

## The Allure of Annihilation: Death Drive in Nella Larsen's *Passing*



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Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) revolves tightly around the complex experiences of two light-skinned African American women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, in 1920s America. Childhood friends who reunite as adults, these women embody utterly different responses to the racial restrictions of the time. Irene lives a bourgeois life in Harlem, is married to a black doctor, and is immersed in the flourishing Harlem Renaissance. Clare, on the other hand, has married a wealthy, bigoted white man, John Bellew, who is unaware of her racial heritage. The narrative culminates in Clare's tragic death—which is open to multiple interpretations. Whether her death was an accident, suicide, or caused by Irene, we never know as the unreliable narrator, "Irene Redfield never afterward allowed herself to remember" (Larsen 209).

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. I explore the novel through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, precisely the concepts of 'repetition compulsion' and 'death drive.' This Freudian approach explains Clare's reckless behaviors and further could help solve the mystery of her death. I argue that Clare Kendry negotiates a deep-seated desire for self-destruction fueled 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.

**Key Words:** Death Drive, Gender, Nella Larsen, *Passing*, Race, Sigmund Freud

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Manzar Feiz is a Ph.D. candidate at The University of Texas at Dallas, where she teaches World Literature and Rhetoric. Her research interests predominantly include 19th and 20th Century American Literature, 20th Century Anglophone Fiction, Cultural Studies, Modernism, Psychoanalysis, Sociology, and Women's Studies. Her previous publications and conference presentations have mainly focused on authors, essayists, and literary characters of the 19th and 20th centuries.