identities but also on didactics and the benefits of teaching literature such as *Passing* in an EFL classroom. Teachers in Sweden are required to follow the curriculum by the Swedish National Agency for Education which states that upper secondary students who are taking the course English 7 are to receive "[t]exts of different kinds and for different purposes," (11) and "[c]ontemporary and older literature and other fiction in various genres" (11). The novel *Passing* would fit into what is required above as it is a provocative text that would, as an example, allow a teacher to take up the important issues of identity, as well as assist the importance to have an awareness of interculturalism. Furthermore, the aim stated in the curriculum stipulates that teaching the students English should ". . . relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge." (1) . Nella Larsen's *Passing* would facilitate a teacher being able to take up the question of identity, as it can relate to students own experience, and also give them an understanding and respect for all cultures. Therefore, I argue that teaching the novel *Passing* is beneficial for students as it gives them an intercultural perspective and it is an effective resource in the classroom.

### **1.1 Aim and scope**

The purpose of this essay is to examine the novel *Passing* through the theoretical lenses of intersectionality by conducting a textual analysis to understand how the main characters construct their identities in a segregated society. The focus will be on how the

novel can be interpreted by using intersectionality as a theoretical framework. Therefore, the novel will be interpreted by using aspects from intersectionality to examine the novel. Moreover, this essay will also focus on the didactic aspects of teaching *Passing* in the EFL classroom by arguing that the novel *Passing* is not only an effective teaching resource in the classroom but that it is also beneficial for students to relate and widen their perspective of the world. This will be done by referring not only to Swedish National Agency for Education guidelines and curriculum but also using articles: i.e. “Teaching Young Adult Literature” by Mike Robert and “Ethnic Literature in the Classroom” by Arpi Sarafian to support this argument.

## 1.2 Background

The novel *Passing* tells the story of two childhood friends who grew up together in Harlem, New York, who then later rekindle their friendship. In this essay, I argue that the protagonist ambivalence of defining their identities culminates in this tragedy which is obscured in the novel's three parts. Part one is called “Encounter” which delves into Irene receiving a letter from Clare which triggers her to remember the encounter she had with Clare in the Drayton hotel in Chicago. Before this encounter the last time they had seen each other was when Clare was sent to live with her aunts after her father's death. Thus, this encounter in Chicago is when Irene comprehends that Clare is “passing” as white and later decide to try to avoid socialising with Clare. Furthermore, Irene finds out that Clare's white husband is unaware of her ethnicity which makes Irene uncomfortable. Irene's uneasiness intensifies when she has coffee at Clare's home, and Clare's husband arrives spewing racist comments unaware that the women in front of him are of colour. Part one of the book displays the protagonist's complex struggles with identity in particular Irene. She criticises Clare for “passing” which makes Irene feel uncomfortable and petrified to be connected with Clare yet Irene herself chooses to “pass” when she enters the Drayton hotel which does not allow coloured people in their establishment. The encounter displays Irene's contradictions, yet it also displays the difficulties of biracial women in America to identify themselves when you have to choose between being black or white.

Irene and her husband's relationship becomes more dissociated throughout the novel. Paranoia plagues Irene as she becomes more concerned that her husband finds Clare more attractive than her and Irene becomes more certain that they are having an affair. In addition, Clare's husband becomes aware of Irene and Clare's race when he bumps into Irene with her friend who is noticeably black. Nonetheless, Irene decides not to warn Clare of her husband's

awareness given that Irene is scared that her husband will leave her for Clare. The novel concludes with the tragic event of Clare's death when her husband rushes in expressing his racist views towards Clare who is standing by an open window. Precipitously, Clare falls to her death and whether she herself fell or was pushed is unknown. In this essay, I argue that the ambivalence of defining their identities culminates in this tragedy which perhaps could have been avoided if the two women were not "passing", and in particular Clare who only "passes" towards whiteness and had no bridge to "pass" back to blackness when needed.

## 2. Previous research

The novel *Passing* has received vast critical acclaim and has been examined by literary critics through different lenses. One that is significant is the article "The Shadow of Lynching in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" by Kangyl Ko. In the article, Ko mentions McDowell's study of the black female's sexuality in the novel *Passing*, and how there is more to the main theme which Ko states is "the safe and familiar plot of racial passing" (Ko, 234) which most other critics agree with (234). Ko examines the hidden narrative of the uncultivated lynching which is linked to the black female sexuality in *Passing* as well as the black female bodies in the Jim Crow era in America (234).

Ko essentially means that Larsen utilized *Passing* as a platform to delve and challenge the dominant narrative on lynching by white writers but also the contradiction made by black male writers. (234) For instance, Ko, disagrees with W.E.B Du Bois' creation of black Christ to justify the white lynching narrative. While examining different stories by W.E.B Du Bois, Ko insists that there is symbolic evidence of black Christ in his stories where the black Christ implicitly blesses black male's interracial desires, however, black females are exploited and disregarded on their sexual desires. Thus, the counter-lynching narrative is as problematic as the white lynching narrative, because of the absence of black females. (237) As Ko states;

"the black woman's devalued position as the opposite of white womanhood made possible the narrative casting of white women as the ultimate symbol of desirable womanhood and civilization; the black woman thus must be evacuated from the ritual of lynching and her victimhood of sexual violence ignored. After all, the white lynching narrative replaces black women's victimhood with their culpability." (235)

In other words, white women's valued positions represent their desirability but as Ko mentions white women's sexuality has progressed and so has the lynching discourse. With this Ko means, that in white lynching discourse white men have the privileges while black men are preconcerted as rapist hence, stigmatization between white women and black men sexual relations. Further, while the counter-lynching discourse normalise black men's interracial heterosexuality and their privileges and control over black women's sexuality, Ko insists that both discourses "reduce racism to the problem between black men and white men, obfuscating intraracial conflicts, especially provoked by gender differences." (237).

Ko argues that the lynching discourse relates to the novel *Passing*, as the narrative clarifies the black women in the novel of their perception and self-consciousness of their own body (237). Further, Ko mentions re-racialization that happens in the novel which she relates it to the hurtful feeling Irene keeps having when Clare mentions Chicago, as it re-enacts awful memories of the horrible violence between white and black people but also the time when Clare's husband kept spewing racists slurs in her presence (239). For Clare, Chicago is filled with happy memories, however, for Irene it evokes awful memories. The memories of Chicago causes Irene's body to shake as it infers to her having a mild panic attack. However, I disagree with the analysis that the central theme of the novel is the lynching discourse and that Clare's representation as a martyr indicates the lynching discourse *Passing*. I argue that the protagonist ambivalence of defining their identities culminates in Clare's tragic death.

Additionally, Ko continues by stating that "Irene's entrance into a café in Chicago's Drayton Hotel is significant as her experience of racialization is deeply linked with the dominant white lynching discourse." (239). Essentially, when Irene went into the hotel to get away from the heat, she chose to pass as white, since the hotel is only for white people. However, when her eyes connected with a white woman who is studying Irene with her stare, causes Irene to panic that she feels throughout her body. Irene realises that her attempt, as a biracial woman, to transgress the colour line is impeded by the white women's gaze, Ko states that ". . . lynching was a "routine" response to "black female attempts at education, self- and communal government, suffrage, and other indicators of cultural inclusion and equality" (Wiegman 94)." (241) Thus, the gaze Irene feels is the symbolic lynching she feels of hatred, in addition, to the hatred she feels about herself which is a hateful perception she has of herself and her body.

A crucial part of *Passing* that divides scholars and critics is what caused the death of Clare. According to Ko, Irene and Bellew bear the responsibility of Clare's death. Ko essentially means that Clare's death is connected to lynching and that ". . . Clare's image before her death and the black Christ's image, . . . suggest both Irene and Bellew are responsible for Clare's death." (Ko, 252). In addition, Ko states that Irene and Bellew's need to control Clare's race and class are the liability of her death which connects to lynching. Moreover, Ko argues that because Irene envision Clare's body as mutilated, thus, Irene is depicting Clare's body in connection to white lynching, "At the same time, Clare takes on the figure of the black Christ in the martyr tale that anti-lynching writers created, as mentioned above." (252). In concluding the article, Ko proposes that Clare is represented as a martyr in the novel to critique Du Bois counter-lynching, since Irene's images of lynching indicate the influence of the lynching discourse in the novel *Passing* (252). Ko work bring forth thought-provoking notions, however as mentioned previously to claim that the central theme of the novel is the lynching discourse, is oversimplified of the characters identification of their own self. Therefore, my claim on the character's identification of their own self will be developed in the analysis.

In the article "Reading Race in Nella Larsen's "Passing" and the Rhinelander Case" Rebecca Nisetich state the central theme of race in the novel *Passing* as well as comparing it to the Rhinelander case. This case is mentioned in *Passing* and it correlates to the central themes of the book as it is about a divorce trial between a socialite white man and a biracial woman (345). Additionally, it touches upon the vague legal system on who is considered white or coloured. The Rhinelander case is about Leonard Rhinelander who applied for an annulment against Alice Jones on the bases of racial fraud. He claims that she deceived him by hiding her true race. Therefore, he would not have married her if he had known her true racial identity (345). The trial ruled in favour of Alice as they agreed "with her lawyer's argument that it was not possible for her to have deceived her husband because her "race" was visibly apparent." (345). Nisetich, argues that the Rhinelander case is one of the implicit main themes of the novel as both the novel and the trial illustrate the need Americans had to categorise individuals in the 1920s (345). She claims that even though the case is only mentioned once in the novel, the correlating themes echoes throughout *Passing*. Alice Jones racial identity came into question in the Rhinelander case, at first, she identified as white, but to be able to win the case Alice and her attorney decided that she would identify as black. To do this Alice had to submit her naked body as her attorney asked the jury, hence the attorney relied on the ideas that race can be seen in the appearance. Even though she won the trial, the

verdict also rejected the complexities of one's identity as the verdict rejected Alice's ability to identify as white. Nisetich means that this correlates with the novel as she claims that Larsen used the theme of the case in the novel; for instance, the character Clare was inspired by Alice's inability to be able to choose her racial identity but also how the case portrayed the ability to be able to read race onto the body. Further, Nisetich concludes that the racial ambiguity in the Rhinelander case is illustrated in *Passing* and that it demonstrates the absurdity of forcing of a racial identity (358). This interpretation of the case similarities to the novel brings forth the claim I mentioned, the difficulties and struggles that biracial women have of having to decide whether to identify as black or white. However, Rebecca Nisetich mentions identity but does not explore the complexities of the main characters identity in the novel.

However, in her own article "A problem of interpretation", Claudia Tate focuses on the jealousy aspect of the story. Tate disagrees with critics who claim that the central theme of the novel is simply about a tragic mulatto passing as white. She claims that ambiguity, intrigue and jealousy plays a large part of the central theme of the novel (597). Irene becomes infatuated with Clare's beauty and starts feeling envious. This feeling intensifies when she becomes suspicious that her husband and Clare is having an affair. This then concludes to the death of Clare, which the story concludes with the tragic end. However, Tate disagrees with this notion, she argues that a tragic "mulatto is a character who "passes" and reveals pangs of anguish resulting from forsaking his or her Black identity." (597) which Tate claims Clare does not reveal any anguish or torment. This essay argues that this perspective simplifies the notion of Clare's identity and but for the fact that her death is also linked to Irene's identity and therefore it disregards the narrative of their intersect identities. Tate argues, that the novel is more of a romance rather than a tragic "mulatto" story, because, the story's main theme centers around Irene jealousy of Clare. Tate state that race is merely a prop to sustain suspense in the novel as she claims that the only time Irene reflects on race is when Clare racial identity portends Irene's class security (598). Therefore, I would argue that both Irene's jealousy towards Clare and her need to maintain her high-class status manifest in her expression of jealousy.

In "Approaching Identity Politics in Literature: Reading, Interpreting, and Teaching Nella Larsen's *Passing*", Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick discusses the difficulties of teaching identity politics of race and gender in the classroom. Chadwick noticed this problem when trying to teach *Passing* in the southern parts of America where race is still an uneasy

discussion (176). In the article Chadwick explores diverse ways of teaching the novel as well as how it can be used to examine our own “gendered, heteronormative, and race conscious (and race divided) world while suggesting approaches to the novel that may prove helpful to other teachers.” (176). Furthermore, Chadwick claims that asking students to construct their own connections to *Passing* helps foster student’s engagement which cultivates students imaginative process (182). Therefore, using *Passing* as a teaching aid would not only foster their engagement but also that it can be used to approach the “intersections of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation” (183) and thus, it will leave the students to reflect and become critical thinkers. Chadwick suggest, a way to foster students analytic abilities is to approach identity politics by interpreting the ending of the novel, thus, “students are formulating an interpretation, they are in the process of figuring out what issues, details, plot developments” (184). Thus, discussing the novel, students are able to question their own beliefs about identity but also their assumption of the characters identity.

Clearly, much of the work on *Passing* hitherto has focused on a number of diverse themes within the novel; however, their research left a gap as none of the them discussed the of theme identity and the importance of using the novel for teaching. For instance, Rebecca Nisetich mentions identity but does not delve into the complexities of the main characters identity and their identity construction. Further, there is little written about the aspect of identity construction, as mentioned previously, researchers use identity as an element to strengthen their thesis as can be seen in Kangyl Ko’s and Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick articles. Moreover, I argue that because this aspect of how their identity is constructed has not been examined with the theoretical lenses of intersectionality, it would be imperative to fill this gap. To be able to understand the main characters Irene’s and Clare’s identities in *Passing*, intersectionality would be able to provide insight as it problematizes the concept of people only having one single identity and how various categories such as sexuality, gender and race intersect.

As mentioned previously, because this essay has a didactic element, I found it vital to review the article “Approaching Identity Politics in Literature: Reading, Interpreting, and Teaching Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick as the research examines pedagogical ways of using *Passing* as a resource to teach in the classroom. Unlike Rebecca Nisetich, who only mentions identity, Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick article is based on her analysis of identity politics in *Passing* in the context of the racial debate in America. Goodspeed-Chadwick article brings forth many interesting ideas, which this essay will build

further on in the implication for education section. However, it is not a substance full enough and has left a gap on the intercultural perspective. I argue that teaching the novel *Passing* is beneficial for students as it gives them an intercultural perspective and using the novel would facilitate that.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for in this essay is intersectionality as it looks to understand the complexities of contemporary society. Intersectionality assumes that identities are multifaceted and that they consist of race, gender, sexuality etc (Collins, 12). The concept of the theory intersectionality is used through a heterogeneous lens, as it was derived from the fact that there was a need for a framework that examined the complex discrimination that black women faced. The term intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to “. . . address the marginalization of Black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics.” (Crenshaw, 303) Essentially, Crenshaw pointed out the structural norm where minorities and especially black women are not included. Thus, Crenshaw states that intersectionality is a tool to expand on what feminist and antiracist theory were not able to, which is to address the suffrage of black women. She argues that the feminist and antiracist theory is a single-axe framework that ignores the intersection of race and gender (311). Furthermore, according to Collins, black women faced discriminatory practices within three major liberation movements namely; the feminist movement, anti-racist movement and the union movement (Collins, 12). These are as per Collins three different and intersecting movements where black women are disregarded as none of the movements fully addressed the discrimination they faced (Collins, 12). Moreover, intersectionality is also rooted in critical race theory and black feminism thus it can be used as a tool to understand the identities of the main characters of the novel *Passing* (Crenshaw, 303).

Crenshaw later elaborated this perception in her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” where she used intersectionality as a framework to examine how women of colour were disregarded in organizations that are for violence against women. In the publication “Demarginalizing” Crenshaw “identifies an antidiscrimination problem that derives from the employment of “single axis frameworks”” (Carbado, 530) to look at the discrimination against black women,

since frameworks that focus primarily on race or sex is not considering that race and sex interrelate and transect in a person's identity. Some scholars and critics assume that because the publications focus on the discrimination against black women and therefore, intersectionality is about black women, race and gender (530), which is a narrow view of intersectionality even though these variables are very prominent in the articles or publication.

Furthermore, Crenshaw's article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." and the publication "Demarginalizing" has steered a movement and a conversation about intersectionality. This occurred through the mention of the two different discourse interventions, which first consists of the exposed establishment discourse that legitimise the existing power relations (Crenshaw, 304). Second is the discourse of resistance which includes feminism and antiracism. Crenshaw states that these reproduce and legitimise the marginalized which include black women (304). Crenshaw continues by stating that the intervention mentioned above is a way to approach intersectionality and insists that there are many ways to approach intersectionality and that it does not deter it from other issues such as other marginalized discourse other than black women's (304).

Intersectionality is not an absolute nor fixed entity; a better approach to understanding intersectionality is to examine its characteristics (304). Intersectionality is a movement which is a constant work-in-progress that can be used to explore uncharted places. Therefore, the power in intersectionality lies in the fact that there is no fixed function rather it is an ongoing process. Sumi Cho counters critics by arguing that because intersectionality has entered a field does not automatically equal that it couldn't enter other fields productively (306). As they conclude "the goal was not simply to understand social relations of power, nor to limit intersectionality's gaze to the relations that were interrogated therein, but to bring the often-hidden dynamics forward in order to transform them." (311). For that reason, the theory intersectionality is a concept that is energised by social change.

In the article "I'm Not Going to Become No Rapper", Niobe Way et al. discuss how the racial identities are developed from a macro perspective. The study is done by interviewing students from different ethnic backgrounds and it is built partially on Erik Erikson work on identity. In "Underscoring the historical and cultural context of identities, Erik Erikson (1968) locates identity development "in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture. . ." (p. 22)." (408). Erikson is essentially saying that our

surroundings, such as socioeconomic backgrounds, culture, religion, etc, intersect to form our core identity. Further, to locate how one's racial identity is constructed the authors mean that social context is imperative to study as they state that racial identity is established in discrimination and oppression from society (407). Furthermore, they define ethnic and racial identity as how one perceives themselves in relation to an "ethnic or racial group belonging or attachment" (408) which research has found grows deeper as one gets older. Moreover, Niobe Way et al. find that one has a stronger sense of belonging and attachment to one's racial or ethnic group when they have a parent or peer support from an ethnic or racial background. However, if an individual is largely met with discrimination and/or stereotypes of that ethnic or racial group, then it is more likely to have a negative impact as they assimilate that (408).

The authors mention Erik Eriksson's study on the process of one's identity which he says is "a process of simultaneous reflection and observation . . . by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them" (p. 22)." (409). Basically, the author explains that identity is not just created by how society perceives you but also developed by one's own reflection and judgement.

In the research, the authors found three stages of how these students' ethnic and racial identities were constructed. The first results showed that "stereotypes about race and ethnicity intersected with those about gender, sexuality, social class, and/or nationality and these intersecting stereotypes shaped adolescents' ethnic and racial identities." (409). Through interviewing students, they found that stereotypes played a role in how they wanted to express themselves through ethnic and racial identities. Secondly, their own ethnic and racial identities are constructed on the difference of the stereotypes on other racial and ethnic groups (415). Lastly, findings reveal that their construction of their identities when they are young is dominated by efforts "to avoid or resist becoming an ethnic or racial stereotype." (409). There is a desire to not become like the 'other' especially with young ethnic minorities. The findings in this article illustrate the need to examine the intersect of stereotypes in the framework of construction and the development of identity. Findings reveal that students construct their identities with the intersect of stereotypes such as religion, class, sexuality, gender, nationality and race.

One of the critical aspects in my analysis of *Passing* from the perspective of intersectionality will focus on the tragic death of Clare and how that is the culmination of the construction of Irene and Clare's identities. I will therefore, also keep in mind the intersect of various categories that Crenshaw mentions such as class, sexuality and race are constructed

categories that intersect in one's identity. In addition, I will use intersectionality to look at how the characters experiences differ based on their overlapping identities.

## 4. Analysis

In the introduction of this essay I presented Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* where the characters Irene and Clare are viewed, and their identities constructed as black women in a segregated society. This section will compare the main characters as they take on different identities even though they are both raised in the same environment. The title refers to the practice of passing and is the key component of the novel. Critics and scholars have focused on race as a major theme of the novel, however, this essay argues that it rather tackles identity issues associated with migration of a time in the American society when people were categorised as either black or white and where black meant degradation while white meant elevation. One of the main characters, Clare, has passed as white for a long time, concealing her identity to her racist husband John Bellew. This is one of the most significant depictions of the novel as her attempt to pass as white is the catalyst for the tragic event of her death. Thus, looking through the lenses of the structure of race, gender and class as espoused by the intersectionality critical perspective, I argue that these three-dimensional variables work together to shape who Irene and Clare are, despite the popular opinion of critics.

### 4.1 The intersect of race, sexuality and class

"This, she reflected, was of a piece with all that she knew of Clare Kendry. Stepping always on the edge of danger. Always aware, but not drawing back or turning aside. Certainly not because of any alarms or feeling of outrage on the part of others." (4)

The epigraph portrays the protagonist Irene's thought on Clare as she receives the letter from her. In this scene she recalls Clare from when she was young as she remembers her being someone selfish, and a risktaker and someone who has "no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire" (Larsen, 5). Irene even recalls how Clare's eye turned cold as her father died. Her remembrance of Clare gives the impression that Irene is jealous and envious, and this becomes clearer as the story unfolds. Irene spends a lot of time thinking and criticizing Clare for the other things she does as well. For instance, Irene criticizes the way Clare lives

off passing as white and not telling her husband about her race. Unlike Irene, Clare is happy to meet her again and is the one initiating the contact between them. In contrast to Irene, she has no inner conflict when it comes to pass herself off as white. Clare does not feel compelled to belong to the African American community. Additionally, as both the African American community and the white community are held down by the idea of race, she is then forging the power structure, as the power of intersectionality lies in the fact there is no fixed identity (Crenshaw, 304). This is proven because Clare has no fear abandoning the black, rather her aim for 'passing' is to climb the social ladder which she does when she marries her rich white husband.

However, Irene takes advantage to do the same as well when she thinks it would benefit her. For instance, Irene decided to relax in a hotel for only white people because she did not want to be "soiled from contact with so many sweating bodies." (Larsen, 10) Although, Irene passes as white when it is convenient for her but unlike Clare, Irene identifies with her black heritage. Irene sees herself through her relationship with others and identifies herself from a class perspective and would rather pass off as white than be with the sweating mass. She is married to a black man who is a doctor which provides her a certain lifestyle, so she compares herself with those that she meets. As the author Way et al. mentions racial identities are constructed on the difference of the stereotypes on other racial groups (Ways et al. 415). For example, this is evident when she meets Gertrude Martin her initial thought is that Gertrude's husband "looked as if her husband might be a butcher" (47) and she continues by thinking that Gertrude's prettiness had faded. This is made clear when Clare invites her and Gertrude into her home and they both start discussing their fears of birthing a dark child, which leaves Irene feeling alone and outnumbered, yet she confirms in a tone "she was proud: "One of my boys is dark"." (50) Irene is left struggling with resentment which could indicate that Irene does not feel at home in her black identity. This feeling of conflict and anger also happened when she was in the hotel for only white people, and a woman was bluntly staring at her which reminded her of that "disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar" (16) feeling.

Furthermore, sexuality is also represented in the protagonists; however, as Crenshaw states, focusing primarily on sex is not relevant as sex and race interrelate and transect in a person's identity (Carbado, 530). Therefore, it would make sense to also discuss Irene's conflicted feelings of her own sexuality as she hides behind the notion that her friendship with Clare is based on race. Hence, Irene's conflicting desire for Clare is what keeps the notion

that the friendship is based on race going as she tries to hide her homosexuality. Irene keeps describing Clare as “incredibly beautiful” (65) and keeps obsessing over her eyes and spend more time thinking about Clare than her husband. However, her obsession turns into jealousy as she starts fearing that her husband might also feel attracted to Clare. Which leads Irene into thinking that they are having an affair. She is afraid that “he would throw everything aside and rush off to that remote place of his heart’s desire” (90) which leads her to begin resenting her husband’s attitude. It is relevant to be aware that this was the 1920s where black women were erotized. Therefore, on the one hand Irene is able to express her desire and on the other, she is unable to act on her expression to be sexual. The restriction black women faced in the 1920s is clear race, sexuality and class intersect. This is evident when Irene reflects on her son “I’m terribly afraid he’s picked up some queer ideas about things” (87), as she is trying to discuss with her husband, she is reflecting her insecurities on to her son.

Eventually, Clare leaves the black community and marries into a privileged white community. It is interesting to note that even though Clare has no inner conflict to passing, the intersect of her identity as a mixed woman gave her more privileges in the black community. For instance, when Clare invites herself to the Negro Welfare League party she is described as an enigmatic beautiful woman as she receives attention from black men (142), whereas with her own husband she is not given the same attention. Her ability as Irene’s to function to be able to be in either of the communities best suited to them gives them privileges and status. However, both Irene and Clare obtain privilege as black women; for instance, Irene is able to hold onto what she finds valuable which is her class status that she is only able to obtain through her black husband. Clare on the other hand finds her appeal and attractiveness is not as evident in the white community as in the black community which deals with colourism. Nonetheless, both of the protagonists receive privilege in the white community; for instance, Clare is able to climb the social ladder from the bottom as a white woman, which privilege she would not have had if she identified as a black woman. This points to Crenshaw’s argument that black women are the most disadvantaged in terms of race and gender and (Crenshaw, 304).

#### **4.2 The ending**

Throughout the novel Irene desires stability, she finds prides in her black heritage, whereas, Clare takes risks, and does not find pride in her black heritage. These are the few

differences that Irene points out throughout the novel and Clare's emergence in her life jeopardies everything that is important for Irene. For that reason, Irene becomes confused by her sexuality and becomes repressed when Clare is the hindrance of her class status and stability. Irene's insecurity with her race, sexuality and class suggests that she may have been the one who pushed Clare out of the window. It began when Clare's husband had found out that Clare was black, as she stood by the open window, Irene ran to her and thought "She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (176). The word "free" is very interesting because free would mean crossing back to the colour line (ibid.), Clare going back as black but also Irene's paranoia might have played out as well of Clare and Brian's supposed affair which might lead to Brian leaving her for Clare. Irene is also infuriated that Clare is smiling as she runs across the room and puts her hand on Clare's arm, "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (ibid.). The intersect of Irene's identity as a black woman was at stake, and Clare was her hindrance. Whereas, Clare seemed to have expected this fateful ending as she "stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity (. . .) as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her." (ibid.). This is where Clare realise that the disadvantage black women had in a society not being able to 'pass' unsuspectingly. Another evidence that Irene might have pushed her out of the window is because she "wasn't sorry" (177). One might argue, if she didn't push her, why is she reflecting on that and feeling that she is not sorry. In addition, she mutters to herself "It was" (177) a terrible accident, Larsen put the word 'was' in cursive suggesting that it was a terrible accident to have let her into her life. That Clare was a danger to the identity Irene had constructed was suggested after Clare fell, the first feeling was the dread that Clare might not have died, this becomes more evident when it gets confirmed to her that Clare died as she "struggled against the sob of thankfulness that rose in her throat" (180).

## **5. Implication for education**

In this section I will present arguments on how literature can be beneficial in the classroom, particularly how *Passing* can be used in the upper secondary school. Given the content of the novel, the novel would be able to facilitate the requirements of The National

Swedish Agency for Education as well as promote The National Swedish Agency for Education core values which consist of intercultural developing and democratic beliefs. Using the article's "Teaching Young Adult Literature" by Mike Robert and "Ethnic Literature in the Classroom" by Arpi Sarafian as well as referring to The Swedish National Agency for Education which is the predominant administrative authority for education, I will examine how effective literature is in the education process. In addition, I will present the importance of teaching *Passing* by Nella Larsen as it gives students an intercultural perspective, which would help develop students critical thinking skills.

In the article "Teaching Young Adult Literature" by Mike Robert with other young adult literature authors share their thoughts on the importance of literature in the classroom. Robert begins by stating the importance of young adult literature in the classroom as it is not only beneficial for students who struggle in school but also that it benefits high-achieving students (Robert, 90). With that he means that students who struggle in school benefit by reading literature as they cannot only relate but also read something that interests them. Whereas students who are high-achievers are able to use the literature as aid to "dissect . . . the literary elements contained within the pages." (90) essentially saying that working with literature develops students' critical thinking abilities.

Further, Robert discusses how literature is a useful resource in the classroom since students are more motivated when reading about characters that they can relate to (90). In this article the author mainly expresses the importance of young adult literature in the classroom. However, the arguments Robert is using can be applied to adult novels as well. For instance, students who are from a mixed background might recognize themselves in Irene or the other characters of the book. Moreover, it gives students a perspective on the culture in the US but also an understanding of the events in a historical context. It's also vital to use literature that is diverse to facilitate an intercultural perspective in the classroom. Therefore, it should not be limited to only young adult literature, as this can be facilitated by using adult novels in particular *Passing* in the upper secondary school, which then can benefit their language learning skills such as help them develop their vocabulary and help them on how the English language is constructed. This would also fulfil The National Swedish Agency for Education requirement that students work with "[c]ontemporary and older literature and other fiction in various genres" (11).

Furthermore, in the article “Ethnic Literature in the Classroom” Arpi Sarafian, discusses the need to prohibit reasoning the usage of ethnic literature (223). Essentially, Sarafian means the justification that usually happens when using ethnic literature in the classroom needs to stop. For instance, she gives the example of her using an Armenian literature and meeting the curiosity and the enthusiasm that the students had about a culture they knew little about (224). Further, it does not mean that you should only teach ethnic literature but to expand the canon to include more diverse writers (224). Sarafian, noted that when teaching about history, there is a clear exclusion of ethnic literature, which is a shame because ethnic literature would help give a social, cultural and historic context which you cannot always do by teaching only the theoretical parts. I agree with the author the use of diverse literature in the classroom is always advantageous for the students. For instance, combining a history lesson on the Jim Crow era in the US with the novel *Passing* would give the history lesson an element of emotion, culture and a social context that literature gives. As Sarafian concludes “introducing them to the literature of "others," to the perspective(s) of "others"? I have found ethnic writing to be a great tool in promoting the critical thinking and writing skills of my students at all levels in my teaching” (224), Thus using a diverse selection of literature, drawn from a wide variety gives students an intercultural perspective.

As Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick mentioned it can be difficult teaching a novel that touches on subject such as race, gender and identity which can be a sensitive topic for some students. However, this can be an opportunity to empower students, help them develop their critical thinking skills, their language skills as well as fulfilling the National Swedish Agency’s criteria by using this powerful text. Therefore, it would be vital to address any uneasiness student’s might have by having the conversation, this can be done by asking them what their thought where when they read the story and in which way they connected with the story which will then develop their intercultural learning. Intercultural teaching will help develop students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes of each other as well as develop a more positive attitude towards other cultures. This will then give them skills and be able to interact with other people and thereby develop a critical attitude towards their own prejudices about others. (Lahdenperä, 3) Therefore, using Nella Larsen’s novel would be incredibly beneficial as it not only fulfils The National Swedish Agency for Education requirements but also enables an important conversation of issues related to identity as well as bring fourth an awareness of interculturalism.

## 5.1 Lesson plan

Teaching literature in a secondary upper school class is vital, because it is essential to their learning. It can help students develop their critical thinking, vocabulary skills, and linguistic structures. Subsequently, literature helps students become better readers and writers. On the website for the Swedish National Agency for Education, when referring to English 5 it mentions the core content that teachers should cover throughout the course. One of the contents that this essay will primarily touch on is: “. . . social, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. The spread of English and its position in the world.” (Lgr11, 1)

An effective way to teach students might be by using the ppp model (present, practice and produce model). To prepare the lesson I would have them read the novel as homework for the class. In the present stage I would give a presentation on the historical context, such as the Harlem renaissance, Jim Crow law, etc. This will give the students' historical and social context in which the novel is written in. In the practice stage I would divide them into small groups to discuss the novel. Each group would then get a term that they would discuss more in depth. For example, the terms can be, sexuality, identity, race etc. Afterwards, the floor is open to discuss any question that they might have in full class. This section is imperative as it allows students to converse any uneasiness they might have, as well as discuss these difficult topics. In the produce stage the students will write a one-page analysis on the novel using the term that they got. They will have the rest of the class time to start writing and will have to hand it in as homework since they would not be able to finish it within the class period. There will also be a peer review for the next lesson, where they have to read and constructively criticise each other's text.

## 6. Conclusion

In the essay I have discussed the intersect of class, sexuality and race of Irene and Clare's identities, in a comparative analysis of the women's differing perspectives in defining themselves.

Irene suppresses her sexuality mainly to remain in her class status, this is indicated as she does not want to lose her husband to Clare. Irene's husband provides her the high-class status she has, which gives Irene relief when Clare dies as the threat to her stability is gone.

Additionally, Irene also suppresses her sexuality because of her race, as she is living in a society that would deny her as a black female homosexual. Irene identifies herself through other people such as through Gertrude who is married to a lower-class man. She dismisses Gertrude as she is beneath her. However, she finds it difficult to identify herself through Clare as she becomes like an enigma to her. Clare is different from Irene as she not only has higher-class status in the white community than Irene, but also in the black community which infuriates Irene. The fact that Clare has no inner conflict with not being proud of her black heritage bothers Irene, as she herself is proud of her black heritage. Clare's presence perplexes Irene as she has conflicting feelings for Clare. Therefore, Irene struggles with her inability to not be able to identify herself through Clare. Furthermore, Irene's conflicting feelings escalate when she suspects that Clare is having an affair with her husband, this intensifies her envious feelings toward Clare, in addition, it deteriorates her identity as she has built it on the foundation of stability, of marrying a black doctor who provides a higher-class status and her heteronormative identity.

Who caused Clare's death is uncertain even though there is evidence that Irene pushed her. The evidence points to Irene as her intricate relationship with her race, sexuality, and class indicate she was the one who pushed Clare out of the window. As Clare was the protagonist who she believes is ruining her future as she is scared that Clare would take her place. Thus, the death becomes a catalyst to how their identities are constructed. Clare's visible smile suggests that she has accepted her predicament of her impending death. Whereas Irene who is struggling with her attraction to Clare decides to suppress her sexuality for her class status and stability. Thus, the society that does not allow them to pass as white and conforms them either to their black heritage or death. The restriction Irene and Clare faced as black women in the 1920s is evident that race, sexuality and class intersect in their identities. The ambivalence of defining their identities culminates in this tragedy which perhaps could have been avoided if the two women were not "passing" especially Clare who only "pass" towards whiteness and had no bridge to "pass" back to blackness when needed.

Teaching a complex novel that delves into important subject of identity can be difficult. However, the novel is a great resource to promote reflection of one self, writing skills and critical thinking. Thus, I claim that teaching the novel *Passing* is beneficial for students as it gives them an intercultural awareness and it is an effective resource in the EFL classroom. The novel would help promote and develop students critical thinking skills and as well as a critical attitude towards their own prejudices about others. It enables an important

conversation of issues related to identity as well as bring fourth an awareness of interculturalism.

In conclusion, Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* is a complex novel with an interesting discussion of identity and a vital text in the EFL classroom, fulfilling the Swedish National Agency for Education's criteria.

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