

Beautiful White Girlhood?: Daisy Buchanan in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

"The idea is that we're Nordics. I am, and you are, and you are, and – " After an *infinitesimal* hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod, and she winked at me again.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), emphasis added.

She couldn't betray Clare, couldn't even run the risk of appearing to defend a people that were being maligned, for fear that that defence might in some *infinitesimal* degree lead the way to final discovery of her secret.

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929), emphasis added.

In October 1927, *The Forum* published a debate entitled "Should the Negro be encouraged to cultural equality?" Writing in favour of the proposal was Alain Locke, one of the leading intellectuals of what was subsequently termed the Harlem Renaissance; writing against it was the nativist and eugenicist, Lothrop Stoddard. Although the thrust of Locke's argument rests on encouraging cultural equality through white recognition of "Negro genius" as evidenced in the work of Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and others, he anticipates Stoddard's concern that "cultural equality" equates with interracial sex, marriage and reproduction. Locke identifies the hypocrisy of a situation by which a man who opposes "amalgamation" so passionately is the very man who "by the sex exploitation of the socially and economically unprotected Negro woman, has bred a social dilution which threatens at its weakest point the race integrity he boasts of maintaining and upholding."¹ What is striking about Stoddard's rebuttal is his refusal to acknowledge, as Locke does, that "amalgamation" is a *fait accompli*, that the amalgamation horse, if you will, had long ago bolted. For Stoddard, "the plain facts of the case" are as follows:

Since the Negroes form nearly one-tenth of the population of the United States, we are *statistically* light mulattos. In the last analysis, the only thing which keeps us from being *biologically* mulattos is the color-line. Therefore, once the principle of the color-line is abandoned, White America is doomed, and a mulatto America stands on the threshold.²

By the term “*statistically light mulatto*,” Stoddard means that the American racial body (envisaged as white) is already one-tenth black. Stoddard believes that the color-line must be policed rigidly if the other nine-tenths of the population are not to become “*biologically mulattos*,” as if America’s “white” majority were not *already* racially-mixed. Here, Stoddard makes no admission of the possibility of what Joel Williamson terms “invisible blackness”: the prospect of a “black” subject looking, and potentially passing as, “white.”³

This debate appeared halfway through the four-year interval between the publication of two apparently unconnected novels: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). In Tom Buchanan, as several critics have noted, Fitzgerald creates a mouthpiece for the ideas of Lothrop Stoddard, especially those articulated in *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (1920), thinly disguised in *The Great Gatsby* as “*The Rise of the Coloured Empires by this man Goddard*.”⁴ Meanwhile, Larsen was not only an exemplar of “the cultural flowering of Negro talent” that Locke identifies; of Danish and African Caribbean ancestry, she was also the embodiment of the “hybridization” Stoddard so feared.⁵ What interests me is the tissue of connections suggested by this exchange between Locke and Stoddard: between the Harlem Renaissance, contemporaneous eugenicist discourses and racial passing and, ultimately, between *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing*. This article argues that, in *Passing*, Larsen responds to both Stoddard and Tom Buchanan, that *Passing* is, in fact, a “blackened” version of *The Great Gatsby*. Indeed, as Thadious Davis discovers, Larsen wrote to Carl Van Vechten in 1926 of the possibility of “blackening” Francisco de Quevedo-Villegas’s novel *Pablo de Segovia* (1595) and it was a similar kind of literary blackening that led to the plagiarism charge levelled at her in 1930 when readers of “Sanctuary” noted the remarkable similarities between this and a story published by Sheila Kaye-Smith, a British writer, in *The Century* in 1922.⁶ In fact, “Sanctuary” appeared in *The Forum* and Larsen was the first black writer to place fiction there. It is therefore possible, indeed likely, that she read the exchange between Locke and Stoddard.⁷ Though the

plagiarism charge is not my primary concern, Larsen's engagement with Fitzgerald's text is so obviously critical and self-conscious as to raise questions about where we draw the line between what Linda Hutcheon would term a "critical reworking" of the literary past and one that is more uncritically derivative.⁸

Anna Brickhouse has argued persuasively that Larsen's first novel *Quicksand* (1928) cultivates an "intertextual geography," a series of "allusive literary landscapes through which Larsen revisits the scenes of various fictions and revises her key prior writers [Harper, Dreiser, Howells, Stein, Stribling, Van Vechten, Toomer]," thus proving itself "to be the product of a literary genealogy that is unmistakably biracial."⁹ For Brickhouse, Larsen's interest in many of these writers derives from their fictional renderings of the "tragic mulatto/a" archetype which, in *Quicksand*, she challenges in various ways. This article builds on Brickhouse's in revealing Larsen's interest in revisiting fiction by white, as well as African American, writers. However, given that *The Great Gatsby* is ostensibly concerned with rich, white Americans, what is at stake in revising Fitzgerald's novel is less obvious than Larsen's motive in rewriting the white-authored mulattas of *An Imperative Duty* (1893) and *Three Lives's* "Melanctha" (1909). Put succinctly, this article contends that Larsen perceived potential traces of "invisible blackness" in *The Great Gatsby* and rewrote the novel to reflect this reading. Here, I map the genealogy of *Passing*, from *The Great Gatsby* through Larsen's first published work of fiction, "The Wrong Man" (1926), proposing that Larsen's allusions to Fitzgerald's novel in *Passing* work to destabilise radically any secure sense of Daisy Buchanan's whiteness by linking her quite emphatically with Clare Kendry, a light-skinned African American passing as white.

If *Passing* is, indeed, a veiled engagement with Fitzgerald's novel, then Larsen's text evinces a heretofore unrecognised symmetry between form and content. Just as Clare Kendry transforms herself by appropriating a white identity, so Larsen appropriates and transforms a white writer's text. *Passing* encourages readers to identify the complexities of Fitzgerald's treatment of race and ethnicity

just as it thematises the pitfalls of assuming that bodies are racially legible. As Sinéad Moynihan argues, “passing narratives have always foregrounded the notion of textuality in relation to the (il)legibility of ‘black’ subjects passing as white.” For instance, in one of the great narratives of unresolved racial ambiguity, William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932), protagonist Joe Christmas is repeatedly described as “parchmentcolored.” From the beginnings of African American writing

the tropes of reading, authorship and passing have been interrelated, even with respect to the etymology of the word itself. The term is believed to be derived from the written pass given to slaves so that they might travel without being taken for runaways. One of the reasons that most slaveholding states prohibited the teaching of slaves to read and write was the danger that such passes could then be forged. For a mixed race slave, white skin could function as an additional kind of pass, enabling them to escape more easily with less risk of detection.¹⁰

Larsen takes on a novel that is ostensibly about rich, WASP Americans and appeals to readers to scrutinise their own readerly assumptions, both in relation to *Gatsby* and *Passing*, and the bodies that are the subjects of those texts. Indeed, Larsen foregrounds the centrality of reading practices to *Passing* at the very beginning of the novel. As Irene opens her morning mail, she is confronted with a “long envelope of thin Italian paper with [an] almost illegible scrawl” that “seemed out of place and alien.”¹¹ Just as the illegibility of Clare’s writing reflects the illegibility of her white-looking black body, so the novel’s opening alerts readers to the fact that their own reading practices are “always on the edge of [interpretive] danger,” especially since, in this novel, they are only privy to the free indirect narration of Irene’s “unseeing eyes” (149, 218).

While Larsen’s biographers do not mention her having read *Gatsby*, it is probable that she did for the novel was “an immediate success with professional writers and that curious underground of serious readers in America.”¹² Indeed, one obvious link between Larsen and Fitzgerald, and *Gatsby* in particular, is their respective friendships with Carl Van Vechten, a novelist and photographer who was something of a ubiquitous presence in New York’s artistic circles in the 1920s and

1930s. Van Vechten was a keen promoter of African American literary and artistic production in the period that subsequently became known as the Harlem Renaissance. Larsen met him in 1924 and Van Vechten gave *The Great Gatsby* a glowing review in the 20 May edition of *The Nation* the following year.¹³ Indeed, in a letter to Van Vechten, Fitzgerald thanked him for taking the trouble to write to him directly to praise the book, as well as review it for *The Nation*.¹⁴ Van Vechten was responsible for bringing *Quicksand* to the attention of his own publisher, Knopf. *Passing* is dedicated to Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff and Hugh Wentworth, the white patron who appears in *Passing*, is thought to be based on Van Vechten, just as the librarian Mary Love in Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) is believed to be partly based on Larsen. It is likely, moreover, that Larsen and Fitzgerald met. In a diary entry dated 29 March 1927 – after the publication of *Gatsby*, but before that of *Passing* – Van Vechten notes that at a party he attended hosted by the Langners (Lawrence Langner was co-director of the Theatre Guild) Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Nella [Larsen] Imes were all present.¹⁵

From *The Great Gatsby* to “The Wrong Man” to *Passing*

In January 1926, some seven months after the appearance of *The Great Gatsby*, Nella Larsen published her first work of fiction for adults: a story called “The Wrong Man,” which appeared in *Young's Realistic Stories Magazine*. The story, published under the “pseudonymous anagram” Allen Semi (Nella Imes, Larsen's married name in reverse), is focalised through the perspective of Julia Romley, implicitly white, ostensibly happily married and a member of “one of Long Island's most exclusive sets.”¹⁶ The story describes Julia's perturbation when she catches sight of a former lover, Ralph Tyler, at a party. When it emerges that her husband is an old school friend of Ralph's, and wishes to become reacquainted with him, Julia summons Ralph by note, confronts him and begs him to keep her past infidelity a secret. Having revealed her indiscretions in making the request, the story ends when Julia realises that the man before her is not Ralph Tyler, that she has “told the

wrong man" (9). As Cheryl Wall notes, the Long Island setting of the story "could have come right out of *The Great Gatsby*, which F. Scott Fitzgerald had published the year before."¹⁷ Indeed, the parallels between *The Great Gatsby* and "The Wrong Man," apart from their setting, are striking: both derive their dramatic impetus from the re-encounter of a married woman and her former lover and the endings hinge on misrecognitions of epic proportions. The story is significant, George Hutchinson argues, because it has "a number of features in common with [Larsen's] 'serious' fiction," notably its use of third-person limited narration and its thematic interest in triangulated relationships and constraints on women's sexuality.¹⁸

The aim of this article is to reveal the connection between Wall's and Hutchinson's observations and to map out the consequences of establishing this connection. In other words, it takes seriously the suggestion that Larsen was interested in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and proposes that this story represents an early attempt, fully realised subsequently in her second novel *Passing* (1929), to engage with and revise the white writer's novel. In "The Wrong Man," the characters are implicitly white, as they are in *The Great Gatsby*, though both story and novel have unmistakable racial undertones that have been independently identified, as we shall see. Although there is no suggestion that Julia Romley is passing as white, her fear that a long-buried secret will be discovered, and that this will result in the collapse of a life she has so carefully built for herself, resonates deeply with *Passing*'s Clare Kendry. As Wall puts it, "Julia has concealed her history, recreated herself, and begun to pass."¹⁹ *Passing*, read alongside and through "The Wrong Man," thus reveals itself to be a "blackened" version of *The Great Gatsby*.

The crucial point here is that of misrecognitions: the failure on the part of critics to recognise fully the extent to which Larsen built covert engagements with reading, writing and authorship into texts thematically preoccupied with looking, seeing and interpreting. Anna Brickhouse has done a great deal to address this in relation to *Quicksand*. My intention here is to trace a similar "refashioning" of the

literary past, from *The Great Gatsby* to “The Wrong Man” to *Passing*.²⁰ Indeed, there is a neat symmetry between Larsen’s use of pseudonym in writing “The Wrong Man” and Julia’s use of her maiden name in her note to Tyler urging him to meet her, which may well have been intentional. Julia hesitates “a moment over the signature, finally writing *Julia Hammond*, in order to prepare him a little for the meeting” (7). Early in the story, Julia’s dancing partner urges her to look over at the remarkable stranger, Tyler, who Julia has already spotted: “Julia didn’t look; she knew what she would see” (4). This refusal to look proves to be prophetic as, later in the story, Julia’s failure to look properly at the man before her results in her failing to see that this is “the wrong man.” Julia’s misrecognitions in “The Wrong Man” have been replicated in critical interpretations of Larsen’s work.

The refusal to take seriously and interrogate Larsen’s own proclamations on the possibility of “blackening” de Quevedo-Villegas’s novel and the textual evidence of comparable endeavours in her published fiction might be attributed to a wilful blind-eye-turning by critics rather than simple myopia. After all, such a line of criticism is extremely risky. As Charles Lewis outlines, the issues of literary originality and authorial ownership

can be especially vexing when discussing the relationship between the works of black and white writers; this is particularly evident in the question of Larsen’s sources and influences, her own profoundly damaging experience of plagiarism, and the larger pattern of reading black literature as an imitation of – or as that is assigned value in relation to – work by white writers.²¹

After Larsen’s ignominious retreat from literary life and publishing, her work languished in obscurity until the appearance of a Rutgers University Press edition of Larsen’s two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, in 1986.²² Given that early Larsen criticism was devoted to reclaiming her work and asserting her importance within African American literary historiography, it is not surprising that scholars were reluctant to focus on any aspect of her work that might lead back to the plagiarism charge that resulted in her marginalisation from African American letters in the first

place. Nevertheless, if the significance of Larsen's work is to be fully appreciated, we can no longer ignore its intertextual, interracial resonances.

By contrast, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* never languished in obscurity. When Wall observes that "The Wrong Man" invests Tyler "with a mythic aura like Gatsby's" and that Tyler's history "becomes a means by which the story inscribes issues of race," she comes close to perceiving the relationship between Larsen's work and a whole body of recent scholarship which contextualises *The Great Gatsby* in relation to debates on immigration, race and ethnicity contemporaneous with the publication of the novel.²³ Examining Fitzgerald's novel in the light of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 and the proliferation of texts by nativist theorists such as Stoddard and Madison Grant, Walter Benn Michaels points out that "For Tom, as for [Lothrop] Stoddard, Gatsby (né Gatz, with his Wolfshiem 'gonnegtion') isn't quite white, and Tom's identification of him as in some sense black suggests the power of the expanded notion of the alien."²⁴ In 2000, Carlyle Van Thompson made national news when he delivered a paper at a conference in Charleston, South Carolina, entitled "The Tragic Black 'Buck': Jay Gatsby's passing in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*." In his subsequent full-length study of passing fiction, Van Thompson offers comprehensive, though not always persuasive, evidence that Gatsby may be a light-skinned African American passing as white. Nonetheless, Van Thompson's central thesis, that to concede the possibility that Gatsby is passing is to acknowledge that the passing figure is simply another manifestation of the self-made American hero, is certainly salient. "[W]ho better to define the American Dream and the pursuit of happiness," Van Thompson asks, "than a fabulously wealthy light-skinned black individual who is passing for white?"²⁵

Along somewhat similar lines, Meredith Goldsmith argues convincingly that "Gatsby's mode of self-invention may be fruitfully read against those of the protagonists of Harlem Renaissance and Americanization fiction of the late teens and twenties," works including those by James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Nella Larsen, Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska and Mary Antin.²⁶ Drawing in

particular on Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), Goldsmith identifies clothing, hair and speech/voice as the *accoutrements* of raced and classed identities which the *parvenu* protagonists of all three novels succeed in acquiring or relinquishing as they infiltrate WASP, middle-class society. Most recently, and most intriguingly, for my purposes, Charles Lewis compares Gatsby's class mobility to the racial passing of Clare Kendry in Larsen's *Passing* (1929).

Along with Lewis, it seems to me that Larsen's *Passing* makes so many allusions to *Gatsby*, that the similarities cannot be coincidental. "In each novel," Lewis argues, "the main character is a passer [Gatsby/Clare] closely observed by another [Nick/Irene] admiring but ambivalent character whose relationship with the passer is fraught with tension and ambiguity."²⁷ He notes, moreover, their "three-part plot structures" and that both stories are conveyed "by way of a participant-observer (Nick and Irene, respectively) who are "given to occasional lapses and odd ruptures in coherency."²⁸ However, Lewis's explication of the resemblances between the novels is sometimes unconvincing (he claims there is "some similarity in corresponding characters' names [Jay Gatsby and Clare Kendry; Tom Buchanan and John Bellew]) and far from exhaustive.²⁹ I wish to expand upon it here by focusing on set pieces and characterisation.

More importantly, I want to make the case for connections between the two texts for a different reason: to assert that when read alongside *Gatsby*, the parallels that emerge more readily are not those that Lewis delineates (between Gatsby and Clare) but between Daisy Buchanan and Clare. In other words, to identify Gatsby's lack of "white" credentials according to normative standards of whiteness is certainly crucial for laying bare the arbitrariness of whiteness as a racial category at this historical juncture. More intriguing, perhaps, is that Larsen questions *Daisy's* whiteness thus exploding the idea of normative whiteness altogether. Larsen's allusions to *Gatsby* make apparent the contradictions in Fitzgerald's representation of Daisy, in which her whiteness is both questionable and unquestioned. Indeed,

Van Thompson finds that although Daisy, “an absurdly vacuous character, becomes the enduring but problematical metaphor and mimetic representation of whiteness,” there is also a suggestion that “Daisy may also be the product of miscegenation or possibly a light-skinned black woman passing as white.”³⁰ Although I remain unconvinced by Van Thompson’s reasons for making this argument – her Southern heritage, the fact that there is a flower called a “nigger daisy,” that her voice resembles jazz music, the idea that her maiden name sounds like “ofay” – Larsen’s recasting of Daisy as Clare in *Passing* is much more persuasive. Indeed, reading *Passing* in this manner, it is difficult not to reach the conclusion that Larsen anticipated the critical embrace of Gatsby-as-passer and the wilful dismissal of the possibility of Daisy-as-passer. After all, *Passing* is itself about at least two characters who “pass” as white, albeit one on a more permanent basis than the other. Similarly, in “The Wrong Man,” a sense of mystery enshrouds Ralph Tyler – dubbed the “Indian chief” because of his “browened” complexion (4-6) – but it is Julia Romley who is really in possession of an important secret.

Daisy Buchanan in *Passing*

What textual evidence is there that Larsen’s novel alludes to *The Great Gatsby*? Apart from the obvious parallels (both novels feature Midwesterners transplanted to New York; the tragic outcomes of both novels may be attributed to revenge-seeking for real or imagined marital infidelities), one way in which this becomes apparent is through striking similarities in set pieces. When Nick Carraway accepts a dinner invitation from the Buchanans at the beginning of the novel, he enters “a bright rosy-coloured space, fragilely bound into the house by french windows at either end” and is confronted with an “enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon” (Fitzgerald 13). When Irene Redfield accepts an invitation to visit Clare at the Morgan Hotel in Chicago, Irene finds herself “in a sitting-room, large and high, at whose windows hung startling blue draperies which triumphantly dragged attention from the gloomy chocolate-

coloured furniture." Sunk "deep in the cushions of a huge sofa" is another acquaintance from their youth, Gertrude (Larsen 165).

Both set pieces are important for what they tell the reader about Daisy's and Clare's husbands. As Lewis notes, there are key connections between Tom Buchanan and John Bellew.³¹ Despite the "effeminate swank" of Tom's riding clothes (Fitzgerald 12) and John's "somewhat womanish" soft mouth (Larsen 170), Tom's body is characterised by "enormous power" (Fitzgerald 12) and Irene is struck by John's "latent physical power" (Larsen 170). If, in Henry Louis Gates's configuration, signifyin(g) is "repetition with a signal difference," the "signal difference" between these two descriptions is that Larsen, a writer of biracial heritage, draws attention to John's whiteness – he has "an unhealthy-looking dough-coloured face" (170) – whereas Fitzgerald, a white writer, takes Tom's whiteness for granted.³² While Tom holds forth on Goddard's *Rise of the Colored Empires* and worries that "if we don't look out, the white race will be – will be utterly submerged" (Fitzgerald 18), John tells Irene and Gertrude that "niggers" give him "the creeps. The black scrimy devils" (Larsen 172). Tom, "after an infinitesimal hesitation" concedes that his wife, Daisy, is white (Fitzgerald 18) while John confidently asserts (twice) that his wife, Clare, is "no nigger" and that there are "No niggers in [his] family. Never have been and never will be" (Larsen 171). As Goldsmith points out, "Tom seems determined to prove that women in white are not necessarily white women."³³ In Larsen's novel, John doesn't mind his wife "gettin' darker and darker" since he knows she's "no nigger" (171). In both cases, the husbands can question their wives' whiteness because they are absolutely sure that their wives' whiteness is ultimately unimpeachable, a paradox which only becomes fully clear when Larsen's text is brought to bear upon Fitzgerald's. The fact that the reader knows that Clare's ancestry is not racially "pure" throws Daisy's racial purity into doubt by implication. Just as Nick professes himself "confused and a little disgusted" as he drives away from the Buchanans' mansion (Fitzgerald 24), Irene

departs feeling “sore and angry” that Clare had exposed her “to such humiliation, to such downright insult” (Larsen 176).

There is only one occasion on which Tom confronts the notion of interracial marriage directly. In Chapter VII, he laments: “Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” (Fitzgerald 124), thus drawing an explicit parallel between Gatsby’s courtship of Daisy and interracial marriage. The equivalent reference in *Passing* is quite telling. Irene worries that John might divorce Clare if he finds out about her African American ancestry, thus leaving Clare free to pursue Irene’s own husband Brian: “Could he? There was the Rhinelander case” (Larsen 228). Larsen’s invocation of this highly-publicised case – which featured in eighty-eight articles published in the *New York Times* in 1924 and 1925, nearly a quarter of them on the front page – sheds light on Tom’s fears for, in fact, interracial marriage had never been illegal in New York State.³⁴ The case involved wealthy white playboy, Leonard “Kip” Rhinelander, who married Alice Jones, a woman of mixed race ancestry, in New Rochelle in October 1924. Just one month later, Rhinelander sued for an annulment of the marriage on the grounds that Jones had deceived him as to her “true” racial identity. In a sensational case that unfolded in White Plains, New York, Jones was forced to disrobe partially so that the jury could ascertain whether her “blackness” was visibly evident on her body. Rhinelander lost the case and several subsequent appeals. Tom’s anxieties, that interracial marriage *might* happen, are misplaced for, as Larsen’s text confirms, interracial marriage *could* and *did* happen in New York State. When read in the light of *Passing*, then, Tom has more to fear in scrutinising *his own marriage* to Daisy than in concerning himself with Gatsby’s and Daisy’s relationship.

A further example of parallel set pieces are tea parties hosted by Nick and Irene, respectively, during which Gatsby nearly breaks Nick’s clock and Irene actually breaks one of her own antique cups. Both incidents foreshadow the novels’ tragic *dénouements*. In Nick’s living room, reunited with Daisy after nearly five

years, Gatsby reclines against the mantelpiece, resting his head “against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock.” The clock tilts dangerously, but Gatsby manages to catch it “with trembling fingers, and set it back in place.” Although Gatsby rescues the clock, Nick notes that “we all believed for a moment that it has smashed in pieces on the floor” (Fitzgerald 84). The defunct clock, and Gatsby’s retrieval of it, symbolise his attempt to “turn back the clock” and rekindle his romance with Daisy. As Daisy tells Nick immediately after Gatsby’s near miss with the clock, “We haven’t met for many years” (84), during which time she has married Tom and given birth to a child. When Gatsby subsequently meets Pammy, he keeps “looking at her with surprise” as if he had never “really believed in its existence before” (111). Gatsby firmly believes that you can “repeat the past” and tries desperately to convince Daisy to admit that she never loved Tom which, in the end, she is incapable of doing (106). Though Gatsby rescues the defunct clock in this scene, and Daisy initially appears to have been won over by him after this encounter, his attempt to recover the defunct clock is ultimately foiled and Gatsby himself breaks “up like glass against Tom’s hard malice” (141).

In *Passing*, Irene hosts a tea party just after having a conversation with her husband that leads her to suspect that he and Clare are having an affair. As Jennifer DeVere Brody argues, Irene’s breaking of an antique cup at the tea party “prefigures Clare’s murder” because it “foreshadows Clare’s own broken body at the end of the novel.”³⁵ Certainly, when Irene claims that she’d “never figured out a way of getting rid of [the cup] until about five minutes ago” and that breaking it provides a “simple” solution, she appears to announce her intention to murder Clare (Larsen 222, emphasis added), especially since, in the subsequent chapter, she considers various outcomes which would “rid her forever of Clare Kendry” (225, emphasis added). Moreover, the confusion over whether Hugh Wentworth accidentally nudged Irene, thus resulting in her dropping the cup to the floor, anticipates the ambiguous ending of the novel: does Irene push Clare to her death, or does she fall or commit suicide?

If Larsen structures her novel in such a way that it recalls *Gatsby* in a general sense, what of the connections between Daisy and Clare specifically? There are certainly physical differences between the two: Daisy has “dark shining hair” (Fitzgerald 143), while Clare’s is “pale gold” (Larsen 161). Daisy invariably dresses in white (Fitzgerald 13, 73, 110), while Clare is alternately seen in “a thin floating dress of [. . .] blue” (Larsen 165), “a stately gown of shining black taffeta” (203) and “a shining red gown” (233). Few references are made to Daisy’s complexion, apart from her “white face” (Fitzgerald 107) and “the pale magic of her face” (145), while Larsen insists upon Clare’s ivory skin, face, cheeks and eyelids (Larsen 148, 161, 198, 220, 221). Nonetheless, the language Irene uses in describing Clare resonates with that used by Nick in describing Daisy. Daisy’s face is “sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a passionate mouth” (Fitzgerald 14) while Clare is distinguished by a “soft white face, [...] bright hair, [a] disturbing scarlet mouth, [. . .] dreaming eyes, [a] caressing smile, [a] whole torturing loveliness” (Larsen 239). Daisy has a “glowing face” and a “glowing and singing” voice (Fitzgerald 19) while Clare is “a vital glowing thing” (Larsen 239). Clare’s “scornful amusement” and “mocking” manner (157, 156) recall the “absolute smirk” that Nick notices on Daisy’s “lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged” (Fitzgerald 22). Nick concludes that

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. (170)

Meanwhile, Clare admits that she’s “not safe,” that “to get the things [she] want[s] badly enough, [she’d] do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away” (Larsen 210).

A further link in the chain of associations between Daisy and Clare is their understated use of, or choice not to use, cosmetic powder, a crucial detail given that in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century, “soap and cosmetic advertising

propagated racialized ideals of beauty, linking clean, flawless skin to whiteness."³⁶ In *Gatsby*, as Goldsmith argues, the novel's leisure-class women use makeup "to mask and enhance" whereas "it transforms independent, working-class women into degraded copies of their ostensible betters." *Gatsby's* treatment of cosmetic powder is consistent with the slippages between race/ethnicity and class that occur throughout the novel. Thus, "Daisy's powder appears noticeable to no one but herself and Nick" and Jordan's uses it to cover her tanned arms, a side effect of her athletic pursuits.³⁷ The implication is that Daisy is "the real thing," whereas Myrtle's sister, Catherine, with "a complexion powdered milky white," has aspirations beyond her class origins (Fitzgerald 32).

In *Passing*, the character with recourse to powder is Irene, an indication of her own desire, upon which she occasionally acts, to pass as white. Indeed, Jennifer DeVere Brody asserts that Irene secretly covets Clare's position as white, upper class wife, a suggestion supported by Nell Sullivan's contention that it is Irene who passes, "not by adopting a white identity as Clare does, but by adopting white values including white standards of beauty."³⁸ On three occasions, Irene is depicted at her morning or evening toilet, applying powder to her face (Larsen 183, 193, 218). Face powder symbolises Irene's desire to lighten her "warm olive skin" (183) and "dark white face" (218) and is thus closely connected to the novel's central theme of racial passing. This is anticipated in its first scene, in which Irene notices Clare staring at her at the Drayton Hotel in Chicago. She worries that there is "a streak of powder somewhere on her face" (149), followed by the gradual onset of

a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. [. . .] Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? (150).

Just as she fears that "a streak of powder" has made her conspicuous, so she wonders if some physical clue such as "finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth" might give her away as a "Negro" in this all-white establishment (150). On the other hand, Clare does not use face powder at all. Instead, Irene perceives that,

at times, Clare's ivory skin becomes an "ivory mask" (157, 220). The slippage between white face and white mask, the fact that the two are virtually indistinguishable, demonstrates the facility with which Clare has assumed her role as a white woman. Daisy and Clare do not need powder to make them "white" whereas Catherine and Irene do. What troubles this dichotomy is the obvious fact that Clare is not "racially" white. Like all racial passers, her whiteness contradicts what Gayle Wald terms "the visual protocols of racial classification."³⁹

The most compelling connection between the two characters is the similarity with which Daisy's voice and Clare's laugh are rendered. Indeed, the interchangeability of voice and laughter is suggested by the fact that before Nick describes Daisy's voice for the first time, he hears her laugh "an absurd, charming little laugh" (Fitzgerald 14) while Clare's voice ripples "in charming, well-modulated streams" (Larsen 170). Clare's voice is repeatedly described as "husky" (148, 150, 151, 157, 167), just like Daisy's (Fitzgerald 104, 142). In a famous description, Nick finally recognises that Daisy's voice is "full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it" (115). While Daisy's voice is "thrilling" (14, 125), Clare's laugh is described as a "trill" (Larsen 151, 154, 199), an auditory similarity that is difficult to miss. Daisy's is "the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again" (Fitzgerald 14) while Clare's laugh is "a small sequence of notes," a "a trill of notes" (Larsen 151) and "little musical trills following one another in sequence after sequence" (199). While there is a "jingle" in Daisy's voice (Fitzgerald 115), Clare's laugh is "like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling" (Larsen 151). Even though Daisy's voice carries "a singing compulsion," Nick notes "the basic insincerity" of what she says (Fitzgerald 14-15, 22). Despite "the exhilarating ripple of her voice," it is sometimes marked by "a clear artificial note" (82, 83). Similarly, Irene perceives Clare's laugh as "the very essence of mockery" (Larsen 154).

If there are unmistakable echoes of Daisy Buchanan in Larsen's

representation of Clare Kendry, this presents a whole new set of questions regarding what Laura Doyle terms the “racial matrix” of modern fiction and culture whereby “the mother figure or role represents complications not just in gender identities [. . .] but in the racial, ethnic, or national identities of the characters and narrators.”⁴⁰ Both Daisy and Clare are two such figures, racialised mothers to Pammy and Margery respectively. Doyle’s analysis is particularly relevant here because she focuses on high modernist texts by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce alongside Harlem Renaissance texts such as Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1922), thus challenging readers to consider why “the mother figure’s influence cuts across [these] two important modern literary traditions” and to throw “the strictness of the opposition” between the Harlem Renaissance and modernism into question.⁴¹ Doyle argues that “the race or group mother is a point of access to a group history and bodily grounded identity, but she is also the cultural vehicle for fixing, ranking, and subduing groups and bodies.”⁴²

While Doyle discusses neither *Gatsby* nor *Passing* specifically, the implications for an analysis of these two novels are significant. During his dinner engagement at the Buchanans, Nick follows Daisy out on to the veranda for a private conversation. Seeing that “turbulent emotions” possess Daisy, Nick asks “what I thought would be some sedative questions about her little girl” upon which Daisy describes her cynicism after the birth of her daughter (Fitzgerald 21). She tells Nick, “You see I think everything’s terrible anyhow [. . .]. Everybody thinks so – the most advanced people” (Fitzgerald 22). Although this is a notably vague statement, its resemblance to Tom’s “I’ve gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things” regarding “Civilization[’s] going to pieces” (18) and her subsequent claim that she and Nick “talked about the Nordic race” (24) while out on the veranda suggest a correlation between her dismay at having a daughter and her implicit agreement with Tom regarding the submerging of the white race. As Richard Dyer observes, “As the literal bearers of children and because they are held primarily responsible for their initial raising, women are the indispensable means by which the group – the race – is

in every sense reproduced."⁴³ In an era in which Nordics were perceived to be in danger of being submerged, white women bear the responsibility for stemming "the rising tide of color." Indeed, the notion that women of color are equally, if not more, capable of producing offspring is perceptible in other Fitzgerald works. Citing an example from *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), Bert Bender notes the attribution of Gloria's reluctance to have children to her conviction that "motherhood was also the privilege of the female baboon."⁴⁴ "[T]he best thing a [white] girl can be in this world," Daisy suggests, is a race mother (22), "who reproduces racial boundaries in her function as subservient procreator."⁴⁵ With Pammy's "yellowy hair" and "small white neck," Daisy indeed seems to have successfully reproduced a "Nordic" child (111, 112).

While Daisy is "the king's daughter, the golden girl" (115), Clare is "a daughter of the indiscreet Ham" (Larsen 159). Nevertheless, both women manage to give birth to "white" offspring. If, as Goldsmith puts it, "Daisy's daughter vouches for her whiteness," Margery certainly does not disprove Clare's apparent whiteness.⁴⁶ Although Clare confesses feeling "terror the whole nine months" of her pregnancy that her child "might be dark," Margery "turned out all right" (168). That a "black" woman can produce a "white" child overturns the notion of blood relationships as a racial guarantee. As Michaels observes, the fact that Nick and Daisy are cousins is significant because "his Nordicism vouches for hers."⁴⁷ In *Passing*, this is also true, but Larsen exposes the guarantee to be fundamentally flawed. When Clare begins to pass as white while living with her great-aunts, it isn't necessary for her "to provide some plausible tale to account" for herself because the aunts were "respectable and authentic enough for anything or anybody." "I see," Irene responds, "They were 'passing' too." "No. They weren't. They were white" (158). Her aunts' whiteness vouches for Clare's, though Clare herself is not white.

Clare's refusal to bear more children contrasts with Helga Crane, who sinks into a "quicksand" of childbearing and child-rearing at the end of Larsen's first novel. However, Clare's role as race mother to Margery is, in many ways, not as

radically unsettling as it may first seem. Clare does not simply refuse to have children, but boys:

No, I have no boys and I don't think I'll ever have any. I'm afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply – too hellish! (168)

Less self-conscious than Daisy, Clare fails to realise that, in giving birth to a girl, she has reproduced a reproducer of racial boundaries. Ultimately, *Passing* is inescapably embedded in the very discourse it challenges, thus confirming Doyle's elucidation of the dual function of race mothers as reproducers of borders which both include and exclude and Amy Robinson's equally salient observation that "the social practice of passing is thoroughly invested in the logic of the system it attempts to subvert."⁴⁸

When Clare invites Irene to tea, she promises that her friend will "see Margery" (156). However, when Irene arrives at the Morgan hotel, Clare tells her she is "sorry [she] won't see Margery," that she is out of town staying with relatives of her husband (166). Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, in which Pammy is summoned to verify her mother's whiteness, Margery is not mobilised as racial evidence. In fact, despite numerous references to Margery, Clare's daughter does not appear in the novel at all (197, 208, 225, 234, 236). Thus, while Larsen avoids imposing object-evidential status on Clare's racially-mixed daughter, the only alternative is that Margery disappears from the narrative altogether. Van Thompson argues that the name "Margery" "conveys the marginal status of assuming a white identity and the neither/nor status between blackness and whiteness."⁴⁹ If this is the case, it is equally true that the name reflects the character's marginal status within the text. In consigning Margery to the margins of the narrative, Larsen not only emulates "the dominant culture's subordination" of Margery's "invisible blackness," she also reproduces the trauma of Clare's own early life.⁵⁰ After her father's death and her removal to Chicago's west side, Clare "would appear occasionally among her old friends and acquaintances on the south side for short little visits" which "dwindled,

becoming shorter, fewer, and further apart until at last they ceased" (152). Eventually, Irene's father returns from a special trip to the west side and announces that Clare has "disappeared" (152). Thereafter, Clare only exists in "rumours" (152). Similarly, ten-year-old Margery spends most of her time in the company of white relatives or at school in Switzerland and only appears in the novel in reported speech. Thus, while, in some ways, Clare's role as race mother to Margery troubles racial categories, by having the act of "passing" inevitably reproduce itself from generation to generation, it also reveals their tenacity.

Even if Clare escapes Helga's particular fate, it is, in the end, difficult for Larsen to avoid sinking into the "quicksand" of *Gatsby's* eugenic logic. By rewriting Daisy as Clare, Larsen capitalises on what Michaels calls "the feminine threat to racial purity" hinted at in several white-authored modernist texts of the 1920s, including *Gatsby*.⁵¹ By literalising this threat in Clare, however, Larsen both mocks *and* lends credence to it. More radical, perhaps, is the connection Larsen forges between the practices of passing, reading and writing. Many critics before me have suggested that *Passing* is a novel that "passes" as a narrative of racial passing when it is "really" about something else.⁵² As such, they mobilise the problematic language of passing – deception, duplicity, authentic versus fake – even as they praise Larsen's achievement. By rewriting *Gatsby* in *Passing*, the white-authored text becomes the passer and *Passing* becomes the text that unveils the "truth" about the original. When read this way, *Passing* equally reproduces the logic of passing but does so in such a way as to implicate the reader. As Robinson argues, "it is the spectator who manufactures a successful pass, whose act of reading (or misreading) constitutes the performance of the passing subject."⁵³ As readers, we are so determined to define and circumscribe that we often miss alternative, less obvious interpretations. When Nick meets Gatsby for the first time, he is unaware to whom he is speaking:

“This is an unusual party for me. I haven’t seen the host. I live over there – “I waved my hand at the invisible hedge in the distance, “and this man Gatsby sent over his chauffeur with an invitation.”

For a moment he looked at me as if he failed to understand.

“I’m Gatsby,” he said suddenly.

“What!” I exclaimed, “Oh, I beg your pardon.” (49)

Nick fails to recognise Gatsby and Gatsby initially fails to understand why Nick fails to recognise him. In a text replete with misrecognitions and mistaken identities (indeed, its tragic conclusion hinges upon such misrecognitions), Larsen’s rewriting of Daisy Buchanan as Clare Kendry in *Passing* calls readers’ attention to a further possible misrecognition on their own part and challenges them to scrutinise the means by which they arrive at their interpretive conclusions.

 Notes

¹ Alain Locke and Lothrop Stoddard, "Should the Negro be encouraged to cultural equality?: A Debate" *The Forum* 78.4 (1927): 503, 505.

² Locke and Stoddard 515.

³ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1980) 103.

⁴ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950) 18. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.

⁵ Locke and Stoddard 507, 514.

⁶ Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1996) 165-166 and 351.

⁷ She was certainly familiar with Stoddard's work as early as 1922. See George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006) 141.

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000) 4.

⁹ Anna Brickhouse, "Nella Larsen and the Intertextual Geography of *Quicksand*," *African American Review* 35.4 (2001): 535-536.

¹⁰ Sinéad Moynihan, *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010) 5.

¹¹ Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001) 143. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.

¹² Arthur Mizener, "Gatsby, 35 Years Later," *New York Times* 24 Apr. 1960, 2 Feb. 2010 <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/24/specials/fitzgerald-gatsby60.html>>.

¹³ Davis 156.

¹⁴ Andrew Turnbull, ed., *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964) 483.

¹⁵ Carl Van Vechten, *The Splendid Drunken Twenties: Selections from the Daybooks, 1922-1930*, ed. Bruce Kellner (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2003) 159. If Van Vechten's relationship with both writers were not suggestive enough, it is probable that Larsen encountered reviews of Fitzgerald's novel in some of the many periodicals to which, as a librarian at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, she had access and which she read. In 1922, when Larsen applied for admittance to the Public Library's prestigious library school, she listed *Literary Digest*, *The Nation*, the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Evening Post* among the periodicals that she read regularly (Hutchinson 141-142). After she began her course of study, her Current Events class required her "to study coverage of selected issues in an array of newspapers, weeklies, and monthlies, a practice that became a habit for her throughout the 1920s" (Hutchinson 147). Among these were *The Nation*, *Outlook* and *Saturday Review*. Reviews of *The Great Gatsby* appeared in *Outlook*, *Literary Digest*, the *New York Herald Tribune* (the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Herald* merged in 1924), *Saturday Review of Literature* and *The Nation*.

¹⁶ Charles Larson, "Introduction," *An Intimation of Things Distant: The Collected Fiction of Nella Larsen*, ed. and introd. Charles Larson (New York: Anchor, 1992) xiii; Nella Larsen, "The Wrong Man" in Larson 5. Subsequent references to "The Wrong Man" will appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.

¹⁷ Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 86.

¹⁸ Hutchinson 197.

¹⁹ Wall 88.

²⁰ Though my emphasis here is on Larsen's interest in *The Great Gatsby*, there are unmistakable echoes of other black- and white-authored texts in "The Wrong Man." Ralph Tyler, Larsen's ambiguously-raced returned explorer is reminiscent of Reuel Briggs, the white-looking medical student/occult enthusiast who discovers an ancient African civilisation in Pauline Hopkins's serialised novel *Of One Blood* (1902-1903). Hopkins also wrote under pseudonyms: Sarah A. Allen

and, as Hanna Wallinger discovered recently, J. Shirley Shadrach. He also bears a resemblance to Tom Outland in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925), who explores an ancient Native American cliff city in New Mexico. Had Outland not died in World War I, he would have become Professor St. Peter's son-in-law and would have been looked upon far more favourably than St. Peter's eventual son-in-law, the Jew Louie Marsellus.

²¹ Charles Lewis, "Babbled Slander Where the Paler Shades Dwell: Reading Race in *The Great Gatsby*," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 18.2 (2007): 184.

²² Lewis 175.

²³ Wall 86.

²⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 25.

²⁵ Carlyle Van Thompson, *The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading in the American Literary Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 75.

²⁶ Meredith Goldsmith, "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.3 (2003): 443.

²⁷ Lewis 174.

²⁸ Lewis 181.

²⁹ Lewis 182-183.

³⁰ Van Thompson 82-83.

³¹ Lewis 181.

³² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) xxiv.

³³ Goldsmith 458.

³⁴ Mark J. Madigan, "Miscegenation and 'the Dicta of Race and Class': The Rhinelander Case and Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 36.4 (1990): 525; Earl Lewis and Heidi Ardizzone, *Love on Trial: An American Scandal in Black and White* (New York: Norton, 2002) 23.

³⁵ Jennifer DeVere Brody, "Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *Callaloo* 15.4 (1992): 1062.

³⁶ Goldsmith 459.

³⁷ Goldsmith 459. While accepting Daisy's whiteness, Lewis casts doubt on Jordan Baker's, noting her attempt to cover her tanned arms and her "tense insistence" in Chapter 7 that "We're all white here" (188, n.5).

³⁸ DeVere Brody 1055; Nell Sullivan, "Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the Fading Subject," *African American Review* 32.3 (1998): 374.

³⁹ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 3.

⁴⁰ Laura Doyle, *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 4.

⁴¹ Doyle 3.

⁴² Doyle 4.

⁴³ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 29.

⁴⁴ Bert Bender, "'His Mind Aglow': The Biological Undercurrent in Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and Other Works," *Journal of American Studies* 32.3 (1998): 405. 399-420.

⁴⁵ Doyle 21.

⁴⁶ Goldsmith 458.

⁴⁷ Michaels 41.

⁴⁸ Amy Robinson, "Forms of Appearance and Value: Homer Plessy and the politics of privacy," *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996) 237.

⁴⁹ Carlyle Van Thompson, "'Makin a way Outta no way': The dangerous business of racial masquerade in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *Women & Performance* 15.1 (2005): 92.

⁵⁰ Doyle 4; Williamson 103.

⁵¹ Michaels 41.

⁵² Deborah McDowell's interpretation of the novel as a veiled treatment of lesbian desire is the most convincing example. "Introduction," *Quicksand and Passing* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1986) ix-xxxv.

⁵³ Robinson 241.

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