

Carrie Wilson

Dr. Groover

English 4508, Section 101: Honors Seminar in American Literature

10 December 2015

Masks and Performance as Representations of Gender Oppression and Repression in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Edith Wharton and Nella Larsen's literature focus on metaphorically representing gender oppression and repression as masked social performances that result in death as the ultimate release from the drama. Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* depicts the heroine Lily Bart who, in the public social realm, attempts to mask herself as a disturbingly superficial character. Her friend and suitor Selden describes how "[her appearance's] impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization which had fused her whole being into one hard brilliant surface" (154). This masquerade imagery demonstrates the extent to which Lily socially capitalizes her beauty. The reader finds a sense of truth and rebirth in events leading up to her death, which shows how dying releases her from the dishonest social masquerade. Nella Larsen's heroine Irene Redfield similarly uses her racial ambiguity to "pass" as "an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy" when in public or in John Bellew's company (8). This idea of "passing" can be applied not only to race, but also to gender since the reader sees Irene reference traditional womanhood as a burden. Whether assuming the "cruellest" role of being a "mother" (52), or "suffering" as a woman in general, Irene views her gender as one that bears enough distress to not warrant having to "suffer" as a black individual as well (78). The term "passing" may also refer to Clare Kendry passing away at the novel's end, which frees her from the burden and influence of her mask of traditionally white femininity. Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, and Lily Bart use masks as a part

of their public social feminine performance whilst suffering from, and eventually seeking release via death from, the duality of demands womanhood places on an individual: those of the personal versus the private social spheres, and how to navigate both whilst not losing a sense of self.

Wharton uses Lily Bart's narrative in order to show the oppression and repression latent in the feminine masquerade's cultural significance, and as a result what it means to be a woman during the American Modernist period. Lily Bart's mother convinces Lily from a young age that she must treat her beauty and social appearance as social capital. Her mother forges an identity for her child that becomes her prime focus during Lily's childhood: "[Her mother] studied [Lily's beauty] with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes" (Wharton 26). The vengeance Wharton mentions here regards the financial loss the Bart family experiences during Lily's youth. Mrs. Bart's preoccupation with Lily's superficiality as an asset shows the masquerade's significance in Lily's adulthood: her appearance as a traditionally, conventionally feminine character creates an alternate reality in which she functions more often than in the honest realm of unmasked intimacy. According to Carol Baker Sapora's article "Female Doubling: The Other Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," the novel's question does not simply regard "who is the real Lily Bart—the 'flesh and blood' woman or the breath-taking work of art she has created—but who or what is a real woman" (372). Lily indulges the male gaze to give her audience the illusion of knowing the real her, especially during the *tableaux vivants* when she has the "impulse to show herself in a splendid setting" and allows "for the study of the female outline" (109). The idealization of the woman Wharton portrays during the *tableaux* scene shows Lily not only inviting the male gaze, but also internalizing male supremacy in a world

where her mask of beauty and feminine dependency creates the only reality in which she might function under the weight of convention.

Irene Redfield also feels the weight of convention in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, but more so as a result of white supremacy because Larsen links feminine identity with African American identity. Irene's mask involves publicly appearing white or racially ambiguous in rather than attempting to appear traditionally feminine. Larsen's language involving both Irene and Clare focuses on the aspects of their lives that passing affects such as social class, wealth and income, and perceived comfort in their respective households. The "ivory mask" Irene and Clare wear in the public eye shows that their performances center on making sure their public and social personas remain untouched by their African American heritage (Larsen 15). Yet, Irene still remains skeptical about the issue of passing: "She said: 'It's funny about "passing." We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it'" (42). She sees the masquerade's dubious nature, yet she guards passing because it guides her public social interactions. For example, when Irene runs into John Bellew at the market, "instinctively, in the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask" (79). She reflexively protects Clare for the sake of not compromising her own ability to pass in public because she "could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry" (80). In "'Makin a Way Outta No Way: The Dangerous Business of Racial Masquerade in Nella Larsen's *Passing*'" Carlyle Van Thompson writes, "Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew are middle-class black women who seek power through class ascension fueled by identification with whiteness to the point of passing" (80). By showing how Irene and Clare internalize white supremacy in order to

gain social acceptance and capital, Larsen indicates the danger of racial masquerade and of considering passing a necessity during the early 20th century.

While Larsen emphasizes Irene's preoccupation with racial appearance in *Passing*, Wharton depicts Lily as preoccupied over her appearance as a youthful, beautiful, marriageable young woman. When Clare stares at Irene on the Drayton's rooftop in an attempt to place her identity, Irene becomes obsessively self-aware about her ability, or potential lack thereof, to pass. Larsen describes this preoccupation as a "small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar" when Irene begins wondering, "Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (7). At that moment, Irene feels like her "ivory mask" might be compromised. She works hard to maintain her mask through powder and textile fashion, which shows the significance she places on being perceived as at least "an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy" while in the company of white folk (8). On the other hand, Lily Bart uses the same methods of powder and fashion to sculpt her mask, but her performance focuses more on youth. When she notices "lines" in her face, she hurriedly tries to "smooth" them out before she publicly shows her mask (Wharton 21). Lily's attempts at passing for a marriageable female signifies submission to male supremacy in a society where being an independent woman does not gain one wealth unless she happens to be a wealthy man's widow. Selden's depicts Lily's appearance as a "crystallization" of her entire being "into one hard brilliant surface," which characterizes Lily's mask as an infusion of falsified wealth and common representations of beauty (154). Therein lies the distinction between Larsen's representation of femininity versus that of Wharton: while the "ivory mask" worn by Clare and Irene fuses femininity with African American identity, Lily must masquerade as both wealthy and conventionally feminine.

Both novels bear themes that regard visualizing the eternal feminine, and gaze (male or female, public or private). Sight and visuals concerning Lily Bart, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry demonstrate how often sexualization of women occurs, and how “appearances...[have] a way sometimes of not fitting facts” (Larsen 14). When any one of these women decides to publicly perform or masquerade as something contrary to their personal identity, they are subjected to the critical gaze of others. During the *tableaux vivants* scene in Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, many characters concern themselves with the knowledge of the true Lily, or outright sexualize her as Mr. Ned Van Alstyne does: “‘Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn’t a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!’” (Wharton 109). Lily’s *tableaux* performance thus invites the male gaze knowingly in order to appear as appealing as possible to the opposite sex. Carol Baker Sapora says, “Each person in this ‘house of mirth’ is convinced that now he or she has had vision of ‘the real Lily’” (Sapora 371). Since sexuality can be seen as a private affair, what Sapora refers to as “the real Lily” might be visualized either in sexual intimacy, or in intimacy of honest connection like Selden and Gerty believe they find when they see her barely made-up: “‘Wasn’t she too beautiful, Lawrence? Don’t you like her best in that simple dress? It makes her look like the real Lily – the Lily I know’” (110). Yet, the *tableaux vivants* still remains a performance—Lily masks her public persona in a shroud of perceived intimacy to make her audience feel connected to her, when in reality she still has hidden away her “real” self. She takes advantage of sight and gaze in order to appear more desirable to potential wealthy suitors.

Irene and Clare achieve a similar stature masquerading as white, wearing their “ivory masks” to gain wealth or social acceptance. The first identifiers of race remain sight and gaze throughout *Passing*, which coincides with Van Thompson’s statement regarding Irene’s visual

perspective of Clare: “The physical aspects of the body that Irene mentions reinforce the ocular nature of racial identity; an individual becomes racially defined by the gaze” (84). Irene sees Clare’s appeal in distinct ways: “Clare was so daring, so lovely, and so ‘having’” (Larsen 32). Irene views Clare this way not only because Clare can pass, but because Clare shows African American traits that Irene finds beautiful such as her “full red lips” and glistening “dark eyes” (14-15). Society’s gaze fixates on Clare’s light skin and hair, whereas Irene focuses on her lips and eyes as more indicative of her African American roots. Just like Selden believes he knows “the real Lily,” Irene believes she knows the “real” Clare; but both Lily and Clare place more importance on their public mask rather than their true identities because they find appealing to the public gaze more advantageous monetarily than sharing their honest identities with their societies.

When Wharton and Larsen’s heroines place so much importance and preoccupation on maintaining a public persona or social mask, the mask gains too much power. In his article “Disowning ‘Personality’: Privacy and Subjectivity in *The House of Mirth*” William E. Modellmog argues:

The “real Lily” for whom [Lily] searches turns out to be plural rather than singular. At the critical moment when she burns the letters, she imagines herself possessing two selves, a fact that complicates her ‘passionate desire to be understood’ and her desire that Selden ‘see her wholly.’ (Moddelmog 353)

Lily’s social mask usurps her passionate desire to be understood, and makes it impossible for her to share her full self with Selden. She places too much power and focus on masquerading as the conventional, marriageable woman, which creates her split identity. Her two selves, the masquerading social self and the honest intimate self, appear to be equally important to her until

Selden's gaze recognizes the encompassing "crystallization" of her mask. This occurrence makes her social self the more powerful of her two identities. Similarly, Clare Kendry wears her "ivory mask" to the excessive point of marrying a white supremacist, racist man with whom she bears a child. Her husband does not know anything about her true racial identity, or the "real" Clare, and refers to her with racist pet names such as "Nig" because he thinks that she hates African Americans as well (Larsen 30).

This destructive racial masquerade comes to an end when Clare dies, which frees not only her from the public gaze, but also Irene from her own racial performance. Van Thompson writes, "Irene masks her blackness even when she is not masquerading as white" (81). At her own social gatherings, she masks her blackness by performing as a higher-middle class feminine socialite. Class distinctions of that sort appeared in early twentieth century society as a white characteristic, or as not typical of African American associations. During situations in which Irene might show her true feelings regarding Clare, she "instinctively" puts on a "mask" (79), or "dust[s] a little powder on her dark-white skin" (71). Clare's ability to pass as white, with all of the wealth that comes with her position, and still remain appealing in an African American way seems to evoke envy in Irene. Irene powders away her true feelings regarding her position as a middle class mulatto woman because she regrets how her choice of husband and lifestyle have held her back from a seemingly comfortable position like Clare's. For Irene, Clare represents the epitome of what one could achieve by passing as white. When Felise says that Clare's death was instant, Irene's suppressed "sob of thankfulness" best demonstrates the extent of relief and liberation Irene feels at the discovery of Clare's dead body because Clare's death frees Irene from her internalized envy (93). Without Clare's influence, Irene no longer needs to put on a mask of whiteness in front of Bellew, and no longer needs to put on a mask of indifference in

front of her own husband. Clare's death on the surface appears to be unprecedented, yet the situation surrounding her death has some of her own actions to blame, most importantly putting so much power into her mask that her marriage would not be able to survive without it. Van Thompson regards this degree of deception as an act of internalizing white supremacy:

Larsen's focus on class and gender relates that passing for white is essentially a tragic performance of deceiving others while simultaneously, and even more tragically, deceiving oneself. For Larsen, a black person who passes for white internalizes white supremacy. All types of passing signify futile attempts at escapism and denial in the face of America's enduring racial hegemony, disastrous performances yielding no clear winners. (80)

The escapism he mentions has a dual meaning inasmuch Clare's decision to pass escapes her private identity, whereas her death escapes both the fallacy of her public identity and the discovery of her private identity. Clare finds physical victory in ascending from being an object of her peers' gazes to the status of her peers' memories.

Similarly to Irene, Lily fashions away her true feelings about being a middle class, single white woman in an act of repression that results in Lily's liberating death. Lily's journey to accepting her position in life begins with becoming indifferent to the society with which she surrounds herself. When she associates herself with the Gormer set, she becomes aware of her insensitivity to her environment: "a hard glaze of indifference was fast forming over her delicacies and susceptibilities" (Wharton 190). Her indifference to her social realm indicates disenchantment with her masquerade, and leads to comfortably seeing herself as "outside what we call society" (228). She also shows change in attitude when she peers into Gerty's mirror and does not preoccupy herself with maintaining youth, but instead maintaining her physical

health when she notices that she “look[s] ill” (215). Her acceptance of her societal position, and her preoccupation with her health show how Lily finally becomes comfortable with recognizing her true self. She shows a newfound value of transparency when she finally speaks her “first sincere words” to Selden (238), and fixates on the “empty clearness of the eye’s” of Mrs. Struther’s baby (256). Lily describes “a wan lucidity of mind” and “intense clearness of the vision” when she lives her last waking moments, which further shows how her death helps her transition from a dishonest masquerade to an appreciation of clarity (260). Selden notes Lily’s death as a “mask over the living lineaments he had known,” and yet feels that “the real Lily was still there, close to him” (265). These observations show how Lily’s mask eerily became a true part of her, and therefore how death liberates her from continuing to live under the pressure of her performance. Sapora writes, “Wharton uses Lily and her double [identity] to criticize society, ... and finally to allow her character a kind of personal triumph even in her physical defeat” (373). Clare Kendry’s “physical defeat” might be seen as a “personal triumph” as well: both Lily and she become released from their masquerades via death.

These novels’ tragic endings demonstrate how death liberates one from the social masquerade’s overbearing influence. Both authors depict death as the only release from the heroine’s mask when it becomes the heroine’s true reality. Liberation via death shows the triumph of the private identity over the public social identity. Rather than allowing the social mask to pervade the lives of Clare Kendry, Irene Redfield, and Lily Bart, Larsen and Wharton make it so that their characters remain known for their struggle against social performance rather than for allowing their forged identities to be their realities for the rest of their lives. Van Thompson agrees with this perspective in his article: “For Clare Kendry Bellew, death out of the sixth floor window of the Freeland’s Harlem apartment becomes a tragic way out of the

suffocating and enslaving existence in her world of whiteness. Death brings freedom” (100).

This perspective can be applied to *The House of Mirth* because leading up to Lily Bart’s death, she rediscovers simple joys such as birth just like Clare Kendry attempts to rediscover her African American roots. Their respective deaths mark the defeat of the mask rather than the defeat of their “real” selves. Not discovering the true selves behind the eternal feminine masks remains the only tragedy in either of these novels. Clare and Irene lose a sense of their true selves while wearing their ivory masks, as does Lily Bart while wearing her crystal mask. The heroines create a rigid social exterior because feminine gender roles create a hefty burden: one must be dependent, social, content, heterosexual, and prudent. Edith Wharton and Nella Larsen depict the tragic truth about private and social deception that gives into these traditionally feminine gender roles: maybe one can attempt to fit into the eternal feminine’s tight mold, but it does become suffocating to a breaking point if one spends too much time and effort publicly remaining there. When the private feminine identity becomes squelched by the public feminine identity, the mask becomes the pervasive eternal feminine. Defeating this mask liberates Larsen and Wharton’s heroines from the stifling mold, one way or another.

Works Cited

- Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. 1929. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004. Print.
- Moddelmog, William E. "Disowning 'Personality': Privacy and Subjectivity in *The House of Mirth*." *American Literature* 70.2 (1998): 337-63. *MLA International Bibliography [EBSCO]*. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.
- Sapora, Carol Baker. "Female Doubling: The Other Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 29.4 (1993): 371-96. *MLA International Bibliography [EBSCO]*. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.
- Thompson, Carlyle Van. "'Makin a Way Outta No Way': The Dangerous Business of Racial Masquerade in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 15.1 (2005): 79-104. *MLA International Bibliography [EBSCO]*. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.
- Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. 1905. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002. Print.