

Patrick Santarsia

May 16th 2023

The House Always Wins: How Cigarettes in *Passing* by Nella Larsen and *Nevada* by Imogen

Binnie Represent Women's Attempt to Explore Their Sexuality Through Patriarchy

Passing is a vehicle through which a marginalized individual attempts to transgress their oppressor by presenting as compliant within a dominant ideology. An example of this mode is when women present as heteronormative in order to explore their sexuality, thereby transgressing patriarchal expectations of women. This notion is represented through cigarettes in *Passing* by Nella Larsen, particularly when Irene and Clare are smoking together. There's a social expectation for men to light women's cigarettes, which implies that men must approve of women's pleasure. Passing relies on this same appeal to social approval; if women are seen as heterosexual, then their relationships aren't considered a threat to male interest, allowing them to act against patriarchy. While this enables women to explore their sexuality, it ultimately reaffirms the same system which prevents that exploration. *Nevada* by Imogen Binnie offers this same criticism of passing through Maria's use of cigarettes. Smoking is perceived as a means to relieve stress, it's a tool to accept one's position and move forward. Passing operates the same way: one accepts a dominant ideology and chooses to work within, but, like cigarettes, this state is temporary and harmful. While cigarettes in *Passing* act as a tool for women to explore and fulfil their sexuality within the confines of patriarchy, cigarettes in *Nevada* underline how that tool perpetuates the construction of patriarchy, and thus call for the need to build anew.

When Irene and Clare first encounter each other after Clare had moved away, Clare calls for cigarettes before the two begin reconnecting: "She gave her attention to the waiter at

the side. “M-mm, let’s see. Two teas. And bring some cigarettes. Y-es, they’ll be all right. Thanks.” Again that odd upward smile. Now, Irene was sure it was too provocative for a waiter” (Larsen 17). The role of a waiter evokes how women’s pleasure is gatekept; if Clare wants to enjoy herself, she must first get a man’s permission. This is signalled by ‘M-mm,’ as it’s a sound associated with both pleasure and contemplation. While Clare is choosing what she’d like, she’s still restricted by the brand the waiter has to offer; Clare’s ‘y-es’ suggests a hesitant acceptance, that she wants something else but is forced to settle. Parallel to Clare’s desire is Irene’s, whose focus is entirely on Clare. Irene considers Clare’s behaviour provocative, which implies not only a sexual connotation, but also a rebellious one—as if Clare is pushing against a social boundary, despite only ever smiling; directly tying cigarettes to women’s sexuality. In the background to all of this is the waiter, who is speaking but is given no words. This is both reflective of how Irene only cares for Clare, and how the two have a language that a man isn’t a part of, despite his control. This creates a complex image of women’s sexuality, it’s subtle yet transgressive, exclusive to women but restricted by men.

While smoking is tied to Clare and Irene's relationship, the symbol of the cigarette extends past them: ““They were nice old ladies ... That adored brother of theirs, my grandfather, got through every penny they had after he’d finished his own little bit.” Clare paused in her narrative to light another cigarette” (Larsen 27). Clare’s aunts have a tenuous connection towards her: they’re her grandfather’s sisters on his “left side” (Larsen 27), yet despite this relationship and their poverty, they’re still willing to adopt Clare. Associating the cigarette with Clare’s aunts expands what female sexuality encompasses, it’s not just about sexual pleasure as it’s often (mis)conceived. Instead, female sexuality represents women’s companionship, even in a non-sexual sense, and the power women can achieve through their relationships. While the notion of female sexuality is expanded, so too are the restrictions imposed upon it. Clare describes her grandfather as very easily accessing their wealth, and

with no mention of how he came to use all their money, the implication is that he just can. His role is reflective of the intersection between patriarchy and capitalism, in which men can very easily disrupt and seize women's wealth. At the same time, Clare's aunts are racists, and so while female sexuality can, to an extent, elevate women within patriarchy, it fails to challenge white supremacy. This repositions passing as a tool that must uphold all systems of power in order to transgress one; just as a cigarette can only be used by one person, but comes to harm all those nearby.

The appeal to heteronormativity doesn't just restrict women's sexuality but comes to shape female relationships: "Carefully selecting a cigarette from the lacquered box on the tea table before her, she turned an oblique look on Clare..." (Larsen 43). The idea of cigarettes as female sexuality is evoked with Irene retrieving them from a box, as the term is often used as a pejorative for the vagina. Not only is this language objectifying, but the image of a box suggests limitation even though Irene is making a choice, similarly to Clare and the waiter. The idea of patriarchal restriction is furthered by both the box being lacquered and the tea table. Serving tea is heavily associated with decorum and proper etiquette, it's about maintaining the height of social norms, and thus perpetuating patriarchy. Similarly, with the box as a euphemism, it being lacquered evokes that something raw has been made to be more appealing, as passing for heteronormative makes women's sexuality to patriarchy. The term 'selecting' furthers a lack of agency, Irene's not making a forceful decision to take a cigarette, instead, the ways in which Irene can engage with her sexuality have been laid out for her. Irene's careful selection may seem redundant, as her behaviour and desire are heavily policed socially, yet she's choosing to further impose those restrictions upon herself. Rather, it represents the continuous limitations women must face to explore their desire; parallel to how the sentence focuses on Irene going to smoke before shifting to Clare.

This passage follows Clare's husband's rant about how he'd never marry a black woman, and Irene watching Clare's reaction: "... she turned an oblique look on Clare and encountered 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" (Larsen 43). Clare's expression here is defined in terms of monstrosity and terror despite being the one accosted by her husband. She's described as a dark mass, with the repetition of 'and' exaggerating a sense of terror and an inability for her to move beyond that title. Additionally, Clare's monstrosity isn't just non-human, as the word 'strange' frames her as alien, while 'apart' suggests she's fragmented as if there's no term to describe what she is. This state is a product of both her disobedience to her husband and her inability to fit under a binary framework, with the word 'apart' describing how Clare is divided between white and black. Notably, in this moment, Irene has a sensation, a pleasure, in viewing Clare as a monstrosity, reminiscent of how Clare's husband enjoys othering black people. What this suggests is that while passing grants women a means to explore their sexuality and accumulate power, this vehicle is individualized and rooted in the systems it challenges. Like Clare's aunts, the capability to transgress a dominant ideology through passing requires that one upholds it.

Prior to Clare plummeting out of a window and to her death, Irene discards a cigarette out of the same window: "Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop down slowly to the white ground below" (Larsen 135). Despite this being the final cigarette in the novel, this is the only one which Irene is described as completing, suggesting that the cigarette, and what it stands for, has come to an inevitable end. As the moment which foreshadows Clare's death, this passage is uneventful. A spark of fire carries a literal potential and acts as a representation of passion, but its size and descent towards plainness suggests that nothing can come of it. Despite this, Irene still manages to watch it fall from the

seventeenth floor of the building, as if it still had worth to her. As a symbol for women's sexuality, what this final cigarette suggests is that the appeasement women must endure to explore their sexuality provides a delicate, finite freedom, because once men challenge their endeavours, women have nothing to fall back on. When they no longer pass, women cannot hold their gains, either they die as the result of their defiance to patriarchy, or they must bury themselves further into the social construct, abandoning their passion, in hopes that it can be sparked again.

In *Nevada*, the first time Maria is depicted as smoking is at a Christmas party, where she's portrayed as hesitant in doing so: "She had mostly quit smoking, since you're not supposed to smoke on estrogen, but in situations of excruciating awkwardness like that, all the self-invalidation and depression/anxiety, you make exceptions" (Binnie 58). The nicotine in cigarettes hinders the body's ability to produce estrogen, and thus impede Maria's transition. This signals the key difference between cigarettes in *Passing* and *Nevada*: For Clare and Irene, the cigarette allows them to access a part of their femininity which has been denied, whereas Maria's use of cigarettes distances her from her femininity. Furthermore, the narration up to this point has bluntly explained the transition process, but why you're not supposed to smoke on estrogen is glossed over. Instead, there's more room dedicated to all the reasons why Maria should allow herself to smoke, as if she needs to explain herself. This passage resembles how women are often expected to over-rationalize their behaviour or wants for a presumably male audience. Additionally, the rationale is relying on empathy, as if the narrator wants the reader to pity Maria, and by extension approve of her cigarette, like the waiter in *Passing*. Ultimately, not only is the use of cigarettes hindering Maria's ability to pass, but their use is associated with conformity to patriarchy.

The notion of patriarchal conformity extends past the narration and into Maria's relationship with Steph: "She totally entertained herself while she smoked that cigarette by

being flirty and confrontational and kind of mean” (Binnie 59). The paragraph this passage is in begins by discussing who Steph reminds Maria of, before it concludes with this line, not indicating who is the one flirting. The flirting here is notably boyish, with men’s social and physical aggression towards women being considered romantic. This is furthered by how it’s considered ‘entertaining,’ as men often relish in their ability to belittle women. Thus, if it’s Steph flirting with Maria, then the man-woman gender dynamic is being adopted by two women, or if it’s Maria flirting with Steph, then they’re adopting the male-female sexual dynamic. Associating the cigarette with this moment actualizes the conformity of the narration within the narrative—it’s not just the narrator-reader relation but the character’s behaviour being guided by patriarchy. Where cigarettes gave Clare and Irene a language of their own, Maria and Steph go on to have a fraught relationship, with the only thing coming out of their interaction is that one can entertain herself at the expense of the other. This frames the adoption of heteronormativity and its benefits as not something being taken from the patriarchy, but from other women.

Maria’s use of cigarettes shapes both her relationship with others and her self-perception:

She still smoked back then, which was nice to have—something to do with your hands and focus on while you walk over to your first transsexual support group meeting and feel like you will turn around go home and die if you can’t stop thinking about the public humiliation of transitioning, scalpels slicing into the meat of your body, your parents telling you outright that they never want to see you again. (Binnie 81-82)

The narration in this moment is framed as Maria’s internal dialogue and, more importantly, it’s rooted in trans-misogynistic tropes; the notion that transition must be humiliating, the over fixation and simplification of transgender affirming surgeries, and familial rejection, are

all conventional concerns transgender people are depicted as having. While transgender people do experience these thoughts, the notion that transgender people are exclusively miserable is a long-standing transphobic ideal. Rather, amongst these concerns, transgender people are capable of joy in their transition; however, the exaggeration of those concerns overwhelms any potential joy with dread. The cigarette in this moment doesn't relieve Maria from these thoughts but allows her to engage in them; parallel to how the passage starts with the cigarette before descending into terror. This suggests that once women give into a patriarchal framework, it not only shapes how they engage with others, but prevents women from seeing themselves outside of said framework. Irene's tossing of her cigarette can be recontextualized as a moment of self-harm rather than self-preservation, as she comes to harbour the guilt of Clare's death.

The final use of cigarettes within *Nevada* isn't with Maria, but with a large crowd of gamblers: "There are lines of garish neon up by the ceiling and tons of old people smoking cigarettes, ashing into the little trays attached to the slot machines and video poker machines that play games James doesn't even know" (Binnie 249). Gambling often has the connotation that it subverts capitalism, where it's framed to get wealthy without requiring any labour. Rather, casinos are the pinnacle of capitalism; someone invests money, if they lose the system benefits, and if they win, they have more earnings to invest back into the system. The ashtrays being attached to the slot machines implies that gambling and cigarettes, the symbol of patriarchal conformity, go together, entwining capitalism and patriarchy. With this location being the end of Maria's journey and the fact that James loses the punk woman within the crowd of elderly gamblers, suggests that this is both the height of what these two dominant ideologies have to offer and how they're all encompassing. In the broader context of women's sexuality, this represents how, as long as women are abiding by capitalism and patriarchy, whatever gains they make have been predetermined and ultimately benefit the

system which oppresses them. This works to dispel the function of passing within *Passing*: it's not entirely transgressive, it's slowly coming to assimilate and accept the patriarchy for what it is.

In Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Lorde criticizes how prominent feminist spaces come to highlight the dominant positionalities. Lorde argues that this reaffirms the same institutions these spaces are supposed to challenge, "*for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support" (Lorde 112). While Lorde is referring to academics and activists, her message can be extended towards passing. Passing is dependent upon the master's house, it's what you're attempting to hide yourself in, and it can only grant temporary reprieve from the home's abusive structure. This is exemplified by both Clare's aunts and Irene, they're able to transgress the dominant powers but not escape from them. Where *Nevada* offers a very pessimistic outlook on queer existence, where no matter what one may do, they'll always end in capitalist patriarchy, Lorde is calling upon marginalized communities to create their own spaces. Rather than women taking a cigarette and finding a way to entertain themselves in the master's house, it's about the need for women to allow the spark of their cigarette to burn that house down and rebuild from the ashes.

Works Cited

Binnie, Imogen. *Nevada*. MCD x FSG Originals, 2022.

Del Sal, Melissa, et al. "The Significance of the Cigarette." AP/EN3150 A - Women in Literature: A Comparative Analysis, 25 January 2024, York University, Keele Street, Toronto, ON. Group Discussion.

Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. Penguin Random House, 2021.

Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 110-113.