

# The Scars of Racism

*by* Abigale Baluta

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### The Scars of Racism

“My old man died in a fine big house. My ma died in a shack. I wonder where I’m gonna die, being neither white nor black?” (Hughes). Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* relays the story of Helga Crane as she navigates life in the 1920s as a racially mixed woman. Both the author and her protagonist were born to a Caucasian mother and African American fathers who left early in their childhoods. Thus, Helga is the fictional embodiment of Larsen’s personal struggles with race and identity. Hypocrisy, rejection, and the distant fascination of others with her “exoticism” plague Helga as she tries to immerse herself into each side of her heritage. *Quicksand* mirrors the experiences of many during the Harlem Renaissance, a time of flourishing African American culture and independence. Furthermore, the novel emphasizes the mental battle of finding one’s identity in a discriminatory world. In her notable and powerful writing style, Larsen confronts how individual acts of stereotyping and discrimination can degrade general society. It is this feature, above all, that makes *Quicksand* a classic.

Helga resists conforming to different stereotypes presented throughout *Quicksand*, which demonstrates a spirit of bravery and independence. For example, Helga chooses to leave Harlem after realizing that one of her closest friends, Anna, has a warped view of racial equality. While at a dinner party, surrounded by people of all races, Anna voices her disapproval of Audrey Denney, an African American woman mingling with both black and white men. When Helga questions why Anna feels Audrey’s behavior is wrong, she states, “Because she goes

around with white people . . . and they know she's colored" (Larsen 55). While Anna is obsessed with fighting racism, she opposes Audrey and claims, "That's what's the matter with the Negro race. They won't stick together" (Larsen 57).  At this point, Helga feels disgust towards her friend for claiming to support equality while perpetuating the stereotype that each race should keep to itself. In an  of defiance, Helga does not hesitate to move to Denmark. While a new life with her Danish family suits her at first, she begins to feel discontented with the Dane's perception of her. She is not hated, but she is still an outcast and is viewed as, ". . . A decoration. A curio. A peacock" (Larsen 67). Confronted yet again with stereotypical reactions to her "exotic" nature, Helga chooses to resist by leaving Denmark. While the Danish people's reaction to her mixed background initially seems more positive than the opinions of others in America, Helga eventually sees that she is not perceived as an individual, but as an object to be admired. The different stereotypes surrounding her race blind others from truly discovering more about Helga outside of her ethnicity. 

Helga's continual struggle with finding her sense of identity throughout the novel strongly resonates with readers.  In many individuals in the 1920s claimed to support equality, these same people did not support the uniqueness of African American culture. For example, a visiting pastor to Naxos University preaches a sermon about how wonderful African American culture is, while also telling the students that they should be "satisfied in the estate with which they had been called, hewers of wood and drawers of water" (Larsen 3). His hypocritical words and the similar opinion of others at Naxos bring Helga to the conclusion that "These people yapped loudly of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve spontaneous laughter" (Larsen 17). Helga senses this inconsistency because it continuously appears in her own life; she

is told to hide her racial identity while still battling an internal struggle to come to terms with her heritage. As she travels to New York with a temporary employer, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, she advises Helga, “. . . by the way, I wouldn’t mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won’t understand it, and after all it’s your own business” (Larsen 39). Helga chooses to leave Naxos’s hypocritical environment to escape the idea that individuals should only express a part of themselves, only to yet again be told to hide a part of her heritage from others. Helga’s constant search for personal identity is thwarted by the push and pull of the different identities in each side of her heritage, a challenge that many readers experience and understand.

Larsen’s descriptive and almost stream-of-consciousness style of writing enlightens readers to the struggle of racial and identity issues. Larsen’s writing makes the reader feel detached, much like Helga herself feels detached from the people around her. Larsen’s unique ability to use her writing style to convey a powerful story also forces the reader to experience the frustration of never feeling a part of the outside world. Helga’s stream-of-consciousness dominates the book, giving the reader an inside look at the emotional side of constantly facing racism. One example of Helga’s mental battles can be seen at the end of the book, as Helga sinks into a state of metaphorical death after the birth of her third child: “Nothing penetrated the kind darkness into which her bruised spirit had retreated” (Larsen 118). In only a few pages, readers feel Helga becoming more hopeless and detached from reality as her mind reaches its breaking point. Trying to be the perfect wife of a pastor and a mother of three becomes too overwhelming for Helga as she continues to face criticism. Larsen leaves readers with a jarring perception of discrimination’s deteriorating consequences, exemplifying the power of *Quicksand*’s distinct inner monologue style of narrative expression.

*Quicksand* has stood the test of time by confronting issues of racism during the Harlem Renaissance that hold relevance today. Larsen's *Quicksand* was one of Harlem's many groundbreaking literary works that help recount the realities of living in the 1920s as a mixed individual. Helga's arrival in Harlem introduces her to a more open and cultured environment, one to which she is unaccustomed. Helga gains a "... sense of freedom, a release from the feeling of smallness which had hedged her in during her sorry, unchildlike childhood among hostile white folk in Chicago, and later during her uncomfortable sojourn among snobbish black folk in Naxos" (Larsen 43). Harlem becomes a temporary escape from discrimination for Helga. However, the racism that was so prevalent during the early 1920s continues to plague society today. As Writer Luciane Oliveira Muller states, "A hundred and fifty two years have passed after the Emancipation Proclamation in The United states . . .but we still feel the consequences of those dark times of bondage" (Müller *Quicksand* conveys a personal account of an individual dealing with these social issues, which offers present-day readers a tool to further educate themselves and others on how to bring change to current society.

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* introduces readers to the life of Helga Crane, a life that reflects the struggles of so many during the 1900s and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Helga's rebellious spirit and her fight against discrimination inspire the same brave spirit in others. Furthermore, Larsen's stream-of-consciousness style powerfully depicts the struggle of finding one's identity in a world so eager to define what is acceptable about a person. By continuing to read *Quicksand*, individuals are not only challenged to learn more about how discrimination and racism can be improved, but are also left with a memorable, heart-rending account about how scarring these negative influences are for others similar to Helga.

## Works Cited

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# The Scars of Racism

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## GRADEMARK REPORT

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### FINAL GRADE

38 /40

### GENERAL COMMENTS

#### Instructor

OMG, Abigale. This paper actually blew me away. It is SUCH a relief to read this after slogging through papers riddled with mistakes in grammar and diction! You have read the book with attention and genuine engagement, and you have responded to it in a way that is sensitive, human, and scholarly all at once. You're really good at this! I'm very impressed! There are a few tiny weaknesses here. The most notable of these is that you don't transition between ideas. Your ideas ARE connected, of course but you sometimes drop the thread of your thesis and then attempt to pick it up later instead of keeping it moving throughout the essay. The other weakness is that your paragraph about prose style is a little "fuzzy." I think you can sharpen it up with just a sentence or two that directly explains how stream-of-consciousness reflects Helga's overburdened mind. Overall, though, this essay is a resounding A. Thanks for working so hard on this.

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### PAGE 1

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#### Comment 1

Perfect MLA format! Thank you!



#### Comment 2

I love the opening quote... but you have failed to connect it sufficiently to your next sentence. You need a segue of some kind.



#### Comment 3

Keep your sentence parallel: ... were born to Caucasian mothers and African American fathers...



#### Comment 4

It's not exactly "in her notable and powerful writing style" that she does this. I think you need to replace "in" with a different preposition or sentence opener.



### Comment 5

Your thesis is very clear. Good girl!

PAGE 2

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### Comment 6

Your quotes are perfectly incorporated. Brava!



### Comment 7

You're kind of leaping from one example to another here. The juxtaposition of these two incidents implies that the first one directly *caused* the second one, which I don't think is the case.



### Comment 8

You have closed off your point about Helga's rebellion against stereotypes, but you haven't quite connected it back with your thesis.



### Comment 9

Your topic sentence is very clear, but there is no real transition. (You could have transitioned easily if your previous paragraph had mentioned resonating with readers).

PAGE 3

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### Comment 10

The pronoun "she" is slightly ambiguous here.



### Comment 11

Yes! Here you have closed off your point very effectively!



### Comment 12

Again, a transition is absent here.



### Comment 13

I'm not sure what an "almost stream-of-consciousness style of writing" is.



### Comment 14

I get this point, but I don't think you have fully explained how the detached writing style *per se* contributes to the novel's power and status as a classic.



### **Comment 15**

You need a transition!



### **Comment 16**

The title "writer" (alas) does not get a capital letter. It SHOULD... but your capitalization here is improper.



### **Comment 17**

Great! You have used an outside source very effectively here.



### **Comment 18**

It's a bit awkward and confusing to roll these two centuries together. What about the 20th?



### **Comment 19**

Wow. Resounding conclusion!