Ghosts of Society and Consciousness

Ubiquitous writer Zora Neale Hurston once wrote “At certain times I have no race… the cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race or time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.” Moreover, while Hurston was an integral part of the Harlem Renaissance as a cultural movement, her assertion eschews the motivations of some of her contemporaries. For example, Hurston believed that Langston Hughes sought to emphasize the “blackness” of his characters, packaging it as a commercialized, primitivist product that would be easier for his white audiences to digest. Similarly, through the shell-like narrative of Darl in As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner manages to create a postmodernist character that rejects the aesthetic of his literary era, while Irene and Clare’s relationship in Nella Larsen’s Passing touches upon Hurston’s struggles as a black woman with their efforts to come to terms with the race question. But the ability of these characters to ultimately transcend their societal shackles rests upon the many different ways in which they are rendered as ghosts. In this analysis, I will first examine how these characters exemplify the qualities that define a ghost, and then go into the implications of their portrayal as such within the framework of societal transcendence.
Faulkner’s narrative structure in *As I Lay Dying* consists of many narrators, all of them unreliable, and it thus precludes true omniscience while trapping the reader in a quasi-omniscient purgatory. Darl, with his keen powers of observation, is effectively an omniscient observer, but he is also continually levying a caustic social criticism of the Bundren household, often participating in and changing the course of events that take place. Thus, as for the other narrators, the reader cannot expect Darl to objectively assess his actions and their impact and present them in a veritable manner. Yet Darl is always an outsider to the family, and indeed to all of Yoknapatawpha County, and his criticisms are thus reliable, his attempts to reform his society less hindered by interpersonal ties. This is especially evident in the scene immediately after Darl has lit Gillespie’s barn on fire.

As an exercise in ekphrasis, Darl spends only enough time on Jewel to capture his expressions and movements, but he doesn’t *explicate* their significance with regard to what he has done. He describes the barn-burning scene in striking visual detail; in describing Jewel’s reaction, he remarks “he [is] looking at me, his face furious” (Faulkner 219), but immediately shifts to a description of the rising flames. Nonetheless, Darl makes use of metaphor to capture Jewel’s reaction to the situation. As a criticism of Jewel’s filial piety, he attempts synecdoche in his description of Jewel’s eyes, likening them to “two small torches” (218), while in the past he has always depicted them as emotionless, “pale… like wood” (4). He recognizes that just as and because he set the barn containing Addie’s coffin on fire, so too he set Jewel’s eyes on fire. In fact, being made of wood, they were always suitable tinder for fire, and Jewel’s volatility stands as a testament to that. While this subtle deviation from objective description establishes the
description as unreliable (Jewel’s glare cannot actually swim like torches), his emotionless narration implies disaffection for his own dead mother, and firmly establishes his external perspective in bringing light to the situation.

Like Darl, Irene Redding is a social outsider. While Darl is ostracized for his clarity of perception and perceived psychosis, the color of Irene’s skin and her race together straddle the line between white and black. Her old friend Clare Kendry asks her “Tell me, honestly, haven’t you ever thought of passing?” (Larsen 42), suggesting that it is unquestionably more desirable to pass for white. It endowed a 1920s woman with a lucrative social currency. But while she refuses this easy pass on life, she remains preoccupied with the color line. Unlike Hurston, she needs to continually assert her race to assume a stance in the racial politics of the era. Irene is then indeed very different from Darl. Larsen makes amply clear that Irene is isolated due to her unyielding allegiance to the “imagined community” of her race, whereas Darl is isolated for precisely the opposite reason. Her differentness places her in a position to transcend the race question, but at first glance, it seems as though she will do anything but that.

Clare Kendry, on the other hand, is an opportunist, seeking to curry favor with and even take advantage of anyone she interacts with. For example, in a confession to Irene, she remarks “Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really ‘Rene, I’m not safe” (139). In that she belongs to nobody, she is much more a Darl-figure than Irene. Although Larsen inverts Faulkner’s paradigm by making Clare the more popular of the two friends, she also demonstrates that everyone’s affections for Clare are only ephemeral. For instance, when her white husband John Bellew is introduced, he greets her with
“hello, Nig” (65), ironic because he doesn’t realize that she is black. However, once her true racial identity is revealed, he is just as quick to transform his playfully offensive remark into a furious insult: “So you’re a nigger, a damned, dirty nigger!” (207). Ultimately, just as Darl is implicated in the barn-burning and ruined, Clare also falls to her death after being pushed or jumping out of a window soon after Bellew’s vehement exclamation (the novel is unclear regarding the specific cause).

Darl’s preternatural ability to pass from one consciousness to another is repeatedly revealed in the novel. For example, he earlier taunts Jewel for his uncertain parentage: “Your mother was a horse, Jewel, but who was your father?” (Faulkner 212). As literary critic Calvin Bedient proposes, Darl agrees with Vardaman that he is “are”, but “that’s why [he] is not is. Are is too many for one woman to foal” (95). He implies that unlike Jewel, whose mother is a horse, he was never a foal, and as he suggests to Vardaman, he is everyone except himself. His foray into Jewel’s obscure origins then implies that he is a spectral presence, a ghost penetrating Addie’s well-guarded secret about her affair with the minister, Whitfield.

Just as Darl passes from one mind to another with impressive fluidity, so too does Clare try to pass from one racial community to another. She is then not a ghost of consciousness, but a ghost of society. She doesn’t rightfully belong to either of the communities she frequents. Although this would in theory allow her to embody the racial transcendence that Hurston espouses, unlike Darl, Clare is not a transcendent ghost. She only appears to divest herself from each of the communities through her nonchalance, but in attempting to defy the one, she is defined by the other. For Clare, passing for black is just as much of a challenge as passing for
white. For instance, when Irene mentions the Negro dance to her, she beseeches her with

“Rene, suppose I come too! It sounds terribly interesting” (Larsen 124). This indicates that

Clare participates in “blackness” in the same way that Cab Calloway’s white audiences at The
Cotton Club, an exclusive 1930s jazz venue, would: she devours it. However, she is

simultaneously dissatisfied with her experience with white society, mentioning to Irene that she

would rather “have just a few more months in [Harlem]” (146) than return to Switzerland with
Bellew.

Since Darl bears such an unmistakable likeness to a ghost, the idea of what it means to be

a ghost is worth investigating in its own right. As privy to the inner emotions of all the

characters, he is also endowed with the entire baggage of the Bundren clan, and indeed, to the

poor, dysfunctional white Southern archetype that Faulkner tries to encapsulate with the

Bundrens. If a ghost is a collection of thoughts and memories, and its society’s history must

then permeate its presence, how is it that Darl manages to transcend this society? Here, the true

wit of Faulkner’s narrative structure is revealed. Darl’s sections never convey his interiority,

only quotes and descriptions of events (his non-observational thoughts seemingly engaged in

trying to point out the inconsistencies in other characters’ actions), because Faulkner transposes

the reader’s interiority upon Darl’s character. Since Darl has access to all the secrets of the other

characters, he is “reading” nearly the same book that we are, his own sections excluded. Just

like Darl, we can piece together the inconsistencies between the characters’ narratives and infer

the true state of affairs. Without interiority, Darl does not transcend the constraints and regional

aesthetic of the American South; instead, the reader does (if he or she so chooses).
However, if there is truly nothing more to Darl than perception, why does he burn the barn? Consistent with Darl’s portrayal as a ghost, he is not present when the barn is lit on fire and as mentioned earlier, he responds to it with a descriptive retelling of the scene, absent any emotional response. However, the primary hint that it is indeed Darl who burns the barn comes from the previous Vardaman section. Darl and Vardaman are seen peering into the coffin, and Darl informs Vardaman that “she [Addie] wants Him to hide her away from the sight of man” (Faulkner 215). One might propose that Darl is exercising his paranormal ability and accessing one of Addie’s secrets, thereby merely acting on her behalf. Nevertheless, a closer reading renders this interpretation inconsistent. While she was still alive, Addie sacrilegiously proclaimed to Cora Tull that “he [Jewel] will save me from the water and the fire” (168), and indeed, Jewel later rescues her coffin from drifting away in the river and removes it from the burning barn. Alternatively, a contextually consistent interpretation is to assume that with Darl Faulkner only constructs the abstract notion of rebellion against the status quo: the reader endows the deed with radicalism. That is, in this act Darl is nothing more than a symbol, emotionally uninvested in the change, only rationally seeking to release the Bundrens from their meaningless struggle to reach Jefferson to bury the body.

While through Dewey Dell’s discomfort we find that “the land runs out of Darl’s eyes [and] swims to pinpoints” (121) all along her body, Clare Kendry is not a hollow pair of eyes, and nothing about her nature compels her to assume the role of a ghost. Instead, since she is rendered a ghost by her choice to pass, her two halves permanently separated by her two societies, fading into translucency within each. For Clare to be a ghost, it means for her to be a
restless spirit caught in the act of passing, trying to reconcile her earthly origins with the afterlife to which she aspires. Indeed, after she introduces Bellew to Irene, she remains nearly silent as he unwittingly bemoans Negroes in front of his African American guests, alleging that they are “always robbing and killing people” (Larsen 69). Yet, when she desires to reconnect with Irene, she “almost plaintively” (118) remarks, “I don’t blame you for being angry” (118). Irene recognizes early on that Clare might be fooling herself in hiding behind the façade of her opportunism in ruthlessly making and breaking alliances. She tells her friend Gertrude soon after the Bellew incident that his offensive statements were “rather a joke… on him and on us and maybe on her” (76).

Faulkner makes Darl’s blank characterization explicit with Cora Tull’s character. Cora views Darl as a firm bastion of the Christian values of the American South, remarking that when he “looked at” (Faulkner 24) his mother, “she felt the bounteous love of the Lord again and His mercy” (24). The reader attuned to H.L. Mencken’s essay “The Sahara of the Bozart,” viewing the American South as just as intellectually and culturally sterile “as the Sahara Desert,” is apt to see Cora’s interpretation of Darl as absurd, but that is only because her interpretation attempts to exogenously ascribe meaning to the reader’s own sentiments regarding Addie on her deathbed. The reader later learns that in the scene that Cora describes, Darl has arrived to tell Dewey Dell that Addie “is going to die” (28). But even though here Darl depicted as an empty shell, he cannot be, since Cora credits him with particular emotions and these inform her future relationship with his presence. That is, these fictional attributions have an actual presence within the novel. However, since the reader’s own interpretations also inform Darl’s interiority, both of
these fictions about Darl must exist within his character simultaneously. This raises the question of which of the fictions is more factual. And in fact, Faulkner is not raising an arcane point relevant only to his proto-postmodern experiment. Faulkner here directly engages us as the readers, asking whether what people believe about us is more important than what we believe about ourselves.

Returning to Irene’s comment regarding Clare, if Clare’s efforts to “get in” with both Irene and Bellew were truly laughable, it would seem as though Clare’s image of herself is a lot less important than how others regard her, especially with respect to her fate. She is marginalized by the judgments her two communities levy on her, and they make her more and more of a ghost caught in passing. Larsen again inverts Darl’s experience with ghosthood in Clare, who neither transcends race nor integrates the two racial communities she interacts with. She, like Faulkner’s narrative, is trapped in a quasi-enlightened purgatory, unable to reach either of the two paths that have laid themselves out before her. But Clare, who at the very least puts on an air of being unconcerned about how people perceive her, seeking to do “as [she] please[s], when she please[s]” (Larsen 196), serves as a foil to Irene’s obsessive compulsion over her racial solidarity. Irene once believed, for instance, that she was unable to obtain the security that she sought because she “lacked the capacity for the acme of suffering” (198), when she in fact does suffer due to her insistence on racial fidelity in spite of her conflicting desires, and this suffering itself inhibits her security. In that she rejects transcendence, Irene is the most earthly real of the three characters; consequently, she projects her beliefs within and about herself upon her society, and this too informs the path her life takes, albeit in a negative manner. For example, in the final
scene of the book, immediately after Bellew lashes out at Clare, the narrator states that “everything was in confusion” (207), just as everything always is in Irene’s mind.

Of course, by nature of the narrative structure that Faulkner has constructed, it is impossible for the readers’ myriad collective sentiments superimposed on Darl’s character to all take effect together; therefore, the popular public opinion of Darl must be what becomes factual. Anse gives the reader an early indication that Darl is popularly regarded as insane: “laughing…with his dead ma laying in her coffin at his feet… makes folks talk about him” (Faulkner 105). And indeed, after the fateful barn-burning, “two men put Darl on the train” to take him to the asylum in Jackson (253). That Darl is forcibly removed from the wagon affirms the interpretation that Darl is just a vessel for the readers’ sentiments. If Darl were merely a shell, then he would not resist the men and instead be placed on the train willingly, but since Darl encapsulates the reader, he resists because the reader resists. We know that we are not crazy for reading this book and being privileged to the interiority of all the characters. Faulkner aligns the ethos of the reader with Darl so that we know with certainty that Darl is not actually crazy. Still, Darl has much less influence over his destiny than Irene, who in fact fails to access her control. While his mind is transcendent, his body remains a puppet for the residents of Yoknapatawpha County.

In the final scene of Passing, after Clare has tumbled to her death from an open window, the narrator states “then everything was dark” (Larsen 215) for Irene. This line has particularly important implications for the examination of racial transcendence in this novel. On the absolutely literal level, Irene has fainted and she is thus no longer subject to the confusion that
perpetually plagues her mind. Here, instead of light bringing lucidity and resolution, dark offers her respite. However, viewing dark as metaphor for her race, with Clare gone Irene no longer needs to reconcile Clare’s borderline existence within the framework of race she has allowed her society to construct for her: everything in her world is black now, and the white world is kept separate. On a more subtle level, the word dark evokes images of uncertainty and tenuousness of form and color (since everything appears to be the same color in twilight), and of the ghosts that reside in the dark. With Clare gone, an attempt at racial reconciliation once more becomes an option for Irene, and she can assume the role of Darl’s societally transcendent ghost. Indeed, she begins this even before Clare’s death. Although her original interactions with the white intellectual Hugh Wentworth indicate the old racial precincts, suggesting that a blonde is dancing with a black man due to “repugnant… excitement” (138), we see her begin to reverse this position as the novel progresses. Regarding herself, she later proposes that Hugh speaks to her because he “prefers intelligent women” (158), not intelligent black women. Whether or not Irene killed Clare, her death marks the end of Irene’s ruinous experiment with her. It is a period of renewal for Irene, perhaps signaling the inevitable end that modernism wrought on the historically permissible practice of passing, and ending the period of unrest for ghosts like Clare.

The original printing of *Passing* contains a peculiar closing paragraph, which disappeared with subsequent reprints:

Centuries after, she heard the strange man saying: 'Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window.' (215)
Clearly, neither the “strange man” nor Irene Redding will be alive centuries after Clare’s death, but Larsen attempts to look forward in her address of race relations. Again, on the surface, it appears as though the strange man has reversed his assessment of the event in ascribing it to “misadventure,” since he originally asked Irene whether “her husband gave her a shove” (214). This indicates that far into the future, the idea of racialized hate crime will be sufficiently absurd to border on the unimaginable. However, this is precisely the racial transcendence that both characters failed to achieve through the course of the novel! For Clare and Irene, simply surviving their racially stratified world the primary concern; metaphysical questions of the validity of race as a construct were immaterial. However, this flash forward quite literally revives the specter of Irene as the transcendent ghost in Darl’s image, since Irene is dead. Her spirit oversees the dawning of a new age, where she can cast off the shadow of history and society.

In the final Darl chapter, Darl laughs at the bitter comic irony with which the end of his story leaves him; sent to Jackson on charges of insanity when he is in many ways the only sane character of the lot. Faulkner implicitly indicates that Darl sees Anse returning with the new Mrs. Bundren, since he witnesses the same scene with “Dewey Dell and Vardaman on the seat… eating bananas from a paper bag” (Faulkner 254) from the train. Thus, Faulkner structures the narrative such that Darl, ghost that he is, anticipates the reader in the revelation about Anse’s true twisted motivation for going to Jefferson: a wealthy new wife. He also laughs at the absurdity of being labeled insane by a family that disgraces itself by carrying around a rotting, 8-day old dead body all through the county just as an excuse to go to town to service their personal needs. Cash
even acknowledges that he “almost believe that he done right in a way” (233), since cremating the body with the barn would have also cremated the Bundren’s upcoming travails along with it. Yet while his laughter is fueled by everyone’s perception of his insanity, it also perpetuates it. His transcendence has no bearing on the Bundren’s eventual fate, and just like Clare, he pays a heavy price for his existence as a societal Other.

Therefore, through Darl, Faulkner suggests to the reader that the transcendent individual has internalized his society and its histories fully to be able to see beyond them. For instance, since the surface of a sphere is locally homeomorphic to a flat plane, the earth is flat to the untraveled man. Only the man who has circumnavigated the earth and returned to his starting point can effectively step out into the third dimension to view his two-dimensional spherical surface anew. But we must continually remind ourselves that Darl is not a transcendent individual, just a transcendent ghost; he is only a telescope and a blank canvas for the reader’s perspective.

Taken together, As I Lay Dying and Passing indicate that an individual achieves societal transcendence through a combination of a clear understanding of contemporary society and a unique perspective with which to assess it. Nonetheless, both Faulkner and Larsen recognize that these together are difficult to achieve in the contemporary moment, so they craft unconventional characters in Darl and Irene that are fluid with respect to perspective and time. But producing these ghosts of society and consciousness is just as much an innovative hallmark of modernism as the concept of secular transcendence. In Faulkner’s own Nobel acceptance speech, he captures his undying belief in the ability of the individual to prevail, noting that man
“is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.” And it is not that poor white rural southerners and upper-middle class black urban types have much in common that unify Faulkner and Larsen, it is that both authors chose to capture these qualities in the characters that broke free from the shackles of their society, to carve a testament to this spirit of man.