Just Between Us Did the Love Affair Maim You Too?
A Study in Female Reclamation

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Abstract

The rise of the "Female Gaze" in cinema as a means of retelling and reframing female stories within literature has become an important response to study. The female gaze uses three primary viewpoints: the individual filming, the viewer, and the character(s) present on screen. Through a combination of feminist and film theories, I argue that the female gaze has allowed for a more complex, nuanced, and accurate understanding of past works within modern storytelling. This thesis focuses on director Rebecca Hall's 2021 film, *Passing,* and Apple TV's series, *Dickinson,* to tie together the idea of using the female gaze to reclaim narratives, spaces, and discussions. In *Dickinson'*s case, the series re-examines the life of Emily Dickinson, labeling her as a war poet for the first time in American history. In *Passing*'s case, the film re-examines the relationship between the two central characters (Irene and Clare), labeling Clare as a hunter instead of a victim. In general, the purpose of this thesis is to examine a rising literary movement within modern media, exploring how this movement reworks older literature and contemporizes it.

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To my committee, thank you for being patient and working with me. To Dr. Hall, thank you for always pushing me to have more interpretation and a more perfect draft.

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DEDICATION

To my brother, Luke. He has been there for me every day and throughout my entire journey at Valdosta State. Without him, I would not be here today.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis will examine the ways in which the female gaze is used in the film *Passing* and Apple TV's show *Dickinson* to understand how feminist film theory is reclaiming and retelling stories/tropes that have been historically dominated and controlled by the male gaze. This developmental movement reveals how the entertainment industry is evolving towards more inclusivity and a developed female gaze.

In connection with historical movements like Feminism or Civil Rights, literary movements often stem and reflect the history of the times. For example, First-Wave French Feminism developed in response to the French Revolution in 1799, or Second-Wave French Feminism in response to the 1940s World War II. In both cases, and with almost every movement, prior findings and movements are re-evaluated and evolved. Literary movements are constantly in flux and development. And in the contemporary era of the 2020s, such developments are hard to track due to such an oversaturation of markets with television on film and streaming services pushing out endless content, and self-publishing allowing for a variety of music and writing to flood the market. This thesis seeks to observe one of these growing movements by looking across a variety of contemporary literature to develop what the movement is, where it takes inspiration from, and what it is saying. To do so, we must first breakdown the history of said movement: the female gaze within cinema used in relation to an era of reclamation.

The Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey is often accredited with the coinage and development of the term "male gaze" in her 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The essay uses

"psychoanalysis to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him" (Mulvey 803). She finds that in the real world, "the function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is two fold," noting that women symbolize the "castration threat by her real absence of a penis and second thereby raises her child into the symbolic" order (Mulvey 804). Additionally, she explores how the cinema "structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking" to code the "erotic into the language of the dominate patriarchal order" in mainstream films (Mulvey 805). In doing so, she uses Freud and Lacan's concepts to develop the term, the "male gaze."

The male gaze begins with Freud's development of the concept of *scopophilia*, which refers to pleasure gained from looking at and being looked at (Mulvey 806). Mulvey argues that narcissism, voyeurism, and exhibitionism are all linked with scopophilia starting with the mirror stage of human development (when a "child recognizes its own image in the mirror") (807). Connecting this idea with films, Mulvey argues that audience members were encouraged to forget their own worlds and slip inside the world seen through the male protagonist on screen. In connection to the mirror stage, male audience members identify with these male protagonists and project their gaze and desires to the male protagonists' gaze and desires, which in turn allows men to own the women on screen and use them as a form of fetishism (Mulvey 807-08). This, either consciously or unconsciously, leads to a male triangle: the male desire of the director and what he wants and sees, the male desire of the male characters and what they want and see, and the male desire of the viewer and what they want and see. This triangle of male gazes' bridges into two modes: voyeurism (looking at the woman as an object to be looked at) and fetishism (looking at the woman as a dangerous yet reassuring form of possible castration) (Mulvey 811).

In terms of fetishism and castration, the female character must die or be revealed as lacking to resolve that castration anxiety.

In a broader sense, Mulvey argues that men are active forces, whereas women are passive forces "simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (808-09). In terms of what male directors use women for, women have two roles on screen: to be an "erotic object for the characters within the screen story" and to be an "erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (Mulvey 809). They become performers within the narrative, simultaneously under the gaze of the "spectator and that of the male characters in the film . . . without breaking narrative verisimilitude" (Mulvey 809). She notes that both directors Josef von Sternberg and Alfred Hitchcock utilize the male gaze within their works, with Mulvey noting that Sternberg relies on fetishistic scopophilia, while Hitchcock relies on both the fetishistic and the voyeuristic in their directing and storytelling. And in conclusion, Mulvey states that to challenge and eliminate the male gaze, the camera must be freed with a restructure to the way movies are filmed and a rise in a new feminist filmmaking.

The Female Gaze

While this thinking had a major impact on film theory, this idea of a male dominate gaze, or a patriarchal society was not new. According to Critical Theory specialist Lois Tyson, a broad definition of feminist criticism is that it "examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (79). For this paper, and as Tyson notes, the "word gender refers not to our anatomy but to our behavior as socially programmed men and women" (88).

In terms of feminist criticism, there are a great number of theorists to pull from and study, so for the sake of specificity and simplicity, this paper will be looking at French feminism, as it is most in line with Mulvey's thinking at the time. For example, 1960s and 70s French feminism stated that "patriarchal thinking believes that women are born to be passive while men are born to be active because it is natural for the sexes to be different in this way. Thus, if a woman is not passive, she is not really a woman" (Tyson 98). Feminist writer Hélène Cixous took the idea that women are passive and argued for a "new, feminine language that undermines or eliminates the patriarchal binary thinking that oppresses and silences women," something Cixous called *Écriture feminine* (or feminine writing) (Tyson 96). This feminine writing is exactly what Mulvey called for in response to the male gaze within film lenses.

In her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous urges women to write about women, and men to write about men. One primary reason for this argument is that:

> with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity; exceptions so rare, in fact, that, after plowing through literature across languages, cultures, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission. It is well known that the number of women writers (while having increased very slightly from the nineteenth century on) has always been ridiculously small. This is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of female writers we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women (as sensitive-intuitive-dreamy, etc.) (878).

To solve that, women must write with the aim at uplifting women and forming their own identities, “because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history” (Cixous 880). In other words, Cixous believes that much of the current state of literature (during her time of writing this in 1975) is aimed at keeping women locked away and repressed.

In a similar vein, French theorist Luce Irigaray argued that “much of women’s subjugation occurs in the form of psychological repression enacted through the medium of language” (Tyson 97). Like Mulvey, Irigaray noticed that women were seen as “just a mirror” for male masculinity, pointing out that Freud was “projecting the masculine fear of castration onto women when he hypothesized that women suffer from penis envy, that they feel they have been castrated” (Tyson 97). In response to Freud, she noted that “the clitoris is conceived as a little penis pleasant to masturbate so long as castration anxiety does not (for the boy child), and the vagina is valued for the ‘lodging’ it offers the male organ when the forbidden hand has to find a replacement for pleasure-giving” (Irigaray 23). In other words, women are lesser than men because they represent what a man once was before castration during development, and that their role in society was to serve as a sign of why masculinity is better than femininity (thinking that because the clitoris is a “little penis,” it is an inferior form of anatomy).

In fact, much like Mulvey, Irigaray focused on patriarchal power and the act of looking, or what other theorists labeled the male gaze, where “the man looks; the woman is looked at” (Tyson 97). In comparison to Mulvey’s notion that women have a looked-at-ness, Irigaray states that “Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies” (25). In the male dominated world, she found that there is little “room neither

for women's sexuality, nor for women's imaginary, nor for women's language to take (their) place" (Irigaray 33). Her solution for this male gaze was as follows:

> For women to undertake tactical strikes, to keep themselves apart from men long enough to learn to defend their desire, especially through speech, to discover the love of other women while sheltered from men's imperious choices that put them in the position of rival commodities, to forge for themselves a social status that compels recognition, to earn their living in order to escape from the condition of the prostitute . . . these are certainly indispensable stages in the escape from their proletarization on the exchange market (33).

In other words, she was calling for the development of *womanspeak*, women-only groups that would develop "nonpatriarchal ways of thinking and speaking" (Tyson 97). A contemporary example of womanspeak can be seen in 2016's *Ghostbusters* or 2018's *Ocean's 8*, where the main cast is made up entirely of women who work as a unit to take down the evil man in power (representative of the patriarchy). During their time together, the women typically use problem solving not often used by men (nonpatriarchal thinking).

All these concepts contributed to the development of a more contemporary term: the female gaze. Since the concept's introduction in Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975, the female gaze has been hotly debated. The biggest issue is seemingly how to define it. The most common way used to define it is to list what it is not. As film scholar Caetlin Benson-Allott comments:

> It is not the male gaze, the patriarchal organization of film language and narrative for (heterosexual) male pleasure. Nor can it simply denote female directors, writers, producers, or cinematographers, since women have proven just as capable of manufacturing sexist media as men. Some of the women-helmed, female-driven dramas on TV today do offer compelling examples of television embracing feminist principles, but as for the female gaze, well, even Soloway admits that 'there really is no such thing, not yet' (65).

And while she has a good grasp on what others say, the female gaze does in fact exist; it just is not so easy to define due to being comprehensively devalued, repressed, and vastly underrepresented.

Going back and looking at the original story of Medusa, she is a prime example of what the female gaze is not. Her story involves her perspective and contains a tragic element, but its themes are more anti-female than anything. The story pits two powerful women against each other (Athena and Medusa) over a man. This is an idea that is in line with Cixous' belief that much of literature is designed to lock away and repress women, specifically in pitting women against women. And, as scholar Susan Bowers, notes, "What Medusa has represented to women is an image of the hatred and fear of female power that, as long as women themselves could not claim that power, allowed the 'best' poetry to be . . . about the death of beautiful women" (234). But as time went on, poets like Bogan and Sarton begin retelling Medusa's story, placing an authentic feminine gaze at the center of their poetry, which then allows for Medusa to become what "she was once for women, an electric and terrifying force representing the dynamic power

of the female gaze" (235). This then raises a good question about the female gaze: does the story have to empower women to be considered a female gaze text?

The short answer is no. Not all women are the same, and not every woman wants to lift up every woman or engage in feminism. Some women want to be left alone to their own devices, creating a story that does not empower women. Take for example 2020's *Nomadland,* which focuses on a woman and her isolation following her husband's death. The key themes of the film are not about female empowerment, but about the quiet moments of solitude following a great change. The long answer involves looking at the history on the evolution of feminist film theory. Feminist film scholar Zoe Dirse explores that history, noting that feminist film theory "was grounded in a paradigm of sexual difference in which the gaze of spectorial pleasure was affiliated with masculinity, and the 'female' within mainstream cinema was assigned the position of object and spectacle, connoting, as Mulvey put it, an exemplary 'to be looked-at-ness'" (15).

The long answer then becomes that for a text to have a feminine gaze, it must first have a female character. And second, that female character must be more than a spectacle, her viewpoint should be centered and framed as she perceives things, not the other way around. In doing this, the female gaze focuses on three primary viewpoints: the individual filming, the viewer, and the character(s) present on screen.

Additionally, the female gaze updates the three main things that film goers liked about film: escapism, realism, and voyeurism. Escapism and realism act the same in this new gaze, although it could be argued that the realism of the female gaze is more "real" than that of the male gaze, as women are now depicted as autonomous characters with less of an emphasis on fetishizing the exploitation and objectification of women. The big difference in the updated three is with voyeurism. Here instead of voyeurism is reframing. This can be done in a variety of

methods: taking an old movie and remaking it with women fulfilling the male roles, taking old film concepts or films, and attaching a female film director at its helm, or even taking historical figures and reexamining their legacy and impact on the world. This thesis will explore the latter two.

In contemporary shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Outlander* both utilize the female gaze to attract/appeal to a growing female viewership, with these shows realizing that they can form a large fanbase by utilizing this gaze to draw-in female fans. Meanwhile, the entertainment industry has grasped the developing movement, with storytelling currently centered around reclaiming and retelling stories/tropes that have often been told, dominated, and controlled by the male gaze. In more defined terms, this thesis will look at contemporary works that utilize the female gaze to understand how this gaze might continue to develop or be utilized. The primary genres that will be studied here are film and television. These two styles of storytelling are similar enough to connect and fit together, while offering different methods or examples of the female gaze in use. The examination of the female gaze within contemporary literature will pull from a multitude of sources, but each chapter will focus on one specific piece, those being: *Passing* (2021) and Apple Tv's *Dickinson* (2019). And as with most things relating to cinema, the development of this style of storytelling begins in the 1930s with storytelling and directing.

Hollywood: The 1930s and 40s

Visual storytelling would not be as grand and important as it is today if the camera lens and its direction had not entranced so many with its escapism, its subverted realism, and its voyeurism. Escapism became a major factor for visual storytelling during the 1930s. During the early years of the 30s, the Great Depression devastated the economy, and the filming industry was no different. *New York Times* scholar A. O. Scott noted that the "first years of the

Depression were a time of near collapse for the industry. Attendance fell precipitously, from 90 million in 1930 to 60 million three years later." This might not sound like a sharp decline, but Hollywood had just begun investing in a major transition from silent films to talkies (or sound films) between 1926 to 1930. This was not a cheap transition, with many silent films being scrapped or dubbed over in post-production. Hollywood expected a big return of profit from this investment, and for a time, Hollywood experienced a record breaking high.

As film historian Thomas Schatz wrote, "the American movie industry enjoyed its best year ever in 1930 as theatre admissions, gross revenues, and studio profits reached record levels" (220). But the Depression soon caught up the following years, with a combined studio net loss of 55 million (Schatz 220). However, things began to look up for the industry in 1934 with help from B-movie Double Features, Wall Street investment, and aid from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. By the end of 1934, the Production Code came into effect, forcing many movies to have a happy, morally upright ending. With a rejuvenated vigor, Hollywood began to work on films that would bring audiences back into cinemas.

By 1939, the film industry was headed in a clear direction. Films like *Gone with the Wind*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Stagecoach*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Babes in Arms*, and *Wuthering Heights* dominated the box office and awards season (with five out of the six films above nominated for "Outstanding Production" at the 1940s Oscars) (Schatz 229). What each of these films shared was its grand scope and direction within its storytelling. This type of storytelling is what would become known as escapism, which is the use of media storytelling as a means of distraction and relief from reality. These films had large and lavish set designs, an ensemble cast, and a high production value that allowed audience members to escape their mundane lives and step into another world. However, this increase in escapism storytelling

would be transformed for a time in the 1940s with World War II (Schatz 229). In retrospect, this high point for film was key for the development of escapism, something that the 1940s would further develop.

Following the start of World War II, American audiences wanted something vastly different than what Hollywood was making: they wanted realism. Scott questioned this shift and concluded that "Audiences want[ed] to be lulled by romance or tickled by comedy, but they also [had] a hunger to see reality depicted. Above all there seem[ed] a universal appetite to see the rawness of the world given the shapely and soothing order conferred by familiar genres." Audiences no longer wanted to see Dorothy traverse through another world and solve its problems with a bucket of water (a film that come out just a month before news of the war broke out); they wanted to see Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa Lund escape the Nazi's (Schatz 230). And it is here in this war-themed era that one of the most influential directors makes his way to America: Alfred Hitchcock.

Alfred Hitchcock: The Legacy

Alfred Hitchcock is a key figure when it comes to the development of the male and female gaze as he amplifies voyeurism more than any other filmmaker. As Amy Stewart notes, Alfred Hitchcock started his career in 1920s London making silent films (280). By 1927, he had released his first majorly acclaimed film: *The Lodger*, and by 1939, he had moved to America to begin his partnership with Hollywood. His films began to reflect the audience call for realism, although he had a unique twist on their expectations: they mixed escapism with realism. In terms of escapism, Hitchcock was quoted saying: "A woman who spends all day washing and cooking and ironing don't want to go to the movies to watch a film about a woman who spends all day washing and cooking and ironing."

Films during this time "served to demonize America's enemies. Watching such films allowed Americans, of all social classes, to escape their concerns about World War II" (Stewart 281). Hitchcock was very aware of this factor, stating: "reality is something that none of us can stand, at any time" (Stewart 282). In other words, especially during war time, people were constantly facing harsh truths such as death of loved ones, financial strain, and hearing depressing story after depressing story from friends. To escape that reality, people went to the theatre. He wanted to "immerse his audience in his stories and have them channel their inner anxiety by having them worry about the characters on screen rather than themselves" (Stewart 282). To accomplish this worry, Hitchcock relied on a multitude of methods, two primary ones being suspense and silence.

As noted earlier, Hitchcock began his career making silent films, what he would call the purest form of cinema. From his time filming silent films, Hitchcock would develop a few core beliefs. He believed that films should not be photographs of people talking, that dialogue should only be used as a last resort of storytelling, and, as Hitchcock himself would say, "The secret of good directing is to remember that you are telling a story visually. Your medium is that of sound and sight. The screen should tell this story as much as possible – not the dialogue." Take for example his film *Psycho*. As Thomas Hemmeter explains:

> Hitchcock's linguistic move is melodramatic -- to strip away verbal language and to rely more fully on visual communication -- but the visual signs, like the skull of Norman Bates's mother, offer no unambiguous sign of endangered or triumphant virtue. In the image of Mrs. Bates's skull is the modernist vestige of the melodramatic visual sign: the same intense desire expressed in a visual without verbal sound, its inflated need for

> communication expressed by shrieking violins. Such an image might be seen as melodramatically silent, stripped of verbal language and elevated by sound (34).

Eye movement could give away more about a character's feelings than a conversation about it could. A quick camera pan into the face of a murdered gives the audience an answer to who the killer is faster than a character could say it, while also building suspense. In simpler terms, Hitchcock believed that the camera was the true storyteller, not the actors or the words they say.

Alfred Hitchcock: The Voyeur

The belief in spectatorship over dialogue would be a revolutionary invention on Hitchcock's part, and camera directing would become more expressive as he developed this invention. But spectatorship would result in the development of film as voyeuristic. One of the best examples of this in his works is the famous shower scene in *Psycho*. In terms of contemporary society, the scene is not graphic, seeming tamer in comparison due to a lack of bloodshed, nudity, or visible moment of knife penetration into a body. And, as Oxford writer Anthony Maskell notes:

> As far back as ancient Greek tragedies, it was customary for horrific or violent deeds to take place "offstage." Indeed, Roman poet Horace quipped in his Ars Poetica that although "the mind is less actively stimulated by what it takes through the ear than by what is presented to it through the trustworthy agency of the eyes," gruesome acts such as Medea butchering her children or Atreus cooking his dish of human flesh should never take place "within public view." It was a rejection of scopophilia, but a simultaneous acknowledgement of its power.

Hitchcock, in depicting this murder, places the violence right in front of the audience, or more specifically, in front of their eyes. The camera is a point-of-view shot, and the murder is the spectator, meaning that the audience sees the murder's point-of-view and witnesses the murder as if it was through their own eyes.

These point-of-view shots were one of Hitchcock's specialties, playing off of humanity's innate curiosity. That curiosity mixed with point-of-view is perfectly depicted in his film *Rear Window*, when the main male character, stuck on a wheelchair with a broken leg, "resorts to spying on his neighbors with a pair of trusted binoculars and the zoom of his camera, spinning a web of speculations and accusations from what he takes in through his subjective eyes. It's also worth noting that the man is a photographer – he literally makes his living from observing with his eager lens" (Maskell). However, in this example, not only is Hitchcock utilizing his voyeuristic specialty, he is also mixing in escapism and realism.

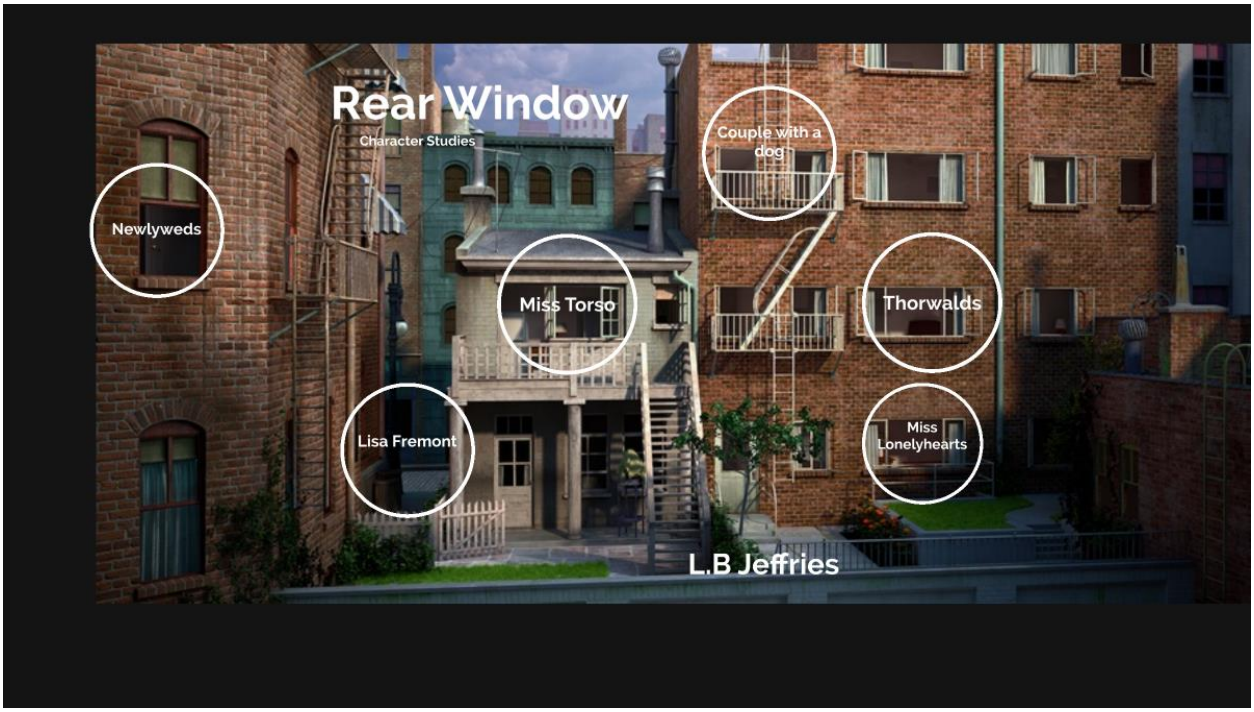

Figure 1. Jeff's view of the apartments across from his apartment

Take for example the view from the main character's (Jeff) apartment, which he uses as his own movie screen. Each apartment features its own story and cast that Jeff (and therefor the audience) watches. Miss Lonelyhearts is a single woman on the verge of suicide (the male character and the audience are on the edge of their seat here) until she finds a lover in the piano man nearby. Miss Torso entertains gentlemen callers throughout the film (changing clothes at one point – something that the male character and the audience look through binoculars) but always turns them away until her Army-uniformed boyfriend/husband returns home looking for dinner. In the film's case, the main character represents the viewer trying to escape into another life (escapism) watches the dull lives of others (realism), using the screen of the cinema and camera lens to do so (voyeurism).

While still looking at *Rear Window*, it is important to note that most of the "main characters" in the stories Jeff (and the audience) watches are women. In particular, these are women doing what a male of this time (1954) would believe a woman to be doing. Miss Lonelyhearts pines after men and almost kills herself when she cannot find one, but she does not evolve as a whole character on her own. Miss Torso does two things through the film: workout and entertain men. But as with Mrs. Lonelyhearts, she does not develop as a whole character on her own; she is just spectacle and one half of a man's story. And when her husband returns, the first thing he says to her is what is for dinner. Mrs. Thorwald is murdered for constantly nagging her husband. The Newlyweds get into a fight once the wife finds out her husband has quit his job, claiming she would not have married him had she known that (almost as if the film is depicting her as money hungry). Almost all the female characters present have no substance or development aside from supporting their male counterparts.

The two main women of the film, Jeff's girlfriend Lisa and his nurse Stella, even fall victim to these patriarchal stereotypes with both women acting as caretakers to Jeff (though it should be noted that in Lisa's case, both she and Jeff acknowledge she has most of the power in their relationship, in both network connections and beauty). And aside from the film's final confrontation between Jeff and Mr. Thorwald, it is the women who are put into dangerous situations. Miss Lonelyhearts almost kills herself, Mrs. Thorwald is murdered, and Lisa is sent over to investigate Mr. Thorwald, caught and almost murdered, and then arrested. Additionally, in the earlier examples from *Psycho*, the shower scene involves the murder of a naked woman, and Norman Bates's dead mother's head is held onto as a sort of trinket.

In each scenario, the woman is used to further the plot or to develop the male characters. Miss Lonelyhearts' suicide distracts Jeff and Stella, but does not focus on her emotions, just the action of distracting. Mrs. Thorwald must die for the plot to begin, and the same with Mrs. Bates. Lisa is around to develop Jeff and his thinking. But most importantly, there is Miss Torso who exists as a sort of spectacle for Jeff to gaze at. In fact, in all these examples, the women exist as spectacle. Every scene they are in, the women are dressed in elegant dresses or tight workout clothes (and sometimes are even naked). If they are not dressed elegantly, they are there to serve the male characters (the maid Stella), or if they cannot do so, they must die a (somewhat) spectacular death (Mrs. Thorwald and Marion Crane in the shower). And with this treatment of women comes a flaw in Hitchcock's directing: the male gaze.

Emily Dickinson: Chapter Two

This chapter will cover Alena Smith's AppleTv show, *Dickinson* (2019-21), which follows American poet Emily Dickinson in the years leading up to and during the Civil War (so about 1850 to 1865) and creates background and inspiration behind her famous poems. The show

is a contemporary reframing of Dickinson's life and family dynamics, and although much of the events and story of the show are based in research and fact, the story and its characters are presented with contemporary morals and thinking. This is not to say that the show is 100% inaccurate, but instead to show that the show itself is aware that this is a reframing and not a retelling of Emily Dickinson's life. Of course, Dickinson's relationships and life are well researched, so her romantic relationship with her brother Austin's wife, Susan Huntington (called Sue), are not fabricated plot details. It should be noted that Dickinson's relationship with Huntington is highly speculated to be a romantic one, with much of their correspondence and Dickinson's poetry adding fact to it, but the show treats it as fact. And in doing so, the show reframes Dickinson as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

As scandalous as a homosexual relationship would be, this chapter will not be focusing on the romantic relationship between Huntington and Dickinson, and the ways in which the show reclaims Dickinson's LGBTQ+ connection. Instead, this chapter will focus on another act of reclaiming the show makes during its second and third seasons. Season Two of the show ends with America on the brink of Civil War, and Season Three picks up near the middle of the war, following Dickinson and her family's dealings with it. Throughout that season, the show advocates that Dickinson was and should be classified as a war poet; to achieve that, the show utilizes the female gaze in its storytelling by focusing on the domestic and artistic sides of the war instead of on the battles. This chapter will explore that use of the female gaze as a tool of reclaiming Emily Dickinson's narrative and legacy.

Passing: Chapter Three

This chapter will focus on Rebecca Hall's Netflix film adaptation of *Passing* (2021), which is an adaptation of Nella Larson's novella of the same name and centers around two

African American women with the ability to pass for white. The story follows a woman named Irene who runs into a past childhood acquaintance named Clare. The two begin to reconnect, but, by the end of the story, Clare is dead. How that happens is debated by many scholars, with the two biggest theories being that Irene pushed Clare to her death or that Clare jumped. But because of her death, Clare is often labeled a tragic mulatto figure.

Rebecca Hall's film challenges that label, instead depicting Clare as a hunter, doing so by utilizing the female gaze, focusing on Irene's perspective and how Clare affects her life. This chapter will explore the first scene where the two women meet, examining the ways Clare reacts and manipulates the conversation and camera.

Chapter Two

A Letter to the World That Never Wrote to Her:

An Examination of Emily Dickinson and The Action of Reclaiming

"Woman . . . stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies . . . by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" – Laura Mulvey

Introduction:

For a large chunk of time following Emily Dickinson's life and death, her biography stood as the bearer of meaning. Dickinson was viewed as a depressed spinster, locked away in her room (and the male constructed narrative woven around her), writing musings of a madwoman "overwhelmed by her own creative energy" (Johnson XVIII). Her status as a single woman was turned into a cautionary tale of the tragic fate of an unmarried woman, something Mary Loomis Todd (the first editor of Dickinson's poetry after Emily's death, and somewhat of a biographer of Dickinson's life) played up in introducing Dickinson's poetry – often making Dickinson appear as an "eccentric, reclusive, asexual woman in white" (Hart and Smith XV). Dickinson's connection to Sue Gilbert, her brother's wife, and her highly speculated lesbian lover, was almost completely removed, with Todd even omitting Gilbert's written obituary for Emily (Hart and Smith XV). For the next four decades, Todd further influenced potential readings and interpretations of Dickinson's works by grouping the poems into sections centered around "love" and "death," and removing many of Dickinson's unconventional grammatical elements in use (such as dashes and commas) and homoerotic subtexts. Dickinson became a

symbol more associated with her pure white dress than with the words and meanings she created, which in turn began to influence the way her poems were interpreted. And, in Todd's case, the gossip and narrative was so strongly connected to Dickinson, that she herself began to believe it and become influenced by it when working to publish Dickinson's writings; instead of disqualifying that narrative, she added to it.

In other words, Dickinson as a writer was erased from history and only circulated within scholarship as an "induction into the American Renaissance" (Marrs 124). Her writings were never even considered or viewed as a commentary on the Civil War, and only in the *Norton* anthology "does she make an appearance as a postwar writer, but even here she is included at the very beginning of the post-1865 volume and without a section heading – as though she were an inexplicable holdover from the pre-1865 installment" (Marrs 124). But recent media trends and discourse within academia and public knowledge have begun to evolve that discussion, acknowledging Dickinson's homoeroticism and potential queerness, while also labeling her a societal commentator.

The modern re-examination of Dickinson and her work is in part due to a contribution from Alena Smith and her Apple TV+ show, *Dickinson* (2019-2022). That show reclaims Dickinson's writings and the narratives around them that were erased or diluted throughout the years, specifically countering the chaste and pure white dressed recluse stereotype of Dickinson. Throughout the entirety of the show, Dickinson wears bright colors and engages with the community around her and has a clear knowledge and understanding of the world, all while engaging in a romantic and sexual relationship with Gilbert. And it did so while relying on the female gaze. This utilization of the female gaze, a term coined by Mulvey, acts as a tool of reclamation for female narratives, and in Dickinson's case, not only aided in making her a queer

icon but also in being classified as a war poet. And through the lens of the female gaze, this paper will explore the contemporary action of reclaiming Emily Dickinson's narrative as a war poet, and encourage rereading's of many of her poems to be looked at as war poetry.

Background:

As stated in the introduction, "the male gaze" was a term coined by Laura Mulvey in her article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), used to describe the psychoanalytic fascination of film (both viewing and creating) and the ways in which film views women. The female gaze was developed as a counter to that lens, and is the lens through which an audience sees the storyline/visual effects. For example, imagine how the story would unfold for Hitchcock had he filmed from the perspective of Mrs. Torso rather than the main character Jeff. This female gaze is utilized by Alena Smith in her contemporary television show, *Dickinson*, by using the audience's perspective as female. And while Smith makes use of it, Caetlin Benson-Allott and other contemporary scholars have often debated whether the female gaze exists, arguing that "there really is no such thing, not yet" (65). This line of thinking is a common one due to the lack of a single, broadly defined, and accepted answer. In addition, the female gaze has been an underdeveloped and unfocused on method of film making and analysis, due in part, again, to the lack of a definition. The primary issue with this reasoning is that the female gaze existed long before Mulvey coined it and is even embedded in the foundation of cinema.

One of the earliest recorded traces of the female gaze can be seen in the works of Alice Guy-Blaché (1873-1968), an early female French filmmaker and pioneer of the narrative film, and her first film, *La Fée aux Choux* (1896). As cinema scholar Gwendolyn Audrey Foster notes, Guy's films have typically been written off as "footnotes within film history" (6). But Guy's work often focused on "emphasizing and privileging women and children as active participants

who perform in a hybrid spectacle that combines theatricality with an almost neorealist and decidedly feminist" perspective (9). In doing this, Guy embedded the female gaze in the foundation of film history, centering feminine expressionism as an artistic means of freedom from the patriarchy.

A similar narrative technique is utilized by Alena Smith in *Dickinson*, which focuses on Dickinson's early life before her Todd-based narrative is constructed. Much of the show is built around letters that Dickinson herself wrote and sent, creating distance from Todd's narrative of Dickinson's life. Through the show, Smith emphasizes women as active participants while relying on art as a means of expression and freedom from the patriarchy, echoing Mulvey and Guy's understanding of the female gaze. The show ran for three seasons, focusing on Emily's life in the 1850s up to the mid-60s.

During the third season of the show, Smith introduced a major influencer of Dickinson's life, Thomas Higginson. Higginson was a Civil War soldier, literary editor, and writer that began to work with Emily as a sort of editor and teacher. One of the questions on Smith's mind was: "I always knew when I pitched the show that Season Three would be the Civil War, and that Higginson would become Emily's correspondent. But then the question becomes, `How do you tell that story and not center the experience of Higginson?'" (McHenry Interview). Within this type of framing question, the female gaze can be found, as the narrative is moved away from the male (like Higginson) to the female. In doing this, Smith takes the traditional "soldier at war" narrative and moves it to a more domestic home front by focusing instead on Emily Dickinson. Dickinson becomes more than just a correspondent to Higginson or a footnote to his story. Her perspective of the story during the war is told, connecting much of her writing to the war – a technique of war narratives that are typically not told within war films written by Hollywood.

Smith even explains in an interview with McHenry that the purpose behind this show was to disrupt the old narrative behind Dickinson, stating:

> The show began in this cheeky, irreverent mode of, We're going to disrupt the things you think you know about Emily, and one of the things people think they know is that she always wore white and wore that white dress. That isn't true; it's just one dress she had. But a replica of it is on display in the Dickinson Museum and it's become mythologized. We began our show taking that myth apart. She's never seen in white, but in a lot of bold colors and patterns. But this show is asking the question, 'How did she become Emily Dickinson?' and the white dress becomes this talisman of her full achievement as the poet she would become. If this is her origin story, this is her superhero cape.

Smith even outlines the old mythology centered around Dickinson, a mythology that is currently being re-evaluated and evolved. One such myth is that Emily was a recluse, cut off from the Civil War. Hart and Smith acknowledge this myth that Dickinson was an "inaccessible, ethereal hermit, too rare for this earthly plane, and probably undone by unrequited love for any or all of several male suitors whose identities have been the stuff of speculation for countless readers," and note that this type of myth was a prevailing one until more recent years (XIII). Cody Marrs compiles a list of such stereotypes, tracing many of them back to Thomas Johnson in 1958, who claimed Dickinson "did not live in history and held no view of it, past or current" (123). Such misreading's and stereotypes derive from her never referencing "the war in her poetry" (Marrs 123). But, Smith again questions, "how could a sensitive gifted artist whose brain was literally on fire during these years … she's writing hundreds of poems. How can [her writing] be distinct

from her political and cultural context" (Onion Interview). As Smith is pointing out, to say that Dickinson was unaware of popular culture, as Johnson claimed in 1958, is untrue. Furthermore, to say that Dickinson only wrote personal thoughts is also incorrect. This thinking was not entirely new, with a 1980s wave of revisionary scholarship undertaken by scholars like Shira Wolosky, Karen Dandurand, and Barton Levi St. Armand who argued that Dickinson was "deeply and passionately engaged with the language, events, and ideas of the war" (pointing to many letters she mailed off) (Marrs 123).

Karen Dandurand specifically attacked the idea that Dickinson had a "supposed indifference to the catastrophic events of the Civil War" (17). Dickinson published three of her own works in the *Drum Beat* (a popular newspaper during the Civil War period), two of which would appear again in the *Springfield Republican*. And these three poems "in the Drum Beat were Dickinson's contribution to the war effort" (Dandurand 22). She did so as "an appeal for aid to the sick and wounded Union soldiers. She was not deliberately seeking publication and did not take advantage of editorial interest in her poems by offering more of them" (Dandurand 27). Because of Dickinson's appeal to Union aid, scholars have recently been able to determine Dickinson's understanding of the war. With her poetry being published as a direct response to emerging Union aid, it can be understood that Dickinson was at least somewhat up-to-date with recent war events and that her poetry reflected some kind of wartime sentiment.

Scholar David Reynolds points out that Dickinson was extremely aware of the popular culture and trends of the day (168). And as Marrs points out, Dickinson "witnessed the Civil War from afar. She read about it almost daily in local newspapers, national periodicals, and in the letters that she frequently exchanged with family and friends. Her war was imaginatively fashioned out of the blood disarray of reports, rumors . . . and poems; and Dickinson was keenly

. . . aware of this fact" (126). More specifically, while Dickinson was not fighting in the Civil War battlefields, she was highly aware of all published updates and stories of it. One example of her understanding of these trends, and a potential reason for misconceptions around her work, is her creative playing of and with female stereotypes. Reynolds notes that Dickinson

> . . . took to a new extreme the liberating manipulation of female stereotypes. In successive poems, she assumed with ease an array of shifting personae: the abandoned woman ("Heart! We will forget him!" J 47); the loving wife ("Forever at His side to walk - " J 246); the fantasist of erotic ecstasy ("Wild Nights - Wild Nights!" J 49); the acerbic satirist of conventional women ("What Soft - Cherubic Creatures - / These Gentlewomen are - ,"J 401); the expectant bride on the eve of her wedding ("A Wife - at Daybreak I shall be - ," J 461); the sullen rejecter of a lover ("I cannot live with You," J 40) (168).

This understanding of the popular female tropes of the time, seen throughout her works across multiple years, is perhaps the key to Dickinson's success in modern times, with her providing insights into what literature, knowledge, and stereotypes were well-known at the time (168). Additionally, this understanding demonstrates Dickinson's well-read understanding of the world around her. A potential reason for that cultural knowledge is potentially the consequence of Dickinson's desire for fame (a different interpretation from the stereotype that Dickinson did not want to be published), something that Reynolds notices in many of Emily's letters to Sue. And because of this desire for fame, Dickinson often paid attention to popular movements, like the developing rise of Romantism ideology, and was even asked to join or advocate for some. A particularly noteworthy trend was the growing feminist movement, something that Emily

seemingly did not condone. After reading a letter addressed to her asking her to join the feminist movement, Emily burnt the letter and sent a refusal in response (185). Reynolds considered Emily a rare writer of her time, being both private and public at the same time. These conceptualizations of Emily as a pop culture and war expert then bridge into ways in which *Dickinson* utilizes the female gaze to reclaim a bit of Emily's narrative as a female war poet.

Understanding the Show:

In addition to the written word, Dickinson's poems function as titles and themes for *Dickinson*, with the first episode of season three named after "'Hope' is the thing with feathers." The episode follows the Dickinson family during the Civil War, exploring the ways in which the war effects them and how Emily aides the soldiers. It begins with Sue explaining that Dickinson is often not considered a war poet due to the sexist belief that a woman did not have the "voice with the power to speak for a nation" (*Dickinson* 01:22). It then cuts to a montage of Emily Dickinson on a battlefield, with her and surrounding soldiers charging forward as cannons and gunshots fire around them. Eventually, Emily reaches her family home and rushes up the stairs into her bedroom. Her war uniform transforms into a dress as she sits at a desk and begins to write a poem (*Dickinson* 01:24-3:01). Both Sue's voice-over and the montage of Emily at war transition the story of war away from the male soldiers who fought in the Civil War, and instead, shift the narrative back home. In doing this, the show begins to reframe the idea of what a war poet is through the creation of a metaphor with Dickinson at the center of the war. She is not there in person, but she is implied to be there on paper.

Much of the runtime following Dickinson sitting down to write focuses on how the Dickinson family is affected by the war back at home. Two particular examples of that include a priest mistaking the death of Emily's aunt for that of a Union soldier. When corrected on his

mistake, he promptly leaves, saying that he does not have time for the funeral of a non-soldier since so many men are dying (*Dickinson* 03:34-05:39). The second example features Dickinson talking with the embodiment of Death, who laments that he is depressed due to the mass number of deaths lately (05:45-08:28). And while both examples are used for comedic effect, they are also used to depict the war from a female perspective. Instead of focusing on the moment of death for a soldier, the narrative begins with the death of a woman being written off as non-important due to not being a soldier. Furthermore, the moment of death is not shown. The story instead focuses on how death affects the women back at home. During the second example, Death asks Dickinson where she gets her inspiration and artistry from. From this conversation, Dickinson is portrayed as a poetic guide to the male Death. This portrayal again focuses on the domestic side of the war, specifically in acting as a guide or motherly figure (things women are typically seen as).

Later, during a conversation with a dressmaker, the female dressmaker comments that "business is booming" but that she is worried for her husband and is greatly overwhelmed by having to raise a child alone while also dealing with a heavy load of orders (20:12-20:24). This conversation again reveals the more domestic side of war, depicting the women as the metaphorical Atlas figures, holding the home (the men's "world" and legacy in a sense) up while the men are away. This idea of acting as a sort of Atlas or guide begins to shape even further inside Dickinson. After talking with the dressmaker, Dickinson begins to form the title poem inside her mind as she cheers up her mother, believing that she needs to be the source of hope and inspiration to her family during this time (08:46-09:11).

By the episode's end, this idea of being a beacon of hope is put to the test as her father has a heart attack and her family looks on in depression (35:00-35:30). Dickinson begins to be

the sole caretaker of her father as the poem, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers," begins to form in her mind. And in that action, Dickinson begins to re-evaluate her purpose as an artist and understand her role as an activist and source of hope for her home. This same kind of narrative can be seen in the early scholarship of Dickinson, with scholars Tyler Hoffman and Eliza Richards stating that Dickinson was intent on "turn[ing] the limits of her [civilian] condition to rhetorical advantage" (Marrs 126). Going further with that role as an activist, Smith notes that this specific episode and season (season three) "is about the role of activists and artists doing something different from activism, but also necessary. It's always an active process of creating the future" (McHenry). As a sort of rhetorical guide in her poetry, Dickinson becomes a war poet reporting from the domestic sphere.

This discussion relates to the idea that "You cannot put a Fire out" is about Civil War tensions, while also connecting the "Fire" in question to the rising abolitionist ideology of freedom. In the prior episode (the second season's finale), "You cannot put a Fire out" depicts a christening in a church, Emily confronting Samuel Bowles, and a match being lit. And, while "Hope" (the poem) was likely published before "You cannot put a Fire out," this show switches them. This is likely because Dickinson could have written these poems at any point since they were published after her death, thus giving a bit of wiggle room to the show. The episode itself opens with Dickinson's father and mother attending a christening while discussing "this John Brown business" (*Dickinson* 01:11-01:13).

Back at the Dickinson household, Samuel Bowles arrives to say goodbye to Dickinson as he takes her poems (previously tied together and given to him for publication by Dickinson herself) back to the printing shop. She then asks for her poetry back, citing that she has decided to not be published and that he has destroyed her empire by taking her poetry. This leads to a

(fictional) falling out between the two (as there is no factual citation for this dispute), with Bowles leaving with her poems to publish without her permission, citing that he is going to stop her from getting in her own way. (This confrontation is likely a decision on the writer's part to convey Dickinson's strong conviction about not being published.) As he rides away, she shouts to him that he is the devil. He replies that he "is a feminist" (04:04- 09:04).

All this tension between Dickinson and fame, men, and even feminism reaches a boiling point in this scene, (again) echoing the title poem for the episode. This harkens back to Reynold's discussion of Dickinson's involvement with the feminist movement, and her dislike of it (185). Her reasoning for disliking the movement remains unclear, but it is likely associated with her disagreement with women's ideology of the time, specifically the idea that women should be in love with a singular man and be submissive to their needs. Another likely reason could have been related to her family, as publicly supporting a feminist movement would likely be strongly opposed by her father and brother.

While all this conflict is going on, the Dickinson's family maid had secretly gone through Bowles's bag and retrieved Dickinson's poems, saying that a poem had fallen out. The scene then cuts to a montage of Dickinson reading over the title poem as a fire is accidentally started by children in the church playing with a match (13:03-13:58). The church burns to the ground and acts as a sort of metaphor for the state of America. The christening going on serves as a sort of metaphor for the birth of America as a new nation, with it being in a Church to reflect how this new nation was built under Christianity. The children who start the match act as a reflection of the men who started the Civil War. They ignore the christening and the things going on around them as they play with things they do not understand - a somewhat cynical depiction of early America.

Looking at both episodes, '"Hope' is the thing with feathers" and "You cannot put a fire out," they generate new interpretations of the poems they are named after. Both episodes utilize the female gaze as a narrative technique. "Hope" begins by labeling Dickinson as a war poet, centering the Civil War's conflict around the domestic front. Meanwhile, "Fire" suggests that domestic safety is being burned to the ground, an unignorable event to the community (and the America this community represents). Both episodes take fictional looks at the Dickinson family, but they rely on historical facts as a sort of limit to that fictional storytelling. And in using the female gaze so, they capture the elements at work within the poetry while creating room for new interpretations, and redefining Dickinson as an active contributor to her community who was fully aware of the impact of the Civil War.

A Feather of Hope:

War poetry is often thought of as a frontline sort of reporting or detailing of war events (specifically battles). But Dickinson's case and for this paper, Dickinson as a war poet is about her observing rising tensions between the North and South, and documenting the domestic side of war (outside of the battlefield), much like what *Dickinson* does within its episodes. A major problem is that there are no key dates within Dickinson's poetry, with most of them being published posthumously. So, there is no way to solidify what works can or should be considered war poetry. Scholars have placed dates around her poetry, though they are rough estimates of when she might have written them. Looking at two specific poems, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers" (poem number 254, established in 1861) and "You cannot put a Fire out" (poem number 530, established in 1862) (due to two episodes of *Dickinson* centering around them), it becomes possible to see how they observe and echo war tensions. This becomes especially

interesting when applying the ways in which their respective episodes generate new methods of interpretation and re-evaluation to these poems.

"'Hope' is the thing with feathers" opens with an echo of hope, with a bird that "sings the tune without the words" (Dickinson 60). The symbolism of hope links to the idea of freedom or equality, and to the Union soldiers Dickinson wrote about in her poetry and their ideas of abolitionism (Dandurand 27). This song could also be a reference to popular abolitionist writers of the time whom Dickinson might have been familiar with that circulated within popular culture. The bird singing is a "Gale," but this word has a double meaning (Dickinson 60). On one hand, a gale is a strong wind or storm. But a gale is also short for a nightingale, a type of bird that usually represents some kind of lament within poetry. Poets often use the gale as a type of muse, and a muse functions as a sort of martyr that conjures a storm – and this bird warning of a coming storm functions as the double meaning behind the gale. Dickinson relied on this double meaning to invoke "This connection between poetry and wind . . . the wind as a figure for worldy change" and the poetry as a "transformative force" (Marrs 139). From that added context, perhaps then the poem is detailing a Union soldier that is fighting for the idea of freedom even though he will become a martyr once he is punished or killed for his efforts, like that of a great poet speaking her mind in spite of the societal role she is supposed to play as a woman.

Cody Marrs notes similar importance around the double meaning of the gale, noting that Dickinson's most "frequently used figure for representing the war . . . is the wind. The latter blows repeatedly in her wartime poems, manifesting as both a harbinger of change and an agent of destruction" (136). The gale present within "'Hope"' is more likely meant to represent that same wind, and that soldier fighting for the idea of freedom is caught in a storm with a wind that

tugs in no particular direction. This tug represents the "war's temporality . . . as though history itself has been uprooted" and lost within the storm (Marrs 138).

Historian Paula Bennett explores Dickinson's relationship with the newspaper and Bowles, as well as her thoughts on slavery. Bennett looked at a letter Dickinson wrote to her friend where she expressed fear at the sight of a black man (56). Here, Bennett notes that because she was a Northerner, she was likely less exposed to people of color. This fear could likely have been attributed to learnings/influences from her friend Samuel Bowles. Bowles held a bit of influence over Dickinson's exposure to slavery. Dickinson's reference to and understanding of abolitionism can be traced back to the *Springfield Republican* (a popular newspaper run by Samuel Bowles back during the Civil War that is still around today). Bennett notes that Bowles and his newspaper held a racist ideology, even explicitly publishing anti-abolitionist articles (57). But Bowles eventually had a change of heart after the Kansas-Nebraska Act and became heavily abolitionist. And it was during this time that Dickinson interacted and formed a relationship with Bowles. So, from that understanding, it is likely that Dickinson was familiar with abolitionist writings through Bowles and her understanding of popular culture. Additionally, Dickinson was a correspondent with a Union Captain by the name of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who would go on to become her mentor figure and an editor of her work with Mabel Todd following Dickinson's death. This relationship would prove a great influence to Dickinson on the war, as well as give her first-hand knowledge of the workings of the war while also making it more personal (Wineapple 136). In other words, now with a close friend sending her first-person accounts of war, Dickinson now had a more personal connection to the war.

For the poem, this punishment mentioned is then the "sore" of the "storm" the poem mentions, with it abashing the "little Bird" that "kept so many warm" (Dickinson 60). America is

built on slavery, and those enslaved are the ones who keep the "many warm" and are continuously punished instead of rewarded. And with this poem being dated around 1861 (the same year the war started), the "hope" that the poem is noting is perhaps a Union soldier's growing hope for abolitionism achievable in the coming war. But that song could also be hope for the war to be averted or avoided.

The poem then mentions the "chillest land" and the "strangest Sea" (Dickinson 60). The strangest sea it references is perhaps the unknown future for America that is flooding in with the developing war. The chillest land is a bit tricker and could reference Dickinson being from the North, a land that is traditionally seen as colder than the more humid South. This could then be the narrator's way of saying "even in the North, where we do not have as many slaves, we see the effects and brutality." It could also be a reference to the South being seen as more cold or cruel to slaves, whereas the North was often seen as more warm or open to freedom for slaves. The poem then ends with the narrator saying that hope "never, in Extremity / It asked a crumb – of me" (Dickinson 60). The ending line is perhaps the narrator's way of calling to attention that those enslaved never asked for help or attention and worked without complaint. The ending line is a bit complicated as well, with the storm trying to silence the Gale's singing. But who is louder is never heard, all that is known is that hope is spreading to the slaves, and war is brewing. The wind/storm has uprooted the very foundation of the land, tugging history into an unknown land.

A Match for the Fire:

Shifting the focus to another poem, "You cannot put a Fire out" (poem number 530) functions like those works of other American authors at the time like Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, in which their works take on a more ambiguous meaning with a subtext

that tackles themes of slavery and war. Reynolds provides a traditional examination of this poem, stating:

> A result of this endless capacity for manipulation was her unusual fusion of female stereotypes, which is particularly visible in "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - " (qtd. In J 754). A common stereotype in popular fiction was the adventure feminist, the tough woman who could survive extreme physical peril and outbrave men in battle. We have seen that another image associated with women, the volcano, was commonly used in the literature of misery to represent the quiet but inwardly explosive woman who was denied a viable outlet for her energies. The first stereotype enacted fantasies of power; the second reflected the realities of repression and powerlessness . . . A loaded gun is not useful until it is fired, just as the 'I' of the poem gains power only when carried off by her master. The fantasies and frustrations the 'I' embodies, however, are secondary to the potency of the poem itself. This ingenious fusion of contradictory female stereotypes sets off a string of lively metaphorical associations that themselves constitute the aggressiveness of the woman writer (170).

And while this interpretation is not wrong, it is more framed around feminism than it is war poetry. But using a war-themed lens, this poem begins with the mention of a flame, and given Dickinson's passion for Greek mythos, this flame may be linked to that of Prometheus and his gift of knowledge to humanity. The narrator then mentions that this flame can ignite "without a Fan" on "the slowest Night" (Dickinson 95). Looking at these lines with the Civil War in Dickinson's mind, these lines could then be tied to the idea of revolution or revolt. Through that

lens, the fire then becomes an idea of freedom within America, perhaps the knowledge given by Prometheus. The spread of the flame "without a fan" could be a metaphor for how all slaves are sharing a similar brutal condition of being seen as property instead of as people. The fan could also be a metaphor for what the white community does not see from their slaves, the fans being a common tool used by women to cool themselves from heat (another connection to fire). And with this growing flame, Dickinson is perhaps pointing to Americans' growing awareness of the brutal conditions of those they have enslaved.

Comparing that knowledge of freedom being spread, the "slowest night" could then be a reference to Turner's Rebellion in 1831 or the Harper's Ferry Raid of 1859. Turner's Rebellion would likely have been known to Dickinson when she began to write her poetry due to her correspondence with Bowles and her deep knowledge of current events, but Harper's Ferry is right around the time the Civil War started, so it could have been current in her mind. The Raid of 1859 was, in context, a leading cause for the Civil War, and that "Fire" Dickinson references could be about growing slave rebellions, abolitionist attempts to free slaves, and cries for freedom (a breaking point of which was the Raid of 1959). But tying this poem in with the prior poem, it then becomes a sort of sequel. "Hope" is all about the build-up to the war, whereas this poem is about the start of the war.

The following lines discuss a "Flood" that cannot be folded and put into a "Drawer" (Dickinson 95). The flood is capitalized and perhaps a reference to the story of Noah's Ark, a flood that occurred because of the wrath of God. In this reference, the narrator is connecting back to the idea of slavery and how the growing tensions are building towards resentment and war. These fires and floods are unavoidable and overwhelming, and it seems that the thing with feathers is fading. The final lines of the poem reference a "Cedar Floor" (Dickinson 95). Cedar is

a type of wood that resists decay, molding, and rot but will shrink or expand after prolonged water exposure. Tying this in with the idea of anti-slavery, perhaps the narrator is saying that this building resentment and war could result in shrinkage or a drastic decline of the population. But it could also result in an expansion of the floor, an expansion or hope for the population to grow with the acceptance of slaves as American people.

Conclusion:

Through *Dickinson*'s utilization of the female gaze, Smith takes a traditionally masculine soldier's detailing of the Civil War and swaps a male story for a female's. Dickinson is fully aware of the events surrounding her, and she becomes a player in the political side of the war. Her poetry, traditionally read as being melodramatic musings on love or death, becomes a poetic depiction of a war that affects the domestic side as much as it does the warfront. "Hope" as a poem, morphs into abolitionist optimism detailing a longing for emancipation, while also providing commentary on observed tensions between North and South. "Gun" follows a similar route, becoming a representation of America as a whole, as war (a gun) goes off.

Smith re-examines the context surrounding Dickinson, attacking the misconceptions and stereotypes associated with Dickinson. And more importantly, Smith provides the context to a modern audience, asking them to evaluate these poems through Dickinson's life and narrative.

Historian Marianne Nobel states that "[e]very reader and every generation creates their own Emily Dickinson" (283). This again harkens back to how other authors of the time function, like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville, who continue into today's era with various changing interpretations. They each can be talking about one specific event in such an ambiguous way that it leaves room for multiple interpretations. And many of those listed are considered "war poets" by the American Library of Congress, even

though some did not fight on the front lines of the Civil War (like Whitman who volunteered as a nurse from time to time). Emily Dickinson should sit beside these men who have outgrown their era's, and yet she is trapped inside hers. As stated earlier, the problem with this type of argument is the lack of certainty around the period written, something that is not in question with a few of the other war poets of the time. But both of these poems and the episode's written about them feature building tension with the rise of some kind of idea (be it flame or hope), and the looming pressure of civil war fits too well within these poems to not be at least somewhat related to Dickinson's understanding of slavery. So, from that, Dickinson's traditional label as a romanticist should be reconsidered. Her work features many elements of romanticism, but it also features an understanding of tensions and ideas present during the pre-Civil War and Civil War eras.

With Smith's use of the female gaze within her filming and storytelling, a re-examination of Emily Dickinson has become easier than ever. Before this show and its use of the female gaze, Emily Dickinson was trapped within modern narratives created by men. Smith's intentional choice to depict the Civil War from Dickinson's perspective and town, and the female gaze's utilization in front and behind the camera all help to put Emily Dickinson back in the spotlight with new, deeper context that reframes her life and beliefs within a truer (to her actual history and poetry) narrative.

Chapter Three

Another Look At That Window:

A Re-examining of the Tragic Mulatto in *Passing*

"It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article."

- Laura Mulvey

Rebecca Hall's 2021 film, *Passing,* expands and develops on Nella Larsen's 1929 novella of the same name, focusing more on Irene and Clare's relationship through the lens of an unbreakable female gaze. An unbreakable gaze can be a sign of hatred, confusion, or lust. Finding an answer for that gaze calls for subtext analysis, often applied to the gaze's owner and the object they are looking at. Imani Perry states in a review for Rebecca Hall's film, *Passing* (2021), that a gaze reveals "the appeal of dangerous uncertainties and suppressed desires." The problem is then what can be made from that gaze, a question that is important in relation to Nella Larsen's novella, *Passing* (1929).

Passing follows Irene, a beautiful woman who can pass for black and white (what was then referred to as being *mulatto*), as she is reunited with her childhood friend Clare (the two had grown apart since childhood). Throughout the novella, Clare and Irene's relationship is rekindled and then strained with jealousy and envy, as Irene's family and friends begin to grow amazed with Clare. By the novel's end, Clare is dead (having fallen out of a window from a great height), either having been pushed or willingly jumped. The reasoning is left hidden in subtext. A likely decision on Larsen's part to leave the ending open to reader interpretation.

Much of Larsen's *Passing* happens within subtext between Irene and Clare, who present as both white and black, while acting in a gray zone. During "The Encounter," Irene walks through town on a hot day, with her narrations revealing hints of a jaded personality. Afraid of passing out, she steps inside an upscale hotel for white skinned people. Inside, she sees Clare for the first time in years, disguised, utilizing their ability to pass for white to access a luxurious dining hall. This hall is full of color, reflective of the novella's first section, a section where two different skin colors (black and white) interact in a brightly lit, eccentric upscale hotel. This section would be the only time Irene and Clare interact in a white dominated space.

Almost a hundred years later, Hall's 2021 film adaptation of *Passing* removes much of the first half of the novel's chapter and any color, save black and white. Filmed with a 4:3 aspect ratio, the two character's faces are the sole focus. Clare is introduced with a penetrating gaze, her eyes unmoving from her focus on Irene, the center of the camera (Hall 07:43). As the scene unfolds, the camera rotates between Irene, who sits on a black chair, and Clare, who stands bathed in white light. As the camera shifts, Clare is focused on singularly, whereas Irene shares her shots with the backside of Clare and the environment around.

And while much of the story remain faithful to Larsen's vision, Hall makes three major changes: removing the color of the scene, shifting the camera between Irene and Clare, and removing the first half of "The Encounter" from the film. These changes are utilized to heighten the subtext at the heart of the story. But unlike many scholars, Hall depicts Clare as a villain, with her film having shots reminiscent of Jordan Peele horror films. This paper will explore the reasoning for those changes and shots, and will seek to understand Larsen's original subtext presently, as well as a call for a reevaluation of Clare as tragic mulatto figure.

The Tragic Mulatto Background

The tragic mulatto's roots began in pre-Civil War abolitionist writing as the "tragic octoroon" figure in writer Richard Hildreth's 1836 novel *The Slave* (Zanger 63). The tragic octoroon is defined by American scholar Jules Zanger as a:

> . . . beautiful young girl who possesses only the slightest evidence of Negro blood, who speaks with no trace of dialect, who was raised and educated as a white child and as a lady in the household of her father, and who on her paternal side is descended from 'some of the best blood in the 'Old Dominion' . . . She discovers that she is a slave; her person is attached as property by her father's creditors. Sold into slavery, she is victimized, usually by a lower-class . . . she is loved by a high-born young Northerner or European who wishes to marry her. Occasionally she escapes with her lover; more often, she dies a suicide, or dies of shame, or dies protecting her young gentleman (63-4).

From these threads, the tragic mulatto was created, with slight differences. Writer Lydia Maria Child's short story, "The Quadroons" (1842), is the first accredited work to feature the "tragic mulatto."

Scholar Claudia Tate describes the tragic mulatto figure as "a character who 'passes' and reveals pangs of anguish resulting from forsaking his or her Black identity" (142). This makes the key difference between the octoroon and the mulatto their ability to pass. This label is often applied to Clare for Nella Larsen's *Passing*, even seen on the cover of a 1971 Collier edition of the novel, stating: "the tragic story of a beautiful light-skinned mulatto passing for white in high society" (Tate 142). But, as Tate elaborates, "Clare does not seem to be seeking out Blacks in

order to regain a sense of racial pride and solidarity. She is merely looking for excitement" (142). And like Tate, this paper will explore the predatory aspect behind Clare's motivation – an aspect that causes her to enact the "lustful pursuer" Zanger makes mention of.

In her Penguin Books introduction of *Passing*, scholar Emily Bernard notes that Irene is "making [Clare] up" as they interact (viii). This version of Clare "is a hunter stalking the margins of racial identity, hungry for forbidden experience," with the characters of the story being "seduced by Clare's self-presentation as a damsel in distress" (Bernard xii-iii).

These hunter qualities are seen the moment Clare is introduced "with utmost singleness of mind and purpose . . . determined to impress firmly and accurately each detail of Irene's features . . . which never for an instant fell or wavered" (Larsen 17). This focus is reminiscent of a predator homing in on its prey, as though imprinting every detail of their prey to memory should a chase ensue. Throughout the discussion, Clare smirks and glances at Irene "as if she had been in the secret of [Irene's] thoughts and was mocking her" and speaks for Irene at times, saying things like "of course you remember!" before Irene can even speak (Larson 22-24). Like a predator closing in on her prey, once Irene makes mention of having to leave, Clare begs her to stay with a hint of tears and a pang of guilt (Larson 24-26). At Clare's disposal is the truth she so casually mentions to Irene, who in turn is manipulated into giving into Clare. This can be seen when Clare mentions that she used to "'hate all of [them]. [Irene] had all the things [she] wanted and never had had. It made [Clare] all the more determined to get them, and others"' (Larson 27). After years of being envious of Irene and others in their community who lived better off than herself, Clare moves away from a victimized onlooker; she instead becomes a hunter, taking the things she wants as she pleases. And because of her ability to pass, Clare can move beyond the power of well-off African Americans and into the power of a well-off white woman.

And based on these hunter qualities, Bernard states that “Clare Kendry is not an incarnation of the ‘tragic mulatto’ figure” (xii).

The Film: Color

With any hunter, there is an aspect of watching, whether it be based around some form of voyeurism or preparation for the kill. In the case of this story, Clare watches a woman, a reoccurring narrative that scholar Laura Mulvey focuses on. Mulvey wrote that “Woman . . . stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier . . . still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.” Mulvey based this ideology around the “male gaze” (when a woman’s purpose on camera is to be objectified) in her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1973). The contrasting ideology is the “female gaze,” or when a woman on screen is the maker of meaning. The film utilizes the female gaze, focusing on these women’s “duality with meticulous care and obvious compassion” (Li). As film critic Shirley Li comments, the film shows “frequent close-ups of their faces" with a 4:3 aspect ratio that makes the faces feel “even closer.” As a result, the “two are shown in the same frame or through mirrors, as if they could overtake each other or switch places at any moment” with a piano score that “underlines the delicate nature of their intertwined lives" and the societal lines being blurred (Li). Reviewer Imani Perry notices similar elements she calls a “Black Gaze.” And perhaps most importantly, Perry notices that:

> . . . the black-and-white film’s luxuriousness is found in texture, light, and gesture. Hall avoids a problem that all too often afflicts Black actors . . . Hall’s effective light is not just visually satisfying; it is a narrative tool . . . Shades of gray in this black-and-white film, of course, are a play on the idea of racial ambiguity that is so central to the story . . .

> But the shades of gray do another kind of work in *Passing*. We are reminded that our sense of self shifts according to our encounters and relationships with others.

And within that use of light, Hall strips away the twenty-nine uses of color within chapter two of the novella.

Some of these removed colors are “green glass” (Larson 15), “black eyes” (Larson 16), “red lips” (Larson 24), and “pale gold hair” (Larson 29). These colors describe the exotic world around Irene, while also highlighting the inability to fully camouflage here. While shot in black and white, these missing colors are not unintentional sacrifices. In fact, the “gold hair” is still present in the film, easily identifiable to the viewer upon first seeing Clare (Hall 07:29). With the lack of color, the missing “gold” is only enhanced by the bright white around Clare. In the novella, color is used almost like a distraction to Irene, constantly pulling her away from the moment by these flickers of color. This perhaps acts as a reflection of Irene’s overwhelmed mentality from being in a primarily white dominated space with a woman she has not seen since childhood. But from this removal of bright colors around, the introduction of Clare is enhanced, particularly with the focus on her fixed eyes. During that first shot, Clare’s eyes are clearly defined, the sclera and iris easily seen. Clare’s “languorous eyes” are perfectly captured and faithful to the novel (Larson 17). This focus enhances the depiction of Clare as a hunter, specifically by presenting Clare as a somewhat aroused onlooker, preparing for the game in front of her.

Furthermore, the exclusion of color blends Irene and Clare into their surroundings, both wearing bright white and becoming one with whiteness so that their blackness fades away. But, as Irene stands with her mouth agape in shock at recognizing Clare, that blackness returns as

Irene's black hair becomes the center of the almost entirely white shot (Hall 08:32). In that same shot, Clare's eyes cannot be seen; only her back and hair are shown. She is shrouded in her whiteness, whereas Irene must keep her blackness covered (by her hat). In the following shot, Clare's face and eyes become the center, big with expression once Irene recognizes her, with Clare saying "'That's right"' (Hall 08:37). From this shot, it is almost as if Clare is letting the black of her eyes light up and grow big to reveal her blackness to Irene.

The Film: Camera

It should also be noted that Irene shares face shots with the backside of Clare, whereas Clare has the screen to herself. The reasoning for this reflects Clare's dominance over the situation. She is capable of fully passing, whereas Irene has bits of blackness that cannot be fully hidden (seen symbolically in her hair). Clare could easily expose Irene and get her kicked out, arrested, or even attacked by the white staff around, though Irene might not realize it, meaning Clare has dominance over this scene. She takes over the shots almost like a poacher, standing over a seated Irene for a moment before sitting, saying '"Now don't run away"' (Hall 08:37-47). This statement acts almost like a threat, with the punishment for running away looming over the conversation, keeping the prey seated and complacent. Clare clearly has the social power here, likely due in large part to Irene's mindset being shaken by the shocking arrival of her past and from being in a setting she typically avoids.

Following their seating, Clare smirks, insisting that Irene stay and chat (Hall 08:57). While talking, the camera rotates between the women, often with Irene's eyes hidden by her hat and her face in a reserved set. Meanwhile, Clare is visible, her expressions loud and large. But unlike earlier, Clare has now begun to share shots with Irene (Hall 08:57). Much like Li notes,

the two women get physically closer in shots as they become entangled. And as they become closer, Clare's eyes fixate on Irene's.

Clare comments that she "almost dropped by [Irene's] father's house" because she has hoped to "run into someone. Preferably [Irene]" (Hall 09:05-21). Clare fixates on the eyes, trying to draw out reactions from Irene that she might analyze. But Irene remains reserved, and Clare places her hand on top of Irene's to disarm her so that Clare might get that reaction she seeks (Hall 09:21). Once Irene removes her hand, Clare takes to blaming and guilting tactics, claiming that Irene has never thought about Clare or Clare's situation (Hall 09:27). She then leans towards Irene to interrogate her (Hall 09:35). Again, Clare has the social upper hand or power. She takes on a cop like role, crushing Irene's confidence and manipulating Irene into giving her the pity she wants.

The Film: Removal

Emily Bernard argues that Irene's eyes behold the story, and she invents Clare as the story progresses. This can be seen in the first chapter of Larsen's novel when a third person narrator (likely Irene) notes that Clare was "Stepping always on the edge of danger" and that she was "selfish, and cold, and hard . . . transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics" (Larsen 10). In fact, most of the first chapter details Irene's attempts to label Clare according to Irene's thoughts. Irene fails to label Clare, and so her thoughts take on a duality. Clare is selfish and cruel, and yet she has fallen over herself to win over Irene. Clare is intent on crushing Irene, but she has an air of lust about her. She is even described as "Catlike . . . apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive" (Larsen 11). This catlike personality reflects the film's opening scene of Clare's interrogation of Irene.

But that first chapter is removed from the film. But because the chapter happens out of sequence and is mostly an internal monologue, this portion of the novel was likely cut.

Whereas Larsen seems to want an objective story, Hall seems to want a subjective one. Larsen's story opens with a third-person narrator, then transitions into Irene's narrative, leaving the reader to decide if the story is reliable or not. But Hall's film bypasses that opening, going straight into Irene's narrative. Though Larsen's novel is not entirely objective, it does have objectivity in its opening: "It was the last letter in Irene Redfield's little pile of morning mail" (9). The film skips past that and opens with Irene in a store. As the camera pans away, it focuses on Irene's face; her eyes barely visible through her veiled hat (Hall 02:44). The opening shot establishes this narrative as Irene's and told through her eyes. The reason her eyes are blurred is to create a sense of mystery. From that, doubt is immediately instilled, and the film shifts into a subjective narrative.

Clare and Irene

As stated earlier, Clare is often labeled a tragic mulatto because of her death. Writer Corinne Blackmer takes a psychological approach to Clare, analyzing the sexual tension between her and Irene. Blackmer notes that "[t]ragically, Clare is not permitted to complete this journey or force the other characters in the novel to confront their ignorance . . . Thus, a novel by an ostensibly heterosexual author forcefully critiques censorship and self-repression as well as the conventional narrative" (64). And while this interpretation that Clare is a positive force that evokes self-realization over homosexual repression is not wrong, the more traditional reading of the novel still depicts Clare as innocent in her role. Meanwhile, Rafel Walker combines that traditional analysis with Larsen's prior novel, *Quicksand*. He suspects that Larsen wanted to distance

> . . . herself from essentialism and its concomitant figure, the 'tragic mulatta.' By portraying passing as oscillation in her second novel, Larsen exposes racial identity for the process and program that it is . . . that the fragility of American racial ideology is the very source of its endurance: too vulnerable to brook resistance, the racial order has to be willing to resort to whatever measures necessary to quash it (187).

In other words, Walker argues that Larsen is distancing herself from the tragic mulatto narrative due to it becoming centered around exoticizing passing. Furthermore, Larsen herself did not view Clare as a tragic mulatto figure, perhaps because "Clare has a lot in common with the writer who dreamed her up: Nella Larsen" (Bernard xviii). The two share multiple similarities, specifically in personality and background, so it would make sense for Larsen to look favorably on Clare.

Focusing on the film, Hall's direction is sharp in the opening encounter – perhaps the only time Clare is portrayed as a predator before Irene is filled with pity for Clare. While Irene could be projecting onto Clare, this implies the novella's more objective depiction of Clare is somehow still told through Irene's eyes, subjectively. And as Perry quotes: "We are reminded that our sense of self shifts according to our encounters and relationships with others."

It is often said that the first opinion of someone is usually the right one. Irene's gut reaction to Clare is reserved until she is manipulated by Clare into opening up. Irene's sense of self shifts throughout the story because she goes from being reserved to telling Clare life stories. In the novella, Irene fluctuates between frustration and desire that "this parting wouldn't be the last" (Larsen 30). A similar conflict can be seen in the film, like when Irene has a frown on her

face (Hall 10:02), then a set resolve of saying no (10:12), and then a small smile as Clare mentions Irene coming over (10:23). All three changes happen in less than a minute and capture shifting conflict within Irene throughout her encounter with Clare.

Conclusion

As Bernard ends her introduction, she states:

> It is this ineffability, the mystery that Clare embodies, that Irene cannot bear . . . The self itself is unstable, just like the concept of race. At the end of the novel, Irene finishes her final cigarette and throws it out of a window, 'watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below.' It is impossible not to associate the cigarette sparks with the vitality and danger that Clare brought into her life. But Clare Kendry is unforgettable. After all, when a fire goes out, one does not necessarily remember the ashes. But one certainly remembers the brilliance of the flame (xxiii).

And like that leftover flame, it can still burn. Clare's impact remains ever present in modern scholarship, with scholars still debating Clare's death and her role as a victim or fighter.

Both the film and the novella depict Clare as a cat toying with her prey, the fates of Irene and those around her are nothing more than a game. The key failure of Clare is not her inability to pass for white, it is Irene's. So, from that, Irene should be labeled the tragic mulatto. And because of Clare's predatory element, she becomes less a tragic mulatto figure, and more so the perfect villain of the story. If anything, Clare takes on the role of the lustful pursuer in the tragic octoroon narrative. And with Rebecca Hall's use of the female gaze through a focus on Irene's perspective, this re-examining is possible.

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