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# Nella Larsen: An Untold Story of Race through Literature

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NELLA LARSEN: AN UNTOLD STORY OF RACE THROUGH LITERATURE

by  
Bria Michelle Stephens

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my three loving and supportive parents: Sigmund and Evangeline Taylor, and Sylvester Stephens. I thank you all for your encouragement throughout this long and strenuous process, and for keeping me sane during my collegiate career.

I would also like to thank my Thesis Advisor, Dr. Ethel Young-Scurlock who helped me extensively in finding this particular subject, and for making the thesis project a thoroughly personal, enjoyable and enlightening journey.

#### ABSTRACT:

Nella Larsen: An Untold Story of Race through Literature  
(Under the direction of Dr. Ethel Young-Minor Scurlock)

This study explores the life of Nella Larsen, investigating how her unusual childhood and early adulthood provided substance for her to make critical and unique views on race relations and racially dichotomized communities. The study shows how the Harlem Renaissance was essential in providing this outlet to Larsen; it was an era where African American art was lauded.

The investigation required research into Larsen's childhood and early adult life using several different pieces of biographical works. After detailing impactful events in her early life, the study developed further with critical analyzation of her fictional short stories and novels. Additional research was required to depict the Harlem Renaissance and explain its potential significance to individuals like Nella Larsen.

The results of this academic work find that Larsen developed a sole critical view of interracial relations based on her personal observances and experiences that she described in her various literary productions. She critiqued the strict racial binary that provided limited life opportunities for blacks, especially black women. Larsen also used her status as a novelist to condemn exclusive or divisive environments, similar to those she experienced as an adult and her encounters during the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was important because its uniqueness as an era of artistic expression and progression is what fueled Larsen's desire to pursue her literary interests.

The conclusion drawn from this investigation is that Nella Larsen was a woman who, because of her biracial background, never truly assimilated into any environment. Being raised, although for a short period of time, in a white household prevented her from fully adapting to a predominantly black community. She had previously been rejected from an all-white community as a teenager. The Harlem Renaissance provided Larsen the opportunity to show the effects these highly divisive and exclusive environments have on mulatto individuals, particularly women. The conclusion shows that Larsen's innovative approach to race allowed her fictional works to stand out from other literary works of the Renaissance. Her later life of reclusiveness only emphasizes the detrimental effects that encounters with several racially dichotomized environments can have on an individual.

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## The Makings of the Author

*“I remember the very day that I became colored” – Zora Neale Hurston*

### **The Mystery**

The story of the young woman who would eventually live a life of obscurity after a period of notable fame and notoriety, began on April 13, 1891. However, she would tell you that it began on April 13, 1893. Nella Larsen’s life is clouded with similar inconsistencies, gaps, and later fabrications created by herself and her family. The few instances of fact that exist are also often surrounded by contradictory theories. There is very little reliable primary information. As described by Charles R. Larson in *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen*, most direct information comes from a biographical paragraph on the inside cover of Larsen’s novel *Quicksand*, a similar bio in another one of her early works, and from the only interview she gave during her lifetime (Larson 185). He says “all of the remaining personal information appears on jobrelated [*sic*] documents she filled in late in her life and on the applications to the Harmon and the Guggenheim Foundations during the 1920s” (Larson 185).

The official statement found in one of her early works is as follows:

Nella Larsen is a mulatto, the daughter of a Danish Lady and a Negro from the Virgin Islands, formerly the Danish West Indies. When she was two years old her father died and shortly afterward her mother married a man of her own race and nationality.

Her formal education began at the age of eight. She and her half-sister child of the second marriage, attended a small private school, whose pupils were mostly the children of German or Scandinavian parents (Davis 22).

To be the only autobiographical statement composed by Nella Larsen, she clarified no dates, names, or information that can be tied down to facts. Thadious M. Davis described this as Larsen's attempt to disassociate "between the Nella Larsen Imes writing in the 1920s and the child Nellie Walker growing up in Chicago during the 1890s" (Davis 22). It is as if Larsen wanted to erase her past and the conditions wherein she was raised. She provides very general information; she clearly only states that she has a mother who remarries and that she attended school at one point. This is significant as this theme of familial abandonment will appear in her short stories and novels. No matter her reasons, Nella deliberately fabricated her past. Some motives behind this absence can be deduced by examining her familial and environmental circumstances while a child.

### **The Early Years: Understanding Nellie Walker (1891 – 1907)**

At the time of Nellie Walker's birth, Chicago had a small African American population— less than 2 percent. Chicago was one of the fastest growing cities at that time, with more than three fourths of its population being foreign-born or children of foreign-born parents (Hutchinson 15). Hutchinson described the city as "a sprawling chaos sprung from the ashes of the great fire of 1871 and already surpassing in population every American city but New York" (14). In short, the city was a disorganized mess. Because of the increasing population, families were forced into

overcrowded living spaces and lived in poverty. The living conditions were not ideal as a:

thick layer of soft-coal smoke blanketed the city and begrimed the buildings. Raised wooden sidewalks kept pedestrians out of the mud. The poorest families inhabited perpetually damp and occasionally flooded basement apartments beneath the level of the sidewalks....There were several saloons to every block, often with an upstairs or back room for gambling and prostitution (14).

This chaotic but ethnically diverse Chicago is where Larsen's mother, the teenaged Mary, – she would also go by Marion and Marie at other periods of her life – found herself. She would soon meet Nellie's father, Peter Walker, who was listed as a 'laborer' in the Chicago city directory (Hutchinson 19). New to America, Mary did not fully understand the stigma against African Americans, people of color, or against interracial romantic relationships.

Mary Hansen immigrated from Denmark to the United States in the late 1880s, presumably in 1886 (Hutchinson 17). She soon took up work as possibly a servant before permanently working as a dressmaker to make a living. There is even less information for how Peter Walker found himself in the states. In the 1920s, Nella claimed her father was "a Negro from the Virgin Islands, formerly the Danish West Indies" (Davis 26). His past can only be deduced through likelihoods and circumstantial records. How Mary and Peter met is not clear; however a close friend of the Larsens, Mildred Phillips, claims that "Mary's first daughter had been born of her union with the black chauffeur of a family for whom she worked" (Hutchinson 18). Whether this account is true or not, the couple

completed a marriage application in July of 1890, although no records of an official marriage taking place has been found (Davis 26). The particular date is disputed, with sources saying either July 1<sup>st</sup> or July 14<sup>th</sup>. However, according to Nella, her father will die two years later – leaving Mary a single mother with an illegitimate child seemingly out of wedlock.

The liaison between Mary and Peter, taboo in the States at that time, would have been of no significance to either Mary nor Peter. In Denmark and the Danish West Indies, “racial classifications differed dramatically from those in the United States” (Hutchinson 19). It was not until after Nella’s birth that Mary realized the ramifications of having an interracial relationship that produced a mulatto or mixed-race child. A month later, Nella was designated as “colored” because of her father (Davis 21). Nella’s distinction would follow the Larsens. They were constantly having to change neighborhoods because of the disapproval of mixed-race families. Ultimately, Nella’s mixed-race identity served as her reason for her family abandoning her.

After Peter Walker’s supposed death – for he only disappeared from Chicago’s city records and there is no death certificate – Mary remarried Peter Larson, a white man from Hanland Iowa. The couple filed for a marriage license on February 6, 1894 (Davis 26). Nellie Walker became Nellie Larsen after her mother’s remarriage. Interestingly, Mary and Peter had a daughter named Anna in 1893, before their marriage; another initially illegitimate child. However, this growing and blended family would soon face the social stigmas posed by their post-slavery racist surroundings. During the early 1890s, the growing but separate racial pride amongst whites and blacks only highlighted the “unnatural” attitudes towards mixed-race families (Hutchinson 29). Being raised in a

growing racially conscious city, Nella recognized her separateness from her family at an early age.

At the age of 9 and a half Nella began her education in 1901 at the Colman School. Some sources believe this is the source of Nella's misrepresentation of her age. By saying she was born in 1893 instead of 1891, she would be starting school at a more reasonable age. Many of the blacks she met during the Harlem Renaissance were of the elite and upper class; therefore, Nella likely fabricated her past in order to feel more at home around her counterparts (Davis 28). The question arises of Nella's whereabouts during the years between the year her sister was born and her enrollment in Colman.

Well according to Nella, part of her childhood was spent in Denmark; most likely the years of 1895-1898 when her stepfather moved living spaces because of rising confrontations and conflicts between races in their neighborhood (Hutchinson 31). One simple statement Nella made to a friend mostly sums up her experience, "She tells me she was brought up in Denmark, the only dark child in the family and town" (Hutchinson 33). While Nella described her time as a young child in Denmark as enjoyable, she could not have helped but noticed how her darker skin ostracized her from the rest of society. She was a novelty: a local sensation. Yet, she did not quite belong with the rest of Denmark's inhabitants.

Mary and her two daughters returned to the United States in May of 1898. Records taken by a health officer from the National Archives list Mary as twenty-nine, Nellie as seven, and Anna as five at this time (Hutchinson 35). The Larsens moved to a new area once again, this time on the corner of Twenty-Second and State. Nella would later claim that her education began here with her half-sister at a private school. In

actuality, young Nellie attended Moseley School, a public school that was noted for being the least successful for passing students in the entire school system (Hutchinson 37).

Race relations at this school were tolerable, with most of the white students being natives of Europe and not too familiar with America's racism. This neighborhood was home to several saloons, prostitutes, and other negative influences that would largely impact a young girl. With Peter Larsen gaining a job with the street railways and Mary becoming a successful dressmaker, the family was able to move to 4538 State Street. This was considered a move up the economic scale (Hutchinson 41).

The Larsens were now living near the 4500 State Street neighborhood. The street had numerous residents of all type of ethnicities: Scandinavian, German, Canadian, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, Italian, and more. Also, the 4800 block nearby provided Nellie with a large African American community. As described by Thadius Davis, "It was a neighborhood in which a mixed-race child could feel at home" (Davis 33). However, as Nella's parents continued to become more affluent and moving to more white-dominated and racially segregated areas, Nella's presence in the family home was becoming a problem. It was in this area that Nella entered the seventh grade at Colman, skipping at least two grades to do so. At this smaller school with a larger white population, racial tensions grew tremendously. White parents were demanding their children to be separated from the black ones in this particular school system, or taking their children out of the school altogether (Hutchinson 43). In an area where she seemingly fit in, her presence proved to still be a source of trouble for her family and the community.

Not only was the school becoming more aggressively segregated, but the city of Chicago as a whole experienced turmoil. There was the formation of the Chicago for

Manasseh Club during the 1890s that banded together seeking justice for working-class blacks and whites. There was the migration of southern blacks challenging the security of whites; the black population doubled, going from 14,271 to 30,150 by the time Nella left Chicago (Davis 41). During that time the union Peter belonged to called for a strike, threatening to bring business in that area of Chicago to a halt. This greatly affected the Larsen family's income and safety. With the threat against their family's well-being growing, and Nella's status as a colored individual living with a white family causing issues with other whites in their neighborhood and school, Mary and Peter decided to take Nella out of Wendell Phillips High School and send her to Fisk University. At that time, it was considered the "most prestigious African American school of the time" that would provide Nella "with the basic training necessary to become both a teacher and a member of the respectable African-American middle class" (Davis 50). Nella would be entering a new phase in her life, preparing for adulthood and womanhood in unknown territory.

An interesting topic that Thadious Davis raises is the idea of Larsen's parents sending her to Chicago's "Erring Woman's Refuge for Reform" (Hutchinson 335). Hutchinson criticizes this opinion, claiming that the date of birth for the Nellie Larson living at the home was listed as July 1892. Though Larsen fibbed about her age, she kept the dates consistent for April 13<sup>th</sup>. Also, the Nellie Larson in the home was listed plainly 'white,' a distinction that Nellie Larsen was too dark to embody, with unknown parents (335). It is hard to say whether Larsen was in the home or not, but Hutchinson's reasoning seems to discredit Davis' claim that she was removed from the family home during the year of 1900.

### **Fisk and Denmark (1907-1908)**

Mary and Peter Larsen were asked to describe their family and household in the 1910 Illinois census. The descriptions read that Mary, Peter, and Anna were living at 43 West 70<sup>th</sup> Place in Chicago. Their ages were forty, forty-three, and seventeen respectively (Larson 188). However, when asked how many children she had, Mary answered one. She also went on to purposely answer the ‘Mother of How Many Children,’ the “Number Here,” and “Number Now Living” as one. Essentially, Nellie Larson had been written out of her family’s lives (Larson 188). While Nellie said she was away in Copenhagen at this time, there is no real reason as to why she was excluded from her family’s home. It could be the family’s attempt to disassociate themselves from Nella’s colored status and the trouble being a mixed-race family brought them. It also could have been an attempt to protect Nella, for she was sent to one of the finest institutions a colored young woman could go to prepare for adulthood – therefore, the family did care for her in some way. No matter the reason, this period marked the last of any interaction the young woman would have with her family, with 1910 being the decisive year that most connections between Nella and the Larsens ended. Essentially, she had to make a decision as a mulatto. Either she chose white or black. Her darker skin caused her family to make the decision for her, so she chose white. This psychological dilemma on self-racial identification would prove the main theme in both *Quicksand* and *Passing*.

In 1907, a young mulatto woman found herself in unfamiliar territory. Still known as Nellie, the fifteen-year-old relocated to Nashville, Tennessee. She was

enrolled in the Normal Department in Fisk University – a department devoted to developing teachers. Not only was she alone, but she was completely surrounded by other African Americans for the first time. She was in the South, where her surroundings were “less ethnically diverse” and “racially segregated by law as well as by custom” (Davis 52). According to Davis, Fisk University had an overwhelmingly African American environment where its white founders “had designed a Christian education for an emancipated race” (Davis 52). Nellie joined a black student body who were the sons and daughters of doctors, lawyers, ministers, teachers, or from a distinguished family. Only a limited number were considered poor. She had ultimately been removed her family, from the connection to her white parentage. By being sent to a predominately African America area, Nellie’s assimilation into Fisk University solidified her ‘colored’ identity.

Registering herself as Nellie Marie Larsen, she then moved in Jubilee Hall that was designated for the female students. Known for its strict and religiously based rules, Fisk insisted all students wear a navy blue uniform or a plain white shirtwaist suit for public occasions (Hutchinson 54). Nellie loved extravagant and colorful clothing, often assisting her mother in designing and making these dresses as a child. This taste of hers would later get her in trouble as she often felt restricted by the strict dress code, ultimately breaking these rules. Other rules were the following: no gambling, betting, drinking, card playing, smoking, dancing, observe all regulations concerning conduct, deportment, attendance and study, to upkeep all personal habits, and to adhere to the rules regarding male and female interactions (Davis 57).

Because of the large black community, Nellie discovered new attitudes with living in a segregated world with few ethnic differences. African Americans placed heavy emphasis on black unity and family while frowning upon “immigrants and unions” (Hutchison 56). Being that both of Nellie’s parents were immigrants and her stepfather was part of a union in Chicago, Nellie had to have felt some animosity towards her. There was also a large focus on religion in the South. She was raised near what was popularly called “Coon Hollow” and other areas where prostitutes and violence thrived (Hutchinson 16). This new religious devotion had to be new and shocking to her. It became present in all aspects of her life where it was once almost if not completely absent. Nellie’s life in Chicago was remarkably distant from this African American Protestantism in the South. Despite these new adjustments Nellie had to have made to become accustomed to her new home, she ultimately found herself in an environment where she could *possibly* belong. Her dark skin was not a consistent problem to deal with.

Though her grades at Wendell Phillips weren’t particularly horrible, Nellie had to take extra classes to consider herself academically on par with her peers. She studied Geography, Advanced Algebra, Mythology, Rhetoric, Grammar Review, and Plane Geometry; she also took one hour classes in Vocal Music, Elocution, Writing, and Drawing (Hutchinson 58). This served as Nellie’s first real and only introduction into literature that she would later apply in her professional writing. The main three extracurricular activities for girls were literary and artistic societies, and worship. The Young Ladies Society of Christian Endeavor was a popular group on campus

(Hutchinson 59). There is no way to determine if Nellie was a member of these groups, but it is a strong likelihood.

Mary visited her daughter towards the end of Nellie's time at Fisk. It was published in the March edition of the *Fisk Herald* – a literary societies and club's publication (Davis 66). Nothing is known from this visit, however this marks the last time that Nellie would see her mother. Shortly afterward, Nellie was asked to leave Fisk University after only a year. The exact reason is unknown, however she and nine others were voted on by the faculty to leave on July 13<sup>th</sup> following the school's reaffirmation of "rules regarding extravagant and expensive dress and jewelry" (Hutchinson 63). Her expulsion enforced the idea that Nellie did not belong in her new surroundings, showing her slight separation from the African American community. Her experiences at Fisk would appear in her future novels with sharp criticism of the institution's strict regulations and rules.

### **The Lost Years (1909-1912)**

Nella's 'lost years' represent one of the greatest mysteries of her life, even though there are so many to choose from. She claimed that after her expulsion, she went to Copenhagen in Denmark for a few years before returning to New York. Whether this happened or not is disputed by different sources. Considering that both of her parents are Danish or have Danish blood, and therefore may have relatives in Denmark, her visit is very plausible. This is also where Nella changed her date of birth from 1891 to 1893, which would have made her sixteen at the time of her stay abroad. However, records show that she was just entering Fisk around that age. Also, Davis reports that no passport

exists for Nella between 1908 and 1912 (Davis 67). The University of Copenhagen also denies any record of a 'Nellie Larsen' being enrolled in or attending classes at their institution (Larson 189). Larson also describes how Nella wrote 'never' as a response to the question "had she ever received a passport" while filling out her application for the Guggenheim grant. The Department of State assured Larson that the first time Nella had ever attempted to go out the country with a passport was in 1930 (Larson 189). It was during this period that Mary, or Peter according to various sources, denied that Nella ever existed within the family. This could tie into why Nella would create a fictional trip to Denmark; to cover the pain of being separated from her family. She could have wanted to erase those years, her final years and whatever happened in them, with her family.

If one were to assume that Nella did not fabricate her second stay in Denmark, she would have arrived in the spring of 1908 to live with her mother's relatives. Records do exist in that four-year period of her returning to America from Copenhagen on January 14, 1909; this is according to Hutchinson (65). Hutchinson also says that although no documentation shows Nella returning to Denmark, several records during those years have been lost. However, if her family denied her existence in 1910, her whereabouts during this time become even more of a mystery. To confirm his theory that Nella returned to Denmark, he remarks on the accuracy of her physical descriptions of the areas where she claimed to have lived and visited in *Quicksand* particularly, and the fact that they match the actual characteristics of those places during the period she claimed to have been there (Hutchinson 69).

Whether or not Nella actually spent time in Denmark, she definitively returns to actions that can be tracked in 1912 when she enrolls in Lincoln University in New York.

These “lost years” leave many curious as to what she was doing during them, and if she hints to this missing period of her life in her works. Some note that she wrote frequently of prostitutes or encounters with them and of married men having affairs or taking mistresses, and wonder if this applied to her. While this would explain why she would want this time of her life to be shortened and undisclosed, information for Nella’s whereabouts during these four year remains scant.

### **Lincoln University (1912-1915)**

In 1912, a twenty-one year old Nella Marion Larsen enrolled in New York’s Lincoln Hospital and Home Training for Nurses (Davis 70). New to the area, “Larsen began work and study in a combination hospital and home located at East 141<sup>st</sup> Street between Concord Avenue and Southern Boulevard in the Bronx” (Davis 71). The twentieth century New York was a racially diverse city, where blacks from the Caribbean, South America, and Africa settled (Hutchinson 77). Despite the growing negro population, nursing schools did not readily accept black women into these “white” training schools (Hutchinson 78). Lincoln served as a unique institution; an American training school for African American women.

The school’s curriculum included the newest subjects in the nursing field. Students were allowed to focus their time on their studies, with maids and staff being hired to keep up the school – these tasks were usually assigned to students. The women shared living quarters. Over two dozen women “shared a single bathroom, furnished with two toilets, three sinks, a bathtub, and a shower” (Hutchison 80). The faculty – doctors, administrators, and superintendents – were white, while the patients, inmates, and nurses were black (Davis 76). This “racial hierarchy and paternalistic racism” of

Lincoln's nursing school served as the main criticism the school received. Otherwise, the school was renowned for producing exceptional black nurses. Larsen began her studies in the "old folks" ward with hands-on training. As time passed, she would graduate to other wards: surgical, medical, emergency, gynecological, maternity, and pediatric (Hutchinson 82). With each new ward she entered, Larsen learned new nursing techniques with accuracy.

Larsen also began the transformation of her past during this time. She grew to "value those in positions of authority" and was noted for her leadership. Marking her entrance into the "African-American bourgeoisie," she told stories of her father's true origins, her relationship to her parents, etc., all in an effort to "please those in authority" (Davis 79). Despite her eagerness to please those in authority, there were few blacks in authoritative positions at the hospital for Larsen to observe. In fact, blacks were a small minority in the nursing profession. There were also few other opportunities for black women in other professional fields. With the lack of blacks in leadership positions, Larsen's efforts are very curious. Why so much effort to impress the whites who held these positions; for those race relations at the hospital were significantly better than other places, there was still evidence of distinct racial separations. Larsen's need for networking for future job opportunities may serve as a reason for Larsen's enthusiasm towards her teachers. However, I believe this is a trait in her personality that will fully come to fruition during the Harlem Renaissance – her desire to be part of those who were respected or part of the elite. She wants the attention and admiration she did not receive as a child; at the hospital, this was given to those in leadership positions.

Nella Larsen graduated from Lincoln Hospital and Home Training School for Nurses on May 13, 1915 after passing the examination for the R.N. license with “honors” (Hutchinson 88). A top student of the school, she then took a job as head nurse in one of the wards and was Assistant Superintendent by October after being noted for her executive ability (Davis 88). However, Larsen had not made many female friends while a student for three years. She was disconnected from her fellow students even though they all lived in constant, close quarters. However, she did participate in an active reading group encouraged by the president of the board of managers and head of Lincoln Hospital and Home, Marry Wainwright Booth (Davis 81). She was reported as “confident and articulate” during these gatherings, although “different, even a bit strange” by her classmates (81).

Nevertheless, this small interaction with her coworkers was not enough to make Larsen stay. Though a recent a graduate and newly hired Assistant Superintendent at Lincoln Hospital, she left the familiarity of Lincoln to go South again after only five months. Receiving a new career opportunity, Larsen departed for John A. Andrews Memorial Hospital at Tuskegee Institute as head nurse in Alabama (Hutchinson 89). In fact, Tuskegee was one of the “oldest diploma programs for African-Americans nurses in the country” (Davis 88). Here, she would function as both a nurse and as an instructor at the hospital. She envisioned a new future for herself here, where she was top executive at a very prestigious institution. Only time would tell if this would prove to be true.

### **Tuskegee Institute (1915-1916)**

Larsen took the train south to Tuskegee. An appealing aspect of her new surroundings was the racial pride and uplift that Tuskegee offered; it was considered a strong and successful institution. The product of Booker T. Washington's efforts of producing an oasis for African Americans to take pride in themselves and become functioning and educated members of society enthralled Larsen. Here was a place where she could take pride in dark skin, and also a place where all blacks were uplifted. Surely, she would not have the same experience that she had at Fisk University. After all, the renowned Booker T. Washington was the founder of the school, and it was run by prominent African Americans. Tuskegee offered no room for someone as open minded and ambiguous as Larsen, "one either got with the program and entered wholeheartedly into the mission, or one resigned or got kicked out" (Hutchinson 92). With her mixed racial background and ambiguous childhood and familial ties, Larsen could never fully assimilate into this type of strict racial culture. Sure enough, as Davis describes, "she departed so disillusioned that for the rest of her life she was cynical and contemptuous of all programs for racial uplift and suspicious and condemning of anyone espousing such programs" (Davis 90). Larsen was the daughter of a white woman, the sister of a white girl, the step-daughter of a white man, possessing several Danish relatives, and ignorant of her black father. If anything, she had more experiences with whites and probably felt disassociated from the black mission at Tuskegee. However, as a mixed woman she welcomed the opportunity to fully embrace her darker skin. Yet, she found Tuskegee similar to Fisk – if anything, the school enforced restrictions on students and faculty to prevent them from behaving in ways perceived immoral. These immoral behaviors were typically ascribed to blacks by whites, and Tuskegee enforced these negative stereotypes.

She became disillusioned because Tuskegee became another place where she did not belong; when it initially appeared a haven.

She started work at the John A. Andrew Memorial Hospital, “an impressive colonial structure in red brick, with a broad two-story portico framed by white columns” (Hutchinson 90). She found her rural environment beautiful, and vastly different from the concrete buildings and urban surroundings of New York or Chicago. Yet, her pleasure at the school would not last long. Soon after she began her duties, Larsen began to understand how deplorable the working conditions were for nurses in the South, especially at Tuskegee. “The gap between Tuskegee’s appearance and its reality of systematic repression shaped Larsen’s experiences in Alabama and destroyed the last traces of her youthful idealism,” Larsen came to learn that being a nurse at Tuskegee constituted taking on the role of the ‘mammy’ (Davis 91). Washington was known to consider nursing more of a domestic service rather than a serious profession – a very different perspective than what Larsen was taught (Hutchinson 93).

Larsen resided in the head nurse’s quarters. Her duties were in health care and nursing administration (Davis 93). After breakfast and morning prayers at Tompkins Hall, she would start her responsibilities at the hospital. She simultaneously maintained her nursing tasks while teaching her pupils. Larsen had to train the young women who often quit due to being overworked, second-year students who provided care to the patients at the hospital, and third-year students who went into town to help the sick – the wages earned going to the institute and not the nurses themselves (Davis 93). She worked longer hours (often fourteen a day) than the other teachers at the school, though she did receive a higher pay. Most of her instruction took place at the patients’ bedside

or supervising the work of the hospital. Larsen's assistant worked the night shift, and alternated with the Dean of Women and other teachers in teaching lessons about hygiene and child health (Hutchinson 96).

Although the building was considered state of the art and an example of modernity – comparable to Lincoln's – Larsen's students often “struggled under oppressive conditions and physical exhaustion” (Davis 95). She found her staff and students completely unprepared to handle even the simplest of tasks. The hospital was crowded with up to one hundred patients a month, and she was severely understaffed. They were forced to be frugal with work expenses because of the institute suffering from the debts that Washington left behind after his death in 1915. With the patient count increasing by the month, Larsen also discovered the hospital was in violation of the modern standards for nursing education when their outdated methods had reached the attention of the state medical authorities (Hutchinson 98). Instead of sincerely trying to change the program to reflect the modern standards, Dr. John A. Kenny – resident physician and head of the nursing school – opted to halfway adjust the nursing program to ‘get by’ (Hutchinson 99).

With such a busy schedule and the title as head nurse not being highly regarded in Tuskegee, Larsen found very little solace from her work in her social life. She was not included in Tuskegee Woman's Club, a very prestigious extracurricular activity for female teachers at the institute (Hutchinson 100). The club was presided over by Mary Murray Washington, a leading race woman in the country. Larsen also isn't on any other attendance list of social programs at Tuskegee. Coupled with being excluded from the other women faculty, Larsen also discovered that Tuskegee had strict rules and

disciplinary actions – similar to Fisk University. Faculty came down hard on uniform and the daily devotional prayers. The Committee on Religious Affairs wanted to implement a “carefully controlled environment,” insisting that:

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, teachers and students assembled in a room beneath the dining room for devotional exercises; on Mondays and Wednesday, they gathered for evening devotional exercises in the dining room. The daily evening exercises followed a set program: the reading of scriptures, a prayer by the principal or a members of the faculty, singing by all of the assembly, and announcements for the following day (Davis 100).

This was in addition to the morning prayers and a third evening service on Fridays.

Larsen soon found herself in a strictly controlled environment similar to the one she loathed and ultimately left at Fisk.

If one were to disobey one of the many restrictions at Tuskegee, both students and faculty members were subject to the demerit system. For crimes such as playing cards and dice or using profanity, a student or member of faculty could be punished by being issued a demerit up to suspension or the dismissal of the employee. Larsen often found herself butting heads with Margaret Murray Washington, who also presided over the moral supervision of the women at Tuskegee. Tension between the two rose after Larsen realized that the hospital had been emptied of the appropriate appliances to equip the new laundry it had received. She wrote a letter brimming with sarcasm to Washington; she asked for the necessary materials citing her responsibilities as a teacher and nurse as reasons for the expenses. It was denied.

She also grew contemptuous towards the racial uplift message the institute preached. Larsen accused the school of accepting the racial critiques and conceptions that whites had of blacks instead of focusing on what makes blacks unique and praising their attributes. She found the constant religious message coupled with the oppression of intellectual freedom, color and individuality on campus hypocritical to the message Tuskegee claimed to exude. Her expectations upon coming Tuskegee were vastly shattered upon her arrival. At a place where her individuality as an African American was supposed to be praised, she was again excluded, underappreciated, and overworked where any thought or action away from the enforced norm was punished (Hutchinson 105).

Larsen promptly sent in her letter of resignation to Dr. Kenny on October 10, 1916. By October 16<sup>th</sup>, her resignation was accepted and she was replaced by Janie Armstead (Hutchinson 107). She would later describe her stay in Alabama for her publisher in one statement “[she] accepted a position as Head Nurse of the hospital at Tuskegee Institute – the school founded by Booker T. Washington – but her dislike of the conditions were both so intense that after a year they parted with mutual disgust and relief” (Davis 110). Tuskegee proved not to be her home.

### **Wedding Bells and the Beginnings of an Author (1916-1919)**

With her family living in the Woodlawn neighborhood, one that aggressively fought the “invasion of Negroes,” Nella Larsen could not have returned to live with her parents. Instead, she returned to Lincoln under the supervision of Adah Thoms as Assistant Superintendent of Nurses (Hutchinson 109). At Lincoln, her profession was

respected. She also could distance herself from the religious and racial pride conformity she found at Tuskegee. Lincoln provided a comfortable and familiar environment.

Many of Larsen's classmates were still at Lincoln. In her new position, Larsen received a salary of \$800 per year and maintenance in compensation (Davis 114). However, not one to stay in one place for long, Larsen joined the Health Department of New York City (Hutchinson 113). With the threat of the influenza approaching, New York decided to increase and improve its public health education. This gave African American nurses several new job opportunities outside of the hospital. After rigorous activity with negative influences in charge, Larsen welcomed this new opportunity. She joined the Municipal Health Department where her working conditions were greatly improved, specifically her racial conditions. With Municipal, "black nurses in the Health Department could not be assigned to districts based on race, and white nurses in public health were considered the most fair of all in their dealings with black colleagues" (Hutchinson 113). It is of no coincidence that Larsen chose a position where segregation and racial restrictions were blurred and not strictly held. As if to further disassociate herself from the confinements of race, Larsen lived in house in a "German" area (Hutchinson 114).

By 1918, Larsen was appointed district nurse and making \$1,600 a year. Larsen most likely worked in the area surrounding her new home near Lincoln Hospital and the Mott Haven clinic (Hutchinson 116). George Hutchinson gives a thorough account on her daily activities:

Larsen reported to the office each morning at nine to receive and write out her assignments for the day, then wrote a description of her work

the day before. While at the office, she also met with patients about their various ailments or other troubles, including marital difficulties, unwanted pregnancies, or unemployment. In the attached tuberculosis clinic, she spent some time each week preparing people for physicals and teaching sanitary precautions. When not doing this work or organizing her field notes and writing formal reports, she was expected to read in the office files and library to keep up with developments in her field. Each week, she also with working in all the related agencies of the district to confer about local problems, and in this way she made valuable contacts.

The heart of her work, however, was walking through her district,

observing, questioning, listening, teaching, cajoling, and taking notes (116-117).

Most of her job was convincing those in her community to improve their hygiene habits.

She excelled in her new career, experiencing salary increases and steady efficiency ratings. During this time, her hardest problem at work was fighting the seemingly unbeatable Spanish Flu. Bedside visits increased and her work days resembled those of her time at Tuskegee. By 1919, the flu epidemic had calmed and Larsen's work day returned to her normal responsibilities.

However, Larsen's life was about to become more interesting. In the fall of 1918, she met Elmer Samuel Imes, Ph.D. through a service organization formed by her friend Thoms, called the Circle for Negro War Relief. He was classically handsome and truly eight years her senior, though he believed himself to be ten years older than her. Her being successful, having a mulatto appearance, intelligence, and being well travelled certainly made her more than appealing to the distinguished Dr. Elmer Imes.

Dr. Imes was a remarkable man himself. He was the oldest son of two not exactly wealthy but educated and prominent scholars. He was born in Memphis on Columbus Day 1883, but attended school at Alabama A&M (Hutchinson 123). He was a graduate of Fisk in 1903, going on to teach at various AMA schools. In 1910, Imes received his Master of Science Degree from Fisk. In other words, he had a firmly rooted background in the very school that Larsen had been expelled from.

Imes was a well-known figure in black elite society. He was a member of Theta Sigma, a graduate fraternity, and Sigma Pi Phi – also known as Boule, the most exclusive and artistic of black fraternities (Hutchinson 123). At the time of their meeting in 1918, Imes had become the second African American to hold a Ph.D in physics in U.S. history. While at Michigan, he was inducted into Sigma Xi, an honorary scientific fraternity. He displayed the close family ties, deep religious faith, and prominence in black society that had always eluded Larsen. He liked her mysterious and lack of background, and appreciated her self-sufficiency. Within a year of their meeting, the two were engaged (Davis 121).

Though nursing was considered a solid career in the North, her profession still placed her on a lower social sphere. Through Imes, Larsen found entrance to a part of black culture from which she was excluded because of extenuating circumstances she could not help – her mixed racial background and lack of background or family. He was her stable security, something she never had with her parents.

On May 3, 1919, the Nella Marion Larsen became Nella Marion Imes in the chapel of Union Theological Seminary by Imes' brother, Reverend William Lloyd Imes (Davis 122). None of her family attended the wedding, although some of her Lincoln

associates came to support. She found herself communicating with prominent figures in black society: Paul D. Cravath, a trustee of Fisk, Lillian Alexander, Charles S. Johnson, head of the Urban League, and more. Larsen and Imes moved to Jersey City, New Jersey in a white neighborhood. It was a long commute to her job in Manhattan, but it wouldn't last long (Davis 126). After the move, Larsen became largely dissatisfied with her work and visited the YWCA in search of a better job, but found nothing.

Her exposure to Imes' world and sudden entry into elite society left her insecure about her own profession and significance (Davis 128). This begins the fabrication of her past; she expounds upon her mixed heritage, which hurts rather than furthers her pathway into the black elite. Their marriage encouraged Nella to become the wife she believed Imes needed. She quit her career as a public nurse to become a librarian, the job most wives of prominent African American men held. A new seed had planted itself within Mrs. Imes, she was striving towards something new and different that would propel her upwards on the black social ladder. This upward movement wouldn't prove difficult to achieve. Within a year, Imes and Larsen would soon move to Harlem right around the time for the Harlem Renaissance. She would then find herself in an environment that she believed was a perfect fit – a recurring theme for Larsen. She would fully embrace the negro culture and join the dozens of other artists at that time to make a name for herself. The Renaissance represented a time where a nobody could reach society acclaim and approval through their work, or so Larsen thought. She would then become a new person with a fabricated past and sharply changed and potentially brighter future.

## Becoming a Novelist

*“You haven’t changed. You’re still seeking for something, I think” - Quicksand*

Nella Larsen was a woman who was never allowed to embrace both sides of her racial background. Chapter One outlines her rejection from the white side of her biological make-up that permanently separated her from her family, while also showing her struggles adapting to a predominantly African American community. Larsen essentially jumps from one environment to another, searching for a sense of belonging. Her marriage meant a new purpose for her for she now had a way into the esteemed black elite. Elmer Imes introduced her to this group where refinement, education, and knowledge seemed the forefront. Surely, her place was here with the Harlemites, with people who looked past one’s background in favor of the intelligent and cultured person in their presence. The Harlem Renaissance ushered in an era of racial awareness and unity to which Larsen gravitated. Now, she could explore her blackness and also become part of something larger than herself. She could prosper because of her individuality and not be reduced to follow outdated restrictions with which she never fully identified with; communities like in Fisk and Tuskegee. In Harlem, white and blacks mingled undisturbed in the streets of Harlem, in the library where she eventually worked, and the dinner parties and social gatherings in which she yearned to be privy. However, a very appealing element of the Renaissance was though the black race was the object of everyone’s attention, other mulattos prospered in the environment: Langston Hughes, Walter White, Jessie Fauset, and more. This chapter explores the appeal of the

Renaissance to Larsen and her attempts to conform fully into the culture; to become a woman of this time and speak her truth through her writing.

### **The Transition and Children's Stories (1919-1923)**

During an interview she gave to the *Amsterdam News* on May 23, 1928, Larsen was described as

a 'modern' woman who smokes, wears her dresses short, does not believe in religions, churches and the like, and feels that people of the artistic type have a definite chance to help solve the race problem.

Her hobbies are doing her own housework, and there is much to do to keep a five-room apartment so clean (and from the smell from the kitchen door she must be an excellent cook), sewing and playing bridge (Larson, xiii).

This quote captures Larsen's evolution after her marriage to Imes. She changes careers entirely, joins the ranks of the black elite – a privilege she had never experienced due to her lack of black family ties – and embraces her new life in Harlem. In the introduction to anthology of Larsen's fiction, Charles Larson claims that Nella made this abrupt career change, leaving behind an extensive and successful career as a nurse, because "she had begun writing because of complications with her health" (Larson, xii.) While this is a viable excuse – she had been dealing with several substantial outbreaks of the Spanish Flu as a public nurse – it is more believable that she made this change to 'fit in' with her new associates. The first of the description perfectly describes the Nella up to her marriage, but the second half seems to describe a new person; not the perpetually busy young woman who had few friends to sew or 'play bridge' with. This interview

shows Larsen's ability to adjust to Harlem; and reveals her desire for a community where she can be fully welcomed.

This transition began in June 1920, when Larsen published descriptions of games she played while as a child in Denmark, "Three Scandinavian Games" (Davis 137). The three games she wrote of, "Cat and Rat," "Hawk and Pigeons," and "Travelers" were published in *The Brownies' Book*, a monthly magazine that was founded by W. E. Du Bois and written for "the children of the sun" (Hutchinson 128). The following month, she published three more games: "The Fox Game," "Hide the Shoe," and "The King is Here" (Davis 139). While the magazine was geared towards black children, her work was still published for its cultured presentation to black youth. She was criticized by her peers for emphasizing her exoticness, as her submissions to *The Brownies' Book* demonstrated her lack of knowledge of African American folklore and teachings. However, this distinction about Larsen's submissions emphasize the importance of her later success in writing. She wrote about the games she knew from when *she* was a child. Her writing reflected her personal experiences which she would also do with her short stories and novels. Yet, though her writings reflected her own observations of a black woman's understandings, she still found success in a career in literature and a place within the African American tradition. She described a different part of the African American experience – one of a black person not immersed deeply in African American traditions and communities but nonetheless still wholly black in identity.

This small venturing into the world of literature marked her growing involvement with the black bourgeoisie of New York, as well as displaying her newfound interest in writing. As the new Mrs. Nella Larsen-Imes, she attended social gatherings with

prominent Harlemites such as Lillian Anderson who was a prominent woman of the renaissance, Grace Nail Johnson a Harlemite who was interested in modern literature, James Weldon Johnson who was “one of the chief architects of the integrationist civil rights movement of the interwar period”, Louis T. and Corinne Wright who were friends of Elmer, and Walter White who was a mulatto that would eventually become the first black president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Hutchinson 130-132). She certainly had moved up the social ladder with those who were considered the cream of the crop in New York. Larsen seemed to be assimilating into society neatly.

Conversely, Larsen was still working for the New York Department of Health at that time where she realized that furthering her career as a nurse appeared slim. On July 21, 1920, Mary Wainwright Booth, the director of the board of managers at Lincoln Hospital, died after fifty-eight years of service (Davis 138). Instead of hiring one of the black nurses who had more than enough of experience to fill her role, the white philanthropists “were not progressive enough to appoint an African-American administrator to replace Booth” (Davis 138). Larsen was forced to confront the idea that “the profession was not yet willing to give women of color equal access to administrative positions or supervisory jobs in health care and social service” (139). She had spent years developing relationships and proving that she was more than capable to have a leadership position. Yet, her race still proved a limitation in her career. Because she was black, she could not have an executive position. Disenfranchised by her dim career aspirations and the presence of racism and discrimination in nursing, combined with a newfound interest in writing and insecurity with her current social position and a

promising social life with highly revered African Americans, Nella resigned from the Department of Health on September 15, 1921 (Davis 139). Larsen would later exaggerate this part of her life. She would go on to tell others that she had attended Columbia, finding it more prestigious than Lincoln. Her fib highlights her inner need to elevate herself socially to be on par with her peers – to further eradicate her true past for one that better suits her ambitions and survives the scrutiny of those around her.

Larsen had been volunteering at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street Branch of the New York Public Library while still working as a nurse, but after her resignation she began a full time position as a grade 1 assistant in the children’s section under Ernestine Rose. This environment proved refreshing and more intellectually stimulating than her work as a nurse; it was entirely more suited to her new role as Mrs. Imes. She worked with a “professional staff” that “was half black and half white” and that served as a “common ground between whites and blacks, English-speakers and Hispanics” that also held meetings between diverse black social and political groups, and where literary book discussions were held (Hutchinson 136). This interracial working environment proved important to Nella because it allowed her to embrace both sides of her racial make-up. She had never felt at home in a predominantly African American community, and had been continuously rejected from a predominantly white community. To be in a place where both races worked together peacefully and successfully – where interracial communication was encouraged – spelled a new sense of belonging for Larsen.

Larsen was so pleased with her new occupation that after much encouragement from Ernestine Rose, she pursued applying to the Library School of the New York Public Library (Hutchinson 141). After filling out the application with recommendations from

Ernestine Rose, E. C. Williams, and her employer from Lincoln, Adah B. Thoms, she sent in her application. The school rarely accepted African Americans, but Larsen proved to be an exceptional student of great potential. She was the first African American woman accepted into the one-year program. Her first semester subjects were Cataloguing and Subject Headings, Reference Work, Book Selection and Administration as well as Current Events, American Libraries, Printing, Bibliography, and Modern Literature (Hutchinson 146). Her second semester consisted of Book Selection, Practice Work, Reference, Administration, Bibliography, Current History, Printing, and Indexing (152). True to her nature, she particularly excelled in Book Selection with their corresponding readings, and Practical Work where she received praises from her temporary employers. This provided an intense regiment for Larsen, but she graduated on June 8 1923. She began work as a grade 2 assistant at Seward Park Branch of the New York Public Library (Davis 150).

At this time, she published her first essay, a review of Kathleen Norris' novel *Certain People of Importance* (Davis 150). In her review she says "The material is certainly ordinary, both in people and in their environment" overall concluding "The charm is remarkable. It surrounds Victoria Brewer like an aura so that one loves her" (150-151). Larsen's focus on the characters of this novel highlights her attention to her own in her two novels. Her publication also showed her determination to enter the world of literature. She was further being encouraged to write by her friend Walter White. Two years would pass before Larsen would write and publish her first set of fiction works. Becoming a librarian spelled Larsen's initial step into gaining a audience of notable writers while simultaneously nurturing her interest in literature and writing.

Nonetheless, she hadn't yet gained the confidence to publish her own works of fiction. Slowly but surely, she was creating a pathway to becoming a novelist.

### **The Spark**

During the years before the publishing of *Quicksand* (1928), Larsen would fully transition from a career in nursing into an artist in the center of robust literary discussion. However, at the beginning of this period she was still a librarian working in the Children's Room section of the 135<sup>th</sup> Street Branch. She attended the Civic Club Dinner, on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1924, that honored Negro writers and specifically Jessie Fauset's novel, *There Is Confusion* (aaregistry.org). The dinner was organized by Charles S. Johnson and brought together black writers, artists, and publishers to celebrate black literary talent; it set the tone for the Harlem Renaissance (aaregistry.org). There were over 110 attendees and Alain Locke hosted the event (voice-of-experience.blogspot.com). The dinner turned into an event where the Negro Intelligentsia were able to display and honor their own and others' literary skills (humanitiestexas.org). This event is important because it highlighted the literary side of the Renaissance, taking the focus away from the music and theater – the cabarets and theater productions like *Shuffle Along* – that often dominated the Renaissance. Witnessing the work and praise of these authors was the final push needed for Larsen. By October 1925, Larsen would quit her job as a librarian to focus fully on writing (Davis 166).

### **Becoming an Author (1924-1928)**

Several factors of the next two years would be reflected in *Quicksand* and her short stories. For example, she became close friends with Carl Van Vechten, a prominent

man of the Renaissance and a highly respected writer. He was a white man who took an extreme interest in black culture, specifically black literary culture. Van Vechten was not liked by everyone of the Renaissance, however he had a very successful career as a novelist himself (Hutchinson 178). Nonetheless, despite an increasing social life, Larsen “felt rather insignificant to much of Harlem ‘society’” (Hutchinson 159). She was often not included or uninvited to the social gatherings of those of Jean Fausset, Regina Anderson, and Ethel Ray – all three were known to have the best of the Negro writers in their dwellings for discussions (Davis 223). She instead befriended writers who were more racially integrated, and not exclusively ‘pro-black’. These included Jean Toomer, Dorothy Peterson, and Dorothy Hunt Harris (Hutchinson 159). She was criticized by her contemporaries for socializing with Van Vechten, and for having an ambivalent stance on racial topics (Hutchinson 193). This is important, for her opinion on having to exclusively associate with either one race or the other would appear in her novels when critiquing the Harlem elite. Already disillusioned with racial uplift from her time as a student and nurse, the Harlemites (Fausset and Ray) and their strict social rules, disassociation with whites, and strong opinions on how blacks should behave proved to her that they embodied the African American qualities she truly did not identify with.

Simultaneously, Larsen became aware of her husband’s infidelities. Thadious Davis describes how Larsen “apparently suppressed, for the most part, sexual drives in her own life” although her female protagonists readily feel and display sexual attraction and desires (169). Why she did this is unknown, but “there is indication that some frigidity on her part led to sexual dissatisfaction in the marriage, as well as to his [Elmer Imes] extramarital affairs” (Davis 169). This beginning distance from her husband and

her growing social life outside of his influence only served to further encourage her to write.

Larsen published her first works of fiction, “The Wrong Man” and “Freedom,” under her pseudonym Allen Semi. Larsen also went on to write two more short stories, “Tea” and “Charity,” however the text for those have been lost (Davis 184). Though there were few critical responses to them, they succeeded in introducing Larsen to the world of fiction. What brought Larsen significant attention, was her public defense of Walter White’s novel, *Flight* in 1926. Though Frank Horne’s response to her defense was critical, the back and forth being published in *Opportunity* “alerted a wide audience that she was knowledgeable and articulate about contemporary literature” as well as introduced her to a number of potential readers and furthering her reputation around Harlem (Davis 207). By the middle of 1926, her social calendar was full (Hutchinson 201). Larsen knew it was time to publish her novel in order to capitalize on this newfound popularity.

After entertaining thoughts of owning a bookstore – this never came to fruition – Larsen began looking for publishers with the aid of Van Vechten. At this time, her novel was entitled *Cloudy Amber* before a title change suggested by Van Vechten. After asking Walter White for help with typing her manuscript of 35,000 words – she was completely incompetent as a typist – she submitted her work, now titled *Quicksand*, to Alfred A. Knopf publishing company (Hutchinson 221). One of the most prestigious publishing companies at this time, Knopf was her first choice; however, the company was known for rejecting many novels (Hutchinson 223). However, her manuscript was accepted for

publishing, and distributed on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1928 (Davis 251). Nella had written her first novel.

### **Nella and the Renaissance**

The Harlem Renaissance (also known as the Negro Renaissance) occurred during the 1920's and 30's in Harlem New York. During this time, several different African American writers, singers, dancers, playwrights, artists, and more burst forth with diverse contributions to American literature. All of them spoke of their own experiences and observations of other blacks, and the issues African Americans faced in America. Alain Locke described the movement as having three objectives: "the encouragement of the Negro artist; another, the development of Negro art; and a third is the promotion of the Negro theme and subject as a vital phase of the artistic expression of American life" (Locke 134). This definition describes the Renaissance as a time when blacks were using art to explore their talents and to assert their part in the American artistic world, and in American society in general. Charles S. Johnson, a Renaissance architect, described this period as "a period of the ascendance of unbridled free enterprise, of the open beginnings of class struggle and new and feeble mutterings of self-conscious labor, of muckrakers and social settlements, of the open and unabashed acceptance of 'inferior and superior races and civilizations'" full of "phenomenal outburst of emotional expression" (Johnson 207). Johnson's description tells of the mood and atmosphere during the Renaissance. It was a period of intense and emotional artistic expression amongst blacks, of blacks speaking their truth through art. It was a time when blacks discovered their own literary

and artistic voice, telling their stories and having it appreciated by other races and nations.

There was an outpouring of novels, short stories, and music. Overall, the Renaissance called for a unification amongst blacks while also igniting pride within the race. This pride ranged from the physical beauty of African Americans to exploring the issues faced by black families, to delving into black communities and the issues that plagued them, to marking the differences in black life following emancipation, and of course to the racism that was still prevalent during the 1920's. All of these topics are remarkably exclusive to African Americans; one would have to be black to discuss them. How could Nella possibly fit in then?

During this era, many prominent writers promoted the idea of purposeful art. Each piece seemed to have to serve a purpose. In "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain," Langston Hughes observed "this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to put racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (Hughes 91). He described some literature of the Renaissance as serving the purpose of proving to whites that blacks have an equal place in American society. These writers went about achieving this goal by appealing to whites and showing they are 'worthy'. Hughes suggested that this mindset may cause some blacks to disassociate themselves from the race. As an example, he uses the frequently heard statement that echo these sentiments: "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet." Hughes found statements like these troubling for they undermined the purpose of the Harlem Renaissance. At a time when blacks were effusing pride in their race through their works, several writers were seeing their race as a restrictive factor.

The statement contradicted the purpose of the produced works. He called for artists to “paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen,” overall wanting everyone to join him in expressing “our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (Hughes 94-95).

Another purpose of the literature produced during the Renaissance is expressed by W.E.B. Du Bois in “Criteria of Negro Art”. Du Bois notes that “a surprising number of white people who are getting great satisfaction out of these younger Negro writers because they think it is going to stop agitation of the Negro question” (Du Bois 101). He recognized that the Renaissance was seen by many as a solution to the ‘race problem’. Despite the progress blacks were making through literature and art, he also saw that blacks were severely limited in the subjects of their works. Blacks were “getting paid to write about the kind of colored people” that existed in their stories (Du Bois 104). He concludes with:

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been use always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda (Du Bois 103).

Like Hughes, he agrees that blacks should right their own truths, but he believes it should all be in the attempt to show whites that African Americans are more than just sources useful for displaying human degradation.

Hughes and Larsen both share mulatto ancestry, and this love of their black heritage is present in both of their works. Similar to Hughes, Larsen praises African Americans in her works, but she critiques them just as much. Larsen however, critiques the black elite specifically. Hughes critiques all of the black community. She also highlights her Danish heritage; it becomes a prominent aspect in Helga Crane's story in *Quicksand* and is also how she began her experimentations with writing. Her discussions of race focus more on her mulatto status than on highlighting only her black ancestry. She also discusses the effects of being a mulatto, not necessarily an African American.

Where does Larsen fit in Du Bois' interpretation of the purpose of literature? Her works are hardly propaganda for the black cause. *Quicksand* offers a mostly bleak view of several different types of African American communities – ranging from educational setting at Naxos, living in Harlem, to the church community in the Deep South. Yet, true to her personality, she cannot be classified as completely opposite of Du Bois. She manages to show her personal truth in her works, whether or not it appropriately displays blacks favorably to others.

It's interesting to see how Nella's writings fit in with the opinions of these two popular writers of the Renaissance. Nella was of mixed heritage with no knowledge of her black ancestry. She had never met her father and therefore was not raised with much insight on an African American upbringing. She had relatively little knowledge of any black experience, and a very negative opinion of the two African American communities she resided in for a short periods of time. Surely, her contributions would not mesh with the African American canon of this time. In fact, though her exoticness and worldly experiences could have possibly ostracized her socially from those around her, they were

the basis of most if not all of her writings. This lack of African American community could potentially alienate her from the community in which she had chosen to make her home. Again, race proved a factor that could alienate her. In spite of this, Larsen challenged the black and white binary in her works that mirrored her own life. She dealt with race in a way that made her short stories and novels unique and appealing; there was a level of relatability beyond that of simply race.

### **“The Wrong Man” and “Freedom”**

“The Wrong Man” was published in January of 1926 (Larsen xiii). It tells the story of a young and beautiful woman, Julia Romley, who is at a social gathering; Larsen’s attempt at paying homage to the gatherings held during the Renaissance. During this gathering, Romley sees a man who she believes to be a figure of a sordid time in her past. The short story explores her inner turmoil and horror with this realization, and the affect that this previous relationship with the man, Ralph Tyler, could have on her future. She meets with him privately to convince him to keep their past concealed. However, as the title indicates, Julia has mistaken this man to be the Ralph Tyler of her past and confronts him as such; she only succeeds in revealing her secret to a man she had never before encountered.

Larsen’s first work of fiction unsurprisingly does not explicitly mention race. For her life to be largely a response to society’s expectations of race, she allows race to have a background role in “The Wrong Man.” Julia and the characters are not given a distinct race and Ralph is the only character whose color is specified. Larsen tells the story by highlighting the importance of the situation on Romley as a woman, and lets the readers

own opinions determine race. Cleverly, however, Larsen avoids signifying him as either white, black, or mulatto. He seems to be other, describing him as an “Indian chief” who is a “tall, thin man, his lean face yellowed and hardened as if by years in the tropics” (Larsen, “The Wrong Man”, 4). Giving his occupation as an explorer, Larsen succeeds in placing her characters outside the realm of race that has complicated her own life. This deliberate cloudiness is made the more obvious by her detailed descriptions of color and the clothing of the characters in this quotation from “The Wrong Man”:

Julia Romley, in spite of the smoke-colored chiffon gown (ordered specially for the occasion) which she was wearing, seemed even more flamingly clad than the rest. The pale indefinite gray but increased the flaring mop of her hair; scarlet, a poet had called it. The satiny texture of her skin seemed also to reflect in her cheeks a cozy tinge of that red mass (Larsen 3-4).

With such an intense attention to color and the slightest detail, how could Larsen have not described skin tone with similar acuity? It’s not that Larsen ignores the idea of race; she makes racial distinctions cloudy in an effort to not only keep the story mysterious, but to also show an example of race not being the main point of the story. Julia could either be a white or black woman. She muddles the specificities of race, contrasting the sharp limitations or distinctions race had in her life.

“The Wrong Man” instead allows race to play a subtle role while it primarily focuses on the issues women face; how quickly their reputation can be ruined and how the antiquated view of being virtuous and moral still pervades their life. Larsen begins with the fragility of a woman’s reputation. She captures how strong of an affect Ralph’s

arrival has on Julia, “She had been so happy, so secure; and now this: Ralph Tyler, risen from the past to shatter the happiness which she had grasped for herself” (Larsen 5).

Tyler’s presence is enough for Julia to question the stability of her future. It is apparent that Julia believes her future is dependent upon this man. She goes so far as to plead for his silence:

You think that even now I should tell him I was your mistress once. You don’t know Jim. He’d never forgive that. He wouldn’t understand that, when a girl has been sick and starving on the streets, anything can happen to her; that she’s grate for food and shelter at any price. You won’t tell him, will you? (Larsen 8).

This paragraph is telling in revealing that a woman’s morality is still an important aspect of her social standing in society. In reality, Julia was simply trying to survive as a young girl. Though she committed an act viewed as morally wrong, she chose to be a mistress in order to survive. Yet she is embarrassed and frightened at the thought of her husband knowing. She is certain that he would reject her, despite her compelling description of their loved for each other “‘The everlasting lovers,’ they were dubbed, and the name suited them as perfectly as they suited each other” (Larsen 5). A sexual discretion in her past could ruin her present and future, and suddenly she feels “weary and beaten. It was hopeless” (Larsen 7). Larsen highlights the view that a women’s virtue determines her place in a community. Julia’s past verges on prostitution, yet it was done to insure her own security. Larsen also challenges the idea of what a woman can do to assert her independence and take care of herself.

“The Lost Years” reflect a time where her location and doings are unaccounted for; there is no proof that her short stories are fictionalized versions of this period. The evidence strongly suggests that Larsen uses her literary writings to describe an unexplained time in her life. The two novels that she wrote are largely autobiographical and reflect her life up to her impending divorce. It is plausible that her short stories detail an earlier period of her life considering that her biography is pungently present in all of her other works of fiction. There is no reason to believe that “The Wrong Man” is an exception. However, Larsen could have been describing what other women have done, what she has observed, or something that she has done herself with Romley’s plight.

Larsen’s second short story is “Freedom,” published in April 1926. This story follows a young man so unhappy with his marriage that he opts to stay in Europe to travel instead of returning home. He subsequently obsesses over his wife’s doings while he is gone, finally committing suicide after learning of her death two years after his abandonment. Larsen also avoids mentioning a character’s distinct race in “Freedom.” In fact, she doesn’t even supply names for the man or his wife. This allows Larsen to focus on the point of the story; dissatisfaction with marriage. At this time, Larsen was known to have issues with her own marriage with Imes at this time; so again, this story is often viewed from an autobiographical standpoint, with Larsen exploring her feelings towards Imes through a male’s narrative.

The protagonist remaining nameless and the gender switch could possibly reflect Larsen’s occupation with her failing marriage. The gender switch comes into play in Imes frequent disappearances. While travelling was a necessary part of Imes’ work, his trips away were becoming more frequent and would last longer. Larsen was often alone

in Harlem. Essentially, he was abandoning Larsen; just as the male protagonist abandoned his wife in “Freedom.” In telling the story from a male’s perspective, Larsen could be exploring the male psyche and the reason behind the abandonment of women – particularly her husband. She could also be expanding her literary techniques, trying her hand in a new narrative style to further her writing prowess.

The protagonist being nameless could be Larsen’s attempt to understand this type of behavior and imagine the different motivations behind her husband’s actions. She’s putting herself in her husband’s shoes through writing. She’s becoming a man – a man trapped in an obviously failing and loveless marriage. The ending possibly shows Larsen’s wish for a better connection with her husband.

Larsen describes the shifting emotions that the husband feels after learning of his estranged wife’s death. Two passages especially show the distinct responsibility that comes with marriage, and the emotional burden of his actions:

Gradually, his mind became puppet to a disturbing tension which drove it back and forth between two thoughts: he had left her; she was dead. These two facts became lodged in his mind like burrs pricking at his breaking faculties...He tried to shake off the heavy mental dejection which weighed him down, but his former will and determination deserted him. The vitality of the past, forever dragging him down into black depression, frightened him...He began to think of his own death, self-inflicted, with feeling that defied analysis. His zest for life became swallowed up in the rising tide of sorrow and mental chaos which was engulfing him (Larsen, Freedom 16-17).

In this passage, Larsen describes the husband's realization of the role he played in his marriage's end. Her rhetoric emphasizes his helplessness at the results of his actions, and the rising horror and mental denial of what has taken place. Without the overt presence of race in her story, Larsen allows herself to explore the emotions that an individual may feel when dealing with the loss of a loved one, while also playing with how a person experiences and deals with guilt. While not exactly stream of consciousness, she uses a similar technique to detail the turn his thoughts take and his descent into insanity.

Keeping with her repeated behavior of using her personal life in her works, the narrator's descent into insanity could describe Larsen's inner turmoil within her marriage. She explores her own feelings through the male protagonist. This could symbolize her wish for Imes to feel what she feels, for him to actually see and understand the emotions his frequent disappearances inflict upon her. The second passage more accurately details this descent:

His increasing mental haziness had rejected the fact of her death; often she was there with him, just beyond the firelight or the candlelight. She talked and laughed with him. Sometimes, at night, he woke to see her standing over him or sitting in his chair before the dying fire. By some mysterious process, the glory of first love flamed again in him. He forgot that they had ever parted. His twisted memories visioned [sic] her with him in places where she had never been (Larsen 17).

Shortly after this recounting of his mental state, the husband commits suicide by jumping from a window. Larsen would later use this theme in *Passing*. Here, Larsen shows how the husband unsuccessfully deals with his wife's death and his abandonment of her.

Larsen discusses mental illness and its role in grief as well as showing that not only a man can experience these emotions, but that the feelings can be so powerful as to lead to a man to commit suicide. By using a nameless and colorless man as her main character, Larsen effectively creates a character that could be synonymous with a woman. For example, if one were to change the pronouns the story would still remain the same. This technique enforces the idea that Larsen wrote "Freedom" as an attempt to step in the shoes of man – her husband – and explore different emotions that deal with a failed marriage.

Larsen made firm contributions to the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance with her initial short stories. Her commentary is on society's treatment of women and the feeling of dealing with an unsuccessful marriage, and Larsen first stories subtly include race but do not make the topic a focal point. She opts for a more open and relatable subject matter instead of diving headfirst into racial topics more common of the Renaissance. This phase of Larsen's life demonstrates her need to fit in a community; one that will uplift the race she was forced to wholly embrace. It reflects her determination to adapt to this culturally, socially, and racially aware era. She's found an environment where she can express her thoughts and feelings without limitations or restrictions, where she can display both sides of racial background with shame or rebuke. Through *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Larsen shows her opinion of race using several situations from her life as an example. Her transition from a successful but socially looked down upon nurse to a blossoming writer repeatedly rejected by the Harlem elite play a major role in these novels. She journeys into Larsen the novelist.

### An Analysis of *Quicksand*

“*Oh, Segregation is not the whole sin, The Negroes need salvation from within*” –

*Claude McKay*

With the publishing of her two novels, Larsen entered a period of intense critical social commentary. She develops and explores her personal opinions of her current environment as well as the different communities she experienced in her past. She shows how a biracial disposition can impact female identity and person development as a woman in both *Quicksand* and *Passing* through Helga, Irene, and Clare. The writings she produced reflects her desire to show the effects the struggle of biracial existence in a strictly binary environment had on her own, personal life as a mulatto woman. She also compares and contrasts both white and black societies, noting how both have their divisive and restrictive qualities on black women.

### **Critical Responses to *Quicksand***

Nella received many favorable reviews of *Quicksand* (1928). *The Saturday Review of Literature* noted “The style of the book is well-mannered and touched here and there with beauty. But the chief interest lies in the fact that its principal character is a person of a quite unusual mixture of blood rather than in what she does or says or what happens to her.” The writer Roark Bradford complimented *Quicksand* “in spite of its failure to hold up to the end, the book is good” and has a “real charm” (Davis 278). What several other responders noticed was the lack of ‘propaganda’ in *Quicksand* (Davis 279).

Gwendolyn Bennett, a fellow renaissance writer, commented “Many folks will be interested to hear that this book does not set as its tempo that of the Harlem cabaret – this is the story of the struggle of an interesting cultured Negro woman against her environment. Negroes who are squeamish about writers exposing our worst side will be relieved that Harlem night-life is more or less submerged”: similarly, activist Arthur Huff Fauset claimed “For the first time, perhaps, a Negro author has succeeded in writing a novel about colored characters in which the propaganda motive is decidedly absent” (Davis 278-279). Simultaneously explaining the propaganda often found in Renaissance literature and the novelty of *Quicksand*, a review in the Baltimore *Afro-American* says “‘Quicksand’ is a refreshing story, built on the proposition there is something else in Negro life besides jazz and cabarets” (Davis 279).

What these critics notice in *Quicksand* is that it tells the story of a black woman without resorting to overusing the Harlem landscape to advance its story. There isn’t a reliance on Harlem attractions, a strong message on racial issues, or on showing how African Americans were proper and socially on par with whites. She avoids what Du Bois describes is a necessity for Harlem writing, while also avoiding the overly African American themed topics that Hughes describes. Yet, she still managed to successfully and interestingly tell the story of a black woman who weaves in and out of African American communities. This is a true testament to the importance of her writing.

*Quicksand* propelled Larsen into key literary discussions by critics who hailed the uniqueness of her writing, content, and themes. Her novel was fresh, tackling subjects that concerned blacks but in a way that most readers weren’t accustomed to during the Harlem Renaissance. The political motivations associated with discussing the race

problem were not the main topic, and the African Americans in her novel weren't obsessed with it – and if they were, Larsen made sure to satirize and mock the characterization. Ultimately, Nella Larsen had successfully entered the literary world of which she had been striving to part – uniquely. She only had to solidify her status.

Understanding Larsen's new approach to presenting the mulatto lies in recognizing how mulattos had been literarily portrayed previously. Jacquelyn Y. McLendon describes the role of the mulatto originating with the 'tragic mulatto' tradition; beginning with James Fenimore Cooper's character, Cora Munro, in *The Last of the Mohicans* published in 1826 (McLendon 13). Cooper characterizes sin and passion – all because of her having black blood- with Cora's character, establishing a ritual of certain racist and sexist attitudes towards the mulatto that would continue. The most common trait of the tragic mulatto was his or her self-loathing. McLendon inserts a line from Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon or Life in Louisiana* (1851), "Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black – bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the flood" (McLendon 14). These attributes become a staple of the mulatto that are only reiterated as time passes.

McLendon details several thematic problems that come with previous writings about the mulatto, usually by white men. First, she notes "the implication is that one cannot escape the racialized body simply because one has white skin" (McLendon 14). In other words, no matter your heritage or physical appearance, the black blood dominates and therefore determines your place in and treatment by society. Secondly, McLendon highlights that white writers characterized blacks based on stereotypes, "heavily influenced by the prevailing sentiment of their day that blacks were passive,

complacent, ugly, and unintelligent or naturally savage” (15). Moreover, white writers often described how mulattos desired a white lover and would commit suicide or a live a horrid existence after discovering their true ancestry and their inability to live a ‘white’ life. Their characters believed “that nothing worse could happen” than discovering one held black blood (McLendon 19). Ultimately, the goal of the mulatto was to reject the African American side of their biracial makeup in favor the white – to become as white as possible. Third, there is a derogatory view of blacks portrayed in novels addressing the tragic mulatto. They are displayed as “worse than apes” and suddenly appear beastly to mulattos once they are aware of their ancestry. McLendon expresses that “these derogatory views of blacks reflect the way blacks allegedly see themselves and especially the way mulattoes see other blacks” (20). This rhetoric portrays mulattoes as looking negatively on other blacks, and sharing this disgust with whites towards other blacks.

While the Harlem Renaissance was known for its praise of inherently anything artistically produced by Negroes, it also gave a space for concerns about the cultural positioning of mulattoes to be heard for the first time. McLendon argues that in *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*, the idea of the mulatto and his or her place in the strict dichotomy of race in the U.S. had gone under little development up to that time. This was evident in T. S. Stribling’s 1922 *Birthright*, a supposed attempt at portraying the mulatto of the modern world that also critiques old stereotypes and portrayals of mulattos and African Americans (McLendon 22). This proved to be far from true. Outraged, Jessie Fauset and Walter White – other prominent writers of the Harlem Renaissance who were also mulatto - met with Larsen to discuss *Birthright* and how to fixed outdated notions of people of mixed heritage. Who better

than to take on this challenge than those three – all three being mulattos? Her dissatisfaction with how race was addressed in *Birthright* frame how Larsen explicitly addresses race in her two novels.

Stribling's novel captured all of these stereotypes with the false pretense of trying to reject these outdated depictions. Instead, he enforces and continues the negative tropes. Any negative trait that a mulatto possessed was therefore attributed to their black blood, and any positive traits were attributed to their white blood. Essentially, "the amount of 'black' or 'white' blood determined moral standards" in these controversial depictions (McLendon 16). However, not only were blacks able to respond and defend themselves against these images, mulattos were able to take this portrayal and flip it – they were able to speak for themselves. Larsen, enraged by how mulattoes were continued to be portrayed, methodically turns every single of those traditions upside using her personal experiences and creates her own definition of the 'mulatto'.

Larsen makes the repercussions of having black blood heartbreakingly clear through Helga's narrative conflicts. For example, when she goes to visit her Uncle Peter, but is instead met by his disapproving wife. She rejects Helga for being half black, asking her to leave and to never return or call refer to her husband as her "Uncle". Helga is frantic and upset after leaving:

For the wound was deeper in that her long freedom from their presence had rendered her the more vulnerable. Worst of all was the fact that under the stinging hurt she understood and sympathized with Mrs. Nilssen's point of view, as always she had been to understand her mother's, her stepfather's, and his children's points of view. She saw

herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden  
(Larsen 27).

Helga clearly recognizes that having Negro blood is why she has been sent away, and acknowledges that it's something that has always followed her. She could never escape the consequences of having mixed blood. As described by McLendon, Helga sees that her black blood dominates over her white heritage and she will always be treated as such. She sympathizes with her family for their treatment of her and silent resentment, claiming "even unloved little Negro girls must be somehow provided for" (21). Larsen explores the extent to which having black blood affects one's stance in society, as did previous writers of the mulatto tradition. Like them, she notes its consequences are unescapable.

In *Quicksand*, Helga rejects a proposal from a white suitor, Axel Olsen. During this rejection she also implies that his motivations behind his offer are morally impure, something he somewhat admits himself, stating "Yes, because I, poor artist that I am, cannot hold out against the deliberate lure of you. You disturb me. The longing for you does harm to my work," and going on to say "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" (Larsen 80-81). He describes his feelings for her as appealing to part of himself driven by pure passion or emotion. These type of urges are often negatively associated with blacks, explaining his "I didn't want to love you" exclamation. Larsen switches these connotations to the white man, instead of the mulatto woman. Then, she goes on to further challenge the previously established trope of mixed characters seeking this 'white identity' through avenues such as marriage. As if speaking directly to writers such as Stirling, Helga exclaims "But you see, Herr 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" (Larsen 81).

Larsen discusses this view at the beginning of *Quicksand*, when Helga considers reaching out to her white Uncle Peter for financial assistance. Helga contemplates their relationship:

Uncle Peter was different. In his contemptuous way he was fond of her. Her beautiful, unhappy mother had been his favorite sister. Even so, Helga Crane knew that he would more likely to help her because her need would strengthen his oft-repeated conviction that because of her Negro blood she would never amount to anything, than from motives of affection or loving memory (7).

Helga thinks of this scornfully, rebuking the thought that her blood determines her future and status in life. Larsen cleverly contemplates a major theme of previous novels about mulattoes and completely disregards it. Helga applies no negative traits to her black blood, but to an individual person. She recognizes the negative and positive in both races – not attributing one type of behavior to either one. In fact, she regards whites with more scorn than blacks, “They feared and hated her. She pitied and despised them” (Larsen 7).

Helga goes on to actually capitalize on the beauty possessed by blacks:

she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto, but something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown,

and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins (16)

Larsen emphasizes the beauty in having black skin and having black blood. She completely rejects the tradition of mixed characters rejecting their black blood, blacks in general, while negating the degrading rhetoric used with describing blacks “apish,” “beastly,” “fiendish,” “violent.” Larsen praises having dark skin and highlights the beauty of having a dark complexion in through Helga. She does not use the rhetoric often used to describe blacks or those with dark skin that other novels portraying a mulatto individual utilize.

*Quicksand* is largely autobiographical not only as an attempt to use Larsen’s personal experiences to directly counter Stribling’s account of the mulatto, but also because her life is her only muse to discuss for the Renaissance. Her childhood and early adult years spent in various environments, she could not discuss the Negro rural/folk life like Zora Neale Hurston, or explain black communities and issues extensively like Langston Hughes because of her lack of knowledge of them. However, she still managed to use her personal experiences to both critique and praise the black community, and also critique racism. Although Larsen didn’t have the background in Negro folklore or early family community that others had, she critiqued the black educational system, the church and religion of Negroes, and the city life that she experienced during the renaissance. In her failures to find a home for herself, Helga provides insightful social commentary on the different environments that surround her.

It is no coincidence that Helga’s life is so similar to her counterpart, Nella Larsen. Like Nella, Helga was born to a white mother and a black father who disappeared and

abandoned the family. As did Nella's mother, Helga's mother went on to remarry a white man to gain a better position in society. Helga spent some of her childhood in Denmark with relatives, as Nella did. Continuing in this fashion, Helga went on to work at an all-black institution where she was ultimately dissatisfied and left. After a bit of travelling, she ended up in Chicago, then New York. Once in New York, she found herself immersed in the black community that is similar to Harlem during the Renaissance. She then left to Denmark again before returning. This is where Helga's and Nella's stories depart. Nella returned to a successful career in nursing while Helga ultimately ends up in the Deep South unhappily married to a preacher, trapped in a loveless marriage with children and stuck in a religious community where she does not share the same faith. Because Helga's and Nella's lives are so similar, it is safe to assume that several of the social commentary offered by Helga are also representative of Nella's actual opinions. It is also safe to assume that through Helga, Nella may have been writing of her own search for a home.

These themes are certainly reflected in Larsen's experiences. Nella spent between two to three nonconsecutive years in two of the most prestigious black higher education institutions, Fisk University and Tuskegee Institute. The beginning of *Quicksand* finds Helga at a similar location called Naxos. Larsen combined her experiences at both schools to form a strong opinion, and Helga reflects Nella's opinion of these schools, their purpose, and their actual results. As Nella herself must have felt, Helga describes her initial attraction to Naxos and the experience that "She had ardently desired to share in, to be a part of this monument to one man's genius and vision" (Larsen 3). Obviously,

that man is representative of Booker T. Washington. However, Helga grows to hate her environment:

This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place 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 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. The place was smug and fat with self-satisfaction (Larsen 4-5).

Through Helga, Nella offers a sharp criticism on the well-established and respected institutions that were often thought to produce the cream of the crop when it came to prominent and successful African Americans; especially during the Harlem Renaissance. Yet, Larsen describes them as repressive societies where she was unable to express herself not only as a black individual, but also as a black woman who was free to act on her emotions and thoughts. The emphasis on the 'unladylike and ungentlemanly' behavior is a great recounting on the strict rules and moral regulations Larsen experienced while at Fisk and Tuskegee. At a place where Helga thought she could find

a potential home, she felt ostracized and looked down upon by others whom she thought would uplift her.

Helga describes this realization “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 (Larsen 5). Naxos was designed to encourage the black youth, yet Helga recounts her individuality was described as excessive “pride” and “vanity” (Larsen 6). Ultimately, Helga’s unfortunate experiences are a reflection of Nella’s later ambivalence towards racial uplifting movements during the renaissance. While Larsen praised African Americans and participated in movements to help black nurses or women, she disapproved of places that held specific missions to supposedly solve the race problem and claim to want to create a space for blacks – like those purported by Booker T. Washington.

Unfortunately, places like Naxos were not home to Helga; just as supposed environments of racial uplift were not home to Larsen. After a brief stint in Chicago, Helga finds herself in New York. She repeats similar behaviors that she displayed in Naxos: at first enamored with her new environment, a growing dissatisfied feeling, then outright hatred of a community where she once felt at home. Initially, she was glad to immerse herself into the Negro society of Harlem and happy to be away from “that white world, so distant, so near” because “not at all did she crave, from those pale and powerful people, awareness” (Larsen 42). However, “it didn’t last, this happiness of Helga Crane’s” (Larsen 43). Larsen uses Helga to show her dissatisfaction with the Renaissance community and its obsession with the “race problem” and the “constant prattling of the incongruities, the injustices, the stupidities, the viciousness of white

people” as well as the community in general – their “grinning faces” and the “sound of the easy laughter of all these people who strolled, aimlessly” (Larsen 44-45). She found the environment repetitive and stifling, as Larsen might have found her involvement in the Renaissance. This continues her critique of racial uplift that she first found hypocritical at Naxos. This feeling of disgust grew until she exclaims that “she didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people” (Larsen 51). Larsen ultimately displays how a movement designed to keep blacks together, similar to Fisk and Tuskegee, did nothing but push Helga away. Again, an all-black community was not her home and so she continued her search.

After a completely white community in Denmark failed Helga in this same respect, one opposite that of Naxos and New York, Larsen describes Helga’s last attempt to find a home – the church and religious community in the Deep South. Helga again finds herself in a predominately black community to escape the failure of a previous and opposite racial environment. Inadvertently, Larsen comments on religion, female sexuality, and female independence. As described by Jacquelyn McLendon, “Out of this composite picture emerges not only sexual allusions but also, more forcefully, a graphic account of Helga’s feelings of inadequacy and rage,” as well as commentary on the role of religion in the black community (McLendon 86). While at the church revival, Helga describes how “Particularly she was interested in the writhings [sic] and weepings [sic] of the feminine portion, which seemed to predominate” (105). Here, Helga notes a place where women can expressive themselves physically and passionately. There was no emphasis on ‘ladylike’ behavior when praising God, and she continues to observe the members’ of the church behavior using sexual rhetoric, “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" (105). Helga makes an interesting observation of religion; she's able to express herself – her individuality – and embrace herself wholly as a woman in this church. She doesn't have to be quiet or conform to strict and controlling rules. In order to fully demonstrate how this newfound freedom appeals to her, Helga uses sexual language to describe this new release of emotion that she usually kept pent away.

Larsen goes on to show how religion is appealing to blacks, offering a "miraculous calm" (106). "Her searching mind had become in a moment quite clear," almost instantly after giving herself over religion she gains peace, a supposed answer to her seemingly never-ending quest. Interestingly enough, by allowing the passion of religion to overtake her, she also embraces the passion of seduction. She describes a "longing for the ecstasy that might lurk behind the gleam of her cheek, the flying wave of her hair, the pressure of her slim fingers on his heavy arm" (107). Larsen makes an unlikely comparison with religion and the idea of sensuality; yet, Helga seems to experience the two simultaneously. She gains a new sense of independence, believing this feeling this experience more fulfilling, "all I've ever had I life has been things – except just this one time" (108). Finding this introduction to passion seductive, she "found a place for herself, that she was really living" with her husband, Mr. Pleasant Green in Alabama (109). This section of the novel is important for it's a moment where Larsen clearly divulges her personal opinion into her novel; she critiques an important aspect of Negro and elite society. Her remarks on religion would cause a rift between her and her husband's family as well as deepening the chasm that already existed between

her and Imes. His family and other members of Harlem elite found the sexual undertones and her further comments on religion being a façade highly offensive.

Larsen also describes the true role of religion as a shield from society, “a kind of protective coloring, shielding her from the cruel light of an unbearing [sic] reality” (117). Growing dissatisfied with her husband, her children, having lost faith in what was protecting her from finding a home, and truly believing that religion is farce, she plans to leave. She exclaims:

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? Not that she at all cared about the ten million. But herself. Her sons. Her daughter. These would grow to manhood, to womanhood, in this vicious, this hypocritical land (121).

While initially attracting her because of the chance to express herself in ways in which she was previously prohibited, Helga critiques the role religion plays in black society. Through her, Larsen shows her disbelief in the “white man’s God” and shows religion to be an artificial crutch that blacks use to cope with their place in American society. She describes the ways that blacks worship using sexual language to display the deep passion displayed in their faith. To Larsen, the wilder the worship, the deeper the faith, the more physical the worship becomes – it’s almost a seduction, the attraction an artificial place for worship. It’s sensual, the way the body becomes the physical representation of praise.

Religion is freeing because it allows a space for black to express themselves and to place all their troubles, freeing themselves from the burden of reality.

Larsen also makes several comments on race during the course of the novel. She begins with a speech made by a visiting white preacher:

This was, he had told them with obvious sectional pride, the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country, north or south; in fact, it was better even than a great many schools for white children. And he had dared any Northerner to come south and after looking upon this great institution to say that the Southerner mistreated the Negro. And he had said that if all Negroes would take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos product, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their place, and that, said the preacher, showed good taste. He spoke of his great admiration for the negro race, no other race in so short a time had made so much progress, but had urgently besought them to know when and where to stop. (Larsen 2-3).

Here, Larsen describes an opinion of how the progress made by blacks was viewed by whites in her current society. The preacher represents a popular view that blacks could only be allowed a certain amount of opportunity – in other words, they needed to stay in their places as second class citizens. Larsen was expressing her disapproval of black institutions that yielded to these viewpoints. Instead of giving African Americans the opportunity to learn about themselves and encourage their uniqueness, these black schools are viewed as teaching blacks how to learn their appropriately submissive role in

society. They were being trained. Her disgust at these statements mirror Nella's opinion on whites and their antiquated opinions and treatment of blacks. Helga sneers and mocks the preacher's speech, showing how blacks are shown to resemble pets. She mocks his oppressive statement that blacks have made great progress but shouldn't aspire for more; as if their progress hadn't been hindered so long by the white race, while unconsciously highlighting his mission to keep the white race the superior race. Interestingly, he comments that schools like Naxos would solve the race problem. This was a large opinion held by whites and blacks regarding the literature produced by blacks during the renaissance. Larsen seems to criticize this opinion as well, showing that whites still intended to keep their superior hold over blacks no matter what was done. As with the renaissance, blacks at Naxos were given a space to express themselves and be with each other, but their progression still proved to be stalled. She shows what she believes to be the real purpose of these black schools – to purport a system of modern day racism. Blacks were allowed certain freedoms that met the expectations of whites. Larsen shows here how blacks were still oppressed.

Another moment where Larsen discusses race is when Helga denies Axel Olsen's proposal. While a moment for Larsen to reject a common condition of mulatto literature, she also uses it to comment on miscegenation and interracial relationships. Before she meets Olsen, she has a telling thought while riding in the train with her white employer, "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 there they do not exist" (Larsen 37). Larsen seems to approve of this miscegenation when she has Helga

deny Olsen's offer with the statement, "I'm not for sale" (Larsen 81). She introduces imagery of slavery, while also showing to the extent that it had been engrained in Helga – a black woman – to not date outside her race.

Larsen further explores the intermingling of whites and blacks when Helga visits Denmark, though not in an explicitly sexual way. Helga often describes feeling like a "pet dog being proudly exhibited" (Larsen 64). In this way, Larsen explores the new role blacks seemed to play with whites during the 1920's, that of a decoration. Helga's new role as a black woman was to serve as a "curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed" (66). She was expected to do as she was told by her aunt and uncle, and simply was goggled at from a distance by others. This new relationship was very prominent in Harlem, with white benefactors often giving money to blacks to produce their art but often being controlling over what was produced or critical of what constituted an 'African American' piece of art. Langston Hughes best described this relationship in his short story "The Blues I'm Playing." Her growing discontent with her new role was only heightened when introduced to how blacks were viewed, "that Negroes were black and had woolly hair" (70). She wasn't even allowed to fully embrace her black identity in her new supposed home. After attending a symphony with black performers, Helga ultimately realized that "I'm homesick, not for America, but for Negroes" (86).

Upon leaving Copenhagen, however, Larsen has Helga narrate distinct views upon the racial position of blacks in the United States, "No. Helga Crane couldn't, she told herself and others, live in America. In spite of its glamour, existence in America, even in Harlem, was for Negroes too cramped, too uncertain, too cruel; something not be endured for a lifetime if one could escape; something demanded a courage greater than

was in her” (89). Here, Larsen comments on the oppressive living conditions for blacks in America, and how it is a place where no black individual can expect to fully prosper. She deems it uninhabitable. No matter how many black communities there are to make blacks ‘feel’ as if they’ve found a place to call their own, those of African American descent simply cannot fully flourish because of their race.

Larsen’s continues her critique of the black bourgeoisie through the relationship of Helga and James Vayle, her fiance. Like Imes, he was successful and assimilated easily into the Naxos culture. Also like Imes, he came from a prominent family. He easily fit into the niche of Naxos, “He was now completely ‘naturalized’ as they use laughingly to call it. Helga, on the other hand, had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold” (7). Their engagement only emphasized the difference between the two, how she didn’t fit black bourgeoisie expectations. Representing Larsen, this shows how Nella noticed her alienation from her husband’s crowd. She writes, “her own lack of family disconcerted them. No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything” (8). Larsen criticized this importance in black bourgeoisie society, accusing it of being a divisive measure in African American society, “Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society” (9). Larsen initially believed Harlem to be a community where her ambiguous and biracial background would not play a significant factor in her assimilation. She believed her success as an author would prove enough for her to adjust. However, her continuous rejections from the black elite and the critiques she suffered because of the lack of significant ties to other successful African Americans only emphasized how exclusive black communities could be.

Larsen advances her critique of black bourgeoisie in the character Anne Grey, a friend of Helga's and the embodiment of a black aristocrat during that era. She calls these black aristocrats hypocrites and secretly scornful of the race they claim to uplift:

She turned up her finely carved her nose at their lusty churches, their picturesque parades, their naïve clowning on the streets... She hated white people with a deep and burning hatred...But she aped their 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 something with a faint amusement. Like the despised people of the white race, she preferred Pavlova to Florence Mills, John McCormack to Taylor Gordon, Walter Hampden to Paul Robeson (44-45).

In short, those of the black bourgeoisie claimed to support blacks and all things Negro, yet they their behavior asserted the opposite; their actions showed them behaving similarly to the whites they claimed to deplore. Larsen continuously highlights this hypocrisy amongst the bourgeoisie and her contempt at them looking down on others, i.e. herself. This shows how deeply Larsen felt their rejection in reality, and how their ways do more harm to an inclusive environment for blacks. She was raised in an area where her race caused to her to be virtually kicked out and abandoned by her family, and now she faced the same treatment from the black bourgeoisie. Helga relates her opinion of how blacks reproduce the actions of white to detrimental effects.

*Quicksand* was Larsen's entrance into the world of Renaissance literature. She used her unique experiences as a mulatto to create an autobiographical picture of the struggles of the modern day mulatto woman. She uses her platform to show the beauty and the ugly of both predominantly white and black communities. The novel was innovative in its approach to the discussion of race – avoiding using Harlem as the main setting. She avoided an overreliance on the cabarets of the negro elite and the simplicity of the rural areas of the folk. Her story was unique, as was her life.

### An Analysis of *Passing*

“*Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate, Against the potent poison of your hate*” – Claude

McKay

#### **Critical Responses to *Passing***

Responses to *Passing* (1929) were slightly less positive than *Quicksand*. Davis reports that publications such as *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and the *New York Times Book Review* “emphasized the exotic theme of passing across the color line” (Davis 329). W. B. Seabrook noted “the sharpness and definition of the author’s mind (even when her characters are awash in indecision) are qualities for which any novel reader should be grateful” (329). However, several critics disapproved of Clare’s characterization and the lackluster ending. Ester Hyman of *Bookman* claimed the novel lacked “sufficient depth” and “a mere forty thousand words are not sufficient to develop a theme of importance against a firm and satisfying background” (329).

*Passing* proved an excellent successor to *Quicksand*. It seems a continuation on the surface – further exploring the role of the mulatto in a distinctly segregated and racially defined world – yet it is far more complex. Superficially, the novel details several encounters between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, a woman who is passing as white. Suspicions of infidelity and Clare’s husband discovering her deceit lead to Clare’s death. However, the novel is not such an open and closed case.

There were several different recurring themes: marriage, sexuality, the idea of passing and race, and the implications of Clare’s death. With *Passing*, Larsen explored

themes different from *Quicksand* – the only similarities lying in the discussion of race, criticism of the black bourgeoisie, and the similar autobiographical tone. All of these themes affect the main characters in some way and Larsen uses them to discuss self-repression, possible homosexuality, female insecurities, the significance of one's skin color determine one's future, and most importantly what the color line does to those who are forced to choose a "side", or a "skin". Her prose regarding Irene's inner thoughts are also excellent insights into how women were affected by choosing a side and the motivations behind their decisions. Larsen managed to further avoid discussing the 'race problem,' using black propaganda and discussing popular renaissance tropes in *Passing* – she continued to write about her own experiences, although in a far less autobiographical tone.

Through Irene, Larsen explores the psyche of a black woman. She begins with a woman's need for security. Throughout the novel, Irene repeatedly mentions Brian's restlessness, "She hoped that had been comfortable and not too lonely without her and the boys. No 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 had had to make such strenuous efforts to repress" (Larsen 47). Irene consistently enforces that her family must stay in America, seeing Brian's will to leave as a threat to her home – to the security of her family, life, and social standing in their society. She fears this threat to the life she carefully molded, "Nor did she admit that all other plans, all others 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 her herself" (61). Here, Larsen showcases the importance a stable home meant

to a black woman. In the 1920's, especially Harlem, family and reputation often preceded your arrival. Considering Larsen had neither of these when she first encountered the Harlem elite, she immediately understood that her lack of a past hindered her social progression. Irene's concern with her home – and its effect on her life as a member of the black bourgeoisie – is her primary concern throughout the novel and drives her actions.

Larsen uses the possibility of Brian's infidelity, the ultimate betrayal, to highlight what Irene values. Faced with reality, Irene chooses to remain in her marriage and share her husband:

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?...Strange, that she couldn't 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?...Nevertheless, she meant to keep him (107).

Her marriage to Brian only meant security for herself. That what was important to women. Marriage took on the same meaning for Clare, "Damn Jack! He keeps me out of everything. Everything I want. I could kill him! I expect I shall, some day" (71).

Saying Clare hates her husband is putting it mildly. Then why marry him? Larsen reinforces the ideal of the reason women marry during the scene with Clare and Irene. Though Clare's reasons for marriage are also tied with her passing, her motivations also highlight marital relationships. When Clare says, "If he gets along better by turning," Irene fires back with "Surely everyone doesn't do everything for gain" (37). Clare's

marriage not only solidified her place in white society, but it brought her financial prosperity and security – similar to Irene’s social security. Marriage becomes a job or duty to these women; it becomes something to obtain in order to secure success.

As if to reduce the idea of the family and cement the it’s position as a necessity or means to an end, both women appear insensitive or not keenly attached to their children. Irene only mentions her sons as a reason to keep her husband in the states. She often repeats lines like “And there were the boys” when thinking of how to keep her life intact, but never shows an emotional interest in her sons (61). She also mentions her sons when the realities of American society threaten to damage the life she built for herself and her family. Irene says “I do wish, Brian, that you wouldn’t talk about lynching before Ted and Junior. It was really inexcusable for you to bring up a thing like that at dinner. There’ll be time enough for them to learn about such horrible things when they’re older” (103). These are the only contexts in which she mentions her sons, completely uninterested in other aspects, or uncaring about readying them for reality – preferring to keep them in the sheltered environment she’s created, “Just the same you’re not to talk to them about the race problem. I won’t have it” (103). Larsen describes something she observes in the environment around her – the desire to ignore the frailty of black progression in society. She shows Irene’s intentional ignorance of the still present racism in America in a need to protect her family, and the entitled bourgeoisie environment she’s surrounded herself in.

Clare is just as unfeeling towards her daughter, Margery. When asked about seeing her daughter, Clare responds “Children aren’t everything... There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don’t seem to suspect it” (81). She does later

express that “Margery?...She’s all that holds me back,” but then goes on to do what she wants (106). Through these characterizations, Larsen highlights how women are still subjected to marriage and childrearing being priorities in life. However, she uses Irene and Clare to challenge the idea that women actually value these prescribed roles. Both Irene and Clare take on these duties as wives and mothers, but manipulate them to serve their own needs. Clare has a better chance in life by passing as a white wife, while Irene enjoys the security of family and social status. Thus, Larsen shows how these mulatto women assert their independence despite the limitations of being black and women.

Another thematic aspect of *Passing* are the strong homosexual tones prevalent in both Irene and Brian. Homosexuality was often seen during the renaissance, so it wouldn’t have been a surprise to have the theme arise in Larsen’s novel. With Irene, these tones are present in her admiration of Clare and being drawn to her presence. When Irene and Clare first meet, Irene describes her as “An attractive-looking woman, was Irene’s opinion, with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin. Nice clothes too, just right for the weather, think and cool without being mussy, as summer things were so apt to be” (14). Though not explicit, Irene’s observations are impressively keen while observing a woman she supposedly does not know.

However, these observations and descriptions become more explicit:

Just as she’d always had that pale gold hair, which, unshaved [sic] still, was drawn loosely back from a broad row, partly hidden by a small close hat. Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the

forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft lustre. And the eyes were magnificent! Dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them (28-29).

After already having described Clare, Larsen deliberately makes another detailed description, one that is more overt. She uses sensual language such as “tempting,” “sweet and sensitive,” “lustre,” and “mesmeric.” She sets the tone for Clare’s allure and her magnetic pull on Irene, who all of a sudden felt it “dreadful to think of never seeing Clare Kendry again” (29). She sets up an interesting dynamic between the two that continues over the course of the novel. Irene continuously expresses her wish to be rid of Clare, yet she is simultaneously drawn to the woman. The attraction could go beyond that of physical desire; Irene could be attracted to Clare because they are total opposites, “Actually there were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness” (63). Recognizing the limitations of the society she lives in, Irene is attracted to Clare’s brashness and intense emotional expressions – aspects she often represses in herself.

Larsen only associates homosexual themes with Brian in passing, but the association is still important to notice, “Well, what of it? If sex isn’t a joke, what is it? And what is a joke?... The sooner and the more he 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 later on” (59-60). These are strong remarks for Brian to make. He simultaneously criticizes his marriage and sex life, as well as heterosexual

sex in general. His comments serve as more than just a remark on his marriage, but his outlook on heterosexual relationships. They are a 'joke' and seem irrelevant and unimportant to him. Coupled with the fact that Irene and Brian sleep in separate beds and Irene not remembering a time where the two actually felt genuine love for each other, Larsen successfully characterizes their relationship as more than a failed marriage. Brian sincerely is not attracted to Irene; he's actually disappointed and finds no pleasure in sexual relations with Irene – with a woman. Similarly, Irene feels so stifled in her relationship that her repressed desires for emotional expression manifests itself in lesbian-like inclinations towards Clare.

I found myself questioning if Irene sensed this sexual displeasure in Brian, and if he had actually had an affair with Clare. Personally, I believe Irene didn't sense homosexuality in Brian – but believed the affair was happening because she was attracted to Clare for being everything she was not. To state the idea more explicitly, Irene felt Brian was attracted to Clare because she, Irene, was attracted to Clare. She felt Brian was attracted to those same qualities. Continuing with this line of thinking, I do believe Brian was drawn to Clare; but he didn't have a physical affair. Irene comments how he always seemed to mock her in their exchanges, and to regard her disdainfully. Yet he did not display this same behavior towards Clare. He actually defends Clare to Irene at one point, "D'you mean that you think Clare is stupid?" he asked, regarding her with lifted eyebrows, which emphasized the disbelief of his voice" (88). His strong aversion to sex with a woman, finding it utterly undesirable, coupled with his strong to leave the country leads me to belief he found Clare mentally stimulating compared to the frigidly restrained life he lived with Irene.

Jacquelyn McLendon describes Clare as “a woman who makes a conscious decision to pass based on her desire for economical [sic] security and comfort” (McLendon 96). However, McLendon discusses the subtler implications of Irene, where “passing is as much a state of mind as a physical act” (McLendon 96). In *Passing*, both Irene and Clare are passing but in completely different ways. Clare’s passing is in total compliance with the tragic mulatto who “physically abandons the race, marries a white man, eventually becomes dissatisfied with her ‘pale existence,’ and dies at the novel’s end while allegedly trying to reestablish racial ties” (96). Irene’s passing exists in her self-repressive “adherence to bourgeois ideological codes” and attempts “to mask any feelings or behavior that appears to be uncivilized or unladylike” (97). Larsen then shows how these two women are more similar than the rhetoric of Irene’s inner thoughts portrays. Essentially, in being mixed, both Clare and Irene had to choose whether to identify as either white or black. In choosing white, Clare chose to physically pass. In choosing black, Irene chose to psychologically pass. Clare’s path highlights the “discrepancy between appearance and reality” as she goes on to protest the color line (97); meanwhile, Irene’s path highlights the stifling black bourgeoisie society as she “chooses to make certain feelings and behavior in order to live up to societal expectations (101). Larsen uses Irene and Clare to show the impact of having to choose one of the races that are part of your racial background. Essentially, the decisions that both women faced are reflective of what Larsen experienced. Clare chooses white and to pass; she’s continuously threatened with the idea of being ousted and rejected by the whites. Larsen was continuously rejected by whites until her own family removed her from their home. Irene chooses black and has to pass socially; she continuously has to put on a certain

front of airs around other blacks in order to conform to their society and their social norms. Larsen does this and is ultimately unhappy and rejected each time: Fisk, Tuskegee, and the Renaissance.

Larsen uses Clare as a representation of the classic tragic mulatto. She shares similar qualities of the tragic mulatto with the mulattos presented in previous novels. “You know, ‘Rene, I’ve often wondered why more coloured [sic] 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,” Clare explains how simple it is to “pass over” (25). She describes her rationale behind her choice by describing her childhood with her white, racist aunts, “I had Negro blood and they belonged to the generation that had written and read long articles headed: ‘Will the Blacks Work?’... They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn’t forgive the tar-brush. They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbours [sic], or even to mention the south side” (26-27). Clare truly did not have a choice. She was raised to hate her negro blood, to only see the negative stereotypes associated with having black blood. Embodying the common tale of the mulatto, Clare finds herself a burden upon her family and chooses white, “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” (26). She believes her decision will bring her more success and allow her to “get along better” (37). The color line forces her to see ‘white’ as the path to more success.

Her decision leads to her marriage to John Bellew. Just as Clare embodies the tale of the mulatto; Bellew encompasses the unfounded, trivial and unstable notions whites had towards blacks. Below are a series of quotes from Bellew – the most he talks

in the novel – yet, Larsen manages to highlight the danger of Clare’s actions as well as demonstrate the ambiguity of the physical color line and showing the strictness of the society’s binary color line:

Oh, no, Nig...nothing like that with me. I know you’re 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 (40).

You got me wrong there, Mrs. Redfield. Nothing like that at all. I don’t dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she’s trying to turn into one. She would not have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. Not that I’d want her to. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy [sic] devils (40).

Thank the Lord, no! And never expect to! But I know people who’ve known them, better than they know their black selves. And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And...worse (41).

Despite the obviously ironic nickname Bellew has for Clare, he is absolutely clueless to the fact that not only his wife has negro blood, but that the other women in the room do as well. He makes several precise declarations as if he’s sure of which he speaks, yet in he’s a room full of mulatto women. Larsen cleverly makes a quiet statement about race relations and the stereotypes whites held of blacks. As with *Quicksand*, she turns these repeated and continuous notions held in society on their head: Bellew is married to something he claims to know all about and despise, and converses with two others who

are the exact opposite of what claims they are. Clare's passing is also decidedly dangerous, considering how strongly Bellew feels about blacks and his opinions of the character of blacks. Ironically, his words reveal him to be the "scrimy devil," and not the blacks that he 'describes'.

Clare then goes on to represent the protest to the color line. She's outwardly unhappy with the results of her choice.

I ought to have known. It's Jack. I don't blame for being angry, though I must say you behaved beautiful that day. But I did think you'd understand, "Rene. It was that, partly, that has made me want to see other people. It just swooped down and changed everything. If it hadn't been for that, I'd have gone on to the end, never seeing any of you. But that did something to me, and I've been so lonely since! You can't know. Not close to a single soul. Never anyone to really talk to (67).

She's not able to fully embrace her entire ancestry. Through this characterization, Larsen shows how the color line not only divides people because of race, but divides the self regarding mulattoes. While the racially divided society strongly affects blacks and whites, it's effects are more potent with mulattoes. In her wanting to reconnect with blacks, Clare challenges the idea of having to "choose". Instead, she opts to try to recapture what she had to deny herself and passionately pursues this. However, Larsen does slip in the notion that this passion of Clare's is insincere when Irene compares Clare to the whites who were storming Harlem at that time, "More, to gaze on these eat and near great while he gaze on the Negroes....You mean because so many other white people?" (70). Therefore, Clare serves a dual purpose: to challenge the idea of choosing

between either white or black, and to represent the ‘fascination’ whites had of blacks during the Renaissance.

Larsen uses Irene to contrast Clare. As Clare chooses white, Irene chooses to identify as black. Her decision leads her to passing in a different way. She constantly represses her true feelings and thoughts in order to appeal to the values of the black elite; essentially “she was a snob” and “cared greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about” (24). This is shown with her interactions with Brian and her children. She finds the topics of sex and the race problem “queer” and aggressively works to keep her children from reality (59). Irene also expresses disapproval with herself whenever she displays moments of passion, becoming “even more vexed at her own explosion of anger” (60). But how exactly is she passing? She represses her reality in order to fit into the pretend reality of the black elite, as pointed out by Brian, “I can’t understand how anybody as intelligent as you like to think you are can show evidences of such stupidity” (104). She hides from the truths her husband presents to her; fearing a life without the security her husband has (because black elites have security), fearing the association with Clare (because black elites were highly critical of whites being around), and especially fearing confrontation of anything that requires an excessive emotional response.

Therefore, Larsen physically portrays these women as opposite while subtly showing that they are more similar than either believes. Just as Clare pretends to be white, Irene pretends to be a person she is not. Just as Clare’s passing causes her to fear discovery and is threatened by the revelation of her true parentage, Irene’s passing causes her to fear the destruction of the fragile and false life to which she’s subscribed.

Clare's death, on the surface, seems to complete the narrative of the mulatto and of the love triangle that Irene imagines. While it is strongly suggested that Irene pushed Clare, it is never clearly stated how Clare fell from the window. I believe Clare's death was the result of all of these themes coming together in one space; simply she couldn't survive with these themes confronting each other. First is Irene's simultaneously lesbian-like and envious attraction coupled with her jealousy because of the believed possible affair towards Clare. Second, Bellew's arrival and use of racial slurs – which triggers a response from Brian – shows how race has come to a high with the confrontation between the men symbolizing racial tensions. Finally, the life that Clare had built for herself is now over. She has probably lost her child, her status as a wife, and the ability to claim either one of the halves of her parentage. Either one of her choices was now lost to her. Seeing how Clare is involved in all of these themes, she simply couldn't survive them coming together.

Larsen was decidedly less enthusiastic about the reception to her latest novel, but she was not discouraged from further pursuing a career in writing. However, she would be accused of plagiarism with her short story, *Sanctuary* that would turn most of Harlem literary society against her and cloud her credibility. Despite this setback, she applied for and won the Guggenheim Foundation Grant that allowed her to travel Europe while working on her third novel tentatively titled "Crowning Mercy" and then "Mirage" (Davis 379). However, Knopf publications would reject this third novel, finding it rushed with uninteresting characters. Her reputation ruined and her career as a writer waning combined with the undisputable end of her marriage – Elmer was publically courting a white woman named Ethel Gilbert (370) – Larsen ended her career as a writer and faded

into virtual obscurity. She would never re-enter the world of literature. She gradually but surely withdrew from most of the friends she made during the Harlem Renaissance and the life she worked so hard to create for herself.

## Nella Larsen: An Untold Story

*“If you can't be free, be a mystery” – Rita Dove*

### **Descent into Obscurity**

Larsen returned to the states in 1932 following her trip abroad funded by the \$2500 Guggenheim award (Larson 98). The accusations of plagiarism had ruined any credibility she held as a writer, and she gradually came to terms that her brief career as a novelist had ended. This realization occurred simultaneously with the understanding that her marriage was over. Charles Larson describes Nella as being preoccupied with the “failures of her life” and thus beginning her life as a recluse. (108).

However, Larsen made one final attempt to fix her marriage with Imes. In April of 1932, she visits him in Nashville, TN where he worked at Fisk University. Unable to cope with his affair with a white woman, Ethel Gilbert, she leaves shortly thereafter. The tension between Imes and herself led to more aggressively eccentric behavior. She was becoming ill, with thinning hair and bulging eyes. She “would not visit or socialize with anyone” which included close friends (Davis 401). Her last attempt at writing also failed, a novel focusing on marital affairs entitled *Fall Fever* (Davis 400).

An incident that signified the end of her marriage was news story published in a black national newspaper, “Recall ‘Jump’ From Window” (Davis 407). As if taking a page from one of her own novels, Larsen reportedly jumped from a window on the first story floor, injuring her leg. Though the accounts of the incident differ, some report that she had simply fallen from the window and broken her leg, she moved forward with

divorce proceedings soon afterward. By the following year, she is officially divorced from Elmer (Larson 110). In one of the last correspondences she has with Van Vechten, she sends a telegram saying, "I DO MEAN TO WRITE BUT LIFE IS PRETTY TERRIBLE THESE DAYS. HOWEVER I CAN'T SAY I WASN'T WARNED" (110). When a popular newspaper entitled *Afro-American* published her divorce, the critical and negative publicity further contributed to her distress (112). She went as Nella Imes, dropping the Larsen from her name for the first time since she had abandoned the name Nella Walker. She received payments from Elmer because of an agreement in their divorce settlement totaling \$150 a month following two initial payments of \$350 and \$175 respectively (Larson 114).

Her return to New York did not initially begin with Larsen's withdrawal from society as she did stay with long-time friend Dorothy Peterson (Davis 416). When Larsen returned, she did not live in Harlem. Peterson had invited her to stay in her Brooklyn home. Upon arrival, Larsen found that mystique of the Harlem Renaissance gone. The Great Depression had reminded blacks that "the veneer of good race relations and assimilationist attitudes had not removed the marginal economic status from "New Negro" artists, or from the educated "talented tenth" (Davis 419). In a sense, The Depression meant that all blacks were again forced into reality. Larsen was not familiar with this new Harlem.

From 1933 to 1938, Larsen socialized with the friends of Dorothy Peterson, attempting to recapture that livelihood and atmosphere of the Renaissance. She planned to restart her writing career and revise *Fall Fever*. However, the effects of The Depression were long standing. Realizing that a fruitful career as a writer would not

work and the world of the Renaissance long gone, Larsen moved to the Lower East Side where she knew no one. Here, “she could live without the distraction of explaining her marital problems to who were close associates of Dr. and Mrs. Elmer Imes, or of justifying her divorced status to those striving middle-class African Americans (Davis 421). She could escape the many disappointments of her past and move forward with a new future. However, she still socialized with Peterson. Her companions were mostly white or mixed groups of blacks and whites. It was speculated that Larsen had begun ‘passing’ to avoid her former contacts. Despite a few instances where she passed out of convenience, this proved not to be true.

### **Final Years as a Recluse**

By the fall of 1937, Larsen “evidently wanted to disappear” (Davis 432). She refused to answer the phone, receive visits, or have correspondence with former friends and acquaintances. The only person who was aware of her decision of withdrawal was Dorothy Peterson. She remained in this state for years until the announcement of her husband’s death in 1941. Davis describes Imes’ death as a point of realization for Larsen. She had built a life for herself based on the superficial reality of the Renaissance, the prestige and materialistic world of the Negro elite, and the drive for a higher position (Davis 440). Her alienation comes from her inability and unwillingness to understand the new world around brought in by The Depression; she no longer wished “to delve further into her female consciousness of the double blind of race and gender” (Davis 440).

By 1941, Larsen resumed her career as private duty nurse. She received a promotion as chief nurse in New York City at Gouverneur Hospital in 1944. She would

remain here for seventeen years. Ten years passed before another notable change occurs in her life – she switched to working as a night supervisor for the hospital. Larsen was supposed to retire in April of 1961, due to nurses being forced to retire by the age of seventy, but she continued to fill in applications (Hutchinson 476). She accepted a position as a Night Supervisor of the Psychiatric Ward. In 1962, Larsen is mugged returning home from work which resulted in her purse stolen and her arm broken. She transferred to the Metropolitan Hospital until her official retirement in 1963 (Larson 115). These are the only major incidents in her life following her return to nursing.

Particularly, Larsen never reconnected with her family. Her friend, Alice Carper, reports that a year before her death Nella had located her sister Anna in California and attempted to reconcile and work on their relationship. Hutchinson claims that Larsen may have made a phone call instead of a physical visit; nevertheless, the attempt was a failure (Hutchinson 478). Upon arrival in California, Anna “had not invited her into her home because Nella Larsen Imes was so obviously a black woman and Anna Gardner was white and without any visible connections to people of color” (Davis 448). Larsen returned despondent and withdrew more from society, if possible (Larson 119). She was never the same after this visit. She simply “could not make peace with her past because she could not resolve the racial issue irrevocably separating her from her sister” (Davis 448). Even at the end of her life, after several attempts to create a high status life that would take her from the subjectivity of race, its effects still found a way to reach her.

In March of 1964, Larsen was found dead in her home due to acute congestive heart failure linked to hypertension and arteriosclerotic disease (116). Her funeral was on April 6<sup>th</sup> and was attended mostly by her fellow nursing coworkers. Her friend Alice

Carper's eulogy lauded Larsen's career as a nurse while briefly mentioning Larsen's claim to fame, "Much of her time was devoted to the writing of novels, and magazine articles. Two known novels are *Quicksand* and *Passing*" (Hutchinson 480). The only official reporting of her death was carried in *The New York Times* the following day, saying "Imes – Nella Larsen, died March 30, 1864, sister of Anna Larsen Gardner of Calif" (480). If one were to never dig a little deeper into Larsen's past, this would seem the culmination of her legacy and hard work.

In these final years of her life, Larsen was described as a "lonely person" who "kept to herself." In fact, "nursing and reading were her entire life" (Hutchinson 477). Her friends and coworkers Alice Carper and Carolyn Lane described her as "not a happy person" (115). Larsen had relatively few friends and correspondents; she simply worked and returned home. Carper was reportedly furious that Larsen had been dead for several days before anyone reported her missing, and that her only living relative besides Anna "decline to identify or claim the body" (Hutchinson 479). Because of her Larsen's estrangement from the remaining member of her family, Carper handled her funeral arrangements. Anna was the recipient of Larsen's estate. When she received the check, Anna said to a friend who had known her family for nearly fifty years, "Why, I didn't know that I had a sister" (119). This was how Larsen was remembered by her only living family member.

### **Conclusion: The Tragic Mulatto**

Nella Larsen was an exemplary and vibrant woman who lived an interesting, eventful, and purposeful life. Ultimately, the effects of racism in a deeply dichotomized

society affected her life and potential greatly. Yet, Larsen proved an intelligent and determined woman who was successful in all her undertakings. She became a successful nurse, the first African American woman to attend the Library School of the New York Public Library, and a successful novelist of the Harlem Renaissance. She used her platform to protest the effects of racist ideals and the divisive natures of both white and black communities. Nonetheless, she faced continuous rejection at every turn: white society, her family, Fisk and Tuskegee, marriage to Imes, black elite, and finally the literary community. Though these deterrents could have led anyone to give up, Larsen simply returned to continue her career in nursing.

Nella's story as the tragic mulatto was a unique one. A singular aspect is present in her failings to wholly assimilate into a community, despite her constant searching. Unable to embrace herself fully no matter the society she immersed in, she chose to withdraw from society entirely. However, the real tragedy that set Larsen up for failure from the beginning is the abandonment of her family. She never had a sense of security, or a welcoming environment the moment her skin proved too dark to be socially acceptable within her family. She was forced to fend for herself by the age of 14, and had lived with the constant knowledge that her dark skin separated her from her family and from having a home.

Despite the many disappointments in Larsen's life, she proved an incredibly tough and enduring woman. She continuously sought challenges and often overcame them. She's an enigmatic woman with many feats, who chose to disappear when she could not overcome the power of race. The story of Nellie Marie Walker is one of perseverance despite the many setbacks of her race. It is a story of a woman who look after herself and

displayed great independence at a time where women of any race had trouble doing so. It is a story of woman who used her talents to care for others and to speak her truth. She is the writer behind the two single novels that show intelligent black women fighting to satisfaction and happiness. Her story goes often untold, but never is it lost.

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