

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

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October 20, 2025. Larsen (2).

review

- ▶ “passing” as a trending topic in the 1920s-30s (segregation, “miscegenation”)
 - ▶ also: look words up! oed.com, greensdictofslang.com
- ▶ the narrative: EN[CF(Irene)]
 - ▶ focalization is a relationship between perceiver and perceived
 - ▶ “third person limited”: okay, but limited [how?](#)
- ▶ failures of the gaze (especially Irene’s): desire, misrecognition
 - ▶ Clare’s “so very seductive” beauty itself repels understanding
- ▶ city life (but which one?)
- ▶ time...passing: the prose absorbs Irene’s confusion

literary history moment (I)

- ▶ “Certain paths seem to lead to fertile land, others to the dust and the desert” (Woolf): which is *Passing*?
 - ▶ Recall: restricted production (James, Joyce, Woolf) differentiated from large-scale commercial fiction and commercial genres like the love story
 - ▶ Recall: what’s modern?

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Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size. (I)

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three.... Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. (78)

bringing people together

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. On the floor and the walls the sinking sun threw long, fantastic shadows. (72)

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Time with Brian. Time without him. It was gone, leaving in its place an almost uncontrollable impulse to laugh, to scream, to hurl things about. (72)

“Rich man, poor man,
Beggar man, thief,
Doctor, lawyer,
Indian chief.”

An old nursery rhyme popped into her head. She turned to Wentworth, who had just taken a seat beside her, and recited it:

“Rich man, poor man,
Beggar man, thief,
Doctor, lawyer,
Indian chief.” (59)

Julia let her eyes wander over the moving crowd. Young men, old men, young women, older women, slim girls, fat women, thin men, stout men, glided by. The old nursery rhyme came into her mind. She repeated it to George in a singsong tone:

“Rich man, poor man,
Beggar man, thief,
Doctor, lawyer,
Indian chief.”



“Allen Semi” [Nella (Larsen) Imes], “The Wrong Man,” *Young's Realistic Stories Magazine*, 50, no. 5 (January 1926): 244. Unsourced text available on [Wikisource](#). Image: *Young's Realistic Stories* 50, no. 2 (October 1925): cover, [philsp.com](#).

inevitable melodrama?

This, Irene told her, was the year 1927 in the city of New York, and hundreds of white people of Hugh Wentworth's type came to affairs in Harlem, more all the time. (54)

Clare Kendry! So that was it! Impossible. It couldn't be. (70)

There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. (91)

critical crux

Much more than *Quicksand*, this novel adheres to the pattern [of “tragic mulatto” fiction]—the victim caught forever betwixt and between until she finds in death the only freedom she can know. The inevitable melodrama weakens the credibility of the narrative and diverts attention from the author’s more compelling concerns. Its plot still reveals something of the predicament of the middle class black woman, and the book itself illuminates problems facing the black woman novelist.

Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 132, [EBSCOhost](#).

Larsen uses her titular subject matter to blast wide holes in established convention, and the mysterious murder of the white/black woman is absolutely essential to the novel.

George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006), 298, [ProQuest](#).

discussion

- ▶ Work on possible explanations of the ending. Consider:
 - ▶ What narrative problems does it solve?
 - ▶ What contradictions remain unresolved?
 - ▶ What elements anticipate this ending?
 - ▶ What elements make it a surprise?

It is a peculiar sensation, this [double-consciousness](#), this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essay and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 3, [HathiTrust](#).

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Her-self. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. (78)

For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged to this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted. (87)

the racial mountain

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926: 694.

At that, Clare laughed for a long time, little musical trills following one another in sequence after sequence. (55)

But Clare Kendry had begun to cry, audibly, with no effort at restraint, and for no reason that Irene could discover. (65)

next

- ▶ Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 3–67.