Just a Cup of Tea

Imagine having a nice cup of afternoon tea at a gathering to gossip and catch up with friends. Tea is often considered a refreshing, therapeutic, calming drink. In some cultures, as well as upper class society tea is a way for people to come together and socialize. Even though socializing while having a cup of tea is seen throughout *Passing* by Nella Larsen, tea serves a literal purpose beyond being a refreshing drink or a posh reception that tea is served at. In *Passing*, the discourse of racial identity is told through the perspective of Irene Redfield, who has a complicated relationship with her rediscovered childhood friend, Clare Kendry. Both of them light-skinned Black women, Irene occasionally passes as white for convenience’s sake, while Clare has passed for her entire married life. Irene is often overwhelmed with joy and affection and enamored by Clare’s beauty when she initially sees Clare. However, every interaction, often leaves Irene feeling angry or heated in which she resorts to drinking tea. Imagery of heat and themes of anger are always accompanied by Irene Redfield drinking tea. While the heat symbolizes conflict and anger, the recurring descriptions of the color of cold tea and the fragile cups it’s served in symbolizes the Black racial identity and to some extent Clare Kendry as race plays an important role in the experiences she and Irene receive as well as how these women navigate the world given that their race is an inescapable part of their identity.

When Irene visits Clare’s house, Clare offers her a cup of tea. “The tea-things had been placed on a low table at Clare’s side, she gave them her attention now, pouring the rich amber fluid from the tall glass pitcher into stately thin glasses, which she handed to her guests, and then offered them lemon or cream and tiny sandwiches or cakes” (Larsen 36). On the surface, it’s a mini gathering where people converse and have tea as refreshments. However, the “low table” where the “tea things” are placed symbolizes Clare and her view of her own racial identity. Clare chooses to pass as white because of the opportunities and the lifestyle that comes with it. Clare views passing as Black, negatively. Irene often describes the color of the tea as a “rich amber fluid,” which is a reference to skin color. On the outside, they are white but on the inside they identify as Black. Clare serves the tea in “stately thin glasses” which symbolizes the complex, fragile nature of passing as white while she has an extremely racist husband and the fact only a handful of people know the truth and that it could come out at any moment. The women go on to discuss race and their families. Larsen writes:

Irene, who was struggling with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger, and contempt, was, however still able to answer as coolly as if she had not that sense of not belonging to and despising the company in which she found herself drinking iced tea from tall amber glasses …. (Larsen 36-37)

The women in this scene discuss the fears of having Black children. Irene on the other hand has Black children and a Black husband who can’t pass. In fact, Irene at some point describes her husband’s fingers as “tea-colored” (Larsen 57). This isn’t a reference to Clare, however, in that specific moment, she directly uses dark color of tea to describe skin tone. Irene finds herself being angry and the tea symbolizing racial identity and the way Clare views race is contributing to that anger. All the women in the room are white passing and were being served amber colored tea in “tall amber glasses” (Larsen 36 – 37). It is important to note that Clare is serving cream with the tea which dilutes the color of tea to make it lighter, however, the cup it is served in is dark. Similarly, Clare’s pale skin taints or dilutes her Black identity. For a brief moment, Clare then refers to herself and the women as “colored people” (Larsen 37). In this specific moment, Clare chooses to identity as Black.

Clare puts Irene in a potentially dangerous situation that leaves her feeling angry and uncomfortable. “She had a leaping desire to shout at the man bedside her. ‘And here you’re sitting here surrounded by three black devils, drinking tea’” (Larsen 41). “Black devils” is a reference to how Clare’s husband, John Bellew, views Black people as he is extremely racist. He is unaware that his wife and the other women in the room are Black women that can pass. Clare offers her husband tea after he casually greets her with racial slurs and racist jokes about Black people in general and Clare’s skin tone which he claims is getting “darker and darker” (Larsen 39). The amber colored liquid is being served to John who is totally unaware that his wife has Black ancestry. Irene often describes Clare’s skin as ivory with golden or bright hair. The ivory of her skin is synonymous with the cream that is poured into the tea. In contrast, there is a moment at the Negro Welfare League where she describes Clare as being golden and she further describes Clare’s feet as being golden, the same way she often describes the color of the tea. Irene is one of the very few who knows about Clare’s Black identity. Despite Clare having pale skin, her Black identity remains a part of her. Clare is in a predominantly Black space. The ivory or cream color of her pale skin is diluted by the rich amber tea color of her Black ancestry.

One of the final mentions of tea is when Irene suspects that her husband and Clare are having an affair. Irene spirals and once again resorts to drinking tea. This time, she describes tea as a “ritual” that “gave her some busy moments…Pouring tea properly and nicely was an occupation that required a kind of well-balanced attention” (Larsen 90). The word ritual can be a ceremony, but it can also mean a sequence of actions or activities that are regularly repeated in a particular manner (“Ritual”). Here, Irene is giving tea a “well-balanced attention” in comparison to the beginning where she was sipping her tea “a little absently” (Larsen 13). In the beginning, she was enjoying sipping tea in a fancy hotel where no one suspects she is Black. She is momentarily using the privilege that comes with being able to pass as white. She didn’t have to worry about her race in that moment. However, that changes when Clare enters the scene. Now, on the other hand, Irene is focusing all her attention on Clare. Clare has ruined the perfect and stable life that Irene is trying to achieve. Irene goes on to state “Above everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life. And now Clare Kendry had come into it, and with her the menace of impermanence” (Larsen 101). The “ritual” of “pouring golden tea into thin old cups” becomes exhausting for her as a “great weariness” falls over her (Larsen 91). The truth or reality of race and Clare have worn Irene down.

Irene’s rage boils over which causes “a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup. Dark stains dotted the bright rug. Spread … Zulena gathered up the white fragments” (Larsen 94). In this moment the spilled tea foreshadows the disaster that is to come in the end: Clare’s Black identity being exposed and her unfortunate death. “The dark stains and the “white fragments” are a reference to Clare’s racial identity. The “white fragments” from the shattered cup is Clare’s white passing identity being shattered. From that the “dark stains” from the tea symbolizes her African American ancestry being exposed. The cold truth. It’s also interesting that Irene after the tea is spilled, comes to her own conclusions about race. She wishes that “she had not been born a negro” and that she that race “bound and suffocated her” (Larsen 98). In the end, she’s finally freed from Clare.

Tea is a recurring symbol that appears in heated situations involving Clare and Irene. It always accompanies the broader theme of anger. Tea is symbolic of Clare and the Black identity. It’s not possible to discuss Clare without discussing her racial identity. Clare is a white passing woman who is often dismissive of the potential dangers that comes with masking her Black identity. She usually tries to hide her hide her Black ancestry to claim the benefits of whiteness. Irene visits Clare at her house where they have tea. Conversations of children and race are brought up that causes Irene to become angry at the way they talk about being Black. Shortly after, Irene encounters John Bellew and is appalled by the dynamic between Clare and John. In the end, the spilt tea foreshadows Clare’s death and the truth about Clare’s race. In each instance, Irene describes the fragile cups that the sea is served in and the dark color of the tea. It’s impossible to separate yourself from your race. No matter what an individual does, their ancestry shapes their identity as well as an individual’s experiences in life. In this case, no matter how hard Clare tries to distance herself from her Black identity, it always presents itself. She and Irene would have moments where they would sip the cold truth of their racial identities and occasionally offer it to others because tea is tea regardless of how much cream is added or the cup it is served in.

References

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