

New Horizons in English Studies 9/2024

LITERATURE



Dagmar Kylarová

UNIVERSITY OF OSTRAVA, CZECH REPUBLIC
DAGMAR.KYLAROVA@SEZNAM.CZ
[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0009-0003-2964-079X](https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2964-079X)

Nella Larsen's *Passing* in the 21st Century: A Queer Perspective on the Novella and Its Movie Adaptation¹

Abstract. The article identifies and analyzes moments of queer passing in Nella Larsen's novella *Passing* (1929) and its movie adaptation *Passing* (2021). The focus of the article is on the two main characters, Clare and Irene, whose queer passing is examined from the point of view of escaping the boundaries and restrictions of heterosexually normative spaces. In particular, the paper emphasizes how the two women manipulate and use their appearance, social status, and private relationships to slip out of normative spaces and construct new, queer spaces. In this way, the article highlights the multidimensionality of passing and the queering of boundaries it enables.

Keywords: queer identity, queer love, sexual passing, homoeroticism

1. Introduction

In this article, I examine the queerness and queer passing of the attraction of Irene and Clare from the *Passing* story. While many believe Irene and Clare's attraction is only sexual, I aim to show that the physical is only the first layer of what the attraction covers as Clare's feelings towards Irene and vice versa go beyond the physical. Their attraction leads to the need to queer passing and hiding the queer in them.

¹ This text is a result of the project SGS01/FF/2022 "Harlem Renaissance in the 21st century" supported by the internal grant scheme of the University of Ostrava

Regarding the thematic layout of this article, in the first part, the focus is on the novella as an original text written by Nella Larsen in 1929. Since Larsen could not explicitly write about same sex attraction, nor same sex relationship – because of censorship in her times, the director of the movie finally gives her space to do so. That's why this piece is so unique and so important even nowadays – because it shows everything Larsen had to hide in her book. The second part of this article, therefore, focuses on Rebecca Hall's monochrome movie adaptation of *Passing*, released in 2021. In both parts, I focus on the above-mentioned and compare the two works. Since the movie adaptation is richer when it comes to the queer topic and the director gave a lot of space to queer identity, I mainly focus on these queered spaces. I examine the behavior of Clare and Irene in the heteronormative spaces when they are together in it, but also when they are in solitude there. I suggest that the heteronormative space is queered by the two mainly by their gaze, fantasies about each other, and physical contact.

I would like to continue with my analysis and build on the existing findings of Jordan H. Landry and Judith Butler, who have argued that the two women desire each other because of their longing to live according to their respective friends' life standards. Landry and Butler believe that whiteness and blackness play an essential role in the queer love of Clare and Irene. Both believe that the desire to be part of the community the other is part of is the reason Clare and Irene are drawn to each other. Landry and Butler discuss that Clare wants to have a better relationship with African Americans and wishes to be an active member of the African American community. Irene wants the exact opposite. She wants to look whiter and be better integrated into the white community. When Clare and Irene are with each other, it seems the two are closer to their wishes.

Taking behavioral characteristics into consideration, Freud's theory of melancholia is a useful tool to apply to understand the mental state of both Clare and Irene. As Davis argues (31), Irene absorbs the qualities of Clare and vice versa.

Throughout the whole story, and especially in the movie adaptation, Clare and Irene are constantly exposed to ideas of the physical idealization of their female bodies and normative sexual identities. They do not want to cross the heteronormative frontier – both heterosexual and white – because they do not want to be judged and potentially punished by others, especially by the members of the African American community. They do not want to be discriminated against because of their queer identity, and neither of them wants to be seen as inferior because of their queerness.

Both the story and this article end with the topic of death. At the end of the *Passing* story, Clare dies. Since her fall from the window may have a different cause in the movie than in the book, I also focus on aspects that may clarify her death, or at least bring ideas of why she passes away and complete the queer love story of these two mixed-raced women.

2. Analysis of the Novella and Its Movie Adaptation

Seeing *Passing* as a queer love story between two women is not merely optional. Besides Irene and Clare's relationship, Larsen also provides queer leads in her book. Among these belong, for example, Countee Cullen's poem at the beginning of the story. Countee Cullen was queer African American poet, who might be picked by the author to nicely open the queer topic in the novella. Other leads might be the names of two artists who are mentioned at the Freelands party: Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters, who were known to be bisexual (Strong 16; Seidman 738-740). By starting the story with mentions of queer artists, Larsen might want to somehow give hints that her story will have queer elements as well. Then, the reader is prepared to think of queerness if they focus on it while reading the book. Also, by mentioning Cullen, Baker, and Waters, Larsen celebrates a delicate topic which is black queer identity.

Larsen uses a third-person omniscient narrator in the story. But the main character, Irene, is shaped through direct dialogues. She does not explain some of the situations, nor does she continue with the storytelling, when there is a queer anxious situation (Lettelier 3-7). She censors herself when she is about to sound queer. An example might be when the two meet in the Drayton Hotel restaurant, and while they talk, Irene thinks to herself, "She's really almost too good-looking. It's hardly any wonder that she-" (33) and does not finish the sentence. In this particular situation, Irene might have revealed her romantic attachment to Clare if she had said this out loud. But because the author did not want it to be explicit about the lesbian relationship between Irene and Clare, she stops Irene every time she thinks or talks about Clare as her lover. The not-mentioned space is therefore perceived as queer and might be intentionally queered by the author.

3. Queerness: Irene and Clare's Sexuality and Their Relationship

The presence of queerness in the novella has been questioned by many scholars. While in the book, the hints of queer love are oblique and hidden between the lines, in the movie the queer love is much more explicit. In the book, Irene's answers to Clare's affectionate questions are negative; for example, when Clare asks Irene, "you mean you don't want me, 'Rene?'" Irene responds to this: "no, Clare, it's not that" (117). By such an answer, Irene admits her desire for Clare. Negation should be read as positive by the reader. In the book, the two speak less frequently about their feelings and relationships in comparison with the movie. In the movie, the two are vocal about their feelings towards each other. Clare never hesitates to express how much she adores Irene: "I've always admired you though" (00:56:42-00:56:44). She also describes Irene as "always so calm and beautiful in the face of everything" (00:56:46-00:56:50). Along with verbal expressions of admiration, these two women also manifest their love non-verbally in the movie, through acts of caring. It is particularly

Irene who shows concern for Clare and tries to comfort her. She seems to always want to be by Clare's side, to hold her and support her when Clare is troubled. Even small gestures, like covering Clare's legs with a blanket while sitting outside (00:56:15), prove that Irene cares about Clare more than just being a friend. In the movie, there is no narrator of the story, so every non-verbal act by the two plays an important role in revealing queerness. By contrast, in the novella, only the narrator can help reveal queerness in the story.

By refusing to explain Irene's actions, the narrator indicates how delicate it used to be to talk openly about passing for heterosexuals in the 1920s (Butler 169). This means that if the narrator acknowledges Irene's passing for heterosexual, this thereby acknowledges her queer identity and sometimes even supports it by leaving some questions in the text unanswered.

To better understand Larsen's decision not to be explicit about queer life, the social context of the era should be taken into consideration. The life of the two queer women in 1920s society was not easy. The safety that Irene and Clare's husbands provide, both from the financial and social point of view, is not easy to leave behind to be with a loved one; if they do so, they may lose a degree of comfort and social recognition (Letellier 10-13). Passing is, therefore done on two levels by both Clare and Irene. The first level is racial (passing for White), and the second is sexual (passing for heterosexual, via their husbands). Due to the normativity of the society Irene and Clare are part of, neither of them has many options for expressing their feelings to the other. If they want to do so, they must do it in a way no one else notices. They need to create their queer space carefully and in secret. The female gaze is one of the ways of creating this space for themselves while remaining concealed from the sight of others. In the novella, the female gaze is described from Irene's point of view. She quite openly adores Clare many times in the story. She evaluates Clare as follows:

Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, was sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft luster. And the eyes were magnificent! dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them (45)

She also sees "[t]he soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry" (210).

In the movie adaptation, the female gaze is present even more strongly than in the novella, and it is enhanced through camera shots, zooms, and camera movements. For a viewer, the camera is often Irene's eyes. When looking at Clare, Irene comments on her body parts. Probably the queerest suspicious moment is when Irene thinks of Clare's lips. She thinks they are sweet, but how does she know what they taste like. That might be the question. She used to meet Clare when they were young, and the

two did not see each other till they met in the Drayton Hotel. Therefore, Irene's comments on Clare's lips make one question whether the two have ever kissed each other on the lips. Such a gap in the narration has again been left without explanation to create a queer space. The evaluation of Clare's face and hair in terms of its color proves that Irene cares about Clare's White features, which help Irene to achieve closeness to the White community via Clare (Butler). The contrasting words used for the description of Clare's eyes (arresting and dreaming) suggest how Irene is attracted to both sides of Clare – to her being serious in some situations and kind, pleasant, and peaceful in others.

4. Irene's Marriage and Brian's Sexuality

In the book and movie, not much is said about Clare's husband, John Bellew, and his sexual identity seems to be heterosexual. However, the heterosexual identity of Irene's husband might be questioned. Brian does not love Irene passionately. Their marriage is functional but without passion or desire. It seems they are together just because having a family belongs to the social norm of the time. Any deviation from this normativity would be sharply criticized by contemporary society, especially when it comes to African American families. If the demands of normativity placed on African Americans and whites are to be compared, the noose of normativity tightens and suffocates African Americans much more than it does Whites (Glick and Golden). An incomplete family or a problematic family situation – Including a queer parent or both – would cause more harm for an African American family than for a White one. Therefore, Irene and Brian try to live with each other, or rather next to each other in peace, so that they are as little touchable as possible as a family.

Overall, everything that could be romantic in Irene and Brian's marriage is very sterile. As mentioned above, in the novella, the two for example do not share a bed: "He slept in his room next to hers at night. But he was remote and inaccessible. No use pretending that he was happy, that things were the same as they had always been. He wasn't and they weren't" (179). They might like each other, and they might cooperate well in their family space, but they do not want to be intimate with each other.

Such a perception of their relationship could also lead one to think about Brian's sexuality, and it could indicate that both might be sexually passing, as Landry suggests. Blackmer digs deeper into this issue, taking into consideration the hypothesis that Irene projects her feelings towards Clare via Brian. According to Blackmer, Irene does not feel love for Clare through Brian physically, but rather mentally. Irene does not make love with Brian, but she talks to him about her and behaves as if Clare lived with them. Irene does not value Brian as an individual. To her, Brian is only an intermediary, while Clare is omnipresent in their household (52).

When it comes to her psychological love projection, Irene does that quite sufficiently via Brian, though less in the novella than in its movie. In the novella, Irene

speaks of Clare with Brian very often, but in the movie, she even imagines seeking Clare when she is looking at Brian. The movie highlights this; at some points, Irene does not seem to be able to distinguish between Brian and Clare at all. For her, they become one person. It seems that Brian is an object who works as a supplement to Clare in Irene's household. That is the only way Irene can survive without Clare – that she projects Clare in Brian – because the two women cannot live together. They cannot build their household; they cannot be in a romantic relationship.

In the movie, Irene enters the phase of not being able to distinguish between Brian and Clare when lying in her bed in a state of mental breakdown. When Brian comes into the room, for a second, Irene sees Clare instead of him. Clare is like Irene's shadow. She is a part of Irene; she is an integral part of her being. I would argue that Irene's love projection through her husband could represent a way of maintaining the heterosexual status which she needs to retain due to the heteronormative society. She needs to maintain her heterosexual status to save her face and to protect her family from social condemnation. Also, Irene is very proud of her marriage. She treats her marriage and her husband like two trophies needed to fit into the norm. She is happy she is married and is also happy about what social class she belongs to mainly thanks to her husband, a successful man – she goes to parties, talks to well-known people, and does not have to work. In general, she does not have to worry about herself because she lives a life in comfort – her queer affinity for Clare, however, threatens all of that.

5. Race and Behavior

Irene and Clare's race and behavioral characteristics should be taken into consideration to better understand the possible reasons why Irene and Clare are drawn to each other. Landry offers two other hypotheses for queer love. The first is that the behavior of Clare and Irene is influenced by their "official to society" male partners' perception of racial identity: Brian Redfield hates whites because of how they treat African Americans, and John Bellew is a racist who hates African Americans. The hatred of the men towards another race leads to Irene trying to be as proud as possible of her racial origin, while it leads Clare to want to be as white-looking as possible. Because Irene and Clare lack self-love, and it appears to them that the only way they can gain it is when they appreciate the values of the other: Clare appreciates Irene's pride in her African American identity, and Irene appreciates Clare for not being afraid to frequently pass for White, not being afraid to stand up for herself, and thus being freer in her life.

The second hypothesis is that Irene's darkish skin tone and black-colored hair, an appearance that places her closer to the African American community than Clare, offers Clare a path to being a part of that community too, via Irene (Landry 37-39). Butler, too, explores the idea of a person's appearance determining whether they belong to a certain community. She suggests that not only does Clare use Irene to be closer to the African American community, but Irene also uses Clare for a similar reason

(Butler 276). Davis takes into consideration the characteristics each character has or wants to have. He explains the behavior of the two women considering Freud's melancholia theory, highlighting how Clare helps Irene to "break away from the norm" (30), a characteristic Irene does not possess. The main idea in Freud's melancholia theory is the absorption of the qualities of one person into another person; Irene absorbs the qualities of Clare and vice versa (Davis 31). I would say that the two are not drawn to each other only because of the qualities the other has, as Freud's theory suggests, but also because they understand each other best. Both are women, both are queer and both of them are of mixed origin. I think that their lives are similar in certain aspects and that is why they also want to be together, because of familiarity. Familiarity that provides safe space for both.

The movie highlights this mirroring of Irene and Clare quite literally – via mirrors. In the mirrors, Irene sees what she wants to see and who she wants to be. At one point, when she prepares herself and sits in front of a mirror in her bedroom, Clare enters the room and stands behind her, but Irene does not initially recognize her. At first glance, Irene sees herself in the mirror, not Clare. Irene's inability to see Clare and herself as two different people at certain moments shows how Irene has a part of Clare inside her.

6. Female Gaze, Fantasizing, and Touching

One of the most powerful female gazes takes place in the restaurant of the Drayton Hotel, where the two reunite after years apart. The tension with which one stares at the other shows not only the tension of the unknown – the two women not recognizing each other – but also the tension of lust. Irene observes Clare with incredible concentration. While watching Clare's legs, Irene looks like she is slowly consuming her, piece by piece. It seems as if Irene has come to the restaurant to look at Clare and enjoy Clare's body rather than the tea she ordered. Suddenly, it seems as if time has stopped, and only Irene and the beautiful blonde are sitting there in the restaurant. A young couple is sitting at the table next to Irene, whispering lovingly into each other's ears the whole time, as well as kissing. The camera pauses at this table for a moment, right when Irene watches Clare. At this moment, the camera presents Irene's view. Irene pauses at the young couple for a while before her eyes return to Clare. I would argue that the connection Irene makes between the relationship of two people at the next table and the connection of some kind between her and Clare is not coincidental. On the contrary, it highlights how much Irene desires the woman sitting in front of her. Also, this sort of comparison between the young couple and Irene and Clare suggests Irene's lust for Clare, and even maybe her wish to be as close to her as the young man is close to the young woman.

At some moments, Irene seems to be afraid of being revealed as queer. To remain hidden, she lowers her head so that her hat covers part of her face. Irene does this so that nobody will recognize she is passing for White in a Whites-only restaurant, and

to hide her queer gaze from others. As soon as Clare's husband passes her, she stares at Clare again. When Clare notices her gaze, the camera and Irene's eyes stop, and they both look straight into Clare's eyes. In this scene, the viewer can recall the passage from the novella about Clare's dreaming and arresting eyes. Irene is immersed in them. This focus on the eyes appears many times in the movie. Camera shots that are very close to Clare's face represent Irene's point of view when she loses herself in Clare's eyes, and they may also show how Clare's eyes influence Irene's behavior.

The Drayton Hotel scene is very important for an early realization of queerness in the movie. The fact that Irene is alone, without her husband and children, and that she immediately notices this beautiful woman shows how free she is without Brian, even though it is only for a few hours. It seems that being alone in the city center enables her to connect with who she is, including her sexual identity and her observation of women. After Clare notices Irene's gaze in the hotel, Irene's passion turns to shame at her examination of Clare's body. It is as if she wants to leap back into normative reality. After Clare comes to Irene's table, the two women flirt. Throughout the movie, Clare can be caught flirting not only with Irene but also with many other people. It appears that she always wants the attention she did not receive from her parents. During one of their conversations, Clare tells Irene how she hoped she would meet her in New York City. She adds that she thinks of her often. Clare continues "And now you're here", and while saying this, Clare takes Irene's hand. Even though Irene's thoughts are not mentioned in the hotel scene when Irene observes Clare, such a heavy female gaze could lead her to fantasize about Clare. The female gaze is, therefore, quite close to the women's fantasizing about each other, and it sometimes leads to physical touching.

The female gaze is something Irene cannot stop herself from if Clare is around. The only way she can prevent the female gaze is by not being in touch with Clare. At the beginning of the movie, Irene tries not to meet Clare again. She stays out of touch and does not reply to her letters. However, when Clare shows up at her house and Irene looks into her eyes, she softens. Irene is suddenly happy that Clare is with her and even apologizes for not talking to Clare and for not being there for her. Such a significant change in behavior shows how Irene tries to avoid queerness and succeeds when Clare is not around. However, every time Clare shows up, Irene falls for her again.

When Irene is with Clare, immersed in love for her, her awareness of her queerness does not bother her; what matters is Clare's happiness and comfort. In the end, Irene always hopes she will stay at their house for a little while. Irene wants to be close to Clare, to be intimate with her. This cycle is repeated after Clare's departure, but over time Irene desires to see Clare more and more often, proving her inability to escape from her queer identity. When Irene succeeds in suppressing her queerness, Clare shows up and reminds her of what she really wants. Then, after Clare's departure, Irene again has space to suppress everything connected with her love for Clare. She can smother the queerness in herself like a fire that would leave only dust, yet she longs for Clare and wishes Clare would appear again.

Fantasizing and sometimes even touching are almost as frequent in the movie as the female gaze. The most significant scene of fantasizing and touching is at the ball in Harlem, where Irene, Brian, and Clare are enjoying the evening. While Clare is on the dance floor, Irene cannot stop herself from staring at her. Observing her every move and ignoring the men who are dancing with Clare, Irene imagines herself to be the person who holds Clare and moves with her. While watching Clare's every step, Irene confesses to her male friend, Hugh, that Clare was passing for others besides White – meaning queer. Irene says “We’re all of us passing for something or other. Aren’t we?”. The word “other” is not insignificant, as Irene uses it to admit her own otherness.

Otherness is an omnipresent phenomenon. Derrida's philosophy, as is described in Calitz's work, explains otherness as a state when “the dominance of one element is dependent on the exclusion of its opposite”. To this explanation, it is added that “‘Other’ relies on an artificial distinction to maintain the superiority of the ‘one’” (17). In other words, otherness is not a natural phenomenon; on the contrary, it has been socially constructed. After Clare comes to their table to take a break from the dancing, Irene lays her eyes on her bare back. The back is an intimate part of the body. Irene enjoys observing Clare's back, and she might be fantasizing about it. In this scene, Irene cannot resist touching Clare in some way, but in public, being a married closeted woman, she cannot do anything more than hold Clare's hand. With passion, she takes Clare's hand, looks into her eyes, and smiles. Clare seems to be confused, but she leaves her hand in Irene's. It seems that by taking Clare's hand, Irene wanted to assure herself that Clare was there with her and that she (and not only the men Clare danced with) could hold her too. After Brian approaches the women with a friend, Clare lets Irene's hand go so no one will see them.

The queer space here is carefully created by the women with their gaze and touch. While other men admire them at the ball, they admire each other. These women find a gap in normativity, and they create a space that belongs only to them. They steal moments exclusively for themselves. Holding each other's hands, they are together in a queer space, and when they let go of each other's hands, they are back in the heteronormative reality.

7. Mirrors and Mirroring

Mirrors play a crucial role in both the novella and the movie. Irene sees in them what she wants to see, who she wants to see, and who she would like to be. As Dean argues, mirrors reflect Irene's inner world (101). I would suggest that it is not only mirrors that reveal Irene's real self but also Clare's body. Irene's female gaze and admiration of Clare's body are something so natural to Clare that she does it very often without even realizing it. Especially in the movie. While staring at Clare, Irene might think of who she really is, what she wants, and how the whole relationship between the two looks or might look. In Clare, she finds herself the same way as she does in mirrors. For example, Clare's bare back at the ball shows how Clare's body substitutes for a mirror.

When Irene looks at Clare's bare back she sees her real self, her queer self, and the White self. She might fantasize about things that are not happening but which in her inner world live and exist vividly. The same applies to other parts of Clare's body when Irene looks at them: her legs, her eyes.

Also, the reason why such a key queer moment takes place at the ball might be because social events in Harlem were occasions where many people showed who they really are. They did not have to hide their true selves in front of others. For example, many White people visited Harlem's parties. They could somehow enjoy African American music, art, and bodies there without being judged by the other White, often racist, people. In Harlem, Whites could admire and truly love African Americans; they could be equal. Just as Irene said, everyone passes for one or the other, but there, in these Harlem events, imaginary veils that otherwise cover individuals' identities can be torn off.

Mirrors appear, physically or figuratively, in many places in the movie. Irene is not forced to look at them; rather, it seems that they attract her attention, and she does not resist looking at herself through them. Her and Brian's bedroom is a place of exceptional symbolism partly (though not only) due to the mirrors in it. The mirrors are connected to Irene, but the room Irene and Brian share is connected to both. In the novella, the bedroom is not mentioned as often as in the movie; Hall probably wanted to depict the marriage using bedroom scenes. Irene and Brian do not spend moments full of love and passion in their bedroom. They do not prove their love to each other there. The bedroom in the movie serves merely as a place where these two people get rest.

8. Irene's Bedroom as Her Queer Space – Closet

For Brian and Irene, their bedroom works as a hallway – they pass each other there, they come and go, they exchange only a few words, a few items of clothing, maybe a few smiles, and then, at the end of the day, they meet each other in the bed, each of them lying on their side. No touching, no lovemaking. Their relationship is not driven by passion or attraction. This marriage is characterized by a kind of estrangement. In this case, the marriage may be only a formality, a kind of norm both have agreed to. Brian spends much less time in their bedroom than Irene does. The viewer can see him in other rooms most of the time. However, Irene is in the bedroom more often than in other places.

The bedroom can therefore be seen as her queer space, where she can allow herself to think about Clare, to fantasize about her while remaining safe. In the bedroom, she realizes her queer identity via mirrors, time alone, and conversations with Clare or about her. She rests there when she is overwhelmed and feels anxiety caused by all the pressure society's normativity puts on her. Even the states of mental breakdown she experiences because of the burden her queer identity places on her take place in the bedroom. Otherness causes mental health issues for all people belonging to minority groups – from what is known as minority stress (a relatively low level of stress that forms part of their everyday lives) to severe depression (McConnell). Irene does not escape either of these.

She has passed through various stages of mental breakdown due to her queerness. The final, climactic stage of Irene's breakdown comes after Clare leaves for Europe.

When Clare is not there, Irene feels love for her through Brian, whom she begins to blame for acting differently when Clare is not around. When they fight, she tells him, "It seems to me you are a lot less content with what you've got when she's not here." The fact is that she is not, in fact, talking about Brian, but about herself. Her struggle with queer identity is not particularly heavy when projected on to another person – in this case Brian. Due to her inability to grasp and handle her feelings towards Clare, Irene falls into a state of depression, depicted in the movie in the part where she lies in her bed after taking pills – which could be antidepressants or other drugs that moderate states of nervousness and anxiety.

During her state of depression, Irene replays what Clare has told her in the past. At these moments, she lives in her head while her body is paralyzed. The conflict with her real self has reached its peak. Such conflict happens to queer people before coming out(s), since often, they must come out more times throughout their lives – i.e. before they admit their sexual identity to those around them (Cho and Sohn). While lying on the bed, Irene stares at the crack in the bedroom ceiling. The crack has already been shown earlier in the movie; Brian was the first one who noticed it. It is a symbol with multiple meanings. One of these meanings could be Irene's sexual orientation, perceived as a deviation from heterosexual normativity; another meaning could be the crack in Brian and Irene's relationship; or the crack could refer to Irene's mental instability.

I would like to add my representation of the crack in the ceiling. I think it shows how intensely Clare has penetrated Irene and Brian's marriage. This penetration is also evident from the conversations Brian and Irene hold every day in their bedroom: they discuss Clare, and at the beginning, Brian wants to know more about the relationship between her and Irene; however, later, it is Irene who cannot stop talking about Clare with Brian. Irene speaking about Clare so often and in detail mirrors Irene's thoughts of Clare. She must think of Clare constantly, and her speech is part of her immersion in her love. Over time, the crack within Irene becomes bigger and bigger, and she has only two options to react to it. She could either let the crack open completely and see what is behind it – explore her sexual orientation and admit it to the people around her – or she could fill it with metaphorical putty. Filling the crack is not effective in the long term, though this does not seem to stop Irene. Her desire for a carefree and safe life influences her very powerfully and forces her to fill the crack, as we see at the end of the movie. The promise that such a decision will provide her with at least a few peaceful tomorrows is apparently enough for her. Her decision to fill the crack on the ceiling symbolizes her approach to her queer identity and the issues it influences, situating her in a life lived according to the hetero norm. Clare's death at the end of the movie confirms Irene's decision to live according to normative rules. Even though her death is ambiguous, for Irene, it clearly marks the end of a certain stage of life.

The ending of the movie differs from the ending of the novella in that Irene does not put her hand on Clare's arm when Bellew storms into the Freeland's apartment.

Instead, she puts her hand in front of Clare as if to protect her from her racist husband. There are three ways of understanding the ending of the movie. The first is that Bellew's anger and racist behavior caused Clare to fall from the window. The second reading would be that Clare jumped from the window to save herself from having to deal with her racist husband in the future after he finds out about her racial origin. The third is that Irene pushed Clare from the window. I would not dare to guess which scenario is probable; however, it is important to note that the ending of the story is more ambiguous in the movie when compared to the novella. In the movie, object supplements – a broken flowerpot, a broken teapot, and a cigarette butt thrown by Irene from a window at the Freeland's home – can be viewed as predicting Clare's death.

Object supplements are also used in the movie more than in the novella. The director, Rebecca Hall, used them alongside many other artistic tools to highlight the queerness of the story. Rebecca Hall brought queer love more to the fore than Nella Larsen did. She did so probably because contemporary society allows her to. This queerness was used, as Hall in Tillet explained, "to highlight the latent homosexuality and power dynamics". The movie may also discuss queerness over biracialism because contemporary American society accepts sexual fluidity much more than it does racial fluidity. Interestingly, Hall's approach differs from that of Larsen. Larsen uses biracial identity to hide queer identity, and Hall uses queerness to place biracial identity in the background.

9. Conclusion

An analysis, interpretation, and understanding of the topics explored in Larsen's novella and its movie adaptation are crucial tools in sympathizing with queer African American women. Passing for a heterosexual is not only difficult, but as we understand from the end of the story, it is also detrimental to one's mental health. Irene is an example of the fact that the struggle with one's sexual orientation is arduous.

There are many more object supplements in the movie than in the book, which suggests that Irene's love has the potential to be evaluated more gently and with a better understanding in the 21st century. The ambiguous ending regarding Clare's death then leaves the reader and viewer wanting to know more. It leaves one wanting to be with Clare, and Irene was in this position throughout the story. The end of the text, therefore, evokes lesbian desire in a person immersed in the story (Landry 46). Queer spaces between Irene and Clare, created via the female gaze and touching, are like an alternative reality for them. Through this queer space, the women weaken the normative society and show hope for minority groups who also pass for something they are not but must do so to live an easier life. Even though Irene hides her queer identity from others, the mirrors in the movie always show her who she really is. The fact is, she cannot really escape from herself. Hall did not want her to escape as much as Larsen wanted it, so she allowed her to look in mirrors – via Clare's body – more often.

References

- Blackmer, Corine 1998. *Race-ing representation: Voice, history, and Sexuality*. Lanham (Mar.): Rowman & Littlefield.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge." *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Edited by Elizabeth Abel et al. University of California Press: 266–284. doi.org/10.2307/jj.5972994.
- Calitz, Martha Lydia. 2011. "Deconstructing the Otherness of Queer Identity in Contemporary Lesbian Fiction." Dissertation Thesis, University of the Free State.
- Cho, Byonghee, and Aeree Sohn. 2016. "How do Sexual Identity, and Coming Out Affect Stress, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation and Attempts Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in South Korea?." *Osong public health and research perspectives* vol. 7,5: 281-288. doi:10.1016/j.phrp.2016.09.001
- Davis, Andrew W. 2006. "Constructing Identity: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*". *English Honors Papers*. [https:// digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/enghp/1](https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/enghp/1).
- Dean, Elizabeth. 2019. "The Gaze, the Glance, the Mirror: Queer Desire and Panoptic Discipline in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Women's Studies*: 97–103. doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1580520.
- Glick, Sara Nelson, and Matthew R Golden. 2010. "Persistence of racial differences in attitudes toward homosexuality in the United States." *Journal of acquired immune deficiency syndromes*. vol. 55,4: 516-523. doi:10.1097/QAI.0b013e3181f275e0
- Passing*. 2021. Directed by Rebecca Hall. Netflix.
- Landry, H. Jordan. 2006. "Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*: 25–46. doi.org/10.2307/4143877.
- Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. ALFRED-A-KNOPF, INC., 1929.
- Letellier, Charlotte. 2019. "„Just Friends’: Queer Theory and Compulsory Heterosexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone*, and S.E. Hinton's *the Outsiders*." *California State University*.
- McConnell, Elizabeth A et al. 2018. "Multiple Minority Stress and LGBT Community Resilience among Sexual Minority Men." *Psychology of sexual orientation and gender diversity* vol. 5,1: 1-12. doi:10.1037/sgd0000265
- Seidman, Steven. 1997. "One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem by William G. Hawkeswood." *Contemporary Sociology*. doi.org/10.2307/2654654.
- Strong, Lester. 2006. "Josephine Baker's Hungry Heart." *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*. link.gale.com/apps/doc/A151013872/AONEu=anon~a8e4a329&sid=googleScholar&xid=ec49373d.
- Tillet, Salamishah. 2021. "The Real Surprise of ‚Passing’: A Focus on Black Women's Inner Lives." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/19/movies/passing-black-lesbian-women.html>.