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Unreliable Third-Person Narrator: the Complexities and Ambiguities of Identity in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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Abstract

Nella Larsen's *Passing* is known for exploring identity from the perspective of mixed-race women. Even though content is very important in the novel, form is relevant too, since Larsen, like many authors in the Harlem Renaissance, experiments with it through narrative techniques such as free indirect style, impressionism, and fragmentation. The main technique used, as this TFG will argue, is the unreliable third-person narrator.

This research focuses on why the author chooses this narrative strategy. Therefore, I propose that the unreliable narration is the technique that allows Larsen to talk about "passing" in connection with race, sexuality, and gender as McDowell suggests, taking into account that they were taboo topics and that prejudice against African American people was very present too. Not only does Irene pass as white sometimes, but also she passes as a happy wife and mother of two sons.

Considering the historical context of the novel and the analysis of key moments in the story, this research uncovers a story about repression and identity, in relation to the main narrative technique used in the novel. The unreliable narrator highlights the fact that everything that is not overtly expressed in the novel matters. Omission and ambiguity are ways of expressing what cannot be talked about.

Keywords: *Passing*, Nella Larsen, Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, third-person unreliable narrator, narrative technique, race, identity, African American, Harlem Renaissance.

0. INTRODUCTION

During the '20s and the '30s, one of the most important movements in the United States of America took place, more concretely in Harlem, New York. The Harlem Renaissance, known as The New Negro Movement back then, was led by African-American artists and intellectuals, most of whom were based in the Black community of Harlem, though the movement included artists from other Black communities such as Chicago's South Side. It was the beginning of new cultural and artistic expressions such as jazz and blues, but politics were also involved since African American people were fighting for their civil rights in a climate of social turmoil, and racial segregation as a consequence of a white supremacist ideology. One of the leading figures of the New Negro Movement was the African American philosopher Alain Locke. In his work *Lock* defends that: "it was rather the necessity for fuller, truer self-expression, the realization of the unwisdom of allowing social discrimination to segregate him [the African American] mentally" (Locke, 1995: 9). This movement was part of North American modernism, in which white authors such as Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway stand out, though the contribution of African American writers was no less significant. The Harlem Renaissance embraces African American artists who wanted to define themselves through art and their own perspective and history since they had always been defined from a white American perspective, full of prejudice and stereotypes like the "mammy" and the "Uncle Tom". W. E. B. DuBois, along with Locke, was one of the most influential philosophers and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. He talked about the foundations of the movement, their purpose, and objectives: "we black folk may help for we have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, a new desire to create, of a new will to be" (DuBois, 1926: 292). In terms of structural and stylistic traits, creativity and experimentation were very present, since all artists had their ways of expressing themselves and shaping new forms of contemplating reality. Black modernists experimented

with techniques such as free indirect style, impressionism, and fragmentation. African Americans did not look for external approval or pleased people, they seek representation, freedom, and equal rights. As Emily Bernard's study on *Passing* comments "art required authenticity, and authenticity was incompatible with convention" (Bernard, 2018: 16).

Some of the most popular authors from the Harlem Renaissance are Langston Hughes, DuBois, and Locke. The case of Nella Larsen is quite peculiar because she was a successful writer—her novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), were very well received at the time—until she was accused of plagiarism and she retired from the public eye. Deborah E. McDowell recovered and studied both of Larsen's novels in 1986. *Passing* is relevant both because of its content and because of its modernist form. It is a novel written by a female mixed-race author about two mixed-race females who pass as white since their physical appearance allows them to do so and consequently they have access to some facilities and goods that they could not get otherwise. Thus, McDowell points out that other critics believe that race is the main topic in *Passing*: "focusing on racial identity or racial ambiguity and cultural history, the book invites the reader to place race at the center of any critical interpretation" (McDowell, 1986: 23). However, she highlights the fact that the plot is not only about race, she acknowledges that, in terms of content, there are also relevant comments on sexuality, gender, motherhood, and friendship. Moreover, *Passing* is very relevant in terms of its experimental form. McDowell acknowledges that "passing" itself is linked to content as well as form:

The novel's clever strategy derives from its surface theme and central metaphor—passing. It takes the form of the act it describes implying false, forged, and mistaken identities, the title functions on multiple levels; thematically, in terms of the racial and sexual plots; and strategically, in terms of the narrative's disguise (McDowell, 1986: 30).

Racial passing is the most obvious form of passing as it relates to the historical and social context, and there is an open dialogue about it with different characters throughout the novel. *Passing* is also related to gender as sexuality since Irene tries to be the role model of an African

American woman as a happy wife and mother of two sons but also she seems to feel sexually attracted to her friend Clare, which is not what is expected from her socially. On top of that, McDowell establishes a connection between passing and the predominant narrative technique that Larsen uses in the novel, which I have identified as the unreliable third-person narration. Thus, the narration is not straightforward, there is a lack of information, and the events presented are ambiguous, so the reader must fill gaps or make hypotheses about what actually happened and why Irene is acting the way she does.

The “unreliable narrator” term was created by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of fiction* (1961). The difference between a reliable narrator and an unreliable narrator has to do with the relationship between the norms of the norms dictated by the implied author and the narrator’s behavior. If these two elements work in accordance, the narrator is reliable, if not, the narrator is unreliable. As the author claims, this is a complex technique that has become more popular in modern literature: “with the repudiation of omniscient narration, and in the face of inherent limitations in dramatized reliable narrators, [...] modern authors have experimented with unreliable narrators whose characteristics change in the course of the works they narrate” (Booth, 1983: 156-157).

Some critics such as Nünning claim that a narrator can be reliable or not according to the reader’s perspective. Greta Olson discusses both Booth’s and Nünning’s models in her article “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators” and she concludes that they are very similar: “both models have a tripartite structure that consists of (1) a reader who recognizes a dichotomy between (2) the personalized narrator’s perceptions and expressions and (3) those of the implied author (or the textual signals)” (2003: 93). She rather focuses on the difference between a fallible and an untrustworthy narrator, which is a distinction that Booth also makes in his book. The former makes mistakes or does not provide all the information required, while the latter provides all the necessary details but there are

discrepancies or inconsistencies. Thus, Olson argues that narrators are not either reliable or not, but that there are different kinds of unreliable narrators and different levels of unreliability.

Taking into account both McDowell's and Booth's ideas, the following research will focus on why Nella Larsen chooses this narrative strategy for her novel. Therefore, I propose that the unreliable narrator is the technique that allows Larsen to talk about passing in connection with race, sexuality, and gender taking into account that they were taboo topics and that prejudice against African American people were very present too. Usually, the unreliable narrator is associated with first-person narrators, but Larsen explores the unreliable narration from a third-person perspective. Murphy and Walsh (2017) discuss this type of narration in their article on Katherine Mansfield, a modernist writer contemporary with Larsen though from a different sociocultural context as a white New Zealander. Murphy and Walsh make a distinction between the two voices presented when there is a third-person narration. The narrator's perspective can be confused with the central character's thoughts and feelings, even though she is not narrating the events in the story.

In the case of Nella Larsen's novel, the narrator's voice mixes with Irene Redfield's feelings and point of view. The reader is aware that the narrator is not giving all the information needed and also that is not always objective, as it is when there is an omniscient narrator. Fragmentation, free indirect style, and impressionism are some techniques that the narrator uses to describe what happened. The fact that Irene is passing in almost every aspect of her life makes the reader think that she is trying to hide the truth or that she is not trustworthy. Nevertheless, it is the narrator that is playing with the reader: he is describing what happened from Irene's perspective as if it was her own voice. (In order to distinguish the narrator's voice from Irene's voice, the narrator will be referred to as "he/him"). Thus, it can be argued that the narrator passes as Irene and that becomes a metaphor of the complexity of identity and self-definition.

Davis' critical study of *Passing* focuses on the relationship between sex and race. The fear of miscegenation impacted African American women who passed as white when they were asked to have babies since they could be born darker and people would discover they were mixed-race. He also talks about different types of passing since Clare lives as a white person that hides her Black ancestry from her husband Jack Bellew, who hates African American people. Irene does not pretend to live like Clare, she is proud of her roots and she is married to Brian, who is darker than she is and cannot pass. Irene passes as white occasionally, in order to access facilities and goods that were restricted for the African Americans. Other critics focus on Irene as the main character, such as Claudia Tate. In her article "A Problem of Interpretation", Tate discusses how Irene's behavior changes throughout the novel as a consequence of paranoia and fear and that creates an environment of mystery and ambiguity: "the real impetus for the story is Irene's emotional turbulence, which is entirely responsible for the course that the story takes and ultimately accountable for the narrative ambiguity" (Tate, 2017: 598). According to Tate's perspective, Irene is untrustworthy because she becomes progressively irrational when she thinks that Clare and Brian are having an affair and her family and life stability are threatened by Clare.

Appearances are very important in the book, not only in terms of racial passing but also in the other forms of passing that McDowell suggests in her introduction to the novel. Irene tries to be the role model of an African American woman to fight against prejudice and gain social acceptance. She is not being honest either with the other characters or herself. In order to be this type of idealized woman, she has to pretend in every aspect of her life. She cannot express herself truly within an environment that is asking her to be perfect, so she pretends she is what society asks her to be. Repressing some of her identity traits leads to hiding information, misunderstandings, and confusion, and this is reflected in the narration of the events. Larsen's use of the unreliable narrator allows her to talk about sensitive topics without them being

overtly expressed since silence and omission are ways of expressing what cannot be talked about. Considering the historical context, in which the novel is written and set, and the analysis of key moments in the story, this research uncovers a story about repression, identity, and self-expression in relation to the main narrative technique used in the novel. The first part of the analysis deals with “passing” in terms of race from a historical point of view, different types of racial passing, how it affects people’s lives, and their construction of identity. The second part of the analysis deals with passing in terms of gender and sexuality since they are all related and Irene pretends to live her life based on lies and appearances. Both sections will be studied from the perspective of narrative “passing”, unreliable third-person narration, and other experimental narrative techniques.

1. “PASSING” AND RACE

1. 1. Racial “passing”

The term “passing” is commonly associated with race due to the historical context of North America during the ‘20s and the ‘30s. By that time, thousands of African Americans were migrating from the South to the North in order to look for better opportunities and equal rights. The Harlem Renaissance was a revindication of African American’s rights, history, and culture since they had been treated as a problem, as an issue that either must be ignored or solved due to the fact that African American people were not considered American citizens with full rights. All the artists and intellectuals that belonged to this movement were trying to fight against prejudice and racism by pointing out every disadvantage or unfair treatment they received. At the same time, all these authors and intellectuals worked to convey the diversity of experiences within the Black American community. Clare, for example, shares with Irene the reasons why she decides to start a new life as a white at the beginning of the novel: “[...] For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn’t bad-looking

and that I could ‘pass’” (Larsen, 2018: 27). Mixed-raced people who had light skin could benefit from their appearance and pass as white in order to have access to some resources and comforts that were considered basic rights for white Americans. Clare Kendry is aware of her race and what her future will be as the daughter of a janitor in Chicago’s South Side. Clare wants to decide her own future, she seeks freedom and the chance to be whatever she wants to be. She decides to get away to start a new life as a white person, far from Chicago, and all the people she knows. She is able to do this because her physical appearance allows her to do so. She finally marries John Bellew and she hides her roots from him since he hates African-Americans so she must pass as white permanently. As Davis suggests: “passing, according to Clare, is a movement in gesture as well as in space: a psychological, social, cultural movement signaling both a reconfiguration of the self and a consolidation of one’s cultural identity” (Davis, 1997: 9).

Even though the term “passing” could seem simple as it is usually presented as an action in which people believe that someone belongs to a different group than the one he or she actually belongs to, the reasons why these people pass are quite complex. The experience of passing is different for each person. As Davis points out, there are different types of passing in terms of race. The novel shows three different types presented by Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, and Gertrude Martin. They are all African Americans, who pass as white but they identify themselves differently. On the one hand, Clare and Gertrude identify themselves as white, they want to get rid of any Black ancestry and they make racist comments in order to differentiate from those who are not like them. The difference in passing between Clare and Gertrude is that Gertrude’s husband knows that she is mixed-race and he does not care about it, even if their children were dark. Nevertheless, both women despise their ancestry (Davis, 1997).

On the other hand, Irene, who identifies as African American, passes occasionally at her convenience in some situations or places. She does not feel sympathy towards Clare and

Gertrude because they have completely opposite lifestyles and values. She feels proud of her mixed-race heritage and her community. She chooses to live as an African American in Harlem with her husband Brian Redfield, who is darker than she is. She feels insulted and humiliated in their company when they are having tea together. This flood of negative feelings has to do with the frustration and contempt she feels toward the racist comments that Clare and Gertrude do about African-American people, Jews, etc: “Irene, who was struggling with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger, and contempt, was, however, still able to answer as coolly as if she had not that sense of not belonging to and of despising the company in which she found herself” (Larsen, 2018: 38). In this passage, Irene is repressing her feelings and thoughts, she wears a mask as if Clare and Gertrude’s insults did not bother her. She tries to answer coolly because it is what is expected of a woman from a social perspective. She must be polite and friendly to her host. When the conversation between them gets too tense, Clare changes the topic on purpose. Irene is therefore “passing” in another sense, since she is not acting according to her values and beliefs because she does not want to be problematic or act improperly.

In the first chapter of the second part, Irene and Brian have a conversation about the diverse opinions that African Americans can have on “passing” and its consequences. Irene points out that there it is a quite complex situation and that she does not know how to feel about it. There are both admiration and rejection: “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, 2018: 56). It can be perceived as an act of turning your back on your roots and community like Clare does, but it is also admirable because she ends up marrying a white man, and traveling around the world. She is now also rich, so she finally has the future she desired for herself when she was younger.

Although Irene and Brian have a life in common since they are married and share two children, they do not agree on what is best for their education and future. Brian cannot escape

racism like Irene does whenever she passes as white, and that it is why he wants to move to Brazil. He wants to provide a happy and quiet life for their sons. He does not want their children to grow up in a violent environment, where prejudice and hate are very present:

“You’re absolutely wrong! If, as you’re so determined, they’ve got to live in this damned country, they’d better find out what sort of thing they’re up against as soon as possible. The earlier they learn it, the better prepared they’ll be.”

“I don’t agree. I want their childhood to be happy and as free from the knowledge of such things as it possibly can be.” (Larsen, 2018: 108)

Brian has a realistic view of the future and opportunities Brian Junior and Theodore have if they remain in the United States. He wants the children to know the truth, which is that they live in a country where they are not accepted and not respected. In opposition to Brian’s perspective, Irene wants to provide a happy childhood as she claims that they will know the truth when the proper time comes. Thus, each character has a different point of view on passing. Irene’s perspective differs not only from Clare’s and Gertrude’s but also from Brian’s. While she disapproves of Clare’s and Gertrude’s forms of passing, her desire for her children to be “happy” and “free from the knowledge” of racism reflects her own “passing” and refusal to confront racism.

1.2. Narrative technique and strategy

Larsen uses the unreliable third-person narrator to reinforce the aspects of racial passing discussed in the previous section. The third-person narrator uses free indirect speech in order to reproduce Irene’s feelings as if the reader were inside her head. For example, in the passage above, Irene is trying to hide or manipulate the objective facts about the reality she lives in. Even though the dialogue is a direct speech, the reader might think that what the reader is getting is Irene’s perspective and that she is unreliable because she tries to mislead her children. Still, Irene is openly speaking about her intentions and the reasons why she thinks it is the right decision. Once the argument with Brian is over, she remains alone in the dining room shivering.

The unreliable third-person narrator uses free indirect speech to reproduce what he thinks Irene is feeling at that moment: “surely she was going mad with fear and suspicion. She must not work herself up. She must not! Where were all the self-control, the common sense, that she was so proud of?” (Larsen, 2018: 109). Fear and irrationality are present once Irene suspects that Clare and Brian could have an affair, as her life stability is threatened, but it is the narrator who states that Irene’s perception might be blurred.

Fragmented narration is also a technique used in the novel to talk about Brian and their married life. In the second chapter of the first part, there is a flashback to the time that Irene was in Chicago. Moments before she meets Clare at the Drayton hotel, her thoughts wander to her family and to the fact that her son Ted and Brian are very similar: “why was it that almost invariably he wanted something that was difficult or impossible to get? Like his father. Forever wanting something that he couldn’t have” (Larsen, 2018: 15). This is an example that shows that fragmentation is used to make the reader guess what Brian actually wants, which is leaving the United States and moving to Brazil, and why it is a problem for their relationship. The third-person narrator chooses to keep that information to himself and reveal it later in the story, as he only gives the reader a glimpse of Irene's thoughts.

The reader’s lack of information is part of the narrative strategy and reinforces the racial content in the novel. The fact that Brian cannot have what he wants alludes to the racial conflict even when the novel has not addressed race explicitly. It is first addressed when Irene is at the Drayton hotel and she sees that Clare is staring at her, even though she does not recognize her right away. Irene is worried that this apparently white woman might have discovered that Irene is passing: “did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (Larsen, 2018: 17). Thus, the unreliable third-person narrator only mentions Irene’s race when she fears that she is not passing successfully, as the

narration is limited to Irene's perspective. She feels anxious and unprotected as she thinks she might be exposing herself.

By the end of the novel, Larsen combines several narrative techniques associated with the unreliable third-person narration when the climax takes place. The last few pages of the novel describe the moment when John Bellew discovers that Clare is an African American and not white, as she told him right before Clare's death. If the reader leaves behind the plot and pays attention to the form, it can be perceived that the narrator is using several narrative techniques in this last chapter. The narrator provides an objective description and direct speech in much of this passage, but at the climactic moment of Clare's death, the narrator limits himself to Irene's perspective through impressionistic and fragmentary narrative techniques.

“It seems dreadfully warm in here. Mind if I open this window?” With that she pushed open one of the long casement windows of which the Freelands were so proud.

It had stopped snowing some two or three hours back. The moon was just rising, and far behind the tall buildings a few stars were creeping out. Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below (Larsen, 2018: 115).

The third-person narrator describes in a direct speech how Irene is hot and she opens the window through which Clare will fall later on. Right after that, the narrator talks about the weather, which is an objective fact. As a consequence, the reader perceives mixed voices that could seem only one. After throwing out her cigarette, she walks away from the window as she speaks with one of the guests, then John Bellew arrives at the party, he is looking desperately for Clare with a violent expression of rage, pain, and incomprehension. Every dialogue and move increases the tension of the situation. Irene finally goes next to the window again, where Clare and John are.

The ending is quite ambiguous because the reader does not know what happened. There are several possibilities: the most likely of them is that Irene pushes Clare and she falls through the open window, as she sees Clare as her enemy because she is threatening her stability. Clare

could be also pushed through the window by Bellew as he showed violent behavior. Another possibility about Clare's death has to do with suicide, she feels trapped, she sees that she cannot be white anymore, and does not know if the African American community will accept her, so she decides to lean back as the only possible option for her. The last one is similar to the second one but it contemplates Clare's fall as an accident because she could be nervous or tense due to the situation so she could have tripped or slipped. This option is the least likely since the narration specifies that Clare looks calm and uncaring about what is going on. She could even feel relieved because she can finally stop pretending to be what she is not.

All these interpretations of the ending of the novel are possible since the narrator does not explain clearly what happened at this climactic moment. Even Irene herself is not sure of every action that led to Clare's death: "what happened next, Irene Redfield never afterward allowed herself to remember. Never clearly" (Larsen, 2018: 116). After this statement, the reader might think that Irene is guilty of pushing Clare out the window, that she does not want to admit it, and that it is why she does not allow herself to remember that night clearly. However, it is not Irene who is narrating the story, all the events narrated are approached from a third-person perspective. The ambiguity at the end of the novel is due to the fact that the narrator is not only fallible but also untrustworthy, according to Olson's classification. He leaves gaps due to the lack of information, but also he tries to pass as Irene, in the sense that the narrator tries to adopt her perspective and thoughts and make it look like she is the narrator. Consequently, the narrator is using many narrative techniques at the time such as free indirect speech, a technique that helps to incorporate the central character's words and feelings with the narrator's voice, and impressionism, which incorporates specific details about the atmosphere in which Clare's death takes place:

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. (Larsen, 2018: 117)

The imbalance between relevant information on the circumstances around Clare's death and a detailed description of what she looks like the moment she falls through the window is evident when a second reading of the novel is done. The reader is so immersed in what is happening and trying to guess if Irene murdered Clare that these inconsistencies can go unnoticed on a first reading.

1.3. Larsen's intentional ambiguity

Larsen, like many other authors from the Harlem Renaissance, also wanted to represent the diversity of identity and experience within the Black American community. As Emily Bernard argues Irene and Clare represent two very different types of women. The former embodies the conservative model of an African American woman. She defends the traditional family structure, and she tries to follow any social rules. She seeks external approval in every aspect of her life, even if that means not attending to her desires or not being happy. She is engaged in what was known as "racial uplift", as all the artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance were. For this purpose, the African American community had to fight against stereotypes and prejudice based on a white American's perspective. This can be one of the reasons why Irene feels the pressure of being perfect at all times, she tries to act as is expected from an African American woman in the '20s and the '30s.

Clare, in opposition to Irene, is the "New Woman" that represents the early ideals of feminism (Bernard, 2018: 15). She questions conventional beliefs such as gender, sexuality, marriage, and motherhood and she had the opportunity to travel to Europe. The narrator described her behavior as masculine, she is confident and has a challenging attitude: "about her there was some quality, hard and persistent, with the strength and endurance of rock, that would not be beaten or ignored" (Larsen, 2018: 74). However, it must not be forgotten that she acts like that because she is passing as white; she has all the privileges that race implies. She can

express her discrepancy because she finds herself in a position where she can do it, as feminism did not always include all women. The “New Woman”, in this sense, is a white woman, or at least a woman who can “pass” as white.

Clare’s mysterious death masks a covert debate that Nella Larsen presents at the end of the novel, in which she considers the future that African American women can strive for. The text presents two different women with opposite values and lifestyles, yet they both feel repressed and unhappy with their lives. If there is a dichotomy between tradition and transgression in the novel, Larsen’s position is deliberately unclear. The novel is clearly about race and all its socio-cultural implications, but it provides no fixed conclusions. Every contradiction, mystery, and blurred narration of the events is strategic so she draws the reader’s attention to subplots that are equally important. Using this technique, Larsen can talk about everything that she cannot talk about because of historical and social context, without even saying it, just suggesting it.

2. OTHER FORMS OF “PASSING”

2.1. Gender, marriage, and motherhood

Even though race is the most explicit topic in the novel, the main characters are both mixed-race women so the reader gets to know everything that Irene and Clare go through because of their gender. Irene, who represents the traditional woman with conservative values, feels that she must be the perfect wife and mother because it is what society expects from women: “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, 2018: 83). She marries Brian and has two children, Brian Junior and Theodore. She has a sense of commitment to her family. Once she becomes a mother and has fulfilled her duty as a wife, she finds stability in her life.

Clare’s perspective on marriage and motherhood is quite different. She married John in order to build a better future for herself as the wife of a white rich man. She also has a daughter,

Margery, because it is what is expected from her, not because she desired it. She actually tells Irene if it was not for her daughter, who ties her to the family, she would leave John and go back to her life in Harlem, even though she remains with Margery and Bellew and takes care of them. Clare does not feel the unconditional love for her child that every parent seems to feel. Clare feels uninvested in her role as a mother because she did not want a baby and that is why she does not understand why Irene is so focused on her family. Clare shows her disagreement with Irene's perspective on motherhood:

“Think how glad you'll be to see her after all this time.”

“Children aren't everything,” was Clare Kendry's answer to that. “There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don't seem to suspect it.” (Larsen, 2018: 83)

Although Clare chooses to pass as a lifestyle, she is totally honest with Irene and lets her know how she feels about these gender roles that are assigned to women. Irene, on the other hand, seems to accept that there is no other possible future for women, that she cannot be anything other than a wife and a mother but she does not feel that she shares a special bonding or connection with Brian either. Irene is even worried that Brian might have an affair with Clare, as they get closer through the novel:

Brian. What did it mean? How would it affect her and the boys? The boys! She had a surge of relief. It ebbed, vanished. A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn't count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle. (Larsen, 2018: 95)

Irene believes that Brian sees her as the mother of two sons and her wife but not as an individual person. Irene doubts Brian's feelings toward her, she fears he might not be in love with her and that he desires Clare. Irene might conform to exclude other aspects of her individuality and define herself as a wife and mother in order to keep her family stability, which is what is expected from a respectable African American woman. Even though she might feel different from what she thinks is Brian's perspective, she accepts it. She feels lonely because she passes

as a happy wife and mother every single day. She cannot share what she feels or thinks because it is not appropriate:

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, 2018: 35)

Irene is always surrounded by people, either by her family or by friends that attend the social gatherings she hosts as part of the Negro Welfare League. Nevertheless, she feels alone and isolated. At the end of the novel, she even acknowledges that she does not know what true love feels like. When the arguments with Brian become to be more frequent she feels like Brian is very distant since she does not understand him anymore, as if she did not know him. As a consequence, not only Irene does feel isolated from Brian because of their different attitudes and opinions towards racism but also by the burden of gender and motherhood.

Clare, far from being moral support, becomes a conflict in Irene's life, as she feels threatened by her, even though Clare does not know it. She even thinks that the reason why Brian is distant is that he feels attracted to her and that they might be having an affair as their relationship becomes more friendly throughout the novel. Irene is desperate to find out a reason for their behavior, even if this desperation is not rational: "yes, life went on precisely as before. It was only she that had changed. Knowing, stumbling on this thing, had changed her. It was as if in a house long dim a match had been struck, showing ghastly shapes where had been only blurred shadows" (Larsen, 2018: 93). She thinks that Clare will ruin her life stability. All her sacrifices and efforts to have a respectable life and be the role model of the traditional African American woman might be frustrated by Clare: "Irene didn't like changes, particularly changes that affected the smooth routine of her household. Well, it couldn't be helped. Something would have to be done. And immediately" (Larsen, 2018: 58). Irene will try to get rid of her in order to keep her life untouched, even if she has to manipulate Brian into not going to Brazil, not

educating her children on race and sexuality, or omitting that John Bellew might have discovered that Irene is a mixed-race when they met by chance in the street. Even though it can be perceived as a manipulative and selfish attitude, Irene feels responsible as a wife and mother to take care of her family and do what she thinks is best for all of them. She wants her husband and sons to be happy, but it must be in a traditional and socially acceptable way.

Almost at the end of the novel, Irene seems to collapse, after discovering that Brian is frustrated with his life and that he is not happy with her, she fears that her family stability might be ruined. She also feels that Clare's presence is a burden. In this passage, Irene demonstrates that she is aware of her condition and circumstances, Clare's appearance in her life made her realize what means to be an African-American woman:

Sitting alone in the quiet living room in the pleasant firelight, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved (Larsen, 2018: 101).

Race, gender, and sexuality are the main topics in the novel, they are all aspects that shape someone's identity. Defining identity for African American people when because of their mixed race. Even though Irene has always obeyed and followed social conventions and tried to pass as a person she actually is not. She realizes that she might be ignoring how she feels and how she is in order to fit in, but that does not bring her happiness.

2.2. Sexuality

Another reason why Irene does not want Clare in her life is that she feels sexually attracted to her and her same-sex desire that it was not socially accepted. Even though Irene seems to have a strong sense of race and "passing" occasionally does not affect her racial identity, Clare is challenging Irene's sexuality: "strange that she couldn't now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons.

But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more?” (Larsen, 2018: 113). The reader does not know if she has ever been attracted to a woman but the narration suggests that she feels attracted to her from the first time she sees her on the roof of the Drayton hotel. This can be perceived in the way Clare is described: “her lips, painted a brilliant geranium red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft luster” (Larsen, 2018: 30). In this impressionist description, we can observe a sensual or erotic undertone that would not be present if she considered Clare just as her friend or her old classmate.

Clare’s opinions and lifestyle make Irene think about her own life and the path she chose as there is a great difference between the traditional values that Irene represents and Clare as the “New Woman”. Thanks to Clare, Irene wonders if the life that she is socially expected to have makes her happy. Irene questions her sexuality and her role as a woman in society but she does not question her racial identity, in opposition to Clare, who feels more confident about her sexuality and gender but not in her racial identity as she wants to be reconciled with her roots.

Irene does not acknowledge these feelings she has for Clare, she tries to delude herself because she wants to avoid the conflict that implies lesbianism or bisexuality. She does not allow herself to consider it. The reader must read between the lines in order to see this connection that she feels. For example, right after the tense conversation between Irene, Clare, and Gertrude. Irene feels that Clare can read her like an open book so she thinks that Clare might feel the sexual attraction that Irene feels towards her: “Irene felt a warmth creeping into her cheeks. Uncanny, the way Clare could divine what one was thinking. She was a little put out [...]” (Larsen, 2018, 36). Clare has an effect on Irene, she causes a physical reaction in Irene’s body. Not only does she blush when she sees Clare but she also feels puzzled at the feelings that Clare awakens in her.

It can be observed that race and sexuality are very connected. The prejudices that white Americans had against African American people, had a heavy impact on women. The Jezebel stereotype refers to African American women that were provocative, seductive, and enchanting. They were even seen as sex workers. Thus, women had to repress their sexual desire in order not to contribute to the existent stereotypes. It is during the Harlem Renaissance that African American artists and intellectuals started talking about sex and sexuality in their works: “Larsen wanted to tell the story of the black woman with sexual desires but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms. The latter desire committed her to explore black female sexuality obliquely” (McDowell, 1986: 16). Irene holds back her sexual desire because she wants the people that surround her to have a great opinion about her but also because she feels attracted to a woman. Historically, homosexuality has been treated as a problem and an illness because it supposedly goes against nature. Lesbianism is even more socially unaccepted considering that it cannot fulfill the women’s reproductive function.

2.3. Narrative “passing”

In many ways, Clare represents a turning point in Irene’s life. Before Clare’s appearance, her life was monotonous and stable, days go by unnoticed, as she takes care of the children and hosts the Negro Welfare League dances and reunions, which is an organization that helps African American people and contributes to racial uplift: “except for these few unconnected things the dance faded to a blurred memory, its outlines mingling with those of other dances of its kind that she had attended in the past and would attend in the future” (Larsen, 2018: 79). She puts her life upside down, but the narration suggests that once she is not present anymore, Irene will return to her life as if nothing happened. However, a few pages later, the narrator specifies that this dance is an important event in Irene’s life because it is the day when they become closer: “for it marked the beginning of a new factor in Irene Redfield’s life,

something that left its trace on all the future years of her existence. It was the beginning of a new friendship with Clare Kendry” (Larsen, 2018: 81). The narrator is able to talk about future predictions as it is impossible for Irene to know what will become an important event in her life until she is older and looks back in time.

At the beginning of the novel, the boundary between the third-person narrator and Irene’s perspective is clearer but becomes progressively blurred as the novel develops. By the end of the novel, the reader can find more evidence of this mix of voices and also evidence that the narrative techniques used in the novel become more complex. Even when the narrating voice chooses to reproduce Irene's words by using direct speech, he also brings omissions so the dialogue and her testimony are not completed:

“More tea, Clare? ... I haven’t had a minute with you ... Yes, it is a nice party.... You’ll stay to dinner, I hope.... Oh, too bad!... I’ll be alone with the boys.... They’ll be sorry. Brian’s got a medical meeting or something.... Nice frock you’re wearing.... Thanks.... Well, good-bye; see you soon, I hope” (Larsen, 2018: 97).

Little by little, the narrator’s voice gets confused with Irene’s perspective and thoughts more often until the reader may think that they are the same voice. Thus, it can be argued that the narrative technique is not only unreliable because he tries to present her as unreliable but also because he tries to pass as Irene by expressing in free indirect speech what she might think and feel in every situation he narrates. The unreliable third-person narrator plays with his own identity and tries to make the reader believe that he is Irene. Hence, “passing” is not only present in Irene and Clare but also in the narrator. “Passing” becomes a big metaphor that does not only affect the characters in every aspect of their identity, as is discussed above but also a metaphor that refers to the title and to the form of the novel, as it is manifested in the narrative techniques used in the novel. It is Larsen’s choice to illustrate how identity is fluid and unsteady, and that it is why it is so difficult to define it.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Passing is a novel about the everyday life of African American women in Harlem during the '20s and '30s. It is a novel about race but also about other aspects that shape identities such as gender and sexuality. It is relevant because of its content and its form. The unreliable third-person narrator is the result of Larsen's use of free indirect speech, fragmentation, impressionism, and omission. These narrative techniques allow Larsen to talk about all these topics that were controversial during the time of its publication. In this way, the main focus is on race but there is also a covert debate about the social conventions and roles that women must follow in order to be respectable and contribute to racial uplift, which was one of the main purposes of the Harlem Renaissance: "meaning in *Passing*, therefore, must be pieced together like a complicated puzzle from allusion and suggestions" (Tate, 2017: 600). Both Irene and Clare represent different types of women and different types of "passing". Nevertheless, they are unhappy and hesitant about who they actually are and Larsen does a splendid job in representing the African American community, diversity, and fighting the stereotyped perspective that white Americans had. They are very complex characters with internal conflicts and dichotomies that trouble them.

"Passing" is no longer associated only with race, as Larsen shows how Irene pretends to be what she is not in almost every aspect of her life. It is even present in the narrative strategy since the unreliable third-person narrator pretends to pass as Irene; the line between his voice and Irene's voice is blurred and in some passages is almost invisible, and that is why the reader detects unreliability. Therefore, "passing" becomes a metaphor that embraces every single aspect of the novel. It is a form of expressing the social differences between African American citizens and white Americans, in the case of racial "passing", but also a metaphorical space that mixed-race people inhabit when they cannot define their identity clearly.

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