DEBORAH E. MCDOWELL

From [Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*]†

Until the early 1970s when previously "lost" work by women writers began to be recovered and reprinted, Nella Larsen was one of several women writers of the Harlem Renaissance relegated to the back pages of that movement's literary history, a curious fate since her career had such an auspicious beginning. Touted as a promising writer by blacks and whites alike, Larsen was encouraged by some of the most influential names on the 1920s arts scene. Walter White, onetime director of the NAACP, read drafts of *Quicksand* and urged Larsen along to its completion. Carl Van Vechten, popularly credited

† From Introduction to Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Edited by Deborah E. McDowell. Reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press, pp. ix–xvi, xxiii–xxxv.

with promoting many Harlem Renaissance writers, introduced the novel to his publisher, Knopf. These efforts paid off. Larsen won second prize in literature in 1928 for *Quicksand* from the Harmon Foundation which awarded outstanding achievement by Negroes. *Quicksand* was also well received by the critics. In his review of the novel W. E. B. DuBois, for example, praised it as the "best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnutt."[1] *Passing* was equally well received. One reviewer gave the novel high marks for capturing, as did no other novel of the genre, the psychology of racial passing with "consummate art."[2] Due largely to the success of these first two novels, Larsen won a Guggenheim in 1930—the first black female creative writer to be so honored—to do research on a third novel in Spain and France. That novel was never published.

After the publication of *Passing*, Larsen published her last piece, a story entitled "Sanctuary." The subject of much controversy, many speculate that the scandal it created helped to send Larsen into obscurity. Following the publication of the story in 1930 Larsen was accused of plagiarism. One reader wrote to the editor of the magazine about the striking resemblance of Larsen's story to one by Sheila Kaye-Smith, entitled, "Mrs. Adis," published in the January 1922 issue of *Century* magazine. The editor of *The Forum* conducted an investigation and was finally convinced that the resemblance between the stories was an extraordinary coincidence. In compliance with the editor's request, Larsen wrote a detailed explanation of the way in which she came by the germ for her story, trying to vindicate herself. Despite her editor's support, Larsen never recovered from the shock of the charge.[3] She disappeared from the literary scene and returned to nursing at Bethel Hospital in Brooklyn where she remained until her retirement. She died in Brooklyn in 1964, practically in obscurity.

Why a career with such auspicious beginnings had such an inauspicious ending has continued to perplex students of the Harlem Renaissance. Many search for answers in the scattered fragments of Larsen's biography, which reveal a delicate and unstable person. Though there is precious little information about Larsen, some pieces of her life's puzzle are fairly widely known.[4] Born in Chicago

1. W. E. B. DuBois, *Voices of a Black Nation: Political Journalism in the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Theodore G. Vincent, reviews of *Home to Harlem*, and *Quicksand* (San Francisco: Ramparts, 1973), p. 359.
2. "The Browsing Reader," *The Crisis* 36 (July 1929): 234.
3. For the full accusation and the explanations that Larsen and her editor provided, see "Our Rostrum," in *The Forum* 83 (1930): 41.
4. For additional biographical information, see Mary Helen Washington, "Nella Larsen: Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance," *Ms.*, December 1980, pp. 44–50 [reprinted in this edition, p. 350]; Adelaide Cromwell Hill's introduction to *Quicksand* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1971); and the definitive biography of Nella Larsen by Thadious Davis forthcoming from LSU Press [published 1994]. I would like to thank Thadious Davis and that allowed me to correct errors in this

in 1891, she was the daughter of a Danish mother and a black West Indian father who died when Larsen was a young girl. Larsen's mother remarried, this time to a white man who treated his stepdaughter with some disfavor. Never feeling connected to this newly configured family, Larsen searched vainly for the sense of belonging it could not provide. Fickle and unsettled, Larsen roamed from place to place, searching for some undefined and undefinable "something." She studied science for a year at Fisk University in Tennessee, during her rocky marriage to physicist Elmer S. Imes, a professor there. She left Fisk to travel to Denmark where she audited classes at the University of Copenhagen. Returning to the states, she studied nursing at Lincoln Hospital Training School for Nurses in New York, graduating in 1915.

For a brief time after her nurse's training, she was superintendent of nurses at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Unable to tolerate its stifling atmosphere, she left after only a year and returned to New York. There she worked as a nurse, between 1916 and 1918 at the hospital where she was trained; and, between 1918 and 1921, for New York City's Department of Health. Dissatisfied with this career, she began work in 1921 at the children's division of the New York Public Library, enrolling in its training program. During her employment as a librarian, she began to write.

Since the beginning of Larsen's career, critics have praised her as a "gifted writer,"[5] commending her skill at the craft of fiction—most notably, successful characterization, narrative unity, and economy. However, they have consistently criticized the endings of her novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), which reveal her difficulty with rounding off stories convincingly. Larsen shared this problem of unconvincing endings with her black female contemporaries, Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston. Fauset's *There Is Confusion* (1924), for example, ends with the heroine's renunciation of her successful stage career to marry, accepting "as a matter of course" that her husband "was the arbiter of her own and her child's destiny."[6] Or there is the example of Missy May in Zora Neale Hurston's story, "The Gilded Six Bits" (1933), who proudly boasts to her husband, "if you burn me, you won't get a thing but wife ashes." At the story's end, weak from bearing her husband a "lil boy chile," she crawls to pick up the silver dollars that he is throwing through the door.[7] Or, finally,

5. See for example, Hiroko Sato, "Under the Harlem Shadows: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972), p. 84, and Amritjit Singh, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976).
6. Jessie Fauset, *There Is Confusion* (1924; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974), p. 292.
7. "The Gilded Six Bits" in *Spunk: The Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Foundation, 1985),

there is the case of Arvay Henson in Hurston's last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), who retreats from the brink of independence and self-realization and returns to her verbally abusive husband, resolved that "he was her man and her care" and "[h]er job was mothering. What more could any woman want and need? . . . Yes, she was in, then snuggled down again beside her husband."[8]

These unearned and unsettling endings sacrifice strong and emerging independent female identities to the most acceptable demands of literary and social history. But these endings seem far less unsettling when compared to those of *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Though both novels feature daring and unconventional heroines, in the end, they sacrifice these heroines to the most conventional fates of narrative history: marriage and death, respectively. In *Quicksand*, the cultured and refined Helga Crane marries a rural southern preacher and follows him to his backwoods church to "uplift" his parishioners. At the end of the novel, she is in a state of emotional and physical collapse from having too many children. In *Passing*, the defiant and adventurous Clare, who flouts all the social rules of the black bourgeoisie, falls to her death under melodramatic and ambiguous circumstances.

Critics of Larsen have been rightly perplexed by these abrupt and contradictory endings. But if examined through the prism of black female sexuality, not only do they make more sense, they also illuminate the peculiar pressures on Larsen as a woman writer during the male-dominated Harlem Renaissance. They show her grappling with the conflicting demands of her racial and sexual identities and the contradictions of a black and feminine aesthetic. Moreover, while these endings appear to be concessions to the dominant ideology of romance—marriage and motherhood—viewed from a feminist perspective, they become much more radical and original efforts to acknowledge a female sexual experience, most often repressed in both literary and social realms.

I

Since the very beginning of their history running over roughly 130 years, black women novelists have treated sexuality with caution and reticence, a pattern clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women's libidinousness. It is well known that during slavery the white slave master constructed an image of black female sexuality which shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions onto his female slaves. They, not

8. Zora Neale Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974), pp. 310, 311.

he, had wanton, insatiable desires that he was powerless to resist. The image did not end with emancipation. So persistent was it that black club women devoted part of their first national conference in July 1895 to addressing it.[9] Though myths about black women's lasciviousness were not new to the era, a letter from one J. W. Jacks, a white male editor of a Missouri newspaper, made them a matter of urgent concern to black club women. Forwarded to Josephine S. Pierre Ruffin, editor of *The Woman's Era*,[1] the letter attacked black women's virtue, supplying "evidence" from other black women. According to Jacks, when a certain negro woman was asked to identify a newcomer to the community, she responded, "the negroes will have nothing to do with 'dat nigger,' she won't let any man, except her husband sleep with her, and we don't 'sociate with her."[2] Mrs. Ruffin circulated the letter widely to prominent black women and to heads of other women's clubs around the country, calling for a conference to discuss this and other social concerns of black women.

Given this context, it is not surprising that a pattern of reticence about black female sexuality dominated novels by black women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They responded to the myth of the black woman's sexual licentiousness by insisting fiercely on her chastity. Fighting to overcome their heritage of rape and concubinage, and following the movement by black club women of the era, they imitated the "purity," the sexual morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie. In such works as Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* (1891), Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900),[3] black heroines struggle to defend and preserve the priceless gem of virginity.

Even in Larsen's day, the Freudian 1920s, the Jazz Age of sexual abandon and "free love"—when female sexuality, in general, was acknowledged and commercialized in the advertising, beauty, and fashion industries—black women's novels preserve their reticence

9. During the nineteenth century, black women formed a network of clubs throughout the country, in which politically minded black women were committed to racial uplift (or Negro improvement). The clubs were largely unaffiliated until they convened in Boston in 1895 for their first national conference and became the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. Predating both the NAACP and the Urban League, the NACW was the first national black organization with a commitment to racial struggles. For a detailed description of the activities of the organization see "Black Feminism versus Peasant Values" in Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978), 103–31.

1. Founded and edited by Mrs. Ruffin, a social activist, *The Woman's Era* was the first magazine in the United States to be owned, published, and managed exclusively by black women.

2. Quoted in Moses, *Golden Age*, p. 115.

3. Though Harriet Wilson's recently discovered novel, *Our Nig* (1859), predates these novels influenced by the efforts of the club movement, the emphasis on the priceless gem of virginity is still strong. See the Vintage edition of the novel edited and with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., New York, 1983.

about sexuality. Larsen and Jessie Fauset, among the most prolific novelists of the decade, lacked the daring of their contemporaries, the black female blues singers such as Bessie, Mamie, and Clara Smith (all unrelated), Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and Victoria Spivey. These women sang openly and seductively about sex and celebrated the female body and female desire as seen, for example, in a stanza from Ma Rainey's "It's Tight like That": "See that spider crawling up the wall . . . going to get his ashes hauled. / Oh it's tight like that." Or Clara Smith's "Whip It to a Jelly": "There's a new game, that can't be beat / You move most everything 'cept your feet / Called whip it to a jelly, stir it in a bowl / You just whip it to a jelly, if you like good jelly roll."[4]

Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen could only hint at the idea of black women as sexual subjects behind the safe and protective covers of traditional narrative subjects and conventions. Though their heroines are not the paragons of chastity that their nineteenth-century predecessors created, we cannot imagine them singing a Bessie Smith lyric such as "I'm wild about that thing" or "You've got to get it, bring it, and put it right here." Rather, they strain to honor the same ethics of sexual conduct called for by a respondent to a 1920s symposium titled "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs." Conducted by some of the same leading Negro club women who had organized around Jacks' libelous attack on black women's virtue, the symposium ran for several issues in *The Messenger*, one of the black "little magazines" of the period. The writer lamented what she called the "speed and disgust" of the Jazz Age which created women "less discreet and less cautious than [their] sisters in years gone by." These "new" women, she continued, were "rebelling against the laws of God and man." Thus, she concluded that the greatest need of Negro womanhood was to return to the "timidity and modesty peculiar to pure womanhood of yesterday."[5]

The blues lyrics and the club women's symposium capture, respectively, the dialectic of desire and fear, pleasure and danger that defines women's sexual experiences in male-dominated societies. As Carole Vance maintains, "Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency."[6] For women, and especially for black women,

4. For a discussion of black women blues singers see Michele Russel's "Slave Codes and Liner Notes," in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982), pp. 129–40.
5. *The Messenger*, 9 (September 1927), p. 150.
6. Carole Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 1. For an excellent discussion in Vance's anthology, of the sexuality of black women, see Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," pp. 73–100. See also Rennie Simson, "The Afro-American Female: The Historical Context of the Construction of Sexual Identity," and Barbara Omolade, "Hearts of Darker

sexual pleasure leads to the dangers of domination in marriage, repeated pregnancy, or exploitation and loss of status.

Both *Quicksand* and *Passing* wrestle simultaneously with this dialectic between pleasure and danger. In their reticence about sexuality, they look back to their nineteenth-century predecessors, but in their simultaneous flirtation with female sexual desire, they are solidly grounded in the liberation of the 1920s. Their ideological ambivalences are rooted in the artistic politics of the Harlem Renaissance, regarding the representation of black sexuality, especially black female sexuality.

II

The issue of representing black sexuality was highly controversial during the movement. As many have argued, Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926)[7] set the pattern that would dominate the literary treatment of black sexuality in the decade. Amritjit Singh suggests, for example, that the novel "had a crippling effect on the self-expression of many black writers by either making it easier to gain success riding the bandwagon of primitivism, or by making it difficult to publish novels that did not fit the profile of the commercial success formula adopted by most publishers for black writers."[8]

Such novels as Claude McKay's infamous *Home to Harlem* (1928) and Arna Bontemps's *God Sends Sunday* (1931) are said to follow the Van Vechten script. In them black women are mainly "primitive exotic" sex objects, many of them prostitutes, an image which Nathan Huggins correctly identifies as a "male fantasy." It is difficult, he adds rightly, "to draw sympathetic females whose whole existence is their bodies and instinct." Besides, he concludes, "Perhaps women, whose freedom has natural limitations—they have babies—are essentially conservative."[9] Helga Crane's outcome poignantly demonstrates this connection between sexuality and reproduction.

There were those—Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, W. E. B. DuBois, among them—who found the primitive/exotic stereotype associated with Van Vechten limited, at best. DuBois voiced his objections vehemently on the pages of the *Crisis*, virtually waging a one man, morality-minded campaign against the "nastiness" he saw embodied in novels that seemed to follow the Van Vechten lead. DuBois was committed to the struggle of "racial uplift" and social equality, a struggle best waged, in his opinion, by the "talented tenth," the elite

7. Excerpt from *Nigger Heaven* is reprinted in this edition, p. 326 [*Editor*].
8. Singh, *Novels of the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 25.
9. Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 188–89.

group of black intellectuals and artists. In that struggle, art had a vital, and necessarily propagandistic role to play.[1]

DuBois reviewed Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* and Larsen's *Quicksand* together for the *Crisis*, praising Larsen's novel as "a fine, thoughtful and courageous piece of work," while criticizing McKay's as so "nauseating" in its emphasis on "drunkenness, fighting, and sexual promiscuity" that it made him "feel . . . like taking a bath."[2]

In this context, Larsen was indeed caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. On the one side, Carl Van Vechten, roundly excoriated along with his "followers" by many members of the black middle-class intelligentsia, was her friend. He was responsible for introducing *Quicksand* to Knopf, and perhaps Larsen showed her gratitude by dedicating *Passing* to him and his wife Fania Marinoff. On the other side, Larsen was a member of the black intelligentsia whose attitudes about art Van Vechten had criticized in *Nigger Heaven*, using Russett Durwood as mouthpiece. Durwood advises Byron Kasson, the would-be black writer, to abandon the old cliches and formulas and write about what he knows—black life in the raw. Harlem is "overrun with fresh, unused material," he tells Kasson. "Nobody has yet written a good gambling story; nobody has touched the outskirts of cabaret life; nobody has gone into the curious subject of the diverse tribes of the region." He concludes with the prediction that if the "young Negro intellectuals don't get busy, a new crop of Nordics is going to spring up . . . and . . . exploit this material before the Negro gets around to it."[3] Van Vechten was one such Nordic.

In her criticism of such black bourgeois intellectuals as Robert Anderson and James Vayle in *Quicksand*, Larsen would seem to share some of Van Vechten's opinions of that class. But as much as she could poke fun at their devotion to "racial uplift," she belonged, blood and breath, to that class, and must have found it extremely difficult to cut her ties with it.

To be writing about black female sexuality within this conflicted context, then, posed peculiar problems for Larsen. The questions confronting her might well be formulated: How to write about black female sexuality in a literary era that often sensationalized it and pandered to the stereotype of the primitive exotic? How to give a black

1. In a statement well known to students of The Harlem Renaissance, DuBois argued, "All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists." ("Criteria of Negro Art," in *W. E. B. DuBois: The Crisis Writings*, ed. Daniel Walden [Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1972], p. 288 [reprinted in this edition, p. 312]). In a section of this essay which has interesting implications for Larsen's treatment of black female sexuality, DuBois describes two plays, "White Cargo" and "Congo." In the first, "there is a fallen woman. She is black. In 'Congo' the fallen woman is white. In 'White Cargo' the black woman goes down further and further and in 'Congo' the white woman begins with degradation but in the end is one of the angels of the Lord" (p. 288).
2. Reviews of *Home to Harlem* and *Quicksand* in *Voices of a Black Nation*, p. 359.
3. Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger*

female character the right to healthy sexual expression and pleasure without offending the proprieties established by the spokespersons of the black middle class? The answers to these questions for Larsen lay in attempting to hold these two virtually contradictory impulses in the same novel. 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. The latter desire committed her to exploring black female sexuality obliquely and, inevitably, to permitting it only within the context of marriage, despite the strangling effects of that choice both on her characters and on her narratives.

* * *

III

> Irene . . . was trying to understand the look on Clare's face as she had said goodbye. Partly mocking, it had seemed, and partly menacing. *And something else for which she could find no name.* [Emphasis added]
>
> —*Passing*

> She wished to find out about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's a chance in another environment.
>
> —*Passing*

Larsen reopens the question of female sexuality in *Passing* with much bolder suggestions [than in *Quicksand*]. While in *Quicksand* she explores these questions within the "safe" and "legitimate" parameters of marriage, in *Passing*, she takes many more risks. Although Clare and Irene—the novel's dual protagonists—are married, theirs are sexless marriages. In Clare's case, the frequent travels of her financier husband and her fear of producing a dark child, explain this situation. In Irene's case, the narrative strongly indicates, her own sexual repression is at fault. It is significant that Irene and her husband sleep in separate bedrooms (he considers sex a joke) and that she tries to protect her sons from schoolyard discussions about sex. Having established the absence of sex from the marriages of these two women, Larsen can flirt, if only by suggestion, with the idea of a lesbian relationship between them.

It is no accident that critics have failed to take into account the novel's flirtation with this idea, for many are misled, as with *Quicksand*, by the epigraph.[4] Focusing on racial identity or racial ambiguity and

4. See, for example, Hugh Gloster, *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1948); J. Saun[d]ers Redding, *To Make a Poet Black* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945); Hiroko Sato, "Under the Harlem Shadows . . ."; and Robert Bone, *Negro Novel*.

cultural history, the book invites the reader to place race at the center of any critical interpretation. Interestingly, Larsen uses the almost romantic refrain of Countée Cullen's poem "Heritage" as the novel's epigraph—"One three centuries removed / From the scenes his fathers loves, / Spicy grove, cinnamon tree, / What is Africa to me?"—foregoing the more dramatic and more appropriate possibilities of the poem's ending:

> All day long and all night through,
> One thing only must I do.
> Quench my pride and cool my blood,
> Lest I perish in the flood.
> Lest a hidden ember set
> Timber that I thought was wet
> Burning like the dryest flax,
> Melting like the merest wax,
> Lest the grave restore its dead.

Not only does the epigraph mislead the reader, but Irene, the central consciousness of the narrative, does as well. It is largely through her eyes, described appropriately as "unseeing," that most of the narrative's events are filtered, significantly, in retrospect and necessarily blurred. The classic unreliable narrator, Irene is confused and deluded about herself, her motivations, and much that she experiences. It is important, therefore, to see the duplicity at the heart of her story. As Beatrice Royster rightly observes,

> Irene is an ideal choice as narrator of a tale with double meanings. She tells the story as the injured wife, betrayed by friend and husband; she tells it as a confession to clear her conscience of any guilt in Clare's death.[5]

Irene paints herself as the perfect, nurturing, self-sacrificing wife and mother, the altruistic "race woman," and Clare as her diametrical opposite. In Clare, there was "nothing sacrificial." She had "no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold and hard," Irene reports. Clare had the "ability to secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard of the convenience and desires of others. About her there was some quality, hard and persistent, with the strength and endurance of rock, that would not be beaten or ignored." Irene describes Clare as "catlike," suggesting that she is given to deception, to furtive, clandestine activity. On the basis of her observations of Clare, Irene concludes, with an attitude

5. Beatrice Royster, "The Ironic Vision of Four Black Women Novelists: A Study of the Novels of Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ann Petry" Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1974.

of smug self-satisfaction, that she and Clare are not only "strangers . . . in their racial consciousness," but also "strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions."

As is often typical of an unreliable narrator, Irene is, by turns, hypocritical and obtuse, not always fully aware of the import of what she reveals to the reader. Ironically, detail for detail, she manifests the same faults of which she so harshly accuses Clare. Despite her protestations to the contrary, Irene, with a cold, hard, exploitative, and manipulative determination, tries to protect her most cherished attainment: security, which she equates with marriage to a man in a prestigious profession, the accouterments of middle-class existence—children, material comfort, and social respectability. Moreover, Irene resorts to wily and feline tactics to insure that illusion of security. After persuading her husband to abandon his dream of leaving racist Harlem to practice medicine in Brazil, Irene rationalizes that she had done this, "not for her—she had never really considered herself—but for him and the boys."

Even Irene's work with racial uplift programs, such as the Negro Welfare League, reveal her true value orientation. Although she deludes herself that this work is a barometer of her racial consciousness, it is actually self-serving, not undertaken for the good of the race. The social functions that Irene arranges, supposedly designed to aid the unfortunate black masses and to give them a sense of belonging, are so heavily attended by prominent whites that her husband, Brian, fears, " 'Pretty soon the colored people won't be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections.' " Thus, the narrative betrays Irene at every turn, as she comes to evince all that she abominates in Clare.

Not only does Larsen undercut Irene's credibility as narrator, but she also satirizes and parodies the manners and morals of the black middle class that Irene so faithfully represents. That parody comes through in the density of specificity in the novel, as seen in the description of a typically run morning in Irene's household:

> They went into the dining-room. [Brian] drew back her chair and she sat down behind the fat-bellied German coffeepot, which sent out its morning fragrance mingled with the smell of crisp toast and savoury bacon, in the distance. With his long, nervous fingers he picked up the morning paper from his own chair and sat.
>
> Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured creature, brought in the grapefruit.
>
> They took up their spoons.

The descriptions of the endless tea and cocktail parties and charity balls capture the sterility and banality of the bourgeoisie, likewise emphasizing Larsen's satire.

> There were the familiar little tinkling sounds of spoons striking against frail cups, the soft running sounds of inconsequential talk, punctuated now and then with laughter. In irregular small groups, disintegrating, coalescing, striking just the right note of disharmony, disorder in the big room, which Irene had furnished with a sparingness that was almost chaste, moved the guests with that slight familiarity that makes a party a success.

Although Irene is clearly deluded about her motives, her racial loyalty, her class, and her distinctness from Clare, the narrative suggests that her most glaring delusion concerns her feelings for Clare. Though, superficially, Irene's is an account of Clare's passing for white and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story—though not named explicitly—of Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare. The narrative traces this developing eroticism in spatial terms. It begins on the roof of the Drayton hotel (with all the suggestions of the sexually illicit), intensifies at Clare's tea party, and, getting proverbially "close to home," explodes in Irene's own bedroom. Preoccupied with appearances, social respectability, and safety, however, Irene tries to force these emerging feelings underground. The narrative dramatizes that repression effectively in images of concealment and burial. Significantly, the novel's opening image is an envelope (a metaphoric vagina) which Irene hesitates to open, fearing its "contents would reveal" an "attitude toward danger." Irene's fears are well founded, given the sexual overtones of Clare's letter:

> "for I am lonely, so lonely . . . cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life. . . . It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases. . . . and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago."

Irene tries to preserve "a hardness from feeling" about the letter, though "brilliant red patches flamed" in her cheeks. Unable to explain her feelings for Clare, "for which she could find no name," Irene dismisses them as "Just somebody walking over [her] grave." The narrative suggests pointedly that Clare is the body walking over the grave of Irene's buried sexual feelings.

Lest the reader miss this eroticism, Larsen employs fire imagery—the conventional representation of sexual desire—introducing and instituting this imagery in the novel's opening pages. Irene begins her retrospective account of her reunion with Clare, remembering that the day was "hot," the sun "brutal" and "staring," its rays "like molten rain." Significantly, Irene, feeling "sticky and soiled from contact with

so many sweating bodies," escapes to the roof of the Drayton Hotel where she is reunited with Clare, after a lapse of many years. (Irene is, ironically, "escaping" to the very thing she wants to avoid.)

From the very beginning of their reencounter, Irene is drawn to Clare like a moth to a flame. (Suggestively, Clare is frequently dressed in red). The "lovely creature" "had for her a fascination, strange and compelling." Because so many critics have missed the significance of the erotic attraction between Irene and Clare, it is useful to trace this theme by quoting from the novel in substantial detail.

When the two are reunited, Irene first notices Clare's "tempting mouth"; her lips, "painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate." Into Clare's "arresting eyes" "there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed." At the end of this chance encounter, "standing there under the appeal, the caress, of [Clare's] eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn't be the last."

When Irene has tea at Clare's house, she notices that Clare "turned on . . . her seductive caressing smile." Afterwards, a "slight shiver [runs] over [Irene]" when she remembers the mysterious look on Clare's "incredibly beautiful face." "She couldn't, however, come to any conclusion about its meaning. . . . It was unfathomable, utterly beyond any experience or comprehension of hers."

The awakening of Irene's erotic feelings for Clare coincides with Irene's imagination of an affair between Clare and Brian. Given her tendency to project her disowned traits, motives, and desires onto others, it is reasonable to argue that Irene is projecting her own developing passion for Clare onto Brian, although in "all their married life she had had no slightest cause to suspect [him] of any infidelity, of any serious flirtation even." The more the feelings develop, the more she fights them, for they threaten the placid surface of her middle-class existence as a doctor's wife. "Safety and security," Irene's watchwords, crop up repeatedly in the novel, after Clare arrives, and explain Irene's struggle to avoid her.

Not deterred, however, Clare visits Irene's house unannounced, coming first to the bedroom where she "drop[s] a kiss on [Irene's] dark curls," arousing in Irene "a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare's two hands in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: 'Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare!' " Their conversation in this scene has a sexual double edge, heightened by Irene's habitual gesture of lighting cigarettes.

Clare scolds Irene for not responding to her letter, describing her repeated trips to the post office. "I'm sure they were all beginning to think that I'd been carrying on an illicit love-affair and that the man

had thrown me over." Irene assures Clare that she is concerned simply about the dangers of Clare's passing for white in Harlem, the risks she runs of being discovered by "knowing Negroes." Clare's immediate response is "You mean you don't want me, 'Rene?" Irene replies, "It's terribly foolish, and not just the right thing." It's "dangerous," she continues, "to run such silly risks." "It's not safe. Not safe at all." But "as if in contrition for that flashing thought," "Irene touched [Clare's] arm caressingly."

Irene's protestations about race are noticeably extreme and disproportionate to the situation, especially since she passes occasionally herself. Further, they function in the same way that Helga's response to Axel Olsen functions [in *Quicksand*]: as a mask for the deeper, more unsettling issues of sexuality. Irene tries to defuse the feelings by absorbing herself in the ritual of empty tea parties, but "It was as if in a house long dim, a match had been struck, showing ghastly shapes where had been only blurred shadows."

At one such party, near the narrative's end, Clare is, in typical fashion, an intruding presence, both at the party and in Irene's thoughts. "Irene couldn't remember ever having seen [Clare] look better." Watching "the fire roar" in the room, Irene thinks of Clare's "beautiful and caressing" face.

In the final section of the novel, Clare comes to Irene's house before they go to the fateful Christmas party. Coming again into Irene's room, "Clare kisse[s] her bare shoulder, seeming not to notice a slight shrinking." As they walk to the party, Clare at Brian's side, Irene describes a "live thing pressing against her." That "live thing," represented clearly as full-blown sexual desire, must be contained, and it takes Clare's death to contain it. Significantly, in Irene's description of the death, all of the erotic images used to describe Clare throughout the novel converge.

> Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole tortured loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter.

Although the ending is ambiguous and the evidence circumstantial, I agree with Cheryl Wall that, "Larsen strongly implies that Irene pushes Clare through the window," and, in effect, becomes "a psychological suicide, if not a murderer."[6] To suggest the extent to which Clare's death represents the death of Irene's sexual feelings for Clare, Larsen uses a clever objective correlative: Irene's pattern of lighting cigarettes and snuffing them out. Minutes before Clare falls from the window to her death, "Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below." Clearly attempting a symbolic parallel, Clare is described as "a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold" who falls from (or is thrown out of) the window as well. Because Clare is a reminder of that repressed and disowned part of Irene's self, Clare must be banished, for, more unacceptable than the feelings themselves is the fact that they find an object of expression in Clare. In other words, Clare is both the embodiment and the object of the sexual feelings that Irene banishes.

Larsen's becomes, in effect, a banishing act as well. Or put another way, the idea of bringing a sexual attraction between two women to full narrative expression is, likewise, too dangerous a move, which helps to explain why critics have missed this aspect of the novel. Larsen's clever narrative strategies almost conceal it. In *Passing* she uses a technique found commonly in narratives by Afro-American and women novelists with a "dangerous" story to tell: "safe" themes, plots, and conventions are used as the protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous subplots. Larsen envelops the subplot of Irene's developing if unnamed and unacknowledged desire for Clare in the safe and familiar plot of racial passing.[7] Put another way, the novel's clever strategy derives from its surface theme and central metaphor—passing. It takes the form of the act it describes. Implying false, forged, and mistaken identities, the title functions on multiple levels: thematically, in terms of the racial and sexual plots; and strategically, in terms of the narrative's disguise.

The structure of the novel complements and reinforces this disguise. Neat and symmetrical, *Passing* is composed of three sections, with four chapters each. The order and control which that tight organization suggests are a clever cover for the unconventional subplot in the novel's hiding places.

The novel performs a double burial: the erotic subplot is hidden beneath its safe and orderly cover and the radical implications of that plot are put away by the disposal of Clare. Although she is the novel's center of vitality and passion, that vitality and passion, which the narrative seems to affirm, are significantly contained by the narrative's end. And Clare becomes a kind of sacrificial lamb on the altar of social and literary convention.

Clare suffers the fate that many a female character has suffered when she has what Rachel Blau DuPlessis terms, "an appropriate

7. In her novel *Plum Bun*, published the same year as *Passing*, Jessie Fauset, another black female novelist of the period, used fairy tale conventions to deflect her critique of the romance and the role its underlying ideology plays in disempowering women. See the recent edition of Fauset's novel, with an introduction by Deborah E. McDowell (London:

relationship to the 'social script.'" Death results, she continues, when "energies of selfhood, often represented by sexuality . . . are expended outside the 'couvert' of marriage or valid [generally spelled heterosexual] romance."[8] While Larsen criticizes the cover of marriage, as well as other social scripts for women, she is unable in the end to extend that critique to its furthest reaches.

In ending the novel with Clare's death, Larsen repeats the narrative choice which *Quicksand* makes: to punish the very values the novel implicitly affirms, to honor the very value system the text implicitly satirizes. The ending, when hidden racial identities are disclosed, functions on the ideological as well as the narrative level. Larsen performs an act of narrative "dis"-closure, undoing or doing the opposite of what she has promised. Or, to borrow from *Quicksand*, Larsen closes *Passing* "without exploring to the end that unfamiliar path into which she had strayed."

IV

Both *Quicksand* and *Passing* are poised between the tensions and conflicts that are Western culture's stock ambivalences about female sexuality: lady Jezebel or virgin/whore. Larsen sees and indicts the sources of this ambivalence: the network of social institutions—education, marriage, and religion, among the most prominent—all interacting with each other to strangle and control the sexual expression of women. But, like her heroine Helga, Larsen could "neither conform nor be happy in her nonconformity."

Considering the focus of both her novels on black female sexuality, one naturally wonders if Nella Larsen would have taken still more risks had her short, but accomplished, literary career been extended. However oblique and ambivalent Larsen's treatment of black female sexuality, because she gave her characters sexual feelings at all, she has to be regarded as something of a pioneer, a trailblazer in the Afro-American female literary tradition. To be sure, her novels only flirt with the idea of a female sexual passion. We might say that they represent the desire, the expectation, the preparation of eroticism that contemporary black women's novels are attempting to bring to franker and fuller expression. In such novels as Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974), Gayl Jones's *Corrigedora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1976), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), among others, black women are naming what at least one stream of Larsen's imag-

Narrative Strategies of Twentieth
1985), p. 15.

ination and her literary milieu found a "nameless," "shameful impulse."

THADIOUS M. DAVIS

Nella Larsen's Harlem Aesthetic†

"I do so want to be famous," Nella Larsen wrote to Henry Allen Moe of the Guggenheim Foundation. She was in Spain for the completion of her year as the foundation's first black woman to receive a fellowship in creative writing: "The work goes fairly well. But I like it. Of course, that means nothing because I really can't tell if it's good or not. But the way I hope and pray that it is [is] like a physical pain. I do . . . want to be famous."[1] The statement in context is innocent enough, but it is an indication of the attitudes and values Larsen held throughout the 1920s and early 1930s when she was writing fiction.

At thirty-seven, Larsen had published her first novel, *Quicksand*, brought out by Knopf, but which she had considered submitting to Albert and Charles Boni, for as she said: "It would be nice to get a thousand dollars . . . and publicity."[2] *Quicksand's* reception in 1928 fueled her determination to be a famous novelist. She promptly decided that she "was asking for the Harmon Award," because as she assessed her chances, "Looking back on the year's output of Negro literature I don't see why I shouldn't have a book in. There's only Claude McKay besides.—Rudolph [Fisher] is just too late—. . . ."[3] She immediately sought out recommendations from James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Lillian Alexander when she discovered that one had to be *nominated* for the Harmon Award.

Larsen had already shaved two years off her age in order to comply with the image of youth promoted during the Renaissance. The daughter of an interracial union, Larsen had come a long way by the end of the 1920s when she no longer admitted to being from a working-class background on Chicago's South Side. However, it was not simply upward mobility that she sought during the Renaissance; by then, she had already been married to a physicist since May 1919.

† From Thadious M. Davis, "Nella Larsen's Harlem Aesthetic," in *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*, ed. Amritjit Singh, William S. Shiver, and Stanley Brodwin (New York: Garland, 1989), pp. 245–56. Copyright © 1989. Reproduced by permission of Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, LLC.

1. Letter to Henry Allen Moe, 11 January 1931, in the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Files. Hereafter referred to as GFF.
2. Letter to Carl Van Vechten, 1 July 1926, in the James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Hereafter referred to as JWJC.
3. Letter to Carl Van