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## Film Review: Passing

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## Film Review: *Passing*

By Cecelia Smith

First published in 1929, Nella Larsen's (1891–1964) novella, *Passing* (1929), offers readers an uncomfortable perspective about the issue of Black identity in the United States. The concept of “passing” refers to the practice by those categorized as a member of one or more minority or oppressed racial groups who use their own racial ambiguity to gain access to the privileges afforded to the dominant group. In Larsen's complex novel, two Black women struggle with their identities as one uses her appearance to escape the disadvantages that Blacks faced in 1920s New York by deceptively “passing for White,” while the other lives comfortably as a Black woman, only occasionally using her light complexion to ease into White society.

Born in 1891 to a Danish seamstress and a Black West Indian cook, Larsen was of mixed-race heritage. Author George Hutchinson, as the most recent biography of the writer, relates a theory of her background offered by author Thadious M. Davis, who hypothesizes that her natural father, Peter Walker (b. 1867), decided to “pass” and thus became the “White” Peter Larsen. Nella's sister, Anna (n.d.), was light enough to pass as White, but Nella was not. Davis argues that the instability in her life—abandonment by her father, emotionally absent from her mother—led to Larsen's own ambivalence towards Black identity, her “confusion” about race, her competitiveness toward other women, and an inability to find her true place among other African Americans.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of that instability, Larsen eventually became recognized as a critically important novelist of the 1920s

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<sup>1</sup> George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, (Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, 2009), Kindle edition, introduction; Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled*, (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1994).

and 1930s during the Harlem Renaissance with a small collection of short stories, and her two best known long-form novellas, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929).<sup>2</sup>

It is within the present-day animus toward race, racism, and racial equality that the film version of Larsen's novella comes to fruition. *Passing* (2021), directed by Rebecca Hall (b. 1982), joins the narrative and renews an old perspective of Black identity that remains a viable, though seldom discussed, controversy in today's climate of hostilities. Starring Tessa Thompson (b. 1983) as Irene Westover Redfield and Ruth Negga (b. 1982) as Clare Kendry Bellew, Hall's film brings to life the reunion of two former high school friends which reignites their common obsession with their own identities.<sup>3</sup> Both African American, Irene and Clare are described as fairly light-complected women in Larsen's novella. Clare, however, lives her life passing as a blonde-haired White woman, married to a well-to-do White businessman, John, who is oblivious as to her true heritage. Irene is married to a Black doctor, Brian, and they, along with their two sons, live in the heart of Harlem, New York.

Hall's film is deliberately shot in a majestic black and white medium, a stylized use of cinematography which not only enhances the movie, but is a veiled strategy forcing audience members to remember that this is a film about race. While black and white films tend to provide a bit more intensity and starkness, this film is somehow softer around the edges, giving the experience an almost dream-like quality, nostalgic, fuzzy, and unclear, akin to movies of the era. In an interview with writer Chelsea Avestruz, Hall stated, "The irony of black-and-white films is they're gray, there's nothing black or white about it, ever."<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Nella Larsen and Charles R. Larson, ed., *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and The Stories*, Anchor Books: New York, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> *Passing*, directed by Rebecca Hall (AUM Group, 2021), <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=passing>.

<sup>4</sup> Chelsea Avestruz, "Why Netflix's *Passing* Is A Black & White Move," *ScreenRant*, November 12, 2021, <https://screenrant.com/passing-movie-black-white-cinematography-story-why/>.

grayscale color palette is apropos for the time frame, the 1920s, but in addition, the lack of color counters real life imagery, compelling the viewer to focus on the narrative and not the skin tones of the main female characters.

The decision to use black and white as a medium is impactful, but the choice of Negga and Thompson as leads is considered by some to be a controversial selection. Both actors are predominantly cast in other roles that depict women of color, and questions arise as to whether the audience can effectively suspend belief that these women could pass for White. In a review of the movie's initial trailer, author Nylah Burton addresses this specific issue. She observes that many people critiqued whether Negga and Thompson are successful in their portrayals. The debates are centered around whether these two women could actually be White-passing. She writes, "They pointed out the features of Negga and Thompson's flesh and bone—their skin, the shape of their noses, the curl of their baby hairs—to say it was impossible that these two women could have passed for white in the 1920s."<sup>5</sup> For some viewers observing these women on screen, there is the drawback of critiquing the character based on complexion or facial features rather than the merits of their storytelling, thus falling into the trap of pigeonholing actors to a role by their race. However, the effectiveness of the medium helps to defuse the critiques and stereotypes used against African American actors, evidenced by the work of cinematographer Eduard Grau. His manipulation of shadow and light without overly relying on the characters' makeup, plus camera exposure, actor's outfits, and film locations facilitates Hall's directing, allowing for a focus on the narrative.<sup>6</sup> In addition, both actresses maintain an acute awareness of the impact of race. In a *Vogue* interview in 2016, Negga explained that "she was aware of the myriad ways in which her identity and ethnicity might be read, territorialised and co-opted; while

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<sup>5</sup> Nylah Burton, "The *Passing* Trailer Highlights That Race Is A Delusion," Refinery, September 24, 2021, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/09/10686104/passing-trailer-reaction-ruth-negga-tessa-thompson-race>.

<sup>6</sup> Avestruz, "Why Netflix's *Passing* Is A Black & White Movie."

Thompson stated that she was conscious of the ways in which identity is a creation.”<sup>7</sup>

Alongside the black and white imagery, and every bit an asset to director Hall’s work, is the musical score for the film. Gentle piano interludes slide in between activities on the screen, somehow transporting the characters along on their journey. The piano composition is from musician Devonté Hynes, a British singer and songwriter also known as Blood Orange.<sup>8</sup> In an interview about the composition, Hynes spoke about his inspiration. Author Lydia Abraham writes,

He drew heavily from the music of Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou, an Ethiopian nun whose bluesy, jazz-inflected piano playing has earned her a cult following outside the Ethiopian Orthodox Church where she first found artistic inspiration.<sup>9</sup>

In the article, Hynes says his goal was “to create a subtle sonic experience that would accentuate the performances.”<sup>10</sup> The music is fitting and non-intrusive. The musical notes tickle and glide over the senses, offering an easy, unconscious transition from one anxious scene to the next.

As the drama unfolds, Irene walks the streets in a White neighborhood, engages with the White cashier at a toy store, and hurriedly enters the back of a taxi with its White driver, when it seemed the heat and the atmosphere overtook her. In all of those encounters, no one considers her out of place. No one questions who she is; she is just another White woman going about her daily

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<sup>7</sup> Janine Bradbury, “‘Passing for White’: How a Taboo Film Genre is Being Revived to Expose Racial Privilege,” *The Guardian*, August 20, 2018. <https://screenrant.com/passing-movie-black-white-cinematography-story-why/>.

<sup>8</sup> Lydia Abraham, “Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou and Devonté Hynes create the aural world of *Passing*,” *The Score*, December 2, 2021, <https://netflixqueue.com/passing-score-dev-hynes/en-gb>.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham, “Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou and Devonté Hynes.”

<sup>10</sup> Abraham, “Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou and Devonté Hynes.”

activities. Irene is, however, uncomfortable in her effort to temporarily pass for White while simultaneously recognizing the privileges that open up to her as she tries to blend in seamlessly within White society. Her awkwardness is noted in the manner in which she hides her eyes beneath the lacy brim of her hat, refuses to look passersby in the eye, and checks her face in the mirror, dabbing white pancake makeup to her cheeks. The fear coursing through her is palpable as she waits to be discovered. Irene is guarded in her actions, and it seems very much as though she is unsure of the steps that she is taking. Later in the movie it is revealed that she has indeed tried “passing” before, but her insecurity in the opening scene is fully on display. Viewers then travel with her to her home in Harlem, and she appears confident in her own skin, embracing her race.

By contrast, when the audience first meets Clare, she demonstrates a comfort and ease at “being White.” She has been White for so long that she does not worry about anyone questioning whether she belongs in this White society. In the café of the hotel where she is staying, two older White women give no particular scrutiny to her when her husband leaves her at the table. When she eventually eyes Irene across the room, she does not break her stare. Irene, initially not recognizing her, appears intimidated, squirms and prepares a hasty exit; it is obvious she feels she has been discovered by this unfamiliar White woman. Their subsequent meeting is one of surprising revelations. Later in her room upstairs, as Clare introduces Irene to her husband, her confidence is even more demonstrative when she eggs him on to reveal that his nickname for her is “nig,” a shortened version of the racial epithet. The uncomfortable laughter from Irene is almost maniacal, and one wonders if she is intoxicated, or merely attempting to placate John. John easily reveals his contempt toward Blacks, confessing to Irene when she pointedly asks, “So you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew?” He responds, “No, no, no, not at all. I hate them.”<sup>11</sup> It is a powerful scene, one that indicates John

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<sup>11</sup> *Passing*, 17:14 to 18:09.

believes Irene to be White, and therefore, he can emphatically display the comfort he feels as he discusses his disdain for Blacks to her. All the while, Clare laughs in collusion with John's declarations but waits with bated breath for her charade to collapse.

Not much is known about their prior friendship, however, the relationship that redevelops between Irene and Clare is engulfed by their shared experiences. As the story unfolds, a subsequent meeting in Irene's home occurs as Clare shows up unexpectedly, distressed that Irene has avoided responding to her letters. Irene weakly tries to dismiss her concerns by offering the excuse that Clare should not visit Harlem because it is not safe, and she might be discovered for passing as White. This does not appear to be a concern for Clare. She follows Irene around the house, and it is in this instant that the audience can see just how much she wants to interact with Irene, practically begging to stay even though Irene feigns work. Clare then invites herself to the charity event that her friend is staging, offering another opportunity for her to mingle or, as Irene says when explaining White novelist Hugh Wentworth's attendance, "The same reason you're here: to see Negroes."<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the movie, the two women traverse the obvious disparity between them, noted not only in the issue of race but also of classism. Both women belong to the upper class but it is Irene who does not seem to navigate her status as well. Irene lives in a beautiful home with her two children. She quickly says to Clare, "Mine are dark," when Clare reveals her fear that her daughter "Margery might come out dark."<sup>13</sup> But her relationship with Zulena, the darker complected maid, is tenuous at best, and it is interactions between the two that exposes the superiority Irene feels over her due to her status and the color of her skin. She is rather reserved and performative in her attempts at charity work, giving the appearance of busyness and importance, absent the

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<sup>12</sup> *Passing*, 38:47 to 39:14.

<sup>13</sup> *Passing*, 11:16 to 11:45.

charitable heart. For example, while speaking on the telephone with Wentworth in the planning stages of her own charity event, her enthusiasm is at best restrained. In the scene at the dance, she makes her way to their seats, but she remains pressed against a pillar removed from the crowd while watching Clare interact with other guests. She does not possess the same social skills as Clare, and her only true interaction is with Wentworth, with whom she surreptitiously reveals Clare's secret.

Irene seems to display a naivete toward the world, doing her best to keep her sons oblivious of the horrific news of a lynching and dismissive of the use of racial epithets. But this effort is not merely to protect her sons; it is evident that she must shield herself from the realities of her world to guard against her own lingering knowledge of the oppression that Blacks face daily. It is she that does not want to hear the truth. It is the crushing weight of this knowledge of oppression that hinders her, also expressed in the underlying envy she feels toward Clare, who manages to exist in their world free from the "burden of Blackness."<sup>14</sup>

Clare is relegated to hotel life. The audience is not privy to her actual home, but the impression given is one of fanciness and prestige. It is Clare who is a world traveler, living in a White world accompanying her husband on business trips and taking her daughter to Europe for boarding school. In a brief amount of time, she develops a relaxed relationship with Irene's maid and plays easily with Irene's children, one of whom labels her a "Princess."<sup>15</sup> She even seems to appreciate the maid's cooking skills more so than Irene and demonstrates a yearning for home cooking. When Clare discovers that Zulena is cooking yams, notably associated with Southern cuisine, she questions the method of cooking and surreptitiously asks Irene, "Where did you find her, Rene? I long for a maid who knows real home cooking."<sup>16</sup> She directly

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<sup>14</sup> Burden of Blackness is the everyday oppression that people of color carry in a society designed to promulgate and perpetuate White supremacy, through both legal and social systems. It is, however, created by society, not Blackness itself.

<sup>15</sup> *Passing*, 44:35 to 45:18.

<sup>16</sup> *Passing*, 40:55 to 41:25.



contradicts what John proclaims in the hotel room as he states, “Why she won’t have them [Negroes] near her, not even as a maid.”<sup>17</sup>

At parties, it is flirtatious Clare who is carefree and dancing, appreciating Harlem’s music, both inside events as well as while sitting on the steps of Irene’s home. At these points in the film, it does not seem that she fears the possibility that her true identity could be revealed, choosing to consistently frequent the Harlem neighborhood, although she understands the safety net over which she dangles could fray at any moment. But most importantly, Clare is once again enjoying being “home,” being amongst those whom she secretly hopes and wishes are still her people, though it is not an identity she wishes to resume.<sup>18</sup>

The dichotomy between the two women is clear. Clare bears no guilt about her choice as she consciously moves about in the world passing for White; beneath that façade, she appreciates exactly who she is, who she has become. She, however, desperately misses her interactions with the Black community. In one scene she laments, “I come here and I really remember what home is.”<sup>19</sup> The harshness of being Black is still a necessity for both of the women to navigate, but it is the one who lives as a White woman who seems better equipped to comprehend this idea. By contrast, Irene seems lost, disconnected from the reality of her Blackness. She seems in search of a non-existent truth, one in which she would be a Black woman, living her Black life, but able to secure the comforts and advantages afforded White society. Her connections with others, both Black and White, appear cold and contrived. Even interactions with her children at times seem strained, which shows that her identity is not her only complication. In one scene as she is standing in an upstairs window staring down at her children playing outside, there is a longing emitting from her, one that indicates she does not enjoy the same relationship with her boys that both her husband, Brian, and her

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<sup>17</sup> *Passing*, 17:14 to 18:12.

<sup>18</sup> *Passing*, 9:49 to 10:15.

<sup>19</sup> *Passing*, 9:49 to 10:15.

maid exhibit. The subsequent interaction with her husband about Brian regarding her fear that her youngest son has picked up some “queer ideas from some of the older boys [about sex],” shows a prudishness.<sup>20</sup> While she praises that her young son is growing up to be like his father, there is a subtle underpinning of bias toward him, as she does not offer the same evaluation of her older son.

Relationships are formed, and conflicting emotions emerge as audiences discover the challenges of identity that envelope the two women. In the beginning of the film, Clare appears comfortable in her own skin, in her Whiteness, regardless of the deception, but as the story develops, her understanding of her precarious situation eases its way into her daily life. The audience is initially led to believe that she does not truly care. However, Clare laments that her friend Irene is happy, free, and, most importantly, safe. These words are Clare’s confession that while she might appear to be happy, she is far from content in this existence that she has created. The audience is not privy to either woman’s prior life, but it is clear that this reunion has hampered their existence, and the issue of race has had a great impact on their lives. The scene draws out the sadness that she is experiencing, but it also presents the notion that Clare knows at any moment the “safety” of being White will crumble. It is a fitting premonition of her tragic fate.

As Irene utters the words, “We’re all of us passing for something or the other,” it signifies several storylines that were not fleshed out but left to the audience’s imagination.<sup>21</sup> The seemingly cozy intimacy between Irene’s husband, Ben, and Clare was not fully seen between himself and Irene, but it was not clear whether there was infidelity between the two. In addition, for a brief moment as Irene clasped Clare’s hand, there was the passing idea that a lingering sexual tension might exist between the two women; however, the audience must decide whether this interaction is an unsatisfied desire, or more demonstrative of a kinship. Moreover,

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<sup>20</sup> *Passing*, 22:15 to 23:30.

<sup>21</sup> *Passing*, 50:06 to 51:07.

throughout the film there are subtle nuances that expose the idea of “passing,” giving the title of the film more weight than had been previously thought. In the opening scene a man is observed dying on the ground, passing on from life to death. There are specific moments in Irene’s bedroom as she observes the growing crack in the ceiling which intimates the passing of time. Hall uses these various subtleties to push forward the main theme of passing, and it is a gentle reminder to the audience that passing is something we all must experience.

The tragedy of this film is borne out in its necessity. Identity, in the form of one social construct or another, forces people to sometimes exist as someone they are not. The topic of passing is a delicate concept that in Black history is infrequently discussed. In author Janine Bradbury’s article on the taboo film genre of Black people passing for White, she notes that the genre was popular in the 1940s and 1950s when segregation was rife and the “one-drop rule”—which deemed anybody with even a trace of African ancestry to be Black—prevailed. Movies such as *Show Boat* (1951), *Pinky* (1949), and a sentimental favorite, *Imitation of Life* (1959), showcased the lives of mixed-race characters who attempted to pass for White.<sup>22</sup> *Imitation of Life* was a remake of a 1934 film, both of which are considered classics, and the 1959 adaptation became the last major film of the [passing for White] genre.<sup>23</sup>

The movie *Passing* is not just about two women who desire to be something that they are not. It seeks not just to relate the story of a woman who chooses another identity over her own, it offers multiple layers of race, class, culture, and gender. It also speaks to obsessions, secrets and lies, and the consequences of such, along with highlighting the underlying shame these women feel for their own skin and for their own race. There is anxiety

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<sup>22</sup> George Sidney, *Show Boat* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1951); Elia Kazan and John Ford, *Pinky* (Twentieth Century Fox/Good Harvest Productions, 1949); John M. Stahl, *Imitation of Life* (Universal Pictures, 1934); Douglas Sirk, *Imitation of Life* (Universal Pictures, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> Bradbury, ““Passing for White.””

raging through the characters, underlying anxiety wending its way throughout the one-hour and thirty-eight minute film, and anxiety building for the audience as they wait for their questions to be answered. Will Clare's true identity be revealed? What will happen if John finds out? And if he does, just how much will he tell their daughter about Clare's history? Will Irene give up her attempts to "pass"? With the tragic ending of the film, nothing is answered, and even more questions arise.

Director Hall's own story materialized in the pages of Larsen's book as her maternal grandfather had also passed as White.<sup>24</sup> Hall's film highlights the torment that ultimately intrudes in both of these women's lives. *Passing* is an excellent rendition of the Nella Larsen novella. Hall's directorial work provides fascinating insight into an often-concealed version of Black history. It is a necessary addition to the conversation about Black identity, one that is rarely discussed. The film forces audiences to challenge their own thoughts about social constructs, and to reconsider what identity actually means

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<sup>24</sup> Terry Gross, "'Passing' Filmmaker Rebecca Hall Shares the Personal Story Behind Her Movie," NPR, November 30, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/30/1059824073/passing-rebecca-hall-film>.

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***Author Bio***

Cecelia M. Smith was born and raised in Los Angeles County and attended Howard University after high school. She transplanted to San Bernardino County as an adult and resumed her pursuit for higher education at Chaffey College and California State University, San Bernardino. She graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in 2013, with a bachelor of arts in history. She retired from her position as a 911 police operator/dispatcher for the city of Los Angeles in 2017, with over thirty-five years of service. In 2020, she began studies in the inaugural class of the master of arts in history program at California State University, San Bernardino, with a focus on African American history. Her thesis explores factors involved in the lynching of women. She graduated with her master's degree in May 2022. Cecelia is currently an adjunct professor at La Sierra University in Riverside. She enjoys writing and art and wishes to focus on completing a fictional novel or screenplay based on her current research. She would eventually like to return to school to further her education, perhaps pursuing a second master's degree. She currently resides in Fontana with her family.

