

2016

Teaching Passing as a Lesbian Text

Suzanne Raitt

College of William and Mary, sxrait@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/asbookchapters>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Raitt, S. (2016). Teaching Passing as a Lesbian Text. Jacquelyn McLendon (Ed.), *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Nella Larsen* (pp. 114-122). New York, NY: Modern Language Association.
<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/asbookchapters/10>

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts and Sciences at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Nella Larsen

Edited by

Jacquelyn Y. McLendon

© 2016 by The Modern Language Association of America
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

MLA and the MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION are trademarks owned by the Modern Language Association of America. For information about obtaining permission to reprint material from MLA book publications, send your request by mail (see address below) or e-mail (permissions@mla.org).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McLendon, Jacquelyn Y. editor.

Title: Approaches to teaching the novels of Nella Larsen / edited by Jacquelyn Y. McLendon.

Description: New York : The Modern Language Association of America, 2016. | Series:

Approaches to teaching world literature ; 138 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016002446 | ISBN 9781603292191 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781603292207

(pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781603292214 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781603292221 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Larsen, Nella—Study and teaching.

Classification: LCC PS3523.A7225 Z75 2016 | DDC 813/.52—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2016002446>

Approaches to Teaching World Literature 138
ISSN 1059-1133

Cover illustration of the paperback and electronic editions:
Cocktails, by Archibald Motley. 1926. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum.
© Valerie Gerrard Brown and Mara Motley, MD.

Published by The Modern Language Association of America
85 Broad Street, suite 500, New York, New York 10004-2434
www.mla.org

Teaching *Passing* as a Lesbian Text

Suzanne Raitt

At the end of a semester teaching an upper-level course called Lesbian Literatures, I always ask students to talk about which texts they recommend keeping the next time I teach the course. They mostly love Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*; they usually dislike Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, but they see why it should be in the course; and, almost to a person, they tell me I should drop *Passing*. It's not about lesbians, they complain; the lesbian interpretations we developed were far-fetched; the novel deals with racial passing, and not with passing as a heterosexual. In this essay, I explore several ways of teaching *Passing* in a course on lesbian literature and suggest some reasons for student dissatisfaction with it in such a context. Much of their resistance, I believe, grows out of their inexperience with and potential reluctance to accept the socially and culturally constructed nature of racial and sexual identities, or the ways in which such identities are mutually constitutive—what Kimberlé Crenshaw has called “intersectionality.” In my Lesbian Literatures classroom, I encourage students to reflect on the historical and cultural contingency of identity categories and on the multivalence of literary writing. The ambiguous nature of much of the language of *Passing* encourages students to think about how their assumptions about the social and cultural configuration of race, sexuality, and gender shape not only the ways they read written and visual texts but also their own identities and their experience of the world around them. Perhaps it should go without saying that their resistance to reading *Passing* as a lesbian text has not deterred me from including it in the course. Rather, knowing how intensely students deny the novel's engagement with lesbian erotic experience has allowed me to experiment with different ways of using the book to help them question their habits of reading and of analysis.

Context in Lesbian Literary History

I teach Lesbian Literatures at a small research university with a liberal arts focus. Lesbian Literatures is an upper-level course in English, cross-listed with women's studies and often with literary and cultural studies, with a maximum of thirty students, most of whom are white, and several of whom usually openly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer. The course is organized chronologically, so that students develop a sense of the historical evolution of contexts and languages for lesbian identities and experiences in Britain and the United States. Students usually encounter *Passing* about halfway through the semester, after they have read selections from the work of the seventeenth-century poet Katherine Phillips, the eighteenth-century novelist Sarah Scott, the Victorian writers Christina Rossetti and Sheridan Lefanu, and the critics Martha Vicinus,

Judith Butler, and Sue O'Sullivan. Immediately before reading *Passing*, students study Hall's classic lesbian tragedy *The Well of Loneliness* and Woolf's fantasy biography of her lesbian lover Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando*.

Students are prepared to read *Passing* in the sessions that precede our study of the novel by discussion of how literary texts sometimes anchor their representations of lesbian experience in an essentialist, usually masculinized, version of what a "lesbian" is, and how they sometimes use imaginative language to release lesbianism from the constraints of definition altogether. *The Well of Loneliness* is an example of the first strategy. Students learn about the "congenital invert" by reading and discussing excerpts from Carl von Westphal, a German doctor, who wrote a case study in 1869 about Fraulein N., a woman who dressed as a man and felt attracted to women (qtd. in Zimmerman 102-03); Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a German lawyer, who wrote of gay men being "women trapped in men's bodies" and who worked to liberalize the German antisodomy laws in the 1860s (Zimmerman 688); Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which describes homosexuality as an "inherited diseased condition of the central nervous system" (Zimmerman 331); and Havelock Ellis's magisterial *Sexual Inversion*, which notes that "[t]he commonest characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity or boyishness" (Ellis and Symonds 94). Havelock Ellis wrote a brief foreword to the first edition of *The Well of Loneliness*, and its central character, Stephen Gordon, fits Ellis's description of the inverted woman almost exactly. *The Well of Loneliness* is thus rooted in the new science of sexology, dramatizing its theories of lesbian sexuality as a function of gender identity.

However, there is one character in the novel whose desire confounds such an easy correlation between masculinity and attraction to women, and students are always attracted to the ways in which she slips beneath the radar in most readings of the book. Mary, Stephen's devoted wife, is ultrafeminine, but nonetheless she has overwhelming and passionate sexual feelings for Stephen. The book resolves with her seeking solace in the arms of a man after Stephen pretends to betray her in order to save her from her tragic life as the wife of an invert. Mary's desire is apparently aroused by masculinity whether it inheres in the body of a woman or of a man, but the novel is uninterested in the complexities of this anomalous, more fluid configuration of erotic feeling. However, Mary is a useful context for discussion of *Passing*, since she is an example of someone who could and sometimes does "pass" in the sexual sense. Her confusing presence in a novel that is apparently so confident about its own explanatory paradigms inadvertently reveals some of the shortcomings of identity politics, shortcomings that are at the center of *Passing's* interrogation of racial and sexual identities.

Identity politics are also challenged in the next book the students read, *Orlando*. Its central character, based on Woolf's lesbian lover Sackville-West, lives for over three hundred years and changes sex from male to female at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Students learn about the biographical

context of the novel in the relationship between the two women and about the place of the novel in the literary history of biography. They view slides of some of the more resonant passages in Virginia Woolf's diaries and letters while she is working on *Orlando*, observing that Woolf never identified herself as lesbian. She was wary even of attaching the label to Sackville-West, who was a well-known lesbian. Woolf, however, preferred to revel in the linguistic possibilities opened up by her lover's erotic splendor: "I like her & being with her, & the splendour—she shines in the grocers shop in Sevenoaks with a candle lit radiance, stalking on legs like beech trees, pink glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung." Woolf saw no contradiction between Sackville-West's womanliness and her attraction to other women: she described her in her diary as "what I have never been, a real woman" (*Diary* 52) while still recognizing her as a "Sapphist" (51). After her sex change, *Orlando*, though biologically female, is an androgynous figure, frequently cross-dressing and retaining the attraction to women she felt as a man: "She was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each" (Woolf, *Orlando* 117); "as all Orlando's loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, it was still a woman she loved" (119). Thus *Orlando*, even while it recalls sexological theories of sexual inversion in locating the origins of lesbian eroticism in a heterosexual encounter, also undermines their assumptions, reflecting on the tenuous relation between gender and sexuality and on the fluidity of identity. The question of the legibility of identity is at the center of both *Orlando* and *Passing*.

Editions and Critical Contexts

Since 2007, when it was published, I have used the Norton Critical Edition of *Passing* edited by Carla Kaplan in my course. I do not require students to read the supporting materials in the volume, but I do on occasion cite them to support a particular interpretation, and I encourage students to browse through any critical articles or other texts that interest them in the second half of the volume.

Interracial and Same-Sex Marriage

Because *Passing* is a relatively short novel, I usually spend only one week (two class sessions) on it. During the first session, I present a brief lecture-style set of remarks, based on a series of *PowerPoint* slides, to frame our study of the text. In my lecture, I focus on the broader context of the issues raised in the novel and allow students to develop their own specific literary-critical readings of the text itself in the discussions that follow my remarks.

I have found it most useful in the contemporary context to start by outlining the history of the miscegenation laws in the United States and encouraging

students to compare the legal and social histories of interracial and same-sex marriage in the United States today. I focus on marriage for two reasons: first, because in *Passing*, interracial marriage is key to Clare Kendry's vulnerability as a passing black woman married to a racist white man and, second, because discussion of marriage in *Passing* can frame a discussion of how lesbian or bisexual women can pass for heterosexual in the context of marriage to a man. Comparing the histories of interracial and same-sex marriage in this country pushes students to think about the specific terms in which discrimination is debated in American culture, allowing them to reflect on the similarities and also the differences between the civil rights and the LGBTQ rights movements. For example, I ask them why interracial marriage has been legal in all fifty states since 1967, whereas same-sex marriage was not federally recognized until 2015.

I open with a slide documenting the gradual passage of miscegenation laws in the majority of American states, giving specific information about Virginia, the state in which I currently teach.¹ Students learn that the first American miscegenation law was passed in Virginia in 1661, that in 1924 the Racial Integrity Law in Virginia made it illegal for a white person to marry anyone with "a single drop of Negro blood," that by the 1920s marriage between whites and blacks was illegal in thirty-eight states, and that by the 1950s many miscegenation laws had been extended to include marriage between whites and a range of ethnic groups, including Mongolians, Malayans, and Native Americans. I then discuss the specific states relevant to *Passing*: Illinois, where Clare and Irene grew up, and New York, where they are living at the time of the action of the novel. Students learn that New York never enacted a miscegenation law and that Illinois enacted laws in 1829 banning whites and blacks from marrying and repealed them in 1874. At the time of writing, then, Larsen and her characters are living in states in which whites and blacks are free to marry. Clare's peril comes not from her legal situation but from ingrained attitudes and feelings; the novel is about prejudice, not about civil rights.

Partly because, as I have noted, I teach in Virginia, I then spend some time on *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) and the subsequent nullification of the miscegenation laws that were still on the books in sixteen American states (most states repealed their laws during the 1950s and early 1960s). I show slides of Mildred Jeter and Richard Loving, who married in Washington, DC, and were arrested at their home in Virginia in 1967. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in the Court's decision: "Under our Constitution, the freedom to marry or not marry a person of another race resides with the individual and cannot be infringed upon by the State" (*Loving v. Virginia*). Discussion of this opinion usually leads to a discussion of the terms of the same-sex marriage debate and of why race has been treated differently from sexual orientation in the marriage laws of so many American states.

Contemporary Cases of Racial Passing

My remarks on interracial and same-sex marriage are usually followed by a series of slides and comments on two famous contemporary cases of racial passing, at least one of which was certainly on Nella Larsen's mind while she was writing *Passing*. My aim in introducing students to some of the specifics of the history of racial passing in the United States is both to encourage them to understand the severity of the consequences of being exposed as a passer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States and to invite them to reflect on the historical and contemporary instability of markers of racial identity in our culture. An understanding of this instability allows students to make a connection between women's sexual passing (where a woman adopts a heterosexual identity despite her sexual attraction to women) and their racial passing (where a woman of color adopts an identity as white). Questions of intent and consciousness inevitably come up during this discussion. If a white woman does not know she is black (for example, if she has black ancestry of which she is unaware), can she still be said to be "passing" as white? If a woman who thinks of herself as heterosexual finds herself attracted to another woman, is she now "passing" as straight? If she never consciously acknowledges her lesbian feelings, how might we describe her sexual identity? Students talk about the peculiar qualities of literary writing, which allows an author to manipulate narrative voice to intimate that a character has feelings but lacks language to describe them.

The two case histories I use to frame this discussion are the story of Anita Hemmings, who was revealed to be black a few weeks before she was due to graduate from all-white Vassar College in 1897 (Mancini; Perkins; Sim), and the *Rhineland* case, an unsuccessful but heavily publicized lawsuit filed by Leonard Kip Rhineland in 1924 in which he accused his wife of deceiving him about her African American identity (Madigan; Thaggert). Students view slides of Anita Hemmings and associated images and learn that she was admitted to Vassar College in 1893, that in 1897 her roommate's grandfather hired a private investigator to look into her family background and discovered that her parents were interracial, and that Anita Hemmings appealed her dismissal from Vassar and was allowed to keep her diploma but not to participate in graduation ceremonies. In 1903 Hemmings married Andrew Love, an African American physician, and moved to Manhattan, where the couple successfully passed as white. Their daughter, Ellen Love, did not learn about her ancestry until she met her grandmother for the first time in 1923. She never told anyone, including her own daughter, Jillian Sim, about the meeting, and Sim did not discover that her grandparents were African American until 1994.

The *Rhineland* case is specifically referred to briefly in *Passing* (228) when Irene, fearful that her husband and Clare are having an affair, starts to worry that if Bellew finds out that Clare is only passing as white, he will divorce her. Leonard Kip Rhineland, who had married his African American

maid, Alice Jones, in October 1924, filed a suit for annulment a month later, claiming that he had married her thinking she was white and that she had lied to him about her racial identity (he alleged that she told him her father was Cuban). The case dragged on for a year and involved Alice Jones in numerous humiliations, including being forced to remove some of her clothes in the jury room so that members of the jury could decide for themselves whether Rhinelander's claim that he thought she was white was credible. In 1925 the New York State Supreme Court finally ruled that Alice had never deceived her husband as to her race. Alice filed for separation in 1927 on grounds of desertion and cruelty.

I follow these painful accounts of the dangers of passing with some slides and discussion of contemporary environments in which interracial social relationships were viewed more positively, telling students a little about Larsen's involvement with the Harlem Renaissance and about the interracial gatherings hosted by Carl Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff, which Larsen attended.

In-Depth Discussion of Specific Passages and Themes

Passing is full of highly suggestive language describing Irene's obsession with Clare's beauty and her longing for her: "the woman . . . had for her a fascination, strange and compelling" (161); "What was it about Clare's voice that was so appealing, so very seductive?" (165); and so on. Toward the end, the novel opens up the possibility that Irene displaces her erotic feelings onto a fantasy that Clare is sexually involved with Irene's husband, Brian. I open our discussion of three key passages in the text (the first chapter, the encounter between Clare and Irene in the Drayton Hotel, and the tea party at Clare's house with Gertrude) by drawing students' attention to the erotic and obsessive nature of Irene's feelings about Clare.

In discussing the opening chapter, students respond to the intensity of Irene's reaction to the "mysterious," "furtive" letter Clare sends her (143) and to the passionate language of the letter itself. What expectations does the opening set up in the reader? Close reading of the vignette of Clare as a girl sewing her frock on the sofa (143-44) reveals the ambivalent nature of the narrator's perspective on Clare, who is treated with tenderness and compassion as well as with exasperation. This oscillation in the narrator's feelings echoes Irene's confusion about how to feel about Clare.

Discussion of the Drayton Hotel episode in chapter 2 explores Irene's narcissistic identification with and repudiation of Clare's actions. Students analyze the complex erotic dynamics of passages such as this one:

Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft lustre. And the eyes were magnificent! dark, sometimes absolutely black, always

luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them.

Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic. (161)²

The free indirect style here suggests that these are Irene's thoughts as her gaze moves slowly over Clare's face. Clare's blackness is revealed bit by bit, and as it is revealed the atmosphere of exoticism and mystery associated with her intensifies: first the "ivory" skin, then the "absolutely black" eyes, and finally the discovery: "they were Negro eyes!" Students talk about whether Irene is attracted to or discomfited by Clare's feminine beauty or her blackness or both, explore the distancing effect of words such as "exotic" and "mysterious" to describe Clare's blackness, and reflect on the interpellated reader in the passage and think about whether the reader is asked to identify with Irene as a passing woman: is the reader experiencing herself or himself as white or black? heterosexual or lesbian/gay? Does it matter?

Conversation about the tea party episode (165–76) centers on Irene's disgust at Gertrude's appearance and explores whether Irene's repudiation of Gertrude is linked to her knowledge that Gertrude—described as "white" (167)—identifies as African American and to her jealousy at Clare's friendship with Gertrude. The complex social and erotic dynamics between the three women are intensified by the arrival of Clare's husband and Irene's rage and mortification at his racist remarks. Forced to pass as white, Irene notices a "look for which she could find no name" on Clare's face as she says good-bye and feels a "recrudescence of . . . fear" (176), perhaps at the idea of what she herself is capable of. Indeed, one of the ironies of the novel, as Jennifer DeVere Brody points out, is that on occasion—for example, in the taxi on the way to the Drayton—Irene herself passes easily and without a second thought (Brody). Irene's sense of transgression and danger in visiting Clare can be linked to violation of both racial *and* erotic norms, so that the "passing" of the title takes on an ambiguity that is never fully resolved in the novel. Unknowingly echoing the conclusions of Deborah E. McDowell, one of my students once remarked that *Passing* itself passes as a novel about race, when in fact it is about the hidden lives of lesbians.

After the close reading exercise is over, students form small groups to identify key moments in the book that relate to Irene's marriage. They then return to the full group to share and reflect on what they have found. During this exercise, students always comment on the distance between Irene and Brian and his contempt for her, as well as on his desire to escape his marriage and what the novel calls his "queer, unhappy, restlessness" (178). Irene's craving for security—"to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life" (235)—is an implicit acknowledgment that identity can never be secure, that people are

frequently not what they seem, and that the price of taking advantage of the ambiguous status of one's own identity is a sense of "impermanence" (229) that Irene finds both alluring and unbearable.

The Ending

The ending of *Passing* is notoriously ambiguous. Readers who believe that Clare committed suicide or was pushed by Bellew probably see her story as continuing the tradition of the "tragic mulatto." Readers who think that Irene pushed her are likely to view Irene's sexual turmoil—whether over her attraction to Clare, her sexual jealousy of Clare, or both—as central to the dynamics of the text. Or they may see Irene herself as the "tragic mulatto," increasingly uncomfortable with the ways in which she has chosen to live out her racial identity, and perhaps revealing of Larsen's own ambivalence (Washington). Readers who see Clare's death as an accident may feel that the novel deliberately holds open a range of possible interpretations of its central themes, as may readers who feel that the cause of Clare's death is deliberately left unresolved.

To encourage students to explore all these different ways of reading the final pages of the novel, I ask them to stage either a debate over the ending or a mock trial of Irene. In the debate, different teams represent different readings of the ending (Clare killed herself, Bellew killed her, Irene killed her on purpose or by accident, etc.) and quote passages from the novel as evidence for their interpretations. In the mock trial, I play Irene, on trial for the murder of Clare, and the students divide themselves into a prosecution group and a defense group. They take it in turns to present their evidence (in the form of quotations from the texts) and to question me. I respond in character, using quotations to support my answers. Eventually, the class forms a jury, deliberates, and votes on my guilt. We then discuss the implications of our decision as a class for our reading of the text, along the lines I have suggested above.

The final exercise (debate or trial) forces us to address the possibility that the text is deliberately ambiguous about the nature of Irene's attraction to Clare. In the course as a whole, we talk at length about available languages for lesbian desire in different historical and cultural contexts, and we allow for the possibility of coded or censored languages of love. During our discussions, I often emphasize the relatively open nature of Harlem Renaissance society and the number of lesbian or bisexual women associated with it (McDowell). This helps students understand that Nella Larsen moved in a world in which lesbianism was visible and somewhat accepted. But students are still often very resistant to the idea that Larsen is encouraging her readers to imagine an attraction between Irene and Clare based not just on their race but also on their shared femaleness. I believe this resistance is in part a resistance to the qualities of literary language itself: its capacity to hold open a number of different readings simultaneously, to allow *Passing* to be more than one text at once. Students'

discomfort at this lack of fixity is related to the broader questions engaged in the novel and in our course about the fluidity of racial and sexual identities, which can also be unresolved for a lifetime and even beyond. I often point toward Claudia Tate's defense of her refusal to adopt any single reading of the ending as a way to help students accept their own uncertainties.

If I can encourage them to see the connections between their anxieties and the anxieties so painfully explored in the novel, I feel I have done my duty as a teacher. A text that invites readers into the longings of one woman for another is inevitably unsettling for a number of students, even those enrolled in a Lesbian Literatures course; one that engages their discomfort about race at the same time is even more troubling—and this goes for students who are lesbian or heterosexual, white or people of color. My role in the classroom is to provide a safe space in which they can learn to articulate both their pleasures and their anxieties as readers and to understand that those pleasures and anxieties have a long and painful history in American culture and society.

NOTES

¹ Information in the lecture comes from Pascoe.

² Cheryl A. Wall, in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, has written most persuasively about this passage (361).