

Zeitschrift:	SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber:	Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band:	44 (2024)
Artikel:	"It was that smile that maddened Irene" : ambiguous antics and the power of uncertainty in Nella Larsen's <i>Passing</i>
Autor:	Castelli, Stella
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1053571

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 15.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

STELLA CASTELLI
(UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH)

“It Was That Smile That Maddened Irene”:
Ambiguous Antics and the Power of Uncertainty in
Nella Larsen’s *Passing*

Nella Larsen’s seminal 1929 novella *Passing* is a text deeply riddled with ambiguity. Written into the fabric of seemingly every line is an element of uncertainty which peaks in and concludes with the ambivalent fall and demise of Clare Kendry. The text’s relentless linguistic undecidability is not simply a case of unreliable narration: rather, it is the text itself which presents as subtly fragmented and traumatised, continually voicing and silencing itself in an attempt to perform an impossible decisiveness. This systemic undecidability becomes a marker of a transgressive liminality which offers the potential to question given societal norms. It is thus that the text opens with the transgressive act of racial passing, foreshadowing the stubborn ambiguity which runs through its entirety to culminate in an ending that becomes instrumental in hardening uncertainty, highlighting fluidity instead of stability. Utilising Wolfgang Iser’s theorisation of the *Gestalt* alongside Jacques Derrida’s conceptualisation of the ‘cryptic,’ this paper seeks to theorise the way in which *Passing* is structured according to a poetics of the ambiguous which is anchored in and negotiated through identity politics. Deploying ambivalence as systemic dynamism allows *Passing* to explore complex themes such as race, sexuality, and gender as well as class mobility within 1920s America through a secure prism of indecision.

Keywords: gestalt; cryptic; reader-response criticism; identity politics; deconstruction

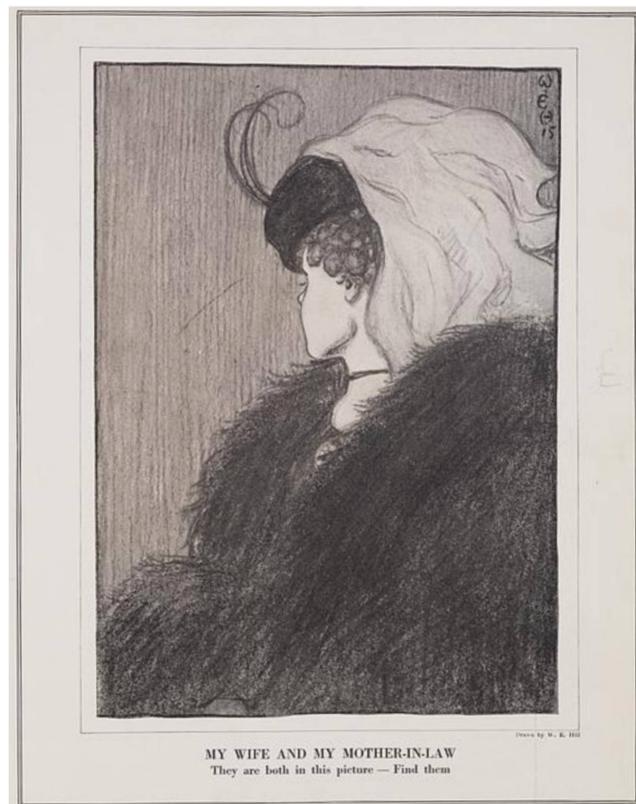


Figure 1. W.E. Hill, *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law*, 1915

What do you see in this image? An old woman? A young woman? Something else entirely? This notorious *vexierbild* [picture puzzle] was created by cartoonist W.E. Hill and was featured in *The American Journal of Psychology* in 1930 in an article titled “The ‘Gestalt’ Psychology and the ‘Gestalt’ Movement” by Professor Edwin G. Boring, which outlines the *Gestalt* principle in psychology. The dynamic of the *vexierbild* illustrates the way in which the viewer can either actively choose to see a young woman or actively choose to see an old woman, albeit not both at the same time. This means that the production of meaning of a given ambiguous image or, by extension, ambiguous text, hinges on an interpretation in which one reading is foregrounded while all other possible readings automatically retreat into the background. In the context of Nella Larsen's excessively ambiguous novella *Passing* (1929), this mechanism of active interpretation becomes particularly relevant; the way in which the image's undecided nature proposes an impossible simultaneity of seeing both the old and the young woman is analogous to the way in which Larsen's novella linguistically positions itself, hinging on a surplus of textual interpretability. In this regard, the image and *Passing* are both marked by a form of excess of possibilities based on which the recipient is urged to

make a decision. Indeed, in an article on the narratology of *Passing*, Gabrielle McIntire identifies this dynamic as the source of the novella's longevity, suggesting that “[...] part of why this novella continues to fascinate is because of its *mise en abîme* structure of indecipherability” (778). For readers to succeed in decoding this kind of indecipherability and, in this way, elicit meaning from the text's excessive ambiguity, they have to consolidate the various possibilities and actively reduce them to one single, provisional interpretation. If they fail to make any decision, the image/text remains meaningless and cannot be translated into textual significance at all.

It is here that the notion of *racial* passing in particular takes precedence in Larsen's text. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the phrasal verb 'to pass as somebody/something' in particular with regard to race refers to a "situation in which a person who belongs to a particular group is believed by other people to be a member of a different group, for example a different race" (*OED*). In the precarious racial context of 1920s America, racial passing most commonly refers to a "performance of whiteness," as Lori Harrison-Kahan (111) terms the act of attempting to pass as Caucasian in order to become socially and economically mobile and garner access to otherwise inaccessible spaces. It is a performance which (mis)leads the gaze of the other towards a false recognition in order to be accepted as part of a certain race. According to Phillip Brian Harper, the "[...] standard-racial pass in the U.S. context is the one in which a light-skinned person legally designated as black passes for white [...]" (382). Visuality, that is ways of seeing and perception, is strongly tied to the act of racial passing as Harper further consolidates: "The possibility of passing's functioning in this way derives from the specifically visual means by which racial identity is registered in U.S. culture [...]" (381–382). What becomes further evident is that the question of identity and belonging is deeply ingrained in the act of racial passing, as McIntire highlights in a catalogue of questions sparked by the novella:

What happens in 1920s Harlem when one's skin color does not announce a clearly decipherable racial genealogy? How does one know how to belong to a "race" when race itself is inordinately prone to the mutable semiotics of skin and the prejudices of its (always racially traversed) readers? How does "race" bind communities and ban its outlaws? (778)

Reminiscent of the definition of racial passing, McIntire's questions similarly seem to circle around ideas of community and belonging, core American values which are mediated through identity politics. Larsen's

text adds an additional, linguistic layer to these questions when endowing her novella with relentless textual ambiguities, rendering it in itself a *vexierbild*. It is here that form and content of the text coincide, or, as McIntire concludes,

The proliferation of interpretive possibilities within this short narration mimics the stress lines at play in twentieth- and twenty-first century American culture around what it means to inhabit African American-ness, or to know race, with Larsen insisting that sexual, racial, and psychic unnarratability together provoke us and draw us into a maze of epistemological unrest. (779)

It is this “epistemological unrest,” the figuration or *Gestalt* of a text, which becomes a conglomerate of impossible interpretative simultaneity and can further be enriched by French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s conceptualisation of the ‘cryptic.’ The ‘cryptic,’ according to Derrida, is that which is seen but not deciphered properly and thus becomes a secret. Hinging on the same mechanism, the ‘cryptic’ illustrates the visible invisibility which is deeply ingrained in the *vexierbild* as well as the ambiguous text. Contextualised vis-à-vis the ‘cryptic’ and read in terms of Wolfgang Iser’s *Gestalt* principle, this paper aspires to present a look at the complex dynamism surrounding linguistic uncertainty in *Passing*. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the way in which Larsen’s novella renders different forms of ambiguity, be that racial, sexual or narratological, her most powerful tool in demanding the reader to actively make an interpretative decision where the text makes none. This, it is argued, also forces the reader to actively position him/herself within this “mediation of race in relation to sexuality and class” (Brody 1053).

In Larsen’s text, almost every utterance, thought and musing of the narrator-focaliser seems to refuse final categorisation. This inherent textual interpretability highlights the way in which *Passing* is structured according to a poetics of uncertainty which is anchored in and negotiated through the ambiguous performativity of identity politics that are simultaneously visible and invisible (‘cryptic’), depending on the reader’s interpretative agency. It is interesting to note here that metatextually, the structuring of the chapters in the novella mirrors the implied reader’s process of interpretation of a given *vexierbild*, being termed “Encounter,” “Re-Encounter,” and “Finale.” Building on this theoretical base, undecidability becomes a powerful nexus of negotiation that demands active interpretation as the text produces a surplus of potentiality which ultimately renders it political. This notion is already present in the novella’s title –

the word ‘passing’ in itself shares a plethora of meanings beyond “racial passing” and thus in itself remains uncertain, interpretable. Picking up on the element of interpretability, Nell Sullivan, for instance, states that “‘Passing’ [...] in Larsen’s novel [...] also carries its colloquial meaning – death” (373). Furthermore, Cheryl A. Wall makes the claim that in Larsen’s novella, “[...] ‘passing’ does not refer only to the sociological phenomenon of blacks crossing the color line,” but rather represents “[...] the loss of racial identity and the denial of self, required of women who conform to restrictive gender roles” (105). While evidently open to interpretation, it is exactly by deploying such a form of systemic linguistic uncertainty that *Passing* explores complex themes such as race, sexuality, and class mobility in 1920s America through a prism of indecision.

While “[e]ven a brief summary of *Passing*’s plot poses problems because the novel relies on textual ambiguities, which appropriately reflect the ambiguous identities of its protagonists” (Harrison-Kahan 111), the following observations nevertheless outline the essence of the plot. *Passing* is set in early 1920s New York City and tells the story of two African American women, Irene Redfield, the protagonist and narrator, as well as Clare Kendry, her long-lost childhood friend. The two women, who had lost sight of each other during early adulthood, ultimately reconcile; they tentatively renew their fragile friendship, which is where the story begins. The subsequent unfolding of events traces the renewal and eventual termination of their friendship (following the interpretative structure of “Encounter,” “Re-encounter,” and “Finale”), which is mediated analogously through their perspective vis-à-vis race and racial passing. According to Brody, the two women are “[...] representatives of different ideologies locked in struggle for dominance” (1053) and it becomes clear that both women practice the act of racial passing; however, they do so to different degrees. While Irene sporadically passes for convenience, she generally identifies with her racial heritage and stands as an African American woman in Harlem. Conversely, Clare’s form of passing is executed on a much larger scale; opposite her racist white husband she has been passing as white all her adult life in order to obtain status, wealth and class mobility. It is also this transgressive act for which she is ultimately punished as the story ends with her ambiguous plunge to death. Triggered by her friendship with Irene, Clare increasingly begins to embrace her racial heritage as she not only sets out on a double life but starts to infringe uncomfortably on Irene’s sense of identity, on her marriage, and on her life. Therefore, Irene’s feelings towards Clare become progressively more complex, tainted with a mixture of judgment, fascination,

and desire. Hinging on the transgressive symbolism of racial passing itself, *Passing* linguistically mirrors the protagonist's racial fluidity and indecisiveness. Written into the fabric of seemingly every line is an element of uncertainty which remains unresolved. While the act of racial passing stands at the forefront of this dynamic, it is important to note that the text insinuates a homoerotic subtext which further mystifies the relationship between Irene and Clare. What crystallises more and more is that in *Passing* nothing is certain; and it is this notion of uncertainty which renders the text itself widely, if not uncomfortably, interpretable.

Wolfgang Iser reflects on this idea of literary uncertainty in proposing an inherent reciprocity between text and reader when, in "Indeterminacy and Reader's Response" (1971), he states that "a text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader" (2–3). Further theorising the phenomenology of reader-response criticism in "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" (1972), he then outlines the idea of the *Gestalt* which manifests as the linguistic codification of the textual form based on the reader's interpretation. He states that

This "gestalt" must inevitably be colored by our own characteristic selection process. For it is not given by the text itself; it arises from the meeting between the written text and the individual mind of the reader with its own particular history of experience, its own consciousness, its own outlook. The "gestalt" is not the true meaning of the text; at best it is a configurative meaning [...]. (289)

What becomes evident in Iser's approach to reader-response criticism is that, based on an idea of excessive meaning (ambiguity), a "configurative meaning" can be extracted, which is to say that a multiplicity of differing interpretations of the same text can be made by individual readers. Iser is thus equating textual ambiguity with textual plurality by means of which a text can obtain a multitude of forms, or *Gestalten*, vis-à-vis an implied reader. Cementing this idea, he further states that linguistic "comprehension is inseparable from the reader's expectations, and where we have expectations, there too we have one of the most potent weapons in the writer's armory – illusion" (Iser, "The Reading Process" 289). It is this form of illusion which Larsen skilfully creates in the suggestive language of *Passing* in order to foster uncertainty as a hermeneutic challenge. It endows the narrator's voice with political agency.

Passing's textually inherent uncertainty becomes visible in the opening lines of Larsen's novella which outline Irene's contemplative musing

on a letter she has received from Clare and which she shares with the reader:

It was the last letter in Irene Redfield's little pile of morning mail. After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn't immediately known who its sender was. Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size. (143)

What becomes immediately evident is that the letter – ultimately symbolic of Irene's relationship with Clare – stands in contrast to what Irene deems normative: her other, “ordinary and clearly directed letters.” Clare's letter, by contrast, is described as other and non-normative: it physically stands out. It features an “illegible scrawl” and through Irene's focalisation it is marked as deviant twice when she states that it “seemed out of place and alien.” Clare's letter is marked by an excess of otherness and is designated as potentially undecipherable, i.e. ultimately meaningless. In a final gesture, Irene's focalisation then also endows the letter with a clandestine element. Not just once but twice she calls it “furtive” in this brief extract hinting at the enigmatic, certainly ambiguous standing Clare maintains in her life. It is thus that in its opening lines *Passing* already draws a microcosm of the complex and uncertain relationship between the two women. The fact that Irene further maintains that the letter is “flaunting” and ornaments it with an element of extraordinariness can also be read as a hint towards her increasing sexual desire towards Clare.

The text even goes on to mark the letter as potentially dangerous when, upon seeing the letter, “[h]er [Irene's] brows came together in a tiny frown” (143). Her face marked with mild irritation, Irene reflects on her emotional reaction when stating that her frown

[...] was more from perplexity than from annoyance; though there was in her thoughts an element of both. She was wholly unable to comprehend such an attitude towards danger as she was sure the letter's contents would reveal; and she disliked the idea of opening and reading it. (143)

Particularly noteworthy in Irene's musings is the fact that she displays a certain duality in her reaction to the letter – perplexity as well as annoy-

ance – to then synthesise her emotional response in deeming the letter dangerous. Her gesture performs a form of opposition towards her own reader-response when she suspects a dislike of engaging with it. In other words, Irene refuses to interpret the letter, even while the implied reader is forced to interpret her reaction in order to render the text a *Gestalt* and thus eliciting meaning from it. From the opening lines onwards Larsen's text tenaciously stages this linguistic undecidability within the focalizing voice of Irene. While the description of the letter as well as Irene's reaction is meticulous, ornamented with precise adjectives, it nevertheless remains unclear *why* Irene is reacting in such a way. This effect mirrors Iser's description of the formation of *Gestalt* when he contends that

This is especially true of modern texts, in which it is the very precision of the written details which increases the proportion of indeterminacy; one detail appears to contradict another and so simultaneously stimulates and frustrates our desire to “picture,” thus continually causing our imposed “gestalt” of the text to disintegrate. (“The Reading Process” 290)

Counterintuitively, then, it is exactly linguistic precision which heightens the potential of interpretation.

The titular “*Passing*” is already marked by an excess of linguistic possibility or interpretability. One might assume that *Passing* here refers exclusively to the act of racial passing which is a cornerstone of the novella; Irene herself references this early on when, regarding Clare's racial passing, she curiously states that “[s]he wished to find out about this hazardous business of ‘passing,’ this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly” (157). What emerges here is that, while she is reflecting on racial passing explicitly, the *Gestalt* it assumes in Irene's perception is that of a general invisible transgression. This dynamic becomes even more pronounced when she questions the way in which the transgressor might present themselves: “What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. But she couldn't” (157). Similar to her previous objection to reading Clare's letter, Irene remains vague in her wording: based on her own transgressions one must assume that she does not object to all forms of racial passing; nevertheless “she couldn't.” The specific act that she couldn't engage with seems to refer to Clare's passing as a means to allow herself upward social mobility. Irene's perception contrasts with Clare's perspective, who references passing as an effortless way of pursuing one's

happiness when stating that “[i]t’s such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve” (158). It is this “little nerve” that implicitly references ambiguity; in the act of racial passing there lies the possibility of being discovered, *if* interpreted as a possible transgressor. And it seems it is this potential decidability which Irene refuses on a multiplicity of levels; the fact that she does engage in racial passing but states that “she couldn’t,” the fact that she declines to engage with Clare’s illegible scrawl while simultaneously drawing a precise image of the letter itself, and the way in which her voice remains precise yet uncertain throughout the entirety of the text. Irene’s voice thus marks a contradiction, stands as a *vexierbild*: while refusing to manifest as decided and certain, it nevertheless must assume a *Gestalt* in order to be meaningful and therefore demands interpretation from its implied reader.

What is ultimately telling is that racial passing in itself contains contradiction, which becomes evident in Irene’s own reflections: “It’s funny about ‘passing.’ We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it” (185–186). This thoroughly undecided nature of the act of (racial) passing mirrors Iser’s idea of the fluidity inherent in the textual *Gestalt* as he contends that

The “gestalt” of a text normally takes on (or, rather, is given) this fixed or definable outline, as this is essential to our own understanding, but on the other hand, if reading were to consist of nothing but an uninterrupted building up of illusions, it would be a suspect, if not downright dangerous, process: instead of bringing us into contact with reality, it would wean us away from realities. (Iser, “The Reading Process” 289)

This idea of weaning away from realities during the process of reading becomes predominant in the context of passing when considering that the verb “to pass” carries a multitude of possible meanings in addition to racial passing (“Pass”), further heightening the titular uncertainty of Larsen’s text. Reading *Passing* as a *Gestalt* itself, it becomes evident that the chosen title is particularly apt for the construction of Iser’s “illusions” as it could potentially reference racial passing, but it also implies the idea of time passing, or that of (Clare’s) death or even the idea of a personal encounter. All of these possibilities and many more are entrenched in the title, and all of these reflect a certain truth about the text. It is in this dynamism that the text mirrors the true character of the *vexierbild*. While all these readings are possible, the reader is forced to make a choice, albeit a temporary one, in order to render ambiguity meaningful. It is then the

impossible simultaneity of interpretation that endows the text itself with powerful agency; even if the narrator herself does not make a decision, it nevertheless demands interpretation by the implied reader. And it is here that the concept of Derrida's 'cryptic' lends a further lens to this analysis.

Derrida's theorisation of the 'cryptic' draws on his lengthy elaborations on the secretive, which in *The Gift of Death: Literature in Secret* (1992) is approached from a number of different angles. Ultimately, in terms of secrecy, his understanding seems to keep circling back to the alignment of its power with the elimination of the gaze upon that which the secret cloaks in opacity. Connecting the secretive to the sense of sight, he encourages us to note that "[...] the penetration of the secret is entrusted to the gaze, to sight, to observation" (88). While Derrida connects the secretive to a lack of visibility, he adds an additional layer to this notion when outlining what he then terms 'cryptic.' In this regard, his discussion distinguishes between the secretive, that which is kept out of sight and concealed, and the 'cryptic,' that which is actively encoded into a form of indecipherability while remaining perfectly visible. Consolidating his ideas, Derrida asserts that "[...] the cryptic has come to enlarge the field of secrecy beyond the nonvisible toward whatever resists deciphering, the secret as illegible or undecipherable rather than invisible" (89). What emerges in this distinction is that the 'cryptic,' as opposed to simply the secretive, feeds on a tautology of opacity; a secret that is not recognised as such, which is not seen even when visible; it is, in fact, its invisibility that becomes tangible. This is to say that while clearly visible, that which is deemed 'cryptic' is encoded as secretive without having to be kept out of sight. The 'cryptic' remains secret even while plainly visible. And it is this mechanism which resonates with Iser's idea of the *Gestalt*: by prioritising and thus foregrounding one possible interpretation of many when faced with an undecided text, other interpretations are simultaneously kept out of sight and rendered momentarily invisible. The act of reading thus renders the ambiguous text 'cryptic' when possible interpretations are pushed into the background in favour of a singular interpretation. While these interpretations might be possible, they are not recognised as such, which highlights the powerful agency the undecided text harbours within itself. *Passing*, along with its protagonists, continually escapes the doctrine of linguistic consolidation without extending the same courtesy to the implied reader.

This notion of 'cryptic' encoding is carried by the ambiguity of the text in which possible interpretations become temporarily invisible depending on the *Gestalt* that the implied reader is forced to elicit from the

text in order to render it meaningful. *Passing* literally performs this dynamism in an early passage in which Irene wonders whether she has been discovered in her act of racial passing. Having entered the Drayton hotel in order to escape the city's boiling temperatures she is observed by (a yet unnamed) Clare's unrelenting gaze. Upon being met with this perceivably penetrating gaze, Irene's discomfort manifests as follows: "All her efforts to ignore her, it, were futile. She stole another glance. Still looking. What strange languorous eyes she had!" (150). Aligning with Derrida's contention that the 'cryptic' is strongly tied to the sense of sight and by extension, recognition, it is interesting to note that Irene, when unable to escape Clare's gaze, steals "another glance" herself. In returning Clare's unrelenting stare, Irene once again voices a precise ambivalence, stating that

[...] gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. She laughed softly, but her eyes flashed. Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that there before her eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? (150)

The exchange of vision and visibility between Irene and Clare in this instant can be tied to bell hooks' idea of the black person's 'oppositional gaze' which she defines as "an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire" (116). Both Irene and Clare develop this "overwhelming longing to look" and simultaneously, both are overwhelmingly observed by this "rebellious desire." hooks then identifies the power of the gaze with its potential to interpret when she states that,

By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality." Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency. (116)

The idea of changing reality recalls Iser's elaborations on the fashioning of a *Gestalt*, i.e. the need for interpretation. Tied to Derrida's contention of the 'cryptic,' what emerges is that the act of interpreting not only prioritises one particular "reality" but in doing so renders all other possible "realities" or interpretations invisible. It is imperative to note here that the text itself does not prioritise but rather maintains a surplus of potentialities; it is the implied reader who is forced into agency and thus stands at the mercy of the ambiguous text. In other words, the text remains pluralistic, and it is only the implied reader's interpretation that becomes reductive. While the text itself remains undecided and ambiguous, the im-

plied reader is not provided with the same liberty, and, in order to produce meaning, is forced to make a decision, to interpret.

Based on this theoretical backdrop it becomes evident that the textual *Gestalt* that *Passing* obtains can be theorised as 'cryptic.' Larsen stages the relationship between Irene and Clare as analogous to as well as tainted by their differing perspectives on racial passing and in doing so, she simultaneously encodes it with the 'cryptic' and, in the words of Derrida "conceals the invisible as visible" (90). This suggestive textual performance of undecidability allows for the negotiation of identity politics beyond the notion of racial passing as it endows Clare and Irene's friendship with the additional potential of being a crypticised homosexual relationship. In her seminal volume *Bodies That Matter*, literary theorist Judith Butler provides a reading of *Passing* in a chapter termed "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," which elaborates on this aspect. Butler highlights the way in which the novel's inherent ambiguity is mediated through Irene's subjective focalisation, which is not specifically translated into spoken discourse, and thus avoids a potentially dangerous public exposure. Butler states that "[t]he question of what can and cannot be spoken, what can and cannot be publicly exposed, is raised throughout the text, and it is linked with the larger question of the dangers of public exposure of both color and desire" (124). Expanding on the interpretability of Larsen's ambiguous language, Butler highlights the way in which colour and desire are rendered interpretable exactly because of the text's intrinsic crypticism; while visible, the true *Gestalt* of the protagonists' race and sexuality remains simultaneously invisible, subject to the implied reader's interpretation. Butler cements her analysis by offering a close reading of the following passage during which Irene enters the living room and finds a radiant Clare alongside her husband Brian:

She remembered her own little choked exclamation of admiration, when, on coming downstairs a few minutes later than she had intended, she had rushed into the living room where Brian was waiting and had found Clare there too. Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn smoothly back into a small twist at the nape of her neck; her eyes sparkling like dark jewels. (Larsen 233)

This description, in particular the use of the word "flaunting," is reminiscent of Irene's description of Clare's letter in the very beginning. What is particularly salient in this excerpt is the textual productivity of Irene's

silent admiration for Clare. Butler maintains that this sequence makes evident that uncertainty is preserved within the protagonist's gesture of restraint, namely Irene's oxymoronic "choked exclamation." As Butler consolidates, "Irene's exclamation of admiration is never voiced, choked back it seems, retained, preserved as a kind of seeing that does not make its way into speech" (123). A form of visibility that does not linguistically translate into discourse can be interpreted as the cryptically encoded ambiguity of the entirety of the text.

Simultaneously, it is this exact uncertainty, the everlasting interpretability that characterises Larsen's novella, which also allows for Irene's forbidden sexual desire to be both voiced and not voiced. As Butler further identifies Clare's sexuality as perceived by Irene, she maintains that it ultimately becomes threatening to Irene in her assertion that

Irene finds herself drawn by Clare, wanting to be her, but also wanting her. It is this risk-taking, articulated at once as a racial crossing and sexual infidelity, that alternately entrances Irene and fuels her moral condemnation of Clare with renewed ferocity. (124)

This state of liminality within which Irene finds herself regarding her race, her sexuality as well as her social standing is made possible through the linguistic uncertainty with which the text is composed. Irene's own uncertainty regarding her self renders the *Gestalt* of her own identity interpretable. As Butler concludes, this dynamism is facilitated through what I would term a 'cryptic' cloaking of Irene's narration and the ultimate focalisation of Clare. *Vis-à-vis* Irene, Butler maintains,

[...] the trick of passing itself [...] appears to eroticize Clare [as] the sudden concession of the secret [...]. It is the changeability itself, the dream of metamorphosis, where that changeableness signifies a certain freedom, a class mobility afforded by whiteness that constitutes the power of seduction. (125)

What is highlighted here is that Clare remains entirely focalised through Irene throughout the story; therefore, it is through Irene's eyes, her own vision, that we get a 'cryptic' projection of Irene's own construction, her own (uncertain) *Gestalt*, of a thoroughly interpretable and, as such, unstable identity. *Passing*'s universal tone of undecidability ultimately peaks in and concludes with the ambivalent fall and demise of Clare Kendry. While the entire novella remains stubborn in its 'cryptic' stance, it comes as no surprise that the final sequence remains thoroughly ambiguous regarding Clare's death the agency of which cannot be clearly classified. It

remains uncertain whether her demise was accidental or incidental either at her own hand or at someone else's.

This final scene is set at a party in Harlem which is attended by both Irene and Clare when suddenly Jack Bellew, Clare's husband, who recently discovered his wife's secret, storms in and accuses her of passing, his voice filled with "rage and pain" (238). What happens next the text skilfully cloaks in an air of uncertainty as Irene retrospectively narrates that

Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes. (238–239)

What is insinuated here is that Clare's immediate reaction is undecipherable. Marked with a conditional, the text, which is to say Irene's focalisation, states that Clare is composed "as if" everyone was not staring at her while it remains questionable whether she is aware of the significance of the situation and, if so, whether she cares. Furthermore, Clare also seems to react in an inappropriate, and unsatisfactory, manner when she begins to smile. Reminiscent of the *vexierbild*, Clare's suggestive smile hovers right at the brink between madness and happiness, and, thoroughly 'cryptic,' cannot be conclusively deciphered. It is this indecipherability which instils an aggravating frustration in Irene, a possible extension of her previous frown regarding Clare's initial letter. She maintains that "[i]t was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (239). The alignment of freedom and the performance of a smile might further recall Irene's previous ambivalent description of Clare's smile during their initial encounter, which she deems "[...] an odd sort of smile" (149) that she labels "a shade too provocative" (149) had it come from another woman. It seems that this smile marks the epitome of *Passing*'s *Gestalt*, remaining ever elusive in its pluralistic interpretability.

The culmination of Irene's aggravation in this final instant outlines the deconstruction of a perceived crypticism, a tangible ambiguity, as not only maddening but as evocative of a strong reaction which instils terror and triggers her to run across the room, potentially killing Clare with an ambiguous yet deadly push out of the window. While the novella states

that “one thought possessed her” it remains uncertain what that thought is – being cast aside by Bellew or obtaining freedom? In the lines that follow, this aspect is further obfuscated rather than clarified: “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (239). While it is implied that Irene possibly pushed Clare, the text refuses final categorisation, which is cemented by Irene’s self-imposed clouding of her own memory. Upon having observed Clare’s fatal plunge from the window, Irene reflects on the, or potentially her own, agency of Clare’s ambiguously staged death in an attempt to find an impossible certainty when she raises the following questions: “What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not—” (239). Irene’s final struggle for words, which culminates in a desperate speechlessness, designates the novella’s thorough and overarching crypticism. It is not simply a case of unreliable narration, rather, it is the text itself which presents as subtly fragmented and traumatised, continually voicing and silencing itself in an attempt to perform an impossible decisiveness. Upon rediscovering her voice, Irene states that “[...] she mustn’t, she warned herself, think of that. She was too tired, and too shocked. And indeed both were true” (239), thus ending her reflection in ambivalence. When claiming that “both were true” she explicitly states the way in which both interpretations are equally possible and, in doing so, forces the implied reader to perform that categorisation which the text refuses to make. The crucial point here then lies not in conclusive classification but rather in outlining the inherent power of the ‘cryptic’ text, its intrinsic ambiguity. As has become evident, that which is encrypted in visible invisibility becomes a productive agent in garnering a reaction, exactly because it remains ultimately opaque. Once uncertainty is endowed with the ‘cryptic,’ it thus comes to harbour potent deconstructive agency towards that which is visible, permanent, and normative – race, sexuality, identity.

In the final lines of the text, Irene curiously asserts Bellew’s innocence in Clare’s predicament, implying instead that Clare’s demise was an accidental fall: “No, no!” she protested. I’m quite certain that he didn’t. I was there, too. As close as he was. She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I—” (239). Upon giving her choked confession, Irene herself mirrors a metaphorical fall. The novella concludes with the following words: “Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned

her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark" (239). Quite tellingly, the text ends in darkness, opacity. Irene's final struggle for words culminates in a desperate speechlessness reminiscent of her choked, or rather, choking exclamation. Ending in uncertainty, the systemic undecidability that characterises *Passing* becomes a marker of a transgressive liminality which, in turn, offers the potential to question societal norms through the mediation of identity. Implementing the transgressive act of passing as a metaphor for identity construction, the act of racial passing thus disqualifies certainty anchored in race. contends that "Larsen's protagonists *assume* false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide. In one way or another, they all 'pass.' Passing for white, Larsen's novels remind us, is only one way this game is played" (98). The added homoerotic subtext of the novella further disqualifies certainty regarding sexuality for both Clare and Irene. Both of these aspects, sexuality and race, strongly tie into identity politics. And it is through the implementation of the ambiguity-as-crypt that the novella not only constructs the complexities of racial and sexual identity but simultaneously deconstructs them, culminating in an ending that becomes instrumental in hardening uncertainty rather than certainty, highlighting fluidity instead of stability. If we accept Manthia Diawara's contention that "[e]very narration places the spectator in a position of agency; and race, class and sexual relations influence the way in which this subjecthood is filled by the spectator" (33) it becomes evident that the power of the text is ultimately also the power of the reader whose momentary interpretation harnesses the power of transformation still, when actively encountering and reencountering interpretation. In the same manner as the *vexierbild*, *Passing* requires active interpretation and therefore demands the reader to position themselves politically vis-à-vis race, sexuality and identity over and over again.

References

Boring, Edwin G. “The ‘Gestalt’ Psychology and the ‘Gestalt’ Movement.” *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1930, pp. 308–315.

Brody, Jennifer DeVere. “Clare Kendry’s ‘True’ Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.” *Callaloo*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1992, pp. 1053–1065.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death: Literature in Secret*. Chicago UP, 1992.

Diawara, Manthia. “Black British Cinema: Spectatorship and Identity Formation in *Territories*.” *Public Culture*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1990, pp. 33–48.

Harrison-Kahan, Lori. “Her ‘Nig’: Returning the Gaze of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.” *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2002, pp. 109–138.

Harper, Phillip Brian. “Passing for What? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility.” *Callaloo*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1998, pp. 381–397.

Hill, W.E. *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law*. 1915. *Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ds.00175/.

hooks, bell. “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992, pp. 115–131.

Iser, Wolfgang. “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response to Prose Fiction.” *Aspects of Narrative*. Columbia UP, 1971, pp. 1–46.

---. “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.” *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1972, pp. 279–299.

Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand and Passing*. Serpent’s Tail, 2014.

McIntire, Gabrielle. “Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.” *Callaloo*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2012, pp. 778–794.

“Pass, V.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford UP, June 2024, doi: 10.1093/OED/1206119682.

Sullivan, Nell. “Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and the Fading Subject.” *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1998, pp. 373–386.

Wall, Cheryl, A. “Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen’s Novels.” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, 1986, pp. 97–111.

