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## Otherness and vulnerability in Nella Larsen's novels

Lamia Mokrane Touati

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# THÈSE DE DOCTORAT

## L'ALTERITE ET LA VULNERABILITE DANS LES ROMANS DE NELLA LARSEN

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# **L'ALTERITE ET LA VULNERABILITE DANS LES ROMANS DE NELLA LARSEN**

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## RESUME

Notre thèse intitulée *L'altérité et la vulnérabilité dans les romans de Nella Larsen* est consacrée aux concepts d'altérité, de vulnérabilité et d'appartenance dans *Quicksand* et *Passing*. Ce travail s'articule autour de la question de l'identité des femmes noires et métisses. Puisque nous nous sommes proposé de considérer la place de Nella Larsen en tant que femme et auteur dans le contexte de l'émancipation des femmes Afro-Américaines en partant de sa place dans la Harlem Renaissance, une partie de notre étude examinera les tenants et les aboutissants de ce mouvement identitaire et culturel. Nous tenterons de cerner la spécificité de la voix de Larsen dans ce mouvement ainsi que son apport à la fois au niveau de l'imaginaire littéraire et des stratégies narratives que l'auteure utilise dans ces œuvres pour définir ce qui les caractérise. Nous nous sommes par ailleurs proposé de dégager ce qui fait la voix distinctive des réalisations de Nella Larsen en examinant son traitement du concept de *passing*, à la fois « passer » et « passer pour ». Cela a permis de situer les romans de Nella Larsen dans leur contexte et de montrer l'altérité et la marginalisation que les Afro-Américains ont traversées pendant la Renaissance de Harlem. En effet, Larsen démontre que même si les années 1920 étaient censées être une ère d'émancipation pour les personnes de couleur, elles souffraient encore de nombreuses discriminations. Analyser les concepts de race, de *passing* et de vulnérabilité dans les fictions de Nella Larsen a permis de prouver que même si l'altérité des protagonistes est confrontée à de nombreuses difficultés qui semblent l'éradiquer ; elle ne disparaît jamais et reste présente dans chaque personnage. Aussi, La soumission des romans à une approche pluridisciplinaire a permis d'examiner les causes et les conséquences de l'altérité dans les œuvres de fiction et d'analyser le concept sous toutes ses formes, qu'il soit racial ou sexuel. Cette thèse a également montré que les romans de Larsen vont à l'encontre du système totalitaire qui a de très mauvais effets sur « l'autre ». En effet, au lieu d'éliminer l'altérité, ce système l'accroît encore plus et « l'autre » se sent plus rejeté et marginalisé que jamais.

Mots clés : société américaine, altérité, appartenance, genre, vulnérabilité, race, Renaissance de Harlem.

## **ABSTRACT**

*Otherness and Vulnerability in Nella Larsen's Novels* is devoted to the study of the concepts of alterity, vulnerability and belonging in *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Revolving around the questions of identity for black and mixed-race women, the study starts with a historical perspective of "otherness" in Nella Larsen's novels while considering the marginalization that African-Americans went through during the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, Larsen demonstrates that even if the 1920s were supposed to be an era of emancipation for colored people, they still suffered from many discriminations. Analyzing the concepts of race, passing, and vulnerability in Nella Larsen's fictions leads us to prove that even if the protagonists' otherness is confronted to many hardships that seem to eradicate it, it never fades away and remains present in each character. Submitting the novels to a multi-disciplinary approach has enabled us to examine the causes and consequences of otherness in the works of fiction and to analyze the concept under several forms. This thesis eventually shows that Larsen's novels go counter the principle of totalitarianism as a system, be it social, political or linguistic in which "otherness" stands as the only possible way to establish one's identity.

Key words: American society, otherness, belonging, gender, vulnerability, race, Harlem Renaissance.

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	10
Introduction.....	12
Part I: The Harlem Renaissance: From Hybridity to Passing.....	21
Chapter I: The Harlem Renaissance: An enclave for African-Americans.....	22
A. Birth and Development of the Harlem Renaissance.....	22
1. The Image of African-Americans in Literature.....	31
B. Women of the Harlem Renaissance.....	37
1. Rebuilding the Image of African-American Women.....	38
2. Nella Larsen Versus Jessie Redmon Fauset.....	42
C. <i>Quicksand</i> and <i>Passing</i> Reviews.....	45
Chapter II: Passing as Performativity.....	62
A. Subverting Race: Passing and its Threat to the White and Black Communities.....	62
1. Is Race Biological or Cultural?.....	62
2. Mulattos: Between Hybridity and Monstrosity.....	69
3. Abjection.....	72
B. Passing: The Evolution of A Literary Tradition.....	74
1. The Transformation of Passing Novels Throughout Time.....	74
2. <i>Fatum</i> .....	81
C. Types of Passing and Performativity in Nella Larsen's Novels.....	85
1. Racial and Sexual Passing.....	85
2. Geographical and Literary Passing.....	91
Part II: Vulnerability in Nella Larsen's Novels.....	97
Chapter I: Racial Difference as a Form of Vulnerability.....	99
A. Double Consciousness in Nella Larsen's Novels.....	99
1. "Two Warring Ideals in One Dark Body".....	101
Black Contradiction: Between Pride and Disgust of Color.....	107
2. Whiteness: Between Love and Hatred for African-Americans.....	113
<i>Medusa</i> .....	114

Racial Fetishism...	118
3. Racial Difference as a 'Problem'.....	121
4. Stereotypes' Internalization and Self-Hatred...	126
Chapter II: Gendered Vulnerability .....	130
A. Sexuality: Between Repression and Expression...	130
1. Gendered Roles and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's Novels.....	130
Colors as a Means of Defense against Social Pressure .....	132
Combining Racial and Sexual Differences...	135
Sexuality: Helga Crane's Ambivalence .....	139
B. Marital Sexuality in Nella Larsen's Novels...	149
1. From Desire to Repugnance .....	149
2. Platonic Relationships and Absence of Desire in <i>Passing</i> .....	155
3. Irene and Clare: Between yearning and loathing.....	160
C. Motherhood Versus Motherlessness in Nella Larsen's Novels.....	165
1. African-American Mothers.....	165
The Effects of Motherlessness on Helga Crane.....	166
From Motherlessness to Motherhood .....	170
Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry as Bad Mothers.....	174
D. Helga Crane, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry as 'Feminine Calibans'.....	179
Chapter III: Deconstructing Vulnerability in Nella Larsen's Novels... ..	189
A. Vulnerability as a Means of Resistance.....	189
1. Playing the Double Bind.....	197
2. Helga Crane's Journey: Between Happiness and Disappointment .....	200
B. The Consequences of Resisting Vulnerability .....	203
1. Binarism and Identity Blurring .....	204
2. Fake Vulnerability .....	205
Part III: Writing the Other: Difference/ Différance .....	210
Chapter I: Otherness, Shout, and Difference .....	212
A. Otherness and Difference in the Philosophy of Difference.....	213
1. The Other Versus the Same... ..	213



The Cob Web System.....	215
2. The Mission of the Philosophy of Difference: Liberation of the Other .....	220
The Victim.....	222
3. Kinds of Shouts and their Manifestations in Nella Larsen’s Novels.....	226
Chapter II: The Aesthetics of Difference.....	230
A. Resisting the Oppression of Sense in Nella Larsen’s Novels.....	230
1. The Omniscient Narrator .....	231
The Unreliable Narrator.....	235
The Stream of Consciousness.....	237
Psychological Realism in <i>Passing</i> .....	239
2. Writing as Difference .....	241
The Novels’ Unfinished Endings.....	242
Description.....	244
Colors and their Symbols.....	249
Names and their Significations in <i>Quicksand</i> and <i>Passing</i> .....	251
3. Rhetorical Devices as a Means to Resist the Oppression of Sense .....	254
Imagery, Similes, and Pictorial Terms.....	254
Metaphors, Proverbs, and Idioms.....	255
Repetition and Amplification.....	257
Rhetorical Questions, Negation, and Antonyms.....	259
B. Graphic Work Or Typography.....	261
1. The Epigraph.....	261
2. Punctuation.....	263
3. Italics.....	264
4. Dashes and Following Dots.....	265
C. Intertextuality.....	267
1. References to Greek Mythology, to <i>The procurator of Judaea</i> , and to Spiritual Songs.....	267
2. Reference to Carl Van Vechten’s <i>Nigger Heaven</i> .....	271

Chapter III: The Monolingualism of the Other.....	273
A. Language as a ‘Dwelling’ in Nella Larsen’s Works.....	273
1. Literary Passing: Nella Larsen’s Case.....	274
2. Mother Tongue as a Foreign Language.....	275
Helga Crane’s Sojourn in Denmark.....	276
3. Speaking the Language of the Oppressor... ..	278
B. Black English in Nella Larsen’s Works.....	280
1. Birth and Development of the African-American Vernacular.....	280
2. Nella Larsen’s Use of AVVE in <i>Quicksand</i> and <i>Sanctuary</i> .....	282
Plagiarism Charges... ..	283
Double or Multiple Negation... ..	285
Verbs’ Conjugation... ..	286
Phonetics... ..	286
Orality.....	287
3. Black English and the African-American Identity .....	288
‘White’ Language as a Means of Colonization .....	289
General Conclusion... ..	297
Bibliography .....	304
Introduction générale... ..	329
Conclusion générale.....	337

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*“Life wasn’t a miracle, a wonder. It was, for Negroes at least, only a great disappointment”*

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (1928)

*“For I am lonely, so lonely . . . You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of . . . It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases”*

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

# **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

“Life wasn’t a miracle, a wonder. It was, for Negroes at least, only a great disappointment. Something to be got through with as best one could. No one was interested in them or helped them. God! Bah! And they were only a nuisance to other people” (*Q*, p. 157)<sup>1</sup>. This is the description Helga Crane makes about African-Americans’ life in the 1920s United States of America. This declaration is full of bitterness and disappointment since after a long journey, the protagonist does not find any way out of her otherness and marginalization. Otherness is omnipresent in Nella Larsen’s works in general and in her novels –*Quicksand*(1928) and *Passing*(1929) – in particular. It has been given a certain attention by critics and scholars. However, these latter underestimated the role alterity plays in the protagonists’ fates and the novels’ endings. This lack of exploration about the topic in Larsen’s works leaves a gap that this research will attempt to fill in. Moreover, Nella Larsen’s notoriety is very limited outside the United States and even inexistent in some countries despite the big success that her works received during the Harlem Renaissance. These two elements make the originality and the necessity of the present thesis.

Questions of otherness, belonging, and vulnerability are timeless. Indeed, many of the topics developed by Larsen in her novels are still very resonating for many people nowadays. In this context, Lise Funderburg states: “slavery laws and social practices set a precedent -which survives to this day among many Whites and Blacks- of regarding anyone with a trace of African blood as black”<sup>2</sup>. In her work, *Black, White, Other*, published in 1994, Funderberg interviews sixty-four mixed race people who recount their experiences of otherness and difference in the American community. They share the same sentiments of non-belonging and marginalization undergone by Larsen’s protagonists in the 1920s. This book permits to demonstrate that these issues are still relevant and that they are universal.

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<sup>1</sup>References to Nella Larsen's works will be in parentheses at the end of each quote. And we will use the following abbreviations

- *Q: Quicksand*
- *P: Passing*
- *S: Sanctuary*

<sup>2</sup>Funderberg, Lise. *Black, White, Other*. New York: Quill, William Morrow and Company. Inc, 1994: 13.

In *The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation*, Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary argue that “the belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships”<sup>3</sup>. In other words, belonging means to be a part or a natural member of a particular group or entity. It involves the individual’s emotional necessity to be recognized as an element of a group. The desire to belong is the urge for strong, firm connections with others. It is an essential sentiment which is vital to human nature, based on people's need to give and receive affection. Without belonging, an individual cannot build a satisfactory identity, and experience major difficulties to communicate and connect with the environment.

The problem of lack of belonging is closely connected with the issue of otherness, or alterity. From the Latin *alteritas*, alterity is the condition of being other; it is “the state of being other or different; diversity”<sup>4</sup>. Otherness and alterity are two interrelated concepts. The word “alterity” was accepted as a substitute to “otherness” to record a twist in the twentieth-century Western insight of the connection between consciousness and the world outside. Otherness can be defined as being different or unusual in appearance or in character. It is usually associated with being a minority or being a stranger. For example, in gender studies, otherness is closely linked to being a woman in a male-dominated culture. Simone de Beauvoir considers women as the most disadvantaged group in society when compared to men. However, women are not the only others of society. In fact, there are different types of others regarding race, gender and class. Otherness is a concept used in many disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, ethnology and geography.

Larsen’s novels were both published during the Harlem Renaissance. In North America, this age is frequently referred to as the "Roaring Twenties" or the "Jazz Age", while in Europe the period is sometimes referred to as the

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<sup>3</sup>Baumeister, Roy F. and Leary Mark R. *The Need to Belong: “Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation”*. New York: The American Psychological Association, Inc. *Psychological Bulletin* 1995, Vol. 117, No. 3: 497.

<sup>4</sup>OED

"Golden Age Twenties"<sup>5</sup>. During that period the United States and the American society went through a transitory and somehow paradoxical era. In fact, the 1920s were supposed to represent a phase of emancipation and liberation for African-Americans. Nevertheless, it was also a phase where marginalization and discrimination attained high scales. For example, after its reemergence in 1915, there was a peak in the early 1920s in the membership of the *Ku Klux Klan* of four to five million members, followed by a rapid decline down to an estimated 30,000 members by 1930. These contradictions left many African-Americans in an ambivalent state concerning their identity. They struggled to integrate in a society where their otherness was celebrated but at the same time denigrated. According to William E.B Du Bois, there was still a veil that prevented both races from seeing each other as equals<sup>6</sup>.

Even if the Harlem Renaissance was supposed to be a period of liberation in which otherness and difference were celebrated rather than repressed, Larsen's characters show that the sufferings undergone by African-Americans throughout history were still present. In this regard, W.E.B. Du Bois writes in *The Souls of Black Folks*

The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,—a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people...The first decade was merely a prolongation of the vain search for freedom, the boon that seemed ever barely to elude their grasp,—like a tantalizing will-o'-the-wisp, maddening and misleading the headless host<sup>7</sup>.

This passage explains the big illusion that the Harlem Renaissance has been for many black people who aspired for equality and justice. Another name for the Harlem Renaissance was the New Negro Movement. This expression carried the conviction that black people could now leave behind their legacy of enslavement and discriminations and define their identity as African-

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<sup>5</sup>Sann, Paul, *The Lawless Decade : A pictorial History of the Roaring Twenties*. Retrieved 03-09-2009.

<sup>6</sup>Du Bois, W.E.B (1903)*The Souls of Black Folk*. Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008: 1.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 1.



Americans. However, this was not always the case as many stereotypes and typecasts were spread about them which made it hard to establish a firm identity.

In *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Eric J. Sundquist argues that

The promised advance of African American rights following the Civil War...has turned out to be a false dawn. In the post-Reconstruction years the 'morning' song of joy and resurrection has been converted again into a song of 'mourning' and despair, as a new slavery of racism and economic oppression once more subverts true freedom for black Americans<sup>8</sup>.

This passage comments on W.E.B Du Bois's use of the spiritual *My Lord What a Morning* in *The Souls of Black Folks*. However, Dubois uses both the words 'morning' and 'mourning'. There is a very significant meaning in that the last word of the spiritual's title has been written in two different manners. Indeed, on the one hand, it indicates the morning or the emancipation hoped for by African-Americans. On the other hand, it shows the mourning or the pain they underwent when discovering that their dream of freedom will remain a dream and that they will still be marginalized in their own country. What Sundquist has called a slavery of racism continued long after the Civil War and even during the Harlem renaissance because even if white people had a lot interest and were intrigued by the blacks; they considered them as exotic others and went to Harlem to see them as if they were animals in a zoo or as freaks rather than human beings.

This situation intensified the otherness felt by colored people and caused difficulties of belonging. This feeling of alienation was even bigger for mixed-race people. In fact, being bi-racial was even harder because these people were neither white no truly black. Therefore, they usually felt displaced with both races and could not find their niche in the world. Likewise, Larsen depicts a society full of ambiguities and contradictions. This makes her

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<sup>8</sup>Sundquist Eric J. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, February 25<sup>th</sup> 1993. (1-2)

characters' search for identity very complex and filled with obstacles. Being mixed-race herself, Larsen could develop the topic from the inside. Her ideas about race were anything but basic. In addition to racial otherness, Larsen's protagonists feel another kind of alienation for being women. Indeed, gender and sexuality play a very important role in identity development. These elements can cause a certain form of vulnerability that is dealt with differently by Larsen's characters.

This thesis entitled *Otherness and Vulnerability in Nella Larsen's Novels* aims to prove that alterity remains at the end of Larsen's novels and hardly ever fades because the characters find it impossible to identify and belong to any group. In fact, from the beginning of the novels all the protagonists –Helga Crane, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry- struggle to find their niche in the world and to identify with any racial, sexual or social group. They do not accept the other within themselves and try to repress it but they fail. Consequently, they constantly feel self-alienated and self-estranged. Their otherness is always present and this is what shapes their lives and leads to their tragic endings.

In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida writes: “In so far as I recognize him as my enemy, I recognize that he can put me in question. And who can effectively put me in question? Only myself”<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, the identification of the enemy leads to the identification of the self. Furthermore, Derrida develops the concept of auto-immunity which sustains that the other exists within the self and that the latter directs its defenses against his otherness to eradicate it by repressing and rejecting it. This auto-immunity can explain the characters' impossible identification which leads to their psychological death but not to the death of their otherness. Thus, the endings of Larsen's novels show the dangers of totalitarianism and of the attempt to assimilate or eradicate alterity.

So, the thesis aspires to show that Larsen's novels attempt to write the other, but refuse to reduce it to the same. Hence, they reject the Hegelian system which leads to totalitarianism. We will prove that the novels' tragic endings and the characters' impossible identification to any group are caused

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<sup>9</sup>Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. New York: Verso, 2006, p. 162.

by their attempt to assimilate or eliminate their Otherness. However, they fail to do so, and their alterity remains. We will also shed light on the fact that racial and sexual differences are not always causes of vulnerability; they can sometimes be a means of resistance.

This research lies within the scope of the field of cultural studies in addition to African-American literature. As a consequence, it is interdisciplinary and regroups different theories like literary theories, ethnic studies, feminist studies, and philosophy. Indeed, because otherness is a concept that is relevant in many disciplines, it cannot be studied with a single point of view or field. To develop this research, we will need to Analyze Larsen's novels by using ethnic studies like the theory of Double Consciousness that Du Bois builds up in *The Souls of Black Folks*. We will also have to rely on some feminist views to examine females' roles and identity construction in the stories. To do so, different theories like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* will be of a great help. Finally, otherness is a crucial concept in the field of philosophy. Therefore, in the last part of this thesis, we will rely on Christian Ruby's book *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard*<sup>10</sup> to define otherness in the philosophy of difference.

The first Part of the present work is entitled 'The Harlem Renaissance: From Hybridity to Passing'. It is divided into two chapters. The first chapter 'The Harlem Renaissance: An Enclave for African-Americans' is devoted to the study of the historical and social contexts of Larsen's Novels. It will also aim at studying women's, including Larsen's, role and place during that era as writers. Additionally, the most important reviews of Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing* will be examined in order to determine how these oeuvres have been evaluated throughout time. The central theme of the second chapter 'Passing as Performativity' is the concept of passing. It will be analyzed under its different forms. After defining race, it will be possible to explain why passing was perceived as a threat and why passers were severely punished. Then, the tradition of passing will be examined by taking as

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<sup>10</sup>Archipelagos of Difference: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard.

examples some of the first books about passing, such as Jessie Fauset's *Plum bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928), and comparing them with the way Larsen treats the subject. At last, the different kinds of passing will be studied so as to show that it does not only have a racial dimension. Besides, we will use the concept of performativity in relation to Larsen's novels.

The second chapter of this work will be devoted to the concept of vulnerability in Nella Larsen's novels. It will aim at establishing if race, gender, and sexuality play a role in the protagonists' supposed vulnerability. In this regard, the protagonists' racial constructions will be analyzed by relying on William .E.B Du Bois's theory of *Double consciousness* to establish if racial difference renders people vulnerable and how race is discussed in the novels. In the second chapter, gender and sexuality are studied to determine if women's roles are gendered in Larsen's novels. Besides, the sexual stereotypes and their repercussions on the female characters will be taken into consideration. Women's relations in society as females, wives and mothers will also be examined. Finally, motherlessness and its role in the novels will be analyzed. The last chapter of this section of the work relies on Butler's article (and speech) *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* to prove that vulnerability can sometimes be a form of resistance and that the fates of Larsen's characters are caused by their own choices rather than by their racial or gender vulnerability.

The last part of this thesis 'Writing the Other: Difference/Différance'<sup>11</sup> is divided into three chapters. First, in 'Otherness, 'Shout'<sup>12</sup>, and Difference', we will define the concept of otherness in the philosophy of difference by using Christian Ruby's *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard*. We will then define what a victim is and examine Larsen's characters to see if they fit in that description. We will also Study the different kinds of 'shout' in *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Secondly, in 'The Aesthetics of Difference', we will study Larsen's style as the latter is an instrument of the writing of difference. Does she change the

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<sup>11</sup>Différance as defined by Jacques Derrida

<sup>12</sup>This is my translation of 'Le Cri' which is the other's reaction to all the sufferings it undergoes. These reactions can be under different forms and types.

meaning of some words? Does Larsen resist the ‘oppression of sense’ as it is described in Ruby’s book and by philosophers as Foucault and Derrida? We will also examine intertextuality and shared references in Larsen’s works and analyze the para-textual elements like the epigraphs and determine their importance in the texts. Finally, in the last chapter, ‘The Monolingualism of the Other’, we will examine Nella Larsen’s use of language among which Black English in the short story *Sanctuary*. We will also try to investigate the reasons that pushed Larsen to use Black English at that time and not before and why she chose to write her novels in the language of the ‘oppressor’.

**Part I: The Harlem Renaissance:  
From Hybridity to Passing**

## Chapter I: THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: AN ENCLAVE FOR AFRICAN-AMERICANS

The journey at least gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back<sup>13</sup>.

This is how in 1903, W.E.B Du Bois described the changes that had occurred since the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. For him, the journey that African-Americans went through, with its hardness and its sufferings, eventually led to the birth of a *New Negro*<sup>14</sup>, after the title of Alain Locke's famous book published in 1925. The main novelty that the title points to stands in total contrast to the "Old Negro", and encouraged the revolt of the black American and his rejection of the Jim Crow laws which were instituted during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) in the Southern States. These laws aimed at keeping African-Americans as second-hand citizens and continuing to take advantage of them and exploit them. For Alain Locke, it suggests their transformation from an 'old negro'<sup>15</sup> who accepted all the discriminations he underwent to a new one who retrieved his racial pride and who wanted to fight for equality and freedom.

### A. Birth and Development of the Harlem Renaissance

After the abolition of slavery in 1865, African-Americans faced segregation and a lot of racial discrimination especially in the South. They obtained the right to vote, but white people created laws to prevent them from doing so. They imposed literary tests or makeshift criteria to exclude them from civil life and keep their control over them. So, they were deprived of any liberty or self-expression. Eric J. Sundquist writes:

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<sup>13</sup>Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications, 1903, p 10.

<sup>14</sup>*The New Negro* is the title of Alain Locke's book written in 1925.

<sup>15</sup>Locke, Alain. *The New Negro*. 1925. Intro. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Macmillan, 1992.

The promised advance of African American rights following the Civil War...has turned out to be a false dawn. In the post-Reconstruction years the ‘morning’ song of joy and resurrection has been converted again into a song of ‘mourning’ and despair, as a new slavery of racism and economic oppression once more subverts true freedom for black Americans<sup>16</sup>.

The author uses the words ‘mourning’ and ‘morning’ to refer to the spiritual used by W.E.B Du Bois as a musical epigraph to the chapter *Of the Down of Freedom* in *The Souls of Black Folks*.

Eric J. Sundquist maintains that “readers familiar with the spiritual will know that the song’s title is variously printed as ‘mourning’ and ‘morning’, an ambiguity that is not insignificant insofar as the message of many spirituals...is double, if not paradoxical”<sup>17</sup>. In fact, the use of the words ‘mourning’ and ‘morning’ shows the disillusion the blacks went through after the abolition of slavery. They were promised freedom and equality. However, the shadow of racism was still haunting them and the hope of new life faded day after day. Du Bois chose to use the spelling ‘mourning’ in his chapter. This may be because he wanted to emphasize the sufferings of black people but also because the word concords completely with the name he gave the spirituals used in *The Souls of Black Folks*: ‘sorrow songs’.

In addition, the mechanization of agriculture left many workers jobless and thus pushed them to leave. As a result, when World War I started, the American factories experienced a lack of workers and many black Americans viewed it as an opportunity for a better life. The Great Migration was itself “a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern”<sup>18</sup>. We can say that it is at that moment that African-American people started to strive for The American Dream. They moved from the South to the North looking for a better life and for jobs. Instead of being preoccupied with racial problems, they wanted to focus on their lives as individuals and achieve economic success. That was the first time in history they could dream for themselves as free human beings.

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<sup>16</sup>Sundquist, Eric J. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, February 25<sup>th</sup> 1993.P 1-2.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>Locke, Alain, *op. cit.*, p. 14.



They settled in northern cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York. Thus, in the 1910s, Harlem, which is located in the northern section of New York City, became mostly inhabited by black people. It is true that it is a small geographical entity. However, it is attached to the rest of the world's greatest metropolis, New York. "Thus Harlem offered both intimacy and sanctuary for its racially uniform inhabitants, and an open connection to the white dominated world of patrons, publishers and people with almost unlimited economic resources"<sup>19</sup>. As the masses of colored people began to arrive in Harlem, its white inhabitants started to leave. Thus, this privileged the creation of an enclave for African-American people. This racial and cultural ghetto rapidly became one of liberation and independence.

It is difficult to determine the exact date of the beginning and the end of the Harlem Renaissance. It is usually accepted that it started in the interwar period which corresponds to the 1920s. As for its end, some specialists agree that it came with the beginning of the Great Depression in the 1930s while others extend it until the USA's entry into war in 1941. During that period, African-American people knew a big change. They had barely any chance to integrate the white society since they were secluded and excluded in all the domains from arts to politics and each effort to get integrated was harshly punished.

So, Harlem became the very heart of *Negro* culture where the most talented and intellectual beings of the race gathered to explore their potentials. If we speak about the literature renaissance that took place in Harlem, we will then take March 21st, 1924 as the point of its emergence. Indeed, it is on that date that The Civic Club Dinner took place. At first, it was a dinner organized to praise Jessie Fauset and her works but Alain Locke accepted to host it only if all African-American writers were celebrated. So, it turned out to a big dinner praising African-American authors in general. It gave the opportunity to

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<sup>19</sup>Sorensen, Bent. *Small, but Exalted: Negotiating Difference: Othering and Personal Identity in Nella Larsen's Life and Works*. Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2006, p. 5.

many authors like Countee Cullen to expose their works and get chances for publication because a lot of white editors and publishers were present.

This was the birth of the Harlem Renaissance whose nucleus comprised artists like W.E.B Du Bois, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, whose works are at the heart of this dissertation. These artists all describe the life in Harlem in their works. At that period, Harlem became the only place where whites and blacks met and where African-Americans could dream of an artistic career. Music and literature were the main vectors of that movement. The Harlem Renaissance is also an esthetic movement as New Negro writers questioned white esthetic standards and found a new, personal expression of their identity based on racial pride as well as on experimentation like Langston Hughes's poetry in which the influence of Jazz music is obvious.

The Harlem Renaissance was not a mere renewal and recognition in black culture. It was a spiritual emancipation and the blacks finally reaffirmed their freedom "shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority"<sup>20</sup> that they had experienced since slavery. "The New Negro was self- defined; indeed, 'self' appears as a hyphenated prefix in the essay [Alain Locke's *The New Negro*] eleven times in thirteen pages. Self-understanding, self-direction, self-respect, self-dependence, and self-expression supplanted the self-pity that is the sole emotion to which the Old Negro seems to have been entitled."<sup>21</sup> During the Harlem Renaissance, there had been a twist in the way white people regarded black ones but also a change in the self-image black people had of themselves.

After internalizing the prejudices and stereotypes that white people had of them, African-American people decided to change their self-pity and self-hatred into self-esteem and self-respect. According to Du Bois, they realized that they carried the same burden and that they should unify and fight for their rich culture instead of giving the whites the advantage by denigrating themselves. It is the self-hatred and shame they felt that bound them together and pushed them to unite and fight for the race up-lift. Furthermore, they felt

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<sup>20</sup>Locke, Alain, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup>Wall, A. Cheryl. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1995, p. 2.

liberated; in this context, once in Harlem, Helga Crane feels “a sense of freedom, a release from the feeling of smallness which had hedged her in.” (*Q*, p. 78) She “soon became thoroughly absorbed in the distracting interests of life in New York...books, the theater, parties used up the nights.” (*Ibid*, p. 77) Indeed, after living an empty social life in Naxos where people have no right to individualism or independence, Helga finds a new world in Harlem. She is captivated by different cultural and social activities she has access to.

The Harlem Renaissance revealed the black culture to the world. But, it is not as if there was nothing before it. African-American culture and literature had existed since American independence. Many writers such as Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), WEB Du Bois (1868-1963) or Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) already produced works like slaves' stories, historical essays or poems in the nineteenth century. However, these works were not recognized at their fair value because of the skin color of their authors. Scholars like Bosman, Hume, and Kant claimed the whites' natural superiority and attempted to prove that there is a correlation between 'blackness' and 'stupidity'.

Besides, Hegel accused blacks of having no history and thus no humanity. As a result, African-Americans started to write their individual histories so as to know their collective one. Henry Louis Gates states “Afro-American writing arose as a response to allegations of its absence. Black people responded to these profoundly serious allegations about their ‘nature’ as directly as they could”<sup>22</sup>. To do so, black people started producing their own literature which represented both themselves and their race. They thought that having a voice would liberate them. Therefore, a big change occurred during the Harlem Renaissance. According to David Levering Lewis, we can divide this period into three phases:

the first phase, ending in 1923 with the publication of Jean Toomer's unique prose poem '*Cane*', was deeply influenced by white artists and writers....The second phase, from early 1924 to

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<sup>22</sup>Gates Jr., Henry Louis. “Introduction: *Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes.*” *Race, Writing and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1986, p.4.

mid-1926,...a period of interracial collaboration between Zora Neale Hurston's "Negrotarian" whites and the African-American Talented Tenth. The last phase, from mid-1926 to the Harlem Riot of March 1935, was increasingly dominated by the African American artists themselves.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, in the last phase of the Harlem Renaissance, African American writers gained more autonomy and started to take over their literature in which the whites used to interfere.

The African-American culture started to have a status and to be recognized by the literary vanguard of the Harlem renaissance, i.e. major American magazines and book publishers. Even white people began to be interested and fascinated by all that was black. They were willing to learn more about the other race. Editors were attracted by African-American literature and many artists took advantage of that to make their voices heard. In an unpublished interview she gave to Marion Starkey, Nella Larsen argued "[editors] seem to be eager to give us an opportunity to show ourselves to the world as we appear to each other, and not as we formerly appeared in magazine literature....even if the fad for our writing passes presently...we will in the meantime have laid the foundation for our permanent contributions to American culture"<sup>24</sup>. Like many writers of the era, she felt invested with the mission of sharing the African-American culture with the world, speaking of the race from the inside, and giving the blacks' point of view instead of letting white people who did not know much about race depict them.

Many other factors contributed to the spreading of the Harlem Renaissance. First, the fact that many black bourgeois chose Sugar Hill as a place to live. So, Harlem became the place where the black elite met. Second, many universities near Harlem like Columbia opened their doors to black people and formed a generation of artists like Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer. Third, many associations were created to encourage the development of the artistic domain like the NAACP. To finish, magazines were produced to

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<sup>23</sup>Lewis, Levering David, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*.1994, p. P xvi.

<sup>24</sup>unpublished interview, Alfred A. Knopf Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin

promote the work of black artists like *Crisis*<sup>25</sup> which was founded in 1910 and which revealed writers like Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen.

This [publishers' interest] would not have happened without the extensive networking going on under the Renaissance label, which involved a complex structure of patronage, friendship, movements and parties,...awards and prizes of many kinds- or in short a whole critical and cultural public, consumed with an interest in African-American issues<sup>26</sup>

In other words, The Harlem Renaissance required a lot of organization and promotion. It is in this context that light was shed on writers like Claude McKay. Some other writers such as W.E.B Du Bois and Alain Locke used this interest to encourage race debates and to fight for the uplift of black people. Yet, very few women were recognized and acclaimed during that era. Some of the rare ones, not to say the only ones, who are associated with that movement and still studied nowadays as parts of it are Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen.

Along with literature, there were other fields that blossomed during The Harlem Renaissance like music, painting, and photography. Black artists used their rich heritage and folklore like religious songs, tales, riddles, superstitions and of course black English to promote their culture. Spectacles were given in Harlem and attracted a lot of people. The famous club called the Cotton Club was only open to white people. Jazz knew a big craze with artists like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane describes the nights in Harlem as

far from quiet, the streets far from empty. Clanging trolley bells, quarreling cats, cackling phonographs, raucous laughter, complaining motor horns, low singing, mingled in the familiar medley that is Harlem. Black figures, white figures, little forms, big forms, small groups, large groups, sauntered, or hurried by. It was gay, grotesque, and a little weird. (*Q*, p. 89)

Thus, the nights there were agitated and full of animation. They were far from being boring and by using the antonyms 'white' and 'black', 'little' and 'big', 'small' and 'large', Larsen shows the diversity present in Harlem at the time.

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<sup>25</sup>*Crisis* is the official magazine of the NAACP, it was created by W.E.B Du Bois who was its editor.

<sup>26</sup>Sorensen, Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 6-7.

As a matter of fact, Harlem was a very diverse place mixing people from different origins and horizons. In this context, Helga Crane is amazed by the mixture of Harlem's inhabitants as well as the different shades of her own race;

There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semibarbaric, sophisticated, exotic were here. (*Q*, P. 90)

This passage and the used adjectives and colors demonstrate the great variety of people who lived or went to Harlem. This suggests an openness of mind and an acceptance of differences. However, even though in surface it looks like a city where there is no discrimination, there were still some racial issues as it will be demonstrated in the next parts of the work.

Fashion also took a new turn, especially because of the famous dancer Josephine Baker who became a fashion reference not only for black but also for white women. Besides, even some female writers were considered as fashion symbols. For instance, Nella Larsen had a lot of interest in fashion and clothes. Whenever she had an interview, her style was described in details. In a review entitled '*New Author Unearthed Right Here in Harlem*', published on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1928 in *Amsterdam News*, Thelma E. Berlack writes that Larsen was an emancipated woman as she used to smoke and wear short dresses in a time women did not<sup>27</sup>. This sense of style is also very clear in her works as she describes every outfit that her characters wear in detail. Helga Crane for example loves fashion and uses it to express her revolt. Indeed, she wears colorful clothes in a time black women were supposed to only wear dark ones.

However, even if the Harlem Renaissance was a period of development for black people, they underwent many sufferings. In fact, people living in Harlem, which was nicknamed 'Mecca' by Alain Locke, experienced very hard social conditions. Gilbert Osofsky asserts that Harlem became a slum during the 1920s. It was overcrowded, people received low salaries and rents

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<sup>27</sup>Berlack, E. Thelma, *New Author Unearthed Here in Harlem*. *Amsterdam News*, 1928, p. 2.

were very high. So, they suffered poverty and many diseases. According to Osofsky, death rates in Harlem were 42 percent above the average rate of the whole city between 1923 and 1927<sup>28</sup>. Besides, he asserts that colored people were persecuted since white people thought that they stole their jobs.

Moreover, even if white people had a lot of interest and were intrigued by the blacks, they considered them as exotic others and went to Harlem to see them as if they were animals in a zoo or as freaks. The nights in Harlem were “merely a taxi trip to the exotic for most white New Yorkers”<sup>29</sup>. For them, it was a way to see exotic creatures without going to the jungle and thus without any danger. Yet, most of the Harlemites did not have time for those parties as they had to work very hard. According to James Weldon Johnson “the vast majority of [Harlemites] are ordinary, hard-working people....most of them have never seen the inside of a night-club”<sup>30</sup>. In fact, most of the people who lived in Harlem did not consider themselves part of the landscape as it is expressed in *Quicksand*.

The author states about Helga Crane “But, while the continuously gorgeous panorama of Harlem fascinated her, thrilled her, the sober mad rush of white New York failed entirely to stir her. Like thousands of other Harlem dwellers, she patronized its shops, its theaters, its art galleries, and its restaurants, and read its papers, without considering herself a part of the monster”. (*Q*, p. 77) Thus, even though Helga is marveled by Harlem, she is not very happy by the whites’ presence there as she knows the real reasons behind their visits to Harlem. Indeed, Helga can see that white people’s only goal is to have an insight to exoticism and that they consider African-Americans as animals rather than human beings.

Being herself bi-racial, Helga Crane is capable to perceive the race hypocrisy lying in the whites’ and blacks’ interactions. She abhors the fact that

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<sup>28</sup>Osofsky, Gilbert. *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930*. Chicago: Dee, 1996, p. 141.

<sup>29</sup>Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Re-naissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup>Johnson, Weldon James. *Black Manhattan*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 1930, p. 161.

her people, African-Americans, make a show of their lives in order to suit the whites' expectation. In Harlem, Helga leads a happy life

Not at all a narrow life, as Negroes live it, as Helga Crane knew it. Everything was there, vice and goodness, sadness and gaiety, ignorance and wisdom, ugliness and beauty, poverty and richness. And it seemed to her that somehow of goodness, gaiety, wisdom, and beauty always there was a little more than of vice, sadness, ignorance and ugliness. (*Q*, p. 78)

Therefore, despite the liberty and beauty Helga finds in Harlem, she also finds scarcity, vice and misery. By using these antonyms, Larsen demonstrates that unlike what some writers of the era described about Harlem as a perfect place to live in, devoid of racism and where the blacks could be free, there were still many race problems and discriminations there.

Like in *Quicksand*, the whites' presence in Harlem is also portrayed in Larsen's second novel *Passing*. In a conversation with Irene, Clare wonders why white people like Hugh Wentworth go to "a Negro dance" (*P*, p. 125) Irene replies that this "was the year 1927 in the city of New York, and hundreds of white people of Hugh Wentworth's type came to affairs in Harlem, more all the time. So many that Brian had said: 'Pretty soon the colored people won't be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections.'"(Ibid) So, there are so many whites in Harlem that African-Americans are afraid of being excluded from it or that the place becomes segregated. The city which was originally all black in the early 1920s is submerged by white Americans who come to "see Negroes" as Irene puts it. She believes there are various reasons why they come to Harlem "A few purely and frankly to enjoy themselves. Others to get material to turn into shekels. More, to gaze on these great and near great while they gaze on the Negroes."(Ibid, p. 125) So, like Helga, Irene thinks that it is voyeurism and curiosity that pushes white Americans into Harlem where they can gaze at exotic and strange creatures.

### **1. The image of African-Americans in Literature**

Black artists were pressured by their white patrons to put primitivism in their works. In fact, this was one of the paradoxical sides of the Harlem Renaissance or as Cary Wintz calls it "the major dilemma of the Harlem



Renaissance"<sup>31</sup>. The financial support that African-American artists received from white people was usually followed by directions and restrictions that made the artist change his work in this regard. "Unselfishness and sincerity could not always prevent misunderstandings between black writers and white patrons, nor could it prevent white support from imposing restrictions, as unintentional as they might be, on black literature"<sup>32</sup>. Some of them like Langston Hughes even stopped working with their patrons because of that. On the one hand, African-Americans wanted to show their independence and to establish their identity apart from the stereotyped image the whites had of them. However, on the other hand, they were obliged to create stereotyped, primitive characters going counter their principles and their real lives.

Furthermore, the Harlem Renaissance's artists diverged on how to describe the race and how to make things better. Indeed, some of them tried to erase all the stereotypes that existed about colored people and to create educated and perfect characters; while others, like Larsen, preferred to expose the different problems undergone by the race and its imperfections in order to find solutions. One of the biggest conflicts was between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Du Bois. In fact, the former claimed that African-Americans had to cooperate with the whites so as to have a better life; while the latter asserted the blacks' independence and their need to create a black elite who would promote their race and develop it. So, some African-Americans like Margarita Murray Washington, who was an educator and essayist, followed the philosophy of Washington and tried to submit to the stereotyped image the whites had of them. They accentuated their 'primitive' side and arranged their lives so as to have the whites' benediction. While others, like Nella Larsen pursued Du Bois's ideas and wanted to measure up to the whites and prove that they had as much potential as them, if not more than them. They showed their best side and fought for equality.

There was no single ideological direction in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Authors had the same goal, promoting the race, but they

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<sup>31</sup>Wintz, Cary D. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston: Rice University Press, 1988, p. 189.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid

did not do it the same way. They also diverged on how characters should be depicted. Therefore, they gave a contradictory image of the blacks which complicated even more their search for identity. Writers like Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen created well-educated characters following Du Bois's philosophy and not submitting to the whites. They focus on female characters to demonstrate the difficulties they underwent but also their strength and independence. Yet, their works were labeled as too bourgeois.

Other writers like Zora Neale Hurston commemorate difference in their works. These three writers use the device of characterization in their works. However, while on the one hand, Nella Larsen usually uses direct characterization like in *Passing* where the characters are described physically but also through their environment, and opinions; on the other hand, Zora Neale Hurston generally uses indirect characterization. In fact, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for instance, Hurston describes some characters indirectly making the reader understand their personalities through their names and behaviors. This can be mostly noticed in the protagonist's, Janie, three husbands. For example, we can understand through Logan's behavior that he thinks that women are objects while on the contrary Tea Cake has a more democratic vision of them.

In a very interesting essay entitled *Authentic American* and published in *The New York Times* on the Web, the critic Margo Jefferson asks the question is Nella Larsen less authentically black than Zora Neale Hurston?<sup>33</sup> She wonders if it is worth trying to give a definition to authentic American or African-American literature. She writes "It isn't the questions I mind, it's certain flat-footed answers that just won't go away. Why are we still tempted to believe there is any one kind of authenticity, that we are the ones who can always recognize it, or that writing marked by one's sex isn't at least as varied and confounding as sex itself?"<sup>34</sup> These questions are very important in the context of this present work as they might help to understand why Nella

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<sup>33</sup>Jefferson, Margo, *Authentic American: Is Larsen less authentically black than Zora Neale Hurston? Is Philip Roth less Jewish than Cynthia Ozick?* New York: The New York Times, February 18<sup>th</sup> 2001, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

Larsen's works did and still do not receive the same recognition as Zora Neale Hurston's.

In fact, even if Larsen's works have been reviewed by such critics as W.E.B Du Bois, Claudia Tate, Deborah McDowell, and Judith Butler, they are not as famous as Hurston's. Furthermore, Hurston is considered as the most important female writer of the Harlem Renaissance and her works are much more studied in the world than other women writers of the era, such as Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen. Margo Jefferson believes that "It's as if the old threat of mixed blood that made the mulatto a figure of shame, guilty allure, rage and acute social anxiety for a couple of centuries still hangs on, now in the guise of literary criticism"<sup>35</sup>. In other words, Jefferson thinks that some critics take the Tragic Mulatto figure as a cover to denigrate Larsen's works. They assert that this figure is used up and that the topic of passing is old-fashioned. To this Jefferson answers

But when did questions of dual identity and desires that flout or yearn to flout convention become dated or rarefied? We accept them in the lethally restricted Old New York of Edith Wharton, and in the muted but tortured negotiations between Henry James's Americans and Europeans. Larsen was a stern clinician of privilege, not a sentimentalist. And given America now, with its profusion of racial, ethnic and religious mixes and its perpetual obsession with status and reinventing oneself, her writing is anything but retrograde<sup>36</sup>.

Therefore, Nella Larsen's works represent a reality that existed and still exists in society about bi-racial people.

Besides, Jefferson asserts that Larsen is accused of literary passing by some white and black scholars because she draws little from the black culture and folklore. Indeed, Larsen uses a 'white' style in her writings. She sometimes introduces some fragments of sentences containing African-American vernacular like in *Quicksand* when Helga Crane speaks with uneducated woman living in the rural south. The only piece of work written in Vernacular is Larsen's short story *Sanctuary* for which she has been accused of plagiarism

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<sup>35</sup>Jefferson, Margo, *op. cit.* p. 5.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

and which largely contributed in her literary career's end. The author's protagonists are mostly privileged African-Americans who speak Standard English and who rarely use vernacular.

Yet, "Standard English is a cultural practice, not a biological inheritance. And so, obviously, is vernacular, or writers from Twain and Stowe to Faulkner and Welty would never have been able to draw on the black speech they heard around them in the rural and urban South"<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, using Black English is cultural rather than biological, and allows non-colored people to use that dialect. So, this belies Larsen's literary passing because of the language she uses, as she shows in *Sanctuary* with her excellent command of African-American vernacular. This use of Black English will be further studied in the last part of this thesis.

Consequently, Margo Jefferson believes that Nella Larsen's disappearance from the literary scene as compared to Zora Neale Hurston is due to two factors: the subjects she analyzes in her works and her use of Standard English instead of African-American vernacular. She asserts that the author's "prose is modernist, with its rhythms of half-suppressed, half-conscious agitation and its psychological ruptures"<sup>38</sup>. Additionally, the critic gives an interesting example about the use of a language and its importance in the categorization of literary works. Indeed, in the 1920s, Virginia Woolf eulogized Ring Lardner's baseball stories for what she named his truly American English. Yet, Wilson wrote in a letter that there is no American English he "felt Woolf was praising Lardner for a kind of neo-primitive charm, implying that American writers had little else of interest to offer"<sup>39</sup>. The critic thinks that his reaction was somehow disproportionate but that she agrees with him on the fact that "culture's power brokers are often most at ease when outsiders do and say nothing that might allow them to be mistaken for insiders"<sup>40</sup>. In this regard, Larsen's use of a perfect Standard 'white' English

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<sup>37</sup> Jefferson, Margo, *op, cit.*, p 6.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid, p.7.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

might have been perceived as a threat since when analyzing her writing style, she could possibly be mistaken for a white writer.

Thus, these allegations of literary passing or ambiguity might have been the reason why Larsen's works have been long forgotten and less studied than works written by Zora Neale Hurston who was considered by some critics as more authentically black and thus more legitimate to talk about the race. In fact, Nella Larsen grew up in a white neighborhood and some scholars thought she was not completely qualified to represent African-Americans. However, the author does not only talk about the blacks or whites; she depicts a third group of people, mixed-race, who struggle to find their place in a world where they are rejected by both white and colored people. It is worth underlining that Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jessie Redmon Fauset led lives that deviated from conformists' prospects of women at the time. Indeed, none of them became a mother and marriage did not seem to be their priority. They played a very important role in the development of black women's literary tradition and that is why their works have been revived by writers as Alice Walker after years of oblivion.

So, black artists had the challenging task of representing the African-American identity and struggled to avoid the stereotypical, exotic figure that some whites looked for in African-American literature. But what is the African-American identity? Can it be defined? If yes, how? And by whom? These are the questions that black writers tried to answer and that we will explore in this dissertation. This lack of a single ideology caused a lot of problems within the movement and contributed to its end. Wintz argues that in the 1930s "black writers and critics either became disillusioned with the movement or else became convinced that the movement was a sinking ship, and they abandoned it" since "the movement never found any common ideology to bind together its adherents"<sup>41</sup>.

The Harlem Renaissance is at the heart of some contestation for three reasons: first, some scholars, like Henry Rhodes in *The Social Contributions of*

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<sup>41</sup>Wintz, Cary D., *op. cit.*, p. 222.

*The Harlem Renaissance*, argue that there was no renaissance taking place while others assert that it did take place. Second, for its location because many of the so-called renaissance authors did not actually live in Harlem. Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston for instance spent much of the Harlem Renaissance on the road. Finally, scholars diverge on its exact period because it is not possible to determine the precise dates of its beginning and ending. Some of them identify the period as the decade of the 1920s while others like Nathan Huggins refer to it as a decade of change between WW1 and The Great Depression.

Furthermore, “Jessie Fauset and several other female poets wrote and published well before World War 1. All of Hurston’s novels and one of Fauset’s were published after the start of the Great Depression. As a consequence, neither Huggins nor Lewis considers Hurston’s major fiction in their studies of the Harlem Renaissance.”<sup>42</sup> Even Harold Bloom does not include Nella Larsen in his work *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) In fact, even if her works received a big success during the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen was and still is excluded from many books about the era. So, is it a kind of strategy of exclusion that these male critics used to marginalize female authors whose works were recognized and praised at their time?

## **B. Women of the Harlem Renaissance<sup>43</sup>:**

Many black and female authors have been excluded from the canon of American literature. Canons exist to distinguish fine writing from mediocre one; they serve to classify good literature from non-literature. Canonization is a process established by the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, leading to the official recognition of a person as 'holy', this person is then proposed as an exemplary model of Christian life. As the canon also served to distinguish 'sacred' texts from heretic ones, it necessarily entails patterns of inclusion and exclusion which, applied to literary productions, favor some categories of writers over others. Such patterns, and more especially the pattern

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<sup>42</sup>Wall, Cheryl. A., *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup>*Women of the Harlem Renaissance* is the title of Cheryl. E. Wall’s book published in 1995.

of exclusion, obviously emerge as a central issue in the present study and will constitute a main focus of analysis of the dissertation, particularly in its intricate connections and interplay with the question of otherness.

The meaning of the term Canon has evolved and is now used in literature to refer to certain works that have become classics that good readers and scholars must be familiar with so as to be considered knowledgeable. But what seems quite remarkable is that these works are usually written by white males. In fact, there has been a sort of gerrymandering in American literature that advantaged male and white authors but also black male authors over females. Women writers were excluded and their works sometimes ignored or forgotten; so, these marginalized authors came to embody a significant mass of ‘others’ of American literature. It is the terror of the other that pushes people to create groups and to construct canons from which the minorities are marginalized and excluded. Some authors like Virginia Woolf and Langston Hughes denounced the exclusionary nature of canons but since they both belong to minorities, female and black respectively, their voices have long been ignored in the past.

### **1. Rebuilding the Image of African-American Women**

The Harlem Renaissance is regarded as male-dominated by critics, like Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* for instance, and very few women were recognized as writers. During that period, black women started to revolt and to claim their rights, they began to be educated and to work. A number of them gained some independence and started to discover the world. However, this did not prevent them from suffering because of the stereotyped image the world had of them.

In “The Task for Negro Womanhood” published in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, Elise Johnson McDougald states about the African-American female:

She is conscious that what is left of chivalry is not directed toward her. She realizes that the ideals of beauty, built up in the fine arts, have excluded her almost entirely. Instead the grotesque Aunt Jemimas of the street-car advertisement

proclaim only an ability to serve without grace or loveliness. Nor does the drama catch her finest spirit. She is most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule; or to portray feminine viciousness or vulgarity not peculiar to Negroes. This is the shadow over her<sup>44</sup>.

This quote reflects the negative image that people used to have of black women. Before the Harlem Renaissance, and even after but to a lesser extent, black females suffered from a paradoxical stereotyped image.

In fact, on the one hand, African-American women were associated with the famous image of the mammy, a fat sturdily built black female, whose use and role was to provide for the needs and demands of the white master and his family. Mechanically, she would appear whenever she was wanted, knowing exactly what to do to satisfy the master. These women were considered as ugly because they did not fit in the white standard of beauty, white skin, blond hair with blue eyes, and their sole utility lay in serving people. On the other hand, they were associated with the image of Jezebel, an attractive, sexual being who seduces and lures men. They were seen as evil beings who seduced white, innocent men. This representation was used to justify the sexual relationships that the white masters had with their slaves. It was a way to put all the blame on black women and to diminish the responsibility of white men who abused and mistreated them.

Rebuilding the image of black women was a real challenge during the Harlem Renaissance. Not only because they had to change it in the eyes of the white people and black males but also because they had to work on their self-image and define their identity. In fact, many black women internalized the stereotyped image people spread of them. They felt ugly and thought that their only ability lay in serving people. Furthermore, they believed that only whiteness could be beautiful and attractive. So, they tried to mimic white women in their way of dressing but also in their life style, for those who had the means to do so. Whiteness was everywhere in their daily lives like in

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<sup>44</sup>McDouglad Johnson, Elise, *The Task for Negro Womanhood. The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1994, p. 369-70.



magazines and advertisements. So, they felt pressured and used all the ways to look lighter.

During the Harlem Renaissance, there were two opposed perceptions about the new colored female. Some women like Margarita Murray Washington considered that black women should stay at home and take care of their husbands and children. They had to be beautiful and maintain a certain social life. Their mission was to cater for their husbands to help them have a successful career thus establishing a bourgeois class. These women continued to imitate the whites' life style because they idealized it. Margarita Murray Washington is a perfect representation of the Gibson Girl. Other women like Pauline Hopkins, on the other hand, sustained that the black female should be very ambitious and focus on personal achievements. She asked for women's emancipation and independence by demanding their rights. This kind of women usually neglected their femininity and had no love life.

There were also two contrasting representations of women among artists and intellectuals. Lucia Morrow Calloway argues that sexuality was a very controversial topic during the Harlem Renaissance between artists and intellectuals<sup>45</sup>. On the one hand, artists tried to present the black female as a sexual, sensual being just like blues singers and exotic dancers. On the other hand, intellectuals wanted to present the image of chaste, respectable black females. As a result of all these contradictory images that people spread about the black female, defining their new identity was a very complex process that took a long time. African-American females had to triumph over many barriers and to work on their self-image before trying to change people's picture of them.

After the Civil War, many African-Americans started to access education. Several of them could not complete school. Yet, some of them had the chance to finish their studies and even to go to college. So, there started to be black doctors, lawyers, physicians, and businessmen. On the other hand,

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<sup>45</sup>Calloway, Licia Morrow. *Black Family (DYS) Function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Fannie Hurst*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2003, p. 146.

women could also complete their studies but they did not have the same chances as their black colleagues. In fact, just like in Europe, the professions reserved to educated women were limited to teachers, nurses, librarians and rarely writers. As a matter of fact, women struggled to be taken seriously as writers. Black males regarded them as either care providers or entertainers. Therefore, black female intellectuals produced great efforts so as to make their voices heard. The trouble, according to Carole Marks, director of Black Studies and associate professor of sociology at the University of Delaware, was that women's tasks were very different from those of the black men. According to African-American males, Black women's role was that of a salon hostess or entertainer.

As a consequence, many women writers were disregarded as participants in the movement. However, some black women authors were able to impose their voices and to overcome their exclusion from the canon. So, literature by and about African-American women began to gain a status and among its representatives were Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Zora Neale Hurston. The number of African-American female writers, poets and essayists had never been so big before that period still it continued to be inferior to male authors'. These latter criticized women's writings that were, according to them, too romanticized and only dealing with women's issues. Paradoxically, they also thought that women should limit their topics and that they should discuss subjects like domesticity and stay away from politics for example. This rejection might have come from the black authors' fear of competition but also from the older generation of African-American females who coped perfectly within the clichéd roles they played. Furthermore, some leaders of the Harlem Renaissance like W.E.B Du Bois kept notice of females' works to ensure that they did not depict the black woman in a stereotypical way.

Thus, female authors did not receive the same degree of attention from editors and this reflected the gender diversity and discrimination of the period. However, these writers produced efforts to make their voices heard. They discussed various topics including womanhood, domesticity but also political

problems and social conditions. They excelled in describing the way African-American females were treated by the whites but also by their own community. Some of them incorporated autobiographical elements in their works which made their depictions even more accurate. So, they portrayed the troubles that black women underwent during the 1920s and the 1930s. Moreover, they gave an overview of the lives they lead and the place of women during that era. Barbara Christian explains that novelists such as Frances E.W. Harper, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston had the difficult task of proving “that the black woman is a woman”<sup>46</sup>.

## 2. Nella Larsen Versus Jessie Redmon Fauset

The small number of renowned black women writers did not prevent them from having some rivalry. Nella Larsen for example was very competitive and the only other woman she considered to be of quality, and may be of equality with her, during the Harlem Renaissance was Jessie Redmon Fauset. This competitive and occasionally pretentious behavior made some male writers like Harold Jackman, who was a minor writer of the Harlem Renaissance, very irritated. Nella Larsen is often compared to Jessie Redmon Fauset and Cheryl A. Wall thinks that it “does Larsen a disservice”<sup>47</sup> since the two writers analyze the race topic differently. Indeed, they both examine the relationship between passing and sexuality. However, while Larsen uses miscegenation in her works, Fauset avoids it. In the latter’s *Plum Bun*(1929), Angela Murray, a mulatto heroine, ends up marrying a black man while in Larsen’s *Passing* Clare has a child with her white husband. Furthermore, Wall believes that Larsen’s work resembles more that of Jean Toomer and Claude McKay than Jessie Fauset’s.

Yet, there are some similarities between Larsen’s and Fauset’s works. In fact, like Fauset’s characters, Larsen’s do not suffer from poverty or even a lot of social injustices. As it is stated above, their works have been perceived as too bourgeois. They both present the figure of the mulatto in a new way.

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<sup>46</sup>Harper, E.W. Frances. *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. California: Praeger, 1980, p. 252.

<sup>47</sup>Wall, Cheryl. A., *op, cit.*, p. 117.

Instead of victimizing and creating a tragic mulatto, they both present this figure as an icon of beauty and a model for the new black female. We do not feel the suffering and the estrangement that the traditional figure of the tragic mulatto conveys.

“Like Jessie Fauset, to whom she is frequently compared, Larsen emphasizes female sexuality as a component of women’s identity, but she also challenges the implication that the domestic sphere can satisfy a woman’s quest for satisfaction and completion”<sup>48</sup>. Like Jessie Fauset, Larsen thinks that sexuality is a part of women they cannot deny. However, in her works, she emphasizes the fact that women’s identity is not limited to sexuality and that they are not sexual objects. Furthermore, she demonstrates that repressing one’s sexuality can lead to disastrous endings like the one of Helga Crane, the heroine of *Quicksand*. Larsen’s characters, especially in *Quicksand*, do not want to be doomed to a domestic role and try to liberate themselves from the restrictions of the society. In addition, both writers focus on the social position of black females. For example, they analyze the relationship between gender and class maintaining that women have been othered and that the stereotyped image society had of them contributed to their alienation. Helga Crane, for instance, demonstrates the disastrous effects that social pressure can have on women.

Furthermore, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen both examine the relationships between men and women and the marriage bond in their works. They discuss the notions of love and consider marriage as an out-of-date Victorian practice that imprisons women and kills their individuality. Marriages are also described as passionless and empty of romance. Through their works, they illustrate the difficulties undergone by black women and try to offer solutions and moralities.

Another common point between Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen is that they both describe everything in detail among which the settings, the characters; so much that it creates an understandable mental image in the mind

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<sup>48</sup>*The Oxford Companion to African-American literature*. Edited by William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 428.

of the reader. Some authors, like Zora Neale Hurston, observe that the thought process of black people of the period was very developed<sup>49</sup>. In fact, according to her, African-Americans thought in a very practical way and created mental images of their ideas. Especially, in the case of writers and this helped them to vehicle their ideas clearly. She thought that it was due to an innate intelligence because black people did not have access to education.

After decades of the oblivion of some authors like Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, their works were rediscovered and prompted by writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. The various works by African-American women writers of the Harlem Renaissance exposed truths about the era and the way of living of people that only the colored females could tell. The African-American women writers of the Harlem Renaissance followed the footsteps of Phyllis Wheatley and Frances E.W. Harper hence shaping a pathway that Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others would pursue. Alice Walker considers authors like Zora Neale Hurston as models who set the foundation of black women's literature and who formed the basis to understand the social and historical context in which they lived. It is very significant that these black women authors, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, were revived and prompted by other black female writers.

Even though the Harlem Renaissance did not last for a long time, it established the foundations for the creation of an African-American literature but also an African-American identity. In fact, during that period, black people's image changed for the world but also for themselves. They understood the importance and the richness of their culture and of speaking up for the race's uplift.

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<sup>49</sup>Neale Hurston, Zora (1928) *How it Feels to Be Colored Me*. New York: American Roots, 2015, p. 20.

### C. *Quicksand* and *Passing* reviews:

When *Quicksand* and *Passing* appeared, respectively in 1928 and 1929, they were the subject of many reviews and critiques. Indeed, many newspapers published articles on the novels but also on the author. In this chapter, some of these reviews, that can be found in the archives dedicated to the author<sup>50</sup>, will be analyzed to see the way Nella Larsen's novels were assessed throughout time.

In a review entitled '*A Mulatto Girl*', published in the *New York Times* in April 1928, the reviewer, whose name is not cited, starts by quoting Larsen's publishers who argue that *Quicksand* is the first novel in years that is free of propaganda. The critic agrees with them and thinks that Larsen recounts the story of an individual rather than of the whole race. He writes: "Miss Larsen cannot help being aware that the negro problem is a real one, cannot help being aware negro exhibitionism...is a vivid and interesting spectacle; but she is most of all aware that a novelist's business is primarily with individuals and not with classes, and she confines herself to the life of Helga Crane"<sup>51</sup>. Even if *Quicksand* mainly focuses on the character of Helga Crane, it also recounts the story of a community. In fact, the novel's first goal may not be propaganda; still it does not limit itself to recounting the story of an individual. Nella Larsen explores race and gender issues. She describes feelings that are shared by mixed-race people, if not by the whole race. Her novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, are not merely fictional; they picture many realities of the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, Larsen explores sentiments of exclusion and otherness that black people and women felt back then.

In '*Mixed Blood*', a review published in *the New York Tribune* on May 13 1928, Roark Bradford, a white author of the period, seems moderately enthusiastic about *Quicksand*. He writes "Here again is the old theme of mixed

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<sup>50</sup>Most of Nella Larsen's archives can be found at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library at the Yale University Collection of American Literature. Some archives can also be found at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and at The New York Public Library, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division.

<sup>51</sup>"A Mulatto Girl." Rev. of *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen. *New York Times Book Review* 8 Apr. 1928: 16-17.

blood”<sup>52</sup>. However, he finds the “result interesting”. For him, the charm of the novel lies in Larsen’s capacity to describe Helga Crane’s feeling of longing for something that is unattainable. He then becomes more critical about the author’s style and technique, and writes: ‘Helga is an idea more than she is a human being; drawing character does not seem to be one of Miss Larsen’s major accomplishments’<sup>53</sup>. Nevertheless, Bradford finds the book “good”. The common point between these first two reviews is that they both maintain that *Quicksand* is not a propaganda novel and that even if Nella Larsen is aware of the race problems, she does not devote her work to them.

An important passage from the review is when Bradford evokes the climax of the novel. In this scene, Helga Crane and Mr. Anderson meet in a party and share a kiss. For him, “savagery tears at her [Helga’s] heart; the black blood chokes the white, and Africa rumbles through her [Helga’s] veins.”<sup>54</sup> He later adds “The reader...should begin [the novel] with a mind as free as possible of racial prejudices and preconceived notions and conclusions.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, there is a contradiction in the critic’s statements. In fact, the last two quotes are completely contradictory. On the one hand, Bradford argues that the reader should read this novel without having any preconceptions. Nonetheless, on the other hand, his own review is marred by stereotypes like the fact that he states that following one’s sexual impulses or desires is only specific to black people, or in this case black females. He accentuates the typecast image of the colored woman as a Jezebel. In other words, a sexual, savage being who cannot control her impulses. Helga Crane tries to fight this stereotyped picture of the black woman throughout the novel. By saying that the “black blood chokes the white one”, Bradford implies that this behavior cannot be committed by a white, respectable woman, on the opposite of a black, savage one.

W.E.B Du Bois reviewed *Quicksand* very positively in an article published in *Crisis* in 1928. He argues “*Quicksand* is the best piece of fiction

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<sup>52</sup>Bradford, Roark. "Mixed Blood." Rev. of *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen. *New York Herald Tribune*. 13 May 1928: 22.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnut<sup>56</sup>. He thinks that it is “a fine, thoughtful and courageous piece of work”<sup>57</sup>. Du Bois also claims that Helga Crane’s character is a fresh approach for his epoch, considering her as “typical of the new, honest, young fighting Negro woman—the one in whom race sits negligibly and life is always first”<sup>58</sup>. It is interesting to see how the reviews and critiques have evolved over time.

In an introduction to an edition of the novel *Quicksand* published in 1971, Adelaide Cromwell Hill writes: “*Quicksand* helps us to see how one Black woman viewed the problem of the Black community, its relation to White society, the survival of the individual Black person in a totally White society abroad, and the basic problem of sex as it expresses itself for Black women and for those males, Black or White, available or attractive to them”<sup>59</sup>. In other words, the novel makes us see through the eyes of a black female to discover her vision of both Black and white environments and perceive how she expresses or hides her sexual passion. It is in the 1970s that Nella Larsen’s works were rediscovered and critics started to analyze themes other than race, like sexuality in the novels.

In *Sexism as Quagmire: Nella Larsen’s Quicksand* (1973), Hortense E. Thornton sees the novel as a fresh advance for the Harlem Renaissance era. She states “when one considers the complex events of the novel, it becomes possible to argue that Helga’s tragedy was perhaps more a result of sexism than of racism”<sup>60</sup>. Helga is marginalized because of her skin color but also because of her sex. She is treated as inferior by black and white people and is obliged to repress her sexuality. She finds in marriage a solution to let go this sexual tension and still be a respectable woman but she is trapped with an insipid man she ends up hating.

So, critics started to read the novel without focusing on the race issues. In a 1986 article entitled *'That nameless... shameful impulse': Sexuality*

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<sup>56</sup>Du Bois, William.E.B. *Review of Quicksand*. *Crisis*. 1928: 284-285.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Hill Cromwell, Adelaide. *Quicksand*. / *With an introd.by Adelaide Cromwell Hill*. New York: Collier Books, [1971, c1928], p. 12.

<sup>60</sup>Thornton, Hortense E., *Sexism as Quagmire: Nella Larsen's Quicksand*, in C. L. A. *Journal* 16, March 1973, p. 288.



in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand and Passing*, Deborah McDowell argues that Larsen attempts “to hold the two virtually contradictory impulses in the same novel. [She] wanted to tell the story of the black women with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle class terms”<sup>61</sup>.

A year later, Hazel Carby published a book entitled *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. In this work, Carby shares Deborah McDowell’s view about Larsen’s treatment of sexuality in *Quicksand*. Indeed, she writes

Larsen recognized that the repression of the sensual in Afro-American fiction in response to the long history of the repression or denial of female sexuality and desire. But, of course, the representation of black female sexuality meant risking its definition as primitive and exotic within a racist society. Larsen attempted to embody but could not hope to resolve these contradictions in her representation of Helga as sexual being, making Helga the first truly sexual black female protagonist in Afro-American fiction<sup>62</sup>.

Otherwise stated, both McDowell and Carby believe that on the one hand, Larsen wants to fight the image of Jezebel and to present the picture of a chaste black woman. Yet, on the other hand, she wants to show that black women have desires like every woman and that they are too pressured by the stereotyped image society has of them. However, they argue that these two contradictions cannot be held by the same person and that it is what led Helga to her disastrous fate.

In *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, a book published in 1994, David Levering Lewis writes “Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), if not the best novel of the Renaissance, is certainly its most engrossing. McKay’s *Home to Harlem* sold more copies, but Larsen’s novel won much better critical reviews and one of the Renaissance’s newest and most prestigious laurels, the

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<sup>61</sup>McDowell, Deborah E. "That nameless... shameful impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand and Passing*. in *Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory*. Ed. Joe Weixlmann and Houston A. Baker. Greenwood, FL: Penkevill, 1988, p. 146.

<sup>62</sup>Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 173-74.

Harmon Foundation's second prize for literature"<sup>63</sup>. Lewis argues that one of Larsen's strengths and what differentiates her from her contemporaries is that she did not only treat the subject of race and color and did not use the latter (race and class) as the causes of her characters' decline. This review of *Quicksand* suggests that Helga's fate is not only related to her skin color or to her gender but also to her personality and behavior. Thus, the critique implies that the psychological side plays a role in the story and that people should not only focus on the obvious topics to understand the novella.

Like Lewis, Licia Morrow Calloway thinks that Helga Crane's misfortune and the hardships she undergoes are more related to a trauma or a psychological problem than to her race. In *Black Family (DYS) Function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Fannie Hurst*, published in 2003, she argues that "In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane's inability to find her niche in the world is firmly rooted in her unresolved, unresolvable conflict with her Danish mother, Karen Nilssen"<sup>64</sup>. For her, Larsen's trauma comes from her mother's rejection and that it is what drives her life. Therefore, "Helga's inapproachability is attributed to a defense mechanism acquired during her youth, which she spent living among people who resented her presence"<sup>65</sup>. For Calloway, Helga built a carapace to protect herself from the sufferings she underwent; that is why some readers can see her as arrogant or insensitive.

In *Not Even Past: Race, Historical Trauma, and Subjectivity in Faulkner, Larsen, and Van Vechten*, Dorothy Stringer agrees with Lewis and Calloway when they argue that Helga Crane's problems come from her as an individual. She states "Much of Helga's whimsical dissatisfaction throughout the novel, her repetitive seeking after something new and better, is driven by her inability to voice anger or even disagreement with anyone"<sup>66</sup>. This silence ends when Helga acknowledges her disagreement with Olsen and his portrait.

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<sup>63</sup>Levering Lewis, David. *op. cit.*, p. 409.

<sup>64</sup>Calloway, Licia Morrow. *Black Family (DYS) Function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Fannie Hurst*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2003, p. 82.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>66</sup>Stringer, Dorothy. *Not Even Past: Race, Historical Trauma, and Subjectivity in Faulkner, Larsen, and Van Vechten*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, p. 81.

She took the habit of leaving before confrontation like in Naxos and Harlem. Yet, before leaving Denmark, she voices her anger and tells Olsen what she thought of his portrait and propositions. Stringer also shares Calloway's view that Helga is traumatized by her mother's abandonment. She writes "The transferential invocation of a beloved, lost mother, though, only marks the beginning, or the possibility, of a working-through that the last pages of the novel deliberately leave unfinished"<sup>67</sup>. In other regards, it may be the fact of losing her mother that drove Helga Crane to an unhappy, ambiguous end because her mothers' absence haunted her throughout her life.

Despite the fact that it was only considered recently, motherlessness is a very important subject in Nella Larsen's novels. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane lives with the specter of her mother even if the latter died seven years before the novel opens. It is her mother's rejection that shapes her life and makes her leave the people she loves because she is afraid of being abandoned. Indeed, as it is demonstrated by the several allusions to the protagonist's mother in the novel, Helga is haunted by her mother's phantom. At the end of the story, Helga is very weak and bed-ridden; yet, she thinks of her mother. Larsen writes "She could watch the figures of the past drift by. There was her mother, whom she had loved from a distance and finally so scornfully blamed, who appeared as she had always remembered her, unbelievably beautiful, young, and remote"(Q, p. 155) This passage shows the heroine's ambivalent feelings for her mother even if love takes advantage on the negative sentiments. Helga keeps a positive image of that woman who raised her despite the hardships of being a white woman with a black child. Unlike Helga, Irene and Clare, the heroines of *Passing*, are not haunted by their mothers. Their fathers are more present in the novel. In turn, Irene and Clare are very bad mothers who are not concerned about their children. In fact, Irene is very distant with her children and overprotects them while Clare never mentions her daughter as it will be shown in the second part of this thesis.

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<sup>67</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

For Licia Morrow Calloway, Larsen did not try to present black women as modern women who are fully satisfied with their roles as mothers<sup>68</sup>. Indeed, unlike the majority of African-American writers who tried to present the domestic life of black women as enriching and full of love and children, Nella Larsen contradicted that vision and focused on the difficulties that these women experience in their daily lives because of their color. She revised the myth describing black mothers as matriarchal figures. Judith Wilt has put it as “the myth of the black earth mother, indestructible under the heaviest load”<sup>69</sup>. These mothers were depicted as strongly built and very caring. They were said to live only for their children and are described as mothers rather than women. They are self-sacrificing and fully satisfied with their nurturing function.

Larsen’s characters have a tendency to subvert this myth as they are independent and do not care much for their children or their roles as mothers. Helga Crane, the protagonist of *Quicksand*, for instance, does not desire to have children since she does not want them to live the same discriminations she went through because of her color. “She [Helga] saw, suddenly, the giving birth to little helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin” (*Q*, p. 104). Therefore, Helga refutes the generally accepted fact that all black women want to have children and that their only goal and utility in life is being a mother. Irene and Clare, on the other hand, are not model mothers. Clare’s daughter is an in-existent character who is only mentioned twice while Irene is a protective, yet an insensitive and cold mother. Indeed, Irene’s relation with her children comes down to protecting them against racial discriminations but she does not give them any love or tenderness.

In *Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood*, Patricia Hills Collins argues that black mothers guarantee the physical survival in their children at the cost of emotional destruction<sup>70</sup>. In this regard, Helga Crane’s mother sends her to an all-black school when she is an

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<sup>68</sup>Calloway, Licia Morrow.*op. cit.*, p 81.

<sup>69</sup>Wilt. Judith.*Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 135.

<sup>70</sup>Collins Hills, Patricia (1990)*Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood. American Families: A Multicultural Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 7.

adolescent because it has become difficult to be a black person living with a white family in a segregated area. She thought that it was the best solution and that Helga would feel better in an all-black environment. However, by rejecting her daughter, she condemns her to a life of continual grief and emotional devastation.

As the subject of motherhood is closely linked to the ones of sex, gender, and sexuality, it will be discussed in details in the second part of this thesis. For now, it is imperative to make distinction between the interrelated, key notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, which will be analyzed later on in this present work. First, sex refers to biological or physical features differentiating males from females like a penis or a vagina or hormonal differences. However, certain people have genetic and hormonal characteristics associated with both males and females which makes their sex unidentifiable. These people are called intersex. Secondly, gender can be defined as a social construct that classifies people according to their biological sex. In fact, there are some features that are usually related to men and women in society and that are supposed to show masculinity or femininity.

Nevertheless, these traits do not always match the reality and some people do not fit with society's expectations about gender. For Judith Butler, gender is too challenging and complicated to be a mere social construct. She thinks that it should be a self-built concept and that each person should have his/her own definition of gender<sup>71</sup>. Finally, sexuality is defined as people's sexual and romantic attraction. For instance, if a person is attracted by the opposite sex, he/she is said to be straight. If he/she is same-sex attracted, he/she is said to be homosexual. Yet, it is not as simple as it seems as people are sometimes attracted by both sexes and are called bi-sexual. Some people feel that these labels –straight, homosexual or bi– are too rigid and prefer to identify themselves as queer.

Although Nella Larsen's second novel entitled *Passing* did not receive the same success as *Quicksand*, it was welcomed by the critics and broadly

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<sup>71</sup>Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Thinking Gender'*. New York & London: Routledge. ISBN 0415389550, p. 286.

reviewed. In ‘*Passing by Nella Larsen*’, an article published in *New York Word* on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1929, Harry Hansen reviews the novel in a positive way. However, the article is flawed by mistakes and contradictory statements. For example, the reviewer writes “We see the story through the eyes of a light-colored Negro woman [Irene] who has never pretended to be white, although her husband has often wished that they might have gone across the line”<sup>72</sup>. Yet, Hansen also writes “Brian Redfield [Irene’s husband] didn’t like ‘jigs’ who passed for white”<sup>73</sup>. In reality, Brian has never wished nor pushed her to pass. Furthermore, he is too black to pass, so it would not have been possible for them to cross the line. On the contrary, he wanted to go to Brazil where being colored would not be a problem as he thought that it was a country free of any prejudice. The reviewer also speaks about Clare’s ‘children. Nonetheless, Clare has only one child. The article then continues as positively as it started, praising Larsen’s ability to create very intelligent characters and suggesting that her work will remain for posterity.

In another article entitled ‘*The Color Line*’, published in *the Herald Tribune Books* on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1929, Margaret Cheney Dawson reviews Larsen’s novel *Passing* in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, she writes “the flat unimpassioned sentences are a disappointment...However, that strange excitement arising from the mere mention of race...holds one’s interest to the end”<sup>74</sup>. Nonetheless, on the other hand, she praises the author’s ability to make black people finally appear human to the whites. Indeed, Cheney Dawson focuses on one scene which takes place in the Redfields’ living room at breakfast time. She argues that Larsen describes the scene in details to demonstrate that black people’s lives are very similar to the whites’ because “Nothing startles the white man so surely as the discovery of a simple, dignified routine in the life of educated Negroes”<sup>75</sup>. In this scene, Irene and Brian are discussing their children’s education while the maid is serving them. For the critic, Larsen unconsciously did this to emphasize black people’s

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<sup>72</sup>Hansen, Harry. ‘Passing by Nella Larsen’. *New York Word*. 26 April, 1929, p. 20.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Cheney Dawson, Margaret. ‘*The Color Line*’. Rev. of *Passing*, by Nella Larsen. *The Herald Tribune Books*, 28 April, 1929, p. 19.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

humanity because white people see them as nonhuman. They regard them as faceless beings whose lives differ from theirs.

On the same day that Dawson's *'The Color Line'* was published, another review entitled *'Beyond the Color Line'* was published in *The New York Times Book Review*. The reviewer, whose name is not mentioned, states that Larsen "is among the better negro novelists. She writes a good, firm, tangible prose"<sup>76</sup>. The critic then analyzes the novel in an optimistic way characterizing Larsen's writing as 'adroit' and not exaggerating black life. He/She writes: "unlike the negro novelists, and white novelists who write about negroes, she [Larsen] does not give her following a bath in primitive emotionalism. She is not seeking the key to the soul of her race in the saxophone to the inclusion of all else"<sup>77</sup>. There are nevertheless two criticisms that the reviewer makes about the novel. First of all, he/she believes that the writer chose to simplify her work's end and solve all the problems by Clare's death. But does Clare's death really resolve all the problems in the novel and simplify the story? This is one of the questions that the next parts of this thesis will try to answer. Second, the critic thinks that Clare is too beautiful to be true. In fact, he/she believes that the depiction that is made of Clare is unrealistic and that she is too perfect. At Last, the reviewer argues that Larsen's being a mixed-race person gives more 'effectiveness' to the novel.

Like many of the articles reviewing Larsen's work, *The Book of the Day*, a review about *Passing* that appeared in the *New York Sun* on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1929, starts with a short biography of the author. Indeed, most of the reviews begin by recalling Nella Larsen's origins, a black father and a white mother. The critic, whose name is unknown, denounces the excessive sophistication and 'impeccable refinement' of Larsen's characters. However, the reviewer thinks that the book is "an earnest and courageous attempt to deal with the theme [of passing]"<sup>78</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup>-----, *'Beyond The Color Line'*. Rev. of *Passing*, by Nella Larsen. *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 April, 1929, p. 08.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>-----, *'The Book of the Day'*. Rev. of *Passing*, by Nella Larsen. *The New York Sun*, 1 May, 1929, p. 14.

As for *Quicksand*, William E.B Du Bois reviewed *Passing* in *The Browsing Reader* published in *Crisis* in July 1929. The reviewer thinks that Larsen's novel is among the finest works of the year. It is worth mentioning that both Jessie Fauset and Walter White had published novels with passing as a central theme in the same period. He argues that Larsen's novel treats the subject of passing in a very intelligent way as the author just explains what passing is and how it is perceived. He writes "the thing is done with studied and singularly successful art. Nella Larsen is learning how to write and acquiring style, and she is doing it very simply and clearly"<sup>79</sup>. The race leader even states that the people's job is to buy the novel because it is the kind of work that will help the race to uplift.

After Larsen's works' rediscovery, many critics reviewed the novels without focusing on race as the central subject. In *'That nameless... shameful impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's Quicksand and Passing*, published in 1986, Deborah McDowell argues that another form of passing which remained unexplored for years is the sexual one<sup>80</sup>. She argues that Irene passes by hiding her lesbian desires for Clare. The feminist uses the erotic descriptions Irene makes of Clare to support her claim. So, just as for Larsen's first novella, critics started to explore other themes in *Passing*. Two years later, Ann Allen Shockley wrote a book entitled *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide* where she affirms that "Both of Larsen's novels represented a coming out of the Victorian closet for black women in reckoning with their sexuality"<sup>81</sup>. Otherwise stated, Nella Larsen challenged the Victorian principle that sex must be taboo and not spoken about openly.

In 1991, Elizabeth Ammons published *Jumping out the window: Nella Larsen's Passing and the End of an Era*. In this article that appeared in the book *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*, Ammons argues that Clare and Irene, the two heroines of *Passing*, are doubles. Furthermore, she believes that "the divisions between

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<sup>79</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Browsing Reader*. *Crisis* 36. July, 1929, 234-248-239, p. 12..

<sup>80</sup> McDowell, Deborah, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>81</sup> Shockley, Ann Allen. *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1988, p. 437.



respectable middle-class feminine status and the woman artist, between heterosexual and lesbian desire, and between acceptance in white and black America are unbridgeable”<sup>82</sup>. In other words, these differences or the divisions between the doubles are insurmountable and that is what shapes Larsen’s story.

In *Nella Larsen’s Passing: Irony and the Critics*, a review published in *African American Review* in 1992, Jonathan Little maintains that the author is a skeptic. He writes “Every direction she [Larsen] offers is quickly undercut by a counter-dilemma- e.g., Brazil is no longer available as a social and racial utopia. Even the traditional passing for white plot is undetermined. There is no supportive ‘birthright’ to which her passers may serenely return”<sup>83</sup>. In other regards, the reviewer considers that Larsen uses irony and quips the tradition of passing. Instead of creating a welcoming world or community where the passer can feel at home, the author shows that even after crossing back the color line, the protagonist does not feel in peace. Little states “Larsen implies that there is no longer a Black community anywhere in the world to return to”<sup>84</sup>.

The same year in which Little’s review appeared and in the same journal, David L. Blackmore published *The Unreasonable Restless Feeling: The Homosexual Sub-texts of Nella Larsen’s Passing*. The reviewer states “The implications of Larsen’s ‘flirtation’ with both female and male homosexuality are radical”<sup>85</sup>. He maintains that for Irene lesbianism is an ‘alternative’ to her repressive marriage. Moreover, he believes Irene represses her sexuality because of the stereotyped image society has of the black female and that she finds a substitute in lesbianism. Blackmore notes that in the 1920s Harlem “lesbianism and particularly female bisexuality received a great deal of attention as naughty but exciting options for adventurous, ‘modern’ women”<sup>86</sup>. Therefore, Harlem became the place where black but also white people’s sexual desires, that were seen as immoral by the white society, could become a reality.

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<sup>82</sup> Ammons, Elizabeth. *Jumping out the window: Nella Larsen’s Passing and the End of an Era, Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 191.

<sup>83</sup> Little, Jonathan. *Nella Larsen’s Passing: Irony and the Critics*. *African American Review* 26, No.1.1992, p. 175.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Blackmore, David L., *The Unreasonable Restless Feeling: The Homosexual Sub-texts of Nella Larsen’s Passing*. *African American Review* 26, No.3.1992, p. 478.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 479.

In 1993, Judith Butler reviewed *Passing* in an article entitled *Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge*. This is a very important work that will be analyzed in the second part of this first chapter. Butler writes "I would agree with both McDowell and Carby not only that it is unnecessary to choose whether this novella is 'about' race or 'about' sexuality and sexual conflict, but that the two domains are inextricably linked, such that the text offers a way to read the radicalization of sexual conflict"<sup>87</sup>. Butler defends the argument that race and sexuality form a whole that cannot be dissociated and that to understand the novel, one has to have them both in mind. Indeed, Larsen's works are too complex to reduce them to one single topic.

In 1995, Cheryl Wall published a book entitled *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. She asserts that "Like *Quicksand*, *Passing* is a metaphor of death and desperation, and it is similarly supported by images of asphyxiation, suffocation, and claustrophobia"<sup>88</sup>. For her, the two novels demonstrate how black women are restricted and confined to some imposed roles. They struggle to free themselves from the suffocating image people have of them but they all fail. Besides, she thinks that the author must have been aware that she was carrying out a dangerous work because "Examining the intersection of race, class, and gender was a perilous business"<sup>89</sup>. Larsen's work was very intriguing to critics and some of them found it controversial because of the sensitive topics it raised.

An important remark from Wall's work is that "readers were so sure they knew the story Larsen was telling they misread the story she actually told. In this sense, one might say Larsen tried to 'pass' as a novelist and to an extent succeeded (...) She paid a price....*Passing* is and ever was a losing game"<sup>90</sup>. Indeed, Larsen used the tragic mulatto as a cover to address topics that were more complex and sometimes taboo in the society of the 1920s. It is only after rediscovering her works that critics started to analyze them in details and discover some themes that were ignored at the time like the theme of

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<sup>87</sup>Butler, Judith. *Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's psychoanalytic challenge. Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 286.

<sup>88</sup>Wall, Cheryl. A., *op, cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid, p. 138.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

lesbianism in *Passing*. For Wall, Larsen continually reinvented herself and her protagonists and she was aware of the risks that affirming an identity which goes counter the society's expectations could represent.

Two years later, a review, where Larsen's modernity is stressed, appeared in *The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*. The reviewer writes "Both *Passing* and *Quicksand* illustrate Larsen's nuanced modernity...[she uses *Passing* as a device for] encoding the complexities of human personality, for veiling women's homoerotic desires, and for subverting simplistic notions of female self-actualization"<sup>91</sup>. We can say that Larsen was too modern for her time because she addressed some taboo topics like sexuality. Articles about her personal life like *New Author Unearthed Right Here in Harlem*, published on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1928 in *Amsterdam News*, also present her as a modern woman because she used to smoke and wear short dresses.

Both Larsen's novels were welcomed and well received. Still, their endings were criticized because they put women in the position of victims. In *Small, but Exalted: Negotiating Difference: Othering and Personal Identity in Nella Larsen's Life and Works* (2006), Bent Sorensen disagrees with the critics considering that "None of them seem to have considered the possibility of deliberate feminist didacticism as a strategy on Larsen's part.....the many cases of ironic narration in *Quicksand* and *Passing* make such reading plausible"<sup>92</sup>. Sorensen argues that the exclusion of Larsen by her family and the discriminations she experienced made her familiar with the economies of victimhood and that she may have ended her novels that way on purpose to demonstrate the dangers of black females accepting the position of victims, struggling to find their identities and to belong instead of fighting and refusing that status.

Finally, in 2010, Dorothy Stinger published a work entitled *Not Even Past: Race, Historical Trauma, and Subjectivity in Faulkner, Larsen, and Van Vechten* where she states that "Sexual exploitation was an abiding concern for

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<sup>91</sup>*The Oxford Companion to African-American literature*. Edited by William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 428.

<sup>92</sup>Sorensen, Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

Larsen; her women are always at risk of being mistaken for prostitutes, and likewise always at risk of becoming such through desperation”<sup>93</sup>. She later adds that “The figure of Clare Kendry thus delivers a delicately nuanced version of the cynicism deriving Larsen’s early pulp stories: there is no fundamental difference, for women, between marriage and prostitution”<sup>94</sup>. This may be the result of Larsen’s personal experience since as a child, she lived in a neighborhood where prostitutes worked freely. Because of her family being mixed-race, they couldn’t live in a better place. Besides, as George Hutchinson argues, at the time a white woman with a black child was always judged as a prostitute. Additionally, Hutchinson notes that this theme of prostitution is very present in Nella Larsen’s first short stories *The Wrong Man*, published under a pseudonym<sup>95</sup>.

Therefore, when analyzing the different reviews that Larsen received throughout time, we come to the conclusion that many of the themes treated by the author were only examined after her work had been rediscovered. In fact, the common point between all the archived reviews that appeared in the 1920s, immediately after the novels were published, is that they only study the race issues and disregard the other themes. Furthermore, they all focus on the author’s origins reminding that she is the mixed-race daughter of a white Danish mother and a west-indies black father. So, at the time critics emphasized the obvious topic of the stories that is race.

It is only after Nella Larsen’s works were revived that critics began to explore new themes in the novels. They started to understand the hidden messages of Larsen and the resistance of her protagonists. For example, it became obvious that gender and sexuality are important themes and that Larsen wanted to show the difficulties black women underwent because of their sex. Indeed, the novels’ characters struggle between repressing or expressing their sexuality. They are trapped between their desires and their fear of confirming

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<sup>93</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid

<sup>95</sup>Hutchinson, George. *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 202.

the bad image society has of the black female. They are frustrated because they want to be sexually fulfilled but they do not wish to be seen as jezebels.

Larsen shows that it is this pressure that dooms Helga into a disastrous marriage. Cheryl Wall writes “For Larsen it is enough that Helga has fought against the white world’s definition of a Negro.....At the same time, she has resisted male definitions of her womanhood.....Helga never achieves true self-definition.....Inevitably, her courage avails little when it is pitted against the quicksand of racism and sexism”<sup>96</sup>. In fact, Helga tries to fight against the stereotypes associated with black women. However, she is unable to overcome the way society perceives her and the journey she undertakes towards self-discovery ends in defeat. Besides, some critics, like Claudia Tate, argue that Irene faces psychological problems and that it is what shapes the story because she is the narrator and thus has the power to influence the reader. In *Nella Larsen’s Passing: A Problem of Interpretation*, Tate states “The real impetus for the story is Irene’s emotional turbulence, which is entirely responsible for the course of that story...[and] the narrative ambiguity”<sup>97</sup>. She believes that there are disturbing aspects about the character’s psychology.

In *Passing*, the subject that was ignored and that became recurrent for critics is homosexuality. Indeed, many critics, like Judith Butler, agree on the fact that Irene is in love with Clare and desires her. They think that the way Irene depicts Clare is not innocent. So after focusing on racial passing, some critics realized that there was also sexual passing in the novel. They argue that Irene describes Clare in an erotic way which makes her desire obvious.

Critics also commenced to view Larsen’s characters as complex and to analyze them in details. Some of them, like Licia Morrow Calloway, argue that the novels’ protagonists suffered from traumas during their childhood and that is why they cannot find their place in the world. For instance, they relate Helga’s inability to be satisfied with life to her motherlessness and her family’s

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<sup>96</sup>Wall, Cheryl.A., *op, cit.*,p. 116.

<sup>97</sup>Tate, Claudia. *Nella Larsen’s Passing A Problem of Interpretation*. Black American Literature Forum 14.4 1980, p. 142.

desert. They also think that Clare's insensitiveness comes from her father's behavior when she was a child.

Thus, after examining the different reviews of Nella Larsen's novels, it becomes clear that after focusing only on the topic of race in the author's works, critics have started to analyze other subjects like sexuality and the protagonists' psychology in the novels. However, there are still many questions and issues that remain unanswered and that will be examined in this thesis. For instance, it will be interesting to determine if Nella Larsen's characters are really vulnerable and if yes, to know if it is because of their skin color or because of their gender. Moreover, it is primordial to analyze Larsen's novels to see if she writes difference and to establish what the tools she uses to write this difference are. In other words, to see if the author uses certain distortions of words and if she resists the 'oppression of sense'.

## Chapter II: PASSING AS PERFORMATIVITY

The central theme of this chapter is the concept of passing. It will be analyzed under its different forms. The first step is to define race using Henry Louis Gates' work *Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes* (1985) This part of the thesis aims at explaining why passing was perceived as a threat and why passers were severely punished. Then, the tradition of passing will be examined by taking as examples from the first books about passing, such as Jessie Fauset's *Plum bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928), and comparing them with the way Larsen treats the subject. Lastly, the different kinds of passing will be studied like passing as author, passing as female or sexual passing and miscegenation. In this regard, Butler's Gender Performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and Homi Bhabha's use of the concept of performativity in *The Location of Culture*(1994) will be considered in relation to Larsen's novels.

### A. Subverting Race: Passing and its threat to the white and black communities

#### 1. Is Race Biological or Cultural?

To analyze the notion of passing and understand the dangers it embodies, one has first to define race and then see how race is represented in literature. In the *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, race is defined as

[It is] each of the major divisions of humankind, having distinct physical characteristics. [It is] The fact or condition of belonging to a racial division or group; the qualities or characteristics associated with this. [It can also be defined as] a group of people sharing the same culture, history, language, etc; an ethnic group.[Or] a group or set of people or things with a common feature or features.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, race is the categorization of human beings into groups according to their physical appearance or because they share certain characteristics. Recently, the use of the word race became problematic and pejorative. It is still used in universal contexts but it is usually replaced by

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<sup>98</sup>"Race - Definition of Race in English" *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford Dictionaries, n.d. Web. 13 Oct. 2016, p. 10.

other words like “population” or “people”. So, it is important to specify that the use of the word race in this thesis is always linked to the context of the novels which were written during the Harlem Renaissance.

To explain the use of the word race and other terms related to it Naomi Zack writes

My intention here is to use the words "race," "mixed race," "black," "white," "mulatto," "quadroon," and so on as an anthropologist might use the words "untouchable," "berdash," "totem," "shamin"-the words are used to describe what is going on in a culture, in order to understand that culture. But, unlike an anthropologist, a philosopher goes beyond understanding into analysis. The analysis translates the understanding of how racial words are used into a theory or worldview, which is then criticized<sup>99</sup>.

Likewise, racial signifiers are used for the purpose of investigation and information in this present work.

Race soon became a problem that divided specialists of all fields. On the one hand, American sociologists like Jonathan Mars and Steve Olsen argue that race is a social construct and that it is not possible to classify people into groups according to biological features<sup>100-101</sup>. On the other hand, biologists like Bamshad M. Wooding and, Stephens, J. C. Salisbury maintain that racial groups can be associated with biological characteristics and that some of these categories share features that demonstrate their belonging to a certain category<sup>102</sup>. In this regard, scientists disagree on whether race can be biologically defined or not. For instance, Joseph L. Graves, Jr. states that it is “a simplistic way” to think that race is biological since all human beings belong to the same species which is *Homo sapiens*<sup>103</sup>.

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<sup>99</sup>Zack, Naomi. *Race and Mixed-Race*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993, p. 71.

<sup>100</sup>Marks, Jonathan. *What it means to be 98% chimpanzee apes, people, and their genes*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 22.

<sup>101</sup>Olson, Steve. *Mapping Human History: Discovering the Past Through Our Genes*, Boston, 2002, p. 48.

<sup>102</sup>Bamshad, M.; Wooding, S.; Salisbury, B. A.; Stephens, J. C. (2004) "Deconstructing the relationship between genetics and race". *Nature Reviews Genetics*. **5** (8), p. 598–609.

<sup>103</sup>Graves, Joseph L. *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium*. Rutgers University Press, 2001, p. 23.



After explaining the concept of race, it is important to see how it is employed in literature in general using Henry Louis Gates's *Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes* (1985) and then in Nella Larsen's novels. In his essay, Gates questions the importance of race as a category in the study of literature and critical theory. He answers by writing "Race, in much of the thinking about the proper study of literature in this century, has been an invisible quality, present implicitly at best"<sup>104</sup>. In fact, he maintains that race was ignored and that it had little importance in literature. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, critics were interested in the historical angles in literature. In contrast, the literary canon is now seen as mirroring the general human condition. W.E.B Du Bois, for instance, considered Larsen's *Quicksand* as a "subtle comprehension of the curious cross currents that swirl about the black American"<sup>105</sup>. Otherwise stated, for Du Bois, the novel represents the situation of the black race. Gates argues that the question of the 'other' speaking for the human condition was only asked recently. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, ideas of natural difference between the races were common. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century "Race, along with all sorts of other unseemly or untoward notions about the composition of the literary work of art, was bracketed or suspended"<sup>106</sup>.

The race issue is a very central one in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*. By creating mixed-race characters who can cross the color line again and again, Larsen asserts that race is not biological. Indeed, the author subverts the stereotypes associated with race to deny its biological nature. For example, her mulattos suggest that there are no true biological features that can be related to a racial category because they pass for white and nobody recognizes their black heritage or distinguishes their 'black' characteristics. While sitting on the Drayton tea terrace, Irene notices that a woman, Clare, is staring at her. She thinks that this latter has unmasked her as a black person who passes for white. Yet, she is not afraid because for her it is

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<sup>104</sup>Gates Jr., Henry Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>105</sup>Du Bois, W. E. D. "Two Novels." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004, p. 784.

<sup>106</sup>Gates Jr., Henry Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro (*P*, p. 150)

The author mocks at the characteristics that white people use to identify passers because they are inefficient. Irene is confident since she knows that her black origins cannot be proved. Ironically, she, in turn, is unable to identify Clare as a passer. Indeed, when Clare calls her by her pet name she wonders “What white girls had she known well enough to have been familiarly addressed as ‘Rene by them?’” (*Ibid*, p.20) So, even Irene herself is incapable of discerning white from black.

Irene Redfield is so convinced that she cannot be recognized as a black person passing for white that when Clare stares at her she wonders “Had she in her haste in the taxi, put her hat on backwards? Guardedly she felt at it. No. Perhaps there was a streak of powder somewhere on her face. She made a quick pass over it with her handkerchief. Something wrong with her dress? She shot a glance over it. Perfectly all right. What was it?” (*Ibid*, p. 17-8) Otherwise stated, she does not have any doubt about her color; instead, she thinks that there is something wrong with her hat or dress. It is only after a while that Irene starts to suspect that the woman looking at her knows that she is in the presence of a black person. At that moment, Irene felt “anger, scorn, and fear slide over her. It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her.” (*Ibid*, p. 19) Therefore, after being sure that Clare's repeated gazes mean that she has been unmasked as a passer, Irene only fears to be exposed and humiliated because as it will be later explained she only cares for appearances and her social status.

Similarly, Jack Bellew, Clare's racist husband, is not capable of saying that he is in the company of three black women during the tea party at the hotel. He nicknames his wife ‘Nig’ but he thinks that the gradual darkening

of Clare's skin color does not constitute a problem as long as she does not become really black. He states "nothing like that with me. I know you are no nigger, so it's all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (*P*, p. 171) Thus, for Jack, blackness is not a visual mark but an intrinsic feature. In fact, it does not bother him that his wife's skin darkens on the condition that he knows she has no black blood. Established stereotypes about race are also challenged during the Negro Welfare Dance where the white novelist Hugh Wentworth, who can tell "the sheep from the goats" (*Ibid*, p. 205), is unable to recognize Clare's blackness. He states "What I am trying to find out is the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairy-tale." (*Ibid*) He compares Clare to the blonde beauty and even says that it is a "nice study in contrasts" (*Ibid*, p. 206) when Clare dances with a black man.

As a matter of fact, at first, Hugh Wentworth is persuaded that Clare is white but after a conversation with Irene he comes to have some doubts and asks if she is black. He tells Irene "Damned if I know! I'll be as sure as anything that I've learned the trick. And then in the next minute I'll find I couldn't pick some of 'em if my life depended on It" (*Ibid*, p. 140) Irene tells him not to worry about that because nobody can tell at least not by looking; according to her there are some ways to know but they are not definite. She then speaks of her own experience saying "I'd met her [Dorothy Thompkins] four or five times, in groups and crowds of people, before I knew she wasn't a Negro. One day .... We got talking. In less than five minutes, I knew she was 'fay.' Not from anything she did or said or anything in her appearance. Just — just something. A thing that couldn't be registered." (*Ibid*, p. 141)

In *Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race*, George Hutchinson writes "Never embracing Jean Toomer's idea of a 'new race', Larsen rather exposed the violence of racialization as such—the force that had divided her from her mother—in the attempt to make it ethically insupportable, an affront to

humanity”<sup>107</sup>. In other words, Nella Larsen exposed the dangers and the consequences that racial categorization can have on mixed-race people’s lives. In fact, Larsen’s as well as Helga Crane’s mixed-blood estranged them from their mothers because it was very difficult to have a black child living with his/her white family in a segregated society. Therefore, the writer shows how much race as a cultural identity influenced the Harlem Renaissance society and its repercussions on black as well as on mixed-race people.

Like Larsen, Gates argues that race has no meaning biologically. Nonetheless, dissimilarities between races became almost scientific and different characteristics have been associated with different races. In this regard, the author writes “The sense of difference defined in popular usage of the term *race* has been used both to describe and *inscribe* differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, ‘gene pool’, and all sorts of supposedly ‘natural’ attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, and fidelity”<sup>108</sup>. At a time, race then became a pretext for murdering people and claiming one of the races’ superiority over the others. These differences became inherent in language; and according to Gates, western writers have tried to make these rhetorical figures of ‘race’ literal. Otherwise stated, these people asserted their superiority by trying to make race differences scientific and to root them in language. Scholars, like Kant, tried to establish that art was reserved for the whites and that the non-whites, on the opposite, had no intelligence. Gates writes “Europeans privileged *writing* as the principal measure of Africans’ ‘humanity,’ their ‘capacity for progress,’ their very place in ‘the great chain of being’”<sup>109</sup>.

After reading Gates’s article, it becomes clear that passing frightened white people because they feared an eventual mixing with the black race. Indeed, passing represented the risk of “contaminating” the white blood and thus the white supremacy by the blood of an inferior race. But to understand more, we have to define the concept of passing. The latter is the fact of hiding

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<sup>107</sup>Hutchinson, George. “*Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race*”. *American Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer, 1997), p. 345.

<sup>108</sup>Gates Jr., Henry Louis, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid*, p. 8.

one's belonging to a certain racial group in order to be accepted in another racial category. The term is usually used to refer to a mixed-race person or a person with a black ancestry who claims to be white so as to be accepted in the white society. These hybrid people usually hide their blackness to avoid the discriminations undergone by colored people. They also do this to enjoy some privileges that are reserved for white people, especially in a segregated society where the blacks are denied all rights.

Therefore, this practice subverts the fixed racial categories and creates a new one which is seen as a threat by both the white and the black communities; indeed, black people saw passing as a bad thing as it showed the disloyalty of some bi-racial persons. That is why white people created the "one-drop rule" or the law of hypodescent. The latter is a system that is used in societies where some races are regarded as superior while others are inferior. Thus, a person with only a drop of black blood was denied the right to whiteness and the benefits it represented. The "one-drop rule" became a law in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to save the white race from getting infected by the subordinate race. An example of Larsen's subversion of the stereotypes associated with the race concepts is that if we follow the 'one-drop rule', Helga Crane is biologically predisposed to be black and has all the characteristics to be a black person. However, she does not seem to fit in the black society and is rejected by 'her' race. The majority of Nella Larsen's characters are bi-racial and this comes from her personal history and experience. Indeed, being a mixed-race person herself, the writer could analyze the motif from the inside. She portrays mulattos who have made different choices and in diverse situations; some of them decided to cross the color line while others preferred to stay on the black side.

In *Quicksand*, the heroine, Helga Crane, has never tried to pass for white. However, she gets in contact with both the white and the black communities and consequently has an overview of how both societies treat the matter of race. Indeed, Helga has a very critical view of the hypocrisy people have about race. For instance, in Naxos, she criticizes the way black people follow Washington's system and submit to the whites. They are taught that

being a good black person means to remain invisible and silent as the preacher who gives a speech at Naxos explains: “if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the Naxos products there would be no race problems, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected from them ... they knew enough to stay in their places” (*Q*, p. 42) In fact, there, African-Americans embrace all the stereotypes the white society has of them and pretend to be happy with that. Yet, Helga can see that all this theoretical integration is fake and that black people suffer from the stereotyped image the whites have of them.

Later in Harlem, Helga can perceive the insincerity of the black *bourgeoisie*: on the one hand they pretend to hate everything that has a relation with the white world and to support the black race uplift; nevertheless, on the other hand, they tend to hate their own culture and to imitate the whites' life style. In the novel, this paradoxical view of race is illustrated through the character of Anne Grey. This last remark also permeates *Passing*, in which Irene Redfield pretends to support the black race while passing to enjoy the privileges reserved for the whites and imitating them in her daily life. For example, she passes for white to get access to the famous Tea terrace, reserved to white people, where she meets Clare.

## 2. Mulattos: Between Hybridity and Monstrosity

Mixed-race people represented a paradox since they were hybrids, i.e. a mixture between two different races. “Hybridity...makes difference into sameness and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different”<sup>110</sup>. So, sameness and difference exist in the same person, which makes it very hard to classify him/her in a sole category. This creates an inner conflict for mixed-race people and confusion for the whites. In *Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing*, Valerie Smith affirms “A more general paradox or conflict exists in the very syntax of the formation “legally black yet physically white,” for the phrase polarizes the two terms and invokes ostensibly stable categories of racial difference. ....Yet the bodies of mixed-race characters defy

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<sup>110</sup>Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 26.

the binarisms upon which constructions of racial identity depend”<sup>111</sup>. Thus, the threat comes from the paradoxes that are contained in one same person. As a matter of fact, bi-racial people exhibit an apparently contradictory nature as they are both white and black; yet, neither completely white nor totally black.

The word mulatto comes from the Portuguese *mula* and the Latin *mūlus* which mean mule. The latter is the hybrid progeny of a donkey and a horse. The sterility of the mule may be regarded as symbolizing the racial separation. The word mulatto was first used in English in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is now regarded as carrying a pejorative sense so the use of the terms multiracial or biracial is preferred when speaking of a mixed-race person. Moreover, mixture is also regarded as a menace because mulattos represented the illegitimate relationship between a white and a black person.

There was a very precise racial taxonomy at the time. Matthew Lewis, an English author and plantation owner, writes about the different racial groups in his 1816 journal that “[t]he offspring of a white man and black woman is a mulatto; the mulatto and black produce a sambo; from the mulatto and white comes the quadroon; from the quadroon and white the mustee; the child of a mustee by a white man is called a musteefino”<sup>112</sup>. Here the author comments on the racial multiplicity of his slaves in Jamaica. There is a word for each child issued from a mixed relationship between white and black or white and mulatto for instance.

Since mulattos were the result of miscegenation, they, as well as their parents, had a very bad image in society. In effect, it was perilous to be the white mother of a mixed-race person in the 1900s especially on the near-South side of Chicago where Larsen and her family used to live. George Hutchinson argues that miscegenation was the flashpoint of race relations in Chicago when Larsen reached puberty. He states: “Whites and blacks known to have married across the color line often lost their jobs. To avoid suspicion, white spouses even "passed" as black. Police would not allow saloons to serve a "mixed"

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<sup>111</sup>Smith, Valerie. *Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing*. *diacritics* 24. 1994, p. 45.

<sup>112</sup>Lewis, Matthew. 1834. *Journal of a West India Proprietor*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999, p. 68.

clientele”<sup>113</sup>. So, parents of mulattos often denied their children in public or even tried to hide their existence.

Nella Larsen’s mother, for instance, sent her to separate school from her sister’s so that they should not be related to the same family. Besides, when people came to the Larsens’ house, they thought Nella was their servant and her mother did not contradict them. She let them think so because it was better for her and for her white family<sup>114</sup>. Another example of that is when Helga recounts her story to Mrs. Hayes-Rore after the latter asked about the mulatto’s family background: “the woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned –and therefore they do not exist.” (*Q*, p. 72) Thus, for the woman it is an indecent and unsafe subject to talk about.

In *Black Metropolis*, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton argue that white mothers of mixed-race people underwent an extreme enmity and were generally thought to be prostitutes<sup>115</sup>. Indeed, Larsen seemed to be familiar with the subject of prostitution and this came not only from the neighborhood she grew up in but also from her mother being taken for a prostitute as a white woman with a black child. At the time, having close relations with white people was also considered as an affront by middle-class African-Americans. Drake and Cayton state that the latter had “scant interest in the world of white society, and little tolerance for those who had”<sup>116</sup>. In fact, mixed-race people who tried to fit in the white society or had white friends were regarded with suspicion.

However, the mulattos were also a reflection of the American society. In fact, the “mulatto represents both a taboo and a synthesis, not only the product of a sexual union that miscegenation laws tried to rule out of existence but also an allegory for the radically divided society as a whole, simultaneously

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<sup>113</sup>Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid*, p. 33.

<sup>115</sup>Drake, St. Clair, and Horace Cayton. *Black Metropolis*. Vol.1. New York: Harper, 1962. 2 vols: 116-20, p. 118.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid*, p. 139.



un-American and an image of America as such”<sup>117</sup>. Otherwise stated, the mulattos symbolized the paradox of racism in America because they were the result of sexual relationships between black and white people.

Consequently, for the whites, their mixedness suggested an obscene relationship that resulted in the birth of a monster and that represented the risk of getting in contact with a light-skinned black without being aware of it. They saw mulattos as monsters because they created in them a feeling of terror and insecurity. Furthermore, miscegenation often reflected sexual transgressions and rapes perpetuated by plantation owners on their slaves. Indeed, the children who were engendered by these sexual abuses reflected a taboo that the white society wanted to silence. They were the proof of the whites’ crimes and cruelty.

### 3. Abjection

Mulattos can be associated with the concept of ‘abjection’ as defined by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*

[Abjection is] one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced...desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects...simultaneously...that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned<sup>118</sup>.

In other words, the ‘abject’ is what disrupts structures or categories; it is what goes counter rules and laws. It captivates as much as it disgusts. The mulatto is ‘abject’ because it goes against the racial classifications and disturbs them for the reason that he/she does not fit in any existing category. They are not totally white; yet, the one-drop rule means that they are not totally black. Therefore, this shows that the notion of race is not relevant in this case.

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<sup>117</sup>Johnson, Barbara. *The Quicksand of the Self: Nella Larsen and Heinz Kohut. Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychology, Feminism*. Ed. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helene Moglen. Berkeley: U of California, 1997, p. 251-52.

<sup>118</sup>Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982, p. 01.

The concept of the 'abject' is very important and it will be reused later in this present work. Mulattos are 'abject' because they both attract and repel. This can be observed in *Quicksand* where Helga is courted by a Danish painter who desires her but who is also disgusted by her. He only wants her for the stereotyped image society has of black women and refuses to see her as a human being. Larsen writes that marrying him "was a thing that at one time she [Helga] had much wanted, had tried to bring about, and had at last relinquished as impossible achievement. Not so much because of its apparent hopelessness as because of a feeling, intangible almost, that, excited and pleased as he was with her, her origin a little repelled him." (*Q*, p. 113) Thus, He only wants to own her and likes her exoticism as it will be detailed in the second section of this thesis. This concept is also present in *Passing* in the relationship of Clare Kendry and her husband Mr. Bellew. Indeed, this latter is a racist, hating everything black yet he nicknames his wife 'Nig'. For Stringer, "When Bellew claims to see his wife's skin darkening, he hallucinates his black object of desire. He sees his own looking"<sup>119</sup>. Therefore, he is nauseated by the blacks but he likes the exoticism he sees in his wife.

So, this part explains the concepts of race and passing in order to show why white people feared so much the mixing of races. For them, it "could lower a superior race to the level of an inferior race or, worse,...the weaker characteristics of each might combine to produce a degenerated people"<sup>120</sup>. Indeed, the whites were so persuaded that their race was superior in all the domains that they were afraid that mixing with the lower race would contaminate them. Thus, mulattos became a source of anxiety for them but they also attracted them for many reasons that will be developed in the second part of this work by relying on Judith Butler' article *Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's psychoanalytic challenge*.

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<sup>119</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>120</sup>Taylor, Walter. *Faulkner's Search for the South*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983, p. 105

## B. Passing: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition

This section of the thesis is dedicated to the tradition of passing, its depiction in fiction and its evolution through time and especially during the Harlem Renaissance. To do so, some examples of novels whose central theme is passing will be analyzed. In addition to Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), two novels that represent the tradition of passing will be under study: *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) by Charles W. Chesnutt and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1927) by James Weldon Johnson. The analysis of these works will allow us to see if the tradition of passing has evolved over time and compare the way the subject has been treated by African-American authors in different periods.

Therefore, the purpose of this section is to determine how passing novels had changed between the early 1900s and the Harlem Renaissance. It will also aim at showing that the heroines of these novels, tragic mulattos, evolved and that this figure became more complex. In this regard, many writers like Nella Larsen or James Weldon Johnson subverted the stereotypes traditionally associated with the tragic mulatto, who then became multifaceted. In fact, these authors altered or belied many characteristics habitually associated with the tragic mulatto so much that these figures became nearly unrecognizable. Consequently, some critics like Marita Golden argue that there are no tragic mulattos in Nella Larsen's works.

### 1. The Transformation in Passing Novels Throughout Time

*The House Behind the Cedars* is Charles W. Chesnutt's first novel. It was published in 1900. It recounts the story of a mixed-race girl named Rena who passes for white. Like many passing stories of the period, Chesnutt's ends tragically as the protagonist loses her mind before dying. The second work that will be studied in comparison with Larsen's novels is *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* written by James Weldon Johnson. It recounts the story of a mixed-race man who chooses to pass for white after witnessing the lynching of a black person. The anonymous narrator feels guilty and has many regrets.

It is worth mentioning that Johnson's novel was published in 1912 without any success and republished in 1927. Indeed, it is interesting to underline that the same story which was ignored in 1912 was very successful during the Harlem Renaissance. This fact sheds light on the evolution and changes that the black race had known during the era. As a matter of fact, passing novels knew a booming during the Harlem Renaissance and like Johnson many writers wanted to show the negative effects of passing and its costs. In fact, during this period African-American writers tried to build the black identity through "the deep sentiment of race"<sup>121</sup>. In this regard, they highlighted the goods of racial loyalty and serving the race while presenting the risks of deserting it and passing for white by reserving tragic fates to most of the mulatto characters they created.

One of the features that all these novels –*Quicksand*, *Passing*, *The House Behind the Cedars*, and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*–have in common is that they all develop the figure of the tragic mulatto. The latter is a stereotypical fictional character that first appeared in American literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sociologist David Pilgrim recognizes Lydia Maria Child as the first who introduced the figure in her 1842 short story *The Quadroons*. Tragic mulattos are bi-racial persons who are said to be sad or in the depths of despair because they are able to fit neither in the white nor in the black communities. As a result, they struggle between the two races and endure many hardships because of their color. These mulattos are depicted as tragic since they usually spend their lives looking for some acceptance from both races but do not get any and since they generally meet tragic endings.

Literary and cinematic representations of tragic mulattos usually characterize them as depressive, self-hating, perverse, and attempting suicide. Additionally, they are said to be sexually seductive and effeminate. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, the stereotype is both phobia and fetish. He states "The stereotype... is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated ... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or

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<sup>121</sup>Locke, Alain, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved"<sup>122</sup>. Thus, much in the same way some white writers like Matthew Gregory Lewis contributed to the heightening of the stereotype of the tragic mulatto by affirming statements like "[mulattos] are almost universally weak and effeminate persons"<sup>123</sup>. So, these stereotypes had to be reiterated to be proved.

Sterling A. Brown, the first scholar to spot and criticize the tragic mulatto stereotype, argues in his 1933 article "The mulatto is victim of a divided inheritance and therefore miserable; he is a 'man without a race' worshipping the whites and despised by them, despising and despised by Negroes, perplexed by his struggle to unite a white intellect with black sensuousness"<sup>124</sup>. Therefore, apart from all the stereotypes credited to tragic mulattos like selfishness and seductiveness, their real tragedy lies in their psychological disorder and internal problems. Brown summarized the way white writers developed the tragic mulatto figure. He states

White writers insist upon the mulatto's unhappiness for other reasons. To them he is the anguished victim of divided inheritance. Mathematically they work it out that his intellectual strivings and self-control come from his white blood, and his emotional urgings, indolence and potential savagery come from his Negro blood. Their favorite character, the octoroon, wretched because of the 'single drop of midnight in her veins,' desires a white lover above all else, and must therefore go down to a tragic end<sup>125</sup>.

Hence, writers such as Matthew Gregory Lewis tended to emphasize the stereotype by attributing the positive features of mulattos to their white blood while certifying that their pejorative characteristics were due to their black heritage.

If they were light enough to pass, mulattos often did so. However, passing did not help them find inner peace. On the opposite, they often longed

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<sup>122</sup>Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 66.

<sup>123</sup>Lewis, Matthew, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>124</sup>Brown, Sterling A. "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors." *Journal of Negro Education* 2.2. April 1933, p. 196.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid*, p. 145.

for the black race and did not find a way to come back to it. Moreover, in literature, they are generally depicted as selfish characters who can give up their black family and their race pride so as to live as a white person. Clare Kendry exemplifies this last statement as she abandons her black identity and relatives in order to be considered white. Another instance is Angela Murray, the heroine of Jessie Fauset's novel *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (1929). In fact, Angela is supposed to pick up her black sister at the train station. Yet, when she sees her white lover, she discards her sister to avoid being unmasked as a passer.

As a matter of fact, the characters of the passing novels under study all represent characteristics of the tragic mulatto figure in different ways but they all have his/her disastrous fate. In her introduction to Larsen's novels, Deborah McDowell spots "contradictory impulses" in *Quicksand*, which she attributes to the obvious trope of the tragic mulatto. For her, "Most critics locate the origins of that duality in Helga's mixed racial heritage. The classic 'tragic mulatto,' alienated from both races, she is defeated by her struggle to reconcile the psychic confusion that this mixed heritage creates"<sup>126</sup> (xvii). Thus, for McDowell, the conflicting feelings and the psychological troubles of Larsen's characters come from their mixed origins and that is what makes them fit in the tragic mulatto category.

Scholars tend to disagree on whether Larsen's characters are tragic mulattos or not. On the one hand, some of them like Marita Golden affirm that there are no 'tragic mulattos' and no victims in Larsen's novels because they believe that the fates of Larsen's characters are only caused by their bad choices and their recklessness. While on the other hand, other critics like Charles Larson argue that there are tragic mulattos in the novels but that they are more sophisticated and complex than the traditional image associated with the tragic mulatto.

Through her characters, Larsen demonstrates the psychological costs of racism and sexism. Her protagonists share some aspects with the tragic

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<sup>126</sup>McDowell, Deborah. *Quicksand and Passing*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986:(xvii)

mulatto but they also differ in many ways. "They are neither noble nor long-suffering; their plights are not used to symbolize the oppression of blacks, the irrationality of prejudice, or the absurdity of concepts of race generally"<sup>127</sup>. Indeed, her characters have the fate of the tragic mulatto; yet, they do not have the same behavior and feelings associated with the image of this figure.

If we take the example of Clare Kendry, we notice that unlike the tragic mulatto, she does not feel guilty for giving up her race. One of the features of the tragic mulatto is that he/she feels a strong connection and firm feelings for the black community. However, Clare is insensitive to her husband's insults for her race. Neither does she react when he displays all his hatred and disgust for black people in front of her colored friends.

It wasn't, as Irene knew, that Clare cared at all about the race or what was to become of it. She didn't. Or that she had for any of its members great, or even real, affection, though she professed undying gratitude for the small kindnesses which the Westover family had shown her when she was a child. Irene doubted the genuineness of it, seeing herself only as a means to an end where Clare was concerned. Nor could it be said that she had even the slight artistic or sociological interest in the race that some members of other races displayed. She hadn't. No, Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it. (*P*, p. 90)

Therefore, the only reason she spends time with African-Americans is that she is bored at home and because, much in the same way white people do, she longs for some exoticism. It is worth mentioning that this passage is written in free indirect speech and represents Irene's thoughts as it is suggested by the words "Irene knew" or "Irene doubted". So, this perception of Clare is limited or even biased by the way Irene regards her. Furthermore, it is influenced by the fact that Irene believes she is reduced to a mere tool which helps Clare get closer to the black community.

As a matter of fact, Clare is selfish and does not have any regrets for giving up her race. She "still retained her ability to secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard of the convenience

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<sup>127</sup>Wall, Cheryl. "*Nella Larsen: Passing for What?*" *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1995, p89.

and desire of others. About her there was some quality, hard and persistent, with the strength and endurance of rock that would not be beaten or ignored” (*P*, p. 132) Otherwise stated, Clare is ready to do anything in order to get what she wants even at the expense of other people. Irene thinks that Clare has the air of a woman whose life has been completely peaceful without any troubles even if she had to carry that dark secret of passing with her.

Clare does not look like a woman “whose life had been touched by uncertainty or suffering. Pain, fear, and grief were things that left their mark on people. Even love... left its subtle traces on the countenance. But Clare — she had remained almost what she had always been, an attractive, somewhat lonely child — selfish, wilful, and disturbing”. (*Ibid*, p. 133) The only time she seems to doubt about her passing is in a letter where she tells Irene “it may be, 'Rene dear, it may just be, that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one. I'm not sure just now. At least not so sure as I have been” (*Ibid*, p. 82)

Clare does not even take her responsibility for the choices she had made. She even puts the blame on other people for not being able to spend as much time as she wants with black people. In this respect she says “Damn Jack! He keeps me out of everything. Everything I want. I could kill him! I expect I shall, someday” (*Ibid*, p. 128) At this, Irene answers that it is not only Jack’s fault as he has no way to know that she is colored or that she is touched when he utters racist statements. She tells Clare that it is her fault as she has chosen this life and she has decided to hide the truth and not let him know about her racial origins. Irene tells her “As far as I can see, you'll just have to endure some things and give up others. As we've said before, everything must be paid for. Do, please, be reasonable” (*Ibid*, p. 129)

But “Clare, it was plain, had shut away reason as well as caution. She shook her head. ‘I can't, I can't,’ she said. ‘I would if I could, but I can't. You don't know, you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh’” (*Ibid*) This passage once again shows Clare’s selfishness and her inability to recognize her lack of reasonableness. She wants to have her cake and eat it too. Indeed, she wants to have a



comfortable life as a white matron and be able to spend time with black people whenever she likes. She would not give up her white life to be permanently black thus being with black people is just a distraction in her pale unflavored life.

Another typical feature of stories developing the tragic mulatto figure is the tragic discovery that passing is a losing and dangerous game, and generally the protagonist decides to go back “to the safe confines of the supportive Black community”<sup>128</sup>. Nevertheless, Nella Larsen’s novels demonstrate that the black community is not that compassionate and welcoming. Indeed, it is the white as well as the black communities that condemn Helga to a passionless marriage and repeated pregnancies as she is rejected by both societies. She does not receive any support from the African-American community who discards her because of her mixed heritage and her wish for freedom.

In *Passing*, the black community, in this case Irene, is neither welcoming nor compassionate with Clare’s longing for the black race. In fact, Irene makes up her mind to get rid of Clare by convincing her that it is not safe for her to be in the company of colored people. Irene tells her “I can’t help thinking that you ought not to come up here, ought not to run the risk of knowing Negroes...Yes, Clare, you. It’s not safe. Not safe at all. Safe! (*P*, p. 117) At this Clare replies that she does not care about being safe. So, Irene proceeds “Brian and I have talked the whole thing over carefully and decided that it isn’t wise. He says it’s always a dangerous business, this coming back. He’s seen more than one come to grief because of it. And, Clare, considering everything—Mr. Bellew’s attitude and all that — don’t you think you ought to be as careful as you can?” (*Ibid*, p. 119) Therefore, Irene tries her best to drive away Clare belying the welcoming nature of the race for passers.

It is only after Clare explains that it is after meeting her in Chicago that she realizes how much she was lonely and how much she wanted to be with the blacks that Irene accepts to reintroduce her in the black community. Indeed, Irene realizes that Clare does not care for safety because she is

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<sup>128</sup>Little, Jonathan, *op, cit.*, p 137.

unhappy in the white world. Clare states “what does it matter? One risk more or less, if we're not safe anyway, if even you're not, it can't make all the difference in the world. It can't to me. Besides, I'm used to risks. And this isn't such a big one as you're trying to make it.” (*P*, p. 121)

Furthermore, Clare dies shortly after going back to ‘her’ race, which belies the safe nature of the black community for passers. In addition, it is her black friend, Irene, who precipitates her tragic ending as she meets Clare’s white husband, Bellew, while not passing and he discovers her blackness. As a result, she could have told Clare that Bellew may have doubts and that it may be dangerous for her to go to that party where she is finally unmasked. Moreover, Larsen insinuates that it is Irene who murders Clare at the party by pushing her from the window. So, all these examples contradict the fact that the black community welcomes the passers and supports them.

## 2. **Fatum**

The last typical feature characterizing tragic mulattos is the notion of fatum. This concept also appears in Nella Larsen’s texts, her two novels closing on a tragic ending similar to tragic destinies. Helga Crane is doomed to a loveless marriage with a man she finds disgusting and to repetitive child-birth at the expense of her own health. She is badly regarded by the rural black society she lives in and is trapped in this unhappy life. “She [Helga Crane] ends up in the worst case scenario of all her fears....waiting for death while her spirit has already died”<sup>129</sup>. So, she gives up on life and on all her projects and ambitions. Thus, she becomes all that she despised and wanted to avoid. The protagonist’s fate will be further analyzed in the second section of this work.

Yet, unlike most tragic mulattos, like the Ex-colored man for instance, Helga’s disastrous fate is self-imposed. Indeed, if we take the example of the Ex-colored man, in that case the protagonist is pushed to passing after witnessing the lynching of a black person. Therefore, he feels obliged to do so to assure his safety. However, Helga's situation is different, and she herself “had ruined her life. Made it impossible ever again to do the things that she

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<sup>129</sup>Sorensen Bent, *op. cit.*, p 10.

wanted, have the things that she loved, mingle with the people she liked. She had, to put it as brutally as anyone could, been a fool” (*Q*, p.133) Indeed, by taking the inconsiderate decision to marry a stranger she had never met, Helga is condemned to that miserable life.

In Larsen’s second novel –*Passing*– both the characters have tragic fates. Clare dies physically while Irene undergoes a psychological death. In fact, Clare falls from a window after being unmasked by her white husband. The end of the novel is ambiguous as Larsen lets the reader decide whether Clare committed suicide, Irene murdered her, or whether she fell by accident. Irene, on the other hand, is left in a psychological turmoil as she cannot realize what has just happened and as she pretends that everything is fine and that she is not to be held responsible for her friend’s death.

Unlike all the other characters studied in this part of the present work, like the Ex-colored man in Johnson’s work or Clare and Helga in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and *Quicksand* respectively, Chesnutt’s heroine Rena does not despise her black race. She does not take the decision to pass by herself. It is instead decided by her brother and mother. She wants to be a respectable black teacher and serve her own community. She even refuses her brother’s proposition to pass a second time. Her resolution never to marry and her loyalty to her race are features common to several tragic mulatto protagonists like Helga Crane who decides not to marry at the beginning of the novel.

In *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt illustrates both a booming and a failing endeavors at passing. In fact, Rena’s brother, John, succeeds in crossing the color line and becomes a respectable ‘white’ lawyer. He benefits from all the advantages of a white man and leads a happy life. Yet, Rena is condemned to a tragic fate and loses her mind before dying at the end of the story. Most tragic mulatto characters are females and this may be due to the fact that bi-racial males had often more freedom and choice than women. Indeed, male leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, like W.E.B Du Bois, characterized black women’s role as responsible for bearing and rising black children. So, female passers not only gave up on their race but also on their social duty of building a new generation of African-Americans. One of the rare

stories illustrating a male tragic mulatto is James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1927)

The tragedy of the Ex-colored man is in the regrets and guilt he feels towards passing. He does not have the physical tragic fate of the traditional tragic mulatto who usually dies or as in the case of Helga Crane, is tortured physically by repetitive child-deliveries. Nevertheless, in the same way as Irene, one of *Passing*'s protagonists, he goes through psychological turmoil and lives an unhappy life. He states

My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am, and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that after all I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage<sup>130</sup>.

He feels that he would have been more successful as a black musician and that he could have honored his race instead of deserting it. He was obliged to pass to ensure his physical safety at the cost of his happiness and blooming.

Unlike most tragic mulattos, like Clare Kendry, the Ex-colored man is not insensitive about his passing. He is deeply affected by turning his back to the black community and his conscience tortures him. He states "I feel small and selfish. I am an ordinary successful white man who has made a little money"<sup>131</sup>. So, through his character, Johnson belies the selfishness usually attributed to tragic mulattos. Through this novel, James Weldon Johnson sheds light on the paradoxical position of light-skinned people who could find solace neither in the black community nor as passers in the white one.

Through the passing novels analyzed here –*Quicksand*, *Passing*, *The House Behind the Cedars*, and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*–, it becomes clear that there has been an evolution in this tradition. In fact, the stereotypes usually linked to the protagonists of these stories, tragic mulattos, have been distorted and this figure became more complex. For instance, Larsen

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<sup>130</sup>Anonymous [James Weldon Johnson] (1912) *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (First ed.) Boston: Sherman, French & Company, p. 100.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid, p. 211.

contradicts the safe nature of the black community for passers while Johnson contradicts the selfishness of the tragic mulatto. Furthermore, the evolution of the passing tradition is visible between Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, published in 1900, and Larsen's *Passing* (1929) Indeed, on the one hand, Rena –Chesnutt's heroine– is passive and pays her life as a price for a decision she does not take, passing for white. While, on the other hand, Clare – one of the protagonists of *Passing*– is active and takes her own decisions. Her fate is the result of her own choices.

## C. Types of Passing and Performativity in Nella Larsen's Novels

This last part of the second chapter is dedicated to the different types of passing and to introducing the concept of performativity. This concept will be defined in relation to Larsen's novels by using Butler's Gender Performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) This division of the work aims at examining how the concept of performativity is used in Nella Larsen's novels. In addition, its purpose is also to analyze the different kinds of passing present in the author's works like racial, sexual or geographical passing.

### 1. Racial and Sexual Passing

The first and most obvious kind of passing in Nella Larsen's novels is the racial one. In *Passing*, the author recounts both a story of passing and 'unpassing'. In fact, Clare Kendry is the passer as she pretends to be white and integrates the white society by marrying a rich white bigot. She is considered as a respectable white lady and her black heritage is completely unsuspected. However, there is also an 'unpassing' story in the novel because even though Irene Westover Redfield passes occasionally, she has chosen to live in the African-American community and feels that she owes loyalty to the race.

The racial passing that Larsen develops in her work *Passing* follows the traditional passing trope where a mixed-race person who is light enough passes for white either permanently like Clare or occasionally in order to benefit from some advantages reserved for white people like Irene. When Clare tries to convince Irene to help her get in touch with the black community the latter wonders why Clare should want that. Her husband, Brian, replies "It's always that way... Remember Albert Hammond, how he used to be forever haunting Seventh Avenue, and Lenox Avenue, and the dancing-places, until some 'shine' took a shot at him for casting an eye towards his 'sheba?' They always come back. I've seen it happen time and time again" (*P*, p. 96) Irene is unable to comprehend this coming back to the black race after taking all the risks to pass as white. She believes that passers like Clare should be satisfied as they got what they have always wanted, being considered white. Brian advises

his wife to let Clare miss her since “it’s [passing] an unhealthy business, the whole affair always is” (*P*, p. 97) After this conversation, Irene reflects on passing and thinks that it is funny that “We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it.”(Ibid, p. 98)

This shows the ambivalence of black people towards passing and passers. Irene, for instance, condemns Clare’s passing while in turn she is unable to unmask her or even get her out of her life because of racial solidarity. So, even if she disapproves of passing,

She was curious. There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. But she couldn't. She was unable to think of a single question that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious, if not actually impertinent. (Ibid, p. 36-7)

Thus, these two passages reflect the interest of African-Americans in passing even if they despise it. When Irene has at last the courage to ask Clare about passing and family background, her friend answers that she would be astonished to know that family background is not as important for the whites as it is for her own race. Indeed, Clare says “You'd be surprised, 'Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us. Maybe because there are so many more of them, or maybe because they are secure and so don't have to bother. I've never quite decided.” (Ibid, p. 37-8)

Interestingly, in her first novel –*Quicksand*–, Nella Larsen introduces an unusual racial passing as Helga Crane passes for black. As a matter of fact, upon her arrival in Harlem Helga is incited to hide her white blood and to pretend to be fully black. It is Mrs. Hayes-Rore, the woman she works for and who introduces her to Anne in Harlem, who advises Helga to pass for black. She tells her

I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won't understand it, and after all it's your own business. . . I'll just tell Anne that you're a friend of mine whose mother's dead. That'll place you well enough and it's all true. I never tell lie. She can fill in the gaps to suit herself and anyone curious enough to ask (*Q*, p. 74)

So, once in Harlem Helga uses the method of silence. Indeed, unlike in passing from black to white where the passer has to endorse a new identity and pretend to be someone else, Helga does not need to do so; she just puts a veil on her white origins by not mentioning them. She believes that by taking some distance from the white world, she will feel better and forget her miseries. Larsen writes "For her [Helga] this Harlem was enough. Of that white world, so distant, so near, she asked only indifference....Sinister folk, she considered them, who had stolen her birthright. Their past contribution to her life, which had been but shame and grief, she had hidden away from brown folk in a locked closet, 'never', she told herself, 'to be reopened'" (*Ibid*, p. 77) Therefore, Helga feels free from the shame and hatred she sensed with her white relatives. However, by denying her white blood, Helga also denies her white mother.

The second type of passing that can be noticed in Larsen's novel *Passing* is the sexual one. Deborah McDowell, who was the first to spot the theme of homosexuality in the novel, argues that Irene passes by hiding her lesbian desires for Clare. She uses the erotic descriptions Irene makes of Clare to support her claim<sup>132</sup>. McDowell writes "though, superficially, Irene's is an account of Clare's passing for White and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story - though not named explicitly- of Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare"<sup>133</sup>. So, the critic maintains that Irene's sexual desire for Clare is clear from the portrayal she makes of her, especially the depictions of her physical attributes.

Irene fails to articulate her desire for Clare. Thus, it is the narrator who does so by conveying her thoughts and descriptions of Clare. It is important to underline that the story is told by a third-person omniscient

<sup>132</sup>McDowell, Deborah E., *op. cit.*, p ix.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibid*, p. xxvi.



narrator who recounts the story based on Irene's consciousness. Larsen writes that Clare is "An attractive-looking woman, [in] Irene's opinion, with those dark, almost black eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin...what strange languorous eyes she has!" (*P*, p. 15-6) Irene is subjugated by Clare's 'mysterious', 'magnificent', arresting, and 'exotic' 'Negro eyes'. She thinks that her mouth is 'tempting' and that her loveliness is absolute. She cannot help but desire to see Clare again and to spend time with her. Larsen states: "Into those eyes there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed. She smiled back. At that moment it seemed a dreadful thing to think of never seeing Clare Kendry again... Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn't be the last" (*Ibid*, p. 46-7) Therefore, Irene has strange feelings for Clare whom she is jealous of and feels attracted to at the same time.

Irene battles with herself in order to take distance from Clare but she is unable to do so. This idea is embodied by a passage when she first meets Clare in the Drayton roof. She tries to look away from Clare but is incapable of doing so. In this regard, Larsen writes "she [Irene] turned away with the firm intention of keeping her gaze on the lake, the roofs of the buildings across the way, the sky, anywhere but on that annoying woman [Clare]. Almost immediately, however, her eyes were back again. In the midst of her fog of uneasiness she had been seized by a desire to outstare the rude observer [Clare]" (*Ibid*, p. 19-20) Thus the relation between Irene and Clare is one that Julia Kristeva calls a relation of 'abjection'. The latter represents the 'abject' for Irene because she is both attracted and repulsed by her. The 'abject', which is represented by Clare, "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced...desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects...simultaneously...that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned"<sup>134</sup>. Thus, on the one hand, Irene idealizes Clare whom she describes as "exquisite, golden, fragrant" (*Ibid*, p. 134); however, on the other, she feels annoyed by her presence.

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<sup>134</sup>Kristeva, Julia, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

In her essay *Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge*, Judith Butler states "The question of what can and cannot be spoken, what can and cannot be publicly exposed, is raised throughout the text, and it is linked with the larger question of the dangers of public exposure of both color and desire"<sup>135</sup>. Otherwise stated, like McDowell, Butler believes that there are subplots in *Passing*. She argues that Nella Larsen wanted to explore some topics that were taboo at the time like homosexuality. Thus, the author explores them in an indirect way so that the novel would not offend the public. In this regard, she uses the cover of racial passing that was a usually accepted subject so as to develop controversial ones. Like Butler, For Cheryl A. Wall, "Perhaps Larsen's most effective act of passing was masking the subversive themes that frequently shimmered beneath the surface of her fiction"<sup>136</sup>. She believes that it is the reason why many of the themes that Larsen explores in her novels were disregarded by the critics and have only been explored recently.

It is worth mentioning that Larsen uses the word "queer" several times in her novel. Butler comments on the way it is used by writing "it seems, queer did not yet mean homosexual, but it did encompass an array of meanings associated with the deviation from normalcy that might well include the sexual"<sup>137</sup>. In the work of fiction, the word "queer" is usually used to refer to something bizarre or abnormal. Judith Butler thinks that it is hardly possible to know who desires whom in *Passing* and that there is a sort of triangular relationship between Irene, Clare and Brian-Irene's husband.

Butler argues that "Irene passes her desire for Clare through Brian"<sup>138</sup>. She thinks that being unable to express the feeling she has for Clare, Irene projects them on her husband. Irene strives against her homosexual feelings, which the ongoing cultural and social standards consider to be abnormal and, still according to the same gendered and male-centered mindset, imagines that her husband has an affair with Clare. Even if there is no proof nor allusion to

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<sup>135</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

<sup>136</sup>Wall, Cheryl A., *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>137</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid, p. 289.

any affair between Clare and Brian in the book, Irene's doubts suggest that she projects her longing for Clare on Brian. For instance, Irene tries to convince herself that Brian finds Clare irresistible. In this regard, she has the following conversation with her husband

Didn't he [Brian], she [Irene] once asked him, think Clare was extraordinarily beautiful? 'No', he had answered. 'That is, not particularly.' 'Brian, you're fooling!' [replies Irene, to what Brian answers] 'No, honestly. Maybe I'm fussy. I s'pose she'd be an unusually good-looking white woman. I like my ladies darker. Besides an A-number-one sheba, she simply hasn't got 'em.' (*P*, p. 145-6)

McDowell also thinks that Irene displaces her own desire on other people like Brian and the waiter<sup>139</sup>. In view of that, much in the same way as Irene suspects that Brian might be attracted by Clare, she projects her desire on the Drayton hotel's waiter. Larsen writes "[a] waiter was taking her order. Irene couldn't quite define it, but she was sure that she would have classed it, coming from another woman, as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter" (Ibid, p. 177) Wall believes that Irene characterizes Clare as provocative to hide her attraction for the latter. In fact, throughout the novel, Irene prefers to pretend that male characters like the waiter and later her own husband are attracted to Clare in order to veil her own desire but also the jealousy she feels towards her.

Freud calls that type of jealousy 'delusional jealousy'. He describes it as the fact of projecting a homosexual desire on a person of the opposite sex because it would be more normal. For a man who feels attracted by another man, it can be summarized in this formula: "I do not love him, she loves him!"<sup>140</sup>. In the case of Irene she somehow argues that she does not love Clare, her husband does so because it is more "natural" than a woman in love with another woman.

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<sup>139</sup>McDowell, Deborah E., *op. cit.*, p. xxviii.

<sup>140</sup>Freud, Sigmund, *Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia, and Homosexuality*.in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74, 127-49, p. 126.

## 2. Geographical and Literary Passing

A third kind of passing that can be found in Larsen's works is the geographical one. Indeed the latter can be regarded as a metaphor of racial passing. According to Samira Kawash, "historically, the idea of race has a long-standing relation to the idea of geography"<sup>141</sup>. In fact, in the 1920s many places of the United States were segregated and there was a clear physical partition separating the whites from the blacks. In this regard, when Helga Crane, the heroine of *Quicksand*, moves around between the two races, she trespasses the fixed limits and shows her wavering as a bi-racial person. In her search for her niche in the world, Helga starts her expedition from Naxos, in the south of the United States, to Chicago, to Harlem, to Denmark, to Harlem again, and finally to rural Alabama in the South. It is interesting to note that Harlem represents the space of transition between the black and the white worlds. In fact, Helga goes to Harlem between her journeys to Naxos and Copenhagen; and then between this latter and Alabama. Thus, Harlem seems to represent an in-between space where blacks and whites meet freely, without any of the usual borders between the two races. Yet it only seems to be so, as history makes it clear that white people usually went to Harlem to meet African-Americans that they did not regard as their equals, but as exotic creatures they could have encountered in a fantasy jungle. In fact, for Helga, Harlem is the place where the "White world, [is] so distant, so near" (*Q*, p. 45) at the same time.

Helga Crane functions as the foreigner or the 'abject', two terms developed by Julia Kristeva. For the theorist, "the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, and space that wrecks our abode"<sup>142</sup>. So, the foreigner is an outsider in a society to which he/she does not belong. He/she is unable to assimilate or integrate in that society and thus destabilizes its equilibrium. Helga can also be considered as the 'abject', because she "does

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<sup>141</sup>Kawash, Samira. *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>142</sup>Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves. European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism*. Columbia: Columbia University Press; Revised ed. edition. 1994, p. 01.

not respect borders, positions”<sup>143</sup>. Consequently, much in the same way as the foreigner does, the ‘abject’ threatens the order of society.

Nella Larsen does not only use the topic of passing in her novels, she also explores it in one of her short stories. Indeed, there are two kinds of passing in Larsen’s short story *The Wrong Man*. The first one is that the heroine, Julia Romley, hides her social background. She passes for somebody she is not by veiling her modest origins. Thus, there is a class passing. The second type is the traditional racial passing. Larsen writes “Tyler’s stint in the tropics has blurred his racial identity. Twice described as ‘a tall browned man,’ ...To Julia, his face has ‘yellowed’”<sup>144</sup>. This passage implies that Tyler hides his true racial origins suggesting that he is black or at least bi-racial and that he passes for white.

Finally, another kind of passing is that of using a pseudonym to publish a work. In *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cheryl Wall states “Adopting a pseudonym, which Larsen did at least twice, constitutes a form of passing for a writer”<sup>145</sup>. As the pseudonym issue has been discovered and reprinted by Charles Larson only in 1992, the reasons for this ‘passing’ can only be imagined. It may be because Larsen did not have faith in her writing and was not sure whether her stories would have positive critiques. It may also be because she thought that a male writer ‘Allen Semi’ would be accepted more easily than a female author. Charles Larson speculates that she wanted to send a personal message to her husband. Finally, it may be because of her fear of rejection. In fact, Nella Larsen suffered from the rejection of her family and from discriminations because of her many differences. Thus, she may have thought that people would reject her once again and built an armor to protect herself by using that pseudonym.

Cheryl A. Wall asserts “Nella Larsen was continually reinventing herself. In her novels, she staged performances of identity for her protagonists,

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<sup>143</sup>Kristeva, Julia, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>144</sup>Larsen, Nella (under the pseudonym of Allen Semi) *The Wrong Man*. *Young's Magazine*, January 1926, p. 04.

<sup>145</sup>Wall, Cheryl A., *op. cit.*, p. 86.

which reveal her awareness of the risks of asserting a self at odds with societal expectations, even as they expose her complicity with myths of race and gender”<sup>146</sup>. In her works, Nella Larsen explores the choices that are offered to a mixed-race woman in a world driven by race and gender stereotypes and prejudices. Her protagonists carry out gender and race identities that are imposed by society. In this regard, it is interesting to consider Butler’s concept of Performativity in relation to Larsen’s novels.

Performativity can be defined as “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains”<sup>147</sup>. This term is traditionally used in linguistics to talk about the ability to create and perform an identity through speech. The feminist Judith Butler uses it in the context of gender studies to show that gender is constructed through linguistic and social structures. She writes that gender is “a stylized repetition of acts . . . which are internally discontinuous (...); the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief”<sup>148</sup>. Butler refuses these constant and established gender identities. Performativity is a very important notion that will be explored further in the second part of the thesis.

In regard of the examination of the concepts of Performativity and passing, it becomes apparent that race and gender are performative in Nella Larsen’s novels. Indeed, race is performative since, as Catherine Rottenberg argues, “series of traits linked to whiteness (civilized/ intelligent/ moral/ hardworking/ clean) and blackness (savage/ instinctual/ simple/ licentious/ lazy/ dirty) have been concatenated in the service of specific social hierarchies”<sup>149</sup>. She also asserts that “race performativity compels subjects to perform according to those fictitious unities, thus shaping their identity and

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<sup>146</sup>Wall, Cheryl A., *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>147</sup>Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge. 1993, p. xii.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4. (Dec., 1988), pp. 519-531, p. 520.

<sup>149</sup>Rottenberg, Catherine. *Passing : Race, Identification, and Desire*. *Criticism*. 45.4 (2003), p. 437.

their preferences”<sup>150</sup>. Thus, for the scholar race is socially constructed as descriptions have been associated with the different racial groups.

In this respect, Helga Crane depicts a black community that has absorbed all the stereotypes made of them and whose people perform a racial identity constructed by the whites in order to suit them. In fact, what bothers Helga in Naxos is that African-Americans submit to the racial constructions white people make for them, following Booker T. Washington’s race’s modal. This idea is made explicit in a passage where a white man of God delivers a speech praising the inhabitants of Naxos for knowing their limits and being happy with the roles they play as black people. He tells them

This [is]....the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country....if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the products there would be no race problems, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them.....They knew enough to stay in their places.....it was their duty to be satisfied in the estate to which they had been called, hewers of wood and drawers of water.” (Q, p. 37)

When Helga hears this speech, she is revolted by the compliance of her people and the way they agree to perform the role of simple people who have no, or very little, intelligence and whose only goal is to serve the superior race. Larsen demonstrates that identity is a social construct established by the whites in order to insure their superiority and generate a hierarchical structure that validates their abuses and mistreatments of the blacks and other minorities. In view of that, Elaine Ginsberg writes “racial categories have throughout history been created for the deliberate purpose of exploitation, domination, or persecution of one group by another”<sup>151</sup>.

Much in the same way as race, gender is also performative. In this regard, Irene follows the norm by hiding her sexual desire for Clare because in the gender construction a woman can only be attracted by a man and vice-versa. Thus, Irene follows the gendered role of females and tries to fit in the description society makes of them. In *We should all be feminists*, Chimamanda

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<sup>150</sup>Rottenberg, Catherine, *op. cit.*, p. 437.

<sup>151</sup>Ginsberg, K. Elaine. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 6.

Ngozi Adichie recounts her own endeavors to get rid of the social pressure put on women. She writes “I’m trying to unlearn many of the lessons of gender that I internalized when I was growing up. But I sometimes still feel very vulnerable in the face of gender expectations”<sup>152</sup>. This gendered and performative identity associated with both males and females will be analyzed in details in the second part of this work.

To conclude, even though the term passing usually refers to the racial one, there are many other kinds of passing which can be used whenever an identity is hidden or changed. Despite the fact that the end of the Civil War marked the end of slavery, it did not resolve race problems in the United States, especially for mulattos. In this respect, Edward Reuter writes in his 1918 book entitled *The Mulatto in the United States*, “Broadly speaking ... the ‘race problem’ is the problem of the mulatto”<sup>153</sup>. This ‘problem’ came from the stereotypical constructions associated with African-Americans as well as mixed-race people.

Consequently, many authors like James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larsen tried to subvert and deconstruct these stereotypes to demonstrate that race, as well as gender, is a social construct rather than a biological identity that white people tried to impose in order to keep their superiority over minorities. So, Larsen’s novels show that the “inequalities between so-called ‘racial’ groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances”<sup>154</sup>. She uses her personal experience as a bi-racial woman to belie many of the characteristics associated with mulattas.

However, many of the topics that Larsen examines in her works, such as miscegenation and homosexuality, were taboo or unwelcomed in her days. Therefore, she also uses race and the figure of the tragic mulatto as a slant way to broach these delicate issues. In *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cheryl

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<sup>152</sup>Adichie, Ngozi Chimamanda. (2012) *We Should All Be Feminists*. TEDx Talks. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU\\_qWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc)

<sup>153</sup>Reuter, Edward (1918), *The Mulatto in The United States*. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970, p. 87-8.

<sup>154</sup>“AAA Statement on Race”. American Anthropological Association website. <http://www.aaanet.org/stmnts/racepp.htm>. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Dec. 2016.



Wall states “Readers were so sure they knew the story Larsen was telling they misread the story she actually told. In this sense, one might say Larsen tried to ‘pass’ as a novelist and to an extent succeeded”<sup>155</sup>. It is only recently that critics started to analyze her works in details and discover how the author denounces the pressure that society exerted on black people as well as on females. As a conclusion, through her novels and their tragic ends, Nella Larsen, like many of her contemporaries, demonstrates that “passing is and ever was a losing game”<sup>156</sup>.

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<sup>155</sup>Wall, Cheryl A., *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>156</sup>*Ibid.*

**PART II: VULNERABILITY IN NELLA  
LARSEN'S NOVELS**

This second part is dedicated to the concept of vulnerability in relation to Nella Larsen's novels. Such elements as race and gender create a prevailing sense of failure and defeat in Larsen's protagonists which makes them feel vulnerable. Therefore, this second section aims at establishing if these elements really cause them to be susceptible. In this regard, the protagonists' racial constructions will be analyzed by relying on William .E.B Du Bois's theory of *Double consciousness* to establish if racial difference renders people vulnerable and how race is discussed in the novels. In addition, gender and sexuality will be studied in the second chapter of this part to determine if women's roles are gendered in Larsen's novels. To finish, the last chapter of this section of the work will rely on Butler's article (and speech) *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* to prove that vulnerability can sometimes be a form of resistance.

The word vulnerability comes from the Latin *vulnus* which means wound. It usually has a pejorative sense as it is used to refer to somebody who is fragile or weak either emotionally or physically. It is associated with a lack of control or a passivity that causes a person to be more likely the target of assault or aggression. It is a kind of exposure to something that can be destructive. A person can be vulnerable because of a social, economic or an environmental condition.

Vulnerability can also be linked to the concept of dependency because one is considered vulnerable when he/she depends on someone else for something. For instance, children or animals are dependent and thus vulnerable beings. In fact, they depend on adults for survival. They need someone to provide care for them in all the domains from feeding to cleaning. Hence, they are powerless, contingent, and always care demanding.

Yet, vulnerability "is a relative notion, a tricky one to deal with, and one applying differently according to the groups, places, and circumstances presiding over its manifestation"<sup>157</sup>. Indeed, even if vulnerability is usually regarded as a negative notion, it can sometimes be a form of resistance as it will be demonstrated in the third chapter of this section. Besides, M. Kottow

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<sup>157</sup>Butler, Judith. *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*. Madrid. June, 2014 , p. 43.

calls vulnerability a "condition humana". In other words, it is something shared by all human beings<sup>158</sup>.

## CHAPTER I: RACIAL DIFFERENCE AS A FORM OF VULNERABILITY

### A. Double Consciousness in Nella Larsen's Novels

The first aspect that will be analyzed in regard of the concept of vulnerability in Nella Larsen's novel is race. To do so, Larsen's novels will be examined in relation to Du Bois's theory *Double Consciousness* to determine if race causes the characters' vulnerability. *Double-consciousness* is an expression coined by W.E.B Du Bois in an Atlantic Monthly article entitled *Strivings of the Negro People*. He describes *double consciousness* as follows:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>159</sup>

In other words, it is a double awareness that African-Americans feel towards being black (" a Negro") and "American". Du Bois argues that Black people tend to see themselves through the lens of the whites and thus to internalize the image the whites have of them. Therefore, they regard themselves with the same pity and disdain and have a very low self-esteem.

He writes: "Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world"<sup>160</sup>. Du Bois uses the veil image as a metaphor to express four things. First, it refers to the dark skin of African-Americans. Second, it points out to white Americans' inability to see black people as human beings and as

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<sup>158</sup>Kottow, M., —*Vulnerability: What Kind of Principle is It?*, Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy: A European Journal, 7 ( 3), 2004, p. 282.

<sup>159</sup>Du Bois, W.E.B (1903)*The Souls of Black Folk*. Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>160</sup>Ibid, p. 3.

complete American citizens with a rich culture. Third, it suggests black people's own incapacity to define themselves outside of the whites' stereotypes. Finally, it can be seen as the invisible frontier or the color-line between the two races.

For Du Bois, the veil is a blessing and a curse at the same time. It is a blessing since it gives black people the opportunity to see the world differently and because the whites ignore all the richness of the African-American culture. Nevertheless, it is a burden as it prevents the two races from living equally in their country. The solution to the problem can be lifting the veil, which would make people surmount their differences. However, things are not as simple as they seem. Du Bois thinks that instead of trying to lift the veil, people should transform it. Furthermore, he believes that the veil should be kept to preserve the dissimilarities it demarcated but not the status differences it reifies. In other words, the veil isolates black people from the whites but it also protects their culture and beliefs.

In "*Expostulations Concerning the Unity of the Self: Double Consciousness, Dual Perspective and Why Bother with All That*", Semra Somersan's analysis shows that the ideas of Du Bois are related to Sigmund Freud's who proposed a "three-tiered structure: id, ego, and superego"<sup>161</sup>. The combining of both Du Boisian and Freudian models of personality produces the following structure: superego-ego1-ego2-id<sup>162</sup>. Otherwise stated, instead of one ego or personality, African-Americans—as well as most of the othered or marginalized minorities—have two-usually contradicting- egos and strive to blend them into one identity.

There are four major ideas in Du Bois's theory that can be related to Nella Larsen's novels—*Quicksand* and *Passing*—. First, the fact that *double consciousness* involves a certain duality of two identities within the same person who usually sees himself/herself through the lens of society. Second, the conflicting feelings that African-Americans have towards white people. i.e.

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<sup>161</sup>Somersan, Semra. "*Expostulations Concerning the Unity of the Self: Double Consciousness, Dual Perspective and Why Bother with All That?*" *Nebula* 3.2-3.3. 2006, p. 162.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

on the one hand, they hate everything that is associated with them, yet on the other they tend to imitate them. Third, black people feel as ‘problems’ because of their differences and the way they are perceived by European-Americans. Finally, African-Americans’ internalization of the stereotypes and images white people have of them.

### 1. “Two Warring Ideals in One Dark Body”<sup>163</sup>

In his article, Du Bois writes:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face<sup>164</sup>.

This passage demonstrates the condition of Nella Larsen’s characters as they constantly feel a racial duality and strive in constructing their identities. The *double consciousness* concept implies that a person has two ‘selves’ which he/she attempts to unify into a truer self. Du Bois thinks that instead of trying to hold these two conflicting identities, African-Americans should attempt to make them co-exist in peace. He dreams of a world where it would be possible to combine these two-selves without being criticized.

In the case of Nella Larsen’s characters, this *double consciousness* is even more present because in addition to being a black person living in a Caucasian-dominated country, Helga has some white blood. Therefore, she feels paradoxical feelings towards her dual heritage. In fact, in the novel Helga is explicitly categorized as black since Larsen states that in the train “Helga Crane sat with others of her race” (*Q*, p. 55) Nevertheless, it is not that simple for the heroine to decide whether she belongs to colored people or not.

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<sup>163</sup> Du Bois, William E.B., *op. cit.*, p 1.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, p 6.

Indeed, she sometimes feels that those are her people, whereas at other times she believes “She was different [from black folk]. It wasn’t merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin.” (*Q*, p. 86) Furthermore, we can say that she has a triple-consciousness as a ‘Negro’, an American, and a woman and that she strives so as to meld her differences and create an identity with these three ‘selves’. Indeed, *double consciousness* does not limit itself to African-Americans; it can be associated with different minorities that are also othered.

Most of Larsen’s protagonists feel this *double consciousness*. In *Quicksand*, for instance, the two characters who represent best the dichotomy are Helga Crane and Anne Grey. Helga Crane is one of the most complex characters of the Harlem Renaissance. She has a multiple-consciousness as she is a bi-racial woman who attempts to resist the sexual ambivalences that people spread hither and thither in the society. Du Bois argues that the veil has advantages as well as disadvantages. Likewise, being a mixed-race person has positive and negative sides. Helga is estranged and secluded because of her racial and sexual otherness and searches for a firm identity and happiness in a world where she is rejected by both races. However, her bi-racial origins allow her to see the world from dual perspectives. In fact, unlike black people, she is able to observe the racism of both races and does not have a single standpoint.

Besides, it enables her to see the hypocrisy in interactions between blacks and whites like in Naxos where African-Americans pretend to be satisfied by the secondary status and roles which are imposed on them by the whites. Helga describes Naxos like a prison where black people’s individuality and identity are suppressed. Helga reflects that “The trees...on city avenues and boulevard...were tamed, held prisoners in a surrounding maze of human beings. Here [in Naxos] they were free. It was human beings who were prisoners.” (Ibid, p. 49)

Helga also feels that duality because she is a female in a male-dominated world. In addition, she has contradictory feelings towards sexuality because society gives it contradictory definitions which do not match with reality. Like in Du Bois’s concept, Helga sees herself from the perspective of

society. She does not only feel this *double consciousness* because of her racial belonging but also because of her gender and sexuality. Actually, she falters between repressing and expressing her sexual tension because of the way people see women in general and black women in particular since they were considered as sexual objects as it is obvious throughout Helga's sojourn in Copenhagen. Therefore, the young woman is trapped in this duality and tries to find a way to express her sexuality while keeping her social respectability. An example of Helga's contradictory behavior is the fact that on the one hand, she agrees to cope with the provocative image her Danish relatives draw of her while on the other she refuses Axel Olsen's proposal because he only desires to own her. This attraction to the other from a white perspective will be studied in the next chapter of this section of the thesis.

The dichotomies described by Du Bois are also present in Nella Larsen's second novel *Passing*. Judith Butler reviews the latter in an article entitled *Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's psychoanalytic challenge*. She analyzes the relationship between feminism, psychoanalysis, and race studies. She writes: "[a white person] cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them"<sup>165</sup>. There are a lot of juxtapositions and causal relationships in the novel. For example, whiteness can only exist in relation to blackness. Otherwise stated, it is only when associated with black people that Mr. Bellew's –Clare's Husband– whiteness is perpetuated. His racist behavior shows his fearfulness over racial frontiers. Jack Bellew insults black people and calls them "the black scrimy devils" (*P*, p. 172) He justifies his abhorrence for them by asserting that they are "always robbing and killing people...and worse" (*Ibid*) However, when Irene asks him if he had ever met any African-Americans, he answers "Thank the Lord no! And never expect to! But I know people who've known them...And I read in the papers about them" (*Ibid*, p. 172)

Therefore, Jack's hatred does not come from a personal experience he had with a black person but from the white society's stereotypes about them. Jack's fear of black people comes from his own vulnerability and terror of the

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<sup>165</sup> Butler, Judith, *op, cit.*, p. 285.



other that he sees as monstrous. In fact, Margrit Shildrick argues that the monstrous is dreadful because it is not very far from the self which makes this latter vulnerable. She defines the monstrous as what does not match with the norm. It is what frightens and causes anxiety because of its difference. In this regard, Shildrick's definition of the monstrous echoes perfectly with Kristeva's notion of the 'abject'. It "disrupts the notions of separation and distinction that underlie such claims [of what is normal]"<sup>166</sup>.

Thus, since the other, or in Shildrick's term the monstrous, can reflect a part of the self characterized by vulnerability, it becomes threatening to the integrity of the self. Shildrick writes: "So as long as the monstrous remains the absolute other in its corporeal difference it poses few problems; in other words it is so distanced in its difference that it can clearly be put into the oppositional category of not-me"<sup>167</sup>. Indeed, as long as one does not recognize similar characteristics between the self and the other, there is no reason to worry. However, if one comes close enough to the other to recognize that they share some features like vulnerability, it might become problematic.

For instance, in *Passing*, Bellew tries to keep as far as possible from the black race and claims that there are no 'Negroes' in his family because he is afraid of realizing that black people are humans just like him. In fact, when Clare tells him "My goodness, Jack! What difference would it make if, after all these years, you were to find out that I was one or two percent colored?" (*P*, p. 68); he offensively replies "Oh, no. Nig...nothing like that with me. I know you're no nigger, so it's all right" (*Ibid*) Thus, as long as he is convinced that his wife is white, he does not mind her getting "darker and darker everyday" (*Ibid*, p. 67)

Furthermore, Jack prefers to be xenophobic and racist without even knowing the people he marginalizes than to feel vulnerable by getting to know them. Shildrick argues that "an openness towards the monstrous other...acknowledges both vulnerability to the other, and the vulnerability of

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<sup>166</sup>Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, California. 2002, p. 2.

<sup>167</sup>*Ibid*, p. 03.

the self"<sup>168</sup>. So, to admit that it is possible to share characteristics with the other is to recognize one's vulnerability and imperfection. Nevertheless, to deny otherness or the other does not erase the latter and this is one of the points defended and that will be elucidated at the end of this present work.

If one does not recognize his own or other people's alterity, the latter still remains and this denial even causes more problems than when otherness is accepted. In this regard, when Helga tries to avoid or hide her otherness in the United States, she is even more othered and rejected by society. However, in Denmark, when her otherness is highlighted and accepted both by the Danes and herself, as Larsen puts it she becomes "an accepted curiosity" (*Q*, p. 106). Her differences are no longer barriers that prevent her from being happy and she does not feel rejected anymore.

In fact, "Helga Crane's new existence...gratified her augmented sense of self-importance. And it suited her. She had to admit that the Danes had the right idea. To each his own milieu. Enhance what was already in one's possession. In America Negroes sometimes talked loudly of this, but in their hearts they repudiated it" (*Ibid*, p. 104). Thus, the protagonist does not have to hide her nature or differences in Denmark unlike what the blacks do in America even if they claim the opposite. As a matter of fact, they would have preferred to be white than to use their potential as colored people; so, their differences become problematic.

Bellew is a paradoxical character because he despises everything black; still, he is attracted to his wife and nicknames her 'Nig'. Butler argues that he is a fetishist because the fact that he calls her 'Nig' suggests that he somehow suspects her racial origins. Yet, he prefers to ignore his doubts because –like many white men– he wants to satisfy his fantasy of having a relationship with an exotic other. Indeed, racial fetishism involves the desire for a person of another origin because of the exoticism it procures like it is the case here. Therefore, there is a sort of contradiction in Bellew's character since he claims that he does not want to be associated with black people; yet, he calls his wife 'Nig'. He wants to "make Clare into the exotic object to be

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<sup>168</sup>Shildrick, Margrit, *op, cit.*, p. 3.

dominated”<sup>169</sup>. It is worth mentioning that the word ‘exotic’ comes from the middle French *exotique* that comes from the Latin *exoticus* and the Greek *exotikos*. Its prefix *exo* means outlandish or of foreign origin. The word also refers to someone or something not native or that appears to be strange or unusual. Thus, ‘exotic’ reflects perfectly the situation of Larsen’s characters especially Helga’s in Denmark.

Irene Redfield seems to believe that all white people are somehow fetishists as Butler calls it<sup>170</sup>. During a party, Hugh Wentworth asks her “What happens to all the ladies of my superior race who’re lured up here?” (*P*, p. 138)The heroine replies that black men are better dancers than the whites. At this answer, Hugh is not really convinced and says that there is some other sort of attraction. Therefore, Irene states “I think that what they feel is — well, *a kind of emotional excitement*. You know, *the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange*, and even, perhaps, *a bit repugnant to you; something so different* that it's *really at the opposite end* of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty.” (Ibid, p. 138-9- emphasis mine) Irene’s explanation of the situation underlines an “emotional excitement” of the “ladies” based on a strong dissimilarity. The whole passage actually emphasizes and rests on a sharp contrast between black and white seen from a white male's perspective, which seems to correspond to Butler’s definition of a fetishist and her analysis about Bellew’s attraction to his wife and her pet name.

The encounter with Mr. Bellew and the way he nicknames his wife leave Irene and Gertrude shocked. “It was hard to believe that even Clare Kendry would permit this ridiculing of her race by an outsider, though he chanced to be her husband...But how rude, how positively insulting, for him to address her in that way in the presence of guests” (Ibid, p. 66) Bellew explains that he calls Clare ‘Nig’ for the reason that when he first knew her she was white as a ‘lily’ (Ibid, p. 67) but that she gets darker everyday and that if she is not careful she will end up black. The same idea is repeated through the introduction of the poetic image of "Clare fair and golden, like a sunlit day" in

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<sup>169</sup> Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid, p. 285.

the same scene. Irene is so shaken by the situation that she has an interminable and hysteric laughter, yet looking at Clare she realizes “the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke” (*P*, p. 67)

But the simile is definitely an illusion and deception, a literary expression of a "joke" about appearances. Even though Irene suddenly feels angry as Clare did not have the right to expose her to such a humiliation, she feels a racial solidarity that prevents her from unmasking Clare. Indeed, Irene “couldn't betray Clare, couldn't even run the risk of appearing to defend a people that were being maligned, for fear that that defense might in some infinitesimal degree lead the way to final discovery of her secret. She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race” (*Ibid*, p. 89-90)

### **Black Contradiction: Between pride and disgust of Color**

Like in *Passing*, the juxtaposition of whiteness and blackness is omnipresent in *Quicksand*. The best example of this juxtaposition is embodied in Helga's sojourn in Copenhagen. Indeed, the black and white sides of Helga are confronted and she feels she belongs to none. “She [Helga] is also tainted by her non-belonging to two races and cultures, the African-American and the Danish, i.e. white culture. She alternates between hatred and disgust of her blackness, and a superficial pride in being exotic among the pale Danes”<sup>171</sup>. Otherwise stated, Helga belongs neither to the black nor to the white races and has contradictory feelings about her blackness. Whenever she is with black people, she is oppressed and disgusted by the way they act and their hypocritical claims about race. In this context, when she is at her office in Chicago,

The inscrutability of the dozen or more brown faces, all cast from the same indefinite mold, and so like her own, seemed pressing forward against her. Abruptly, if flashed upon her that the harrowing irritation of the past weeks was a smoldering hatred...It was as if she was shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race...Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk? (*Q*, p. 85-6)

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<sup>171</sup>Sorensen, Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Suddenly, Helga “hated him [her black boss] and all others too much” (*Q*, p. 85-6) Yet, in the next sentence, she attempts to convince herself that she belongs to those people she hates “‘They’re my people, my own people,’ she kept repeating over and over to herself.” (Ibid)

Besides, when she is Denmark, she longs for African-Americans and displays a race pride; she states “I’m homesick, not for America, but for Negroes. That’s the trouble.” (Ibid, p. 122) At first in Denmark, she seems to be proud of her exoticism and is treated accordingly. Hence, this proves the ambivalence of racial otherness. This perfectly applies to double consciousness as a black person, in this case Helga, “wouldn’t bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world”<sup>172</sup>. In other words, even if black people suffer from racial discrimination, they would not accept to change their color.

Much in the same way, Helga feels proud of her color and longs for the colored community while away. Back in Harlem, she understands that

*These* were her people. Nothing, she had come to understand now, could ever change that....How absurd she had been to think that another country, other people, could liberate her from the ties which bound her forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes. Ties that were of the spirit. Ties not only superficially entangled with mere outline of features or color of skin. Deeper. Much deeper than either of these (Ibid, p. 125)

Larsen’s italicization of the word ‘these’ aims at emphasizing the fact that Helga realizes that no one else than African-Americans are her own people. Besides, by using words like ‘liberate’ and ‘bound’, the author shows that Helga does not have the choice, she will always be a part of the black race even if she does not want to. The ties that bind her to them are unbreakable. Furthermore, the writer’s use of oxymoronic adjectives like ‘horrible’ and ‘lovable’ demonstrates that Helga accepts African-Americans with all their characteristics, either positive or negative, because their ties are much more profound than mere skin color.

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<sup>172</sup>Du Bois, Willian E.B., *op. cit.*,p. 6.

Bent Sorensen argues that the way Helga is treated in Denmark is expressed in the novel through metaphors of slavery. In fact, the bracelets she is given can be compared to the shackles of the slaves and the way she is dressed with colorful and sexy clothes designed to provoke and attract is a way of prostitution. She is perceived as an object which only exists to be an ornament and her relatives think that the best option for her is to be a wife. Much in the same way, as a mixed-race person, Helga has to play an ornamental role in Naxos, as one of her colleagues tells her when she learns that Helga wants to quit: “we need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives.” (*Q*, p. 14)

It is the Danish painter, Alex Olsen who paints a portrait of Helga and who proposes to her, who is the most honest with her. His portrait, which reflects the image of a whore, illustrates the way people see her. The Dahls, her relatives in Denmark, act as if they were her pimps and are angry when Helga refuses the painter’s proposal because it contradicts their plans of social uplift. In fact, “they had not so much expected as hoped that she would bring down Olsen, and so secure the link between the merely fashionable set to which they belonged and the artistic one after which they hankered” (*Ibid*, p. 120)

Stringer emphasizes the particular scene of *Quicksand* when Axel Olsen paints a portrait of Helga. She analyzes Helga’s self-image and the one people have of her. Stringer describes the scene of “a male artistic genius giving meaning to inert female bodies”<sup>173</sup> and notes that the reader does not know what clothing Helga wears. Helga is depicted as a silent model; she does not even react to Olsen’s degrading proposition of becoming his mistress. Not having any answer Olsen decides to make a more respectable proposition of legal marriage. It is at that moment that we feel that Helga senses a race pride and a racial solidarity. It might be the only moment in which Helga feels her belonging to the black race. She tells him “You see I couldn’t marry a white man...it isn’t just you...It’s deeper, broader than that. It’s racial...If we were married, you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother did that.” (*Ibid*, p. 118) Helga associates marriage to hunt

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<sup>173</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

because she feels that if she accepts Olsen's proposal, she will be trapped and become his property. In this regard, she tells Olsen "I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. *I don't at all care to be owned.* Even by you." (*Q*, p. 117, Italics mine)

The moment when Helga sees Olsen's painting is a key one in the novel because "Helga sees herself in Olsen's portrait, and she dies" (*Ibid*, p. 119) In fact, it is at that moment that her fate changes and the portrait is one of the major factors that leads her to her unhappy life where she dies psychologically. She had never "forgiven Olsen for the portrait. It wasn't she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (*Ibid*, p. 119) She realizes that the image she reflects does not match with her real personality and the values she defends. For instance, she is against race hypocrisy but she plays the racial role of the exotic other to gain some privileges just as people do in Naxos. Helga leaves Denmark and returns to Harlem but she "is haunted by the images of herself refracted in the European cultural mirror"<sup>174</sup>. Yet, vulnerability, in this case being or acting like the exotic other, can be used as a resistance tool or a weapon to attain some goals.

Throughout the novel Helga is unable to express her resentment but this changes in Denmark. Stringer argues that "much of Helga's whimsical dissatisfaction throughout the novel, her repetitive seeking after something new and better, is driven by her inability to voice anger or even disagreement with anyone"<sup>175</sup>. This silence ends when Helga acknowledges her disagreement with Olsen and his portrait. She took the habit of leaving before confrontation like in Naxos and Harlem. Yet, before leaving Denmark, she voices her anger and tells Olsen what she thinks of his portrait and propositions. This click takes place when Helga asks her Danish relatives' maid what she thinks of the painting. She answers honestly by saying "I don't like that picture. It looks bad, wicked. Begging your pardon." (*Ibid*, p. 120) At that moment, Helga realizes that she must speak for herself and express the feelings she had while discovering the painting which reflects the way she is seen by the Danes.

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<sup>174</sup>Wall, Cheryl A., *op, cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>175</sup>Stinger, Dorothy, *op, cit.*, p. 75.

When Helga tells Olsen that he is mistaken about her and that the painting does not reflect reality, he feels obliged to belittle her to reassure his white superiority. In fact, when Helga refuses his propositions and tells him that she does not want to be owned, he insults her by saying “you have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer” (*Q*, p. 117) Olsen feels humiliated and shows Helga that he only wanted her for her exoticism and thus otherness. He thinks that, as a white person, he knows everything about the blacks and he explicitly tells her that she is just an object that can be bought and sold. Unlike people in the United States, like Helga, who know perfectly the consequences of mixed-race marriage and miscegenation, Olsen cannot understand “this foolishness about race” (*Ibid*, p. 118) He tells her “I have offered you marriage, Helga Crane, and you answer me with some strange talk of race and shame. What nonsense is this?” (*Ibid*)

As an artist, Alex Olsen is not disturbed by Helga’s differences. However, he does not consider her as a woman who needs love and affection. Moreover, “She was aware also of a curious feeling of repugnance, as her eyes slid over his face. Was it possible? Was it really this man that she had thought, even wished, she could marry?” (*Ibid*, p. 115) Interestingly, Olsen can be compared to Jack Bellew who is attracted but repulsed by his black wife; which makes him a fetishist according to Judith Butler<sup>176</sup>. Olsen also sees Helga as a new object that he can use to look more extravagant and original and to impress people. Otherwise stated, as it is assured in the novel, Olsen is a ‘theatrical’ (*Ibid*, p. 76) and excessive character. He likes to dress in an original manner and to act exceedingly in order to look mysterious and unique. Thus, for him, marrying Helga would only add to his inscrutability and fascinate people even more about him as an artist as well as about his works of art. He thinks that it will make him somehow different and thus superior. He asserts “For me it will be an experience. It may be that with you, Helga, for wife, I will become great. Immortal. Who knows? I didn’t want to love you, but I had to.” (*Ibid*, p. 117)

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<sup>176</sup> Butler, Judith, *op, cit.*, p. 285.



Upon leaving Copenhagen for Harlem, Helga realizes that the image she had of Denmark as a country with “no Negroes, no problems, no prejudices” (*Q*, p. 65) turns out to be false. Indeed, when she leaves the United States, she resolves

never to return to the existence of ignominy which the New World of opportunity and promise forced upon Negroes. How stupid she had been ever to have thought that she could marry and perhaps have children in a land where every dark child was handicapped at the start by the shroud of color! She saw, suddenly, the giving birth to little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin, an unforgivable outrage (*Ibid*, p. 104)

However, the protagonist understands that “it is only in surface that Denmark is different and that the underlying social pressures are really the same for a coloured woman no matter what nation she lives in”<sup>177</sup>. At that point, Helga understands that the problem does not come from the place where she lives because the prejudices and pressure are the same everywhere since she is othered everywhere she goes. For Sorensen, this novel should be seen as the strong feminist and racial message that Larsen created for the reader.

*Double consciousness* also consists in an inner conflict between “two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body”<sup>178</sup>. This aspect of W.E.B Du Bois’s theory can be associated with Clare’s internal ambivalence towards passing. Indeed, in a letter to Irene, Clare appears to regret her decision of passing, declaring, “For I am lonely, so lonely . . . You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of . . . It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases.” (*P*, p. 174) Nevertheless, only a few pages later, she questions Irene’s choice to embrace her African- American origins: “You know, Rene, I’ve often wondered why more colored girls, girls like you and Margaret Hammer and Esther Dawson and—oh, lots of others—never passed’ over. It’s such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve” (*Ibid*, p. 187) Clare seems to have two

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<sup>177</sup>Sorensen, Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>178</sup>Du Bois, Willian E.B., *op. cit.*,p. 1.

incompatible personalities and no one seems to have the upper hand in the internal conflict that she goes through.

## 2. Whiteness: Between Love and Hatred for African-Americans

A second idea from Du Bois's theory that matches with Larsen's novels is African-Americans' mixed feelings towards white people. Indeed, on the one hand, they despise them. Yet, on the other, they tend to imitate them and ape their life style. In *Quicksand*, Anne Grey fails to admit that she idealizes the white world and follows its values and ways. Helga believes that Anne Grey is "almost too good to be true." (*Q*, p. 76) She is described as a very beautiful and gentle black woman who welcomes Helga and who offers to host her in Harlem. Anne is a thirty year-old, wealthy lady who is a fervent defender of the race cause. This fixation on race problems and the hypocrisy that lies in it distress Helga.

Anne was obsessed by the race and fed her obsession. She frequented all the meetings of protest...she talked, wept, and ground her teeth dramatically about the wrongs and shames of her race...'Social equality,' 'Equal opportunity for all,' were her slogans, often and emphatically repeated. *Anne preached these things and honestly thought that she believed them...*'To me,' asserted Anne Grey, 'the most wretched Negro prostitute...is more than any President of these United States, not excepting Abraham Lincoln'. (Ibid, p. 79, italics mine)

Anne believes that no white person is worth being equal with African-Americans. The italicized sentence insinuates that Anne does not really believe in what she advocates. In reality, she does not like to mix with middle class black people as "she turned up her finely carved nose at their lusty churches, their picturesque parades, their naïve clowning on the streets." (Ibid, p. 97-80)

Therefore, Anne is full of ambiguities and discrepancies; she promotes social parity while living a life of social disparity. In other words, she is a privileged, rich person who claims to comprehend poor black people's problems. The duality which permits associating Anne Grey with Du Bois's theory is that even if she hates the whites, she follows their way of living and adopts their values as it is explained in the novel: "Anne hated white people

with a deep and burning hatred” (*Q*, p. 82) Nonetheless in the next paragraph, Larsen writes,

But [Anne] aped [white people’s] clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Toward these things she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement... Theoretically, however, she stood for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid, and was in revolt against social inequality. (Ibid)

Larsen uses the pejorative word ‘aped’ to show that Anne imitates the whites in an unthinking and absurd way. Anne actively supports the race uplift. However, she internalizes the racist stereotypes and the whites’ values by hating her own black culture and songs.

### *Medusa*

Therefore, African-Americans pretend to be content with their color while in reality they would do anything to get rid of their "Negroid" features and look like whites. In this respect, while talking to her only colleague who tries to dissuade her from leaving Naxos, Helga is “wondering for the hundredth time just what form of vanity it was that had induced an intelligent girl like Margaret Creighton to turn what was probably nice live crinkly hair, perfectly suited to her smooth dark skin and agreeable round features, into a dead straight, greasy, ugly mass.” (Ibid, p. 48) Thus, Helga believes it is a pity how Margaret transformed her beautiful curly hair into a hideous heap. The use of the antonyms live and dead is very significant because by getting rid of the features that make black people what they are, people like Margaret participate in the vanishing of the black culture. Indeed, they try so hard to look like and imitate white people that they leave their own identity aside and enhance a new fake and instable personality. It is fake and unstable because they will never be accepted or even regarded as complete American citizens like the whites.

Consequently, Margaret Creighton’s hair which turns from nice curls into a repugnant mass is comparable to the myth of *Medusa*. In fact, *Medusa* was transformed from a beautiful girl with nice golden and curly hair into a monster. She was one of the *Gorgon* sisters and a priestess of Athena

condemned her to a life of celibacy. Nevertheless, she fell in love with *Poseidon* and married him. This act changed her from a fair beauty into an ugly woman with snakes instead of hair. Besides, her lovely eyes turned into scaring orbs that petrified every onlooker. Therefore, it is possible to compare this transformation to the one which took place with Margaret's hair. In *The Laugh of Medusa*, Helene Cixous asserts that "there is...no general woman, no one typical woman"<sup>179</sup>. Thus, Margaret's attempts to fit in with white standard of beauty, that advocates straight hair, are useless. Indeed, in her work Cixous defends women's right to difference and freedom. She deconstructs the myths that defined femininity in a pejorative way like the *femme fatale* one represented by Medusa.

In addition, Cixous disentangles the connection between sexual difference and fear through the figure of *Medusa*. *Medusa* as *femme fatale* stands for an illusion of the male gaze caused by a terror of "castration," or a loss of identity and authority. So, Cixous rewrites *Medusa* as a personification of this feminine economy that undergoes a *jouissance*, or strong intellectual and physical delight that results from this contact with alterity and questions definitions of gender, sex and sexuality and even race, since the color politics are intertwined in the essay's epigraph which states

As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark<sup>180</sup>.

This passage demonstrates the negative image of femininity as women are considered as dark and thus dangerous and frightening. It is also interesting to notice that in the Greek myth, *Medusa* flees her house after her transformation

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<sup>179</sup>Cixous, Helene, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893, p. 876.

<sup>180</sup>*Ibid*, p. 877-8.

and goes to Africa where snakes dropped out of her head until she is killed by Perseus<sup>181</sup>.

Furthermore, in her essay, Cixous emphasizes on laughter which is an important and frequent element in Nella Larsen's novels. Indeed, the word 'laugh' is repeated fifty times in *Passing*. For example, Irene is subjugated by Clare's laughter which obsesses her throughout the novel and which she describes as a ringing bell. It is very significant that Irene does not recognize Clare until the latter laughs. Irene states "I'd never in this world have known you if you hadn't laughed" (*P*, p. 23) Another instance is when Irene meets Jack Bellew for the first time. He speaks about the reasons that push him to nickname his wife 'Nig' and after that

He roared with laughter. Clare's ringing bell-like laugh joined his. Gertrude after another uneasy shift in her seat added her shrill one. Irene, who had been sitting with lips tightly compressed, cried out: "That's good!" and gave way to gales of laughter. She laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided (*Ibid*, p. 67-8)

Thus, laughter is a recurrent aspect in Larsen's novels. It rather seems to suggest a type of typically feminine, Gorgon-like power which, ironically, does not bring the protection etymologically promised by the Medusa status, and at that point, remains to be discovered by the protagonist.

These paradoxical feelings towards white people are also examined in Du Bois's article where he writes "[black people's] youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white"<sup>182</sup>. Ironically, they hated all that was associated with the whites. Yet, they copied their values and some of them even wished to be white. They disliked being different and sometimes asked themselves "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?"<sup>183</sup> It is this racial hypocrisy that pushes Helga to leave Naxos then Harlem. She thinks that

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<sup>181</sup>Walker, Barbara . *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths & Secrets*. New Jersey: Castle Books. ISBN 0785807209, 1996, p 8.

<sup>182</sup>Du Bois, Willian E.B., *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>183</sup>*Ibid*, p. 4.

these feelings are unhealthy and that black people should be proud of their own values instead of adopting the whites'. Larsen writes that "[Negroes] didn't want to be like themselves. What they wanted, asked for, begged for, was to be like their white overlords. They were ashamed to be Negroes, but not ashamed to beg to be something else. Something inferior. Not quite genuine. Too bad!" (*Q*, p. 105)

However, even if Helga is persuaded that all the insincerity and double standards that prevail in Naxos are damaging, she still sees through the eyes of that community and believes that her decision of leaving is something insane and mean. Indeed, on the one hand, Helga states "I hate hypocrisy. I hate cruelty to students, and to teachers who can't fight back. I hate backbiting, and sneaking, and petty jealousy. Naxos? It's hardly a place at all. It's more like some loathsome, venomous disease. Ugh! Everybody spending his time in a malicious hunting for the weaknesses of others, spying, grudging, scratching." (*Ibid*, p. 53) Nonetheless, when she finally decides that she is "through with that" (*Ibid*, p. 39), she compares that resolution to an act of the devil. Indeed, She is "like a person who had been for months fighting the devil and then unexpectedly had turned and agreed to do his bidding" (*Ibid*) She is so pressured by the preconceived ideas about how good woman should behave that she believes her choice is wicked.

When in Naxos, Helga Crane gets annoyed with the double standards that prevail in Harlem. Larsen writes "Shallow and provincial, Helga's Harlemites are possessed of a race consciousness at once consuming and superficial, proud and ineffectual. They immerse themselves in the race problem, scanning newspapers to tabulate every injustice against the race. But, of course, they keep their distance from the suffering masses" (*Ibid*, p. 98) This passage shows the contradictions in the Harlemites' behavior. Even if they assert their race pride, they imitate the whites and their values. Furthermore, they do not know about their own culture and are more interested in the whites'. As a consequence, they internalize the stereotypes white people have about them and try to transform Harlem accordingly. In other words, they

shape Harlem according to the image white people have of it in order to meet their desire of exoticism and savageness.

In *Quicksand*, Helga describes a nightclub which was transformed into a 'jungle' in order to attract the tourists. She feels humiliated by the way white people see black ones as exotic others. Likewise, she feels the same shame when she goes to the theater with Alex Olsen, the Danish painter, to attend a black vaudeville act. Indeed, she feels "shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget" (*Q*, p. 80) In *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, Hutchinson argues that as the only black person in the audience Helga feels exposed<sup>184</sup>. As a matter of fact, Helga even has some resentment for the colored performers who expose her. "She was not amused. Instead she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage...And she was shocked at the avidity with which Olsen beside her drank it in." (*Ibid*, p. 112) She realizes that even if she thinks that she found her people in Denmark, she is not one of them and that their only interest for her lies in her difference. She senses a racial pride and wants to assert her blackness.

### **Racial Fetishism**

Like Anne Grey, Irene has a very ambivalent relationship with the white world. She criticizes Clare's choice of passing but she herself passes by adopting European-American values while proclaiming her racial pride. Irene strives between her conventional consciousness and her subconsciousness, symbolized by Clare as it will be demonstrated in the third part of this work. In fact, Clare is the opposite of Irene in all aspects. The two women have chosen different paths as Irene chooses the security while Clare chooses to always be "stepping on the edge of danger" (*P*, p. 172) Irene condemns Clare's life style but she also admires it. By encountering Clare, Irene becomes aware that her life is passionless and that may be the reason why she lets Clare interfere in it to make it more animated. However, her rival starts to take her place within the household. Indeed, Clare plays with the children and even goes to parties with

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<sup>184</sup>Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

Irene's husband, Brian. At that point, Irene becomes as selfish and insensible as her rival and decides to get rid of her by all means. By the end of the novel, Irene's conscious and subconscious reunite when Clare is defenestrated.

Jennifer De Vere Brody claims that "Irene value[s] class over race"<sup>185</sup>. In fact, Clare only thinks of her social status and tries to "distance herself from the...working classes"<sup>186</sup>. For instance, when she meets a man who faints in front of her, she immediately tries to run from the mass and feels "disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many sweating bodies" (*P*, p. 8) In other words, she does not want to get in contact with lower-class black people. She prefers to go to a place for white people, the Drayton Hotel, where she feels safe. Like Anne Grey, Irene participates in organizations supposed to help poor black people, like the Negro Welfare League, but she does not wish to get close to them. Additionally, she does not want to converse with her domestics and creates a distance between them and herself. In this context, she is annoyed when Clare talks to them. She thinks it is "an exasperating childlike lack of perception" (*Ibid*, p. 57) from Clare. Therefore, even if Irene claims she is a race woman who fights for the advancement of her people, she stays far from reality and from the true race problems. She even prevents her children from knowing what their people go through. She lives in her own world where she has control over everything.

In *Not Even Past: Race, Historical Trauma, and Subjectivity in Faulkner, Larsen, and Van Vechten*, Stringer maintains that Irene and her husband Brian, in *Passing*, are fetishists because they ape white people's life style while claiming their race pride and pretending to hate everything white. She writes "In other words, not the things at her [Irene's] table, but she herself, and her husband Brian, are the fetishes in this scene [of breakfast]: these two people, apparently an ideal couple, stand as the cancellation of the past of oppression and its transformation into enjoyment."<sup>187</sup> Irene prefers to ignore

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<sup>185</sup>Brody, Jennifer D. "Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Callaloo: A Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters* 4 (Fall 1992): 1053-65. Rpt. in *Passing*. Ed. Carla Kaplan. New York: Norton Co, 2007. 393-408, p. 401.

<sup>186</sup>*Ibid*, p. 399.

<sup>187</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 102.



the historical trauma that the black race went through. She does not even accept to answer her children's inquiries about racism and thinks that to be a good "New Negro" one should ignore the past and forget it. She believes that she protects her children by hiding racial problems and pretending that black and white people are equal. Yet, she does not seem to realize that as black people, her children will be confronted to racial discriminations sooner or later. Stringer explains the notion of racial fetish

Being a racial fetish, as Coleman explains, involves a global self-mutilation, by which the whole person stands for 'black', signs race without being fully present. Thus the Redfields' auto-fetishization, played out for the audience of their dark-skinned maid (and by extension for the larger, working-poor and recently-migrated black Harlem community who pays Dr. Redfield's bills), 'shutters down' their own capacities for pleasure.....The husband and wife must be only what they are supposed to be, and eat only what they are supposed to eat<sup>188</sup>.

So, for Stringer the Redfields' fetishism lies in being black and sharing the whites' values. They live for appearances and arrange their lives accordingly.

In the breakfast scene, everything seems to be arranged and acted.

Larsen states

They went into the dining-room. He drew back her chair and she sat down behind the fat-bellied German coffee-pot, which sent out its morning fragrance, mingled with the smell of crisp toast and savory bacon, in the distance. With his long, nervous fingers he picked up the morning paper from his own chair and sat down. Zulena, a small mahogany-colored creature, brought in the grapefruit. They took their spoons. (*P*, p. 94)

In other words, the Redfields have to behave and even eat what they are supposed to because society expects them to do so. This way, they limit and condemn themselves to life styles that sometimes wound them and leave them unsatisfied. In this context, Brian is displeased by the life he leads and suffers from being obliged to hide his real desires and personality in order to please society. In fact, this blind imitation is a sort of mutilation because by doing so they hurt themselves and spoil their lives. This mutilation can be associated with castration as it is Brian who clearly suffers more because of the situation.

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<sup>188</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

Furthermore, Irene can be seen as a castrating woman since she is the one who imposes this life style on her husband.

Nonetheless, this fetishism can be seen as a strategy from Larsen not only to show the futility of the whites' stereotypes about the black community but also the superficiality of the whites' life style. This imitation that is omnipresent in Larsen's novels is what Homi Bhabha calls mimicry<sup>189</sup>. It is when colonized or black people imitate the whites in different aspects of life from language to politics. It is regarded as opportunistic as these people imitate the holders of power to get an insight of that power. However, it is seen as reprehensible and people who do so are generally rejected by their own community. Thus, it is perceived as a betrayal. In the novels, mimicry is used to denounce those black people living with white values and imitating them in all the domains like Irene in *Passing* and Anne Grey in *Quicksand*. In fact, Helga seems against what Anne is doing and leaves Harlem because of the hypocrisy of people despising the whites but imitating them. However, this mimicry of white people does not seem as shameful for most Harlemites and Anne is considered as a bourgeois, respected woman. Bhabha argues that mimicry can be "unintentionally subversive"<sup>190</sup> because it reveals the inauthenticity of all emblematic expressions of authority and this is one of the arguments defended in this work. Hence, Larsen uses mimicry to demonstrate that imitating the whites' life style does not lead to a happy life like in the case of the Redfields.

### 3. Racial Difference as a 'Problem'

An important aspect in W.E.B Du Bois's article is that African-Americans are seen as problems rather than human beings. In other words, they are dehumanized and their difference is transformed into a trouble which has to be solved by the country. Du Bois draws on his own experience and recounts

They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say....Do not these southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile,

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<sup>189</sup>Bhabha, Homi, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>190</sup>Ibid.

or am interested....To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. And yet being a problem is a strange experience,--peculiar even for one who has never been anything else<sup>191</sup>.

Du Bois goes on and relates the first time he realized he was “a problem” when a white little girl did not accept his card because of his skin color: “it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.”<sup>192</sup>

Unlike Du Bois, who learned that he was different and thus “a problem” at school, Helga Crane knew that she was “a problem” at a very early age. Janice Hale insists that the task of the black family is to “prepare its children to live among white people without becoming white people”<sup>193</sup>. However, Helga was not prepared to face the discriminations that she went through. In fact, being the only dark-skinned person at home, Helga, just like Larsen, felt as a burden that her family had to carry. She knew that her stepfather and sister despised her and that her mother was embarrassed by her and may be even detested her as she tells Olsen when he proposes to her “you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother did that” (*Q*, p. 118) Her relatives did their best to dissociate her from the family.

Helga knew that when she needed help or support “her stepfather, her stepbrothers and sisters, and even the numerous cousins, aunts, and other uncles could not be even remotely considered. She laughed a little, scornfully, reflecting that the antagonism was mutual, or, perhaps, just a trifle keener on her side than on theirs. They feared and hated her. She pitied and despised them” (*Ibid*, p. 41)As a result, Helga suffered from racial discrimination earlier than many black people, who unlike her felt safe in their own home, and she knew that her differences would shape her life. Indeed, many African-

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<sup>191</sup>Du Bois, Willian E.B., *op, cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>192</sup>*Ibid.*,p. 3.

<sup>193</sup>Hale, Janice. *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press; Revised Edition, 1986, p. 80.

Americans found solace at home and used their family unity as a carapace against racial discriminations.

As Du Bois argues, black people see themselves through the eyes of the whites. So, Helga felt as ‘a problem’ for her family, which makes her familiar with the economies of victimhood and which haunts her throughout her life. Larsen writes that “[Helga] saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden.” (*Q*, p. 62) Helga’s differences separate her from her relatives who consider her as a shameful mistake and who try their best to dissociate her from them. As a result, they completely put her out of their lives when she goes to school after her mother’s death. In all this rejection, Helga finds comfort in her white uncle who seems to accept her and who even pays for her education. Indeed, “Uncle Peter was, she knew, the one relative who thought kindly, or even calmly, of her” (*Ibid*, p. 41) Thus, when Helga needs money after departing from Naxos she naturally goes to his house.

However, when she visits him, she is poorly received by his white wife who tells her “Oh, yes! I remember about you now. I’d forgotten for a moment. Well, he isn’t exactly your uncle, is he? Your mother wasn’t married, was she? I mean to your father?” (*Ibid*, p. 61) It is clear that her uncle’s wife “so plainly wished to dissociate herself from the outrage of her [Helga’s] very existence” (*Ibid*, p. 61) She does not consider Helga as their niece merely because her parents were not married. She believes that after all the goods her husband did to the mulatto, the best thing she can do to thank him is to disappear from his life. She states “Mr. Nilssen has been very kind to you, supported you, sent you to school. But you mustn’t expect anything else. And you mustn’t come here anymore. It –well, frankly, it isn’t convenient. I’m sure an intelligent girl like yourself can understand that.” (*Ibid*, p. 61) She is so embarrassed and shocked by the idea that she might have a black relative that she asks Helga “please remember that *my husband is not your uncle*. No indeed! Why, that, *that would make me your aunt! He’s not–*.” (*Ibid*, Italics mine)

Helga is so touched by this rebuff that she flees and wanders in the streets of Chicago till late in the evening. She is accosted by a white man, but

she is so shocked by what happened in her uncle's home that she only replies "You're not my uncle." (*Q*, p. 62) But, "worst of all was the fact that under the stinging hurt [Helga] understood and sympathized with [her uncle's wife] Mrs. Nilssen's point of view, as always she had been able to understand her mother's, her stepfather's, and his children's point of view" (*Ibid*, p. 61) Surprisingly, Helga seems to accept and even to agree with the arguments of her uncle's wife.

Yet, even if her family put her in an all-black environment, in Nashville, to make her closer to her 'race', Helga does not feel she belongs to either community because "If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (*Ibid*, p. 43) So, even if Helga looks black "She didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people" (*Ibid*, p. 76) At that school, she feels very lonely and is even more exposed to her absence of family. Indeed, Larsen states "as she [Helga] grew older, she became gradually aware of a difference between herself and the girls about her. They had mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters of whom they spoke frequently, and who sometimes visited them. They went home for the vacations which Helga spent in the city where the school was located" (*Ibid*, p. 57) In this respect, Helga Crane fits in the representation that Du Bois made of his theory.

Helga's lack of family and bonds shapes her life and she believes that it is the reason why she cannot belong anywhere. When breaking up her engagement to her fiancé, she immediately thinks

The family of James Vayle...would be glad. They had never liked the engagement, had never liked Helga Crane. Her own lack of family disconcerted them. No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her engagement to James. (*Ibid*, p. 43)

Therefore, Helga thinks that she is rejected because "If you were just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable" (*Ibid*) Even though she pretends to comprehend and accept her family's rejection, Helga is traumatized

and just the fact of thinking of that makes her have “that sore sensation of revolt, and again the torment which she had gone through [looms] before her as something brutal and undeserved.” (*Q*, p. 71) When Mrs. Hayes-Rore asks her about her family she wonders “was she to be forever explaining her people- or lack of them?” (*Ibid*, p. 70) Helga replies that she has no people and that she is alone. But, Mrs. Hayes-Rore cannot believe it and tells her “if you didn’t have people, you wouldn’t be living. *Everybody has people*, Miss Crane. *Everybody*” (*Ibid*, p. 71, Italics mine) The repetition of the word ‘everybody’ shows how incredulous the woman appears to be about Helga’s answer.

As for *Passing*, behind the apparently insensitive character of Clare emerges the image of a sad childhood, characterized by a painful absence of ties with her black origins and culture, which makes Irene declare that “Clare had never been exactly one of the group” (*P*, p. 28) Furthermore, when the latter is fifteen years old, her father dies and she is compelled to live with two white aunts who despise everything black, and make her feel she is a burden for them, treating her as a servant rather than their niece. Clare says about her aunts “for all their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn’t want anyone to know that their darling brother has seduces-ruined, they called it- a Negro girl....They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbors, or even to mention the south side” (*Ibid*, p. 159) In other words, like Helga Crane’s relatives, Clare’s aunts are ashamed of what they consider their brother’s mistake and try to hide her black blood.

Therefore, in addition to the *double consciousness* felt by African-Americans, most of Larsen’s mixed-race characters feel another pressure that comes from their white entourage. Clare feels she is a problem for her aunts and thus decides to leave and marry Jack Bellew without even letting them know. Therefore, they feel what could be called a “double double consciousness” or a multiple consciousness because they have paradoxical feelings about whiteness. Indeed, on the one hand, they feel hatred for the white world since the latter rejects them. Yet, on the other hand, they themselves have a white part as they have some white blood.

Hence, like white people in contact with black ones, these latter also feel vulnerable because of their racial difference and internalize the way they are regarded by society. In fact, African-Americans learn that they are a burden for society and that they are seen as abnormal or monstrous whenever they get in contact with the white world. They start to see themselves as problems and even understand the whites' point of view. They become vulnerable and sometimes try either to copy the whites or to cope with the stereotyped image that is drawn of them.

#### 4. Stereotype Internalization and Self-Hatred

Finally, another idea from Du Bois's work which can be related to Nella Larsen's is African-Americans' internalization of the stereotypes white people have of them. Du Bois writes: "Men call the shadow prejudice, and learnedly explain it as the natural defence of culture against barbarism, learning against ignorance, purity against crime, the "higher" against the "lower" races. To which the Negro cries Amen! and swears that to so much of this strange prejudice...he humbly bows and meekly does obeisance"<sup>194</sup>. Du Bois asserts that black people accept the prejudices that the whites have of them and thus feel inferior.

He argues that by facing the stereotypes, African-Americans have a very low self-esteem. He writes: "Lo! we are diseased and dying, cried the dark hosts; we cannot write, our voting is vain; what need of education, since we must always cook and serve? And the Nation echoed and enforced this self-criticism, saying: Be content to be servants, and nothing more; what need of higher culture for half-men?"<sup>195</sup> Otherwise stated, these prejudices are so assimilated by black people that they denigrate themselves and give up on education because they feel it is useless since all the opportunities are for the whites.

Du Bois recounts that when he was young he felt very proud when getting higher score than his white mates at school. However, when he got older he realized that they had all the chances and that he could not measure up

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<sup>194</sup>Du Bois, Willian E.B., *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>195</sup>Ibid..

to them because of his hue<sup>196</sup>. This passage can be compared to a scene taking place in Naxos where a white man of God gives a speech in which he praises the inhabitants because they know their limits and place in society. “This great community, Helga thought, was no longer a school...It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man’s magnanimity, refutation of the black man’s inefficiency” (*Q*, p. 38) Naxos’s people follow Washington’s philosophy, hoping to get civil rights.

There, people are taught that their best ambitions should be limited to becoming woodcarvers and well-diggers. Stereotypes about African-Americans are conveyed by teachers and workers of the school. For instance, the dormitory matron characterizes the girls as “savages from the backwoods” (*Ibid*, p. 12) She tells them “Well! Even if every last one of you did come from homes where you weren’t taught any manners, you might at least try to pretend that you’re capable of learning some here, now that you have the opportunity.” (*Ibid*, p. 45) For her, they are incapable of learning good manners. So, they have to pretend. Pupils and inhabitants of Naxos are continually reminded that they are inferior. “Helga was wondering if it had ever occurred to the lean and desiccated Miss MacGooden that most of her charges had actually come from the backwoods.” (*Ibid*, p.46)According to Helga “she was...perhaps unable to perceive that the inducement to act like a lady, her own acrimonious example, was slight, if not altogether negative.” (*Ibid*, p. 45)

These two passages are very similar because they both show the way Caucasian-Americans lower black people’s abilities and how they teach them that they are inferior and that they should recognize their limits and be happy to serve the superior race, white people. It is at an early age that they indoctrinate them with the idea that the best future they can aspire to is to become servants because they are neither intelligent enough nor do they fit in their standard of beauty. As a result, and as argued by Du Bois, African-Americans internalize these images and accept this secondary position in the nation.

It is this self-pity and internalization that irritates Helga Crane in Naxos. As the preacher said in his speech, the inhabitants of Naxos admit to be

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<sup>196</sup>Du Bois, Willian E.B., *op. cit.*, p. 4.



low-grade people and do their best to win the white's recognition by following the stereotyped roles which are imposed to them. They know their limits and they accept their destiny of being domestics and indorse the same responsibilities they had as slaves- manual jobs. Besides, black people should be satisfied with the life they lead as second-class citizens. Helga leaves for Harlem since she is horrified by the way the population who lives in Naxos gives up on the race problems and how they accept the priest's denigrating speech.

Helga perceives the hypocrisy in the society of Naxos as "These people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction". (*Q*, p.18) Hence, Helga is shocked by the fact that Naxos people deny "all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race" because even if she suffers from her bi-racial origins and from her color, she does not despise them and she shows race pride in many occurrences. So, unlike many of Larsen's characters, Helga can see racism under its true colors and this may be due to her mixed blood. Furthermore, Larsen uses characters, like Helga, who sometimes adopt a white point of view in order to describe the stereotypical manifestations of race and show their absurdity.

To conclude, Du Bois's theory and Nella Larsen's novel have several common points and ideas; Cheryl Wall writes that

As the formulator of the double-consciousness concept, Du Bois was attuned to Larsen's explorations of the possibilities and restrictions in both the black and white worlds. As had Du Bois, she stressed the duality of the Afro-American experience, the psychic pull between the African (the supposedly primitive and spiritually liberating folk experience) and the American (the apparently refined and intellectually liberating urban experience) Unable to mediate between these two inadequate constructs, Helga becomes a psychological exile<sup>197</sup>.

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<sup>197</sup>Wall, Cheryl A., *op. cit.*, p. 117-8.

Therefore, like Du Bois, Larsen attempted to show the difficulties undergone by African-Americans because of the double consciousness. The author had drawn characters who represent this striving and who suffer from society's stereotypes and discrimination.

However, like Du Bois, Larsen also wanted to depict the changes that occurred during the Harlem Renaissance in African-American identity. In this respect, Du Bois writes "The journey...changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect"<sup>198</sup>. So, after accepting the whites' stereotypes about them and feeling vulnerable because of their racial difference, black people, like Helga Crane, came to be aware of their own potential and realized that they could use it to create a new black identity which they would be proud of.

Therefore, vulnerability is a trauma, a wound which may jeopardize one's identity and integrity, and arises from racial or gender differences. Yet, it will be argued in the third chapter of this part that racial or gender differences are not necessarily forms of vulnerability, and may even turn into a kind of strength, as showing one's vulnerability can sometimes become a form of resistance and may help to reach formerly inaccessible goals and privileges.

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<sup>198</sup>Du Bois, Willian E.B., *op. cit.*, p. 4.

## CHAPTER II: GENDERED VULNERABILITY

Gender and sexuality are two key concepts in Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*. In fact, in addition to race, gender and sexuality are two major topics that Larsen broaches in her works. In this chapter, women's roles will be analyzed in Nella Larsen's novels in order to evaluate the importance of gender in her fictions. Besides, sexual stereotypes will be examined to establish their repercussions on the female characters. To finish, women's relations in society as females, wives and mothers, in addition to motherlessness, in the narratives, will be studied. Vulnerability is often associated with women who are sometimes referred to as the weaker sex by patriarchal society. So, this chapter aims at analyzing the characteristics and stereotypes that society usually associates to women in the novels so as to determine if they make them vulnerable. Furthermore, it entails that it is not possible to restrain the complexity of female sexual desire within firm dichotomies of race, gender and class.

### A. Sexuality: Between Repression and Expression

“If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be”<sup>199</sup>. In *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, Elaine Showalter demonstrates the dangers of the gendered and stereotyped roles attributed to women in literary history. She argues that male authors tended to victimize women and condemn them to secondary roles. She explains that after tolerating to be passive readers of such stereotypes, some women writers decided to give their version of womanhood. So, does Larsen belong to this second category or are her female protagonists' roles gendered?

#### 1. Gendered Roles and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's Novels

However, the contradictory definitions that are given of womanhood by society make it hard for the characters to know what is expected from them.

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<sup>199</sup>Showalter, Elaine. *Toward a Feminist Poetics*. The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. Ed. Elaine Showalter. London: Virago, 1986. 125-143, p. 126.

In this respect, Helga Crane is lost because, on the one hand, at times she is incited to hide her femininity. For instance, in Naxos where women are supposed to wear dark and long clothes which hide their attributes and which kill their individuality. On the other hand, and at other times, she is encouraged to shed light on her feminine attributes. Indeed, in Copenhagen, Helga's relatives push her to wear colorful and sexy clothes.

Upon her arrival in Denmark, Helga is immediately incited to wear "something brighter". Her aunt tells her "you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression" (*Q*, p. 98) Here exotic implies that Helga is a work of art. Thus she has to make a visual impression and mark the Danes by her exoticism and differences. Besides, when asked to wear a black dress with cerise and purple trimmings, Helga inquires "Isn't it too gay? Too- too- outré?" but her aunt answers "Oh dear, no. not at all, not for you. Just right" (*Ibid*, p.98) Therefore, the mixed-race woman is right away pressed to emphasize her difference and to exhibit her exotic femininity.

This previous scene is a very important one in the novel and is thus worth analyzing in detail. First of all, the word 'outré' is used to talk about something or someone bizarre, unusual or shocking. It comes from Old French *ultrere*, *utrer*, from *ultra* which means going beyond or carrying to excess. In English, it is associated with the word outrage which stands for everything morally unaccepted. So, Katrina encourages Helga to go beyond her limits by wearing clothes that she finds shocking even though "she [Helga] loved color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and Gypsies know" (*Ibid*, p. 99) Her aunt wants to over-emphasize Helga's exoticism by staging and shedding light on it. It is true that Helga has always been dressed in bright color even in Naxos but her aunt takes it to another level. Indeed, even Helga finds the dress "too gay" and thinks it might be uncomfortable to wear it. Furthermore, Katrina's answer, especially "not for you" directly shows Helga that she is a foreigner and different.

Katrina emphasizes on the fact that Helga will never be considered as one of the Danes and thus can expose her exoticism by wearing colorful

clothes. Helga is only seen as a work of art or an object to be exhibited and as every good work of art she has to be original and display her uniqueness. Nonetheless, when she remembers her aunt telling her that she is a foreigner, Helga thinks “Did it mean that the difference was to be stressed, accented? Helga wasn’t sure that she liked that. Hitherto all her efforts had been toward similarity to those about her.” (*Q*, p. 102) Actually, during her whole life Helga has tried to hide or at least to minimize her differences so as to be accepted in America. Yet, she is now incited to do the contrary and expose those distinctions. Larsen writes

Incited. That was it, the guiding principle of her life in Copenhagen. She was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. After a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired...she submitted to her aunt’s arrangement of her life to one end, the amusing one of being noticed and flattered. (Ibid, p. 103-4)

Therefore, after refusing to be categorized according to her color in America, Helga uses the latter to gain status and be privileged in Denmark. Yet, at first, she does not realize that this does disservice to her because of her vanity and need of attention.

### **Color as a Means against Social Pressure**

An important aspect in Nella Larsen’s works is her use of colors. In fact, colors are central in the novels and everything is described in details and this starts from the opening scene of *Quicksand*. In this regard, Helga’s room is depicted to show the protagonist’s “rare and intensely personal taste” (Ibid, p. 35) The author portrays “a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade...a blue Chinese carpet...and oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet” (Ibid) Then, Helga is described in a “vivid green and gold negligee...her skin like yellow satin...her penetrating, dark eyes.” (Ibid, p. 36) These detailed depictions of colors are used not only to help the reader get a clear image of the characters but also in a symbolical way at times.

In this context, the lamp’s black and red shades in Helga’s room in Naxos can be linked to the black dress with cerise and purple trimmings that

her aunt pushes her to wear upon her arrival in Copenhagen. By using these similar colors Larsen might have wanted to show that what was limited to Helga's room in Naxos could now be exposed in public in Denmark. Indeed, in Naxos, Helga transcended the dress color code which claimed that "bright colours are vulgar" and that "black, grey, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colours for coloured people" (*Q*, p. 38); yet, she still limited herself so as not to shock. This is exemplified by the fact that that she thinks the dress her aunt chooses for her is too gay because even if she used to wear colorful clothes in Naxos like red; in Copenhagen she wears blood-red.

Thus, Larsen uses the same shades of colors to demonstrate the great changes that occurred in Helga's life like in Denmark, she is dressed in "batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet chiffon in screaming colors, blood red, sulphur yellow, sea green...there were turbanlike hats of metallic silks, feathers, and furs, strange jewelry...a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels." (*Ibid*, p. 103) It is worth mentioning that this description is made through Helga's point of view.

Therefore, she finds the eastern perfume nauseous and the high heels dangerous. This latter is very significant as the word dangerous involves a certain fear of highness as the more a person goes high, the more the fall could be perilous if it happens. The author might have used this sentence to announce Helga's fall at the end of the novel. In fact, after living a comfortable life in Harlem, then in Copenhagen where she enjoys a "sensation of lavish contentment and well-being enjoyed only by impecunious sybarites waking in the house of the rich." (*Ibid*, p. 97), Helga finds herself in rural Alabama living a miserable life in a nearly empty house. There, she accepts the "bleak air of poverty which, in some curious way, regards itself as virtuous, for no other reason than that it is poor." (*Ibid*, p. 146)

In Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing*, the characters are pressed to be feminine and play certain roles reserved for females like the role of the dependent wife. Indeed, they agree to play in what Cheryl Wall calls "a

masquerade of femininity”<sup>200</sup>. In the novel, everything is about keeping up the appearances. Females are only judged according to their husband’s position in society and only play the roles of subdued, superficial beings who exist only to satisfy the wishes and needs of their husbands. In that perspective, women are supposed to act like ornaments and always look beautiful and "feminine".

In “*We should all be feminists*”, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains how people learn oppressive understandings on gender and how little girls and boys are taught to behave and the places they should occupy in society. She states:

We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity becomes this hard, small cage and we put boys inside the cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves, because they have to be, in Nigeria's speak, *a hard man*...But by far the worst thing we do to males, by making them feel that they have to be hard, is that we leave them with very fragile egos. The more "hard man" a man feels compelled to be, the weaker his ego is. And then we do a much greater disservice to girls, because we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of men. We teach them to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, "You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful; otherwise, you will threaten the man. If you are the breadwinner in a relationship with a man, you have to pretend that you are not. Especially in public, otherwise you will emasculate him"<sup>201</sup>

This passage from Ngozi Adichie’s speech shows that women, as well as men are put to a considerable social pressure when it comes to gender difference. They are taught how to look like and how to behave according to their sex.

In Nella Larsen’s novels, the female protagonists seem to be subjected to the type of pressure defined by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In *Passing*, these women agree to be seen as others and to behave as their husband’s property. Irene, who is married to a black physician, defines herself, as well as her female friends, according to their husbands and status in society. Her first goal is to reflect the image of a perfect family and show people that she has an

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<sup>200</sup>Wall, Cheryl A. *op. cit.*, p. 126

<sup>201</sup>Adichie Ngozi, Chimamanda. *We Should All Be Feminists*. New York: Vintage Books, 2014, p. 5.

ideal life in order to gain position and prestige in the black community. Yet, the reality is completely different and her relationship with her husband gets worse every day. Whenever Irene meets a friend, she judges her according to her appearance. In this regard, when she meets Gertrude, a friend of hers who is married to a white man, she thinks that she “looked as if her [Gertrude’s] husband might be a butcher” (*P*, p. 25)

In *The Danger of a Single Story*, Chimamanda Adichie describes the danger of having a single view or vision of a story, a place or a person. Through some personal memories, she demonstrates how human beings tend to generalize and accept some pre-conceived ideas about people or some areas of the world. She argues that stereotypes are constructed about people and places and that they tend to be accepted as realities. In *Passing*, as well as *Quicksand*, people have a single story of females. In other words, women are associated with some stereotypes like fragility and dependence and find themselves playing roles which do not suit them.

Females’ single story is that they are beautiful, gendered and submitted beings who only live to satisfy men either by having a beautiful appearance or serving them. They are seen as the properties of their husbands and are judged according to these latter’s status and jobs as it is the case for all the women in *Passing*. Society has also a single story about black females’ sexuality as they are either depicted either as jezebels or as asexual beings, which also occurs in Larsen's novels, more especially *Quicksand*. These single stories, like other single stories, are very dangerous because they confine women to certain positions that are usually secondary and these restrictions end up suffocating them and limiting them.

### **Combining Racial and Sexual Differences**

Another important aspect related to gender is sexuality. In *Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s psychoanalytic challenge*, Judith Butler argues that sexual difference tends to be considered as prior to racial and class differences and that these differences should rather be considered in relation to one another and seen as co-constitutive in the creation of an identity. She criticizes Luce



Irigaray's claim that "the question of sexual difference is the question for our time"<sup>202</sup> as it implies not only that sexual difference has to be considered as more important than other forms of otherness, but also that sexual difference might be the creator of other forms of difference. Moreover, Butler believes that sexual, racial, and class dissimilarities should work together to create one identity.

This idea can be linked to Du Bois's theory *double consciousness* which suggests that African-Americans have a sense of two-ness and that they have two contradicting identities which they try to transform into a truer self. *Double consciousness* does not limit itself to African-Americans; it can be related to groups that are rejected because of a difference in religion, class, gender or because of being transnational. Therefore, Butler's and Du Bois's theories share the same idea, which Larsen develops in her novels and suggests that the differences that make up a person should be combined together in order to create a new identity.

*Passing*, as well as *Quicksand*, has been read differently by the critics. Some of them have examined it in its historical context whereas others have analyzed it in its social context as it is seen in the first part of this work. Some of them have seen it as considering the topic of race while others have focused on the way sexuality is depicted in it. Butler writes "I would agree with both McDowell and Carby not only that it is unnecessary to choose whether this novella is 'about' race or 'about' sexuality and sexual conflict, but that the two domains are inextricably linked, such that the text offers a way to read the radicalization of sexual conflict"<sup>203</sup>. Butler continues to defend the argument that race and sexuality form a whole that cannot be dissociated and that to understand the novel, one has to have them both in mind and this is one of the points defended in the present thesis. In fact, sexual difference and sexuality are as important as race in Nella Larsen's works.

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<sup>202</sup>Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993, p. 282.

<sup>203</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

As Larsen implies in her works, all the differences must be put together so that to build a firm identity. Sexual difference is closely linked to racial one and they cannot be dissociated. In this respect Butler argues

If as Norma Alarcon has insisted, women of color are "multiply interpellated," called by many names, constituted in and by that multiple calling, then this implies that the symbolic domain, the domain of socially instituted norms, is composed of racializing norms, and that they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another. Hence, it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial difference or, for that matter, to make them into fully separable axes of social regulation and power<sup>204</sup>.

Consequently, all the differences of Larsen's characters are interrelated. None of them is more fundamental than the other and they all have to be overcome in order for the characters to affirm their identity.

Sexuality is a very sensitive theme in Nella Larsen's novels. Dorothy Stringer argues that "sexual exploitation was an abiding concern for Larsen"<sup>205</sup>. The writer tried to give a real insight of the pressure and problems faced by African-American women because of their sexuality and the stereotypes society spread about it. Indeed, white people spread two contradictory preconceived ideas about black females. The former focused on the exoticism and sexiness of African-American women; while the latter presented them as innocent and devoted women.

Therefore, black authors had the difficult task of rebuilding the representation of black females. In this respect, Deborah McDowell writes

Conscious of the fact that a reconstruction of black female sexuality was required, these writers assumed a revisionist mission in their work, one based on a belief that they could substitute reality for stereotype. That substitution would assist a larger and related mission: to elevate the image of the entire black race. In so doing, they naively believed, they could eliminate caste injustices<sup>206</sup>.

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<sup>204</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

<sup>205</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 91

<sup>206</sup>McDowell, Deborah E. *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995, p. 38.

Nevertheless, their mission was easier said than done because black women had internalized the stereotyped images society spread of them. In Helga Crane's case, it is the repression of her sexuality that leads her to an unhappy marriage because she is so obsessed with keeping her respectability that she gives herself away without thinking of the consequences. It is worth mentioning that Helga's obstinacy to keep her respectability as a lady may come from her illegitimate origins as she was born to a mixed, unmarried couple. Furthermore, women in her case are usually seen as sexual objects. So, she finds in marriage a simple way to keep her decency while being free to express her sexuality. Therefore, black women considered themselves ugly and were ashamed of a sexuality they tried to repress in order to belie the Jezebel label but this was very harmful for them.

Before the Harlem Renaissance, even black writers used the white standard of beauty in their novels which means that they associated whiteness to beauty while blackness was seen as ugly. This era is what Elaine Showalter has identified as The Feminine phase<sup>207</sup>. But, the Harlem Renaissance was the time of reform and change as some black people started to argue for a new standard of beauty. This new standard was destined to be racially inclusive, permitting blacks to perceive blackness as attractive, beautiful and good-looking. Therefore, black writers, like Nella Larsen, tried to change the physical descriptions of their black characters.

For instance, Nella Larsen's female characters are always depicted in details and valued physically. Helga Crane, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry are said to be beautiful and stylish women who take care of their appearances. For example, Anne Grey, in *Quicksand*, is described as "brownly beautiful...with shining black hair and eyes" (*Q*, p. 47) Hence, putting the adjective beautiful after the word 'brownly' shows the shift that has happened in standards of beauty for African-Americans. Indeed, after being seen as repulsive and ugly, color –in this case brown- has started to be regarded as beautiful. So, white is no longer the only criterion to be considered in the standard of beauty. This work that black writers did on the image reflected by

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<sup>207</sup>Showalter, Elaine, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

colored people had the purpose of changing not only the way African-Americans were perceived by society but also the self-image they had of themselves after years of denigration and assault.

Nevertheless, even if Nella Larsen participated in restoring the image of black women and subverting the white standard of beauty, she does not depict asexual women who only live for the race and for their children. In fact, many black writers described respectable African-American females who were happy with their domestic roles and who were totally filled by their roles as mothers like Eliza Harris in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Instead, Larsen exposes the hardships undergone by black women because of their gender as well as their sexuality and tried "to hold the two virtually contradictory impulses in the same novel"<sup>208</sup>. She describes stormy relationships between her female and her male characters and the dangers of repressing one's desires and sexuality.

### **Sexuality: Helga Crane's Ambivalence**

From the opening of the novel in Naxos, Helga Crane is torn between repressing and expressing her sexuality. Cheryl Wall writes "Here is an incipient realization that sexuality is political; it is "power". But Helga mistakenly assumes it is hers to wield. Actually, she is trapped by the need to repress her sexuality, to assume the ornamental, acquiescent role of "lady", which not only Vayle but the entire Naxos community expects"<sup>209</sup>. Helga thinks that she can use her attractiveness and beauty as a power. Yet, Vayle has contradictory feelings towards her. On the one hand, he is disturbed by the fact that Helga is rejected by his family and society. In fact, "He was liked and approved of in Naxos and loathed the idea that the girl he was to marry couldn't manage to win liking and approval also. Instinctively Helga had known that secretly he had placed the blame upon her." (*Q*, p. 42)

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<sup>208</sup>McDowell, Deborah E., "'That nameless... shameful impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*," in *Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory*. Ed. Joe Weixlmann and Houston A. Baker. Greenwood, FL: Penkevill, 1988, p. 146.

<sup>209</sup>Wall, Cheryl A, *op. cit.*, p 126.

Still, on the other hand, he is attracted to her. Helga “knew...that a something held him, a something against which he was powerless. The idea that she was in but one nameless way necessary to him filled her with a sensation amounting almost to shame. And yet his mute helplessness against that ancient appeal by which she held him pleased her and fed her vanity- gave her a feeling of power.” (*Q*, p. 42-3) However, she does not realize that she is the one made vulnerable because of her ‘beauty’ and the gendered expectations that society has of women and more precisely bi-racial ones. Indeed, the stereotypes conveyed about mixed-race women and their beauty limit Helga to an ornamental role and render her more vulnerable and powerless as it is the case in Naxos. As a matter of fact, to prevent Helga from leaving her colleague he says to her “I wish you’d stay...We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives” (*Ibid*, p. 18) Thus, Helga is only considered according to her physical appearance and even her female colleagues do not get to know her further and consider her as a mere beautification.

Once in Harlem, Helga can wear brighter clothes which “had been one of her difficulties in Naxos, she had tried not to offend. But with small success.” (*Ibid*, p. 51) Indeed, she is no longer incited to wear dark clothes like in Naxos. Nonetheless, she still senses the pressure of society and of other black women to contain her femininity. In this regard, Larsen introduces the character of Audrey Denney, an African-American woman who demolishes all the racial barriers by giving “parties for white and colored people together” (*Ibid*, p. 62) Helga is fascinated by Audrey whom she admires from afar without ever talking to her. She is subjugated by the “beautiful, calm, cool girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people” (*Ibid*, p. 63) For Davis, Audrey represents “an element in Helga’s own self that she has not allowed herself to become”<sup>210</sup>. Helga feels happy because through her encounter with Audrey Denney she feels “gradations within this oppressed race of hers” (*Ibid*, p. 61)

Yet, upon leaving the club, Helga senses “a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but she had enjoyed it” (*Ibid*) This passage

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<sup>210</sup>Larsen, Nella. (1928) Edition and introduction by Thadious Davis. *Quicksand*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2002, p. xxxi

from the novel shows how much internalized the stereotypes of society are. In fact, Helga feels as if she was in the jungle just because Audrey wears sexy clothes and because her party is bi-racial. Seeing the racial frontiers crossed and almost destroyed makes her feel uncomfortable and ashamed since she enjoyed the party. By these feelings, Helga shows that the stereotyped image of Africa as a jungle and Africans as animals or jungle creatures has been internalized by African-Americans who fear to become one of these creatures.

Interestingly, George Hutchinson remarks that “Audrey and Helga are similarly dressed- Audrey in an extremely ‘décolleté’ apricot dress and Helga in a ‘cobwebby black net touched with orange’ (*Q*, p. 60) that Anne thinks ‘too décolleté’<sup>211</sup>. Therefore, Helga is perceived just like Audrey by conservative black women, as in *Naxos*, but on a lower scale. They think she is too provocative and exotic. For Anne, Audrey is “positively obscene” for organizing mixed parties and acting without inhibition. It is important to mention that obscene means offensive or in this case bad woman. Audrey is seen as nasty and indecent because she does not repress her sexuality.

Once again Anne Grey’s hypocrisy is proved when talking about Audrey Denney. Indeed, she believes that the latter embodies everything that goes wrong in the black community and states “you can’t get round the fact that her behavior is outrageous, treacherous, in fact. That’s what’s the matter with the Negro race. They won’t stick together...I’ve nothing but contempt for her, as has every other self-respecting Negro” (*Ibid*, p. 92) Not only does Anne want to impose her point of view by implying that those who do not share her vision are not self-respecting; but she is also hypocritical because she admits herself that some of her friends go to such parties as Audrey’s, where black and white people meet. To this, Helga responds “Well, then, they [the mixed parties] can’t be so bad. I mean, if your friends sometimes go, can they?” (*Ibid*) Furthermore, when Helga inquires about what is so terrible about those parties, Anne does not have any strong arguments. She only says that they drink too much but this does not really differ from Harlem parties according to Helga. Thus, Anne seems to be an unfair and two-faced person as she hates Audrey

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<sup>211</sup>Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

for ungrounded reasons and accepts from her friends the same behavior as this latter.

On such a black and white background, colors stand out all the more in Nella Larsen's novels. In this context, Helga and Audrey wear similar colors since apricot is a soft version of orange. These colors are also in the same hue as the black and red lampshade in *Naxos* and the dress with cerise and purple trimmings in *Copenhagen*. Helga's dress is very symbolical as its colors remind the reader of the traditional tints of Halloween which is usually associated with witches in white standards. Besides, the fact that it is cobwebby can be associated with the figure of the spider which is seen as a trickster in African and African-American oral tradition. In fact, slaves brought with them many tales and fables from Africa and adapted them to their new land. In this context, the spider is seen as a trickster in Anansi's story which is known in the United States as Aunt Nancy. It is considered a swindler because despite its small size it utilizes its cleverness to defeat bigger creatures.

Moreover, the precise hue of the protagonists' skin color is always described by the author. Helga's skin is compared to yellow satin while Audrey's is described as alabaster which is a sort of white. In *Passing*, Clare's skin is portrayed as ivory, Irene's as olive while Brian's is depicted as "an exquisitely fine texture and deep copper colour" (*P*, p. 92) These shades of skin are very significant and this will be demonstrated in the third part of this work. Indeed, Irene can be considered as the dark or somber double of Clare and this is corroborated by their skin colors.

Audrey Denney's party is the last Helga attends in Harlem before her departure for Denmark. There, she is dressed just like Audrey and is expected to act accordingly. She wears dazzling clothes and accessories and exhibits her feminine side. It is only when seeing the portrait the painter, Alex Olsen, does of her that Helga realizes that her sexuality is being used against her and that she has been transformed into a sexual object. Olsen judges Helga according to that image and wants to have an affair with her. When Helga ignores his indecent proposition, he proposes to her. However, she declines this offer as upon seeing the portrait she understands that she will never be regarded as

equal to the white people she socializes with and that she will always be othered because of her differences.

Indeed, Helga is apparently well treated by the Danes, yet, she will never be considered as one of them. In this regard Larsen writes “The women too were kind, feeling no need for jealousy. To them this girl, this Helga Crane, this mysterious niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, *but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count*” (*Q*, p. 100) For the Danes, Helga is just “A decoration. A curio. A peacock” (*Ibid*, p. 103) like a fascinating work of art. Larsen even compares the way people look at Helga in Denmark to the way they would regard “some new species of pet dog being proudly exhibited” (*Ibid*) When she went shopping with her relatives, “Helga felt like a veritable savage as they made their leisurely way across the pavement...this feeling was intensified by the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature.” (*Ibid*, p. 99)

Furthermore, Helga is not seen as a complete human being who can express herself without the help of her relatives. Larsen states “was she to be treated like a secluded young miss...not to be consulted even on matters affecting her personally” (*Ibid*, p. 102) In this context, at the first tea party Helga attends people take for granted that she does not speak their language and thus “she had only to bow and look pleasant. Herr and Fru Dahl [who] did the talking, answered the questions” (*Ibid*, p. 100) Moreover, unlike her aunt and her husband, who are pleased by Olsen's presence during their shopping, “Helga's own feelings were mixed...It had all been decided and arranged without her, and, also, she was a little afraid of Olsen.” (*Ibid*, p. 102) Helga's opinion is not asked “all had been selected or suggested by Olsen and paid for by Aunt Katrina. Helga had only to wear them.” (*Ibid*, p. 103)

Helga Crane can be regarded as a feminist because she does not agree to be kept in a cage, gilded as it may be. In this context, when she is treated like an ornament in Denmark, she reacts by confronting Olsen and leaving that country. There, people have a single story of black females. They think that she is exotic and savage and they consider her as an object rather than a human



being. Indeed in Copenhagen, “Her dark, alien appearance was to most people an astonishment. Some started surreptitiously, some openly, and some stopped dead in front of her in order more fully to profit by their stares. ‘*Den Sorte*’ dropped freely, audibly, from many lips.” (*Q*, p. 103)

After leaving Denmark for Harlem, Helga is a new person. She is very well-liked because she accepts her femininity and exposes her attributes. She is no longer afraid of being judged. Yet, her experience with Olsen and the Danes still haunt her and she is so “Determined not to sell herself, [that] she gives herself away. Unwilling to repress her sexuality any longer, she misconstrues Robert Anderson’s intentions when he drunkenly kisses her. She is ready to have an affair, but Anderson....declines”<sup>212</sup>. In fact, after Dr. Anderson’s kiss, which is the only demonstration of love in the novel, Helga is exhausted. “She was used to kisses. But none had been like that of last night. She lived over those brief seconds, thinking not so much of the man whose arms had held her as of the ecstasy which had flooded her. Even recollection brought a little onrush of emotion that made her sway a little” (*Ibid*, p. 133) After days and weeks passed, she met Dr. Anderson but their kiss was silenced. Helga is troubled by a strong desire and “as the weeks multiplied, she became aware that she must get herself out of the mental quagmire into which that kiss had thrown her” (*Ibid*, p. 134)

Dr. Anderson’s kiss even changes Helga’s whole life because even if she was determined to return to Denmark she decides not to go back “without exploring to the end that unfamiliar path into which she had strayed.” (*Ibid*, p. 134) Therefore, when Dr. Anderson gives an appointment to Helga for the next day, she is persuaded that he will reveal his feelings. She is elated. “She hadn’t been so happy, so exalted, in years, if ever. All night, all day, she had mentally prepared herself for the coming consummation; physically too, spending hours before the mirror” (*Ibid*, p. 135) However, all her dreams and expectations fade when Dr. Anderson tells her “I was afraid...that you might have misunderstood; might have been unhappy about it...It was, it must have been, Tavenor’s rotten cocktails” (*Ibid*, p. 136) Helga immediately loses her sense of

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<sup>212</sup>Wall, Cheryl A. *op. cit.*, p 102.

elation; she slaps him and runs away. She tries to get drunk to forget but she only gets sick. Helga realizes how much she loves him and that she wanted “something special. And now she had forfeited it forever. Forever. Helga had an instantaneous shocking perception of what forever meant. And then, like a flash, it was gone, leaving an endless stretch of dreary years before her appalled vision” (*Q*, p. 137)

Thus, Helga is desperate because she understands that she did not give her only love a chance when she should have. In fact, when they meet again in Harlem she senses strange feelings and knows that there is something particular about him. Larsen writes “The prominent gray eyes were fixed upon her, studying her, appraising her. Many times since turning her back on Naxos she had in fancy rehearsed this scene, this re-encounter. Now she found that rehearsal helped not at all. It was absolutely different from anything that she had imagined” (*Ibid*, p. 81-2) This implies that Helga kept thinking of Dr. Anderson and that she imagined and even hoped to see him again. She is very disturbed by his gray eyes which trouble her throughout the novel.

She is aware that behind the ordinary conversation that they have lies “a strange ill-defined emotion, a vague yearning rising within her” (*Ibid*, p. 82) They share a taxi and Helga is disappointed when they arrive since she wants to spend more time with him. Nevertheless, when he calls her some days later, “she put him off on Anne and went out, pleading an engagement, ...Until the very moment of his entrance she had had no intention of running away, but something, some imp of contumacy, drove her from his presence, though she longed to stay”(*Ibid*, p. 82) Once again, Helga’s carapace prevents her from letting go and being happy. In fact, she is so afraid of being hurt that she prefers to flee than to face her sentiments.

Helga wants to stay but her fear drives her away from Dr. Anderson. The author writes “again abruptly had come the uncontrollable wish to wound. Later, with a sense of helplessness and inevitability, she realized that the weapon which she had chosen had been a boomerang, for she herself had felt the keen disappointment of the denial. Better to have stayed and hurled polite sarcasm at him” (*Ibid*, p. 83) Thus, this carapace of Helga’s is supposed to

protect her; yet, it also prevents her from being contented. She tries her best to avoid all the feelings that can render her vulnerable but in reality this causes her to be unhappy. The heroine goes to a tea-party in order to forget Dr. Anderson but she is haunted by the vision of “level gray eyes set down in a brown face which stared out at her, coolly, quizzically, disturbingly.” (*Q*, p. 83) So, Helga missed her chance to construct a love story with the only man she had ever loved. Moreover, she even pushes him into Anne Grey’s arms by putting him off to her.

After Dr. Anderson’s rebuff because he feels guilty towards his wife, Helga feels that

She had ruined everything. Ruined it because she had been so silly as to close her eyes to all indications that pointed to the fact that no matter what the intensity of his feelings or desires might be, he was not the sort of man who would for any reason give up one particle of his own good opinion of himself. Not even for her. Not even though he knew that she had wanted so terribly something special from him (*Ibid*, p. 136)

Indeed, she knows Dr. Anderson well enough to realize that he has principles and that these latter are the most important things for him. Even though he is attracted to Helga and might even be in love with her, he cannot disregard his sense of loyalty and faithfulness.

Therefore, the only time Helga loves a man and tries to get free of the sexual pressure she feels, she is rejected because Anne Grey thinks Dr. Anderson’s “vagrant primitive groping toward” (*Ibid*, p. 96) Helga is “something shocking and frightening to the cold asceticism of his reason” (*Ibid*) So, for him, the feelings he has for Helga are primitive and irrational, furthering the exclusionary sentiment Helga senses. Indeed, through this passage, loving Helga is implicitly regarded as something unreasonable and abnormal, as if she was unworthy and undeserving of that love. For him, the kiss is just a “nameless and...shameful impulse, that sheer delight, which ran through his nerves at mere proximity to Helga” (*Ibid*, p. 69) It is an error for which he “can’t forgive ... could kick” (*Ibid*, p. 136) himself. Subsequently, Helga’s feeling of alienation and rebuff prevalent throughout the novel is deepened. Thus, “Helga began to know that the blow to her self-esteem, the

certainty of having proved herself a silly fool, was perhaps the severest hurt which she had suffered” (*Q*, p. 138)

Helga is devastated by what happens with Dr. Anderson. She loses herself-esteem and even wishes to die. She feels a sense of mortification, of self-loathing and knows that she has deceived herself. “It was her self-assurance that had gone down in the crash. After all, what Dr. Anderson thought didn’t matter. She could escape from the discomfort of his knowing gray eyes. But she couldn’t escape from sure knowledge that she had made a fool of herself” (*Ibid*, p. 138) Thus, the wound is more internal as Helga’s pride and ego are shaken and this exposes her to vulnerability. She feels belittled and undesirable. She feels physically and mentally wrecked. To stop thinking and recalling her humiliation, Helga leaves in a rainy night and wanders in the streets. She ends up wet and decides to enter into a church to take refuge from the floods of rain.

Immediately, Helga is in a hysteric state. She sits on the floor and keeps laughing about the song’s lyrics about showers of blessings. She is helped into a seat where she continues to listen to the songs that reflect her condition as they talk about shame and sorrow that the lord or savior will make disappear. Women started to weep audibly and after a short moment Helga was weeping as well. Then, A woman in the church shrieked at Helga: “Come to Jesus, you pore los’ *sinner*...A scarlet ‘oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los’ *Jezebel*.” (*Ibid*, p. 140-1, italics mine) The woman’s words are very significant because it is what Helga feels about herself at that moment.

Helga is compared to the one figure she had tried so hard to avoid during her whole life and worst of all is the fact that she agrees with it. Indeed, throughout the novel Helga represses her sexuality so as to belie the association of black or mixed-race women to Jezebel. However, her intention to give herself to Robert Anderson and especially his denial makes her feel just like that sexual figure. Furthermore, the woman’s words confirm the way society sees females like Helga. For her, the fact that the heroine is in a bad shape and cries to the moaning verses automatically makes her a sinner and a Jezebel who needs to be saved by Jesus.

Helga is so confused because of what happened the night before with Robert, the fact that she did not eat anything since that event, the shouts and cries in the church that she enters into a trance. As she listens to the songs and weeps “a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness, she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about. Frightened at the strength of the obsession, she gathered herself for one last effort to escape, but vainly” (*Q*, p. 142) It is worth mentioning that this passage in the church has a lot of sexual connotations starting from the used vocabulary like ‘orgy’ or ‘penetrated’. Indeed, the word orgy usually refers to wild or drunken parties in which sexual intercourses with many participants take place. Thus, the rituals in the church are compared to an orgy with “its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions” (*Ibid*, p. 141)

## B. Marital Sexuality in Nella Larsen's Novels

### 1. From Desire to Repugnance

After her trance, Helga feels reborn and calm. She is escorted to her hotel by the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green with whom she spends the night. Dr. Anderson's refusal is like a sharp knife as "for days, for weeks, voluptuous visions had haunted her. Desire had burned in her flesh with uncontrollable violence. The wish to give herself had been so intense that Dr. Anderson's surprising, trivial apology loomed as a direct refusal of the offering" (*Q*, p. 137) Thus, she spends the night with the first person she encounters not only to get rid of her sexual tensions but also to prove to herself that she is desirable. In fact, Dr. Anderson's denial shakes Helga's self-confidence and she tries to confirm that she is attractive and that the problem does not lie in her.

When she wakes up Helga is happy; she thinks of Dr. Anderson and has a feeling of "elation, revenge. She had put herself beyond the need of help from him. She had made it impossible for herself ever again to appeal him. Instinctively she had the knowledge that he would be shocked. Grieved. Horribly hurt even. Well, let him!" (*Ibid*, p. 145) She decides to marry but for a short time, she is afraid her marriage plan fails if the reverend does not accept it. Yet, she thinks "How could he [the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green], a naïve creature like that, hold out against her? If she pretended to distress? To fear? To remorse? He couldn't. It would be useless for him even to try." (*Ibid*) Once again, Helga makes the error of thinking that she is the one who holds power while in reality she is the one made vulnerable by her decisions.

Therefore, Helga "loses her soul"<sup>213</sup> in the church. In a moment of weakness and of perdition, she marries a man she does not love or even know and is doomed to an unhappy life. She returns to a place she thought she would never go back to the South. In fact, when Margaret, a colleague, warns Helga that "Naxos has enormous influence in the South" and that she will be blacklisted and never work again, she responds "Heaven forbid...that I should ever again want to work in the South! I hate it" (*Ibid*, p. 48) Yet, by marrying her husband

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<sup>213</sup>Wall, Cheryl A., *op. cit.*, p. 113

Helga moves back to the South; to Alabama where people are described as “scattered and primitive folk.” (*Q*, p. 146) Larsen writes “As always, at first the novelty of the thing, the change, fascinated her. There was a recurrence of feeling that now, at last, she had found a place for herself...And she had her religion...She felt compensated for all the previous humiliations and disappointments and was glad” (*Ibid*)

Nevertheless, Helga's eagerness and efforts to be an active part of the community are met with little enthusiasm. The heroine is determined to do good things for the community like creating a sewing circle, teaching children “she was met, always, with smiling agreement and good-natured promises... [but] she was unaware that...among themselves they [community women] talked with amusement, or with anger, of ‘dat uppity, meddlin’ No’the’nah ” (*Ibid*, p. 147) Thus, Helga is rejected by the black females of the community who think that Clementine Richards, who is described as a black beauty or an Amazon, is a much better match for the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green.

Helga spends her days taking care of the house, chicken and pigs. Yet, it did not bother her as “everything contributed to her gladness in living. And so for a time she loved everything and everyone. Or thought she did” (*Ibid*, p. 148) Her life there is so far from the way she used to live and it is even hard to imagine the refined, sophisticated young woman in that situation. She, who likes to live in a well-decorated and stylish house, is not bothered by the repulsiveness of her home there. The latter is depicted as a four room ugly brown house with white plaster walls and an uncovered painted floor. Its furniture is in shiny oak and it contains religious picture (*Ibid*) If this setting is compared with Helga's previous residences, the difference is clear. Indeed, in Naxos, in Anne's house, and in Copenhagen, she has colored and refined rooms decorated with care and good taste.

Surprisingly, Helga is happy with that simple life; she who “someday intended to marry one of those alluring men who danced attendance on her [in Harlem]. Already financially successful, any one of them could give to her the things which she had now come to desire, a home like Anne's, cars of expensive makes...clothes and furs from Bendel's..., servants, and leisure” (*Q*,

p. 77) Helga's house may be seen as a metaphor for her life as before arriving to Alabama, she had many choices and chances to get a good and comfortable life. However, by marrying the reverend, her chances are lost and her existence seems to take a dark and hopeless direction.

At first, Helga does not even see her husband's flaws or decides to ignore them "What did it matter that he consumed his food...audibly? What did it matter that, though he did not work with his hands, or even in the garden, his fingernails were always rimmed with black? What did it matter that he failed to wash his fat body, or to shift his clothing, as often as Helga did?" (*Q*, p. 149) She, who has always expected a chic and wealthy husband who would be able to afford everything she wants, is stuck with a sort of primitive and disgusting man and this does not seem to bother her. She can even overcome his odors of sweat and stale garments. Worst of all is that "she was...proud and gratified that he belonged to her" (*Ibid*, p. 149)

Furthermore, this man has a self-satisfaction that "poured from him like gas from a leaking pipe" (*Ibid*) Indeed, this simile represents a phallic image and demonstrates that the feature that usually distresses Helga is no longer a problem for her. The reverend's sense of superiority is furthered by his portion as "open adoration was the prerogative, the almost religious duty, of the female of the portion...if this unhidden and exaggerated approval contributed to his already oversized pomposity, so much the better. It was what they expected, liked, wanted" (*Ibid*, p. 147) For, the more superior he feels, the more flattered they are by the smallest of his attentions.

Helga's personality seems to have completely changed. She likes things that she used to abhor. "The dark undecorated women unceasingly concerned with the actual business of life, births...marriages,...were to Helga miraculously beautiful. The smallest, dirtiest, brown child, barefooted in the fields...was an emblem of the wonder of life" (*Ibid*, p. 149) She is fascinated by everything that surrounds her as usual when she first arrives in a place but this time it is as if she changes her principles and values and this may be due to the fact that she thinks she has found faith in God.



Nevertheless, with time her true self resurfaces and she can see the real face of her new life and the people surrounding her. Her relation with her husband is passionless and she is disgusted by that “fattish yellow man” (*Q*, p. 130) With time, Helga even starts to hate him and is horrified by his touch. Larsen writes

It was...disagreeable to feel his moist hand on hers. A cold shiver brushed over her. She closed her eyes. Obstinate and with all her small strength she drew her hand away from him. Hid it far under the bed-covering, and turned her face away to hide a grimace of unconquerable aversion. She cared nothing at that moment, for his hurt surprise. She knew only that, in the hideous agony that for interminable hours...she had borne, the luster of religion had vanished; that revulsion had come upon her; that she hated this man. Between them the vastness of the universe had come. (*Ibid*, p. 156)

Therefore, Helga's sexual repression leads her to a repulsive sexual life and an in-existent social life. She is trapped in that small town and becomes physically vulnerable because of multiple pregnancies and childbirths in a short period.

With time, Helga even loses her faith in God, a faith that might have been an illusion. Indeed, “The cruel, unrelieved suffering had beaten down her protective wall of artificial faith in the infinite wisdom, in the mercy of God. For had she not called in her agony for Him? And He had not heard...He wasn't there. Didn't exist” (*Ibid*, p. 157) For Helga, religion is just a delusion created by white people to submit the black race. It is nothing more than a strategy which aims at convincing African-Americans that the more they suffer on earth, the better their life will be after their death.

This, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in 'kingdom come'...How the white man's God must laugh at the great joke he had played on them! Bound them to slavery, then to poverty and insult, and made them bear it unresistingly, uncomplainingly almost, by sweet promises of mansions in the sky by and by. (*Ibid*, p. 160)

Larsen's repetition of the phrase "white man's God" twice in this passage should be underlined, as it might aim at strongly suggesting Helga's discovery that there are discriminations even in religion. Furthermore, it demonstrates

that such a God has been imposed on black people by the whites, depriving them of any freedom to choose their own beliefs and religion. Of course, by imposing their faith, white people enlarge their control on colored ones and doom them to pretending that they are satisfied by the miserable lives designed for them.

Larsen develops further on this white, andro-centric vision when Helga asks the nurse who takes care of her after childbirth to read her Anatole France's *The procurator of Judaea*. This book was translated into English when the author was completing her novel *Quicksand*. Hutchinson states that the book "concerns, in part, the way Roman society depended on the control of sexuality to reproduce racialized subjects for the imperial state"<sup>214</sup>. The story is in form of a conversation between two men. One of them, Pilate, is racist and intolerant of mixing with the Jews. He is afraid of bi-racial relations and miscegenation because for him it goes counter nature. While, the second man - a philosopher- is more broadminded and speaks openly about his admiration for a Jewish girl named Lamia. Pilate tells his friend that

Marriage from the patrician point of view is sacred tie...As to foreign women and slaves, such relations as one may inter into with them would be of little account were it not that they habituate the body to a humiliating effeminacy...what, above all, I blame in you is that you have not married in compliance with the law and given children to the Republic, as every good citizen is bound to do<sup>215</sup>.

This passage that derives from Larsen's quotation of the book is very similar to the way racial differences as well as sexuality and motherhood could be seen in the United States and more precisely the stereotypes about African-Americans, major topics that are discussed in *Quicksand*.

In Larsen's novels, the relationships between men and women are very platonic; they lack love and desire. In Naxos, Helga is engaged to James Vayle. Nevertheless, their relation is romance free and they seem to be together only by habit. Larsen writes "she [Helga] had been engaged to him since her

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<sup>214</sup>Hutchinson, George, *op, cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>215</sup>Anatole, France. *The Procurator of Judaea. Golden Tales of Anatole France*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1926, p. 23-4.

first semester there [Naxos], when both had been new workers and both were lonely. Together they had discussed their work and problems in adjustment and had drifted into a closer relationship.” (*Q*, p. 42) Each of them had some privileges in this rapport which had nothing to do with a love story. In fact, James Vayle is attracted to Helga because he likes her unconventional style and is happy to diverge a little from the straight line drawn by his family.

Helga, on the other side, wants a social status and upon leaving Naxos she knows that “to relinquish James Vayle would most certainly be social suicide, for the Vayles were people of consequence. The fact that they were ‘first family’ had been one of James’s attractions for the obscure Helga. She had wanted social background, but- she had not imagined that it could be so stuffy.” (*Ibid*, p. 43) Therefore she realizes that social status is not a priority to her and that her happiness is not possible there. She tries to establish an identity and to find her belonging based on other criteria than being from a first family, which is a white concept that black people appropriated.

Before leaving Naxos, Helga has to inform James Vayle. But, “she hated to admit that money was the most serious difficulty.” (*Ibid*, p. 40) Thus, money is more important than her engagement. Besides, “she felt no regret that tomorrow would mark the end of any claim she had upon him” (*Ibid*, p. 43) As a result, it is very calmly that she gave him a “gentle but staccato talk” about her imminent departure. He responded with impatience and felt cheated. When recalling that moment, Helga thought

She would never be married to James Vayle now. It flashed upon her that, even had she remained in Naxos, she would never have been married to him. She couldn’t have married him. Gradually, too, there stole into her thoughts of him a curious sensation of repugnance...certainly she had never loved him overwhelmingly...but she had liked him, and she had expected to love him, after their marriage. People generally did then, she imagined. (*Ibid*, p. 58)

This last thought that love as well as desire come after marriage is a result of the indoctrination society spreads about the feelings that a ‘lady’ should experience before and after marriage. In this regard, there should be no passion and surely no sexuality before marriage like it is requested in the myth of the ‘Southern Belle’ which is another white stereotype. It is worth mentioning that

the disgust Helga feels for James Vayle foreshadows her repugnance for her husband the Reverend Pleasant Green.

This experience with James Vayle pushes Helga to repress even more her sexuality and develops the feeling of repugnance she has towards men. She realizes that “she had not loved James, but she had wanted to. Acute nausea rose in her as she recalled the slight quivering of his lips when her hands had unexpectedly touched his. The throbbing vein in his forehead...when... she had allowed him frequent kisses...she must have been mad, she thought” (*Q*, p. 58) The mere thought of a physical contact with her ex-fiancé causes Helga’s sickness and revulsion.

In Larsen’s novels, marital sexuality is depicted as a passionless obligation that women have to go through which reminds of the Victorian ideology. Indeed, all the married couples in Nella Larsen’s novels either have passionless relations or do not have any sexual relations with their partners. Helga Crane and Anne Grey do it as an obligation or a necessity in their marriages. Besides, sexuality is depicted as something disgusting for respectable ladies. Larsen states “There were, so she had been given to understand, things in matrimonial state that were of necessity entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to.” (*Ibid*, p. 46)

## 2. **Platonic Relationships and Absence of Desire in *Passing***

Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, the heroines of *Passing*, do not have sex with their husbands anymore. In the novels, women tend to develop repugnance for their sexuality and for their husbands. Sexuality is only used as a tool for reproduction and as the couples already have children in *Passing*, they do not seem to be attracted or to desire their partners. In this context, Irene and her husband Brian do not even share their bed; they even sleep in separate rooms. Moreover, Brian thinks that sex is no more than a disappointing joke. In fact, when Irene tells her husband that she is worried because their son, Junior, “picked up some queer ideas [and dreadful jokes] about things...from the older boys” (*P*, p. 104), her husband answers “Well, what of it? If sex isn’t a joke, what is it? And what is a joke?” (*Ibid*, p. 105) Actually, he believes that “the

sooner and the more he [Junior] learns about sex, the better for him. And most certainly if he learns that it's a grand joke, the greatest in the world. It'll keep him from lots of disappointments" (*P*, p. 105) This reflects his own dissatisfaction with his wife and their inexistent sexual life.

Furthermore, there is no love or romance in Irene's marriage. Her relationship with her husband is wobbly and based on the repression of feelings and desires. Indeed, Irene always pretends to be happy while she lives with the fear of losing her husband and social status; while Brian is completely unhappy and represses his longing for another life. Larsen writes

He had never spoken of his desire since that long-ago time of Storm and strain, of hateful and nearly disastrous quarrelling, when she had so firmly opposed him, so sensibly pointed out its utter impossibility and its probable consequences to her and the boys, and had even hinted at a dissolution of their marriage in the event of his persistence in his idea. No, there had been, in all the years that they had lived together since then, no other talk of it, no more than there had been any other quarrelling or any other threats. (*Ibid*, p. 100)

This passage shows that the Redfields' marriage is founded on silencing all the subjects which can cause problems. Brian does not give up his dreams because he loves his wife; he only does since she threatens him to take away his boys. "But because, so she insisted, the bond of flesh and spirit between them was so strong, she knew, had always known, that his dissatisfaction had continued, as had his dislike and disgust for his profession and his country" (*Ibid*) Thus, even if she claims that everything is all right, she is conscious of her husband's discontent but refuses to "submit" to his authority within the sacred bond of marriage, as the Christian (and White) religion requires; and from that moment on in the fiction no real interaction or discussion between the spouses will occur, apart from the children's topic.

When Irene tells her husband "I'm awfully glad to get this minute alone with you. It does seem that we're always so busy — I do hate that — but what can we do? I've had something on my mind for ever so long, something that needs talking over and really serious consideration" (*Ibid*, p. 103), the reader might assume that she wants to speak about their relationship or have

some good time with her husband. However, Irene only wants to introduce a topic concerning her son, Junior. Indeed, she only wants to talk about his education and suggest a European school for him. The rarity of interactions and moments alone between husband and wife show that they have nothing in common apart from their kids.

Besides, there seems to be no attraction between husband and wife. Larsen writes “Brian didn't speak. He continued to stand beside the bed, seeming to look at nothing in particular. Certainly not at her. True, his gaze was on her, but in it there was some quality that made her feel that at that moment she was no more to him than a pane of glass through which he stared” (*P*, p. 159) This passage demonstrates the indifference of Brian towards his wife. He does not even look at her or see her; she seems to be invisible for him. Irene, in turn, does not have any feelings for her husband. The author states “Strange, that she couldn't now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour she thought not” (*Ibid*, p. 202)

The only passionate relationship where there is mutual desire between the two people is between Helga and Mr. Anderson, in *Quicksand*, but their relationship is impossible because he is married. Female characters in Larsen's novels internalize the stereotyped image white people have of them. Indeed, instead of rejecting the fact that black females are uncontrollable sexual beings, many of them think that they have this in their nature and try to repress it in order to be respectable women. Larsen's characters also deny their sexuality or project it on other female characters.

For example, Irene projects her sexuality on Clare as she thinks that the latter is more liberated than her. Helga projects her sexuality on Audrey Denney, a black woman who lives her sexuality openly and without any restriction. In a way, Helga fantasizes on the life she leads and on her freedom. Indeed, Audrey is the only character who has an influence on Helga without ever approaching her. This may be a way of showing Helga's incapability of reaching Audrey's unracial experience. While Anne and her friends show only

disdain for Audrey, “what she [Helga] felt for the beautiful, calm, cool girl...was not contempt but envious admiration” (*Q*, p. 92)

In addition to having no sexual relations with her husband, Irene disagrees with him on many points. For instance they diverge on the education of their children as Brian thinks it is better to tell them overtly about the race problem; while Irene prefers to disregard this topic in front of them so as to ‘protect’ them. Moreover, they have completely different visions about the lives they want for them and for their children. Brian says to Irene, “I wanted to get [the children] out of this hellish place years ago. You wouldn’t let me. I gave up the idea, because you objected. Don’t expect me to give up everything” (*P*, p.74) In this context, Brian wants to move to Brazil where he believes race problems are inexistent. However, Irene prevents him from doing so since she likes their life style in the United States and wants to keep her social status there.

Nonetheless, Brian dislikes the life he leads and when he complains about his patients, Irene thinks

“It isn’t fair, it isn’t fair.” After all these years to still blame her like this. Hadn’t his success proved that she’d been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York? Couldn’t he see, even now, that it had been best? *Not for her, oh no, not for her – she had never really considered herself – but for him and the boys.* Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have it remain as it was? That strange, and to her fantastic, notion of Brian’s of going off to Brazil which, though unmentioned, yet lived within him; how it frightened her, and – yes, angered her! (Ibid)

Yet, the italicized passage and the emphasized narration shed light on the fact that Irene tries to hide her selfishness. She pretends that she made the decision of remaining in the United States for her children and husband without even thinking of herself because in her head she is a devoted mother who only thinks of her family. Still, in reality she is selfish and only considers her own wishes and social status while imposing her husband, and therefore children, to remain in what Brian refers to as a ‘hellish place’.

Irene tries to persuade herself that she is selfless but using the word ‘arranged’ while talking about their lives and desiring to keep it as it shows her wish of controlling everything surrounding her. Furthermore, the word ‘arranged’ emphasizes the lack of passion and the dull nature of their lives. Indeed, the word ‘arranged’ implies a certain control or organization and while using it before the word life it has a pejorative way. As a matter of fact, saying of a family life that it is arranged by one person entails that it may not suit the other members of the family. Furthermore, it also means that this life lacks surprise and imagination and that it is may be boring. Therefore, Irene lives in her own world and convinces herself that her husband loves her and that everything is fine in her life as “it wasn't now, as it had been once, that she was afraid that he would throw everything aside and rush off to that remote place of his heart's desire. He wouldn't, she knew. He was fond of her, loved her, in his slightly undemonstrative way. And there were the boys” (*P*, p. 108)

Like Irene, Clare, the second protagonist of *Passing*, has a platonic relationship with her husband. No love can be felt in their relation and Clare says clearly that she marries him because “to get the things I want badly enough, I'd do anything” (*Ibid*, p. 58) So, her marriage is based on her material desires and she has no sentiments for her husband. Yet, by marrying a white man and committing miscegenation, Clare is entrapped in male domination and power. For Stringer, “The figure of Clare Kendry thus delivers a delicately nuanced version of the cynicism driving Larsen’s early pulp stories: there is no fundamental difference, for women, between marriage and prostitution”<sup>216</sup>. She somehow sells herself to a white man in order to have a comfortable material life and to enjoy the privileges of white matrons. Her husband, in turn, has contradictory feelings towards her and that is why Judith Butler calls him a fetishist<sup>217</sup>. In fact, he abhors everything that is related to African-Americans; yet, he nicknames his wife ‘Nig’.

In addition, Butler argues that “Blackness is not primarily a visual mark in Larsen’s story”<sup>218</sup>. Irene and Clare do not only pass because of their

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<sup>216</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>217</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

<sup>218</sup>*Ibid*, p. 284.



mixed heritage and light skins, they also do so because they refuse “to introduce [their] blackness into conversation”<sup>219</sup>. Thus, they accept people’s assumptions about their racial origins. Furthermore, when Bellew -who does not know that he is talking to three black women- utters racist statements, they accept them and even make fun of their race with the oppressor, white people. Indeed, Irene laughs but she has “a leaping desire to shout at [him]: ‘you’re sitting here surrounded by three black devils, drinking tea’” (*P*, p. 70)

Later, when Irene thinks about the incident she wonders “Why hadn't she spoken that day? Why, in the face of Bellew's ignorant hate and aversion, had she concealed her own origin? Why had she allowed him to make his assertions and express his misconceptions undisputed? Why.... had she failed to take up the defense of the race to which she belonged? (Ibid, p. 89) This silence about their race as well as about their own feelings is very present in the novel. Indeed, the word ‘silence’ is mentioned twenty three times in the book. All over the story, there are many uncomfortable silences and the characters prefer to hide their sentiments in long silences. For instance, when Irene thinks that Clare is having an affair with her husband, she tries not to cry but she is incapable of doing so “so she laid her face in her arms and wept silently” (Ibid, p. 164) After this scene, Irene goes back to her party and acts as if nothing happens in order to keep up the appearances.

### 3. Irene and Clare: Between yearning and loathing

In the same novel, we can feel some sexual tensions between Irene and Clare. Indeed, Irene has ambivalent feelings towards Clare whom she is jealous of and feels attracted to at the same time. She is unable to resist Clare; in this context, Larsen states

She [Irene] meant to tell Clare Kendry at once, and definitely, that it was of no use, her coming, that she couldn't be responsible...But that was as far as she got in her rehearsal. For Clare had come softly into the room without knocking, and before Irene could greet her, had dropped a kiss on her dark curls. Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare's two hands in her own and cried with

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<sup>219</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

something like awe in her voice: "Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare!" (*P*, p. 114-5)

So, whenever Irene tries to get rid of Clare, she is incapable of doing so. However, these feelings are silenced by the gender lessons that Irene learned as a child. She decides to continue to play the role imposed on her by society and, which largely shapes the disastrous ending of the novel where Clare is pushed to her death, or may commit psychological suicide, thus apparently becoming paranoid.

In a way, Clare represents the excitement that Irene lacks in her life. When Irene succeeds at resisting this passion, she does it in the name of race pride and faithfulness. For Butler,

Irene herself is in a double bind: caught between the prospect of becoming free from an ideology of 'race' uncritical in its own masculinism and classism, on the one hand, and the violations of white racism that attend the deprivatization of black women's sexuality, on the other. Irene's psychic ambivalence toward Clare, then, needs to be situated in this historical double bind<sup>220</sup>.

In other words, Irene, like black women in general, has a sort of triple consciousness of being a black person, An American, and a woman. She is caught between the hope of being liberated from all the stereotypes that the masculine dominance has of black females. Besides, she wants to get rid of the exposure of black women's sexuality and its lack of privacy because of racism. Hence, Irene wants to be free sexually and not have the constraints caused by the prejudices overspread in the society. However, she is afraid of this freedom which would expose her sexuality to the eyes of the world.

In addition to the strange feelings she has for Clare, Irene does not want to give her up because of race solidarity. First, when Clare exposes her and Gertrude by introducing them to her racist husband without even warning them before, Irene is shocked and is inclined to reply to the man's insults about black people. However, her race solidarity prevents her from doing so as she knows that this will create problems to Clare. She prefers to laugh with the bigot in order not to arouse his suspicion. Then, when she is annoyed by

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<sup>220</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p 289.

Clare's interference in her life, she thinks that she could easily get rid of her by telling Bellew about her secret.

Nevertheless, "She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race" (*P*, p. 180) In other words, Irene is bound to keep her friend's secret because of race ties. She wants so bad to get rid of Clare; yet, she is unable of doing so. She even blames her race for that powerlessness. Larsen writes

Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children. (*Ibid*, p. 181)

So, the protagonist feels helpless and even wishes not to be black so as to get rid of that race allegiance. Finally, when Irene and her black friend, Felise, meet Jack Bellew she ignores him but she later regrets and thinks "I had my chance and didn't take it. I had only to speak and to introduce him to Felise with the casual remark that he was Clare's husband. Only that. Fool. Fool" (*Ibid*, p. 184) Once again, Irene blames her racial loyalty for her passiveness. The author writes "why couldn't she [Irene] get free of It? Why should it include Clare? Clare, who'd shown little enough consideration for her...[she] could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry. (*Ibid*, p. 184-5) Thus, Irene is always confronted with the same problem of race solidarity whenever she attempts to put Clare out of her life. So, she remains trapped in a state of vulnerability as she is not able to establish her own safe self and identity.

To explain further the relationship between Irene and Clare, Butler exposes an interesting theory expressed by Sigmund Freud. She writes

In his essay on narcissism, Freud argues that a boy child begins to love through sacrificing some portion of his own narcissism, that the idealization of the mother is nothing other than

narcissism transferred outward, that the mother stands for that lost narcissism, promises the return of that narcissism, and never delivers on that promise. For as long as she remains the idealized object of love, she carries his narcissism, she is his displaced narcissism and, insofar as she carries it, she is perceived to withhold it from him”<sup>221</sup>.

This theory can be used by replacing the child and the mother by Irene and Clare. Indeed, according to Freud, people idealize the person to whom they transfer their narcissism. Likewise, Irene idealizes Clare; thus, Clare carries her self-love for her. This creates an ambivalent relationship torn between love and hatred. On the one hand, Irene loves Clare and even gives up her narcissism for her. Still, on the other hand, she hates her for taking her place and that self-love. She wants to get rid of her but she is unable to do so because she stands for her lost self-love and is the only one capable of returning it to her. Consequently, this results in Irene’s contradictory feelings towards Clare as she feels passion, jealousy and abhorrence at the same time.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Larsen’s novels lack a certain feminine solidarity which usually exists between groups made vulnerable because of the same condition, here gender and sexuality. Bryan Turner argues that human beings share a common ontology that is grounded in a shared vulnerability”<sup>222</sup>. He argues that humans are bound together by the “risks and perturbations”<sup>223</sup> that they undergo and that their shared vulnerability is “common and uniform”<sup>224</sup>. In this context, Larsen’s characters do not share the heavy weight of social pressure and stereotypes. There is very little or no ethics of care in the two novels. For instance, nobody cares for Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, not even her own family who do not even consider her as one of them.

Judith Butler believes that feminine solidarity would have changed everything. In this context, she states “Perhaps the alternative would have meant a turning of that queering rage no longer against herself [Irene] or Clare,

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<sup>221</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p 290.

<sup>222</sup>Turner, Bryan, *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 2006, p. 6.

<sup>223</sup>Ibid, p. 9

<sup>224</sup>Ibid.

but against the regulatory norms that force such a turn: against both the passionless promise of that bourgeois family and the bellowing of racism in its social and psychic reverberations, most especially, in the deathly rituals it engages”<sup>225</sup>. In other words, it might have been possible for Irene and Clare to survive, for Irene died psychologically and Clare literally, if they had turned their rage towards the restricting norms and stereotypes that prevented them from living freely and being happy.

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<sup>225</sup>Butler, Judith, *op, cit.*, p 293.

## C. Motherhood Versus Motherlessness in Nella Larsen's Novels

### 1. African-American Mothers

The mother figure is a very important one in Nella Larsen's novels. In fact, the presence but above all the absence of the mother has a main responsibility in the identity constructions, vulnerability and otherness of the characters. Indeed, Helga's motherlessness, or absence of mother, deepens her sentiment of self-estrangement and makes her feel othered. Irene and Clare's otherness, on the other hand, cause them to be bad mothers which will surely create a feeling of estrangement in their children which will in turn make them experience otherness in the future like it is the case for Helga Crane. Thus, motherhood and motherlessness strongly contribute to the child's feeling as othered or not.

During the Harlem Renaissance, the leaders of the movement advocated that women had the responsibility of child bearing and raising in order to create a 'new Negro'<sup>226</sup>. This idea is conveyed by Helga Crane's ex-fiancé, James Vayle, when they meet in Harlem and when he proposes again to Helga. As a matter of fact, Vayle tries to convince Helga to marry him because he feels invested with the mission of giving birth to upper class African-American children. James tells Helga "Don't you see that if we—I mean people like us—don't have children, the others will still have. That's the one thing that's the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children [...] I feel very strongly about this. We're the ones who must have children if the race is to get anywhere". (*Q*, p.132) He believes that educated black people should have children to advance the race because even if they do not, lower classes would still have children who would lower the level of the African-American race. Hence, women were encouraged to have children and to be good mothers so as to participate in the race's improvement.

The role that was given to women and especially to mothers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century had the goal of building a new social order and curing

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<sup>226</sup>Locke, Alain, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

society from its ills. Black women followed the strategy used by white writers of domestic novels and tried to reflect the image of loving, innocent mothers to counter the stereotypes and beliefs that people had of them, as jezebels for instance. Therefore, like white female authors, the black ones tried to reconstruct the image of African-American women by depicting them as respectable mothers.

### **The Effects of Motherlessness on Helga Crane**

Licia Morrow Collaway sums up Larsen's dealing with the topic of motherhood by writing

In Larsen's *Quicksand*, Karen Nilssen's flawed mothering is signaled by Helga's painful reminiscences of her miserable childhood and her mother's failure to intervene to protect her. In *Passing*, Irene Redfield considers herself a dedicated and conscientious mother, but the text suggests that, though she rigidly adheres to the outward forms of nurturance, she deprives her children of the demonstrative affection they need from her; she remains curiously emotionally detached from the boys as well as from her husband. She is not personally invested in their relationships<sup>227</sup>.

Helga is haunted by the phantom of her mother but she never invokes or looks for her biological father. She seems to victimize her mother and to put all the wrongs on her father whom she describes as a gambler and irresponsible person who left his family helpless and poor. The fact that Helga does not condemn her mother's abandonment and rather blames her father can be seen as a symbol as Helga blames her father for being black. In other words, her mother transmitted normality, or the white side, into her and her father the color which causes her marginalization.

Helga Crane might think that her mother's rejection is due to the fact that she embodied her past and reminded her of the mistake she made by having an affair with a black person. Furthermore, Helga sees herself and the black race through the eyes of her family and thus with repulsion and feels that she is a worthless person until the age of fifteen. Indeed, at that age, her mother

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<sup>227</sup> Collaway Morrow, Licia *Black Family (DYS) Function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Fannie Hurst*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2003, p. 4.

dies and unable of living with her step-family, she is sent to an all-black school by her maternal uncle.

Patricia Hills Collins argues that mothers must “ensure their daughter’s physical survival [by]...teach[ing] them to fit into systems of oppression”<sup>228</sup>. So, they privilege the physical survival of their daughters at the cost of their emotional stability. Likewise, Helga’s mother marries a white man since “even foolish, despised women must have food and clothing, even unloved little Negro girls must be somehow provided for” (*Q*, p. 56) Thus, her mother ensures her physical survival but in turn Helga has to endure “the savage unkindness of her stepbrothers and –sisters, and the jealous, malicious hatred of her mother’s husband” (*Ibid*, p. 56) causing the little girl to create a carapace that will prevent her from living happily throughout her existence.

Besides, Helga’s family, her uncle after her mother’s death, prefer to send her to a segregated black school so as to guarantee her integration. Once there, she learns that some black people feel that they deserve respect and that the black race can also be proud of its color. Yet, instead of losing the inferiority complex she has, the latter is reinforced by her contact with the upper class black children. In fact, Helga has nothing in common with her mates. They come from wealthy families to whom they are usually close and vindicate their culture and tradition while she does not know anything about her own background and stands lonely in the world.

Helga Crane is motherless, which is associated with having no living or known mother. Her motherlessness, or absence of mother, leads to a “long term, pathological condition of loss”<sup>229</sup> which Freud describes as a state of melancholia. Freud makes a distinction between mourning and melancholia. The former is a normal process that anybody goes through after the loss of a beloved for instance. The latter, on the other hand, is a pathological state in which the person does not know the ‘object-loss’ or why he/she is grieving. Helga is traumatized by her absence of family and motherlessness. Yet, she is

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<sup>228</sup>Collins Hills, Patricia, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York: Routledge Classics, 2000, p. 123.

<sup>229</sup>Freud, Sigmund (1917) *Mourning and Melancholia*. In the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol 14. London: Hogarth Press, 1957: 243-58, p. 244.



incapable of recognizing that it is these absences that shocked her. In this context, Larsen writes

Into Helga's second year in Denmark came an indefinite discontent. Not clear, but vague...she desired ardently to combat this wearing down of her satisfaction with her life, with herself. But she didn't know how...what was the matter with her? Was there, without her knowing it, some peculiar lack in her?...Why couldn't she be happy, content somewhere? Other people managed, somehow to be. To put it plainly, didn't she know how? Was she incapable of it? (*Q*, p. 110-111)

Thus, Helga is unable of building a stable identity without constantly remembering her mother's absence.

She builds a carapace to protect herself from being hurt again. In fact, she does her best to create a distance between her and other people so as not to be hurt. Her colleague, Margaret Creighton, tells her "you never tell anybody anything about yourself" (Ibid, p.47) She might seem insensitive or arrogant at times but this is rooted in her lack of affection and real binds. Consequently, this carapace prevents her from having a social life because people do not take the risk to even talk to her. In this regard, the author states when talking about her colleague "She [Margaret] was a little afraid of Helga. Nearly everyone was" (Ibid, p. 48) Jill Bergman maintains that "another expression of motherlessness takes the form of longing for home"<sup>230</sup>. In this respect, Helga longs for a place she can call home. She travels from spot to spot in order to find her niche in the world. Nevertheless, she does not seem to fit anywhere and does not feel to belong to any of the communities she encounters. Since mother and home are linked in domestic ideology, Helga might have been looking for her home to find a mother figure<sup>231</sup>.

Calloway thinks that it is interesting that Helga finally forgives her father and starts to understand him in her mother's land<sup>232</sup>; "She understood and could sympathize with his facile surrender to the irresistible ties of race, now that they dragged at her own heart"<sup>233</sup>. In fact, upon leaving Denmark,

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<sup>230</sup>Bergman, Jill. *The Motherless Child in the Novels of Pauline Hopkins*. Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2012, p. 24.

<sup>231</sup>Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>232</sup>Calloway Morrow, Licia, *op, cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>233</sup>Ibid, p. 122.

Helga realizes the importance of the black race to her and understands her father's decision of going back to his own race but she never questions his abandonment and never wonders if it is her mother who did not want to be separated from her. In this regard, Katrina, Helga's aunt, says about her sister: "She wanted to keep you, she insisted on it, even over [her second husband's] protest, I think. She loved you so much, she said....And so she made you unhappy. Mothers, I suppose, are like that. Selfish" (*Q*, p. 108) Consequently, before her departure from Copenhagen, Helga seems to find some answers to her questions. First of all, she is able to understand her father's choice, as she feels a certain racial pride and a longing for black people. Moreover, she realizes that her mother wanted to keep her and that her father's abandonment may be due to the fact that he did not have any other choice.

Because of her motherlessness, Helga seems to be afraid of being herself a mother. Helga is determined to remain childless because she wonders "why add more suffering to the world? Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why do Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful. Think of the awfulness of being responsible for the giving of life to creatures doomed to endure such wounds to the flesh, such wounds to the spirit." (*Ibid*, p. 132) She does not want to bear black children who will suffer discrimination and add "more black folks to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch" (*Ibid*, p. 133) She believes that the solution for the race to move forward is not giving birth to black children but is in educating the living community. Neither does Helga want to have bi-racial children by marrying a white man. Indeed, she does not want to experience new rejections because she is married to a white man. Furthermore, she does not want her children to experience what she underwent as a biracial child. She even asks her aunt if miscegenation was wrong (*Ibid*, p. 108) That is what pushes Helga to refuse Olsen's proposal and to refuse the idea of marrying a white man.

When her aunt talks about marriage "She didn't, she responded, believe in mixed marriages, 'between races, you know.' They brought only trouble –to the children– as she herself knew but too well from bitter experience." (*Ibid*, p. 108) Her aunt responds "Because your mother was a fool.

Yes, she was! If she'd come home after she married, or after you were born, or even after your father –er– went off like that, it would have been different. If even she'd left you when she was there. But why in the world she should have married again, and a person like that, I can't see.” (*Q*, p. 108) Helga would have had a different life in Denmark. It's worth pointing at the fact that her aunt insinuates that her mother was married to her father. This is very significant as Helga is not sure whether her parents were married or not. Indeed, when her uncle's wife Mrs. Nilssen asks her if they were she replies that she does not know. However, Mrs. Nilssen concludes that “of course she [Helga's mother wasn't [married to her father]” (*Ibid*, p. 61)

### **From Motherlessness to Motherhood**

Nevertheless, Helga ends up marrying a reverend she meets in a church. Her marriage is passionless because she only feels repugnance for her husband and she has four children in a very short time. Helga loves her children but she is so depressed by the life she leads that she feels relieved when she learns of her one-week baby boy's death. Indeed, she “was unconcerned, undisturbed” by the news. She thinks that this would make her plan of leaving her husband and children easier. In fact, with the baby's death, Helga is freer to leave everything and return to the life she led before marriage. However, she realizes that she does not want to abandon her children and does not want them to experience what she went through as a child.

Helga “wanted not to leave them- if that was possible. The recollection of her own childhood, lonely, unloved, rose too poignantly before her for her to consider calmly such a solution” (*Ibid*, p. 135) It is only at this moment of the novel that Helga recognizes the trauma she went through because of her lack of ties with her family. Unlike her, who suffered from race problems and was the only black person in her family thus felt no race solidarity, “There was no element of race, of white and black. They [Helga's children] were all black together. And they would have their father” (*Ibid*) Yet, “to leave them would be a tearing agony, a rending of deepest fibers. She felt that through all the rest of her lifetime she would be hearing their cry of ‘Mummy, Mummy, Mummy’ through sleepless nights” (*Ibid*, p. 116) Helga

postpones her departure and upon leaving, she realizes that she is pregnant again.

Helga's pregnancies render her weak and represent a pattern of repetition. Nevertheless, it is a sterile circular pattern which does not lead to any exit. Each time she gets pregnant, she feels more trapped in the life she lives. Her motherhood is seen as a mere bodily function as she does not even have enough time to take care of her children and her house. This pattern of repetition can also lead to trauma as defined by Freud. In fact, this vicious circle which seems to have no end can put Helga in a traumatic state.

In Helga's case, her womb can lead her to the tomb. In fact, her continual pregnancies endanger her health and make her bedridden. Yet, the trauma she went through because of her motherlessness and her melancholia prevent her from abandoning her children. She wonders how the other women of the community can manage; "could it be possible that, while presenting such smiling and contented faces, they were all always on the edge of health?...Or was it only she, a poor weak city-bred thing, who felt that the strain of what the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green had so often... reminded her was a natural thing, an act of God, was almost unendurable?" (*Q*, p. 152)

Yet, the other women of the community where Helga lives tell her that it is natural for a woman to go through repeated pregnancies and that she should be more patient. They even blame her for not accomplishing her domestic role as she should. In this context, when Helga complains and says that she is tired, Sary Jones, who has six children, replies "Yuh all takes it too ha'd. Jes' remembah et's natu'al fo' a 'oman to hab chilluns an' don' fret so....we's all ti'ed. An' ah reckons we's all gwine a be ti'ed till kingdom come...we all gits ouah res' by an' by. In de nex' worl' we's all recompense" (*Ibid*, p. 116) Otherwise stated, women like Sary have completely internalized the image of motherhood spread by white and then black leaders of the era. She believes that she must scarify and endure all those hardships because it is natural for a woman to do so.

Facing Sary Jones, “Helga had a sensation of shame that she should be less than content. “Why couldn’t she be as trusting and as certain that her troubles would not overwhelm her as Sary Jones?...Before her Helga felt humbled and oppressed by the sense of her own unworthiness and lack of sufficient faith.” (*Q*, p. 153) Thus, even Helga becomes persuaded that the problem comes from her and that it is a natural thing to take care of many children. She even feels embarrassed because she complained. Even her husband tries to convince her that she should be more grateful for the children and that every woman is capable of multiple births.

The Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green tells her “‘my mother had nine children and was thankful for every one’. If she [Helga] was inclined to wonder a little how they were to manage with another child on the way, he would point out to her that her doubt and uncertainty were a stupendous ingratitude” (*Ibid*, p. 151) Therefore, he reprimands her just because she has some doubts. He tells her that she must trust the Lord because he has given her many reasons to do so like saving her soul from hell. After the conversation with Sary Jones and her husband’s sermons, Helga thinks only of her faith forgetting her own pains. She tries her best to be a good wife and mother and the community’s women even start to like her.

Unlike Helga, Irene and Clare are not obsessed by their mothers. Their fathers are more referred to in the novel. Irene and Clare have completely different fathers. Irene’s father is a loyal, discrete and respected man while Clare’s father is depicted as alcoholic and careless man. Clare even envies Irene for her father. Likewise, Clare’s mother is only referred to twice in the novel. The first time is when some people start to discuss rumors they hear about Clare’s passing. They say “Poor little girl, I suppose it’s true enough, but what can you expect? Look at her father. And her mother, they say, would have run away if she hadn’t died” (*P*, p. 182)

The second time is when Irene describes Clare and her ‘Negro eyes’ saying “Yes, Clare Kendry’s loveliness was absolute, beyond challenge, thanks to those eyes which her grandmother and later her mother and father had given her” (*Ibid*, p. 191) So, the reader knows very little about Clare’s mother.

However, this absence is very significant because once her parents are dead, Clare like Helga, has no close family and no people. She has no connection with the black race and that may be the reason why it is that easy for her to pass for white and leave her past behind.

Unlike Clare, Irene grew up in what she believes was a perfect childhood. She was raised by her two parents and had everything she needed to succeed and be courted by the elite of the black community. Irene sees her parents' relationship as an ideal one and tries to mold her family life according to her childhood memories. She wants to be like her mother. However, her husband, Brian, does not want to be a copy of Mr. Westover, her father. In fact, Brian aspires to a better life and wants to move to Brazil where he thinks that black people are treated better than in his country. He becomes very dissatisfied with the life his wife has chosen for him and even if he gives up his dream of exoticism, he lives with regrets.

Irene, in turn, feels that she knows what is better for her family and thinks that even if Brian does not realize it, she did the best for him. She lives in an imaginary world and convinces herself that her family is perfect and happy thanks to her decisions. Yet, she is sometimes haunted by the fear that her husband's desire to leave destroys her wonderland. In this context, when she is in Chicago, she hopes that Brian does not feel "so lonely that that old, queer, unhappy restlessness had begun again within him; that craving for some place strange and different which at the beginning of her marriage she has had to make such strenuous efforts to repress, and which yet faintly alarmed her, though it now sprang up at gradually lessening intervals" (*P*, p. 84)

Larsen's characters' complicated or sometimes inexistent relationships with their mothers have an impact on their relations to men but more importantly on their own motherhood. "As a result of their traumatic –and for Irene, traumatically idealized– childhood experiences, none of the women [Larsen's characters] is emotionally equipped to function as a good mother"<sup>234</sup>. In fact, Irene is the only character who seems to be a good mother. However, this is only on the surface as the first pages of the novel make it obvious.

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<sup>234</sup>Calloway Morrow, Licia, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

Indeed, even if Irene looks to be a dedicated and protective mother, her children only come after her societal obligations.

### **Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry as Bad Mothers**

In this context, at the opening of the novel, Irene is shopping to get presents for her children. Yet, she “characteristically [...] put it [the buying of the gifts] off until only a few crowded days remained of her long visit” (*P*, p. 146) In other words, Irene positions the needs of her sons as the last thing to do before her departure. She only gets to buy a present for Brian Junior however “the drawing-book, for which Ted had so gravely and insistently given her precise directions, had sent her in and out of five shops without success” (*Ibid*, p.164) Thus, the protagonist prefers to focus on her societal duties in Chicago and take the risk of disappointing her children by postponing her shopping for them. In doing so, she breaks the promise she made to Ted and is unable to find his present making her not so committed to her children as she pretend to be.

Gloria Wade-Gayle argues that “mothers in black women’s fiction are strong and devoted...but...are rarely affectionate”<sup>235</sup>. In this regard, Irene tries to create a ‘safe’ place at home; she is very protective with her children. However, this protection does not help her children build a real identity as she prevents them from dealing with reality. Calloway writes “her [Irene’s] futile effort to repel the intrusion of the atrocities inherent in a racially polarized society into the confines of her household is yet another example of Irene’s delusional machinations to create her own reality and exist in her own artificial universe”<sup>236</sup>. In fact, when Brian, Irene’s husband, talks about race problems during the dinner, Irene directly stops him and tells him that it is not a topic he should discuss in front of his children. She thinks “It was really inexcusable for you to bring up a thing like [lynching] at dinner. There’ll be time enough for [Ted and Junior] to learn about such horrible things when they’re older” (*Ibid*, p. 73)

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<sup>235</sup> Wade-Gayle, Gloria. *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women’s Fiction*. New York: Pilgrom Press, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>236</sup> Calloway Morrow, Licia, *op. cit.*, p. 103-4.

Yet, Brian disagrees with his wife and thinks that his sons should be aware of the race problem in order to be more prepared to face them. He believes that she overprotects them and that she should let them be more autonomous. He replies “You’re absolutely wrong! If, as you’re so determined, they’ve got to live in this damned country, they’d better find out what sort of thing they’re up against as soon as possible” (*P*, p. 73) Irene thinks that she acts for her sons’ interest and that she should protect them from the outside world as long as she is able to do so.

Patricia Hills Collins writes “Black daughters[in this case children] must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures”<sup>237</sup>. However, Irene’s behavior does not allow her sons to learn these structures. Consequently, she does disservice to her children because they remain ignorant and too innocent for the surrounding world. In this context, when talking about lynching their son, Ted, asks “Dad, why is it that they only lynch colored people?” (*Ibid*, p. 190) He does not understand his father’s answer about the whites’ hatred and fear from the blacks because he does not know of the race problems.

Moreover, once they are confronted to the real world, they will be shocked and will not understand why white people are so mean with their race. In fact, their mother teaches them that they are perfect and normal, so, what would be their reaction upon knowing that they are not considered as so and that their color is a burden they have to carry? In this regard, her husband states in a discussion about Junior “you’re trying to make a molly-coddle out of him. Well, just let me tell you, I won’t have it. And you needn’t think I’m going to let you change him into some nice kindergarten kind of school because he’s getting a little necessary education [about sex and race]...he’ll stay right where he is.” (*Ibid*, p. 105)

So, Brian does not accept Irene’s way of thinking and when she interrupts him while talking about racism, he tells the boys that they will discuss the topic together when their mother is not present. He asks Irene “what

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<sup>237</sup>Collins Hills, Patricia, *op. cit.*, p. 124.



was the use of our trying to keep them from learning the word 'nigger' and its connotation? They found out, didn't they? And how? Because somebody called Junior a dirty nigger" (*P*, p. 190) Thus, Irene has not been capable of preventing her boy from getting racist statements by keeping him from knowing the word. Brian thinks that the sooner the boys know about these things, the better it will be for them. He does not understand how a woman as intelligent as Irene "can show evidence of such stupidity" (*Ibid*, p. 190) Yet, she still does not understand and believes that hiding the truth would make her children happy. Their father, in turn, believes that it is necessary to sacrifice some of their happiness as children "at the expense of proper preparation for life and their future happiness" (*Ibid*) Besides, he states "I'd feel I hadn't done my duty by them if I didn't give them some inkling of what's before them. It's the least I can do" (*Ibid*)

Irene's coddling of her children reflects the stereotype of the good mother who cares for her children more than for everything else. Nevertheless, her children only occupy the second position in her life; her marriage and her social position come first. Indeed, Irene's first concern is the image she reflects and the way she is seen in society. To keep her position, Irene must keep her husband. She even uses her children in doing so and considers them as the cement that obliges her husband to stay with her. Besides, they are the only remaining tie between the couple. So, isn't Irene selfish by using her children to attain her objectives and by putting her image above everything else? Irene takes her husband for granted because she believes that she and her children are one inseparable package and that he cannot live without his children and thus without her. However, when she realizes that Clare is close to her children and when she sees Brian as a man rather than as a father, she feels threatened and goes through a psychological confusion as she feels that she is about to lose everything she has built.

Irene does not have a close relationship with her children. In the morning, she does not wake up until they are gone to school and in the afternoon they spend their time in their playroom. In the novel, there is no allusion to any intimate moment that she spends with her children. It is worth

mentioning that this life style reproduces the Victorian or the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant stereotype of socially prominent white families. Thus, Irene's imitation of the whites' standard of living can be observed even in the small details of her existence. The only moment Irene speaks directly to her sons is when introducing Clare to them. Yet, the way she talks to them is very formal and lacks sentiments. She tells them "'Get up, Ted! That's rude. This is Theodore, Mrs. Bellew. Please excuse his bad manners. He does know better. And this is Brian junior. Mrs. Bellew is an old friend of mother's'" (*P*, p. 131) Clare, on the other hand, is more informal and friendly with them (*Ibid*, p. 232) Irene's sons rapidly adopt Clare, which causes their mother to be jealous and resentful towards her friend. Irene appears to be a protective but insensitive and cold mother. For example, when Brian talks about lynching and Ted displays interest for the topic, she changes the conversation without ever addressing her sons.

After convincing herself that Clare and Brian are having an affair, Irene decides to ignore it and plays the role of the sacrificing mother who is ready to disregard her husband's unfaithfulness and to give up on her dignity in order to protect her children. She thinks "how would it [Brian's unfaithfulness] affect her and the boys? The boys! She had a surge of relief. It ebbed, vanished. A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn't count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle"(*Ibid*, p.171) Yet, it is quite obvious that the true reason is that her life revolves around her marriage, children and social position and that by losing her husband, she would lose everything. Indeed, the fact that she wonders what it would mean first for her and then for the boys demonstrates that nobody is more important than herself. Second, she is relieved when she considers her boys because she knows that Brian stays only for them and that without them, she has no value for him since she is only his kids' mother.

Irene also tries to make Clare feel guilty toward her daughter, Margery. In fact, she always reminds Clare of her duty as a mother and even encourages her to go to Europe so as to see her daughter "Clare, We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children. Think what it

would mean to your Margery if Mr. Bellew should find out. You'd probably lose her.... She'd never forgive you. You may be used to risks, but this is one you mustn't take, Clare. It's a selfish whim" (*P*, p. 122) To this advice Clare only replies that children are not everything, that "there are other things in the world, though I admit some people don't seem to suspect it" (*Ibid*, p. 148)

Margery is an inexistent character in the novel. She is only mentioned but never appears and the reader knows very little about her. It may be her child's absence that makes Clare feel exempted of her duties as a mother and act without thinking of the consequences for her daughter. In fact, when Irene tells her that she takes being a mother very seriously, Clare answers "it's just I haven't any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do." (*Ibid*, p. 149) This does not match Irene's ideas and might be the sign that Clare is a 'New woman' who breaks society's perceptions of how a woman and precisely a mother should act.

The French feminist Julia Kristeva states "a woman does not have to be a mother in order to have a motherly relationship to the world...there are women who have children and stick to a military lack of sensitivity...physiological and mental motherhoods are different things"<sup>238</sup>. In other terms, even if women are biologically able to give birth to children, all of them are not emotionally equipped to become good mothers. In this sense, some children, who are abandoned by their mothers or who do not receive the affection that their mothers should give them, are raised by othermothers.

Othermothering is an institution common in African-American community. It is when a woman raises children who are not biologically hers. In this respect, Clare gives Irene's children some of the affection they lack from their mother. Indeed, Clare takes time to play with Irene's sons and is much tenderer with them than their real mother. Larsen states "If Irene happened to be out or occupied, Clare could very happily amuse herself with Ted and Junior, who had conceived for her an admiration that verged on adoration, especially Ted" (*Ibid*, p. 144) Alluding to othermothering in *Passing*

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<sup>238</sup>Midttun Huitfeldt, Birgitte. *Crossing the Borders: An Interview with Julia Kristeva*. 2006, p. 172.

can be a strategy from the author in order to show that even though Clare passes for white, she has kept some of her African-American heritage by following that tradition. Furthermore, othermothering in a way supports that the issue of otherness involves welcoming the other at several levels.

#### **D. Helga Crane, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry as ‘Feminine Calibans’**

It is very important to shed light on the similarities between Nella Larsen’s characters and the Feminine Caliban as defined by Marita Bonner. It is worth mentioning that Caliban is one of the major characters in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Being the son of a witch named Sycorax, he is half-human and half-monster. After being banished from Algiers, his mother gives birth to him on an island and dies shortly after. Prospero then arrives to the island and forces Caliban into servitude after the latter tries to rape his daughter Miranda. The figure of Caliban perfectly fits Nella Larsen’s characters in that they all have two sides a human, sensitive one and a monstrous and an unemotional one. In fact, even if Caliban is a monster, he obviously loved and adulated his mother. He even considers Setebos as his mother’s god. Therefore, despite his monstrousness that pushes him into rape, he still has some human feelings like love. This is a point that all of Larsen’s characters share as it will be demonstrated subsequently.

Marita Bonner uses the figure of Caliban by comparing it to black females and wonders “Why [does the world] see a colored woman only as a gross collection of desires, all uncontrolled, reaching out for their Apollos and their Quasimodos with avid indiscrimination?”<sup>239</sup> She condemns the stereotypes that condense African-American women to unrestrained and wild desire. She believes that black women are multi-faceted and cannot be reduced to sexual beings craving to imitate white females. Indeed, she questions why do people think that black woman are “feminine Caliban[s] carving to pass for

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<sup>239</sup>Bonner, Marita . "On Being Young — a Woman —and Colored." *Frye Street and Environs: The Collected Works of Marita Bonner*. Joyce Flynn, ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987. 3-8.

Ariel”<sup>240</sup>. Similarly, Nella Larsen’s characters do not want to be reduced to a stereotype and are multi-faceted. In fact, they have an emotional side and a tougher side.

In *Quicksand*, on the one hand Helga Crane seems to be very arrogant and insensitive. However, on the other hand, she constantly feels very lonely and in need of affection. In this context, when in Chicago, she goes to a church seeking for human to diminish her solitude. She hopes that someone will talk to her but no one does because of the haughtiness she conveys. Yet, the protagonist does not realize the image she reflects because of the carapace she built to protect herself from pain. Larsen states

She was herself unconscious of that faint hint of offishness which hung about her and repelled advances, an arrogance that stirred in people a peculiar irritation. They noticed her, admired her clothes, but that was all, for the self-sufficient uninterested manner adopted instinctively as a protective measure for her acute sensitiveness, in her child days, still clung to her” (*Q*, p. 66)

Thus, Helga does not realize that people perceive her carapace as egotism and so do not even try to know her. The fact that Helga feels lonely shows her human side; but she has also a mechanic side that she might not perceive but which other people do see.

The best representation of the Caliban motif might well be Clare Kendry in *Passing*. Larsen writes “there had been...nothing sacrificial In Clare Kendry's Idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold, and hard. And yet she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics” (*P*, p. 5) Throughout the novel, the reader can see both sides of Clare at different occasions. The best example is her reaction about her father’s death in a saloon fight when she was fifteen. Clare

had just stood there with her lips pressed together, her thin arms folded across her narrow chest, staring down at the familiar pasty-white face of her parent with a sort of disdain in her slanting black eyes. For a very long time she had stood like that,

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<sup>240</sup>Bonner, Marita, *op*, cit., 3-8.

silent and staring. Then, quite suddenly, she had given way to a torrent of weeping, swaying her thin body, tearing at her bright hair, and stamping her small feet. The outburst had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. She glanced quickly about the bare room, taking everyone in...in a sharp look of flashing scorn. And, in the next instant, she had turned and vanished through the door. (*P*, p. 6)

The protagonist's response to the loss of her father demonstrates both of her sides. At first, Clare's insensitive and indifferent side is visible by the rigidity of her positioning and the scorn she manifestly has for her dead parent. Then, the reader sees her sensitiveness and pain through the outbreak of tears that submerges her. Yet, her mechanic side ultimately takes the advantage as she stops crying as unexpectedly as she has started. Therefore, this scene perfectly illustrates why the Caliban figure fits with Clare's character.

For Irene, this reaction looks more like an expression of contained anger than a verbalization of sorrow for the dead father. She believes that the best word that describes Clare Kendry is 'catlike' (Ibid) Larsen writes about the latter

sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly Impulsive. And there was about her an amazing soft malice, hidden well away until provoked. Then she was capable of scratching, and very effectively too. Or, driven to anger, she would fight with a ferocity and impetuosity that disregarded or forgot any danger; superior strength, numbers, or other unfavourable circumstances. (Ibid, p. 7)

So, Clare is a very complex character who falters between two contradicting personalities. At times, she is very sensitive and cares for the people around her; while, at other she is very selfish and does not consider the others' feelings. In this regard, Irene states "to count as nothing the annoyances, the bitterness, or the suffering of others, that was Clare...The trouble with Clare was, not only that she wanted to have her cake and eat it too, but that she wanted to nibble at the cakes of other folk as well" (Ibid, p. 88)

Like Clare, Irene has also some points in common with the Caliban. In fact, she is a very mechanical and manipulative person while she claims to be a loving and caring mother and wife. In fact, Irene is a very calculating person who wants to control everything in her life as well as in her family's life. She is

very selfish and does not care about her husband's happiness as long as he behaves the way she wants. In this context, Larsen writes

It was only that she wanted him [Brian] to be happy, resenting, however, his inability to be so with things as they were, and never acknowledging that though she did want him to be happy. It was only in her own way and by some plan of hers for him that she truly desired him to be so. Nor did she admit that all other plans, all other ways, she regarded as menaces, more or less indirect, to that security of place and substance which she insisted upon for her sons and in a lesser degree for herself. (*P*, p. 108)

Thus Irene imposes her own rules and does not want anything to change in her life. She breaks her husband's dreams without any remorse.

Furthermore, Irene is persuaded that she knows everything and that she could not have been wrong in her decisions. The author states

A feeling of uneasiness stole upon her at the inconceivable suspicion that she might have been wrong in her estimate of her husband's character. But she squirmed away from it. Impossible ! She couldn't have been wrong. Everything proved that she had been right. More than right, if such a thing could be. And all, she assured herself, because she understood him so well, because she had, actually, a special talent for understanding him. It was, as she saw it, the one thing that had been the basis of the success which she had made of a marriage that had threatened to fail. She knew him as well as he knew himself, or better. (*Ibid*, p. 101)

Thus, the heroine is so self-confident that she believes she cannot have been mistaken. She convinces herself that she does not have to worry since Brian's longing for a new life will fade and flicker out. For that, she has only "to direct and guide her man, to keep him going in the right direction" (*Ibid*) She believes that his dream would die just because she makes her mind that it will. Moreover, she takes up the mission of banking and smothering this desire until it dies as she does not "like changes, particularly changes that affected the smooth routine of her household" (*Ibid*, p. 103)

It is also worth mentioning that Irene only lives for appearances and for her social status. She does not at all care about her family's real contentment as long as they looked happy. Indeed, when she suspects that her

husband and Clare are having an affair, the only thing that matters to her is that nobody knows about it. Indeed, Irene “could bear anything, but only if no one knew that she had anything to bear. It hurt. It frightened her, but she could bear it” (*P*, p. 172) Thus, even though, Irene knows about Brian’s dissatisfaction, her only fear is that people know about it.

Moreover, she is also afraid of losing power on him. Larsen writes “Brian again. Unhappy, restless, withdrawn. And she, who had prided herself on knowing his moods, their causes and their remedies, had found it first unthinkable, and then intolerable, that this, so like and yet so unlike those other spasmodic restlessnesses of his, should be to her incomprehensible and elusive” (*Ibid*, p. 154) The use of the words ‘unthinkable’ and ‘intolerable’ shows Irene’s over-sized self-confidence about the fact that she controls everything even her husband’s moods and character.

Irene cannot admit that after all these years spent "studying" Brian and consequently knowing him better than he knows himself, she could not understand his behavior: “That guarded reserve of his seemed to her unjust. Inconsiderate, and alarming. It was as if he had stepped out beyond her reach into some section, strange and walled, where she could not get at him” (*Ibid*, p. 156) So, the protagonist is frightened by her husband’s incompressibility which threatens the only thing she wants in life: Security.

Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things?...to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, *unmolested*, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband. (*Ibid*, p. 200, emphasis mine)

Otherwise stated, Irene does not care about love or happiness, the only thing that matters is keeping her social status and looking happy in front of people. Her statements show that she does not love her husband or anybody else and that even if she pretends to be happy with her arranged life, in reality she is not.



Security or safety does not mean being unwounded; for her, it is to have a good social status and keeping up appearances.

Irene Redfield criticizes Clare's selfishness and insensitiveness while in reality she is not better. Indeed, when looking at Brian "she saw again the vision of Clare Kendry staring disdainfully down at the face of her father, and thought that it would be like that that she would look at her husband if he lay dead before her"(P, p. 119-120) Thus, Irene condemns her friend's behavior while they are very similar. Another instance is when she wants to get rid of Clare, she wishes that something happens to her "Anything. She didn't care what. Not even if it were that Clare's Margery were ill, or dying. Not even if Bellew should discover" (Ibid, p. 179) Thus, like Clare, Irene is ready to do anything to get what she wants and that is what she apparently does at the end of the novel by desiring Clare's death and may be even pushing her out of the window.

Additionally, Irene herself sometimes recognizes her insensitiveness. In fact, at first when she suspects her husband's unfaithfulness, she feels hurt. But, when she makes up her mind that everything has happened between Brian and Clare she does not feel hurt anymore and

this absence of acute, unbearable pain seemed to her unjust, as if she had been denied some exquisite solace of suffering which the full acknowledgment should have given her. Was it, perhaps, that she had endured all that a woman could endure of tormenting humiliation and fear? Or was it that she lacked the capacity for the acme of suffering? 'No, no!' she denied fiercely. "I'm human like everybody else. It's just that I'm so tired, so worn out, I can't feel any more." But she did not really believe that. (Ibid, p. 199-200)

Otherwise stated, the heroine has to reassure herself that she is human and that she can feel pain like anybody else and to find excuses to her lack of emotions. However, the last sentence clearly states that she does not believe it and that in reality she knows that she does not care because she does not love Brian. Actually, Irene does not permit her emotions to appear. In this context, Larsen writes "the other's [Brian's] words had brought the tears to her own eyes, though she didn't allow them to fall. The truth was that she knew weeping did

not become her” (*P*, p. 120) So, just like Helga Crane, Irene has constructed a carapace which makes her look insensitive.

Thus, after accepting that something happened between her husband and Clare, Irene recovers her manipulative nature as “she could again reach out for plans. Could think again of ways to keep Brian by her side...His duty was to her and to his boys” (*Ibid*, p. 201) She did not love him but she “meant to keep him” (*Ibid*) She even thinks of the possibility to share him with Clare. For her, it is “Better, far better, to share him than to lose him completely. Oh, she could close her eyes, if need be. She could bear it. She could bear anything” (*Ibid*, p. 202) This passage shows again Irene’s determination towards keeping a certain security at the cost of her dignity. Moreover, she decides to remain silent on her encounter with Bellew because she thinks that if Clare or Brian know about it “it would only weaken her own power to keep him [Brian]” (*Ibid*, p. 203)

After exploring the insensitive side of Irene, it is important to show that she has a second human side which makes the comparison with Caliban possible. In fact, even if there are many instances of Irene’s selfish and controlling behavior, she is also subject to emotions and even if it is rare she sometimes doubts of herself. Throughout the novel, she is fearful of losing the life she has constructed for her family. She is sometimes overwhelmed by this dread that constantly threatens her security. Besides, when she suspects an affair between her husband and her friend, she first reacts by feeling weak and even if she tries not to cry, her human side takes advantage and she cannot keep her tears from falling. In this regard, “she closed her unseeing eyes and clenched her fists. She tried not to cry. But her lips tightened and no effort could check the hot tears of rage and shame that sprang into her eyes and flowed down her cheeks; so she laid her face in her arms and wept silently” (*Ibid*, p. 163)

But, Irene does not want to show any emotions in front of people. Therefore, she first makes sure that Brian is out of the room before crying and afterwards she very cautiously erases all traces of her weeping. As a matter of fact,

When she was sure that she had done crying, she wiped away the warm remaining tears and got up. After bathing her swollen face in cold, refreshing water and carefully applying a stinging splash of toilet water, she went back to the mirror and regarded herself gravely. Satisfied that there lingered no betraying evidence of weeping, she dusted a little powder on her dark-white face and again examined it carefully, and with a kind of ridiculing contempt. "I do think," she confided to it, "that you've been something — oh, very much — of a damned fool" (*P*, p. 163-4)

Thus, before returning to her party, Irene wears the mask of the happy wife and perfectly hides her pain. She even feels that she has been a fool just because she cried which is a normal emotion in that situation.

Consequently, like Clare, Irene is a multifaceted character that perfectly fits with the figure of Caliban. This resemblance is clear in the following quotation. When Irene suspects that Brian is cheating on her, she thinks "it hurt. It hurt like hell. But it didn't matter, if no one knew. If everything could go on as before. If the boys were safe. It did hurt. But it didn't matter. But it did matter. It mattered more than anything had ever mattered before" (*Ibid*, p. 174-5) The repetitions and contradictions present in this passage completely illustrate Irene's mechanical and human sides. On the one hand, she seems to be insensitive and to not care. Yet, on the other hand, she is very hurt and suffers from the situation since even if she does not love her husband, his unfaithfulness touches her dignity and pride.

As a conclusion, Nella Larsen's novels show the real face of womanhood and sexuality for African-American females in the 1920s United States. Licia Morrow Calloway writes "Instead of showcasing positive images of the modern, fashionable black woman expertly functioning as wife and mother within her upwardly mobile family, Larsen's novels persistently dramatize the complications to motherhood generated by what W.E.B Du Bois called 'the problem of the color line'"<sup>241</sup>. Unlike some writers of her era, who wanted to rehabilitate the image of black women by ignoring the problems they faced, Larsen exposes such difficulties.

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<sup>241</sup>Calloway Morrow, Licia, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

This may also show the author's wish to prove that the best way to overcome these hardships and change the image of black females was by facing the stereotypes and subverting them instead of creating new pressures and putting black women in a restricted space where they are only supposed to be mothers. In this context, Helga struggles to find her place and gain sexual autonomy. However, she can achieve none. The former because she is a bi-racial person and thus rejected by both the white and black communities and the latter because her sexuality is either restricted or exploited. In Naxos, it is restricted because she is supposed to wear dark clothes that hide her femininity; whereas in Denmark, it is exploited as her relatives push her to show her femaleness by wearing colorful and sexy clothes.

At first sight, women's roles seem to be gendered in Nella Larsen's novels like Irene and Clare who perfectly play the roles of black and white matrons. Nevertheless, this is only in surface. These roles are subverted because the author shows how superficial they are. In fact, Irene faultlessly plays the role of a respectable black woman who only cares for her children. However, and as demonstrated above, she is not a good mother and neglects her children at the cost of her social obligations and image.

Helga Crane, on the other hand, demonstrates the dangers of such roles on women as well as on their families. For instance, she shows that having many children, as the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance incite to, can be dangerous for females' health and that it becomes difficult to take care of all of them correctly. She does not have enough time to clean her house or even to cook and always feels tired. Helga looks with disgust at "the disorder around her, the permanent assembly of partly emptied medicine bottles on the clock-shelf, the perpetual array of drying baby-clothes on the chair-backs, the constant debris of broken toys on the floor" (*Q*, p. 115) She is unable of taking care of her house and feels powerless about it. Thus, even though some women think it is natural to go through several pregnancies and still be able to take care of their husbands like Sary Jones, Larsen shows the danger of such repeated child-births on women.

Therefore, Larsen's characters try to fight against the vulnerability that society imposes on them because of their gender and sexuality. Mary Helen Washington argues that Larsen's protagonists "are driven to emotional and psychological extremes in their attempts to handle ambivalence, marginality, racism, and sexism...Behind the appearance of security is a woman who hears the beating of her wings against a walled prison"<sup>242</sup>. Thus, unlike many of the characters created during the era, Larsen's revolt against the image society reflects of them either because of their color or because of their sex. However, they are usually confronted to difficulties that render them vulnerable in the face of society's expectations. So, Nella Larsen's novel suggest that the fluidity of female sexual desire cannot be contained within strict dichotomies of race, class, or sexual orientation, and that women can manipulate and perhaps even transcend such boundaries.

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<sup>242</sup>Washington, Mary Helen. *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*. Garden City: Anchor- Doubleday, 1987, p. 356.

## CHAPTER III: DECONSTRUCTING VULNERABILITY IN NELLA LARSEN'S NOVELS

Race, gender, and sexuality are usually seen as provoking vulnerability. After examining these three concepts in Nella Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, it will be interesting to determine if this vulnerability leads the characters to their fates and if it can be a form of resistance. In this context, Judith Butler's speech and article *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* will be used to determine if vulnerability can become a weapon for Larsen's characters and if their racial and sexual differences are sometimes a privilege rather than a burden.

### A. Vulnerability as a Means of Resistance

Butler states "I want to argue against the idea that vulnerability is the opposite of resistance. Indeed, I want to argue affirmatively that vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment"<sup>243</sup>. In effect, Butler maintains that vulnerability can sometimes be a weapon for oppressed people because by exposing their precariousness or weakness, they sometimes get reparations for the injustices they undergo<sup>244</sup>.

Furthermore, the feminist argues that performativity makes people vulnerable because "We are called names and find ourselves living in a world

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<sup>243</sup>Butler, J., 2014. *Rethinking vulnerability and resistance*. Lecture at the Instituto Franklin, 24 June 2014 [online]. Madrid: University of Alcalá. Available from: <http://www.institutofranklin.net>, p. 12.

<sup>244</sup>Butler takes as an example the public assemblies in which people who live in precarious conditions ask for their rights. For her,

There is plural and performative bodily resistance at work that shows how bodies are being acted on by social and economic policies that are decimating livelihoods. But these bodies, in showing this precarity, are also resisting these very powers; they enact a form of resistance that presupposes vulnerability of a specific kind, and opposes precarity.

The power of these public assemblies lies in the fact that these people expose their vulnerability to authorities that can see their precariousness and try to resolve their problems.

of categories and descriptions way before we start to sort them critically and endeavour to change or make them on our own. In this way, we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose”<sup>245</sup>. Thus, people are acted upon by society as they were born in a world where everything is predetermined and where they do not have much freedom to change things. Much in the same way, Larsen’s characters are vulnerable to society’s preconceived ideas and conceptions, especially about race, gender, and sexuality as previously determined.

In fact, Larsen’s protagonists are pressed by the stereotypes society spreads about them because of their race, gender, and sexuality. Some of them like Anne Grey, in *Quicksand*, even internalize those stereotypes and hate their own black culture. In this context, Helga Crane states “[Negroes] didn’t want to be like themselves. What they...begged for, was to be like their white overlords” (*Q*, p. 105) Consequently, African-Americans like Anne are made vulnerable because of racial preconceived ideas and even feel ashamed to be colored. Similarly, female characters feel exposed because of the stereotyped views society has of their sexuality. For instance, Helga Crane tends to repress her sexual desires in order to belie the jezebel image associated with black women.

For Butler, vulnerability can direct democracy as an intentional mobilization of physical exposure. She argues that there are two kinds of resistance. On the one hand, there is resistance to injustices and discriminations of which vulnerability and its exposure are a part and which take political dimensions. On the other hand, there is resistance to vulnerability which takes psychic proportions<sup>246</sup>. These two types of resistance are present in Nella Larsen’s novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*.

In fact, in *Quicksand*, in Denmark Helga Crane exposes her vulnerability. She plays the role of the exotic other and values her differences. Likewise, she uses her femininity and sexuality as a power to seduce men both in Naxos and Copenhagen. In Naxos, with her ex-fiancé James Vayle and in

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<sup>245</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>246</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

Copenhagen with Alex Olsen. Additionally, she uses these features to seduce her husband the Reverend Pleasant Green. In Copenhagen, Helga is well-treated because she exposes her bare vulnerability. She gets expensive clothes and attends the most prestigious events of the city.

Butler believes that “the very meaning of vulnerability changes when it becomes understood as part of the very practice of political resistance”<sup>247</sup>. Thus, Helga is not ashamed of her vulnerability and uses it as a weapon that allows her to befriend the bourgeoisie of Copenhagen and to be courted by the most influential gentlemen of the country. When she returns to Harlem, Helga is very popular as “Her courageous clothes attracted attention...Her life in Copenhagen had taught her to expect and accept admiration as her due.” (*Q*, p. 127) Helga’s intentional vulnerability consequently becomes a form of resistance.

After using the word "everybody", Butler argues that universalizing the conditions of people by using such words can be dangerous since totalitarianism kills individual distinctions. She states “if we accept that part of what a body is...in its dependency on other bodies and networks of support, then we are suggesting that it is not altogether right to conceive of individual bodies as completely distinct from one another”<sup>248</sup>. In other words, if the body is universal then people become vulnerable because their differences are not taken into account. So, society creates categories and depictions that are considered as the norms and people try to fit in them by hiding or ignoring their distinctions.

Nevertheless, is it important to know “whose lives were never included in those norms? Whose lives are, in fact, explicitly excluded from those norms? What norm of the human constrains those common norms? And to what extent is that a masculinist norm?”<sup>249</sup> Through these questions, Butler stresses the exclusionary nature of the established standards that only match with certain groups of people. Thus, it is the fact that Larsen’s characters do

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<sup>247</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>248</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>249</sup>Ibid, p. 11.



not fit in those norms that gets them in trouble and prevents them from having a stable life.

Nonetheless, it is only in Denmark that Helga uses her vulnerability as a form of resistance. Indeed, throughout the novel the prevailing kind of resistance is the one against vulnerability. Butler states that “the psychic resistance to vulnerability wishes that it were never the case that discourse and power were imposed upon us in ways that we never chose, and so seeks to shore up a notion of individual sovereignty against the shaping forces of history on our embodied lives”<sup>250</sup>. Helga does not want to see her color or gender as features that make her vulnerable and above all she does not want to be perceived as such. She struggles throughout her journey to belie the stereotypes society has about black or bi-racial women.

Helga is so obsessed with avoiding the Jezebel image that she does not give herself the chance to know what love is when she meets Dr. Anderson. Despite the feelings she has for him during their first encounter, she does not follow her heart and she pays a high price for that. Larsen states

Just what had happened to her there in that cool dim room under the quizzical gaze of those piercing gray eyes? Whatever it was had been so powerful, so compelling, that but for a few chance words she would still be in Naxos. And why had she permitted herself to be jolted into a rage so fierce, so illogical, so disastrous, that now after it was spent she sat despondent, sunk in shameful contrition. (*Q*, p. 55)

Throughout the novel, Helga cannot avoid thinking of Dr. Anderson but she does not allow herself to admit it because she is so obsessed by repressing her sexuality in order to be a ‘lady’. She tries to convince herself that “she didn’t..., after all, like this Dr. Anderson. He was too controlled, too sure of himself and others. She detested cool, perfectly controlled people. Well it didn’t matter. He didn’t matter. But she could not put him from her mind.” (Ibid, p. 59) He occupies her thoughts even after years as he still retains his place in her memory.

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<sup>250</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

After learning his engagement to Anne, Helga wonders what “was there about that man which had the power always to upset her? She began to think back to her first encounter with him. Perhaps if she hadn’t come away – She laughed. Derisively. ‘Yes, if I hadn’t come away, I’d be stuck in Harlem. Working every day of my life. Chattering about the race problem” (*Q*, p. 111) She imagines what would have happened if she had given their love a chance. This passage is somehow ironic because even if Helga Crane is horrified and exhausted by people who chatter about the race, Larsen herself discusses the topic of race in her novels. However, it is important to shed light on the fact that Larsen’s aim is not propaganda; it is rather to expose the race problems and their repercussions on African-American or mixed-race women.

Helga’s refusal of admitting her feelings for Robert Anderson is closely related to her mother’s experience with love. In fact, she describes Marie as “a fair Scandinavian girl in love with life, with love, with passion” (*Ibid*, p. 56) but Marie’s love for a black person who deserted her and the cruelties of life left her “a little pathetic, a little hard, and a little unapproachable” (*Ibid*) Helga sees her mother as naïve and believes that her love destroys her since “in forgetting all but love she had forgotten...that some things the world never forgives” (*Ibid*) like miscegenation.

Thus, Helga decides never to open her heart to a man whom she believes will leave her like her father did. Helga hopes her mother had been happy at least in the short period before her father left; yet, she doubts it. Indeed, “How could she have been? A girl gently bred...flung into poverty, sordidness, and dissipation. She visualized her now, sad, cold, and –yes, remote” (*Ibid*, p. 56) As a result, Helga does her best to stay away from love and creates armor to protect herself from being hurt. However, it is this carapace that prevents her from knowing real love with Dr. Anderson and which dooms her to an unhappy end.

Butler maintains that “Of course, there are many reasons to be opposed to vulnerability...There are those who worry that vulnerability, if it becomes a theme or a problem for thinking, will be asserted as a primary

existential condition, ontological and constitutive”<sup>251</sup>. Some people are afraid that if they recognize and expose their vulnerability, it will become prevalent and existential. However, they do not realize that vulnerability is a “condition humana”<sup>252</sup> which is shared by all human beings. Therefore, it is almost useless to try to resist vulnerability because it is impossible to defy it by trying to resist it. Moreover, it can even be destructive to try to do so and that is the case for Helga Crane.

Helga is victim of her vulnerability: either she uses it as a form of resistance or she resists it. Indeed, on the one hand, when Helga exposes her vulnerability in Denmark and when she realizes what image she reflects there, she is haunted by that picture and is ashamed of having exploited her differences to get some privileges. She does not recognize herself in that portrait and hates it. She feels that she betrayed her race by making a spectacle of it. On the other hand, when Helga tries to resist her vulnerability by repressing her sexuality to belie the jezebel image associated with black women for instance, she pays a high price and is condemned to a miserable life. As a matter of fact, when Helga attempts to resist the contradictory definitions that are given by society to race, gender, and sexuality, she dooms herself to an unhappy ending.

It is interesting to remember that jezebel was the Phoenician wife of King Ahab of Israel. She is mentioned in different passages in the Book of Kings. She is usually described as a murderer, a prostitute, and an enemy of God. Thus, the association of African-American women with that figure was very pejorative. There are some similarities between jezebel and Larsen’s characters. In fact, like them, she was othered because she was a foreigner and different. Moreover, her death reminds of Clare’s death in *Passing* as both of them fell from a window. Jezebel was thrown by her own people while Clare’s death remains a mystery. Indeed, it is impossible to ascertain whether Clare was murdered by Irene, fell by accident, or committed suicide. These

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<sup>251</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>252</sup>Kottow, M., —Vulnerability: What Kind of Principle is It?, *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy: A European Journal*, 7 ( 3), 2004, P. 282.

similarities and especially the parallel between Jezebel's and Clare's deaths will be further explored in the third part of this thesis.

Nonetheless, it is primordial to shed light on the fact that Helga Crane's vulnerability is not caused by her color or by her sex. It is rather the result of the way she deals with them and how she tries to reduce them in order to contradict society's expectations about a black or a bi-racial female. In this context, David Levering Lewis argues, in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, that unlike many of her contemporaries who focused on the subjects of race and gender and who used these latter as the source of their protagonists' misadventures, Nella Larsen does not put color or sex as what can be held responsible for her characters' decline. For him, "The quicksand of her novel's title is found not just in the social situation she [Helga] encounters but in her own inner emptiness"<sup>253</sup>. Consequently, Helga's fate is not only related to social pressure and stereotypes; it is also rooted in her internal troubles. Indeed, Helga suffers from a traumatic state related to her childhood spent among people denigrating her even within the household. Besides, her mother's absence of solidarity and later her death leaves her with an internal emptiness that she struggles to fill without any success.

Throughout the novel, Helga has many chances to live a happy and comfortable life. Yet, she throws away all those opportunities because she is obsessed with racial and sexual stereotypes which make her vulnerable and which she attempts to defy. Cheryl Wall describes Helga Crane as an intelligent, idealistic person who takes a journey towards self-discovery. However, Helga is so fixated on her differences that she misses a lot of occasions and ends up trapped in a hopeless life. She does not realize that she ruins her life in order to resist her vulnerability and that her efforts are ineffective.

It is only at the end of the story, once in the deep rural South and when it is too late that Helga becomes conscious that "she had let so many other things, other chances, escape her" (*Q*, p. 129) She has many regrets and wishes to be free again but her obsessions with racial and sexual constructs led

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<sup>253</sup>Levering Lewis, David, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

her to an empty life. She also realizes “how deeply, how passionately she must have loved him [Dr. Anderson]” (*Q*, p. 129) She laments about her choices and thinks that, just like her mother, she has been “the damnest kind of fool” (*Ibid*, p. 134) She has left the only person who could understand and sympathize with her. Indeed, when he meets her in Harlem, Dr. Anderson tells her “You haven’t changed. You’re still seeking for something, I think” and “at his speech there dropped from her [Helga] that vague feeling of yearning, that longing for sympathy and understanding which his presence evoked” (*Ibid*, p. 82) He was able to perceive that she was longing for that something that she herself would not identify but she drove him away because of her fear to be vulnerable or hurt.

Helga thinks she can only blame herself. She cannot even blame God as he does not exist “The white man’s God. And his great love for all people regardless of race! What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe. How could she, how could anyone, have been so deluded? How could ten million black folk credit it when daily before their eyes was enacted its contradiction?” (*Ibid*, p. 157)The protagonist takes the entire responsibility of her actions and understands that her fate has been caused by her stubbornness towards race and gender problems and that it was a lost cause.

Helga Crane alone is unable to fight racism and sexism, her resistance to vulnerability renders her even more helpless. In this regard, Wall maintains that “For Larsen it is enough that Helga has fought against the white world’s definition of a Negro.....At the same time, she has resisted male definitions of her womanhood.....Helga never achieves true self-definition.....Inevitably, her courage avails little when it is pitted against the quicksand of racism and sexism”<sup>254</sup>. Helga does not accept the double bind; instead she tries to solve it. In *An Aesthetic of Education in the Era of Globalization*, Gayatri Spivak analyzes the double bind which can be defined as a paradoxical, binary relationship between two subjects that oppose yet construct each other<sup>255</sup>.

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<sup>254</sup>Wall, Cheryl A. *op, cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>255</sup>Spivak Chakravorty, Gayatri. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 3.

## 1. Playing the Double Bind

In Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, the double bind is present in two ways first because society incites African-Americans "to live with contradictory instructions"<sup>256</sup>. In other words, this notion portrays the experience of receiving contradictory commands like in the phrase "be spontaneous". This demand is totally illogical because it contradicts spontaneity. Much in the same way, African-Americans "were prompted to reject their Mother [Africa] even as they were prohibited from identifying with their Father [America]"<sup>257</sup>.

Besides, black females were both described as sexual and asexual beings. Second, the double bind is present within the novels' protagonists themselves. In fact, the characters themselves are bound to be caught in a double bind because they are composed of two opposed elements blackness and whiteness. They are both black and white yet neither fully black nor completely white. They have to admit that they are bi-racial and to accept their background in order to succeed in playing the double bind and to have a stable and firm identity.

The double bind also involves an irreconcilable dilemma in which the obligation of one subject contains a ban for the other and vice versa. In a review of Spivak's *An Aesthetic of Education in the Era of Globalization*, Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti defines the concept by stating

I could only start to grasp this when I realized that dialectical negations (e.g., White had been bad, when it was supposed to be good) generated antagonistic projections (e.g., therefore Black is now good) that became a mirror reactive reflection of what the dialectical negation was trying to overcome in the first place. The possibility of holding Black and White in tension with their potential negative and positive aspects in view (and being aware of the partiality of this view) is how I interpret the double bind<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup>Spivak Chakravorty, Gayatri, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>257</sup>Bergman, Jill, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>258</sup>De Oliveira Andreotti, Vanessa. *Book Reviews: An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization, Gayatri C. Spivak. Other Education - The Journal of Educational Alternatives. Volume 3 (2014), Issue 2 · 2012, ISSN 2049-2162, p. 105.*

In other terms, it is only through acknowledging the relationship between two antagonistic subjects that one can understand and be involved in a double bind.

This idea of trying to negotiate the double bind by accepting one's differences and making them as one identity can also be found in Du Bois's concept of Double Consciousness, later developed in Judith Butler's essay *Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's psychoanalytic challenge*. Indeed, Spivak, Du Bois, and Butler share Larsen's idea about the fact that all the individual's differences should be put together so as to create a firm identity. Nevertheless, Larsen's characters seem unable of doing so and try to defy their differences by either fighting or ignoring them. Otherwise stated, instead of trying to resolve the double bind, by choosing between the white or black communities as Helga does for instance, Larsen's characters may have found a solution in playing with it.

Furthermore, denying this double bind, which implies resisting one's vulnerability by rejecting one's differences, is impossible and can be very dangerous. Indeed, Helga is so preoccupied by contradicting the vision society has of black females that she ironically ends up as the perfect stereotype of this vision. Stringer writes "Ironically, Olsen's racist and sexist invocation of 'the warm, impulsive nature of the women of Africa,' James Vayle's horrified vision of 'the others' having too many children, will have been indeed the true, or at least the final, Helga Crane"<sup>259</sup>. Helga becomes everything that she fears and abhors, "a poor black woman at the mercy of her fertility"<sup>260</sup>.

Helga marries all the things she rejected and was running away from. She becomes a housewife living in a rural south area and whose only utility is to have children. She is disgusted by her husband and by everything surrounding her. The protagonist loses all her principles and submits to the stereotypes she was opposing. She faces a spiritual and intellectual death as she becomes a machine with no feelings and no dreams. She is resigned and agrees to give up on her ambitions and to drown in this quicksand of depression. At the end of the story, Larsen states: "It seemed hundreds of years

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<sup>259</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>260</sup>*Ibid*, p. 81.

since she [Helga] had been strong” (*Q*, p. 134) In fact, the promising and strong character seems to have become lifeless and lost some of her strength.

It is Helga’s obstinacy towards resolving the double bind that predestines her to an unhappy life. Spivak emphasizes on the importance of learning to see one’s privilege as a loss <sup>261</sup>. Otherwise stated, when there is a deficit of deprivation, people tend to lose many things. In the terms of Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti “our inherited privilege (e.g., class mobility, social and cultural capital, whiteness, education, etc.) has restricted our imagination and possibilities of inexistence, and prevented us from having access to other ways of knowing and being. This interrupts the common belief that the privileged ‘I’ is complete while the Other is lacking”<sup>262</sup>. Therefore, learning to see one’s privilege as a loss is very important because if people do not open their minds and only see what they have, they will certainly miss something, which can be turned, in the extreme case, into ignorance and xenophobia like in the case of Jack Bellew in *Passing*. Indeed, it is his ignorance and his reluctance to know about African-Americans that create his hatred and racism for them.

This idea of learning to see one’s privilege as a loss can be inverted in the case of Nella Larsen’s characters. Indeed, one can also see his/her loss, or what he/she believes to be a loss, as a privilege. In this regard, Nella Larsen’s characters can see their bi-racial origins as a privilege instead of regarding them as a burden to carry. Their mixed background could have been a force giving them a chance to know two communities and two cultures. Helga Crane, for instance, can see the hypocrisy prevailing both in the white and black communities towards race problems. Yet, she does not see it as a privilege. Contrariwise, it is this ability of seeing people’s hypocrisy and superficiality, especially about race, that shapes Helga’s unhappy life.

When she exposes this problem to Dr. Anderson in Naxos, he replies “Someday you’ll learn that lies, injustices, and hypocrisy are a part of every ordinary community. Most people achieve a sort of protective immunity, a kind of callousness, toward them. If they didn’t, they couldn’t endure” (*Ibid*, p. 54)

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<sup>261</sup>Spivak Chakravorty, Gayatri, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>262</sup>De Oliveira Andreotti, Vanessa, *op. cit.*, p. 105.



Otherwise stated, one has to accept the imperfections of society in order to be part of it because they are in every community. However, Helga is unable to accept this fact and travels from place to place so as to get rid of them. It is only at the end of the novel that she realizes that it is impossible and that she missed out on her life looking for an inexistent wonderland.

## 2. Helga Crane's Journey: Between Happiness and Disappointment

When arriving into a place, Helga is always persuaded of finding her niche because she can only see its good sides. Nevertheless, after a while, she understands that the racial problems and hypocrisy are just the same everywhere. Larsen states

Helga crane taught in Naxos for almost two years, at first with the keen joy and zest of those immature people who have dreamed dreams of doing good to their fellow men. But gradually this zest was bottled out, giving place to a deep hatred for the trivial hypocrisies and careless cruelties which were, unintentionally perhaps, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift. (*Q*, p. 39-40)

But, Helga is also conscious that the problem is within herself. When reflecting about her life in Naxos, she comprehends that “it wasn’t, she was suddenly aware, merely the school and its ways and its decorous stupid people that oppressed her. There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her from getting the things she had wanted. Still wanted.” (Ibid, p. 44) This disappointment with the places where she lives causes the heroine’s frustration and loneliness.

Yet, Helga had never felt so isolated as she did in Chicago. As a matter of fact, when she is rebuffed by her uncle’s wife, she feels “as if all the bogies and goblins that had beset her unloved, unloving, and unhappy childhood had come to life with tenfold power to hurt and frighten. For the wound was deeper in that her long freedom from their presence had rendered her the more vulnerable” (Ibid, p. 63) This unfortunate encounter leaves her even more vulnerable in a city that reminds her of the wounds and discriminations she underwent as a child. Thus, she feels “horribly lonely...This sense of loneliness increased, it grew to appalling

proportions...shutting her off from all of life around her. Devastated she was, and always on the verge of weeping. It made her small and insignificant that in all the climbing massed city no one cared one whit about her” (*Q*, p. 66) In this turmoil, and even if she is not religious at all, Helga goes to a crowded church where she hopes that “some good Christian would speak to her, invite her to return, or inquire kindly if she was a stranger in the city” (*Ibid*) But, no one did and she hated religion even more.

It is always the same pattern that is repeated in *Quicksand* concerning the protagonist’s happiness and sense of belonging. Whenever she takes the decision to leave, Helga feels reborn and dreams of a joyful future. When she arrives in New York, at first, she believes she has found a place she can call home “she was able to reflect with a flicker of amusement on the constant feeling of humiliation and inferiority which had encompassed her in Naxos. Her new friends looked with contempt and scorn on Naxos and all its works. This gave Helga a pleasant sense of avengement.” (*Ibid*, p. 75) There, she “found herself.” (*Ibid*) Gradually, she even “lost the tantalizing oppression of loneliness and isolation which always, it seemed, had been a part of her existence.” (*Ibid*, p. 77)

Helga is finally happy and it is because she does not analyze her happiness or the people around her. For a while, she has been able to reach what Dr. Anderson has called the protective immunity against society’s hypocrisy. She even got rid of the feeling of smallness she felt “first during her sorry, unchildlike childhood among hostile white folk in Chicago, and later during her uncomfortable sojourn among snobbish black folk in Naxos.” (*Ibid*, p. 78) However and as usual “it didn’t last, this happiness of Helga Crane’s” (*Ibid*) because she starts to analyze the hypocrisy of Harlemites who pretend to hate everything white but who tend to imitate these latter’s life style. Helga is unable to understand what happens to her. She first thinks that she is sick and goes to the doctor; then she believes she needs a vacation which she takes. Nevertheless, her restlessness does not disappear and she starts to hate everything around her. Like in Naxos and Chicago, “a sensation of

estrangement and isolation encompassed her” (*Q*, p. 79) She even starts to feel repulsion for the black race.

Once again, Helga prefers to flee and to go to Denmark. She dreams of change and to go “somewhere where at least she would be permanently satisfied...She let herself drop into the blissful sensation of visualizing herself in different, strange places, among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated and understood.” (Ibid, p. 88) Helga “turned her back on painful America, resolutely shutting out the griefs, the humiliations, the frustrations, which she had endured there.” (Ibid, p. 105)She feels like a released bird and has “that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race.” (Ibid, p. 94)

She believes that “This [Copenhagen], then, was where she belonged. This was her proper setting. She felt consoled at last for the spiritual wounds of the past.” (Ibid, p. 97) Still, after a year in Copenhagen, Helga’s phantoms of unhappiness start to haunt her again. In fact, the feelings of dissatisfaction and displacement that she thought she had left in America grow every day and she starts to believe that the problem is inside of her rather than the place where she lives. She does not accept the vulnerability or the shortcomings of society and comprehend that she needs to make some concessions towards her values in order to be happy because nothing is perfect.

It is her persistence to resist vulnerability that destroys Helga Crane. Butler argues that exposing one’s vulnerability can seem to be allied with self-destruction as when demonstrators expose themselves to the risk of being hurt by the police. However, in Larsen’s novels it is the opposite that happens. Indeed, when exposing her vulnerability, Helga is well-treated; she is invited to the most prestigious parties and is courted by many rich, white men. Likewise, Audrey Denney, who is proud of her differences and who vindicates them seems to live a happy life and to be blooming. She seems free of all the pressure that Helga senses as she tries to resist what she thinks is her vulnerability, race and sex. Instead of letting her sexuality be exploited because of the stereotyped image society has of black women and the pressure put on these latter, Audrey prefers to use her sexuality to get rid of that pressure.

## B. The Consequences of Resisting Vulnerability

So, all the efforts Helga puts in resisting vulnerability turn against her and produce the opposite of what she wanted to do. In fact, at the end of the novel, she is condemned to become all she was running from. Stringer states

[What would it mean] to imagine Helga Crane, with her many little children, her self-satisfied, sloppy husband,...surviving at least for a time in the South at the beginning of the Great Depression, and long prior to the Civil Rights era? What would it cost us to hang on to the lost cosmopolitanism, the multicultural inheritances, of this rural Southern black woman?<sup>263</sup>

Through these questions, Stringer seems sorry for the fate of such a promising character. Throughout the novel, Helga, who is described as intelligent and ambitious, has many opportunities to change her life for the better. Yet, she ruins all those prospects because of her fixation on race and gender problems. This is a strategy used by Larsen in order to show how society's stereotypes ruin a young woman's life as it will be demonstrated in the next part of this work.

Instead of trying to resist vulnerability by denying her differences, Helga Crane could have attempted to negotiate them and use the double bind to take advantage of them like Audrey Denney. Butler's article sheds light on the fact that since people were born in a world where categories are already imposed, the best thing to do is to accept the vulnerability that is generated by this categorization and to recognize the series of dependence that rule human existence. Butler maintains that "we may find ourselves somewhat awkwardly opposed to vulnerability. Of course, that is a rather funny thing to say, since we might conjecture that any amount of opposition to vulnerability does not exactly defeat its operation in our bodily and social lives"<sup>264</sup>. In other words, it is useless to attempt to resist that vulnerability since it exists even before people are born.

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<sup>263</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>264</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

## 1. Binarism and Identity Blurring

Nonetheless, these categories are sometimes subject to negotiations or changes. For instance, passing suggests that people hide their color and pretend to be white. These people are no longer considered as black so, they succeed, in a way, to change their color or at least the way it is perceived. In this context, Clare and sometimes Irene, succeed in transcending the racial barriers which maintain that black can never become white and vice versa. Furthermore, the mere fact of being mixed-race goes counter these categories which imply that a person can only be white or black but never both. In fact, bi-racial people are both white and black because of their origins.

Bent Sorensen argues “A very limited catalogue of large, signification-carrying differences can be generated, consisting of the following six discourse differences: age, sex, race, class, nation, and religion.....Here it should be restated as strongly as possible that all the differences are negotiable, even the supposedly biologically determined ones<sup>265</sup>. Otherwise stated, these dissimilarities that create in-groups and out-groups and which are a pretext to exclude people who are viewed as abnormal are only the basis that are used to categorize people when they are born communicatively. However, these differences are not a sufficient element to judge people because they can be variable. So, these differences are not absolute and can be altered. But, does negotiating or hiding one’s racial or sexual distinctions contribute to make her/him more or less vulnerable?

Likewise, Jessica G. Rabin argues that “Binarisms permeate the foundations of our western cultural and intellectual framework –native/foreign, black/white, man/woman, heterosexuality/homosexuality– but are these fixed essentialisms implicit in such models truly reflective of human experience (actual and literary)?”<sup>266</sup> Otherwise stated, do these binarisms match with reality? Is a person only black or white or is it possible for a person to be both black and white? To what extent do these binarisms define people and how do

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<sup>265</sup> Sorensen, Bent, *op. cit.*, p. 8

<sup>266</sup> Rabin G. Jessica. *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen*. New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 1.

they contribute to the construction or deconstruction of their identities? What happens when the imaginary line between the binary concepts becomes hazy?

Rabin argues that the multicultural ambiance in the United States of the interwar period resulted in a blurring of identity categories and that this gave the opportunity to writers who had difficulties to identify with such categories to write their own literature and create characters who had troubles in finding their identities like Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein and Nella Larsen. Therefore, Larsen goes beyond those rigid identity groupings by creating mixed-race characters who show that their individuality cannot be put in a narrow racial or sexual category.

## 2. Fake Vulnerability

Judith Butler wonders “if women or minorities seek to establish themselves as vulnerable, do they unwittingly or wittingly seek to establish a protected status subject to a paternalistic set of powers that must safeguard the vulnerable, those presumed to be weak and in need of protection?”<sup>267</sup>. In other words, if women expose their vulnerability, does it mean that they ask for protection from men for example? In this respect, in *Passing*, female characters play the roles that society imposes on them in what Cheryl Wall calls “a masquerade of femininity”<sup>268</sup>. The word masquerade implies the superficiality of those roles in addition to meaning acting or staging. Hence, Clare and Irene, especially the latter, perform those trickeries to attain their goals of gaining social status. Therefore, they pretend to be fragile and delicate beings who need the support of their husbands to live comfortably and to be accepted by society. Accordingly, they judge one another according to their husbands’ success and possessions.

Another form of resistance to vulnerability that can be encountered in Larsen’s novels is mimicry<sup>269</sup>. This last concept is developed by Homi Bhabha in his work *The Location of Culture* (1994) It is when colonized or in this case black people imitate the whites in different aspects of life from language to

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<sup>267</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>268</sup> Wall, Cheryl A. *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>269</sup>Bhabha, Homi, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

politics. It is regarded as opportunistic as these people imitate the holders of power to get an insight of that power. However, it is seen as reprehensible and people who do so are generally rejected by their own community. Thus, it is perceived as a betrayal. On the other hand, Bhabha argues that mimicry can be subversive because it reveals the inauthenticity of all emblematic expressions of authority<sup>270</sup>.

As a result, when Larsen's protagonists imitate white Americans' life style, they resist vulnerability by showing the superficiality of such aspects of the lives of what is considered as the superior race. In this regard, Anne Grey in *Quicksand* and Irene in *Passing* ape the whites' way of living by wearing the same clothes, buying the same furniture and shaping their existence accordingly. Anne Grey, for example, does a lot of charity work to help poor black people. Yet, she is disgusted by them and African-American culture and prefers the white one even in the way her house is decorated. It is as if Larsen wanted to denounce those black people living with white values and imitating them in all the domains. It seems to be a strategy the author uses to point at the prevailing racial hypocrisy in the 1920s black society.

Therefore, even if the female characters in *Passing* seem to be submitted and to depend on their husbands, in reality, it is just a strategy they use to attain their goals. Irene, for instance, arranges her family life as she wishes and takes all the important decisions that concern them. She is the one who decides to stay in the United States even as her husband wants to leave for Brazil. Clare, on the other hand, has a power to change her husband and to make him softer. In this regard, Irene states "she [Clare] smiled on him [Bellew], and her smile seemed to transform him, to soften and mellow him, as the rays of the sun does a fruit" (*P*, p. 173)

Judith Butler claims that sometimes dominant groups use vulnerability as a pretext to take advantage of minorities and exploit them. She writes

There are too many cynical and self-interested appropriations of "vulnerability" by dominant groups, sometimes by colonial powers, who claim to be made unacceptably "vulnerable" by

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<sup>270</sup>Bhabha, Homi, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

those who seek equality, democracy, the end of colonialism, or reparation for past injuries.... This use of “vulnerability” effaces the condition of vulnerability in which precarious populations live, and constitutes an ideological seizure of the term to expand and rationalize inequalities<sup>271</sup>.

This exploitation of vulnerability can be very harmful for minorities because it justifies inequalities and abuse. In this context, in *Passing*, Clare’s husband, Jack Bellew, feels vulnerable in the contact of black people. Jack is a white, wealthy man but he fears African-Americans. He justifies his hatred by the fact that he feels vulnerable because they always steal and kill people and worse (*P*, p. 172) He claims that white people are the ones who need protection from those “black scrimy devils” who “give [him] the creeps” (Ibid)

This way, Jack Bellew and other white Americans “use the discourse of “vulnerability” to shore up their own privilege”<sup>272</sup> and to justify their exploitation and abuse of black people. The most interesting point is that Bellew, like many white people, thinks that he does not know any black person. His ideas come from newspapers and the white community. Consequently, it proves that white people spread stereotypes about African-Americans to make the white population feel vulnerable and fearful of the other race and validate these latter’s mistreatment. Thus, there is a reversal of vulnerability as white people are incited to be fearful of the other who is made diabolic by white leaders and media that define black people as a threat. This leads to xenophobia and racism from white masses like in the case of Jack Bellew.

To conclude, Butler affirms that “it would seem that without being able to think about vulnerability, we cannot think about resistance, and that by thinking about resistance, we are already underway, dismantling the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist”<sup>273</sup>. So, vulnerability and resistance are two inseparable concepts as each one implies the other. Yet, as proved through Helga’s story, it can be very dangerous to attempt to resist vulnerability because it is a losing game. Larsen’s protagonists establish that

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<sup>271</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 15-6.

<sup>272</sup>Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>273</sup>Ibid, p. 18-9.



racial and sexual differences do not cause vulnerability unless they are denied or resisted as Helga does. Furthermore, Irene and Clare's characters show that some women that lived during the 1920s could be powerful and control their family lives if they knew how to expose their vulnerability and accept being caught in a double bind.

Both Larsen's novels were welcomed and well received. Still, their endings were criticized because scholars have considered that her novels put women in the position of victims because of their gender or race. However, "None of [the critics] seems to have considered the possibility of deliberate feminist didacticism as a strategy on Larsen's part.....the many cases of ironic narration in *Quicksand* and *Passing* make such reading plausible"<sup>274</sup>. Sorensen argues that the exclusion of Larsen by her family and the discrimination she experienced made her familiar with the economies of victimhood and that she may have done it on purpose to demonstrate the dangers of black females denying their differences and resisting their vulnerability.

Yet, unlike what most critics argued just after the publication of the novels, these disastrous endings are not due to racial or sexual differences. They are rather the result of the protagonists' choices and decisions because as Levinas argues, vulnerability belongs to no sex or gender; neither does it belong to any ethnic group<sup>275</sup>. Clare's death, for example, is the consequence of "the mess she's liable to get herself into" (*P*, p. 174) and the risks she took by marrying a white man without telling him the truth about her racial origins. Yet, risk taking may also be part of resistance to vulnerability which, as demonstrated above, is impossible and always leads disastrous endings like in the case of Helga Crane in *Quicksand*.

So, did the author mean that there is no escape from becoming what society expects one to be if that person does not accept her/his differences? Or did she want to show the necessity to change the social restrictions of that time because they had disastrous effects on the lives of women? The answer for

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<sup>274</sup>Sorensen, Bent, *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>275</sup>Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969, p. 256.

both questions is yes. On the one hand, Larsen wanted to show the inevitability of submitting to the norm because one person cannot change things especially if that person tries to solve the double bind instead of playing it. Therefore, by resisting one's vulnerability, that person only gets to submit even more to society's expectations. On the other hand, Larsen aimed at demonstrating the need to alter people's ideas about black women because the social pressure they went through doomed them to tragic endings.

**PART THREE: WRITING THE  
OTHER: DIFFERENCE/  
DIFFERENCE** <sup>276</sup>

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<sup>276</sup>Différance , as defined by Jacques Derrida in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris: Seuil, 1967.

As Otherness emerges as a key term and issue in the philosophy of difference, this crucial notion logically comes under intense scrutiny, before eventually giving a voice to the other. Thus, this last part of the present thesis will be dedicated to the study of the philosophy of difference in relation to Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*. To do so, Christian Ruby's book *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard*<sup>277</sup> will be used since it gathers the theories of four well-known philosophers in that field of difference as its title indicates.

To start, otherness will be examined in relation to the philosophy of difference so as to determine what the latter has done to fight totalitarianism, which is "a political system where the state recognizes no limits to its authority and strives to regulate every aspect of public and private life wherever feasible"<sup>278</sup>, and help the other make his/her voice heard. This exploration of otherness will lead to defining what a victim is in the context of that philosophy so as to determine if Larsen's characters match that description. Furthermore, the different kinds of 'shout' or dissent present in the novels will be studied. In the second chapter of this part entitled *The Aesthetics of Difference*, Larsen's style will be analyzed as this latter is an instrument of what J. Derrida calls "the writing of difference". In fact, it will be interesting to establish if Larsen resists the 'oppression of sense' as defined by philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida.

Then, intertextuality and para-textual elements like the epigraphs present in *Quicksand* and *Passing* which are key constituents in an author's style will be examined. In the last chapter of this third part entitled "*The Monolingualism of the Other*": *Black English versus White English*, Derrida's books *The Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin* and *Of Hospitality* will be exploited in order to study Larsen's use of Black English which is mostly used in the short story *Sanctuary*. By doing so, it will be possible to compare the style the writer uses in that short story to her novels written in White English.

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<sup>277</sup>Archipelagos of Difference: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard.

<sup>278</sup>Conquest, Robert, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (2000), New York: W. W. Norton & Company; Reprint edition (March 17, 2001), p. 74.

## CHAPTER I: OTHERNESS, ‘SHOUT’<sup>279</sup>, AND DIFFERENCE

Christian Ruby’s book *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard* starts by introducing what he considers to be the major issue of the XXth century, totalitarianism. Indeed, some philosophers like Hegel suggested that the solution to eradicate otherness and differences is to universalize them. For them, ignoring one’s distinctions makes them disappear. But, they did not take into account the sufferings of the victims and the struggles they went through because they tried to hide their differences. As a matter of fact, those differences did not vanish just because they were disregarded. On the opposite, such a denial only added to the torment and excruciating anguish the subjects endured. Ruby writes

By accommodating themselves to these fortresses, philosophers have not been able to listen to the tears of the world, the victims of their constructions, the differences that escape unifications, lives in archipelagos... Today, these voices, like an apostrophe clamored in the depths of the night of the world, are altered. The intention is suspended. The accent diminishes. But the effects are getting worse.<sup>280\_281</sup>

In other words, by creating those constructions, philosophers deepened even more the sense of alienation and exclusion of minorities. They put them in a limited cage where their differences were supposed to be smothered but they failed. Thus, the philosophies of difference set themselves the task and mission to eradicate the Hegelian philosophy<sup>282</sup>.

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<sup>279</sup>This is my translation of ‘Le Cri’ which is the other’s reaction to all the sufferings it undergoes. These reactions can be under different forms and types.

<sup>280</sup>My translation. “En s’accommodant de ces forteresses, les philosophes n’ont pas su prêter l’oreille aux larmes du monde, aux victimes de leurs constructions, aux différences qui échappent aux unifications, aux vies en archipels »... « Aujourd’hui, ces voix, comme une apostrophe clamée au plus profond de la nuit du monde, s’altèrent. L’intention est suspendue. L’accent s’atténue. Mais les effets s’aggravent.».

<sup>281</sup>Ruby, Christian. *Les Archipels de la Différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard*. Paris : Edition du Félin, 1990, p.16.

<sup>282</sup>Ibid, p. 18.

## A. Otherness and Difference in the Philosophy of Difference

### 1. The Other Versus the Same

The latin- based term ‘alter’ concerns the other from the point of view of the "I." Alterity must be understood on the basis of a division between self/ same and the other or between us and them. The other has customs, traditions and representations different from those of oneself. In Hegelian philosophy, there is a big distance put between the self and the other and the only way to eradicate it is that the other hides his/her differences to become ‘normal’ and thus closer to the self. That is why the philosophy of difference gives another sense to the concept of otherness which is used to designate the discovery of the conception of the world and the interests of the other according to Ruby. For the latter, alterity implies putting oneself in the place of the other, alternating with his own point of view and that of others. In it, otherness is recognized rather than ignored because ignoring it does not eliminate it.

For Christian Ruby

The system seeks at the same time to dissolve alterity even better, to canalize it and to reduce it by vanishing it in the regime of the same, from an identity which owes its purity only to the right of suspending any other ; or on the contrary, one can want by another approach to preserve the originality of otherness. This second solution obviously prevails, because of the prodigious force perceived in the legacy of the shout<sup>283-284</sup>.

It is the second resolution that the philosophy of difference has chosen. Unlike the Hegelian system that removes the other’s individuality, the philosophy of difference encourages originality and sees it as strength rather than a handicap. For example, in *Quicksand*, the whites push black people to wear dark clothes in Naxos to constrain their uniqueness as in the Hegelian System, a point which will be further analyzed in the next paragraphs.

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<sup>283</sup>My Translation .[Le système] cherche en même temps à dissoudre mieux encore l’altérité, à la canaliser et à la réduire en l’évanouissant dans le régime du même, d’une identité qui ne doit sa pureté qu’à raison de suspendre tout autre ; ou au contraire, on peut vouloir par une autre démarche préserver l’originalité de l’altérité. Cette seconde solution prévaut bien évidemment, du fait de la force prodigieuse aperçue dans l’héritage du cri

<sup>284</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op, cit.*, p. 98.

Furthermore, Ruby believes in a strong interplay between the self and the other which builds more than it destroys each of them. Indeed, even if the self and the other are the definite figures of two problems for which it is difficult to reach what would resemble a solution, they need each other to survive<sup>285</sup>. Ruby states “the same, on the one hand, the system in a word, persists in its detachment to ignore the torments to which he vows the other. The other, on the other side, the shout, dissipates the fogs of the same, pointing to it the uncertainties of its voices”.<sup>286-287</sup> Besides, Julia Kristeva writes “Strange, indeed, the encounter with the other - that we perceive by sight, hearing, smell, but do not ‘frame’ by the conscience ...Strange too, this experience of the abyss between me and the other who shocks me ...The shock of the other”<sup>288-289</sup>. Thus, we can perceive the other but our conscience prevents us from recognizing it because we regard it as a threat. It is even a shock as we see it as something which can wound and threaten the integrity of the self. Moreover, the other versus the same involves a question of identity as the other may be used as a means of establishing one’s identity by contrast or what is different or other. This is also the principle that is used in systems of signs and linguistics and structuralism.

It is important to shed light on the fact that the other does not want to be seen as the other of the same. It wants to be regarded as a complete person without always being compared to the same. Ruby writes “The other, the shout, envelops another requirement than that of being the other of the same, its other”<sup>290-291</sup>. It is the case in Larsen’s *Quicksand* as Helga is annoyed by the way black people always compare themselves and try to be like white people. She believes that they should instead be proud of their individuality and their

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<sup>285</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op, cit.*, p. 99

<sup>286</sup>My translation. « Le même, d'un côté, le système en un mot, persiste dans son détachement à ignorer les tourments auxquels il voue l'autre. L'autre, de son côté, le cri, dissipe les brouillards du même, en pointant vers lui les incertitudes de ses voix »

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

<sup>288</sup>My translation. « Étrange, en effet, la rencontre avec l'autre – que nous percevons par la vue, l'ouïe, l'odorat, mais n'« encadrons » pas par la conscience (...) Étrange aussi, cette expérience de l'abîme entre moi et l'autre qui me choque (...) Le choc de l'autre ».

<sup>289</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *op, cit.*, 276.

<sup>290</sup>My translation. « L'autre, le cri, enveloppe une autre exigence que celle d'être l'autre du même, son autre »

<sup>291</sup> Ibid, p. 100

African heritage. Nevertheless, Helga thinks that “it wasn’t the fault of those minds back of the diverse colored faces. It was, rather, the fault of the method, the general idea behind the system. Like her own hurried shot at the basket, the aim was bad, the material drab and badly prepared for its purpose” (*Q*, p. 39) In fact, she thinks that the system imposes many things on black people and that they are poorly prepared to fight it back.

### **The Cob Web System**

In *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard*<sup>292</sup>, Christian Ruby uses the metaphor of the cob web which shows the damage of reducing all the differences into one sameness, thus making them invisible or universal by creating a homogeneous world in which people would fit despite their differences. The philosophy of difference rather promotes to recognize differences instead of ignoring them. Christian Ruby argues that

This web shows that what is thought and thinkable slips into the mesh of a net prepared in advance, the general form of inclusion, indefinitely renewed. The web weaves ... the system of its victories over separation and dispersion. It brings together and leaves nothing outside, invasive and solid, so that everything holds in this 'overall thought'.... In the philosophy of difference the spider's web and the circular plenitude of the System face each other. Metaphor is a way of emphasizing the perpetual process of homogenization that maddens difference.<sup>293-294</sup>

Otherwise stated, one of the main tenets of Hegelian philosophy strives to create an ideal, all encompassing network ruled by the law of the Same; obliterating all types of differences, otherness would be annihilated too. Such a system can be considered as totalitarian, imposing an all-powerful sameness at all levels, in ideology, texts and society.

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<sup>292</sup>Archipelagos of Difference: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard.

<sup>293</sup>My translation. Cette toile montre que ce qui est pensé et pensable vient se glisser dans les mailles d’un filet prêt à l’avance, forme générale de l’inclusion, indéfiniment reconduite. La toile tisse...le système de ses victoires sur la séparation et la dispersion. Elle rassemble et ne laisse rien au-dehors, envahissante et solide, afin que tout tienne dans cette ‘pensée d’ensemble’.... Dans la philosophie de la différence la toile d’araignée et la plénitude circulaire du Système se font face. La métaphore est une manière de faire valoir le perpétuel procès d’homogénéisation qui affole la différence (25)

<sup>294</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 25



Likewise, Larsen's characters were born in a world made like a cob web where all the racial and sexual stereotypes are already established and accepted. They are supposed to cope in this network and participate in enlarging it. Yet, the protagonists, like Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, do not agree to become a mere element of this construction. In fact, Helga can see the hypocrisy behind every attempt to hide one's differences and the sufferings it causes to the black community. Interestingly, it is among white people in Denmark that Helga realizes even more the hypocrisy of black people concerning their color. Indeed, she reflects on the way white people admire her differences and wonders

Why subtly indicated that she was different? And they hadn't despised it. No, they had admired it, rated it as a precious thing, a thing to be enhanced, preserved. Why? She, Helga Crane, didn't admire it. She suspected that no Negroes, no Americans, did. Else why their constant slavish imitation of traits not their own? Why their constant begging to be considered as exact copies of other people? Even the enlightened, the intelligent ones demanded nothing more. They were all beggars like the motley crown in the old nursery rhyme (*Q*, p. 113)

So, she wonders why black people do not use their potential instead of trying to imitate the whites. The author's use of the adjective 'slavish' before the word imitation is very significant as it shows that the latter is pejorative and unproductive. Indeed, their imitation of the whites and their begging to be like them does not have a positive effect on the black community because by doing so they will always remain second-hand citizens. It is worth mentioning that Hegel has explored the relationship between master and slave in his work *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he explores the development of self-consciousness between these two different beings.

For instance, in Naxos, African-Americans accept the racial constructions white people make of them. Indeed, they think that if they act as they are supposed to in the web the whites made for them, they will be accepted by these latter and their differences will disappear. In this regard, the town's inhabitants applaud to show their approval of the "white man of God" who tells them that "if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the products there would be no race problems, because Naxos Negroes knew what was

expected of them.....They knew enough to stay in their places” (*Q*, p. 6) So, these people are partly accepted by the whites because they try to fit in the cob web these latter constructed for them. Yet, they are still regarded as second-zone citizens and as inferior.

Yet, in this system they are seen as second-hand citizens and are obliged to get rid of their individualities. Larsen writes

It [the school] was now a showplace in the black belt, exemplification of the white man’s magnanimity, refutation of the black man’s inefficiency. Life had died out of it. It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms. Ideas it rejected, and looked with open hostility on one and all who had the temerity to offer a suggestion or ever so mildly express a disapproval. Enthusiasm, spontaneity, if not actually suppressed, were at least openly regretted as unladylike or ungentlemanly qualities (*Ibid*, p. 39)

Therefore, Naxos perfectly illustrates the cob web pattern as it is a circular world where everything and everybody has to be standardized and not show any sign of originality. Moreover, Helga thinks that it is no longer a school but a machine as it has no heart and no humanity. She even compares it to the army and the students to automatons. She states “The goose step began. Left, right, left, right. Forward! March! The automatons moved” (*Ibid*, p. 47) It is worth mentioning the goose step is the official step of the German Army.

At first, Helga tries to fit in that web but after a while she realizes that “she had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying. She could neither conform nor be happy in her unconformity” (*Ibid*, p. 42) She reflects that her efforts to fit in were pathetic and that it was not as she thought the fault of the community but rather her own wish of not being made over. “it was as if she had deliberately planned to steal an ugly thing, for which she had no desire, and been found out” (*Ibid*) Thus, it is only after a period that Helga comprehends that it is impossible for her to follow “the strenuous rigidity of conduct required in this huge educational community of which she was an insignificant part”. (*Ibid*, p. 36)

Besides, she understands that the Naxos society threatens to remove her individuality. Indeed, she feels lost in “the general atmosphere of Naxos, its air of self-rightness and intolerant dislike of difference...[Her] essentially likable and charming personality was smudged out.” (*Q*, p. 40)

Furthermore, life in Naxos perfectly fits Foucault’s definition of the other, considered as what is inside and outside, rejecting it but by enclosing it. One has to exclude the other in order to protect the self from its otherness but to enclose it in order to reduce or control it<sup>295</sup>. Thus, people in Naxos are excluded and segregated from white Americans. Yet, these latter keep the control over them by telling them how to behave and live. In this context, in Naxos women are pushed to wear dark and long clothes which hide their traits and which kills their femininity. They are taught how to act in order not to look like “savages from the backwoods” (*Ibid*, p. 12) The dean of women at Naxos tells the students that ‘bright colours are vulgar’ and that “black, grey, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colours for coloured people” (*Ibid*, p. 11) Helga disagrees with that statement and believes African-American people should wear “yellow, green, and red” (*Ibid*) and that dark colors demolish “the luminous tones lurking in their dusty skins” (*Ibid*)

However, Helga does not accept to conform to that system where her differences are a burden she must hide at all expenses. She is against the policy of that school and community which press on people to “adopt white values and to create from the multiplicity of black persons a “machine” of dull conformity”<sup>296</sup>. In fact, the description of Helga’s room in Naxos reflects her desire to go counter that web and display her own individuality. The room is described in details showing the red, black, green and blue colors that characterize it. Indeed, it is “dimmed by a great black and red shade...[with a] blue Chinese carpet” (*Ibid*, p. 36) In addition, Helga does not respect the dress code imposed on the females of that community. Indeed, she wears colored dresses, which makes her the center of critics but also of admiration from some

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<sup>295</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>296</sup>Hostetler, Ann E. 'The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *PMLA*, 105 (Jan., 1990), 35-46, p. 38

of her colleagues who hold their breath waiting to see which style Helga will adopt for the day. As a matter of fact, “it was this carving, this urge for beauty, which had helped to bring her into disfavor in Naxos – ‘pride’ and ‘vanity’, her detractors called it” (*Q*, p. 41) But, Upon leaving Naxos “their [Helga’s colleagues’] curiosity and slightly veiled hostility no longer touched her...[she was] for once uncaring whether the frock which she wore roused disapproval or envy.” (Ibid, p. 51)

The cob web pattern can also be noticed in Nella Larsen’s second novel *Passing*. The protagonists, like Irene Redfield, are mere constituents of that system and try their best to fit in it. As a matter of fact, Irene and her husband, Brian, mimic the whites’ standards of living in order to be accepted by society. Dorothy Stringer believes they are fetishist since they mutilate themselves in order to satisfy their audience, i.e. the community. For her, “The husband and wife must be only what they are supposed to be, and eat only what they are supposed to eat”<sup>297</sup>. So, to cope with the descriptions made of them in that web, Brian and Irene play roles to the expense of their happiness. Indeed, the life they lead does not really suit them.

While Irene is a hypocrite and pretends to be contented, Brian shows his ill-being. He wants to go out of that bubble where he cannot affirm his differences by leaving for Brazil where black people are not marginalized; yet he feels obliged to stay for his children. His wife does not want to leave because she is afraid to know what lies behind the cob web which constitutes her life. Indeed, Irene does not want to lose “the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all [her family], and desired so ardently to have it remain as it was” (*P*, p. 74) She is afraid of not coping outside the cob-web which the American society constructed for her and thus does her best to dissuade her husband from leaving for Brazil.

In addition to the cob web metaphor, Christian Ruby uses the figure of the circle in order to show the dangers of totalitarianism. He believes that Hegel sees the development of thought not as a straight line but as a circle. Any

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<sup>297</sup>Stringer, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, p. 102

point on the circumference of the circle can be seen as a beginning. Ruby states that

The circle presents itself as the place of possibility of experiments, and lastly as irrecusable. However, from the circle one retains only one predicate, the return to the starting point, the closing of the circuit (while we could, why not, retain the possible deformation, ellipse, spiral, and even assert that the circle is only this deformation itself) In such a way that the cob web and the circle ultimately combine to assert this new evidence: the dialectical philosophical language is dying in the fence and the insignificance without appeal of the heterogeneous annihilation<sup>298\_299</sup>.

Therefore, the two figures presented, the cob web and the circle, both show the limits of Hegelian ideas.

Nella Larsen presents characters who react differently towards the Hegelian system. In fact, on the one hand, Helga Crane does not accept to participate in that scheme represented as a cob web or a circle by Christian Ruby. She can see the hypocrisy behind trying to hide one's differences and prefers to keep her individuality rather than being partially accepted by society. Irene Redfield and her husband Brian, on the other hand, seem to accept the Hegelian system and to be happy with their life style. However, their life is far from being perfect especially for Brian who is deeply dissatisfied and who can see the hypocrisy behind this system just like Helga. Indeed, "He was restless and he was not restless. He was discontented" (*P*, p. 194) Thus, in spite of his family fitting the mold designed for them by society, Brian is unhappy.

## 2. The Mission of The philosophy of Difference: Liberating the Other

As a matter of fact, the philosophy of difference has set itself the task of freeing the other from that limited and limiting system. Indeed, it counters Hegel's system of totalitarianism and gives the other a chance to express its

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<sup>298</sup>My translation. Le cercle se présente comme le lieu de possibilité des expériences, et en dernier lieu comme irrécusable. Cependant, du cercle on ne retient qu'un seul prédicat, le retour au point de départ, la fermeture du circuit (alors que l'on pourrait, pourquoi pas, en retenir la déformation possible, en ellipse, en spirale, et même affirmer que le cercle n'est que cette déformation même) De telle sorte que la toile d'araignée et le cercle se conjoignent en définitive pour assener cette nouvelle évidence : la langue philosophique, dialectique, se meurt dans la clôture et l'insignifiance sans appel de l'anéantissement l'hétérogène.

<sup>299</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

individuality. Christian Ruby argues that the philosophy of difference lies in the movement that goes from Hegel's denunciation to the will to circumvent it, passing through the task of designating the fault to that of naming differently an alterity that escapes the resolution-dissolution of the Negation, which can be detected in speculative discourse<sup>300</sup>. In other words, that philosophy gives a new definition to the notion of alterity and a chance to the 'other' to lead a life devoid of hypocrisy, allowing it to express his differences and vindicate them. This is what happens in Nella Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, where Helga does not agree to be a part of the totalitarian system and tries to assert her individuality or rather to construct her own identity.

Furthermore, it gives a voice to the voiceless of society: the other. All the sufferings absorbed by the other in the Hegelian system are freed and the other has a chance to finally be heard. In the philosophy of difference, one would have access to a discourse hitherto inaudible by the fact of Hegelianism, a word erased, but which would cease incessantly to dispense a stifled cry. By itself, it would risk bringing to light what is crushed, locked up, colonized by the orders of the dialectic<sup>301</sup>.

Thus, the philosophers of difference like Derrida could intercept the difference of the other which is called 'the shout'. For them,

Difference cannot be reduced to one word, let alone pass for a concept. It is a shout that strikes the ears, especially those who are prepared to hear it. It screams unheard-of tortures in the incessant whisper of the discourse of unity, this speech of annexation and finally of perversion ... they have been imposed by the system, circles and fences as panic acts, voluntary or not, emanating spontaneously from the pain torn from the words that have been blown.<sup>302-303</sup>

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<sup>300</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>301</sup>*Ibid*, p. 47.

<sup>302</sup>My translation. La différence ne se réduit donc pas à un mot, encore moins peut-elle passer pour un concept. Elle est un cri qui heurte les oreilles, et surtout celles qui sont préparées à l'entendre. Elle hurle des tortures inouïes dans le murmure incessant du discours de l'unité, ce discours de l'annexion et finalement de la perversion... ils [les cris] ont été imposés par le système, les cercles et les clôtures comme actes paniques, volontaires ou non, émanant spontanément des douleurs arrachées aux paroles soufflées

<sup>303</sup>*Ibid*, p. 56.

Otherwise stated, the shout can be seen as a dissent from the victim of discrimination or the other. It can be under different forms as dissent is expressed differently according to the situation. In fact, in Nella Larsen's novels there are various kinds of shouts against the prejudices undergone by the characters as it is shown in this chapter.

### **The Victim**

In *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard*, Christian Ruby states "One will only recognize one type of shout: that of the victims of the Concept, that cry of difference which has no other place than in Scripture. Between the shout and the victim, no sharing, because it will be admitted that the former does not take over from the second, since the victim exists only in his/her shout"<sup>304-305</sup>. But are Larsen's characters really victims? Do they fit in that description? To answer these questions a definition of what a victim is must be given. For Ruby, the victim does not exist apart from her/his shout. "She is only a shout, his/her shout. And to ask the question 'who is the victim?' makes little sense if this question is based on an ontological demand"<sup>306-307</sup>. Furthermore, he believes that far from being able to be designated as a being, it is designated by its activity, by its effectiveness, the energy of despair?

Thus, a victim is a person or entity that suffers damage, abuse, or moral harm. He/she is subjected to the ill-treatments and injustice of others. Ruby believes that "there would be no difficulty in defining the victim, if the very concept of a victim was not too quickly linked to that of the executioner, thus eliminating the difference with which he testified"<sup>308-309</sup>. In fact, behind

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<sup>304</sup>My translation. « On ne reconnaîtra donc qu'un seul type de cri : celui des victimes du Concept, ce cri de la différence qui n'a d'autre lieu que l'Écriture. Entre le crier la victime, pas de partage, parce qu'on admettra que le premier ne prend pas la relève de la seconde, la victime n'existant que dans son cri.»

<sup>305</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>306</sup>My translation. « Elle n'est qu'un cri, que son cri. Et poser la question 'qui est la victime ?' n'a guère de sens, si cette question se fonde sur une demande ontologique. »

<sup>307</sup>Ibid.

<sup>308</sup>My translation. « Il n'y aurait aucune difficulté sur ce plan [pour définir la victime], si justement la notion même de victime n'était trop rapidement reliée à celle de bourreau, éliminant par ce fait la différence dont elle témoigne. »

<sup>309</sup>Ibid, p. 60.

every discriminated person there is a discriminator. For example, discussing racism and race prejudice necessarily involves colored people as well as the white ones; studying sexism and gender bias also includes females as well as males.

Based on the given definition, it becomes clear that Larsen's characters are depicted as victims. Indeed, they suffer many injustices and are marginalized because of their race and gender. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane is the victim of racial prejudice even within the household. She is the only colored person in a white family and her step-father and sister mistreat her and clearly show her that she disgusts them. Helga is sent to a different school from her sister's so that they are not associated as members of the same family. When people come to visit, they suppose she is a servant and the family accepts this because it is more logical than having a black child in a white family. Later, at the age of fifteen, when Helga is sent to an all-black school she is victim of the mockeries and discriminations of other black children.

Thus, Helga fits the description of a victim throughout her life as she continues to be marginalized because of her color and gender. Yet, she does not want to endorse that role. She always takes defense of her race and disagrees with black people who dream of being white. She thinks that "They [African-Americans] were ashamed to be Negroes, but not ashamed to beg to be something else. Something inferior. Not quite genuine. Too bad!" (*Q*, p.105) She vindicates being black and does not submit to society's stereotypes. She stands up for her principles and refuses to be pitied just because she has black blood.

Christian Ruby states that "one cannot speak of a victim without immediately asserting that the victim accepts the terms which define her as a victim"<sup>310,311</sup>. So, does this mean that because she does not accept to be regarded as a victim, Helga is not one? It is true that Helga tries to hide her sufferings throughout the novel. She attempts to remain strong and reject the

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<sup>310</sup>My translation. « On ne pourrait parler de victime sans affirmer immédiatement que cette dernière accepte les termes qui la définissent comme une victime. »

<sup>311</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 61.



status of a victim. However, her efforts are vain as she ultimately seems to submit to that position by marrying the Reverend Pleasant Green, which makes her become everything that society expects of a black woman. Helga has got used to the economies of victimhood since her childhood and even if she tries to get rid of that status she at last seems to accept it, which makes her perfectly fit with the definition of the concept.

In Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, Clare Kendry has been a victim during her childhood and early adulthood. As a motherless child, she suffers from being abandoned and lonely facing the disdain of her neighbors and family. As a mixed-race person, she is not accepted by the relatives of her white father. She suffers poverty which provokes her friends' rejection. She is also the victim of her drunken father who makes her life a nightmare by always degrading her. An instance of that is a scene recounted by Irene Redfield. She recalls that Clare wanted absolutely to wear a new dress to a school picnic. But having no money to buy one, Clare decided to steal some money from her neighbor in order to buy the material to sew one.

While sewing that "pathetic little red frock" (*P*, p. 3), "her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual, sometimes he did manage to reach her" (*Ibid*) This recollection of Clare's childhood and this last passage from the novel demonstrates the lack of affection and the injustices she went through. Indeed, she grew up with an alcoholic, violent father who did not give her any attention apart from his insults and threat. This passage draws the image of a powerless little girl who is continuously harassed by her indelicate father making Clare fit in the depiction of the victim.

When her father dies, her situation becomes even worse as she is obliged to live with her two white aunts who only see her as the mistake committed by their brother with a black woman. They are ashamed of her and treat her as a servant. Clare tells Irene that "they didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother has seduces-ruined, they called it- a Negro

girl....They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbors, or even to mention the south side” (*P*, p. 159) Once again, Clare is the victim of racial bigotry until she decides to run away from them and marry a white man, thus apparently leaving her black identity behind. She tells Irene “they made me what I am today. For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet ham” (*Ibid*, p. 3)

Thus, Clare feels as an object and this influences her identity by turning her into a selfish person. Yet, by passing, Clare creates new victims because of her self-centeredness. In fact, her husband, Jack Bellew, and her daughter, Margery, live in a lie and their existence will for sure be completely turned upside down when knowing about her racial origins. Her husband who is a bigot is totally repulsed and furious when he discovers that she has black blood. Indeed, he tells her "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain” (*p*, p. 208) He feels betrayed and is divided between his hatred for black people and his love for his wife as it will be further shown in the next chapters of this present work.

Unlike Clare, Irene Redfield lives a happy childhood with her two parents. Yet, she is also a victim as she suffers from the labels community associates with black females. She, like Anne Gray in *Quicksand*, is always under pressure and does her best to cope with the image designed for her. She tries to copy her parents’ life style and imposes it to her family. She is so obsessed by her image that she neglects her children and destroys her husband’s dreams of living in Brazil.

As a result, no one is happy by the life they lead, not even Irene. She misses her sons’ childhood and the tender moments that mothers usually share with their offspring. She also destroys her couple and loses her husband’s love. She becomes an insensitive matriarch who can do anything to attain her goals even killing. It is worth reminding that the word matriarch involves empowerment and Irene is influential in her community where she participates in the organization of the most important events. But, she ultimately dies

psychologically because of all the confusion that follows Clare's death, especially inside her head.

### 3. Kinds of Shouts and their Manifestations in Nella Larsen's Novels

In Nella Larsen's novels, the characters show their dissent or shout in various ways and they are also themselves shouts like it is shown by Helga Crane for example who challenges all the preconceived ideas about Mulattos even by her way of thinking. In *Quicksand*, Helga is the protagonist who articulates the most obviously her dissent against the race, sex and gender injustices spread in society. In fact, from the beginning of the novel Helga suffers from the cob web in which she is supposed to cope. She dissents and shows her disagreement by leaving Naxos and trying to find a better place to live.

Nevertheless, she realizes that her differences are always accentuated somehow and that she is never accepted for who she is even by her own black race. Later, in Denmark, she shouts out her frustration at the painter Alex Olsen who compares her to a prostitute. She tells him "I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man" (*Q*, p. 117) Yet, nobody seems to understand her protest; not even her aunt and her husband who are angry at her decision not to marry Olsen. Once again, her distress remains unheard because of the totalitarianism that prevails in community.

There are several other scenes in *Quicksand* in which Helga shouts and dissents either voluntarily or involuntarily. In fact, when Helga is in trance in the church after being rejected by Mr. Anderson, she lets all her anger and distress emerge. All the pain she underwent because of race and gender disparities come out and she finally liberates the sexual tension accumulated because of society's stereotypes about black and mixed-race women. Larsen writes "For a single moment she [Helga] remained there in silent stillness...[then] maddened,...and with no previous intention began to yell" (*Ibid*, p. 142) This extract perfectly fits the description of the shout which is formed "by a prisoner breath delivered at one stroke by and in the tear of

unity”<sup>312-313</sup>. So, after being silent and motionless, Helga lets her anger break in a deafening cry. Here the mention of silence is very interesting especially as opposed to shouting.

Ultimately, after trying to make her voice heard in vain, Helga pushes a last involuntary shout as she resigns to marry all she abhors and to become what society expects of her. This cry is involuntary since Helga is not in her normal state while marrying the reverend Pleasant Green. She is tired of screaming out her sufferings without being heard and thinks that by assimilating to the image community has of black and mixed-race women, by becoming a part of the cob web, her pain will finally become audible. Similarly, Ruby writes about the other "His/her difference is excluded, therefore he/she cries out, but he/she can scarcely do anything but scream because he/she must take the paths of those who exclude him/her in order to be heard.”<sup>314-315</sup>.

Like in *Quicksand*, there are some moments in *Passing* in which the characters let their shouts burst. However, the shouts are not concrete and audible, they are rather indirect. In fact, it is the passing itself that is considered as a shout. In other words, Irene and Clare show their dissent and disagreement with the community’s stereotypes by passing for white. As a matter of fact, dissent is not always a clear and loud disagreement with reality; it can take different forms. Likewise, Ruby thinks that the victim always testifies by constantly deploying his/her shout in multiple forms. He writes “It is the shout of protest that escapes the wounded, even when there is no one to hear; the shout of misfortune torn from torments. *A cry without word, but without silence*, which writes in zebra the serene sky of the executioner”<sup>316-317</sup>.

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<sup>312</sup>My translation. Le cri se forme « par un souffle prisonnier délivré d’un seul trait par et dans la déchirure de l’unité. »

<sup>313</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>314</sup>My translation. « Sa différence est exclue, par conséquent elle crie, mais elle ne peut guère faire autre chose que crier parce qu’elle doit emprunter les voies de ce qui l’exclut pour se faire entendre. »

<sup>315</sup>Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>316</sup>My translation. « C’est le cri de la protestation qui échappe au blessé, lors même qu’il n’y aura personne pour entendre ; le cri du malheur arraché dans les tourments. Un cri sans mot, mais sans silence, qui écrit en zébrant le ciel serein du bourreau. »

<sup>317</sup>Ibid,p. 57.

So, they show the absurdity of totalitarianism and the Hegelian system by destroying fixed stereotypes of what a black and a white people look like.

In fact, by passing Irene and Clare demonstrate that there are no fixed features associated with black or white people and this goes counter the widespread preconceived stereotypes based on physical appearances. Irene thinks that white people are “so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot...Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro” (*P*, p. 150) Therefore, they counter the system by defying these characteristics and showing the superficiality of such typecasts. By passing they belie the biological nature of race and shake off the predetermined ideas about black people.

Interestingly, the shouts of Larsen’s characters fit Ruby’s definition as the latter states

The shout is a discarded alterity, that is to say, it is nothing more than a waste of the system- consequently the pure effect of a rejection; but also that it has a particular density, since it can in turn play a role of dissent in the face of this same system. The shout, the otherness, can succeed in shaking what covers it by holding fast against the system while having the strength not to abandon himself/herself to his/her own pains. The shout is, in a sense, a solid memory, an unfailing trace, a deportment that knows the worst and most merciless outbursts <sup>318\_319</sup>.

Otherwise stated, even though the shout of the other may seem insignificant and useless, it can still shake the system. However, it must be a collective rather than an individual work as it is the meeting of shouts that can make a difference in the system. Ruby believes that as there is no possible synthesis of difference, each shout resembles a micro-universe, each refusing, from its

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<sup>318</sup>My translation. «le cri est une altérité mise au rebut, c’est à dire qu’il n’est rien de plus qu’un déchet du système- pur effet d’un rejet par conséquent ; mais c’est-à-dire aussi qu’il a une densité particulière, puisqu’à son tour il pourra jouer un rôle de dissidence face à ce même système. Le cri, l’altérité, peut réussir à ébranler ce qui le recouvre en tenant bon face à lui tout en ayant la force de ne pas s’abandonner à ses propres douleurs. Le cri c’est en quelques sorte une solide mémoire, une trace indéfectible, un déport qui connaît les pires et les plus impitoyables débords. »

<sup>319</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op, cit.*, p. 98.

shout, the very idea of assimilation and totalitarianism. This is why the rustle of shouts is encountered, at times releasing noisy waves that underlie the need to question and listen<sup>320</sup>. For instance, Helga Crane's shout remains unheard at the end of the story because she is only a small particle in a huge, established cob web.

After examining Nella Larsen's novels in relation to a part of Christian Ruby's book *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard*, it becomes clear that Larsen's characters are victims of society's totalitarianism. They are supposed to fit in world made like a cob web with its preconceived ideas. Some of these characters like Helga Crane try to save their individuality and to go counter the system. However, they are usually helpless against that established structure Ruby writes "the shout is getting excessive so that something finally happens: a 'nothing' for the Concept that becomes 'everything' for difference. There will never be satisfaction again. The quality of the System being only a feigned calm, a tranquility concealing an unheard-of oppression"<sup>321-322</sup>. That is why the philosophy of difference undertook the mission of eradicating the Hegelian idea. To do so, the victims must be given a voice so as to make their sufferings heard. Larsen's characters manifest their shouts in different manners going from the most explicit like Helga Crane's to the less audible ones like Irene Redfield's and Clare Kendry's. Yet, these shouts are not given much attention from the community and sometimes vanish without being heard.

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<sup>320</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>321</sup>My translation. « Le cri se fait excès afin que quelque chose, enfin, se produise : un 'rien' pour le Concept qui devient 'tout' pour la différence. Il n'y aura plus jamais de satisfaction. La qualité du Système n'étant qu'une feinte quiétude, une tranquillité cachant une oppression inouïe. »

<sup>322</sup>*Ibid*, p. 58.

## CHAPTER II: THE AESTHETICS OF DIFFERENCE

In this second chapter of the last part of the present work, the emphasis will be laid on the analysis of Larsen's style as it constitutes an instrument of the writing of difference. This part of the study will rest on a general questioning of the author's style as a tool she uses to denounce the discriminations of her era. For instance, does Larsen use certain distortions of words? Does she change the meaning of words? Does she resist the 'oppression of sense', according to what philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida described? Other elements that constitute a writer's style will also be examined. In this regard, intertextuality and shared references in Larsen's works will be studied, in addition to the para-textual elements appearing in both of her novels. Finally, Larsen's presence in her fiction, as author and narrator, will be examined.

### A. Resisting the Oppression of Sense in Nella Larsen's Novels

Though the philosophy of difference is not a relevant approach to a number of scientific fields, it obviously applies to the notion of writing. In *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard* Christian Ruby argues that

It [writing] is responsible ... to make effective the struggle against the 'prejudice' of the privilege of thought, presence and truth ... Its task is to disintegrate a device of words designed and approved in the translation carried and closed by Hegel. It is a practice that composes and breaks down ... It is also in charge of breaking with this fence by producing the first clear signs of the existence of another 'side' of the fence.<sup>323\_324</sup>

Thus, he believes that an author's job is to break the boundaries of silence because it is a 'shout'.

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<sup>323</sup>My translation «elle [l'écriture] est chargée...de rendre efficace la lutte contre le 'préjugé' du privilège de la pensée, de la présence et de la vérité....Elle a pour tâche de désintégrer un appareil de mots conçus et approuvés dans la traduction portée et fermée par Hegel. Elle est une pratique qui compose et décompose...C'est elle aussi qui est chargée de rompre avec cette clôture en produisant les premiers signes manifestes de l'existence d'un 'autre côté' de la clôture. »

<sup>324</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

As a matter of fact, “it shouts against the concept of mutism in which it was retained ... writing comes screaming on the surface of the texts the coercion of which it feels to be the victim”<sup>325-326</sup>. So, it is used as a tool of resistance against the system. Nella Larsen’s writings completely fit these descriptions as her work may be considered to be an instrument against the discriminations undergone by the black women of her era. In this regard, Ruby states that there must be an intimate relationship between writing, difference, and shout, to the point that in its very form the text gives to read the need for resistance<sup>327-328</sup>. Therefore, these concepts are interrelated and serve the cause of the other or of marginalized minorities.

For Ruby, there are three important elements that determine if an author’s work relates to the philosophy of difference, thus making it a device of resistance which eventually allows the voice of the other to be heard: style, shared references, and graphic work. These three elements need to be analyzed in Nella Larsen’s novels. For Ruby, style “is manifested in a language work to which we owe certain twisting of words, displacements of meaning, attention to the plurality of values of a term ..., and proliferating, multiple, fractured narratives ... a style that reflects the man or a form that would cover a bottom”<sup>329-330</sup>. So, an author is able to convey a message of resistance through his word choices and uses. One of the aims of this chapter is to determine whether Larsen resorts to word twisting or shifts in meanings in her novels.

## 1. The Omniscient Narrator

First of all, it is primordial to settle on who tells the stories and from what point of view. As already mentioned before, Larsen uses a third person

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<sup>325</sup>My translation « elle crie contre le Concept de mutisme dans lequel elle fut retenue...L’écriture vient crier à la surface des textes la coercion dont elle se sent la victime»

<sup>326</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>327</sup>My translation « Il doit exister une intime relation entre eux [l’écriture, la différence, et le cri], au point qu’en sa forme même le texte donne à lire la nécessité d’une résistance ».

<sup>328</sup>Ibid.

<sup>329</sup>My translation. « Ce style se manifeste dans un travail de langue auquel on doit certaines torsions des mots, des déplacements de signification, une attention à la pluralité des valeurs d’un terme..., et aux récits proliférants, multiples, fracturés...un style qui refléterait l’homme ou une forme qui recouvrirait un fond. »

<sup>330</sup>Ibid, p. 50.



omniscient narrator in both of her novels. However, the author's uses of narrator and points of view differ in *Quicksand* and *Passing*. In *Quicksand*, the narrator appears to be privileged and to know everything about Helga Crane. Indeed, this latter's thoughts are transcribed and the reader has the opportunity to have an insight into Helga's personality from the first pages of the novel told in what Genette calls internal focalization<sup>331</sup>.

In addition to internal focalization, there are also many passages of interior monologues in *Quicksand*. Indeed, Helga's thoughts are conveyed through the use of free indirect speech. In other words, even if the reader can follow Helga's thoughts, they remain articulated by an often obtrusive third-person narrator. For instance, when Helga is ill and bedridden after a hard child delivery, she thinks of her life, the people she met and all the chances she missed, the narrator states that

She could watch the figures of the past drift by. There was her mother, whom she had loved from a distance and finally so scornfully blamed, who appeared as she had always remembered her, unbelievably beautiful, young, and remote. Robert Anderson, questioning, purposely detached, affecting, as she realized now, her life in a remarkably cruel degree; for at last she understood clearly how deeply, how passionately, she must have loved him. Anne, lovely, secure, wise, selfish. (*Q*, p. 155)

Here Helga makes an account of her life and this journey into the past leads her to comprehend her errors. The narrator's use of words such as "realized" and "understood" makes the reader shift from the narrative of the story to Helga's own thoughts. Likewise, another instance of transcription of the heroine's reflections is when this latter is on her way to Chicago. She thinks of Dr. Anderson and wonders "Why hadn't she grasped his meanings? Why, if she had said so much, hadn't she said more about herself, her mother? He would, she was sure, have understood, even sympathized. Why had she lost her temper and given way to angry half-truths" (*Ibid*, p. 59)

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<sup>331</sup>Genette, Gérard. "Discours du récit." *G. G. Figures III*. Paris: Seuil, 1972, pp. 67–282.

Despite the fact that most of the novel is written in free indirect speech, there are also many dialogues and some passages written in free direct speech:

Just how, she wondered, and how had it come about he was being married to Anne? And why did Anne, who had so much more than so many others –more than enough– want Anderson too? Why couldn't she– 'I think,' she told herself, 'I'd better stop. It's none of my business. I don't care in the least. Besides,' she added irrelevantly, 'I hate such nonsensical soul searching' (*Q*, p. 112)

Here the use of the brackets and the personal pronoun 'I' shows the protagonist's implication and dismisses the narrator into a secondary role. But, the narrator is still present to put Helga's ideas together ("she wondered") and to comment on her state ("she added irrelevantly") In fact, the use of the adverb 'irrelevantly' further shows that Helga is only jealous of Anne's marriage with Anderson. Furthermore, at that point in the novel she is herself looking for her soul mate, making her arguments irrelevant. Indeed, throughout the novel Helga does not only search for an identity she also looks for her a partner which makes her remark about Anne and Anderson irrelevant.

From the beginning of the novel, the reader can understand that Nella Larsen is not a very subtle writer concerning her characters' descriptions. Yet, the author is very subtle about the themes she develops in her works as it will be demonstrated in this chapter. In fact, her protagonists are depicted in details either physically or mentally. Through Helga's thoughts, the reader can comprehend her personality and understand what she is herself unable of comprehending until the end of the novel. Otherwise stated, Nella Larsen uses characterization. In this context, it is possible to know that Helga is in love with Dr. Anderson from their first encounter. For example, when she meets him in Harlem "A peculiar, not wholly disagreeable quiver ran down her spine. She felt an odd little faintness. The blood rushed to her face. She tried to jeer at herself for being so moved by the encounter" (*Ibid*, p. 81)

Thus, the omniscient narrator describes every feeling and state the heroine goes through throughout her different trips and adventures. Each time she leaves a place for a new one, she feels as if born again, and happy. For

example, when departing from Chicago “she felt reborn. She began happily to paint the future in vivid colors. The world had changed to silver, and life ceased to be a struggle and became a gay adventure” (*Q*, p. 68) Here the word ‘reborn’ is a very interesting image given by the omniscient narrator. In fact, it can be associated with the birth of the author when he/she first enters the world of writing and creation or into the world that has changed to silver as Larsen writes. Thus, the writer is born through the creation of a novel.

Like *Quicksand*, *Passing* is told by a third-person omniscient narrator but the novel seems to be written from Irene Redfield’s point of view. The reader is allowed to know Irene’s actions and thoughts which makes him/her feel some sympathy and closeness to her while viewing the other characters according to her judgments. For instance, in the scene taking place in the Drayton hotel where Irene meets Clare, everything is seen from the former’s perspective. Indeed, during the whole scene where Clare stares at Irene, the reader sees this external event only through Irene’s thoughts. On the whole, nothing really important happens in this scene apart from two ladies drinking tea while staring at each other.

Yet, Irene’s description of that moment makes it a key one and introduces the topic of passing but it also describes Clare’s character through her physical appearance and behavior with the waiter. In this regard, Larsen states

A waiter was taking her order. Irene saw her smile up at him as she murmured something — thanks, maybe. It was an odd sort of smile. Irene couldn't quite define it, but she was sure that she would have classed it, coming from another woman, as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter. About this one, however, there was something that made her hesitate to name it that. A certain impression of assurance, perhaps. (*P*, p. 16)

Therefore, through this depiction of Clare’s conduct with the waiter, Irene demonstrates Clare’s seductiveness.

Furthermore, Irene’s thoughts at that moment adumbrate her inability to resist Clare which will lead both women to tragic ends. In this context, Larsen writes “she turned away with the firm intention of keeping her gaze on

the lake, the roofs of the buildings across the way, the sky, anywhere but on that annoying woman. Almost immediately, however, her eyes were back again. In the midst of her fog of uneasiness she had been seized by a desire to outstare the rude observer” (*P*, p. 19-20) Thus, this anticipates Irene’s incapacity to get rid of Clare as if there was something irresistible in her that the protagonist could not fight back. In fact, each time Irene tries to keep Clare out of her life as she does not want to “assist Clare to realize her foolish desire to return for a moment to that life which long ago, and of her own choice, she had left behind her”. (Ibid, p. 8) However, as soon as she is in front of Clare she gives up her resolutions as if the latter puts a spell on her.

### **The Unreliable Narrator**

Nevertheless, some aspects point to the unreliability of the narrator in some passages of *Passing*. As a matter of fact, even if Irene is a cultivated person and does not deliberately attempt to deceive the reader, there are some elements which are blurred and ambiguous in the novel. The two scenes that best exemplify this claim are the ones when Irene breaks a cup during a dance and in the last part of the novel when Clare is defenestrated. In the first scene, after thinking of Clare’s supposed affair with her husband, Irene breaks a teacup as she experiences a feeling of total unimportance and worthlessness. Here the narrator is unreliable or fallible because of the use of an ellipsis as the scene where the teacup is broken is omitted. Indeed, the reader goes from Irene’s thoughts about her husband's imagined unfaithfulness and her fury towards losing her security to the crushed cup. In this context, Larsen states “A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she [Irene] didn't count. She was, to him [Brian], only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle. Rage boiled up in her. There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup” (Ibid, p. 171)

Likewise, the scene where Clare falls out of a window is completely ambiguous. Thus, it is possible to make a connection between these two passages by substituting the teacup by Clare as it foreshadows the latter’s death. The shattered teacup and its white fragments parallel Clare’s destroyed life and dead body. In this respect, Larsen writes “Clare stood at the window,

as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her” (*P*, p. 208) Here the reader cannot be sure that Irene broke the cup intentionally as Hugh Wentworth thinks he had pushed her causing the object’s destruction.

Yet, her answer suggests that she purposely did. She tells him that it is an ugly thing she did not know how to get rid of. She says “‘I’ve never figured out a way of getting rid of it until about five minutes ago. I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it forever’” (Ibid, p. 172) Irene’s hatred for the cup is comparable to her irritation towards Clare and her supposed destruction of her couple. Sullivan believes that, “fragmented things become metonymies for Clare, and since Clare is a version of Irene, they represent Irene herself, even when she is consciously performing the fragmentation”<sup>332</sup>. Thus, for him all the fragmented objects in the novel like the torn letter and the broken up are related to Clare and thus to Irene herself.

After shattering the teacup, Irene directly engages in a conversation with Clare. However, the reader has only access to Irene’s words. Larsen writes “More tea, Clare? . . . I haven’t had a minute with you. . . . Yes, it is a nice party. . . . You’ll stay to dinner, I hope. . . . Oh, too bad! . . . I’ll be alone with the boys. . . .They’ll be sorry” (Ibid, p. 174) Thus, Clare’s sentences are substituted by ellipses which foreshadows her end as her words already disappear from the narrative at this stage of the novel. Right after that and after saying goodbye to her guests, Irene directly relapses in her painful thoughts about her husband’s affair with her friend. She thinks “It hurt. It hurt like hell. But it didn't matter, if no one knew. If everything could go on as before” (Ibid, p. 174-5) This further prefigures the novel’s end as no one knows the truth about Clare’s death and everything becomes as before Clare’s appearance in Irene’s life. The latter gets back her security and her monotonous habits.

Another scene in which the narrator is unreliable is when Clare is defenestrated. Additionally, this passage is also an example of Larsen’s use of the stream of consciousness. Indeed, the events are completely unclear and the

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<sup>332</sup>Sullivan, Nell. “*Nella Larsen's 'Passing' and the Fading Subject.*” *African American Review*.32.3 (Autumn 1998), 373-86, p. 380.

reader has access to them through Irene's disjointed and half-conscious thoughts. There is a textual omission between the moment Irene puts her hand on Clare and the instant the latter falls out of the window. In this regard, Larsen states "what happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (*P*, p. 209)

The reader remains uncertain about what has happened to Clare; did she fall by accident? Did she commit suicide? Or did Irene push her? Nevertheless, Irene's state after the dramatic happening and her reluctance to remember what happened inevitably casts doubts on her. Furthermore, her confused reflections and general mental condition seem to suggest that she does have something to feel guilty about, and implicitly point at her as a prime suspect. In this respect, Larsen states that "Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, in credulous almost" (*Ibid*, p. 210) These are not the usual feelings of a person whose friend just died.

As a matter of fact, Irene is very angry that Clare still smiles after her husband's humiliations. As with the teacup, Irene seethes with rage when she sees Clare's smile and the next minute her friend's body lies lifeless in the street, just as the cup's fragments lay on the floor a few pages before. In this regard, the author writes "It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (*Ibid*, p. 209) Right after the incident Irene remains silent and apart from the scene. She struggles and fights back her conscience, as if to convince herself that she did not do anything wrong. Therefore, Larsen uses ellipsis and once again the narrator is not reliable as the way Clare falls out of the window is omitted.

### **The Stream of Consciousness**

After the happening, Nella Larsen uses stream of consciousness as the reader has access to Irene's fragmented and half-conscious thoughts without any interference of the narrator. Indeed, Irene seems shocked and her

ideas are completely indistinct. She makes free associations or associational logic as she goes from a thought to a completely different one. In this context, when thinking of getting down to see what happened to Clare, Irene wonders “should she put on *her* coat? Felise had rushed down without any wrap. So had all the others. So had Brian. Brian! He mustn't take cold. She took up *his* coat and left *her* own” (*P*, p. 211-2, emphasis mine) Thus, Irene goes from thinking about what the others will think about her not rushing to ask about her friend, to the necessity of taking her husband's coat so that he will not "take cold". This illogical and totally immoderate association of ideas is a typical feature of the stream of consciousness.

It is worth shedding light at the fact that the cold mentioned by Irene can be a veiled allusion to the coldness of Clare's dead body. Moreover, the interplay of the personal adjectives ‘her’ and ‘his’ is interesting. In addition, the next lines of the passage are very significant as the author writes “Down, down, down, she went, Brian's great coat clutched in her shivering arms and trailing a little on each step behind her” (*Ibid*, p. 211) The mention of “down, down, she went” reenacts, in pure fantasy and imagination, the fall of Clare, and Irene's own "fall" as she drowns into sin and shame and into psychological turmoil. The use of the stream of consciousness here seems to imply that she tries to prevent and even reverse the deadly sequence leading to death and to a "cold body", with her action now, going “down, down clutching Brian's greatcoat” , which will, that time, keep him away from being as cold as death.

So, Irene is present and absent at the same time; she is half-conscious and seems unable of taking any action. She remains silent and stares at “a ridiculous Japanese print on the wall across the room...she was not sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost” (*Ibid*, p. 210) Then, her quietness starts to disappear as she wonders what the others would think “That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other, not—” (*Ibid*) Thus, Irene is even unable to finish her sentence as she does not want to admit that she has something to do with her friend's death. This break in her string of thoughts, conveyed by generally incoherent speech in is also characteristic of the stream of consciousness. Irene does not allow herself to

remember what happened as she thinks – or pretends that- she was too tired and too shocked.

### **Psychological Realism in *Passing***

*Passing* can also be regarded as psychological realism because it emphasizes the in-depth of a character's mind and recounts the external events accordingly. In fact, all the story is told in internal focalization as the reader has no other way to know what happens other than through Irene's perspective. Besides, it is important to shed light on the fact that the novel was produced after a period of major advances in the psychological field. Indeed, Sigmund Freud suggested the notion of the human conscious and unconscious. He advocated that at times the human unconscious takes control and causes behaviors that the individual is not capable of commanding. Likewise, Irene seems to lose control and to be unconscious, like in the two cited examples: the broken teacup and Clare's death.

Moreover, the reader has access to feelings that even Irene herself is unconscious about. In this context, the protagonist's selfishness and insensitivity may be perceived, though these are traits she denies, as well as her true feelings for Clare, however hard she tries to repress them. For instance, Irene tries to get rid of Clare and decides that she will talk to her and tell her that she has decided not to see her again and not to help her get closer to the black race. Nevertheless,

that was as far as she got in her rehearsal. For Clare had come softly into the room without knocking, and before Irene could greet her, had dropped a kiss on her dark curls. Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare's two hand in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: "Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare!" (*P*, p. 115)

Through this passage the narrator demonstrates how hard it is for Irene to resist Clare's charm. Even if she decides not to see Clare again, each time they meet, she is unable of repulsing her.

Two major elements permit to consider *Passing* as a work of psychological realism. First, Larsen develops her characters through Irene's



thoughts as these latter are the only way for the reader to know everything about the protagonists including Irene herself. In this context, the reader can understand that Irene is only interested in her social status and what people think of her. This is obvious from the first pages of the novel when Irene fears to be unmasked as a black person in the Drayton as she only thinks of the humiliation it will cause and people's judgments. Furthermore, when she asks Clare to join a party in Chicago, she immediately regrets it. In fact, "in the very moment of giving the invitation she regretted it. What a foolish, what an idiotic impulse to have given way to! She groaned inwardly as she thought of the endless explanations in which it would involve her, of the curiosity, and the talk, and the lifted eyebrows" (*P*, p. 34-5)

Thus, through Irene's thoughts it becomes clear that she is only preoccupied by the image people will have of her if she goes to the party with Clare. Likewise, when she suspects her husband of being unfaithful, she prefers to think that nothing happened and that everything is fine because as long as nobody knew of it she could bear it. Worse, she even believes that sharing her husband is far better than losing him since she would also lose her status. So, this makes *Passinga* work of psychological realism as Larsen uses Irene's reflections to depict her personality.

Second, Larsen creates many associations that the reader can make to further understand the novel. For instance, Larsen uses colors in both of her novels as symbols which allow the reader to construct visual images of the scenes. In this context, in the opening scene, after suffering from the heat, Irene goes to the Drayton where she drinks refreshing tea in a "tall green glass" (*Ibid*, p. 13) This detail might go unnoticed. Yet, right after, a woman who will later be introduced as Clare, makes her entry "in a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days" (*Ibid*, p. 14) Thus, the author associates the refreshing teacup to Clare who enters Irene's fade and monotonous life to make it more exciting and interesting. Likewise, and as developed in the preceding part, Larsen uses colors in the same way in *Quicksand*. In this regard, Helga Crane and Audrey Denney wear similar colors

since apricot is a soft version of orange. Here, Larsen wants to show the similarities between the two women. Finally, the author's style is also characteristic of psychological realism as it focuses the narration on Irene's thoughts rather than what actually happens.

## 2. Writing as Difference

It is worth emphasizing that writing is itself a difference and Nella Larsen's writings represent difference. In this context, Ruby states "The thought of writing rises at this peak only as soon as it is ascertained how much writing has long been obscured, the victim of meaning. Its difference is excluded by the Hegelian system ... writing is this difference, a victim who experiences itself outside the concept"<sup>333-334</sup>. In other words, writing itself suffers from the Hegelian system which limits it to certain meanings and forms. But, it refuses to reduce itself to a single and unifying sense. It unfolds while creating new fold and therefore prevents linearity<sup>335</sup>. Therefore, to combat this, authors/ writers of difference have to resist the tyranny of meaning by producing non linear works. They have to "move the writing towers to build networks of meaning multiplication ... [to refuse] to cooperate in a unification enterprise under the aegis of a principle, a beginning oriented towards an end which would constitute the accomplishment"<sup>336-337</sup>. One of the aims of this chapter is to determine if Larsen resists the oppression of sense.

Nella Larsen's style contributes to the creation of complex characters and stories, which fight and reject an oppressive, not to say repressive, univocal meaning; the reader's expectations are seldom met, and polysemy or at least several layers of meaning characterize her fiction. In this perspective, the title of her second novel *Passing* has directly been interpreted as racial passing after its first publication. Nonetheless, years later critics suggested that

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<sup>333</sup>My translation « La pensée de l'Écriture ne s'élève à ce faite qu'aussitôt constaté combien l'écriture fut longtemps occultée, victime du sens. Sa différence est exclue' par le système hégélien...l'écriture est cette différence, victime qui s'expérimente en dehors du concept »

<sup>334</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op, cit.*, p. 52-3.

<sup>335</sup>Ibid.

<sup>336</sup>My translation « déplace les tours d'écriture afin de bâtir des réseaux de démultiplication de sens...[refuser de] coopérer à une entreprise d'unification sous l'égide d'un principe, d'un commencement orienté vers une fin qui en constituerait l'accomplissement. »

<sup>337</sup>Ibid, p. 54.

it also applied to sexual passing or homosexuality. Likewise, the theme of sexuality had been disregarded by critics in both of her novels at the time, because it was taboo as well as because Larsen talks about the theme subtly. In fact, though she may not show considerable subtlety when describing her characters, she addresses themes that were taboo during the Harlem Renaissance and that remained unnoticed until the later reissues of her works.

### **The Novels' Unfinished Endings**

Another major point that demonstrates Larsen's resistance to the oppression of sense is her novels' endings. Indeed, these latter completely destroy the expected linearity of the usual Aristotelian plot's structure of literal works as they are have no real conclusion and have open endings. Furthermore, Larsen's novels don't respect the linearity of a standard novel as they both have ambiguous unexpected endings. This lack of a clear and established conclusion to the novels has been criticized and regretted by many scholars. In this regard, Thadious Davis thinks that the novels' "narratives stop abruptly, present no viable solution, and remain dominated by dissatisfaction (...) despite an adept framing of character and incident, Larsen's narratives do not finally penetrate the meaning of that subject"<sup>338</sup>. Other critics even judge that these finales "reveal [Larsen's] difficulty with rounding off stories convincingly," and that, "though both novels feature daring and unconventional heroines, in the end, they sacrifice these heroines to the most conventional fates of literary history: marriage and death, respectively"<sup>339</sup>.

However, these ambiguous endings constitute strategies used by Larsen to denounce the discriminations undergone by African-American women. Even if some critics like Mary Mabel Youman argue that the finales are "disconcertingly vague on what should be joyously embraced"<sup>340</sup>, it is important to focus on the fact that if the endings were happy, they would contradict the reality of what the author tries to denounce throughout the

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<sup>338</sup> Davis, Thadious M. *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life unveiled*. Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1994, p. 191.

<sup>339</sup> McDowell, Deborah E., *op. cit.*, p. xi.

<sup>340</sup> Youman, Mary Mabel. "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Study in Irony." *CLA Journal*. 18, 1974, 235-41, p. 241.

novels. Otherwise stated, the novels' endings definitely match the rest of events and creating happy and perfect endings for the characters would deny the racial and sexual prejudices condemned. Jonathan Little states: "While *Passing*'s ending may seem abrupt and evasive to those looking for triumphant characters or affirming political messages, it remains consistent with [the novel's] internal logic and organic design"<sup>341</sup>. It is true that the books' finales fit the logic of the stories. Yet, they also convey strong political messages, even stronger than if there has been happy, established ends.

Therefore, the characters' fates do not reverse either novel's view against the conventional depictions of black females in American literary tradition. Though the protagonists fail in their social backgrounds and are not able to break free from the racial and sexual stereotypes that prevent them from being happy, they nevertheless constitute complex characters conveying a message about the destinies of independent women who try to counter society's expectations. In this regard, Nella Larsen is a writer of difference because "writing .... Stands up against the principles of classification, the normative rules that so many institutions support"<sup>342-343</sup>. She does not follow the linearity of most literary works which have clear and unambiguous endings.

Larsen's endings are not even real ones technically speaking because they offer no true solution and leave the reader uncertain about the protagonists' destinies. In fact, apart from Clare Kendry who dies, the reader does not know what happens to Irene Redfield and Helga Crane. In *Quicksand*, it is not clear whether Helga survives to her new pregnancy or not. Will she continue to live with her husband and children? Or, will she leave after her child-delivery? Will she retrieve some sense of belonging? Or, will she continue to be marginalized everywhere she goes? Similarly, will Irene get back her life as if nothing has happened and as if she has never met Clare? Will she find peace after the mental turmoil in which the reader leaves her? Will she continue to pretend to be happy in her marriage in order to keep her social

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<sup>341</sup>Little, Jonathan, *op, cit.*, p 173.

<sup>342</sup>My translation «L'écriture...s'élève contre les principes de classement, les règles normatives que tant d'institutions soutiennent. »

<sup>343</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op, cit.*, p. 47.

status? All these questions are left unanswered, which pushes the reader to think that the novels' finales are not definitive ones and that the stories have been left unfinished.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that by creating these vague finals, Larsen criticizes the racism and misogyny which cause such realistic and hurting fates. Christian Ruby asserts that "Writing enters the zone of difference by attempting to pulverize through dispersions, constantly rearranged networks, differential intervals, fences, units and linear histories."<sup>344</sup><sub>345</sub>. Therefore, he thinks that it's the writer's job to change the views people have of difference and to alter the thoughts Hegel spread by crushing the linearity of stories like Larsen does.

### **Description**

Another important feature that characterizes Larsen's style is description. The author depicts each character and object in her novels in details. She fills her narratives with aspects of life during the Harlem renaissance and permits the reader to have a visual image of the protagonists as well as the context. The author shows her skills in the way she handles the themes she develops as race and sexuality, most often with echoes meant to create networks and associations, such as the green invigorating cup of tea associated with the refreshing Clare in her green dress. For instance, Irene describes her childhood schoolmate, Gertrude Stein, as

Gertrude, Irene thought, looked as if her husband might be a butcher. There was left of her youthful prettiness, which had been so much admired in their high-school days, no trace. She had grown broad, fat almost, and though there were no lines on her large white face its very smoothness was somehow prematurely ageing. Her black hair was dip, and by some unfortunate means all the live curliness had gone from it. Her over-trimmed Georgette crepe dress was too short and showed an appalling amount of leg, stout legs in sleazy stockings of a vivid rose-beige shade. Her plump hands were newly and not

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<sup>344</sup>My translation« L'écriture entre dans la zone de la différence en tentant de réduire en poudre par des dispersions, des réseaux constamment réaménagés, des intervalles différentiels, les clôtures, les unités et les histoires linéaire. » (48)

<sup>345</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

too competently manicured — for the occasion, probably. And she wasn't smoking. (*P*, p. 57-8)

The author uses several adjectives and colors such as ‘fat’, ‘sleazy’, ‘white’, and ‘crepe’ so as to draw a precise image of the character in the reader’s mind.

It is important to shed light on the fact that the description is only made through Irene’s perspective as the phrase “Irene thought” demonstrates. There are also some "signs" in this passage of the text showing that it is written through Irene's point of view. In fact, the narrator uses adverbs like "not too competently" or "probably" in addition to evaluative adjective phrases such as "over-trimmed", " too short", or " appalling amount" showing Irene’s bias when describing the scene. So, the last line "And she wasn't smoking" obviously conveys the narrator's or the enunciator's judgment or point of view, with the "-ING" form expressing her negative vision of the character.

Similarly, Irene draws detailed depictions of Clare’s physical appearance. In this context, when Clare dies, Irene thinks “Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter” (*Ibid*, p.210) Significantly, the author uses positive as well as pejorative adjectives to depict Clare’s beauty. Indeed, the adjectives ‘disturbing’, ‘torturing’, and ‘mocking’ used before words like ‘loveliness’ are quite unusual. This aims at showing the ambivalence of Irene’s feelings for her friend.

Furthermore, Larsen uses description as a tool to emphasize her ideas and focus on key passages in the novels, as for instance when Clare’s husband, Jack Bellew, follows her to a black party in Harlem. He is the only white man in the room, and still he shows his hostility towards colored people and denigrates his wife when he finds out her black lineage. When he makes his shattering entry, Felise, the party host, warns him “‘Careful. You’re the only white man here.’ And the silver chill of her voice, as well as her words, was a warning” (*Ibid*, p. 90) Adding the depiction of Felise’s voice here and saying that it was a warning gives more intensity to the scene. The "Silver chill"

foreshadows the tragic outcome of the scene with the death of Clare. Moreover, this "silver" voice being associated with a black woman is ironic since "silver" is closer to the white color. This phrase might also be a veiled allusion to "Speech is silver, but silence is golden". This can be an expression of the "voice" or "cry" of the other, but without using "words".

It is very significant that the word 'voice' is repeated fifty one times in the novel and nineteen times in its Finale part and each time the word is used in order to describe the tone of the speaker. For example, when Brian asks Clare to come to a party, "Irene cried out: "But, Brian, I — " and stopped, amazed at the fierce anger that had blazed up in her. Brian's head came round with a jerk. His brows lifted in an odd surprise. Her voice, she realized, had gone queer" (*P*, p. 161) Here the narrator informs the reader that Irene's tone is very unusual and conveys her anger. Nonetheless, she next tries to repress her jealousy and show that it does not bother her. In this respect, Brian tells her "You're quite certain. You don't mind my asking her? Not awfully, I mean? I see now that I ought to have spoken to you. Trust women to have their reasons for everything." She [Irene] made a little pretence at looking at him, managed a tiny smile, and turned away. Clare! How sickening! 'Yes, don't they?' she said, striving to keep her voice casual" (*Ibid*, p. 162-3) Therefore, the description of Irene's voice demonstrates that she tries to keep her calm in front of her husband while showing the reader her real feelings.

Like in *Passing*, Larsen uses a lot of adjectives and describing paragraphs in her first novel *Quicksand*. She describes the protagonists like Anne Grey physically as well as mentally by showing her way of thinking and her behaviors. In this respect, during their first encounter, Helga thinks that Anne is

Brownly beautiful, she had the face of a golden Madonna, grave and calm and sweet, with shining black hair and eyes. She carried herself as queens are reputed to bear themselves, and probably do not. Her manners were as agreeably gentle as her own soft name. She possessed an impeccably fastidious taste in clothes, knowing what suited her and wearing it with an air of unconscious assurance...And she was interesting, an odd confusion of wit and intense earnestness; a vivid and remarkable

person. Yes, undoubtedly, Anne was almost too good to be true. She was almost perfect.” (*Q*, p. 76)

Thus, Helga the narrator believes that Anne looks too perfect to be real. She later understands that she is far from being perfect and that it is just an impression. Similarly, the reader can comprehend from the author’s descriptions Anne’s hypocrisy concerning the race problems as Helga says that she imitates white people while proclaiming to love everything black (*Ibid*, p. 82) Furthermore, there is a sort of irony in the phrase ‘almost perfect’. As a matter of fact, perfection cannot be almost. It cannot be approximate, so, it is ironic and shows that Anne is not perfect as Helga later discovers.

It is important to emphasize that Larsen attaches a great importance to describing each character’s clothing style. Indeed, as it is demonstrated in the examples above and throughout this thesis, the author loves fashion and depicts the dresses of her characters in details. In this regard, she shows that there is a contrast in black women’s styles. In fact, on the one hand, in rural places and in the South like in Naxos there is a dress code limiting African-Americans to dark clothes. While on the other hand, she shows the fashion revolution taking place in Harlem as more and more women like Audrey Denney show their femininity and wear bright colors. Larsen also takes this to another extreme as Helga goes from being unable of wearing bright clothes in Naxos, to dressing like an exotic creature in Copenhagen.

This physical description of the characters is very important and is an element of the writings of difference since it helps in showing the uniqueness and the differences of each protagonist. In *Passing*, For instance, Larsen describes Clare’s and Irene’s looks before going to a party; she writes

Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn smoothly back into a small twist at the nape of her neck; her eyes sparkling like dark jewels. Irene, with her new rose-colored chiffon frock ending at the knees, and her cropped curls, felt dowdy and commonplace. (*P*, p. 134-5)

In this passage, Clare is ironically associated with "dark", or "black" jewels. She is also related to gold or precious stone as the simile clearly expresses.



Here the description is quite poetic, with alliterations, mainly the /f/ sound which is a fricative, letting the air flow; as if some sort of freedom, as if "flying" and indeed Clare "flies" at the end of the novel. In opposition, Irene is referred to as wearing a "rose-colored chiffon frock", which takes up the image of Gertrude and her "vivid rose beige stockings" that she scornfully mentions. The /f/ alliteration appears here as well, but it produces a very different impression, as it does not lead to any opening nor to freedom, just "ending at the knees".

Larsen also uses description to build a solid image in the reader's mind about the setting where the actions take place. For example, the author gives a detailed depiction of every city Helga goes to. She, thus, writes about Copenhagen that

the charm of the city itself, with its odd architectural mixture of medievalism and modernity, and the general air of well-being which pervaded it impressed her. Even in the so-called poor sections there was none of the untidiness and squalor which she remembered as the accompaniment of poverty in Chicago, New York, and the southern cities of America" (*Q*, p. 105)

So, the writer compares between Copenhagen and the United states and praises the cleanness of the city as contrasted with her country of origin. This passage, along with her mastering of the Danish language and the details she gives about the country, shows Larsen's knowledge about Denmark and supports her claim of having lived there for two years after leaving the nursing school. In *In Search Of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchison argues that "the chapters on Denmark, overall, are an impressive –and unique– comparative study of European and American cultures from the perspective of a young mulatto woman shuttling between them"<sup>346</sup>. Therefore, the author uses description so as to contrast between The United States of America and Europe and to depict the setting so that to build a clear image in the reader's brain.

Moreover, the author also utilizes oxymorons in order to describe some scenes. In this respect, Larsen depicts Helga's room and states that she "placed the magazines in ordered carelessness." (*Q*, p. 86) This is a two

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<sup>346</sup>Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

Word paradox as the author uses two opposites. In fact, something cannot be ordered and careless at the same time. Likewise the author writes that Irene “dusted a little powder on her dark-white face” (*P*, p. 164) This is paradoxical as two antonyms are used successively and normally a face can be either dark or white not both.

### **Colors and their Symbols**

Another important aspect of Nella Larsen’s style is her emphasis on colors and their use in both of her novels. In fact, hues and shades take on a symbolical value in her fiction. This starts from the beginning of *Quicksand* where Helga Crane’s room is described as colorful and alive, as opposed to the rest of the school and the city. This makes it her refuge with its “reading lamp, dimmed by black and red shade, [which] made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on the bright covers of the books...on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her.” (*Q*, p. 35) This safe haven seems to provide a breath of fresh air in Helga’s monotonous life, surrounded by dark-clad black people respecting the imposed dress-code of Naxos. Helga describes her women colleagues as wearing “drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks” (*Ibid*, p. 51), while wondering why “didn’t someone write *A Plea for color?*” (*Ibid*)

Besides, Larsen pays a particular attention by depicting in details the skin colors of her characters. In this regard, she writes that Helga’s skin is “like yellow satin” (*Ibid*, p. 36), Anne Grey’s is referred to as “brownly beautiful”, and Audrey Denney’s complexion is said to be pale with a creamy hue “almost like an alabaster” (*Ibid*, p. 90) Audrey Denney can be considered as Helga’s emancipated double as they wear dresses in the same shades of color and Helga is in total admiration in front of her. Likewise, “Clare is Irene’s projected psychological double. It is through Irene’s descriptions of Clare that readers learn about Irene’s deepest and unacknowledged impulses and desires<sup>347</sup>. Indeed, Irene seems to be Clare’s somber or dark double as the former’s skin

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<sup>347</sup>Little, Jonathan, *op, cit.*, p. 117.

color is described as olive while the latter's is depicted as ivory. Therefore, while Irene's skin is light brown, Clare's is closer to a white's complexion.

Clare represents all the desires Irene represses and which lead her to uncontrolled and destroying behaviors like breaking the teacup or pushing her friend to her death. Furthermore, while Clare apparently lives in serenity, Irene seems to be always internally anxious, as she unconsciously denies to acknowledge the flaws, like selfishness or hypocrisy, which make her a somber version of Clare. It is very significant that the word 'fear' is repeated twenty-three times in *Passing* and that it is usually used to talk about Irene's condition. She is not serene and always fears that her life changes. In this regard, Larsen writes "was she [Irene] never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all [her family], and desired so ardently to have remain as it was?" (*P*, p. 100)

It is worth mentioning that these shades of color are still used nowadays to describe a person's skin. Indeed, Ivory is mostly used in makeup foundations while olive was a category travelling people could choose to describe their skin color some years ago. In *Quicksand*, Larsen gives a palette of the colors used to describe or classify people according to their skins. In this context, Helga Crane describes a party in Harlem where "There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair." (*Q*, p.90) This passage shows the diverse hues of people in Harlem and the difficulty of classifying them as simply black or white.

For example, in this passage, there is a gradation of the skin colors, starting from "sooty black" to "pinky white" which is an off-white and which could be the color of a healthy glow on a white lady's cheeks, to "pastry white". The use of the word "pastry" is very interesting here as it is not a common way of qualifying the color "white". It is a rather negative word and image since "pastry" evokes a thick layer of makeup, or a mask. So, it is definitely not natural nor subtle. This last image might refer to an attempt to hide one's natural dark skin under a fake color which makes a person definitely

unattractive for the enunciator or the narrator who describes the scene. Moreover, it is significant that there is a higher number of terms referring to dark skins (8 adjectives) than words used for fair complexions (5 expressions) This may be a way to suggest that there are more "black skins" than white ones in Harlem.

### **Names and their Significance in *Quicksand* and *Passing***

The characters' names are also an important element in Nella Larsen's style as they may hide various meanings and symbols, and may function as labels. For example, Anne Grey's name is very significant as it reflects a side of her personality. In *In Search Of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchinson argues "Her name, Anne Grey, suggests the dependence of her own 'black' identity on an abject whiteness within ('Miss Anne' being a derogatory term for a white woman)"<sup>348</sup>. Therefore, choosing the color grey- a mixture of black and white, as a name for Anne may contribute to demonstrate her ambivalence towards race and its problems. Indeed, Anne's life is based on an association of "black" and "white" elements even though she refuses to admit it. She claims her blackness and her hatred for everything white while living a white life style. Besides, James Vayle's name offers a homophonic allusion to a "veil", similar to the metaphorical one mentioned by W.E.B Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folks*, re-affirming the African-American presence in The United States.<sup>349</sup>

In *Passing*, in addition to Clare's name which may be seen as another homophonic way of suggesting that she could stand for the light side or double of Irene, Jack Bellew's name also provides a very interesting instance of Larsen's subtle style. Bellew is a homophone of the word 'bellow' which means shout or scream. It is used to characterize Bellew's voice and racist insults which haunt Irene throughout a large part of the story. In fact, Irene is so shocked and petrified by Bellew's insults that she is unable to reply and to defend her own race. The word 'bellow' is used several times in scenes of fear in the text. It is first utilized when a man faints because of the heat and the

<sup>348</sup> Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>349</sup> Wall, Cheryl A., *op. cit.*, p. 97.

breeze which is compared to a “flame fanned by slow bellows” (*P*, p. 146) The word is also used when Irene remembers Clare’s drunken father threatening his daughter and “bellowing curses” (*Ibid*, p. 144) at her. Furthermore, Bellew is also a pun on ‘below’ as if to foreshadow Clare’s descent, of course literally when she falls out of the window, and figuratively as she is humiliated in front of all her friends by her husband's insults at the fatal party in Harlem. Other names like Naxos and Crane are very significant as it will be demonstrated in the next paragraphs.

Additionally, Nella Larsen uses words that had different meanings in the 1930's than nowadays. Ruby writes “All this philosophy [of difference] is lodged with enthusiasm in this reconquest of words that goes from the first adoption to the displacement of meaning”<sup>350-351</sup>. In this regard, the word ‘queer’ is repeated several times in both *Quicksand* and *Passing*. In fact, the word is mentioned thirteen times in the former and eleven in the latter. The term ‘queer’ originally means strange or particular but it has come to be used to mean ‘homosexual’ as it is explained in the Oxford dictionary.

The word queer was first used to mean ‘homosexual’ in the late 19th century; when used by heterosexual people, it was originally an aggressively derogatory term. By the late 1980s, however, some gay people began to deliberately use the word queer in place of gay or homosexual, in an attempt, by using the word positively, to deprive it of its negative power. Queer also came to have broader connotations, relating not only to homosexuality but to any sexual orientation or gender identity not corresponding to heterosexual norms.

Nowadays, it is accepted as a neutral term holding no pejorative meaning for the non-heterosexual minorities. Larsen’s use of the term seems to be with its original sense as it is used to mean ‘strange’ like when Helga thinks of Dr. Anderson’s eyes for instance. “‘Queer’ she thought, ‘how some brown people have gray eyes. Gives them a strange, unexpected appearance. A little frightening’” (*Q*, p. 46) Here it is obvious that she means "weird", or even

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<sup>350</sup>My translation «Toutes cette philosophie se loge avec entrain dans cette reconquête des mots qui va de l’adoption première au déplacement de sens» (99)

<sup>351</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op, cit.*, p. 99.

"frightening". Another instance occurs when Helga talks about the dress code of Naxos. She states: "they [African-Americans] felt that colors were queer" (*Q*, p. 42) In this respect, the word means "bizarre" or anything that deviates from the accepted standards of normality. Thus, wearing colors, which goes counter the imposed dressing code, is said to be queer. The use of the word 'queer' demonstrates that the author uses distortions in some words which makes her resist the oppression of sense.

Indeed, the author also uses the word with different senses or symbols. Indeed, critics like Butler who believes that there is a homosexual tension between Irene and Clare think that the use of the word 'queer' over ten times in a short novella imparts a number of sexual connotations to the text. Such sexual hints associated with the word 'queer' may be observed, for instance when Irene tells her husband that their son "picked up some queer ideas about things...from the older boys" (*P*, p. 104) Brian replies 'Queer Ideas?' he repeated. "D'you mean ideas about sex, Irene?" (*Ibid*) In this passage, 'queer' is in point of fact used to replace the word 'sex'. When said by Irene, it has a pejorative sense as it is associated with nastiness.

Moreover, Larsen uses the past participle of the word with a different meaning. In fact, when Irene meets Jack Bellew by accident while strolling with her black friend Felise, the latter understands that Irene is embarrassed and has something to hide. Felise says "Aha! Been passing, 'ave you? Well, I've queered that" (*Ibid*, p. 183) Here, Felise means that she has unmasked her passing friend. Thus, it is closely related to being exposed. According to Butler, "as a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, 'queering' works as the exposure within language –an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language– of both sexuality and race"<sup>352</sup>. Therefore, the term 'queer' is used by Larsen either in its original meaning to show that something is abnormal or in its deviating acceptance to talk about sexuality or exposure.

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<sup>352</sup>Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

### 3. Rhetorical Devices as a Means of Resisting the Oppression of Sense

Nella Larsen's writing also uses similes, metaphors, amplification, and proverbs in addition to irony which makes her style multifaceted. These rhetorical devices are elements which contribute in characterizing a writer's style and show his/her difference and uniqueness. Therefore, they are very significant and need to be analyzed especially when talking of otherness and difference. Furthermore, they convey meanings which are sometimes hidden and that are central to the themes of otherness and passing. Furthermore, these elements are important to develop as they contribute to make Larsen's novels part of the philosophy of difference since they demonstrate that the author resists the oppression of meaning by using symbolic illustrations and comparisons.

#### **Imagery, Similes, and Pictorial Terms**

As for imagery, Larsen introduces a variety of tropes in both of her novels. When Irene is in Chicago at the beginning of *Passing*, she describes the heat and through similes and metaphors: "Chicago. August. A brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun pouring down rays that were like molten rain" (*P*, p. 20) Larsen uses this simile so as to compare between the sun rays and the rain to show their intensity. Larsen also uses similes in describing her characters. In this context, when she first encounters Clare Irene states that "The woman laughed, a lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was like a trill and also like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling". (*Ibid*, p. 22) Irene compares Irene's laugh to a trill or a ringing bell (*Ibid*) In another passage, Irene depicts the effect that Clare has on her husband as "She [Clare] smiled on him, and her smile seemed to transform him, to soften and mellow him, as the rays of the sun does a fruit" (*Ibid*, p. 71) Thus, Irene intends that Clare has such an influence on her husband that he seems to become calmer just because she smiles at him. He seems to mellow as a fruit does at the contact of sun rays (*Ibid*, p. 71)

In *Quicksand*, there are many similes among which when Helga describes the dean of the school in Naxos as "Miss MacGooden, humorless,

prim, ugly, with a face like dried leather, prided herself on being a lady” (*Q*, p. 41) Here, she compares the woman’s face to a dry and hard material, leather, to show her rigidity and insensitiveness. Another example is when Helga’s oppression in Harlem is depicted and when Larsen writes that “This passionate and unreasoning protest gained in intensity, swallowing up all else like some dense fog” (Ibid, p. 84) Thus, this repression Helga feels among black people is compared to a dense fog which prevents her from breathing freely and being happy. Afterwards, when Helga arrives in Copenhagen even if she is tired because of the long trip, she is “reveling like a released bird in her returned feeling of happiness and freedom” (Ibid, p. 94) The author compares Helga to a bird as she seems released from the pressure and the strain she felt in New York. These similes are central to the theme of otherness as they convey meanings of oppression and freedom.

Second, Nella Larsen writes in a very pictorial style and uses metaphors in order to support her ideas. In this context, the title of her first novel is itself a metaphor. In fact, *Quicksand* is a metaphor for Helga’s life and fate. The word means sinking down below the surface of the earth. Much in the same way, Helga Crane sinks in her marriage and “she was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or– she would have to die. She couldn’t endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking loathing were too great [ . . . ] this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation” (Ibid, p. 134) Here the use of the word “asphyxiation” is very significant as it can be related to the suffocation of a person caught in a quicksand or buried alive. Similarly, Helga Crane is trapped in her marriage and seems to sink everyday more and more.

### **Metaphors, Proverbs, and Idioms**

In *Passing*, Larsen uses many metaphors especially in the passage where she depicts the high temperatures in Chicago. In this context, the author states that “Quivering lines sprang up from baked pavements...The automobiles parked at the kerbs were a dancing blaze... Sharp particles of dust rose from the burning sidewalks,...What small breeze there was seemed like the breath of a flame fanned by slow bellows”(P, p. 146) There are two metaphors and two hyperboles in this scene. As for the metaphors, Larsen first compares the



parked cars to a dancing blaze then the breeze to the breath of a flame. In addition to these figures of speech, Larsen also uses hyperboles in the two remaining sentence as she writes that the pavements are baked and the sidewalks burning. These comparisons and exaggeration are meant to make the reader understand the strength of the heat which makes the atmosphere unbreathable and even causes Clare to nearly faint which pushes her to go to the Drayton Hotel. Moreover, they may be used to suggest the metaphorical flames of hell or death which foreshadows the ending of the novel.

Nella Larsen also uses proverbs and idioms in her novels. An instance of that is when Helga decides to leave Naxos. Larsen writes “she [Helga] wanted to shake the dust of the place from her feet forever” (*Q*, p. 44) This expression is used four times by Jesus when he gives his instructions to his disciples: “And whosoever shall not receive you...when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet”<sup>353</sup>. Larsen could have simply said that Helga wanted to quit Naxos but by using this verse, she emphasizes on the fact that Helga has done everything she could to find her place and even improve Naxos. So, she has no responsibility and her conscience is free from any regrets. Therefore, ‘shaking the dust off your feet’ is equivalent in meaning to ‘washing your hands of something’. Moreover, the author shows the disdain and indignation with which Helga leaves Naxos.

Like in *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen uses proverbs and idioms in *Passing*. In this context, when Clare recounts the story of her marriage and tells Irene how she left her aunts without telling them, she says “I couldn't be sure that those consciences of theirs wouldn't begin to work on them afterwards and make them let the cat out of the bag”. (*P*, p. 43) This proverb is usually used to indicate that somebody allows a secret to be known without intending to. The author uses this expression to demonstrate that Clare is afraid that her aunts may let her husband know about her drop of black blood because of their consciences. In fact, being very religious and racist with black people, if her aunts knew about her passing, they could tell Bellew the truth and thus ruin all

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<sup>353</sup>*The Bible*. The New Oxford Annotated Version, 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2001. Matthews 10:14.

her plans. So, she prefers to flee without ever telling them why and where she is going.

In another instance, Larsen writes “she [Irene] heard Ralph Hazelton's voice saying: ‘I was looking right at her. She just tumbled over and was gone before you could say 'Jack Robinson.'” (Ibid, p. 215) This figure of speech is used to refer to the quickness or rapidity of something. The scene takes place at the end of the novel when Clare lies dead in the street. Ralph Hazelton describes the way she fell out of the window and uses the expression in order to show the speed of the fall. Therefore, Larsen’s use of such metaphors and expressions is an element which makes her works considered as part of the philosophy of difference. Indeed, the richness of her style makes her uniqueness and otherness as an author.

### **Repetition and Amplification**

Another significant aspect that characterizes Nella Larsen’s style is her recurring use of repetitions and amplifications. In fact, these rhetorical devices are very frequent in the author’s novels. *Les Archipels de la Différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard*<sup>354</sup>, Christian Ruby writes “Repetition is a kind of permanent miracle, in which differential otherness draws its resource”<sup>355-356</sup>. Consequently, repetition is an important component of the philosophy of difference as it contributes in conveying the message of the other and make his voice heard. Ruby further argues that “Repetition now refers to a power of movement, a mode of activity that constantly invents 'vibrations, rotations, tournaments, gravitations, dances and jumps', which will be called 'real movement', in opposition to the 'false movement' as thought by Hegel”<sup>357-358</sup>. Thus, as opposed to Hegel’s claim that repetition is a vain

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<sup>354</sup>Archipelagos of Difference: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard.

<sup>355</sup>My translation « La répétition, c’est une sorte de miracle permanent, dans lequel l’altérité différentielle puise sa ressource ». (108)

<sup>356</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>357</sup>My translation « La répétition désigne désormais une puissance de mouvement, un mode d'activité qui invente en permanence ‘des vibrations, des rotations, des tournolements, des gravitations, des danses et des sauts’, ce qui s'appellera ‘mouvement réel’, en opposition au ‘faux mouvement’ tel que pensé par Hegel ». (107)

<sup>358</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

circularity which only causes boredom, Ruby believes that it sparks inventions that create a true movement and help the cause of the other.

There are many types of repetition or amplification and the author uses, among which anadyplosis, epistrophe, and symploche. First, Larsen writes “Her [Irene’s] brows came together in a tiny frown. The frown, however, was more from perplexity than from annoyance.” (*P*, p. 3) This is an example of anadiplosis since the last word of the first clause is used to begin the next one. In fact, the word ‘frown’ is used to start the second sentence of this passage. Second, Larsen uses epistrophe or epiphora in this statement “They’re my own people, my own people” (*Q*, p. 86) as the last part of the first phrase is repeated. Third, anaphora, which is the repetition of the beginning of a sentence is utilized in the following example “But about that Gertrude was skeptical. “She’ll find out different,” was her verdict. “She’ll find out different all right.” (*P*, p. 78) Fourth, symploche, which is a combination of anaphora and epiphora, is used in the following passage “it hurt. It hurt like hell. But it didn’t matter,... It did hurt. But it didn’t matter. But it did matter. It mattered more than anything had ever mattered before”(Ibid, p. 174-5) The repetitions and contradictions present in this passage completely illustrate Irene’s mechanical and human sides and the turmoil she goes through when she suspects a relationship between her husband and Clare.

Fifth, Nella Larsen utilizes epizeuxis, which is an amplification where no words intervene between repeated words. For example, Helga talks about African-Americans and states “poor, poor colored people.” (*Q*, p. 60) She also calls them “Fools, fools, stupid fools!” (Ibid, p.84) Finally, the author uses diacope, which is an amplification of the same words with one or few words between them. In this context, she writes “it was late, very late. Almost evening, when finally Helga turned her steps northward, in the direction of uncle peter’s home.” (Ibid, p. 60) Another instance is when Clare and Gertrude talk about a black friend who converted to Judaism. Clare says “‘A Jew!’ Clare exclaimed. ‘Yes, a Jew. A black Jew’, he calls himself” (*P*, p. 62)

The writer’s major purpose in using repetition is to emphasize on certain sentences or words. In this regard, when Brian wonders why Irene did

not invite Clare to a party and shows some suspicion about this hostility, the narrator states “Irene, who was beginning to shake off some of her depression under his familiar banter, said, almost gaily: “Not at all. It just happens that this party happens to be for Hugh, and that Hugh happens not to care a great deal for Clare; therefore I, who happen to be giving the party, didn't happen to ask her. Nothing could be simpler. Could it?” (P, p.158) Here Irene’s constant use of the word ‘happen’ aims at masking her jealousy and resentment for her friend. She wants to convince her husband that everything is normal and to hide her doubts about his eventual unfaithfulness. Moreover, the narrator’s sentence shows that Irene is trying to hide her true feelings as she shakes off her depression and attempts to show a happy face. Besides, the rhetorical question at the end of the passage demonstrates that Irene tries so much to look natural that it becomes clear that she is not so.

### **Rhetorical Questions, Negation, and Antonyms**

It is also worth mentioning that Larsen uses rhetorical questions throughout her novels for the purpose of emphasis. In *Quicksand*, when Helga goes to her Uncle Paul’s house, his racist wife tells her “Oh, yes! I remember about you now. I’d forgotten for a moment. Well, he isn’t exactly your uncle, is he? Your mother wasn’t married, was she? I mean to your father?” (Q, p. 61) Here the questions are purely rhetorical as it is shown by the fact that the woman answers her own questions. It seems that her only goal is to hurt Helga by reminding her that she is the fruit of an unmarried couple and so illegitimate.

In *Passing*, after meeting Jack Bellew who openly expresses racist statements, Irene wonders why she did not react to his words:

Why hadn't she spoken that day? Why, in the face of Bellew's ignorant hate and aversion, had she concealed her own origin? Why had she allowed him to make his assertions and express his misconceptions undisputed? Why, simply because of Clare Kendry, who had exposed her to such torment, had she failed to take up the defense of the race to which she belonged? (P, p. 89)

However, Larsen directly informs the reader that these questions are “merely rhetorical, as she [Irene] herself was well aware. She knew their answers, every

one, and it was the same for them all. The sardony of it! She couldn't betray Clare” (*P*, p. 89)

In addition to the literary devices Larsen uses in her works, she also utilizes negation and antonyms so that to make her messages clearer for the reader. In this context, the author writes about Helga that “She had been happy there [black school], as happy as a child used to unhappiness.” (*Q*, p. 57) The use of the opposites happy and unhappy sheds light on the miserable childhood Helga went through until she was sent to an all-black school. In another instance while talking about Helga’s re-encounter with Dr. Anderson, Larsen states that “She [Helga] found that rehearsal helped not at all.”(Ibid, p. 82) It would have been more formal to say ‘the rehearsal did not help at all. Yet, Larsen did this on purpose to emphasize on the rehearsal’s uselessness. It aims at showing the effect of Dr. Anderson on Helga and her feelings for him. Indeed, even if she tries to be indifferent towards him, she is overwhelmed when meeting. Despite the fact that she had imagined and rehearsed this moment many times, it did not help her hide her enthusiasm while seeing him.

Similarly, Larsen uses antonyms in *Passing*. In this regard, she states

Young men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women; fat men, thin men, tall men, short men; stout women, slim women, stately women, small women moved by. An old nursery rhyme popped into her head. She turned to Wentworth, who had just taken a seat beside her, and recited it: "Rich man, poor man, Beggar man, thief, Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. (*P*, p. 137)

Here Irene describes the diversity of people present in a party by using an English nursery rhyme. She looks at the crowd and feels that “everybody seems to be here and a few more” (Ibid) The use of opposites like young/old, or white/black demonstrates that Harlem is not only the center of black life but that it also attracts people from all the horizons like white people.

## B. Graphic Work or Typography

According to Christian Ruby, a second literary element that makes a book a part of the philosophy of difference is graphic work or typography. For example, this can be the fact of using a column layout, or in the margin as is the case in Jacques Derrida's works. Ruby believes it is very important as "in the species of literature, the question of aesthetics had already come to support the triumphs of difference"<sup>359</sup><sub>360</sub>. Thus, graphic work can be seen as a weapon used to defend and demonstrate difference. So, does Larsen use graphic work and deviate from the standard aesthetically speaking in her novels? As a matter of fact, while inspecting Larsen's writings, the reader can notice elements such as the use of epigraphs, italics, the choices of punctuation, the presentation of dialogues, and the use of songs and nursery rhymes.

### 1. The Epigraph

First of all, it is important to shed light on the fact that Nella Larsen opens both of her novels by using epigraphs. In *Quicksand*, the author opens her book with a passage from Langston Hughes' poem *Cross*<sup>361</sup>:

My old man died in a fine big house.  
My ma died in a shack.  
I wonder where I'm gonna die,  
Being neither white nor black?

In this poem, a mixed-race child tries to define his/her identity as he does not feel he belongs to the black community or to the white one. The race of the parents is not clearly stated but the reader can infer it from the place where the 'old man' and the 'ma' live and die, supposing that the 'old man' living in a big house is white while the 'ma' living in a shack is black.

<sup>359</sup>My translation « Sous l'espèce de la littérature, la question de l'esthétique était déjà venue apporter son soutien aux triomphes de la différence. »

<sup>360</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>361</sup>Langston, Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Vintage; Annotated edition edition (October 31, 1995)

It is worth reminding that Helga Crane, as well as Nella Larsen, has a white mother and a black father, which is quite unusual in mulatto stories. In fact, these latter usually depict bi-racial children who are the result of a relationship between a wealthy white man and his servant. In *In Search Of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchinson argues “the models available to Larsen bore no resemblance to her personal history”<sup>362</sup>. Yet, even if the poem talks about the more conventional mulatto, it still represents what Helga lives looking for a place where she can belong being neither black nor white.

In *Passing*, Nella Larsen cites a part of *Heritage*<sup>363</sup>, a poem by Countee Cullen.

One three centuries removed  
 From the scenes his fathers loved,  
 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
 What is Africa to me?

This passage is very significant as it can be interpreted from an African-American perspective. The XXth century poem refers to the harsh removal of the African slaves three centuries before, and in the excerpt Cullen seems to wonder about the African-Americans’ identity and their relationship to their mother continent Africa. The dilemma that black people feel towards being African and American is further felt by mixed-race people. In fact, mixed-race people like Clare seem to be split between being white or black. They struggle in defining their identity and the race to which they belong. It is very significant that Nella Larsen chose to cite the same poem that her friend Carl Van Vechten’s epigraph in *Nigger Heaven* is taken from. Besides, like her friend, she quotes from the italicized section of the novel. The only difference is that while she quotes from the first italicized stanzas, he quotes from the last ones and this might be due to Larsen’s identification with the first stanzas questioning the place of Africa in African-Americans’ lives while he, as a

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<sup>362</sup>Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

<sup>363</sup>Cullen, Countee, *Countee Cullen Collected Poems*. New York: Library of America, 2013.

white person, did not have this problem of an identity connected to another continent.

## 2. Punctuation

A second feature which characterizes Nella Larsen's style is her choice of punctuation, especially in the presentation of dialogues, and her use of italics. For instance, Larsen uses phrases between two full stops in order to support her idea. In this context, When Helga tells Margaret that she is not going to work the latter concludes that she must be sick. Yet, Larsen writes "No, Helga wasn't sick. Not physically. She was merely disgusted. Fed up with Naxos." (*Q*, p. 48) The last phrase contains no subject and no conjugated verb and stands as a sentence between full stops. The writer uses free indirect speech or interior monologue to further show that Helga cannot bear to stay in Naxos anymore. Likewise, Larsen states "Always she had [Helga] wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things." (*Ibid*, p. 97) The repetition of the three words at the end of this passage and the use of interior monologue are for the purpose of emphasis.

Moreover, Larsen's use of punctuation is not always conventional as she does not always break her dialogues from the preceding paragraph. As a matter of fact, they are sometimes written as parts of the previous paragraph. In this context, the dialogues in *Passing* usually twist with Irene's internal monologues rather than interrupting them. For instance, Larsen states

For a minute there was silence. She completed the bright red arch of her full lips. Brian moved towards the door. His hand was on the knob. He said: "I'm sorry, Irene. It's my fault entirely. She seemed so hurt at being left out that I told her I was sure you'd forgotten and to just come along." Irene cried out: "But, Brian, I — " and stopped, amazed at the fierce anger that had blazed up in her. Brian's head came round with a jerk. His brows lifted in an odd surprise. Her voice, she realized, had gone queer. But she had an instinctive feeling that it hadn't been the whole cause of his attitude. And that little straightening motion of the shoulders. Hadn't it been like that of a man drawing himself up to receive a blow? Her fright was like a



scarlet spear of terror leaping at her heart. Clare Kendry! So that was it! Impossible. It couldn't be. (*P*, p. 161)

Here, the dialogue is embedded in the narration and in Irene's inner thoughts. The writer starts the dialogue in the same line as the narration in order not to dissociate the characters' words from their thoughts or from the narrative.

### 3. Italics

A third feature typical of Larsen's style is her use of italics in her novels. In *Quicksand*, the author utilizes italic many times. She, for instance, writes "she [Helga] had again found herself surrounded by hundreds, thousands, of dark-eyed brown folk...*These* were her people. Nothing, she had come to understand now, could ever change that" (*Q*, p. 125) Here the word 'these' is italicized so as to put the stress on it. It means that Helga understands that black people, and no other people are the ones to whom she belongs. Another instance is when the protagonist wonders "Why *do* Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful" (*ibid*, p. 132) The purpose is once again one of emphasis as Helga thinks African-Americans should not have children and cannot understand why they do. The author also italicizes words of foreign origins like "*Den Sotre*" which designates a black person in Danish. Finally, the epigraph, the nursery rhymes, the letters and the songs sung in the church are italicized as well.

Similarly, there are some italicized passages in Larsen's second novel. For example, the correspondences are always italicized and this might aim at isolating them from the rest of the text. In addition, like in *Quicksand*, some words are also italicized in *Passing*. For instance, when Clare falls out of the window and dies, Larsen writes "'it was an accident, a terrible accident,' she [Irene] muttered fiercely. '*It was*'" (*P*, p. 272) Here the repetition and most importantly the italicization of the word 'was' gives the impression that Irene tries to convince herself that it was an accident but that in reality she knows it was not. She attempts to remove the blame from herself and persuade herself that she does not have anything to do with Clare's death even as she knows she caused it. Another instance is when Irene says "I *am* wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can't help it." (*Ibid*, p. 240) Like in the

preceding example, the author stresses the verb in order to show Irene's deceitfulness and her efforts to look like a good mother and wife. Irene does not only try to deceive the reader, she also lies to herself and lives in a wonderland where everything is perfect. However, in reality, she is not a devoted mother and only cares for her social status and the image people have of her and her family.

#### 4. Dashes and Following Dots

Larsen's style is also set apart by her use of dashes and following dots. As a matter of fact, the author uses dashes at many instances like when Margaret, Helga's colleague in Naxos, tells her that she is late and states "Helga Crane, do you know what time it is? Why, it's long after half past seven. The students—" (*Q*, p. 47) To this, Helga replies "'yes, I know,' said Helga defiantly, 'the students are coming out from breakfast'" (Ibid) Here the dash is utilized in order to show that Helga cut off Margaret's sentence without letting her finish it. The dashes are also used so as to give details or descriptions in the novel. In this context, Larsen states "But in spite of his [Olsen's] expressed interest and even delight in her exotic appearance, in spite of his constant attendance upon her, he gave no sign of the more personal kind of concern which —encouraged by Aunt Katrina's mild insinuations and Uncle Paul's subtle questionings— she had tried to secure". (Ibid, p. 107) The use of the dashes aims at letting the reader understand that in reality it is not Helga who wishes that Alex Olsen proposes to her. She is encouraged, even pressured, by her aunt and her husband to seduce Olsen and this becomes clearer when she refuses his marriage proposal.

In *Passing*, the dashes play a significant role in Larsen's descriptions and scenes. In this regard, Gertrude Stein talks about having black children and says "of course, nobody wants a black child" (*P*, p. 60) To this, Irene replies that one of her boys is black. At this unexpected response, "Gertrude jumped as if she had been shot at. Her eyes goggled. Her mouth flew open. She tried to speak, but could not immediately get the words out. Finally she managed to stammer: "Oh! And your husband, is he — is he — er — dark, too?" (Ibid,

p.61) Here the dashes are used in order to demonstrate Gertrude's hesitation at asking this question. She seems unable to talk fluently and ill-at-ease.

Another example of that usage is when Irene tells her husband that she is afraid that their son "picked up some queer ideas about things — some things— from the older boys" (*P*, p. 104) Once again the dashes are employed in order to show that the protagonist is uncomfortable because she talks about a taboo topic. Indeed, it seems that Irene is ill-at-ease while talking about sex, even with her husband. Generally speaking, dashes or breaks are a disruption in the unfolding of speech. They are part of typography, and are used here as writerly renderings of purely oral occurrences such as hesitations, lack of syntactically well formed sentences, or difficulties in expressing oneself clearly. It is worth shedding light on the fact that orality is an important aspect in Nella Larsen's novels because Larsen uses her characters' conversation to convey important messages. Indeed, as it is shown in the passage just cited above, Larsen shows that the theme of sexuality is a sensitive and taboo one even between husband and wife like it is the case for Irene and Brian.

In addition to dashes, the author utilizes following dots in her novels as well. In this respect, the author writes in *Quicksand* "why had she [Helga] lost her temper and given way to angry half-truths?...Angry half-truths...Angry half-..." (*Q*, p. 59) In this scene, Helga is laying in the train on her way to Chicago, after leaving Naxos. She thinks of Dr. Anderson and their conversation that morning. She remembers that she told him that she is not a lady because her father was a gambler who took profit and exploited a poor white immigrant. At this thought Helga feels sorry since "she had terribly wronged her mother by her insidious implication" (*Ibid*, p. 56) The dots, the repetition of the same words, and most significantly the cutting off of the last word followed by dots aims at showing that Helga falls asleep while still thinking of Anderson. This is also a writerly rendering of orality in the text.

In *Passing*, the dots are also used many times, especially in phone calls where the reader understands what the second person says according to the responses of the first interlocutor. For instance, when Clare calls Irene continually, here is what the reader sees

It's Clare, 'Rene. . . . Where have you been? . . . Can you be here around four? . . . What? . . . But, 'Rene, you promised! Just for a little while. . . . You can if you want to. . . . I am so disappointed. I had counted so on seeing you. . . . Please be nice and come. Only for a minute. I'm sure you can manage it if you try. I won't beg you to stay. . . . Yes. . . . I'm going to expect you. . . . It's the Morgan. . . . Oh, yes! The name's Bellew, Mrs. John Bellew. . . . About four, then. . . . I'll be so happy to see you! . . . Goodbye. (*P*, p. 52)

Therefore, the dots replace Irene's sentences though the reader can understand the whole conversation. In fact, it is clear that at first Irene tried to cancel the appointment with Clare but that the latter convinced her to come. Another instance is when Irene speaks to Clare at the end of the novel. The reader can only have access to Irene's words as she says "Brian's got a medical meeting, or something. . . . Nice frock you're wearing... Thanks. . . . Well, good-bye; see you soon, I hope" (Ibid, p. 174) As it is already explained above, here Clare's voice is replaced by ellipses foreshadowing her disappearance from the novel as her voice has already faded from the narrative.

Finally, Nella Larsen's novels are not written in continuous blocks. She sometimes breaks the continuity of the paragraphs by using nursery rhymes or spiritual songs like in the church in *Quicksand*. These latter are separated from the rest of the paragraphs, are written at the center of the pages, and are written in italics. They will be further explored in the last section of this chapter. Furthermore, *Passing* is divided into three distinct parts: Encounter, Re-encounter, and Finale. This reminds of the division of Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven*<sup>364</sup> as it will be demonstrated later.

### C. Intertextuality

#### 1. References to Greek Mythology, to *The procurator of Judaea*, and to Spiritual Songs

A third essential point which leads a novel to be considered as part of the philosophy of difference is its use of shared references or intertextuality. In her novels, Larsen makes reference to many other literary pieces in addition to voices such as nursery rhymes and spiritual songs. First, the setting in which

<sup>364</sup> Van Vechten, Carl, *Nigger Heaven*, Illinois: University of Illinois Press; 1 edition (December 30, 1999)

*Quicksand* opens is called Naxos. This school is molded on Tuskegee where Larsen studied. It enhances race ideas based on Booker T. Washington's policy. In Greek mythology, Naxos is the name of the island where *Theseus* abandoned *Ariadne*.

The legend recounts that King *Minos* obliged Athens to sacrifice seven boys and seven girls to be consumed by The Minotaur. Thus, *Theseus* decided to free Athens from this injustice. Once there, he was helped to escape the labyrinth after killing the monster by *Ariadne* who is the daughter of *Minos*. However, *Theseus* deserted *Ariadne* on the island of Naxos where she was found by *Dionysus* who married her making her immortal. Nevertheless, in another version Plutarch said that *Ariadne* was pregnant while abandoned by *Theseus* and that she dies during childbirth. In the meantime, *Theseus* navigates to Delos where he creates a dance named *Geranos*, the 'Crane', after the bird whose movements resemble the twistings and turnings of a labyrinth<sup>365</sup>

Nella Larsen then may have chosen the names Naxos and Crane in reference to this myth. In that perspective, the labyrinth may be compared to the racial and sexual oppression and discriminations that Helga is not able to free herself from throughout her life. She is somehow enclosed in a labyrinth of prejudice that she tries to escape without success. Furthermore, the monster living in that labyrinth, The Minotaur, is a hybrid shameful creature, half human, half bull, that resulted from a relationship between King *Minos's* wife and a bull. It is the representation of forbidden and disgraceful union that causes dishonor to the royal family. Thus, the king decides to hide the creature in a labyrinth from which it can never come to the eyes of people. Here it is possible to make a parallel between that creature and Helga who is bi-racial. Like The Minotaur, Helga is "an obscene sore in all their [her family's] lives, at all costs to be hidden." (*Q*, p. 62) She is the fruit of a prohibited relationship between a white and black person. Indeed, mixed-race people were then seen as monsters that defied nature and revealed miscegenation.

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<sup>365</sup> Hornblower, Simon, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford: OUP Oxford; Édition : 4 (29 mars 2012), p. 898.

Another parallel that can be drawn here is between Helga Crane and *Ariadne*. In fact, In *In Search Of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, George Hutchison states that “The version of the myth that says *Dionysus*...marries Ariadne and makes her immortal fits Helga’s hopes when, after a religious orgy...she goes off with Reverend Pleasant Green. It turns out, however, that Plutarch’s version of the myth is the correct one in relation to Helga Crane’s fate”<sup>366</sup>. In fact, at first Helga wishes to be saved by Dr. Anderson but after he let her down, she believes the Reverend Pleasant Green is her savior. She thinks she has found what she had been looking for and a way out of the labyrinth. Nevertheless, she realizes that she has sunk further into a quicksand of racial and sexual unfairness. Thus, her fate resembles more Plutarch’s version according to which Ariadne died in childbirth. Indeed, Helga is made very fragile by repeated childbirths and the reader leaves her very weak and bedridden, almost dying, at the end of the story. Finally, Naxos is also the anagram of Saxon which might be an allusion to the fact that the school imitates everything Anglo-Saxon.

In addition, to Greek mythology, Nella Larsen also refers to Anatole France’s *The procurator of Judae*, to nursery rhymes and spiritual songs. In fact, apart from the already examined ‘Rich man, poor man’ that Larsen uses in *Passing* so as to show the diversity of people in Harlem, she also mentions another nursery rhyme in *Quicksand*. Indeed, she states

*Hark! hark! the dogs do bark,  
The beggars are coming to town;  
Some in rags and some in tags,  
And some in silken gowns.* (*Q*, p. 113)

This 13<sup>th</sup> century English nursery rhyme is used when Helga Crane thinks of how African-Americans try to imitate white people. Indeed, she regrets that they do not like themselves as they are and beg to be different. She believes that “even the enlightened, the intelligent ones demanded nothing more [than being white]. They were all beggars like the motley crowd in the old nursery rhyme.” (Ibid, p. 13)

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<sup>366</sup> Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p.227.

Additionally, Larsen also introduces spiritual songs in *Quicksand* when Helga enters into the church:

*...Showers of blessings...*

*...Showers of blessings*

*Oh, the bitter shame and sorrow*

*That a time could ever be,*

*When I let the Savior's pity*

*Plead in vain, and proudly answered:*

*'all of self and none of Thee,*

*All of self and none of Thee.'*

*Yet He found me, I beheld Him,*

*Bleeding on the cursed tree;*

*Heard him pray: 'forgive them, Father'....*

*...Jesus knows all about my troubles...'(Q, p. 138-9)*

This song perfectly echoes Helga's situation at that stage of the story as she feels shameful and unworthy. As a matter of fact, after kissing Dr. Anderson who rejects her, Helga feels like a sinner. After hearing these words, she starts crying and then enters into a trance, thinking that she has found her 'savior' and the answers to all her questionings. The repetition of this song by the parishioners acts like a brainwashing on Helga who abandons herself at the hands of those strangers who she thinks can understand her at that time. The words of a parishioner confirm that these people think Helga is a sinner; she tells her "come to Jesus, you pore los' sinner" (Ibid, p. 140) before adding "A scarlet 'oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los' Jezebel" (Ibid, p. 141) Therefore, all the fears Helga had about being considered like a Jezebel and her efforts to belie that stereotyped seem vain at that moment. Her kissing a married man

further makes her believe that she is a Jezebel and this makes her weaker and more welcoming to the songs sung in the church.

## 2. References to Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*

Nella Larsen also refers to her friend Carl Van Vechten in *Passing*. Indeed, the author used Countee Cullen's *Heritage* as an epigraph which Van Vechten himself used in *Nigger Heaven*. Moreover, *Passing* is divided into three parts: Encounter, Re-encounter, Finale. Likewise, *Nigger Heaven* is split into three fractions: Prologue, Book One, Book Two. Consequently, the two novels offer transitions that are quite similar. *Passing* opens with a scene where Irene takes the lift to go to the Drayton Hotel where she can escape the overwhelming heat and the sweating bodies in Chicago. This passage parallels the bracketing scenes in *Nigger Heaven* which take place in the underground of a cabaret. Here it is possible to see a similarity in the lift going from the dark, noisy setting to a calm one. Additionally, the endings of the novels are similar as they finish with the death of a character and the appearance of a policeman. In *Passing*, the officer is depicted as "a strange man, authoritative and official" (*P*, p. 114); while in *Nigger Heaven*, he is described as wearing "a coat of blue buttoned with brass"<sup>367</sup>

It is also worth shedding light on the fact that the working title for *Passing* was *Nig* which is a clear reference to Van Vechten's work. Besides, at the beginning of her novel, Larsen makes tribute to her friend Carl and his wife Fania. After dedicating her first novel to her husband, Elmer Samuel Imes, she states in a letter addressed to Van Vechten and written on 7, March 1927 "heaven forbid that I should ever be bitten by the desire to write another novel! Except, perhaps one to dedicate to you. For why should Langston Hughes be the only one to enjoy notoriety for the sake of his convictions"<sup>368</sup>. Here Larsen alludes to the fact that Langston Hughes dedicated *Fine Clothes to the Jew* to Carl Van Vechten.

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<sup>367</sup> Van Vechten, Carl, *op. cit.*, p 284.

<sup>368</sup> Nella Larsen to Cal Van Vechten. James Weldon Johnson Collection Files, 1809- 1979 Letters. Photostats of 4 letters to Carl Van Vechten 1925-1926. Box 9. Folder 191. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library, Yale University Collection of American Literature.



To conclude, there are many features that permit to classify Nella Larsen's novels within the philosophy of difference. For Ruby, "the act of writing institutes a network in which the letter of the victim is inscribed"<sup>369</sup>.<sup>370</sup>. As a matter of fact, Larsen's writings are a means that help the victims of racial and sexual discriminations make their voice heard. Her style is rich of many rhetorical devices which allow creating a clear image in the reader's mind about the settings, the characters, and the actions taking place. Moreover, her style can be considered as precious since it is refined and delicate. It is complex and simple at the same time. Indeed, it might seem simple because she lacks subtlety in the description of her protagonists for example. Nevertheless, it is complex because of the use of different literary devices, intertextuality, and the development of themes which hide other themes while reading more carefully. Otherwise stated, Larsen's novels seem to speak only about racial prejudice; but, in reality there are other important themes developed like sexuality, and motherhood. All these characteristics make Larsen's style timeless as her writings still resonate in nowadays' society.

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<sup>369</sup>My translation "le geste d'écrire institue un réseau dans lequel s'inscrit la lettre de la victime »(88)

<sup>370</sup>Ruby, Christian, *op, cit.*, p. 88.

## CHAPTER III: “THE MONOLINGUALISM OF THE OTHER”

### A. Language as a ‘Dwelling’ in Nella Larsen’s Novels

After focusing on the expression of Otherness through narratology in Larsen's fiction, language and its role in establishing one's identity should logically come under scrutiny. Among the multiplicity of possible relevant approaches to the subject, Derrida's theories as they appear in *The Monolingualism of the Other Or the Prosthesis of Origin* undeniably provide an interesting angle of study. Language is a crucial part in each person's identity as it allows the identification or the belonging to one community. But both in the cases of Derrida's and Larsen's protagonists, and even Larsen herself, language is imposed on individual or community by an ‘other’ who can be a colonialist , or situation master/slave; or oppressor/ oppressed. This last aspect can be noticed in Larsen's fiction especially when she uses Black English. Moreover, the strong autobiographical dimension in *Quicksand* may be an echo of the author's own situation in addition to the question of the "mother tongue".

Therefore, this chapter will be dedicated to the study of Larsen's use of language, especially Black English. Indeed, even if the author mostly uses standard or White English in her works, she sometimes introduces a limited amount of African-American vernacular in her novels. Furthermore, her short story *Sanctuary* is mainly written in Black English and it is an interesting example of the author's use of that language. Besides, it may seem surprising that the author introduced and developed the use of Black English at the end of her literary career while writing her novels in the language of the ‘oppressor’ or the whites’ language. This part also aims at studying Helga Crane's use of language throughout her journey and more precisely the language she uses during her sojourn in Copenhagen.

## 1. Literary Passing: Nella Larsen's Case

Of course, as a Midwesterner who grew up and was educated in a multi-cultural working class community in Chicago, Nella Larsen was confronted to an "othered" type of oral English spoken by foreigners expressing themselves in what constituted for them the language of the other. When she moved to Nashville to start university, she could hear again the well-mannered Victorian-like voices of privileged upper-middle and upper class black people mixed with the southern tones of poorer students who had been granted a scholarship, and attempting to suppress their typically black accents and influences. A whole array of different accents and voices pervades her works, from Standard English to Ebonics including, quite unsurprisingly, a few words of Danish.

In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen was accused of stylistic passing because of her nearly exclusive use of White English. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons such claims appear to be unfounded. First, the writer grew up in a totally white family who had no knowledge in Black English. They were likely to speak Standard English mixed with their original Scandinavian language. So, apart from her black neighbors, Larsen could not have heard Black English until leaving her house in Chicago. Second, even after being sent to an all-black school, she had little contact with Black English since the students were required to master White English while repressing their language. Thus, in the first years of her life and until young adulthood, Larsen did not have access to African-American Vernacular. As a result, Larsen had to learn Black English at an unknown stage of her life. This learning may have been a means for Larsen to get closer to her black side and to African-American culture<sup>371</sup>.

Last but not least, language is not biological, it is cultural. In fact, according to a study led by the University College of London and US researchers like Nick Chater, language develops culturally rather than genetically. In *Restrictions on biological adaptation in language evolution*, Nick Chater, Florencia Reali and Morten H. Christiansen argue that "language

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<sup>371</sup> Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

change is governed by cultural forces and uninfluenced by genetic factors”<sup>372</sup>. Therefore, the child is not genetically predisposed to learn a certain language. He/ She rather acquires the language spoken by the entourage. In this context, African-Americans are not inclined to learn Vernacular English. Likewise, white people and writers may show mastery of Black English, as is the case in Faulkner’s texts for example. So human beings are unlikely to have a genetic language module as it would not be able to adapt to its rapid changes. Therefore, Larsen, as a mixed-race person is not biologically predisposed to learn African-American Vernacular over white English thus the claims of literary passing are totally inconsistent.

It is also common to think that the AAVE is a language spoken by the entire African-American community. In *The Workings of Language: From Prescriptions to Perspectives*, Rebecca Wheeler writes: “AAVE should not be thought of as the language of Black people in America. Many African Americans neither speak it nor know much about it”<sup>373</sup>. In other words, many people of color know nothing about this dialect, which is more present in some parts of the country, like the ghettos of Harlem, than in others. Once again, this reality demonstrates that language is not biological as Vernacular is not spoken by all African-Americans.

## 2. Mother Tongue as a Foreign Language

Therefore, African-American English was not Nella Larsen’s mother tongue. The latter is a very important notion and plays a central role in the development of the child’s identity and sense of belonging. It is important to shed light on the fact that Larsen’s mother tongue was not the natural native tongue of her mother. In fact, Larsen’s mother’s native language was Danish. But, as an immigrant, English was imposed to her in the United States. This is paradoxical since even if the language of the ‘oppressor’ was chosen by

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<sup>372</sup> Chater, Nick. Reali, Florencia. Christiansen, Morten H., *Restrictions on Biological Adaptation in Language Evolution*. USA: Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 2009 Jan 27; 106(4): 1015–1020, p. 4.

<sup>373</sup> WHEELER, R. S. (dir.) *The Workings of Language: From Prescriptions to Perspectives*, Westport, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999, p. 22.

Marie; she also chose to speak that language in order to be assimilated or to belong to her new community.

Nevertheless, Larsen's mother, as well as the other immigrants, fantasized this integration to the society. Indeed, language can be considered as a fantasm in this situation since it used as a tool supposed to allow access to identity defining and belonging. By choosing to use that 'imposed' language, Larsen's mother in a way rejected an aspect of her native identity which is Danish. Likewise, some African-Americans chose to use Standard English instead of the Vernacular.

### **Helga Crane's Sojourn in Denmark**

Helga Crane's trip to Denmark is a very interesting passage that permits to know her degree of mastering her mother's native language, Danish. Besides, since *Quicksand* has a strong autobiographical facet, this part of the novel might well be an insight into Nella Larsen's own mastering of that language. Upon Helga's arrival in Copenhagen, she is received by her aunt and her husband. Larsen writes

How gracious he was in his [Herr Dahl] welcome, and how anxious to air his faulty English, now that her aunt had finished kissing her and exclaimed in Danish: 'Little Helga! Little Helga! Goodness! But how you have grown!'... 'Welcome to Denmark, to Copenhagen, to our home,' said the new uncle in queer, proud, oratorical English. And to Helga's smiling, grateful 'Thank you,' he returned: 'Your trunks? Your checks?' also in English, and then lapsed into Danish. (*Q*, p. 96)

This passage immediately makes the reader understand that Helga's aunt Katrina does not speak English while her husband has only some notions of that foreign language.

This information is further accentuated in the next scene as right after that a breathless couple arrives and is introduced as the Dahls' friends. These latter have lived in England for some years and so master English, they have been sought in order to play the role of interpreters. They exchange with the Dahls in Danish so as to explain the reasons of their lateness and "then to Helga in English: 'You see, I was especially asked to come because Fru Dahl

didn't know if you remembered your Danish, and your uncle's English – well–” (*Q*, p.96) Since the couple only speaks about Herr Dahl's faulty English, it clearly implies that Fru Dahl does not master English at all. Therefore, when Helga and her aunt have conversations, they speak in Danish.

At the first party where Helga goes to in Copenhagen, “it was taken for granted that she knew nothing or very little of the language. So she had only to bow and look pleasant. Herr and Fru Dahl did the talking, answered the questions.” (*Ibid*, p. 100) This statement and especially the phrase ‘taken for granted’ suggests that as opposed to what these people think Helga does speak some Danish and does understand what it said about her. Indeed, later on in the evening, Helga sits among an admiring group “replying to questions about America and her trip over, in halting, inadequate Danish” (*Ibid*) Therefore, even though her Danish is not perfect, she still can have a conversation where she understands and even replies to questions.

This possibility of speaking Danish is also visible when Helga addresses Marie, the maid. In fact, the Danish maid probably does not speak English. Moreover, Helga can understand the comments made by people in the street, such as ‘*Den Sorte*’ which describes her black color in Danish. Finally, when an old woman asks Helga to which mankind she belongs in the streets of Copenhagen, it is very unlikely that the conversation is in English.

Nevertheless, Helga's abilities in Danish are limited and this is obvious when she first meets Alex Olsen. The latter does not at all speak to her, he just makes comments about her in Danish. He first says to Herr Dahl “Yes, you're right. She's amazing. Marvelous” (*Ibid*, p. 101) Then “His words flowed on and on, rising and rising. She [Helga] tried to follow, but his rapid Danish eluded her. she caught only words, phrases, here and there. ‘Superb eyes...color...neck column...yellow...hair...alive...wonderful...’” (*Ibid*) So, when the speech becomes rapid and uninterrupted, Helga is only able to understand some words. This suggests that her following conversations with Olsen might be in English.

Hence, Helga tries to speak Danish which is foreign and thus other for her even if it is supposed to be her native language. When the dialogues are in Danish, Larsen translates them into English and most of the time signals that they are in that foreign language by adding phrases like ‘his rapid Danish eluded her’ or ‘all this in Danish’. Thus, Helga’s mother tongue is alien for her and she needs to make efforts so as to understand it. This exceptional situation represents a sort of original alienation which makes of each language the language of the other and which makes it impossible to possess a language.

Jacques Derrida uses the word ‘dwelling’ to name the language in which he inhabits. He states “I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I draw my very breath is, for me, my element”<sup>374</sup>. Jacques Derrida’s use of the word dwelling is very interesting as it can be linked to the fact that Larsen’s characters look for their dwelling throughout the novels. In *Passing*, Clare Kendry finds her last dwelling when she falls out of the window and passes away.

In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane seems to be looking for her dwelling by multiplying trips and moving from a place to another. In other words, she is looking for a place where she belongs and this includes language. She is confronted to different accents or even languages during her trips and tries to find her dwelling in them. At the opening of the novel, Helga lives in Naxos within the structure of a strict school where Vernacular and everything related with black identity is considered as ‘savage’. Therefore, the students as well as the teachers are incited to use Standard English. Later in Harlem, Helga continues to hear as well as to speak Standard English even in a community where blackness is vindicated.

### 3. Speaking the Language of the ‘Oppressor’

This absence of African-American Vernacular in Harlem both in *Quicksand* and *Passing* is very significant. The Harlem Renaissance was supposed to be a period which “stresses and sometimes glorifies certain

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<sup>374</sup>Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other ;or, the Prothesis of Origin*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 1.

characteristics of the race...[as] uniquely Negro”<sup>375</sup>. However, in Larsen’s novels Vernacular English, which is an important aspect of black identity, is completely absent and the characters choose to speak a White English. They leave behind their Africanism as they are middle class people whose life style resembles more the whites’ rather than the black folks’. In this regard, in *Quicksand*, Anne Gray “disliked...the softly blurred speech of the race.” (*Q*, P. 80) She pretends to defend the uplift of the race, and this goes hand in hand with the uplift of its language, while preferring the language of the other. Therefore, Helga goes from the accepting state of submission prevailing in Naxos to the supposed emancipation of Harlem. Nevertheless, this hypothetical new racial consciousness is more a masquerade for Helga who can see its hypocrisy

In *Passing*, Larsen exposes the same problem of racial hypocrisy. Unlike *Quicksand* which contains some passages of African-American Vernacular that will be analyzed in the next paragraphs, *Passing* is exclusively written in Standard English. Mary Helen Washington states that, “the woman who passes is required to deny everything about her past—her girlhood, her family, places with memories, folk customs, folk rhymes, her language, the entire long line of people who have gone before her”<sup>376</sup>. In this case, Clare, as the only permanent passer, should be the only one who denies black language. Nevertheless, all the other characters speak the whites’ language. For instance, Irene Redfield who describes herself as a defender of the race and who vindicates her race loyalty lives a white life and dissociated herself from the folks or the poor class by speaking a different language. In this regard, when Clare descends

to the kitchen and, with –to Irene– an exasperating childlike lack of perception, spend her visit in talk and merriment with Zulena and Sadie. Irene, while secretly resenting these visits to...the kitchen, for some obscure reason which she shied away from putting into words, never requested that Clare makes an end to them, or hinted that she wouldn’t have...been so friendly with white servants. (*P*, p. 144-5)

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<sup>375</sup>Singh, Amritjit. *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance: Twelve Black Writers, 1923- 1933*. London: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1976, p. 13.

<sup>376</sup> Washington, Mary Helen, *op. cit.*, p. 354.



This passage shows that on the one hand Irene does not speak to her maids unless she needs something. On the other hand, it demonstrates Irene's irritation with Clare's speaking to her maids. Furthermore, Irene describes Zulena as "a small mahogany-colored creature" (*P*, p. 94) Using the word creature is very interesting as Irene belittles Zulena and considers her as a creature rather than a human being. Thus, Irene seems to use Standard English to distance herself from the poor black class.

In "La langue, le même et l'autre", Laurent Jenny writes

"My" language is a "usual atmosphere", a "milieu" where I am immersed and from which I cannot extricate myself to contemplate it. From this point of view, the mother tongue is, symbolically, the equivalent of a "clean body". This body that is called "clean" in phenomenological psychology is, we know, both the privileged place of a physical appropriation, by which, by touching my own body, I sketch a form of carnal reflection - but it is also the place of an irreparable incompleteness<sup>377\_378</sup>

In other words, language is paradoxical as it is within the person but the latter does not own it. It is a body where the person can find a dwelling. Yet, at the same time it causes a permanent partiality. This seems to be the situation of Helga at the end of *Quicksand* through pregnancy and becoming a "mother". She uses her own "body" and finally becomes "herself" in the body of the text as she achieves a type of "paradoxical identity". It is important to shed light on the fact that language as a body can be related to "corpus" in linguistics.

## **B. Black English in Nella Larsen's Works.**

### **1. Birth and Development of the African-American Vernacular**

It is not possible to analyze Larsen's use of Black English without defining the latter and its characteristics. African-American English is a sociolect designated in English by "African American Vernacular English" and

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<sup>377</sup>My translation. «Ma » langue est une « atmosphère habituelle », un « milieu » où je suis immergé et duquel je ne saurais m'extraire pour la contempler. De ce point de vue, la langue maternelle est, sur le plan symbolique, l'équivalent d'un « corps propre ». Ce corps qu'on appelle « propre » dans la psychologie phénoménologique est, on le sait, à la fois le lieu privilégié d'une appropriation physique, par laquelle, en touchant mon propre corps, j'esquisse une forme de réflexion charnelle – mais c'est aussi le lieu d'une incomplétude irréparable(5-6)

<sup>378</sup>Jenny, Laurent, *La Langue, le Même et l'Autre*. in « Théorie et histoire littéraire », Fabula LHT (Littérature, histoire, théorie), n° 0, 16 juin 2005, p. 5-6.

abbreviated as AAVE. It is also called "Black English", "Black Vernacular" or "Ebonics". It is also important to underline that whether the African-American vernacular is a language or a dialect has not been clearly established yet, and remains a topic of debate between specialists. However, as vernacular contains all the features that characterize a language, as will be demonstrated later, it will be considered as such in this work. It is a language that is characterized by a linguistic use developed in a social environment associated with the African-American community. This language varies according to education, age, region and social class. It is a heterogeneous language combining expressions and words of English with grammar, syntax and lexical forms from West African languages. It also shares much of its grammar and phonology with rural dialects spoken in the Southern States of America<sup>379</sup>.

The African-American vernacular is a mixed language or pidgin, at the basis of the mother tongues of the first slaves as well as the languages spoken by the merchants and their masters, that is, European languages and especially English. This language is the consequence of the fact that slaves did not have access to education, and therefore to Standard English. On the other hand, they could not keep their mother tongues, because their masters wanted to dissociate them from any African identity by using different means, such as torture. So, English took more and more space. In addition, they had to learn English in order to understand the orders of their masters. Therefore, this language is closely related to the oppression and enslavement suffered by this community<sup>380</sup>. Besides, Ebonics can be defined as diglossia that is the state in which there are two linguistic varieties coexisting in a given territory, one being represented as superior and the other inferior in the population. Both varieties may be dialects of the same language or belong to two different languages.

The vernacular is rooted in the uprooting and sufferings undergone by this community, but it is also a means of resistance and revolt. Toni Morrison

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<sup>379</sup>GREEN, L.: *African American English: A linguistic introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>380</sup>BAUGH, J. *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic pride and racial prejudice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 6.

describes it as “the thing that black people love so much ... The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language”<sup>381</sup>. Losing this language would be the worst thing possible, because the African-American identity is anchored in it. With time, "Black English" took a prominent place in the construction of African-American identity, especially after the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, the revival that happened in the African-American identity at that time also involves language, and many authors have used Black English as an instrument to manifest and defend their culture<sup>382</sup>.

## 2. Nella Larsen's Use of AVVE in *Quicksand* and *Sanctuary*

Nella Larsen has introduced some passages of Black English in her first novel *Quicksand*. In fact, the author mostly uses this language in the church passages, where Helga “loses her soul”<sup>383</sup> and in dialogues where the protagonist talks with uneducated rural people when she moves back to the South. For instance, the songs and prayers in the church are in vernacular. Other examples of the use of Vernacular in the novel are when a woman shrieked “A scarlet ‘oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los’ Jezebel” (*Q*, p. 141) while another man said “Remembah de words of our Mastah” (*Ibid*) When moving to rural Alabama, Helga is confronted to uneducated women who only use Black English. In this regard, when she gives them advice, they reply “Yuh all is right, Mis’ Green” (*Ibid*, p. 147) or “Ah suttinly will, Mis’ Green” (*Ibid*) Yet, in reality they thought that the reverend “would’ a done bettah to ’a ma’ied Clementine Richards” (*Ibid*) These examples show many of the African-American Vernacular’s features that will be analyzed in the next paragraphs like replacing the final letter by the ‘h’ or using the ‘eye dilect’.

In order to analyze Nella Larsen's use of White and Black English, it is primordial to introduce her short story *Sanctuary* which is her only work mostly written in Vernacular. Indeed, there are very few passages written in African-American Vernacular in *Quicksand* which makes it important to bring in Larsen's short story that contains a wider range of examples of the author's

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<sup>381</sup>DANILLE, T.-G., éd. *Conversations with Toni Morrison, par Thomas LeClair, Jackson, Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, 1994, p. 123.*

<sup>382</sup>Locke, Alain, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>383</sup>Wall, Cheryl A. *op. cit.*,p. 113.

use of Ebonics and thus which shows her mastery of that language. Furthermore, the short story develops the same themes that are studied in Larsen's novels such as otherness and race solidarity.

*Sanctuary* tells the story of a young black man, Jim Hammer, who committed a murder and who takes refuge with the mother of his victim. When the police come to learn the terrible news to the mother, Annie Poole, the murderer understands that he has just killed his friend without realizing it. He has no hope and thinks he will be arrested. Against all odds, Annie decides not to denounce him, for racial solidarity. Unlike her other works, in *Sanctuary*, Nella Larsen uses Black English. All the dialogues, which make up the majority of the short story, are in this language.

### **Plagiarism Charges**

*Sanctuary* is Larsen's only work written in big part in Black English as well as her last published work. In fact, her bright career suddenly ended after she was accused of plagiarism. The short story's plot is similar in many ways to Sheila Kaye-Smith's work *Mrs. Adis*. Critics agree that Larsen turns a story about British class-consciousness into a story about race solidarity. After the scandal, Larsen sent her drafts to her editor Knopf and explained that the story has been told to her by one of her patients while she was a nurse. Nevertheless, even if her editor believed her and published another article in the *Forum* to defend her, her literary career was destroyed.

Her friend Carl Van Vechten has always taken her defense but her detractors saw it as a chance to drown her even more. In this regard, when Countee Cullen tells Harold Jacksman to be more indulgent with Larsen, Jacksman replies

Poor Nell is right; it is poor, sad Nell. Boy, that gal has used some of the identical words miss Smith uses in her *Mrs. Adis*, and as for the dialogue, little Nell, I'll call her this time, has just changed it to make it colored. The technique and method is identical...Is it known? I'll say it is. All literary Harlem knows about it, and I hear that the *Forum* has gotten word of and has written Nella about it. Nella's benefactor, Carl Van Vechten, is

trying to justify his protégée but his arguments are so weak and in this case so stupid”<sup>384</sup>

Therefore, many male writers who did not accept that a woman writer could be more successful than or even as successful as male authors. In this respect, Harold Jacksman once again wrote to Countee Cullen “It is known all over Harlem that Nella Larsen stole Sheila Kaye-Smith’s story, and now that Larsen has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship everyone is quite sorry, especially when such people like Langston Hughes and Bud Fisher are on the horizon”<sup>385</sup>. The two letters sent by Jacksman show his hostility and his disdain for Nella Larsen. He even regrets that male writers like Langston Hughes, whom he believes is more deserving, did not win the fellowship.

A short comparison between the two short stories permits to notice the similarities in plot as well as in description and denouement. For example, Sheila Kaye-Smith states “‘I’m in trouble.’ His hands were shaking a little. ‘What you done?’ ‘I shot a man, Mrs. Adis’”<sup>386</sup> while Larsen writes “‘Ah’s in trubble, Mis’ Poole,’ the man explained, his voice shaking, his fingers twitching. ‘W’at you done now?’ ‘Shot a man, Mis’ Poole.’” (S, p. 14) These two passages are very similar in the words’ choice as well as in the narrative. In *Passing from Paranoia to Plagiarism: the Abject Authorship of Nella Larsen*, Beverly Haviland writes “Larsen’s story is complicated. The sympathetic reader of her work wants to understand this act of literary suicide because the loss of this talented writer is regrettable”<sup>387</sup>. Otherwise stated, it is hard for the reader to understand why such a brilliant author who is familiar with librarianship and writing did risk her career by elaborating a story so close to Sheila Kaye Smith’s.

This is a sort of literary suicide as the author knew well the consequences that such charges could have on a literary reputation. The reasons for such an act remain unknown as Larsen never accepted nor admitted

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<sup>384</sup>Quoted by Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p 345.

<sup>385</sup>*Ibid.*, p 348.

<sup>386</sup> Kaye-Smith, Sheila, *Mrs. Adis*, London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1929, p. 2.

<sup>387</sup>Haviland, Beverly. "Passing from Paranoia to Plagiarism: the Abject Authorship of Nella Larsen." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 43 no. 2, 1997, pp. 295-318. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/mfs.1997.0051, p. 295.

the accusation and always rejected those plagiarism charges. Therefore, critics have always tried to disregard the short story and focused on Larsen's novels instead. In the present work, the use of the short story is indispensable as it is the only piece of work Larsen wrote mostly in Black English.

Since *Sanctuary* is largely written in vernacular, it contains many syntactic, lexical and phonetic elements particular to that language. To analyze these features, Lisa Green's linguistic study *African American English: A Linguistic* will be of a great help. This manual examines topics such as the use of language in literature and the media to create an image of black Americans. In this book, it is clear that the author supports researchers who advocate that the vernacular should be considered legitimate and as a linguistic system. There are three major elements typical of the Vernacular that Larsen uses in *Sanctuary*.

### **Double or Multiple Negations**

First, the writer uses double or multiple negations, which is very common in African-American literature. For example, Annie says "you ain't in no hurry, is you?" (S, p. 15) In this passage, Jim Hammer opens the door and enters Annie's house uninvited. The question is rhetorical, because Jim's condition and the fact that he did not bother to knock on the door show that he is in a hurry. In addition, Larsen later writes "it wasn't, however, entirely a question" (Ibid, p. 15) So this ironic question and the use of the double negation reveal Annie Poole's discontent with Jim's manners and lack of politeness.

Further on, Annie says "ah shuah don 'see nuffin' in you but a heap o'dirt" (ibid, p. 16) The use of "do not" and "nothing" in this sentence accentuates Annie's disgust and contempt for Jim. Elsewhere in the short story, Annie adds "Cain't do nuffin 'propah" (ibid.) to emphasize the negative aspect of her feelings and the fact that, for her, Jim is a bum who cannot do anything positive. When Jim thanks Annie for her help, she retorts, "Dis ain't no time foh all dat kin 'o' fiddle-of-roll" (ibid, p. 17), as if to suggest that he is not frank

and that she does not need these thanks, because if she helps him, it is only by racial solidarity.

When the sheriff asks Annie if she saw anyone, she replies, “No, Ah ain’t sees nobody pass. Not yet” (*S*, p. 17) She uses multiple negations to convince the sheriff and emphasize on her sincerity so as to protect Jim. Finally, when Annie orders Jim to leave her house, she tells him “don 'nevah stop thankin' yo 'Jesus he done gib you dat black face” (ibid, p. 18) to assure him that the only reason why she did not denounce him is his skin color and that he can thank God for not being white. Therefore, the double or multiple negation, instead of being “wrong” or indicating a misunderstanding of standard grammar, has its place in the AAVE because it serves to signify or accentuate emotions.

### **Verbs’ Conjugation**

Second, Lisa Green indicates that in the structure of the vernacular, verbs are generally conjugated in the same way with all personal pronouns, such as “I/ she / they were”, “I / you / he sees”. This aspect is very present in *Quicksand* and *Sanctuary* and here are some examples: “Yuh all takes it too ha’d (*Q*, p. 116), “we’s all ti’ed” (Ibid), “w’at am you lookin 'foh” (*S*, p. 15.), Or “ah does mah duty as ah sees” (ibid, p. 16) In some passages of *Sanctuary*, Annie uses either the omission of the auxiliary where one would expect to find them in normally composed times. For example, “you been” to say “you have been”. Besides, she uses “Done” as an auxiliary to indicate a past time. In this regard, Larsen writes “W’at you done done?” To ask “what have you done?” Or “you done missed” instead of “you have missed”.

### **Phonetics**

Third, there are some phonetic characteristics associated with the African-American vernacular in *Quicksand* and *Sanctuary*. These features are ‘observable’ from the non-standard graph that Larsen chose to use. For example, it is possible to observe the suppression of some final consonants as the ‘d’ in ‘find’ or ‘background’ or the ‘r’ of some words like ‘for’. Lisa Green also observes the articulation of the suffix ‘ing’ which changes to ‘in’ in the

AAVE, as in 'seeing' which becomes 'seein'. It is also possible to note the change of some letters at the end of the words, such as the 'r' which becomes 'h' for example in the words 'for' ('foh') and 'proper' ('propah') On the other hand, the 'v' is sometimes changed to 'b', as in 'evening' which becomes 'ebenin ". Finally, the graph 'th' changes in two ways in the transcription of Black English in Larsen's work. In the short story, when the 'th' represents an unvoiced sound, it is transformed into either 'ff' or 'fe', as in 'nuffin' for 'nothing' or 'trufe' for 'truth', and when it represents a voiced sound, it turns into 'd', as in 'dat' for 'that'.

The language used by Sary Jones in *Quicksand* and Annie Poole in *Sanctuary* is so different and so far from standard English and even, in some cases, vernacular spoken by some African-Americans, that it suggests that they did not have any education. In fact, by the texts, it is possible for the reader to understand that they belong to a modest class and that they live in an environment devoid of any instruction. For instance, this can be noted in the repeated use of apostrophes to replace letters and the use of the phrase "Ah'm a-gwine" or "we's all gwine" for "I am going" or "we are going", or in "cose Ah jes 'don' want you hyah . Ah, so kep 'mahsef outen trubble all mah life" (S, p.16) It is also clear in Sary's words for Helga "Jes' remembah et's natu'al fo' a 'oman to hab chilluns an' don' fret so" (Q, p. 116) So, the African-American vernacular also varies according to the level of study of the speaker.

### **Orality**

Furthermore, a major characteristic of the African-American vernacular is orality. Indeed, as most African-Americans did not have access to education during slavery and after its abolition, speaking was the only way for them to pass on their history and folklore to the succeeding generations. In *La langue, le meme et l'autre*, Laurent Jenny writes

But there is another trait by which the Creole [in this case the Vernacular] is supposed to be distinguished from the master's language: it is as essential and living orality. Here we find, particularly in Glissant, the themes of phonocentrism: the language of the whites is marked by writing, a sign of the



dictation of God, unity and power. As a written language, it is constitutively oppressive<sup>388,389</sup>.

This aspect is present in several works written in Black English, notably in *Quicksand* and *Sanctuary*. Many words are actually written as they are pronounced and not in their usual spelling, such as ‘trubble’ that Larsen writes without ‘o’, or ‘bettah’ instead of ‘better’. George P. Krapp calls this way of writing the spoken language ‘the eye dialect’<sup>390</sup>, or the visual dialect. It is a literary technique that involves using a non-standard spelling that approximates the phonetics of words. It is a dialect for the eye, but not for the ear. Otherwise stated, one can see that words are not spelled according to the academic standard in writing, but he does not hear it orally. So, the difference in spelling is not audible.

Nella Larsen uses this technique in *Sanctuary*, for example the word ‘trouble’ becomes ‘trubble’, ‘myself’ is spelled ‘mahse’f’, ‘dead’ becomes ‘daid’, ‘sure’ becomes ‘shuah’, ‘lord’ is spelled ‘lawde’, and ‘explain’ becomes ‘splain’. According to Krapp, the use of the ‘eye dialect’ indicates either that the character's speech is generally dialectal, or that the person is foreign or uneducated. Finally, orality is characterized by the use of short sentences and the omission of words, including personal pronouns, as in ‘daid?’ Instead of ‘is he dead?’ Or ‘trufe?’ To ask ‘is it the truth? Or is it true?’

### 3. Black English and the African-American Identity

The African-American vernacular has often been a cause of disagreement between African-American writers, because, on the one hand, some people think that they must always write in that language in order to preserve it and defend the identity to which it belongs or to which it is associated. This is particularly the case of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, cited above. On

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<sup>388</sup>My translation. « Mais il est un autre trait par lequel le Créole est supposé se distinguer de la langue du maître : c'est en tant qu'oralité essentielle et vivante. On retrouve ici, particulièrement chez Glissant, les thèmes du phonocentrisme : la langue des blancs est marquée par l'écriture, signe de la dictée de Dieu, de l'unité et du pouvoir. En tant que langue de l'écrit, elle est constitutivement oppressive ».

<sup>389</sup>Jenny, Laurent, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>390</sup>KRAPP, G. P. *The English Language in America*, New York, Senjo Pub.Co, 32 p. originellement publié en 1925, 1966, p. 55.

the other hand, some authors believe that it is better to write in White or Standard English to reach a wider audience that does not include only people of color.

### 3.1. 'White' Language as a Means of Colonization

Indeed, behind the use of the African-American vernacular lies a question of identity and even sometimes of loyalty to the African-American community, especially in literature, and particularly in the 1920s, at the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Some African-Americans saw Standard English as the language of the 'oppressor'. In *If Black English Is not a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?* James Baldwin (1979) defines standard English as a contemporary system of racism and marginalization. For him, this language was used to ensure the superiority of whites over blacks<sup>391</sup>. Julian Mitchell writes:

The construction of Western language reflects the same alienating principles which validate the Western ideology of race, executing the political and economic agendas of both colonization and nationalism. Therefore, the English language is colonial because it establishes a power structure which imposes whiteness to create a means of identifying and objectifying the "other", placing empirical value upon racial separation. "Whiteness" is defined as "the quality of being white or freedom from darkness and obscurity; purity or cleanliness"<sup>392</sup>.

In other words, for him, Western languages are colonial, because they created a system of power that favored the whites at the expense of the blacks, who were marginalized and seen as others. So, White English was considered right and correct, while the vernacular was seen as impure. As a result, speaking Standard English was sometimes considered as a means to be less rejected by white people. For Baldwin, the refusal to recognize the African-American vernacular as a language is not due to the language itself, but rather to the role it plays, because not recognizing the AAVE as a language is like a weapon that

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<sup>391</sup>BALDWIN, J. « *If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What is?* », The New York Times, 1979, p. 1–3.

<sup>392</sup>MITCHELL, J. (2009): « *BALDWINISM: The English language functioning as a system of racism and colonization in a 'Post'-Colonial America* », ECLS Student Scholarship, 2009, p. 1.

allows the whites to maintain their control over African-Americans. For him, language unquestionably reveals the speaker and therefore his/her identity; in this case his/her race<sup>393</sup>.

Apart from wanting to maintain their superiority, for James Baldwin, white people also wanted to have a common language that would represent the American nation<sup>394</sup>. Here, it is possible to talk about totalitarianism, because creating a universal language in America would force African-Americans to melt into the mass and eliminate their difference, which would theoretically bring them closer to white Americans. However, some black Americans see this assimilation as a betrayal to their culture and a lack of loyalty to their race. As a result, Baldwin believes that the African-American vernacular, as well as any language associated with any community, should be protected, and that they should be given great attention so as not to disappear into the mass<sup>395</sup>.

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West quotes an excerpt from the African-American revolutionary Ralph Ellison:

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the “outsider”. Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. Perhaps this is why one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term “nigger” – it made them feel instantly American. But this is tricky magic. Despite his racial difference and social status, something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man’s value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black<sup>396</sup>

In other words, white Americans have rejected African-Americans and whatever may relate to them, especially the African-American vernacular, because of uncertainty about their own identity and fear of others. As a result,

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<sup>393</sup>Baldwin, James, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>394</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>395</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>396</sup>WEST, Cornel. *Race Matters*, New York, Beacon Press, 1993, p. 3.

they tried to remove everything that differentiated African-Americans while excluding them and limiting their integration by creating terms like "nigger" which gave the whites a kind of power and unity. In this context, Derrida writes about "this universal destiny which assigns us to a single language while prohibiting us from appropriating it, given that such an interdiction is linked to the very essence of language."<sup>397</sup>

Like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, Jacques Derrida believes that language is an instrument that colonialists used in order to keep their superiority. Being raised in colonized Algeria, Derrida has always been confronted to this problem of language and thus identity. He lived in a country where the colonizer's language, French, was recognized as the official language while the original language was seen as a foreign and secondary one. In this context, he states

For contrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything. Because the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate [dire] this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantic constructions, because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as "his own." That is his belief; he wishes to make others share it through the use of force or cunning; he wants to make others believe it, as they do a miracle, through rhetoric, the school, or the army<sup>398</sup>.

In other words, Derrida maintains that the master or the colonizer does not own language. It is only considered as such because of politics and power. In fact, the master sees language as his property because of his superiority over minorities. Thus, he imposes this language on these latter in order to suppress their identity. In this regard, masters or colonizers obliged the other to repress its identity and differences. Indeed, African-Americans as "a supposedly "ethnic" or "religious" group... finds itself one day deprived, as a group, of its

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<sup>397</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

citizenship by a state that, with the brutality of a unilateral decision, withdraws it without asking for their opinion, and without the said group gaining back any other citizenship. No other”<sup>399</sup>

In *The Monolingualism of the Other Or the Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida wonders “What is identity, this concept of which the transparent identity itself is always dogmatically presupposed by so many debates on monoculturalism or multiculturalism, nationality, citizenship, and, in general, belonging?”<sup>400</sup> Otherwise stated, he questions how a person can pretend to own a language and how this belonging to a linguistic group awards identity. Thus, how does language contribute to the constructing of one’s identity? In addition to Derrida, this question is at the heart of study of other scholars like Heidegger, Austin, and Wittgenstein.

Derrida argues that “the language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable”<sup>401</sup>. For him, people do not own a language or create it as they all learn or acquire it from others. Therefore, it neither belongs to them nor to the others as it is shared and transmitted while using it. So,

that it is not your language, even though you have no other one,... How could one have only one language without having any, without any which is theirs? Their very own? And how does one know it? How does one claim to have any knowledge of it? How does one say it? Why would one want to have others share this knowledge so long as one is alleging equally, and in the same outburst of the same idiom, that one does not know or practice any other language?<sup>402</sup>

These are the questions that Derrida tries to answer in his work. The scholar further states that “alienation institutes every language as a language of the other”<sup>403</sup>. It is worth noting that the other here is not another person; it is rather a fact in which language involves being heard by others.

However, Derrida’s and Larsen’s situations are completely different. On the one hand, Jacques Derrida lived in a country where he embodied the

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<sup>399</sup>Derrida, Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>400</sup>Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>401</sup>Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>402</sup>Ibid, p. 3-4.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

colonizer for the original inhabitants who were colonized, marginalized, and considered as others, Algerians. Furthermore, even if he did not see himself as a colonist, he was seen as such and as superior by the French government as well as by Algerian people. Nella Larsen, on the other hand, represented the other and the marginalized one. As it is stated, the author was considered as a literary passer by some critics for her use of Standard English. Thus, these latter considered her as other when talking about White English and thought it was more legitimate for her to write in African-American Vernacular. Therefore, Larsen's situation is more comparable to the Algerians' one rather than to Derrida's as she was seen as an outsider in her own country. Indeed, black people who were ripped out from their countries in Africa had to learn the language of their masters just like colonized people had to learn the one of their colonizers. In this respect, black slaves had to acquire English while Algerians had to acquire French.

Nevertheless, their language was usually approximate because they did not have access to education. Derrida asserts that this rough language

suffices for him [the master]... to make himself understood, to have his "speech act" work, to create conditions for that, in order that he may be "happy" ("felicitous" –which means, in this code, efficacious, productive, efficient, generative of the expected event, but sometimes anything but "happy") and the trick is played, a first trick will have, at any rate, been played. Liberation, emancipation, and revolution will necessarily be the second trick. It will provide freedom from the first while confirming a heritage by internalizing it, by reappropriating it-but only up to a certain point, for, as my hypothesis shows, there is never any such thing as absolute appropriation or reappropriation. Because there is no natural property of language<sup>404</sup>

Indeed, the master's only goal was to make his orders understood. So, he did not need his slaves to acquire complete knowledge of the language. However, this turned against them because learning the language gave them some power and helped in their revolution. In fact, it permitted to understand as well as to create a dialogue with their oppressors and for black people to create a new identity in their new land while keeping some of their original personality by

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<sup>404</sup>Derrida, Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 23-4.

creating an intermediary language that mixed between English and African languages and which became African-American Vernacular.

Furthermore, Derrida talks about the "Franco-Maghrebia" hyphen that unites France and Maghreb historically. He states that "the silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything, not a single torment, not a single torture. It will never silence their memory. It could even worsen the terror, the lesions, and the wounds. A hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, the noise of weapons, airplanes, and bombs"<sup>405</sup>. This is very similar to the situation of African-Americans. In fact, this hyphen which suggests a composed identity and a mix between two cultures to create a new personality does not erase the sufferings and oppression black people went through and their combat to affirm their individuality whether by their language or by their African heritage.

Since the beginning of her career, Nella Larsen has always written in Standard English. For her first two short stories, she even pretended to be a white man using a pseudonym, Allen Semi. Her two novels are also written in a very Standard English except some passages in *Quicksand* where the author introduces a touch of African-American Vernacular. Therefore, it is legitimate to wonder why this turnaround occurred when her career was at its highest. The reasons can only be imagined since the author never answered this question. It is possible to think that Larsen, who was a person lacking self-confidence<sup>406</sup>, was afraid of being rejected and initially wanted to show that she had a good education and could write in a 'good English'.

So, when she was considered as an established writer she took that 'risk' of using Black English. In addition, she may have wanted to have a broader audience and not be limited to a few African-American readers. Furthermore, Larsen said that the short story *Sanctuary* was told to her by one of her patients while she was a nurse; so, she certainly wanted to transcribe it as it was and keep its orality. Finally, according to Larsen's publisher, Knopf,

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<sup>405</sup>Derrida, Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>406</sup>Hutchinson, George, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

she said it was a story that was part of African-American folklore, so it can be inferred that she wanted to preserve the spirit and authenticity of the tale<sup>407</sup>.

In conclusion, the African-American vernacular creates many divisions, because the researchers do not always agree on its origin: some say that it comes from the Standard English; others claim that it comes from languages of West Africa, while others claim that it is very similar to the Caribbean creoles. The AAVE also divides because some people think that it is simply a distortion of English or that it is an English full of mistakes that should disappear, while others would like to see it as an independent and recognized language, with its own rules. However, for the individuals concerned, African-Americans, this language is rooted in their identity and reducing it to a simple street language is like ignoring the richness of their history and culture. Black English is a very diverse and rich language that should have more attention from researchers, teachers, writers and the general public. It is inseparable from African-American identity and history and is essential for any study of this community.

In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o asserts that language and culture are deeply intertwined. As a result, language defines us as people, but it is also inseparable from our history as a community, because it allows us to preserve and transmit our culture from generation to generation:

Languages as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their places politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a

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<sup>407</sup>ALFRED A. K. (1930): Inc. Records. Manuscript Records and Readers Reports, [Imes] Larsen, Nella. Box 20. New York, New York Public Library, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division,



community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world<sup>408</sup>.

On the other hand, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o thinks that the history of African-Americans can only be told in Black English because using another language would be to distort this history. Therefore, the aim of this chapter has been to study the different languages used or not used by Nella Larsen's protagonists and the role these languages play in defining them as persons and their belonging to a certain community.

So, language is a crucial component in the development of an identity and in defining the belonging to a certain group. People who have a multilingual background are usually confronted with difficulties in the choice of their daily language. They struggle even more because choosing a language means choosing the group to which they belong and identify. Language plays an important role in Nella Larsen's works. Indeed, the choice of language is determinant in an author's style in addition to the characterization of the protagonists' identity. Obviously, Larsen's characters in the novels do not seem to think that it is important to use African-American Vernacular so as to be considered as black. They prefer to speak in Standard English which is more associated with white people. Nevertheless, this choice does not permit them to be identified with white Americans.

Nella Larsen shows her mastering of Ebonics in *Sanctuary* which makes the reader perplex about the author's choice of language. Yet, it is important to shed light on the fact that Larsen's characters in the novels are mixed-race well-educated people who live a comfortable life and who do not experience the same hardships as black lower-classes who usually lack education. On the opposite, Annie Poole, the heroine of *Sanctuary* is very poor and seems to have no education. By creating such characters, Larsen might have wanted to emphasize another kind of passing which is the linguistic one.

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<sup>408</sup>NGŪGĪ Wa. Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1986, p. 15-6.

# **General Conclusion**

Nella Larsen is one of the most brilliant writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Even though her career did not last long, she produced works that marked her era and still resonate for some people nowadays. In *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cheryl A. Wall argues that “Nella Larsen was continually reinventing herself. In her novels, she staged performances of identity for her protagonists, which reveal her awareness of the risks of asserting a self at odds with societal expectations, even as they expose her complicity with myths of race and gender”<sup>409</sup>. In her writings, the author explores the choices that are offered to mixed-race women in a world driven by race and gender stereotypes and prejudices.

Larsen was a modernist for her epoch since she developed taboo themes like sexuality and miscegenation. She also depicted African-American women and mixed-race women in a new way that counters the stereotypes spread about them. Indeed, Larsen deconstructs the image of the black woman who functions as a perfect wife and mother. She demonstrates that some women are not satisfied with these limited and limiting roles by creating characters like Helga Crane. As a matter of fact, Helga is totally overwhelmed by her roles of wife and mother and is not satisfied by that life style. Hence, the author shows the difficulties undergone by colored females in a society that considers them more as mothers than women. Moreover, Larsen also deconstructs the white standards of beauty and shows that color is beautiful. In fact, she describes her characters as “brownly beautiful” (Q, p. 47). Additionally, her protagonists transgress the dress codes that preconize that black women should wear dark colors. In this regard, Helga Crane wears bright colors and does not want to be assimilated to that mass of women who are dressed uniformly.

However, developing such controversial themes and going counter the accepted norms is never an easy task for the author. But, Wall believes that “To some degree, Nella Larsen must have been aware all along that the work she did was dangerous. Examining the intersection of race, class, and gender was a

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<sup>409</sup>Wall, A. Cheryl, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

perilous business”<sup>410</sup>. Therefore, Larsen was conscious of the taboo nature of some of the subjects she exposes in her works but she wanted to denounce the reality of colored and mixed-race women that some writers tried to disguise. Indeed, the writer felt invested with the mission of showing the real image of the black female to the world. Unlike many writers, she did not want to create perfect ladies with no sexual desire and whose only goal is to take care of their houses and children. Instead, she preferred to show the complications created by gender and race differences and the otherness and the marginalization that these women go through.

Nella Larsen influenced generations of writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Alice Walker states “*Quicksand* and *Passing* are novels I will never forget. They open up a whole world of experience and struggle that seemed to me, when I first read them years ago, absolutely absorbing, fascinating, and indispensable”<sup>411</sup>. It is worth reminding that writers like Alice Walker permitted to rediscover the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen after years of oblivion. Another well-known author who was influenced by Larsen is Maya Angelou who thinks that “Discovering Nella Larsen is like finding lost money with no name on it. One can enjoy it with delight and share it without guilt”<sup>412</sup>. Therefore, these two famous writers show their admiration and respect for the works of Nella Larsen whom they believe has largely contributed to the development of African-American literature as well as in the American one.

Nella Larsen’s style is characterized by the paradox of her simple but complex texts. In fact, the author uses a simple language that may deceive the reader. Nevertheless, she uses a subtle imagery and develops themes that can only be discovered through a deep reading. Indeed, when the novels first appeared, critics thought they were only about race but after some decades other subjects like homosexual desire and sexual repression were brought into light. As a matter of fact, Larsen’s works are not merely about race, even if it is

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<sup>410</sup>Wall, A. Cheryl, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>411</sup>Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand and Passing*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. Edited by Deborah E. McDowell: front cover.

<sup>412</sup>*Ibid.*

the most obvious topic, they are about identity seeking for females in a society full of prejudices and pre-conceived ideas. Therefore, even though her style is simple, Larsen's "expansively complex representations of gender and race resist reductive reading"<sup>413</sup>. These pieces of fiction crossed the years because they deal with concepts that still exist and that many people experience in their lives like otherness and belonging.

The present thesis has permitted to shed light on some of the themes that were still unexplored in Larsen's works. First, it allowed to situate Larsen within the Harlem Renaissance as a woman and as an author. Besides, the analysis of the different reviews about the novels has shown the evolution of the critiques and has determined which themes were understudied and thus those on which the thesis should focus. Second, the definition of race and passing has contributed to establishing why passing was seen as such a threat and how it was perceived by both the white and the black communities. Then, a comparison between some passing novels written in different periods with Larsen's works have shown the evolution of the passer from passive to active in literature. Subsequently, analyzing the various types of passing has shown that passing is not only racial; it can also be sexual for instance.

The second part the thesis has allowed to come out with some interesting answers that have largely contributed to the resolution of the present work's problematic. First, defining vulnerability in relation to race and to double consciousness has permitted to study the racial identity construction of the characters, their racial otherness and its impact on their lives. Second, studying gender as an element that can contribute to the vulnerability of the protagonists has established that Larsen's females' roles are not gendered. Besides, it considered the consequences of the sexual repression that the characters go through. We have also examined motherhood and motherlessness in Nella Larsen's novels in order to see their effects on women in the novels. Finally, these analyses of race and gender allowed us to settle on that they are elements that can contribute to the vulnerability of a person but not in the case

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<sup>413</sup>*The Oxford Companion to African-American literature*. Edited by William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997: 428.

of Larsen's characters and their fates as vulnerability can sometimes be a form of resistance. However, by resisting their vulnerability, the novels' characters only submit even more to society's expectations. But, this does not mean that the solution is accepting vulnerability. It only means that a single person cannot change things as change needs to come from the community as a whole.

The last part of the thesis is mainly devoted to the study of the concept of otherness within the philosophy of difference in order to investigate if Larsen's novels were part of that philosophy. We have studied the different kinds of *shouts* in the stories to see how the characters fight against totalitarianism and its dangers and effects on otherness. This has permitted to consolidate our hypothesis which advocates that otherness never fades. Then, we have been able to conclude that Larsen's writing style makes her works fit within the philosophy of difference since she does not follow the norms. Moreover, Larsen's writings help the victims of racial and sexual prejudices to make their voice heard. Her style is rich in many rhetorical devices and it is characterized by its simplicity while being complex. Finally, we have studied the importance of language in identity construction and its significance as a dwelling in Larsen's works.

So, all these results collected through the study of Larsen's novels have contributed to proving that otherness does not fade away at the end of the stories. In fact, trying to make differences disappear through systems of totalitarianism or through the individual's own willing to do so does not make these differences fade away. On the opposite, they are even more accentuated. In this context, in *Quicksand*, Helga Crane appears to vindicate her otherness throughout the novel. However, at the end of the story she seems to have agreed to submit to society's expectations and to get rid of her differences. She tries to fit in and makes efforts to fight all the feelings of pity and disdain she has for her new community. Nevertheless, her otherness is still there and eventually catches her up as she realizes that these differences are part of her and that she cannot deny them. Helga tries to run away to get back to her previous life where she felt proud of her alterity but she is unable to do so. Yet, even if she is bed-ridden and unable to get herself out of that prison that her life

has become, she still dreams of that freedom she had when she claimed her color and gender.

In *Passing*, Clare can be seen as the double or the other of Irene. They have a paradoxical relationship full of love and hatred. In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida writes “the other is my brother. The other is revealed as my brother. And the brother reveals himself as my enemy”<sup>414</sup>. Therefore, the identification of the enemy leads to the identification of the self. That’s why there is a slight line between the self and the other. At the end of the novel, Clare is defenestrated and dies and the reader is left with no answer concerning the way it happened. He wonders if it was an accident, a suicide or a murder. However, Irene’s attitude designates her as the major suspect. Even if Clare dies, her other –in this case Irene– is still alive. Irene believes that by getting rid of Clare, she would be able to have a serene life but she dies psychologically and her otherness remains. Therefore, even if the other undergoes a lot of troubles that at first seem to eliminate it, it is still alive at the end of the novels. It survives not only what is imposed by society but above all, the dangers it represents for itself because it is its own enemy.

Nella Larsen’s fiction seems to suggest that the best way to come to terms with otherness lies in a more linguistic or literary solution. She believes that “a woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies”<sup>415</sup>. This idea has been developed by Helene Cixous in *The Laugh of Medusa*. Indeed, Larsen is considered as modernist for her epoch and her heroines represent the image of the new woman. Helga Crane and Clare Kendry, for example, depart from the system of phallogocentrism based on Reason and Logos which mean male and usually white for Cixous<sup>416</sup>. Thus, these women must become ‘the new insurgent’ through their new ‘womanly way of writing’.

In *Quicksand*, Helga writes herself mainly through her bodily experiences and more particularly her repeated pregnancies. Her body changes

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<sup>414</sup>Derrida, Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>415</sup> Cixous, Helene, *op. cit.*, p. 878.

<sup>416</sup>Ibid, p. 879.

from that of a young woman or a motherless child to the body of a mother. Thus change inscribes Helga's body and "kill[s] the false woman". Her near-death in child-birth and her apparently surprising pregnancies are the "anti-logos weapon" that Cixous believes women should create to protect themselves by writing. However, Helga is very ambivalent concerning her role as she is both a mother and a lost child. Therefore the protagonist becomes a "sext"<sup>417</sup>. She is the 'locus' for otherness and when she becomes a mother, she 'other' herself because she is still a child. Furthermore, Elaine Showalter believes that this movement of writing the self is "the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text"<sup>418</sup>. Thus, Helga becomes within the body of the text which is interestingly called corpus in linguistics.

In *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, David Levering Lewis writes "Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), if not the best novel of the Renaissance, is certainly its most engrossing. McKay's *Home to Harlem* sold more copies, but Larsen's novel won much better critical reviews and one of the Renaissance's newest and most prestigious laurels, the Harmon Foundation's second prize for literature"<sup>419</sup>. Even if Larsen's novels were not the best sellers of the Harlem Renaissance, they allowed her to integrate into the elite of authors of the era. They also permitted her to be the first black female to obtain the Harmon Foundation's second prize of literature and the Guggenheim fellowship which she used to travel to Europe. Larsen is a revolutionary writer who explores different questions of identity seeking and belonging. Unfortunately, her works are underestimated and understudied and this leaves the field open for further researches.

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<sup>417</sup>Cixous, Helene, *op, cit.*, p. 879.

<sup>418</sup>Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *The New Feminist Criticism: essays on women, literature, and theory*. Elaine Showalter, ed. London: Virago, 1986, p. 249.

<sup>419</sup>Levering Lewis, David, *op, cit.*, p.:409.



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## INTRODUCTION GENERALE

« La vie n'était pas un miracle, une merveille. Ce n'était pour les Nègres, au moins, qu'une grande déception. Quelque chose à traverser dans les meilleures dispositions possibles. Personne ne s'intéressait à eux ou les a aidés. Dieu! Bah! Et ils n'étaient qu'une nuisance pour les autres »<sup>420</sup>(Q, p157)<sup>421</sup>. C'est la description faite par Helga Crane sur la vie des Afro-Américains dans les années 1920 aux États-Unis. Cette déclaration est pleine d'amertume et de déception car après un long voyage au cours duquel Helga se cherchait, la protagoniste ne trouve aucun moyen de s'en sortir par rapport à son altérité et à sa marginalisation. L'altérité est omniprésente dans les œuvres de Nella Larsen en général et dans ses romans - *Quicksand* (1928) et *Passing* (1929) - en particulier. Ce concept a reçu une certaine attention de la part des critiques et des universitaires. Cependant, ces derniers ont sous-estimé le rôle de l'altérité dans le destin des protagonistes et la fin des romans. Ce manque d'exploration sur le sujet dans les travaux de Larsen laisse un vide que cette recherche tentera de combler. De plus, la notoriété de Nella Larsen est très limitée en dehors des États-Unis et même inexistante dans certains pays malgré le grand succès rencontré par ses travaux pendant la Renaissance d'Harlem. Ces deux éléments font l'originalité et la nécessité de la présente thèse.

Les questions d'altérité, d'appartenance et de vulnérabilité sont intemporelles. En effet, beaucoup de sujets développés par Larsen dans ses romans sont encore très résonnant pour beaucoup de gens de nos jours. Dans ce contexte, Lise Funderburg déclare «Les lois sur l'esclavage et les pratiques sociales ont créé un précédent - qui survit jusqu'à ce jour parmi beaucoup de Blancs et de Noirs - à l'égard de quiconque a une trace de sang africain comme noir»<sup>422-423</sup>. Dans son ouvrage *Black, White, Other*, publié en 1994,

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<sup>420</sup>Ma traduction, "Life wasn't a miracle, a wonder. It was, for Negroes at least, only a great disappointment. Something to be got through with as best one could. No one was interested in them or helped them. God! Bah! And they were only a nuisance to other people"

<sup>421</sup>Les références aux œuvres de Stephen King seront indiquées entre parenthèses à la fin de chaque citation. Et nous utiliserons les abréviations suivantes :

- Q: *Quicksand*
- P: *Passing*
- S: *Sanctuary*

<sup>422</sup>Ma traduction, "slavery laws and social practices set a precedent -which survives to this day among many Whites and Blacks- of regarding anyone with a trace of African blood as black"

Funderberg interroge soixante-quatre métis qui racontent leurs expériences d'altérité et de différence dans la communauté américaine. Ils partagent les mêmes sentiments de non-appartenance et de marginalisation subis par les protagonistes de Larsen dans les années 1920. Ce livre permet de démontrer que ces questions sont toujours pertinentes et universelles.

Dans *The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation*, Roy F. Baumeister et Mark R. Leary affirment que «l'hypothèse de l'appartenance est que les êtres humains ont une volonté profonde de former et de maintenir au moins une quantité minimale relations interpersonnelles durables, positives et significatives »<sup>424-425</sup>. En d'autres termes, l'appartenance est de faire partie ou d'être un membre naturel d'un groupe ou d'une entité particulière. C'est la nécessité émotionnelle de l'individu d'être reconnu comme un élément d'un groupe. Le désir d'appartenir est le besoin de liens forts et fermes avec les autres. C'est un sentiment inévitable qui est présent dans la nature humaine parce que les gens ont besoin de donner et recevoir de l'affection. Sans appartenance, les humains ne peuvent pas s'identifier et ont des difficultés à communiquer et à se connecter à leur environnement.

Le problème du manque d'appartenance est généralement causé par l'altérité des personnes. Du latin *alterītas*, l'altérité est la condition d'être autre; c'est « l'état d'être autre ou différent ; la diversité »<sup>426-427</sup>. L'altérité peut être définie comme être différent ou inhabituel en apparence ou en caractère. Ce concept est généralement associé à être une minorité ou être un étranger. Par exemple, dans les études de genre, l'altérité est étroitement liée au fait d'être une femme dans une culture dominée par les hommes. Simone de Beauvoir le définit comme les personnes les moins favorisées dans une société qui sont

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<sup>423</sup>Funderberg, Lise. *Black, White, Other*. New York: Quill, William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1994, p. 13.

<sup>424</sup>Ma traduction. "the belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships"

<sup>425</sup>Baumeister Roy F. and Leary Mark R. *The Need to Belong: "Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation"*. New York: the American Psychological Association, Inc. *Psychological Bulletin* 1995, Vol. 117, No. 3: 497.

<sup>426</sup>Ma traduction. "the state of being other or different; diversity".

<sup>427</sup>OED

généralement les femmes par rapport aux hommes. Cependant, les femmes ne sont pas les seules 'autres' de la société. En fait, il existe différents types d' 'autres' par rapport à la race, le sexe et la classe. L'altérité est un concept utilisé dans de nombreuses disciplines telles que la philosophie, l'anthropologie, l'ethnologie et la géographie.

Les romans de Larsen ont tous deux été publiés pendant la Renaissance de Harlem. En Amérique du Nord, cette période est souvent appelée les «années folles» ou «l'âge du jazz», alors qu'en Europe, on parle parfois de «l'âge d'or des années vingt». Pendant cette période, les États-Unis et la société américaine ont traversé une période transitoire et en quelque sorte paradoxale. En fait, les années 1920 étaient censées représenter une phase d'émancipation et de libération pour les Afro-Américains. Néanmoins, c'était aussi une phase où la marginalisation et la discrimination atteignaient des échelles élevées. Par exemple, après sa réapparition en 1915, le nombre de membres du *Ku Klux Klan* atteignit, au début des années 1920, un sommet de quatre à cinq millions de membres, suivi d'un déclin rapide jusqu'à 30 000 membres en 1930. Ces contradictions laissèrent beaucoup d'Afro-Américains dans un état ambivalent concernant leur identité. Ils avaient des difficultés à s'intégrer dans une société où leur altérité était célébrée mais en même temps dénigrée. Selon William E. B. Du Bois, il y avait encore un voile qui empêchait les deux races de se voir comme des égaux<sup>428</sup>.

Même si la Renaissance de Harlem était censée être une période de libération où l'altérité et la différence étaient célébrées plutôt que réprimées, les personnages de Larsen montrent que les souffrances endurées par les Afro-Américains tout au long de l'histoire étaient toujours présentes. À cet égard, W.E.B. Du Bois écrit dans *The Souls of Black Folks*

La Nation n'a pas encore trouvé la paix de ses péchés; l'affranchi n'a pas encore trouvé en la liberté sa terre promise. Quoi qu'il soit arrivé de bien dans ces années de changement, l'ombre d'une profonde déception repose sur le peuple nègre, déception d'autant plus amère que l'idéal inatteignable ne fut borné que par la simple ignorance d'un peuple modeste ... La première décade n'était qu'un prolongement de la recherche vaine de la liberté, la

<sup>428</sup>Du Bois, W.E.B (1903)*The Souls of Black Folk*. Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008, p. 1.

faveur qui semblait à peine échapper à leur emprise, comme une volonté-feu follet, énervant et induisant en erreur l'hôte sans tête<sup>429-430</sup>.

Ce passage explique la grande illusion que la Renaissance de Harlem a été pour de nombreux Noirs qui aspiraient à l'égalité et à la justice. Un autre nom pour la Renaissance de Harlem était le 'New Negro Movement'. Cette expression portait la conviction que les Noirs pouvaient désormais laisser derrière eux leur héritage d'esclavage et de discriminations et définir leur identité en tant qu'Afro-Américains. Cependant, cela n'a pas toujours été le cas car de nombreux stéréotypes et idées conçues étaient diffusés à leur sujet, ce qui rendait difficile l'établissement d'une identité consistante.

Dans *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Eric J. Sundquist soutient que

L'avance promise des droits afro-américains après la guerre civile ... s'est révélée être une fausse aube. Dans les années post-Reconstruction, le chant du matin de la joie et de la résurrection a été converti en une chanson de deuil et de désespoir, alors qu'un nouvel esclavage du racisme et de l'oppression économique subvertit une fois de plus la vraie liberté pour les Noirs américains.

Ce passage commente l'utilisation par W.E.B. Du Bois du spirituel *My Lord What Morning* dans *The Souls of Black Folks*. Cependant, Dubois utilise à la fois les mots «matin» et «deuil». Il y a une signification très intéressante dans le fait que le dernier mot du chant spirituel ait été écrit de deux manières différentes. En effet, d'une part, il indique le matin ou l'émancipation espérée par les Afro-Américains. D'un autre côté, il montre le deuil ou la douleur qu'ils ont éprouvés en découvrant que leur rêve de liberté restera un rêve et qu'ils seront encore discriminés dans leur propre pays. Ce que Sundquist a appelé un esclavage du racisme a continué longtemps après la guerre civile et même pendant la Renaissance de Harlem parce que même si les blancs avaient

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<sup>429</sup>Ma traduction. The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,—a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people...The first decade was merely a prolongation of the vain search for freedom, the boon that seemed ever barely to elude their grasp,—like a tantalizing will-o'-the-wisp, maddening and misleading the headless host

<sup>430</sup>Du Bois, W.E.B., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

beaucoup d'intérêt et étaient intrigués par les noirs; ils les considéraient comme des 'autres' exotiques et allaient à Harlem pour les voir comme s'ils étaient des animaux de zoo ou comme des monstres plutôt que comme des êtres humains.

Cette situation a intensifié l'altérité ressentie par les personnes de couleur et a causé des difficultés d'appartenance. Ce sentiment d'aliénation était encore plus grand pour les métis. En fait, être métis était encore plus difficile parce que ces gens n'étaient ni blancs ni vraiment noirs. Par conséquent, ils se sentaient généralement déplacés avec les deux races et ne pouvaient pas trouver leur place dans le monde. De même, Larsen dépeint une société pleine d'ambiguïtés et de contradictions. Cela rend la recherche d'identité de ses personnages très complexe et remplie d'obstacles. Étant elle-même métisse, Larsen développe le sujet de l'intérieur. Ses idées sur la race sont tout sauf élémentaires. En plus de l'altérité raciale, les protagonistes de Larsen ressentent une autre forme d'aliénation en étant des femmes. En effet, le genre et la sexualité jouent un rôle très important dans le développement de l'identité. Ces éléments peuvent causer une certaine forme de vulnérabilité qui est traitée différemment par les personnages de Larsen.

Cette thèse intitulée *L'Altérité et la Vulnérabilité dans les Romans de Nella Larsen* vise à prouver que l'altérité demeure à la fin des romans de Larsen et ne s'efface presque jamais parce que les personnages ne peuvent s'identifier et appartenir à aucun groupe. En fait, dès le début des romans, tous les protagonistes - Helga Crane, Irene Redfield et Clare Kendry - ont du mal à trouver leurs places dans le monde et à s'identifier à tout groupe racial, sexuel ou social. Elles n'acceptent pas l' 'autre' en elles-mêmes et essaient de le réprimer mais elles échouent. Par conséquent, elles se sentent constamment aliénées. Leur altérité est toujours présente et c'est ce qui façonne leur vie et conduit à leurs fins tragiques.

Dans *Politiques de l'amitié*, Derrida écrit: « En tant que je le reconnais commemon ennemi, je reconnais qu'il peut me mettreenquestion. Et qui peut me mettre effectivement en question? Seulement moi-même.»<sup>431-432</sup>. Par

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<sup>431</sup>Derrida, Jacques. *Politiques de l'amitié*. Paris, Ed Galilée, 1994, p.187.

conséquent, l'identification de l'ennemi conduit à l'identification de soi. De plus, Derrida développe le concept d'auto-immunité qui soutient que l'autre existe dans le soi et que celui-ci dirige ses défenses contre son altérité pour l'éradiquer en la réprimant et en la rejetant. Cette auto-immunité peut expliquer l'identification impossible des personnages qui conduit à leur mort psychologique mais pas à la mort de leur altérité. Ainsi, la fin des romans de Larsen montre les dangers du totalitarisme et de la tentative d'assimilation ou d'éradication de l'altérité.

Ainsi, cette thèse aspire à montrer que les romans de Larsen tentent d'écrire l'Autre, mais refusent de le réduire au même. Par conséquent, ils rejettent le système hégélien qui mène au totalitarisme. Nous prouverons que les fins tragiques des romans et l'identification impossible des personnages à un groupe sont causés par leur tentative d'assimiler ou d'éliminer leur altérité. Cependant, ils ne parviennent pas à le faire, et leur altérité demeure. Nous mettrons également en lumière le fait que les différences raciales et sexuelles ne sont pas toujours des causes de vulnérabilité; ils peuvent parfois être un moyen de résistance.

Cette recherche s'inscrit dans le champ des études culturelles en plus de la littérature afro-américaine. En conséquence, elle est interdisciplinaire et regroupe différentes théories comme des théories littéraires, des études ethniques, des études féministes et la philosophie. En effet, l'altérité étant un concept pertinent dans de nombreuses disciplines, elle ne peut être étudiée avec un seul point de vue ou champ. Pour développer cette recherche, nous aurons besoin d'analyser les romans de Larsen en utilisant des études ethniques comme la théorie de la double conscience que Du Bois construit dans *The Souls of Black Folks*. Nous devons également nous appuyer sur des points de vue féministes pour examiner les rôles des femmes et la construction de l'identité dans les fictions. Pour ce faire, différentes théories comme *We Should All Be Feminists* de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie seront d'une grande aide. Enfin, l'altérité est un concept crucial dans le domaine de la philosophie. Ainsi,

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<sup>432</sup>Ma traduction. "In so far as I recognize him as my enemy, I recognize that he can put me in question. And who can effectively put me in question? Only myself"

dans la dernière partie de cette thèse, nous nous appuyerons sur le livre de Christian Ruby *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard* pour définir l'altérité dans la philosophie de la différence.

La première partie du présent travail s'intitule «La Renaissance de Harlem: de l'hybridité au *passing*». Elle est divisée en deux chapitres. Le premier chapitre «La Renaissance de Harlem: une enclave pour les Afro-Américains» est consacré à l'étude des contextes historiques et sociaux des romans de Larsen. Il visera également à étudier le rôle et la place des femmes, y compris celle de Larsen, pendant cette période en tant qu'écrivains. De plus, les critiques les plus importantes des romans de Larsen *Quicksand* et *Passing* seront examinées afin de déterminer comment ces œuvres ont été évaluées au fil du temps. Le thème central du deuxième chapitre «*Passing* as Performativity» est le concept de *passing*. Il sera analysé sous ses différentes formes. Après avoir défini la race, il sera possible d'expliquer pourquoi le fait de passer pour blanc était perçu comme une menace et pourquoi les 'passeurs' ont été sévèrement punis. Ensuite, la tradition du *passing* sera examinée en prenant comme exemples quelques-uns des premiers livres sur le thème, tels que *Plum bun: A Novel Without a Moral*(1928) de Jessie Fauset, et en les comparant à la façon dont Larsen traite le sujet. Enfin, les différents types de *passing* seront étudiés afin de montrer que cela n'a pas seulement une dimension raciale. En outre, nous utiliserons le concept de performativité par rapport aux romans de Larsen.

Le deuxième chapitre de ce travail sera consacré au concept de la vulnérabilité dans les romans de Nella Larsen. Il visera à établir si la race, le sexe et la sexualité jouent un rôle dans la vulnérabilité supposée des protagonistes. À cet égard, les constructions raciales des protagonistes seront analysées en s'appuyant sur la théorie de la double conscience de William E.B. Du Bois pour établir si la différence raciale rend les gens vulnérables et comment la race est analysée dans les romans. Dans le deuxième chapitre, le genre et la sexualité sont étudiés pour déterminer si les rôles des femmes sont sexués dans les romans de Larsen. Par ailleurs, les stéréotypes sexuels et leurs répercussions sur les personnages féminins seront pris en compte. Les relations



des femmes dans la société en tant que femmes, épouses et mères seront également examinées. Enfin, l'absence de maternité, la maternité et leurs rôles dans les romans seront analysés. Le dernier chapitre de cette section s'appuie sur l'article (et le discours) de Butler *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* pour prouver que la vulnérabilité peut parfois être une forme de résistance et que les destins des personnages de Larsen sont causés par leurs propres choix plutôt que par leur race ou leur genre.

La dernière partie de cette thèse «Writing the Other: Difference / Différance<sup>433</sup>» est divisée en trois chapitres. Tout d'abord, dans 'Otherness', Shout<sup>434</sup> and Difference', nous définirons le concept d'altérité dans la philosophie de la différence en utilisant *Les archipels de la différence: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard* de Christian Ruby. Nous définirons ensuite ce qu'est une victime et examinerons les personnages de Larsen pour voir s'ils correspondent à cette description. Nous étudierons également les différents types de 'cris' dans *Quicksand* et *Passing*. Deuxièmement, dans «The Aesthetics of Difference», nous étudierons le style de Larsen, car ce dernier est un instrument de l'écriture de la différence. Est-ce qu'elle change la signification de certains mots? Larsen résiste-t-il à «l'oppression du sens» telle qu'elle est décrite dans le livre de Ruby et par les philosophes comme Foucault et Derrida? Nous examinerons également l'intertextualité et les références partagées dans les œuvres de Larsen et analyserons les éléments para-textuels comme les épigraphes afin de déterminer leur importance dans les textes. Enfin, dans le dernier chapitre, «The Monoliguialism of the Other», nous examinerons l'utilisation du langage par Nella Larsen, parmi laquelle l'anglais noir dans la nouvelle *Sanctuary*. Nous essaierons également d'enquêter sur les raisons qui ont poussé Larsen à utiliser l'anglais noir à cette époque et pas avant et pourquoi elle a choisi d'écrire ses romans dans la langue de «l'oppresseur».

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<sup>433</sup>Différance comme définie par Jacques Derrida

<sup>434</sup>Ceci est ma traduction du 'Cri' qui est la réaction de l'autre à toutes les souffrances qu'il subit. Ces réactions peuvent être sous différentes formes et types.

## CONCLUSION GENERALE

Nella Larsen est l'un des écrivains les plus brillants de la Renaissance de Harlem. Même si sa carrière n'a pas duré longtemps, elle a produit des œuvres qui ont marqué son époque et qui résonnent encore aujourd'hui pour certaines personnes. Dans *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cheryl A. Wall affirme que «Nella Larsen se réinvente continuellement. Dans ses romans, elle met en scène des représentations identitaires pour ses protagonistes, révélant ainsi sa conscience des risques de s'affirmer en contradiction avec les attentes sociétales, tout en exposant sa complicité avec les mythes de race et de genre»<sup>435-436</sup>. Dans ses écrits, l'auteure explore les choix offerts aux femmes métisses dans un monde conduit par des stéréotypes et des préjugés de race et de genre.

Larsen était moderniste pour son époque puisqu'elle a développé des thèmes tabous comme la sexualité et le métissage. Elle a également dépeint les femmes afro-américaines et les femmes métisses d'une nouvelle manière qui contredit les stéréotypes répandus à leurs sujets. En effet, Larsen déconstruit l'image de la femme noire qui était vu comme une épouse et une mère parfaites. Elle démontre que certaines femmes ne sont pas satisfaites de ces rôles limités et limitatifs en créant des personnages comme Helga Crane. En fait, Helga est totalement dépassée par ses rôles d'épouse et de mère et n'est pas satisfaite par ce style de vie. Ainsi, l'auteur montre les difficultés rencontrées par les femmes de couleur dans une société qui les considère plus comme des mères que des femmes. De plus, Larsen déconstruit aussi les standards blancs de la beauté et montre que la couleur est belle. En effet, elle décrit ses personnages comme "brownly beautiful" (Q 47) De plus, ses protagonistes transgressent les codes vestimentaires qui préconisent que les femmes noires doivent porter des couleurs sombres. À cet égard, Helga Crane porte des couleurs vives et ne veut pas être assimilé à cette masse de femmes qui sont habillées uniformément.

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<sup>435</sup>Ma traduction. "Nella Larsen was continually reinventing herself. In her novels, she staged performances of identity for her protagonists, which reveal her awareness of the risks of asserting a self at odds with societal expectations, even as they expose her complicity with myths of race and gender"

<sup>436</sup>Wall, A. Cheryl, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

Cependant, développer de tels thèmes controversés et aller à l'encontre des normes acceptées n'est jamais une tâche facile pour un auteur. Mais, Wall croit que «jusqu'à un certain point, Nella Larsen devait savoir depuis le début que le travail qu'elle faisait était dangereux. L'analyse de l'intersection de la race, de la classe et du sexe était une entreprise périlleuse »<sup>437-438</sup>. Par conséquent, Larsen était consciente de la nature taboue de certains des sujets qu'elle expose dans ses œuvres mais elle voulait dénoncer la réalité des femmes noires et métisses que certains écrivains essayaient de dissimuler. En effet, l'écrivain s'est senti investi de la mission de montrer la véritable image de la femme noire au monde. Contrairement à de nombreux auteurs, elle ne voulait pas créer des femmes parfaites sans désir sexuel et dont le seul but est de prendre soin de leurs maisons et de leurs enfants. Au lieu de cela, elle a préféré montrer les complications créées par les différences de genre et de race et l'altérité et la marginalisation que ces femmes traversent.

Nella Larsen a influencé des générations d'écrivains comme Alice Walker et Toni Morrison. Alice Walker déclare: «*Quicksand* et *Passing* sont des romans que je n'oublierai jamais. Ils ouvrent tout un monde d'expérience et de lutte qui me semblait, quand je les ai lus il y a des années, absolument absorbants, fascinants et indispensables »<sup>439-440</sup>. Il convient de rappeler que des écrivains comme Alice Walker ont permis de redécouvrir les œuvres de Zora Neale Hurston et Nella Larsen après des années d'oubli. Maya Angelou est un autre auteur connu qui a été influencé par Larsen. Elle pense que «Découvrir Nella Larsen, c'est comme trouver de l'argent perdu sans nom. On peut en profiter avec délice et le partager sans culpabilité »<sup>441-442</sup>. Par conséquent, ces deux écrivains célèbres montrent leur admiration et leur respect pour les

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<sup>437</sup>Ma traduction. "To some degree, Nella Larsen must have been aware all along that the work she did was dangerous. Examining the intersection of race, class, and gender was a perilous business"

<sup>438</sup>Wall, A. Cheryl, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>439</sup> Ma traduction. "*Quicksand* and *Passing* are novels I will never forget. They open up a whole world of experience and struggle that seemed to me, when I first read them years ago, absolutely absorbing, fascinating, and indispensable"

<sup>440</sup>Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand and Passing*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. Edited by Deborah E. McDowell: front cover.

<sup>441</sup> Ma traduction. "Discovering Nella Larsen is like finding lost money with no name on it. One can enjoy it with delight and share it without guilt"

<sup>442</sup>Larsen, Nella, *op. cit.*, p. front cover.

œuvres de Nella Larsen qui, selon elles, ont largement contribué au développement de la littérature afro-américaine ainsi qu'à celle de l'Amérique.

Le style de Nella Larsen se caractérise par le paradoxe de ses textes simples mais complexes. En fait, l'auteur utilise un langage simple qui peut tromper le lecteur. Néanmoins, elle utilise une imagerie subtile et développe des thèmes qui ne peuvent être découverts qu'à travers une lecture profonde. En effet, lorsque les romans sont apparus pour la première fois, les critiques pensaient qu'ils ne concernaient que la race, mais après quelques décennies, d'autres sujets tels que le désir homosexuel et la répression sexuelle ont été mis en lumière. En effet, les travaux de Larsen ne sont pas seulement sur la race, même si c'est le sujet le plus évident, ils concernent la recherche d'identité pour les femmes dans une société pleine de préjugés et d'idées préconçues. Par conséquent, même si son style est simple, les «représentations expansivement complexes du genre et de la race de Larsen résistent à une lecture réductrice»<sup>443</sup>.<sup>444</sup> Ces fictions ont traversé les années parce qu'elles traitent de concepts qui existent encore et que beaucoup de gens vivent dans leur vie comme l'altérité et l'appartenance.

La présente thèse a permis de faire la lumière sur certains des thèmes encore inexplorés dans les travaux de Larsen. Premièrement, cela a permis de situer Larsen dans la Renaissance de Harlem en tant que femme et en tant qu'auteur. Par ailleurs, l'analyse des différentes critiques sur les romans a montré l'évolution des ces dernières et a déterminé quels thèmes étaient peu étudiés et donc ceux sur lesquels la thèse devait se concentrer. Deuxièmement, la définition de la race et du *passing* a contribué à établir pourquoi ce concept était perçu comme une menace et comment il était perçu par les communautés blanches et noires. Ensuite, une comparaison entre quelques romans de *passing* écrits à différentes périodes avec les travaux de Larsen ont montré l'évolution du 'passeur' dans la littérature de passif à actif. Par la suite, l'analyse des

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<sup>443</sup>Ma traduction. "expansively complex representations of gender and race resist reductive reading".

<sup>444</sup>*The Oxford Companion to African-American literature*. Edited by William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997: 428.

différents types de *passing* a montré que cette pratique n'est pas seulement raciale; ça peut aussi être sexuel par exemple.

La deuxième partie de la thèse a permis d'aboutir à des réponses intéressantes qui ont largement contribué à la résolution de la problématique du présent travail. Premièrement, la définition de la vulnérabilité par rapport à la race et à la double conscience a permis d'étudier la construction de l'identité raciale des personnages, leur altérité raciale et son impact sur leurs vies. Deuxièmement, l'étude du genre en tant qu'élément pouvant contribuer à la vulnérabilité des protagonistes a établi que les rôles des femmes de Larsen ne sont pas sexués. En outre, nous avons examiné les conséquences de la répression sexuelle que les personnages traversent. Nous avons également analysé l'absence maternelle et la maternité dans les romans de Nella Larsen afin de voir leurs effets sur les femmes dans les romans. Finalement, ces analyses de la race et du genre nous ont permis de constater que ce sont des éléments qui peuvent contribuer à la vulnérabilité d'une personne mais pas dans le cas des personnages de Larsen et dans leurs destins car la vulnérabilité peut parfois être une forme de résistance. Cependant, en résistant à leur vulnérabilité, les personnages des romans se soumettent encore plus aux attentes de la société. Mais, cela ne signifie pas que la solution est d'accepter la vulnérabilité. Cela signifie seulement qu'une seule personne ne peut pas changer les choses car le changement doit provenir de la communauté dans son ensemble.

La dernière partie de la thèse est principalement consacrée à l'étude du concept d'altérité dans la philosophie de la différence afin de déterminer si les romans de Larsen font partie de cette philosophie. Nous avons étudié les différents types de cris dans les histoires pour voir comment les personnages se battent contre le totalitarisme et ses dangers et ses effets sur l'altérité. Cela a permis de consolider notre hypothèse qui prône que l'altérité ne s'efface jamais. Ensuite, nous avons pu conclure que le style d'écriture de Larsen fait que ses œuvres s'inscrivent dans la philosophie de la différence puisqu'elle ne suit pas les normes. De plus, les écrits de Larsen aident les victimes de préjugés raciaux et sexuels à faire entendre leurs voix. Son style est riche de nombreux

dispositifs rhétoriques et il se caractérise par sa simplicité tout en étant complexe. Enfin, nous avons étudié l'importance du langage dans la construction de l'identité et son importance dans les œuvres de Larsen.

Ainsi, tous ces résultats recueillis à travers l'étude des romans de Larsen ont contribué à prouver que l'altérité ne s'estompe pas à la fin des fictions. En effet, essayer de faire disparaître les différences par des systèmes de totalitarisme ou par la volonté de l'individu de le faire ne fait pas disparaître ces différences. Au contraire, elles sont encore plus accentuées. Dans ce contexte, dans *Quicksand*, Helga Crane semble revendiquer son altérité tout au long du roman. Cependant, à la fin de l'histoire, elle semble avoir accepté de se soumettre aux attentes de la société et de se débarrasser de ses différences. Elle essaie de s'intégrer et fait des efforts pour combattre tous les sentiments de pitié et de dédain qu'elle a pour sa nouvelle communauté. Néanmoins, son altérité est toujours là et finit par la rattraper car elle se rend compte que ces différences font partie d'elle et qu'elle ne peut pas les nier. Helga essaie de s'enfuir pour retrouver sa vie antérieure où elle se sentait fière de son altérité mais elle est incapable de le faire. Pourtant, même si elle est alitée et incapable de sortir de cette prison que sa vie est devenue, elle rêve encore de cette liberté qu'elle avait quand elle revendiquait sa couleur et son sexe.

Dans *Passing*, Clare peut être vu comme le double ou l'autre d'Irène. Elles ont une relation paradoxale pleine d'amour et de haine. Dans *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida écrit « l'autre est mon frère. L'autre est révélé comme mon frère. Et le frère se révèle comme mon ennemi »<sup>445-446</sup>. Par conséquent, l'identification de l'ennemi conduit à l'identification de soi. C'est pourquoi il y a une légère ligne entre le soi et l'autre. À la fin du roman, Clare est défenestrée et meurt et le lecteur est laissé sans réponse concernant la façon dont cela s'est passé. Il se demande si c'était un accident, un suicide ou un meurtre. Cependant, l'attitude d'Irene la désigne comme le principal suspect. Même si Claire meurt, son autre -en l'occurrence Irene- est encore en vie. Irène croit qu'en se débarrassant de Clare, elle pourrait avoir une vie sereine mais elle

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<sup>445</sup>Ma traduction. "the other is my brother. The other is revealed as my brother. And the brother reveals himself as my enemy"

<sup>446</sup>Derrida, Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

meurt psychologiquement et son altérité demeure. Par conséquent, même si l'autre subit beaucoup de problèmes qui semblent d'abord l'éliminer, il est toujours vivant à la fin des romans. Il survit non seulement à ce qui est imposé par la société mais surtout aux dangers qu'il représente pour lui-même parce qu'il est son propre ennemi.

La fiction de Nella Larsen semble suggérer que la meilleure façon de faire face à l'altérité réside dans une solution plus linguistique ou littéraire. L'auteur pense qu'« une femme doit s'écrire elle-même, écrire sur les femmes et amener les femmes à écrire, d'où elles ont été chassées aussi violemment que de leur corps »<sup>447-448</sup>. Cette idée a été développée par Hélène Cixous dans *Le rire de la méduse*. En effet, Larsen est considérée comme moderniste pour son époque et ses héroïnes représentent l'image de la nouvelle femme. Helga Crane et Clare Kendry, par exemple, s'écartent du système de phallogocentrisme basé sur la Raison et le Logos qui signifient masculin et généralement blanc pour Cixous. Ainsi, ces femmes doivent devenir «la nouvelle insurgée» à travers leur nouvelle «écriture féminine».

Dans *Quicksand*, Helga s'écrit principalement par ses expériences corporelles et plus particulièrement par ses grossesses répétées. Son corps change de celui d'une jeune femme ou d'un enfant sans mère au corps d'une mère. Ainsi, le changement inscrit le corps de Helga et «tue la fausse femme». Sa quasi-mort dans l'accouchement et ses grossesses apparemment surprenantes sont «l'arme anti-logos» que Cixous croit que les femmes devraient créer pour se protéger en écrivant. Cependant, Helga est très ambivalente concernant son rôle car elle est à la fois une mère et une enfant perdue. Par conséquent, le protagoniste devient un "sext". Elle est le «locus» de l'altérité et quand elle devient mère, elle s'aliène elle-même parce qu'elle est encore enfant. De plus, Elaine Showalter pense que ce mouvement d'écriture de soi est «l'inscription du corps féminin et la différence féminine dans le langage

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<sup>447</sup>Ma traduction. "a woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies"

<sup>448</sup>Cixous, Helene, *op. cit.*, p. 878.

et le texte»<sup>449</sup>-<sup>450</sup>. Ainsi, Helga devient dans le corps du texte qui est intéressement appelé corpus en linguistique.

Dans *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, David Levering Lewis écrit: «*Quicksand* de Nella Larsen (1928), sinon le meilleur roman de la Renaissance, est certainement le plus captivant. *Home to Harlem* de McKay a vendu plus d'exemplaires, mais le roman de Larsen a remporté de bien meilleurs critiques et l'un des lauréats les plus récents et les plus prestigieux de la Renaissance, le deuxième prix littéraire de la Fondation Harmon »<sup>451</sup>-<sup>452</sup>. Même si le romans de Larsen n'ont pas été les best-sellers de la Renaissance de Harlem, ils lui ont permis de s'intégrer dans l'élite des auteurs de l'époque. Ils lui ont également permis d'être la première femme noire à obtenir le deuxième prix de littérature de la Fondation Harmon et la bourse Guggenheim qu'elle a utilisé pour voyager en Europe. Larsen est un écrivain révolutionnaire qui explore différentes questions de recherche d'identité et d'appartenance. Malheureusement, ses travaux sont sous-estimés et pas assez étudiés, ce qui laisse le champ libre pour d'autres recherches.

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<sup>449</sup>Ma traduction. "the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text"

<sup>450</sup>Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *The New Feminist Criticism: essays on women, literature, and theory*. Elaine Showalter, ed. London: Virago, 1986, p. 249.

<sup>451</sup>Ma traduction. "Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), if not the best novel of the Renaissance, is certainly its most engrossing. McKay's *Home to Harlem* sold more copies, but Larsen's novel won much better critical reviews and one of the Renaissance's newest and most prestigious laurels, the Harmon Foundation's second prize for literature"

<sup>452</sup>Levering Lewis, David, *op. cit.*, p.:409.