

Sexual Passing
In
Giovanni's Room and *Passing*

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Passing by Nella Larsen and *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin are two books with different storylines. *Passing* is a book about racial passing. One of the main characters Irene passes as a white woman on occasion while the other main character, Clare passes permanently. In *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin writes about a young man, David, who struggles with accepting his homosexuality. I have chosen to compare these two novels because both authors use safety and risk to discuss sexual passing among their storylines. In *Passing*, Irene has been more concerned with acquiring security in her life that she has given up her own happiness to acquire it. She is in a sexless marriage and it isn't until her reencounter with Clare that her sexual desires are awakened. In *Giovanni's Room*, David refuses to accept his homosexuality and hides in a safe relationship with his fiancé Hella. He hides his homosexuality and passes as a heterosexual man because he believes that to be the safest decision. He is afraid of what his father, deceased mother, and society might think of him if they were to find out he is homosexual. While at times both Irene and David find themselves almost relinquishing their fears, neither of them can let go of their safety in fear of society's opinion.

David grows up with a father who expects his son to grow and become a man, not just any man, but a masculine man. In the novel David's father describes his idea of masculinity in reference to David, "all I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say a man, Ellen, I don't mean a Sunday school teacher" (Baldwin15). The general stereotype for a Sunday school teacher is typically, very proper, nurturing and

feminine, this is not what he wants his son to be like. Ellen, his sister thinks that he wants David to grow up to be like him, drunk and out with random girls. That is what seems to be David's father's standard of masculinity.

David feels as though his father is disappointed in him because he is not growing to be the man his father expects him to be. Feeling this way would of course cause a struggle with his acceptance of his sexuality. He cannot accept his homosexuality because he believes no one else will. He believes that his father will not accept him if he is different. His father will be disappointed and David doesn't want to disappoint his father, so, he plays it safe by denying his homosexuality. As David thinks back to his relationship with his father, he comments. "I was in full flight from him. I did not want him to know me. I did not want anyone to know me" (Baldwin 16). Critic Robert Tomlinson comments on the quote by David, "Of course, his problem is that he cannot accept his sanction" (136). I think what Tomlinson means is that David has a hard time conforming, that's why he is was in full flight. He tries hard to, but he can't. If David stays around then people might discover that he is trying to hide his homosexuality. David gets his idea of safety from his surroundings. Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson state that *Giovanni's Room* asks,

What does it mean to be a man? This is the burden from which David takes refuge in flight but cannot escape, and it dominates his reflections on two formative experiences: a homoerotic childhood friendship that he terminates in defiance to an internalized cultural homophobia, and his relationship with his parents marked by a sense of filial debt (253).

I agree with what Shin and Judson have stated. I think that throughout the novel David is asking himself what it means to be a man. He thinks that if he is homosexual then he is less of a man, or not the man that everyone expects him to be. Yasmin DeGout comments, “David, however, has assimilated the homophobic attitudes of main stream society, and this forces him to flee from Joey, then become cruel to him” (426). He like everyone around him has expectations and those expectations of a masculine man do not include homosexuality.

If he gives into his sexual desires he is disappointing his father, going against society and viewed as an outsider. To David, it seems more logical and safe for him to pass as a heterosexual so he can fit in with the norm.

Safety in *Giovanni's Room* is conforming to the rest of society. Not conforming could result in being viewed as an outsider. If David is an outsider he is afraid he might be treated differently. Since *Giovanni's Room* is set in the 1950's, homosexuality was not widely accepted, so, David is most likely right in assuming he will be treated differently.

Risk in *Giovanni's Room* on the other hand is considered giving into his sexual desires. Not just giving in, but giving in to everything that it entails. In David's case, if he was to give into his sexual desires, he would have to also go through the suffering. Critic Emmanuel S. Nelson states, David “fails to forge his human identity through an acceptance of his sexuality and the suffering it entails...” (28). I agree that David does not make any progress with accepting himself because he cannot accept his homosexuality. He realizes that accepting his homosexuality will lead to suffering, but he doesn't want to suffer. However, if David was to accept his sexuality and the suffering then that would be a risk. He would risk the suffering to be with Giovanni. Since David is

a homosexual and homosexuality is not what society views as “normal,” David feels the only safe thing to do is to conform to the rest of society and to hide from himself and others around him his true inner self.

The very first decision David makes regarding safety and risk involves a boy Joey. Joey is the childhood friend that Shin and Judson mention. David had his first homosexual experience with Joey. He describes the experience as,

Then, for the first time in my life, I was really aware of another person’s body, of another person’s smell. We had our arms around each other. It was like holding in my hand some rare, exhausted, nearly doomed bird which I had miraculously happened to find. I was very frightened; I am sure he was frightened too, and we shut our eyes

(Baldwin 8).

David is frightened because he has given into his sexual desire, the danger of his homosexuality. While later in the novel he completely tries to avoid having another experience like he did with Joey, for this brief moment in time, while he is still frightened, he chooses to ignore his other thoughts about how dangerous a homosexual experience is to him. He can’t let it happen again. He doesn’t want to shut his eyes and risk being different from society, he feels like he needs to conform to the rest of society by rejecting his sexual desires. It’s giving into his homosexual desires is what scares David. The fact that David and Joey had this experience is dangerous to David, but because David allowed it to happen is what he sees as the real danger. “My flight may, indeed, have begun that summer – which does not tell me where to find the germ of the dilemma which resolved itself, that summer, into flight” (Baldwin 10).

His experience with Joey leads him to question himself. Now, David has had a sexual experience with another male. He liked it, it felt right to him, but he doesn't want it to feel right. He has a sexual desire toward men but he cannot act on them. Shin and Judson state, "He is nevertheless imprisoned by the social codes militating against the expression of his homosexual impulses" (253). He will not allow himself to feel that it is in fact alright and the right thing to be himself. He is so "imprisoned by the social codes" (Shin and Judson 253) that he is sacrificing his own happiness to conform because this is safe. He turns away from his sexual attraction toward Joey by acting cruel to him. He drives Joey right out of his life to the point that the two of the boys never see each other again. He doesn't want himself to be tempted by his sexual desires. He has to keep the risks as far away from him as possible. Everything else to David seems safe; as long as he can hide his homosexuality from the rest of the world he is safe in his eyes.

David could not face his experience with Joey. He puts the experience in the back of his head. This is utterly disappointing because he has had a homosexual experience and is so afraid to remember it, to think about it, to examine it because doing so will confirm his homosexuality. He is ignoring his inner sexual desire, his key to happiness. If he could just stop and examine the situation, if he could see that by passing as a heterosexual, ignoring his homosexuality is in fact not the safe way to go about this he could end up happy.

The biggest threat to David's passing as a heterosexual is Giovanni. This is because David has a sexual attraction toward Giovanni and Giovanni is openly homosexual. "Giovanni looked at me. And this look made me feel that no one in my life had ever looked at me directly before" (Baldwin 37). That is a huge risk to be around

Giovanni if when he looks at him it's as though no one as ever looked at David directly before. For someone to have such an impact on him is greatly threatening to his passing as a heterosexual. Giovanni tries to get David to be honest with his sexuality, but David cannot bring himself to accept his sexuality or commit himself to Giovanni. David finally says to Giovanni,

“‘But I'm a man,’ I cried, ‘A man! What do you think can *happen* between us?’

‘You know very well,’ said Giovanni slowly, ‘what can happen between us, it is for that reason you are leaving me’” (Baldwin 142).

David wants to be with Giovanni, but he just won't let himself commit to another man.

When David and Giovanni are together David finds himself looking at Giovanni thinking how great he is. “And I felt myself flow toward him, as a river rushes when the ice breaks up” (Baldwin 83). When he thinks of Giovanni he has a desire to be with him, to go toward him, to accept his sexuality, but when he thinks of his father he has a desire to run from his father and hide in hopes that he will never know who he really is. It's as though David feels safer with Giovanni, he can be himself, but yet he is denying his feelings. David wants to act on his feelings and be with Giovanni but he won't. When David has thoughts like these about Giovanni it may seem as though he is relinquishing some of his fear, but then he grabs onto his fears again and returns to safety. He can't let his sexual desires take over him, but every time Giovanni is around he is at risk. When people see them together they assume that the two of them are a couple. David will be seen and known as a homosexual and therefore an outsider to society.

Jacque, David's friend notices that David is holding back his sexual desires. Jacque says to David, "You don't know what he means by friendship but you have the feeling it may not be safe. You are afraid it may change you. What kind of friendship have you had?" (Baldwin 56-57). Jacque sees in David what David feels for Giovanni. Jacque sees David's fear to just come out. Jacque knows that David doesn't want to suffer through society's opinion of him, that's why he chooses the words "safe" in his sentence. It's not "safe" if David just lets his feelings flow with Giovanni because the outcome will be a homosexual relationship.

Hella, David's fiancé, serves as David's security. The way he sees it, as long as he has Hella, there is no reason to suspect that David is any different from anyone else. Emmanuel S. Nelson agrees, "he uses Hella... to 'confirm' his heterosexuality"(28). Hella and David do not even have a real genuine relationship. She isn't even sure how she feels about him. While David is in Paris, Hella is off in Spain thinking about her relationship with David. However, Hella is what keeps people from assuming anything. David obviously isn't concerned with true happiness otherwise he wouldn't be with Hella. He doesn't have true feelings for Hella the way he had with Joey and has with Giovanni. The feelings he has experienced with Joey and Giovanni are feelings he has never experienced before. To be with Hella is just plainly for the security of being in a heterosexual relationship. After Hella has confirmed David is a homosexual she says to David, "I knew. This is what makes me so ashamed. I knew it every time you looked at me. I knew it every time we went to bed. If only you had told me the truth *then*. Don't you see how unjust it was to wait for *me* to find out?" To put all the burden on *me*?"(Baldwin 164). When Hella realizes that David is homosexual and has a relationship

with Giovanni, she realizes she has been used. She knew something wasn't right all along, but she also thought he would have the common decency to tell her, especially if he knew himself. In David's selfish decision to be safe he has destroyed Hella and Giovanni.

David never really does accept his homosexuality. DeGout suggests that David, "is able to admit to Hella that he was lying to himself when he denied his love for Giovanni. However, neither of these admissions – though they represent a movement toward self-acceptance – allows David to break the chains of his psychological prison"(427). I completely agree. I think there is a big difference between admitting and accepting. I, like DeGout think that admitting is along the road to accepting, but we never see David accepting his homosexuality. I don't think he ever will accept it. David is overly concerned with what other might think and has been brainwashed by society to believe that homosexuality is a bad thing.

Similar to David is the character Irene in Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing*. Much like James Baldwin, Nella Larson uses safety and risk to portray sexual desires between Irene and Clare. The way that Giovanni is a threat to David's passing as a heterosexual and security with Hella is the way that Clare is a threat to Irene's security. Irene's life seems to be perfectly safe and secure. She, "...refuses to acknowledge her sexuality" (Davis xv). She is classy, the wife of a doctor, the mother of two sons, people are aware of her black heritage. She is on the ticket committee for the Negro Welfare League; she carries herself well and appears content with her life. "She didn't like it to be warm and springy when it should have been cold and crisp..." (Larsen 85). She was very involved

with her sons and her home, and wanted the home to the way it should be. "I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can't help it" (Larsen). She appears to be a wholesome caretaker.

Clare on the other hand seems to be dangerous, "self-absorbed," and "non maternal" (Davis xv). "The point that Larsen does not leave in doubt is that Clare is very much a sexual being who assumes sexuality is a basic part of women's identity"(Davis xiv). She is passing as a white woman permanently. She is married to a white man who has no idea that she has black heritage. She has all the fine things in life. She seems to have all eyes on her when she walks in a room. She is described to be an astonishingly beautiful woman.

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 (Larsen 89).

The two women live completely different lifestyles.. Neither of the women appears to be happy and both of the women are in sexless marriages. Irene is especially concerned with her security. The reencounter with Clare poses a threat to Irene's security because Clare awakens sexual desires in Irene.

Safety in *Passing* is Irene's desire for security. Much like David's concern to conform to society, Irene is also concerned with society's opinion of her and her own security. She has married her husband for security and only that, "...to her, security was

the most important and desired thing in life" (Larsen 107). If security is the most important thing in life to Irene then it was the "sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known..." (Larsen 107). She may think that security will bring her happiness, but in all reality, she isn't happy at all. Irene is passing as a wholesome, natural caretaker. Security brings safety to Irene in the same way that passing as a heterosexual brings safety to David, not happiness. Irene's focus on obtaining security has allowed her to pass on all the really important things in life. Irene's marriage is purely a marriage of convenience.

To others Irene seems to be happy. Clare thinks Irene might be the happier one. As Clare says in her postscript, "It may be, 'Rene dear, it may just be, that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one"(Larsen). This is what Irene wants people to think and see, but the truth is Irene isn't happy.

There is no sexual attraction between Irene and Brian at all. She thought,

He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour she thought not. (Larsen 107)

Irene's husband really is only her husband and father of her children. That's all that Irene wanted, it's all she looked for; security and safety. David Blackmore agrees the marriage is sexless. "Irene's marriage to Brian, a handsome doctor who can take her to all the right parties provides her with irreproachable social respectability. However, their marriage allows no room for sexual or romantic expression" (478). Blackmore suggests there is no time for romantic or sexual expression, I agree, there absolutely cannot be.

Both of them are so absorbed in society and their boys that romantic and sexual expression doesn't even approach their minds until Clare comes into the picture. Irene is tied to her husband and sons, "A wife is by definition only an extension of the husband to whom she remains subordinate" (Blackmore 479). True to this quote Irene is secondary to her husband. She puts Brian and her two boys before her all the time. She rarely stops thinking about them. It isn't until the end that they slip her mind briefly, "The Boys! For once she'd forgotten them" (Larsen 92). She believed they had duties to each other, "Brian, too, belonged here. His duty was to her and his boys" (Larsen 107). Since Irene believes that security is the most important and desired thing in life, she has shut the door on other things that make one happy. She has desired security because she thought that is what would make her happy, but her secure life has not made her happy. She has nothing, but security.

Blackmore also suggests that Brian might be homosexual. As Irene is talking to Clare's husband about her husband she mentions, "It's South America that attracts him" (42). Blackmore points out that, "Same sex acts have never been criminalized in Brazil, and political persecution of gays and lesbians has never been so widespread in Brazil as it has been in the United States" (476). Blackmore's ideas make sense. Irene does make a reference to her husband and his lack of attraction toward women. Clare's husband asks,

"Hard on the wife's nerves at least, eh? So many lady patients?"

Irene responds, "Brian doesn't care for ladies, especially sick ones. I sometimes wish he did" (42).

I think she wished he did for either two reasons: she has lost interest in him as her husband and wants him to meet someone else or she has an idea he might be homosexual. Either reason, she has suggested their marriage is sexless.

Clare however, is also in a sexless marriage. As Deborah McDowell points out in the introduction to *Passing*, "In Clare's case, the frequent travels of her financier husband and her fear of producing a dark child" (McDowell xxiii) are excellent reasons to assume their marriage is sexless. If her husband is constantly traveling there is no time for any type of sexual relation and if there is any time, Clare's fear of producing a dark child would prevent her from wanting to have any type of sexual relation with her husband.

Clare affects Irene's sexual desires the way Giovanni affects David's sexual desires. When Irene and Clare meet again their sexual desires are awakened. Very similar to *Giovanni's Room*, the risk would be Irene giving into her sexual desires that Clare has awakened. Irene's awakened sexual desires are what scare her. Irene feels that she needs to push Clare out of her life. She feels Clare is interfering with her security which she has worked so hard to maintain. She acts as though it's the passing that bothers her, but in fact it's Clare's sexual presence. "Irene is tempted, mesmerized by Clare, her desire could hardly be more explicit. But she quickly draws back, masking her physical desire behind a shield of racial solidarity" (Blackmore). Irene finds herself taken away by Clare throughout the novel. Clare, "who had suddenly clouded all her days" (Larsen 92) seduces Irene. This occurs from the very beginning right through to the end.

Similar to the way David reacts to Giovanni's looks and actions, Irene like David tends to give into Clare temporarily while they are together. When they first meet Clare

asks Irene to meet her on Tuesday. Irene did not want to see her, but "The telephone. For hours it had rung like something possessed" (32). Irene finds Clare to be so seductive, as they talk on the phone Clare talks Irene into meeting her.

Irene hung up the receiver with an empathetic bang, her thoughts immediately filled with self-reproach. She'd done it again. Allowed Clare Kendry to persuade her into promising to do something for which she had neither time nor any special desire. What was it about Clare's Voice that was so appealing, so very seductive? (Larsen 32).

When Irene and Clare meet, Irene puts on her gloves and Clare responds, "You can't go now, 'Rene dear" (38). Irene then stayed to meet her husband, Mr. John Bellew. Irene has all intentions of leaving, but as soon as Clare opens her mouth it's almost as though she is hypnotized into listening and staying with Clare. Clare has put Irene in very uncomfortable positions, Irene realizes it is because of Clare she is in the situation, but still looks at Clare as though she is the most beautiful creature she has seen. Even while Mr. Bellew was referring to his wife as "Nig" a funny little nickname he has made for her, and when asked if he dislikes Negroes he responds, "I don't dislike them, I hate them" (40), Irene could not keep her eyes off "Clare's smiling face." (Larsen 39). As much as Irene would love to stay away from Clare, she can't. Clare brings passion into Irene's life which is missing in Irene's marriage. Nell Sullivan suggests that "Clare becomes Irene's vicarious connection to the white world" (375). I think that Clare is mainly Irene's connection to her own sexuality. Clare awakens Irene's sexual desire, that's the attraction.

Numerous times Irene has told herself that she will not see Clare again, but Clare is determined to see Irene. If Irene gives into her sexual desires, she like David thinks about what society will think of her. She has made a good name for herself and her family, she can't allow Clare to disturb her security. When Clare shows up at her house unannounced, Irene wants to tell her to leave, "But that was as far as she got in her rehearsal" (65). She went from not wanting to see Clare to holding on to Clare's hands saying "Dear God! But aren't you lovely Clare!"(65). Irene just can't say no to Clare. Deborah McDowell writes in the introduction to *Passing*, "From the very beginning of their reencounter, Irene is drawn to Clare like a moth to a flame" (xxvii). Clare is very persuasive and always insists, for example she insists she attend the Negro Welfare League dance. "Irene, that if you're not going to be nice and take me, I'll still be among those present" (71). Irene insists that she does not want Clare to go to the dance because of the danger of Clare's situation. She tells Clare it is dangerous if someone sees her there, her husband might find out she is black. Typical of Clare, "...in the look she gave Irene, there was something groping and hopeless..." Irene gave into Clare and Clare attended the dance. As critic David L. Blackmore states, "While she does not articulate explicitly her attraction, Irene cannot escape the urges which Clare evokes in her (476). Irene says the danger that Clare's husband might find out that Clare is black is what worries Irene, but the danger that Irene is worried about is her sexual attraction towards Clare. When Clare extends an interest in coming to Harlem, Irene responds, "Yes, Clare, you. It's not safe. Not safe at all" (66). While Irene may be saying to this Clare, she's actually saying it to herself. She wants Clare to believe it's not safe that Clare comes to Harlem, but Irene really doesn't think it is safe for Irene to be around Clare. Irene wants

everyone to think that she is annoyed with Clare, but it's just that Clare poses a threat to Irene.

Irene denies her attraction towards Clare by making up an affair in her head between her husband and Clare. She does this so she can take the feelings she has towards Clare and the sexual desires that Clare has awakened in her and instead pretend it is her husband who has these feelings. She knows deep down that there isn't any reason to ever suspect her husband of infidelity. "In all their married life she had no slightest cause to suspect her husband of any infidelity, of any serious flirtation even" (Larsen 96). According to critic Judith Butler, "Irene displaces her illicit desire for Clare by imagining it is her husband, Brian, who responds to Clare's seductive nature, thus conjuring the aforementioned affair" (Harrison-Kahan 112). Like Irene asks herself, why start to question him now? The only reason she would imagine such an affair is to deny her own attraction towards Clare. Plus, earlier she mentioned that she wishes her husband was attracted to women. So, by imagining this affair she tries pushing her feelings for Clare off her and onto her husband and at the same time imagines that he husband *is* attracted to women. When Irene is concerned with the affair she has imagine in her head between Clare and Brian, she worried about the security she has in her life. Everything she has given up for that security could be gone in an instant. That is why she feels the need to stay away from Clare, but she can't stay away from Clare and Clare can't stay away from her. . "But if you could know how glad, how excitingly happy, I was to meet you and how I ached to see more of you..." (Larsen 46). Irene gives Clare the security that Clare needs.

While in *Passing* we cannot confirm that it was Irene who pushed Clare out of the window causing her to fall to her death, one could assume it was Irene. By the end of the novel Irene was making up scenarios in her head and Clare was intruding in on Irene's secure life she has made for herself. Because Irene hasn't had passion and excitement in her life, she doesn't know how to handle Clare when she and her meet again. Irene wants Clare out of her life. Clare isn't a nuisance she is a threat, a threat to Irene's security. Irene needs her security, without it she thinks she has nothing. I think that Irene felt the only way to save her security was to get rid of Clare. At the very end of the novel after Clare's death, Irene says,

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth,
the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that
had been Clare Kendy. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life.
Done! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of
her laughter (Larsen 111)

What Irene says here alone explains why she wanted to stay away from Clare throughout the novel. Clare's beauty and laughter tortured Irene. "That beauty that had torn Irene's placid life." (Larsen 111) Clare disturbed her quiet, calm, secure life. Finally Clare was gone. I think it was Irene who pushed Clare out of the window. To Irene, Irene didn't have any other option. Clare would show up everywhere, Irene had no control around Clare, she had to push her out of the window to save her safe secure life.

Irene and David are very similar in that they both want to be viewed a certain way. It seems that both characters have this idea of what they are supposed to be like made up in their heads, but brought on by society. Both of them seem to be very influenced by society and feel that they need society's approval. While they do not realize it, the characters have sacrificed their own happiness so they appear normal and conform to the rest of society. They have remained safe in their lives hoping that it will bring happiness. David's struggle with the acceptance of his sexual desires has made him unable to commit himself to Giovanni. Therefore, Giovanni is torn apart and commits an unthinkable crime costing him his life. In *Passing* Clare who has disturbed Irene's life falls to her death. The way I see it, David and Irene are wrong. It is not really safer to deny your desires. In fact, I couldn't think of anything more dangerous than spending your life in denial.

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