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Title: Tracing the Aspects of Beauty, Segregation, and Racial Identity in *Quicksand* and *Passing* Novels by Nella Larsen

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Abstract

In this research work, Nella Larsen's two novels *Quicksand* and *Passing* explores the structures of the African American female identity. It investigate the textual depictions of Beauty, segregation and racial identity, and how these demonstrations are based in Harlem Renaissance literature and the broader literary canon on the stereotypes of the American women's identity. This study also demonstrated how both texts novels defy stereotypes of African American women by portraying women capable of liberty while condemning a culture that deprives them of their freedom and identities. Talking about race still causes discomfort, especially when trying to demonstrate how strategies for maintaining whiteness work as a hierarchical process, and that is why it is necessary that identities become key elements to open this path that is sometimes so tortuous and thorny. *Passing* exemplifies that the very notion of Whiteness must be questioned in order to illustrate that the debate about identities must not be dissociated from the question of race. *Quicksand* explores modern modes in which African American women represent identity by struggling to find their place in society in Larsen's first novel. Both novels challenge stereotypes of African-American women by depicting independent women and criticizing a culture that denies them agency and identity. This work portray

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	protagonists and how fights against racial stereotypes, despite the difficulties they faced. For characters in <i>Passing</i> , beauty is very important, whom Larsen portrays as constantly assessing the physical appearances of other people, taking care of their own and worrying about how they appear. Also examines how Larsen employs mirrors, an unreliable speaker and unclear states to comment on the inefficient and dangerous effects on American society of segregation and assimilation. Her use of a distrusted, yet loyal-race heroine has revealed the traps in enabling the division between racial and social duties of a complete civilization.
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تتبع جوانب الجمال والعزلة العنصرية والهوية العرقية في روايات مختارة للكاتبة نيلا لارسن
الرمال المتحركة و العبور . دراسة تحليلية

م.د معتز طارق شاكر محمود العزاوي
جامعة ديالى / كلية التربية المقداد

<p>الخلاصة : في هذا البحث العملي اراد الباحث ان يسلط الضوء على بعض المشاكل المشار لها في الروايتين (الرمال المتحركة وعبور) للكاتبة نيلا لارسين حيث تدرس التمثيلات النصية للهوية العرقية والعزلة العنصرية و الجمال وكيف تستند هذه المواضيع في أدب نهضة هارلم و القانون الادبي الواسع على الصور النمطية لهوية المرأة الامريكية . . توضح الروايتان الصور النمطية للمرأة الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي من خلال تصوير النساء المستقلات وانتقاد الثقافة التي تحرمهن من الهوية. يصور هذا العمل ابطال الروايتين في كيفية محاربة الصور النمطية للعنصرية ، على الرغم من الصعوبات التي واجهوها. وضحت الكاتبة ان مسألة الجمال أمرا مهما للغاية على انه يقدر باستمرار المظاهر الجسدية والقلق من كيفية المظهر الخارجي . ومن المشاكل التي وضحتها الكاتبة هي العزلة وتأثيرها النفسي وخطورتها على المجتمع الامريكي وكذلك عدم استيعاب الفرد في المجتمع. لايزال الحديث عن العرق يسبب عدم الراحة خاصة عند محاولة توضيح كيفية عمل استراتيجيات الحفاظ على البياض كعملية هرمية ولهذا من الضروري ان تصبح الهوية من العناصر الاساسية</p>	<p>الكلمات الدالة:-</p> <p>- جوانب الجمال - العزلة - الهوية العرقية</p> <p>معلومات البحث تاريخ البحث: الاستلام: ٢٠٢٠-١١-٢١ القبول: ٢٠٢١-١٢-١٥ التوفر على النت 23-1-2022</p>
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لفتح المسارات الذي يكون احيانا شائكاً وشديد التعقيد في المجتمع الامريكي. تمثل رواية (عبور) موضوع اصحاب البشرة البيضاء ذاتها والتي يجب ان تكون موضع التسائل من أجل توضيح النقاش حول الهويات والتي يجب الا تتفصل عن مسألة العرق. أما رواية (الرمال المتحركة) والتي تستكشف الانماط الحديثة التي تمثل فيها هوية النساء الامريكيات من اصول افريقية وكفاحهن من أجل ايجاد مكانهن في المجتمع.

1. Introduction

Nellie Walker, who was born in Chicago in 1891 and changed her name to Nella Larsen in 1914, was an American actress. Her father worked as a black employee in Denmark's Danish West Indies when she was a child. Her mother worked as a maid for a white Danish family. Larsen's father was no longer a part of her life after she was born. Her mother's marriage to a Scandinavian, Peter Larsen, resulted in the birth of a girl. Varied families had a hard time finding places wherever they were accepted, even when Nella took her stepfather's name. At the same time that Larsen was growing up, racial segregation was becoming more entrenched in Chicago's largely immigrant neighbourhoods. Her family became white after she moved away from Chicago. Larsen's half-sister didn't recognise her until she realised she was the sole beneficiary after Larsen's death. Her upbringing as the resentful stepdaughter, the darker-skinned daughter, who may have burdened her otherwise happy mother, would fill her literary work with females who are too dark to just be white and too light to be black, about black women who live among white and black people but don't belong anywhere culturally. Larsen's literary career was short and unproductive, practically consisting only of the two aforementioned novels. The author's biography – *In Search of Nella Larsen* – published by George Hutchinson in 2006, reveals a life story that gives the first of her works a distinctly autobiographical character: like Larsen, *Quicksand's* heroine Helga Crane is an Afro-American visibly black; both are the illegitimate daughters of a white, white, and black, Damarque immigrant, and victims of the absence, during childhood and youth, of primordial affective ties; both the author and her character suffer a painful intimate cleavage, provoked by the psychological wandering between two racial identities. According to Hutchinson, these circumstances and their consequences on Nella Larsen's personality may explain, at least in part, not only the very early abandonment of a promising literary career but also her marginal position, compared to other high-profile names in Harlem Renaissance :

The constant strains on her closest relationships fostered a persistent dread of abandonment that she would never be able to overcome. She wore a protective mask of diffidence and severe self-restraint, keenly sensitive to the stigmas of blackness on the one hand and suspected illegitimacy on the other. She was accustomed to being on the outside, wary of hypocrisy, and irritated by slights. She handled group identity with caution. After all, to what "group" had Nellie Larsen ever truly belonged? (*In Search of Nella Larsen* 52)

The "tragic mulatto" wasn't a common character in American literature when Larsen set out to write her debut novel, *Quicksand* (1928). Her bilingual heritage is reflected in her reading of Henrik Ibsen and Jens Peter Jacobsen, had the most impact on how he interpreted his story of a black lady striving not to be imprisoned because of unsafe societal circumstances. Helga is the adopted daughter of a black man who deserted his family when she was young and was raised by a white mother. After her mother's death at the age of 15, Helga's uncle remarried and her white family no longer wants to be associated with her. After leaving her position at the Naxos College, Helga decides to go to the then-tolerant and affluent Copenhagen. Despite this, her heart is restless since she has fallen in love with a Naxos guy who has a second wife. As a black woman and a single woman, she had the audacity to write about sexuality.

Unlike Jessie Redmon Fauset, Larsen did not seem to share the marked commitment to a literary strategy aimed at elevating the black race; within the ideological debate of Harlem Renaissance, the author of *Passing* departs, in fact, from the Duboisian philosophy – which is confirmed by the plot and characters of her work. At the same time, and in an innovative way for the time, the narrative brings together several emerging issues of an identity complexity that gradually builds up throughout the text, extending beyond definitions around the historical chromatic dichotomy.

In *Passing*, the narrative's omniscient voice merges with that of the protagonist, Irene Redfield, through which all the other characters are introduced to us – thus, the reader has access only to a point of view whose credibility is, forcibly, limited. Irene and Clare Kendry are two Caucasian-looking African-Americans, born in Chicago, who had shared a childhood, living in the same building; having separated during their adolescence, they meet again twelve years later on the terrace of an elegant hotel, intended only for white clients. Both are protagonists of the racial *Passing* behaviour; Irene occasionally uses it, like Mattie and Angela from *Plum Bun*, to access public places reserved for whites; but Clare permanently crosses the racial boundary and forms a family with a white man, without revealing her black ancestry.

For the reading proposed here, the researcher seek to explore the relationships between identity and race beyond isolated phenomena, highlighting how the interstitial space between the two becomes a critical tool in the novel *Passing* and *Quicksand* by the American writer Nella Larsen. The discussion about identity and race encourages whiteness to be highlighted as an element for creating privileges in the novel and to discuss the very interpretation of what the term "passing" means within the text. The issue of race as an element of identity cannot be ignored, after all, this difference reaffirms privileged positions within extremely racialized social structures as in the case of American society – not only the one portrayed in *Passing*, but even today as the Black movement Lives Matter exposes.

2. Review of Literature

The analysis of several critical studies on the narratives of *passing*, complementing those that were opportunely mentioned throughout the remaining parts of this second chapter, provided a broader view of the state of the art on the literary treatment of the theme. In the essays and reviews published in the period that followed the Civil Rights Movement, the literary representation of *Passing* is interpreted, above all, as an instrument of denunciation of the chimerical and socially constructed nature of social categories, namely race and ethnicity, allowing for a broader perspective on the network – unstable and contingent – of connections that constitute individual and collective identity.

It was in exactly the same spatiotemporal context as Plum Bun that Nella Larsen created *Passing* (1929), the work that occupies a central place among the narratives of racial *Passing* – a position, however, that would only be reached about sixty years after its publication: *Passing* went almost unnoticed until its publication in 1986, together with *Quicksand* (1928), by the same author, *Passing* would become a bestseller in the 1990s. Gayle Wald explains in *Crossing the line* the rise of an unprecedented interest, not only in this work, but also in the genre to which it belongs:

[T]exts gain or lose status is based on demands and interests that are not intrinsic to their presence as aesthetic objects. As a result of this observation, *Passing's* ascent to prominence may be traced back to a convergence of numerous trends: primarily, black feminist educators' attempts to combat the cultural amnesia that has harmed the reputations of several African American female writers, It has also seen the expansion of African American literary and cultural studies in higher education and the emergence of the academic discipline of African-American studies.. (Wald, Gayle, 2000, viii)

In comparison with other narratives of racial passing, which went almost unnoticed by the general public at the time they were published, *Passing*, by Nella Larsen, received significant attention, generating a relatively abundant contemporary critical corpus; thus, it is possible to defend the hypothesis that these first readings of Larsen's text are representative of the type of concerns that critics will have identified in other classic narratives as well, and that are evident in a set of reviews about this work, all dating back to 1929, almost all published in newspapers (although some have also appeared in literary magazines) and collected in the collection *Passing: Nella Larsen* (2007), edited by Carla Kaplan.

Kaplan, in the introduction to the work, notes that Larsen moved away from the conventions of his time, using the literary trope of *Passing* in an innovative way, alien to moral dichotomies and revealing a more complex understanding of identity – which explains not only the extraordinary interest that would arouse decades later, giving rise to an extensive critical corpus, but also the apparent incomprehension with which the text was received at the time of its publication:

Larsen's use of passing..., while familiar, is both original and difficult. Passing... is especially effective in the production of morality stories.... But by taking the *Passing* trope out of the moral realm altogether, Larsen rewrites the tradition from the roots up, making it more relevant not only to black women, but also to a modern, even postmodern, sense of identity. (Maguire, 2010,p.5) .

In fact, several of the contemporary criticisms highlight in the work, above all, the author's intention to condemn racism and segregation; but Larsen's censorship would also fall, according to some critics, on the very behaviour of racial passing. As Mary Griffin points out in a June 23 article in *The Detroit Free Press*, “[Miss Larsen] demonstrates the condemnation and at the same time the half-admiration that those who could pass for white, however do not, hold for those who of” (97); writer Aubrey Bowser also argues, in a text published on June 5 in *The New York Amsterdam News*, that Clare's character, deliberately constructed as a despicable, immoral and selfish character, denounces the author's resentment – justifying it with a perspective essentialist and dichotomous racial identity: “[Larsen] capitulates to the hatred that ultimate Negroes have against a Negro who goes over the race line and cannot stay there. The resentment is defensible, a people must be either one or the other.” (95).

The analysis of these contemporary reviews reveals, on the part of their authors, an understanding of identity as essential and biologically determined, together with a deep interiorization of the principle of hypodescent, as is evident, for example, in an

anonymous review, published on 1 May in The New York Sun: possibly alluding to Clare's desire to return to her community of origin, its author argues that "There is an acknowledgment... of a strong call of black blood that connects the near-white grandchild or great-grandchild of a black man to the more primitive race." (Hutchinson, 329). In a slightly different formulation, published on September 28 in the New York News, another anonymous also identifies in the work the "call of the black blood" (which he understands to be evident also in Plum Bun): "This is a wonderful novel in which the 'near whites' always back to their own race for real happiness, satisfaction, and understanding." (Hutchinson, 101).

In the set of these first reviews, collected by Kaplan, only Alice Dunbar-Nelson's, published on May 3 in *The Washington Eagle*, makes reference to the multiplicity of themes covered in *Passing*, its universal, timeless and transversal character, and its ending open to the reader's interpretation, speculation and imagination:

It is a condition that is so worldwide that (race, color, country, time, and place have nothing to do with it. Of certainly, the author was right in hanging the situation to a color complex: the general public need it now. However, the book would have been equally intriguing, just as provocative, just as interesting if in mention had been made of color or race. (Wald , 200)

In fact, the short contemporary reviews reveal readings focused on the racial issue, unable to go beyond the superficial layer of the text, and which denounce the alienation of their authors from the African-American communities, expressed in stereotyped and prejudiced views, and in essentialist notions of racial identity.

3. *Quicksand*

Quicksand, her first novel (1928), the most autobiographical, is the story of an uprooting, of the doomed search for a place under the sun impossible for the protagonist, who, being neither black nor white, lives between two worlds weighed down by prejudice and sectarianism. Nella Larsen did not fully satisfy the literary exoticism that some editors were looking for in the writers of her race, but she, too, did not construct the characters that certain militants of the black cause would have liked. She bitterly criticized racism, violent or paternalistic, the alienating religion that prevailed among blacks, especially in the South, the classism and snobbery of black elites, or the sexual fetishism of whites in their dealings with women of color. Ambivalent and contradictory, she painted a magnificent fresco of harlemite life and the religious communities of the United States' black belt. The issue of race, at the same time a bond and burden for the protagonist, is so powerful that it hides other no less important (the condition of women in her time, the difficult relationship with motherhood or the struggle to achieve a stable economic situation , among many others) and, in a certain way, conditions the reading, but the author endowed her female character with enormous psychological complexity, who wanders from one stage to another, from one country to another, from south to north and north to the south, in a state of continuous uncertainty, of continuous restlessness, until the final encounter with a merciless destiny. Nella Larsen wrote in Standard English, a white English that earned her numerous criticisms, but language is a cultural fact, not a biological one, and she was an educated woman raised among whites. With a fluid and modern prose, an enormous lexical richness and an abundant adjectives, she achieves wonderful descriptions of both the exteriors, natural or urban, as well as the interiors, especially the nocturnal, bustling, dazzling lights, in perfectly furnished, visual and colourful scenes, always accompanied by the best music of the time. Equally successful are her descriptions of the textures of clothes and skins, with a varied mosaic of tones and shades of "black" skin, not always easy to translate due to the lack of equivalences in

Spanish. This is the case, for example, of yellow, which can be translated as "olive" or "sallow", even knowing that the yellowish brown of a black is not exactly the greenish-yellow of a white.

Shortly before the end of the school year, Helga Crane, the protagonist of *Quicksand*, disillusioned with the environment, peers and teaching methods of the school for young people of color where she works as a teacher, makes an unexpected decision: resigning from your position, even knowing that it will be very difficult for you to find a job at another school. After spending a brief time in Chicago, her hometown, she settled in New York, specifically in Harlem, where Helga, the daughter of a white mother and an African-American father, finds some stability, a wide circle of friends and an environment in which her racial identity is not a problem for her. After a few years, and after having given her life more rudder strokes in her tireless search for a place where she can feel fully fulfilled and happy, she acquires a commitment that will condition her existence forever. In "*Quicksand*", published in 1928, Nella Larsen gave life to a character, Helga Crane, who has many parallels with her, a complex, multifaceted character, full of nuances, who in the course of the novel has to overcome various obstacles derived from both her racial identity and her status as a woman and her origins.

Larsen starts "*Quicksand*" by emphasising Helga's physical beauty, as well as the elegance of her dress and surroundings. These descriptions are meant to counteract racial stereotypes of people of colour as being either ugly and poor or exotic and alluring. Larsen challenges typical black and white racial categorizations when representing humans by using various colours to describe Helga as "yellow."

Quicksand is a novel about Helga Crane, a mixed-race lady who travels across the United States and Europe as an adult, reflecting on how others treat her in various parts of the country. Helga flies to Denmark to reconcile with her white family and the white portion of her mixed-race identity after living among black Americans in Harlem. Helga is taken aback when she learns that the Danes regard her as a thing of beauty, but she appreciates it. Helga's ego begins to disintegrate as she realises she is just seen as an exotic, sexualized product. Nella Larsen illustrates how white people of her day view the black female body as a sexual object, regarded appealing because it is "different," through Helga's meetings in Denmark. Larsen,

hand, portrays her own feeling of blackness as gorgeous throughout the work, in contrast to thorough portraits of persons such as Helga. She emphasises beauty above sexual objectification in her depictions. Larsen, like other Harlem Renaissance thinkers, writes from Harlem in the 1920s, focusing on the development of new narratives for the emerging black post-slavery culture. Larsen's physical depictions of the story's black characters reflect the Harlem Renaissance's emphasis on the development of a new beauty aesthetic for people of colour that isn't centred on the white gaze which is captured in the way the Danes view Helga.

Larsen, on the other hand, uses a whole different vocabulary in her work to depict Helga's (and other black characters') beauty, avoiding sexually objectifying terms and emphasising the beauty of blackness itself. Larsen's descriptions stand out because they emphasise elegance and beauty, in contrast to the Dahls' overt sexualisation of Helga's body. Helga is described as a "radiant" young woman by Larsen. She praises her gorgeous "sharply cut face," "soft yet penetrating eyes," "wonderful mouth," "delicately chiselled ears," and "delightful" blue-black hair that flows gently around her shoulders, among other things. Larsen's choice of terms like "radiant," "lovely," and "delightful" encourages the reader to think of Helga as attractive without implying that she is sexually interested. This portrayal of Helga contrasts dramatically with the Dahls', who

describe her with objectifying terms like "voluptuous" and "rare." Larsen uses words like "beautiful," "musical," and "luminous" to describe other black characters in the novel, including Anne (Helga's Harlem roommate) and Dr. Anderson (Helga's central love interest), to show that describing people of colour without sexual innuendo or exoticizing language is possible.

The Dahls' perception of blackness as sexually exotic illustrates how the white gaze frequently objectifies the black female body. Larsen's depictions of black characters, on the other hand, provide a counter-narrative about black beauty that does not objectify the black body. *Quicksand* represents the Harlem Renaissance's goal of creating a new style for people of colour that isn't obsessed with blackness as an exotic curiosity.

4. *Passing*

The passage in the text that narrates the reunion of the two friends invokes the myths, widely disseminated on both sides of the "color line", about the ability to recognize an ancestry that is not phenotypically visible: feeling observed by Clare on the terrace at the hotel, Irene, who does not recognize her, fears at first that the stranger has guessed her racial identity, and then reaffirms to herself the impossibility of such an occurrence: "Absurd! Impossible! White folks were so clueless about such matters that they usually claimed to be able to tell; and by the most absurd means, finger-nails and palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and extra similarly silly rot" (*Passing* 10-11).

However, and ironically, this non-essentialist understanding of racial identity, revealed in Irene's intimate argument, is contradicted by Irene, in another passage in which she claims to have guessed that a Caucasian woman who claimed to have black ancestry was entirely white: "In fewer than five minutes, I knew she was 'fay.' Not from her appearance or said or anything else. Just – just something. Something that could not be registered." (*Passing* 56). If little is known about Irene's appearance, much is said about Clare's, described in countless passages as unusually beautiful: "[a] blond beauty out of the fairy-tale" (54); thus, for the construction of this racial *Passing* character, Larsen did not escape the tradition that shaped the "tragic mulattos" of Child and Brown, Iola Leroy, John and Rena Walden, the anonymous narrator of *Ex-Colored* and Angela Murray. On the other hand, as the plot unfolds, the psychological portrait of Irene becomes increasingly clear, and Clare's is increasingly enigmatic – building the voice of the narrative, in this way, two images that are gradually moving apart. Gradual, of those initially formed: that of Irene as a self-assured woman, comfortable with her gender and racial identity, dedicated to her family and committed to the uplifting of the black race, and that of Clare as opportunistic and disloyal, as her own confession about the reasons behind the behaviour of *Passing* – the desire for social ascension: "I was resolved to go away, to be a person rather than a charity, a problem, and perhaps even the indiscreet Ham's daughter. I desired stuff back then, too. I knew I wasn't unattractive and could 'pass'". (19).

This is also one of many passages in *Passing* in which Larsen hints at the existence of class prejudices on the dark side of the "color line": Clare had clearly been in a position of inferiority, which she resented, vis-a-vis her youthful friends. During the reunion on the hotel terrace, Irene's own thoughts evoke her friend's subordinate status: "Clare had never been exactly one of the group" (14). However, the most significant episode in this regard takes place at a meeting at Clare's house, to which she had invited Gertrude Martin, another common youth friend, also protagonist of *passing*:

Later, when she investigated her annoyance, Irene recognized, albeit unwillingly, that it sprang from a sensation of being outnumbered, of being alone, in her loyalty to her own class and kind, not only in the great thing of

marriage, but in the entire pattern of her life as well. ... Gertrude, Irene thought, appeared as if her husband might be a butcher. (24-25)

Simultaneously, Larsen denounces the existence of a chromatic hierarchy among blacks; Gertrude thus comments on the anxieties she felt before her two Caucasian-looking children were born, which prevented her, against her husband's will, from running the risk of having a third: "It's terrible how it skips decades and then reappears. Naturally, no one wants a dark child." (26).

Jack Bellew, Clare's husband who, however, joins her friends, symbolizes the open, primal racism of the white majority; ignorant of the racial identity of the guests and of the woman, he comments of African-Americans: "I do not dislike them, I hate them. ... They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils" (29-30). This entire passage, in addition to invoking a set of prejudices – of race and class –, exposing its transversal dimension to the chromatic binomial, significantly expands the trope of the racial frontier spy, which James Weldon Johnson had already explored in the figure of the anonymous narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and that will appear in later narratives, namely, in some of those that make up the primary corpus of this work. Inserting a satirical tone into the text, the passage also takes up the theme of the supposed capacity of whites to detect a phenotypically invisible black ancestry; says Bellew, in the presence of his wife – with whom he has a daughter – and his guests, all African American: "I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (29).

The resumption of the relationship between Clare and Irene is insistently sought after by the former, and justified by a deep nostalgia – "You don't know, you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (Larsen, 1986, P 200).

For Irene, Clare is not only an opportunistic and disloyal woman, as evidenced by the type of *Passing* that she stars, but also too ostentatious in her sexually provocative appearance, a selfless mother, which leads her to suspect a behavior in her friend that will not correspond to their own standards of moral behaviour. Eventually, however, Irene will give in, and, albeit reluctantly, will welcome Clare and grudgingly allow her access to the social milieu she herself frequents.

The description of this medium, her parties, Irene's activities in favour of the progress of the black race - in fact, little more than the organization of charity events - and her home and family, consolidate the protagonist's image as a woman well settled in the comfortable black middle class of New York City. For the reader, it is clear that Irene is satisfied with her racial identity, her social position, her role as wife and mother, and what she understands to be her activism in favour of the black race - Irene considers herself, in short, a confident woman entitled to a high opinion of herself, her personality, and her status.

Gradually, Irene's dislike of the almost forced relationship with Clare turns into a deep and disturbing discontent, and it is this emotional turmoil that will gradually undermine her self-confidence – a confidence, after all, that is not even innate, nor as solid as the protagonist would have her believe. Irene is, essentially, a conformist and very afraid of anything that might change the status quo she considers ideal: "Irene did not like changes, particularly changes that affect the smooth routine of her household" (41); a happy marriage is just a facade, which hides a relationship without intimacy, maintained for convenience. The couple's estrangement results from the frustration and permanent bitterness of Brian Redfield, who, permanently tormented by the racist oppression of his country, had conceived the dream of emigrating to Brazil – a life project that met with implacable and unshakable opposition from Irene : "[she] had

even hinted at a dissolution of their marriage in the event of his persistence in his idea” (40).

Irene's lucubrations, provoked by the restlessness resulting from the differences between her and Clare, reveal to her aspects of her character that she herself did not know, and which she reluctantly and semi-unconsciously identifies: “into her mind had come a thought Despite her obstinate selfishness, [Clare] was incapable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known. Certainly, she never be concerned to know” (46-47).

On the other hand, the constant presence of the very beautiful and very sophisticated Clare, and the fact that she has won Brian's sympathy, give rise to a feeling of envy that is mixed with jealousy. Quickly, Irene's troubled imagination builds an intimate relationship between them, of which the reader, however, despite witnessing the tensions between the couple, has no clue other than the protagonist's not entirely credible appreciation. Tempted to report to Clare's husband her suspicions about a relationship that would put her entire family and social life at risk, Irene decides not to, justifying her inability to act with the duty of racial solidarity.

Irene's despair gradually grows, and will reach its peak during the episode, which is also the climax of the narrative: Clare falls from the apartment window, on a sixth floor, where a party is held hosted by Irene's friends – African-Americans – and where she is surprised by her husband. Those present and the authorities interpret the fall as accidental; one can accept the hypothesis, however, that the text proposes three alternative outcomes: either Irene pushed Clare, or she accidentally fell, or committed suicide – in either case, evoking the fate of the “tragic mulatto”, although, in many ways, her psychological portrait seems to distance her from this conventional figure.

The title of the narrative itself is open to the reader's interpretation: what kind of *Passing* does “Passing” refer to? To racial and social class passing, certainly; but it could also refer to the opposition between what Irene believes, and appears to be, and what she actually is, and which is revealed throughout the text due to the tension between her and Clare – whose image of a flirtatious woman, opportunistic and futile, as it emerges from Irene's monologues, it is never clearly confirmed, suggesting that this enigmatic character may, in many respects, not be what he seems either.

According to Gabrielle McIntire,, “*Passing* is a warning against sealed epistemologies or ethnologies ... race, [it] seems to be saying, is a figure which can never be decoded once and for all, either on the body or via language sign systems that guarantee truth-content by categorizing racial feeling and effect.” (McIntire ,2012, p:779). In *Passing*, ambiguity is not exclusive to the dilemmas of experiencing the hybrid identity; on the contrary, ambivalence and vagueness permeate the entire work, and are constantly fuelled by a tension between appearance and being, between appearance and reality, also manifesting itself in the hierarchy of themes present in the narrative: racial prejudice seems to occupy a first place. plan, but its role is not as central as it appears, serving, above all, as a catalyst for other social issues, transversal to the “color line”, which the text also calls for.

If Fauset, in *Plum Bun*, highlights the nature, common to humanity, of the frailties and imperfections of his mixed characters, so does Larsen in *Passing*; however, in the first narrative, this objective is achieved by maintaining the integrity of the racial boundary, which in the second, fades almost to the point of erasure - which, simultaneously, evidences the adoption, by the two authors, of different literary aesthetics within a same cultural movement, and underlines the innovative and deeply subversive character of Larsen's work.

By privileging race as a tension trait in the formation of identity, it is inevitable to bump into the concept of racial identity which, according to Janet Helms, is defined as:

[...] a sense of collective or group identity based on a perception of sharing a common racial heritage with a particular racial group... is a belief system that develops in reaction to perceived differentials in belonging to groups. racial. (Belgrave, 2018,p.65)

For Helms, belonging becomes an element of identification and feeds the strength of a group from those shared that unite the subjects of this group. Understood from the perspective of a black identity, this form of identification illustrates seeing race as a discursive concept used to keep minority groups out of any position of power in the social structure, after all, there is much to lose by allowing whiteness to become a object of study, especially in the construction of the other.

5. Comparative study of *Passing* and *Quicksand*

Larsen's contemporaries praised both novels, and they are now considered exemplary works of American Harlem Renaissance literature. *Quicksand* was praised by W. E. B. DuBois as a "thoughtful and courageous piece of writing," as well as "the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnutt [...]" in its nuanced grasp of the weird cross-currents that spin around the black American" (Hostetler,1990, p.35). *Passing* was so well received that it earned Larsen a Guggenheim Fellowship, making her the first African American woman to do so (McDowell ix). Larsen's works have been universally lauded, although her endings have been regularly criticized by contemporary and current critics. "Tales end abruptly, present no viable solution, and remain dominated by discontent... yet despite an adept framing of character and circumstance, Larsen's narratives do not finally reach the meaning of that subject," writes critic Thadious Davis(Davis,1981,p.191). Despite their "daring and unconventional heroines," as McDowell points out in her introduction to both works, "[t]hough both novels contain daring and uncommon heroines, in the end, they commit these heroines to the most conventional destiny of literary history: marriage and death" (McDowell xi). Critics' dissatisfaction, on the other hand, reflects their own predetermined expectations about how these works should conclude. Mary Mabel Youman describes the ending of *Passing* as "disconcertingly vague about what should be gladly embraced" in her review (Youman 241). This kind of criticism punishes novels for violating expectations and not ending on a positive note. The novel's ending may feel sudden and surprising for those looking for triumphant characters or affirming political themes. However, critic Jonathan Little argues that it is compatible with the novel's inherent logic and organic design (Little,1992,p. 173). For the sake of my argument, I'll claim that the characters' end results criticize rather than dismiss in today's world, there are many African American women. The conclusion of both novels underline how each woman's identity within her culture links her to unresolvable fates. If any of these characters succeeds, the stories will reveal the realities depicted in the novels—a world in which racism and misogyny deny African American women autonomy and independence. In the last scenes of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, the destiny of the three females is depicted using the fundamental metaphor of descent. *Quicksand*, as its name implies, depicts the picture of slowly sinking into the earth. "How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the humiliation, that her existence had become?" Helga wonders in the novel's last pages. (135). The weight of oppression suffocates her desire to resist: "she was determined to extricate herself out of this bog into which she had fallen." Either that or she'd be put to death. "She couldn't

handle it any longer." This unhappiness, this feeling of asphyxiation," was too much for her. She was suffocating and shrinking in horror. (134).

Her anguish is captured in images of suffocation, which kills and disables a person's ability to communicate. Helga loses her ability to combat her own slide, metaphorically speaking. Because of her discomfort, Helga cannot get out of bed, and she must consequently bear the figurative sinking into death. In both figuratively and literally, *Passing* Clare and Irene's decline. Clare's and Irene's near-fatal falls down the stairs after leaping from the window signify more than just their departure from their racist culture; they also depict African American women's subjugation and enslavement. A repeated phrase of "down, down, down" is used to emphasize Irene's downward spiral as she leaves the apartment: "Down, down, down, she went." (240). Visions of sinking and being pushed down are interwoven with images of ascending and boosting the race. Irene and Clare are not allowed to enter the high-rise apartment in Harlem where the last party is held (235). Both Irene's Harlem party and Irene's Southern village are African American communities, and both stories' ends occur there. Larsen "undermine[s] romantic convention, replacing ironic tragedy where there had been a joy" by placing the awful destinies of her characters there, according to reviewer Jonathan Little (Little 174).

Furthermore, they demonstrate that non-stereotypical depictions of African American women have no place in these idealized civilizations. All three heroes cannot reach full autonomy under the weight of their repressive civilizations and hence lose their identities. Despite this, neither novel's fight against preconceptions about African American women in American literature is weakened by the destinies of Larsen's protagonists. Whether the novels develop characters who defy objectification and obedience to dominant ideologies makes little difference. Helga's recognition of her servitude and exploitation puts her beyond the novel's objectified African American female figure. The novel does not endorse Helga's fate; however, the novel's concluding chapters, which chronicle Helga's inner monologue, provide a voice to those who have been silenced by dominant white male culture. The larger criticism of society's reinforcing of prejudices and biases that oppress African American women would have been obliterated if Helga had found a welcoming community before the end of the novel. Similarly, while the text allows for Irene's murder, the narrative portrays Clare's death as ultimately the outcome of racism— Clare's death was precipitated by Bellew's appearance at the party and his racist comments. Irene, on the other hand, is the one who is most unsure about her fate. Irene's fainting is described in the novel's final sentences as a drowning, akin to Helga's symbolic sinking into death: Irene moaned, slipped down, and moaned some more. As she was being engulfed and drowned, she was vaguely aware of muscular arms hauling her up. It was now completely dark. It appears as if Helga is dying symbolically, as her choking gasps echo Irene's moaning after she faints. Despite this, I get a glimpse of hope as I see the hands raising Irene. Even if Irene is spared and may rise, indeed, she will not do so on her own; it will only happen while she is unconscious and not of her own free will. Like Helga in *Quicksand*, Irene loses control of her fate, and her chances of survival are no longer in her hands. Both books challenge stereotypes of African-American women by depicting independent women and criticizing a culture that denies them agency and identity.

In Larsen's *Passing*, beauty is especially important to the characters, who are constantly analysing, other people's physical characteristics, attending to their own, and

fretting about how they appear in contrast. Larsen, displays Irene's obsession with beauty early in the novel, during Irene's trip to Chicago. Irene tries to "fix" her appearance as soon as she is out of the heat after witnessing a man collapse or die from heatstroke and nearly dying from heatstroke herself. This indicates, perhaps paradoxically, how important beauty is to Irene—she doubts about her appearances, not the destiny of the man she detected faint—and how she senses "broken" when she is not at her finest.

When characters in *Passing* discuss what they believe makes someone physically beautiful, they commonly correlate their ideals of beauty with racialized physical traits. Because characters usually equate beauty with race, judgements of physical attraction are deeply socially and politically sensitive. Certain characters plainly mention (at least at the outset of the book) that they favour "white" traits such as light skin, hair, and eyes. Consider the tea conversation between Gertrude, Clare, and Irene, in which Gertrude and Clare express their satisfaction that their children had pale skin. Gertrude even claims that "nobody wants a dark child." Though this predilection is definitely related to the perks that black folks can experience when they pass as white, it also obviously use aesthetics to disparage blackness.

Irene tells Clare and Gertrude that she favours dark skin and notes that her spouse and one of her own children are both dark. Later, as Irene evaluates Brian's attractiveness, she adds that if it weren't for the beauty of his dark complexion, he wouldn't be nearly as lovely. Irene makes it evident that she believes dark skin to be aesthetically beautiful. The reader can guess that Irene, who is strongly concerned with black American justice and racial loyalty, interprets this desire as political as well.

In spite of Irene's expressed affinity for "black" features, she extols Clare's "whiter" beauty. Irene is attracted back to Clare's beauty, admiring her pale skin and blond hair. Larsen expresses Irene's preoccupation with Clare's attractiveness is expressed not just through her active comments about her looks, but via the narration's depiction of her. For the reason that the narrative is told in a very intimate third person from Irene's perspective, the narrator's statements about Clare's "ivory" skin and blond hair are portion of Irene's inner monologue. Irene is especially taken to Clare's dark eyes, which she refers to as "ebony eyes." Irene regularly comments on the difference between Clare's black eyes and her pale complexion, arguing that the contrast is the essence of Clare's beauty. For example, while Irene and Clare chat in the Drayton, she remarks on her eyes, which she characterises as "weird" in comparison to the rest of her pale complexion.

Clare and Irene, two light-skinned African American women, struggle with the act of *Passing* for white in a divided world in *Passing*. Irene only travels through on occasion, preferring to seek the comfort and stability that her upper-middle-class African-American lifestyle promises. Clare, a mixed woman, creates an identity by impersonating a white woman. Irene is enthralled by Clare's colourful and careless lifestyle, but Clare's *Passing* threatens Irene's as well. Clare dies unexpectedly once her racial identity is revealed by her bigoted white spouse in the end. Though Irene's fate is unknown, the novel's conclusion illustrates both women's exclusion from white society, highlighting how a racist culture isolates African Americans. Through focusing on the creation of identity and exploring literary representations of beauty, segregation, racial identity, and sexuality, this research paper demonstrates how these books challenge

expectations during the Harlem Renaissance and concerning on the important role of African American women.

This research paper will look at how Larsen uses mirrors, an untrustworthy narrator, and perplexing settings to comment on the futile and dangerous effects of segregation and integration on American culture. Her choice of an untrustworthy but racially loyal heroine served to highlight the dangers of allowing racial and social roles to divide an entire civilization. Larsen's central idea is illustrated through her character Irene, who demonstrates how upholding racial barriers for reasons of ethics or pride can have severe and even fatal consequences. As a result, Larsen counters the media's message that *Passing* the colour line would only bring disgrace and even danger to the person who did so. Through her race loyalist (Irene), she explains that adhering to racial segregation is just as dangerous. Irene's dedication to social order has the consequence of blinding her, as she is incapable to recognize the characters for who they are. Larsen admits that society has such a problem. The community was so worried with figuring out who was passage over that they didn't give a damn about what drove people to do so.

Because segregation was so widely promoted in the media, it seemed necessary to investigate possible explanations for crossing racial lines. It was never considered that potentially *Passing* might be a natural reaction to society's unworkable racial divisions. Rather, the general public sought to understand why people did not stay on their assigned side. Several authors, as well as sociological researchers, have attempted to find motivating factors behind the *Passing* fad. *Passing* was done for a variety of reasons, including avoiding persecution, gaining acceptability, and gaining financial gain. In "Negro Passing: To Pass or Not to Pass," published in 1963, one researcher, James Conyers, used a scientific method to discovering the origins of racial passing. As he follows the millionaire around cities free of segregation, the narrator enjoys freedom from race and class restrictions. As the ex-colored man travels around cities like Berlin, Amsterdam, and Paris, he notices that he is not treated as a second-class citizen as he would be in the United States.

Conclusion

Debating the relationship between Segregation, beauty and race, without minimizing the relevance of other factors such as class and sexuality, demonstrates that there is still a path that needs to be taken to demystify the fallacy of a post-racial world. It is not by chance that, when elaborating an entry on the term race, the postcolonial scholar Thomas Bonnici highlights that there is a "negative charge that has accumulated around this term for centuries [making it] obligatory to take into account the delimitations and the qualifications contained in the term 'racism'". (Bonnici, 2007, p. 226) Talking about race still causes discomfort, especially when one seeks to demonstrate how strategies for the maintenance of whiteness work as a hierarchical process, and that is why it is necessary that identities must become key of elements to open this path that is sometimes so tortuous and thorny. Identity politics itself becomes less of a monolithic issue to refer to the ideologies of difference "which characterize politically motivated movements or movements of literary criticism (multiculturalism) in which diversities or ethnicity function as the main problem of political debate." (Bonnici., 2007, p. 147). The richness and complexity of Larsen's texts novels are revealed to the reader through reading them not just as reactionary texts against stereotypes of African American

women, but also via other critical and theoretical perspectives. When you read both works through a reactionary view, you'll be disappointed to learn that their tragic endings signal the failure of a new style of representation. According to Nella Larsen in her introduction in 1986 which discussed the endings of her novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*, McDowell discusses that "Until the early 1970s, Nella Larsen was one of several Harlem Renaissance women writers relegated to the back pages of that movement's literary history" (McDowell ix). The critical acclaim that Larsen's works has received from contemporary writers and critics has sparked renewed interest in and scholarly pursuits of these novels. According to Alice Walker's showed, there is a quote on the back cover of the 1986 Rutgers edition of *Quicksand* and *Passing* that says, "*Quicksand* and *Passing* are novels I will never forget."(Davis, 2006,p:54). Nella Larsen's clarifies "rediscovery" establishes a link and relevance between her works and contemporary fiction about African American women. Indeed, both works portray protagonists who fight against racial stereotypes, despite the difficulties they face in doing so. As a result, these novels demonstrate that self-identification is worthwhile, but that belonging is not worth the risk of losing one's uniqueness. The fates of the three women are depicted in the final scenes of *Quicksand* and *Passing* through the central metaphor of descent. *Quicksand's* title emphasizes the metaphor of an inevitable sinking into the earth—a slow burial into the ground. Helga wonders in the novel's final paragraphs, "How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become?" (McDowell 135). In the *Passing* Novel the main characters Clare and Irene are metaphorical and literal. Clare's leap from the window and Irene's following near-fall down the stairs represent not just the expulsion, but also the oppression and enslavement of African American women in a racist society. The novels' inferred not only criticize traditional endings that portray idealized African American communities, but also imply that independent, non-stereotypical images of African American women have no place in such society. Under the weight of their repressive civilizations, the three protagonists are unable to gain total self-reliance and lose their identities. Furthermore, both novels' endings take place in African-American communities: Helga moves to the Southern town and the Harlem party of Irene's African American friends. Finally, this study demonstrated how both texts defy stereotypes of African American women by portraying women capable of liberty while condemning a culture that deprives them of their freedom and identities.

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