Tragic Figures of Race

The Dilemma of Minority Races in Richard Wright’s and Nella Larsen’s Fiction

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

The period between 1920 and 1940 in America was a time of raised awareness for people of color. They began to voice their eagerness to be accepted in their community. At this time black people had broken free from slavery. They were, however, not considered equal to white Americans and still had the ghost of slavery hanging over them. During this time in New York a group of people, black and white, formed an alliance to further their mutual interest to establish an identity for people of color and their acceptance amongst other Americans with the aim of social equality for all citizens of the United States of America. This movement was called the New Negro Movement but later referred to as the Harlem Literary Renaissance movement. The main focus of this essay is on this literary movement and in particular the writers Richard Wright and Nella Larsen. Wright’s novel *Native Son* (1940) and Larsen’s short stories “Passing” (1929) and “Quicksand” (1928) form the essay’s narrow focus. Wright centralizes on the poor lower class black American in Chicago between the 1920s and the 1930s, where his main character is an African American of a poor working class and the trouble he runs into. Larsen chooses a completely different perspective as she focuses on the dilemma mixed race individuals face belonging to neither the black nor the white race. This essay shows how these two writers address the problem people of color face regarding their identity in their work and places their fiction in the context of the Harlem Renaissance to show how it influenced them.
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Introduction

Every individual has a claim to an identity and this is our civil right: to be recognized in the world we live in. Identity influences our behavior and our characteristics as human beings. It shows our individuality and we seek our acceptance as this socially accepted individual. This essay addresses issues of individualism and the problems facing people of color appearing in literature. The central focus is the literary era between the 1920s and the 1930s and the setting is the United States of America. This period is marked by a rise in movements such as women’s and colored people’s campaigns for identity and self-image.

The focus is on identity issues concerning people of color, cumulating in the Harlem Renaissance literary movement. A few writers belonging to that movement will be discussed, especially Richard Wright and Nella Larsen. Wright was born to a poor colored family in the remote southern state of Mississippi and had the experience of having grandparents who escaped slavery. Larsen was a woman of mixed ethnic background, who at the time was referred to as mulatto. This phrase will not be used here, nor the words *Negro* and *nigger* as these terms are now considered racist. However these terms will be visible, particularly in direct quotations. Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son* (1940) will be discussed as it tells the story of a black man’s life and the dilemma of poverty and hardship which places the main character, Bigger Thomas, in a situation beyond his comprehension. Followed by discussion of two of Nella Larsen’s short stories “Passing” (1929) and “Quicksand” (1928) as they raise the question of mixed ethnicity since the leading characters are bi-racial women.

At the time of this essay’s main focal point (1920-1940), America had gone through changes in terms of its people’s origin and an immense increase in population through immigration that had been ongoing for decades. The American government had recognized the problem of this enormous immigration and sought to control it with constitutional acts, and slavery had long been abolished. However the descendants of the slaves were in a great struggle to find their place in American society just as well as some of the new arrivals. In other words, American society was becoming more mixed, even too much in some people’s view and the African Americans were placed in the same assortment as the immigrants. They did not have a certain place in society and were seen as outsiders; as not accepted as the general white American. Furthermore, African Americans were placed apart from the
immigrants, many of whom easily established their image and status by holding on to their heritage. In contrast to those immigrants’ legacy, what was the heritage of the common black American? What was their identity? These questions and other speculations about the African Americans and other black people’s stance towards individualism as reflected in literature will be given attention and discussed.

The recognition of a self-image happens when people share views and the notion of themselves, their position, their world and importantly the role they have in society as a group. We all, as human beings, expect this to be the case for every person in our, and other societies. Nevertheless as shown in this essay, this has not been the fact for everyone and is still not so in some communities. Present cultural situations are not discussed here as the focus is on the search for accepted self-image in the Harlem Literary Renaissance period, which was a central focus for the quest of self-image, identity and social acceptance amongst African Americans in the white American society in New York in the 1920s and the 1930s. This period has been greatly investigated and discussed by scholars whose work will be used to support the journey through the Harlem Literary Renaissance period. Such research will be used to look at how Richard Wright dealt with identity issues regarding the poor working class of a colored individual in Chicago, which is the platform of his novel and to deepen the understanding of how Nella Larsen dealt with her life as a bi-racial person and how it appears throughout her short stories.

It is vital for this essay to give recognition to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) part in assisting the writers of the Harlem Renaissance literary movement to have their work published. Furthermore, it is necessary to briefly mention the Communist Party of The United States of America (CPUSA) to which Richard Wright belonged between 1934 and 1943, although he later criticized its policies. These two organizations played an important role for many writers, especially colored writers, publishing their work in their journals. Without these associations’ journals their voices would not have been heard.

Several people were central figures at this time and the main persons will be discussed briefly in connection with this timeframe and the main authors. In essence, which image the colored writers set for their characters is crucial for the representation of them as a part of their society and what was expected of them. Therefore it was crucial for these writers to establish an identity within the American social framework as it was a tool for opening up the racial dilemma many of them
faced during this period, this holds especially true for Richard Wright and Nella Larsen.
1. The Harlem Literary Renaissance

This chapter discusses the early identity of Americans, especially that of African American individuals in contrast with immigrants and the difference in their status as citizens of the United States. This discussion will lead into the development of the Harlem Renaissance Literary movement and its part in development of writers who dealt with race discrimination and self-image amongst people of color in America. Furthermore, the allies colored writers had during this era will be given attention as well as the fact that not all colored individuals influencing the Harlem Literary Renaissance were descendants of slaves.

1.1. Early Identity Issues

In the early twentieth century conjectures for whom America was got louder. For a long period of time immigration to America had been immense, particularly in the decades following the industrial revolution, where people’s manual work in Europe especially, had been replaced by machinery (Montagna). In the years after WWI conditions in America were changing and immigration had reduced severely to the point of almost stopping with the National Origins Act passed by the American Congress in 1921. This was an emergency legislation and with a further detailed act in 1924 an attempt was made to control how many immigrants entered the US from each country. These acts were meant to actually control who could immigrate and who could not by placing restrictions on the flow of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, which had been massive, as well as to place limitations on immigration from Asia (United States Dept. of State). Meanwhile, conditions for African Americans had changed with the increase of mobility between areas in the United States, which provided them with more stability and security in their living standards by offering opportunities of some degree in trade and industry with the result that their economic status changed for the better. However, “these changes were met with the revival of the Ku Klux Klan and its own form of ‘100 percent Americanism’” (DiNardo 27). This created difficulties for the African Americans in forming their identity as the fanatical actions of the Ku Klux Klan meant they were not accepted as a part of the community. In their identity dilemma the African Americans could not look to the North or the South, as the white man in the North could not agree to colored people adopting his white model and the South would only hold them in bondage as workers
in remote Southern farming. Still, the North seemed to be the more desirable choice for African Americans as it provided more possibilities than Southern farming, by which the colored would be trapped in the clutches of poverty with no chance of getting out of the hardship (Keller 29). In contrast, freely arriving immigrants had no difficulty rooting themselves in their new homeland; their heritage was based on old traditions, which they had proudly brought with them. “Irish-Americans grew more Irish than they had ever been, the Polish established Polish Lodges in America and the Italians built their ‘Little Italy’,” by difference “the Harlem Negro could not grow more Southern, for this defeated his need for dignity and status” (Keller 30). For this reason, since others could look back to their legacy and the traditions of their past, should the African American look to Africa for his heritage? This would be very deviant for them since all of them were born and raised on American ground and for most of them their parents and grandparents as well. Therefore their ties to Africa were none, what remained was only the tentative fact that their ancestors had been brought to America from Africa, which gave them the unclear identity of being African American. Thus, for the black people to look back to Africa for their heritage was as farfetched as “for other Americans to grow more medieval” (Keller 30-31). All in all the status for the African Americans was difficult. They did not belong to the white world nor did the majority of white America want them to belong, as was made clear by the fanatic deeds of the Ku Klux Klan. In the midst of these changes in the American society a group of individuals formed an alliance for the recognition for black Americans in the society through their writings, rooting their movement in Harlem, New York.

1.2. The Harlem Literary Renaissance
The Harlem Literary Renaissance of the 1920s was a movement where various writers put forward a quest for acceptance and status through their work to create an image and form an identity that could be accepted by white Americans. This was a claim for full participation in this community for “it was a search for an adequate sustaining model of the kind of an American the Negro might become” (Keller 29). People base their heritage on their past, therefore this search for sufficient representation was not simple for African Americans. Their heritage was slavery, on which they were reluctant to distinguish their identity. For the African Americans to locate themselves within American society after slavery was far from an easy task; hence finding a place
and identity socially was a struggle for most of them. During slavery the colored individual knew his status and his place and so did the white man; post-slavery neither one of them knew where to station the colored in the society (Keller 29). Consequently this quest for an image came to the fore in the Harlem Literary Renaissance, the main aim being to seek out a model for the African American to emulate.

A group of colored writers along with a few white supportive writers living in Harlem in New York began to publish ideas and raise awareness of the demand for equality for all Americans, regardless of their background, especially in terms of race. During this era these writers got the impression of belonging to a movement, an association where their mutual concerns for the race dilemma came together (Keller 30). Namely: how could the colored people seek their acceptance for their identity?

The publication of the anthology *The New Negro* by Alan Locke in 1925 is claimed to have marked the beginning of the Harlem Literary Renaissance period (Rampersad 87). For the first time the perspective of an African American on literature and artistic accomplishments was published. In addition *The New Negro* “alerted the world that something approaching a cultural revolution was taking place among blacks in New York as well as elsewhere in the United States and perhaps around the world. The book also attempted in a fairly ambitious, expansive way to offer a definition of this cultural movement” (Rampersad 87). Alain Locke had high hopes for the rising publicity of African American writers, not only for the United States but the whole world and wanted to raise awareness about it by publishing his anthology. He made sure not to leave any of the contemporary artists of this era out in his anthology and guaranteed to acknowledge all of the writers and artists of the movement and their effort in raising awareness of the issue of their status as racial minorities in the United States. In essence he talked about black art and literature, its past, present and future, with high hopes for the black race to be equal with whites (Rampersad 88). Clearly Locke had hopes of attaining social acknowledgment for colored people. For this reason, the “new” black individual would serve in society as someone of importance rather than having a model of a person with no specific cultural status, and therefore “through a presentation of attainments by the Renaissance writers there would be a great racial coalescence, and a consequent uplifting” (Keller 32).
The writers of the Harlem Literary Renaissance felt a need for an image of a visible and characterized African American individual. Locke’s anthology was an imperative contribution into their movement for acceptance and approval. However, they did not agree on how to portray their reflection of this identity. Therefore disagreement between the writers sometimes caused intense conflicts and at times could be seen in their work. Keller explains this dispute as such:

The focus of a sharper disagreement was the selection of a representative type. Some of the writers felt the need to invest their people with a sense of dignity and intelligence in their own eyes as in the eyes of white Americans, to be like the white people, while others wanted to keep black identity clear and distinct but with acknowledgement and acceptance. (32-33)

In other words, the writers’ ideas of an image crossed, causing lack of unity amongst them. At this point the question arises: what were they trying to contribute? Were they attempting to be like whites or to keep their distinctiveness as blacks? This was quite clear for most of them, as Keller points out, “the American Negro must create his own image, and he must do this out of his own present. This is what the Renaissance writers were trying to do. Their literature is not a literature of protest; it is a literature of search, with an object of creation” (34). Thus, it was in their own hands to be the makers of their self-image and that is what the renaissance was about, a peaceful action of writing in hope of acknowledgement and acceptance by the white community and the hope to achieve their goal.

1.3. Allies

One of the most important aspects of the Harlem Literary Renaissance was, as stated above, the existence of the NAACP. In 1910 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded, creating a platform for a union of black people and their ideas. The NAACP was lead by W. E. B. Du Bois who was the association’s most influential spokesman, particularly as the editor of Crisis, the organization’s journal, which was one of the greatest support black writers had as it provided a platform for publishing their work along with providing literary awards and reviews (Rampersad 89). To have a place where their voice could be heard was crucial for the Harlem Literary Renaissance movement. For the men and women of the literary association Crisis was a united location for them to exchange ideas and
accomplish how they wanted to present their view on their search for self-image. Furthermore, interaction between the writers and other artists of the Harlem Renaissance was of great importance. The 135th Street Library in Harlem, for example, became the most important gathering point for members of the Harlem Renaissance movement (Hart 620). Its main attractions were series of lectures by eminent authors, a vital effort for the pursuit of self-image. One of the most dynamic authors of the Harlem Literary Renaissance movement was not black but white. Carl Van Vechten was very active in hosting the Harlem Renaissance parties along with attending them and created vital connections with various artists of this time (Hart 614). These social gatherings of the Harlem Renaissance seem to have been an important factor of this period; this is where the authors interacted, heard about each other’s work and formed a network of relations which would help them with further promotions. However, there was little involvement between the influential representatives of the white renaissance, notably Eliot, Hemingway and Faulkner and the Harlem writers, the reason being that these white typhoons saw the black writers as second-class writers (Hart 627). Consequently, there was irregular interaction between those writers, merely for the most the prestigious white writers forming some sort of encouragement to the black writers as a way of mentoring or guidance how they should write. In short “the relationship was essentially white patron to black artists” (Hart 627).

Being categorized as belonging to a lower literary order must have been frustrating for the authors of the Harlem Renaissance movement since their aim was to achieve acceptance, to find their identity and self-image as well as being accepted as writers and artists equal to other Americans. On the other hand other artists of the renaissance also placed their mark on this period significantly as Rampersad points out:

In spite of its shortcomings, however, the achievement of The New Negro was real. In this way it reflects the mixed record of the Harlem Renaissance itself. In spite of the fact that the movement was short lived and many of its works and talents of less than stellar quality, the Renaissance succeeded in laying the foundations for all subsequent depiction in poetry, fiction and drama of the modern African American experience; and the same claim can be made even more strongly if its
music, in the compositions and performances of artists such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. (91)

In essence, the goals and expectations of the Harlem Renaissance were authentic, even though what the writers had anticipated did not in the end turn out as they had expected.

1.4. Caribbean Presence

One of the important factors of this era is the Caribbean presence at the Harlem Renaissance. The contributions of Caribbean influences such as Nella Larsen are important for the whole stance of how writers’ work appeared in contrast to Richard Wright’s writing as a slaved descendant. This influence is important when literary work from this time is explored as it gives an aspect of this different outlook, which is just as important as the standpoint from the African Americans since “about 25 percent of the Black populace of Harlem came from outside the United States” (Philipson 146). This is essential to notice when looking at Nella Larsen’s work in Chapter 3, since her background was different from many of the other writers of the Harlem Literary Renaissance movement. Thus these people had not “experienced legalized segregation and limitations upon opportunity” and as a result the Caribbean stand was better prepared to confront racial hindrances (Philipson 146). The presence of the Caribbean created circumstances for the average black Americans to see themselves differently and added another approach to the identity quest given.

Philipson points out that “many African American writers made the effort in their writing to distance themselves from a racist American discourse, but the colonial world provided, by definition, an international perspective and geographically distanced locus of the ruling discourse” (146). All in all, this period was the time for important black autonomy and realization for conscious acceptance for the black race in whole as a part of the American cultural society with their distinctive identity as Americans. How the authors dealt with the race dilemma in different manner will be further visible as the focus shifts to the main authors of this discussion, starting with Richard Wright and his novel Native Son.
2. Richard Wright

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on September 4th 1908 on Rucker’s Plantation near Roxie, Mississippi. His parents were Nathan Wright and Ella Wilson Wright. Both sets of his grandparents had been slaves and his grandmother on his mother’s side had been of mixed race, partly Irish, Scottish, American Indian and African descent and was almost white in appearance. Wright’s upbringing was mostly in the hands of his maternal grandmother since his father had abandoned the family when Wright was at young age, and his mother was of poor health. The family lived for the most part at his grandparent’s house in Jackson, Mississippi and Wright managed to finish his elementary and high school even though he had to start to work at an early age to provide for the family because of his mother illness. He was raised in great poverty but early in his life, he began to read voraciously. When he was nineteen years old, he read a book which influenced him the most, *A Book of Prefaces* by Menchen. Wright was especially impressed with Menchen’s iconoclasm and use of “words as weapons” (Wright 886).

In 1927 Wright moved to Chicago to seek work, mostly at digging ditches and working in a mail office. He kept reading different literatures and found interest in the “view of Communist orators and organizers, especially those in the League of Struggle for Negro Rights” (Wright 888) leading Wright to join the Communist Party (CPUSA) in 1934. His poetry was published in several journals run by the Communist Party and his increasing attention by the party members leads to Wright achieving a seat as a member of the editorial board of the *Left Front*, one of the party’s journals. This marks the beginning of his career as a writer, though he worked for many years more in a range of employments other than writing to provide for himself and his family. From the time Wright joined the Communist Party the leading members of the party tried to control his writing up to the point that Wright decided to leave the party quietly in 1943 due to those conflicts as well as his disagreement with the party’s “unwillingness to confront wartime racial discrimination” (Wright 896).

The Harlem Literary Renaissance was an influence for Wright and he moved to New York from Chicago in 1937 to get into the heart of the movement with the purpose of pursuing his career as a writer. He later though criticized the Harlem Literary Renaissance movement for too many influences by white writers, cumulating when he refused to meet Carl Van Vechten when the latter “requested a meeting with
Richard Wright” in 1938 (Carreiro 255). At that time he had been publishing both poetry and short stories and began to make a name for himself as a writer. In the years he lived in New York he became friends with many of the well known names of the Harlem Renaissance movement such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke and Langston Hughes to name just a few. In 1940 his novel Native Son was published and “offered by the Book-of-the-Month Club as one of its two main selections” and in only “three weeks it sells 215,000 copies” (Wright 893).

Native Son caused quite an uproar and was for example banned in libraries in Birmingham, Alabama. Nevertheless the novel was well accepted and the decision to adapt the novel to the stage was made not long after its publication. The play became widely popular and ran in theatres in the United States for years. Occasional stage productions are still to be found and one of the latest productions was by The American Century Theater at the Theater II, Gunston Arts Center in Arlington, Virginia in April 2009 (The American Century Theater).

In 1941, the very first stage production of Native Son was directed by Orson Welles and Wright received the NAACP’s Springarn Medal given for “notable achievement” by black Americans (Wright 894). Later on in 1947 Wright refused to allow filming of the novel where the leading character Bigger was supposed to be changed to a white man. However he played the lead role himself – in French – shortly thereafter, when the novel was filmed in Argentina, named Sangre Negra. Wright had also played the role of Bigger in one of the early stage productions. In 1947 he had placed his focus on Europe and decided to move to Paris, France, where he came to know the leading individuals of European literature. For the rest of his life after he moved he was sure the American authorities were after him due to his former involvement to the Communist Party and therefore he refused all visits to the States. However he travelled wide and far in Europe, Africa and Asia to lecture on his work along with the claim for rights for colored individuals. Richard Wright died of a heart attack in 1960 at the age of 52. His ashes are interred in the famous cemetery Père Lachaise in Paris.

2.1. Native Son

Richard Wright’s novel Native Son was published in 1940. It was an immediate success and sold numerous copies. The story tells of Bigger Thomas, a dirt poor black man twenty years of age. He lives with his mother, a younger brother and a younger
sister in a one room apartment on the South Side of Chicago in contemporary time of
the publishing of the novel. Right there at the beginning of the novel the helpless
conditions of the African American people are made painfully clear, with the three of
them living in one room without any privacy. The family survives on a very low
income and they only have their dreams to go to when the burden of their poverty gets
overwhelming. Wright captures clearly how bad the living conditions were for many
African Americans in this black community. He himself had lived in similar
conditions when he was at the same age as Bigger, only having low paying and
unsteady work. Bigger has a dream of flying and wants to learn how to fly, but he is
fully aware of the limitation of his race when his friend says “if you wasn’t black and
if you had some money and if they’d let you go to the aviation school, you could fly a
plane” (Wright 460). There Wright turns the focus on how little opportunity the lower
social class of blacks had to improve their lives. Bigger has been in minor trouble
with the law before and because of his mother’s encouragement he takes a job as a
chauffeur for the Daltons, a wealthy family in the North Side of Chicago. As
described in the novel, a line parted the areas of Chicago where the white lived from
where the black lived, hence “no white real estate man would rent a flat to a black
man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live”
(Wright 678). The Dalton family is highly regarded and prestigious in the community.
They are the owners of the South Side Real Estate Company in Chicago, which owns
the building where Bigger lives at with his family, indicating their superiority in the
city.

Right at first sight both Mr. and Mrs. Dalton are friendly to Bigger and are
eager for him to feel comfortable in their company. Bigger is baffled by this kindness
for he is not used to this kind of treatment by white people, and he profoundly hates
all white people. By portraying the Daltons’ courteous behavior Wright shows his
readers how unnatural it seems to the colored person to be approached in what
appears to be acceptance of him as a human, when he has only been treated with
hostility and degradation by the self-claimed superior race of whites. In contrast,
Wright acknowledges the humanitarian willingness of some whites to create favorable
conditions for blacks. Mrs. Dalton’s interest in helping her colored employees to seek
education is an example of this; it is an opportunity for those colored individuals to
escape poverty, or at least to have a chance for a better life. In particular, “many
reform-minded whites who were committed to racial equality in the 1930s, such as
members of the NAACP and the Urban League resembled the white humanitarians in *Native Son*” (Carreiro 249) and the Daltons are representative figures of white philanthropists whose purpose is to enhance the life of their hired colored help. Bigger fails to recognize the friendliness and does not understand it.

Bigger’s unfortunate fate takes control the very first night of Bigger’s employment as the Daltons’ chauffeur when he accidentally kills Mary Dalton, the daughter, after driving her to see her friend Jan and later bringing her home heavily intoxicated. Bringing Miss Dalton home immensely drunk makes Bigger afraid of being caught carrying her up to her room in that condition and he fears losing his job and, even worse, being accused of having intentions to rape her. The African Americans’ biggest concern must have been first and foremost to have work and being able to sustain themselves and to earn enough to support their home. In Bigger’s case he has become the main provider for his mother and siblings after getting this job, losing it means no food for them. His fear cumulates when Mary’s blind mother enters the room calling for her daughter and in the panic of being caught he smothers Mary accidentally with a pillow to silence her so her mother will not know he is there, too. Mary’s blind mother is described throughout the novel as a floating white figure and seems to appear when Bigger least expects it as to represent the overwhelming but blind white race, too blind to see or understand the plight of the colored. Another metaphor is apparent throughout the novel since it snows heavily, as to show the white superiority: Bigger seems to be engulfed by whiteness. In his terror when he realizes he has accidentally killed Mary, his absolute horror causes him to make numerous wrong decisions, the most horrific being to burn Mary’s body in the furnace in an attempt to dispose of the body.

The chapter in the novel about this night reveals Wright’s communist connection when Mary’s friend Jan divulges his involvement with the communist movement and their willingness to improve and support equality for blacks. Richard Wright, along with many other African American writers, acknowledged the CPUSA as “the best hope for fighting racial inequalities in employment, housing and education in the United States” (Carreiro 247). Despite all the friendliness shown by Mary and her friend Jan, Bigger is skeptical of their purpose as they indicate a willingness to see his world and participate in it. At the time in Wright’s life when he wrote this novel he had himself become skeptical of the purpose of the white social reformers of the CPUSA and their attempts to eliminate racial discrimination and
began to wonder if the main intention was to collect voters (Carreiro 249). On the other hand, Bigger’s skepticism revolves around unawareness and his lack of understanding what the communists stand for and what they want to do for him and his race.

What drives Bigger is his fear, his terror of being caught for his crime and being killed. His greatest scare is being lynched by an angry mob as well as losing his job. In an attempt to get away with his crime he behaves like nothing happened and shows up for work the next morning and acts just as surprised as everyone else when Mary’s disappearance is discovered. Since he is the last person who had seen her he is questioned about what took place the night before. He lies about what happened and says Jan had accompanied Mary to her home, knowing that Jan would probably lie about Mary’s condition to protect her honor. He knows, as well, that the communists are not popular and Jan’s affiliation with them would make him an ideal suspect. Many white Americans were not pleased with the Communist Party’s willingness to battle for equality for the black race at this time in the United States when “in the South, Jim Crow laws and voting restrictions placed limitations on the political rights of most African Americans. And in the North, African Americans dealt with the color-line in employment, housing and entertainment” (Carreiro 248). However Bigger’s lie does not hold for long and when Mary’s bones are discovered in the furnace, in the evening of the day after her murder, Bigger knows he is cornered and escapes, only to find himself trapped in the city. In the panic of trying to escape he kills his girlfriend, whom he had involved in an outrageous attempt earlier, before Mary’s bones were found, to collect ransom for Mary, making everyone believe she had been kidnapped by cells of communists in Chicago. In all his actions, Bigger’s narrow-mindedness is revealed. He truly believed he would get away with collecting a ransom, which indicates his lack of understanding of what he had really done as well as revealing his insanity.

Bigger is eventually caught and the last chapter of the novel revolves around his trial and his lawyer’s failed attempt to free him from capital punishment for his hideous crime of killing a white woman for “though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely ‘evidence’” (Wright 754). In other words the death of his girlfriend had no meaning for the court other than to prove how inhumane he was. This last section of Wright’s novel gives a different tone to the storyline as it
seems as Wright uses both the prosecutor’s speech as well as Max’s, Bigger’s lawyer, speech as a tool to bring to the surface his views of the race dilemma and his dispute to the Communist Party (Carreiro 248).

2.2. Compilation of Wright’s Native Son

Wright’s motives in his novel were not to glorify his main character in any way. Rather, his “major purpose in this novel was to show that social and economic barriers based on race lead to grave injustices toward racial minorities and that those injustices so distort character and personality growth that criminal monstrosities, such as Bigger, are produced” (Siegel 89). First and foremost Bigger’s first murder is by accident and the second is driven by paralyzing fear. As Paul N. Siegel points out as a criticism to Wright’s character-building “Bigger is defeated by his hostile environment, he [Wright] should consider how Bigger’s killing was presented as a means of liberation.” Siegel continues by saying: “Wright is of course not advocating murder. Murder gave Bigger a sense of freedom, but it also gave him sense of guilt, and, not giving him a sense of relatedness to others, it finally left him empty” (521). Throughout the novel, Bigger hates all white people and profoundly believes all white people hate him and all the black race, therefore is he puzzled by the friendliness he faces from the Daltons, Jan and his lawyer Max. All in all, however flawed Bigger’s character might be, Wright is merely pointing out to us, his readers, that we must reflect on “our accountability to ourselves and to each other” (Redden 115).
3. Nella Larsen

In contrast to the general African American writers, Nella Larsen was a woman born to an interracial relationship: she was born Nellie Walker on April 13\textsuperscript{th} 1891 to a Danish mother, Mary Walker, maiden name Hanson or Hansen, and a Danish West Indian (The Virgin Islands) father, Peter Walker (Hutchinson, \textit{In Search of Nella Larsen} 15). She grew up with her mother and her white stepfather Peter Larsen and never knew her real father. This may have caused the conflicts with her race that appear in her work.

Nella Larsen wrote five short stories in her career, however only two of her short stories will be discussed here. Her career was short lived since she was accused of plagiarism after the publishing of her short story “Sanctuary” in 1930. She never wrote anything after that and became a nurse, spending the rest of her life working at hospitals until her death on March 30\textsuperscript{th} 1964. Her mixed racial background, and her being descended not from the American slave race but a European and a Caribbean individual, is an important input into the whole discussion of the search for identity and shows the diversity in the colored population in the early twentieth century in the United States. If the average African American had difficulty finding his place in American society, the mixed race individual was in an even worse situation. When a child of mixed racial backgrounds is born it may encounter a lack of understanding in its community in many ways. Children of either black or white parents seem to represent blackness and whiteness, each side of the coin causing conflicts as to which side they should lean toward. Since society will never allow them to do both, they will have to choose, and at that point will either the black or the white communities accept them as a mixed race person?

3.1. “Passing”

The core of Larsen’s short story “Passing” are conflicts facing the race mixed individual, along with tension regarding infidelity, which will not be discussed here. The story’s two key characters are Irene and Clare, both women of mixed races. The story focuses on Irene who is the story’s narrator; she is living a comfortable life as a middle class colored woman with her African American husband and two sons and spends her days doing charity work and socializing with other colored women. However, she does occasionally enjoy excursions to the white areas of the city
passing as white to take pleasure in having delicacies at any of the cafés in those areas. On one of her many stops at a white café she meets Clare, a lady she used to know during her childhood. They reconnect at the café and Irene discovers that Clare is passing as a white woman, in a white community with a white husband, who has no idea that his bi-racial wife is harboring a secret. Therefore Clare has alienated herself from the colored community so that her identity as a woman of mixed race does not emerge. As the story evolves, Clare frequently sneaks out to the black community and clings on to Irene and her lifestyle as a woman of color, which she appears to long for and feel connected to in some way. However, since her appearance is white with her pale skin and blonde hair, she has difficulty passing as black. The difference between those women is clear, one is passing as white and the other one is not. These conflicts will definitely cause those two mixed race women to be torn in their identity as they “seem to constitute two mutually exclusive and antagonistic forms of identity” (Hutchinson, “Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race” 329). At one point in the story Clare’s agony is painfully clear, in a letter to Irene she tells how she aches for the life she had had when she was a child: “You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other I once thought I was glad to be free of . . . It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases” (Larsen 174). The story revolves around those ladies’ social interaction. They frequently either attend parties together or meet over a cup of coffee. One of the startling moments in the novel is when Irene pays Clare a visit and meets her white husband and she realizes he does not know his wife has blackness in her. It almost brings Irene to the floor when he replies to her question if he dislikes colored people, by saying:

You got me wrong there Mrs. Redfield. Nothing like that at all. I don’t dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she’s trying to turn into one. She would not have a nigger maid around her for love or money. Not that I’d want her to. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils. (Larsen 202)

When speaking of “Nig” he is referring to his wife, which he called “Nig” as a joke without knowing she really is one. Irene realizes the danger Clare puts herself in by attempting to cross over to the other side without her husband knowing when she has the knowledge of how he actually feels about colored people. Here Larsen seems to be aiming the reader’s attention at how different these two worlds come across. The antipathy seems more severe on the white side than the black, which in many ways is
logical because of the superiority the white race enjoyed over the black for centuries. Therefore, would the white world accept members of their communities to be of mixed race? According to Clare’s husband his world would never accept anyone with a drop of black blood in them into society. In contrast, Clare is generally accepted in Irene’s black community where she frequently attends the black elite’s parties as a white woman. This she must do, for she cannot hide her whiteness with her blonde hair and fair skin. Nonetheless, she fully participates in the social network of the colored community. Irene is immensely critical of Clare’s double life and disapproves of it but at the same time admires Clare’s boldness of living this life. She says to Brian, her husband, “It’s funny about ‘passing’. We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites out contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it” (Larsen 216). She actually admits to her husband she does admire Clare for “passing” as a white woman. She is forgiving of the deed and protects Clare. Towards the end of the novel her own fear for Irene’s secret to come fore is exactly what she faces when she runs into Clare’s husband while out with a colored friend and in a panic for Irene’s secret to be exposed pretends not to know him when he calls her by her name. She realizes at that point that Clare’s hidden life in the colored community is in danger. This fear eventually materializes when Clare’s husband bursts into one of the colored parties his wife is attending.

Larsen’s conflicts with the mixed ethnicity evolves in her characters in “Passing”, not just Clare but also in Clare’s husband who appears as the representative of the white superior race with so much antipathy for colored people, that not even a drop of black blood in a person would be tolerated. His sense of racial superiority give him the permission to openly show his dislike. In essence the difficulty of being of mixed race is the core in Larsen’s story where the characters deal with their dilemma of not knowing where in society they belong.

3.2. “Quicksand”

Larsen’s own conflicts with being of mixed race are also apparent in her short story “Quicksand” where the connection to her Danish roots is reflected. George Hutchinson points out that this story “dramatizes striking contrasts between the racial ideologies of Danes and Americans” (“Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race” 338). One of Larsen’s main characters in “Quicksand” is Helga Crane and the resemblance
between the author and Helga is striking. Similarly to Larsen, Helga is an offspring of a Danish mother and a black father. This gives an insight into Larsen’s experience with her roots and heritage within the Danish culture. Larsen’s own upbringing tells of her struggle to fit in and find a place, her own image and identity. Furthermore as her mother had remarried a white man after her father had died and had a child with him, Larsen was in an even worse dilemma with her identity as a mixed person, since her stepfather seems, according to her biography, to have rejected her (Hutchinson, “Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race” 341). In the story, Helga’s white uncle, who was like a father figure to her, also rejects Helga after he marries a white woman.

Conflicts of prejudice against white people by one of the less important characters, Anna Gray, are displayed in the story. Gray is a woman who takes Helga in to her home in the time between her quitting her work as a teacher and leaving the United States for Denmark. Anna Gray is portrayed as a middle-class African American woman in New York. She does not shy away from her immense dislike for white people as, “she hated white people with a deep and burning hatred” (Larsen 80). She tells Helga to hide her whiteness to the people of this black community they live in.

Larsen is showing her reader the other side of the coin, which she does not display in “Passing”, as to give impression and contrast to the loathing whites had for colored individuals. Helga is therefore asked to hide her identity as a bi-racial person making her long even more to leave this world of division between black and white for her mother’s homeland, Denmark, where she is certain no prejudice exist and she can blend in with the locals. She is most likely not thinking things through and in a naïve way does not realize, as she will come to know when she is finally in Denmark, that she does anything but blend in. In America she is used to see other black and bi-racial people but has no idea what awaits her in Denmark where she is the only colored person around. She frequently hears the word sorte (which means black in Danish) used around her after she arrives, showing the astonishment of the Danes when they see her, for she is the only black person many of them have seen.

In “Quicksand” a group identity for a mixed race woman is the story’s essence. There Larsen’s main character is an educated, middle class woman, struggling to find her place in the society as she finds it difficult to associate with the black community. Thus she feels as an outsider, like she does not belong. She therefore decides to move abroad when the opportunity arises to seek identification
within her mother’s family in Denmark. Thus to cast a light on her situation “the mulatto is a traveler, moving back and forth between black and white communities or, as in Helga’s case between continents” (Gray 259). Hence Helga Crane has a position, one that allows her to be an insider and an outsider at the same time, facing the race dilemma both as an “observer and participant” nevertheless “she cannot occupy both positions” – she has to choose (Gray 259).

Helga’s trip to Europe is a quest for happiness and future in Copenhagen, where there are “no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice” (Larsen 87). However, Helga experiences some difficulties in Copenhagen where she is seen as an exotic figure, something out of the ordinary; she is not only a foreigner but also a colored foreigner. The Danes see her as a black person and connect her to Africa. These were not Helga’s intentions since her aim was to find her roots, her heritage on her mother’s side of the family and acceptance by this community. The people, in particular those she gets acquainted with in Copenhagen, see her but do not understand her. They cannot begin to comprehend what she stands for since she is alien to them, someone who is so different from them in so many ways, not only in her appearance as a colored person but as well in her lack of communication, which interferes with them getting to know her since she does not speak much Danish. In other words they do not accept her as one of them; they only see her as something exotic and foreign.

Eventually Helga does not relate to her Danish roots and feels her blackness is missing. Since she does not have anyone who understands her agony in Denmark, she moves back to America to blend again with her colored roots. A full circle is reached for Helga as she realizes she rather belongs to the colored race.

Some scholars have a reasonable belief that Helga Crane is an allegory for Nella Larsen herself and her life (Hutchinson, “Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race” 341). When Larsen was sixteen years old she went to Denmark and spent three years there with her relatives (Larson xix). She must have had similar experiences as her character Helga Crane when she first came to Denmark. Helga is well aware of her distinctiveness in this foreign community and it is certainly not what she had anticipated as she was in search for an accepted identity and the acknowledgement of the locals.

All things considered, Larsen’s short story “Quicksand” proposes recognition that “there is no essence, black, white or mulatto”; our understanding of ourselves is
as different as the individual variations of humans to be found and therefore
“everyone is a mulatto, born of and self-located between two differences” (Gray 268).

3.3. Analysis of Larsen’s work
The appearance of Larsen’s own struggle with her identity in her short stories
cumulates in her main characters. The struggle these women in her two stories face
are very diverse and Larsen is dealing with very unlike conditions for them. Larsen
treats her leading characters in her short stories as allegories for the conflicts of being
of mixed races and additionally their struggles for finding identities as women, since
she herself was of that combination. What does this mean to Larsen? Being a bi-racial
person herself, she must have been torn between those two worlds, the world of
blacks and the world of whites. Her short stories have been placed in the category of
“The Tragic Mulatto,” but this term came to fore in the late nineteenth century after
the publishing of Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy in 1892 and Charles Chesnutt’s The
House Behind the Cedars in 1900, which dealt with the same concept of bi-racialism
as Larsen (Larson xiv). Thus these identity issues for mixed race persons have been
tragic and possibly still are in the sense that these individuals feel isolated as neither
black nor white. Incidentally this dilemma of being caught in between two races
places them on the outside since a “mulatto” seems not to be considered a separate
race.
Conclusion
It is clear that Richard Wright and Nella Larsen are fully aware of the limitations colored people face in society as they confront their issues in their fiction. Wright portrays the picture of the poor, lower class and inferior African American in his novel as he himself had experienced this hardship at an early age. It is also immensely important in Wright’s novel to identify the political and economic undertone in relation to the race issues.

Larsen’s dilemma is perhaps even more complicated, albeit in different manner. Her characters are torn between two worlds and her readers must wonder to which world they truly belong. There is no final conclusion to be drawn from that however, since her characters themselves seem to be uncomfortable in both situations, as was Larsen herself.

Both of those writers are taking risks in opening discussions relating to the race issues especially in times of open and active hostility towards blacks appearing in movements such as the Ku Klux Klan. An interesting outcome and the most surprising is to discover Wright’s criticism of the true intentions of the Communist party to go beyond limits to collect followers without having an authentic interest in bringing about full equality for blacks. However, the bravery of the Harlem Literary Renaissance writers reflected in their willingness to discuss the importance of being accepted as equals to other Americans is noteworthy since their society was hostile to them and stood in the way of equal opportunities. These writers must truly be looked upon as trailblazers for the equality pioneer who came later. Even though the Harlem Literary Renaissance writers may have been working in a hostile environment they did have strong allies especially in the NAACP, which provided encouragement and was willing to publish their work.

In the second quarter of the 20th century, people of color had moved far in American society, from being forced laborers to becoming free citizens of a community that was hostile to them, pushing them to raise their voices especially through literature, and claim their right to equality. They did this at the same time as they became more active participants in the community, which had brought them unwilling to reside in the country. The transferring of Africans to America in the times of slavery and what would become of them probably was never fully thought through, certainly not to the extent that their descendants would claim acceptance and
self-image which began to fully develop in such a noteworthy manner in the time of the Harlem Literary Renaissance.
Works Cited


The American Century Theater. “American Century Revives Native Son, the Mercury Theater Company’s Famed 1941 Adaptation of Richard Wright’s
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