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Nella Larsen The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s was a considerably significant period for African American as it was a major step towards their fight for equality. Nella Larsen, one of the major contributors of the Harlem Renaissance literature, was a famous novelist who is renowned for her two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing* (Hutchinson 4). Larsen was born in 1891 in Chicago as Nellie Walker to a white (Danish) mother and an African American father who had East Indian roots. Her father died when she was only two years old after which her mother remarried a white Danish man. When she was growing up, Larsen was the only black member of her family. She attended a number of schools such as Fisk, Copenhagen before she went to New York to study nursing (Christian 11). It was while she was working as a nurse that she met and got married to a prominent African American physicist, Dr. Samuel Elmer Imes. It was her husband who introduced Larsen to the upper class in Harlem and it was here that her writing career blossomed. She wrote *Quicksand* in 1928 and *Passing* a year later. The two books were instant successes and they won her a number of awards including the first ever Guggenheim Fellowship for a black woman (Hutchinson 7). The two books deal with the issues that light skinned women in America faced during the Harlem Renaissance. Many of these women, of whom Larsen was one, had to undergo discrimination and the urge to turn their backs on their African heritage and pass for white. Many literature reviewers have drawn comparisons between what Larson wrote and her real life experiences (Christian 30). As a young girl and on into her adult life, Larsen had to contend with the fact that she wasn't wholly white due to her African American roots. The women in her novel are also half white and they

go through the same experiences and frustrations that many believe Larsen might have gone through. Quicksand tells the story of Helga Crane, an educated woman of mixed race who seeks a sense of self-identity, social acceptance and sexual expression in her movements through the rural South, the urban North and Denmark. Larson writes: " Helga, on the other hand, had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying. She could neither conform, not be happy in her conformity" (Larsen, 1969 16) However, Helga fails in her insatiable quest for control over her self-identity. Passing is a novel about Irene Redfield, light-skinned African American protagonist and Clare who use their light skin color to pass as white whenever they want. Larson says of Irene: " They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a negro" (Larsen, 2004 8). Both are part of the upper class Harlem community but they are constantly at logger heads due to their dissenting views about social identity. In both of her books, Larsen highlights vividly the struggle of non-white women during the Harlem Renaissance. She picks from her own experiences as the only black member in her family. In her search for identity, she moves from Fisk to Copenhagen and then to New York, where she finally finds a place to call home, Harlem (Christian 25). The characters in her novels also traverse the country, sometimes going to Europe in such of identity and recognition for which they so crave. The hopelessness at the end of the novels just shows how the gender and race situation was during this time. It was evidently hard, almost impossible for women of color to find a place they could comfortably feel welcome and

happy (Wall 18). Although her writing career was short and abrupt, there is no denying that Nella Larson did make a huge contribution to the Harlem Renaissance. Her two published novels are a perfect highlight of the struggles of half white/half black women who lived in the middle and upper middle class of Harlem during the 1920s and early 1930s (Larsen 1969, 33 and Larsen 2004, 24). Their search for self identity in a racially divided America and their quest for recognition as women of substance are subjects that Larsen deals with very clearly and with considerable authority (Wall 22). However, the ending of her books is quite tragic as none of her major characters actually finds what they have been seeking for. Perhaps this was how the women of Harlem felt then, that they would never find recognition due to their skin color and gender. Her description of women's sexuality, race issues and the emerging African-American middle class cuts deep into what society expected and what was actually happening in the 1920s and early 30s in New York, specifically in Harlem (Christian 43). Larsen discontinued her writing career after allegations were leveled against her, claiming that he had plagiarized some material in one of her books. Even though the allegations were found to be false, Larsen decided to concentrate on nursing. She died in 1964 in New York (Christian 76).

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