THE ALLURE OF ANNIHILATION: DEATH DRIVE IN NELLA LARSEN'S PASSING

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ABSTRACT

Nella Larsen's Passing (1929) centers on Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, light-skinned African American women in the 1920s. Irene lives within Harlem's bourgeois society, while Clare passes as white, married to a racist white man unaware of her heritage. The novel, known for exploring racial identity, gender, and sexuality, culminates in Clare's ambiguous death. This analysis applies Freudian psychoanalysis, specifically "repetition compulsion" and "Death Drive," to understand Clare Kendry's self-destructive choices. It argues that Clare's reckless behaviors stem from a subconscious death wish, driven by childhood trauma, racial anxieties, and societal constraints. Her repeated exposure to danger, fueled by this internal drive, ultimately leads to her demise, offering a potential resolution to the mystery surrounding her death.

KEYWORDS

Nella Larsen, Passing, Race, Gender, Freudian psychoanalysis,

1. Introduction

Nella Larsen's Passing (1929) revolves tightly around the complex experiences of two light-skinned African American women, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry, in the 1920s America. Childhood friends who reunite as adults, these women embody starkly different responses to the racial restrictions of the time. Irene lives a comfortable life in Harlem, married to a black doctor, Brian, and immersed in the flourishing Harlem Renaissance. She can occasionally pass as "Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gypsy" for the sake of convenience but chooses to identify with and live within the black community [1, p.19]. Clare, on the other hand, has married a wealthy, bigoted white man, John Bellew, who is unaware of her racial heritage. As Irene is drawn into Clare's world, a complex relationship develops. Irene sees danger in Clare's deceit, yet she is simultaneously captivated by the allure of passing.

The story culminates in a tragic ending with Clare's death—which is open to multiple interpretations. Whether her death was an accident, suicide, or caused by Irene—due to her growing suspicion of her husband having an affair with Clare—we never know as the unreliable narrator, "Irene Redfield never afterward allowed herself to remember" [1, p. 209].

Any one of these scenarios seems to serve as a cautionary tale through which Larsen addresses the psychological burdens and tragic consequences of concealing one's true self and identity.

Though Passing has received considerable scholarly attention for its exploration of racial identity, gender, and sexuality, there remains a gap in the attention paid to the psychological reasons behind Clare Kendry's self-destructive choices and their implications. My paper explores the novel through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, with a special attention to the concepts of 'repetition compulsion' and 'death drive.' This Freudian approach provides an explanation for Clare's reckless behaviours and further could help solve the mystery of her death. I argue that Clare Kendry negotiates a deep-seated desire for self-destruction fuelled by her childhood trauma, her racial anxieties, and the constraints of a rigidly segregated society. Driven by a subconscious death wish, she repeatedly exposes herself to danger, which ultimately leads to her demise.

In the 1920 paper, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud confronted three critical phenomena that defied explanation by the pleasure principle alone. Firstly, those who experienced trauma, as in war neuroses, often found themselves compelled to repeat the traumatic event through dreams. Freud notices that dreams and fantasies in traumatic patients have the characteristic of "repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident" [2, p. 13]. This contradicts the expected desire for pleasure as explained by the pleasure principle. Secondly, in children's play, Freud questioned the purpose of reenacting distressing experiences such as the disappearances of loved ones. He posits, "How then does his repetition of this distressing experience as a game fit in with the pleasure principle?" [2, p. 15]. Lastly, in his clinical work, he noted patients' tendency to relive repressed pain rather than simply remembering it and the "compulsion of destiny" that plagued specific individuals' relationships [2, p. 23]. This suggested a powerful force that overrides the desire for pleasure and fulfilment in his well-formulated pleasure principle.

Freud sought to explain this compulsion to repeat by positing a force within the psyche more "primitive" and "instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides" [2, p. 23]. His speculation led him to a profound assertion, "an urge in organic life to restore an earlier state of things," specifically, the inorganic state from which life originated [2, p. 36]. From this, he deduced his concept of the death drive, the "pressure towards death," which ultimately aims to dissolve the organism and counterbalance Eros's unifying, life-promoting energy [2, p. 44]. The death drive is, therefore, an innate, self-destructive force whose "function is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death" [2, p. 39].

While seeking to confirm this theory with concepts like primary masochism, Freud openly acknowledged the speculative nature of this construct, calling it "the whole of our artificial structure of hypotheses" [2, p. 60].

However, since Literature mirrors the depths of human experience and our underlying psychological complications, it offers a great arena to examine Freud's theory. In analysing characters like Clare Kendry from Larsen's Passing, we find a fascinating illustration of the death drive in action. Her story allows us to see forces at work manifesting themselves through the death drive and repetition compulsion. Passing lends literary weight to Freud's controversial hypotheses by showing how the repetition of hazardous behaviours costs Clare her well-being and survival.

Traces of repetition compulsion and self-destructive behaviours are integral to Clare Kendry's characterization. Light-skinned enough to pass as white in the 1920s, Clare lives an extravagant life with her racist husband, John Bellew, who remains unaware of his wife's racial ancestry till the end of the narrative. Of Carle's childhood and her parents, we know very little, but enough to prove the existence of severe psychological damages she received at a relatively young age. Her grandfather was white. Her father was the product of her grandfather's dishonourable relationship with a black woman. Somewhere along the way there had been money, but her grandfather squandered it.

Irene gives us an account of what Clare's father, Bob Kendry was like by describing how she remembers Clare as "a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part. Ineffectual. Sometimes he did manage to reach her" [1, p. 4]. Bob Kendry had gone to college but had somehow wound up a janitor, and a very unprofitable one at that. There is no mention of how or when Clare's mother passed away. We just know that she "would have run away if she hadn't died," which suggests that it happened in Clare's childhood before her father got killed [1, p. 27].

Irene later remembers the day that Clare's father was brough home, dead. A drunkard janitor, Bob Kendry had apparently died in "a silly saloon-fight" [1, p. 5]. Clare, who was barely fifteen at the time, had just stood there with "her thin arms folded across her narrow chest, staring down at the familiar pasty-white face of her parent with a sort of disdain in her slanting black eyes" [1, p.6]. She then turned and vanished through the door and never came back to her childhood house again.

Thus, Clare's reaction to her father's death, marked by disdain rather than grief, suggests deeply repressed emotions stemming from the abuse she suffered. Her initial outburst, followed by her storming out of the room and never coming back, could be seen as a defence mechanism, shielding the young Clare from overwhelming feelings in the face of his sudden and violent removal. Moreover, the event marks a turning point; it grants her freedom from an abusive home and simultaneously thrusts her into a new world.

The early death of her father moved her away from the predominantly black neighbourhood in Chicago and left her upbringing in the hands of her father's aunts, who forbade her from revealing her race to others. Once she reunites with Irene, we are informed of how when she was in Aunt Grace and Aunt Edna's custody, she had to suppress her past and conceal her race. In her words, her white aunts "didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced—ruined, they called It—a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn't forgive the tarbrush. They forbade [her] to mention Negroes to the neighbours, or even to mention the south side" [1, p. 41].

However, Clare states that the omission was of great value to her when the chance to get away came. When her husband, then a schoolboy acquaintance of a neighbour, "turned up from South America with untold gold, there was no one to tell him that [Clare] was coloured" [1, p. 42].

By the time she eloped with her husband at eighteen, she had cut ties with the south side and gradually integrated herself into the social circles that were the exclusive domain of the upper class in the 1920s. She, therefore, transported herself by appropriating a white identity, which turned her into the wife of a prosperous upper-class white man living an opulent lifestyle. Moving the colour line, she gained access to a lifestyle that had otherwise been closed off to her, albeit at a price. Indeed, this appropriation extended beyond mere racial concealment, encompassing a meticulous cultivation of social presentation. This strategic appropriation extended far beyond mere racial concealment; it involved a meticulous cultivation of social presentation. Larsen's novel, in fact, posits that the "fabrication of taste appropriate to the prevailing social standard could mask and transcend racial boundaries" [3, p. 65]. Thus, Clare's ability to construct a "carefully crafted persona as an 'outer shell'" became an essential performance for her survival and integration into white elite society, thereby further entangling her psychological state with the profound demands of her chosen path and contributing to the internal conflict driving her self-destructive behaviours [3, p. 65].

This glimpse into Clare's childhood paints a picture of a traumatic past marked by violence and loss. The death of her mother at a young age can be seen as a primal loss, a disruption to the security and comfort a child craves. Freud believed such experiences could be repressed but still exert a powerful influence on adult behaviour. Furthermore, the physical and verbal abuse from her father likely instilled fear and a sense of powerlessness in Clare. Her lifestyle could be understood within the context of this trauma and Freud's concept of 'traumatic neurosis,' which can lead to hysterical and hazardous behavioural patterns.

The first account of Clare's tendency to behave in a dangerous, self-destructive manner could be detected in her childhood when, determining to wear a new dress to her Sunday school's picnic, she took a portion of the dollar that was her weekly wage "in spite of certain un-pleasantness and possible danger" [1, p. 5]. Thus, "stepping always on the edge of danger," Clare continued exhibiting similar behaviour patterns in her adulthood [1, p. 3].

When Irene first met her after twelve years in Drayton Hotel in Chicago, Clare was accompanied by a man who clearly was not her husband. Once they met and chatted, Clare insisted that Irene should go and have tea with her and her husband, John. Despite her initial reluctance, Irene finally accepts to visit them a few days later in their hotel room. There, she learns how vehemently racist Clare's husband is. John openly expresses his hatred toward black people by clearly stating that he hates Negroes. He goes on about how "they give [him] the creeps" and calls them "the black scrimy devils" [1, p. 69]. When Irene asks him if he has known any black people in his life, he arrogantly responds, "Thank the Lord, no! And never expect to! [But] I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And […] worse" ([1, p.70].

This encounter exposes Irene, and by extension the reader, to the precariousness of Clare's choices. Not only has Clare concealed her racial background from her virulently racist husband, but she has also invited her friends, Irene, and Gertrude, to meet him. While both friends are light skinned enough to potentially pass as white, this does not eliminate the

significant risk involved. Introducing them to her husband could jeopardize not only Clare's carefully constructed life but also the safety of her friends.

As the narrative develops, Clare repeats her self-destructive behaviours by insisting on visiting Irene's black friends and acquaintances in Harlem, New York. While her husband, "an international banking agent," travels for business, Clare finds enormous opportunities to mingle with black people. One day, she unexpectedly shows up at Irene's house after Irene has refused to respond to her letters. There, Irene confronts her and warns her about how unsafe and unwise it is for her to be seen with black people, to which Clare responds, "Damn being safe!" [1, p. 118]. Irene then attempts to bring to Clare's attention that her coming back is "a dangerous business" given her husband's attitude and is a "selfish whim" and "an unnecessary risk," not only to Clare but to her daughter Margery [1, p. 118]. All her attempts fail as Clare refuses to acknowledge the potential risks and dangers caused by her acts and concludes, "I'm used to risks. And this isn't such a big one as you're trying to make it" [1, p. 121].

Thus, Clare gradually becomes a constant visitor to Harlem and appears repeatedly at tea parties and the Negro Welfare League Dance, which Irene hosts. Clare's warm and flirtatious behaviours earn her popularity among black people, who often do not realize she is passing. In Irene's view, Clare retained her ability "to secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others" [1, p. 132].

While readers might attribute Clare's total lack of consideration for her actions and her selfish blindness to the risk she is causing to her false sense of security, a psychoanalytical lens would shed light on how Clare's childhood traumatic experiences pushed her toward exhibiting self-damaging behaviours.

Clare's relationship with her father, the absence of her mother, and her aunts' rigid insistence on hiding her background result in a deep sense of self-loathing and destructive tendencies. To escape this condition, she runs away with a white boy, who turns out to be highly racist—an escape route that provides Clare with a lavish lifestyle but exposes her to the unimaginable risk that ultimately claims her life.

Her compulsive behaviours, which defy logic and self-preservation, align with Freud's idea of the repetition compulsion overriding the pleasure principle. Irene's warnings about safety fall on deaf ears because the pull towards her dangerous choices seem to outweigh any potential dangers. Clare's disregard for self-preservation, potentially reflects an unconscious death drive. Irene's warnings resonate with the reality principle, the part of the psyche that seeks safety and security. However, Clare's compulsive behaviour suggests a more powerful force at play, one that compels her to revisit the Black world she had previously tried to escape. This repetitive, risky behaviour can be seen as a way of working through unresolved trauma or a self-destructive yearning for a lost part of herself.

One may argue, and no doubt Larsen intended to show, how racial discrimination and biases make life exceptionally painful for the 'tragic mulatto' who falls for the allure of passing. What is important here is that racism does not simply affect Clare's conscious life. She freely attends parties and events in both Harlem and predominantly white neighbourhoods without any

disturbance. Racism becomes a part of Clare's unconscious because her father's aunts, her father, and her husband consciously and unconsciously reflect the racist values of the culture onto her from her early moments of life. Her successive and conscious experiences with trauma and racial suppression further worsen the unconscious masochism of her ego and result in self-destructive behaviours. She tries to protect herself from a racist society by marrying into it. This decision could be viewed as her means to social uplift and also her tendency to experience some sadomasochistic pleasure. By doing so, she unconsciously seeks self-effacement. To compensate for this act of erasing her identity and past, she pursues narcissistic approval from black people. Thus, she falls victim to a vicious circle, compulsively repeating the kind of behaviour that would plunge her increasingly into tragedy. The longer she is married to John, the more she is denying her own racial identity and, hence, the more approval she needs from the black community. Asking for their attention and approval, she keeps exposing herself to the risk of joining their gatherings, which constantly puts her in a compromising position and ultimately claims her life.

The Freudian concept of repetition compulsion can further help us understand what truly happened to Clare. As stated earlier in the paper, Larsen deliberately avoids showing whether Clare falls, jumps, or is pushed out of the window by Irene because she suspects her husband is having an affair with Clare. Multiple scholarly articles have discussed the story's ending and how each possible scenario could potentially affect our reading of the novel and our interpretation of the characters' behaviours. Of all the scholars who have written about the novel, Claudia Tate's article "Nella Larsen's Passing, A Problem of Interpretation," in which she examines the three possibilities, has been the most cited. While asserting that Passing's conclusion defies solution, she points to how "few address the psychological dimension of Larsen's work," arguing that the novel needs to be treated as "a romance of psychological intrigue" [4, p. 601]. Inspired by her interpretation and applying Freud's hypotheses, I propose that the possibility of suicide is something worth re-examination since it could be seen as Clare's tendency to repeat a specific behaviour in the face of tragedy.

Early in the novel, the scene depicting Clare's reaction to her father's death sets an alarming precedent for her future choices. Once her father's body is brough home, "She glanced quickly about the bare room, taking everyone in, even the two policemen, in a sharp look of flashing scorn. And, in the next instant, she had turned and vanished through the door" [1, p. 4]. Faced with the raw pain of her father's death and the uncertain future it presents, Clare chooses to storm out, refusing to confront the emotional turmoil. This pattern of avoidance becomes tragically relevant in the novel's final scene, where Clare finds out that her secret has been revealed to her husband.

Before the final scene we understand that, while out with her friend Felise, Irene has unexpectedly run into John. John greets Irene, but upon noticing Felise, he seems to recognize them as Black. Fearing for Clare's secret life, Irene pretends she does not know John. Later Clare and Irene attend a party at their friend's apartment where they are interrupted by the angry John looking for Clare. He yells racial slurs while "his voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain" [1, p. 208]. What happens next remains ambiguous. "One

moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" [1, p. 208]. Whether Clare fell, committed suicide, or was pushed off the window by Irene is never revealed in the novel. All we know is that the authorities who showed up to investigate the scene pronounced it as "death by misadventure" [1, p. 216].

Clare's final act in the novel tragically echoes her earlier response to emotional turmoil-a chilling disappearance. Distraught by the potential consequences of John discovering her racial background, she chooses to vanish, quite possibly by suicide. This pattern of retreat has become her desperate strategy for navigating painful situations. Earlier, upon confronting her father's death, she stormed out of the house, refusing to engage with the grief and uncertainty it brought. Similarly, when she met John, she left behind her life on the South Side and her Black heritage. Now, faced with the potential destruction of her constructed life, she chooses the ultimate escape-vanishing from existence.

Nella Larsen's Passing, thus, explores the themes of identity, social constraints, and the destructive power of repressed trauma. Examining Clare through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly the concepts of 'repetition compulsion' and the 'death drive,' reveals the depth of her self-destructive tendencies. The insights gleaned from examining Clare's psyche are not limited to Passing alone.

This Freudian framework offers a potent tool for analysing other literary characters and narratives that explore the psychological burdens of dealing with rigid social structures, racial oppression, gendered expectations, or the lingering effects of childhood trauma. Moreover, while this paper focused on Freudian psychoanalysis, future research could expand on these foundations by incorporating other psychoanalytic perspectives, such as Jungian archetypes, Lacanian theories of desire and the Symbolic Order, or object relations theory, to further unpack the complexities of character motivation and psychological conflict in Passing. Beyond psychoanalysis, critical race theory, intersectionality, postcolonial studies, or even sociological and historical approaches could provide complementary lenses, enriching our understanding of how external societal pressures deeply internalize and shape individual psychology. Comparative studies could link Passing with other narratives exploring racial identity, gendered experience, or psychological trauma—such as Charles W. Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars, Brit Bennett's The Vanishing Half, or Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye—to reveal broader patterns in the human response to social coercion and personal trauma.

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