

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

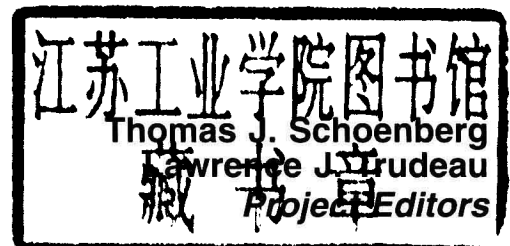
TCLC

200

Volume 200

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



GALE
CENGAGE Learning™

Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn • Waterville, Maine • London

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 200

Project Editors: Thomas J. Schoenberg and
Lawrence J. Trudeau

Editorial: Dana Ramel Barnes, Tom Burns,
Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kathy D. Darrow,
Kristen A. Dorsch, Jeffrey W. Hunter,
Jelena O. Krstović, Michelle Lee, Russel
Whitaker

Data Capture: Frances Monroe, Gwen
Tucker

Indexing Services: Laurie Andriot

Rights and Acquisitions: Margaret
Chamberlain-Gaston, Matt Derda, Tracie
Richardson

Composition and Electronic Capture: Gary
Oudersluys

Manufacturing: Cynde Bishop

Associate Product Manager: Marc Cormier

© 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may be reproduced, transmitted, stored, or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including but not limited to photocopying, recording, scanning, digitizing, taping, Web distribution, information networks, or information storage and retrieval systems, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This publication is a creative work fully protected by all applicable copyright laws, as well as by misappropriation, trade secret, unfair competition, and other applicable laws. The authors and editors of this work have added value to the underlying factual material herein through one or more of the following: unique and original selection, coordination, expression, arrangement, and classification of the information.

For product information and technology assistance, contact us at
Gale Customer Support, 1-800-877-4253.

For permission to use material from this text or product,
submit all requests online at www.cengage.com/permissions.

Further permissions questions can be emailed to
permissionrequest@cengage.com

While every effort has been made to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, Gale, a part of Cengage Learning, does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-0-7876-9975-8

ISBN-10: 0-7876-9975-6

ISSN 0276-8178

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series

For criticism on	Consult these Gale series
Authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999	<i>CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM (CLC)</i>
Authors who died between 1900 and 1999	<i>TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERARY CRITICISM (TCLC)</i>
Authors who died between 1800 and 1899	<i>NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE CRITICISM (NCLC)</i>
Authors who died between 1400 and 1799	<i>LITERATURE CRITICISM FROM 1400 TO 1800 (LC)</i> <i>SHAKESPEAREAN CRITICISM (SC)</i>
Authors who died before 1400	<i>CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL LITERATURE CRITICISM (CMLC)</i>
Authors of books for children and young adults	<i>CHILDREN'S LITERATURE REVIEW (CLR)</i>
Dramatists	<i>DRAMA CRITICISM (DC)</i>
Poets	<i>POETRY CRITICISM (PC)</i>
Short story writers	<i>SHORT STORY CRITICISM (SSC)</i>
Literary topics and movements	<i>HARLEM RENAISSANCE: A GALE CRITICAL COMPANION (HR)</i> <i>THE BEAT GENERATION: A GALE CRITICAL COMPANION (BG)</i> <i>FEMINISM IN LITERATURE: A GALE CRITICAL COMPANION (FL)</i> <i>GOTHIC LITERATURE: A GALE CRITICAL COMPANION (GL)</i>
Asian American writers of the last two hundred years	<i>ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE (AAL)</i>
Black writers of the past two hundred years	<i>BLACK LITERATURE CRITICISM (BLC)</i> <i>BLACK LITERATURE CRITICISM SUPPLEMENT (BLCS)</i>
Hispanic writers of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries	<i>HISPANIC LITERATURE CRITICISM (HLC)</i> <i>HISPANIC LITERATURE CRITICISM SUPPLEMENT (HLCS)</i>
Native North American writers and orators of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries	<i>NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE (NNAL)</i>
Major authors from the Renaissance to the present	<i>WORLD LITERATURE CRITICISM, 1500 TO THE PRESENT (WLC)</i> <i>WORLD LITERATURE CRITICISM SUPPLEMENT (WLCS)</i>

Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name is given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the name of its author.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *TCLC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *TCLC*, VOLUME 200, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

African American Review, v. 32, fall, 1998 for “Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and the Fading Subject” by Nell Sullivan. Copyright © 1998 Nell Sullivan. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*Annali d’Italianistica*, v. 19, 2001; v. 22, 2004. Copyright © 2001, 2004 by Annali d’Italianistica, Inc. Both reproduced by permission.—*Black American Literature Forum*, v. 20, spring/summer, for “Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen’s Novels” by Cheryl A. Wall. Copyright © 1986 Indiana State University. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and author.—*Books Abroad*, v. 44, autumn, 1970. Copyright © 1970 by the University of Oklahoma Press. Reproduced by permission.—*Bucknell Review*, v. XXXIX, 1995. Copyright © 1995 by Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*Callaloo*, v. 15, fall, 1992. Copyright © 1992 by Charles H. Rowell. The Johns Hopkins University Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*CLA Journal*, v. XVI, March, 1973; v. XXXVIII, September, 1994; v. XL, June, 1997; v. XLII, September, 1998. Copyright © 1973, 1994, 1997, 1998 by The College Language Association. All rights reserved. All used by permission of The College Language Association.—*Criticism*, v. 45, fall, 2003. Copyright © 2004 Wayne State University Press. Reproduced with permission of the Wayne State University Press.—*Forum Italicum*, v. 26, supp., 1992. Copyright © 1992 by *Forum Italicum*. Reproduced by permission.—*Italian Studies*, v. XXVIII, 1973. Reproduced by permission.—*Italianist*, 1996, 2000. Both reproduced by permission.—*Journal X*, v. 5, autumn 2000-spring 2001. Copyright © 2001 by the University of Mississippi. Reproduced by permission.—*Matatu*, v. 1, 1987; v. 23-24, 2001. Copyright © 1987, 2001 by Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam. Both reproduced by permission.—*MELUS*, v. 30, fall, 2005. Copyright *MELUS: The Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 2005. Reproduced by permission.—*Modern Language Studies*, v. 32, fall, 2002 for “Her ‘Nig’: Returning the Gaze of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” by Lori Harrison-Kahan. Copyright © 2002 Northeast Modern Language Association. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—*Novel*, v. 27, spring, 1994. Copyright © 1994 NOVEL Corp. Reproduced with permission.—*Pacific Coast Philology*, v. XXI, November, 1986 for “Giuseppe Ungaretti’s *Sentimento del Tempo*: Baroque Rome and the Experience of Time” by Margaret Brose. Copyright © 1986 Philological Association of the Pacific Coast. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—*Philological Papers*, v. 38, 1992 for “Passing Beyond: The Novels of Nella Larsen” by T. S. McMillin. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—*Poetry*, v. LXXXVIII, June, 1956 for “Ungaretti’s *La Terra Promessa*: A Commentary and Some Examples” by Allen Mandelbaum. Copyright © 1956 by Modern Poetry Association, renewed 1984. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*Soundings*, v. LXXX, winter, 1997. Copyright © 1997 by The Society for Values in Higher Education and The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Reproduced by permission.—*South Carolina Review*, v. 34, spring, 2002. Copyright © 2002 by Clemson University. Reproduced by permission.—*Twentieth-Century Literature*, v. 52, spring, 2006. Copyright © 2006 Hofstra University. Reproduced by permission.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *TCLC*, VOLUME 200, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Cambon, Glauco. From “Ungaretti’s ‘Lindoro di Deserto’: Jongleur of the Self,” in *Italian Literature, Roots and Branches: Essays in Honor of Thomas Goddard Bergin*. Edited by Giose Rimanelli and Kenneth John Atchity. Yale University Press, 1976. Copyright © 1976 by Yale University. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Davis, Thadious M. From an Introduction to *Passing*, by Nella Larsen. Penguin Books, 1997. Introduction and notes copyright © 1997 Thadious M. Davis. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.—Eke, Maureen N. From “The Novel: *Sozaboy*: A Novel in Rotten English,” in *Ken Saro-Wiwa: Writer and Political Activist*. Edited by Craig W. McLuckie and Aubrey McPhail. Copyright © 2000 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved. Used with permission of the publisher.—Garuba, Harry. From “Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* and the Logic of Minority Discourse,” in *Ogo-*

ni's Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria. Edited by Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah. Africa World Press, 1998. Copyright © 1998 Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Gloster, Hugh M. From *Negro Voices in American Fiction*. University of North Carolina Press, 1948. Copyright © 1948 The University of North Carolina Press. Renewed 1975 by Hugh M. Gloster. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher.—Goldsmith, Meredith. From "Shopping to Pass, Passing to Shop: Bodily Self-Fashioning in the Fiction of Nella Larsen," in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*. Edited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson. Rutgers University Press, 2001. Copyright © 2001 by Meredith Goldsmith. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of Rutgers, The State University.—Howard, Lillie P. From "'A Lack Somewhere': Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and the Harlem Renaissance," in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*. Edited by Victor A. Kramer. AMS Press, 1987. Copyright © 1987 by AMS Press, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Inyama, N. F. From *New Trends & Generations in African Literature*. Edited by Eldred Durosimi Jones and Marjorie Jones. Africa World Press, 1996. Copyright © 1996 James Curry Ltd. Reproduced by permission.—Jones, Frederic J. From *Giuseppe Ungaretti: Poet and Critic*. Edinburgh University Press, 1977. Copyright © 1977 Frederic J. Jones. Reproduced by permission.—McDowell, Deborah E. From an Introduction to *Quicksand and Passing* by Nella Larsen. Edited by Deborah E. McDowell. Rutgers University Press, 1986. Copyright © 1986 by Rutgers, The State University. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press.—McLendon, Jacquelyn Y. From "Self-Representation as Art in the Novels of Nella Larsen," in *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction: An Essay Collection*. Edited by Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall. Garland Publishing, 1991. Copyright © 1991 Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall. All rights reserved. Republished with permission of Garland Publishing, Inc., and the author.—Ojaide, Tanure. From "The Poetry: *Songs in a Time of War*," in *Ken Saro-Wiwa: Writer and Political Activist*. Edited by Craig W. McLuckie and Aubrey McPhail. Copyright © 2000 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved. Used with permission of the publisher.—Raji, Wumi. From "Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Four Farcical Plays* and the Postcolonial Imagination," in *Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Human Rights in a "Post"-Colonial World*. Edited by Peter H. Marsden and Geoffrey V. Davis. Rodopi, 2004. Copyright © 2004 Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam-New York, NY. Reproduced by permission.—Schulze-Engler, Frank. From "Civil Critiques: Satire and the Politics of Democratic Transition in Ken Saro-Wiwa's Novels," in *Ogoni's Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria*. Edited by Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah. Africa World Press, 1998. Copyright © 1998 Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Wilkinson, Jane. From "'Second-New': Serialization and Circulation in *Basi and Company*," in *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*. Edited by Jacqueline Bardolph. Rodopi, 2001. Copyright © 2001 Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA. Reproduced by permission.

Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

Barbara M. Bibel

Librarian
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Dr. Toby Burrows

Principal Librarian
The Scholars' Centre
University of Western Australia Library
Nedlands, Western Australia

Celia C. Daniel

Associate Reference Librarian
Howard University Libraries
Washington, D.C.

David M. Durant

Reference Librarian
Joyner Library
East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

Nancy T. Guidry

Librarian
Bakersfield Community College
Bakersfield, California

Heather Martin

Arts & Humanities Librarian
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library
Birmingham, Alabama

Susan Mikula

Librarian
Indiana Free Library
Indiana, Pennsylvania

Thomas Nixon

Humanities Reference Librarian
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis
Library
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mark Schumacher

Jackson Library
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro, North Carolina

Gwen Scott-Miller

Assistant Director
Sno-Isle Regional Library System
Marysville, Washington

Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Nella Larsen 1891-1964	1
<i>American novelist and short story writer</i>	
Ken Saro-Wiwa 1941-1995	200
<i>Nigerian novelist, playwright, short story writer, poet, essayist, juvenilia writer, and diarist</i>	
Giuseppe Ungaretti 1888-1970	261
<i>Italian poet, prose writer, and translator</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 375

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 487

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 501

TCLC-200 Title Index 507

Nella Larsen

1891-1964

American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Larsen's life and works. For additional information on her career, see *CLC*, Volume 37.

INTRODUCTION

Larsen's two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), focus on issues of race and gender. Her protagonists are, like Larsen herself, mixed-race, middle-class women. The novels follow the protagonists' search for fulfillment in life as they contend with identity issues stemming from their marginalized racial and gender status.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Discrepancies exist in biographical accounts of Larsen, largely because she chose to reveal information about her life on her own terms, and at times gave fanciful replies to inquiries about her background. The following biographical information is generally considered reliable. Larsen was born in Chicago, Illinois, on April 13, 1891, to a Danish mother and a Black West Indian father. When Larsen was two years old, her father died, and shortly thereafter her mother married a Danish man and bore another daughter. Larsen attended a private elementary school whose students were predominantly of Scandinavian or German descent. She began attending secondary school in Chicago, and at age sixteen she was sent to Nashville to attend Fisk University's Normal School, a predominantly Black high school, for one year. She then moved to Denmark, where she lived for three years, visiting with relatives and auditing courses at the University of Copenhagen. After returning to the U.S., she entered a three-year nursing course at Lincoln Hospital in New York City, graduating in 1915. Later that year, she moved to Alabama and briefly served as assistant superintendent of nurses at Tuskegee Institute. She returned to New York in 1916, working as a nurse at Lincoln Hospital until 1918, and then at the City Department of Health. On May 3, 1919 she married Dr. Elmer Samuel Imes, a prominent Black physicist. In 1921 she resigned from her job, and in January of 1922 she began a new career, as a librarian at the New York Library. In January of 1926 she resigned.

She began working on her first novel, *Quicksand*, in 1926 or possibly earlier. When she completed it, her friend Carl van Vechten, author of the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven*, presented the manuscript to his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, who agreed to publish it and requested additional manuscripts from Larsen. *Quicksand* was published on March 20, 1928. Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, was published some thirteen months later, on April 26, 1929. She applied for and received a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in creative writing, becoming the first Black woman granted this award. In 1930 Larsen's short story "Sanctuary" was published in *Forum* magazine, and shortly thereafter a reader suggested to *Forum* that "Sanctuary" bore a striking resemblance to "Mrs. Adis," a short story by Sheila Kaye-Smith, published in 1922. The magazine's editors backed Larsen's assertion that she did not plagiarize, but the incident haunted Larsen. She went to Spain to work on her Guggenheim project—a novel comparing the Black experience in America with that in Europe—but, apparently weighted down by the plagiarism accusation as well as a recent discovery that her husband had been unfaithful, she was unable to produce a book. Following her return to the U.S., she continued her effort to write, but did not complete anything. She and Imes divorced in 1933, and after his death in 1941 Larsen resumed her nursing career, working at Bethel Hospital in Brooklyn until her death on March 30, 1964.

MAJOR WORKS

Both of Larsen's novels feature middle-class, mixed-race, female protagonists who search for fulfillment and contend with identity issues. *Quicksand* follows the fortunes of Helga Crane, the daughter of a Danish woman and a Black man. Helga restlessly searches for contentment in life, periodically moving to various locales when she feels dissatisfied with her life and environment. The novel opens with Helga's resignation from her teaching position at Naxos, a Black college in the South. The school's principal, Dr. Robert Anderson, implores her to stay, but Helga, frustrated by the school's complacent attitude toward racial segregation, will not be convinced. Halfheartedly engaged to fellow teacher James Vayle, she ends her relationship with him and travels to Chicago. There, she hopes to connect with her uncle Peter, her mother's brother, but is rebuffed by his racist new wife. Helga leaves Chicago upon accepting a job assisting Anne Gray, a wealthy young widow

living in New York. Arriving in Harlem, Helga enjoys the vibrant culture there and is initially happy, but the feeling fades. A chance encounter with Dr. Anderson imparts within her a vague yearning. Her restlessness is subdued when she receives a \$5,000 check enclosed in a letter from her uncle Peter, encouraging her to travel to Copenhagen. There, she stays with her aunt Katrina and her uncle, Herr Dahl, who love her yet regard her, as does their society in general, as an exotic foreigner. When Helga receives a marriage proposal from Axel Olsen—an artist who paints her portrait and clearly objectifies her—she refuses him. Realizing that she misses Black society, Helga returns to New York City, but is unhappy there, especially upon the discovery that Dr. Anderson and Anne Gray are married. When he rejects a romantic overture from Helga, she is distraught and goes to a church, seeking inner peace. There, her unkempt appearance and red dress suggest to the congregation that she needs to be “saved.” Their intense concern for her soul moves her greatly. She soon marries the visiting pastor who conducted the service, Rev. Pleasant Green, and they move to his native Alabama. Initially, marriage and small-town life bring Helga serenity and a feeling of relief, but she soon feels stifled. Motherhood brings her little joy and makes her feel trapped. As the novel ends, Helga is giving birth to her fifth child, before recovering from the birth of her fourth.

Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, centers on Clare Kendry Bellew and Irene Westover Redfield, who were childhood friends in Chicago. The story is told from Irene's perspective. As the novel opens, Irene and Clare meet by chance while having tea in the whites-only rooftop restaurant of a hotel and, because they have not been in contact for a long time, they barely recognize each other. Both women are biracial, and Clare, a light-skinned blonde who was raised by her white aunts, has been passing as white for years, unbeknownst to her wealthy white husband, John Bellew, who is an avowed racist. Irene, who is also light-skinned, generally identifies herself as Black and is married to a successful Black physician, Brian Redfield. Irene is conventional and committed to her social standing, while Clare is more daring. Clare attempts to renew her friendship with the ambivalent Irene, who is uncomfortable with Clare's identification as white. At a tea party at Clare's apartment, Irene meets John for the first time and he assumes that she is white. Irene is aghast and personally insulted when John jokingly suggests that his wife's skin has darkened over the years, referring to Clare as his “Nig.” Irene does not express her rage or reveal to him that she and Clare are biracial, unable to bear “the idea of being ejected from any place.” Though Clare greatly enjoys the lifestyle her marriage has brought her, she risks discovery of her Black heritage—and therefore risks her marriage and, consequently, the up-bringing of her daughter in an intact and privileged

family—by visiting the Redfields and frequenting Harlem. Irene, who is fascinated by the beautiful and bold Clare, begins to suspect that Brian is attracted to her, and begins to view Clare as a threat to her marriage. At a party in Harlem, John storms in to confront Clare about suspicions that she is Black. Irene runs to Clare, who is standing in front of an open window, and lays a hand on her arm. In the next moment, Clare is dead, lying on the ground below.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Quicksand and, to a lesser extent, *Passing* received an enthusiastic response from contemporary critics. Many reviewers praised *Quicksand* as a finely written and sensitive first novel, and both works were lauded for their characterization and form. Some critics, however, faulted the novels' dramatic endings, especially that of *Passing*, asserting that the death of Clare was too convenient and unconvincing. Overall, Larsen was considered a writer of great promise. After the Wall Street crash of 1929, ushering in the Great Depression, both novels went out of print and critical attention to them diminished. Following the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements, Larsen's writings were rediscovered and interest resurged. Much recent discussion of both novels focuses on the psychology of Larsen's protagonists and on Larsen's treatment of race, gender roles, sexuality, and social class.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Quicksand (novel) 1928

Passing (novel) 1929

“Sanctuary” (short story) 1930; published in journal *Forum*.

CRITICISM

Amsterdam News (review date 16 May 1928)

SOURCE: “Miscegenation? Bah!” *Amsterdam News* 19, no. 25 (16 May 1928): 16.

[In the following review, the critic praises *Quicksand*'s style but expresses ambivalence toward its plot, particularly Helga Crane's decision to marry Pleasant Green.]

It was rumored recently that a Harlem lady was about to publish a novel on the theme of miscegenation. It was expected with eager curiosity; people wondered whether it would be pro or con. They need not have been excited, for the subject of miscegenation is not worth colored people's worry. Let white people do the worrying; they are the ones who bring it about. We might as well worry because water does not flow uphill.

The expected book [*Quicksand*] has arrived and miscegenation is in it. The book is neither pro nor con. It is not loaded down with lengthy arguments on the good or evil of race mixtures: it is neither a plea to be taken into the white race nor a long scream of hate for everything Caucasian; it is a story, and mostly a well-told one.

In her determination to keep to her story the author pares it down more than is necessary. There are places in the book where an author might be forgiven for spreading out into description or philosophizing, but this author yields not to temptation. She cleaves to the line of a personal narrative.

Helga Crane, the heroine, is the child of an American Negro and a beautiful Danish woman. This is original and enlightening. It is original because in a mulatto's parentage the father is generally white and the mother colored. It is enlightening because an American publisher has dared to issue a book in which a Nordic white woman voluntarily has a child by a Negro. And the unhappy result of the union is due not to the miscegenation but to the personal character of the man. If Helga's mother had married a decent colored man she would have been happy. But then this story would not have been written.

Helga is one of those unfortunates who are born and die dissatisfied. The story begins with her teaching English at Naxos, a Negro school in the South. She stands it for a while, but at length her gorge rises at the narrow life, with its smugness and cant. She quits the place in midterm and goes back to Chicago, where she was born. Her white uncle's white wife is aghast at the idea of a Negro niece, so Helga leaves Chicago and comes to New York under favorable conditions. The favorable conditions are—but this is a book review, not a book.

Soon Helga begins to hate New York. The reader, who has sympathized with her so far, wonders if there is any place this side of heaven, or in heaven, where she will be contented. By a romantic turn of fate which all girls dream of and few experience, she goes to Copenhagen, Denmark, the home of her mother.

There she finds that not only on the question of race, but in everything else, Denmark is different from America. The very things that make her a social outcast

in America make her a social triumph in Denmark. For a while she lives in a maiden's Paradise. But soon her general dissatisfaction with life asserts itself, she grows homesick for black faces, and an annoying experience brings matters to a head, and she seizes on an excuse for returning to America.

In the meantime, the man she has always secretly loved has married her best friend. But Helga is still in his blood, and at a party, stimulated by forbidden spirits, he loses his head for a moment. So does Helga. They make an assignation, and Helga blissfully contemplates adultery. They meet and—believe it or not—the man gets cold feet. In a rage she slaps him in the face. Who wouldn't?

Helga concludes that the thing she has always missed, in Naxos, Chicago, Copenhagen and New York, is biological fulfilment. She has certainly traveled a long way to find out such a simple thing. Then comes the incredible part of the story, which has thus far held the reader by its fidelity to life. Helga's intelligence deserts her; she snatches what she wants, not, indeed, in the worst way, but one of the worst ways for a girl of her training, aspirations and tendencies. Thus she finds herself in a bog, a quicksand, from which there is no escape. For the rest of her days she will beat her life out against the walls of a prison.

The last part of the story, though interesting, is a disappointment. The reader has not been artistically prepared for it. Given such a character as Helga, he finds it hard to fit her into such a picture. He would find it more logical if she had become a courtesan, or at least something by which she might have satisfied her aesthetic tastes. Some girls might have gone down into drab ugliness, but not Helga, unless she was forced. And she was not forced.

One of the best things about this story is the author's style, especially in the first chapters. It is fresh, clear and limpid; in its easy, natural, crystal grace there is no striving for effect. If the plot were as good as the style it would raise the story considerably. One feels that a much stronger story could have been written around Helga's Danish mother and the Negro gambler who was Helga's father.

W. E. Burghardt Du Bois (review date July 1929)

SOURCE: Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. Review of *Passing*, by Nella Larsen. *Crisis* 36, no. 7 (July 1929): 234, 248-49.

[In the following review, Du Bois asserts that *Passing* is "one of the finest novels of the year" but will be disregarded because of its provocative theme.]

Nella Larsen's *Passing* is one of the finest novels of the year. If it did not treat a forbidden subject—the inter-marriage of a stodgy middle-class white man to a very beautiful and selfish octoroon—it would have an excellent chance to be hailed, selected and recommended. As it is, it will probably be given the “silence”, with only the commendation of word of mouth. But what of that? It is a good close-knit story, moving along surely but with enough leisure to set out seven delicately limned characters. Above all, the thing is done with studied and singularly successful art. Nella Larsen is learning how to write and acquiring style, and she is doing it very simply and clearly.

Three colored novelists have lately essayed this intriguing and ticklish subject of a person's right to conceal the fact that he had a grandparent of Negro descent. It is all a petty, silly matter of no real importance which another generation will comprehend with great difficulty. But today, and in the minds of most white Americans, it is a matter of tremendous moral import. One may deceive as to killing, stealing and adultery, but you must tell your friend that you're “colored”, or suffer a very material hell fire in this world, if not in the next. The reason of all this, is of course that so many white people in America either know or fear that they have Negro blood. My friend, who is in the Record Department of Massachusetts, found a lady's ancestry the other day. Her colored grandfather was a soldier in the Revolutionary War, and through him she might join the D. A. R. But she asked “confidentially”, could that matter of “his—er—color be left out?”

Walter White in *Flight* records the facts of an excursion of a New Orleans girl from the colored race to the white race and back again. Jessie Fauset in *Plum Bun* considers the spiritual experiences and rewards of such an excursion, but the story of the excursion fades into unimportance beside that historical document of the description of a colored Philadelphia family. That characterization ought to live in literature.

Nella Larsen attempts quite a different thing. She explains just what “passing” is: the psychology of the thing; the reaction of it on friend and enemy. It is a difficult task, but she attacks the problem fearlessly and with consummate art. The great problem is under what circumstances would a person take a step like this and how would they feel about it? And how would their fellows feel?

So here is the story: Irene, who is faintly colored, is faint with shopping. She goes to a hotel roof for rest and peace and tea. That's all. Far from being ashamed of herself, she is proud of her dark husband and lovely boys. Moreover, she is deceiving no one. If they wish to recognize her as Spanish, then that is their good for-

tune or misfortune. She is resting and getting cool and drinking tea. Then suddenly she faces an entirely different kind of problem. She sees Clare and Clare recognizes her and pounces on her. Clare is brilliantly beautiful. She is colored in a different way. She has been rather brutally kicked into the white world, and has married a white man, almost in self-defense. She has a daughter, but she is lonesome and eyes her playmate Irene with fierce joy. Here is the plot. Its development is the reaction of the race-conscious Puritan, Irene; the lonesome hedonist, Clare; and then the formation of the rapidly developing triangle with the cynical keen rebel, Irene's husband.

If the American Negro renaissance gives us many more books like this, with its sincerity, its simplicity and charm, we can soon with equanimity drop the word “Negro”. Meantime, your job is clear. Buy the book.

Hugh M. Gloster (essay date 1948)

SOURCE: Gloster, Hugh M. “Fiction of the Negro Renaissance: Nella Larsen.” In *Negro Voices in American Fiction*, pp. 141-46. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948.

[In the following essay, Gloster assesses *Quicksand* and *Passing* as tragic stories of attractive women—Helga Crane and Clare Kendry Bellew, respectively—whose lives are damaged and ultimately destroyed by society's unaccepting attitude toward interracial marriage.]

In *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) Nella Larsen is concerned with the disintegration and maladjustment wrought by miscegenation in the lives of two young colored women. The former novel is primarily a study of the character and experiences of a heroine not white enough to pass but nevertheless not too dark to mingle socially as an exotic personality among fashionable and artistic circles of Copenhagen, while the latter is mainly an analysis of the forces at work in the life of a mulatto beauty who forsakes the Negro group for the white race. In each case the implication is that the Negro-white hybrid frequently fails to attain a satisfactory harmony between his desires and his status in society.

Helga Crane, the heroine of *Quicksand*, is the daughter of a Danish woman and a colored gambler. Scorned after the death of her parents by all members of the American branch of her mother's family except a sympathetic uncle who educates her, she becomes self-conscious concerning her racial background. Deciding to devote her life to the uplift of her father's people, she accepts a teaching position at Naxos, a mammoth Negro educational institution; but the hypocrisy, servil-

ity, and snobbishness of the staff provoke her to resign in the middle of the term and break her engagement to a smug and respectable instructor who has adjusted himself to the school environment. At the home of her sympathetic uncle in Chicago, she is rebuffed by his recently acquired wife, who requests that Helga dissociate herself from the family. After many difficulties Helga gets temporary work as the traveling companion and secretary of a Negro woman lecturer, and through her employer later obtains a good position in a New York Negro insurance company as well as desirable lodging quarters at the home of Anne Grey. At first finding contentment and happiness in Harlem, Helga eventually becomes uncomfortable and restless. Especially boring to her are Anne's obsession with the race problem and her ceaseless chatter about the humiliations and injustices suffered by Negroes. Just as her dissatisfaction is developing into anguish, Helga receives a substantial check from her uncle in Chicago and decides to follow his advice by visiting her Aunt Katrina in Copenhagen. In the Danish capital she at first enjoys the luxury of her new surroundings and attracts a host of admirers, including sophisticated Axel Olsen, a famous portrait painter. After two years, however, she again becomes dissatisfied, and her uneasiness increases with the announcement of Anne's coming marriage to Dr. Robert Anderson, a former Naxos principal, who had appealed to Helga since her teaching days. The appearance of Negro entertainers at a Copenhagen vaudeville house further whets her nostalgia for America, and while under the influence of these longings she rejects, for racial reasons, an offer of marriage by Olsen. Realizing that her aching for America is really a homesickness for Negroes, Helga informs her aunt and uncle of her intention to return to the United States. Again in New York, Helga is strongly attracted to Anderson but develops a dislike for him when he refuses the offering of her body. Belittled by the drift of events, Helga wanders out the next night into a rainstorm, takes refuge in a building where a revival is being held, permits herself to be considered converted, and impulsively submits to the physical desires of the pastor. Subsequently marrying the minister, she goes with him to a small Alabama town where she becomes the mother of four children. Though a fifth pregnancy frustrates her immediate plans of retrieving her former social position, Helga nevertheless clings to her dreams of doing so, even in her encompassing and confining motherhood.

Quicksand, Du Bois commented flatteringly in 1928, is "the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnutt, and stands easily with Jessie Fauset's *There Is Confusion* in its subtle comprehension of the curious cross currents that swirl about the black American."¹ While this high evaluation of the novel may be debated, it is hardly deniable that Helga Crane is a convincing portrait of the tragic mu-

latto. Sensitive because of her questionable background, Helga can not integrate herself into either race. Among Negroes she is bored by Babbitt as well as by interminable discussions of racial oppression, while in the company of whites she is inhibited by convictions concerning intermarriage. In rejecting Olsen's proposal, for example, she declares:

"You see, I couldn't marry a white man. I simply couldn't. It isn't just you, not just personal, you understand. It's deeper, broader than that. It's racial. Some day maybe you'll be glad. We can't tell, you know; if we were married, you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother did that."

Helga's attitude toward America is equally confused. On the one hand, she is determined to hold her social freedom in Denmark because of the suffering of black folk in the United States:

Never could she recall the shames and often the absolute horrors of the black man's existence in America without the quickening of her heart's beating and a sensation of disturbing nausea.

On the other hand, as soon as the novelty of her residence in Copenhagen passes, she longs for Negro communities and for the first time sympathizes with her father for his abandonment of her mother. In brief, racial crosscurrents in the blood of Helga render her an unstable and sometimes paradoxical personality. The aloofness of her American white relatives and the consciousness of her mixed extraction intensify her problems of adjustment.

Quicksand also embodies a satire upon large white-supported institutions for the education of Negroes in the South, a glimpse at Harlem during the Renaissance period, and a picture of fashionable social life in Copenhagen. Naxos, the school which is ridiculed, is presented as a huge machine accepting no revisions, breaking the wills of enterprising teachers, and creating a wide breach between instructors and students. Insincerity, tyranny, and snobbishness are the main traits of faculty members, most of whom join students in applauding white speakers who advise Negroes to remain in their assigned sphere and to steer clear of independent thought and conduct. In the Harlem scene we find Helga moving among upper-class colored folk whose sophisticated conversation, fastidious dress, well-appointed homes, spirited parties, and militant racial attitudes furnish a radical change from the Naxos way of life. In contrast to the joyousness and glamour of Harlem we observe the stately and formal social life of Copenhagen, where race prejudice is practically nonexistent and Helga enjoys the lavish attention usually accorded an exotic visitor. From these more elevated social planes Helga sinks at the close of the book to the drab and monotonous life of an Alabama small town.

Whereas in *Quicksand* Nella Larsen studies the life of a mulatto girl who never openly relinquishes connection with Negroes, in her second novel, *Passing* (1929), which is dedicated to Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff, she unfolds the experiences of a beautiful woman who severs ties with colored people in order to enter the white group. *Passing*, which probes the psychology of an individual moving from one race to another, is one of the significant studies of its kind in American fiction. The novel is mainly the story of Clare Kendry, the illegitimate daughter of a white wastrel and a colored girl. Rather than accept drudgery in the home of her father's prejudiced aunts, Clare crosses the color line in order to wed John Bellew, a Chicagoan who has acquired considerable wealth in South America. She becomes a mother but is unable to suppress her yearning "to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh." In a Chicago hotel she accidentally meets Irene Redfield, a light-skinned girlhood friend who has married a colored physician and moved to New York City. Though at first determined not to serve as a link with Negroes for her passing friend, Irene agrees to come to the Bellew apartment for tea. At this tea Irene meets Gertrude Martin, who has openly married a white sweetheart of her schooldays, and Bellew, who calls Clare "Nig" because of her seemingly darkening complexion and openly expresses his aversion for Negroes. Thus humiliated and insulted by Bellew's disparaging remarks, Irene returns to New York and, supported in her position by her husband, resolves to sever all relations with Clare. Sweeping aside Irene's objections, Clare comes to New York while Bellew is in Florida and, disregarding the inconvenience her presence might occasion, insists upon attending the Negro Welfare League Dance with the Redfields. At first vexed by Clare's wilfulness, Redfield later accepts her company with indulgent pleasure and manifests so much interest in her that Irene becomes suspicious and, distressed by the possibility of broken faith, even considers telling Bellew of his wife's frequent pilgrimages to Harlem. While in this disturbed state of mind Irene, during a downtown shopping tour with a dark friend, accidentally meets Bellew, and, ignoring his genial greeting, continues on her way. His suspicion aroused by Irene's failure to recognize him, Bellew eventually traces Clare to a party at a Negro residence where he, moved by anger and pain, says to his wife: "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" Trapped by her husband and embarrassed before friends, Clare falls from a sixth-floor window to her death.

Passing provides a study of the life of a young colored woman who repudiates her mother's race in order to escape insult and deprivation. Once comfortably settled in a new environment, however, she can not refrain from seeking the society of Negroes, thus verifying Redfield's observation that passers "always come back."

The hazards of passing are illustrated, and chief among these is the possibility that an offspring may have Negroid pigmentation. Clare, usually daring and adventurous, loses courage in contemplation of future motherhood:

"I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too—too hellish."

Though married to a white man who is aware of her race, Gertrude likewise flinches before the possibility of having dark children. The attitude of Negroes toward passing is succinctly expressed by Irene:

"It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it."

In brief, *Quicksand* and *Passing* are studies of the warped lives of two attractive young women of biracial parentage, the one too dark to pass but light enough to be accepted socially by unprejudiced Danes, and the other sufficiently fair to mingle freely with white Americans. Racial maladjustment leads Helga to degrading mediocrity in a small Alabama town and Clare to tragic death in New York City.

Note

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, Review of *Quicksand*, *The Crisis*, XXXV (1928), 202.

Hortense E. Thornton (essay date March 1973)

SOURCE: Thornton, Hortense E. "Sexism as Quagmire: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*." *CLA Journal* 16, no. 3 (March 1973): 285-301.

[In the following essay, Thornton asserts that while critics of *Quicksand* tend to focus on race and categorize Helga Crane as a classic "tragic mulatto," her ultimate tragedy is brought about by sexism rather than racism.]

Nella Larsen represents one of several unlabeled Black women who contributed greatly to the development of the Afro-American novel. Writing during the Harlem Renaissance, Miss Larsen distinguished herself as the author of two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing*, (1929),¹ both of which treat the experiences of cultured, middle class mulatto heroines. On the merits of *Quicksand*, she received the Harmon Foundation bronze medal, and in 1930 she earned a Guggenheim Fellowship to travel to Europe in search of material for a third novel which she never completed.² That Miss Larsen's

novels are partly autobiographical can be gleaned from certain facts about her life. Born in Chicago in 1893 to a Danish mother and West Indian father, Nella Larsen experienced a difficult childhood when her father died and her mother remarried a white man with whom she had other children. Miss Larsen's educational experiences were varied: she audited classes at the University of Copenhagen, and in New York she earned a certificate in library science and a nursing degree. She was married to Elmer S. Imes, a physicist; their marriage ended in divorce. She died in Brooklyn in 1963.

In *Quicksand* Miss Larsen relates the experiences of her heroine Helga Crane, mulatto offspring of a Danish mother and West Indian father. Upon her father's desertion of her mother, Helga has an unhappy childhood with the white man her mother marries and the children of that union. After her mother dies, Helga's education at Devon, an all Black college, is financed by her maternal uncle, Peter Nilsson. When the novel opens, Helga has decided to terminate her employment as an English teacher at Naxos, a southern Black institution whose educational system she can no longer stomach because of its policy of "uplift," of dulling the minds of its students so that they would fit securely into the pattern set for them by the white man. Helga leaves Naxos for Chicago in the middle of the spring term. When her efforts to obtain a loan from her Uncle Peter are thwarted by her confrontation with his new wife, Helga searches constantly for jobs. With luck, she obtains a speech-editing position with Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a prominent Black uplift spokeswoman, with whom she travels to New York. Securely employed by a Black insurance company, with the assistance of Mrs. Hayes-Rore, Helga remains in New York, living with Mrs. Hayes-Rore's niece, Anne Grey. She essentially enjoys an exciting life, has lots of friends, attends dinner parties, plays, cabarets. After a year and a half Helga becomes restless. With an unexpected \$5,000 check from her Uncle Peter, Helga decides to go to Denmark in search of a happy future. She is well received by her aunt and uncle, the Dahls, who generously embellish her with clothes and friends. Eventually Helga resents being displayed in Copenhagen where she is flaunted, observed, and painted. Disgustingly she refuses the marriage proposal of Axel Olsen, an eccentric portrait artist, upon confirming that he had, in fact, intended a concubinage before being forced into his proposal. After two years, Helga leaves Copenhagen for New York with the intent of attending Anne Grey's marriage to Dr. Anderson, formerly principal of Naxos (the man whose memory she has been unable to shake since her departure from Naxos). While in New York, Helga becomes cognizant of the awakening of new feelings within her. For the first time, she is sexually attracted to someone. Anderson kisses her at a party, an incident upon which she places great significance. She is dumbfounded when he apologizes for his misdirected kiss. Angered, embar-

assed, hurt, Helga weakens mentally and physically. One evening upon searching for shelter from a rain-storm, she despondently strays into religious services being held in a storefront church where she is "saved." Dissolving into emotion and clasping the crutch of religion, Helga marries a visiting minister, the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, a colorless, paunchy man who breaks one of the Lord's commandments with her after church services. He takes her to live with him at his parsonage in a rural Alabama town. The novel ends with Helga pregnant with her fifth child.

In her "Ebony Flute" column of May 1928, a column written monthly for *Opportunity*, Gwendolyn Bennett announced the publication of *Quicksand*.

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* has just arrived. And let me say that many folks will be interested to hear that this book does not set as its tempo that of the Harlem cabaret—This is the story of the struggle of an interesting cultured Negro woman against her environment. Negroes who are squeamish about writers exposing our worst side will be relieved that Harlem night-life is more or less submerged by the psychological struggle of the heroine. . . .

(p. 153)

Miss Bennett's announcement hints at an issue of the Harlem Renaissance which was of concern to certain older-generation intellectuals, especially W. E. B. Du Bois and Benjamin Brawley: the "negative" representation of Black life in some of the works being published. Cases in point were Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), both best-selling novels, and Langston Hughes' *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927).³

The subject matter of *Quicksand* is varied, but the novel reveals that the issues of racism and sexism are no doubt concerns of Miss Larsen in that she exposes the racial and sexual prejudice which Helga, a perceptive, responsible woman, confronts in her cross-cultural quest for a sense of her place in life, her identity. When one considers the complex events of the novel, it becomes possible to argue that Helga's tragedy was perhaps more a result of sexism than of racism. The novel assumes picaresque proportions as Helga frantically moves from one place to another in pursuit of an environment which will allow her free expression. Despite what some may label as snobbishness in her character, or cowardice, one must admire this young woman, who because of the hardships of her youth, wears a stoic mask of indifference for survival, a mask worn solely to prevent others from hurting her. Understandably, Helga's childhood taught her to be suspicious of the affections of others, thus crippling her adaptability to the events experienced in her adult life. Helga optimistically pursues a variety of experiences with hopes of realizing a sense of self being and retreats from each experience with