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**Helga Crane's Pursuit of Happiness: Identity
and Racial Duality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

What, exactly, she wondered, was happiness? Very positively she wanted it. Yet her conception of it had no tangibility. She couldn't define it, isolate it, and contemplate it as she could some other abstract things. Hatred, for instance. Or kindness. (Larsen, 2001: 45)

Helga Crane's most desirable aspiration in life is, as any human being, happiness, yet she is unable to find the way to it. Her binary identity –that is to say, her both black and white origins– makes her believe she is not part of anything, rather, she experiences homesickness wherever she goes.

The emotional stability she needs could probably be accomplished through the understanding that she does not have to belong to neither of the two extremes. It is precisely a balance between the two of them what would have make her reach this so-much-longed-for bliss. Nonetheless, the pressure of the historical context and the society of the time impose on her that she will never find her way if she does not choose one of the two sides.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to analyse why Helga cannot reach happiness due to the social obligation of taking a stance on one community or the other. I will also explore the aspects of both communities that Helga admires in order to establish the midpoint that could have make her realize her purpose in life. To this effect, I will focus on Helga's deepest thoughts and racial conflicts that make her so miserable and wretched, coming to the conclusion that the acceptance of her own dual identity –even if it was contrary to the identities proposed by the society of the epoch– was, in fact, the road to happiness.

Keywords: *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen, Helga Crane, happiness, identity, racial duality, racial consciousness, racism

0. Introduction

Helga Crane, the protagonist of one of Nella Larsen's masterpieces, *Quicksand* (1928) is a mixed raced woman with a conflicted racial identity who is seeking happiness through finding her place in the world. Her indeterminate position in a such a racist society as the United States' one at the beginning of the 20th century makes her a miserable and downhearted character throughout the novel, since the search of this happiness becomes extremely complex.

The solitary girl incessantly attempts to find emotional stability and acceptance wherever she goes, unsuccessfully, since the problem lies in herself. This is

The great difficulty a mixed-race individual faces in order to identify him or herself to a single culture, a single race and to forge a proper sense of identity. This quest for one's identity is a common issue in African American literature, as well as it must have been in Larsen's segregated society, especially for those who have been in touch with both cultures (black and white) and must have felt that they do not belong to any of them. (Müller, 2016: s217)

Such distinctions, however, were not only made only by the white communities but also by the black ones, as we can see in the novel. Even so, it is undeniable to say that the ones who ended up losing were the black communities. Helga not only scorns white people, but also her black fellows. When she is with blacks, she feels alienated, and so she does in the opposite case. Helga is so obsessed with having to choose and find her own place in one of those two sections that she is incapable to see that this decision would tear the half of what she was from her, making her lose part of her own roots.

However, she is completely aware of the racial categorization made by the white and predominant race and she profoundly condemns and repudiates it. Nonetheless, she cannot help feeling ashamed by some black people's conducts when she is with them. As an example, and in a very particular moment in the novella,

Helga feels as if "something" in her has been exposed. [...] this "something" should not be read as a common and innate characteristic that links black Americans together, but rather as a forced identification with blackness, a socially constructed but nonetheless powerful category of identity that has been coded as beggarly and undesirable by a white supremacist society. (Rottenberg, 2007: 90)

This "something" Rottenberg talks about is what Helga considers to be her pride and her disgrace in equal measure. A compulsory identification which was undeniably seen as inferior by white mastery.

Helga does not feel comfortable neither with herself not with the places she is living in, and in her adulthood, she constantly tries to belong to somewhere –or to something– by travelling around not only the US but also the world. She "always approaches but never quite achieves a state of perfect belonging" (Macharia, 2011: 260), for she is never contented with anything in her life.

Throughout the novel, there is a thorough depiction of racial issues and a lack of sense of belonging by Helga Crane that hinders the possibility of being complete. Her binary identity –that is to say, her both black and white origins– makes her believe she is not part of anything, rather, she experiences homesickness wherever she goes. She somehow does not accept what she actually is, and that is precisely what could have made her fortunate. The emotional stability she needs could probably be accomplished through the understanding that she does not have to belong to neither of the two extremes. It is precisely a balance between the two of them what would have make her reach this so-much-longed-for bliss, but "her mixed heritage thwarts this wish" (Walker, 2016: 171). Nonetheless, the pressure of the historical context and the society of the time impose on her that she will never find her way if she does not choose one of the two sides.

0.1 Contextualization: The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as “The New Negro Movement” was a vindication of African blackness and racial pride that took place in Harlem, a neighbourhood in Manhattan, New York. Its purpose was to reassess the music, dancing, the traditions and customs of black people they had been denied previously, as well as to get rid of the “racial prejudice that equated blackness with barbarism” (Dawahare, 2006: 23). They wanted to achieve social respect and rights, that is to say, equality. This was the movement in which African American people “redefined themselves and announced their entrance into modernity” (Wall, 2016: 3). With this activist movement, black people in America tried to rule out any chance that white supremacy continued to be superior in many ways, reclaiming their entitlement.

During this cultural awakening, another fact was also occurring, the Great Migration¹, as we can see with Larsen’s protagonist Helga Crane, when she leaves the college where she works as a teacher in Naxos, in the south of the country, in order to look for a better future in Chicago and later in New York. The North offered a new beginning and higher life expectations to those who had suffered from racism in the south of the country.

However, “Segregation was the law in much of the United States, and the practice in the rest” (Wall, 2016: 1). This means that, even if the north of the country was somehow less racist than the South, the whole United States of the early 20th century did not fully accept neither dark-skinned people nor “unclassified” persons –that is to say, double-

¹ The Great Migration, that started during the First World War, was the relocation of millions of Afro-Americans from the south of the country to its northern territories in order to escape from the segregationist laws that governed the South and to seek social and labour opportunities.

raced people—, and one had to choose between one community or the other so as not to be in a social limbo that impeded people to be part of something.

Once she arrived in Harlem, she felt “that magic sense of having come home” (Larsen, 2001: 75). She had found a place where black people were free and felt proud of themselves. There was sophistication, interesting conversations, elegant fashion; she was fascinated. However, all this vice, enjoyment and joyfulness quickly began to tire her out. She was so obsessed with the race issue that she did not understand why those people who had always been underestimated by whites could spend their time partying, singing or dancing –what she saw as a lack of concern– instead of being constantly fighting for their rights. Nonetheless, what she was not able to see was that these practices were the guns they used to accomplish the recognition not only of their rights, but also of their freedom. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why Helga Crane cannot establish a “relation between herself and the social world around her” (Walker, 2016: 171), since she herself has to battle against her own prejudice towards both black and white people. That righteous Harlem was one of the few places in the United States where she could have fulfilled herself, but she decided to move away, and this “migratory, nomadic impulse reinforces her ideological disdain” (Rutledge, 2016: 83).

In an America “sharply divided by the color line²” (Dawahare, 2006: 24), our protagonist could not feel comfortable anywhere she went. Her mixed colour origins acted as a boundary to herself that did not allow her to have stable thoughts or expectations, not even in Harlem, the place where she could have been emotionally reawaken. Rather than this, she is stuck in a “racial liminality” (Walker, 2016: 166) that makes her be in an

² The term “color line” was used in the United States to draw the distinction between white and black people. It referred to the racial segregation and discrimination and appeared after the abolition of slavery in 1865.

endless void. These racial bounds are not only established by herself, but also by an American society that had always been so discriminatory with black people.

0.2 The “Tragic Mulatta” Figure

The “tragic mulatta” heroine is a commonly used character in the American literature between the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. This figure is characterized by being a disenchanted and luckless woman that usually ends up in a dreadful situation that, in some cases, leads to “rejection or death” (Scheper, 2008: 680). These two tragic endings are strongly linked with the hopelessness heroines undergo throughout their entire lifetime due to social and racial repudiation.

A tragic mulatta is the embodiment of the mixed-race and double-consciousness³ issue, a person who needs to construct herself in order to “be”. The main problem a tragic mulatta has to endure is the awareness of her lower racial position within a society she will never belong to. In order to have society polarized and differentiated, “race identification has operated as a mechanism of control (Rottenberg, 2007: 91) at a particular moment and within a particular society that wanted at all costs not to be mixed with Afro-Americans.

We can therefore perfectly establish similarities between this melodramatic figure and the protagonist of *Quicksand*. Helga Crane is the highest representation of what a tragic mulatta has to be like: a mixed-raced woman who feels anxiety and consternation because of her condition, a condition that does not let her belong to neither the white American community nor the black one. On account of this, what Larsen intended “was

³ A term created by W. E. B Du Bois that appeared for the first time in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). It refers to the inner conflicts a mixed-raced person has to deal with within such a domineering and repressive society as the white American one.

to make the heroine a mulatto, [...] and to place the question of racial indeterminacy” (Gray, 1994: 257) so as to give voice to a situation that was taking place in that exact moment. She attempts to

Present the mulatta heroine as a psychologically complex, independent woman; however, the personal, social, and vocational fulfilment that Larsen attempts to imagine for her volatile heroines—their self-creation—is constantly impeded by their function as an iconic fetish in both black and white elite circles. (Sherrard-Johnson, 2004: 836)

Sherrard-Johnson's description of a tragic mulatta fits in with Helga Crane quite accurately: she fulfils the standard of an independent woman whose thoughts are profound and emotional but still inept at establishing her own identity.

However, and despite Helga fulfils the tragic mulatta stereotype, I would like to remark a big difference between her and the figure that also make them somehow opposing. Whereas a tragic mulatta character is someone who does not find room in any of the two communities she could belong to, in the case of Helga, her problem is not that neither of these communities accept her, moreover, Helga fits in both and nobody rejects her. But her inner conflicts go beyond all this. It is Helga herself who thinks she cannot be a member of anything, since her own experience seems to compel her to, by turns, admire and disdain both racial groups.

Be that as it may, although the protagonist is accepted by both communities she belongs to, the author does not make Helga guilty of her own thoughts, but she “redirects the blame to the society whose flawed racial ideology effaces the biracial woman's existence” (Walker, 2016: 187), since it is assumed that the complexity of fitting in such a racist country cannot be a human being's fault and responsibility.

Another similarity between a tragic mulatta and Helga Crane is their tragic ending, which is another characteristic feature of the figure itself. Whilst Helga does not end up passing away, the denouement of her story is equally devastating. This close is due to her

lack of possibilities to really feel embraced by something, she continually “wrestles with essentialist notions of race, heritage, and culture that repeatedly compel her to view herself as a tragic mulatto, who may be tolerated but never truly belongs” (Piep, 2014: 114).

1. Between Two Worlds

Helga Crane is a young American woman whose origins are mixed: neither she is fully a black woman nor a white one, or rather, this is how she feels all the time. She is actually the result from a relation between her black father and her white mother, what makes her be in the middle of nowhere in an epoque that forced people to establish a fixed identity.

Our protagonist does not only have two races but also two different ways of thinking, two souls, two senses of belonging. She equally loves and disregards both of her parts at the same time, always trying to see which percentage of her own self beats the other. She lives in a constant attempt to decide what of the two worlds she prefers to live in, yet she is unable to fit in neither without missing something from the other side.

Helga feels so lost in the world that she tries to find her home, yet we will now see she “moves to different places, but never to a home” (Macharia, 2011: 264), since it is impossible to her to belong to somewhere. The more she tries to find her way, the more lost she is. However, this is the only way she thinks she will be able to run away from what bores and annoys her, travelling tirelessly until finding her place to be. However, that time never comes.

1.1 White Origins, Bonds and Community

Daughter of a beautiful Scandinavian woman (who was a foreigner in America), Karen, Helga usually feels pity for her mother. She does not know very much about the relationship her parents shared, but she is aware of the pain her father caused to her mother when he left her. Besides, Macharia (2011: 262) noted that a white immigrant and a black gambler living in an urban, northern slum represent a combination that cannot be assimilated into either white or black nativist paradigms, and that was precisely Helga's parents' situation. While living in Chicago, they formed a race mixture that cannot be understood and therefore barely accepted in the society of the time. Moreover, there is a transformation on the part of Helga's mother when she ended up raising a child without the father's support. She believes she was a cheerful and joyful woman until he made her turn into a miserable and even hopeless being.

Once Helga was born and after her father left them high and dry, Karen got married again, but this time she married a man of her own race, that is to say, white. Helga not only had to bear her progenitor's new husband—who, by what she describes of him, deeply upset her—, but also her new half-brothers and sisters, who were cruel and mean to her. Even if the situation was unsustainable, Helga was not able to run away, she could not escape from what was hurting her. Her memories of this stage of her life are terrifying: she recalls how her mother had to keep silent not to start an argument with her husband, making her guilty of everything, as well as the feeling of constantly being a nuisance for him and her half-siblings, even claiming that “unloved little Negro girls must be somehow provided for.” (Larsen, 2001: 56) This is exactly how she felt: lonely, abandoned and, repeating her own words, unloved.

All this troublesome and chaotic situation is what Helga perceived from the very beginning of her existence, that is to say, “isolation, vulnerability, anger, and loneliness”

(Phipps, 2016: 154). This is the environment she started building her personality in, which hindered the possibility of creating a complete and fulfilled self, not only to Helga, but to anyone who had to live this sorrowful start. She was a fragile child who becomes an easy breakable woman as soon as she starts getting older, even if her strong behaviour could make the reader think she is so confident and self-assured.

Moreover, at the age of 15, Helga's mother passed away. We do not get much information about Helga's feelings about this tragic event from the text, but the fact she describes her detachment from that family as a "rescue" (Larsen, 2001: 57) really stands out. It is not until that particular moment that Helga begins a new life and she briefly relishes happiness. Even though she was sent to a new school for black people and she somehow felt relieved because she was not turned down by her skin colour anymore, she could not help feeling like a fish out of water. There is always a feeling of non-belonging accompanying her wherever she goes.

In order to continue analysing the protagonist's white bonds, I will skip her affairs in Naxos, Chicago and New York –which will be expounded further on– so as to describe the moment she wanted to distance herself from the black culture she was absorbed in. To do so, she decides to leave the States and travel to Denmark, where her maternal family lived in, "not only in order to seek a happy future in Copenhagen, [...] but to join the only blood relatives who will accept her" (Gray, 1994: 259) and "hoping to escape the ubiquitous effects of American racism" (Scheper, 2008: 679). Gray uses the word "accept" and it could not be more accurate: acceptance is what Helga constantly searches for. As soon as she arrived in Copenhagen, her outstanding figure did not go unnoticed at all and "she relishes the appreciation and attention to her beauty as a black woman" (Scheper, 2008: 684) and she becomes "a desired object" (Walker, 2016: 173), something she felt she had never experienced before. It was a city full of fair-skinned and blonde-

haired people who had probably never seen a swarthy woman before and, as stunning and striking as she was, she made everyone who walked past her feel astonished. She rapidly got used to being flattered by everybody. Helga also loved the refinement, the good manners and the pride every single Dane possessed. She was delighted with having “leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things.” (Larsen, 2001: 97). She was convinced that she belonged to that exquisite and elegant place, where she would no longer be criticised.

At first, she enjoyed being the centre of attention but, at some point, she started missing some of her black people's customs and habits. Her black side –the one she thought that was forgotten– was getting out from the cage she had tried to lock it up, “Helga cannot escape the reification of blackness” (Dawahare, 2006: 30), it always reappeared. It was also a part of her true self, she would never be able to get rid of it, because it was what she was too. Therefore, she realized that she was never going to be seen as one of those sophisticated white people but, in fact, she was more like “A decoration. A curio. A peacock” (Larsen, 2001: 103). One more time, what she enjoyed and appreciated at first became boring and uninteresting to her; it seems “she is never simply willing to be what is expected of her” (Scheper, 2008: 684), for whatever comes to her life she eventually rejects it. She found out she was just different, and she would always be. It is true that she scorned the America –and white people who lived in it indirectly– that did not live its black people freely, in her own words:

Go back to America, where they hated Negroes! To America, where Negroes were not people. To America, where Negroes were allowed to be beggars only, of life, of happiness, of security. To America, where everything had been taken from those dark ones, liberty, respect, even the labor of their hands. To America, where, if one had Negro blood, one mustn't expect money, education, or, sometimes, even work whereby one might earn bread. (Larsen, 2001: 111)

Undoubtedly, Helga is referring to white Americans when pronouncing these words, it is “them” who hate blacks, who have stolen everything from black people; their rights, their duties, their identity. In spite of that, and once again, she was feeling incomplete, unfulfilled, she knew she needed something else. According to her, it was her experience in Denmark that made her realize that she had to go back to the States, to her origins, to try to achieve the so-much-longed-for happiness one more time. Nonetheless, “flee where she will, Helga’s case is hopeless” (Walker, 2016: 173) because, as we will see later, her return to America will not solve any of her worries, on the contrary, it will be the beginning of the end.

1.2 Black Origins, Bonds and Community

Hereafter, I will focus on Helga’s opposite identity. We actually know very little about Helga's black origins, the only information we are explained in the novella is that her father was an African-American who had a sexual –I would not dare to say romantic– relationship with her mother. Thus, I will focus on her adult stage. Her story begins in Naxos, a college located in the South of the United States –where racial distinctions have always been even more obvious than in the north–. Working as a teacher, Helga expresses contempt for her fellows’ conformism and resignation from the very beginning of the narrative. She abhors having to accept her situation without being able to complain about what she disagrees with.

The protagonist had the impression that everybody surrounding her acted as automatic robots which have been set up to operate methodically, without thinking too much. Dawahare (2006: 26) asserted that the protagonist saw her colleagues as a machine operating independently of human will. This absolutely nauseated her. She felt alienated

from this situation and was not willing to yield, she “had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying. She could neither conform nor be happy in her unconformity” (Larsen, 2001: 42).

Her perception was that everybody in there had accepted their “role” as inferior beings –to white people–. Therefore, as well as whites were constantly establishing racial categorizations –and she profoundly detested it–, her own black community, the one she believed herself as part of, was doing exactly the same, that is to say, a racial and social distinction, placing themselves in a lower position by default, as if they had completely assumed their inferior situation.

Helga could not understand why her own people undervalued themselves and why

These people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction. (Larsen, 2001: 51)

Indeed, she felt disappointed to learn her people had somehow surrendered in this dignifying process of their race. But she also felt a deep sorrow because she was conscious that she lived in a country which was obsessed with racial disparity and her opportunities of succeeding the way she wanted were lower than those of fully white people. Nevertheless, she decides she has to change her lifestyle so as to, at least, try to reach her long-awaited happiness.

Once in Chicago, the city she was born in, she suffered the first heavy blow: while she is looking for her uncle, her mother’s brother and the one who “rescued” her as a teenager when Karen died, she was looked down on by her uncle’s wife, who claimed that her uncle was not going to be so anymore, doubtlessly, because of her skin colour and what people could think about them hanging out with a mulatta. She did not only accept it but even understood her act because Helga, from the beginning of her childhood,

had internalised she was “an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden” (Larsen, 2001: 62).

After some time in the Windy City, Helga took the opportunity to go to New York and more specifically to Harlem, where, as soon as she got there, she felt “that magic sense of having come home” (Larsen, 2001: 75). After her traumatic childhood, her frustrated stay in Naxos and her cruel experience in Chicago, she arrived in a place where she finally felt actual freedom for the first time in her entire life. She was unchained from her fears, from her sorrows, from her ghosts of the past that persistently tortured her.

Surrounded by those who she considered her people, the African-American, Helga experienced what to belong to somewhere was, which is what she had been looking for during all her whole life. She was so convinced that was her place to stay that she could not even believe her eyes. Once and for all, she was proud of her black bonds more than ever. Those people who strolled along the Harlem neighbourhood showed exhibited their honour and dignity –unlike people in Naxos, who resignedly had accepted their role in a racist society without complaint– because, even if they lived in a segregationist country, they were not willing to accept an unfair fate just for the fact of having a dark-coloured skin.

Helga, fully engaged with her black fellows, began to feel indifference –that quickly turned into hostility– towards white people who also lived in The Big Apple. To her, they were guilty of having made her stow her black identity away for many years, also making her feel ashamed of what her half self was.

Nonetheless, this magical feeling that filled her with joy and gladness, little by little developed into tedium and even rejection once again:

It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien.

[...]

Back in the privacy of her own cubicle, self-loathing came upon her. "They're my own people, my own people," she kept repeating over and over to herself.

[...]

She didn't, in spite of her racial marking, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn't merely a matter of color. (Larsen, 2001: 86)

Her troublesome spirit did not let her be complete at all. There would always be something missing, something wrong or something bad because, just as she said, it was not simply a matter of colour, it was something else. This is the point where Helga decides to leave the city that, during a short period of time, made her feel alive so as to live a new adventure –a failed one, as we have already seen– in Copenhagen.

2. Helga Crane's Quandary

Duality is present in every single day of Helga's life, and this is what conditions her entire existence. Given racial consciousness, Helga thinks she needs to choose between one colour or the other because, to her, accepting both at the same time is unthinkable, "Helga finds [...] that she cannot occupy both positions, that her indeterminacy [...] does not enable the search for the Self" (Gray, 1994: 258). She is completely unable to strike a balance between them.

Several reasons may explain why Helga cannot reconcile her two sides: the racist societal standards, her traumatic experience in her childhood and, on top of that, her mother's apathy and weakness towards her misery as she tried to build her personality. Her mother's role in her development was crucial and we might think "her mother's coldness toward Helga frames Helga's perceptions of black people and herself,

preventing her from ever feeling comfortable in either black or white social communities” (Phipps, 2016: 150). Therefore, we should consider that the emotional denial she suffers from the very beginning of her life on the part of her maternal parent is the basis of the anguish and sorrow that are stick to her all her lifelong.

Although she could not fit in any of the two factions, this does not mean that Helga is unaware of her social and racial condition, it was quite the opposite. Her consciousness about what she was is what makes her so unfortunate in soul. In contrast with Irene Redfield, the protagonist of Larsen's *Passing* (1929), who somehow does not fully accept her black condition and sometimes passes in order to enjoy some privileges only whites could relish, our protagonist, Helga, is absolutely aware of her origins and at no time hides them –yet they disgust her equally–. She knows that being a black person –and, what is more, a black woman– does not benefit her, especially in such a segregationist country.

Our protagonist is constantly fighting against her own thoughts, sometimes unfair and disagreeable even to herself. She cannot help feeling she has to make an anxious and desperate decision in order to find their place in the world, which is what she looks forward to the most. Racial ambiguity is getting her out of her mind, and that is why she tries so hard to settle down. All she is crying out for is emotional stability and sense of togetherness, which is precisely what she has never possessed, not even as a kid.

Helga continually escapes from one identity to embrace the other so as to eventually loathe it and want to come back to the previous one. She is trapped in a vicious circle and it is what she has to fight against all the time. Sadly, as much as she tries to get rid of one of her halves, it will always return. She will not be happy wherever she goes, no matter how far, because the other part of herself will be on the other side of the world, waiting for her to unlock it again. And this does not let her live.

Unquestionably, “Helga Crane is not a one-dimensional individual” (Jones, 2020: 118), but a very complex woman who repeatedly has a sense of otherness she cannot escape from. In fact, feeling one-dimensional when she cannot bear with her two souls is especially unfeasible.

3. An Inevitable Outcome

In a last-ditch attempt to give her own life a meaning and to achieve what she wishes the most, happiness, Helga makes a decision that would change her whole existence forever. When she had already made all efforts to settle down, Helga embraced religion so as to what she thought would provide her with bliss.

All of a sudden, this new path had opened for her to fulfil her dreams, she realized she did not want to go

Back into the clear bareness of her own small life and being, from which happiness and serenity always faded just as they had shaped themselves. And slowly bitterness crept into her soul. Because, she thought, all I've ever had in life has been things—except just this one time.

[...]

Things, she realized, hadn't been, weren't, enough for her. She'd have to have something else besides. It all came back to that old question of happiness. (Larsen, 2001: 144)

She thought she had finally found what she had been looking for all of her life. But she had not. “A new cycle—one founded on domesticity, pregnancy, and illness” (Phipps, 2016: 137) was about to start. This was another fruitless attempt to reach her goal, but she would not be able to escape from this one. This last attempt would be her life sentence.

Helga married Reverend Pleasant Green, a religious man whose aims were marrying and having children —a lot of them—, after her conversion. At first, as always,

Helga felt excited and amazed with her new life, appreciating things she had never even noticed before, “she had done with soul searching” (Larsen, 2001: 149), which gave her peace and calm. As soon as she started bringing children into the world and her life became dreary and monotonous –as well as she let herself go, something that Helga always had taken care of–, the weariness and aversion appeared again. It seemed that “Helga can never quite settle down with her happiness, even when she seems to have found it” (Rutledge, 2016: 76). There is always something accompanying her that is hidden for a while but eventually shows up.

Suddenly, God did no longer exist to her. Something that had provided her with glee and hope became inexistent. At the end of the novel, however, she is chained to her own destiny, the one she had chosen. She could not escape from marriage and maternity, she was “locked in a cycle that produces nothing but embitterment, regret, and hatred for her husband and her surroundings” (Phipps, 2016: 137). But this time she could not leave her responsibilities behind.

4. Conclusions and Further Research

What troubles Helga the most is not the fact of not finding what collective she belongs to, but the constant quest for the feeling of belonging to one of those collectives. Actually, “the tragedy of Helga lies in her inability to recognize her real problems that are more emotional than racial ones” (Müller, 2016: s217), that is to say, Helga continually blames her biracial identity for being the reason why she cannot feel at ease anywhere she goes; however, her actual trauma is probably more existential than racial. She does have the irremediable desire and need of finding her “place”, she cannot only share values, principles, ideas and traditions of both communities, because this does not

satisfy her and, inevitably, she never finds the emotional stability in this never-ending search.

Even though there were things that were unique in the two cultures, Helga could not understand how it was possible to feel black and white at the same time. However, and despite her scorn for both communities at some points, “Helga never develops a simple or outright hatred for either black or white people” (Phipps, 2016: 151), besides, she openly admires some aspects and traits of both racial groups and their members. Notwithstanding, she is unable to find the midpoint between her two realities, to reach harmony between them because her constant feeling of alterity accompanies her during all her life and does not facilitate her comfort.

As a further matter we must consider the fact she was also rejected from the very beginning of her life as well, firstly by her father, who abandoned her and her mother, later by her mother –emotionally– and by her maternal uncle for the third time. Recent research claims that “being denied membership in a cultural or racial group that is relevant to how people identify themselves may be especially impactful as it could threaten additional aspects of the self-concept” (Albuja et al., 2019: 1167), ergo, the denial Helga suffers all along her childhood and adolescence –and sometimes in her adulthood, too– disrupts her own selfhood. For her, “this lack of place is an unfortunate birthright, a consequence of illegitimacy and abandonment” (Manora, 2019: 13). Manora, by using the words “birthright”, “illegitimacy” and “abandonment”, somehow presents some of the main existential problems of any human being, because it all comes to a sense of belonging in the end. Neither birthright nor legitimacy are provided to Helga, but she only knows abandonment. Furthermore, and taking into consideration that “bicultural and biracial people’s frequent identity denial experiences are associated with a lower sense of freedom in choosing their own identity and with increased perceived conflict between

their two identities” (Albuja et al., 2019: 1167), Albuja et al. delve into the same issue once again: one cannot establish his/her identity without a sense of belonging. Additionally, and taking all these factors into account, it is impossible that Helga “attains a sense of being Danish, American, or both” (Piep, 2014: 116), because due to her volatile and unstable condition, she can never fit in.

Consequently, and in an era where racial pride and racism were coexisting, it was a very challenging task to decide which of the two opposite factions one wanted to belong to. Therefore, we should consider that “Helga’s quest might well be read as a liberatory one” (Manora, 2019: 12), because what she was looking for with this quest was to release herself from her own insecurities and distresses that were wounding her so much. However, it becomes unattainable.

Sorrowfully, Helga Crane never finds her yearned-for happiness and never accomplishes her goal in life. She never attains a place to be, a place to belong to. She never fits in with anybody and anywhere. She is never able to reconcile her two sides, the ones that will never leave her. She cannot find the balance that would have led her to calmness. However, it was not her fault, the social standards of the period impeded it, because she did not fulfil them. In a white supremacist world and within a black race pride movement, there was no room for a girl who was incapable of stripping a part herself off. Happiness for Helga is, therefore, something to dream of, something she constantly thinks to have achieved but that all of a sudden vanishes in the end.

Lastly, the pathetic ending is a symbol of the tragic impossibility she has to flee from what she has built in Alabama, in fact, what is new there is “the sense of permanence. This time familial and physical constraints will keep her forever in one place” (Phipps, 2016: 138). Before that, Helga could run away from everywhere she tried to live in as soon as she got tired and bored, however, all of her efforts during her existence to find

her place were eventually useless, since in the end “she finds a locale that she *cannot* leave” (Phipps: 2016: 137). Eventually, Helga is entrapped in a cage she herself has created with just the opposite she had been looking for: unhappiness.

For further research, it would be interesting to analyse contemporary texts and authors that discuss biracial identities or racial dualities –that is to say, Du Bois’ double consciousness– and whose protagonists are women so as to compare them to Larsen’s masterpieces *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). It would also be engaging to study these women’s worries and nervousness within a more modern century to establish possible similarities and differences between two different epochs, societies and standards.

Life wasn’t a miracle, a wonder. It was, for Negroes at least, only a great disappointment. Something to be got through with as best one could. No one was interested in them or helped them. God! Bah! And they were only a nuisance to other people. (Larsen, 2001: 157)

5. Works Cited

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