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# Constructing Identity: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*

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Constructing Identity: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality  
in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*.

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Andrew Walter Davis

to

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the constructions of African American female identity in Nella Larsen's two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. It examines the textual representations of race, class, gender and sexuality and how these representations speak to the stereotypes of African American female identity prevalent in Harlem Renaissance literature and the wider literary canon. The first chapter shows the connection among constructing racial, gender and sexual identities by paralleling *Quicksand*'s protagonist's plight to define her racial identity with her simultaneous struggle to obtain sexual autonomy. It concludes that Helga's failure to achieve autonomy signifies the novel's critique of the racism and misogyny within its contemporary society. The second chapter focuses on Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, and how the two protagonists, Irene and Clare, construct their identities in their segregated society. The agency Clare possesses in constructing her identity leads to the tragic ending of both women, for her white husband's racism prevails and his power to dictate his wife's identity indirectly causes her death. The thesis concludes by considering the criticism both novels receive and its influence on Larsen's place in the literary canon. The thesis argues that both novels' portrayal of female characters as three dimensional women capable of autonomy, refute the stereotypical representations and the novels' tragic endings further criticize the societies that deny them agency.

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## *Quicksand* and *Passing*: Resisting Stereotypes and Subverting Literary Tradition

In 1928 and 1929 Nella Larsen published her only two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, respectively, both of which center on the lives of African American women and their place in society. *Quicksand*'s protagonist, Helga Crane, searches for a community in which she feels at home; her journey takes her from the Southern United States, to Harlem, and to Denmark-- where her white relatives live. In each setting Helga negotiates her place in society facing the challenges of being both a biracial person and a woman. Every location, however, forces Helga to confront the stereotypes that confine her. Ultimately, Helga enters a loveless marriage of convenience and returns to the South. Unable to express her individuality, Helga is resigned to live a life that denies her the autonomy she has struggled for. In *Passing*, two light-skinned African American women, Clare and Irene, deal with the act of passing for white in a segregated society. Irene only passes occasionally; she instead strives for the security and stability she hopes her lifestyle as an upper-middle class African American woman will provide. Clare, a biracial woman constructs an identity by passing for white. Clare's flamboyant and careless lifestyle intrigues Irene but ultimately threatens Irene's lifestyle as the dangers of Clare's passing effects both women. In the end, Clare mysteriously dies immediately after her racial identity is discovered by her racist white husband. Though Irene's final fate remains unresolved, the ending depicts both women's expulsion from white society conveying the alienation of African Americans by a racist society. By focusing on the construction of identity and exploring the textual representations of race, class,

gender and sexuality, this thesis reveals how both novels refute the stereotypes of African American women during the Harlem Renaissance and in the canon of American literature.

Both novels were praised by Larsen's contemporaries and held as exemplary works in the canon of American Harlem Renaissance Literature. W. E. B. DuBois described *Quicksand* as a "thoughtful and courageous piece of work" and "the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnut [ . . . ] in its subtle comprehension of the curious cross currents that swirl about the black American" (DuBois 784). *Passing* was equally well received earning Larsen a Guggenheim Fellowship, making her the first African American female to garner such a distinction (McDowell ix). Despite such immediate accolades, however, contemporary and current critics often fault the endings of Larsen's novels. For example, critic Thadious Davis argues that both novels' "narratives stop abruptly, present no viable solution, and remain dominated by dissatisfaction [ . . . ] [and] despite an adept framing of character and incident, Larsen's narratives do not finally penetrate the meaning of that subject" (Davis 191). In her introduction to both novels, McDowell similarly concludes that these endings "reveal [Larsen's] difficulty with rounding off stories convincingly," and attests that, "[t]hough both novels feature daring and unconventional heroines, in the end, they sacrifice these heroines to the most conventional fates of literary history: marriage and death, respectively" (McDowell xi). However, the dissatisfaction expressed by critics speaks more to their own expectations of how these novels should conclude. In her criticism of *Passing* Mary Mabel Youman describes the ending as "disconcertingly vague on

what should be joyously embraced” (Youman 241). Such critiques penalize the novels for thwarting expectation and not offering celebratory endings. Critic Jonathan Little argues that: “While *Passing*’s ending may seem abrupt and evasive to those looking for triumphant characters or affirming political messages, it remains consistent with [the novel’s] internal logic and organic design” (Little 173). Instead of dismissing the novels’ endings, this thesis will argue that the characters’ final fates offer a critique on the place of African American women in society. Neither novel endorses the protagonists’ failures, but rather the endings show how the identity of each woman within her society surrenders her to irresolvable fates. Had any of these characters succeeded, the stories would compromise the reality that each novel depicts—realities in which racism and misogyny deny African American women independence or autonomy in their lives.

The narrative conventionality of both novels derives from their similarities with the traditional “passing-for-white” story in which typically a biracial character, specifically of African American and white heritage, discovers the negative effects of passing for white and in the end returns “to the safe confines of the supportive Black community” (Little 173). Little documents many such stories beginning in the nineteenth century and their resurgence during the Harlem Renaissance (Little 173-74). The basic plot of *Quicksand* follows this formula; Helga Crane feels alienated by her biracial heritage in both African American and white communities. Yet Larsen’s novel subverts this tradition by depicting an African American community that condemns Helga to a loveless marriage and potentially fatal pregnancies. *Quicksand* thus criticizes not only the oppressive white dominant culture but also the



absence of a “supportive Black community.” Similarly, in *Passing*, Clare Kendry, passes for white yet longs for an embracing African American community. However, soon after integrating herself into African American culture, Clare dies, indicating the fleeting illusion of a supposedly safe and freeing community. Such endings of marriage and death, though conventional in the larger American literary tradition, as McDowell argues, are in fact subversive in the context of the “passing-for-white” genre these novels critique. Ultimately, each novel reveals a more cynical, less idealized ending, which depict the limitations of African American women and the hypocrisy and repression prevalent in both the African American and white communities.

Larsen’s novels also stray from the conventional “passing-for-white” stories by equally focusing on the exploration of female identity. In *Quicksand*, Helga’s construction of her racial identity runs congruent to her struggles as a woman and with her sexuality. As Helga’s biracial heritage prevents her from fully fitting into either African American or white communities, similarly, each community somehow hinders Helga’s exploration of her sexuality by either repressing or exploiting it. The novel links the construction and performance of race to the expression of female sexuality, specifically African American female heterosexuality in the context of race conscious and racist societies. Just as the novel underscores limiting modes of defining race— as either African American or as white-- the novel conveys the restrictive modes of representing female sexuality—as either chaste or promiscuous. As Helga struggles to define her racial identity she also tries to maintain her sexual autonomy. Through Helga’s journey, the novel defines and refutes the stereotypes

that objectify literary representations of African American women. In her introduction to the novels, McDowell outlines the historical and literary traditions that created the two dichotomous modes of representing African American female sexuality (McDowell xii-xiii). One such representation is the figure of the exotic and promiscuous African woman who is prevalent throughout the literature and cultural myths of early American society (Simson 230). Such archetypes influenced much of the writing of the Harlem Renaissance, which exploited African American women as “primitive exotic sex objects” (McDowell xv). The second representation, one of the chaste and pious African American Christian woman, came as a reactionary stance against the first stereotype of the licentious and libidinous female (McDowell xiii). Whereas the first stereotype exploits African American female sexuality as objects, the second stereotype represses any expression of sexuality thus equally denying sexual autonomy. Helga’s final inability to freely express her sexuality reflects upon and criticizes the damaging nature of both of these stereotypes and their confining limitations on the representations of African American women.

*Passing* further critiques the literary representations of African Americans in the genre of the “passing-for-white” story by exposing the absence of a supportive African American community. Irene’s obsessive desire for security stems from her lack of it in the African American bourgeois society; though she tries to obtain safety and stability, the threat of racism infiltrates all aspects of her life straining her relationships with Clare and her husband. Irene constantly fears being cast out of her society; this fear of expulsion reflects the instability and terror of racism in all its forms, but especially in the legalization and enforcement of segregation. The text

conveys the ubiquitous threat of racism through Clare's racist white husband, John Bellew. Irene is insulted by Bellew's racist slurs, and the anxiety she feels haunts her throughout the novel. The text emphasizes the power of Bellew's voice and words through the pun on his name—Bellew is a homophone of “bellow,” characterizing Bellew's loud booming voice. The word “bellow” is also repeated throughout the text linking scenes of terror with Bellew-- the novel's ultimate embodiment of white racism and its power of excluding the Other. For example, Irene recalls Clare's father running “threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses” (143-144). In another scene, Irene feels an ominous presence in the air, foreshadowing her discovery of an unconscious man lying in the street, and in a catalog of oppressive metaphors, the warm breeze is described as a “flame fanned by slow bellows” (146). Additionally, the name Bellew also is a pun on the word “below” which signifies the literal and figurative descent of both Clare and Irene at the hands, or words, of Bellew's racist epithets. Bellew's intrusion upon a party in the African American community Clare tries to return to, initiates Clare's death and exposes the false illusion of the safety of any community from the threat of racism. The tragic ending subverts the conventional depictions of idealized communities thus challenging the traditional “passing-for-white” narratives.

This thesis examines the construction of the protagonists' identities in both novels. The first chapter explores the connection between Helga's identities as both a biracial person and as a woman. By establishing the stereotypes that historically either exploited or repressed African American women, the first chapter explores how *Quicksand* resists such representations despite the prevalence of these oppressive

stereotypes. Helga rejects both the exploitation and repression of her sexuality by refusing to conform to society's limiting modes of expression for African American women. Helga struggles to construct her own identity free of societal pressures to fit into certain stereotypes. Similarly, *Passing's* Clare tries to establish her biracial identity free of the limitations existing in a segregated society. The second chapter explores Clare's identity construction through Irene's identification with Clare, and how each woman negotiates her place in a society, which threatens to alienate them. This chapter uses different theories of identification to examine the relationship between Irene and Clare. Through the different lenses of Freud and Lacan, the second chapter argues that Irene's relationship with Clare dictates Irene's own identity construction. The second chapter concludes that both Irene and Clare's autonomies are denied by the racism that names them as the marginalized Other; by interpreting the novel's ending through Althusser and Fanon's different theories of naming and identifying, the chapter reveals the power of Bellew's racism and its destruction of Clare and Irene's identity.

## Race, Sexuality and Agency in *Quicksand*

Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, explores the contemporary modes of representing African American female identity through Helga's struggle to find her place in society. Helga struggles to express her sexuality without losing agency through exploitation, objectification or sexual repression. Through Helga's search for sexual autonomy the novel exposes the two dichotomous stereotypes of African American females that prevail throughout literature. *Quicksand* depicts the limitations both stereotypes hold and their ubiquity throughout the United States and Europe. The story conveys the pervasiveness of these stereotypes through the constant change of setting; each location Helga lives in threatens to conform her into a stereotype. First, the novel criticizes the reactionary stereotype that "treated sexuality with caution and reticence" in order to counterbalance the "social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women's libidinousness" (McDowell xii). Larsen's text reveals the limitations of this representation in its mocking portrait of Naxos, a rich Southern school where Helga teaches, that is the epitome of an African American community trying to assimilate to white culture in order to succeed. Helga recognizes and flees the assimilationist mandates of the school and its leaders' internalized racism. Helga then moves to Harlem, "which in Harlem Renaissance mythology is the site of sexual freedom and abandon" (McDowell xviii). Here the novel exposes the exploitation of African American culture as appropriated by dominant white culture. Helga fears sexual objectification as an African American woman and so she moves again. Helga's subsequent

departure to Denmark illustrates another form of exploitation as the Danes try to mold her into a sexualized object based on the stereotypes of the black female exotic figure. Helga rejects her new white society and returns to Harlem to regain her sexual agency within the black community. Yet Helga's autonomy is fleeting and ultimately surrendered. By creating limited options for Helga to express her sexuality, *Quicksand* depicts the restrictiveness of both stereotypes and their denial of African American female sexual autonomy.

*Quicksand* uses the historical stereotypes of African American women to comment upon the opposing movements within the Harlem Renaissance. These contemporary stereotypes of African American women which the novel contests were established and shaped by the earliest constructions of the African female identity in the United States. Critic Rennie Simson summarizes: "The construction of the sexual self of the Afro-American woman has its roots in the days of slavery. During those days the black woman was thought of, at best, as a worker and, at worst, as an object for sexual gratification and as a breeder for more slaves" (Simson 230). Enslaved women were robbed of their humanity and were stripped of their identity because they lacked autonomy. Angela Davis documents how female slaves were treated no different from male slaves when it came to work:

Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex [. . .] when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles (Davis 6).

The legacy of rape that “facilitated the ruthless economic exploitation of [female slaves]” completely deprived African American women agency in their sexuality (Davis 7). “Their enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodifying so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome” (Spillers 76). Critic Hortense Spillers argues that African American women were robbed of a legitimate sexuality as their agency was taken away. Larsen’s *Quicksand* connects this exploitation and dehumanization of black female sexuality with the exploitation and objectification of the contemporary African American female within Harlem Renaissance culture. Larsen’s text criticizes the stereotype of the “primitive” African American prevalent in contemporary literature.

Critic Baruch Kirschenbaum defines primitivism as “an attitude of mind working from a cultural state to an imagined pre-cultural state uncontaminated by the ills of civilization. It arises out of the suspicion [. . .] that civilization has brought with it a progressive deterioration of the true state of being” (Kirschenbaum 168). In the primitivist movement of the Harlem Renaissance the industrialized United States represents the civilization which stripped African Americans from their African identity through enslavement. Thus primitivism emphasizes the celebration of African roots as means of departure from dominant white civilization that threatens to eradicate it. Critic Michael Stoff defines primitivism as a “fundamental challenge to the effete civilization of white America” and refers to this movement as the cult of primitivism (Stoff 127). He explains: “The rising interest in jazz, the study of African art forms, and the examination of tribal cultures were all variations on the theme of the primitive. The Negro as the uncorrupted remnant of preindustrial man became the

central metaphor in this cult” (Stoff 127). Stoff cites Claude McKay’s 1928 novel, *Home to Harlem*, as a forerunner to the primitive movement in Harlem Renaissance literature; he describes the protagonist as an “instinctive primitive, deeply rooted in the exotic mystique of Africa” (Stoff 133). Though Stoff celebrates McKay’s novel, his praise reveals the problems Larsen’s novels recognize and try to counteract. Stoff describes *Home to Harlem* as “a vivid glimpse of the lower depths of black life in urban America [. . .] with its thematic emphasis on the black man as the unrestrained child of civilization” (Stoff 132). Stoff’s demeaning characterization of black men as unrestrained children offered as a positive element in McKay’s novel, illustrates the acceptance and expectation of such stereotypes. Stoff’s positive attitude reflects how many contemporary readers and critics of McKay’s, similarly praised the depiction of African Americans as childlike and unrestrained. The pervasiveness of such stereotypes demonstrates the challenge Larsen faces in creating characters not defined by these stereotypes. Moreover, Stoff’s reading of Ray, a foil to the protagonist, as a “the civilized black whose education has sensitized his mind but paralyzed his body” illustrates Larsen’s challenge of portraying a creditable African American intellect not devoid of sexuality (Stoff 133). Stoff dismisses Ray as a “social misfit” who is “robbed by his ‘white’ education of the ability to act freely and impulsively [and he] remains little more than a ‘slave of civilized tradition’” (133). In his reading, Stoff appropriates education and civilization with whiteness; endorsed by McKay’s characterization, Stoff views the uneducated black character as the hero because he resists the ‘cultivation’ of white society. By conflating education with whiteness, Stoff implicitly conflates uneducated and uncivilized behavior with blackness.



*Quicksand* contests such stereotypes by portraying Helga as intellectual. Yet the novel also shows the prevalence of this stereotype through Helga's internalization of it; Helga views her intelligence as separate and in conflict with her African American identity. For example, in a Harlem cabaret Helga views the African American patrons as "jungle creatures" and feels her whiteness keeps her apart from the "distorted childishness of it all" (59). This scene portrays the stereotypical equation of childishness with blackness to depict the internalization of such stereotypes.

*Quicksand* also includes the Harlem cabaret, a common trope in Harlem Renaissance literature, to depict the objectification and exploitation of women. Stoff's reading of the cabaret in *Home to Harlem* highlights the myths that Larsen's novel refutes. Stoff celebrates McKay's "barrage of erotic images" that imbue the Harlem cabaret, which is filled with "allusions to the unrepressed African culture" (Stoff 132-33). He offers the following passage as an example: "Brown girls rouged and painted like dark pansies. Brown flesh draped in colorful clothes. Brown lips full and pouted for sweet kissing. Brown breasts throbbing with love" (McKay qtd. Stoff 132). Stoff's reading of the passage fails to recognize the text's overt fetishization of the African American female. The bodies described are simply that-- body parts severed from people, from identities. The women are compared to flowers and their bodies are highly sexualized through objectification. McKay writes that their lips are 'for' kissing, as if that is their sole function; the women in the cabaret are being served up as objects, not subjects, of desire.

*Quicksand*'s seemingly similar cabaret scene allows Larsen's novel to criticize McKay's glorified portrait of Harlem. As Stoff notes, McKay's cabaret is

forbidden to whites and exists in an uncorrupted pocket of African American society (Stoff 133). Larsen's novel challenges the unreality of this setting and presents its cabaret scene within the contexts of the broader society. Helga, adjusting to her new life in Harlem, is an outsider and thus keenly aware of the dominant white society that exists outside the club and that threatens to intrude upon the cabaret scene. The scene plays out Helga's fear by personifying the rattling taxi cabs as the cabaret dancers, mirroring their movements. She describes the cabs as "rattling things which jerked, wiggled, and groaned and threatened every minute to collide [. . .] with inattentive pedestrians" (58). The threat of hitting 'inattentive pedestrians' symbolizes Helga's fear that the primitive cabaret will hit up against white society, otherwise inattentive to African Americans, and will be misinterpreted or appropriated by dominant culture. Helga's alienation once inside the cabaret conveys her isolation from this primitivist culture. The inside of the cabaret is imbued with violent, wild imagery emphasizing Helga's perspective as an outsider: "They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms" (59). The scene's use of nature imagery-- the leaves and the streaming rhythm-- combine with the wild display of dancing and music to present the motifs of primitivism Harlem symbolizes. The scene's violent characterization reveals the threat primitivism holds for Helga. She is "drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra" (59). This quote emphasizes the forceful effect the music has over Helga, who feels contempt for the "childishness of it all" and feels "singularly apart from it all" (59;

58). Yet Helga does not wholeheartedly condemn her experience but rather leaves feeling “a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, that she had enjoyed it” (59). These opposing feelings of wanting to enjoy the club scene and the shame she feels for doing so, characterizes Helga’s internal struggle between wanting to fit in and her inability to do so without giving up her individuality, her identity. Helga cannot fully celebrate the primitivist culture for fear that it will be misinterpreted by dominant culture and perpetuate the racism in her society. Critic Deborah Silverman argues that “for Helga, to lose herself [in the Harlem night club] is to risk the recognition of her own sexuality-- a risk because to acknowledge in this place that she is a part of the place would be for her to fit a mold to which she is unwilling to conform fully” (Silverman 609). However, Helga does not fear recognizing her own sexuality, instead the novel reveals the mold which Helga is unwilling to conform is one which fetishizes and objectifies female sexuality. Like McKay’s scene, Larsen’s scene depicts the fragmented dancing bodies; Helga’s outward criticism conveys the novel’s recognition and denouncement of this form of objectification. Helga resists the mold of the primitive stereotype and resolves to leave the country. “She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t she told herself a jungle creature” (59). Helga’s resists labelling herself as a “jungle creature” showing her rejection of the appropriated primitivism that Harlem symbolizes.

In order to distance herself from the limitations white racism inflicts on African American communities, Helga decides to leave the country and go to Copenhagen, the home of her aunt and uncle. The narrator describes Helga as she sails to Denmark, “reveling like a released bird in her returned feeling of happiness

and freedom, that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race” (64). Yet Helga’s identity in Copenhagen is completely defined by her race as the natives shape Helga’s identity into an exotic creature merely to be marveled at. Like the cabaret in Harlem, in Denmark Helga’s blackness is exploited and objectified. Helga’s desire to belong to herself and not to a race conveys her desire to stand out as an individual and not conform to the ideals or stereotypes of one group. However, what makes Helga stand out is not her individuality but the uniqueness of her skin color. At first her aunt’s reception relieves Helga; the aunt is not ashamed of Helga’s African American heritage, as Helga’s white American relatives are. However, her aunt’s desire for Helga to wear “bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things,” reveals her objectification of her niece. Thus, like the other Danes, the aunt tries to “sculpt her in [the] white image of blackness--the black female exotic” (Silverman 610). Clearly Helga’s aunt views her niece as an ‘other’; when Helga questions her aunt’s own subdued choice in clothing she replies, “Oh, I’m an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you’re young. And you’re a foreigner, and different” (68). Significantly, Helga’s aunt not only views Helga as a foreigner but also different, different from the white Danes because of her skin color. In her aunt’s eyes, and the eyes of the other Danes, Helga’s national identity marks her as a foreigner but it is her blackness that marks her as different. Helga’s identity is defined solely by her skin, and not by her inner qualities. The aunt’s act of dressing Helga in exotic clothes depicts the aunt’s objectification of her niece. Indeed, as Helga is paraded down the streets she feels “like a veritable savage” a “queer dark creature, strange to [the Danish] city” (69). Surprisingly, Helga grows accustomed to

her ornamentation and indeed perpetuates her objectification in her choice not to learn Danish. “Intentionally she kept to the slow, faltering Danish. It was she decided, more attractive than a nearer perfection” (74). This desire to sound more attractive than articulate furthers Helga’s objectification; not only does she tolerate the presentation of herself as the visual exotic she deprives herself her voice and thus an identity.

Nevertheless, once Helga connects her objectification with the exploitation and stereotyping of African Americans she becomes contemptuous of her new surroundings just as she was in Harlem. One night Helga’s suitor, Olsen, a white Danish painter, takes Helga to the theater. During the performance, Helga’s own exploitation becomes apparent when she sees two black performers; Helga describes the men as “American Negroes” who “danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease!” (82-83). Helga watches, silently outraged at the performance and its reception by the white Danish audience. “She was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget” (83). The something in her that Helga notices and wants to forget is her objectification she endures in Harlem, now perpetuated by the caricature of herself as the Danish perception of the exotic black figure. Helga’s identity has been merely a performance constructed by dominant culture (embodied by her aunt and later by Olsen). By seeing the stereotypes of African Americans on stage, Helga recognizes the exploited

and objectified primitivism that the Danes projected onto her, and their delight in the performance and in her exoticism is yet another form of racism.

Helga's recognition of her objectification and exploitation becomes more apparent when she sees Olsen's portrait of her. In the painting, Helga does not see "herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creatures with her features" (89). Essentially she sees the white perception of her race which reduces her to an object of sensual desire. Significantly the "collectors, artists, and critics had been unanimous in their praise" and the portrait is proudly displayed (89). Just as the theatergoers celebrate the racist performance, the painting's reception reflects a society which perceives and embraces blackness as solely an exotic aesthetic. Moreover, the painting symbolizes the society's view of Helga as merely that sensual object they see in Olsen's art. *Quicksand*'s portrayal of a receptive audience mirrors the praise McKay and other writers received for their equally demeaning works. Olsen defends his representation of Helga by claiming that his painting is "the true Helga Crane" (88). Olsen's insistence that his perception of Helga is more authentic than her own self, illustrates his deeply rooted racism that claims Helga to be merely a desirous object. This assertion reveals that Olsen projects his own desires for Helga as her true qualities and strips her of any agency she has in constructing her identity. This form of objectification mirrors what critic McDowell describes as the myth of "black women's libidinousness" which stems from slavery in which "the white slave master constructed an image of black female sexuality which shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions onto his female slaves" (McDowell xii). Olsen views his own sexual interest in Helga as something innate in Helga's being. His assertion to Helga

that “my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane” conveys his view that the objectified sexualized representation of Helga is Helga’s true self and not his own projections of his desire. Helga recognizes that it is Olsen’s racism that causes him to exploit her. Helga’s later refusal to marry him stems from her resistance to be sexually objectified by Olsen, who, for Helga, embodies white dominant culture. Thus by rejecting Olsen “on racial grounds, [Helga] is at the same time rejecting his construction of her sexuality” (Silverman 611). Helga explains to Olsen, “you see, Herr Olsen, I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I do not at all care to be owned” (87). Later she tells him, “I couldn’t marry a white man. I simply couldn’t. It isn’t just you [. . .] It’s deeper broader than that. It’s racial” (88). McDowell argues that “Helga uses race here as a mask for her sexual repressions. She implies, simultaneously, an awareness of her legacy of rape and concubinage at the hands of white men, a legacy which compels her to decline Olsen’s sexual proposition and his marriage proposal” (McDowell xix). Yet in this scene, Helga is not, as McDowell claims, repressing her sexuality but instead refusing to let her sexuality be commoditized or objectified. Helga recognizes that with Olsen, her only expression of her sexuality would be through his exploitation which would deny her any agency in her sexuality. Consequently, Helga resolves to flee this racism by leaving her all-white surroundings and return to Harlem.

Helga’s departure stems from her longing, “not for America, but for Negroes” (92). Helga’s return marks her temporary control over her sexuality; her friend Anne notices that, “she had grown more charming, more aware of her power” (95). Helga wears “courageous clothes” and possesses a “deliberate lure” (98). Yet Helga’s

control of her sexuality is fleeting; after her friend's fiancée, Dr. Anderson, kisses her "all [her] power seemed to ebb away" (104). The kiss is the first realization of Helga's desires and her thoughts are filled, "not so much of the man whose arms had held her as of the ecstasy which had flooded her" (105). However, when Dr. Anderson fails to acknowledge their kiss, Helga is "shamed by his silence" (106). The shaming of this desire reveals the second stereotype the novel contests: that of the bourgeois African American female whose sexuality is suppressed. *Quicksand* depicts the two stereotypes that limit Helga by offering her protagonist only two choices: Helga can either return to Copenhagen, where her sexuality would not be her own, or as she decides "[explore] to the end that unfamiliar path into which she had strayed" (106). When Dr. Anderson suggests a meeting, Helga anticipates "the coming consummation" yet "fear[s] for possible exposure [. . .] from society, Negro society" (107). Helga's fear derives from the recognition that her expression of sexuality positions her at odds with the second stereotype the novel contests, that which denies women agency in their sexuality.

The stereotype of the bourgeois African American female derives from the work of the Woman's Club Movement whose focus was to bring respectability to African American women. The initial Woman's Club Movement formed partly because of African American women's exclusion from the National Woman Suffrage Association (Davis 112; 128). African American women formed these clubs in the 1890s as "a response to the unchecked wave of lynchings and the indiscriminate sexual abuse of Black women" (Davis 128). As one leader of the club movement explains, "The club movement is only one of the many means for the social uplift of a



race [. . .] [It is] the struggle of an enlightened conscience against the whole brood of social miseries, born out of the stress and pain of a hated past [. . .] the club is the effort of the few competent in behalf of the many incompetent” (Williams qtd. Davis 133-34). The club women sought to ‘uplift’ their race by modeling themselves on the dominant white Christian “ideology of femininity” (Davis 12). Simson explains that “sexual ‘purity’ was considered the noblest virtue of the white woman of the South” (Simson 231). This ideology also placed women solely in the roles of wives and mothers. Davis explains the industrial age rendered the productive labor of women obsolete. Thus the word “‘woman’ became synonymous propaganda with ‘mother’ and ‘housewife’” (Davis 12). The call for chastity and sexual purity suppressed women’s agency in their sexuality limiting their expressions of sexuality within the roles of wife.

*Quicksand* criticizes the suppression of female sexuality and attacks the assimilationist attitude of the movement through its depiction of Naxos, the African American community where Helga teaches. The novel satirizes the African American leaders of the school through its portrayal of Miss MacGooden, the most obvious example of this internalized acceptance of stereotypes. For example, Miss MacGooden tells the teachers, “*please* at least try to act like ladies and not like savages from the backwoods” (12). The verb “act” implies a performance and construction of something that is not innate, and so by beseeching the women to merely act like ladies, Miss MacGooden’s plea reveals her desire to imitate white society’s notions of acceptable behavior, implying that her views of African Americans are indeed savages from the backwoods. *Quicksand* mocks the

overcompensating tactics this assimilated black society employs to separate itself from the stereotypes of the sexualized African American female. In one scene, Helga derisively grins at the memory of Miss MacGooden's reason for not marrying: "There were, so she had been given to understand, things in the matrimonial state that were of necessity entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to" (12). Helga's amusement reveals the novel's parody of this fear of sex and criticism on the suppression of African American female sexuality.

Additionally, *Quicksand* connects the suppression of African American female sexuality with assimilating to white values. Miss MacGooden's insistence that the teachers act like ladies parallels the Woman's Club Movement's appropriation of the white Christian woman's "ideology of femininity." The novel portrays this call for chastity as trying to fit into the ideals of white society. Helga acknowledges the assimilationist mandates of the school by recognizing the racism inherent in the white society's approval of the school. Helga shudders as she recalls "the statements made by that holy white man of God to the black folk sitting so respectfully before him," who refers to Naxos as "the finest school for Negroes" and concludes "that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them" (2-3). What white society expects, and demands, of the African American community is to conform to the white ideals and shed itself of its heritage, everything that marks it as different and thus threatening to the white community. Essentially the white preacher's solution to racism is to eliminate African American identity. Helga

recognizes the white preacher's endorsement for the school as his endorsement for eradicating African American culture. Helga's "hot anger and seething resentment" towards the white preacher "subside[s] in amazement" when he is greeted with applause from the African American audience. The warm reception his speech garners perplexes Helga who, by contrast, is outraged by its racism. The Naxos community accepts this appropriation of education by the white community and see the elimination of their own culture as the only acceptable way for African Americans to gain an education. The preacher's assertion that "Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them" and "knew enough to stay in their places" reveals the destructive notion of uplift which forces assimilation and keeps African Americans subservient to dominant white society (3). The audience's acceptance and celebration of this form of discrimination conveys the internalization of this racism. Helga attempts to escape this internalization by quitting her job and moving to Harlem.

*Quicksand's* portrayal of Harlem, however, draws parallels between the assimilationist community of Naxos with the elitist movement of 'racial uplift' in Harlem. By placing the story in Harlem, the novel connects the stereotypes of the suppressed bourgeois African American female with the second movement prevalent in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance: that of 'racial uplift.' This movement was in direct opposition to the primitivist movement. Figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois criticized the primitivist movement as playing into dominant white stereotypes of African American culture. Reviewing *Home to Harlem*, Du Bois writes: "McKay has set out to cater for that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk

back from enjoying” (Du Bois 785). Du Bois further criticizes McKay’s depiction of “drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint” that saturate his novel (Du Bois 785). Du Bois’ call for restraint in order to elevate African Americans from the poverty to ‘respectable’ society echoes the mandates of the earlier Woman’s Club Movement. Indeed, *Quicksand* depicts the suppression of female sexuality within this contemporary movement. In Harlem Helga meets her former fiancé from Naxos, James Vayle, who now embodies the ideals of the ‘uplift’ movement. He argues with Helga after her assertion that she does not want to have children: “Don’t you see that if we-- I mean people like us-- don’t have children, the others will still have them [. . .] very few Negroes of the better class have children and [. . .] we’re the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere” (103). James then proposes marriage to Helga solely in order to breed more “Negroes of the better class” (103). James’ argument conveys both the classism and the suppression of women within this movement. Helga’s desire not to have children is not considered; instead James sees the situation as Helga’s duty to become a wife and mother. James clearly does not love Helga but merely views her as an instrument of procreation implicitly denying Helga space to express her sexuality. In James’ marriage proposal, Helga’s sexuality is severed from her role as mother because her sexuality would only be for procreation and not expressive of love or desire. Thus, Helga would have no more agency in this marriage as she would have had in marrying Olsen. Just as the Woman’s Club Movement conflates female identity with wives and mothers, James too views Helga’s only productive role in society as a mother.

Helga's contemptuous disinterest in marriage reveals the limitations she sees in the institution: "As if anybody couldn't get married. Anybody. That is, if mere marriage is all one wants" (98). Helga's desire for more is her desire for autonomy that marriage would take away. Content in her rejection of Olsen and James, Helga for the first time possess control in her sexuality. After Helga rejects James' marriage proposal, she goes "tripping off with a handsome coffee-colored youth whom she had beckoned from across the room with a little smile" (104). Helga gains power and initiates flirtations on her own terms. However, this shift is fleeting; in the subsequent paragraph the text forces Helga into the arms of her former Naxos colleague: "[she] stepped out into the hall, and somehow, she never quite knew exactly just how, into the arms of Robert Anderson" (104). Helga, without intention, walks right into the arms of Dr. Anderson, marking her lost of autonomy. She is no longer in control but put into a place of submission. "He stooped and kissed her, a long kiss, holding her close. She fought against him with all her might. Then, strangely, all power seemed to ebb away" (104). Helga's initial struggle subsides into passivity as "a long-hidden, half understood desire welled up in her with the suddenness of a dream" (104). Helga then actively puts her arms around Dr. Anderson and equally takes part in their embrace. Helga later notes the difference between this encounter and her others: "She was used to kisses. But none had been like that of last night. She lived over those brief seconds, thinking not so much of the man whose arms had held her as much as the ecstasy which had flooded her" (105). The difference is not Dr. Anderson, but Helga's role in the kiss; she, for the first time, experiences agency in expressing her sexuality. Helga awaits her second meeting

with Dr. Anderson: “she had mentally prepared herself for the coming consummation; physically too, spending hours before the mirror” (107). However, at their second meeting Dr. Anderson simply apologizes for the kiss quickly dismissing it. Helga, despite her embarrassment and anger, “felt the need to answer carefully. No, she replied [ . . . ] it had meant nothing to her. She had been kissed before” (107). For Helga, Dr. Anderson’s dismissal of the kiss renders it just as her other kisses—void of love or desire and therefore meaningless. Dr. Anderson’s rejection culminates into Helga’s realization of her sexual frustration she experiences throughout the novel:

Helga Crane, stretched out on the bed, felt herself so broken physically, mentally, that she had given up thinking [ . . . ] For days, for weeks, voluptuous visions had haunted her. Desire had burned in her flesh with uncontrollable violence. The wish to give herself had been so intense the Dr. Anderson’s surprising, trivial apology loomed as a direct refusal of the offering (109).

This passage characterizes Helga’s passions with intense violence; these passions haunt her and burn her flesh, foreshadowing her ultimate doomed fate-- a direct result of this desire. Indeed, Helga’s loss of agency foreshadows her ultimate relinquishment of autonomy as a direct result of her reclaiming her sexual agency.

Dr. Anderson’s rejection prompts Helga into a symbolic and literal descent. Helga’s denied desires propel her into the streets to flee the frightening and maddening images that wrack her mind. Mirroring the violent imagery that invade Helga’s hotel room, this scene depicts the outside nature imagery in increasingly aggressive personifications: “rain and wind whipped cruelly about her [ . . . ] a sudden more ruthless gust of wind ripped the small hat from her head. In the next minute the

black clouds opened wider and spilled their water with unusually fury” (110). This violent imagery foreshadows Helga’s ultimate punishment for her expressed sexuality and literally casts her into the gutter. Seeking shelter in a church, Helga is mistaken for a prostitute. This scene parodies the role of the church by satirizing Helga’s religious “salvation.” The scene conveys the text’s criticism of the hypocrisy of the church by mockingly turning the site of the church into a “foul, vile, and terrible” place reminiscent more of a “weird orgy” peopled with wild, carnal attendees (113). Upon seeing Helga, lost and soaking wet from the rain, the members of the congregation cry out: “A scarlet ’oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los’ Jezebel!” and proceed to drag her into the church (112). The vernacular of the churchgoers condescendingly conveys the distinction between the less educated congregation and Helga, who consistently uses well-educated, proper English. Inside the church, Helga is overwhelmed and horrified by the moaning masses listening to the Reverend, who tells them to “remembah de words of our Mastah” (112). The passage is imbued with sexual imagery, describing the congregation convulsing towards Helga: “Little by little the performance took on an almost Bacchic vehemence. Behind her, before her, beside her, frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered to the praying of the preacher” (113). Helga watches in horrified amazement at the service “with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions, all in wild appeal for a single soul. Her soul” (113). Helga gives in to the congregation and “rechannels her frustrated sexual energy into the ‘weird orgy’ of a wild religious conversion” (Monda 34). Larsen’s intense imagery foreshadows Helga’s sexual consummation and the brutal inescapability of the consequences that follow:

And in that moment she was lost-- or saved. The yelling figures about her pressed forward, closing her in on all sides. Maddened, she grasped at the railing, and with no previous intention began to yell like one insane, drowning every other clamour, while torrents of tears streamed down her face. She was unconscious of the words she uttered, or their meaning [. . .] those who succeeded in getting near to her leaned forward [. . .] dropping hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bare arms and neck (113-14).

Helga's religious conversion, thinly veiled as sexual consummation, also mirrors the symbolic decent she will experience. Larsen's language abruptly slows to a quite steady rhythm characterizing the aftermath of Helga's violent conversion: "A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand, and to become very easy [. . .] Gradually the room grew quiet and almost solemn, and to the kneeling girl time seemed to sink back into the mysterious grandeur and holiness of far-off simpler centuries" (114). The last chapters reveal the cruel irony of Helga's hopes for an easy, simpler life.

Helga's religious experience prompts her to seduce and then to marry the Reverend of the church out of "the confusion of seductive repentance" (118). By revealing the rashness and foolishness of Helga's marriage, the novel critiques Helga's need to legitimize her sexual encounter with Reverend Green.

Helga Crane was married to the grandiloquent Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, that rattish yellow man, who had so kindly, so unctuously, proffered his escort to her hotel on the memorable night of her conversion. With him she



willingly, even eagerly, left the sins and temptations of New York behind her (118).

The narrator's contempt and sarcasm for the Reverend undercuts Helga's decision to marry him. Helga marries the Reverend not out of love but out of guilt for her sexual experience. Thus, Helga finally succumbs to marriage, which void of love, deprives her of her agency. Helga tries to find meaning in her life outside her status as the preacher's wife but in the end yields to the societal pressures to bear children and sacrifice her autonomy. Helga's repression as a wife is "punctuated only by the intense pain of repeated and dangerous childbirth" (Monda 39). The last setting of the novel depicts Helga's denial of sexual agency and exploitation as a child bearer. "Larsen constructs the ending of the novel to make clear the victimization of Helga" who "becomes a victim of a system" in which "procreation takes precedence over a woman's pleasure" (Silverman 612). Larsen decision not rescue Helga from the stereotypes that deny her autonomy does not, however, indicate the novel's endorsement of Helga's fate. Rather, by forcing Helga into a stereotype, *Quicksand* characterizes more poignantly the pervasiveness and inescapability of these stereotypes that strip away agency and place African American women in fates equal to death.

## Identification and Naming in *Passing*

Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, centers on the reunion of two childhood friends, Irene and Clare, whose adult lives have followed very distinct paths. Irene lives an upper-middle class lifestyle and strives for stability and security. Clare, on the other hand, has spent her life trying to obtain the luxuries Irene and their other wealthier friends have. During their first encounter Clare confesses to Irene: "You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others" (159). Clare's longing for these things lead her to "pass," to live her life as a white woman. This revelation establishes the key distinction Irene makes between herself and Clare. Whereas Irene strives for a safe life and avoids conflict, she sees Clare as living dangerously, which both intrigues and frightens Irene. Upon first learning about Clare's lifestyle, Irene "wished to find out more about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly" (157). Irene is fascinated with this reality of passing; yet, "she was unable to think of a single question that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious, if not actually impertinent" (157). Irene's propriety prevents her from asking her friend about this lifestyle which seems foreign and dangerous to Irene. Ironically, it is only while Irene herself is passing that she runs into Clare; their meeting takes places at a "white-only" restaurant. Irene's feigned unfamiliarity with the concept of passing, in the passage quoted above, is an example of her self-deception and her desire to view Clare's lifestyle as utterly

alien to her own. Later, Irene wrongly predicts that the two will never meet again, concluding that: “Since childhood their lives had never really touched. Actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness” (192).

Nevertheless, Irene is drawn to Clare, and her inability to sever her identification with Clare, keeps Clare in her life. Irene admits to herself that to rid herself of Clare, “she had only to turn away her eyes, to refuse [Clare’s] recognition” (178). Nevertheless, it is Irene’s continuing recognition of Clare as a part of herself that perpetuates their relationship. In a conversation with her husband, Brian, Irene discusses Clare and then without provocation states: “It’s funny about ‘passing.’ We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it” (185-86). Because these comments directly follow Irene’s comments on Clare, this passage can be read as Irene’s attitude toward Clare. Irene seemingly disapproves of Clare, yet Clare’s inhibitions equally excite Irene and cause her to protect Clare.

Irene’s inability to distance herself from Clare can be interpreted through Freud’s theory of mourning and melancholia. Freud defines melancholia as the unhealthy absorption of a lost object into the ego; contrastingly, mourning is the healthy reconciliation of a lost object through the person forgetting about the lost object. For Irene, Clare represents the excitement, the “breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly,” that Irene has given up in order to obtain a secure and familiar lifestyle (157). Clare represents what Irene has never had—the conviction to successfully break away from the norm. Clare’s lifestyle is a substitute for the

lifestyle Irene never lived. Thus Clare can be read in Freudian terms as Irene's loss object. Freud states that the "[melancholic] ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself" (Freud 250). Indeed, Irene figuratively absorbs Clare into her identity by self-identifying with Clare. The most obvious occurrence of Irene's self-identification with Clare takes place in front of Irene's dressing room mirror. Sitting in front of the mirror, Irene does not notice Clare behind her and regards Clare's reflection in the mirror as an image of her (Irene's) self.

Irene first begins to blur the boundary between her and Clare's identity at her first visit to Clare's house. During a small tea party Clare's husband, Bellew, arrives and calls his wife "Nig," a nickname he uses because of his wife's darker skin. To him the name is a joke for he believes his wife is white. Irene is outraged by this unchallenged display of racism and more significantly interprets the nickname as a reference to herself marking the first time she mistakes Clare for herself. Indeed, Bellew's racism ties the two women together as it refers to their shared race. Irene recognizes this unavoidable bond while later reflecting on this instance:

Why, in the face of Bellew's ignorant hate and aversion, had she concealed her own origin? Why had she allowed him to make his assertions and express his misconceptions undisputed? Why, simply because of Clare Kendry, who had exposed her to such torment, had she failed to take up the defence of the race to which she belonged? (182).

Irene concludes that she did not defend her race because she was protecting Clare:

She couldn't betray Clare, couldn't even run the risk of appearing to defend the people that were being maligned, for fear that the defence might in some

infinitesimal degree lead the way to final discovery of her secret. She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to sever (182).

Irene's loyalty to Clare costs her own self respect, for instead of challenging Bellew's racism Irene internalizes it.

Critic Anne Anlin Cheng uses Freud's theory of melancholia to discuss race and racism in the United States. Cheng asserts that melancholia "presents a particularly apt paradigm for elucidating the activity and components of racialization" (Cheng 10). Cheng argues that racial identification is a melancholic act "by which the racial other is at once rejected and retained" (Cheng ix). Bellew's racial slur reveals his simultaneous rejection and acknowledgement of African Americans, though at that moment he does not know he is referring to Irene and Clare. Bellew's statement that there are "No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" shows his desire for eradication of African Americans; this statement emphasizes the irony of the situation for there is an African American in his family, his wife (171). Bellew's adamant stance against African Americans represents the larger racist society's "melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection" (Cheng 10). Cheng argues that through white society's enforcement of segregation, race becomes "an issue of *place* (the literalization of Freudian melancholic suspension) rather than full relinquishment" (Cheng 12). For example, locations that are deemed "white-only" could not exist without the identification (and exclusion) of African Americans.

Applying Cheng's interpretation of Freud's theory to *Passing* leads to the conclusion that melancholia is inescapable in an oppressive society. Like the

melancholic person who “expects to be cast out and punished,” Irene, too, constantly fears exclusion from dominant society (Freud 246). Moreover, the text legitimizes Irene’s fears for she and Clare are ultimately cast out from society. In the final chapter Irene and Clare go up to a party hosted by their friends, the Freelands. Critic Lori Harrison-Kahan suggests that the Freelands’ Harlem penthouse symbolizes freedom, noting that “Clare had expressed her desire to ‘come up’ to Harlem to live, where she’d be ‘able to do as I please, when I please.’ This wish contrasts with her earlier desire for the freedoms afforded by whites” (Harrison-Kahan 134). Yet this ‘free land’ is invaded by Clare’s husband, Bellew, who upon discovering his wife’s racial identity barges in and denounces her. Watching this spectacle, Irene rushes to Clare for, “she couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (239). Clare then falls out the window, though how she falls— whether pushed, by her own accord, or by accident-- is omitted from the text: “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (239). The ambiguity of Clare’s fall significantly focuses the reader’s attention to what the text does reveal, specifically that Bellew’s entrance catalyzes the events and also Irene’s desire to somehow interfere.

Irene’s agency in Clare’s fall remains ambiguous; nevertheless, the text foreshadows Irene’s role as a participant in Clare’s destruction throughout the novel. Indeed, Irene and Clare’s positions by the window in the final scene are mirrored in an earlier passage. On one of Clare’s visits to New York Irene tries to discourage Clare from attending the Negro Welfare League dance. As the argument intensifies

the action moves towards Irene's window: "[Irene] had risen again as she spoke and was standing at the window lifting and spreading the small yellow chrysanthemums in the grey stone jar on the still. Her hands shook slightly, for she was in near rage of impatience and exasperation" (199-200). Clare vehemently declares her hatred for her husband whom Irene surprisingly defends. She tells Clare, "I can't see that you've a right to put all the blame on him. You've got to admit that there's his side to the thing [. . .] As we've said before, everything must be paid for" (200). Irene's insistence that "everything must be paid for" corresponds with her later admission that "She couldn't have her free" (239). Irene does not want Clare to get away with passing or to be free of her racist husband— a representation of the larger racist society; instead Irene wants Clare to be punished, to pay for her transgressions. In Freudian terms, Irene's desire to punish and perhaps kill Clare first appears to be the mournful act of re-killing the lost object as reconciling the loss. However, Irene's subsequent fainting and the novel's ending parallel Clare's death thereby suggesting Irene's own symbolic death. By tracking Irene's own inauthenticity, her self-denial and rationalization of her actions, and through her desires for a secure and stable life, Irene's equally ambiguous fate can be read as her own punishment. Ultimately, the novel offers no sustained depiction of security or luxury— the two life goals of its protagonists.

Irene aspires to live in "the land of rising towers"-- a metaphor the novel employs to show the upward mobility of dominant culture and the oppression of minorities. In an early scene Irene literally ascends from the streets to a segregated hotel rooftop. Irene recalls that day as "a brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun

pouring down rays that were like molten rain” (146). The scenery is imbued with fire metaphors suggesting that the whole setting is aglow in flames: “The automobiles parked at the kerbs were a dancing blaze, and the glass of the shop--windows threw out a blinding radiance” (146). The wind blows on Irene like a “breath of flame” threatening and intimidating her (146). Irene sees a “man toppled” on the pavement, “an inert crumpled heap on the scorching cement” (146). Irene’s language objectifies the man as a “crumpled heap”; an obstacle in her way. Indeed the gathering crowd and oppressive heat weigh down on Irene, and she flees the scene after “a quick perception of the need for immediate safety” (147). This scene conveys Irene’s self-centeredness; as she casually wonders if this man is dead or not, she is only concerned with her own safety. Irene whisks herself away in a taxi cab making “small attempts to repair the damage that the heat and crowds had done to her appearance” (147). The taxi driver, mistaking Irene for a white person, takes her to the Drayton hotel. Ascending the elevator of this segregated hotel restaurant, Irene feels as if she is “being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below” (147). Irene views this wealthy white-only restaurant as part of a distinct world, one in which she tries to fit by distancing herself from those outside. On the rooftop, Irene “had been gazing down for some time at the specks of cars and people creeping about in the streets, and thinking how silly they looked” (148). One deduces Irene’s elitism as she condescendingly regards the people in the streets like insects, literally looking down upon them from the exclusive rooftop restaurant.



In her daily life, Irene immerses herself in her upper-middle class lifestyle while ignoring the problems of others, including her family's. For Irene, "security was the most important and desired thing in life" (235). Irene clings to her safe upper middle-class lifestyle at the expense of her husband's dreams to go to Brazil, his ideal of freedom devoid of the racism in the United States. She convinces herself that she must "keep Brian by her side, and in New York. For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged in this land of rising towers" (235). The motif of rising towers symbolizes the affluence granted to the rising white middle class and to those who can pass for white. Brian's desire to move away would mean giving up his lucrative practice as a doctor and thus abandoning their comfortable lifestyle which Irene equates with security. Brian's dreams threaten his wife's sense stability and permanence at home. Irene wonders if her husband's desires will ever cease haunting her thoughts: "Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have remain as it was?" (187). Yet Irene denies that her own need for security motivates and even dictates her decision to remain: "Hadn't his success proved that she'd been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York? Couldn't he see, even now, that it *had* been best? Not for her, oh no, not for her-- she had never really considered herself-- but for him and the boys" (186). The narration's cutting sarcasm reveals Irene's rationalization of her thoughts. Irene's self-denial that she is motivated by self interest is mocked by the phrase "Not for her, oh no" (186). This feigned shock to the suggestion that Irene might in fact be acting for herself reveals

that it is indeed of herself whom Irene is thinking about. The suggestion that Irene “had never really considered herself” contradicts with the earlier admissions that Irene is preoccupied with her own security. Irene’s insistence that her decision “*had* been best” suggests her own justification and need to rationalize her refusal to leave New York. This passage signifies Irene’s obliviousness to her own motives, and ironically depicts Irene’s inner thoughts as those of a self-sacrificing mother and wife who only thinks of her family and not herself. Ultimately this passage undercuts Irene’s thoughts and actions to illustrate her hypocrisy and self-interest.

Irene’s commitment to the upper class lifestyle drives her class prejudice. Irene’s elitism is conveyed through her attitude toward Clare: “Well, Clare can just count me out. I’ve no intention of being the link between her and her poorer darker brethren” (185). In the same conversation Irene complains about the “terrible lot of work” her involvement in charity requires; her husband concurs stating: “Uplifting the brother is no easy job [. . .] Lord! how I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways” (186). This passage exposes Irene and her husband as members of the resentful upper class helping out the lower classes merely out of obligation. This type of classism echoes the elitism of the racial uplift movement that *Quicksand* criticizes. Moreover, Irene’s brand of elitism is conflated with her disregard to the “poorer darker brethren.” Irene equates the lower classes with darker skin revealing her own form of racism. This prejudice is further revealed during a conversation in which Irene tells Brian of her indignation at Bellow’s use of the word “nigger.” Irene’s outrage is followed by a demeaning description of their maid: “Zulena, a small

mahogany-colored creature, brought in the grapefruit” (184). The narration, though not first person, is so closely tied to Irene’s thoughts that the offhandedness of this characterization illustrates Irene’s indifference towards her maid—indicative of her dismissiveness towards the working class. More significantly, Irene connects Zulena’s darker skin with the dehumanizing label “creature.” As critic Nell Sullivan observes, “The unselfconscious use of dehumanizing language to describe dark-skinned [. . .] African Americans indicates the triumph of racist signification in Irene’s own thinking, a signification that will eventually demand her obliteration” (Sullivan 376). Irene’s prejudice stems from her elitism, yet she expresses her discrimination only against African Americans. Importantly, “creature” is the same word Irene uses to describe Clare after Bellew makes his overtly racist remarks: “[Irene] turned an oblique look on Clare and encountered her peculiar eyes fixed on her with an expression so indignity and deep and unfathomable that she had for a short moment the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart” (172). Significantly, this contemplation occurs when Irene associates Clare with having darker skin—as Bellew’s nickname emphasizes; Irene condescendingly dismisses her friend as “some creature utterly strange and apart” (172). Yet Bellew’s nickname also allows Irene to identify with Clare as it links both women by its racist connotation.

Bellew’s racist nickname for Clare offends Irene personally, for Irene applies the epithet to herself. As Harrison-Kahan notes, “Irene’s husband, Brian, must remind her that Bellew didn’t ‘call you a nigger. There’s a difference you know’.

But for Irene, there is no difference; in responding to Bellew’s hailing [. . .] Irene not

only becomes a racial subject, but her subjectivity merges with Clare” (Harrison-Kahan 110). Bellew’s hailing can be understood through Althusser’s theory of ideology which recruits and transforms all individuals into subjects through interpellation. Althusser uses an example of a policeman hailing a passerby, “the hailed individual will turn around [. . .] Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him” (Althusser 699). The hailed individual becomes the subject of the policeman’s hailing– the passerby is now identified and defined by the policeman. Irene, who interprets Bellew’s nickname as really addressing her, becomes the subject of Bellew’s naming. Bellew’s nickname, indeed, holds great significance in the novel; it represents the power of naming African Americans through a racialized signifier, one which defines them as the Other who is expelled from white society. The nickname defines Clare and Irene arbitrarily and by racist connotations. As Sullivan notes, “Bellew’s naming makes present the identity that Clare strives to hide” (Sullivan 375). The act of naming thus shapes the identity of the named rendering the subject a passive participant in his/her own identity construction. According to Sullivan, this loss of agency becomes the central focus of the novel. She argues that even “*Passing*’s title [. . .] hints at the subject’s disappearance in the narrative,” or in Lacanian terms “the disappearance of the subject behind the signifier” (Sullivan 373). Bellew’s label reduces Clare to a derogatory racial identity, one which Irene fears she will be reduced to at the Drayton hotel: “It wasn’t that [Irene] was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her” (150). Neither

Irene nor Clare is ashamed of her African American identity; it is the threatening power of exclusion and destruction that Bellew's nickname holds in its racism that both women try to escape. Frantz Fanon's theory of naming takes Althusser's model of naming and puts it into a racial context. Fanon uses the example of a white child calling out "Look a Negro." This hailing identifies and transforms the named into a racialized object (Fanon 111). As Harrison-Kahan explains, "Fanon notes the power of interpellation to constitute and deform the black body through racialized naming" (Harrison-Kahan 109). It is thus through this racism that Irene identifies herself with Clare and thus tries to rid herself of Clare.

The opposing characterizations of Irene and Clare at once act to polarize the two characters; nevertheless, their opposites intuitively connect the two women both in their lives and in the text. By characterizing Irene by her thoughts and Clare by her appearance, *Passing* presents its two protagonists as complementary figures; incomplete on their own, each one completing the other. Both women long for something the other has, or rather something each assumes the other has. Clare longs for Irene's connection with the African American community; Irene longs for the luxury she perceives Clare to have. As Sullivan explains, Irene links Clare to blackness, and at the same time "Irene mediates her desire for whiteness through Clare" who becomes "Irene's vicarious connection to the white world" (Sullivan 375). In a way Clare and Irene complete each other; both women possess the part of the other's life that has been forsaken for either security or luxury.

Irene's sense of incompleteness stems from her need for and lack of security. Her desire to stay in New York, within the society she most associates with security,

causes her greatest anxieties. Her fear of rejection for being African American, both by the hotel restaurant and by white society in general, causes her feelings of instability. Sullivan argues, “[Irene’s] sense of permanence, her conception of herself as a stable, integrated *I*, is always in jeopardy, plagued as she is by a tense apprehension of doom [. . .] Because Irene experiences a problematic *I*, she seeks an idealized image to represent herself” (Sullivan 377). Irene’s search for an idealized image can be interpreted through Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, which emphasizes an individual’s identification with an outside image. Irene’s need for the idealized self is satiated by the appearance of Clare. Indeed Clare, more confident in her ability to pass for white, possesses the physical attributes that Irene admires. Irene’s attraction to Clare and her simultaneous identification with her is evident during Clare’s first visit to Irene’s house. Before Clare arrives, Irene sits at her mirror applying makeup and combing her hair; Clare’s entrance first goes unnoticed: “For Clare had come softly into the room without knocking, and before Irene could greet her, had dropped a kiss on her dark curls. Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” (193-194). The novel’s phrasing is purposefully ambiguous, for “the woman” Irene sees in the mirror could be either Clare or herself. The text’s ambiguity characterizes Irene’s inability to distinguish herself from Clare. Irene’s possible misrecognition of Clare as herself follows Lacan’s theory of identification. “Lacan further suggests [that] the assumption of the idealized image always involves *meconnaissance*, or misrecognition, because the image is *not* the self” (Sullivan 378). Thus Clare symbolizes Irene’s mirror opposite and also a reflection of Irene’s self. Physically,

both women share similar features; both are light skinned and thus able to pass, yet Clare embraces the risks she takes that enable her to pass back and forth between her white and black identities. This fluidity that Clare possesses stands in stark contrast to the rigidity with which Irene structures her life.

Clare longs for the part of Irene's life which she herself has given up: permanency in the African American community that she assumes Irene has. At one point Clare confesses that "in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of" (145). Clare contrasts the paleness of her life as a white woman with the vibrancy she associates with African American culture. Significantly, it is when Clare enacts her African American identity that she wears striking, elaborate dresses. At a Harlem dance Clare wears a "stately gown of shining black taffeta," despite Irene's advice "to wear something ordinary and inconspicuous" (203). In contrast, when Clare passes for white she wears duller, more practical clothes, "just right for the weather" (148). Clare's association with Irene permits her entrance into the Harlem social scene allowing her to wear showy clothes that make her stand out, things she cannot do while passing for fear of drawing attention to herself. Thus by depicting the incompleteness of both characters' lives the text represents the fractured nature of passing and identity performance. Irene identifies with Clare's feelings of being trapped, "in the look she gave Irene, there was something groping, and hopeless, and yet so absolutely determined that it was like an image of her futile searching and the firm resolution in Irene's own soul" (200). Irene's intense identification with Clare, demonstrated by Irene literally seeing Clare while looking at herself in the mirror,

causes Irene to project Clare's fears and longings onto herself. For Irene cannot "separate [. . .] herself from Clare" and thus Clare's risk taking threatens Irene's own security (227). Irene's inability to dissuade Clare from attending the Negro Welfare League dance in Harlem coincides with her loss of control within her marriage as her decision to stay in New York increasingly alienates Brian. Irene blames her loss of control solely on Clare, as she suspects an affair between her and Brian. Clare threatens Irene because Clare "forces Irene to look at herself and the constructedness of her marriage, her sexuality, and her racial position" (Michie 154). In identifying with Clare, Irene also sees how the two women are different. In a rare instance of self-awareness Irene confesses that "she had never truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour she thought not" (235). This revelation further conveys that for Irene, her marriage is based on economic security. Harrison-Kahan argues that "in identifying with Clare, Irene eventually must come to acknowledge her own performances through Clare" (Harrison-Kahan 134). Irene recognizes her relationship with Brian as insufficient, yet instead of addressing the fact that she cannot express her love, Irene blames Clare who easily shows her affection. Sullivan argues that Irene's unfounded suspicion of an affair "marks a loss of control, the beginning of a mental deterioration that plagues Irene throughout the novel" (Sullivan 376). Consequently, for Irene to regain her sense of security and stability Clare must vanish.

Clare's embracement of her sexuality poses a threat to Irene, whose reserved nature helps her maintain her upper class values. Clare's visual aspect is essential to



her identity because it is through her appearance that she constructs her identity. Clare uses her light skin and blond hair to pass for white and to hide her biracial background from her white husband. She uses her ability to pass to gain the things denied to her as a biracial woman. Clare blames her white aunts' harsh treatment of her for her decision to assume a white identity. She explains: "They made me what I am today. For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things [. . .] You had all the things I wanted and never had" (159). Ironically, for Clare "to be a person" she must deny her biracial heritage and assume a "purely" white identity. As Sullivan explains, her "aunt's definition of blackness attempts to rob Clare of her humanity, so she must shed that black identity to be human" (Sullivan 375).

Clare's identity depends on how she is perceived by others and she manipulates those perceptions to construct her identity. The textual emphasis on Clare's physical appearance over her inner thoughts, which are completely absent from the text, parallels the reaction of other characters to Clare, for they too can only know her through her own construction and their perceptions without knowing her thoughts. Harrison-Kahan argues that Clare merely "appears to embody the feminine and exotic stereotypes" but that "[t]he most feminine aspects of Clare are her scent and her outfit" (Harrison-Kahan 125-26). In other words, the things that mark Clare as feminine are things she puts on, perfume and clothes, indicating that she actively chooses her appearance; there is nothing innate in Clare that is overtly feminine. "Clare's performance of hyper-femininity may mask her subversive act of passing"

and “each aspect of her identity becomes an exaggerated performance” (Harrison-Kahan 126). Harrison-Kahan reads Clare’s identity as wholly constructed, arguing that “[t]he text suggests that Clare acts out both her whiteness and her blackness by pointing to the flamboyant nature of her performances” (Harrison-Kahan 127).

Clare’s identity is defined by performance--the way she appears, how she dresses and the make-up and perfume she puts on. Figuratively, Clare is often substituted by objects, by decorative ornaments symbolizing Clare’s aesthetics and lack of inner thoughts within the text. Indeed, Irene views Clare as an almost unchanging work of art: “Clare’s ivory face was what it always was, beautiful and caressing. Or maybe today a little masked. Unrevealing. Unaltered and undisturbed by any emotion within or without” (220). The adjective “ivory” signifies Clare’s whiteness but also carries the connotation of ornamental, a material once living but used solely for decorative purposes. The metaphor of Clare’s face as a mask reveals that there is in fact something beneath the surface, yet it is unknowable to Irene—and the reader. Irene’s inability to interpret Clare, to see behind the mask, hinders her identification with Clare and causes resentment and frustration.

In the opening scenes of the novel, Irene receives a letter from Clare; the letter recalls their tea with Bellew when he used the racist nickname. The indignation and shame Irene felt at the tea party reawakens within her at the sight of Clare’s letter and she conflates her disgust for Bellew, and for Clare whom she blames for their encounter, with the presence of Clare’s letter. Irene’s conflicting feelings for her friend are expressed by Irene’s reaction to the letter, which can be read as a substitution for Clare. Indeed, Irene’s exaggerated and disapproving description of

Clare's letter parallels her hyperbolic and slightly condescending characterization of Clare. Her description of Clare's handwriting as "illegible scrawl out of place and alien," and "mysterious and slightly furtive" that is "in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting" and written on "foreign paper of extraordinary size" all echo Irene's descriptions of Clare as "exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting" (143; 203). Irene's simultaneous intrigue and distaste for Clare's letter can be read as her relationship to Clare herself. "Like her illegible handwriting, Clare is difficult to read" (Harrison-Kahan 114). Irene must intuit Clare's words from her illegible handwriting and the mysterious and foreign nature of the letter makes the complete content unknowable to Irene. Likewise, Irene interprets and internalizes Clare's behavior and cannot understand her friend's true motivations. In this way the reader depends on Irene's interpretation of Clare; Clare's inner thoughts are kept from the reader, and her voice-- in this instance her letters-- are mediated by Irene's interpretations.

Finally, enraged at Clare's audacity, Irene tears the letter into pieces, thus destroying the object that reminds Irene of Clare as an act of ridding herself from Clare. Irene's destruction of the letter foreshadows her ambiguous role in Clare's death. The novel's imagery in the first passage furthers the connection between Clare and her letter: "[Irene] tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares that fluttered down and made a small heap in her black *crepe de Chine* lap" (178). The phrase "tiny ragged squares" echoes Irene's description of the ragged sofa Irene associates with Clare as a child. Irene remembers, "a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa" (143). The adjective "tiny," describing the letter, emphasizes the insignificance

that Irene assigns both the letter and her memory of Clare as a small pale child. The juxtaposition of these tiny ragged pieces falling on Irene's expensive black dress further emphasizes the class distinction between her and Clare and the blackness of Irene's dress emphasizes Clare's contrasting whiteness. In fact, Irene's subsequent disposal of the torn letter anticipates Clare's fall out of the window to the ground: "The destruction completed, she gathered them up [ . . . ] [and] dropped them over railing and watched them scatter, on tracks, on cinders, on forlorn grass, in rills of dirty water" (178). The scattering of the letter over the ground below foreshadows Clare's mutilated body laid out on the street.

In a later scene, the text suggests that Irene's anger towards Clare is acted upon another object substitute. During one of Irene's parties, Irene breaks a teacup foreshadowing Clare's death and suggesting Irene's agency in the fall. In the final chapter, Irene imagines Clare wrecking her marriage and destroying Irene's stability and sense of security. Irene experiences a debilitating sense of worthlessness at the thought of losing her husband: "A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn't count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse an obstacle. Rage boiled up in her. There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup" (221). Irene's insecurity and jealousy towards Clare causes her such intense outrage that Irene loses control and her teacup falls. Significantly, the textual omission of the cup falling parallels the absent narrative describing Clare's fall from the window. Instead the narrative in both passages moves from rage--Irene's and Bellow's--to the resulting destruction--the teacup and Clare's corpse, respectively. Again, Irene's actions can be read

through Freud's theory of melancholia; he writes: "The melancholic displays [. . .] an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard" and the ego suffers as the object loss takes over the identity (Freud 246). Irene wants to rid herself of Clare in order to maintain her sense of security and stability that Clare's lifestyle threatens. Clare's presence in Irene's life makes Irene doubt her own identity and lifestyle. Cheng explains, "the melancholic subject experiences resentment and denigration for the lost object with which he or she is identifying, the melancholic ends up administering to his or her own self-denigration" (Cheng 8-9). Irene's resentment of Clare leads to Irene's own feelings of inadequacy which leads her to rage and the possible thought of destroying Clare—the text's ambiguity allows for the possibility that Irene purposely destroys the cup as an act of destroying Clare. In fact, the teacup's shattered "white fragments" parallel Clare's mutilated body (221). If the teacup symbolizes Clare, then Irene's reason for destroying the former apply to her possible involvement with Clare's fall. Irene explains, "I've never figured out a way of getting rid of it until about five minutes ago. I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it forever" (222). Irene's intense dislike for the cup reads as a likely projection of Irene's resentment towards Clare. Sullivan argues that, "[f]ragmented things become metonymies for Clare, and since Clare is a version of Irene, they represent Irene herself, even when she is consciously performing the fragmentation," for instance Irene's deliberate act of tearing the letter (Sullivan 380). Sullivan further argues that: "As Lacan demonstrates in 'The Mirror Stage,' corporal integrity is fundamental to subjectivity, so we could conclude that corporal disintegration is a prelude to aphanisis, the subject's disappearance" (Sullivan 380).

Following this reading, the destruction of the teacup foreshadows the loss of subjectivity for both Clare and Irene.

Directly after Irene drops her teacup, she converses with Clare. “More tea, Clare? . . . I haven’t had a minute with you. . . . Yes, it is a nice party. . . . You’ll stay to dinner, I hope. . . . Oh, too bad!” (222). Significantly, Clare’s speech is replaced ellipses; Clare’s voice is already vanished from the narrative. The final passage of the scene further parallels the novel’s ending. Irene bids Clare and the other party guests goodbye. Irene’s polite goodbyes are juxtaposed by the subsequent paragraph revealing Irene’s inner turmoil and the façade of happiness she shows her friends: “It hurt. It hurt like hell. But it didn’t matter, if no one knew. If everything could go on as before” (222). At this point in the novel, the hurt refers to Irene’s suspicion of the affair, yet it also foreshadows Irene’s later physical pain that she endures after she faints. Irene’s isolation further connects the two scenes, thus the line “if no one knew” could also refer to knowing how Clare fell out of the window. The scene’s applicability to the later scene strengthens the possibility that Irene pushes Clare out the window, for Irene’s life “could go on as before” as long as no one knows the truth (222).

However, the fact that Irene’s involvement in Clare’s fall from the window is ambiguous positions the tension within the text around Bellew’s intrusion into the party and his denouncement of Clare. Sullivan argues that the only events that readers,

know with narrative certainty [is] that the chain begins with Bellew’s invocation of ‘nigger’ and ends with Clare’s plunge from the window, her

body conspicuously absent from the scene by the time Irene descends to the street level. Whether Clare jumps or Irene pushes her, Bellew's "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" inaugurates Clare's disappearance from the window (Sullivan 381).

By withholding how Clare falls from the window, the text emphasizes the symbolism of Clare's fall. Sullivan argues that "Clare's death reveals [that] the epithet 'nigger' brings with it [. . .] a mutilation inevitably preceding the disappearance that the word 'nigger' invokes" (Sullivan 381). In this scene, Bellew's nickname is replaced by the actual racial slur, and his naming of Clare thus completes his signification of his wife into a racialized subject. Theorist Judith Butler explains signification by stating: "the production of the 'subject' takes place to some degree through the subordination and even destruction of the body" (Butler 91). Clare is the subject of her husband's racist nickname and later his outright racist slurs; consequently her body becomes subordinate to the defining power of his act of naming. Her body is destroyed by the racist name. Thus Bellew's name for his wife replaces Clare's identity and consequently she is erased from the text. Sullivan explains this through aphanisis, which refers to the replacement of the subject with the subject's name:

In the Lacanian version of aphanisis, the subject disappears behind the signifier in dialogue with the Other, always while trying to determine the desire of the Other with the question, "He is saying this to me, but what does he want?" Frantz Fanon notes in turn that, for black subjects in dialogue with the white Other, the answer must always be, 'Turn white or disappear.' To both women in Larsen's novel, Bellew's [epithet] 'damned dirty nigger'

implies his desire for Clare's expulsion. Thus Clare, who is denigrated in Bellew's mind for consorting with Negroes, must die. (Sullivan 381)

Bellew's racism figuratively terminates Clare as the epithet replaces her identity; the racialized signifier defines Clare, the subject, and demands her eradication.

Bellew's final appearance also perturbs Irene's sense of identity. Again the racist name he uses signifies Irene as well as Clare and both, in theoretical terms, disappear behind the racist signifier. The text conveys this symbolic act through Irene's fainting. Sullivan argues that Irene's fainting "is another example of aphanisis in the novel, the mirror of Clare's violent death" (Sullivan 382). Indeed, Irene's fainting and the novel's final passage parallel Clare's death scene, suggesting Irene's symbolic death. The novel emphasizes Irene's own descent down the stairs towards Clare's body: "Down, down she went [. . .] down the endless stairs [. . .] she had had to grasp hold of the banister to save herself from pitching downwards" (240). In the final paragraph after Irene arrives on the street she faints: "Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark" (242). Irene's descent down the stairs and her fainting, marking the ending of the novel, parallel Clare's fall from the window and consequent death. Thus, textually, Irene cannot separate herself from Clare, and the latter's death is symbolically mirrored through Irene's fainting. Irene loses consciousness and thus temporarily loses agency. Therefore, Clare's death also initiates the deterioration of Irene's selfhood—her agency. Irene's desires to rid herself of Clare are projected back upon her. As Freud writes:



no neurotic harbours thoughts of suicide which he has not turned back upon himself from murderous impulses against others [ . . . ] The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object--cathexis, it can treat itself as an object-- if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego's original reaction to objects in the external world (Freud 252).

The hostility Irene feels for Clare is intensified by Bellew discovering his wife's passing and his crying out "nigger." Bellew clearly embodies oppressive white society and symbolizes Irene's internalized racism which she thus projects upon Clare and ultimately herself. In Freudian terms, Irene's hatred is the "original reaction to objects [Clare] in the external world." In this interpretation Bellew is an actualization of Irene's fears and internalized racism which terminate both Clare and herself. Thus in her last melancholic act Irene kills herself through the death of her mirror image. Sullivan confirms: "The prophecy contained in [Bellew's] pet name for Clare-- 'Nig'-- is fulfilled, and so will be the displacement of Clare by the signifier (the diminutive of 'nigger') that demands her disappearance" (Sullivan 381). Nevertheless, Irene's loss of selfhood through fainting is only temporary. Unlike Clare's permanent eradication, Irene's fate is unresolved. The novel ends when Irene faints and loses consciousness; logically the narration which follows Irene's thoughts, cannot continue with Irene incapable of thought. Yet instead of continuing the text with Irene awakening, the novel ends. *Passing's* unresolved ending, like *Quicksand's* ending, conveys a cynicism in its ambiguity. The reader does not know where Irene will end up, but it is certain that the novel ends with her on the street having been cast out of the top

floor of the Freeland apartment. The final image is the realization of her greatest fear: being expelled from upper-class society. Though it is likely that Irene will awake, though her future is uncertain whether she will stay married to Brian or even stay in New York. Of course, these questions plague Irene throughout the novel as her only goal is to live in the land of 'rising towers.' In the end the protagonist is kept from the two things that matter to her most: security and stability. Throughout the novel Irene is haunted by the need for security and stability which constantly remain just out of her reach; the novel concludes by pushing Irene further down father away from these basic necessities of life. Indeed the novel's final scene keeps Irene in the one place she fears the most: on the street cast out of the rising tower. Like Helga's fate in *Quicksand*, Irene's is one more bleak than death, for she must continue living.

## *Quicksand, Passing, and the Critics: Interpreting the Novels' Endings*

In her 1986 introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing*, McDowell explains that, “until the early 1970s [. . .] Nella Larsen was one of several women writers of the Harlem Renaissance relegated to the back pages of that movement’s literary history” (ix). However, literary criticism of the past three decades has reexamined Larsen’s novels and has brought them back into the canon alongside current African American female writers. The critical attention Larsen’s work receives from current writers and critics has led to a new interest in and scholarly pursuits of these novels. Alice Walker’s collection of nonfiction, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, describes Walker’s personal and academic interest in Larsen among other Harlem Renaissance era African American female writers, arguing for their place in the canon (Walker 371). A quote of Walker’s appears on the back cover of the 1986 Rutgers publication of *Quicksand* and *Passing*: “*Quicksand* and *Passing* are novels I will never forget. They open up a whole world of experience and struggle that seemed to me, when I first read the years ago, absolutely absorbing, fascinating and indispensable. They do that still.” Critic Anne Staveny argues that such attention by writers like Walker, as well as critical studies “have done the crucial work of recovering the names and histories of more than a dozen black female poets and novelists of the Harlem Renaissance,” including Larsen (Staveny 533). Larsen’s “rediscovery” suggests her novels’ connection and relevancy to current fiction about African American females.

Indeed, the issues Larsen’s novels address lead McDowell to agree that “[Larsen] has to be regarded as something of a pioneer, a trail blazer in the Afro-

American female literary tradition [. . .] [her novels] represent the desire, the expectation, the preparation of eroticism that contemporary black women's novels are attempting to bring to franker and fuller expression" (McDowell xxxi). McDowell's praise of Larsen among current African American female writers helped reintroduce Larsen's novels into the literary canon. Juda Bennett argues that McDowell's introduction "was instrumental in securing Larsen new readers as well as sparking critical interest" in Larsen's novels (Bennett 206). Nevertheless, despite McDowell praise, she still criticizes the novels for not dealing with their subject matter more frankly or fully. McDowell attests: "To be sure, [Larsen's] novels only flirt with the idea of a female sexual passion" (McDowell xxxi). McDowell further accuses Larsen of not being able to realize her intent—an intent McDowell only imagines: "We might say that Larsen wanted to tell the story of the black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms" (McDowell xvi). McDowell's phrase "we might say," indicates her hypothesis that these intentions and desires motivating Larsen are simply McDowell's own assumptions; she does not include any historical information that suggest any of Larsen's possible motivations for writing. Nevertheless, because of McDowell's influence, the idea of this competing desire is indicative of much the criticism that shapes the interpretations of Larsen's novels—as documented earlier in this thesis. Indeed by reading the criticism of McDowell's contemporaries, the overarching sentiment is that Larsen's novels fail to produce sexually liberated African American female protagonists because the novels cannot imagine such a character. Critic Anne Stavney confirms that, "These early studies [of the 1970s and

1980s] read the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance as primarily absorbed with producing in their fiction a counter-class of bourgeois, educated, refined black women” (Stavney 533). However, as this thesis demonstrates closer reading reveal that these novels delve deeper into defining African American female identity within the context of a racist society. Stavney summarizes that: “more recent scholarship has built upon these past interpretations by offering an increasingly complicated and nuanced understanding of the motivations and cultural effects of [Harlem Renaissance era] women’s poetry and fiction” (Stavney 533-34). Current scholarship, Stavney further argues, “cannot reductively assume an ever-present defensive critical posture to white American culture as *the* informing characteristic of this body of writing” (Stavney 534). Such a critical approach stands in opposition to McDowell’s earlier critique of Larsen’s novels being preoccupied with establishing African American female characters that go against the stereotypes “the white slave master constructed” (McDowell xii). By reading Larsen’s novels not merely as reactionary texts against the stereotypes of African American women, but also through other critical and theoretical lenses, the richness and complexity of Larsen’s texts reveal themselves to the reader. Readings of both novels only through a reactionary lens leads to the dissatisfaction that such tragic endings convey the failure of a new mode of representation. The fact that neither novel portrays non-stereotypical, autonomous women triumphantly, leads McDowell to criticize Larsen for “undoing or doing the opposite of what she promised” (McDowell xxxi). However, as this thesis demonstrates, if one reads each novel without imposing assumed promises upon the text, one opens one’s reading to fuller interpretations. Broader readings thus lead one

to read the endings of each novel not as “abrupt and contradictory,” but rather as conveying an additional level of meaning applicable to the entire text.

In the final scenes of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, the fates of the three women is depicted through the central metaphor of descent. Emphasized by its title, *Quicksand* suggests the metaphor of an inevitable sinking down into the earth— a slow burial into the ground. In the last paragraphs of the novel, Helga wonders, “How, then was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become?” (135). The oppression weighs down on Helga, stifling her determination to challenge her fate: “she was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or— she would have to die. She couldn’t endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking loathing were too great [ . . . ] this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation” (134). Helga’s suffering is conveyed by images of suffocation— an act which not only kills but deprives the person of speech. Figuratively, Helga loses her voice, and by extension, her ability to protest her sinking down. Physically, Helga cannot rise out of bed without pain and thus must endure the symbolic sinking into death. In *Passing* the descent of Clare and Irene is both figurative and literal. Clare’s plunge out of the window and Irene’s subsequent near fall down the stairs symbolize not only the expulsion but the oppression, the holding down of African American women in their racist society. The repetition of the word “down” stresses Irene’s psychological fall as she leaves the apartment: “Down, down she went [ . . . ] down the endless stairs” (240). The imagery of decent and being forced down connects to the metaphors of rising up and uplifting the race. Irene and Clare are kept from the “land of the rising towers,” even the high rise apartment in Harlem where the final party takes place

(235). Additionally, the sites of both novels' endings are in African American communities— the Southern town Helga moves to and the Harlem party of Irene's African American friends. Critic Jonathan Little argues that by locating the tragic fates of her characters in these settings, “Larsen does not depict any ‘freeland’ or supportive community [. . .] undermin[ing] romantic convention, substituting ironic tragedy where there had been joy” (Little 174). The novels' endings not only critique the conventional endings which depict idealized African American communities, but also suggest that there is no place for autonomous, non-stereotypical representations of African American women in such societies. All three protagonists are unable to obtain complete agency and lose their identity under the weight of their oppressive societies.

Nevertheless, the fates of Larsen's characters do not negate either novel's position against the stereotypical representations of African American women in American literary tradition. The characters' failure to succeed in their society does not reflect upon the novels' failure in creating characters that resist objectification or submission to dominant ideology. Helga's awareness of her repression and exploitation elevate her above the objectified figure of the African American female the novel critiques. The novel clearly does not endorse Helga's fate; the final pages narrating Helga's inner monolog give voice to the marginalized figures victimized by dominant white male culture. Had Helga found an embracing community, such an ending would undermine the novel's larger critique on society's reinforcement of ideologies and stereotypes that oppress African American women. Similarly, *Passing* does not endorse Clare's death; even though the text offers the possibility that Irene

kills Clare, the text depicts Clare's death as ultimately the result of racism— Clare's death, however it was caused, was initiated by Bellew's intrusion on the party and his racist slurs. On the other hand, Irene's fate is the most ambiguous. The last lines of the novel describe Irene's fainting as a drowning-- parallel to Helga's figurative sinking into death: "[Irene] moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark" (242). The imagery of Irene's fainting seems like a symbolic death; her moaning echoes Helga's figurative gasps of air through her suffocation. Nevertheless the presence of the arms lifting Irene up seems vaguely hopeful. While the text creates the possibility that Irene will be saved and perhaps rise up, it is certain that she will not do it on her own; it will only happen while she is unconscious and not of her own volition. Though Irene does not die, like *Quicksand's* Helga she is stripped of her agency and the possibility of survival rests outside of herself. Ultimately, this thesis shows how both texts challenge the representations of African American women by depicting women capable of autonomy while criticizing a society which robs them of their agency and identities.



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