

“Still Seeking for Something”: The Unspeakable (Loss) in “Passing” by Nella Larsen

*I am saturnine – bereft – disconsolate,
The Prince of Aquitaine whose tower has crumbled;
My lone star is dead – and my bespangled lute
Bears the Black Sun of Melancholia.
Gérard de Nerval, *El Desdichado*¹*

The Melancholic Souls

In his famous essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Sigmund Freud writes that the loss of an object normally provokes a reaction known as mourning. The mourner knows whom or what he/she lost and is aware that suffering is part of a normal process at the end of which a new life begins. Yet, Freud adds that in some people the same event produces melancholia instead of mourning. In many cases one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost. This situation is common in psychoanalysis, even when the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his/her melancholia, but only in the sense that he/she knows *whom* he/she has lost, but not *what* he/she has lost in him/her. Freud suggests therefore that melancholia is in some way related to an object lost which is withdrawn from consciousness.

The most striking characteristic of the melancholic personality is extreme diminution in self-regard: somehow the loss of an object has triggered an impoverishment of the self. As Freud puts it: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud, 1989: 585). In other words, while it would seem as though the loss suffered is that of an object, what the melancholic has actually experienced is a loss of self.

According to Julia Kristeva, the author of *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*, the melancholic suffers not from the Object but the Thing (French *Chose*) lost, which is “an unnamable, supreme good, something unrepresentable, that [...] no word could signify. [...] The Thing is inscribed within us without memory, the buried accomplice of our unspeakable anguishes” (1989: 13-14). Kristeva identifies the Thing with the Mother, by which she understands the pre-Oedipal Mother – the one strongly bonded to the child and then prohibited in the Name of the Father. The mother is the child’s first love which has to be abandoned in order to enable him or her to become the subject, which in Lacanian terms means to enter the language.

Kristeva emphasizes that even though the process of losing the maternal (semantic) in order to become part of the paternal (symbolic) is common to both the male and the female child, it is the girl who suffers more from the matricide. While the boy, entering the paternal sphere, identifies with the father and replaces the mother with another object of the opposite

¹ A quotation taken from Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia* (1989: 141).

sex, the girl has to return to the abandoned mother to identify with her in order to make herself an object of the opposite-sex desire. According to Kristeva, this is “an unbelievable symbolic effort,” as for the girl the act of killing the mother is, in fact, the act of killing herself. This thesis explains why, and sociology seconds the observation, depression (Kristeva uses this term interchangeably with that of melancholia) is more frequently called “a feminine disease:” “In the midst of its lethal ocean, the melancholy woman is the dead one that has always been abandoned within herself and can never kill outside herself” (30).

For Kristeva, as well as for Luce Irigaray, the only possible way to solve the problem of the melancholic and to halt his/her self-destructive drive is to “reveal the sexual (homosexual) secret of the depressive course of action that causes the melancholy person to *live with death* [...]” Thanks to this the melancholic is “able to integrate *loss* as signifiable as well as erogenic. The separation henceforth appears no longer as a threat of disintegration but as a *stepping stone* toward some other – conflictive, bearing Eros and Thanatos, open to both meaning and nonmeaning” (Kristeva, 83). Though recovery of the lost object (the maternal Thing) as an erotic object (the Object of desire) insures continuity in a metonymy of pleasure, for women, it means the necessity of being faced with “the dilemma of homosexual drive.”² And what, for Kristeva and especially for Irigaray, is expected to be an unquestionable value or at least an unavoidable consequence of the economy of desire (since lesbianism is understood as a re-creation or repetition of the primary mother-daughter (homosexual) attachment),³ for Judith Butler, it is not necessarily such a great feast of the mother-daughter reunion.

According to Butler, who in *Gender Trouble* juxtaposes Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” with his later work, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), “the taboo against homosexuality must *precede* the heterosexual incest taboo; the taboo against homosexuality in effect creates the heterosexual ‘dispositions’ by which the Oedipal conflict becomes possible” (Butler, 1999: 82). Butler’s comparative reading of Freud’s essays proves that he has separated identification (desire to be) from desire to have (desire for); for him these have been “two psychologically distinct ties:” “For Freud, desire for one sex is always secured through identification with the other sex; to desire and to identify with the same person at the same time is, in this model, a theoretical impossibility” (Rottenberg).

Butler notices that in heterosexual order a complicated process of gender identification and desire directed at the opposite sex, which is, at the same time, the process of one’s dealing

² Kristeva writes that the lost object may be recovered as erotic object (and this is the case of male heterosexuality or female homosexuality); transposed onto the other (sex) now eroticized (in case of heterosexual woman); or constructed into “sublime” erotic object (in social bonds, intellectual and aesthetic productions etc.). (28).

³ This is what Irigaray concludes in her essay “Body against Body: In Relation to the Mother” (1993).

with the loss of the object once loved and desired, is preceded by the total prohibition of desire for the same-sex object.⁴ It happens because the consolidation of the ego is always accompanied by the appearance of the ego ideal (super-ego), “which acts as a moral agency of various kinds. [...] As a set of sanctions and taboos, the ego ideal regulates and determines masculine and feminine identifications. Because identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications are the consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as prohibition” (79-80). Referring to Foucault, Butler calls desire for the same-sex object a “repressed” one and emphasizes that “the repressive law effectively produces heterosexuality, and acts not merely as a negative or exclusionary code, but as a sanction and, [...] as a law of discourse, distinguishing the speakable from the unspeakable (...), the legitimate from the illegitimate” (83-84).

Butler’s pessimistic or, if one prefers, realistic diagnosis proves that in patriarchal, heteronormative order there is no place for desire for the same-sex object and women are expected to appear in their relations with men only. Neither the mother-daughter relationship can be reactivated nor the Mother-Thing can be recovered as erotic object (other woman positioned as an object of desire). Thus the woman is doomed to eternal melancholy (the unfulfilled loss), as well as nostalgia, which, according to Lacan, “is the desire for the indefinable something” (Gallop, 1991: 150).

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), read through the lens of the theory of melancholy from Freud to Butler, confirms this observation. Analyzing the dynamic relationship between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, two protagonists of Larsen’s novella, one may figure out that under the surface of clearly expressed racial tensions, focused upon the dilemma of passing, there is a more deeply hidden problem – the one of gender identity and sexual desire. Or, putting it in other words, in Larsen’s text, there is a great accumulation of racial, gender and sexual tensions which remain unrelieved as long as the characters obey the rules of white, patriarchal and heteronormative society that represses any exception to these rules, and especially Black lesbian desire.

Claiming that Larsen’s female characters are “still seeking for something,” I am going to demonstrate that what they are really looking for is another woman: the object of desire and the link to the first lost object which is the Mother herself. The loss of the Mother combined with denial of desire for the same-sex object leads to melancholic self-destruction. As a result of women’s appearing in relations with men only and their supporting the traditional system

⁴ In other words, gender identification is a prize awarded to a person who has successfully dealt with the loss of the same-sex object once loved and desired. The person internalizes the lost object, identifies with it and at the same time transfers his/her desire onto a “fresh” object of the opposite sex. And the ego ideal, which emerges at that time, watches over the ego choices and morally scrutinizes its acts.

of values, they are doomed to loneliness and experience the loss for which they cannot even find words. Broken maternal genealogy and locked access to language, in which the female desire might be expressed, doom women to silence and squander their chances of building an alternative world to the existing one.

However, the melancholic sense of loss in Larsen's novella is not simply about the Mother-Thing, or, in other words, it does not concern the gender/sexuality issue only. For what Judith Butler demands in her analysis of *Passing* is not to separate race, sexuality, gender, and class: "not to affirm the primacy of sexual difference, but to articulate the convergent modalities of power by which sexual difference is articulated and assumed" (1993: 168). Therefore, I claim that the loss in Larsen's text has a much broader meaning, in and through which various aspects of human identity are expressed, including the sense of rootlessness, the lack of a sense of belonging, as well as deeply internalized denial of "undesirable" elements of one's identity, considered as such by the subject itself, though usually enforced on it by the social judgment. Thus in *Passing*, the loss can be understood as something which appears along with the split of self, irresolvable conflict between one's desires and severe restrictions imposed on the ego by the social norms and laws, and which results in nostalgia for the self left behind, without a possibility of return.

Paradise Lost

In his reading of Larsen's *Passing*, Biman Basu calls the first meeting between Irene and Clare after a twelve-year break in their acquaintance a "performance of [...] desire," which lasts until John Bellew, Clare's husband, disrupts it (Basu). Referring to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, I would like to explain this "performance" in terms of repetition of the mother-daughter relationship, a re-creation of the first love attachment between women, next given up in the Lacanian Name of the Father.

Hermeneutic analysis of Larsen's novella shows that the Irene-Clare encounter at the Drayton hotel restaurant bears a striking resemblance to the Demeter-Persephone encounter after the latter's return from Hades, where she spent some time kidnapped by the God of the Underworld. Like in the mythic story, in *Passing* too women recognize each other by smile, the tone of voice, and at last by the look. For Irene, Clare's eyes are not only "dark, almost black," but most of all "magnificent," "always luminous," "arresting, slow and mesmeric," and, interestingly, "mysterious and concealing." Irene sees that there is "something withdrawn and secret about them" (Larsen, 1995: 161) and both at the Drayton hotel and later at Clare's place she attempts to reveal the friend's secret.

Eye contact is very important in the Irene-Clare relationship. Women “look at each other,” “stare,” “gaze,” “glance” and “watch,” but from the beginning they have problems with giving each other a recognition. While Irene’s eyes are described as “unseeing” (149), Clare’s are “peculiar, dark and deep and unfathomable;” “the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart” (172). Cheryl A. Wall considers that “in ironic contrast to her name, Clare is an opaque character, impossible to ‘read’” (1995: 122).⁵ This paradoxical opacity is better understood when explained in reference to the name of Clare’s archetype, Persephone, meaning “she who destroys light” (or, in some versions, “she who brings death”).⁶ Like Persephone, who wanders between the Kingdom of the Underworld, where she reigns at her husband’s, Hades, side, and Eleusis, where she visits her mother, Demeter, Clare passes, mediating between two worlds, the white and the Black one. As a white woman, she enjoys the luxurious life and is held in high esteem by her environment, but what she really longs for is her return to the Black community represented by Irene: “‘For I am lonely, so lonely... cannot help to be with you again [...] You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of...’. [...] ‘and it’s your fault, ‘Rene, dear. At least partly. For I wouldn’t now, perhaps, have this terrible, *this wild desire* if I hadn’t seen you that time in Chicago...’” (145; emphasis mine).

It must be remembered that Clare, as Irene recalls it, was “taken away,” “stolen” from the Black community just like Persephone, kidnapped to the Kingdom of the Underworld; Clare literally “disappeared” (152) from the place she used to live, being at the same time blotted out of memory of her friends, including Irene. However, one “August, brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun pouring down rays that were like molten rain” (146), after twelve years of absence, clothed in “a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of *narcissuses*, jonquils, and *hyacinths* was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days” (148; emphases mine),⁷ Clare re-appeared like the Greek Goddess of Springtime and Rebirth, recognizing Irene at the white-only restaurant and exposing herself to Irene’s recognition.

⁵ Martha J. Cutter calls Clare „a mystery [...], a gap or blank, a screen onto which others project their own instabilities” (1996: 94).

⁶ It is interesting to observe how the meaning of Clare’s name (light) is being exposed in the text, the effect of which has been achieved through a combination of significant colors of Clare’s clothes (red, gold), as well as a juxtaposition of colors contrasting Clare’s appearance (“Clare fair and golden, like a sunlit day” (205)) with that of her environment (“Hazelton dark, with gleaming eyes, like a moonlit night” (205)). Clare’s death has been in turn described as a fading of the light: “One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (239).

⁷ As Laura Strong emphasizes in her analysis of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, “most versions of the story of Persephone, including the *Hymn to Demeter*, say that Persephone was wandering through an entire meadow of beautiful flowers including roses, crocuses, violets, irises and hyacinths, when the most lovely of them all caught her eye. It was the sweet-smelling narcissus with one hundred blooms, ‘a flower wondrous and bright, awesome to see, for the immortals above and for mortals below’” (Strong).

Irene, who in my reading of *Passing* stands for the figure of ancient Demeter, the Mother Goddess,⁸ is not able to recognize Clare by her eyes, which remain “mysterious” and “strange,” but also seem to her to be “seductive,” “provocative,” “caressing;” she has a “peculiar mellowing” smile, a “husky” voice, and “a lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was like a thrill and also like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling” (151).

According to Julia Kristeva, author of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, such act of recognition by the tone of voice, laugh, smell, touch, taste is characteristic for the mother-child relationship in the pre-Oedipal phase, called here the semantic. What Kristeva argues, along with Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, is that before the child enters the paternal (symbolic) sphere, ruled by the Father – his voice (Lacan) and gaze (Freud) – he/she “speaks” the Mother tongue, which is that of the body, senses, emotions, inexpressible and unreadable in phallogocentric discourse. Only in relationship with the Mother’s body one may experience *jouissance*, the highest form of enjoyment that “fractures the structures of signification through which the subject knows himself or herself” (Middleton, 1990: 261). The recognition by smile, laugh and “husky voice,” experienced by Clare and Irene, is then a kind of repetition or re-creation of the mother-daughter relationship in which both women discover *jouissance* that does not need and does not find words to be expressed in.⁹

However, as Biman Basu points out, the happy feast of the mother-daughter reunion, or “performance of desire,” cannot last long and is soon disrupted by Clare’s husband, John Bellew, whose coming home is called “the aggressive return of the father” (Basu).¹⁰ Two words, “hello Nig,” spoken by Bellew in his loud booming voice (Andrew W. Ross reads Bellew’s name as a homophone of “bellow”), may be understood as the Father’s “no,” prohibiting the Mother’s body to the child and threatening with castration. When Bellew says that he “hates niggers” and there is “no place for niggers” in his family, he is not aware that he directs these words at Black women, one of which is his wife, who is passing for white. Nevertheless, he achieves his goal: he disrupts the mother-daughter harmony, or, to be more precise, he destroys the female sexual bond re-established as a fragile imitation of the first,

⁸ My reconnaissance of Irene as Larsen’s Demeter (the Mother Goddess) is mainly made on the basis of description of her relations with the children who are the most important to her: “I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I *am* wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can’t help it” (210).

⁹ According to Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, the laugh is the “volcanic capacity to break up the ‘truth’ of a phallogocentric order,” or something that “lifts inhibitions by breaking through prohibitions” (after Gubar, 1997: 129). The laugh has a revolutionary power to destroy the patriarchal order, which is why it is prohibited in the patrilineal, patri-centered world.

¹⁰ It is interesting to observe how the change in the mother-daughter relationship, before and after the father’s return, is accompanied by the weather change. As a happy encounter between Irene and Clare takes place on a hot and sunny day, which symbolizes the universal harmony, Bellew’s return is accompanied by rain, fog and darkness, symbolizing (d)anger and destruction.

created and then forgotten, homosexual attachment.¹¹ Clare, an object of desire through which the erotic Thing might be recovered, is thus given up by Irene, abandoned in the Name (Law) of the Father. Leaving Clare's party, Irene thinks: "The chances were one in a million that she would ever again lay eyes on Clare Kendry. If, however, that millionth chance should turn up, she had only to turn away her eyes, *to refuse her recognition*" (178; emphasis mine).

According to Irigaray, the myth of Demeter and Persephone, classically read as a victory of life over death, a glorious treatise on rebirth, is one of the most mournful myths of our culture; one that clearly demonstrates women's broken genealogy, women's enslavement in the patriarchal order, loneliness and abandonment, as well as the matricide, which precedes the Freudian patricide.¹² The lost mother and destroyed relationship with her body doom woman to silence, as she forgets the Mother tongue and is not able to speak that of the Father, which is a "foreign language" to her, and issue a denial of her desire. Irene, who, at the sound of Bellew's words, breaks off her relationship with Clare¹³ and represses those (unconscious) impulses, which have not been even defined by and inside her, dooms herself to melancholia, the longing for the lost object of desire, and nostalgia – "a desire constitutively unsatisfied and unsatisfiable because its 'object' simply cannot be defined," and it cannot be defined "because of repression" (Gallop: 151).¹⁴

In her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray calls the mother-daughter relationship "the dark continent of the Dark Continent," emphasizing its indefinable character, inaccessible to and unrecognizable by women themselves; depressive. Although Irigaray refers metaphorically to the women's (gender) identity and (sexual) desire rather than literally to Africa,¹⁵ one may combine the two meanings (gender/sexual uncertainty and racial unstable

¹¹ Neil Sullivan explains the meaning of Bellew's words in a slightly different way. According to him, "the invocation of 'nigger,' 'nig' [...] and other racial slurs results in the aphanisis of the subject, for the meanings assigned to these words eclipse the being of the 'racial' subject so named. Lacan refers to this eclipse as the 'fading of the subject' behind the signifier" (Sullivan).

¹² Though for the purpose of my examination of the Irene-Clare relationship I recall the myth of Demeter and Persephone, I do not use it literally. Rather than compare the plot of *Passing* with that of the mythic story and trace the similarities between Irene and Demeter, as well as between Clare and Persephone, I focus on the analysis of the women's relations in the patriarchy. I regard the myth of Demeter and Persephone as an allegory of the women's fate in the patriarchal order; the one marked by melancholia, silence, and denial of desire; the one in which the act of either literal or symbolic murder of other woman is considered as a sacrifice made for one's own survival, though turning out to be self-destructive at the end.

¹³ Sullivan points out that even though Bellew's offensive words are not directed at Irene, which is confirmed by Brian: "[...] the man, her husband, didn't call you a nigger. There's a difference, you know" (Larsen, 184), she is panicked and eager to break off her relationship with Clare in order to protect herself from disappearance, or, using Ralph Ellison's metaphor, from "becoming invisible" (Sullivan). Since Franz Fanon notices, "for black subjects in dialogue with white Other, the answer must always be: 'Turn white or disappear'" (Fanon, 1967: 100).

¹⁴ Butler says that "the loss of the homosexual object requires the loss of the aim *and* the object. In other words, the object is not only lost, but the desire fully denied, such that 'I never lost that person and I never loved that person, indeed never felt that kind of love at all'" (1999: 88).

¹⁵ Calling the mother-daughter relationship "the dark continent of the Dark Continent," Irigaray refers to Freud's name for female sexuality, expressed in his famous essay "Femininity" (1933).

identity/unknown background), having in mind the twists and turns of the lives of Larsen's characters, as well as the novel's epigraph from "Heritage" by Countée Cullen: "One three centuries removed/ From the scenes his fathers loved,/ Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,/ What is Africa to me?". In Larsen's novella, Africa, the Dark Continent, stands for the place and time one would like to return, but "the return cannot be imagined because one does not know the 'object'" (Gallop: 151). Like the desire to return to "an earlier state" (maternal), the one of the return to the "Black roots" has to be suppressed, as everything that disturbs white, patriarchal and heteronormative order (undermines trust in Father's authority) is always repressed and prohibited.

Thus the first encounter after twelve years between Clare and Irene not only brings back their childhood memories, but also awakens an indefinable desire, grounded in the act of re-creation of the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship, quickly broken in the Name of the Father. The reminiscence of the maternal body, desired though prohibited, combined with that of the Black roots, renounced though yearned for, evokes a sense of loss, especially Irene's: "And all the while, on the rushing ride out to her *father's house*, Irene Redfield was trying to understand the look on Clare's face as she had said good-bye. Partly mocking, it had seemed, and partly menacing. And *something else* for which she *could find no name*. For an instant a recrudescence of that *sensation of fear* which she had had while looking into Clare's eyes that afternoon touched her. A slight *shiver* ran over her" (176; emphases mine). Irene, who chooses the paternal at the cost of the maternal, is not able to define the loss she suffers from because the one has been deeply repressed and Irene cannot find words to name it (a woman cut off from the Mother tongue is speechless in phallogocentric discourse). As Butler puts it, "melancholy results in the failure to displace into words; indeed, the place of the maternal body is established in the body, 'encrypted' [...] and given permanent residence there as a dead and deadening part of the body or one inhabited or possessed by phantasms of various kinds" (1999: 87).

Irene's repressed desire for Clare and, through her, for the lost maternal Black Thing leads her to desperation, which begins with the destruction of Clare's letters and ends with the murder of Clare, aligned with Irene's self-destruction. For Butler, Irene is a sad example of a slave (a victim possibly) who supports the dominant (white, male, heterosexual) order, regardless of its destructive influence on all those defined as "Others:" "[...] this drama displays in all its painfulness the ways in which the interpellation of the white norm is reiterated and executed by those it would – and does – vanquish" (1993: 185). And for Cheryl Wall, passing, read in this context, "represents both the loss of racial identity and the denial of self required of women who conform to restrictive gender roles" (131). It also stands for the

passing-off opportunity to re-create the mother-daughter bond, re-establish the primary (homo)sexual attachment, as well as return to “an earlier state” – “a culture known in childhood” (Sheehy).

Dilemmas of the Narcissistic Self

In his reading of Larsen’s *Passing*, Neil Sullivan regards the mirror scene in Irene’s bedroom as the key one for the characters’ fate. When Irene is looking in the mirror, Clare enters, and the presence of the mirror creates an ambiguity concerning the meaning of the phrase “the woman before her,” as it could refer both to Clare and to Irene’s reflection in the mirror: “For Clare had come softly into the room without knocking, and before Irene could greet her, had dropped a kiss on her dark curls. Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare’s two hands in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: ‘Dear God! But aren’t you lovely, Clare!’” (194). For Sullivan, this scene proves the oscillation between Irene’s (narcissistic) “desire for Clare and identification with her” (Sullivan).

Read through the lens of the Lacanian theory of the “mirror stage” the scene shows Irene’s problems with self-identification and recognition of her own desire. According to Lacan, though the mirror scene is crucial for the origin of the subject (the infant identifies himself or herself as “I,” as subject, after seeing his/her image in the mirror), it always involves *méconnaissance*, or misrecognition, because the (idealized) image seen in the mirror is not the self: “The mirror stage is a *drama* whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject... the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality... and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of *alienating identity* which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development. Thus to break out of the circle of the Innenwelt into the Urnwelt generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego’s verifications” (Lacan, 4; emphases mine). Being a turning point in the chronology of self, the “mirror stage” involves the subject in a complex and mutually reflective relationship with the “other.” Mistaking an image of self for the Other, the subject becomes involved in narcissistic love, the consequence of which is always (self)destruction.

In front of the mirror Irene adopts Clare as her ideal image, the image superior to her own (“Clare Kendry was just a shade too good-looking” (198)), though bearing resemblance to that of her own. Yet, like in the classic Lacanian “mirror stage,” Irene mistakes herself for

Clare.¹⁶ The consequence of the mistake is a blend of admiration and mistrust, love and hatred, as well as a sense of guilt evoked by the combination of those emotions. At one moment Irene has the feeling that Clare and her “were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in desires and ambitions. [...] Since childhood their lives had never really touched” (192), but the other moment the feeling is gone and Irene cannot help giving into Clare’s wishes: “She was angry with herself and with Clare. But more with herself [...]. Clare, it seemed, still retained her ability to secure the thing that she wanted [...]. About her there was some quality, hard and persistent, with the strength and endurance of rock, that would not be beaten or ignored” (201).

There is something in Clare that makes her desirable though frightening at the same time (“Clare Kendry. Stepping always on the edge of danger” (143); “[...] a little mysterious and strange, someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity” (209)). Irene does not know what it is (“seductive smile”?, “husky voice”?, “hypnotic eyes”?)¹⁷ and cannot even define her own desire, the one of controlling/mastering Clare, devouring her, becoming (with) her. The “strange” relationship between Irene and Clare is described in terms of “an illicit love-affair” (194), as well as a combination of “joy” and “vexation” (208). The sense of lack and indefinable loss accompanies this relationship and casts a shadow over it.¹⁸

In the second crucial mirror scene, instead of Clare’s, Irene meets the eyes of Brian. This is when she finds out (or suspects rather) that Brian and Clare have an affair. This is also when she discerns that her own image is separate from that of Clare’s, or, in other words, that “between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood” (192): “In the mirror before her she saw that he was still regarding her with that air of slight amazement. [...] For a long minute she sat in strained

¹⁶ This situation may also be examined and explained in terms of what Freud calls „the uncanny,” here “the double,” whose source is the primary narcissism of the child, its self-love. In early childhood this produces projections of multiple selves. By doing this the child insures his/her immortality. But when it is encountered later in life, after childhood narcissism has been overcome, the double invokes a sensation of the uncanny – a return to a primitive state. But Freud also relates the double to the formation of the super-ego. The super-ego projects all the things it represses onto this primitive image of the double. Hence the double in later life is experienced as something uncanny because it calls forth all this repressed content. (Freud, 2003).

¹⁷ According to Catherine Rottenberg, what makes Clare so desirable to Irene, as well as distracting, is her „counterhegemonic performance of ‘blackness,’ which can be seen as an attempt to reevaluate the desirability of ‘desiring to be black.’” As whiteness (the white way of life) is what Irene aspires to, Clare’s “wild desire” to return to the Black community seems bold and attractive though strange. Clare proves that passing is possible and works in both ways. It is a “hazardous,” “dangerous business,” yet extremely exciting, and Irene becomes seduced by the idea of it.

¹⁸ Interestingly, all Larsen’s female characters are defined in terms of (uncontrollable) desire, being a symptom of lack (Sullivan). But while some of them are able to name it and make an effort to fulfill it (for example, Clare is ready to “do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away” to “get the things [she] wants badly enough” (210)), the others blindly search for the reasons of their pain and often choose the wrong ways to ease it (for example, Helga Crane of *Quicksand* (1928), “done with soul-searching” (Larsen, 121), literally gives up her life when she marries a preacher from Alabama and gives birth to five children). Finally, there are characters who totally deny their desire/lack/loss, the method of which edges them slowly to self-destruction (this is the case of Irene).

stiffness. *The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out* by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind. Impossible for her to put it immediately into words or give it outline, for, prompted by some impulse of self-protection, she recoiled from exact expression” (217-218; emphasis mine). What Irene sees in the mirror now is her own face, the self unaccompanied by the “shadow of an object” (Freud), unmasked, naked, revealing its own impotence and fear.

According to Butler, an alleged affair between Clare and Brian acts only as a pretext for an unresolved conflict between Irene and Clare, or, to be more precise, for Irene’s inner battle against herself, and Brian acts only as a surrogate object for Irene’s desire for Clare: “Irene passes her desire for Clare through Brian; he becomes the phantasmatic occasion for Irene to consummate her desire for Clare, but also to deflect from the recognition that it is *her* desire which is being articulated through Brian” (1993: 179). Irene cannot admit that it is Clare whom she secretly desires for, as deeply internalized prohibition (that of the super-ego which works as a moral agency watching over the ego) halts her. Instead, she uses the alleged affair to crush the enemy, whom, she suspects, is Clare: “[...] she was very tired of Clare Kendry. She wanted to be free of her, and of her furtive comings and goings. If something would only happen...” (224).

What is interesting in Freud’s (and those following him) notion of melancholia is the fact that the object of desire evokes not only the self’s unfulfilled (unhappy) love and longing but hatred as well, which at the end turns out to be the hatred against oneself: “I love that object [...], but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am nonexistent, I shall kill myself” (Kristeva, 11). Loving Clare, Irene at the same time hates her, as she hates the part of herself that is responsible for the longing for the prohibited object. The loss, lack and constant mistaking herself for Clare and Clare for herself evokes Irene’s frustration, which bursts out with a huge strength: “It was gone, leaving in its place *an almost uncontrollable impulse* to laugh, to scream, to hurl things about. She wanted, suddenly, to shock people, *to hurt* them, to make them notice her, to be aware of her suffering” (219; emphases mine). At one moment a certain plan takes shape in Irene’s head, the one of “ridding her forever of Clare Kendry” (225).¹⁹

¹⁹ According to Catherine Rottenberg, Irene’s main problem, which she is not able to deal with successfully, is her racial identity, or, to be more precise, her being torn between her identification with Blackness and desire to be white. Since “white racist regimes create a distinct bifurcation between identification and ‘desire-to-be,’ [...] certain subjects are encouraged to privilege and thus desire attributes associated with whiteness, but currently these same objects are forced to identify as black” (Rottenberg). As whiteness circulates as an ideal, Irene desires it and aspires to be white, though never admits it openly (for example, she occasionally passes for white, as well as conforms her way of life to the norms of white society). At the same time she carries “the burden of her race”

As for the melancholic the desire to kill the object of love alternates with a deeply rooted need to protect it, Irene is not able to decide at once whether and how to get rid of Clare. Neil Sullivan observes that before killing Clare physically (and he is sure that a murder indeed took place), Irene symbolically destroys Clare's body by tearing her letters to pieces and smashing a white china teacup. Yet she still shudders with fear to reveal Clare's secret: "She drew a quick, sharp breath. [...] Strange, she had not before realized how easily she could put Clare out of her life! She had only to tell John Bellew that his wife— No. Not that!" (225). Hiding behind "the burden of race," she secretly wants to save Clare, to give her protection. That is why she "refuses recognition to John Bellew," when she meets him in the street. Still not ready for definite separation from Clare, Irene dreams of setting her free, though, at the same time, she is aware that she cannot allow this: "If Clare was freed, anything might happen" (236).

According to Kristeva, "depressive persons cannot endure Eros, they prefer to be with the Thing up to the limit of negative narcissism leading them to Thanatos. They are defended against Eros by sorrow but without defense against Thanatos because they are wholeheartedly tied to the Thing" (20). Irene has to kill Clare because only this act will allow her to survive, and, paradoxically, save Clare. If Clare dies, Irene wins back her own "security," "tranquility," and assurance that her secret (desire for Clare) remains unrevealed; ridding herself of Clare, she rids herself of the Other, the uncanny double, with whom her life has been alternated since childhood. Obviously, Clare's secret remains safe too, as her death puts an end to the "hazardous," "dangerous business" of passing. In that context, as Butler notices, "passing carries the double meaning of crossing the color line and crossing over into death: passing as a kind of passing on" (1993: 183).

As Martha J. Cutter and Biman Basu observe, Clare has to die because in the society adhering to "stiff divisions" and "distinct boundaries" there is no place for "exotic hybrids" and "fluid identities" like her. According to Judith Butler and Neil Sullivan, she cannot survive because, as the Other, she represents everything that undermines trust to (white, heterosexual) Father's authority: "racial crossing," "sexual infidelity" etc. Yet, as both Butler and Sullivan point out, Irene is also not able to escape from her own destiny, aligned closely with that of Clare's: "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of

and attempts to fulfill the "duty" to the Black community she feels a part of; however, she never really considers Blackness as "desirable." Before encountering Clare, Irene is able to reconcile these internal contradictions, but when Clare enters her life, Irene realizes that she cannot exist between Blackness and whiteness. Making Blackness "desirable" (Rottenberg) and, what is more, demonstrating that one does not need to stick to his or her racial/gender/sexual identity (Cutter), Clare destroys Irene's internalized and perfectly balanced order. Unlike Helga Crane, "unable to mediate between these two inadequate constructs [the Afro-American, as well as the American experience – A.M.]," and becoming thus "a psychological exile" (Wall, 117-118), Irene Redfield has to repress her own uncertainties in order to win back her tranquility. The murder of Clare, who remains the main reason of her sense of ambiguity, is to be a way out of Irene's identity dilemma.

red and gold. The next she was gone” (239). Sullivan reads Irene’s faint at the end of the novel as her symbolic death, bearing a striking resemblance to Clare’s literal death: “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” (242). This shows that in case of the melancholic person the destruction of the other is always connected with self-destruction, as the self cannot live without the other.²⁰ For the lives of those two are alternated – Clare is Irene’s dearest lost object, her own image reflected in the mirror – they are forced to endlessly repeat their “performance of masochist desire” (Basu). And if Kristeva is right, “desire to cause the other’s death [...] can be narrated as a sexual desire to joy in rival or to give her jouissance. For that reason, depression appears as the veil of a *blank perversion* – one that is dreamed of, desired, even thought through, but unmentionable and forever impossible. [...] Melancholia’s unbounded activity [...] secretly cathezes perversion in the most inflexible feature of the law – constraint, duty, destiny, and even the fatality of death” (82).

According to Butler, Irene’s attempt to support the Father’s order and to maintain *status quo* (by ridding of the Other who threatens it) symbolizes women’s (here Black lesbians’) enslavement and self-destruction in patriarchal (white, heterosexual) society. Even though one may read Irene’s act of killing Clare as “desire to give her jouissance,” one has to remember that jouissance is indefinable in phallogocentric discourse, unrecognizable and unspeakable away from the maternal sphere (which is lost forever). In other words, Irene’s act is, as befits the melancholic, a “suicidal mission,”²¹ squandering the chance to establish “the alternative world,” where the “queering rage” would no longer be turned against the self and the other, both female, but against social regulatory norms with deathly rituals they engage women (Butler, 1993: 185).

Antigone’s Kinswomen

²⁰ Kristeva observes that the melancholic person is a „split subject,” „disintegrated body” that constantly „falls into pieces” (18). In his analysis of the ending of *Passing*, Sullivan confirms this observation noticing that “Irene herself shatters once Clare actually experienced corporal disintegration, for she cannot ‘separate... herself from Clare Kendry’” (Sullivan). In other words, the I constructed with great care during the mirror stage is now doomed to “the aggressive disintegration,” meaning the return to chaos.

²¹ Similar “suicidal mission” is undertaken by Helga Crane who marries the poor Alabama preacher and gives birth to five children, burring herself in a place she does not belong to and living a life that is not her own. Neil Sullivan, referring to *A Spy in the Enemy’s Country* by Donald Petesch, finds a parallel among the fates of Clare, Irene, and Helga Crane: “The violence done to the self in *Quicksand* becomes the violence done to the other in *Passing*. And Helga Crane’s sinking into quicksand becomes Clare Kendry’s fall to her death. The wrenchings of racial ambivalence and desire are violently stilled.” After Petesch, Sullivan observes that “Irene’s violence is like Helga Crane’s self-destructiveness. Though projected eternally, Irene’s actions issue from her own internal conflicts and ultimately end in her own destruction” (Sullivan).

For Luce Irigaray, the myth of Antigone like that of Demeter and Persephone shows clearly that the women's genealogy has been broken. Replacing her mother Jocasta within patriarchal structures (becoming not only Oedipus' darling but his guide as well), Antigone cannot identify with her but by death. However, this self-destructive gesture means the woman's voluntary exclusion from the society, as well as her symbolic annihilation. Supporting the Father's order, Antigone becomes the guardian of other women and their social death.

According to Agata Araszkiewicz, the author of *Wypowiadam wam moje życie. Melancholia Zuzanny Ginczanki* [*I Declare You My Life. Melancholy of Zuzanna Ginczanka*] (2001), dedicated to the life and artistic work of the Polish-Jewish poetess of the interwar period, killed by the Nazis, Antigone stands for a symbol of the woman's melancholia. Separated from her mother, disinherited, she is doomed to loneliness and suffers from a feeling of alienation. Her return to the motherland is impossible ("the dark continent"), and the fatherland remains a foreign country to her.

Nella Larsen's life and artistic work was part of Antigone's heritage. As the daughter of a Danish immigrant mother and an African American father, Larsen was doubly marginalized in American society, but when her mother remarried a white man, Larsen found herself even more excluded from the family. Cheryl A. Wall writes that "along with the alienation experienced at home, she was ostracized at school and in the neighborhood" (91). Wherever she went (college, Denmark), whatever she did (working as a nurse, librarian, writer), whoever she met (Black or white), "her status as outsider remained unchanged" (91). The accusation of plagiarism after the publication of a short story, "Sanctuary," in 1930, was such a shock to her that she decided to remain anonymous until her death in 1964. As Judith Butler has put it, Larsen slipped into "such a living death" (1993: 185), just like the characters of her novels – Irene of *Passing* and Helga Crane of *Quicksand*. In the context of her life, the titles of her two famous novels take on a new meaning, as Wall notices: "Like 'quicksand,' 'passing' is a metaphor of death and desperation, and it is similarly supported by images of asphyxiation, suffocation, and claustrophobia" (131).

The shadowy portrait of Larsen's life suggests many parallels between her and her fictional characters. Like them, she suffered from unnamable loss and indefinable desire, experienced lack and exclusion; persistently tried to understand that "disturbing strangeness within herself: being one's own stranger – being split" (Araszkiewicz, 178): "Frankly the question came to this: *what was the matter with her?* Was there, without her knowing it, *some peculiar lack* in her? Absurd. But she began have a feeling of discouragement and

hopelessness. Why couldn't she be happy, content, somewhere?" (Larsen, 81; emphases mine).

According to Kristeva, the answer to those questions could easily be learnt from her own face: "the Face of the Stranger," with its "inner boundary, a constant invitation to an inaccessible journey that does not know its own destiny" (Araszkiewicz, 179). These words relating to Zuzanna Ginczanka²² may undoubtedly concern Nella Larsen as well. What the Jewess Ginczanka once said: "I am like a Negro," the Mulatta Larsen could paraphrase and refer to herself: "I am like a Jew." And both were women. And for the strangers, others, "[the] bespangled lute/ bears the *Black Sun of Melancholia*" (Nerval, "El Desdichado"), which comes like "death inevitable/ like the needle circulating in veins" (Ginczanka, "Strangeness").

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²² In many details, Zuzanna Ginczanka's life resembled that of Nella Larsen's. Born in 1917, she was a daughter of a Jewish couple living in Poland. Her parents divorced right after her birth and moved to the West; her father worked as an actor in Berlin and then in Hollywood; her mother remarried a Czech brewer and moved to Spain. Ginczanka was brought up by her grandmother. She was a gifted poetess, heart and soul of the Warsaw interwar artistic circles; by friends called a "Zion star," a "Jewish gazelle." According to Agata Araszkiewicz, Ginczanka's fate indeed resembled the fate of a fading star. Having eye-catching Jewish features, Ginczanka spent all of World War II in hiding (Warsaw, Cracow, Lvov). Unfortunately, she was caught and executed by a firing squad in December 1944, a few months before the liberation. She is the author of a single volume of poetry, *O centaurach [On Centaurs]*, 1936.

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