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Monstrous, Angelic, Abject: Clare Kendry and the Collapse of Boundaries in *Passing*

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the character of Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) through the lens of Julia Kristeva's abjection theory and the image of the Gothic *femme fatale*. By embodying contradictory archetypes – from the Angel in the House to the Tragic Mulatta – Clare ends by destabilizing rigid boundaries of race and gender. The analysis also aims to show how Clare's fluid identity exposes the fragility of Irene Redfield's constructed selfhood, revealing how precarious the nature of identity can be in a segregated society.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Nella Larsen, *Passing*, Abjection, Female Gothic, Racial Identity.

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Introduction: The Collapse of Boundaries

Nella Larsen's *Passing* is a complex narrative imbued with ambiguity and tension – a novel that ultimately leaves its readers unsettled. Within its pages, social, racial, and gender boundaries are constantly questioned and blurred. At the core of this ambiguity is Clare Kendry, a character seen entirely through Irene Redfield's perspective – a woman torn between her desires and fears.

Clare's nature is analysed through the frameworks of Marie Mulvey-Roberts, Barbara Creed, and Julia Kristeva. This analysis explores whether Clare's character ultimately reinforces or subverts the archetypal tropes she embodies, specifically the Gothic *Femme Fatale*, the Angel in the House, and the Tragic Mulatta.

An in-depth analysis of the dynamic between Clare and Irene is essential to fully comprehend Clare's persona, as the two women are inextricably intertwined. While Clare's identity becomes inherently more fluid, Irene's sense of security gradually disintegrates. Crucially, Irene's stability is one based on hypocrisy, lack of empathy, and rigid identity performance – the very flaws she projects onto Clare. This interplay not only highlights the complexity of Clare's character but also underscores the precarious nature of identity formation in a racially stratified society.

Oscillating between Tropes: *Femme Fatale* or Angel

Clare's ambivalent nature is evident from the novel's very peritext. Following the epigraph, the reader is immediately greeted by the heading: *Part One – Encounter*. In literature, terminology is rarely accidental, but the choice of this specific word seems especially purposeful. Nella Larsen did not opt for a less intimidating term, such as reunion, since – as the reader will discover later in the novel – the protagonist, Irene, should merely be re-joining with her long-lost friend Clare.

The Cambridge Dictionary's definition of the noun encounter encompasses a range of meanings, including: «to experience something, especially unpleasant» or «an occasion when people have sex»¹. These definitions align perfectly with the ambiguity and suspense underpinning Clare and Irene's relationship, a dynamic steeped in both fear and desire.

In fact, from the outset of the novel, Irene exhibits a negative yet mesmerized perception of Clare. For instance, when the protagonist first receives Clare's envelope, it is described as a «thin sly thing» (Larsen 1929: 3). The letter's personification reflects Irene's biases, transforming a mere object into an extension of her sender's persona – cunning, beguiling, and irresistible. Significantly, despite her reluctance, Irene decides to open the letter out of pure curiosity, foreshadowing how she will continue to interact with Clare despite her doubts.

Irene's conflicted emotional response to the letter mirrors her reaction in their first face-to-face encounter. This initial meeting takes place at the Drayton roof, where Irene, after nearly fainting, decides to go for tea. Here, the two women unexpectedly run into each other, and, from Irene's perspective, Clare emerges as both fascinating and unsettling. Irene does not immediately recognize Clare, describing her as «an attractive-looking woman [...] with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin» (Larsen 1929: 15-16). This vivid description conveys Clare's allure while also underscoring a homoerotic tension between the two women, particularly through Irene's focus on Clare's «full, red lips» (Larsen 1929: 33). Irene stares at Clare in a way reminiscent of how the protagonist of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* regards the female vampires, with «a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips» (Stoker 2024: 34). One could infer that Irene may be anticipating a similarly charged encounter as well.

This ambivalence can be further illuminated through Barbara Creed's concept of the Monstrous Feminine. According to the scholar, female monstrosity is rooted in patriarchal fears of the female body (Creed 2023: 31). Similarly, in *The Female Gothic Body*, Marie Mulvey-Roberts argues that «Monstrosity has been regarded as quintessential to the construction of femininity» (Mulvey-Roberts 2016: 106). Clare embodies this monstrous femininity as a *Femme Fatale* who presents a subtle yet undeniable threat. Her role as an unsettling presence is even more striking, especially considering that she is perceived as a monstrosity by Irene, a woman who is ostensibly her friend. Furthermore, Clare evokes the Gothic figure of the Gorgon or Medusa² due to her almost paralyzing eyes. As Clare's gaze takes on nearly supernatural qualities, Irene finds herself unable to look away: «For a very long time she had stood like that, silent and staring» (Larsen 1929: 6). Clare possesses the power to ensnare, suggesting that her whole persona holds a strange, captivating force: «she had for a short moment the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart» (Larsen 1929: 69) and again, «What strange languorous eyes she had!» (Larsen 1929: 18). These descriptions clearly evoke the Victorian Gothic tradition, where the *Femme Fatale* combines beauty with an eerie, otherworldly presence.

Crucially, in Greek mythology, Medusa's gaze petrifies her victims, rendering them powerless, in a state akin to death. In parallel, Clare's ambiguous stare drives Irene to a sense of helplessness. Clare's dangerous – and gorgon-like – persona is evident when she provocatively declares, «I'm not like you a bit? Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, 'Rene, I'm not safe» (Larsen 1929: 149). It remains unclear whom Clare refers to when she mentions anybody, whether it is herself, her husband John, or even Irene. This is one of many examples in which Clare's vagueness unsettles the protagonist, leaving her powerless and mirroring the fate of Medusa's victims.

However, the uncanny feelings Clare elicits arise not only from her alluring gaze but also from the latent threat she poses to Irene's life. The Drayton roof is a crucial space, as it is a place where only white people are allowed, and Irene, who is African American and passing as white, feels vulnerable. Clare's gaze triggers anxiety in Irene,

¹ The definitions provided were sourced from the online version of the Cambridge Dictionary; the full reference and URL are available in the bibliography.

² For further analysis, refer to Marie Mulvey-Roberts' *The Female Gothic Body* (2016).

leading her to question: «Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?» (Larsen 1929: 18).

This moment foreshadows the later revelation that Clare, too, is an African American passing as white, and it underscores the tension created by racial boundaries in a segregated society.

This tension is visually reinforced by Clare's ambiguous beauty. While the novel does not present literal vampirism, Clare's pale skin and red lips suggest a haunting, otherworldly presence. Yet, such pale skin allows Clare to play a dual role: she embodies both the seductress and the Angel in the House (Noddings 1989), the idealized image of the white, domestic woman. To her husband, John Bellew, Clare represents the epitome of whiteness and purity. The man, who is overtly racist, remains blissfully unaware that his wife is an African American woman passing as white until the novel's very end. However, his perception is so deeply ingrained that he decides to designate her with the tragic and racist pet name «Nig» (Larsen 1929: 66), a choice that is steeped in bitter irony: John uses a slur to mock the apparent impossibility of Clare being Black, intending to highlight her whiteness. Yet, he is unknowingly speaking the truth – he prides himself on his hatred of Black people, yet he has married one, proving that the racial boundaries he holds dear are entirely performative.

Clare's ability to play both the role of the Angel in the House and the Gothic Femme Fatale complicates the social construct of race and gender. Through her performances of these roles, Clare, like the female vampires of Victorian Gothic literature, challenges and subverts the traditional expectations of womanhood and femininity.

Performing Archetypes

However, the central question of whether Clare ratifies or disrupts the stereotypes associated with the Angel in the House and the Femme Fatale requires careful analysis. Historically, disruptive female figures in Victorian literature often meet tragic ends – either through death or some form of containment in asylums – reinforcing patriarchal norms. The inquiry is whether Clare's character conforms to this prevailing pattern or whether her death introduces a more intricate layer of complexity, especially given the sociocultural dimensions at play. As an African American woman who ends up being murdered, does Clare's death reinforce the Tragic Mulatta (Manganelli 2009) stereotype?

Upon closer examination, Clare appears to disrupt these stereotypical roles by performing them. As Lori Harrison-Kahan notes, Clare presents herself as «a sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days» (Harrison-Kahan 2002: 126). Yet other descriptors – such as «her slightly husky voice», which «held a dubious note» (Larsen 1929: 20) – reveal her performative femininity. These contradictions speak to her fluid, uncrystallized nature. Clare does not fully embody the Angel or the Femme Fatale; instead, she seems to be performing these roles, blurring their boundaries, occupying a space between them. This performativity aligns with Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, wherein an individual exists in a state of ambiguity and danger, constantly teetering between contrasting roles and identities.

Clare's abject nature is particularly evident in her position as a woman who occupies a liminal and dangerous space in society, as she is – like Irene – an African American woman passing as white. The distinction between the women lies in the fact that Clare consistently presents herself as white, thereby navigating a precarious, dangerous social landscape. Despite the risk, she seems to find pleasure in such a perilous state. Her capacity to incite danger and derive satisfaction from it is clearly demonstrated when she provokes Irene and their friend Gertrude during their initial encounter with John. Here, the man calls her Nig, causing ambiguity in whether he knew or not of his wife's passing: «“Did you hear what Jack called me?” “Yes,” Gertrude answered, laughing with a dutiful eagerness. Irene didn't speak.

Her gaze remained level on Clare's smiling face» (Larsen 1929: 67). Irene is lost, unable to act, and petrified once again by Clare's actions, who put at risk not only her friends but also herself. Clare's willingness to tease her friends, flirt with danger, and provoke John reflects her thrill in occupying liminal spaces.

Clare embraces uncertainty, using it as a means of asserting her identity and dismantling traditional racial boundaries, perfectly embodying Kristeva's definition of abjection, which is: «above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger» (Kristeva 2024: 9). This attitude destabilizes Irene's worldview, which is firmly rooted in middle-class respectability. She is deeply invested in maintaining her constructed identity, one that is tied to social, racial, and gender norms. This is evident in her interaction with her housemaid, Zulena, whom she reduces to «a small mahogany-coloured creature» (Larsen 1929: 94). This description reflects Irene's internalized racist perspective, dehumanizing Zulena by likening her to a mere object. This distance is further emphasized by Zulena's demeanour; her «discreetly regretful tone», due to her reluctance «to disturb her mistress at that hour, and for a stranger» (Larsen 1929: 114), implies an underlying tension between the women. Despite the brevity of the exchange, it reveals the relationships between them and Irene's reliance on hierarchy to maintain her sense of self.

Irene's need for control extends beyond her interactions with Zulena, manifesting also in the management of her family's life. While she accuses Clare of being «selfish, and cold, and hard» (Larsen 1929: 5), Irene mirrors these very traits. A particularly telling moment arises when Irene recalls her husband Brian's desire to move to Brazil – a place that promises freedom from the pervasive racism of the United States. The man is rightfully fascinated by the idea of escaping to a better country. Yet, Irene forces him and her family to stay in Harlem, declaring that «His duty was to her and to his boys» (Larsen 1929: 201). Irene's need for stability and adherence to societal norms outweighs the possibility of freedom, showcasing her reluctance to challenge the status quo. This resistance is a key element in her relationship with Clare, who, on the other hand, embraces fluidity and instability, continually destabilizing Irene's constructed identity.

Clare further disrupts Irene's worldview by rejecting her African American identity – «And it wasn't, as Irene knew, that Clare cared at all about the race or what was to become of it. She didn't» (Larsen 1929: 90). Irene resents Clare because of her lack of a proper selfhood, yet this resentment stems from the fact that Clare's fluidity highlights Irene's own anxieties regarding the fragility and socially constructed nature of racial identity. Clare remains a constant, haunting presence in Irene's life – «she had remained almost what she had always been, an attractive, somewhat lonely child – selfish, wilful, and disturbing» (Larsen 1929: 133). Indeed, Clare's existence perpetually destabilizes Irene's carefully constructed persona.

Clare's disruptiveness extends not only to race but also to gender roles, challenging even the idealization of motherhood – a concept heavily romanticized in Western culture. According to Kristeva (1985), maternity has traditionally been constructed as a utopian role, in which mothers are utterly devoted to their children. To be a mother implies becoming an angelic entity who lacks an authentic identity. Thus, for women, motherhood is an ambivalent and contradictory state – desired but regrettable – a burden and a sacrifice. Clare implicitly mocks the utopic notion of motherhood, further underscoring her abject nature. In fact, despite having a daughter, Margery, Clare demonstrates little interest in traditional maternal obligations. Furthermore, when Irene reminds Clare of her daughter, urging her to return to her family, Clare responds: «Children aren't everything [...] There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don't seem to suspect it» (Larsen 1929: 148). This attitude ridicules Irene's, whose identity seems to be shaped only by maternal devotion. Clare describes motherhood as «the cruellest thing in the world» (Larsen 1929: 121) and, while Irene initially agrees, she ultimately affirms a socially constructed view of motherhood, expressing that «We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children» (Larsen 1929: 122). However, Irene's devotion toward her children seems more rooted in her desire to conform to societal expectations rather than genuine affection; she is a mother because «she can't help it» (Larsen 1929: 148).

Their differing moral frameworks further amplify the tension. Irene, in contrast to Clare's apparent amorality, often seems to embody conventional moral values. Clare herself acknowledges this disparity: «I haven't any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do» (Larsen 1929: 149).

This admission underscores Clare's struggle to conform to societal norms. Irene's perception of her as a monster reflects her own need to distance herself from Clare's subversive qualities, perfectly embodying Kristeva's abject: «immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, [...] a friend who stabs you» (2024: 4).

Ultimately, the most significant moment of abjection occurs with Clare's death – a scene steeped in ambiguity. It takes place at a party hosted by Felise Freeland, where Clare is attending. Throughout the evening, Clare's presence increasingly unsettles Irene until it reaches its climax, and, suddenly, John Bellew arrives at the party and confronts his wife after acknowledging that she is an African American woman. The narrative is deliberately vague; it is unclear whether Irene pushes Clare toward an open window on the sixth floor – maybe to somewhat protect Clare from her husband – or whether Clare falls accidentally. If Irene is genuinely responsible for Clare's death, it is a desperate effort to eliminate the threat Clare poses to her life. This act would represent Irene's desire to return to the security of her socially constructed existence – one in which racial, societal, and gender norms remain unchallenged.

While Clare's tragic end aligns with the Tragic Mulatta trope, she is not merely a victim caught between two worlds. In a moment of vulnerability, Clare tells Irene: «“You're free. You're happy. And” with faint derision, “safe”» (Larsen 1929: 120). This specific description is crucial; the «faint derision» underscores the hypocrisy of a society that privileges safety over challenging the status quo, stability over fluidity. It suggests that for Clare, years of performing the Angel in the House have forced her to embrace danger as a means of survival, to find some raw truth in her performative life. Her death is the consequence of her defiance – her refusal to accept the boundaries imposed on race, gender, and identity. For Irene, however, Clare's presence represents the collapse of security, one that she wanted to maintain at any cost: «It hurt. It hurt like hell. But it didn't matter, if no one knew. If everything could go on as before. If the boys were safe. It did hurt. But it didn't matter» (Larsen 1929: 175). With Clare's death, the risk she embodies is eliminated, allowing Irene to retreat into her hollow stability.

Conclusions

Clare Kendry embodies and simultaneously disrupts contrasting tropes. Her allure and transgressive nature caused the collapse of Irene's constructed identity, exposing its fragility. Despite Clare's fate aligning with the Tragic Mulatta stereotype, viewing her through the lens of abjection reveals a character who refuses to be flattened into a binary category. She demonstrates that such constraints are mere constructs. Clare's haunting presence lingers, compelling readers to critically examine the societal norms within which the character of *Passing* – and human beings – must navigate.

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