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Bacardit Gallego, Anna; Gimeno Pahissa, Laura, dir. Beyond the "Tragic Mulatta" : the 19th century figure in Nella Larsen's Quicksand. 2015. 29 pag. (801 Grau en Estudis Anglesos)

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Beyond the “Tragic Mulatta”: the 19th Century

Figure in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística

Grau en Estudis Anglesos

Treball de Fi de Grau

Anna Bacardit Gallego

Supervisor: Dr. Laura Gimeno Pahissa

June 2015



Table of Contents

Abstract	1
1. Introduction	2
2. Family	4
3. Race and Identity	8
3.1. Black Naxos and Harlem	9
3.2. White Denmark	13
4. Tragic Outcome	17
5. Conclusions	22
Bibliography	24

Abstract

The “Tragic Mulatto” was a significant American literary figure in the nineteenth century that intended to function as a representation of those mix-raced individuals who struggled with their identity as neither blacks nor whites. These children of black slave mothers and white masters found themselves trapped in between two incompatible communities, never utterly belonging to any of them. Regardless of their likely light complexion, the “one-drop rule” claimed that anyone with an African American ancestor was considered to be black, and therefore their only escape was to either face the burdens of slavery or, instead run away to the free Northern states, yet at the expense of denying their own black ancestry. In any case, they were conditioned to live a sorrowful life due to their impossibility to deal with their racial hybridity within a society that disregarded them for that.

Although created with the purpose to give voice to an American minority, this literary character was often dismissed as a stereotypical figure that did not truly portray the reality of these biracial human beings. They were believed to be too disconnected from the actual social issues surrounding the characters, and to rather depict a simple image of the miserable black race that lived with what was given to them. However, during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and with Alain Locke’s determination to enhance the black intellectuals’ self-confidence and artwork, the literary characters were provided with a higher degree of realism and gave way to improved representations of their community.

Within this context, I focus on Helga Crane, Nella Larsen’s protagonist in *Quicksand* (1928), and aim to describe the complexity of her reality as a mixed-race female. She eventually becomes a rural housewife who tediously gives birth to five children and has to give up her intellectual interests in order to adjust to her Southerner life. Certainly, a miserable outcome comparable to that of the stereotypical mulatto figure. Nonetheless, in the first two parts of the novel placed in Naxos, Harlem and Denmark, Larsen introduces a strong and independent woman who questions her racial identity and the perception others have of it. She longs for a community where she can belong, yet she chooses to remain an alienated individual in order to prevent others from undervaluing her racial uniqueness. Helga is determined to find her true self, and does not resign herself to the social and racial constructions of the diverse environments she encounters. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to analyze the protagonist’s attitudes towards her family background, lack of community, and mainly, race and identity, and conclude to what extent Larsen’s Helga Crane goes beyond the traditional figure of the “Tragic Mulatta”.

1. Introduction

The figure of the “Tragic Mulatto” was first introduced in American literature during the nineteenth century as a representation of the mix-raced individuals who struggled with their identity as neither blacks nor whites. They were children of white masters and black female slaves, and were confined to slavery as a consequence of the “one-drop rule”, which stated that anyone with an African American ancestor was considered to be black, regardless of their likely light complexion. Whereas some of them found themselves trapped in the hardships of bondage, others tried to escape the South and live in the free states of the North, what obliged them to deny their black ancestry. The racial duality they dealt with led them to a living of constant sorrow, distress and resignation that often ended in death or suicide.

Lydia Maria Child’s “The Quadroons”, published in 1842, is considered the first short story in which the character of the “Tragic Mulatto” becomes the main protagonist, yet other authors such as William W. Brown, Frances E. W. Harper and Charles W. Chesnutt also wrote about them. In works such as *Clotel; or the President’s Daughter* (1853), *Iola Leroy* (1892) or *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) respectively, they presented the female variation of this character, the “Tragic Mulatta”, whose beautiful biracial features intensified the burden of slavery and made her endure objectification and abuse by their white master. Not only did these females deal with the regular impediments of their race, but also they were concerned with their difficulty to improve life through marriage, due to their mixed heritage.

However, this figure was seen as a clichéd literary stereotyped after Sterling A. Brown described these characters as “unrealistic, nonindividualized, and unoriginal” (Sollors 1997: 223). According to Brown, their representation was disconnected from the reality of their lives, since they derived from mere conventions that avoided the mention of more serious social issues. White writers used this stereotype only because “The Negro of unmixed blood is no theme for tragedy; rebellion and vindictiveness are to be expected only from the mulatto;

(...) he is a “man without a race” worshipping the whites and despised by them, despising and despised by Negroes” (Sollors 1997: 224). Besides, it allowed them to flatter white readers, who could feel identified with the characters because of their whiteness: their bright mind was assumed to come from their white blood whereas their “tragic outcomes supported the belief that mixture of the races was a curse” (Sollors 1997: 225).

Alain Locke had actually already drawn attention to Brown’s viewpoint among the black writers during the Harlem Renaissance. In his manifesto “The New Negro” (1925) he introduced the watchword “No more stereotypes!” in order to encourage his fellow artists towards “the spirit of self-determination” (Steward 2007: 15) he wanted to spread among the African American movement: that of a group of black people outspokenly demanding their rights with confrontational honesty and integrity. Because they wanted to build a new Modernist culture where black intellectuals became a new enlightened voice of America, their works and characters had to be realistic since until then “in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being” (Sollors 1997: 229).

In this context, Nella Larsen, a mulatta herself, wrote her two novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), whose main protagonists are usually dismissed as clichéd “Tragic Mulattas”. In both of them, three mixed-race female characters struggle with their inability to integrate their racial and cultural duality within a society that barely understands the difficulties encountered by those of mixed heritage. The unhappy and distressing endings in both stories are consequence of a series of situations where these women have to come to terms with their identity and make tough decisions concerning their relation towards their closest circle. They cannot completely belong to any of the two racial communities, yet as Hazel Carby notes “the mulatto figure is a narrative device of mediation; it allows for a fictional exploration of the relationship between the races while being at the same time an imaginary expression of the relationship between the races. (...) Larsen’s particular use of the

mulatto figure allowed her protagonist [*Quicksand*'s Helga Crane] to be both inside and outside contemporary race issues.” (Carby 1987: 171) This observation, then, refuses Brown’s critique and rather acclaims the possibilities a mulatto character contributes to both the reader and the writer as for the representation of racial issues is concerned.

The aim of this paper is to provide an innovative reading of Helga Crane as a “Tragic Mulatta” whose complex family background, racial duality and search for identity, and personal repression, distance herself from the traditional nineteenth century figure. Despite her initial apparent strong personality as an independent, ambitious and non-conformist woman, Helga evolves towards a misplaced, unhappy human being who can never find utter satisfaction in her life. I argue that the starting point of her tragedy is already visible from her childhood, due to the resentment she feels towards both black and white races because of her parents’ abandonment. I also claim that her racial and cultural duality, which she tries to adjust to every community she encounters, are the reasons why she is unable to establish her own identity. As a consequence, she chooses to leave her intellect behind and resigns herself to an unsatisfactory life as a rural housewife that leads her to her tragic outcome. Nevertheless, I conclude that Helga Crane’s determination to find herself and question and confront the social and racial constructions make the character go beyond the stereotypical figure of the mulatto, and transform her into a modern twentieth century “Tragic Mulatta”.

2. Family

Helga Crane’s family situation is unquestionably the starting point of her personal tragedy as a disoriented mulatta. The first fact to notice is her unusual ancestry background: unlike other mulattos, Helga is the daughter of a white European woman and an African American man. She describes her mother as “a fair Scandinavian girl in love with life, with love, with passion, dreaming, and risking all in one blind surrender” (26), the risk of falling in love with “a gambler” (24), a “gay suave scoundrel” (26), a black man who abandons her and

her daughter. The latter never learns if they were even married, despite her mother does for a second time to “a man of her own race, but not of her own kind” (26). Helga’s stepfather, together with her stepbrothers and sisters, despise her and make her feel loathsome for what her race is during her childhood. Her mom dies when Helga is fifteen, and her Uncle Paul, “the one relative who thought kindly, or even calmly, of her” (10), sends the orphan to a Negro school where she somehow learns to appreciate her ethnicity. Nevertheless, not even in that school, or in any other place she stays from that moment onwards, does Helga leave behind the resentment for her lack of family.

On the one hand, Helga Crane’s bitterness grows from the reality of their parents’ relationship. She cannot bear that a woman like her mother –“gently bred, fresh from an older, more polished civilization” (26)– was such a fool as to give up everything for the love of a black man who only brought her to “poverty, sordidness, and dissipation” (26). She was happy but “in forgetting all but love she had forgotten, or had perhaps never known, that some things the world never forgives.” (26) Helga is the first-hand victim of that which the world does not forgive: a mixed-race kid that grows up in a society where people will remind her about not only her unmarried parents but also her black dad who abandoned a white woman. Besides, her mother’s marriage to a different man who practically ignores her emphasizes her feeling of abandonment by both her parents.

Helga coexists with its consequences throughout her whole life. As Thadious A. Davis points out, “she cannot articulate the severity of her deprivations, her sense of herself as an illegitimate child and a social orphan. Therefore, Helga is silenced; she can neither voice her innermost reality to others nor express that reality in her own story” (Davis 2002: xxvi). Instead, she feels anger towards both her mother and father, and fears being treated like they did treat each other. After being asked to marry Olsen, she claims that if they “were married, you [Olsen] might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother

did that.” (90). Furthermore, her thoughts show the fixation with her personal experience: she does not believe in mixed marriages, she informs her Danish uncles, because of the trouble they bring to the children. She does not want to become like her parents, to follow their same steps and make the same mistakes. Nevertheless, as Davis indicates, Helga happens to unconsciously solve her situation the same way her father did, by moving away “from the difficult or problematic aspects of individual existence.” (Davis 2002: xxvi) Just like her dad ran away from the white world of her lover, Helga keeps moving across both the white and black communities believing she will find her place, like I will further point out in the following chapter, and thus avoids facing the struggle that, in fact, remains within herself as a mixed-race orphan.

Notwithstanding, Helga eventually learns to forgive her father. On her second year in Denmark, when she realizes she misses Harlem, she finally comprehends “his rejection, repudiation, of the formal calm her mother had represented, (...) his yearning, his intolerable need for the inexhaustible humor and the incessant hope of his own kind” (94). Whereas she grasps the motives of the man whose race she had inherited and had hated for so long, it takes her some more time to forgive her mother for choosing a man over her. Helga tries to suppress “her anger towards her mother, particularly for her complicity in Helga’s childhood suffering” (Davis 2002: xxv) during her adulthood, and it is finally solved after she herself becomes a mother. She eventually appreciates her white inheritance and “its inseparability from her core existence, just as her connection to the racial and cultural legacies of her father” (Davis 2002: xxviii), regardless of the indifference they both demonstrated towards her.

On the other hand, the resentment before those last moments of forgiveness I have just commented on is visible due to the relevant role the community plays among African Americans. Helga is always reminded about her lack of family because that is how black communities classify themselves: “Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as

rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't "belong." (12) Wherever she goes, Helga has to face her role of a "pretty, solitary girl with no family connections" (9) that does not allow her becoming the "lady" Dr. Anderson considers she is. "Dignity and breeding" (24) go hand in hand, and because she cannot refer to her ancestors she humbles herself as an individual.

Even in the Negro school where her Uncle Peter sends her, she acknowledges the difference between the other girls and herself. "They had mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters of whom they spoke frequently, and who sometimes visited them. They went home for the vacations (...) They visited each other and knew many of the same people." (27) Once again, Helga remained outside the circle. Only when she finally arrives to New York does Helga start finding a community she can relate with, and yet the first advice she receives is not to mention her white ancestry: "colored people won't understand it" (45) tells her the woman who only some paragraphs before was telling her "if you didn't have people you wouldn't be living. Everybody has people, Miss Crane. Everybody" (41) in order to make her talk about "race intermingling and possibly adultery" (42) which is never mentioned among black people "and therefore they do not exist" (42).

Essentially, Helga carries with her resentment towards her family background wherever she goes. She might be able to avoid mentioning anything about them to their new acquaintances, but sooner or later, she is forced to make reference to their origins, which makes her evoke once again her incapability to "belong". Nevertheless, "[i]n reaction against the pain of losing her mother and (...) suffering subordination to a black elite that disdains miscegenation but nonetheless models itself after the white elite, Helga has developed her own sense of ethnic honor." (Hutchinson 2001: 181) To a certain extent, she learns to overlook the remarks and implications of her family background and resolves to give more

importance to her own status as an independent human being, rather than identifying herself to those communities whose attitudes she cannot comprehend.

All in all, Helga's (lack of) family is undoubtedly the origin and basis of her tragedy. By the end of the novel, when she is delirious, she considers abandoning her rural life and therefore her children:

“The recollection of her own childhood, lonely, unloved, rose too poignantly before her for her to consider calmly such a solution. Though she forced herself to believe that this was different. There was not the element of race, of white and black. They were all black together. And they would have their father. (...) She felt that through all the rest of her lifetime she would be hearing their cry of “Mummy, Mummy, Mummy” through sleepless nights. No. She couldn't desert them.” (135-6)

This powerful scene emphasizes the harmful reality of her life as an almost orphan. It is not the racial situation but the lack of a mother what worries her the most. George Hutchinson remarks that “to Larsen the most unbearable effect of racist patriarchy in the United States was its power to deprive her of her mother,” (Hutchinson 1995: 445) as concerned by the harm slavery had caused to many children separated from their progenitors. Nella Larsen creates a “Tragic Mulatta” whose experience as an abandoned kid affects her entire existence. Needless to say, her biracial identity plays a central role in her ill-fated outcome, as I will further express in the following chapters. Yet her dissatisfaction within and towards the world will most of the times go back to her parentless childhood.

3. Race and Identity

As mentioned above, Helga Crane mirrors her father's difficulty to solve her inner problems: just as he ran away from Helga's mother because of their racial differences, Helga's condition as a mulatta forces her to constantly escape from facing the occasion to accept who she is. Throughout the six years *Quicksand* encompasses the protagonist moves away six different times, always believing the new surroundings will bring in more gratification to her life. In spite of her satisfactory initial feelings towards these new places, either when she

arrives to Chicago –“as she stepped out into the moving multicolored crowd, there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm (...) And, oddly enough, she felt, too, that she had come home” (33)– or when she moves to New York –“Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment” (46)–, it never takes her too long to change her mind. “But it didn’t last, this happiness of Helga Crane’s” (50) after a rather happy year in Harlem, or “Well into Helga’s second year in Denmark, came an indefinite discontent” (83) are examples of the recurrent lines that open many of the discouraging chapters in the narration. Her gloomy perceptions about every scenario are to some extent cyclic. “For she had to admit that it wasn’t new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen.” (135). After a certain time in each one of the settings, Helga feels the necessity to move forward (or back) to a distinct environment due not to the nature of the locations but rather to her personal incapability to belong within the community.

Helga’s everlasting and growing misfortune seems to be predetermined –Uncle Peter already warns her with “his oft-repeated conviction that because of her Negro blood she would never amount to anything” (10). Truth is, her racial and cultural duality is what prevents her from finding fulfillment among a group. Neither the black community nor her white relatives are able to provide the sympathy she needs in order to build a bonding with them, yet she is neither capable of accepting her reality and dare to define her identity as belonging to one group or the other. It is in this sense that her role as “Tragic Mulatta” differs from the stereotype, as Helga Crane happens to choose to become an individual who confronts the social constructions of race.

3.1. Black Naxos and Harlem

Helga Crane detects inconsistencies in the behavior of the black community and becomes dissatisfied within their environment. It was not unusual for the black population, at

the period, to receive criticism and lack of respect from the white Americans. Even those who are apparently eager to praise their race seemed to do it with impertinence, just as the white preacher in the very first chapters in *Naxos* illustrates when he refers to its members' disposition "to stay in their places". He admires them for their conduct but encourages them to "know when and where to stop. He hoped, he sincerely hoped, that they wouldn't become avaricious and grasping" since "it was their duty to be satisfied in the estate to which they had been called, hewers of wood and drawers of water¹." (7)

Nevertheless, the tolerance the black audience of *Naxos* demonstrates towards the preacher's humiliating speech makes Helga become aware of the reality of the school. In spite of her initial enthusiastic desire to work in such a well-known educational institution, she eventually comprehends that it is actually an "exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency." (8) Their system is a replica of that of the white race, and thus they all become ordinary copies with no possibility to differ or stand out for the beauty of their complexion. Helga's disagreement to their suppression of individuality plays a significant role in her outcome as a "Tragic Mulatta", which I will discuss in the following chapter, yet what she really despises is their hypocrisy towards their own community. Notwithstanding they form a group of well-educated black youth with the potential and aptitude to uplift their race, they consume their time and strength in looking down on their own members, "hunting for the weaknesses of others, spying, grudging, scratching." (22) Helga does not subscribe with this self-disdain and is aware of her unlikely conformity to their mindset, and so she chooses to leave her position as a teacher.

¹ *hewers of wood and drawers of water*: Biblical reference by which the United States in the nineteenth-century justified black slavery and their consignment to menial labor and subservient positions. (Editor's Note in Larsen 2002:138)

Likewise, this black middle-class hypocrisy is also visible among the acquaintances Helga meets in Harlem. The character of Anne Grey is the ultimate example of the individuals of the period who both stood up for and complained about their race, and despised whites but behaved like them. Anne “frequented all the meetings of protest, (...), talked, wept, and ground her teeth dramatically about the wrongs and shames of her race, (...) “Social equality, “Equal opportunity for all,” were her slogans, often and empathically repeated.” (51). She also “hated white people with a deep and burning hatred” (51) and criticized other colored women for going out with white men, yet “she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living.” (51)

Unquestionably, Helga is outside Anne’s frenzy. Firstly, she cannot consent as much hatred against whites as Anne’s because of her white family background. Besides, just like happened in Naxos, she conflicts with blacks’ idea of imitating whites’ lifestyle and attitudes instead of promoting the singularities and uniqueness of their own race. As Hazel Carby observes, Nella Larsen “used Helga, who was both black intellectual and member of the middle class but stood outside both, as a figure who could question the limits of middle-class intellectual pretension.” (Carby 1987:171) Yet in this sense, she also creates a character that, at this point, supports relevant conceptions in regards to the self-representation by the black society that came up during the Harlem Renaissance. On the one hand, Helga seems to complain about what Nora Zeale Hurston mentioned in her essay “How it Feels to be Colored Me” (1928) published the same year as *Quicksand*. Whereas Helga wonders why “didn’t they find something else to talk of? Why must the race problem always creep in?” (54), Hurston also argued the urge to move on and leave the past behind in order to focus on their new status as both black and American:

“But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature

somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you.” (Hurston 1928: 258-59)

Despite Helga is unable to self-define with such strength as Hurston does, she coincides in her thoughts concerning the need to cease the constant remarking of the differences between races. She objects to Anne’s racial obsession and considers that the black community must stop referring to the bad conditions in which the legacy of slavery has placed them in order to move forward into a better future.

On the other hand, the fact that Helga notices Anne and her friends’ disinterest for black music, dance and art in general, brings us to Langston Hughes’ groundbreaking essay on “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926). In it, he encourages black artists to be themselves and stop intending to write like white artists “to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.” (Hughes 1926:210) Helga also makes reference to this idea when, already in the context of white Denmark, she realizes that “[Negroes] didn’t want to be like themselves. What they wanted, asked for, begged for, was to be like their white overloads. They were ashamed to be Negroes” (76). Yet the problem, as Hughes claims, is not only in the artists but also in the black middle and upper class audience who, like Anne, only pays attention when “the other [white] race had noticed him [the black artist] beforehand” (Hughes 1926:211). That is, the black community distrusts its own talent unless it is already popular and appreciated by whites, thus implying once again the hypocritical self-conception and rejection towards their own race.

As a consequence of her experiences in both Naxos and Harlem, Helga Crane's impressions on her black fellows cannot quite help her establishing her identity. She is critical towards their attitude and does not agree with their views on the relationship their community should have with the white population. She cannot belong to a community that not only displays contradictions in their discourse, but that also despises the race that brought her up. Therefore, she fails to identify herself as one of them and hopes to find her true personality among her white relatives.

3.2. White Denmark

Helga's first thoughts towards her trip to Denmark are obviously cheerful. She dreams about a "happy future in Copenhagen, where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice" (58), and where she will be able to find a community, a family where she will not feel out of place. Nonetheless, the reality proves her wrong and the protagonist realizes she can neither belong there. Her escape from the race problem becomes indeed a contrasted approach to the topic, since she rather faces with the Europeans' completely different mindset. As James Gray points out, the difference on racial culture between the two continents is visible in the complicated position mulattoes encounter when traveling in between races, "moving back and forth between black and white communities. (...) The African-American artist's journey to Europe may be a flight *from* white and/or black Americans, but it is certainly a flight *to* a different or at least a differently perceived white people." (Gray 2012:259-60)

On the one hand, Helga deals with the constant admiration of the Danish population when she first arrives, as a consequence of the unusual presence of black people in the country. Although she enjoys "being noticed and flattered" and is gratified for her "augmented sense of importance" (76), she is surprised that her aunt and uncle take care of her life without considering her opinion, and buy her clothes that stress the exoticism she was

supposed to suppress in Naxos. She likes the compliments of the neighbors, because “[t]rue, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn’t one of them. She didn’t at all count.” (72)

Helga eventually apprehends that she is no more than the adornment she had already been considered before: “I wish you’d stay. (...) We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives” (18) had claimed one of her colleagues when she had announced her resignation in the blacks’ school. In Denmark, therefore, she plays once again her role as “[a] decoration. A curio. A peacock.” (75) “The section of the novel set in Copenhagen confronted directly the question of the representation of blacks by whites” (Carby 1987:171) and this representation does not totally correspond to what Helga anticipated. “Outside the black community, Helga became a mere object of white consumption.” (Carby 1987:172) – white Europeans see her just as a fascinating object to observe and admire, thus preventing Helga, once again, from developing her own personality as a human being.

On the other hand, she observes the distinct and conflicting reasoning both herself and her white family follow. When Olsen asks her to marry him, her argument to reject the offer is underestimated by everyone: ““Don’t,” was her aunt’s reply, “be a fool too, Helga. We don’t think of those things here.” (80); “Come now, Helga, it isn’t this foolishness about race. Not here in Denmark” (92) remarks her uncle as well. By emphasizing this, her relatives intend to make her aware of the absurdity of her reasons in a society that apparently does not compare to the American one. The fact is that “Helga is at a loss to explain that, which in the United States would no need explanation.” (Hutchinson 2001:185). Her views on race and marriage, undoubtedly swayed by her American background, are certainly incomprehensible for a European free population that has not dealt with black slavery and segregation. In the first place, a white American family would not even consider an interracial marriage as Helga’s relatives do. Even a remark such as “If you’ve got any brains at all they came from your

father” (80) would never be spoken in any situation, considering that it is her father’s complexion that she has inherited.

Therefore, Helga finds herself again in an environment where her identity is undervalued. Her argumentation becomes senseless in Denmark, yet it is part of her self as a mixed-race American and she cannot overlook it. As Hutchinson observes, for Helga, “Europe does not offer freedom from racism, just a different kind of racism.” (Hutchinson 2001:185) Despite believing she will be able to find tranquility and happiness in what she believes a non-racist Europe, she stumbles upon a reality that does not respect the singularity of her African-American mindset. Her white relatives do not intend to make her feel different, but their impossibility to understand her circumstances as an American black woman, and their emphasis on enhancing her distinction and exoticism make Helga feel out of the community once again.

Altogether, Helga Crane becomes the hopeless soul who wonders “[w]hy couldn’t she have two lives, or why couldn’t she be satisfied in one place?” (95) She does not empathize with her black fellows in Naxos and Harlem who criticize white people but do the most to behave like them. She cannot connect to her white relatives in Denmark because she feels underestimated by their belittlement of the problem of race. Although she despises the black population’s fixation for inciting discussions about race, she brings in the subject as a denial for marriage. She is trapped in the metaphor of quicksand the title implies:

“it is a condition where individual struggle and isolated effort are doomed to failure. Helga’s search led to the burial, not the discovery, of the self. The only way out of quicksand is with external help; isolated individual struggle ensured only that she would sink deeper into the quagmire. The question that remains is, to what social group does Helga attach herself in order to be saved?” (Carby 1987:173)

Presumably, her only solution to deal with this struggle would seem to be throughout the help of others, yet, as I have argued, she is unable to recognize herself as belonging to one or the

others. Helga rather evolves into a lonesome human being, disconnected and detached from all others. If her childhood had already defined her as a young girl without a family to rely on, her impossibility to find a group as a grown-up further distances her from the society.

Nevertheless, it is in this sense that Nella Larsen creates a protagonist that I believe goes beyond the stereotype of a “Tragic Mulatta”. Helga Crane’s outcome in the last chapters possibly contributes to the readers’ idea of *Quicksand* telling the story of a simple unhappy mulatta who is meant to end up very badly – her almost moribund situation in Alabama after marrying a Southerner preacher certainly is a tragic ending for what the reader would have expected of this strong woman, as I will discuss in the last chapter. Whatever may be the case, the story of Helga Crane up until her marriage becomes the narration of a woman who matures throughout her experiences as an undefined individual:

“As a *Bildungsroman* interrelating psychological and social forces in Helga Crane’s search for definition, *Quicksand* relies on each phase of a spatial journey—Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Denmark, Alabama—to represent a stage in Helga’s developing consciousness. (...) [T]he episodic narrative structure depends upon the physical transformation of scene to converge action and meaning in Helga’s spiritual quest for growth, emergence, and identity.”(Davis 2002: xvii)

Finally defined or not, Helga endures the difficulties that approach her, and happens to encounter on her own what the principal of Naxos, Dr. Anderson, already told her when she left her position: “[s]ome day you’ll learn that lies, injustice, and hypocrisy are a part of every ordinary community.” (23) Regardless of the fact that her incapability to find herself comfortable within a group may remain behind the ideas of this statement, Helga certainly goes through a transformation that does not apply to Sterling A. Brown’s description of the figure of the “Tragic Mulatto” as unrealistic, nonindividualized or shaped by simple and standard attitudes (Sollors 1997: 223). Besides, Larsen’s decision to incorporate new notions that were being brought out during the Harlem Renaissance enriches the construction of the

character, and illustrates the influence of the real context in the mindset of the fictional personage.

Furthermore, Hutchinson discusses Larsen's focus on "the problem of divided social loyalties and the issues of the conflict of cultures" rather than the "grim tragedy of blood and fateful heredity." (...) [W]hile subverting racial essentialism Larsen explores the force of social construction of racial identity and the conflicts deriving from the fact that not everyone "belongs" to just one "race." (Hutchinson 1995, 204-5) It is this claim, in fact, that shows Helga's special characterization. She does not conform with what society tells her to believe, and reasonably for that reason she "gives up" on her search for a community and chooses to be an isolated individual above everything. "Equally out of place in the United States and in Denmark, as it turns out, she comprehends her difference as a cultural hybridity for which there is no name beyond the race-inflected term "mulatto," and no solution beyond a partial self-negation required by the fixity of identity: black or white, American or Danish" (Davis 2002: x).

Just as Hazel Carby makes reference to the metaphor of quicksand that obviously gives title to the novel, George Hutchinson compares Helga's life to the figure of a labyrinth that "might well stand as a correlative to the racial maze from which Helga Crane is never able to emerge." (Hutchinson 2001:179) She certainly does not achieve her desired self-definition as neither black nor white, yet the path she follows before getting inevitably lost illustrates the strength and determination that she has acquired from the overwhelming search for an identity.

4. Tragic Outcome

According to George Hutchinson, the mulatto character is typically "either destroyed (or spiritually diminished) by inner conflicts caused by his/her alienated condition in a racially bifurcated society, or becomes "whole" by becoming wholly "black". (Hutchinson

1995:418). For four years after having abandoned Naxos, Helga Crane makes an effort to find her place within one of the communities that form her mixed-race self, but fails to relate herself to the middle class of neither blacks nor whites. By marrying a Southern preacher, Helga seems to abandon her internal struggle to rather accept her black ancestry, thus choosing to become a “wholly black” individual. Nevertheless, her life as a rural housewife in Alabama eventually consumes her as much as her quest for identity, and deteriorates her life as a whole.

It is at this point of the narration, therefore, when Nella Larsen appears to alter Helga’s crafted characterization and gives way to a less complex and individualized woman that makes her become, only after this event, a stereotypical “Tragic Mulatta”. On the one hand, she gives up her intellect and determination to fit in the provincial community she is surrounded by, and instead she procures the sexuality she has been repressing until now. On the other hand, because her household and children tediously demand her attention, she becomes one other regular member of a Southern town, where only work and religion are important above any physical appearance or mental reflection. She loses her quality of being “different” within a group, fails to keep her strong-minded identity, and therefore is transformed into an ill-fated woman with a practically dead future.

In the previous chapter, I have already made reference to the particular view Europeans have about African Americans. Helga’s Danish family sees her skin as a feature that must be highlighted, as it infers her exoticism and sensuality. Olsen, specifically, observes her “warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute.” (89), suggesting the sexuality implied in her complexion. Truth is, Helga ends up abhorring their white relatives’ fixation with the embellishment of her complexion when she is in Denmark. Yet one of the reasons she abandons Naxos lies behind their disagreement towards those “bright colors [that] *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned

people *should* wear.” (20-21) They support the sobriety of their students and faculty in order not to stand out, and reject the saliency of colorful garnishments. “They don’t think I’m in the spirit of the work. And I’m not, not if it means suppression of individuality and beauty.” (23) Besides their production of equal human beings that are not encouraged to think by themselves, Helga also condemns Naxos’ opposition to the visual enhancement of the race.

Although this fact makes her become, to some extent, complicit in her own criticism against black bodies’ objectification, her concern towards her external appearance seems to actually allude to her sexual repression. Many scholars observe this constraint is originated after the exploitation of black sexuality throughout history, which led to African American females’ denial of sexuality and desire. As Pamela E. Barnett notes, Larsen negotiates between two traditions of representation of black women’ sexuality: whereas the black representation regards it as disgusting, the white representation pictures it as promiscuous and dangerous. (Barnett 1995: 588) The implication is that whatever a black woman does, society will disapprove it.

As a consequence, Helga not only distances herself from her blackness but also rejects her sexual nature and desire due to the social assumption that relates the latter with the color of her skin. According to Cherene Sherrard-Johnson (2004), Larsen illustrates “how racist and sexist projections can penetrate the psyches of both the subject and the observer, preventing Helga from reinventing herself and transcending race.” (841) Either with James Vayle in Naxos, Dr. Anderson after meeting him in Harlem, or Olsen in Copenhagen, Helga is unable to display her real feelings and rather emphasizes her sensuality through her good-looking self-embellishment. By sending mixed messages to herself and everyone else (Rayson 1998:91), she reinforces once again her incapability to build her own identity.

Only after she marries Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green and moves to Alabama does Helga apparently leave her oppression behind, since “the only condition under which

sexuality is not shameless is if it finds sanction in marriage” (McDowell, 1986, cited in Barnett 1995: 598). Nevertheless, “Helga has to give up her middle class values, behaviors, and intellectual pursuits to allow herself a sexual life.” (Rayson 1998:98) Despite this suggests impossibility of black women to be educated, a topic that is not within the scope of my paper and I will not discuss, Helga’s move to a rural environment does indeed force her to resign herself to her new reality and town neighbors. Her initial enthusiasm encourages her to intend and plan “to do much good to her husband’s parishioners. Her young joy and zest for the uplifting of her fellow men came back to her.” (119) Yet the inhabitants’ poor response and her early state as a mother eventually consume her good intentions and she finally abandons all the comforts she once had as a middle-class woman.

Sherrard-Johnson actually points out that “[h]er potential for artistic or intellectual production is subsumed beneath the reproductive duties of a wife.” (Sherrard-Johnson 2004:849) Helga’s marriage, besides decreasing her academic background in favor of a debatable sexual emancipation, also brings in five children that eventually exhaust her until nearly death. Certainly, Larsen’s representation of wedlock displays “a limiting outlet for women, tied to the burdens of reproduction (Barnett 1995: 598) After giving birth to her fourth child, Helga copes with a long period of physical daze where she questions not only the choices she has made throughout her life but also the aspects that are part of her current household. She becomes aware of the “idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe” concerning “[t]he white man’s God” (131) she had happened to have faith on after her marriage to the preacher. She feels relieved when she is told that that forth baby has passed away. She is “determined to get herself out of his bog into which she had strayed.” (135) For she certainly has given up her search for an identity that preserved her mixed heritage; she has manifestly overcome her sexual repression; “[s]he had, to put it as brutally as anyone could, been a fool. The damndest kind of a fool.” (134). Unquestionably, she has exchanged all

these choices for an oppressing life in the provincial South that has made of her an unfortunate woman she did not expect to become.

The distress caused by her difficulty to belong is replaced by the decay she suffers from the moment she moves to Alabama, when her existence evolves into a complete trap of housework, upbringing, sexual dissatisfaction and, definitely, utter misery. “How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become? It was so difficult. It was terribly difficult. It was almost hopeless.” (136) The last sentence of the novel does certainly not give opportunity to any kind of optimism: “And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child.” (136) The severity of this ending demonstrates Helga’s unquestionable outcome as a tragic character. This sentence can actually function as the summary of Helga’s life as a whole: every time she thought she had found a new home, a new community, every time she believed her life was going to improve because of the happiness the new environment provided her; every time that happened, her quest for identity prevented her from a joyful life just as the ending suggests her new pregnancy will do.

Therefore, Helga is finally left in the pitiable position her choices have taken her to become. None of the previous cities and communities she has lived in have provided her the happiness she yearned from a defined identity. To some extent, in fact, only in this town in the South has Helga been able to leave behind her role as “other”. Until then, her colleagues in Naxos could not comprehend her desire to enhance her complexion with colorful clothes; Anne could not accept her years living among whites in Denmark; her European relatives could not understand her reasons to decline a marriage proposal for being based on racial issues. In Alabama, the inhabitants happen to consider Helga one more member of their community, thus contributing to her feeling of belonging. She finally becomes an individual

who is not judged for what she represents as either black or white but rather for who she is as a human being, a woman that has to deal with obstacles like everybody else.

Nonetheless, this acceptance by the group cannot yet completely satisfy her due to the intellectual interests she has had to lose in return, which were also part of her being. Besides, her adjustment to the domestic life actually enforces her to forget about her identity in order to be able to confront her new sorrowful life. According to Davis, the whole section in the South “ends her self-development, in favor of her new racially and communally derived subjectivity.” (Davis 2002:xxix) Helga’s life loses her initial sense and her search for an identity remains an episode of the past, yet suspending her struggle for identification does not provide her the happiness she has been looking for all this time because it can only be found in her personal acceptance of her mixed-race uniqueness. Rayson observes that “[f]or Nella Larsen, and for Helga Crane, the choices facing black American women are all unsatisfactory.” (Rayson 1998:92) If they are not eager to accept the objectification Europe will offer them, their only solution is to belong to the despised black American community that will either deprive them from their rights as human beings, or rather transform them into a reproductive instrument. After years facing her incapability to self-define in order to avoid the affliction of non-belonging, Helga chooses to give up and therefore becomes the “Tragic Mulatta”.

5. Conclusions

Helga Crane has certainly proved to be a non-conventional representation of the figure of the “Tragic Mulatta”. Firstly, her family’s interracial background and her experience as an abandoned kid clearly have an influence on her outcome as a tragic character, since she fears becoming like her parents and being treated in the way they both treated each other. Nevertheless, the evolution she goes through from her resentment towards them to the forgiveness and understanding of their reasons to behave as they did demonstrates that Helga

is willing to learn from her experience and apply it to her growth as a woman, wife and mother.

Secondly, she is finally unable to find the community she longed for due to her incapability to integrate her racial and cultural duality as a single identity. Yet her effort to reject the contradictions and pretensions visible in the black communities of Naxos and Harlem, and her departure from Denmark after becoming aware of the different kind of racism present in Europe, where her American attitudes, that are indeed part of her identity, are undervalued, confirm Helga's determination to develop herself into an independent woman who does not necessarily act like or agree with what others expect from her.

Up to this point, Helga Crane is displayed as a strong and ambitious female character that could have been able to avoid her classification as a "Tragic Mulatta". She certainly deals with the objectification and sexual repression these literary figures were usually related to, but her final tragedy is found in the fact that she has to give up her intellect and quest for identity in order to face her new rural life in the South. By abandoning the struggle her mixed heritage has caused her, she actually moves into a worse entrapment that is an oppressive and hopeless life as a housewife. All in all, Helga Crane eventually becomes a tragic character by the end of the novel, yet her personal development and awareness of the social constructions she has had to learn to disregard clearly corroborate her role as a non-traditional "Tragic Mulatta".

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