

Research Article

The Symbolic Role of the Elevator and Identity Crisis of Colorism in *The Vanishing Half* and *Passing*

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Abstract

This paper examines the symbolic role of the elevator in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), with particular attention to its connection to colorism and identity crisis. Set almost a century apart, these novels illuminate the enduring complexities of racial passing in the United States, where skin tone stratification shapes access to privilege and belonging. The elevator, far from being a mere mechanical device, emerges as a metaphorical stage for the negotiation of race, class, and selfhood. Through the dual application of Postcolonial Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study demonstrates how elevator scenes dramatize both aspiration and entrapment. Frantz Fanon's reflections on the "mask" and W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness help illuminate the fractured selfhood of characters like Stella Vignes and Irene Redfield, who experience upward social movement only at the cost of authenticity and psychic security. CRT further situates these struggles within systemic racial hierarchies, exposing how legal and cultural constructs of race sustain barriers that passing can only temporarily circumvent. By comparing the earlier twentieth-century Harlem Renaissance text with a contemporary African American novel, this article highlights the transhistorical persistence of passing as both a strategy of survival and a source of alienation. Ultimately, elevators embody a paradox: they lift characters into spaces of prestige and temporary acceptance while simultaneously reminding them of the fragility of such an elevation. In both works, mobility is revealed to be precarious, conditional, and psychologically burdensome. The analysis thus contributes to scholarship on African American literature by proposing the elevator as a powerful symbol that encapsulates the paradoxes of racialized existence. Elevators become not simply vehicles of transport but metaphors for the precarious balance between aspiration and authenticity, privilege and exposure, belonging and estrangement in a racially divided society.

Keywords

Symbolism, Elevator, Colorism, Identity Crisis

1. Introduction

Literature often employs symbols to capture complex social realities, particularly those related to race, identity, and power. In Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the elevator functions not merely as a mechanical device but as a symbolic, carefully gradated social status

altimeter of a world divided by race and privilege. The vertical movement of the elevator encapsulates the paradox of ascension in racially stratified societies: elevation into spaces of prestige also entails the instability of performing an identity which is not fully one's own.

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This research engages both Postcolonial Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the symbolic significance of the elevator in these two novels. From a postcolonial perspective, Frantz Fanon's notion of the "mask" in *Black Skin, White Masks* illuminates the psychological toll of racial passing, while W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness underscores the fractured selfhood experienced by characters negotiating colorism. At the same time, CRT provides a framework for understanding how systemic racism and legal-social constructs of race underpin the very need to "pass" and the limitations of such mobility. By combining these perspectives, this study interrogates how the elevator embodies both aspiration and alienation, symbolizing the uneasy intersections of race, class, and identity in American literature.

2. Elevator as Symbol of Elevation to a More Cosmopolitan Lifestyle

This section is based on two main passages: one showing Stella going to look for work at Maison Blanche, a job reserved for white only and another presenting Irene. It is worth mentioning that the word *elevator* is used ten times in *The Vanishing Half* and three times in *Passing*.

Bennett said in a public interview (2023) that the novel deliberately explores the permeability of racial borders, which enhances the symbolic reading of the elevator as a threshold of performance and metamorphosis [2].

As a matter of fact, the scene depicting Stella's desperate search for an employment to sustain herself and her sister during their descent into hunger and poverty captures with precision the vertical dynamics of their struggle to regain their footing and climb back into social and economic stability, the up-and-down movements of the elevator:

Why subject herself to the humiliation of some prim white secretary telling her that colored girls need not apply? Still, she woke up the next morning, put on her nice dress, and rode the streetcar to Canal Street. It was her fault that they were running out of money in the first place; she had to at least try. The elevator carried her to the sixth floor, where she stepped into a waiting room filled with white girls. She halted in the doorway, wondering if she should just turn back. But the blonde secretary waved her over.

"I need your typing sample, dear," she said.

Stella could have left. Instead, she carefully filled out the application and typed up the sample paragraph. Her hands trembled as she pressed the keys. She was terrified of being discovered, but almost more afraid that she wouldn't be. And then what? This wasn't the same as sneaking into the art museum. If she was hired, she would have to be white every day, and if she couldn't sit in this waiting room without her hands shaking, how could she ever manage that? When the secretary announced that the position was filled, she felt relieved. She'd applied; at least, she could tell Desiree that

she'd done her best. She quickly gathered her coat and her pocketbook, heading toward the elevator when the secretary asked if Miss Vignes could start tomorrow. [3]¹

This scene is central to understanding the symbolic role of the elevator in *The Vanishing Half*. When Stella takes the elevator to the sixth floor of the Maison Blanche building, she is not only moving upward in space, but she is also crossing an invisible racial boundary. The elevator here becomes more than a machine; it is the patent symbol of social aspiration, fear, and positive transformation. It carries Stella into a space reserved for white women, a world to which she does not belong by birthright, but one she is willing to enter into through performance and risk. Her arrival at the sixth floor marks a moment of tension. She pauses at the door, not because she is physically tired, but because she is emotionally overwhelmed. The white waiting room is a space she knows she does not naturally belong to. The elevator has carried her up, and although nothing in her intrinsic identity has changed, she is seen differently than what she was. She is still Black, still uncertain, but now afraid of being discovered for what she really is.

The symbolic power of the elevator lies in what it represents: mobility without safety. It lifts Stella physically but does not protect her emotionally or socially. As she sits in the waiting room with her trembling hands, the reader sees the cost of passing not as a simple decision, but as a deep psychological burden. Her fear is not just about being found out. It is also about the terrifying possibility that she might succeed; that she might be hired, and therefore be forced to perform whiteness every day. The elevator has brought her to a new floor, a higher place in social terms, but it has also exposed her to a space filled with surveillance and uncertainty. The more she ascends socially, the more she loses the comfort of truth and belonging. Her quick move toward the elevator when the secretary says the position is filled shows a desire to escape, not just from the job, but from the lie she is about to endorse and slip in.

When, unexpectedly, the secretary calls her name and offers her the job, the symbolic role of the elevator is made more patent. It no longer just represents upward movement. It becomes the static gateway to a new identity, one that Stella will be forced to maintain through silence, denial, and daily fear. From this moment on, she will ride elevators, move through white spaces, and enter new social levels - but each ascent will cost her part of herself. As Frantz Fanon argues, the person who passes must "wear a mask that sticks to the skin" [5], and Stella's ride in that elevator is the first moment she steps into the mask permanently. Her physical elevation symbolizes her social shift, but also announces the long psychological descent she is about to endure.

Stella's hiring scene echoes Irene's use of the elevator in *Passing* as she gets to the Drayton:

1 In accordance with IJLA's editorial standards, in-text references are presented in this precise format to ensure clarity, conciseness, and ease of checking used sources online.

All too soon the rattling vehicle shot towards the sidewalk and stood still. The driver sprang out and opened the door before the hotel's decorated attendant could reach it. She got out, and thanking him smilingly as well as in a more substantial manner for his kind helpfulness and understanding, went in through the Drayton's wide doors.

Stepping out of the elevator that had brought her to the roof, she was led to a table just in front of a long window whose gently moving curtains suggested a cool breeze. It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below.

The tea, when it came, was all that she had desired and expected. 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, from the tall green glass, while she surveyed the room about her or looked out over some lower buildings at the bright unstirred blue of the lake reaching away to an undetected horizon.

She had been gazing down for some time at the specks of cars and people creeping about in streets, and thinking how silly they looked, when on taking up her glass she was surprised to find it empty at last. She asked for more tea and while she waited, began to recall the happenings of the day and to wonder what she was to do about Ted and his book. Why was it that almost invariably he wanted something that was difficult or impossible to get? Like his father. For ever wanting something that he couldn't have [10].

Irene takes the elevator in order to get to the Drayton, the whites-only, privileged hub of the Chicago's affluent society. The presence of elevator stands as a powerful symbol that captures the theme of race and, more importantly, of social mobility in a context of colorism or skin tone stratification. As a matter of fact, when she ascends to the rooftop café of the Drayton Hotel, she experiences a sense of elevation that symbolizes her yearning for a more cosmopolitan lifestyle. The moment spends reveals and describes Irene's deep desire and aspiration to access spaces normally reserved for white Americans and proves that passing offer the allure of social mobility, a semblance of freedom and acceptance which she is denied by her society.

The symbol of the elevator, congruent with its etymology, connotes mobility. Upward mobility. Among all the restaurants, she chooses the Drayton, which reflects her desire to belong to the upper class of society. Irene's ability to pass as white is deeply tied to her physical appearance and the societal perceptions that categorize her based on her features. This capacity is further reinforced by the physical and social separations created by spaces like the Drayton Hotel, which symbolize the racial and class divides of 1920s America. The Drayton Hotel, a whites-only establishment, represents a world of privilege and exclusivity that Irene can temporarily access through passing. The Drayton Hotel Staff and Patrons represent the societal norms and expectations that Irene navigates when she passes as white. They embody the racial

segregation and class distinctions of the time. Her entry into such spaces depends on her being perceived as white, a perception shaped by both her light skin tone and the assumptions of those around her.

The physical separation of spaces like the Drayton, which is marked by its rooftop café elevated above the bustling streets of Chicago suggests the societal barriers between Black and white communities. The elevator ride to the rooftop is described as a "magic carpet" transporting Irene into a world of whiteness, comfort, and simplicity, contrasting sharply with the heat and chaos of the streets below. This ascent symbolizes not only Irene's literal movement into a privileged space but also her fleeting access to social mobility through passing.

She also sits in a place from which she "looked out over some lower building at the bright unstirred blue of the lake reaching away to an undetected horizon" [10]. Looking at lower buildings and "specks of cars and people creeping about the streets" gives her an untold feeling of superiority. She feels the people to be creeping and thinks how 'silly' they look. She is described as a woman who has perfectly embodied the white character she's playing. She is almost totally alienated to herself because even on her own, she distances herself from Blacks, pitying their lifestyles.

It is described as being 'wafted upward on a magic carpet ride' to a real that is calm, elegant and removed from the chaotic realities of her everyday life in Chicago's Black neighborhoods. This ascent signifies her temporary escape from the harsh realities of racial tensions and societal expectations, allowing her to experience a fleeting sense of privilege and comfort associated with whiteness.

Also, in her ascent from Mallard, through New Orleans, to the Northern city of Washington, one sees that Stella's journey in *The Vanishing Half* can be understood through the metaphor of the elevator. By convention, maps orient the north upward and the south downward. Thus, Stella's vertical movement from the Deep South to in a hectic, predominantly white northern city, Washington, DC, also maps her racial migration from blackness into whiteness. In both novels, blackness is portrayed at the ground floor and the characters' ascension into whiteness located upward, is allegorically made though an invisible elevator.

3. Elevators as Symbols of Social Division

The presence of literal and metaphoric elevators in both *The Vanishing Half* and *Passing* connotes the idea of social hierarchy, while the two narratives situate blackness at the bottom and whiteness in the elevated heights. The act of moving upward into a space designated for white individuals only emphasizes the barriers that exist between Blacks and Whites. Irene and Stella's capacity to pass is contingent upon their appearance and their communities' perception of the black self, which are reinforced by the physical separation created by spaces like the Drayton Hotel in *Passing*, and Maison Blanche in *The Vanishing Half*. The elevator thus

becomes a literal and metaphorical means of navigating these divisions. It represents characters' attempts and capacity to cross racial boundaries.

Conversely, elevators also symbolize decline or loss. In spite of her upward movement afforded by the elevator, elevators also reveal to Irene a few constraints about her social mobility. Although she can ascend physically, this access is precarious; it relies entirely on others' perceptions and Irene's ability to maintain the illusion of whiteness. There are deeper societal barriers that prevent her from enjoying and experiencing a full-scale integration into white society.

Moreover, these segregated spaces underscore the limitations of Irene's mobility. While she can physically navigate between these worlds, her presence in white spaces is always temporary and fraught with tension. The act of passing grants her certain privileges but also reinforces the rigid boundaries that separate racial identities. In this way, spaces like the Drayton Hotel highlight both the allure of social mobility and the constraints imposed by systemic racism, reflecting Irene's internal conflict as she navigates her dual existence in Black and white worlds. This tension reflects Gecas' (1989) concept of self-efficacy, as Irene and Stella's challenges with passing expose a tenuous sense of agency about their identities, perpetually influenced by cultural constructs of race and class. [6]. It also recalls Du Bois's (1903/2007) typical formulation of 'double consciousness,' whereby Black individuals are forced to negotiate two irreconcilable identities, a negotiation the elevator dramatizes in both novels. [4].

She has experiences in the elevator that reveal to her that this physical ascension is incomplete because she is only allowed in those higher spaces temporarily. While Clare has ascended and adopted the higher lever of the racial ladder, Irene is still connected to her racial identity and fully aware of her situational and precarious belonging to that assumed position in the Drayton, an escape of a few hours.

The elevator reflects Irene's internal struggles. The elevator ride can be seen as a solitary journey, where Irene experiences a sense of calm and detachment as she ascends to a space reserved for whites. This separation allows her to reflect on her position within society without immediate external pressures. In contrast, interactions with Clare are fraught with emotional intensity and ambiguity. Clare's presence sparks feelings of jealousy, desire, and resentment in Irene, complicating their relationship. While the elevator symbolizes a controlled ascent into privilege, Clare represents the chaotic and unpredictable nature of racial identity. Irene's interactions with Clare often bring the latter back down to earth, confronting her with the realities of passing and the emotional turmoil it entails. Conversely, Clare forces Irene to confront uncomfortable truths about herself and her choices regarding race and identity. Their interactions often lead to moments of self-reflection for Irene, revealing her internal conflicts regarding acceptance and belonging. Irene brings back to Clare's consciousness that they are too many parts of her that she left behind, that she could never bring upstairs with her.

At Drayton, Irene thinks she is admiring the beauty and ease of a white woman, while she is just admiring another black woman like herself. "She tried to treat the woman and her watching with indifference, but she couldn't. All her efforts to ignore her, it, were futile. She stole another glance" [10]. It is a widely observed phenomenon that people experience discomfort or irritation when subjected to intrusive and persistent gazes from unfamiliar others in public spaces, but the vivid description of the encounter and the intensity of the feeling of disturbance it produces are honed in the narrative to its highest acuteness. Irene's insistent stare makes Clare feel naked at a certain point. She starts to think that she might be unmasked and started asking herself: "Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" [10].

Clare's constant focus on her appearance shows a great deal of insecurity while her constant attempts to hear the conversation from the other table shows a low level of self-confidence. Actually, Clare's discomfort upon perceiving herself as the object of intense scrutiny primarily reflects her diminished self-assurance in social contexts, which has been demonstrated to increase susceptibility to external observation or questioning, which means that they tend to follow the behavior of others in an attempt to be socially accepted [6].

Actually, it is obvious that for African Americans, image and self-esteem are quite related, with gender and racial identity playing a key role. Studies have revealed that African American women's self-esteem is quite and more strongly linked to body image than it is for African American men [13]. So, while passing allows some African Americans the temporary comfort of another identity, it does not go without the constant fear of being caught and unmasked. During her encounter with the woman whom, she later realizes, is her childhood friend, Irene feels uneasy as she fears the woman did know or suspect her race. The feeling of insecurity gets to a climax when she "starts to rise," moving toward Clare Kendry to greet her [10].

The elevator rides can also serve to illustrate Irene's internal conflicts regarding her identity. While she temporarily enjoys the privileges associated with passing, there is an underlying tension as she grapples with her own racial identity and societal expectations. The ease with which she moves between these worlds raises questions about authenticity and self-perception. In other words, elevators in *Passing* serve as a vehicle for exploring Irene's internal struggles as she navigates her dual existence with both Black and White worlds. The accelerated up-and-down movements of the elevator capture the breathtaking instability of this deluding ascension into privilege and descent into reality, reflecting the complexities of race, class, and social mobility in a racially stratified society.

Clare's deep and strong internal struggles are tightly connected to her desire to be elevated so as to enjoy social privileges. Although she wants to ascend into that white world of sweet privileges, only for a few hours, Irene's exchange of

gaze with Clare that she does not recognize at first sight challenge her perception of race and identity directly, forcing her to grapple with feelings of danger and fear of exposure on the Drayton's rooftop. Bar-Tal and Saxe (1976) contend that physical appearance influences social views and interaction patterns, a notion that Larsen emphasizes through the shared gaze between Irene and Clare, where race and beauty converge to elicit both desire and distrust. [1]. So, Irene's situational passing becomes a double-edged sword. While it grants her access to certain spaces to discreetly partake in certain forbidden pleasures under the veil of anonymity, it also temporarily alienates her from her true self. For both women meeting in the rooftop restaurant, the elevator assumes the symbolic role of a threshold, a gateway through which they trespass into a realm of privileges that their social identities otherwise prohibit.

In the later sections of the novel, when Irene departs from Clare Kendry and her prejudiced husband, the act of descending in the elevator symbolizes a stark return to reality. This moment signifies Irene's re-engagement with the intricate challenges and realities that define her existence as a Black woman. The downward trajectory can be interpreted not only as a symbolic fall from grace but also as a poignant acknowledgment of the inherent risks associated with the act of passing.

This descent into the depths of the elevator encapsulates Irene's confrontation with her own identity and societal pressures. It serves as a reminder that while Clare may enjoy certain privileges through her choice to pass, such an identity is fraught with peril and moral complexity. Irene's journey back to her own life underscores the emotional and psychological toll that passing takes on individuals, revealing the precarious balance between safety and authenticity in a racially divided society. The closing section of the novel that portrays Irene's unmasking by her husband and her subsequent death is the final re-enactment of the elevator's movement: "One moment, Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next, she was gone" [10]. The narrative remains deliberately equivocal as to whether Clare leaps from the sixth-floor window of Irene's apartment or is pushed by Irene. Her fall, in its speed, parallels the elevator's precipitous descent, underscored by recurring textual motifs such as "down," "long, long flight of stairs," "slamming of distant doors," "voice," "raced," and "down, down, down, she went" [10]. These motifs concretize the elevator's downward movement, added to and its shutting out of outside voices, all symbolizing Clare's reversion to Blackness. While she embodied "whiteness" upstairs on the sixth floor, her descent now restores her to her true racial identity as she physically returns downward. Similarly, as Stella's twin sister Desiree returns South to Mallard, she reverts to blackness and poverty. Larsen's conceptualization of passing, as well as Bennett's, thus, is not merely a horizontal dynamics, it is first and foremost vertical.

Racial passing, while historically situated, projects ahead as

a recurring challenge in American identity, as both Bennett and Larsen demonstrate through their elevator metaphors. Alice Walker (2004) reminds us that if the present reflects the past, the future is inextricably implicated. [16].

4. Impact of Colorism on Identity and Self Esteem

Personal Identity is one of the most important factors described in *Passing* by Nella Larsen. Curiously, it happens to be one of the most intricate aspects of human society. Irene embraces her blackness but is now and then ready to pass for white when the situation so requires. Her identity fluctuates and changes as time and situation evolve. In *Passing*, Larsen contrasts Irene's temporary passing to Clare's permanent decision to pass for White. During the conversation, both make allusion to the fact that they have passed without saying it utterly. Sentences like "...for the very reason at which Clare had hinted" [10] show that there is at every moment an elephant in the room.

Irene Redfield, recurrently, grapples with ambivalence regarding her racial identity, striving to maintain a middle-class Black identity. More and more since has met with Clare again, does she repress and deny some aspects of her black identity. Although she identifies as Black and lives within the Black community, her ability to pass for white creates a psychological tension. Irene feels compelled to protect her status and her family, yet she also harbors a repressed desire for the freedom that racial passing represents. This duality manifests in her interactions with Clare Kendry, who fully embraces passing. Irene's discomfort with Clare's choices reveals her internal struggle between loyalty to her racial identity and the allure of social acceptance that passing offers.

Irene's identity is heavily influenced by societal expectations of race and gender during the 1920s. As a middle-class Black woman, she is expected to uphold certain moral standards and act as an uplifter, like an elevator, for her race. This role constrains her personality, forcing her to adopt a facade that aligns with societal norms while repressing her true feelings about Clare and her own desires. The pressure to conform leads Irene to view Clare's passing as immoral, reflecting her internalized beliefs about race and ethics, which ultimately complicates their relationship.

Irene identifies with the poor and the less privileged. Deep within herself, she feels attacked anytime that reference is made to people of inferior class. Her husband has to silence her by changing the subject when he noticed how she tries to "fight back the fear and irritation that she felt" [10] for hearing the man speak about "sick people and their stupid, meddling families and smelly, dirty rooms and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways" [10]. To Irene, the description was just too well correspondent to that of a dark-skinned Black. The man seems to have exactly the same mindset with Clare's husband when he refers to blacks as "little devils" [10].

The psychological toll of racial passing is evident in Irene's repression of her own desires and fears. Her interactions with Clare trigger feelings of jealousy and insecurity, as she perceives Clare's freedom as a threat to her carefully constructed life. Critics have noted that Irene's repressed emotions manifest through the character of Clare, who serves as an "uncanny double" representing Irene's rejected desires for integration with the Black community [12].

This dynamic illustrates how Irene's identity is shaped by both her adherence to societal norms and her subconscious desire for a more authentic existence. Irene is a woman used to self-accusation [10] and feels she is wrong. During her argument with her husband, she feels her method is wrong. She is even more vexed at her own explosion of anger. What could have got into her to give way to it in such a moment? Irene engages too much in inner monologues. Whenever she is confronted with an outburst of emotions, she talks to herself engaging in an inner soliloquy. Irene's inner soliloquy in Nella Larsen's *Passing* serves as a crucial lens to understand her psychological complexities and the overarching themes of identity, race, and social status.

This internal monologue reveals her insecurities, fears, and conflicting emotions regarding her relationship with Clare Kendry and her own racial identity. Irene's thoughts often reflect a deep psychological realism, illustrating her reliance on her husband Brian for social stability. Her mental associations - such as linking Clare to feelings of both attraction and resentment - highlight her internal struggles. For instance, during their reunion on the rooftop, Irene experiences a blend of admiration and indignation towards Clare, which underscores her feelings of inferiority and self-doubt in social settings dominated by whiteness.

In addition, Irene's soliloquy revolves around themes of racial passing and identity crisis. Her interactions with Clare force her to confront her own choices about racial identity - whether to embrace or reject aspects of her heritage. This conflict is compounded by her simultaneous desire for social acceptance and fear of losing herself in the process. The tension between admiration for Clare's perceived freedom and disdain for what that freedom represents creates a complex emotional landscape for Irene.

Irene expresses a profound sense of responsibility towards her children, believing that mothers must prioritize their children's security and happiness above anything else. This notion reflects the societal expectations of motherhood during the 1920s, where women were often confined to domestic roles. Irene states, "We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children" [10]. This is an indication that her identity is deeply intertwined with her maternal role. This commitment to motherhood leads her to suppress her own desires and aspirations, as she feels obliged to conform to traditional gender norms.

The contrast between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry's approaches to motherhood is noteworthy. While Irene embraces her role as a mother, finding purpose in it, Clare views

motherhood as a burden filled with anxiety. She exclaims: "being a mother is the cruelest thing in the world," [10] which resonates with Irene's own unarticulated fears about motherhood. Her sense of maternal responsibility creates a barrier between Clare and her, as Irene often views Clare's more carefree approach to motherhood as irresponsible. This juxtaposition highlights how both women navigate their identities through their maternal experiences but arrive at starkly different emotional landscapes. Perhaps more intimately connected to her passing, is Stella's motherhood experience in *The Vanishing Half*.

Stella Vignes struggles deeply with her daughter Kennedy's unruly behavior and unpredictable professional ambitions, which clash with the orderly life Stella has painstakingly built through passing. Kennedy embodies everything Stella has sought to suppress or erase from her own past: impulsiveness, a thirst for freedom, and a refusal to conform to the narrowly prescribed identity Stella enforces. Kennedy's rebelliousness and desire to pursue an acting career, despite Stella's objections, challenge Stella's carefully maintained psychological and social boundaries she has set to protect the truth of her racial identity from resurfacing. With the discovery, Stella is forced to face her past again, to come back to Mallard for her final shameful reckoning with her twin sister and her own mother. Through the daughter of her twin sister Desiree, Kennedy discovers that her mother is black. However, Stella clings to her own lies. Her departure from Mallard as a young woman had severed all ties with her old self forever. She is apparently remorseless and lost to her own self. In a nutshell, racial passing profoundly impacts Irene and Stella's identities and personalities. Clare's internal conflicts stem from ambivalence about race, societal expectations, psychological repression, and the complexities of navigating class dynamics, while Stella Vignes shows almost no regrets, as she places social uplift and privilege above any other value. She tentatively tries to buy her family silence with her golden wedding ring.

4.1. Navigating Contradictory Selves: Identity Conflict in *Passing*

Clare Kendry embodies a complex duality; she is perceived as a double-spirited individual, harboring two contrasting worlds and personas within herself, navigating them fluidly like the upward and downward movements of an elevator. This internal conflict arises from her biracial heritage and the societal pressures that compel her to navigate life by 'passing' as white. Clare's existence is marked by a constant tension between her desire for acceptance in white society and her longing for her cultural roots.

Her character is often described as catlike, selfish, emotionally detached, and occasionally vicious. She reflects a survival instinct that prioritizes her own desires above all else. While Clare publicly embraces the privileges of her white identity, she simultaneously grapples with feelings of isola-

tion and a desire for connection to her Black heritage. This duality is further complicated by her marriage to John Bellew, a man who openly harbors racist sentiments, highlighting the sacrifices she makes for social acceptance. “Sometimes, she was hard and apparently without feeling at all, sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive” [10]. She hides a soft malice well away and does not let it show unless provoked. Clare need not reveal herself in detail for Irene to know she is the sender of the letter [10]. While she holds the letter, she is absorbed into past memories that reveal to the reader who the sender is and what is her personality. Right from the onset, the narrator shows a need to show the reader the differences in the personalities of the two characters and the little repulsion Irene feels as she remembers the personality of the sender and what the letter may mean to her.

The narrative begins with an intriguing anonymous letter from Clare, hinting at a potential clash between two distinct worlds. After years of meticulously maintaining a separation between these realms, Clare embarks on a journey to bridge the gap and reconnect with her past. In stark contrast, Irene is resolute in her desire to cut all ties with her former friend, seeking to distance herself from the memories and complexities that their relationship entails. This tension sets the stage for a compelling exploration of identity, friendship, and the struggle between past and present. Clare’s actions reveal a profound ambivalence; she seeks freedom and self-fulfillment but at the cost of authenticity and responsibility to her racial identity. Her beauty and charisma draw others in, yet they also serve as a mask that obscures her true self, a self that is torn between two worlds yet fully belongs to neither. The classic definition of the “halo effect” by Thorndike (1920) explains how Irene first misreads Clare’s beauty and grace as indicators of moral superiority. This makes their relationship more complicated and shows how passing can be misleading. [15]. Hill’s (2002) research on attractiveness and skin tone demonstrates how lighter complexions typically translate into perceived social desirability, which is repeated in Irene’s anxiety as she compares herself to Clare’s elegance. [7].

Ultimately, Clare Kendry represents the struggles of identity and belonging in a racially divided society, embodying the conflicts that arise from living between two dichotomous realities.

4.2. The Psychology of Risk-Taking in the Context of Racial Passing

Right from her childhood, Clare “was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and her work” [10]. While she is trying to sow a new red dress to attend a picnic, she does not fear her father’s (Bob Kendry) anger and violent reaction. Clare has always been immune to the feeling of danger. “In spite of certain unpleasantness and possible danger, she had taken the money to buy the material for that pathetic little red frock” [10]. She displays that quality once again when she invites Mrs. Martin and Irene to her place and allow there to

be a discussion with her husband John Bellew. It is certainly the highest level of danger she exposes herself to because for hearing John’s comment of Blacks, Irene was “seething with anger and rage” [10]. While Clare’s cover could be totally destroyed during that conversation, she manages to be outwardly calm so that “her voice did not tremble” [10].

Clare embodies a willingness to embrace risk as a means of achieving personal freedom and social mobility. Unlike Irene, who values security and stability, Clare thrives on the thrill of passing as white. She perceives the risks associated with her double life not merely as dangers but as opportunities that allow her to enjoy the privileges of wealth and status. For instance, Clare’s ability to navigate both black and white social circles illustrates her comfort with danger; she often laughs off the potential consequences of being discovered by her husband, John Bellew, who is unaware of her racial background. This attitude indicates that Clare views the rewards of passing as outweighing the inherent risks. Clare’s fearless approach to risk, “silly risks” like “the risk of knowing Negroes” [10], creates a psychological toll on Irene, who finds it difficult to comprehend Clare’s nonchalance towards danger. Irene’s paranoia about Clare’s influence over her husband Brian exacerbates this tension, as she becomes increasingly anxious about Clare’s ability to secure what she wants without regard for the consequences. This dynamic illustrates how Clare’s perception of risk not only shapes her own identity but also impacts those around her, particularly Irene. Irene does not want to “assist Clare to realize her foolish desire to return for a moment to that life which long ago, and of her own choice, she had left behind her” [10].

Clare’s perception of danger is also marked by a dual awareness of the risks she faces. While she acknowledges the potential repercussions of her actions, such as the threat to her family if her racial identity were revealed, she often downplays these dangers in favor of pursuing personal desires. For example, she expresses regret only about the risks associated with motherhood, fearing that her child might reveal her secret. This selective acknowledgment of danger suggests that Clare compartmentalizes her experiences, allowing her to navigate her complex identity while still seeking fulfillment in both worlds.

Clare’s relationship with risk is further complicated by her disregard for societal constraints. She actively chooses to engage with Black communities despite the dangers this poses to her safety and social standing. Irene warns Clare about the potential consequences of visiting Harlem, yet Clare dismisses these concerns, arguing that if complete safety is unattainable, she might as well enjoy the company of Black people. This attitude reflects Clare’s belief that the joy derived from her connections outweighs the potential risks involved. Clare ringing bell-like laugh was just a smoke, a facade to cover deeper truths. She is smart to avoid the reality. She knows how to drift away from controversial subjects and keep the conversation on a friendly tone. She almost always put on that laugh to cover her deepest secrets. One of the rarest times

when she feels danger in when Irene hears her husband opinion about having a white in her family. Clare is trying her chances. She certainly thinks that Irene can now become a threat to her because she knows exactly her house, her husband family name and most of all her husband stance on passing. So Clare shows Irene her “peculiar eyes fixed on her with an expression so dark and deep and unfathomable that she had for a short moment the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart” [10].

Clare Kendry's perception of risk and danger in *Passing* is characterized by a complex interplay between embracing freedom and acknowledging potential consequences. Her willingness to navigate dangerous social terrains highlights a desire for autonomy that contrasts sharply with Irene's need for security. Ultimately, this divergence in their perceptions underscores the broader themes of identity, race, and societal expectations within Larsen's narrative.

4.3. The Interaction of Identity, Insecurity and Social Pressure

In *Passing*, the narrative provides an intimate look into Irene's psyche through psychological realism, allowing readers to witness her mental associations and reactions to various stimuli. Her thoughts reveal a mind burdened by jealousy, fear, and insecurity elements that drive the plot forward while highlighting the complexities of her character. To be more precise, Irene Redfield's character in Nella Larsen's *Passing* exemplifies a complex interplay of internal conflict, societal pressure, and a lack of autonomy that together contribute to her seeming inability to assert her own will. Her personality is shaped by this complex interplay while her character embodies the internal struggles faced by many individuals navigating the intersections of race, gender, and personal desire in the early 20th century.

Irene appears not to have a mind of her own. She appears to lack the inner strength required to do her own bidding without bending. Irene is well-controlled both in her manners and her choice of words. This is evident in expression like “I was more than a little angry”, though she is in the position of creating a scene in response to the frustration she is made to suffer [10]. As a woman who likes to be by herself, she often tries “to be free of the other woman, to be alone; for she was still sore and angry” she is much more in the reflexive state [10]. At the Drayton, she was also alone. That behavior is probably symptomatic of her inner state. She is the kind of woman that can “try a tiny laugh” only to realize that “it was close to tears” [10]. There were questions she cannot answer:

Why hadn't she spoken that day? Why, in the face of Bellew's ignorant hate and aversion, had she concealed her own origin? Why had she allowed him to make his assertions and express his misconceptions undisputed? Why, simply because of Clare Kendry, who had exposed her to such torment, had she failed to take up the defense of the race to which she belonged? [10].

So, deep inside, Irene has always seen Clare as a fiend that as a friend. As a matter of fact, she herself admits to that folly that consists in hating and admiring passing at the same time. “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” [10].

Actually, Irene lives in a psychological ambiguity. She does not admit it but she feels alive and excited in the presence of Clare. Skin color stratification has given a bend to their relationship. Lake's (2003) insights into color consciousness and naming practices show how words like “light,” “dark,” or “fair” may be used to divide people into groups, which reinforces the vertical dynamics that the elevator represents. [9].

They belong to two different worlds. Clare tries all her possible to make those words intersects while Irene endeavors to keep the boundaries although deep inside something in her eventually make her surrender to Clare's insistence to meet her.

Several factors illuminate why she appears to be often unable to act independently without giving up to external influences and to be unable to express herself in confrontational situations. Irene is deeply influenced by the societal norms and expectations of her time. She often judges herself based on how others perceive her, which leads to a fragile sense of self-worth. Her actions are frequently motivated by a desire to maintain social status among her peers in Harlem's Black elite. This reliance on external validation creates a psychological dependency that undermines her ability to assert her own desires or opinions. Her tendency to adhere to the expectations of Harlem's elite is consistent with Pool et al.'s (1998) theory that self-esteem typically compels individuals to connect with favored majority while opposing marginalized groups, hence exacerbating her ambivalence about Clare. [14].

Irene chooses to live as a Black woman, which reflects her loyalty to her race. She therefore has to navigate a precarious social landscape where passing for white can provide her with safety and privilege. But it is needless to say that her choice of loyalty to the Black race is fraught with insecurity as shown in this passage:

Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved [10].

Curiously, as a light-skinned Black woman, she can pass for white. And she does pass for white occasionally. If that act of passing as white provides her tangible benefits, it also comes at a significant personal cost. Irene's decision to present herself occasionally as a white American woman to access the privileges associated with that identity reflects a complex interplay between identity and societal benefits, suggesting that she has to deny and reject her black heritage

every time there is need to embrace the white identity. Hunter (2007) emphasizes that colorism persists as a structural problem within African American communities, making Stella's and Irene's elevator rides emblematic of how skin tone stratification regulates access to privilege. [8]. In their turn, in "What is beautiful is good because what is beautiful is desired: Physical attractiveness stereotyping as projection of interpersonal goals" (2010), Lemay, Clark, and Greenberg's work on physical attractiveness stereotyping explains why Irene initially interprets Clare's beauty as evidence of inner virtue, revealing how social biases shape her ambivalence. [11].

By assuming a white identity, Irene seeks to leverage the advantages that come with it, such as social acceptance and economic opportunities. However, this choice inherently denies her black identity, illustrating a painful dichotomy where she must navigate the expectations of her occasionally adopted persona while sidelining her authentic self. Unfortunately, those two identities cannot coexist harmoniously. To be recognized as American, she must engage in a performance that aligns with societal standards of whiteness. To be perceived as authentically American, she must meticulously embody that identity, which includes not only altering her outward appearance but also modifying her mannerisms and tastes, refining her behaviors, preferences, and style of dress. The pressure to conform leads her to an internal conflict, as she grapples with the implications of distancing herself from her roots in pursuit of acceptance and privilege.

While embracing occasionally the White identity, Irene's commitment, while admirable, often leads her to suppress her own desires and needs in favor of maintaining social order and adhering to the rules she believes are necessary for safety and acceptance. Throughout the novel, the reader is acquainted with an Irene who grows into a people pleaser and is always ready to blend and bend to Clare's appeal before realizing that her acceptance is not fully volitional. Many times, "she began to wonder just what had possessed her to make her promise to find time, in the crowded days that remained of her visit, to spend another afternoon with a woman whose life has so definitely and deliberately diverged from hers" [10]. Many times, "her thoughts immediately fills with self-reproach", for allowing Clare "to persuade her into promising to do something for which she had neither time nor any special desire" [10].

Times and times again, Irene fails to understand "why in the world she had made such a promise" [10]. Even when she returns from Clare's house, upon reflecting on the humiliation and the insult Clare exposes Gertrude Martin and her too. She starts regretting and "her reason told her she had only herself to blame for her disagreeable afternoon and its attendant fears and questions. She ought never to have gone" [10]. Threatened by the possible impact of skin color discrimination in the Harlem which offers its settings to the plot, Irene's profile is also characterized by fear and loss. Her desire for stability and security is paramount in her life. She fears losing her family and social status, which makes her overly cautious and

sometimes paranoid. This fear manifests in her obsessive thoughts about Clare's influence over her husband, Brian, as she suspects Clare may be a threat to their marriage. Irene's need for control leads her to suppress her own desires and emotions, resulting in a repressive psychological state that limits her ability to act authentically.

Surprisingly, she is a woman of character. One who believes that "if a man calls me a nigger, it is his fault the first time, but mine if he has the opportunity to do it again" [10]. Her jealousy towards Clare Kendry, who fully embraces passing and enjoys the privileges that come with it, reveals Irene's deep-seated fears about her own identity and social standing. She often feels inadequate compared to Clare's perceived freedom and allure, leading to feelings of envy and resentment.

Moreover, Irene Redfield's relationships, particularly with Clare Kendry, are fraught with jealousy and insecurity. Irene is not described as having a problem with her memory. However, during their meeting at the Drayton, she forgets her childhood experience with Clare until the later reminds her. Her selective forgetfulness goes a long way in telling how much her memory, selective with Clare, unsettles her life. She has a long-time remembering Clare, her mind probably too clouded by fear or buried in her desire to change and become somebody else.

Her fixation on Clare's choices reflects her own feelings of inadequacy. Irene's jealousy over Clare's perceived freedom and lifestyle leads her to judge Clare harshly while simultaneously envying the very qualities that make Clare appealing. This internal conflict manifests as a lack of decisiveness in her actions; she often prioritizes Clare's needs over her own, revealing an inability to assert herself in the face of emotional turmoil.

Irene's marriage to Brian Redfield further complicates her sense of self. While she seeks stability through her family life, Brian's desire for change, specifically his inclination to move to Brazil, challenges Irene's conservative instincts. "For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted. Not even because of Clare Kendry, or a hundred Clare Kendrys" [10]. Her fear of losing control over her family and the safety she associates with their current life leads her to resist his wishes, showcasing how external pressures dictate her decisions rather than her own convictions.

Irene feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility not only for herself but also for Clare and their shared racial identity. This burden often forces Irene into a protective role that limits her ability to act on her desires. For instance, when faced with racist comments from Clare's husband, Jack Bellew, Irene's instinctual loyalty to Clare prevents her from defending Black people more broadly. This contradiction highlights how Irene's protective instincts can lead to self-silencing rather than empowerment.

Throughout *Passing*, Irene grapples with her identity as a Black woman in a society that devalues that identity. Her ambivalence towards passing, sometimes utilizing it for

convenience while condemning Clare for fully embracing it, reflects a deeper struggle within herself. This ambivalence can be seen as a defense mechanism against the complexities of racial identity; however, it also contributes to her inability to take decisive action based on her true feelings.

5. Conclusion

In both Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the elevator operates as more than a physical device of movement; it becomes a symbolic vehicle through which the complexities of race, identity, and social aspiration are revealed. Each ascent reflects the characters' yearning for access to spaces reserved for whiteness, while each descent underlines the fragility of that access. Through the lens of Postcolonial Theory, particularly Fanon's reflections on the mask and Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, these elevator scenes expose the psychological burden of racial passing, showing how the pursuit of acceptance requires a performance that erodes authenticity. At the same time, Critical Race Theory underscores that these tensions are not only personal but systemic, rooted in the structures of racial hierarchy that make passing both necessary and precarious.

Ultimately, the elevator in both novels encapsulates the paradox of mobility: it offers the promise of elevation while simultaneously reminding the characters of the limits imposed by colorism and racism. The upward journey is always shadowed by the possibility of exposure and the certainty of alienation. By reading the elevator as a symbol of aspiration and loss, Bennett and Larsen illuminate the enduring cost of navigating identity in a society defined by racial boundaries. The elevator thus stands as a metaphor for the double bind of racialized existence: to rise socially is to risk falling deeper into the crisis of the self.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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