

## Exploring Operant Conditioning in Nella Larsen's *passing*: Beyond Clash of Civilizations



Taif Abdulridha Raheemah<sup>1</sup>, Ahmed Rahi Alhelal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Department, Faculty of Education for Women, University of Kufa/ Najaf/ Iraq

<sup>2</sup>Islamic Department, Faculty of Basic Education, University of Kufa/ Najaf/ Iraq

**ABSTRACT:** Through the clash of civilizations, this study represents the ongoing negotiation and redefinition of personalities of their identities. This conflict between traditional values and personal ambitions highlights cultural tensions between ethnic and cultural identity. The study illustrates Skinner's behavioral theory, pointing out how external reinforcements and punishments affect characters' actions and decisions. In addition, the novel provides a commentary on social norms and the relentless pursuit of identity and belonging in a divided world, reflecting the ongoing struggles that individuals face with societal expectations and personal ambitions. The clash of civilizations shows the importance of cultural diversity and complexities in shaping identities in a multicultural society. Identity's responses to reinforcement and punishment reveal the complex relationship between behavior, societal expectations, and individual choices in shaping a person's sense of self. After the study, it was discovered that Skinner's theory of reinforcement and punishment can be seen in the behavior of the two main characters in Larsen's novel. The novel reflects cultural and social tensions in early twentieth-century America and illustrates how the clash of ethnic and cultural identities can shape an individual's behavior and life decisions.

**KEYWORDS:** Behaviorism, Operant conditioning, identity, reinforcement and punishment, clash of civilization, *passing*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nella Larsen's *Passing* is a persuasive exploration of racial identity and social dynamics in early 20th-century America. It was written during the Jim Crow era, a period in American history, as Carter (2006) writes, characterized by the most significant racial segregation between Black and White individuals than any previous shared historical period, marking a pronounced divide between the two communities. The novel centers on the complex relationship between two mixed-race women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who navigate the precarious boundaries of race and class through the act of racial passing. Clare and Irene duel with identity in distinct behaviors. While Clare passes obviously as white, Irene keeps a sense of racial pride. This narrative can be read according to Skinner's theory (1974) of behaviorism, which reveals how changes can be observed from the beginning of the novel toward the end. Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1904-1990) is well-known as one of the leaders of behaviorism. According to him, observable behaviors are unobserved psychological emotions and feelings; therefore, they are a more worthwhile aspect to be analyzed. Skinner's theory of behaviorism began with his study and analysis of the relationship between animals' behaviors and their environment (Skinner, 1974, p.19). In his radical view of behaviorism, Skinner (1974) argues that the environmental variables that affect an individual's behavior are far more critical to the fundamental understanding of a person's psychological state. He would focus on the way behavior was influenced by its consequences. Hence, Skinner came up with such notions as reinforcement and punishment as the key factors in determining behavior. These two notions are of high importance in the two protagonists Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Furthermore, Skinner (1974) established a chamber that paved the way for the comprehensive examination of the principles of transforming behavior by reinforcement and punishment. Skinner's central attention was on how behavior is influenced by its consequences, with behaviors that are reinforced being more likely to be repeated and those that are punished being less likely to recur.

Behaviorism is considered a base for an individual's values and success. For more elaboration on the concept of behaviorism, Moore (2011) provides a comprehensive overview of behaviorism as a theoretical and methodological approach in psychology and he states that the term 'behaviorism' refers to the concept of psychology originated by John B. Watson in 1913 with the publication of Watson's paper 'Psychology as the Behaviorist View It' (p. 449). Watson (2017) defines it as the natural science which precedes all human changes. It deals with behavioristic psychology to expect and resist the activities of humans.

Staddon and Cerutti (2003) mentioned operant conditioning as a learning process by which the strength of behavior is modified through reinforcement or punishment. It is a fundamental concept in behavioral psychology developed by P.F. Skinner.

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Procedural adaptation involves a link between the behavior and the consequences of that behavior. There are four types of operant conditioning: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment. The operant conditioning approach is based on the theory of the Law of Effect by Edward Thorndike in 1905. According to Skinner's approach, any behavior that is recompensed tends to repeat itself, whereas the behavior that is punished tends to diminish. Moore (2011) also discusses that behaviors are influenced by their consequences, with reinforcement whether positive or negative serving to strengthen behaviors and punishment serving to weaken them. Behaviorism was developed based on the idea that behavior can be measured, educated, and altered, also known as behavioral psychology (p. 450). This theory is primarily concerned with facets of human behavior that are observable and measurable (p. 451).

Skinner (1957) excludes the significance of emotion, thinking, and interior behavior in examining the behavior. Hayes and Fryling (2016) comment on Skinner's radical behaviorism and argue that behavioral analysts commonly consider emotions to be private activities that establish biological happenings (p. 3). Behaviorists have been drawn to the fundamental problem concerning the subject and the causes of human behavior (p. 4). Skinner argues that people's thoughts and feelings should not affect their actions because the causes of their actions themselves induce them: contingent variables are thoughts and feelings (as cited in Hayes & Fryling, 2016, p. 5).

The American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington (1993) claims that future wars will not be fought between nations but between cultures (p. 16). The term 'civilization' is defined as "a stage of social development" (Retrieved from *Oxford Dictionary*), in addition to "the culture characteristic of a particular time or place" and "a relatively high level of cultural and technological development" (Retrieved from *Webster Dictionary*). Accordingly, it can be argued that the two terms 'civilization' and 'culture' are linked.

The American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington (1993) posits that future conflicts will not occur between countries but rather between cultural groups (p. 16). The term 'civilization' is understood as "a stage of social development" (Retrieved from *Oxford Dictionary*), as well as "the culture characteristic of a particular time or place" and "a relatively high level of cultural and technological development" (Retrieved from *Webster Dictionary*). Therefore, it can be argued that the concepts of 'civilization' and 'culture' are interconnected. Huntington argues that the notion of different civilizations, as the top grade of cultural identity, will become more and more helpful in analyzing the potential conflict (as cited in Pieterse, 2020, p. 58). In Larson's *Passing*, the societal clash of civilizations creates an environment that shapes the personal behavior of the main characters of the novel. Ethnic tensions and cultural expectations at the time strongly influenced how both main figures behaved.

## 2. DUELING IDENTITIES

Various factors, including the environment, community, and human values and attitudes, significantly influence the behavior of *Passing*'s characters. Skinner (1974) emphasizes that the environment plays an essential role in affecting behavior; this idea is very much reflected in both characters. Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry experience environmental changes that affect their manners. Starting with the protagonist, Clare's behavior whose environment greatly influences her conduct can be regarded as the first example.

Skinner's (1974) experiment proves that human beings learn behavior through their interaction with the environment; this interaction can be noticed in Clare's character. Her surrounding condition creates her mysterious personality from the earlier events; she is presented as a girl who has everything. Drowning in her imagination. She prefers to dive into her world, which prevents any connection with the real world, and her limited association with the real environment leads to her devastation. Her world guarantees her escape from her reality as a black African woman. It is thus used as a means to avoid the stigma associated with social marginalization and anti-black racial discrimination. Hardy-Butler (2017) states "we can see the desire to pass as not merely being a desire for whiteness, but as an attempt to gain access to the privileged afforded to whites" (p. 2).

Clare Kendry understands the behaviorist's role while dealing with human behavioral mysteries. For her, behavior can be influenced by some specific stimuli in the environment, or a consequence of her history, including particularly, reinforcement and punishment. She believes that her role is to solve all problems and issues related to others' affairs. She sees herself as the policewoman of all humanity, stimulated by others' problems: Yet how can one understand the consciousness of another person or how can one picture someone's mind with one's own mind's limitations?

Clare's lack of communication with her race people restricts her personality from any development since contact with the surroundings develops an individual's character and helps in learning and making positive progress. However, in Clare's case, moving from black to white society makes her adopt negative habits. Her motivation for making a fatal claim is compounded by her egoistic desire to construct a story, a reasonable arrangement of things in which she would be a savior, a wise heroine, and a judge (Mathews, 2006, p. 148). Clare's actions are often odd, but they are a means of survival and getting rid of the inferiority and racial prejudice of the whites. as she is conscious of what she is doing and what she is deducing from the events around her. Therefore, what makes the reader disapprove of this trait even more is that Clare does not seem to give up the hunger for superiority as she communicates with black society.

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By passing from the black community to the white community, Clare got social and economic reinforcement like obtaining higher social status and economic privilege that she would have been denied as an African-American woman. She marries a rich white man and lives a comfortable and luxurious life. "she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics" (Larsen, 1929, p. 54). She has the ability to blend into white society and this blending brings her positive social interaction and acceptance, reinforcing her decision to pass. She also got the ability to move between different social circles, allowing her to achieve a level of social mobility that would not be reached if she adopted her African-American identity. Butler (2015) writes "the changeability itself, the dream of metamorphosis, where the changeableness signifies a certain freedom, a class mobility afforded by whiteness that constitutes the power of that seduction" (p. 170). You can attend exclusive events and integrate into elite social groups. It is constantly strengthened by its ability to avoid the overt racial discrimination and prejudice faced by African Americans at the time. This protection and ongoing reinforcements are a powerful catalyst to preserve her white claimant identity. According to Butler, the "seduction" of passing, where Larsen's novel is concerned, is derived from the crossing of the color line, the wonder of fully entrenching oneself in something new and foreign.

Clare's misconception that the world revolves around her is based upon her spoiled lifestyle and creates a dusty cloud of fantasy over reality. Her environment is firstly represented as a stable one, in which everything is under her control

Skinner (1974, p. 57) defines negative reinforcement as being the equivalent of punishment which is the demonstration of an aversive incentive. It is the removal of an unfavorable condition following a behavior, thereby increasing the likelihood of that behavior. Clare's decision to pass allows her to escape from the financial instability and social marginalization that characterized her life as a child. The death of her mother and the subsequent neglect of her relatives have reinforced her desire to escape those difficulties. Also, she avoids direct and institutionalized racism that would have restricted her opportunities and freedoms as an African-American woman. This avoidance reinforces her decision to continue passing.

Demorest (2014, p. 88) explains that Skinner considers punishment a system of human control that entails a consequence that reduces or subdues a specific behavior, and when hostile behavior is followed by punishment, it is unlikely to recur. Punishment in behaviorism refers to the introduction of an unfavorable outcome or the removal of a favorable one following a behavior, decreasing the likelihood of that behavior recurring.

Larsen introduces Clare as a woman who lives in constant fear that her true identity will be discovered by her husband Jack or other social circles and this generates great anxiety for her. This state of constant fear is a kind of psychological punishment that constantly accompanies her deception. Clare's double identity leads to an internal conflict between her true identity and the façade she maintains. This conflict is a source of psychological distress and instability, which punishes her more for choosing to transcend from one race to another. The ultimate punishment for transgressing her race comes with the inherent risk of violent repercussions if her true ethnic identity is discovered. The societal and personal consequences of such a disclosure can be catastrophic. In her letter to her friend Irene, Clare writes:

For I am so lonely . . . cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life. . . . You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of. . . . It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases (Larsen, 1929, p. 51).

Clare lives in extreme loneliness and emotional isolation and this loneliness acts as a negative consequence that makes her wonder about her choice to change her identity. This loneliness acts as a punishment which reduces the likelihood that she will find real satisfaction in her current identity. She points out in her letter to her friend Irene that she is losing authentic social and emotional bonds, especially with her African-American roots. Clare's longing to return to her friends and former community reveals that she lacks the positive reinforcements that she had in her past life such as a sense of belonging and cultural connection. On the other hand, she stated that she suffers from pain and longing, both of which can be seen as a negative reinforcement of her behavior in pretending to belong to the white community. When she engages with the African-American community, she is comfortable with this encounter and constantly wants to repeat it and create vivid images of her past life, highlighting the positive experiences and satisfaction she got from those bonds. These memories serve to reinforce her desire to return to that life. Clare lives in an intense conflict between passing into the white race and the rewards she gets through this passing such as social and economic privileges and avoiding racial discrimination, and the life she left behind. It seems that the psychological punishment associated with losing her true identity is stronger than the privileges of passing. When she joins the black community and lives with her true identity, she gets constant reinforcement.

Irene Redfield is the exact antithesis of Clare's character. Although her skin is also light and she can pass and pretend to belong to the white community, this was not her choice at all. Irene chose to be deeply involved in her African-American community in Harlem. She values stability, safety, and social respect. She behaves in ways that align with her race expectations, generates constant positive reinforcements from them, and reinforces her sense of stability and control. However, Irene's identity is influenced by negative reinforcements and punishment, especially regarding her interactions with Claire Kindri. Claire's decision to pretend to be white and her incursion into Erin's family life is a potential source of anxiety and turmoil for the stable world Erin has built.

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Claire's presence is a negative catalyst that threatens to destroy the identity that Irene has built and maintained with great care and attention. Irene's fear of losing her social status and respect for her race and community is a form of punishment she avoids.

Emotional distress is a form of punishment. Irene feels threatened by her emotional stability as Clare enters her life. For example, when she sees her husband's obvious admiration for Clare, she is jealous. This emotional turmoil reinforces Irene's determination to stay away from Clare, as Irene's loss of love and admiration for her husband is a powerful deterrent, leading to caution. "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" (Larson, 1929, p. 151). All that Irene wants is to maintain her routine without disruption and maintain a stable and predictable life. This shows that her sense of security is closely linked to maintaining a certain routine and order. Irene's relationship with her husband, Brian, is portrayed as a relationship based on stability and comfort, rather than love or passion "...the husband and the father of her sons, but was he anything more?" (p. 107). Irene's marriage to Brian is seen as a way to maintain a certain level of class privilege and security, rather than a deeply satisfying partnership. Clare's presence in Irene's life challenges this sense of security and privilege, prompting Irene to confront her agency and weaknesses. This presence is a life-threatening intrusion. This intrusion is unexpected and threatens that stability. Irene's sense of danger from Clare's presence in her life and the fact that she poses a major nuisance and threat to her emotional well-being represents her intense jealousy of her husband. Clare's ability to disrupt the heroine's life suggests that she has a certain power or influence, which can increase feelings of envy and insecurity. Emotional impact and fear are embodied by "and with her the menace of impermanence".

Clare, for her part, seeks to end her marriage to Bellew. By joining the black community, Clare finds that she can have a double sense of privilege: as a light-skinned black woman within the Harlem black community and as a distinct white woman, if necessary. Thus, she seeks to build a place for herself in both worlds, and ending her marriage to Bellew is the only way to achieve this type of class. Thus, if she marries Erin Brian's husband – as Erin often suspects – Clare could have a dual identity and an exaggerated social class with a sense of male privilege that Brian would give her. Irene thinks:

What if Bellew should divorce Clare? Could he? There was the Rhinelander case. But in France, in Paris, such things were very easy. If he divorced her—if Clare were free—But of all things that could happen, that was the one she did not want (81).

Irene tries to avoid punishments such as ostracizing her community and losing her husband's love and admiration, so she decides to stick to her identity and remove Clare, who poses a threat to her stability. Larson showed Irene's concerns about her husband:

She hoped that he had been comfortable and not too lonely without her and the boys. Not so lonely that that old, queer, unhappy restlessness had begun again within him, that craving for someplace strange and different, which at the beginning of her marriage she had had to make such strenuous efforts to repress, and which yet faintly alarmed her, though it now sprang up at gradually lessening intervals (Larson, 1929, p. 95).

This quote captures Irene's obvious and intense concern that her husband might want a strange and different place. This fear is a reflection of her insecurity about whether she alone can fulfill her husband's personal needs and desires. Clare's presence increases her stress and insecurity. Clare's striking beauty may excite her husband because Clare is beautiful and dares to do anything such as bypassing social restrictions, and this boldness represents the strange and bold aspects that Brian may be attracted to. As well as, here is Irene's concern that explains how afraid she is of losing control and her desire for continued control over her husband and family. Her jealousy stems from her fear of losing control.

Since Huntington proposed his *Clash of Civilizations* thesis, a robust debate has ensued regarding its validity (Huntington, 1993). Huntington (2014) argues that the majority of world conflicts will occur between different civilizations, particularly between Western and non-Western societies. He even goes further to say the "next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations" (39). Ghadban and Hussain (2017) writes:

Huntington's proposition of the conflict is based on political, economic, and ideological destinations which articulate an image of the cross powers. According to Huntington, civilizations clash to maintain the binary status of the controller and the controlled, the exploiter and the exploited, the master and the servant (p. 27).

In *Passing* (1929), the clash of civilizations is vividly depicted through the cultural, racial, and identity conflicts experienced by the two main characters, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. This clash represents the broader conflict between African Americans and European Americans in a segregated society and is explored through Irene and Clare's movements between their racial identities in an ethnically divided world. Both women, light-skinned African Americans, have the ability to pass as white, and their decisions to adopt or reject this practice highlight the cultural tensions of early 20th-century America.

The conflict between African Americans and European Americans is central to the narrative, as Irene and Clare navigate a society that enforces rigid racial boundaries. The act of passing, or crossing the "color line," as Wald (2000) describes it, becomes a form of rebellion against these boundaries: "The interest of narratives of racial passing lies precisely in their ability to demonstrate the failure of race to impose stable definitions of identity, or to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner" (p. ix). Clare's success in passing challenges the notion of race as a fixed and visible marker of identity, exposing the fluidity of racial



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categories. This fluidity is a central theme in the novel, as both characters navigate the social consequences of moving between racial identities. Clare's ability to pass as white highlights the socially constructed nature of race, revealing that it is not an inherent, stable identity but rather one that can be performed and adapted depending on context.

Clare's decision to pass and live as a white woman brings about significant tensions, particularly in her relationship with Irene, who rejects passing and embraces her black identity, despite the privileges that might come with passing. Clare's passing is not only a personal choice but a representation of the broader clash between African American and European American societies. As Kaplan (1992) notes, Clare's decision reflects "the internalized conflict between racial loyalty and personal survival" in a society marked by stark racial hierarchies. For Clare, passing is a means of achieving social mobility and escaping the limitations imposed by her black identity, yet it comes at the cost of her ties to the African American community. Clare's passing, as well as her complex relationship with Irene, underscores the broader cultural tensions and racial divisions that define the novel's setting.

Irene's discomfort with Clare's choice to pass is rooted in her belief in racial loyalty and solidarity. As a woman who embraces her black identity while navigating the complexities of middle-class life, Irene finds Clare's actions threatening to the social order she adheres to. As Hutchinson (2006) observes, Irene's "self-policing" of her identity, and her discomfort with Clare's passing, reflect the "internalized racism and class anxieties" that many African Americans faced during the era of racial segregation and social mobility. Irene's attempts to maintain control over her own racial identity—and the identities of those around her—illustrate the pressures that black individuals faced in a society that demanded conformity to rigid racial roles.

Furthermore, Wald's (2000) description of passing as a form of social rebellion is echoed in Clare's actions. By crossing the "color line" and adopting a white identity, Clare gains access to social privileges that would otherwise be denied to her due to her race. This act of passing reflects a broader critique of the racial hierarchies in America, where blackness is associated with inferiority and whiteness with privilege. Clare's social climbing through passing illustrates the subversive potential of challenging racial boundaries, as she takes advantage of the flexibility of racial categories to improve her social position.

The Harlem Renaissance setting of *Passing* serves as a backdrop to this clash of civilizations, contrasting the cultural flourishing of black intellectualism and art with the continued racial oppression experienced by African Americans. As Patterson (2000) argues, *Passing* "interrogates the boundaries of black identity" at a time when African Americans were asserting cultural influence yet remained marginalized by systemic racism. This clash between cultural progress and racial marginalization is embodied in Clare and Irene's divergent experiences. Clare, by passing as white, chooses to escape the limitations imposed by blackness, while Irene attempts to navigate the tensions within her own racial identity and class status.

Clare transcends her identity pretends to be white and marries an African-hating white man. This is where the tensions and dangers inherent in transcending cultural and ethnic boundaries become clear. Internal and external conflicts are generated because of this ethnic crossover. These conflicts and tensions are evident in her letter where she states that she is alone, "For I am so lonely" which indicates her unease and stability (Larson, 1929, p. 51). Clare's inner conflict and longing for the black community she left behind, illustrate the conflict between her current life transcending her white identity and her true racial identity.

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic (Larson, 1929, 147).

This quote from the novel shows Clare's inner struggle between two different loyalties, between herself and her race. It sums up the duality of its conflict. Her personal identity and ethnic identity conflict but they are inseparably linked creating a sense of suffocation and inevitability. Clare's failure to take any action has many consequences. Her behavior is influenced by external social pressures related to her race, which leads to a sense of blockade. External social pressures affect their behavior and create an internal conflict for which there is no easy solution. Here the picture of identity conflict and the impact of social and cultural expectations on individual behavior becomes clear.

On the other hand, Irene struggles to preserve her identity despite all the difficulties and conflicts she faces. She faces a broader cultural clash. Westerners represented by Europeans view themselves as civilized (Bellour, 2017). According to Todorov (2010):

we cannot advance on the road to civilization without having previously acknowledged the plurality of cultures. If we refuse to take into consideration visions of the world that are different from ours, we will find ourselves cut off from human universality and end up nearer to the pole of barbarism (34).

Progress requires recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity. If everyone fails to take into account different worldviews, we find ourselves isolated from society, and that's what happened in the first place with Clare.

Positive and negative reinforcement greatly influences the clash of civilizations, as the characters deal with their conflicting ethnic and cultural identities. The decisions and behaviors of the main characters are greatly influenced by these principles. Characters move between different cultural identities in an attempt to reconcile them. The clash of civilizations is constantly manifested through these tensions between preserving ethnic identity or demonstrating and crossing another identity to achieve social gains and acceptance from the other race.

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Every civilization and culture has different opinions about the relations between members of society, the composition of the family, work, duties, and rights, especially concerning women and children. Huntington (1993) in his *The Clash of Civilizations?* notes:

The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear. They are far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes (p. 25).

In the novel, these differences exist between white and African society and shape daily life and relationships between individuals. Clare Kendry adopts the values and norms of the white community based on her passing to this community. "Children aren't everything," according to her (Larson, 1929, p. 130). she prioritizes her social place, money, and personal happiness. She is looking for individual freedom and personal gain. Irene Redfield chooses to stay within her community and shows a larger tram with traditional social and family relationships. Clare's denial of her identity leads to her feeling of isolation in the end, unlike Irene, who feels socially and emotionally stable, reflecting the gap between the family values of the two communities. In the novel, American society suffers from hierarchy and inequality, and this theme is clearly illustrated by race and social relations. Ginsberg (2009) describes passing as moving "...from a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege, a movement that interrogates and thus threatens the system of racial categories and hierarchies established by social custom and legitimized by the law" (pp. 1-2). Clare seeks to escape this racial hierarchy of society, but Irene accepts her place and seeks to promote equality within her community.

Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things? Irene didn't know, couldn't decide, though for a long time she sat questioning and trying to understand. Yet all the while, in spite of her searchings and feeling of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life (Larson, 1929, p. 158).

In societies facing rapid social changes or instability, the primary goal of its members becomes safety. That's why Irene here prioritizes safety, reflecting a cultural value in her community. Safety is her primary goal versus personal happiness, love, and ecstasy. Irene experiences an internal conflict as a result of her aspirations and her natural desire to achieve love and ecstasy which clash with the traditional values of society. Cultural upbringing emphasizes and invites the search for safety while personal desires seek love, ecstasy, and diverse and complementary experiences. Irene finds safety can only be achieved by sacrificing these experiences. This suggests that she has learned through effective conditioning that safety is the positive reinforcement and reward she seeks. Security-oriented behavior is reinforced by the rewards associated with it. The positive and negative stimuli that the protagonist receives from the environment in which she lives are contradicted here, so she remains living in an internal conflict.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, the analysis of Nella Larsen's *Passing* through the framework of operant conditioning demonstrates how external reinforcements and punishments significantly shape the actions, identities, and decisions of the novel's two main characters, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Drawing on Skinner's behaviorist theory, this analysis explores how societal pressures, personal ambitions, and cultural tensions converge to influence behavior, ultimately leading to complex internal struggles within both characters.

Clare Kendry's decision to pass as white is motivated by the positive reinforcements she receives—social privilege, economic security, and access to opportunities otherwise denied to her as an African American woman. Clare's choice to transcend her racial identity provides her with a comfortable lifestyle, as she successfully integrates into white society, marries a wealthy white man, and enjoys the social status afforded by her passing. However, this social and economic reinforcement is coupled with emotional and psychological punishment. Clare experiences a deep sense of loneliness, isolation, and constant fear of discovery. These negative consequences act as psychological punishments, intensifying her internal conflict and highlighting the personal cost of her passing. Her detachment from the African American community further exacerbates her sense of alienation, leaving her trapped between two racial identities.

Irene Redfield, on the other hand, consciously chooses to embrace her African American identity, rejecting the notion of passing despite having the option to do so. She prioritizes racial loyalty and community solidarity, which provide her with a sense of stability, safety, and respect within her Harlem social circle. These positive reinforcements from her community strengthen her commitment to her racial identity. However, Clare's reentry into her life brings emotional turmoil and threatens the stability Irene has carefully built. Irene views Clare as a destabilizing force, a symbol of betrayal to the racial solidarity she holds dear. Clare's presence introduces jealousy, fear, and anxiety into Irene's world, particularly regarding her marriage to Brian. The emotional strain Irene experiences as she watches her husband grow increasingly infatuated with Clare serves as a form of punishment, reinforcing her internal conflict and sense of insecurity.

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This analysis also highlights how *Passing* illustrates the broader societal clash of civilizations between African Americans and European Americans in a racially segregated society. Clare's passing represents not only a personal choice but also a critique of the rigid racial boundaries that define American society. Her decision to cross the color line exposes the fluidity of racial categories and challenges the notion that race is a fixed and visible marker of identity. Clare's passing demonstrates how racial identity can be performed and adapted depending on societal expectations and individual needs, revealing the socially constructed nature of race.

By integrating Skinner's theory of operant conditioning with an exploration of the cultural and racial tensions in *Passing*, this analysis underscores the complex relationship between behavior, identity, and societal expectations. The novel provides a nuanced commentary on how external reinforcements and punishments influence individual decisions and personal identities in a racially divided world. Ultimately, *Passing* offers a profound exploration of the ongoing struggle for identity, belonging, and survival in a society defined by rigid racial hierarchies.

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