Quicksand

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NELLA LARSEN

Nella Larsen was born in a poor neighborhood of Chicago, to a mixed-race father from the Danish West Indies and a white mother from Denmark. Nella's father deserted the family when Nella was very young, and is believed to have died soon after. Nella's mother remarried Peter Larsen, another Danish immigrant, and attempted to move to a more prosperous neighborhood of Chicago, but the family was targeted because of Nella's race and returned to the original neighborhood of her birth. Larsen's childhood was split between Denmark and the U.S. In the U.S. she attended Fisk College, a historically black university, but did not graduate. Larsen then enrolled in nursing school in New York in 1914, and went on to work in Alabama, and then New York. She married a physician named Elmer Imes, and the pair moved to Harlem in the 1920s, where Larsen began to work as a librarian and pursue writing. She became entrenched in the literary scene in Harlem's bourgeoning African American culture. Larsen published a number of short stories and two novels in the 1920s. The first of these, *Quicksand* (1928), was modeled closely on her own life experiences, and received high critical acclaim. In 1933, Larsen and Imes divorced, and Larsen returned to her nursing career before receding from Harlem's literary circles and moving to the Lower East Side. She died at the age of 72 in her apartment in Brooklyn. Larsen's mixed-race heritage and life experiences had a profound influence on her novels, which focus on mixed-race characters attempting to figure out their place in the world. Larsen is best known for her novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*, which are both semi-autobiographical, and feature raw, emotive explorations of complex race and gender issues. Larsen is touted as the premier novelist of the Harlem Renaissance literary movement, and both of her novels have been taken up in academic settings as canonical explorations of race and gender in early 20th-century American life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Nella Larsen was writing in Harlem in the 1920s, during which time there was a so-called Great Migration of millions of African American people from the rural South to northern cities. Many black Americans from around the U.S. settled in Harlem, New York, where a social and artistic movement called the Harlem Renaissance was formed. The movement focused on capturing the contributions of black thinkers to American culture, representing black perspectives in arts and literature, and prompting progressive social change. As a work of Harlem Renaissance literature, *Quicksand* includes all of these elements. Since *Quicksand* is also set in the time it was written, it references many key figures in the Harlem Renaissance movement, including Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and Booker T. Washington.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Quicksand is one of two novels published by Nella Larsen in the 1920s. Her other novel, *Passing*, was published in 1929. Like *Quicksand*, it draws on Nella Larsen's life and addresses the experiences of mixed-race women in early 20th-century American society. Larsen is one of several early 20th-century Harlem-based writers of color who are collectively known as Harlem Renaissance writers. Other Harlem Renaissance works include Langston Hughes's 1930 novel *Not Without Laughter* and Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Both overlap with *Quicksand*'s themes of racial identity. *Not Without Laughter* addresses the religion and class division in the African American community, while *Their Eyes Were Watching God* deals with race in American society. Later works dealing with themes like racial injustice and the experiences of people of color in American society include Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah*, and James McBride's 1995 memoir *The Color of Water*, which explicitly focuses on mixed-race identity.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Quicksand
- **When Written:** 1925-1927
- **Where Written:** Harlem, New York
- **When Published:** 1928
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** The American South; Chicago; Harlem; Copenhagen; Alabama
- **Climax:** Helga resolves to get better and escape her miserable life of poverty, but as soon as she is able to leave her bed, she starts giving birth to her fifth child.
- **Antagonist:** Anne Grey
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Dress Codes. Rumor has it that Nella Larsen was expelled from Fisk College for violating its strict dress code. This is probably the source of *Quicksand* protagonist Helga Crane's damning critique of the restrictive dress code at Naxos (a school for black girls in the South), which bans black women from wearing

bright colors.

Uplift. Naxos (a fictional boarding school for black girls) is modeled on the real Tuskegee University, a historically black university in Alabama founded by Booker T. Washington and modeled on his "uplift" philosophy of encouraging people of color to improve their economic and social standing through hard work, rather than social reform. Larsen makes no effort to hide her distaste for this model, and frequently criticizes the "uplift" ethos in *Quicksand* through the voice of protagonist Helga Crane.

PLOT SUMMARY

Helga Crane, the story's protagonist, sits in her room at Naxos—a school for young black girls in the South—where she teaches. Helga is 23 years old and is a beautiful mixed-race woman with golden skin and a slight frame. She didn't get a lunch break earlier in the day because everyone was required to attend a sermon by a white preacher. His sermon irritated Helga, because he said the black people at Naxos knew how to "stay in their places" and that the race problem would disappear if all black people acted like that. Helga finds the system at Naxos highly problematic because she detects an undercurrent of racism in the way the school is run, even down to the way black staff are required to wear muted colors because the dean of women thinks "bright colors are vulgar" on dark skin. Helga feels frustrated, and decides she needs to quit her job. Even though it would be prudent to wait out the school year, she feels she must leave Naxos (and her fiancé, James Vayle), immediately.

The next morning, Helga visits the new principal, Dr. Anderson, to hand in her resignation. She is taken aback by his piercing gray eyes and kind demeanor, but keeps her resolve. Helga explains that she can't stand Naxos. Dr. Anderson implores her to stay, passionately explaining how they can work together to fix things. Helga is moved by his speech and almost changes her mind, until he calls her a "lady." Suddenly, she bursts out that she's no lady: her black father left her white immigrant mother. Helga storms out of the room, never to return again.

Helga takes a train to Chicago, and frets about the way she talked to Dr. Anderson. For some reason, she can't get him out of her mind. When Helga gets to Chicago, she decides to visit her kind Uncle Peter. After Helga's father left her mother, Helga had to live with her mother's second husband who hated Helga for being half-black. When Helga was 15, her mother died, but Uncle Peter sent Helga to a school for black girls, where she finally started to fit in. Unfortunately, Uncle Peter's racist new wife, Mrs. Nilssen, answers the door and turns Helga away, telling her never to come back again.

Helga resolves to find work instead. However, she soon realizes it's much harder to find work than she imagined, especially as she has no reference, and most of the jobs for women of color are in domestic labor. Weeks pass and Helga gets desperate. Eventually, she lands a short-term gig helping a woman named Mrs. Hayes-Rore correct speeches about the "race problem" for a few days on a train ride to New York. Mrs. Hayes-Rore takes pity on Helga when she hears her life story, and suggests Helga come to stay in Harlem where Mrs. Hayes-Rore can fix her up with a job. Mrs. Hayes-Rore introduces Helga to her niece, Anne, who takes Helga in as a roommate.

A year later, Helga is enjoying a pleasant life in Harlem. She is relieved to be away from white people and resolves to lock that part of herself away. Helga bumps into Dr. Anderson at a community meeting and there is palpable chemistry between them. However, when Dr. Anderson stops by to take Helga on a date, she panics and slips out the back door. She feels shameful and disappointed. Soon after, Helga starts to feel restless and dissatisfied with her life. One day, a letter comes from Uncle Peter, apologizing for the way Mrs. Nilssen treated Helga. He encloses a check for her inheritance of $5,000 and suggests that Helga visit her family in Copenhagen. That night, at a jazz club, Helga sees Dr. Anderson on a date with Audrey Denney. Anne hisses to Helga that Audrey is disgusting because she dates interracially. Helga is revolted by Anne's disapproval of mixed-race couples, but bites her tongue. A lot of things about Anne have been bugging Helga, like the way she espouses hatred for white people yet imitates their tastes, thinking it makes her classier. Helga leaves the jazz club feeling forlorn, and resolves to leave Harlem.

Soon after, Helga sails to Copenhagen and is met by her Aunt Katrina and Katrina's new husband, Herr Dahl. They welcome Helga with open arms, buy her many extravagant clothes, and show her off around town. Helga feels a little put off by the way they dress her up and parade her around, but she goes with it because she likes the attention. Helga slips into a luxurious life of dinner parties and cultural outings in Copenhagen. She develops feelings for a wealthy artist, Axel Olsen, whom Helga's aunt and uncle hire to paint her **portrait.** When Axel Olsen proposes, however, Helga is overcome with feelings of shame, fear, and anger, and refuses him, saying she's "not for sale" to any white man. Helga also hates the portrait, which depicts her in an overtly sexualized way. The Dahls are disappointed in Helga's refusal of Axel Olsen—it's clear that they wanted her to marry well in order to increase their own social standing. After a few tense weeks during which Helga feels restless, she receives a letter from Anne. Anne is engaged to Dr. Anderson, which upsets Helga even more. Helga decides that she's homesick for Harlem and black people, and decides to return to Harlem for Anne's wedding.

Helga returns to Harlem, but Anne keeps her distance. Anne disapproves of Helga's time among white people, and she also knows Dr. Anderson is deeply attracted to Helga. A few weeks

later at a party, Helga trips and falls into Dr. Anderson's arms and they share a deep and passionate kiss. Neither of them mentions it again, although Helga can't stop thinking about it. A few weeks later, Dr. Anderson asks Helga if they can meet alone. Helga is ecstatic, thinking she can't deny her feelings for Dr. Anderson any longer, and that this is her chance at happiness. However, when Dr. Anderson meets Helga, all he does is apologize for the kiss. Helga is suddenly overcome with shame and rage. She slaps him and runs out of the room.

The next day, Helga is distraught. She walks furiously through the streets during a rainstorm and gets blown into a gutter. Seeking shelter, Helga runs into the nearest building to discover a church service going on. She collapses into hysterics and the congregation crowds around her, trying to save her soul. Overcome with her wrecked nerves, Helga starts screaming. All of a sudden, she feels calm, and at peace, and the congregation cheers because they think she's been saved. A "rattish yellow man" named Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green escorts Helga home, and Helga decides to marry him on a whim, partly to spite Dr. Anderson.

After Helga marries the Reverend, she finds herself living in a small impoverished town in rural Alabama with three small children. For a time, Helga is happy, and her shabby life feels rich because it is illuminated by her faith. Nonetheless, Helga struggles to manage a hard life of poverty and childrearing, and her body grows weaker with each passing day. The townsfolk reassure Helga that God will reward her for her toiling in the afterlife. When giving birth to her fourth child, Helga falls into a fever that lasts for several weeks, and is secretly relieved when her infant child dies. Fragments of Helga's life flash before her eyes, and she realizes she was deeply in love with Dr. Anderson. She also realizes that she finds her husband repulsive and feels that he ruined her life. Helga becomes disillusioned with her faith, and decides that religion is just a tool that's used to mask miserable living conditions among poor and black people. Helga resolves to get better and run away from this horrible life. However, just as she's finally well enough to leave her bed, she starts giving birth to her fifth child.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Helga Crane – The story's protagonist. Helga is a young biracial woman who is half-black and half-white. Helga was raised as a racial outsider by her white mother's new white family after her black father abandoned her. The story begins after Helga's parents have died, and she is a 23-year-old teacher about to quit her job at Naxos, a school for young black women in the South. Helga ultimately decides to leave Naxos (and her fiancé, James Vayle) and move to Chicago, where her Uncle Peter lives. From this point on, the story tracks Helga's life as she continuously moves around to new places. Her life is marred by her attempt to fit in somewhere, but she always feels like an outsider. In Chicago, Helga is turned away by Uncle Peter's new wife, Mrs. Nilssen, because Helga is half-black. She then finds a job helping a woman named Mrs. Hayes-Rore write a speech, and ends up moving to Harlem, New York and living with Mrs. Hayes-Rore's niece, Anne. Here, Helga develops complicated romantic feelings for Dr. Anderson, the former principal at Naxos who has also moved to New York City. Helga feels insecure and too white for Harlem, however, so she moves to Copenhagen, Denmark to live with her white aunt and uncle, Fru and Herr Dahl. In Copenhagen, Helga is admired for her beauty but also exoticized and objectified for being black, an uncomfortable situation which causes her to reject the marriage proposal of Axel Olsen, a wealthy artist commissioned to paint her portrait. Continuing her pattern of repressed racial shame and running away from her feelings, Helga returns to Harlem, where Dr. Anderson is now married to Anne. Faced once more with her messy feelings for Dr. Anderson, Helga meets a man named Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green and impulsively marries him in another attempt to escape her shame and difficult emotions. The couple moves to rural Alabama and has five children, and the story ends with Helga giving up on her lifelong attempt to find a place where she belongs—she is too worn down by age and illness to escape her miserable existence of poverty and perpetual childbearing in Alabama. Larsen leverages Helga's story to capture the difficulties of living as a mixed-race woman in early 20th-century American and European societies. Through Helga's eyes, Larsen criticizes aspects of these societies that she believes impinge on social progress, including binary race categories, religion, white superiority, white mimicry, objectification of the black female body, and segregation.

Robert Anderson (Dr. Anderson) – The new principal at Naxos. He is a handsome black man with grey eyes, who unsuccessfully implores Helga to stay and help him fix the problems at Naxos. Helga is unnerved by her attraction to Dr. Anderson and angrily shuns him. He crosses paths with Helga again in Harlem where they are both living about a year after she leaves Naxos. There is palpable chemistry between Helga and Dr. Anderson, but Helga toys with him and stands him up on their date. Later in the story, after Helga moves to Denmark, Dr. Anderson marries Anne (Helga's former roommate in Harlem) despite his obvious desire for Helga. He drunkenly kisses Helga one night at a party, and Helga thinks he will leave Anne for him after this happens, but he merely apologizes. Having rejected Dr. Anderson multiple times, Helga is devastated by Dr. Anderson's polite apology and marries the next man she meets to spite him. Only years later does Helga realize that she has been in love with Dr. Anderson for most of her life, and she let her chance at happiness slip away.

Anne Grey – A beautiful, affluent, 30-year-old widow living in

Harlem. She invites Helga to live in her house for Helga's first year in Harlem, and they become close friends. As a black woman, Anne is passionate about black empowerment, but curiously models her own life on white culture, mimic white people's speech, clothing, and artistic tastes. Anne is very vocal about her support of segregation, as she thinks it's immoral for black and white people to mingle. She denigrates people in her community who date white men. This puts Helga in an awkward position as a mixed-race woman, and their friendship cools when Helga leaves Harlem for Denmark. Helga reconnects with Anne when she learns that Anne is going to marry Dr. Anderson, the man Helga herself loves. Anne's marriage to Dr. Anderson causes a rift in their friendship. Anne is jealous of Dr. Anderson's attraction to Helga, and Helga is jealous that Dr. Anderson married Anne. Anne's character demonstrates how white mimicry and belief in segregation harms social progress.

Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green – Helga's husband, whom she marries on a whim to spite Dr. Anderson after the Reverend escorts her home from a church that she runs into to seek shelter from a rainstorm. They move to an impoverished town in rural Alabama where the Reverend preaches, and have five children together. Helga describes him as a "rattish yellow man," and finds his unkempt, overweight appearance repulsive. He is a kind man, but busy with church business for most of their marriage, though he cautions Helga to bear the burden of having lots of children because he believes she should accept what God sends. Larsen leverages the Reverend's character to show how religious faith can be used as a tool to oppress poor black people.

Herr Axel Olsen (Herr Olsen) – A wealthy artist in Copenhagen who paints a highly sexualized **portrait** of Helga, which he thinks captures her true nature as a "tragic" mixed-race woman. Helga is attracted to him, but when he proposes, she impulsively rejects him, saying she is "not for sale" to a white man, much to his dismay. Herr Olsen's painting symbolizes the way in which white people tend to view black or mixed-race people like Helga as exotic sexual commodities.

Fru Dahl (Aunt Katrina) – Helga's wealthy, white maternal aunt. Helga lives with Fru Dahl and her husband, Herr Dahl, in Copenhagen. Fru Dahl welcomes Helga warmly into her life, and lavishes her with extravagant, but revealing clothing. Fru Dahl is eager to show off Helga as an exotic prize, with the aim of attracting an artistic suitor who will increase her own social standing in Danish society. Larsen uses the character of Fru Dahl to expose the way white culture tends to objectify and exoticize the black female body.

Herr Dahl (Uncle Poul) – Fru Dahl's husband. Like Fru Dahl, Herr Dahl is eager to show Helga off with the hopes of landing good social connections. He thinks Helga should capitalize on her status as the only mixed-race woman in town, and scolds Helga when she rejects Axel Olsen, an affluent artist. Like Fru Dahl, Larsen uses Herr Dahl to criticize the objectification of black women in white cultures.

James Vayle – A well-to-do teacher at Naxos. He is engaged to Helga at the beginning of the story. Helga doesn't really love or respect him, and she leaves him without letting him know when she impulsively quits her job and moves to Chicago. They bump into each other years later at a party in Harlem.

Sary Jones – A woman in Alabama who had six children in six years. She advises Helga that their suffering and labor in this world will be rewarded in heaven. Larsen uses Sary to represent the kind of person who is oppressed by blind faith in heavenly rewards, and accepts therefore, a hard life of poverty.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Helga's mother (Karen Nilssen) – A white Danish woman who died when Helga was 15 years old. Helga's father abandoned them when Helga was a baby. Helga's mother remarried and had more children with a volatile white American man who despised Helga during her childhood.

Helga's father – A poor, black American "scoundrel" who abandoned Helga and her mother when Helga was a baby. He has already died when the story begins.

Preacher – A white preacher who visits Naxos and gives a racist sermon about the superiority of white people, which repulses Helga. Larsen leverages the school preacher to criticize "uplift" institutions that merely recreate a hierarchy in which white people are perceived as superior to people of color.

Dean of Women – A racist staff member at Naxos who requires black employees to wear muted colors that wash out their skin tones, because she finds bright colors garish on dark skin.

Miss MacGooden – The dormitory matron at Naxos, who often scolds students to be more ladylike. Larsen leverages this character to show that trying to make black children more "civilized" is inherently racist.

Peter Nilssen (Uncle Peter) – Helga's white uncle, who functions as her absent financial benefactor. When he dies, he leaves Helga an inheritance that she uses to travel to Copenhagen so she can reconnect with her Danish family.

Mrs. Nilssen – A white woman who has just married Helga's Uncle Peter. When Helga tries to reconnect with her uncle in Chicago, Mrs. Nilssen turns Helga away, because she doesn't want anyone to know her husband has a mixed-race family member.

Ida Ross – The clerk at the employment agency in Chicago. At first, she thinks she will not be able to find work for Helga, who is overqualified for jobs in domestic labor. A few weeks later Miss Ross sets Helga up with a short-term gig helping a woman write a speech.

Mrs. Hayes-Rore (Aunt Jeannette) – A wealthy social activist who employs Helga to help her write a speech on her way from Chicago to New York. She connects Helga with her niece, Anne, who ends up becoming Helga's roommate in Harlem.

Mrs. Helen Tavenor – A progressive woman in Harlem, who throws a party to which people of multiple races are invited. Dr. Anderson drunkenly kisses Helga at the party, while his wife, Anne, is downstairs disapproving of the racial integration at the party.

Audrey Denney – A young woman of ambiguous ethnicity living in Harlem, who openly dates interracially, and holds parties where people of multiple races mingle. Helga's friend Anne detests Audrey and thinks her actions are immoral.

Clementine Richards – A flirtatious young woman in Alabama who adores Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, and is envious of Helga's marriage to him.

Margaret Creighton – A teacher at Naxos, and Helga's friend.

Marie – A maid who works for Fru Dahl.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACE, SEGREGATION, AND SOCIETY

Quicksand traces the life of Helga Crane, a young biracial woman searching for belonging in the early 20th-century U.S. Helga lives in a time when slavery has been abolished, and many people are now concerned with the "race problem" of how to overcome the different forms of racial oppression that black people now face. Despite these efforts, Helga persistently encounters oppressive beliefs held by other characters wherever she goes. Through Helga's experiences, author Nella Larsen argues that although slavery has ended, many people still privilege white culture and think in terms of rigid black and white race categories, which are harmful to the goals of social progress and inclusivity in an integrated post-slavery American society.

At the start of the story, Helga decides to leave her teaching job at Naxos (a boarding school for black girls in the South) because she believes that nearly all the staff assume white culture is superior, and that this undermines the institution's goal of empowering young black students. To Helga, Naxos merely perpetuates the view that people of color should fit into society by trying to act as "white" as possible. In other words, Larsen thinks that attitudes at "uplift" institutions are too caught up in white mimicry to be truly progressive. At a lunchtime sermon, a famous white preacher praises the black community for achieving progress, but advises them to "know when to stop." He suggests that knowing enough to "stay in their places" shows "good taste," and behaving as such will eradicate the "race problem." Miss MacGooden, the dormitory matron, admonishes students for being unladylike and acting like "savages from the backwoods" without realizing that most of the students are, in fact, from the backwoods. Helga feels that the ethos at Naxos suppress self-expression, "individuality," and "innovation," and reduces the institution to a celebration of "the white man's magnanimity" (or generosity). Rather than empowering students to achieve their fullest potential as individuals in society, Naxos encourages students to be grateful for white people's generosity, and to never threaten white culture's authority.

After leaving Naxos and living in Chicago for a few weeks, Helga moves to Harlem in New York City, a thriving urban community for people of color. Through Helga's reflections on life in this community, Larsen suggests that when black people mimic white cultural tastes in social and cultural settings, they end up preserving the idea that white culture is essentially superior. Near the middle of the story, Helga reflects on her time in Harlem and thinks disparagingly of black Americans who "didn't want to be like themselves. What they wanted, asked for, begged for was to be like their white overlords." For instance, Helga's roommate in Harlem (a wealthy black woman named Anne) is very vocal about celebrating black culture in Harlem, yet she nonetheless models her own life on affluent white society's "clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living" while looking down on "the songs, the dances, the softly blurred speech of the [black] race." In aligning herself with white culture, Anne reveals that, on some level, she thinks it's superior to black culture.

Ironically, while Anne aspires to mimic white cultural tastes, she thinks integration between races is immoral. Larsen depicts Anne's attitude as divisive because it underplays Harlem's racial diversity and makes mixed-race people feel like outsiders for their whiteness in black communities. Mrs. Hayes-Rore also warns Helga not to mention too much to Anne about her white relatives when they first meet, because "colored people won't understand." Her warning indicates that Anne dislikes mixed-race people, and will be unwelcoming towards people with some white heritage, like Helga. Helga soon finds out that Mrs. Hayes-Rore was right. Anne is repulsed by Audrey Denney, a young woman who has parties where black and white people can mingle freely. Anne says Audrey Denny is a "disgusting creature" who should be "ostracized" for dating white men. When Helga presses Anne about her comments, Anne becomes even more intolerant. Anne's refusal to budge on this issue makes Helga feel angry and revolted, as it implies there is something unnatural in Helga's existence as a mixed-race person. Towards the end of the story, Helga attends a mixed

party with black, West Indian, and white people. Many guests struggle to socialize with each other, and "sulk in widely separated places in big rooms," while people like Anne express "open disapproval." The undercurrent of hostility from people like Anne creates a tense and divisive atmosphere, even though this is one of the few environments Helga enjoys because she doesn't feel out of place.

In contrast, Helga's descriptions of the people around her depict a much more diverse world than either Anne or the staff at Naxos are able to see. Helga resists merely describing people as black or white but uses a vivid array of colors and words to emphasize a racial spectrum, rather than a binary picture of race. At Naxos, Helga describes her students as "ebony, bronze, and gold." Likewise, at a jazz club in Harlem, Helga marvels "at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. There were sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pasty white." She also sees flashes of Africa, Europe, and Asia in their faces, and describes the crowd as a "moving mosaic." Through Helga's eyes, Larsen emphasizes that dividing people into "black" and "white" is reductive, and fails to capture the full range of diversity in American society.

Larsen's criticisms of early 20th-century American culture imply that although black people are no longer enslaved, many people still need to change embedded attitudes about binary race divides, white mimicry, and segregation, for American society to become truly inclusive.

MIXED-RACE IDENTITY

Quicksand tracks the life of Helga Crane, a young biracial woman searching for belonging in early 20th-century American and European societies. Her character embodies the "tragic mulatta" trope common in 19th-century abolitionist literature: a half-white, half-black woman who is raised in an affluent setting, struggles to find her place in society, and meets a tragic end. Typically, the "tragic mulatta" is sold into slavery. Helga Crane's life represents a failed attempt to escape the "tragic mulatta's" fate. Throughout the novel, Helga is constantly searching for a place where she'll feel at home as a mixed-race person. Helga's restlessness takes hold whenever she realizes a part of her racial identity has been suppressed by her surroundings. Despite moving five times in the story, her lifelong search for a community where she feels she belongs is repeatedly thwarted. Although she refuses to be "sold" into a marriage with a white man, Helga never finds a community in which she feels at ease, and this ultimately breaks her. Leveraging Helga's life story, the author, Nella Larsen, argues that despite the abolition of slavery, mixed-race women still meet "tragic" ends in the segregated world of her time. The ever-present pressure to suppress part of their identity is what "breaks" them.

At Naxos, the boarding school for black students where Helga teaches, she feels that the belief in white cultural values as superior stifles her blackness. The dean of women requires people of color to wear muted colors at work, because she finds bright colors "vulgar" on dark skin tones. Helga's frustration at the dean's policy is captured in her internal retort about people like the dean, who "yapped loudly of race consciousness, of race pride, yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter." It bothers Helga that Naxos is supposed to empower black women, yet many of its staff members reveal an undercurrent of racism in the way they talk about black people.

In Chicago, Helga finds that there is a mismatch between her background as a teacher and the work opportunities available to her, as most jobs available to women of color are in domestic labor. When Helga explains that she has teaching experience at the employment office, the disinterested clerk repeatedly interjects with statements like, "Our kind of work wouldn't do for you" because it's "Domestic mostly." Because Helga's individual experience doesn't match racist societal norms, she's excluded from multiple groups: she can't teach because she's a person of color, but she can't work a domestic job because she's too educated.

In Harlem, Helga is disturbed by her roommate, Anne's, vehement belief in segregation, since it implies that Helga's very existence as a mixed-race person is somehow immoral. Anne is disgusted by Audrey Denney "because she goes about with white people," and "gives parties for colored people together," which Anne finds "obscene." Failing to remember that Helga is half-white herself, Anne is annoyed when Helga defends Audrey's behavior. Helga is seized with anger but ignores her sudden impulse to leave Harlem forever, despite finding Anne's comments "revolting." Helga realizes that in order to fit in, she has no choice but to deny certain aspects of her essential identity.

In Copenhagen, Helga refuses to marry her Danish suitor, Axel Olsen, an artist who views her as an exotic curiosity. In this action, Larsen shows that Helga is resistant to ending up like the "tragic mulatta." Even though Axel Olsen is rich and well connected, Helga doesn't want to be "sold" into a marriage with a white man who thinks of her as some "decoration." Helga is repelled when Herr Olsen describes his objectifying **portrait** of her as a true likeness because it captures her "tragedy." Although Herr Olsen could offer Helga a life of luxury, she refuses him because she doesn't want to limit the daily freedom of her life in Denmark. Helga explicitly says, "But you see Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't care at all to be owned. Not even by you." Helga's experiences make her realize that even though she is part Danish, she will never be treated as an insider in this community. She feels more like an exotic "pet,"—or "peacock"—and will not accept the "tragic" fate of having her experience limited like that.

After leaving Denmark and returning to Harlem, Helga marries

a man named Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green on a spontaneous whim, and moves to rural Alabama with him, thinking she will finally find a home where she fits in. She tries to adjust to the impoverished community where he lives, but finds that her affluent upbringing has rendered her unable to fit in with other women in this community, and unfit to handle a hard life of childrearing and poverty. Inspired by her experiences with wealthy white culture in Europe and wealthy black culture in Harlem, Helga attempts to share advice on clothing and home decoration with the women in her town, but most of them find her "uppity" and "meddling." Despite finding temporary meaning in her life of homemaking, Helga ultimately struggles to keep up with the labor of housekeeping and having children. In the end, ill and worn down as she begins to give birth to yet another child, Helga simply feels broken. Although Helga didn't fit in with her wealthy white relatives in Copenhagen, or the wealthy black community in Harlem, she also feels like an outsider in this poor black community. Her whiteness comes off as snobbish, and her affluence leaves her feeling ill-equipped to handle a life of poverty.

Larsen thus shows that although slavery has been abolished in Europe and the U.S., the plight of the "mulatta" is still "tragic." Mixed-race American women living in this time can still be broken by the perpetual social pressure to suppress some aspect of their identity.

RACIAL SHAME AND EMOTIONAL REPRESSION

Helga Crane, the central character in *Quicksand*, is a mixed-race woman who was abandoned at a young age by her black American father. She is raised in the U.S. by her white Danish mother and white step-family, always feeling like an awkward racial outsider. After her mother dies when Helga is 15, she is sent away to a boarding school for black women. In adulthood, Helga struggles to find her emotional footing. She feels a great deal of racial shame throughout her life, but she persistently buries this feeling and makes bad decisions (like constantly moving to some new place) to avoid dealing with it head on. In the end, Helga's self-destructive tendencies steer her into a hard life of poverty in rural Alabama with a husband she does not love, and children that she cannot cope with caring for. Through Helga's emotional repression, author Nella Larson argues that although being a mixed-race person in a segregated society comes with unavoidable pain, repressing that pain only causes more damage and heartache.

Helga feels deep personal shame as a mixed-race person, stemming from her painful childhood. She is frequently overcome with feelings of anger when she experiences racism, but she also feels racial shame because she thinks her existence is somehow responsible for triggering the racism. Early in the story, Helga travels to Chicago to seek out her white Uncle Peter for financial support. She is turned away by Peter's new wife, Mrs. Nilssen, who doesn't want black women coming around. Helga is deeply angered but also sympathizes with Mrs. Nilssen's racism because Helga sees herself as "an obscene sore in all [her family's] lives, at all costs to be hidden." When she moves to Harlem, Helga is offended by her roommate, Anne's, disgust at mixed-race romance, but only tepidly confronts her about it, opting to suppress her anger instead. Throughout the story, Helga reflects her own racial shame when she feels strongly that she shouldn't have children, because bearing "tortured Negro children" would be "sinful." In fact, the only time in Helga's life when she doesn't feel ashamed or angry is at the end of the story, because she is too tired and broken to feel anything. Instead of facing her racial pain, Helga frequently pushes her feelings down or flees to another city to avoid confronting her complicated feelings about her race. Helga leaves her teaching job at Naxos (a boarding school for young black girls in the South) because she feels angry at having to endure constant commentary on how white culture is superior. Dr. Anderson, the new principal, sympathizes with Helga's frustrations and implores her to stay, but Helga loses her temper with hm and impulsively leaves for Chicago in the middle of the semester without a plan, job, or reference letter. Every time Helga starts to feel at home somewhere, she feels deep shame at ignoring one side of her mixed-race identity. When Helga starts to fit in with the black community in Harlem, where she moves after leaving Chicago, she feels ashamed at overlooking the white side of her identity, so she flees to Denmark where she has white relatives. Similarly, in Denmark, Helga feels ashamed at ignoring her black roots, so she returns to Harlem.

What's more, Helga represses positive emotions as well as negative ones, showing how running from pain can actually intensify it in the long run. This tendency has particularly devastating consequences in Helga's romantic life. Helga enjoys how much her first suitor, James Vayle (another teacher at Naxos), needs her, but this enjoyment makes her feel "a sensation amounting almost to shame," which makes her pull away from him. Helga leaves James Vayle with a brief and curt brush off, indicating she'd rather run away than face up to matters of the heart with maturity. Helga spends the majority of her time in Denmark enamored with a wealthy artist named Axel Olsen, but is unable to face her feelings for him when he proposes. Helga craves a sign of interest from Herr Olsen, but decides his advances are "insulting" when he hints at a future together. When Herr Olsen eventually proposes, Helga feels "a little frightened and embarrassed." Unable to make sense of her feelings, she impulsively hides behind a newfound distaste for his whiteness, and angrily rejects him. Helga invents reasons to push her suitors away whenever they show interest her, because she is uncomfortable embracing intense romantic feelings, even if the attention is what she wants.

Helga is similarly unnerved by her attraction to Robert

Anderson, so she falsely convinces herself that he is ill-mannered instead of embracing her feelings. At Naxos, she impetuously storms out of Dr. Anderson's office when he implores her to stay on, convincing herself that he is "controlling" and "rude." Helga suppresses her attraction to Dr. Anderson and lies to herself because she doesn't know how to handle feelings of attraction. When Dr. Anderson calls on Helga in Harlem, she pretends to be out, despite her longing to be courted by him. Helga convinces herself that standing up Dr. Anderson is a good strategy, but in actuality, she becomes panicky and flustered when he arrives at her door, and runs away to avoid embracing her growing feelings for him. Some years later, when Helga realizes the now-married Dr. Anderson has come over to apologize rather than to propose an affair, she despairs so violently that she rushes into the street and marries the first man she sees—a Reverend from Alabama whom she describes as a "rattish yellow man"—to spite Dr. Anderson. Helga moves to Alabama with a man she does not know, to live in poverty, despite having craved wealth and nice "things" her whole life. Many years too late, Helga realizes she ruined her life, because she is repulsed by her husband and was hopelessly in love with Dr. Anderson the whole time. Helga's impulsive behavior shows that she consistently makes rash decisions that stem from her insecurity about her racial identity. This ultimately makes things worse for her, especially when she faces romantic situations. Her tendency to shut down intense feelings and act coldly to her suitors causes her a great deal more pain in the long run.

Helga is overcome with intermingled feelings of anger and shame throughout her life, but is never able to confront them directly. She ultimately undermines her ability to handle intense feelings at all, whether they are positive or negative ones. Through Helga's emotional repression, Larsen alludes to the mental burden of racial shame in segregated societies, emphasizing the damaging and long-lasting effects of running from difficult emotions instead of confronting them head on.

RACE, BEAUTY, AND EXOTICISM

Quicksand depicts the adult life of Helga Crane, a mixed-race woman who travels to various locations in the U.S. and Europe, reflecting on the way people treat her in different communities. After living among black Americans in Harlem, Helga travels to Denmark to reconnect with her white family, and the white side of her mixed-race identity. Helga is surprised to find that the Danes embrace her as a thing of beauty, and relishes in the attention. Soon, however, Helga's ego unravels when she realizes that she is only appreciated in an objectifying way, as an exotic, sexualized commodity. Through Helga's encounters in Denmark, Nella Larsen captures ways in which white people of her time tend to frame the black female body as a sexual object, rendered attractive because it is "different." In stark contrast, Larsen presents her own view of blackness as beautiful in vivid descriptions of characters like Helga throughout the story. Her descriptions emphasize beauty, rather than sexual objectification. Larsen writes from Harlem in the 1920s among other Harlem Renaissance thinkers who were focused on developing new narratives for the emerging black post-slavery culture. Larsen's physical descriptions of black characters in the story reflects the Harlem Renaissance's emphasis on developing a new beauty aesthetic for communities of color that doesn't center on the white gaze (which is captured in the way the Danes view Helga).

When Helga moves to Copenhagen to live with her white family, she is objectified as an exotic curiosity. Larsen shows that often, the white gaze reduces black women to sexual objects who are only valued because they seem different and "exotic" to the white norm. Helga's aunt and uncle, Herr Dahl and Fru Dahl, frequently dress Helga up in revealing, eye-catching clothing and adorn her with jewelry, makeup, and "dangerously high heels" which makes Helga feel embarrassed and demeaned. When the Dahls dress Helga up and take her to a tea room in Copenhagen, Helga feels reduced to "some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited," and is "reddened" by the thought of her appearance. The maid, Marie, tailors one of Helga's favorite dresses lower in the back, to the point that Helga thinks it's "practically nothing but a skirt." Fru Dahl, Helga's aunt who she lives with, furnishes Helga with many colorful, extravagant clothes, and subtly schools her to make a "voluptuous impression." Helga is later appalled to learn that the Dahls want Helga on display because her exoticism will likely appeal to an artistic suitor and enhance their social standing. Axel Olsen, Helga's Danish suitor, paints a **portrait** of Helga that she describes as "some disgusting sensual creature with her features." After refusing Axel, Helga realizes that her aunt and uncle had hoped she would marry him to "secure the link between the merely fashionable set to which they belonged, and the artistic one after which they hankered." They scold her for failing to exploit her status as the only "mulatto" (mixed-race person) in town. Helga realizes that she will always be seen as no more than an exotic "decoration, "curio," or "peacock" to the Dahls.

In contrast, Larsen describes Helga's (and other black characters') beauty very differently in her prose, avoiding sexually objectifying language, and emphasizing the beauty in blackness itself. Larsen's descriptions stand out because they focus on beauty and sophistication, contrasting with the overt sexualization of Helga's body by the Dahls. Larsen introduces Helga as a "radiant" young woman. She describes Helga's beauty in careful detail, emphasizing "her narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate but well-turned arms and legs," her attractive "sharply cut face," her "soft yet penetrating eyes," her "pretty mouth," her "delicately chiseled ears," and her "delightful" blue-black hair that falls gently around her

shoulders. Larsen's use of words like "radiant," "pretty," and "delightful" prompts the reader to see Helga as beautiful without referencing her sex appeal. This picture of Helga contrasts sharply with the Dahls', who use objectifying words like "voluptuous" and "rare" when describing Helga. Larsen similarly describes other black characters, such as Anne (Helga's roommate in Harlem), and Dr. Anderson (Helga's central love interest) with words such as "beautiful," "musical," and "luminous," to show that it is possible to describe people of color without relying on sexual innuendo or exoticizing language.

The Dahls' view of blackness as sexually exotic exposes how the black female body is often objectified under the white gaze. However, Larsen's descriptions of black characters offer a counter-narrative about beauty in blackness that doesn't objectify the black body. *Quicksand* thus reflects the Harlem Renaissance's goal of developing a new aesthetic for communities of color that doesn't objectify blackness as an exotic curiosity.

RELIGION, POVERTY, AND OPPRESSION

Towards the end of *Quicksand*, Helga Crane, the story's protagonist, runs out of her Harlem apartment in a fit of despair because Dr. Anderson, the man she loves, is not going to leave his wife for her. Battered by a rainstorm, Helga seeks refuge in a nearby church. As she leans into the railing to steady herself, Helga is overpowered by the congregation, who crowd around her and say she has been "saved." Helga, who has spent her life traveling around to different places and trying to find a place to fit in, experiences a brief moment of belonging, which is intermingled with the congregation's attention and joy. On a whim, she marries a man from the congregation, moves to a poor town in rural Alabama, and throws herself into a religious life. Helga's spiritual awakening begins in Alabama, and she finds a sense of acceptance and belonging (for the first time in her life) in the idea of being accepted by a loving God. However, Helga's newfound spirituality is short-lived. As time and age wear her down, Helga becomes increasingly skeptical about the force of religion in her life. Helga notices that other poor, black women in her town think it's okay to suffer in this world because they'll be rewarded in the next one. She becomes disillusioned with religion, and depressed about her poverty. Through Helga's disillusionment, Nella Larsen argues that many poor black Americans in her time simply accept their fate rather than pushing for better lives because they believe their rewards will come after death. Larsen thus communicates that religion is oppressive because it encourages poor black people to tolerate their poverty and hardship rather than fighting for better living conditions.

Helga decides to marry Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green (even though she describes him as "rattish yellow man") because she hopes that she will find a sense of belonging in a poor, religious community. For a time, she does. After Helga's experience in the church, she clutches "to the hope, the desire to believe that now at last she had found some One, some Power, who was interested in her, who would help her." When Helga moves to a tiny town in Alabama with the Reverend, she begins to feel some sense of peace and belonging for the first time in her life. Larsen writes, "Here she had found, she was sure, the intangible thing for which, indefinitely, always she had craved." Helga reflects that when she tends to her "ugly brown house," she feels that her life is "utterly filled with the glory and marvel of God." The other houses and people in the community similarly "shared in this illumination." Larsen shows that Helga, like other people in the "tiny" town's community, really believes that her hardships are alleviated because her faith makes everything tolerable.

As time wears on, however, Helga grows older and weaker, and is run down by the labor of living in poverty and having child after child, as many women in the town do. She starts to realize that the people in the town believe that their burdens are "God's will," and they should simply endure their hardships until they die, which she cannot accept. When Helga complains about being perpetually ill and exhausted from having so many children, her husband (who was one of nine siblings) keeps telling her to "trust the Lord more fully," and to "accept what God sends." Similarly, another woman in the town named Sary Jones—who has six children in six years—advises Helga to bear her exhaustion because she will get time to rest in the next world. Helga realizes that faith often serves as a "shield" that disguises "the cruel light of an unbearable reality." After bearing her fourth child and falling gravely ill, Helga decides that faith is an illusion, and is really more of an oppressive tool. It has its "uses" because it holds back "the poor and the blacks" from seeking better lives. Helga thinks that religion is "what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in 'Kingdom Come.'" Helga vows to escape her life of poverty, exhaustion, and illness in Alabama, but she is trapped by motherhood, and the story ends with Helga giving birth to yet another child.

Larsen thus communicates her criticism of religion through Helga's voice. For Larsen, religion is a dangerous tool that is used to impede the social progress of poor, black people in her time, because it instructs them (just as the Reverend instructs Helga) to "accept" God's will, and tolerate their poverty.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PORTRAIT

Axel Olsen's portrait of Helga Crane symbolizes the way in which European people often treat blackness as an exotic sexual commodity. Axel, a wealthy and eccentric artist, paints Helga's portrait while Helga is living in Copenhagen with her Danish family. Helga is a mixed-race woman who spends her life seeking a place to fit in. After living in Harlem for a while and suppressing the white side of her identity, she moves to Copenhagen, but soon finds that her family only want to exoticize her blackness. The portrait is a highly objectifying depiction of Helga as a voluptuous black woman and reflects Axel's attraction to Helga, which is bound up with the idea of wanting to possess something dangerous, sexual, and rare. Axel is convinced he has captured Helga's true likeness, but what he captures is actually a representation of Helga that she wants to escape. All she wants to do is fit in—but among the white community, she'll always be an outsider, a "tragic mulatta" who will never be seen as white and will be exoticized and objectified by white people.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and The Stories* published in 2001.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places, and that, said the preacher, showed good taste.

Related Characters: Helga Crane, Preacher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *Quicksand*, Helga Crane is unwinding after a stressful day at her teaching job at Naxos, a school for black girls in the American South. It's early in the 20th century, and slavery has ended, but the civil rights movement has not yet happened. Helga reflects on the most troubling part of her day. She, and all the school's participants, had to listen to a sermon by a famous white preacher who was passing through. The preacher attempts to commend the community at Naxos for their work, but what he actually says is extremely offensive to Helga. The preacher believes that the people of color at Naxos act appropriately because they try to better their situations in life, but not so much that they usurp the white man's authority in the culture. This, in the preacher's opinion, is commendable. It's clear that he thinks people of color in the U.S. ought not threaten the authority of white culture. The preacher believes tension between white people and minority communities will be resolved if people of color are smart enough to "stay in their places."

The preacher's comments reflect his belief in white superiority, which is precisely what frustrates Helga about the environment at Naxos. Through Helga's voice, Larsen thus communicates her own criticism of institutions like Naxos in her own society. Helga is teaching at an institution that is tasked with empowering the black community, but constantly encounters people who believe that white people are, and should remain superior, which has the opposite effect: such beliefs oppress communities of color.

❝ This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a showplace in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency. Life had died out of it. It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with a cruelly sharp edge ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern.

Related Characters: Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Helga has been sitting in her room reflecting about her stressful day. After thinking about a visiting preacher's racist sermon, her thoughts turn to Naxos, the school for black girls in the Southern U.S. where Helga is a teacher. Helga reflects that when she began teaching at Naxos, she believed she was part of something that would help the black community in this period of history, when communities of color were integrating into society from marginalized starting points after the abuses of slavery. However, now, after a couple years at Naxos, Helga is disillusioned with the system at the school. Although the institution purports to empower the black community, Helga feels that it is designed to imitate and venerate the practices of the dominant white culture.

Copying white culture, for Helga (and for Larsen, whose social critiques are reflected in Helga's voice) will never

empower communities of color for two reasons. First, the mimicry merely reinforces a hierarchy in which white people and their practices are dominant and considered superior to other Americans. Second, trying to be like white people will never allow people of color the space to grow and develop their own unique cultural identity. In short, Helga thinks the system at Naxos claims to empower black people, but really it just celebrates white superiority and is ultimately oppressive.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"And *please* at least try to act like ladies and not savages from the backwoods."

Related Characters: Miss MacGooden (speaker), Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Helga wakes after deciding to leave her teaching job at Naxos, a boarding school for young black girls. Outside her room, Helga hears the dormitory matron, Miss MacGooden, yelling at the students as they leave the dormitory for breakfast. Helga thinks Miss MacGooden's comments capture exactly what is wrong with the environment at Naxos: the institution is supposed to empower people of color, but many of the people at the school say racist things that disempower the people of color there.

Miss MacGooden implies that people from the "backwoods"—meaning poor, rural communities—are "savages." Helga reflects to herself that most of the students (like many people of color in the U.S.) are, in fact, from such areas. Miss MacGooden carelessly implies that communities from those areas are uncivilized, which exposes her racism toward poor people of color. For Helga, racism like this is entrenched among the community at Naxos, which is why she wants to leave.

Chapter 3 Quotes

"Bright colors are vulgar"—"Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people"—"Dark-complected people shouldn't wear yellow or red."

Related Characters: Dean of Women (speaker), Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

As Helga waits for her meeting with the principal to tell him she's quitting her job at Naxos, she looks at the clerks sitting in the administration building, and thinks about the dreary colored clothes they are required to wear. She thinks back to a speech made by the dean of women, who believes that people of color shouldn't wear bright colored clothes because they are "vulgar." Helga thinks exactly the opposite. Whereas colors like "black, gray, brown, and navy blue" may suit other skin tones, Helga thinks they wash out dark skin, while bright colors make dark skin "luminous." The dean of women's speech exposes an oppressive attitude that captures Helga's central issue with institutions like Naxos: its mimicry of white culture actually suppresses things that celebrate the unique beauty of black culture, such as the love of color, infectious laughter, and rhythm. Once again, Larsen offers a criticism of uplift institutions in her own society through Helga's criticisms of Naxos.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"And please remember my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that would make me your aunt!"

Related Characters: Mrs. Nilssen (speaker), Helga Crane, Peter Nilssen (Uncle Peter)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

After Helga has quit her job at Naxos, and taken a train to Chicago, she visits her maternal Uncle Peter, who is white. When Helga was a teenager and her mother died, Uncle Peter came to Helga's rescue and sent her to a school for women of color to get Helga away from her abusive stepfather's family. Helga now things that perhaps Uncle Peter will help her once again. Unfortunately, Uncle Peter doesn't answer the door—his new wife, Mrs. Nilssen does. She is disgusted that Uncle Peter has relatives of color, and firmly tells Helga to go away and never return. Mrs. Nilssen's racism is some of the most overt in Larsen's story. Mrs. Nilssen thinks so badly of people of color that she will not allow Uncle Peter's own blood relative to make contact with him, for fear that people would think she herself is

somehow related to a person of color. This shows just how entrenched racism was in early 20th-century American society—in addition to the discrimination that black and mixed-race people like Helga face from strangers, they are also subject to hatred from those closest to them. It's no wonder that Helga struggles with racial identity issues and internalized self-hatred throughout the novel, given that even a family member is apt to treat her with racist cruelty.

❝ She saw herself for an obscene sore in all their live, at all costs to be hidden.

Related Characters: Helga Crane (speaker), Peter Nilssen (Uncle Peter) , Mrs. Nilssen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Helga has just run away from Uncle Peter's house after his new wife, Mrs. Nilssen, told Helga to go away and never come back again. Helga is angry and hurt, but she reflects that she also understands why Mrs. Nilssen turned her away, just as she understands why her white family—including her mother, her stepfather, and her stepfather's children—treated her cruelly throughout her childhood. Helga grew up as the only mixed-race person in a predominantly white environment and felt like she stood out like a sore thumb: her very presence in their lives exposed her whole family to racism that they did not want to deal with. Helga's childhood experiences prompt her to feel deep racial shame and self-hatred, which fuel her emotional repression throughout the story. Because she can't accept herself, she understands acutely why other people can't accept her. Larsen, who draws on her own childhood as a mixed-race person growing up in a predominantly white family, reflects on the emotional turmoil that mixed-race people are likely to feel when growing up in segregated or otherwise hostile environments.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ "Our kind of work wouldn't do for you" […] "Domestic mostly."

Related Characters: Ida Ross (speaker), Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

After Helga has been turned away by Mrs. Nilssen, she walks around Chicago for a few days before finally mustering up the motivation to go to an employment agency. As she explains that she is looking for work, the employment clerk, Ida Ross, cuts her off, explaining that the only jobs they have for women of color are housemaid jobs. Given that Helga was a teacher up until this point, it's clear that she is overeducated for this kind of work. Through Helga's encounters at the employment agency, Larsen communicates the lack of opportunities for the advancement of women of color in her own society. Helga doesn't fit in once again, because it's unusual for a woman of color to be so well-educated.

Helga is thus a misfit in in many ways: she is interracial in a segregated society, she is well-educated in a society that assumes women of color aren't, and she comes from an affluent background when many women of color live lives of poverty.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ "I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won't understand it, and after all it's your own business."

Related Characters: Mrs. Hayes-Rore (Aunt Jeannette) (speaker), Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Helga has been searching for work in Chicago for some weeks, and finally lands a job helping a woman named Mrs. Hayes-Rore write speeches on a train ride from Chicago to New York. Mrs. Hayes-Rore takes a liking to Helga and wants to help her, so she suggests Helga come to stay with her at her niece Anne's house in Harlem. Mrs. Hayes-Rore also thinks she can fix Helga up with a job, and help her start a new life in Harlem, where most of the residents are people of color. Before they arrive, Mrs. Hayes-Rore gives Helga some advice. Mrs. Hayes-Rore, who is likely mixed-race herself, thinks it's best to avoid telling people of color about her part-white heritage. Mrs. Hayes-Rore's comments show

that racism is prevalent in both sides of a segregated society, which leaves mixed-race people perpetually out of place. Predominantly white communities struggle to accept part-black people, but predominantly black communities also struggle to accept part-white people.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Of that white world, so distant, so near, she asked only indifference. No, not at all did she crave, from those pale and powerful people, awareness. Sinister folk, she considered them, who had stolen her birthright. Their past contribution to her life, which had been but shame and grief, she had hidden from away from brown folk in a locked closet, "never," she told herself, "to be reopened."

Related Characters: Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

After searching for work without any luck in Chicago, Helga moved to New York. She has been living and working in Harlem for several months, and has become absorbed in the emerging urban culture. Helga is surrounded by people of color and feels relieved to be away from white people, around whom she has only ever felt like an outsider and amassed shame about her black heritage. Helga now imagines she can stay in Harlem forever and forget about the white side of her identity. She vows to keep it a secret forever. Unfortunately for Helga, the perpetual suppression of some part of her identity is precisely what causes her to experience lifelong emotional pain. Helga feels she can never be her full self in a segregated society, so she tries to hide some part of her identity, but the self-deception eventually starts to wear on her. This triggers a constant feeling of being out of place, which makes her feel alienated and restless for a new living environment no matter where she goes.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ She hated white people with a deep and burning hatred[.] [...] But she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race.

Related Characters: Helga Crane, Anne Grey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Helga's roommate, Anne Grey, frustrates Helga with her attitude about white culture. As a black woman, Anne is passionate about racial equality and very vocal about her hatred of white people. Yet, at the same time, Anne mimics white tastes in the way she presents herself, and looks down on the cultural practices of black people. It almost seems as if Anne thinks white culture is more civilized than black culture. Anne's paradoxical behavior bothers Helga because it is hypocritical. Anne expresses great distaste for white people, yet holds their culture up as superior by copying them. Anne's mimicry has the effect of putting black people and black culture down, instead of championing their equality. As progressive as Harlem seems, Helga notices that deep down, people like Anne still think that white culture is superior. Anne, therefore, betrays an implicit belief in the superiority of white culture that Larsen (through Helga's discomfort) argues is damaging to social progress in a post-slavery American society.

❝ Until the very moment of his entrance she had had no intention of running away, but something, some imp of contumacy, drove her from his presence, though she longed to stay. Again abruptly had come the uncontrollable wish to wound. Later, with a sense of helplessness and inevitability, she realized that the weapon which she had chosen had been a boomerang, for she herself had felt the keep disappointment of the denial.

Related Characters: Robert Anderson (Dr. Anderson) (speaker), Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Helga is living in Harlem, and bumps into Dr. Anderson at a community meeting a few days ago. She is secretly thrilled to see him, and the chemistry between them is obvious as they flirt on her way home. Now, Dr. Anderson has just dropped by to take Helga on a date. When he arrives, Helga panics and pretends she's not home. She runs away to another engagement and stands up Dr. Anderson. Helga's

behavior toward Dr. Anderson is self-destructive—she likes Dr. Anderson and has feelings for him, but she pushes him away every time he comes around. Helga also does this with her other suitors throughout the novel. Helga's behavior clearly shows that she struggles to deal with her feelings. She feels such deep racial shame as a mixed-race person that she represses all of her emotions and desires, even the good ones—perhaps because she feels that she doesn't deserve to be happy. Every time a romantic confrontation occurs, Helga runs away and sabotages her romantic life to avoid dealing with her emotions, thereby causing herself more pain in the long run.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Characteristically she writhed at the idea of telling Anne of her impending departure and shirked the problem of evolving a plausible and inoffensive excuse for its suddenness. "That," she decided lazily, "will have to look out for itself; I can't be bothered just now. It's too hot."

Related Characters: Helga Crane (speaker), Peter Nilssen (Uncle Peter) , Anne Grey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Helga has been living in Harlem for about a year, but she is starting to feel restless. She has suppressed the white side of her heritage and is starting to feel out of sorts, as if she doesn't quite fit in. Out of the blue, she has just received a letter from her kind Uncle Peter with her inheritance of $5000. Helga has decided to use it to sail to Denmark and reconnect with her white relatives in Copenhagen. She hasn't told her roommate Anne yet and decides to put it off doing so because "It's too hot." Helga's behavior is characteristic because she avoids emotional confrontations throughout *Quicksand*. Helga brushes off her fiancé, James Vayle, at Naxos without a proper goodbye, and she's about to do the same to her roommate and close friend Anne. Helga's tendency to avoid confrontations (because she's uncomfortable with handling intense emotions) often ends up causing her more problems in the long run.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair, straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, woolly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semibarbaric, sophisticated, and exotic, were here. But she was blind to its charm, purposely aloof and a little contemptuous, and soon her interest in the moving mosaic waned.

Related Characters: Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

On one of Helga's last nights out in Harlem before she moves to Copenhagen, she goes to a jazz club with her friends. In the jazz club, she marvels at the "moving mosaic" of people intermingling in the club. Through Helga's eyes, Larsen describes the crowd at the jazz club in vivid detail, to emphasize the diversity and worldliness of this community. Even though segregated American society divides people into "black" and "white," Larsen is keen to show that this division is reductive: the community of color in the U.S. is much more worldly and diverse than a binary division allows. In fact, it almost seems arbitrary. With the exception of Native Americans, everyone in the U.S. has a blended heritage. Larsen thinks it's important to recognize this for two reasons. First, binary segregation doesn't reflect the true diversity of American culture, and it creates arbitrary boundaries that exclude mixed-race people. Second, there is beauty in this diversity. Larsen—like other Harlem Renaissance authors—focuses on providing language that fuels the idea of beauty in blackness and doesn't limit beauty to a white aesthetic.

❝ "Why, she gives parties for white and colored people together. And she goes to white people's parties. It's worse than disgusting, it's positively obscene."

Related Characters: Anne Grey (speaker), Helga Crane, Audrey Denney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Helga is at the jazz club on one of her last nights in Harlem, when she spots Dr. Anderson on a date with a woman named Audrey Denney whose ethnicity is ambiguous, though she appears (like Helga) to be mixed-race. As soon as Anne sees Audrey Denney, she spews hateful comments about her. This reaction exposes a larger issue of problematic thinking within communities of color because of segregation. Anne thinks interracial relationships are wrong, which implies that mixed-race people, like Helga, are somehow immoral or unnatural. This is, of course, highly offensive to Helga and makes her feel like an outsider.

Through the tension between Anne and Helga, Larsen shows that segregationist thinking is counter-productive to social progress, because it excludes many people who live in American society. Helga thus feels like an outsider wherever she goes. So long as people endorse segregation, people like Helga (and by extension Larsen, who is also mixed-race) will always be misfits.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"Oh, I'm an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you're young. And you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression. "

Related Characters: Fru Dahl (Aunt Katrina) (speaker), Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

After a couple years in Harlem, Helga moves to Copenhagen to reconnect with her white family and the Danish side of her heritage. As soon as she arrives, her aunt, Fru Dahl, goes through Helga's clothes and decides Helga needs a complete makeover because her clothes are too dowdy. Through Fru Dahl's comments, Larsen exposes that in many white cultural contexts, black bodies are fetishized. Blackness is treated as different, exotic, and sexual, and black people are treated as rare objects to be collected, rather than people.

Fru Dahl wants to dress Helga up to emphasize her "lovely brown skin" and "make an impression" because she wants Helga to attract an artistic suitor who will find Helga's blackness fascinating and marry her, thereby increasing Fru Dahl's social standing in Danish society's artistic circles. Fru Dahl's attitude is a problem because it reduces Helga to a commodity: she is only seen as valuable because of her blackness, which others want to possess because it's different, rare, and sexually tantalizing.

Chapter 14 Quotes

A decoration. A curio. A peacock.

Related Characters: Herr Axel Olsen (Herr Olsen) (speaker), Herr Dahl (Uncle Poul) , Fru Dahl (Aunt Katrina) , Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Helga has been living in Copenhagen for a few months. In coming to Denmark, Helga wanted to reconnect with her white family, and imagined being accepted as one of them herself. However, even though Helga is half-white, she realizes that she will always be treated as an outsider in this community.

Helga's aunt and uncle, Fru and Herr Dahl, and Helga's suitor, Axel Olsen, dress her up in revealing clothes that exoticize and sexualize her blackness. Their intention is to show Helga off as different. While Helga enjoys the attention, she realizes that nobody is interested in getting to know her and accept her as a person. They are only interested in collecting her and showing her off because she is a "curio" in this society. As such, she feels more like an exotic pet or a decorative object that people want to own, rather than a respected member of the community.

Larsen utilizes Helga's objectification by the Dahls and Axel Olsen to show that in many predominantly white cultural contexts, blackness isn't seen as beautiful in the same way whiteness is. Rather, blackness is treated as exotic and sexual, which objectifies people of color and reduces them to things that people want to collect, instead of equals whom people want to know.

Chapter 15 Quotes

"But you see, Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't care at all to be owned. Even by you."

Related Characters: Helga Crane (speaker), Herr Axel Olsen (Herr Olsen)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *Quicksand*, Larsen alludes to the "tragic mulatta" trope when writing Helga's life story. The "tragic mulatta" is a literary character who is a mixed-race person raised in an affluent, white setting who meets a tragic end, typically by being sold into slavery because she isn't fully white. The trope emerged in abolitionist literature to garner sympathy for people of color through the tragic narratives of people who occupied the spaces in between white freedom and black enslavement.

Helga's life story is an attempt to escape the fate of the "tragic mulatta." Here, she is living in Copenhagen among her rich white relatives, and has just been offered a lucrative marriage proposal by the famous artist Axel Olsen. Although Helga enjoys her life in Copenhagen, she is acutely aware that people treat her more like an object (who is curious and interesting because she's black) than a person. Axel Olsen's proposal thus represents an attempt to own Helga, rather than to enter into a relationship with her. Helga, who wants to achieve true happiness in her life, refuses to be sold into a marriage.

Helga's refusal of Axel Olsen is an explicit reference to the "tragic mulatta" trope. Helga will not be sold the way "tragic mulattas" are, she wants to be free, and happy. Whether or not she will achieve true emancipation remains to be seen, but she tries to resist the "tragic mulatta's" fate throughout the story, as she explicitly does here.

> "I think that my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane. Therefore—a tragedy."

Related Characters: Herr Axel Olsen (Herr Olsen) (speaker), Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Helga's suitor in Copenhagen, Axel Olsen, has just completed painting Helga's portrait and has proposed to her. Helga has refused his proposal because she doesn't want to be sold into a marriage. Axel's comments about the portrait allude, like Helga's refusal, to the "tragic mulatta" trope of abolitionist literature. The "tragic mulatta" is a literary character who meets a tragic end because of her mixed-race heritage. Larsen explicitly references the "tragic mulatta" trope through Axel Olsen's description of Helga's portrait as "a tragedy." Axel can never see Helga's race as anything other than an affliction. He thinks he is being noble by offering to save her from the "tragic" ends that most people of color meet in his society by elevating her to the status of his wife. To Helga, however, Axel's marriage proposal isn't an attempt to save her, but an attempt to *own* her. Accepting his proposal won't save her from the "tragic" fate of the "mulatta." Rather, it will condemn her to it.

> It wasn't, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features.

Related Characters: Herr Axel Olsen (Herr Olsen) , Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

When Helga is living in Copenhagen, a famous artist named Axel Olsen paints her portrait. Axel contends that the portrait is a true likeness of Helga, but Helga is horrified when she sees it. She feels as if she hasn't been depicted as her true self, but as a grossly sexualized version of herself. The portrait represents the way black people are often viewed in predominantly white societies: as exotic sexual commodities that are attractive because they are different. Throughout her time in Copenhagen, Helga feels as if she is treated more like a wild animal that people want to own, than a person they want to know.

Larsen leverages the portrait of Helga to encapsulate the problematic way that blackness is often treated as a sexual commodity in white societies. One of Larsen's aims in *Quicksand* is to develop a new aesthetic for the beauty in blackness that doesn't sexualize or objectify the black body. The portrait represents what Larsen—like other Harlem Renaissance writers—wants to resist about the way blackness is seen under the white gaze.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Why couldn't she have two lives, or why couldn't she be satisfied in one place?

Related Characters: Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After living in Copenhagen for year or two, Helga starts to miss Harlem. She admits that she is homesick for black culture, and decides to return to Harlem for Anne's wedding to Dr. Anderson, secretly knowing that she might not return to Denmark. Just as the boat is pulling away from the port in Copenhagen, however, Helga is overcome with regret and knows she will miss Copenhagen just as much she misses Harlem. Helga wishes she could have two lives in order to appease both sides of her mixed-race identity. When she is in a predominantly white environment, she misses the black side of her heritage. However, when she is in a predominantly black environment, she misses the white side of heritage. Larsen thus communicates, through Helga's plight, that mixed-race people will never feel at home in segregated societies.

Helga also wishes she could be satisfied in one place. The reason she is never satisfied is because she always suppresses one side of her identity, which causes her great emotional pain. When Helga starts to feel anguish at repressing some part of herself, she runs in the other direction, but ends up repressing another part of herself when she gets to her next destination. Larsen implies that if Helga were able to embrace and accept her full self, rather than pushing some part of it away, she wouldn't feel so out of place. Running from place to place will do nothing for Helga until she is able to express her full identity.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ Even with Clementine Richards, a strapping black beauty of magnificent Amazon proportions and bold shining eyes of jetlike hardness. A person of awesome appearance.

Related Characters: Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green , Clementine Richards , Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Helga Crane has just moved to Alabama because she married a man named the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green on a whim, to spite Dr. Anderson, the man she really loves. Before she knows it, Helga finds herself living in an impoverished community in rural Alabama, where a number of new characters are introduced, including the town beauty, Clementine Richards, who has a massive crush on the Reverend.

Larsen's description of Clementine Richards is one example in *Quicksand* where Larsen describes people of color in a way that emphasizes their beauty without objectifying or sexualizing them (in the way that Axel's portrait of Helga does). Clementine Richards is clearly a force to be reckoned with, but Larsen does not reduce Clementine to a sexual object, even though Larsen is specifically addressing Clementine's attractiveness. Larsen's aim, like other Harlem Renaissance authors, is to offer prose that resituates blackness as uniquely beautiful without reducing black people to exotic sexual objects.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ "Jes' remembah…we all gits ouah res' by an' by. In de nex' worl' we's all recompense'."

Related Characters: Sary Jones (speaker), Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Helga has been living in poverty in rural Alabama for a couple years, and already has three young children. Life is hard, and Helga, who has little experience with physical labor, is struggling to keep up. She is constantly exhausted from her pregnancies, childcare, and housekeeping, and grows sicker and weaker with each passing day. One day, in frustration, she asks Sary Jones—who had six children in six years—how to cope, and Sary advises Helga to remember that they can rest when they are dead, and they will receive rewards for their labor in the afterlife. Helga grits her teeth and tries to bear her burden by trusting in God.

Sary Jones's advice represents what Larsen thinks is problematic about religious life in her society. Many people suffer and endure harsh and impoverished living conditions because they believe they will be rewarded in heaven. For

Larsen, this belief is problematic because people tolerate their poverty instead of pushing for better living conditions in society, and therefore remain oppressed.

Chapter 24 Quotes

Audrey Denney, placid, taking quietly and without fuss the things which she wanted.

Related Characters: Audrey Denney , Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Helga, who is living in poverty in rural Alabama, and growing weaker every day from perpetual childbearing, has just given birth to her fourth child and lapsed into a fever. As she lies sick and disoriented in bed, her life flashes before her eyes and she remembers various people, including Audrey Denney, whom Helga crossed paths with in Harlem. Helga didn't know Audrey Denney well, but she remembers her as a person who was at ease, and just lived her life the way she wanted—even though many people in Harlem, including Helga's roommate, Anne, disapproved of Audrey's lifestyle. Audrey Denney, who is likely mixed-race like Helga, doesn't try to suppress her identity, but openly socializes with black and white people, and lives a blended, progressive, interracial life.

Larsen leverages the character of Audrey Denney to show what Helga's life could have been like if she were able to accept herself and her full identity. Because Helga cannot embrace her black and white heritage at the same time, her life ends in tragedy. It's difficult for Helga to live the way Audrey does because she finds herself surrounded by people who endorse segregation, like Anne. Audrey Denney's life represents the peace and acceptance that people like Helga could find if it were easier to live as Audrey Denney does in American society.

Chapter 25 Quotes

Religion had, after all, its uses. It blunted the perceptions. Robbed life of its crudest truths. Especially it had its uses for the poor—and the blacks.

For the blacks. The Negroes.

And this, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in "kingdom come."

Related Characters: Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159-150

Explanation and Analysis

Helga has been lying in bed for weeks, having collapsed after giving birth to her fourth child, who doesn't survive. During her illness, Helga decides that her faith has masked her ability to see that her impoverished life of perpetual childbearing in rural Alabama is slowly killing her.

Through Helga's disillusioned reflections about her faith, Larsen articulates her explicit criticism of religion's role in the American society of her time. Larsen believes that religion is often used as a tool to oppresses impoverished communities of color. Larsen thinks religious life encourages disenfranchised people to tolerate their poverty and hope for better lives in heaven, rather than empowering them to push for social change, better living conditions, and true equality. Belief in heavenly rewards thus perpetuates unfair living conditions for many people of color in the U.S., and keeps poor people of color oppressed.

And hardly she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child.

Related Characters: Helga Crane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159-150

Explanation and Analysis

In the final sentence of *Quicksand*, Larsen reveals that Helga's life has settled in failure. Helga has fallen gravely ill from her life of constant childbearing and housekeeping in Alabama, and has realized that she needs to escape, or she

will die. Helga vows to get better, flee this life, and find happiness. Just as Helga is finally well enough to get out of bed, however, she starts giving birth yet again. This life, it seems, has trapped Helga after all.

Helga ends up with the sad ending of the "tragic mulatta," despite her lifelong efforts to avoid this fate. Although slavery has ended in American society, and Helga isn't sold into slavery (which is the end that most "tragic mulatta" characters meet in abolitionist literature), the world that she lives in—which is entrenched in segregation, white superiority, exoticization of the black body, and faith-based tolerance of poverty—effectively breaks her.

Larsen's parting comment to the reader, thus, is a critical statement about American and European societies in the early 20th century. American and European societies no longer enslave people of color, but they still need to change if they want people of color to truly be free.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Helga Crane sits alone in her room in the evening, wearing a colorful negligee. A lamp casts dim light over the ornate and eclectic furnishings. Helga enjoys these quiet, tranquil evenings after a busy day's teaching, and never opens her door to the hubbub of gossiping faculty that mill around all day. She is 23 years old, with shapely limbs, satiny "yellow" skin, and delicate features. Her dark hair falls loosely around her shoulders. She tries not to think about work, but she struggles to shut it out tonight. Today was particularly irritating.

Larsen opens the novel with a description of Helga's physical beauty and the sophistication of her dress and living quarters. These descriptions are intended to subvert racist stereotypes of people of color as either ugly and poor, or exotic and sensualized. Larsen's description of Helga as "yellow" leverages the use of different colors to resist binary black and white racial categorizations when she describes people.

Helga didn't get a lunch break today because the staff and teachers had to attend a sermon in the stuffy chapel by a famous white preacher who was passing through. The preacher had said that if anyone thought the South treated black people poorly, they should look at the exemplary community at Naxos. The black people here have good enough sense to make progress, but "know when to stop." Thinking back on the sermon now, Helga still feels a surge of anger and resentment, and she is amazed that the preacher got a strong applause.

The preacher aims to say positive things about the Naxos community, but his comments clearly betray a sense of white superiority. When the preacher says "progress," he means that black people get better by mimicking white culture, rather than forming their own cultural identity. The preacher's advice about knowing "when to stop" shows that he doesn't really want black people to have true equality, since he wants them to stay below white people.

Helga suddenly feels like she hates the South, the school, and the whole system of "Negro education" at Naxos. She wishes she could leave forever. She sits and thinks about this for hours as the room darkens about her. Seized with a desire for action, Helga flips on the light switch and throws her teaching books into the trash. She's tried to infuse innovative ideas into her diverse students with "ebony, bronze, and gold faces," but she thinks they are too indoctrinated by the broken system at Naxos—the school is too fixated on doing things the way white people would.

Helga's frustration with Naxos stems from the fact that she thinks the institution is supposed to empower black people, but all it really does is perpetuate and imitate white culture. This system suppresses innovation, which Helga thinks is necessary for true empowerment. Once again, Larsen describes people of color using an array of colors rather than boxing them into a single category. Her use of "ebony, bronze, and gold" connotes the beauty and diversity of these skin tones.

Helga decides she's through with all this. She's been teaching at Naxos for two years, and her initial enthusiasm has been slowly replaced with bitterness at the hypocrisy of the place. She feels like her personality is blotted out at Naxos, and decides she really shouldn't wait any longer to leave. Of course, Helga needs to tell her fiancé, James Vayle, and figure out how to get some money. It's too late to do all that tonight, so she decides to wait until morning.

The "hypocrisy of the place" makes Helga bitter because she thought she would be helping people of color by teaching at Naxos, but really, all people do at Naxos is encourage black people to act like white people, which Helga finds oppressive. The fact that Helga only thinks of her fiancé as an afterthought implies that Helga doesn't really love him.

Helga is annoyed by her money struggles. She's spent most of her earnings on expensive clothes and books. She can't get another teaching job in the middle of the year, but she'll have enough salary to get on a train to Chicago. Helga decides to see if her kind Uncle Peter can help her. He's the only member of Helga's family who doesn't despise her, because he was very fond of his sister, Helga's mother. Helga figures he'll help her out with some money because he doesn't think people with "Negro blood" can amount to much on their own.

Uncle Peter's opinion of people with "Negro blood" implies that he and Helga's mother are white, and that Helga's family looks down on her for being mixed-race. Larsen begins to introduce Helga's feelings of self-loathing and shame about her mixed-race identity when she describes how Helga feels like an outsider—even in her own family. Even though Helga is half-white, she has "Negro blood" which makes Helga's white family think of her as fundamentally different from them.

Now Helga thinks about how to tackle James Vayle. They got together when they were new and lonely at Naxos, and Helga was attracted by James's well-established family. James adjusted to Naxos and fits in now, but Helga still can't bend her will enough to reshape herself the way others at Naxos do. She's certain that James Vayle holds this against her. The fact that he still likes her makes her feel powerful, but she shrinks away from this feeling. Helga decides that it's much more convenient for her to just leave than have an annoying quarrel with James. She feels impatient and rushes into bed, leaving her books, papers, and stockings strewn around the room.

Helga's avoidance of James shows that she doesn't have a good handle on her feelings. James Vayle clearly accepts Helga and this makes her feel powerful, but she represses the feeling—even though it's a positive feeling of empowerment. Helga's decision to leave without having a proper discussion with James shows that she is uncomfortable with emotional confrontations and prefers to flee rather than being vulnerable and facing romantic matters head on.

CHAPTER 2

Helga wakes up feeling stressed. She remembers that she decided to leave Naxos, and she still feels the same way. Helga wants to leave right now, but there's a lot to sort out: paperwork, James Vayle, money, and a new job. It makes more sense to wait a few months until the end of the school year. She knows this is the sensible thing to do, but she feels a sense of rebellious urgency. Helga always feels as if she's up against some powerful enemy that she has to prove herself to, even though this way of thinking gets in her way a lot. She wonders what she really wants. Obviously, there's financial security, lovely clothes, and the adoration of others. But more than this, she wants happiness, if only she knew what that meant.

Helga's sense of rebellious urgency results from feeling out of place as a mixed-race person, wherever she is. Her need to prove herself stems from her feelings of personal shame. Helga wants to leave the place she's in when feelings of displacement and shame arise in her, as she thinks a change of scenery will make these feelings go away. Helga would rather push her feelings away than face them, and this tendency clouds her judgement: she wants to leave even though it's not sensible to quit in the middle of the school year without a backup plan.

The breakfast bell rings, and Helga hears Miss MacGooden, the dormitory matron, yelling at the students for being raised with no manners, and acting like "savages from the backwoods." Helga wonders if Miss MacGooden realizes this is kind of insulting to the girls in the dorm who are, in fact, mostly from the backwoods. Through her window, Helga watches students scrambling to get to class. Margaret Creighton cautiously knocks on the door to see if Helga's alright, as Helga is going to be late for her first class. Helga defiantly asserts that she's not going to class at all. In that moment, she realizes that Naxos disgusts her, and wants to get out as soon as possible. She even tells Margaret that the school should be shut down.

Miss MacGooden, like the white preacher, betrays an undercurrent of racism in her comments. She implies that people of color from poor rural communities (the "backwoods") are "savages." By assuming that people of color are raised without manners or culture, Miss MacGooden exposes her belief that white culture is superior. Helga thinks the school should be shut down because she believes that young people of color won't become empowered in environments where they are constantly belittled.

Margaret worries for Helga, as she thinks it'll be hard to find work in the middle of the school year. Margaret wishes Helga would stay, as she likes her. She reminds Helga that Naxos offers good work with a high salary and nice job perks. Helga is unmoved. She's enlivened by the thought of leaving, and her mind is already thinking about packing and trains, and her journey to Chicago.

Margaret's worries about Helga's job prospects foreshadow what Helga will encounter in Chicago: a lack of employment opportunities for educated people of color. Helga is so eager to run from her loathsome feelings about Naxos that she doesn't think about such matters—she would rather run away than be pragmatic.

CHAPTER 3

Helga walks toward Dr. Anderson's office. After insisting she needed an appointment today, she's been given 20 minutes at 11 o'clock. She resents that this is all the time she's worth to people at Naxos. On her way, Helga notices the beautiful trees that seem so free among the humans at the school, who seem like prisoners in comparison.

Helga is bitter about her short appointment duration because she thinks it reflects the general atmosphere of disrespect toward people of color at Naxos. Larsen uses the juxtaposition of free trees with imprisoned people to emphasize that Naxos is an oppressive environment.

Dr. Anderson is the new school principal. Helga doesn't know him well, but feels he's much kinder and more well-meaning than the rest of the cruel system at Naxos. Helga becomes irate as she thinks about how annoying and uncomfortable it is that she has to be unkind to a nice man. Helga suddenly feels nervous. Although she's inclined to turn away, she stubbornly forces herself to push through the desks in the administration building. Helga calms herself as she waits for Dr. Anderson, and thinks that at least she doesn't have to be nice to any of the clerks sitting in front of her any more.

Helga is quick to anger when she has to face a confrontation, and experiences turbulent emotions that seem to flare up in a way that shows she doesn't have a good handle on her emotions. Once again, when faced with feelings of anger or anxiety, her first inclination is to run away from the encounter, rather than push through her discomfort.

Helga thinks about the "dull" navy and brown colors that the clerks are forced to wear. The dean of women thinks bright colors are "vulgar" on dark skin, but Helga completely disagrees. She thinks muted colors wash out dark skin, while bright colors make it look "luminous." It annoys her that people like the dean of women speak constantly about race pride but try to stamp out all the unique things about the black race, such as love of color, dancing, and laughter. Helga, who loves clothes, has had to subtly add small amounts of color into her wardrobe to avoid offending anyone. She chuckles to herself at how much it unnerves other staff members that she's always so well-dressed.

Like the preacher and Miss MacGooden (the dormitory matron), Helga thinks the dean of women disempowers people of color. Helga believes the dress-code restrictions are an attempt to make people of color dress like white people and imitate white culture, instead of celebrating what is unique and special and unique about black culture. Larsen describes dark skin as "luminous" because she wants to celebrate the blackness as beautiful in its own way.

Helga is called into Dr. Anderson's office. He's a young principal in his 30s. Helga suddenly feels a strong urge to burst into hysterical laughter, but she controls herself, and says calmly that she's leaving Naxos today. Dr. Anderson asks why in his deep, resonant voice, and Helga admits it's a beautiful setting, but she doesn't fit in. Dr. Anderson smiles a little, and Helga is immediately angered that he is so relaxed. She suddenly feels angry and wants to hurt him. She says deliberately that she hates Naxos, and it's a petty, cruel, unjust institution that puts people down instead of lifting them up. In fact, it's more of a "disease" than a school.

Larsen's description of Dr. Anderson's deep and resonant voice is another example of her overall effort to describe people of color as beautiful. It also suggests that Helga is attracted to Dr. Anderson. Through the voice of Helga, Larsen communicates her thoughts that institutions like Naxos—where people of color are schooled to imitate white culture in order to better themselves—are oppressive, even though they purport to be empowering.

Dr. Anderson asks if Helga will stay and help him fix Naxos. She notices his piercing, gray eyes. Helga says that people don't like her, and she feels like she can't be herself here. When Dr. Anderson realizes that Helga is only 22, he says she'll grow less sensitive to injustice, which happens in every community. He pleads with her to stay, talking earnestly about the chance to do something great. Helga suddenly feels compelled to help him, and wants to stay. Dr. Anderson says they need people like Helga. She's a "lady." Helga suddenly feels enraged, and retorts that her father was a gambler who abandoned her white immigrant mother. She doesn't even know if they were married. With that, Helga says she's leaving today, and storms out of the room.

Helga notices Dr. Anderson's eyes because she is attracted to him. Even though Helga is moved by Dr. Anderson's speech, she reacts with sudden, uncontrollable anger because she doesn't handle herself well when faced with romantic feelings like attraction. Helga tends to repress her emotions rather than process them, so she doesn't know how to control herself when intense feelings rise up in her. In this passage, the reader learns that Helga had a troubled childhood as a mixed-race girl after her black father abandoned her and her white mother. Helga feels shame and anger when people compliment her—as Dr. Anderson does—as she struggles to accept her racial identity.

CHAPTER 4

Helga Crane sits on the train, with "others of her race." She has a headache, and feels shameful for losing her temper in Dr. Anderson's office and throwing her job away. She wonders why his piercing eyes unsettled her so much. Helga decides his calm demeanor was controlling and rude. She can't stop thinking about him, even though it makes no difference now.

Larsen implies out that the train is segregated when she describes Helga sitting with "others of her race." Helga is so uncomfortable with experiencing romantic attraction that she represses the feeling by convincing herself that Dr. Anderson was rude, even though he wasn't.

Helga feels guilty for describing her parents the way she did. Helga's mother was a passionate, well-bred, fair, Scandinavian girl who simply fell in love and fell into poverty when Helga's father left her. Helga knows her mother's second marriage, to a mean white man, was out of necessity. She remembers her mother mediating arguments, and trying to shield Helga from her racist stepfather's cruel jealousy. Helga recalls her mother's death, when Helga was 15, and how her Uncle Peter saved Helga by sending her off to a school for black women. It was the first place she could breathe freely in her life, because she realized for the first time that having dark skin didn't make her repulsive.

The reader learns about Helga's backstory and her troubled childhood as the only person of color in an all-white and largely hostile family. Helga's feelings of self-loathing appear to stem from her childhood and abusive step-father's racist attitude toward her. Even though Helga is half white, she feels out of place in her family setting for her dark skin, which makes her hate herself. Larsen implies that in a segregated society, people with good intentions—like Helga's mother—are often forced into oppressive situations.

Helga was happy at this school, even though she felt like an outsider. Over time, this feeling grew when she realized the other girls had families, but she didn't. It bred discontentment in her, and she was happy for a change when she got the job at Naxos. Helga recalls how she broke up with James Vayle, calmly and quickly, and how he felt cheated by the discussion, as if she were hiding something. Helga realizes now that she never could have married him. When she thinks of him touching her, she feels nauseous.

Helga's backstory reveals that she has been bouncing back and forth between predominantly white and predominantly black environments in a segregated society her whole life, and that she's always felt like an outsider of some sort. Helga's lack of feelings for James Vayle shows that she tends to commit to people she's not attracted to, while running away from people she is attracted to—perhaps because she believes she doesn't deserve to be happy.

The train car is buzzing with activity. A white man walks through and spits on the floor. Helga tries to get a berth but the conductors refuse her. After a shift change, the new conductor offers to let Helga have a berth if she'll slip him some money. Helga needs every penny she has, but she pays him anyway. As Helga undresses and lays down in the berth, her mind is preoccupied with Dr. Anderson. She wonders why she lost her temper instead of talking honestly about her family. She's sure he would have sympathized with her. Helga feels like she talked in angry half-truths. Now, as she drifts off to sleep, she thinks about the phrase "angry-half," repeating it to herself.

Helga's difficulty at getting a berth on the train reflects the systemic oppression faced by people of color in a segregated U.S. In this era, only white people could have berths, while people of color had to travel in a crowded separate carriage. The phrase "angry-half" captures Helga's frustration as a mixed-race person in this society: she feels too white for predominantly black environments, yet is perceived as too black for predominantly white environments. One half of her, therefore, is put out wherever she goes.

CHAPTER 5

Chicago is gray, seething, and rushing around Helga. Helga decides to have a bath and a good meal, and then surprise Uncle Peter. When she knocks on the door, her uncle is out. The maid fetches Mrs. Nilssen, which surprises Helga, who didn't know her uncle had gotten married. Mrs. Nilssen is dismissive of Helga and tells her not to return again. In fact, she tells Helga not to think of them as family at all. Helga is overcome with fear and anger, and runs away from the house as fast as she can. Helga is stung by the rejection, but she understands why Mrs. Nilssen would act that way. She feels like an "obscene sore" that should never have existed in her white family's life.

Mrs. Nilssen's refusal of Helga exposes her racism, as she doesn't want to be associated with people of color, even if they are technically related by marriage. Helga's pattern of feeling angry, fearful, and running away when faced with confrontations resurfaces once again. Helga's sympathy with Mrs. Nilssen's position and her description of herself as a "sore" exposes her self-loathing. Helga feels like an outsider and hates herself for her race, so she is not surprised when other people express hatred toward her.

Later, in her hotel room, Helga remembers the reason she went to Uncle Peter's house in the first place: she needs money. She's confident she can figure out some kind of work, and decides to try the library, as she loves books. She looks out of the window at the teeming multicolored crowds. As she steps into the street and joins the crowd, Helga feels a strange sense of enthusiasm, and even though she doesn't know Chicago at all, she feels as if she's come home.

Helga's pattern of feeling out of place and then running away to somewhere new is always accompanied by a hope that the new place will feel like home. Helga is optimistic about feeling at home in Chicago, though she will soon experience difficulties that change her perception of the city.

CHAPTER 6

Helga wakes on a dull, rainy day, and frowns when she remembers she has to find work. She dresses in the simplest clothes she owns: a tailored blue suit and a silk blouse. Helga finds the library, but is out of there in 15 minutes, disappointed to learn that she needs all sorts of special qualifications for library work. She wonders what else she could do. She remembers an employment agency she heard of, but spends hours wandering around and doing a little shopping, so she gets there too late in the day. Helga decides to go back first thing in the morning. Instead, she treats herself to a few days off, and winds up at the employment agency three days later, when she's almost out of money.

Helga's choice of clothing communicates her status as a misfit in this society in many ways. She owns fine clothing and nice things, and therefore comes across as too affluent for a typical job-seeker, though she has no financial resources of her own. Once again, Helga avoids facing a difficult situation, and distracts herself with shopping and sightseeing, despite the fact that her behavior will cause greater difficulties for her in the long run.

Helga is embarrassed as she approaches the brusque clerks in the employment office. She explains she's a teacher, but the disinterested clerk interrupts her to say they can't help as most of their jobs are in domestic labor. Helga says she'll take any work, but when the clerk realizes Helga has no references, she turns Helga away. Days and weeks pass, as Helga tries unsuccessfully to find work. Without a reference, it's almost impossible. She feels small, lost, and alone.

Through Helga's encounters at the employment agency, Larsen shows the lack of opportunity for for women of color in early post-slavery U.S. society. The only jobs on offer are for work as a cleaner or maid. There is nothing suitable for Helga, who is well-educated and well-dressed. Once again, Helga is a misfit, but this time, because of her educated background and affluent appearance. Larsen thus shows that this society is limited in its perception of what women of color are capable of achieving.

Just as she is losing hope, Helga receives a note from Ida Ross at the employment office. Ida Ross explains that a woman named Mrs. Hayes-Rore needs help writing speeches on "the race problem" on the train ride from Chicago to New York. Helga is to meet Mrs. Hayes-Rore in under an hour. Helga is offended that nobody asked her if she actually wants the job. She is about to storm out in a rage, but she bites her tongue, as she becomes enlivened with a new plan: she will ride the train with Mrs. Hayes-Rore, collect a reference from her, and then look for work in New York. The world around Helga suddenly seems brighter, and the shop windows shine with radiance.

Helga's turbulent emotions once again rise to the fore. Even though she desperately needs a job, she becomes indignant when offered one. Larsen shows yet again that Helga struggles to handle her emotions—especially her anger, which surfaces frequently. Mrs. Hayes-Rore's race is ambiguous, though Larsen's use of the word "yellow" (like her earlier description of Helga) implies that Mrs. Hayes-Rore is likely mixed-race as well. Once again, Larsen describes people in ways that avoid binary black and white categorizations in order to emphasize a racial spectrum.

CHAPTER 7

On the train to New York, Helga makes fast work of correcting and summarizing Mrs. Hayes-Rore's speeches. Helga notices that the speeches are patched together from things prominent race scholars have said, including like Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Nonetheless, Helga finds Mrs. Hayes-Rore fascinating, and Mrs. Hayes-Rore feels the same way about Helga. As the train approaches Newark, Mrs. Hayes-Rore asks Helga how she was able to drop everything for a gig like this so easily. Helga is immediately angered. She feels as if she's perpetually explaining herself to people. But she manages to reply politely that she has nobody in the world, so it's easy.

Through Helga's voice, Larsen names several real Harlem Renaissance thinkers, foreshadowing Harlem's cultural environment that Helga is about to join. Helga's anger surfaces once again when Mrs. Hayes-Rore makes polite conversation. Even though Mrs. Hayes-Rore asks a simple question, Helga is unable to separate it from her lifelong frustration at constantly having to explain herself on account of her race. Helga's mixed-race identity thus bleeds into every aspect of her day-to-day life, and takes over her emotions.

Mrs. Hayes-Rore laughs and says it's impossible to have nobody, but is embarrassed when she notices Helga is upset by the remark. After a little probing, Helga tells her life story, unable to hide her personal torment, while Mrs. Hayes-Rore looks out of the window. Feeling uncomfortable, Mrs. Hayes-Rore changes the subject and asks Helga what her plan is when she gets to New York. Helga admits that she has none. Mrs. Hayes-Rore warns Helga that New York can be lonely, and suggests Helga come and stay uptown with her for a few days.

Helga constantly carries her racial shame with her, and is unable to communicate her story without exposing her personal torment about her race. Helga's anguish is juxtaposed with Mrs. Hayes-Rore's calm and comfortable demeanor. Mrs. Hayes-Rore—who may also be mixed-race herself—seems much more level-headed, and thinks about pragmatic solutions to help Helga, who tends to negatively dwell on her emotions.

As the train pulls into New York, Helga notices that it looks shiny, unfriendly, and a little scornful in the sharp air. Intimidated, Helga accepts Mrs. Hayes-Rore's offer. Mrs. Hayes-Rore explains that they will stay with her niece Anne, who lives in a big house with lots of room. As they get into a cab and head uptown, Mrs. Hayes-Rore warns Helga not to mention that her "people are white," since "colored people won't understand."

Mrs. Hayes-Rore reveals that she is, in fact, mixed-race, and has some white relatives. Her reluctance to publicize this information shows that in a segregated society, there is discrimination on both sides: blackness is questioned in white environments, and whiteness is questioned in black environments. Mixed-race people thus always have to hide a part of their identity to fit in.

As Mrs. Hayes-Rore and Helga walk into Anne's house, Mrs. Hayes-Rore greets Anne, who is a "tall slim creature beautifully dressed in a cool green tailored frock" with a pleasant voice. Mrs. Hayes-Rore mentions that Helga's mother died (omitting that it was a long time ago) and suggests Helga could do with a spell in New York. Anne agrees and whisks Helga into the house.

Larsen emphasizes Anne's beauty and sophistication when introducing her into the story for the first time. Her description of Anne as a "slim creature" with a "tailored frock" and "pleasant voice" ties into her overall aim of populating the story with positive descriptions of blackness as beautiful without sexualizing or exoticizing it.

CHAPTER 8

A happy year has passed since Helga first walked into Anne's house. Helga has fallen into a fun life in Harlem's bourgeoning culture, with a job, friends, and perhaps even a sense of contentment. Helga has been working at an insurance company and has made a lot of sophisticated friends through Anne. Helga is happy that her new friends look down on the sense of inferiority that the black community at Naxos has. Helga feels as if she has "found herself."

Helga feels at home in her new environment. Her new friends also denigrate the way white superiority is prevalent in the Southern education system. Larsen exposes a pattern that is emerging with Helga. At the beginning of her experiences in a new place (as with school, and with Naxos) she is optimistic that she has found her place to fit in. Soon after, however, the veneer of each new life begins to wear off as soon as she realizes she can't escape the reality of life as a mixed-race woman.

Helga and Anne have fallen into a fast friendship, and Helga is living with Anne in her tastefully-furnished home, which suits Helga just fine. She is absorbed in Harlem's cultural life and no longer feels the need to be acknowledged by white people. She has resolved to lock that part of her heritage away forever, marry a wealthy "brown or yellow" man, have "laughing, appealing dark-eyed children," and stay in Harlem forever. Helga never thinks of James Vayle, but—much to her distaste—she thinks often of Dr. Anderson. Happy to be far from Naxos, and released from the feeling of smallness that she has felt her whole life, Helga feels free, content, and happy.

Larsen foreshadows the reason why Helga eventually struggles in Harlem: she is burying the white side of her identity in this new life. She also represses her feelings for Dr. Anderson, whom she often thinks about. Repressing parts of herself like this, instead of accepting herself and her feelings, is what causes Helga's emotions to bubble to the surface when she feels provoked and loses control, as will happen shortly. Larsen, once again, weaves in descriptions of people of color that emphasize a racial spectrum and the beauty in blackness.

CHAPTER 9

Helga's happiness, however, is short lived. As her first year in Harlem comes to a close, she starts to feel restless, and even anguished. She feels trapped. As summer rolls around, Helga starts to feel annoyed by Harlem, her friends, and even Anne. Anne is passionate about "the race problem." She's incredibly vocal about how much she hates white people. Yet she copies their clothes, mannerisms, and artistic tastes, and looks down on "the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the [black] race." Helga is irked by Anne's simultaneous hatred of white people and mimicry of white culture.

Helga's suppression of her whiteness starts to make her feel restricted in Harlem. Meanwhile, Anne's dislike of white people shows that mixed-race people struggle to fit in anywhere in a segregated society: they are too black for predominantly white environments, and too white for predominantly black environments. Anne's mimicry of white cultural values shows that a part of her still treats white culture as superior, and dismisses many things that make black culture unique, much like many of the people at Naxos.

Around this time, Helga bumps into Dr. Anderson at a community meeting. As she sits down, she finds herself thrilled to catch him sitting near her out of the corner of her eye. After the meeting, Dr. Anderson approaches Helga, and she jokes awkwardly about her departure from Naxos. Helga is acutely aware of Dr. Anderson's gaze on her, and they flirt and talk about life in Harlem as they share a taxi back to 139th Street. Helga is unnerved by a vague feeling of yearning that she feels rising within her, which triggers her anger. Nonetheless, she and Dr. Anderson agree to meet again. Dr. Anderson reflects that it still seems Helga is searching for something. Helga laughs dismissively and goes inside Anne's house.

The chemistry between Helga and Dr. Anderson triggers Helga in much the same way as her other encounters with him. She is excited and can't quite understand her feelings of romantic attraction, which she describes as a "vague yearning." As soon as Helga steps into emotionally complex territory, however, she starts to feel afraid and angry, and pushes her romantic feelings away. Ironically, Helga yearns to be understood, but is dismissive and shuts down the discussion when Dr. Anderson actually does perceives insightful things about her.

Helga lies around for hours, thinking "angry, self-accusing thoughts" about the way she stormed out of Dr. Anderson's office at Naxos. She feels "a thousand indefinite longings" and thinks up speeches in her head for how to make a better impression next time. Three days later, Dr. Anderson stops by to take Helga out. Abruptly, Helga feels a strong urge to hurt him, and pretends she's not home. She runs down the street and hurries to another engagement, feeling overwhelmed with disappointment. The vision of Dr. Anderson's cool, gray eyes flashes in her mind and she feels disturbed and unhappy.

Helga's emotions are in chaos after her simple and straightforward encounter with Dr. Anderson. Instead of embracing her attraction to him, she overwhelms herself with self-loathing, and a desire to sabotage her growing connection with him. Helga gets in her own way and runs away out of fear when Dr, Anderson visits. Once again, Helga pushes her emotions away because she is afraid to embrace them, which damages her romantic life and causes her a great deal of mental anguish.

Helga finds herself at a tea party, feeling frustrated. She finds the conversation—about the race problem, as always—dull and insipid. She learns from Anne the next day that Dr. Anderson no longer works at Naxos, since the community there thought his ambitions were too liberal. Helga sneers when she thinks about "uplift," and slips away before Anne can start prattling on about "the race problem."

Through the voice of Helga, Larsen communicates her disapproval of "uplift" strategies in American society, which focus on helping people of color advance in society by working hard and fitting into the dominant culture, rather than pushing for social change to ensure equal rights.

CHAPTER 10

As summer draws to a close, Helga's nerves are increasingly frayed. She is always out of sorts, especially when she sees how happy and carefree the people around her are. As Helga arrives at work one day, she sees a letter from Uncle Peter. In the letter, he apologies for the way Mrs. Nilssen acted, and for having to cut off contact with Helga. He suggests that Helga go to visit her family in Copenhagen, who would be happy to take her in, and encloses a check for the inheritance he planned to leave her when he died, thinking it might come in handy sooner rather than later. Helga looks in disbelief at the check, which is for $5,000.

Larsen shows that Helga has run into the same problems she had at Naxos after a couple years there: she feels irritable, unhappy, and ultimately unable to fit in. Uncle Peter's letter reminds Helga of her whiteness, which she has been suppressing, and triggers the thought that Helga always has when she feels out of place: she starts to wonder if going to a new place will enable her to escape the feelings of unhappiness she carries with her from suppressing some part of her identity.

Helga suddenly feels emboldened, and as if her irritation with Harlem is actually a "smoldering hatred." She feels boxed-in and wants to rebel against being "yoked to these despised black folk." Even though Helga is overcome with self-loathing at having such terrible thoughts about her "own people," she can't deny that she feels as if she doesn't belong to "these dark segregated people," and decides she needs to go to Copenhagen. Suddenly, Helga is excited. She daydreams about a happy life in Denmark, one without black people, or race problems, or the endless discussions about prejudice that cloud her days in Harlem.

Helga recognizes that she has been suppressing her whiteness. As before, when experiencing a complex feeling, Helga's anger takes over. She directs it this time at the black community, which triggers her self-loathing. Instead of processing her feelings, she fantasizes about running away to a new life, just as she did when she became frustrated with Naxos. This time, Helga imagines life a place where she will not face the torment of being a mixed-race person in a segregated society.

At home, Helga gets dressed for Anne's dinner party. She looks over her clothes and decides to put on a revealing, black, lacy dress that she promised Anne she would never wear. Feeling a little guilty about her impending departure, Helga straightens up the house before Anne gets home. She frets about telling Anne she's leaving, and decides to put it off because "it's too hot," and starts visualizing herself living blissfully in a culture where she'll be "appreciated and understood."

Larsen again highlights Helga's emotional repression as Helga makes excuses to avoid having a difficult confrontation with Anne. Once again, Helga is tempted to run away rather than embrace a confrontation or emotional encounter. Larsen also emphasizes Helga's yearning to feel at home somewhere, through Helga's fanciful imaginations about her future life in Denmark.

CHAPTER 11

The dinner party is winding down, and everybody is in the mood to go out. After some cajoling, Helga finds herself crammed into a taxi and headed to a jazz club. The night is buzzing with energy, and despite Helga's reluctance, she can't help but be drawn in by the jazz club's jovial, sultry, smoky energy. She observes the "moving mosaic" of diverse people, who are "sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white pasty white." Their features are a blend of African, European, and Asian.

Larsen emphasizes two things with her descriptions of the people in the jazz club. First, that American society is incredibly diverse, which Larsen shows through her descriptions of people's skin tones, features, and Helga's speculations about their ethnic origins. Larsen implies that mixed-race people would not feel so out of place if the American society of her time recognized and celebrated its racial diversity instead of categorizing people as either black or white. Second, Larsen's vivid descriptions of the colorful "moving mosaic" suggests that diversity is beautiful, which supports her larger aim of developing an aesthetic for beauty that doesn't just mimic whiteness.

Helga's eyes scan the room, and she notices Dr. Anderson sitting with a "lovely," "creamy" and "golden" skinned girl. Anne hisses to Helga that the girl is a "disgusting creature" named Audrey Denney, who "goes about with white people" even though she's "colored." Helga is confused at Anne's anger, but decides to let it go. Anne won't let it go, however, and becomes even more irate as she discusses Audrey's parties where black and white people mix. Helga finds Anne's comments sickening, but holds her tongue. Helga watches Audrey Denney dance with Dr. Anderson. As they move closer together, Helga feels her "heart throbbing" and runs out of the club. She gets into a taxi, feeling "forlorn."

Larsen's physical description of Audrey Denney as both "creamy" and "golden" implies that she, like Helga and Mrs. Hayes-Rore, is likely mixed-race. As before, Larsen describes Audrey as "lovely" to emphasize her unique beauty. Anne's comments expose her racism: she thinks that interracial relationships are wrong, which implies that Helga is somehow immoral for existing as a mixed-race person. Helga, once again, avoids a confrontation by suppressing her anger at Anne and leaving, just as she did with her feelings for Dr. Anderson. In pushing all her feelings away, Helga ends up with nothing but a sense of pain and loss, or "forlorn."

CHAPTER 12

Helga feels no regret as the coastline recedes out of view. She is happy to be away from the community in Harlem, where she didn't belong. Helga finds the boat journey delightful, and enjoys the attention from the "curious glances of turquoise eyes," as snatches of forgotten Danish from her childhood start to return to her mind. Helga feels happy and free in the feeling of belonging to herself, and not to a race. The only thing troubling Helga is the vivid image of Dr. Anderson. She wonders if she's in love with him, but is immediately humiliated by the thought and dismisses it as "Sheer nonsense!" Nonetheless, Helga can't quite shift the image of Dr. Anderson's "serious smile and gravely musical voice" from the crevices of her mind.

The "curious glances of turquoise eyes" indicate that Helga is probably the only person of color on the boat. On the ocean, Helga is between her black father's homeland and her white mother's homeland, and feels at home here: in the space between these two worlds (and races). Helga continues to repress her feelings for Dr. Anderson by dismissing them as "nonsense." Larsen offers another description of Dr. Anderson with positive imagery that connotes his beauty as a person of color.

As the boat approaches Copenhagen, Helga starts to feel fearful and apprehensive, worried that her Fru Dahl's new husband might be like Mrs. Nilssen. Suddenly, Helga wishes she was back in New York. As she disembarks the ship, she is unsure what to do. Almost immediately, however, she notices her well-dressed aunt—who looks just like her mother—coming toward her, and feels relieved. Her aunt's new husband, Herr Dahl, is following behind her and they all greet each other warmly. As they pass through customs and get into a cab, Helga begins her new life.

Helga's fear of a bad confrontation triggers her usual reaction of wanting to flee, except she can't as she's on a boat. Helga's acknowledgment of how much Fru Dahl looks like Helga's mother shows that she is reconnecting with this side of her identity, and is optimistic about being embraced as a Danish person herself. Larsen will soon show that this is not to be the case.

CHAPTER 13

Helga likes her new life in Denmark. She's taken very well to the luxury, admiration, and attention from everyone around her. As Marie, the "rosy-faced maid," brings in Helga's breakfast, Helga decides that here—in this luxurious Danish house with fine things—is where she belongs. She doesn't even mind the "sly, curious" looks from people who are seeing a person of color for the first time in their lives.

Larsen highlights that mixed-race people are uncommon in the setting for this part of the story, as indicated by the "sly" and "curious" looks from the people around her. Larsen also emphasizes Helga's comfort with affluence, which will be juxtaposed with Helga's poverty toward the end of the story. Larsen's description of Marie as "rosy faced" once again avoids binary physical descriptions of people as just black or white.

Fru Dahl comes in to consult Helga on the outfit Helga should wear to tea, but finds Helga's clothes "too sober." She thinks Helga needs "bright things to set off your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things" that will "make an impression." Helga is shocked when Fru Dahl picks out a flamboyant black and purple taffeta dress for tea, suggests that Marie trim down Helga's emerald green dress for a dinner party later tonight, and makes a note to buy Helga high heels and jewelry. Helga is a little resentful at first, but she gives in to the attention, deciding that there's no harm in a bit of showing off.

Fru Dahl dresses Helga up in ways that show off Helga's physical difference from the community in Copenhagen. Fru Dahl wants Helga to be seen as "exotic" in a way that shows off her "lovely brown skin." Larsen begins to show, through the way Fru Dahl dresses Helga, that Helga's blackness is being objectified rather than genuinely admired or respected. Fru Dahl treats Helga as exotic in order to entice a reaction from others, or to "make an impression."

Herr Dahl and Fru Dahl have decorated Helga with lots of jewelry, and she blushes as people stare and whisper "sorte" (which means "black" in Danish) when they walk toward the tea house. At the tea house, Helga is overcome with the feeling of being "some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited." She feels uncomfortable, but nonetheless enjoys the attention.

In saying that Helga feels like a "strange species of pet dog," Larsen shows explicitly that Helga is, in fact, being objectified: she feels like an animal or a possession that the Dahls own and want to show off, rather than a person they want to get to know.

At the dinner party, Helga feels very exposed in the makeup, jewelry, and emerald dress that has been trimmed to "practically nothing but a skirt." Still, she enjoys the murmurs of admiration as she walks through the room and sits down to talk about America with the guests. The guests admire Helga's exotic beauty, but aren't jealous, as she is isn't one of them.

The revealing nature of Helga's trimmed dress shows that the Dahls's objectification of Helga is tied up with a problematic perception of black bodies as sexual commodities. The absence of jealousy among the guests shows that Helga is really seen as an outsider, and not a person who shares Danish heritage with them.

A theatrical man in a cape strides over to Helga with Fru Dahl, who introduces the man as Herr Axel Olsen. Herr Olsen studies Helga and proclaims to Fru Dahl in rapid Danish that she's "marvelous" as Helga catches phrases about her hair and her skin. A guest explains that Herr Olsen—who didn't address Helga directly at all—came to decide if he would paint her **portrait**, and the matter would be settled with Herr Dahl. Helga is amused, and imagines herself as a protected young Danish maiden. Later that night, Helga feels happy as she climbs into bed, but is a little mystified by her aunt's comments that Helga is "different."

Herr Olsen emphasizes how strongly Helga is being objectified. Rather than talking to Helga as a person, he talks about Helga's body to Fru Dahl. The portrait that he will eventually paint will also represent the way Helga's blackness is sensualized and objectified in this culture. Helga's naïve optimism exposes the difference between the way she sees herself (as a Danish maiden among people like her) and the way others see her (as a racially exotic outsider) at the party.

CHAPTER 14

Fru Dahl and Herr Dahl have arranged for Axel Olsen to paint Helga's **portrait**, and for him to come out shopping with them to pick out new clothes for Helga. She's a little intimidated by his arrogance, and it starts to dawn on her that to this community, she is nothing but "A decoration. A curio. A peacock." Helga looks over the exotic, colorful, and extravagant clothing that has been purchased for her. At first, she's a little put off, but this feeling is soon replaced with pleasure at having such lovely clothes. Helga knows she's being dressed and schooled to make a "voluptuous impression" but she goes along with it, as it makes her feel important.

As implied at the party, Fru Dahl, Herr Dahl, and now Axel Olsen all want to dress Helga up like an exotic sexual object. As more and more people expose that they see her this way, Helga's initial perception of herself as a fellow Danish person among her family becomes replaced with the perception imposed on her by others. Helga is seen as an exotic possession, which she acknowledges by referring to herself in objectifying terms as a "decoration," "curio," and "peacock."

Helga doesn't think about America much, except to reflect that people of color don't try to celebrate difference as her family does here. Instead, they try to subdue themselves and be like "their white overlords." She realizes she was stupid to imagine she could have had children in a country where "every dark child was handicapped at the start" by indignity, by lynching, and by hatred. Helga feels so humiliated and disturbed when she thinks of America that she distracts herself with thoughts about how happy she is in her luxurious new life.

Helga's growing awareness of how her difference is being emphasized as something of value makes her critical of the ways in which many Americans of color (like Anne and the community at Naxos) attempt to imitate white culture. For Helga, mimicry of white cultural practices does nothing more than bolster the idea of white superiority. Through Helga's worry about having children, Larsen shows that although slavery has ended, people of color are far from emancipated in the American society of her time.

Helga leans into her life as an "accepted curiosity" in a quaint and picturesque Denmark. In the countryside, people are shocked by her well-dressed appearance and golden skin, having assumed that "Negros were black and had woolly hair." Although she misses dancing, Helga enjoys her busy social life of spirited dinner parties and cultural excursions. Mostly, however, her mind is preoccupied with the worldly and eccentric Axel Olsen. She has been posing for him often, as he is painting her **portrait**. Helga knows he likes her but wonders why he doesn't make a move. She wonders if it is because of her race.

The people in the Danish countryside encapsulate some of the simplified (or reductive) perceptions of people of color (as "black" with "woolly hair") that Larsen challenges with her own descriptions of the story's characters as both diverse and beautiful. Helga's curiosity about Axel's feelings shows that even though she is entrenched in Copenhagen's society, she still doesn't quite feel like she is one of them due to her racial difference.

One afternoon, at the Hotel Vivili, Fru Dahl casually suggests that Helga should think about "making a good marriage," and lists a number of well-established potential suitors. Helga is shocked, and protests that she doesn't believe in mixed marriages, reflecting on her own "bitter" childhood. Fru Dahl thinks this over and says that Helga only feels that way because Helga's mother was silly to remarry instead of returning to Denmark with Helga, where she would have been loved. She warns Helga not to be a fool herself, before suggesting Herr Olsen would be ideal husband material, especially since he likes Helga. Helga feels exposed, outraged, and fearful all at the same time, and pretends she doesn't know what Fru Dahl is talking about.

Fru Dahl's intentions for Helga are made explicit here: she has been dressing Helga up as exotic and voluptuous to attract a husband for Helga. Fru Dahl's list of suitors shows that she is a social climber, interested in securing wealth and social status for Helga—and, by extension, for herself. Helga exposes her racial shame by talking about the bitterness of her childhood and her reluctance to marry. Once again, when romantic matters are at stake, Helga feels a mixture of shame, anger, and fear, which makes her push her feelings away.

CHAPTER 15

Part way through Helga's second year in Denmark, she starts to feel vaguely discontent and a little restless. She wishes she could rid herself of these recurring feelings of dissatisfaction with "her life, with herself" but she doesn't know how to. One day, she receives a letter from Anne, who writes that she is going to marry Dr. Anderson. This makes Helga feel even more annoyed, and she wonders why thinking about this man always upsets her. She could have stayed in Harlem, she reasons, but she would have been stuck in a country where black people are oppressed, talking about "the race problem" until the end of her days. The thought makes her nauseous.

As Helga passes the one-year mark in her new life, she once again starts to feel restless (just as she did in Harlem and at Naxos). This time, she is discontent because she has been suppressing her blackness. In lumping together "her life" and "herself," Larsen shows that Helga's dissatisfaction with herself as a mixed-race person is closely intermingled (and perhaps even confused) with her frustration in every place she lives. As before, when thinking of Dr. Anderson, Helga fails to understand her true feelings. She muddles running away from him with running away from racism in the U.S.

A few days later, Helga goes to the theater with Herr Olsen and some other friends. She's appalled to see two black men on stage singing ragtime and dancing with exuberance. The audience is charmed, but Helga feels ashamed, as if some secret part of her that she wants to forget has been exposed. She is full of hatred for the "cavorting Negroes on the stage." Helga wonders why Herr Olsen and her friends admire her difference, when she despises it so much.

Through Helga's encounter at the theater, Larsen shows that Helga has been suppressing her blackness in Denmark. Helga's dismay at the "cavorting Negroes on the stage" shows that she doesn't want people to associate her with the performers. Again, Helga's racial shame triggers her anger and her fear, and exposes her self-loathing.

Soon after, Axel Olsen finishes his **portrait** of Helga, and asks her to marry him. Helga is surprised. She's wanted this for a long time, but suddenly feels repelled. She admits that Herr Olsen has complimented her before, but she had decided that his advances were insulting and ignored them. Now, Helga decides his body and voice are off-putting as she thinks with nostalgia about Harlem. She doesn't understand why, but she's frightened, embarrassed, and feels "stripped, naked" under Herr Olsen's glare. He confesses that he is "disturbed" and "maddened" by Helga, and thinks the marriage will be "an experience."

Helga doesn't know how to handle intense feelings and romantic encounters, so she pushes them away. She does so here by dismissing Olsen as rude and distracting herself with sudden thoughts about the repulsiveness of his whiteness when he proposes. Meanwhile, Olsen exposes how strongly he has exoticized Helga in his mind. He thinks she is so different that his attraction disturbs him, and he thinks of her as an exotic experience rather than a person.

Herr Olsen tells Helga that she has been groomed by Fru Dahl to "sell yourself to the highest buyer," and he is truly happy that the highest bidder is himself. At this comment, Helga answers coldly, "I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you." He is perplexed that she is refusing him. Helga explains that she can't marry a white man because he might be ashamed of her darkness one day. Herr Olsen is irritated that Helga is bringing up "some strange talk of race and shame" when he's discussing marriage. Too proud to explain why race matters, Helga simply says that he waited too long and missed his moment.

Herr Olsen has objectified Helga so much that he doesn't even realize his comments about Helga selling herself are offensive. Larsen alludes here to the "tragic mulatta" trope, in which a mixed-race woman attempts to be free, but ends up being sold into slavery. Helga attempts to resist this fate by saying she's "not for sale […] to any white man." Although Helga displays a rare attempt to address her racial shame here, she ultimately lapses into her usual strategy of burying the topic, and her feelings.

Helga rises to say goodbye, and Herr Olsen proclaims their encounter "a tragedy," just like Helga's **portrait**, which he thinks captures "the true Helga Crane." After Herr Olsen leaves, Helga thinks about how she'll never quite get over the way he painted her, as "some disgusting sensual creature with her features." Helga asks Marie what she thinks about the painting, and Marie answers cautiously that she doesn't want to be rude about a great artist, but she thinks the painting is "bad, wicked." Helga agrees.

Larsen's use of the word "tragedy" refers more explicitly to the "tragic mulatta" trope (in which a mixed-race person's life ends in tragedy because of their race). The portrait stands for the way blackness is often treated in European societies: as a perversely sexualized commodity. Helga and Marie can see this, but Herr Olsen cannot, because he thinks it is a true likeness.

CHAPTER 16

Herr Dahl and Fru Dahl are disappointed by Helga's refusal to marry Herr Olsen. They were expecting her to make a good match that would draw them into artistic circles of Danish society, and think her objections about race are "idiotic." Herr Dahl points out that Helga really ought to exploit her "unique" position as the only "mulatto" in town. He's convinced that Helga's using the race issue to mask her true feelings for Herr Olsen. Helga says she can't explain and bursts into tears. Herr Dahl is softened by Helga's tears, but tells her to try and control herself, and not to worry, as they only want her happiness. Helga says she would do anything to make the Dahls happy. Herr Dahl shrugs, as Helga clearly won't do the one thing that they want from her.

Helga's family has been trying to capitalize on her racial status to increase their social standing. In other words, they have been treating her as a commodity, and not as a person. Herr Dahl points out Helga's tendency to run from romantic encounters, but Helga's emotional reaction shows that her pain is no mere mask: she knows that she will never be accepted as one of them, even though she is half-Danish herself.

Life goes on for Helga as before, but the atmosphere at home is more tense after her refusal of Herr Olsen. She also can't ignore a nagging longing for America that has started to rise up in her. At the symphony one night, Helga decides she must go back, because she's homesick. Not for America, but for Negroes. That's the trouble." She longs for the company of fellow people of color, and begins to forgive her father for abandoning her mother. Herr Dahl and Fru Dahl are sad, and urge Helga to return in the fall, after Anne's wedding. As Helga's departure approaches, she starts to feel regretful. She wishes she could have two lives, or be happy in one place.

Helga feels dissatisfied with Copenhagen when she realizes how much she has been suppressing her black cultural identity. She longs for Harlem, where she believes she can thrive again. Helga knows that she became dissatisfied with Harlem because she felt she had to suppress her whiteness. Now she wants to leave Copenhagen because she can't give her blackness its full expression. This passage thus shows that Helga will never feel happy if she constantly has to suppresses some part of her racial identity to fit in.

CHAPTER 17

Summer has come and gone, and Helga is still in Harlem, though she's no longer living with Anne. Anne has returned from her honeymoon with Dr. Anderson, but avoids Helga because she is jealous of her. Helga is a little restless in Harlem, but still happy to be "surrounded by hundreds, thousands, of dark-eyed brown folk," and really feels that these are her people. Harlem seems relaxed, joyous, and carefree in comparison to her "pretentious, stately life in Copenhagen." She still thinks she'll go back eventually though. Helga feels "spiritually" free in Harlem, but is "physically" free in Denmark. She imagines herself being relentlessly tossed back and forth between these two places.

After standing out so much in Denmark, Helga is happy to blend in again, in Harlem's diverse community. Helga feels "spiritually" free in Harlem because people treat her like a person there (even though blackness is oppressed by white mimicry and white superiority). Yet Helga feels "physically" free in Copenhagen because her body is admired and desired there (even though she is not treated as a person by others). This suggests that if there is no place where a person can feel accepted in mind and body, they will always feel divided.


Helga feels pity for the Americans of color who know nothing else than life in America, and feels outright contempt for their patriotism. She acknowledges, however, that their lives are joyous and carefree, while she feels a creeping sense of insecurity. Helga feels she ought to return to Denmark, and blames Axel Olsen for triggering her departure, though deep down she feels like a fool for refusing him. She wishes she had married him so that she could rub her marriage to a white man in Anne's face.

Helga's reflections about patriotism criticizes the inequalities that people of color face in the American society. Helga's insecurity, meanwhile, communicates that she feels like an outsider because of her mixed cultural background. Helga's petty thoughts about using a relationship to snub Anne expose Helga's emotional immaturity in romantic matters.



CHAPTER 18

One November evening, Helga is dressing for a party at Helen Tavenor's place. She hopes that Anne won't come. Their friendship has cooled because of Anne's marriage to Dr. Anderson, and Anne's disapproval of Helga's time with white folk in Denmark. The party proves to be a lot of fun, especially as Mrs. Tavenor has invited people from many different races and social groups, including white people and Audrey Denney, much to Anne's disgust. Helga confides to Mrs. Tavenor that she's never met Audrey Denney, and Mrs. Tavenor says that's a shame, for they'd surely get on even though Anne hates Audrey.

Larsen leverages the party to contrast the progressive attitudes of Mrs. Tavenor and Audrey Denney with Anne's disapproval of racial intermingling. Anne's disapproval creates tension, even though this is one of the few environments where Helga actually feels comfortable, because there is a diverse array of guests from multiple backgrounds—including people like Audrey Denney who have no interest in appeasing segregationist attitudes.

Helga is amused to see James Vayle at the party and jokes breezily with him as they discuss Naxos and Helga's time in Europe. James gestures at an interracial couple, saying he doesn't like the way white men come uptown to flirt with "colored girls" in Harlem. Helga laughs and explains that the pair he's looking at are, in fact, married. James asks Helga if she'll ever marry, and she scowls, explaining that it's wrong to have children of color in a society where they will face so much prejudice. James is horrified, as he thinks people of color must have children to keep the race going. In fact, he starts proposing to Helga again, but she makes a swift exit.

James Vayle assumes that interracial parties only happen because white men want to objectify women of color. James's assumption shows that there is still a long way to go in American society before interracial relationships will be normalized. Many people (like James) still assume that something perverse rather than progressive is going on. Once again, Larsen leverages Helga's worries about having children to highlight the racial inequality of American society in her time.


Later in the evening, Helga tears her dress, so she heads upstairs to the bathroom to pin up her hem. As she steps out into the hall, she somehow falls directly into the arms of Robert Anderson. She looks up to apologize, but he swoops in for a deep, passionate kiss. She fights him off at first, but eventually gives in, and returns the kiss with passion. Suddenly, she's overcome with anger and pushes him indignantly away, before straightening herself out and heading down to rejoin the party.

The kiss shows that Helga and Robert Anderson still have chemistry after all this time. Once again, the romantic confrontation triggers Helga's turbulent emotions and she pushes Robert Anderson away. Importantly, it's Helga's own emotional discomfort (rather than any loyalty toward Anne) that motivates her response to this encounter.

CHAPTER 19

Helga wakes in her hotel room after a night of colorful romantic dreams. She swoons a little when she recalls her kiss with Dr. Anderson. She feels no different toward Anne though, whom she still finds annoying. Helga decides that nothing has changed. A few weeks pass, and Helga is outwardly calm, but inwardly teeming with emotion. She bumps into Dr. Anderson often, but never says a word about their kiss. One night, at a party, Helga decides she can't ignore her feelings anymore and goes over to talk to him. Her confidence fails when she arrives at his side, however, and she slides into a chair, feeling weak. Dr. Anderson says he would like to meet with Helga alone. She is elated, feeling this was destined to happen.

Helga is overcome with feelings for Dr. Anderson, and can't stop thinking about him. Nonetheless, she still pushes her feelings away and acts as if nothing happened. Eventually, after years of running from her feelings for Dr. Anderson, Helga decides she can run no longer. Of course, Dr. Anderson is now married to Anne, which means it is an awkward time for Helga to finally embrace her emotions. Stifling her emotions has led Helga to a place where her chances of getting what she wants are highly limited, though she is too emotionally naïve to see this yet.

The next day, Helga spends hours primping in front of the mirror. She's excited, and has decided that it's time to accept her feelings for Dr. Anderson. When he arrives, he immediately apologizes for having kissed her and explains he was tipsy. This discussion isn't going the way Helga wants, and she suddenly feels deflated. Helga answers calmly that it was just a kiss and that there's no need to worry, but as she rises to leave, she suddenly feels hysterical and savagely slaps Dr. Anderson, before running out of the room. Hours later, Helga lays heartbroken in her hotel room. She feels as if she's lost Dr. Anderson forever. The realization of that thought hits her as she has a flashing vision of many dull and empty years ahead.

Helga has been pushing her feelings away for so long that she is romantically inexperienced and misreads Dr. Anderson's intentions. Helga's inability to keep her composure during emotional encounters wins out, and the confrontation yet again triggers an aggressive response from Helga. The ramifications of Helga's lifelong emotional repression are starting to bubble to the surface as it becomes clear to Helga that she has missed her chance at happiness with Dr. Anderson.

CHAPTER 20

Helga wakes the next morning, feeling broken, isolated, humiliated, and utterly rejected. She runs into the street in frustration and walks furiously but aimlessly through a heavy rainstorm. A gust of wind blows Helga into a gutter as the clouds rip open and a torrent of rain mercilessly floods the street. Helga drags herself up and hauls herself into the nearest building, which turns out to be a church full of people singing hymns. Overcome with nerves, she collapses to the floor and laughs hysterically, as the people turn and stare at her in shocked silence.

Larsen leverages the violent rainstorm as a metaphor for Helga's emotions. Helga doesn't know how to process her emotions but they are too strong for her to push them away, and she feels utterly broken.

Suddenly, Helga finds herself being picked up and put in a chair as the singing resumes. A woman behind Helga starts to weep audibly. Helga starts to cry as well, at first quietly, but then in violent, cathartic sobs. People start to pat her and proclaim "yes chile." They stomp and throw their hands up in the air shouting "Come to Jesus, yo poor lost Jezebel." Helga is alarmed and shrinks away as the preacher starts praying for her soul. She's equal parts amused and angry, but too entertained to leave. The congregation starts to chant in a cultish frenzy, and Helga is mesmerized that they are all praying for a single soul: hers.

The rare dose of humor in this scene foreshadows Larsen's criticisms of religious belief that will dominate the final chapters of Helga's story. Larsen's tongue-in-cheek description of the frenzied congregation is clearly intended to seem a bit absurd and theatrical. Her appeal to humor thus provides a hint to the reader that a criticism of religious belief is about to follow. The phrasing and spelling of shouts communicate that the congregation is likely made up of black people from the South.

Suddenly Helga feels an overwhelming urge to join in. A little freaked out, Helga gets up to leave, but she hasn't eaten anything for well over a day, so she collapses into the railing, feeling as if she might throw up. People crowd around her and start screaming. Helga starts screaming too. A "thunderclap of joy" surrounds her and people stretch out their arms toward her. They fall to their knees, crawl around, rip off their clothes, and tear out their hair in a savage frenzy, dripping tears and sweat all over Helga. All of a sudden, Helga feels miraculously calm, and a surge of happiness soars through her.

Helga's church encounter continues to have comical undertones, which is particularly evident when the crowd is described as crawling around and ripping their clothing and hair. The thunderstorm of Helga's pain has been overtaken by a "thunderclap of joy," indicating that she is about to go through a transition. Helga's feeling of calm and joy has a profound effect on her: this is a rare moment in her life when she feels at ease. The experience drives her into a spontaneous adoption of religious belief as an attempt to find peace of mind.

CHAPTER 21

Helga is walking back to her hotel, escorted by the "fattish yellow man" who sat next to her. He introduces himself as the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. Helga can tell that he's attracted to her, and wonders if she should dare to act on it. She realizes that nothing and nobody is holding her back. Her mind suddenly feels clear, and she wonders if a spiritual life is really what she needed all along. Helga stops herself from thinking and looks at the Reverend, trying to remember his name.

Helga's feeling of ease and calm prompt her to consider a religious life as a way to ease her troubled mind and internal anguish. Despite Helga's intentions to address her emotions, she continues to mishandle her romantic affairs, and considers a spontaneous marriage to the Reverend: a man whom she doesn't know, doesn't find attractive, and whose name she can't even remember.

The next morning, Helga is pensive, wondering if religion is responsible for her calm mood. She feels bitter as she realizes the calm will dissipate, leaving her small life of mere things in which "happiness and serenity" evades her. Helga decides that she needs something more, and if she can handle the price of marrying the Reverend to get it. She reasons that it's a chance at stability and happiness, and she's lost so many chances already that she's resolved to take this one. Helga also thinks about God, and decides it's practical to take care of the God business and the marriage business in one fell swoop.

Helga solidifies her plan to launch herself into the next phase of her life. Although she has started to fall into place in Harlem, has met more likeminded people, and discovered interracial social contexts where she isn't an outsider, Helga decides to run away yet again. This time, she tells herself she's running toward *something: her feeling of "happiness and serenity" that she found at the church. She convinces herself that marrying the Reverend is a smart move, but it's clear that her approach to romantic affairs is still not in tune with her actual emotions.*

Helga's mind wanders to Robert Anderson and she thinks gleefully about how her marriage to the Reverend will be her revenge. She feels elated as she thinks about how much it will hurt him. Suddenly, Helga feels compelled to act on her impulse immediately, before the chance escapes her. She's sure the Reverend won't be able to resist her. She just needs to lock it down, and quickly.

Although Helga convinces herself she's running toward happiness, she's really running away from her feelings for Robert Anderson, as her comments about revenge indicate. Once again, Helga represses her feelings by running headfirst into a new situation, instead of processing her pain.

CHAPTER 22

Before she knows it, Helga finds herself married to the Reverend and living in a tiny Alabama town. She feels as if she's finally found a place to fit in, and is really living. She feels that for once she hasn't "clutched at a shadow and missed the actuality." She's convinced that his time her happiness will last, and she accepts her new life whole heartedly, even the poverty. Helga is enthused to fully embrace her role as the town pastor's wife, and has grand plans to set up a sewing circle, help the congregation smarten up their attire, and be a guiding force for the children of the town.

So far, Helga has lived among white people in in Denmark. She's also lived among people of color in an educational context at Naxos and in the affluent, urban environment of Harlem. Now, she has completely shifted gears to a poor, rural environment. Helga's constant moving thus illustrates a wide scope of living environments available to people of color in early post-slavery American society. As before, Larsen will leverage this part of the plot to offer social criticism, this time of religion and poverty.

Helga makes a bit of progress with her goals, and is happy when the women in the town politely thank her for sharing her thoughts on improving their church clothes. She has no idea, however, that behind her back they call her "uppity" and pity her husband for having to put up with her. Even if she did know, she wouldn't mind, because she feels truly endowed with newfound humility. Helga isn't even put out by the adoring women of the congregation who hang on the Reverend's every word, especially Clementine Richards, a "strapping black beauty" with "bold shining eyes" who makes no secret of her desire for the Reverend.

Once again, Larsen describes a person of color (this time, Clementine Richards) in a way that emphasizes their beauty without objectifying them, which contributes to her wider goal of developing a new aesthetic for the beauty in blackness. Larsen emphasizes the way Helga doesn't fit in to this community by showing Helga's concern with how people dress, which seems "uppity" to the rural community. This clues the reader in that Helga's enjoyment of her new life may be short-lived.

Helga's days are completely full with tending the house and garden, and the joy of being "right with God." She is convinced she's finally found the happiness that she's been looking for all her life. Sometimes she's disturbed by anxiety at night, but her fears are always gone by morning. Even the simple shacks that the townspeople live in feel illuminated by the "radiance" of God as the rhythms of life—births, deaths, and marriages—unfold around the impoverished but happy people in this tiny little corner of Alabama.

Larsen leverages Helga's joy and happiness to offer a convincing account of how belief in being "right with God" can make life in poverty seem much brighter and more radiant than it actually is. Helga's anxiety at night, however, informs the reader that her present happiness is still covering up her pain, and that there may be more to the full story of life in Alabama than this rosy description portrays.

Helga even feels grateful for the Reverend, and won't disrupt her feeling of peace with nagging thoughts about his dirty fingernails, infrequent bathing, and stinky clothes. She pushes such thoughts away, deciding they are shallow and meaningless. She's even able to ignore the smug self-satisfaction that "pours from him like gas from a leaking pipe." At night she embraces his "amorous" advances, feeling so in love with life that it blocks out all reason.

Larsen's vivid descriptions of the physically repulsive Reverend show the reader that Helga is covering up her true feelings about him, and her false reading of her situation will likely soon unravel. Although Helga has found a life that feels happy, she still repeats the same patterns of pushing her true feelings away. Here, she pretends she loves her husband when she is clearly turned off by him.

CHAPTER 23

After her first few months in Alabama, Helga is too busy and too sick to make good on her grand plans for supporting the townspeople with clothing advice and sewing circles and such. Her pampered body is not accustomed to the labor of poverty, and it shows. Every day Helga feels sicker, weaker, and more used up by back-to-back pregnancies and children. In just a few years, she has three children, whom she loves, but she is utterly exhausted. The Reverend advises Helga to trust her faith, that "we must accept what God sends." The Reverend, however, often dines at other people's houses Helga struggles to cook or clean with her constant pregnancy nausea.

Having painted a rosy picture of Helga's life in Alabama, Larsen now switches to expose the true picture of life in poverty underneath the veneer of religion. Once again, Helga doesn't fit in because she was raised in an affluent urban environment and is unfit to handle the physical demands of an impoverished life. Larsen uses the Reverend's comments to show how people often cast unacceptable social struggles as acceptable because they are God's will.

Helga wonders how the other women in the town keep up, and finally plucks up the courage to ask some of them how they manage. A woman named Sary Jones (who's had six children in less than six years) tells Helga it's nothing, and that she shouldn't fret because they'll be rewarded in heaven. This is starting to feel like slim compensation to the worn-out Helga, though she feels ashamed for being unhappy and lacking faith. In fact, she even feels a bit oppressed, but stops asking questions, yields to her faith, and submits to just getting through it all.

Larsen's description of Sary Jones as "bronze" implies, as before, that there is a wider racial spectrum than simple black and white distinctions allow. Larsen uses Sary Jones's comments to expose her central criticism of religious life: people think they will receive rewards for their struggles in the afterlife, so they accept unfairly impoverished and laborious lives rather than pushing for social change and equality in this life.

CHAPTER 24

Helga goes into labor for the fourth time on a hot Sunday morning. A few difficult days later, she gives birth to her fourth child. She's so exhausted that she barely acknowledges the child and remains listless for a week. Everyone worries about Helga, but she blocks them out, retreating into the calm, quiet darkness of her broken mind. Memories from her life float by and she thinks of her mother and Robert Anderson, painfully realizing how deeply she loved Robert. She thinks of the lovely, selfish Anne, the conceited Axel, the calm Audrey Denney who just lived her life the way she wanted, the smug James Vayle, the kind Mrs. Hayes-Rore, and the social-climbing Herr Dahl and Fru Dahl.

Helga's life comes crashing down with the birth of her fourth child, which finally breaks her. Helga finally realizes that she has repressed her emotions her life and ruined her chance of happiness with Robert Anderson because she was too afraid to embrace her feelings. Helga's memories of other people juxtapose Audrey Denney's happy life with Helga's tormented one. Audrey Denney embraces interracial life throughout the story, rather than trying to fit into one race or another. Larsen thus implies that interracial communities are better than segregated ones.

When Helga comes to, she feels the Reverend's "moist" hand on hers, and pulls away, repelled. The veneer of faith has worn off and the luster of her current life has completely faded. Helga is completely disillusioned, and decides that God has never helped black people, who only suffer. She weeps for the painful lives her children will have, and sinks into sleep. When Helga awakens, she's told that her fourth child didn't survive. She tries to hide her relief.

Helga's weeping shows that although slavery has ended in the U.S., life in American society for people of color is far from emancipated. Larsen makes her criticism of religion explicit, arguing that it is often used as a tool to oppress people of color and make them accept suffering instead of fighting for better living conditions.

CHAPTER 25

During Helga's recovery, she has a long time to think. She feels angry, and thinks she ruined her life. She decides that religion is a tool that oppresses "the poor and the blacks." They put so much faith in heavenly rewards that they put up with terrible poverty. The nurse sees Helga fretting and tells her to sleep, saying she needs to regain her strength. Helga agrees. She needs to regain her strength to get out of here. If she doesn't, she'll suffocate from self-loathing. Familiar feeling of dissatisfaction, restlessness, and shame reappear as Helga decides she has to escape from the "degradation" that her life has become.

Larsen reinforces her criticism of religion, arguing that belief in rewards after death cannot make up for the unacceptable poverty in which many people of color live in America society. Helga realizes she has repressed her true feelings, hiding this time, behind faith, and once again her self-loathing and racial shame bubble to the surface. Larsen shows that Helga wants to make one final attempt to escape the "tragic" fate of the "tragic mulatta" trope.

Helga realizes she hates the Reverend and her life, and has to escape or she'll die. She feels bad about leaving the children, but knows that they'll at least be among people like them. Helga realizes she must sleep, and regain her strength. Then she'll figure out a plan. But just as Helga starts to feel strong enough to leave her bed, she starts giving birth yet again.

Helga's attempt to escape the fate of the "tragic mulatta" ends in failure. Larsen concludes the story by showing that even though slavery has ended, the myriad of ways in which people of color are still oppressed—including segregation, belief in white superiority, exoticizing blackness, and religious life—can still ultimately break them, just as they break Helga.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Naqvi, Erum. "*Quicksand*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 10 Jan 2020. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Naqvi, Erum. "*Quicksand*." LitCharts LLC, January 10, 2020. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/quicksand.

To cite any of the quotes from *Quicksand* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Larsen, Nella. Quicksand. Random House. 2001.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Larsen, Nella. Quicksand. New York: Random House. 2001.