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Must We Mean What We See? : Ambiguity and Anxiety in the Novel

Phenomenology provides a reflective means of reading because it "slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice" (Heinemmaa 13). The loosening of these threads of perception helps one to think, without the presuppositions of the objective sciences getting in the way. Perception can be tricky when it is always easier to defer to the value-seeking way of looking at the world. When reading through the lens of phenomenology, one refuses to withdraw or to snap back into one's own belief system as she or he perceives a thing or a person. Themes in literature such as the passing trope in conjunction with a phenomenological lens can help readers gain perspective of the world around them. The theme of the passing trope in the novels *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, and *Quicksand* and *Passing* by Nella Larsen not only confronts readers with their perception of socially divided categories but also provides a fertile ground for the application of a phenomenologist reading.

One's becoming aware of her own means of apprehending the world around her, means she can live beyond binary thinking and value seeking. I believe that *that* is what the passing

trope is trying to teach us. The passing trope allows for passage through the dichotomous divide -- from black to white or male to female -- while remaining ambiguous. The passing trope teaches the reader to think more like a phenomenologist, by forcing her to confront presuppositions and assumptions. Beyond presuppositions, assumptions, and conditioned categorical thought, we can confront our fears of ambiguity.

As Husserl points out in *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, we can have two different kinds of experience of bodies or -- for the grammarian -- the object or subject of the sentence. As object, he says, one is situated the way a natural scientist sees her, where we can abstract all meaning for ourselves, taking value and purpose away from the body, thus gesture and movement is merely an effect of internal/external causes, thus all behavior can be predicted by some general laws (Heinemmaa 26). But, with this attitude, we no longer experience people, or even animals; "instead we experience merely material things" (Heinemmaa 26). On the other hand, with the phenomenological attitude, we can relate to living bodies as meaningful and purposeful agents, not predicting their behavior or sizing up their value, but responding to them in the given, in the moment. Husserl's valuable insight is that "the phenomenologist suspends his belief in the presence of practical and theoretical objects and turns his attention to their ways of being given. This is why his object of study is called "'pure experience'…in the sense of being presuppositionless, or free from assumptions about existence and nonexistence" (13).

Today, I think phenomenology is of extraordinary import. Because of the constant inundation of information in modern life, we are more prone to make snap judgments and the time to contemplate the world around us is compromised . Thus, viewing the passing trope within the framework of phenomenology may help the reader by making him or her sit in the murkiness, where critical and original thinking can occur in lieu of typifying phenomena with which we are

confronted. When discussing freedom, Merleau-Ponty elucidates this murkiness. He states "I never am completely for myself […] nevertheless I remain free to posit another person as a consciousness whose views strike through to my very being, or on the other hand merely as an object" (Merlau-Ponty 505). The third space of phenomenological thinking offers a view of ambiguity as a means to freedom not as a concept to be feared. Adding to the discussion, he posits the "scientism" or thinking in terms of causality and motivation should be rejected because this approach is incompatible with consciousness which has no nature (506-507).

Literary interpretation, within the framework of philosophy, stretches our preconceived notions of the world, so we can perceive those notions as they are -- not as they are conditioned to appear. Taking the time to untangle our notions of characterization and how it interacts with institutionalized knowledge within a novel can lead to a more satisfying engagement with a text as well as a new way of perceiving the world around us—no matter the sociohistorical context. As Beauvoir puts it, "[l]iterature is born when something in life goes wrong. In order to write…the first condition is that reality is no longer taken for granted; only then can one both perceive it, and make others do so" (5). The passing trope within these novels do just that -- they stop taking reality for granted, and in doing so, make others perceive her own reality differently. Furthermore, the passing trope can be seen as a critique of essentialism. Because of the passing trope in the novels -- *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, and *Quicksand* and *Passing* by Nella Larsen -- the reader's threads of perception are slackened, and they are awakened to an alternative to binary thinking.

The protagonists vacillate between the two socially manufactured categories, male versus female and black versus white. As we become privy to the plight of ambiguity through the first-person narratives, and how they are perceived in these novels, the experiences of these characters

create necessary distortions, slowing our evaluation of them and by extension allows for a reevaluation of them. In doing so, Eugenides and Larsen illuminate the space between the categories themselves and also between the ways in which the readers sees the world. Through the narrator's explication and the experiences of the characters, the reader can empathize and realize how she may take what they perceive and realize she may compulsively categorize these perceptions without allowing critical thinking to takes place within the murkiness of a third space of ambiguity.

I realized how misunderstood these characters were when talking about Larsen's character, Helga Crane, and a classmate said: "But, really Kerry, does she have agency?" So, I have been thinking about it for a couple of years---and yes, she has agency beyond the limitations of a system built on othering."Because she is neither black nor white but can pass for either, the character transcends both the confines of the position of power and the "othered" subordinate. She is neither and therefore represents a third space or as Merleau-Ponty would put it a consciousness without nature or race. When analyzing literature, the third space is often difficult to reconcile, so one reaction is to decide whether the character has agency or is reliable."

This classmate said, "But the protagonist is unreliable." Yes, because the label -- unreliable, as such -- puts them neatly out of the mind of the reader as soon as she determines that the character fits into a discrete category. The protagonists, at certain points in all three novels seem unreliable; they fluctuate between being fractured and solid. But, this state of flux is why they are revolutionary. They are written to refuse ascription, as a static identity—but, reliable because at all times they defy presuppositions. These characters have the advantage of fluidity and defy the restrictive biological categories to which they are designated. Merleau-Ponty points out "expression and meaning" belong to the world of language as already

constituted. Expression and meaning are applied to what we see when we encounter another being or body and conclusions are reached uncritically, "but bodily experience must, on the contrary, teach us to correct them" (50). The entangled bodies without discrete categories of belonging, shrouded in ambiguity, make the characters necessarily more difficult to relate to because the tolerance/intolerance of their ambiguity (as experienced by the reader) is the lesson itself. Thus, the body as portrayed through the passing trope teaches us to correct our potentially wrong-headed experience of ambiguity, which leads to the possibility of embracing the ambiguous situation or person.

In a discussion of the life-world and the world of science, Husserl distinguishes the "pre-given nature—the domain of the life-world" and our everyday familiarity with it versus the propositions of science (Husserl 381). For Husserl, the pre-given life-world is the sphere where the scientist "wishes to accomplish something new: theory for nature, theoretically new true being, predicative determination—under the idea unconditionally, universally valid truth" (381). We see the danger and externalities of accomplishing this feat in the life-world of human experience as Eugenides and Larsen critique the historical consequences therein. The language of empiricism or as Husserl would call it "natural science" that influences laws enacted and surgeries performed has real-world consequences. For instance, it was not until the 1967 case of *Loving vs. Virginia* that laws criminalizing miscegenation were found to be unconstitutional, as a violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. The idea behind the law, prohibiting a non-white to marry a white, is incontrovertibly linked to a biological concern. That concern being the prevention of the birth biracial children. Notwithstanding the historical context, binary thinking is the process behind this law and all other forms of racism, whether *de jure* or *de facto*. If races could not legally mix, then Americans could remain distinct in blood

from one another, or so that was the rationale. The psychological ramifications of binary thinking, imputed onto biology and law, are apparent in Larsen's *Passing*. Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield are two characters who can pass for black or white, juxtaposed because of the inherent tension: whether to pass and abandon the culture from whence they came or to use the ability to pass only as a convenience. The fear of being found out is salient throughout the novel, Both Clare and Irene manifest the ambiguous, where without warning they can conform to whatever "object" they need to be depending on the social circumstance. But, Clare goes over to the *light* side for good so it seems, and when discussing having another child and her ethnicity being found out by her husband, Clare says "I do think that coloured people—we—are too silly about some things…It's only deserters like me who have to be afraid of freaks of nature" (Larsen 169).

Larsen, writing in 1920s Harlem, gave voice to the "passing" character, which could pass but did not belong because she was not firmly planted on this or that side of the dichotomy. What is curious though is the way Larsen successfully depicts the turmoil of this freedom to pass, while simultaneously challenging the reader to reevaluate her own belief system. What does not seem to occur to her throughout the novel is that she could also be suspected of adultery.

Likewise, in Larsen's *Quicksand*, we see the passing trope at work. Helga Crane (the character I was told was unreliable), does pass in Denmark. She struggles from having no family connections, and a nagging identity crisis in every situation and setting. Her continuous state of crisis relates to a lack of belonging because she is biracial and passes when necessary as well. Within each new situation, she is content for a moment only to fall prey to "the uneasy sense of being engaged with some formidable antagonist, nameless and ununderstood, startled her" (Larsen 10).

But, her character *has* agency. As the central character, Helga traverses the continent and the Atlantic Ocean to Denmark, which I believe to be an artfully rendered metaphor. This metaphor points out her fluidity between rigid categories of social distinction. When she stays somewhere too long, the feeling of "estrangement and isolation" haunt her (Larsen 48). The prison that awaits her is *not only* her domestication, or procreation factory-like in the south; it is the prison of trying to adapt to every institution, be it the school she teaches at or a theater in Denmark. In *Quicksand*, Helga remarks that Naxos, an all-black college in the south, was a "big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern" (Larsen 4). Through Helga, we understand that the institutions -- religious, social, academic, or domestic -- are built as monuments to categorical thinking, and, though she seems bipolar to the modern reader, she helps to locate this problem. This begs the question that this crisis of identity is not in the person -- Helga -- who dares to question the thoughtlessness that keeps these institutions standing. Watching Helga, as she interacts within the confines of categorical *unthinking* and apathetic conformity, situates the reader into a phenomenological stance. The reader must distance herself to understand the transgressions of the object, but the reader is also intimately aware of the turmoil within the subject. Therefore, the reader is afforded, for the moment, the suspension of the categories she took for granted.

The same kind of confrontation with ambiguity is also thematic in *Middlesex*. But, the "big knife with cruelly sharp edges" Helga refers to in *Quicksand* is a real one in *Middlesex*. In this novel, written in 2002, the passing trope and tension built up throughout relates to gendered identity, not race. Through the protagonist's eyes, Eugenides forces the reader to focus on ambiguity as well. But, the main character's plight is due to innate androgyny. Callie or Cal was raised as girl for 14 years because no one noticed she had the characteristics of both sexes until

she had an accident and went in for routine medical services. Her parents took her to have sexual re-assignment surgery at the Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic. In first-person narration, Callie says to herself "Milton and Tessie [her parents] treated me as they always had—as their daughter, in other words. They acted as though my problem was medical and therefore fixable. So I began to hope so, too. Like a person with a terminal illness, I was eager to ignore the immediate symptoms, hoping for a last-minute cure" (Eugenides 405).

Upon realizing that she is a hermaphrodite, Dr. Luce (Callie's doctor) psychologically evaluates her, along with a series of test involving endocrine levels and hormone levels. Her parents reassure her that they "only wanted to confirm what was obvious: that [she] was a normal, well-adjusted girl" (Eugenides 415). Callie finds the doctor's report and realizes the doctor's information was equivocating. He left out that she had undescended testicles, and that the sexual re-assignment surgery meant to make her a girl, cutting out the testicles, and starting hormone therapy. All because her "speech, mannerisms, and dress [of the subject] manifests a feminine gender identity and role, despite chromosomal status" (437). As Callie reads on, she also realizes that the surgery may eliminate the possibility of sexual pleasure.

In the last chapter, the narrator comments on living as an intersex person. While refuting biological determinism, the narrator comments "my psychological makeup doesn't accord with the essentialism popular in the intersex movement, either…unlike other so-called male pseudo-hermaphrodites…I never felt out of place being a girl" (Eugenides 479). While the novel's main character can pass as male or female, the character is not only passing but, by the standards of empiricism and medical science, Callie is an anomaly who must be remedied. Therefore, the binary categories of male/female are scientifically impossible in Callie's situation. Eugenides capitalizes on the idea of how one is perceived socially necessarily mandates how to proceed

medically. Therefore, he assigns Callie—a pseudohermphroditic male with externally female characteristics---surgery and therapy that promises to produce a complete and final identity from the body inward (complete person acceptable by the standards of society). So, why was the sexual assignment surgery necessary when Callie or Cal had already formed an identity within the body given and had no pain or discomfort to speak of? *Middlesex* is a novel in which one can clearly see that gender is a performative act.

These novels read in conjunction with Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Consitution" helps the reader embrace the idea that gender is a performative act, a role for which we wake up and dress in costume for everyday. But, I would add, in light of Larsen's novellas, that races are constituted in much the same way. Butler's assertion that these binary signifiers are inherited and culturally performed is an idea that marks the culmination of influences from Beauvoir's framework for studying sexual difference to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conception of the body. As Beauvoir argues, we have not reached the threshold of experience until "the body is taken as subject of experience, not as a bioscientific object" (Heinemmaa 24). Butler adds to phenomenological thought, stating gender is "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and play genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production" (Butler 522).

In light of Larsen's novellas, I would add this assertion to racial signifiers as well. Butler adds that "because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term 'strategy' better suggests the situation of duress under which gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences -- discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler 522). Belonging to discrete categories of race, as we see in Larsen's novellas, is also an attempt to

humanize the character by giving them the decorum and status or strategy to blend in depending on which social contract is required. The reader gains insight into how adaptable these characters *are*, while simultaneously reckoning with the character's implicit state of disarray.

Because gendered identity is a performance, it requires cultural reproduction. Because one's identity is contingent upon cultural reproduction, one is expected to embrace certain social signifiers, which are "effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame…[rendering] social laws explicit" (Butler 526). In applying this concept to race and gender, one could argue as seen with the passing trope that the binary thinking customary (not natural) in Western thinking is nourished and maintained through medicalization to avoid deviation.

So what causes intolerance of ambiguity? I believe the anxiety comes from the apprehension caused in one when other people or other people's bodies perform a role deviating from the comfort we have come to expect from such categorical thinking. So, how do we move away from apprehension to a more phenomenological approach, an all-encompassing approach to understanding the world around us, once the threads of perceptions are slackened?

The revolution begins in our allowing *beings* to remain ambiguous to us, in refusing the compulsion to make snap judgments about them. When we are free from all objective notions of being and value, for a moment, we can study the difference between material things and bodies as persons, and we can inquire into the conditions of new possibilities for these two phenomena (Heinemmaa 27). Finally, we must suspend our obsession with the myth we call objectivity to break away from categorical thinking. I do not mean to posit that categorical thinking is always bad or always improper, but merely that the ambiguity that what the passing trope brings to the

fore is evidence that categorical thinking is not *always* proper because everything in the world does not *always* fit into neatly prescribed categories. I believe the passing trope is one way to find mediated ground and will encourage us to challenge ourselves with the task of *really* perceiving without presuppositions. As Pare remarks in "Gender and Identity," "Just as ideology is masked by convention, so, too, can these contradictions be hidden by the apparent naturalness of daily practice" (141).

Looking at both authors' approach to the passing trope illustrates a phenomenon that has embedded itself historically and has become more insidious in the twenty-first century. The projection of one's identity to the exclusion of others is made manifest more easily in the digital age. The underlying causes, though, are not the medium itself but a lack of social consciousness in hastily deciding that the constitution of one's identity must rely on the exclusion and negative representation of the opposite group. Perhaps, phenomenology along with literature portraying a third space will be paramount in eradicating discrete categories, which perpetuate misunderstanding, anxiety, and hatred.

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