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The Relationship Between Colour and Identity in the Literature of Nella Larsen and Richard Wright

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Abstract

The fiction of Nella Larsen and Richard Wright explores the struggle of African-American men and women to forge an identity for themselves that is free of the bonds placed on them by society. The protagonists of *Quicksand*, *Passing*, and *Black Boy* all try to create identities for themselves that transcend racial boundaries. Because of this desire, they all have trouble relating completely to either white society or black society and, as a result, feel estranged from their communities.

The fiction of Nella Larsen and Richard Wright explores the struggle of African-American men and women to forge an identity for themselves that is free of the bonds placed on them by society. The protagonists of Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing* and Wright's *Black Boy* all have one thing in common: they do not wish for their identities to be defined by their race. Helga Crane, Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, and the young Richard Wright all try to create identities for themselves that transcend racial boundaries. Because of this desire, they all have trouble relating completely to either white society or black society and, as a result, feel estranged from their communities.

In Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, the protagonist Helga Crane, who Hazel Carby called 'the first truly sexual black female protagonist in Afro-American fiction,'¹ is trapped between two racial identities. The daughter of a white Danish woman and a black jazz musician she has never known, Helga has never had a black family member, and therefore struggles with the disconnect between her outward appearance and her external reality. Helga never truly feels at home in the company of either black people or white people and, as a result, is constantly fleeing from place to place in search of a society wherein she can 'fit in.' Wherever Helga finds herself, she is portrayed as the 'other.' In black society, she feels ostracised because of her colourful, flamboyant clothing, her distaste for 'the race problem,' and her ethnic identity as a mulatto. In white society, she is objectified as an exotic, primitive creature without agency. She is portrayed as a spectacle, almost never as spectator. Because she does not belong to one race completely, she never truly finds a place where she belongs. Helga's sense of self is always censored by society's restrictions and expectations. She never finds a version of reality that is not mediated by her surroundings.

When the novel begins, Helga is about to leave Naxos, a school for black children, where she is a teacher. Her room, which reflects her 'rare and intensely personal taste'², is described in great detail, especially in regards to its colours and shadows. Larsen describes 'a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade,' 'a blue Chinese carpet,' and 'oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet' (*Quicksand*, p.1). These opening descriptions set into motion the focus on colour, light, and materiality found throughout Larsen's novel. Helga's physical appearance is then described in great detail, using sensuous language which highlights her role as a desiring yet passive (she is not performing any actions, she is only been seen) character. Larsen describes her 'vivid green and gold negligee,' her 'skin like yellow satin,' her 'penetrating, dark eyes,' and her 'sensuous lips' (*Quicksand*, p.2). All of these descriptive terms emphasize Helga's role as a spectacle and an object; she is mostly seen and not heard. The elaborate furnishings of her room frame her physical self, making her seem like a portrait: 'An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade' (*Quicksand*, p.2). According to Pamela E. Barnett, the narrator 'positions Helga inside frames and strategically places her at the center of the settings in which she appears.'³ This representation of Helga as portraiture is explored more explicitly when the Danish painter Axel Olsen paints an actual portrait of her later in the novel.

In her first of a series of relocations, Helga flees from Naxos, detesting the narrowness of a place defined only by race and the 'hypocrisy' of its inhabitants. Helga tells Anderson, the school's principal, that she does not 'fit in.' In a place where conformity is valued, Helga stands out like a peacock against a monochromatic background. She is known for her colourful, outlandish clothing. Her fellow faculty members 'hold their breath' when waiting to see what outfit Helga will turn up to a function dressed in. She disdains what she views as the repression of beauty and individuality at Naxos. In a speech given by the Dean of Women at Naxos, the students and faculty were told that 'bright colours are vulgar' and that 'black, grey, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colours for coloured people' (Quicksand, p.18). Helga reflects that dark-complexioned people *should* wear 'yellow, green, and red' and that black, brown, and grey destroy 'the luminous tones lurking in their dusty skins.' This repression of colour and individuality drives Helga away from Naxos, which Hostetler says is an anagram for 'Saxon,' revealing the goal of the school to 'adopt white values and to create from the multiplicity of black persons a "machine" of dull conformity.'⁴ Helga knows intuitively that this environment is not right for her and goes off in search of a place she can call home, ending up first in Chicago and then in a place where black people can seemingly be free to express their individuality: Harlem.

In Harlem, Helga initially finds herself extremely contented. She feels that she is well suited to Harlem, a place where the people at parties are 'beautiful and urbane'⁵ and she can attend functions in sophisticated clothing. She meets a friend, Anne Grey, who shares her aesthetic sense and her taste for beautiful material things. Helga lives with Anne, who lives in 'big cream-coloured rooms' (Quicksand, p.44) filled with valuable antiques and worldly possessions. Helga thought that Anne was 'almost too good to be true.' However, unlike Helga, who identifies partially with both white and black cultures and dislikes talk of race, 'Anne hated white people with a deep and burning hatred.' Helga soon became disenchanted by Anne and detested her 'obsession' with 'the race problem.' I believe that Helga envisioned an idealised world where nothing and nobody was characterised by race, but became increasingly disenchanted when she found that in each new place she lived, race was in some way an issue. Helga also disliked Anne's hypocrisy; while Anne claimed to dislike white people, she avidly partook in white popular culture, preferring the clothes and music of white culture to black. These things irked Helga with 'a great irksomeness and she wanted to be free of this constant prattling of the incongruities, the injustices, the stupidities, the viciousness of white people' (Quicksand, p.49). She soon receives a letter from her Uncle Peter, who offers her five thousand dollars - her inheritance - in exchange for relinquishing familial ties with him, due to his wife's racist objections to having Helga in the family. Helga uses the money to move to Copenhagen, in search of a place where she is not tied down by race. She thinks of the black people of Harlem, 'She didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it wasn't merely a matter of colour. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin' (Quicksand, p.55). She leaves America to find a place where she can 'belong.' She feels that, in Harlem, she is 'shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race' (Quicksand, p.40). She feels that she is suffocated by her race and hopes to find a place where race is not such a defining characteristic. This vision signifies 'an unfolding complexity in her understanding of her identity as a black woman.'⁶ She also leaves Harlem, according to Hostetler, because she is 'terrified of her strong sexual attraction to Robert Anderson, who has reappeared in New York.'⁷ Helga struggles with her identity as a sexual woman, which I will explore more deeply later on.

Similarly to when Helga arrived in Harlem, she initially feels very content in Copenhagen, where she moves to live with her Aunt Katrina and her husband. She gets to wear elaborate clothing and attend sophisticated parties among the white bourgeoisie of Copenhagen. However, as one of the only black people in the city, Helga is objectified and viewed as exotic, almost as if she were of another species. She feels as if she is 'a decoration. A curio. A peacock.' (Quicksand, p.73). Her aunt dresses her up in exotic, eccentric clothing, essentially stripping Helga of her right to dress as she chooses. She is dressed in 'batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, blood-red, sulphur-yellow, sea-green.' (Quicksand, p.74). At first, Helga is fascinated by this image her aunt has created for her, and submits to be dressed at her aunt's whims. But she is not comfortable. She feels like 'some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited' and has 'a deep faith in the perfection of her own taste, and no mind to be bedecked in flaunting flashy things' (Quicksand, p.68). Helga goes to Copenhagen to escape from what she views as 'the race obsession' in Harlem, but finds that her racial identity is just as big of a problem for her in Copenhagen. Because of her difference, she is seen as the 'other.' She is made into a spectacle and an object, and seems only to exist for the viewing pleasure of white people. She is stripped of agency when she is displayed as a prize dog and as a paper doll for her aunt to dress up. In Harlem and Copenhagen she encounters two different modes of racial thinking, neither of which suit her, both of which she rejects. But both of these modes help her to find her own identity as a black woman.

There are two crucial events in Copenhagen which, I believe, help Helga to forge her own sense of racial identity. The first is when Helga watches a minstrel show. She sees how the black people are objectified and laughed at on stage and she links the minstrels 'with her own position in Danish society as an object to be admired, a living performance.'⁸ According to Barnett, Helga is 'angry at the deliberate construction of the black self according to the suppositions of the white audience. Most troubling, she feels some connection between herself and the stereotyped portrayals on the stage.'⁹ At this point in the novel, Helga realises that her position in Danish society, because of her race, is basically as a minstrel. Both she and the minstrels are enacting what a white audience wants.¹⁰ She is not viewed as a person in her own right, but rather an object to be adorned and viewed. But by continuously returning to see the minstrel shows, Helga is expressing a longing to connect with black culture, but at the same time, her position as spectator 'underscores her distance from black culture.'¹¹ After the minstrel show, Helga is conscious of her exploitation and refuses to give into what the white audience expects of her any longer.

The second incident which I believe helps Helga to forge her racial identity is when she is painted by the Danish artist, Axel Olsen. This event is the culmination of one of the novel's strongest themes: Helga as an object, a spectacle, a portrait. Throughout the novel, Helga is continuously described in terms of her physical appearance and her surroundings, which 'frame' her. The narrator is constantly painting a portrait of Helga. Axel's actual portrait of Helga concretises this idea of Helga as a portrait. Axel 'arranges' Helga for the portrait and leaves 'without addressing a word to her' (Quicksand, p.71). Helga thinks to herself, 'Was she to be treated like a secluded young miss, a Danish frokken, not to be consulted personally even on matters affecting her personally?' (Quicksand, p.71). According to Barnett, Helga's agency is denied when she is 'not consulted personally.'¹² Helga's agency is continually denied as she performs her role as a spectacle in Copenhagen, and she realises it at this point. Axel's portrait shows Helga as she is seen by the Danish public. She looks primitive, savage, and exotic. As she is now conscious of her exploitation, Helga rejects the portrait as she feels 'it wasn't herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features' (Quicksand, p.89). According to Barnett, the idea of a painted

portrait is generally objectifying; it 'locates a human being as an object of the gaze and assumes the passivity of the rendered subject.'¹³ This is especially true of portraits of women, who are usually portrayed as an object of beauty. Helga is conscious of this and wants nothing more to do with Olsen or with Danish society, rejecting Olsen's marriage proposal and leaving Copenhagen altogether. When Axel proposes to Helga, he looks at the portrait instead of Helga, seemingly confusing the portrait with the real person. This serves to further emphasise Helga's role, and the role of black women in general, as portraiture in Danish society.

Helga Crane is often acknowledged to be the first truly sexual black woman in American literature. As well as struggling to find her identity as a black woman, Helga also struggles to find her identity as a black woman with sexual desires. Black women have often been stereotyped as being savage, primitive, and licentious in their sexuality. This stereotype, according to Barnett, 'functioned to absolve white slave masters of their responsibility for the rape of slave women.'¹⁴ Axel Olsen valorises the primitive depiction of black female sexuality in his portrait, and Helga does not recognise herself in this depiction. In response to this stereotype, many black female writers took the opposing extreme: they insisted on the chastity of their female characters and stripped them of sexual desire. Larsen, on the other hand, 'would not valorise reactionary sexual purity any more than she would uncritically indulge in the primitivized versions of black sexuality.'¹⁵ Helga spends much of the novel disconnected from her sexuality, as she is usually represented as an object instead of as a desiring subject. Helga only performs as a desiring subject and experiences eroticism directly at two points in the novel. The first is her kiss with Robert Anderson in New York, and the second is her sexual encounter with Reverend Green on the night of her conversion. Her erotic kiss with Anderson ends ultimately in rejection, and her evening with Green ends in their marriage, which is done only to legitimise their night of passion. Larsen portrays their marriage as 'joyless, punctuated only by the intense pain of repeated and dangerous childbirth.'¹⁶ Helga therefore never finds a way to experience desire and sexuality safely and freely. Barnett concludes that Larsen's novel ultimately contends that 'there is no mode of representation or any legitimate space within society in which black women's sexuality can be expressed.'¹⁷

Helga struggles deeply to come to terms with her identity as a mulatto woman in *Quicksand*. She experiments with several different modes of living: living among black people in an urban environment and in a rural environment, and living among white people. In none of these environments is she able to be herself completely, and she always feels suffocated by the expectations of society. Nor is she ever able to find a legitimate space in which she can express her sexuality. I believe that in writing *Quicksand*, Larsen was attempting to convey her view that, in American and European society in the 1920s, black women were marginalised to such an extent that there was no place where they could truly be free.

Nella Larsen's second novel, titled *Passing*, also explores the problem of African-American women struggling to come to terms with their racial identity. Specifically, it explores the phenomenon of black women who are light-skinned enough to pass for 'white.' Their ability to do this highlights race as being a social construction. There is, as the book's protagonists, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, show, no definitive line between 'black' and 'white.' Both Clare and Irene have the ability to pass for white, but Irene only uses this ability in certain circumstances, while Clare has completely 'passed over' and has even married a white man who is unaware of her race. According to Cheryl Wall, both characters assume a role that Helga Crane rejects: Irene is the 'perfect lady' and Clare, 'the exotic other.'¹⁸

Clare and Irene meet, for the first time in twelve years, on an occasion in which both are passing for white. They are having tea on the top of the Drayton Hotel, where only white people are permitted. Irene goes to the Drayton because a cab driver suggested it, further exemplifying her ability to pass for white. There is no comment on this exchange in the text, which suggests that passing is so natural for Irene that she is not even conscious that she is doing it.¹⁹ Irene sees Clare, whom she does not recognise, looking at her, and fears her race being found out. Although both characters are passing for white, Irene is critical of Clare's decision to pass over completely. According to Brody, Irene and Clare are representatives of different ideologies locked in a struggle for dominance.²⁰ Irene says that they are 'strangers even in their racial consciousness'.²¹ Although Irene claims to be unashamed of being black, she fears being found out. According to Brody, it is Irene, not Clare, who harbours a secret desire to be white.²² She belongs to the black middle class and embodies 'numerous stereotypical middle-class values.'²³ As she aligns herself with conservative middle class values, such as family and stability, she views Clare as an 'exotic other', much like Helga is viewed by Danish society. Brody maintains that, although Clare lives in white society as a white woman, she has a greater sense of racial consciousness than Irene does: 'She remains perpetually aware of her own racial origin and her duplicitous personality.'²⁴ Irene, on the other hand, sees herself purely as 'an American.'

Both characters came from different backgrounds and have different motivations for 'passing'. Clare came from a lower-class black family but, by marrying John Bellow, rose quickly to the top strata of white society. Irene came from a middle-class black family and has stayed as such. She views 'passing over' as too risky and lives in fear of losing what status she has. She passes occasionally for the convenience of being able to attain the benefits that white people have, such as being allowed to drink tea on top of the Drayton. Until Clare's marriage, she worked for weekly wages as a servant at her aunt's home. She tells Irene, 'You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others' (*Passing*, p.159). Thus, one of her motivations for passing was to win Irene's appreciation. Yet even in passing to the upper classes of white society, Clare maintains a clear sense of her past identity and 'patriotic racial sympathies,' according to Brody.²⁵ Irene, on the other hand, tends to look down on the black lower classes. Brody wrote that much of the novel is devoted to realising Irene's desire not to be the missing link between Clare and her 'poorer dark brethren' (*Passing*, p.185).²⁶

Both Clare and Irene take part in the passing phenomenon, but Irene seems to harbour a certain amount of jealousy of Clare, who is able to infiltrate white society completely, while still having a sense of her black identity. Irene enjoys the conveniences of passing, but maintains of a sense of superiority over Clare, and at the same time feels threatened by her. Irene ends up suspecting Clare of having an affair with her husband and, when Clare falls to her death out of a window at the end of the novel, it is strongly suggested that Irene was the one to push her. In the end, neither character 'wins.' Irene isn't contented at being either black or white and, like Helga, doesn't feel completely at ease in either black or white society. Like in *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen is showing the difficulties of black women in American society to find a place that they can call their own. According to Wall, Irene and Clare demonstrate the 'price black women pay for their acquiescence and, ultimately, the high cost of rebellion.'²⁷

In his autobiography *Black Boy*, Richard Wright narrates the story of his childhood and adolescence. Although professing to be autobiographical, it is judged by some critics, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, to be 'fiction or fictionalized biography.'²⁸ Regardless of its truths or untruths, *Black Boy* is a striking tale of a black boy living in the American South, fighting against the restrictions placed on him by both white and black society. From a young age, the narrator was a rebel; he burned his house down at age four, killed a kitten at five, and became an alcoholic at six. From the beginning, Wright had a strong sense of self. He is presented as a rebel who 'refuses to compromise with the dictates of society and family.'²⁹ As a child, after his mother told him that he was too young to understand why another black boy was beaten by a man who was not his father, Richard declares, 'I'm not going to let anybody beat me.'³⁰ His resolve not to be beaten by anyone is seen at many points throughout the autobiography.

In writing *Black Boy*, Richard Wright is giving a voice to the previously voiceless black youths of the South.³¹ According to Hakutani, Wright's purpose in writing his autobiography is to study the way in which black life in the South was determined by its environment.³² In a society that oppressed black people so viciously, it was exceedingly hard for any individual to shake off the bonds placed on them by society and rise above them. But through fierce determination, Richard succeeded. Wright himself said that his desire was to render a judgment on his environment: 'This judgment was this: the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings.'³³ This judgment is evident in his criticisms of many black people around him. Like the protagonists in Larsen's novels, Wright does not feel completely at ease in either white or black society; he is a man 'estranged from his own race by sensitivity and intellect, yet segregated from the white race by the colour of his skin.'³⁴ He says of black people, 'I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories' (*Black Boy*, p.33). He blames this condition on his environment, the oppressive environment of the South: 'The shocks of southern living had rendered my personality tender and swollen, tense and volatile' (*Black Boy*, p.260). He shows how crushing such an environment is on black people, and how it drives them to do things they never otherwise would have done, by using his family and peers as examples. Throughout his entire childhood, Wright was subject to physical violence and threats of violence at the hands of his own family. Even at the age of four when he started a house fire, he was thrashed violently by his mother. According to Hakutani, 'It seems as though black adults, subjected to racism in white society, in turn felt compelled to rule their children at home.'³⁵ In another instance, Wright encounters a black elevator boy named Shorty, who professed to be proud of his race, but who would regularly let white men kick his buttocks in exchange for a quarter. Wright doesn't understand why he would degrade himself like that. He is also critical of a black maid who let the white night watchman slap her on the buttocks. These examples show how black people in the South internalised the oppression placed on them by white society. Most black people in Wright's community let racist society interfere with the creation of their own identity: 'I began to marvel at how smoothly the black boys acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them' (*Black Boy*, p.174). But Richard too took part in this, to some extent, before realising his mistake. At one point in the story, Richard agrees to take part in a boxing match against another black boy for the amusement of a white audience. 'I suppose it's fun for white men to see niggers fight... To white men we're like dogs or cocks' (*Black Boy*, p. 239). On this occasion, Richard is performing the role expected of him by white people. Like Helga in Copenhagen, Richard is a spectacle and 'the other' and he is used by white people for their entertainment. To white people, Richard and Helga are something less than human. Richard realises this by the end of the fight and says, 'I felt that I had done something unclean, something for which I could never properly atone' (*Black Boy*, p.245). From this point forward, he does not let his actions be determined by a white audience. He uses the power of his own intellect and soul to rise above his oppression. He says, 'Because I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen within' (*Black Boy*, p.70). Although much of the novel focuses on atrocities committed by white people against black people, he does not blame white people as individuals, but rather blames the society that drives them to such atrocities. According to Hakutani, *Black Boy* is a document showing that 'the oppressors are as much victims of the elemental design of racism as are the oppressed.'³⁶

In the end of *Black Boy*, Richard flees from the South, citing the South as the cause for his oppression. He says, 'In what way had the South allowed me to be natural, to be real, to be myself, except in rejection, rebellion, and aggression? [...] The pressure of southern living kept me from being the kind of person that I might have been' (*Black Boy*, p.261). I believe that Wright wrote *Black Boy* to show how a racially oppressive environment is a hindrance to realising one's full identity. Many black people in Wright's autobiography internalised racial hatred, preventing them from being themselves completely and leading them to actions that they might not otherwise have committed. But through his determination and perseverance, Richard Wright managed to keep his dignity and individualism intact.

Quicksand, *Passing*, and *Black Boy* all show the struggles of African-American men and women to fight against the tide and to retain their individuality despite their oppression. *Quicksand* and *Passing* both end bleakly, with their protagonists never finding contentment. *Black Boy*, on the other hand, ends on a more optimistic note, with Richard heading North, 'full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity' (*Black Boy*, p. 262). Perhaps this shows how it was even harder to be a black woman than to be a black man in early twentieth century America, as they lived with a double burden: to be female and black in a society that oppressed both women and black people. Despite *Black Boy's* more positive ending, all three of these works by Nella Larsen and Richard Wright exemplify the difficulty of black people to find an identity in a society that wished to suppress their identities.

About the Author

The author is a final year undergraduate student studying English Language and Literature at King's College London. She has special interests in women's writing and British and American twentieth century literature.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Ann E. Hostetler, 'The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *PMLA*, 105 (Jan., 1990), 35-46 (pp. 35).
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3. Pamela E. Barnett, "My Picture of You Is, After All, the True Helga Crane": Portraiture and Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *Signs*, 20 (Spring, 1995), 575-600, pp.575.

4. Hostetler, p.38.
5. Barnett, p.576.
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19. Jennifer DeVere Brody, 'Clare Kendry's "True" Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's *Passing*', *Callaloo*, 15 (Autumn, 1992), 1053-1065 (pp. 1057)
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21. Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001), p.192.
22. Brody, p.1055.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Brody, p.1056.
26. Brody, p.1085.
27. Wall, p.105.
28. W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, 'Richard Wright Looks Back: Harsh, Forbidding Memories of Negro Childhood and Youth', in *Richard Wright's Black Boy (American Hunger): A Casebook*, ed. by William L. Andrews and Douglas Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 33-36 (p. 33).
29. Yoshinobu Hakutani, 'Creation of the Self in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*', in *Richard Wright's Black Boy (American Hunger): A Casebook*, ed. by William L. Andrews and Douglas Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 131-147 (p. 143).
30. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (London: Vintage Classics, 2000), p.22.
31. Hakutani, p.134.
32. Ibid.
33. Quoted in Hakutani, p.134.
34. Hakutani, p.140.
35. Hakutani, p.139.
36. Hakutani, p.136.

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