A Struggle for Peace in the Warring Soul: The Double Consciousness and Psychoanalysis of *Passing*

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According to W.E.B. DuBois, African Americans possess a double consciousness, which consists of an internal conflict between "two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (8). This idea comprises a horizontal structure of personality in which two types of consciousness coexist (8). Previous analysis has shown that the ideas of W.E.B DuBois are related to Sigmund Freud, who proposed a "three-tiered structure: id, ego, and superego" (Somersan 162). Combining both DuBoisian and Freudian models of personality produces the structure: superego-ego1-ego2-id (Somersan 162). The two egos are inner and outer reflections of the self respectively, representing the double consciousness. Freud suggests that there is also conflict between the ego and the id and between the superego and the ego (Freud 33-48). Therefore, DuBois' ideas of a double consciousness, where a conflict arises between the conscious and subconscious, are strikingly similar to Freud's ideas of the characteristics of the id, ego, and superego. In this way, DuBois presents a new concept of Freud's ideas that are influenced by the African American experience.

In regard to DuBois' formulation of the double consciousness, Sandra Adell claims the presence of a desire for reconciliation in the intersubjectivity of the Negro and the Other (58). She analyzes Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*, and Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Both pieces of literature describe the struggles of an African American in a race-conscious society. Wright's desire to be

a part of the African world and of the world of Western literature in *Black Boy,* and Maya Angelou's desire for the absent mother in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* represent the idea of intersubjectivity of the Negro and the Other (Adell 58). Similarly, Badia Sahar Ahad has used Freudian psychoanalysis to analyze Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (46). Ahad uses Freud's idea of the anxiety of birth, in which the mother shapes the ego and identity of the child, thus leaving the mother as the source of the child's primal anxiety (Ahad 46). However, few analytical studies have used both Freud and DuBois' ideas in conjunction. This study uses DuBois' ideas of the double consciousness, supplemented by Freud's ideas of personality, to analyze the relationship between Clare and Irene's dynamic characters in Nella Larsen's *Passing*.

Passing was published in 1929 during the Harlem Renaissance. As a result, the novel mainly reflects the psychological struggles of African Americans who migrated to the North following the emancipation of slaves (Huggins 14). However, African Americans were still limited in opportunity by a race-conscious society in the North (Huggins 18). As Henry May states, African Americans had to "break into the dominant respectable culture of the day before they could break out of it" (Huggins 84). Light skinned African Americans often "passed" as white by moving into a white social identity in order to obtain opportunities and enjoy privileges otherwise denied to them because of their race (Larsen viii). In her novel, Larsen, of African-Danish ancestry, explores the confining and psychological narrowness of the lives of Irene Redfield and her childhood friend, Clare Kendry, both of whom are light skinned African American women of mixed ancestry (160). Clare and Irene are childhood friends who unexpectedly reunite after many years at the Drayton Hotel. Irene is a working mother of two sons who passes as

white only when necessary for social events, and she maintains the security of her family. She is married to Brain, an African American doctor, who longs to move away to Brazil. Brian's wishes and Irene's resistance to change causes a strained marriage. On the other hand, Clare completely identifies and passes as a white woman (Larsen 159). Her husband, businessman John Bellew, is a white bigot who is ignorant of his wife's African American ancestry. As Clare lives on the edge and Irene maintains security, both women lead different lives. As a result, their sudden reunion causes Irene to question her lifestyle.

The desire to pass was especially appealing to African American women who faced oppression due to both race and gender. During the Harlem Renaissance, this New Negro Woman was expected to be a teacher, homemaker, or nurse who supported the endeavors of the New Negro Men—the race leaders (Sherrard-Johnson 27). Larsen, a former nurse and librarian, knew the challenges and constraints of being a New Negro Woman (Sherrard-Johnson 27). She exemplifies this struggle through Irene who strives to maintain peace in her home and acts as a moral guide supportive of her husbands. As Cherene Sherrard-Johnson states, Irene embodies the characteristics of an idealized New Negro Woman expected to supply the moral rationale for her behavior and the choices she makes for her family (27). Her anxiety regarding her husband's restlessness—"that craving for some place strange and different"—which she has "had to make such strenuous efforts to repress," reflects her own inner struggles to reconcile herself to her role as wife, mother, socialite, and New Negro Woman (Sherrard-Johnson 37). Irene chooses to not pass as often as Clare because she prefers the safety of her position as the New Negro Woman. Upon reuniting with Clare, Irene begins to question

her lifestyle. Their relationship illuminates the DuBoisian and Freudian psychological struggle.

In *Passing*, Nella Larsen illustrates the presence of this double consciousness in Irene, who struggles between acting according to her established consciousness and conflicting subconsciousness, represented by Clare. While Clare lives dangerously, passing between the white and black community, Irene chooses to remain mostly grounded as a black woman striving to maintain the security of her family. Despite their apparent differences in nature, Larsen shows that Clare's presence greatly influences Irene and makes her aware of her subconscious desires for security, passionate conjugal love, and the risks of passing. Clare reflects Irene's true self to which Irene ultimately succumbs to in the end of the novel. In this way, Larsen presents a variation of DuBois' theory of a double consciousness, in which the "two warring souls" can become one. Therefore, the souls conflict yet are inseparable and can converge. The struggle between Irene's established conscious and Clare as her conflicting subconscious unites within Irene to make her a dynamic character. Similarly, Clare represents Irene's superego and id, which separate from and merge to form the ego, shaping Irene's dynamic character. The fluidity of the superego and id reflect DuBois' idea of a double consciousness. This mental dynamism comprises the psychological struggle of the New Negro Woman.

Throughout the novel, Clare and Irene encounter each other through mirrors, which symbolizes Clare as Irene's reflection or subconsciousness. At the Drayton Hotel, Clare symbolically acts as the mirror through which Irene becomes aware of her true self. Clare's blatant stare causes Irene to question her appearance before she

comes to the realization that she might look out of place because she is truly black. Irene thinks to herself, "Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? Absurd! Impossible!" (Larsen 16). Irene had always thought of herself as an "Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican," just as others usually saw her (Larsen 16). However, in the presence of Clare, Irene becomes aware of her true identity as a black woman. Therefore, Clare reveals Irene's subconscious awareness of her inner self and identity. Clare is the "mirror" that reflects an opposing image, or ideal, that creates Irene's internal conflict. Therefore, Clare's immediate recognition of Irene at the Drayton Hotel shows that Irene cannot hide her true self from her subconscious. Clare is the "portion of the id from which the ego has separated itself by resistances due to repression" (Freud 48). Hence, Irene's inability to recognize Clare reflects how she has repressed her subconscious for too long. Now, the presence of the subconscious creates an internal conflict within Irene.

Before Irene's encounter with Clare at the Drayton Hotel, Irene was content in her own life, living according to her own consciousness without opposition. Her trivial thoughts revolved around her daily life as a New Negro Woman. In Chicago, before Irene encounters Clare, she shops for gifts for her sons and thinks of her family and career. As she sits alone at a table at the Drayton, "[Irene's] mind returned to her own affairs. She had settled, definitely, the problem of the proper one of the two frocks for the bridge party that night…The dress decided, her thoughts went back to the snag of Ted's book" (Larsen 15). However, the latent desire burning within Irene wishes to escape from the confinement of the idealized New Negro Woman. Though Irene tries to be a good mother, she chose to delay buying her sons gifts "until only a few crowded

days remained of her long visit" (Larsen 12). She prolongs her freedom and avoids the duties of her confining role as a working homemaker. Furthermore, the hot weather illustrates her internal conflict and made her "realize that she was about to faint. With a quick perception of need for immediate safety, she lifted her wavering hand in the direction of a cab" (Larsen 13). The heat embodies Irene's repressed desires from which she tries to escape. However, the subconscious is impossible to escape from as it ultimately leads Irene to ironically seek safety at the Drayton where she faces her subconscious in the flesh by uniting with Clare. Before seeing Clare, Larsen writes, "In fact, so much was it what she had desired and expected that after the first deep cooling drink she was able to forget it, only now and then sipping, a little absently" (13). Irene has repressed desires that threaten to emerge and then become latent again as she continues to sip absently. This unidentified desire described as "it" highlights Irene's psychological struggle of conforming to the doubly oppressed New Negro Woman. Because the desire to escape from this role is frowned upon by society, she tries hard to repress these feelings. Only in the presence of Clare do these latent desires fully emerge. Clare's presence was felt when Irene describes a flashback of opening a letter she had received from Clare months ago, thus recalling a repressed memory. As she opens the letter after two years of not speaking to Clare, the written words in the letter brought "a clear, sharp remembrance, in which even now, after two years, humiliation, resentment, and rage were mingled" (Larsen 11). Clare's words immediately remind Irene of the dangerous life that Clare leads, passing as a white woman and escaping the role of the New Negro Woman. The recovered memories of Clare occupy Irene's mind, conflicting with her established consciousness and transforming her character.

Clare's presence heightens Irene's awareness of her repressed desires, such as her curiosity about "passing." Although passing brings an element of danger to the New Negro Woman, it also brings an escape from oppression. As Larsen writes, "The truth was, she was curious. There were things she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing" (Larsen 24). Irene describes the act of passing as hazardous because it forces her to risk her security and defy her role as a New Negro Woman who must remain true to her African American identity. After her encounter with Clare, Irene becomes more aware of her confined place in society and the dangers of passing. Clare has permanently passed as a white woman for several years, and married John Bellew, whose ignorance of his wife's true racial identity presents an element of danger to Clare's life. Only after meeting John Bellew, and observing his relationship with Clare, does Irene realize the danger of her own place as a black woman who may pass as white. Larsen writes, "A faint sense of danger brushed her, like the breath of a cold fog" (40). Clare's choice to completely mask her African American identity defies the role of the New Negro Woman as being supportive of the New Negro Men, or race leaders. On the other hand, Irene holds African American pride, and becomes angered when Bellew calls her people, "black scrimy devils" (Larsen 40). Larsen hints at the conflict presented by Irene's double consciousness to fight back against his racial comment when she writes, "The impulse passed, obliterated by [Irene's] consciousness of the danger in which such rashness would involve Clare" (41). Irene's suppressed desire to defend her race conflicts with her conscious need to avoid danger, the opposite of Clare's "rashness." Therefore,

Irene struggles to resist the opposing desire brought by Clare with her established conscious.

In addition, Clare brings out Irene's repressed sexual desires. At the Drayton, Irene describes Clare's smile for the waiter as "a shade too provocative" (Larsen 15). This description hints at Irene's subconscious sexual desire that is otherwise missing from her life, thus sparking her awareness of the trouble she has in her marriage with Brian, "a marriage that had threatened to fail" (Larsen 58). Irene has known "that [Brian's] dissatisfaction had continued, as had his dislike and disgust for his profession and his country" (Larsen 58). Brian wishes to move to Brazil and Irene "didn't like changes, particularly changes that affected the smooth routine of her household" (Larsen 58). She tries to be a New Negro Woman who "had only to direct and guide her man, to keep him going in the right direction," but now, her efforts are not enough to save her marriage (Larsen 58). When Irene contemplates her marriage, "A feeling of uneasiness stole upon her at the inconceivable suspicion that she might have been wrong in her estimate of her husband's character" (Larsen 58). After this thought, Clare suddenly appears in her dressing mirror and, "Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling," saying, "'Dear God! But aren't you lovely Clare!'" (Larsen 65). Clare's appearance to Irene in the mirror shows that Clare reflects Irene's latent desire for love and affection. She desires a love that appreciates her efforts to maintain the safety and smooth routine of the household as a New Negro Woman. The tension between Irene's insecurities about her marriage and her repressed affection and sexual desire brought out by Clare, reveals Irene's true desires, the desire for a secure family and passionate conjugal love.

Larsen explores how Clare acts as both the super-ego and id of the subconscious by bringing out favorable desires and "untamed passions" respectively. Clare brings out Irene's inner favorable desire to have a stronger connection with her sons and husband yet also the untamed thoughts of resenting motherhood. Clare, Irene's subconscious desires**,** brings out this repressed "untamed" longing when she tells Irene, "'I think that being a mother is the cruelest thing in the world,'" Irene agrees, "For a moment she was unable to say more, so accurately had Clare put into words that which, not so definitely defined, was so often in her own heart of late" (Larsen 68). Because Clare's words reflect Irene's inner feelings, Clare represents Irene's subconscious thinking. Throughout the novel, Irene appears to be distant from her sons, and she scolds Ted when she informs Clare, "'Please excuse his bad manners. He does know better'" (Larsen 72). Similarly, she and Brian disagree when it comes to parenting their children. Brian wants to expose his sons to the hardships of life, whereas Irene works to protect their innocence. This constant conflict with her husband threatens the security of their marriage. Her desire for a loving relationship with her husband is nearly nonexistent when she questions, "He was the husband and the father of her sons, but was he anything more?" (Larsen 107). Larsen shows how Irene's untamed thoughts make her seem imperfect despite her conscious attempts to maintain the security of her family. Ironically, only Clare embodies the perfect woman because she avoided the role of the New Negro Woman by taking on a white identity and thus escaping the African American woman's psychological struggles.

Clare also resembles Irene's favorable self, or superego, when she makes Brian and Irene's children happy. Consequently, Clare is the ideal mother and wife when

Irene fails to be, and she represents Irene's desires for a stronger connection with her family. In this way, Larsen points out the complexity of a double consciousness, in which the "two warring souls" can unite, and the superego mediates the id and ego. When Irene befriends Clare, she begins to spend a lot of time in the Redfield household, showing that she can fill Irene's daily roles as a wife and mother more favorably. As Larsen describes, "If Irene happened to be out or occupied, Clare could very happily amuse herself with Ted and Junior, who had conceived for her an admiration that verged on adoration, especially Ted" (79). Clare takes on Irene's roles, showing Irene how she could be a better mother. In response, "Irene, while secretly resenting these visits to the playroom and kitchen, for some obscure reason which she shied away from putting into words, never requested that Clare make an end of them" (Larsen 79). The tension between the super-ego and ego causes Irene to feel a moral sense of guilt. This guilt of desiring to escape motherhood causes Irene to allow Clare to replace her in her roles. Although there is an opposition between Irene's double consciousnesses, there is also a unifying relation between them that allows Clare to be seen as Irene's subconscious, and possibly, her better half. Similarly, Clare begins to accompany Brian to social gatherings to fill Irene's role as a wife. Larsen writes, "She had gone alone with Brian to some bridge party or benefit dance" (80). Clare replaces Irene as Brian's date because she represents the ideal wife within Irene. The relationship that Clare has with Brian is how Irene desires her marriage to be. Clare intrigues Brian: "never…had he shown any disapproval to Clare's presence" (Larsen 79). Therefore, Clare represents Irene's subconscious longing to be the better mother

and wife in order to secure her household, her true desire. In this way, Clare is seen as Irene's favorable half, when "two warring souls" unite.

Although there may be an agreement between the "two warring souls," the essence of a double consciousness is constant conflict. In this way, Larsen shows the complexity of the double consciousness. For example, the desire for security is the main conflict between Clare and Irene. Clare lives a dangerous life and says, "'Why, to get things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, 'Rene, I'm not safe'" (Larsen 81). Despite the presence of her subconscious, Irene longs for the security of her household. Larsen writes, "Security was the most important thing she desired in life. She would not be uprooted. Not even because of Clare Kendry, or a hundred Clare Kendrys" (107). However, Clare presents a conflict that goes against Irene's consciousness. As a result, Irene begins to question herself, saying, "'I'm beginning to believe that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe'" (Larsen 67). Irene says she wanted only "to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband" (Larsen 107). When Irene suspects that Clare and Brian are having an affair, she has a sudden desire to get rid of Clare so that she can maintain the security of her family. Looking at herself in her dressing mirror before going downstairs to attend a tea party, Irene says, "'I do think,' she confided to [her reflection], 'that you've been something—oh, very much—of a damned fool'" (Larsen 90). Irene could be referring to either her conscious self as the fool for being blind to the affair until now, or she could be telling her subconscious, Clare, that she has been a fool for thinking that she can destroy Irene's life. By blurring the distinction between

consciousness and subconsciousness, Larsen shows how Irene's two souls have become united.

In the end, Irene ironically embraces Clare's dangerous lifestyle by wishing for Clare's death in order to secure her marriage. Irene ultimately embraces Clare's danger, showing how the ego is weak and borrows its energies from the dominating id (Freud 48). The novel's ending demonstrates how the struggle of Irene's double consciousness is not easy to resolve. She wants to repress her subconscious forever, yet gives into it by embracing danger and going to great lengths to achieve the security that she wants in her marriage, possibly pushing Clare out of the window to her death. Larsen writes, "She wanted to be free of her" (97). Yet, she "could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry" (Larsen 100). However, once Clare falls out of the window, Irene is relieved. Larsen writes, "That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone!" (111). Also, instead of grieving for Clare, Irene can only think of Brian. She says, "Brian! He musn't take cold" (Larsen 112). And she drags his coat with her downstairs, and "had a great longing to comfort him" (Larsen 113). When Brian wraps his coat around her, he symbolically secures their marriage. As a result, Irene sobs from relief that her marriage is now saved and that she has successfully repressed her subconscious forever. Alternatively, now that she has embraced Clare's dangerous lifestyle, she sobs because she fears that Clare is still alive within her. The ambiguity reflects the complexity of ridding one of their subconsciousness, a nearly impossible act.

Furthermore, Larsen shows that it is impossible to separate the double consciousness, or Clare from Irene, because they are symbolically tied together through

the color red throughout the novel, thus making them unified. Clare is first introduced into the novel as little girl "sewing pieces of bright red cloth together" to make a "pathetic little red frock" (Larsen 9-10). As the story comes back to Irene in the present recalling this memory, "Brilliant red patches flamed in Irene Redfield's warm olive cheeks" (Larsen 11). Because Clare is associated with danger and fire throughout the novel and these "red patches flamed" in Irene's cheeks, Larsen melds Clare into Irene through the image of red and fire. Clare, as the girl with the "pathetic red frock" in the beginning of the novel, transforms into a woman, "radiant in a shining red gown," who disappears quickly like "a flame of red and gold" at the end (Larsen 105, 111). Although Clare physically disappears, she will always remain tied to Irene. Her last name, "Redfield," further emphasizes that the color red, often associated with Clare, is actually embodied by Irene. This shows that Irene may never be able to completely forget Clare, who remains within her soul.

Throughout *Passing*, Nella Larsen demonstrates the complexity of DuBois' double consciousness. As Irene's subconscious, Clare is a part of her double consciousness that caused the psychological struggle of women during the Harlem Renaissance. Because Clare brings out Irene's subconscious desires yet ultimately changes her into an impulsive and dangerous character in the end, the double consciousness and the three-tiered mind are conflicted yet united. Despite the unity of Irene's two souls where Clare is forever bound to her, there will always be conflict between them, which defines the struggle presented by the double consciousness. As W.E.B. DuBois pointed out, "two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (8). This also relates to how the ego

struggles much like a double consciousness, “The ego, driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, repulsed by reality, struggles to master its economic tasks of bringing about harmony among the forces and influences working in and upon it” (Freud 49). This shows how much the struggle of the ego and double consciousness can take a toll on a human being, especially an African American woman defined by her role as a New Negro Woman of the Harlem Renaissance. DuBois’ words reflect Irene’s struggle for strength at the end of the novel where she collapses on her knees from the conflict between her two warring ideals, herself and Clare.

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