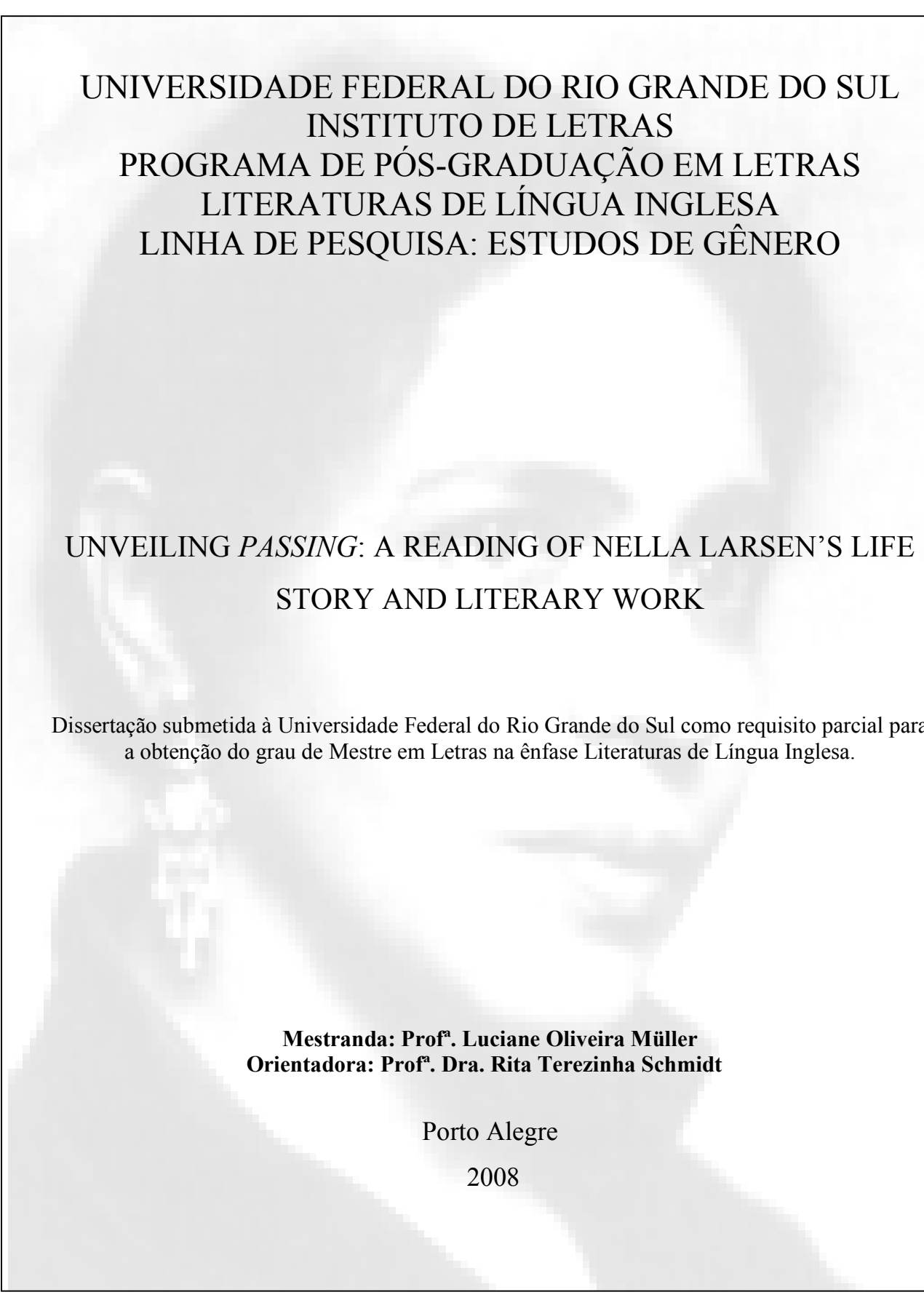


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**UNVEILING *PASSING*: A READING OF NELLA
LARSEN'S LIFE STORY AND LITERARY WORK**

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UNVEILING *PASSING*: A READING OF NELLA LARSEN'S LIFE
STORY AND LITERARY WORK

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This dissertation is dedicated to the ones whom motivate this work: my daughter Emily who I love more than anything else; and my mother Olinda who raised me with love and care.

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The Subway

“The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.”

(Kate Chopin).

RESUMO

Esta dissertação apresenta uma leitura do romance *Passing*, com o foco na caracterização e enredo a partir da perspectiva de duas questões inter-relacionadas. Primeiro, a leitura examina a questão da maternidade e a questão da raça na caracterização de duas protagonistas, considerando que ambas as questões sustentam uma importância histórica no contexto de vida das mulheres negras daquele período, como os biógrafos de autores testemunham. Segundo, a leitura enfatiza as correlações de enredo e desejo como uma forma de entender o que está em jogo na narrativa. O romance foi publicado em 1929 pela escritora Afro-Americana Nella Larsen durante o movimento estético e cultural chamado Harlem Renaissance, um movimento cujo apogeu na década de 20 do século passado causou um crescimento da consciência social e o surgimento da literatura moderna Afro-Americana. Em uma década, o tema ‘passing’ constituiu um dos tópicos privilegiados em vários romances por escritores Afro-Americanos. Minha análise se sustenta a partir de diferentes fontes: relações entre mãe/filha a partir de Marianne Hirsch e Nancy J. Chodorow; a questão da raça e conflitos de ‘passing’ a partir de Thadious M. Davis, Elaine K. Ginsberg e Martha J. Cutter, assim como enredo e desejo de Peter Brooks. Na interligação de elementos biográficos, psicológicos, culturais e literários, minha leitura apresenta como a novela dramatiza o conflito insolúvel de raça dividida – branca e preta – que destaca as lutas e dificuldades dos personagens quando enfrentando o vazio do pertencimento que acompanha a experiência de ‘passing’.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Afro-Americana – *Passing* – Raça – Maternidade – Desejo.

ABSTRACT

The thesis presents a reading of the novel *Passing*, with a focus on characterization and plot from the perspective of two interrelated issues. First, the reading examines the question of motherhood and the question of race in the characterization of the two major female protagonists, considering that both questions bear historical importance in the context of black women's lives of the period, as the author's biographers testify. Second, the reading highlights the connections of plot and desire as a way of understanding what is at stake in the narrative design. The novel was published in 1929 by the Afro-American writer Nella Larsen during the cultural and aesthetic movement called the Harlem Renaissance, a movement whose heyday in the 20's in the last century brought about the uplifting of racial consciousness and the emergence of modern Afro-American literature. In the decade, the theme of 'passing' constituted one of the privileged topics in several novels by Afro-American writers. My analysis draws support from different sources: mother/daughter relationships from Marianne Hirsch and Nancy J. Chodorow; the question of race and ensuing conflicts of 'passing' from Thadious M. Davis, Elaine K. Ginsberg and Martha J. Cutter; and plot and desire from Peter Brooks. In the interweaving of biographical, psychological, cultural and literary elements, my reading shows how the novel dramatizes the insoluble conflict of the racial divide – white and black - which underlies the characters' struggles and difficulties when facing the void in belongingness that attends the experience of passing.

Key words: Afro-American Literature – Passing – Race – Motherhood – Desire.

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Page 2 (cover) – Nella Larsen, circa 1930. Photo by Ben Pinchot. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Taken from <http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/143/Nella_Larsen_a_landmark_novelist> (Access on December 3rd, 2008).

Page 5 – Composition for the Epigraph Page - Palmer Hayden. The subway – 1930 31x 26 inches-original image size. Taken from < <http://store.encore-editions.com/artist/palmerhayden.html>> (Access on December 3rd, 2008).

1 INTRODUCTION

My old man died in a fine big house.
 My ma died in a shack.
 I wonder where I'm gonna die.
 Being neither white nor black?

(HUGHES, LANGSTON)

This passage from Langston Hughes's poem *Cross*, which Nella Larsen presents in her first novel *Quicksand* (1928), depicts the great difficulty a mixed-race individual faces in order to identify him or herself to a single culture, a single race and to forge a proper sense of identity. This quest for one's identity is a common issue in Afro-American literature as well as it must have been in real life, mainly among those who have been in touch with both cultures [black¹ and white] and must have felt that they do not belong to any of them. This sense of being dislodged, or displaced, presented by Hughes's poem, is a part of Nella Larsen's literary works and her own life story. Indeed, Thadious M. Davis claims that, "the forging of a racial identity was a general objective of the New Negro Renaissance, but for Larsen, the validating of a personal identity, conjoining gender and race, was even more essential" (DAVIS, 1994, p.242). In this sense, Larsen's biography and literary works provide a discussion of how problematic identity formation to Afro-American individuals might be.

¹. Taking into account that throughout my reading of subjects relating to Afro-American culture I found a variation of words to refer to colored people in this dissertation I decided not to privilege any of them. Thus every time one of these options appeared, "black, Negro, Afro-American, or colored", they mean the same thing, Afro-American people.

This problem of identity formation presented by Larsen in her novels has a close relation to ‘passing’. This practice of ‘passing’, in a racial context, referred to a fair-skinned person of African origin disguised as white. In this sense, the way Larsen’s two novels – *Quicksand* and *Passing* – present racial identity issues provides indications, as Martha J. Cutter claims, that through ‘passing’ racial identity itself is not something fixed, unitary. It is generally “a performance, a mask, a public persona”, that is, the individual takes on a role according to a given situation. Her first novel *Quicksand*, for instance, portrays a heroine, Helga Craine, who searches throughout the story for what Cutter calls “a unitary sense of identity – a sense of identity structured around *one* role, a role that somehow corresponds to her “essential self” (CUTTER, 1996, p.83). However, this search leads this heroine to a dead end, to a psychological death. What Helga never realizes, according to Cutter, is “the fact that perhaps her identity itself is both plural and social and, therefore, that she can never achieve synthesis of self”, she can never achieve a unitary racial identity, she can never play a unitary role (CUTTER, 1996, p. 83). In an attempt to find a suitable identity, a proper role in society, a synthesis of self, Helga undergoes many trials, at first she passes for a committed teacher in Naxos, then, as a legitimate colored woman [‘passing’ for black] among black middle-class in Harlem, then, as an exotic woman in Denmark among her white relatives. Finally, this heroine ends up entrapped in a marriage without love, because she does not understand that a fixed and unitary identity does not exist. As Cutter asserts “to assume a single identity”, or to play a single role in a society that sees identity as “a performance ... a public persona is to ensure psychological suicide” (CUTTER, 1996, p.76). Thus it is exactly what happens to Helga. After five pregnancies she cannot escape anymore, and she is condemned to remain in that marriage performing the role of a mother and wife.

Differently from Helga in *Quicksand*, Clare in *Passing* is a heroine who is not interested in a single racial identity, in achieving a synthesis of self, or playing a single role in society. Instead, this heroine refuses containment in a single racial identity. She undergoes many trials and passes for white, a bourgeoisie woman, a mother, and a wife; however, none of these roles seem to fulfill her wishes or her desires. Irene, the second protagonist of *Passing*, echoes some characteristics of Helga: she pursues security and the maintenance of her marriage throughout the story. For her, security means to be a dedicated wife and mother. However, Clare’s presence in the story destabilizes her sense of security and clarifies Irene’s ideas of the

impossibility of a secure life and a single racial identity. In *Passing*, Larsen goes further with these problematic issues of self-discovery and identity formation. She puts together two different women who mirror each other, one destabilizing the life of the other.

In many ways, literature functions as representative of a language, a people, a culture, a tradition. This very important vehicle proposes to us, readers and writers, possible interpretations of our own world and our own lives through artistic forms. A literary journey within books makes possible an interpretation of our lives, and ourselves, through the stories we read and write. In reality, in literature, it is possible to identify images, emotions, allegories and descriptions of what may have happened in real life. Most of the time, the author's message seems to speak to us, acting upon us and affecting our sense of self. The fascinating character Clare, for instance, has affected me deeply. Some parts of her fictional story seem to echo some parts of my own real life.

As soon as I finished my first reading of *Passing*, I realized that I felt affinity with the heroine Clare; a woman who defies her fate and surpasses the adversities of a racist society and succeeds in life, even though she had been misunderstood and ended up killed. I am a white woman from the twentieth first century and I also have to struggle to find a place among my peers. This happens not because of my skin color, but because of my social condition, since we live in a competitive society and it is very difficult to succeed with so many qualified people. It is necessary to have strength, daringness and courage to succeed. And those characteristics I identify in Clare, as well as, I identify them in myself.

In the United States of the late nineteenth century and early twenties, many people were set aside to the margin because of their skin color. Here in Brazil, in the twenty first century there are minorities not only because of their skin color, but also because of the amount of money they have. I was born a poor girl, in a small city where prejudice is even greater than in large cities. Everybody knew me, my home, and my parents's work. I saw indifference in their eyes, just because of my social condition. It seemed that my future was traced to be nothing more than that of a housewife with many children. I do not identify myself with that destiny. By reading *Passing* I've realized that Clare's destiny is quite similar, it is cursed according to her religious aunts who believed black people should be subservient and work a lot because it is written in the Bible. Thus Clare did not accept that destiny as she exclaimed "I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham" (LARSEN,

2003, p.26). In the novel, Clare challenges her destiny and changes from being in a subservient condition to being a woman from the bourgeoisie. It seems to me that I did the same. I fled from this predestination and challenged my destiny. I see in the academy the possibility of forging a career and reaching my goals.

In fact, Clare is a kind of character that destabilizes not only the life of the other characters of the novel but the reader's life too, as Martha J. Cutter observes

Clare's sliding significations within the text are meant to destabilize both other characters and reader's sense of identity. Through Clare, readers are deliberately invited to construct their own interpretations of the text and in so doing to see the problematic plural of Clare's identity and of identity in general (CUTTER, 1996, p.84-85).

In this thesis, I attempt to account for the correlations between the representations of gender, race and mothering to the process of identity formation. I aim at investigating in *Passing* the relations between the aforementioned categories, in order to understand women's role as wife, mother and black in American society. I choose to read this novel from these perspectives because I understand that mothering is an issue that though present in few circumstances, is there on the surface of the story as a subject that causes pain and suffering to the protagonists, in view of the absence of their own mothers. I understand that it is very dangerous to compare the author's biography to the narrative, however, it is impossible not to consider Larsen's relationship with her own mother and not to compare the absence of this figure in the life of those protagonists, and the way those protagonists deal with motherhood. Larsen, similarly to Clare and Irene, could not count on her mother's advice and protection to grow up. Besides, the subject of race cannot be separated from the theme of mothering in the analysis of this novel. These characters live in a society which separates its citizens by the color of their skin. White people

receive the best facilities, while the black ones stay with the leftovers [menial jobs, shabby houses, limited public facilities] that most of the times are the worst ones.

Additionally, I see desire as the very motive of the story; desire to fulfill, to surpass an absence, to belong, to have things, to be a good mother and wife, to be free of conventions. As Peter Brooks states “desire is always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun” (BROOKS, 1992, p.38). In fact, for Brooks desire is the force that instigates the reading and telling of a story in order to reach its end.

In Afro-American literature black women are generally represented as strong figures. Such representation might be related with what Alice Walker claims in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, namely that “black women are called in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society: “the *mule* of the world,” because they “have been handed the burdens that everyone else – *everyone* else – refused to carry” (WALKER, 1985, p. 2378). Thus, such strength is not a choice, but engendered out of the roles they play in order to carry on their families. Most of the time the figures that represent female strength, in Afro-American literature, are the matriarchal figures, either mothers or grandmothers. Black woman as a strong figure has to do with the power of physical and emotional resistance and endurance to fight and keep family together. Literary works such as Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* are perhaps the best examples of the influence of the matriarchal figure in the life of the protagonists. Linda Brent, the protagonist of *Incidents*, presents great mothering stories and memoirs of her life story. From her mother's death to the nurturing of a grandmother and through her own struggles as a young mother, Linda's autobiography as a literary text makes important contributions to the literary records of black motherhood. Jessie Fauset in *Plum Bun* presents a heroine whose life is mirrored in her mother. Angela sees her mother as a model that she should follow; when her mother passes, for the first time, for white at a hospital in order to be assisted Angela believes it was the correct thing. From that time on Angela passes for white believing that it is a common attitude. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* does not present a mother but a grandmother who did her best to protect and prepare the heroine Janie Mae Crawford for life. Janie, a strong woman who defies stereotypes and seeks independence, grows up under the influence of her grandmother Nanny Crawford. As a woman who sees black women as “the mules of the world” and does not

want Janie to be a mule, who was raped by her master, and saw her own daughter, Janie's mother, following the same fate, Nanny does not want Janie to repeat the same story. Nanny's experience and values clash with Janie's independence and desire to experience the world. However, she prevents her from repeating the same fate of her mother and grandmother. Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* follows a different path for the matriarchal figure is absent from her work. The heroines eventually become mothers, but, they do not seem to present the characteristics of a real matriarch². Larsen's characters, especially Clare, different from the heroines aforementioned above challenge their fate in order to escape the characterization of "mule of the world".

The word mothering along with many of the ideas now associated with the term, as it seems, is a product of a biological distinction between male and female, with the effects of separating the roles in a sexual division of labor. During the period of hunting societies, man had to leave home to hunt while woman stayed at home taking care of the children and the household chores. Time passed, many developments took place in our society, and such a social structure of women totally responsible for the nurturing has not seemed to suffer much change. [I understand that in some strata of our society, like middle and upper classes, this structure suffers some transformations, however, at the lower classes, family structures provide the indication of being unchangeable]. Researchers investigate this phenomenon and come to the conclusion that there is not any viable explanation for the maintenance of this family structure in which the women should be entirely responsible for the children's well being, while men work outside the house and are the head of the family. Indeed, a proposal of sharing parenting on behalf of the children, mother, father, and the family relationship is proposed by Nancy J. Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering*. Sharing parenting would be the perfect family structure; unfortunately it is most of the time an exception than a rule. The explanation for the maintenance of this social structure [in which mothers are totally responsible for the children's well being] until nowadays in some strata of western society might be used to reinforce women's exploitation.

². The *Merriam-Webster online Dictionary*² defines matriarch as "a woman who rules or dominates a family, group, or state; specifically: a mother who is head and ruler of her family and descendants". Accessed on August 10, 2008, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/matriarch>

In terms of the formal aspects of the novel, the third person narrator presents to us an instigating story in which it is possible to identify some techniques such as flashbacks that give movement to the narrative. It also presents some rhetorical devices like metaphors as a form of creating new meanings, new combinations of ideas and as a form of writing about some complex issues like feelings. Therefore, it is necessary to perform a close reading of the text in order to try to grasp the meaning of its representations – character and plot. In order to examine the theme of ‘passing’ and the conflicts inherent to mothering and racial identity I use some assumptions from different sources. First, I draw some notions from Psychoanalysis and Feminism. Taking into account that *Passing* is basically narrated in the third person and presents Irene’s inner conflicts related to her racial and social condition, psychoanalytic criticism is very important in this thesis. Since, in *Passing*, Larsen writes her story from the perspective of female characters which approach delicate issues of a female universe, gender studies is also necessary to study this novel. Also, two biographies of Larsen and a selection of female and male critics of Afro-American works and theories about passing and race are chosen to throw light on the issues.

The critics Elaine K. Ginsberg and Martha J. Cutter contribute to this dissertation in terms of their discussion of ‘passing’ and identity. They propose a wide comprehension of these terms in order to expand our understanding of the novel *Passing*. Elaine K. Ginsberg, for example, claims that “the process and the discourse of ‘passing’ challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics, a challenge that may be seen as either threatening or liberating but in either instance discloses the truth that identities are not singular true or false but multiple and contingent” (GINSBERG, 1996, p.4). In short, Elaine K. Ginsberg does not believe in a unitary and fixed identity, she understands identity in this discourse of ‘passing’ as something malleable, changeable. Besides, Cutter understands ‘passing’ as a strategy of subversion. In her opinion, Larsen “uses “passing” as a way of avoiding the enclosures of a unitary identity” (GINSBERG, 1996, p.75). For Cutter, passers call into question the old verities such as racial superiority.

Concerning the relevance of this work to the academic community, it is possible to say, that this specific novel provides a good panorama of the United States during the time of segregation and the development of black culture. Besides, the novel *Passing* is a good example of how problematic this context demonstrates to be to black individuals in terms of identity formation and assimilation in American society. In addition, the way the characters, Clare and

Irene, contest and challenge the social structures such as race, marriage, mothering, religion, and demonstrate the fragility of such structures, may add to our understanding of the feeling of resistance indigenous to Afro- American culture.

How does the novel promote the feeling of displacement? How can an individual develop a suitable identity in such a context? Which are the strategies that Larsen uses to subvert social structures? In what ways is this subversion relevant to us Brazilian students of the twenty-first century? These are some questions that I intend to pursue throughout this dissertation.

This dissertation is divided in three chapters: The Harlem Renaissance: the Black Crusade, Questions of mothering/questions of race, and *Passing* as a form of desire. Considering that Nella Larsen and the Harlem Renaissance do not seem to be well known by many academic students in Brazil, the first chapter will be used to fill in this gap and present not only Larsen, but the movement in which she took part. In addition, this particular chapter can be seen as an endeavor to behold the fate of one writer as the by-product of a specific historic and cultural circumstance. Nella Larsen's own life story and her literary works may both be seen as cultural texts, placing themselves in a particular socio-cultural moment in history: the heyday of Afro-American literature. The issues she presents in her texts are particular to a discourse of racial and gender problems and her own destiny can be understood as a text which is also marked by the dynamics of gender and racial belonging and dread of exclusion. Larsen also faces difficulties to accomplish a professional career as a writer due to the pressures of race, gender, social rank, and the same pressures which eventually destroyed her career as an artist.

Based on Nathan Huggins's *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* and Cary D. Wintz's *Black Culture and The Harlem Renaissance*, among other important works about the movement, the first part of this chapter presents a brief description of the United States of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with its racial hostility and social problems.

During a period of *Jim Crow*³ codes, lynching and protests, Afro-American intellectuals promoted a movement entitled the *Harlem Renaissance* on behalf of Afro-American culture. It consisted of the heyday of Black culture and brought to the scene many important American writers such as W.E.B Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Faucet, and Nella Larsen, to mention but just a few. The second part of this same chapter, presents a biographical outline of Larsen's nebulous, private life and literary career. This first chapter will be of use to contextualize the story in order to provide a better understanding of the subjects that will be explored in this thesis. The research for the second part of the first chapter was based on two biographical works about Larsen's life, the first one published in 1994 and written by Thadious M. Davis entitled *Nella Larsen Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*, and the other one published in 2006 and written by George Hutchinson entitled *In Search of Nella Larsen*.

In the second chapter I draw from Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, and Nancy J. Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering*, and read *Passing* in terms of two intricate issues, mothering and race; mothering from the perspective of Hirsch and Chodorow, and race from the perspective of the story, the social context and some critics such as Thadious M. Davis, Elaine K. Ginsberg and Martha J. Cutter. The analysis starts with the perspective of race and mothering as products of a culture, in the case here, that of black culture. The term culture in this thesis provides a difference between black and white culture as two fields of force – the white dominant and the black resistance. Culturally, the role of a mother seems to be seen as something natural and it provides the impression that women should be the only responsible for the infant's well being. For the Afro-American women of the last century, mothering might have represented more than a female task, but also the reproduction of suffering, and of hostility. Taking into account that most of the time the mother cannot avoid or prevent her children from suffering, from the awareness of the atrocities of their society, such as segregation and lynching.

³. Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in Southern and Border States, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. This source of information is available at <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>. Accessed on August 12, 2008.

Through culture ideas and beliefs are spread in order to support the hegemony of a society. Theorists define culture as a system of normative beliefs that reinforce some social institutions such as race. The meaning of the word race, for example, like many other social constructs, has suffered some transformations along history. Initially, it was a product of European imperialism and colonization. According to Stuart Hall's ideas in *Representation Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* "the images of racial difference" go through some transformations across the centuries. At first, Africa was seen to the European as something positive. However, as time passed, this image suffered some modifications. As Hall asserts, changing the positive to a negative image "Africans were declared to be the descendents of Ham, cursed in *The Bible* to be in perpetuity 'a servant of servants unto his brethren'" (HALL, 1997, p.239).

Hall goes further saying that Africans were also "identified with Nature, they symbolized 'the primitive' in contrast with 'the civilized world'" (HALL, 1997, p. 239). For this reason Hall argues that the intention "behind naturalization is simple. If differences between black and white people are 'cultural', then they are open to modification, and change. But if they are 'natural' – as the slave –holders believed – then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed" (HALL, 1997, p. 245). Nowadays, such a view changed and Stuart Hall among other scholars, understand that race is a human invention, a social construct used in order to manage difference. The anthropologist Franz Boas, for instance, argued that ideas of race are culturally constructed and that skin color indicates little about innate difference⁴. However, during Nella Larsen's life time, it was spread as a natural truth⁵ used to reinforce black exploitation.

4. This source of information is available at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/anthropology/about/main/one/boas.html> and was accessed on November 16th 2008.

5. According to David Pilgrim "many Christian ministers and theologians taught that Whites were the Chosen people, Blacks were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation. Craniologists, eugenicists, phrenologists, and Social Darwinists, at every educational level, buttressed the belief that Blacks were innately intellectually and culturally inferior to whites." This source of information is available at <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm> which was accessed on October, 10th, 2008.

The third and last chapter presents the notion of desire, borrowed from Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*, in which desire is regarded as the very motif and the motor force of a narrative. I move on to examine Nella Larsen's novel, focusing on plot and its protagonists' relationship, differences and conflicts. This chapter is divided into two parts; the first one provides an examination of the plot in order to raise the possibility of the novel as metaphor of the condition of a divided self in view of the tragic outcome. The second part inquires about the close relation of the two protagonists, their desires and racial conflicts bringing to the foreground the questions of the story's enigmatic ending in terms of resolution of the differences between the characters. In other words, the relation between character, motive and consequence.

2 THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: THE BLACK CRUSADE

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, a new Afro-American writer published her first novel. At first, that unknown writer, called Nella Larsen, enchanted the critics with her novel *Quicksand* (1928). This novel was an extraordinary candid examination of interior dramas of the middle class mixed-race women in Harlem. Furthermore, it promoted Larsen's participation in the movement which, risen during the twenties, was known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Considered a symbol of change, changing of point of view, and of attitudes towards black people by some scholars such as Nathan Irvin Huggins, and Cary D. Wintz, the Harlem Renaissance brought to light a new black consciousness, which overturned white stereotypes calling attention to the roots of black identity and folk culture. This important movement emerged in the American cultural scene right after World War I, and the first signs of the decline started to appear with the financial collapse of 1929 and with the Great Depression of 1930 (WINTZ, 1988, p. 219).

Some historical and socio-economic factors such as the economic depression in the South and the outbreak of World War I influenced the appearance of the movement. The deterioration of the racial situation in the South increased the motivation for the exodus to the North. The migration of black Americans brought them new opportunities to alter their social and economic life. Such geographical mobility was a mark in black society; it not only changed the way of living of the blacks, but the way they were seen by white society.

The starting point of the Renaissance seemed to have been the outbreak of World War I that drove the migration of the peasants from South to North. Taking into consideration that the United States was a supplier of war products to other countries, and the outbreak of the war caused a great search for munitions and all kinds of supplies, allied to a shortage of labor force because of the migration of the foreigners to their countries of origin; the eyes of the employers turned to the only option available at that moment, that was the black labor in the South. For the northern black folk it was a blessed opportunity. With this migration from countryside to town, the Negro was acquiring experience and earning more money. This change

brought to light a new black consciousness, from that point on, black people, who had money in their pockets and could buy a place to live, acquired some economic freedom. This economic impression of freedom brought them a kind of optimism of racial equality.

In fact, such an impression of amelioration lasted for a short period of time. Black people quickly realized that the geographic mobility did not erase the prejudice against them. They were still considered as inferior in the North as they were in the South. The job vacancies, and the dwellings reserved to them were the worst ones. Furthermore, the southern colored people imagined that in the North they would be socially and politically treated as real citizens. However the riots and lynching that swept the North in 1919 helped increase their disillusionment with American democracy.

Indeed, the early twentieth century went through many political troubles such as World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the emerging of Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany that culminated in World War II. Such conflicts in politics affected the world of arts too. The artists could not be impartial before such changes; they felt that it was a time for breaking off from old conventions. During this time of transformation, artists started to reflect about the old verities, everything that was accepted as the norm, in politics, in religion and especially in art. Such a moment represented a subversion of the accepted notions; this feeling of change not only affected Europe, but America too, especially the Afro-American people who had been segregated for many years and wanted to change their condition. Throughout this time of changing the Afro-American people felt that it was a time to call into question all the things that had been done to segregate them, to reduce them to a subservient class.

The Afro-American artists took advantage of this moment of reflection to interpret their own lives, and culture, apart from the influence of the white culture. Furthermore, it was a time of being free from the old stereotypes that contributed to diminish their condition in America. As Wintz asserts, for such a long time, the uncles, aunts, and mammies were a part of the imaginary of the American people. Such characters represented the good subservient. During slavery, black people repressed aggression as a survival strategy. And such attitudes granted them the stereotype of been patient, humble, and easygoing; accepting every injustice without protest. The answer that colored people gave to whites for that position was that it was the only acceptable attitude for good Christians.

For so many years, black people had followed Christian ideals, bowing their heads before the injustices they suffered. They probably thought that by showing kindness they would be recognized as good people. Thus, time went by and such a view did not change, they continued to be seen as inferior. Then, several black men went to fight in the World War I hoping that with this sacrifice they would be rewarded as citizens. However this did not happen. Finally, black people, unfulfilled and tired of being mistreated, decided to react to the *status quo* and started fighting back against the injustices they had been suffering. And from that time on, a new form of social consciousness was born. While black folk were fighting against injustice with their hands, the black intelligentsia was unifying their efforts in order to strengthen their culture and their art and it motivates the appearance of the Harlem Renaissance.

The black writers of the Harlem Renaissance did not want to start a revolution; what they really wanted was to understand themselves, their importance to America and America's importance to their lives. And this was corroborated by what Arthur A. Shomburg once observed in *Voices From Harlem Renaissance* that "History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that present generations must repair and offset" (SHOMBURG, 1995, p. 216). If slavery had destroyed part of the black American people's past, it was imperative for blacks to reconstruct it in order to ameliorate their present. First of all, it was necessary that they trust themselves in order to make white people do the same. If they ignored their own qualities as people, how could they show confidence to white people? The best way they found to acquire self-reliance was delving into their past, searching in their folklore to better comprehend their present. And such a plunge was just possible through artistic form as Nathan Irvin Huggins observed:

Much of the racial problem in the United States was due to the ignorance of whites of the true character of blacks, and ignorance of blacks of their own true qualities as people. The production of art and literature would serve to lift this cloud of ignorance by demonstrating to the white world that blacks could achieve on the highest level, measured by Euro-American standards (HUGGINS, 1995, p. 279).

During the second decade of the twentieth century, black artists attracted the attention of white people with their art, their songs and their writings. At that time, Harlem's nightlife was intense. The night clubs, theaters and cabarets brought to Harlem a great number of people interested in having fun and in the exotic culture of blacks especially their song, jazz. The white's interest in black culture was very important; they did not only appreciate black art, they became sponsors, they helped circulate black art. For a long time black people supported their art with the money received from white patronage. Most of the early writers published their first works in white magazines like *Survey Graphic*. Carl Van Vatchen was one of those white men who worked on behalf of the black people. He promoted parties, dinners, helped writers publish their works presenting them to the publishers that were interested in literature produced by black artists. He did not only help colored people to develop their art, but even wrote a novel about black life. His book entitled *Nigger Heaven* was a landmark for the movement. It did not please all the Negro community, though it helped put the Harlem Renaissance in evidence. According to Cary D. Wintz "Van Vechten's literary strength was his ability accurately and sardonically to describe American society in the 1920s" (WINTZ, 1988, p. 95). Moreover, because of better opportunities to study as well as close contact to intellectuals helped black writers to produce a literature of better quality.

It is important to say that black literature was not born during the Renaissance. Afro-American literature started with Slave Narrative. This was a kind of literature in which the writers like Phillis Wheatley and Sojourner Truth used their stories to advance the cause of abolition. The second phase of Afro-American literature was the Local color or Regional literature⁸ which focused on the characters, dialect, customs, topography and other features that pertained to a specific region, the South. A variation of this last genre is the Plantation school. As Cary D. Wintz observed "plantation school was nostalgia for the good old days of antebellum plantation life by former slaves who remembered nothing of their former servitude except the good times, the carefree life, and the benevolent relationship between master and slave" (WINTZ, 1988, p.50).

6. *Nigger Heaven* was a story about the *Harlem Renaissance* from the point of view of a white artist. Van Vechten's intention with this book was to "depict all the facets of black life" showing how difficult such a life could be in America.

7. 8. These sources of information are available at <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/plant.htm> accessed in October 5th, 2007.

Hence, what we had with the Harlem Renaissance was the emergence of the questions of voice fostered by a black consciousness. From that time of uplifting of black consciousness on, black writers started to produce a kind of literature that expressed through artistic forms their anxieties, desires, and uncertainties. According to Robert A. Bone, “the Negro Renaissance was essentially a period of self-discovery, marked by a sudden growth of interest in things Negro” (BONE, 1970, p. 62). The artists took advantage of that moment of self-discovery to analyze their inner problems, their life’s condition and blackness in the American context.

The Harlem Renaissance had many great writers, and their contribution was very important to grasp the meaning of that important movement for the Negro folk. W.E. B. Du Bois, for example, observed in his masterpiece *The Souls of the Black Folk* that the “problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color-line” (DU BOIS, 1995, p. 54). For him, who lived at a time when there were two separate worlds in the United States - the black and the white one, this seems very clear. The public facilities were segregated with separations for blacks and whites; there were different churches, schools, train cars, street-cars, hotels, theaters, jails, hospitals and even graveyards to each one. To be a black person, at that time, meant to be an other, one that should be placed aside from the rest of the population. Although American law defined the differences between the races in terms of “separate but equal” in practice blacks were always regarded as belonging to an inferior race which did not enjoy equal access to opportunities. In view of all these hierarchies W.E.B. Du Bois said that each black man had a dream “he wants to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face” (DU BOIS, 1995, p. 45-46).

While Du Bois was worried with social problems that affected Negro life, James Weldon Johnson was concerned with the psychological problems that a black person faced in American society. His first novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored man*, published in 1912, had, as its main theme, someone passing for white. Such a practice of passing just increased the sensation of displacement. By acting as white, the passer felt that he or she belonged neither to the white nor to the black race. According to Cary D. Wintz “the major problem that confronted blacks was no longer how to deal with prejudice but how to achieve racial identity; the major task of black writers was not to expose racial injustice but to uncover, describe, and possibly explain the life of American blacks” (WINTZ, 1988, p. 67). Du Bois and Johnson were dealing with the

two sides of the same coin, black people's life condition in American society. The former chose to explore the social aspect and the later the psychological one.

Setting was another point that distinguished the approaches of some black writers. Some chose not to explore the lower stratum of black society and their lives in ghettos because, in their opinion, these representations would reinforce negative racial stereotypes. Writers such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset generally described blacks in an elevated level in society, emphasizing the similarities between whites and blacks. They took as the object of their novels the urban middle-class community.

On the other hand, some writers such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston preferred to seek for the black roots of Afro-American tradition focusing on the black Southern insular communities. Such writers used the folklore in order to explore the roots of Afro-American culture in their prose and poetry as a form of exalting black culture.

A great number of men took part in the Harlem Renaissance, however only a few women were involved. These women found some obstacles that blocked them from sources of patronage and faced some difficulties in getting their work published. However, some surpassed the adversities and managed to get their novels printed like Nella Larsen, who published her novels with A. Knopf; Jessie Fauset, who published with Boni & Liveright and Frederick Stokes; and Zora Neale Hurston, who published with J.B. Lippincott. These female writers overcame the obstacles and exposed their anguishes through their female characters. The main theme of these writers was the American black women's role in American society of the beginning of the twentieth century.

Although each writer had a different interpretation of what was the appropriate role for women in American society, each raised questions in her own way. Larsen and Fauset chose to explore black women from the perspective of class, the bourgeoisie, with their problems, longings and, their relationship with men. Hurston, on the other hand, projected her women from the folk in the lower stratum of American society. Such women were strong, and in spite of the adversities that life placed in their paths, they endured and often overcame them. I am not saying that the characters explored by Larsen and Fauset were not strong. In fact, the problems that they faced were similar, though their social condition was different. All these writers mentioned above were very important for the Harlem Renaissance. Since my focus is on Nella Larsen, I will examine her contribution to the New Negro Movement.

2.1 LARSEN'S CONTRIBUTION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF BLACK CULTURE

Nella Larsen's first piece of writing was very representative of how different she was from her contemporaries. In June 1920, W. E. B. Du Bois invited Larsen to write for a children's magazine *The Brownie's Book*. Since she did not have any contact with black culture when she was a child, she wrote games, riddles, and rhymes she had learned in Denmark, when she went there to visit her mother's family as a young girl. In fact, Larsen was born in a mixed-race family: her mother, Mary Hanson Walker, was a white woman of Danish origin, and her father, Peter Walker, was a colored man from the West Indies. When Larsen was only two-years-old her father disappeared (it is not clear what really happen with Larsen's father) and shortly afterwards, her mother married a white man, thus, Larsen became the only dark member of her family. For this reason, her childhood was influenced by white culture. That is why she did not know any black children's plays and stories to write in the *Brownie's Book*. Nevertheless, she was encouraged by W. E. B. Du Bois to go ahead and give her contribution to that undertaking.

Larsen's mixed-race family's experience could be of great contribution to understanding the American society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Interracial families were illegal in some places of the United States, therefore, Larsen lived a childhood of dislocation. Her family had to move in order to escape prejudice and eventual problems that a black family member could cause to the other members. Such an impasse resulted in the premature removal of Larsen from her family. Because this might have hurt her a great deal she disclosed very little about her childhood and adolescence. The brief pieces of autobiography that she wrote to Alfred Knopf said almost nothing about her past. In fact, there are blanks in the account of her life; we have more suspicion than certainty.

From very early in her life, Larsen realized that she did not have anyone to support her, thus she should be independent and self-sufficient in order to survive. Larsen's mother, Mary, saw in education a way to help improve Larsen's chances of survival in a segregated society.

She registered Larsen at Fisk University⁹, an institution for teacher's education in Nashville. This experience was very important for Larsen, a girl who was accustomed to living surrounded only by whites - at Fisk there were no white students. This was a significant change in her life; as Hutchinson observed, "it was a time for her to find her place in the Negro world to which her family would never belong" (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.52). At Fisk, Larsen was exposed to a variety of subjects such as Latin, Plane Geometry, Grammar Review, Rhetoric, Geography, Algebra and Mythology; some of these helped her later to venture as a writer. Beyond the school subjects, the contact with some rituals, expression, faith, and customs of the black south could be seen as a bridge between her old ancestry and her present. In spite of being a rich experience it did not last long. After a year at Fisk, Larsen was expelled. The motives for her expulsion were not very clear, however, according to Hutchinson, there was suspicion that "she had broken some regulation of dress or conduct" (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.63).

Right after the experience at Fisk, among the black people [her peers], she went to Copenhagen and spent three years there living among her white relatives. In Hutchinson's opinion, Larsen aimed at living in Denmark, but she was "defeated by a combination of racial alienation, cultural difference and gender entrapment" (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.74). As soon as she came back from Copenhagen, Larsen saw in the nursing profession a chance to have a career. This enterprise changed her life considerably. She not only acquired financial independence, but learned the art of observation and listening among the patients. Some of them were so ill that they could barely speak, thus, the nurse should know how to identify their needs by only looking at them. Others, on the other hand, who were recovering, had many stories to tell in order to help time pass quickly.

9. Fisk University began as Fisk Free Colored School, one of several schools founded for freedmen during the Union military occupation of Nashville. In 1867 the institution was chartered as Fisk University. This institution used to graduate black teachers to teach in black schools. This source of information is available at <http://www.tnstate.edu/library/digital/FISKU.HTM>, accessed on: March 5th. 2008.

Besides, this environment among doctors and nurses who were involved with “a function associated with social work in the city” helped her find companionship in her husband, Elmer S. Imes, who had earned a Ph. D. in physics and had a remarkable job for a black man in those days, causing a great impression on Larsen. According to Hutchinson they were introduced by Elmer’s brother, the Reverend William Lloyd Imes, and his wife Grace. “William likely knew Larsen from Lincoln as well as Fisk, and Grace had been the one other Northerner in her class at Fisk” (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.122). Hutchinson also says that Imes’s “attraction to Larsen may have owed something to her being a “mulatto” but not necessarily to “light skin.”...in addition “she shared both his charming ironic wit and his interest in books” (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.122). For Larsen, on the other hand, beyond being handsome, Imes was a promising young man.

After getting married and moving to Harlem, Larsen’s career changed. Influenced by the intellectual vicinity she started to work as a librarian, and the proximity with books provided Larsen with familiarity with the literary artistic devices to her further career as a writer. Thadius M. Davis observes that Larsen used to read James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, William James and Joseph Conrad, among others (DAVIS, 1996, p.311) that would influence her writings later on. In 1925, taking advantage of the golden age of Afro-American literature, Larsen, who had the intention of becoming a novelist, asked to reduce her work-time in the library. Indeed, Larsen’s aim at becoming a writer can have an origin in – the knowledge that she acquired at Fisk, allied to the art of observation and listening acquired in nursing, and the close contact with literature in the library. A year later she started to publish her first piece of literature.

Larsen’s first short story, *The Wrong Man* (1926) was first published in a pulp magazine called *Young’s Realistic Stories Magazine*. In this story Larsen dealt with themes focused on sexuality and its psychological aspect, something that would be developed in her later fiction. The plot is about a secret that was revealed to a wrong person. The protagonist of the story, Julia Romley, was a prostitute as a young woman, and she hid this secret from her husband. However the person to whom she had been a mistress suddenly appeared in the city where she was living, and seemed to know her husband. The possibility of this revelation disturbed Julia. Before such disclosure she decided to talk with that man again and implore for compassion. However, as soon as she finished her conversation, she realized that he was not the man she was thinking about.

Three months later, in the same magazine Larsen published her second short story entitled *Freedom*. In George Hutchinson's opinion, this story is "so claustrophobic in its focus on the mind of the male deserter that it creates an intense aura of expressionistic compulsion. It originates in personal nightmare and fantasy bred by familial insecurity and division" (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.199). In this story, a man wants to get rid of his wife. Mentally he analyzes his life with her and realizes that he had never loved her and starts to long for her death. The entire story takes place in the main character's mind; it seemed to be a nightmare. In this sense, it is similar to Larsen's last novel *Passing* in which one of the protagonists wants to be free of the other and starts to wish for her death too.

Some details of Larsen's life damaged her image as a writer. For example, her first publications were in pulp magazines. Besides she lacked family connections, and a university degree. According to George Hutchinson, "pulp magazines were not yet welcoming to "Negro Fiction" (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.196). In addition, during Larsen's time a woman without a family was not seen with good eyes and, to make things worse, her friendship with a white man was not well accepted by most of the black society of her time. However, it is imperative to say that she had personality; she did whatever she wanted without being intimidated by conventions. For someone with her past she had gone far, and this was remarkable.

Two years after her first venture in writing, Larsen published her first novel *Quicksand*. This novel examines the life of an intelligent and solitary girl who, grappling with her lack of adaptation as a black woman and with her bitterness towards whites, roams from place to place searching for a suitable identity. For her, the huge problem of her life is race. In fact the tragedy of Helga lies in her inability to recognize her real problems that are more emotional than racial ones. This misconception leads her to a bad ending. Her interminable search ends up entrapping her in an undesirable marriage and motherhood. She has a similar life to Larsen's, a mixed-race family, a childhood among whites, and Danish relatives. Many critics see this novel as autobiographical, but it is very difficult to be certain. In regards to Larsen's life we have more suspicions than certainty.

Passing, Larsen's second novel, published in 1929, explores the lives of two black women whose attitudes on race leads them to different destinies. Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry are the protagonists of the novel and they are beautiful, intelligent mulattoes who are representatives of a black American bourgeoisie. Relating to race, they have a different approach

towards their heritage. Even though she sees the strategy of passing as an incorrect attitude, Irene is attracted to it, and in some situations she uses this stratagem in order to benefit from it. She is tranquil with her blackness and marries a black man. Content about her family and domestic life, Irene abhors any possibility of modification. For Irene the most important thing in her life is her family, it provides her stability and a sensation of security. On the other hand, Clare, who decides to pass completely and hide her black past, sees passing as an “easy thing to do” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 25). She marries a racist white man who is ignorant of her ancestry. She seems to like living in danger. Her marriage brings her a comfortable life. But at a certain point, she starts to be fond of Negroes and this puts her into the risk of being unmasked.

Despite all the adversities, Larsen’s novels were well received by her contemporaries in Harlem. *Quicksand*, for example, was not only praised by the critics, it also gave Larsen an important prize for a black writer during the Renaissance, the Bronze Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes in Literature, which consisted of a bronze medal and \$100 in cash. Such an event in Larsen’s career motivated her to write more, and within a year she published *Passing*. According to Thadious M. Davis Larsen “resistant to conventional definitions of the place of women in society and the role of race in identity, she had no peer among Harlem Renaissance writers in the kinds of questions she posed in her novel” (DAVIS, 1997, p. xxix).

Although, her second novel had a satisfactory reception, it did not merit any award and she became very disappointed with this result. At the same time her marriage began to deteriorate. In 1930 she published what would be her last work, a short story. For Charles R. Larson, Larsen’s last narrative, *Sanctuary*, endorses “the strongest tie that binds people together. Even though Jim killed her son, Annie will protect him because his is black” (LARSON, 1992, p. xxi).

As a last try, she entered in a competition sponsored by the Guggenheim Foundation, for an important prize for creative writers in the United States; it consisted of a fellowship to write her next book abroad. In view of the good reception of *Passing* she was awarded the fellowship and spent two years in Europe, traveling and writing her third novel *Mirage*. When Larsen returned to Harlem her dream to forge a career as a professional literary writer was over. Her marriage was doomed as her husband Elmer Imes was having a love affair with one of his workmates, a white woman. And Larsen’s third novel was refused by the publishers.

For someone who had lost so many things in life since childhood, the divorce was the last straw. Larsen's reaction to it was to become a recluse. Disenchanted with several defeats in her personal and professional life, she disappeared from the public scene right after the divorce. Many of her friends tried in vain to contact her, but were not successful in their undertaking. According to George Hutchinson, some of her old acquaintances even said that she started drinking and using drugs in order to forget her suffering. With Imes's death and the end of the alimony, she returned to nursing until her death in 1964. Larsen's death was as sad as her life, she died alone in her apartment and was found only a week after it happened. Her end was as lonely as her entire life, alone among the others. She never found someone who really loved her.

With such a sad life, the way she found to sublimate her suffering was writing. Her characters disclosed the things that she did not have the courage to say. It is possible to conclude that her life intertwined with her characters represented in the mixed-race people who did not belong to any place. Larsen's career as a writer lasted as long as the movement that she took part in.

3 THE QUESTION OF MOTHERING/ THE QUESTION OF RACE

According to Robert A. Bone, the Harlem Renaissance can be regarded in terms of a cultural dualism: the nationalist tendency and the assimilationist one. The intellectuals that followed the former perspective believed that racial pride would rebuild what the whites had torn down. They possessed “antiwhite sentiment” and were against “all things white”. (BONE, 1970, p.6) The later perspective, on the contrary, suggested that some individuals possessed “an unconscious desire to be white”; as Bone asserts “assimilationism is, in this sense, a means of escape, a form of flight from “the problem”” (BONE, 1970, p.4). In light of these two perspectives, novels whose main theme is ‘passing’ [such as Larsen’s novels] might have been misinterpreted by the nationalist perspective and seen as a betrayal to the black race. Besides, the black intelligentsia, constituted mainly by male writers, was not interested in trivial issues such as family relations which generally appear in novels written by female writers. In reality, the black intelligentsia failed in not understanding that within a family it was possible to identify conflicts between races. They seemed to forget that family was a microcosm which represents a society.

Nella Larsen’s second novel *Passing* can be seen as a good example of the misinterpretation mentioned above. Besides it might have been also misunderstood by a critic like Robert A. Bone who claims that *Passing* is Larsen’s “less important novel” and, except for some details, it escapes mediocrity. With such a remark it is possible to question if he had really read, and understood the novel *Passing*. For this reason, the analysis that follows intends to examine the interrelation between race and mothering in order to show how important these subjects are to understand Afro-American literature, as well as Afro-American society in the last century.

“Being a mother is the cruellest [*sic*] thing in the world” (LARSEN, 2003, p.68). In a small sentence Clare summarizes what might be the most anguishing and fearful feeling for a black woman who lives in a racially stratified society – to become a mother. This character is inscribed in a context in which individuality is directly influenced by four factors: race, gender, nationality and social condition. By being black, a woman, American, and a mother, a woman

may not find a place to become subjects themselves, but, on the contrary, they end up becoming objects of this culture, of male yearning, of the American nation, and of their children. As a matter of fact, I understand that mothering and race are institutions directly influenced by culture. Culturally, race is presented in order to manage the difference between white hegemony and black resistance, and mothering does the same in the sense that this female role supports women's exploitation. Through the female characters: Clare and Irene, Larsen calls into question those institutions mentioned above that threatened Afro-American women during a great period of time.

I choose to read the novel *Passing* in terms of mothering and race because I understand that in this plot both issues can be intertwined, although race is openly approached in the narrative and mothering only approached in a subtle way. Race and mothering are present and sometimes silenced in the lives of the protagonists. I see these themes as something that bothers and disturbs the life of Clare and Irene. At first, it seems that they do not notice, that neither race nor mothering causes them any problems; however throughout the narrative it is possible to observe that Clare and Irene give us some clues of their troubles. Their lives are not as perfect as they seem to be. During the course of the narrative it is possible to verify Clare and Irene's understanding of mothering and race.

Independently from the context in which a woman lives, the role of mothering can demand great responsibility, since it not only means to keep the child clean, warm and nourished, but to give him/her psychological tools to become independent, secure and ready for life's challenges. For a woman free of racial predicaments, mothering can enclose positive and negative meanings such as: joy, fulfillment, nurturing, obligation, commitment, preoccupation, responsibility, limits, entrapment, to mention but a few. For a black woman who lives in an environment of racism it is possible to add to the list above segregation, persecution, hostility. If to the white women mothering in some circumstances represents gender and social exploitation, to the black women it might be a reproduction of suffering, anguish, and problems.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun points out that "at the heart of the women's problems (to say nothing of men's) is the nuclear family, where the nurturing is done almost entirely by the mother, while the representative of the outer world, the only alternative to the nurturing female, is inevitably male" (HEILBRUN, 1981, p.32). Carolyn G. Heilbrun sets mothering as a gender problem in which women end up entrapped in the conventional female role, in terms of

patriarchal models, of mothers and wives. In this sense, they do not finding space for becoming professionals outside the household chores. Considering that, although we are in a post modern era, most of the times women are still the ones who nurture the children and do the household chores without the participation of a male figure such as a husband. Adding to this gender problem, in the 20^s racial segregation, lynching, and riots were frequent and, the great responsibility that a mother assumed in such a context might have produced hundreds of outbursts similar to the one that initiates the third paragraph of this chapter in which Clare says that “being a mother is the cruellest [*sic*] thing in the world” (LARSEN, 2003, p.68). Mothering is a subject that might be considered sensitive in Nella Larsen’s universe, her own experience with her white mother might have been a traumatic one due to Larsen’s blackness [taking into account that she was the only black member of her family with her father’s disappearance] and to the fact that she did not experience motherhood herself. *Passing* with its motherless protagonists, might be a way that the author found to come to terms with her own mother and her past.

Considering Larsen’s society, it is possible to perceive that context was not a comfortable one for a black person to grow up and survive. As I illustrated in the first chapter, Larsen’s own world was a mix of two cultures, the white Danish and the Afro-American. Larsen’s biographers describe how difficult it was for her to cope with racism and sexism in her environment. According to George Hutchinson, Larsen was inscribed in a context in which

The regime of race in the United States was set up precisely to ensure a ‘natural’ correlation between race and family identity – which, in turn, would help secure for the future the powerlessness and exploitation of the racial minority. The family was the basic unit in the reproduction of race. So-called mixed families thus became ‘unnatural’, as new theories promulgated by the most prestigious natural and social scientists in the United States and Europe seemed to prove on objective scientific grounds (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.29).

The natural correlation between race and family observed by Hutchinson makes me wonder whether Larsen, in an attempt to subvert such a view, portrays Clare as a character who destabilizes and challenges the regime of race. Clare's nuclear family and the family that she constitutes with John Bellew are good examples of these "unnatural" families that Hutchinson mentions above: both are mixed-race families, both subvert the *status quo*. Clare is a woman who illustrates invisible blackness, who is described as having light skin compared to ivory. Her mother was a black woman¹⁰ and her father was a product of a mixed-race family. She is inscribed in a context of one-drop rule¹¹ in which independently of her white features she is designated as black. She spends her childhood among black people, but with the disappearance of her parents she moves into a white community. Clare's white aunts [representatives of the racist white society] are religious women who do not accept black people as their equals as we can see from this passage: "the aunts were queer. For all their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced – ruined, they called it – a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn't forgive the tar –brush¹²" (LARSEN, 2003, p.26/27). From this passage it is possible to comprehend that a black person occasionally born in a white family might not be accepted by this family as a real member, hence becoming a burden, a shame. Clare marries John Bellew a racist white man, who advocates "no nigger in my family. Never have been and never will be" (LARSEN, 2003, p.40). It is possible to perceive Larsen's irony in this passage. Clare's aunts prohibited Clare from mentioning her black ancestry among the community and it provides the appropriate conditions for Clare to marry Bellew. In fact, each generation of Clare's family, departing from her father up to Margery, her daughter, challenges the system of racism. First her father is the son of a white man and a dark mother, furthermore, Clare is a daughter of a mixed-race father and probably a black mother, and finally, she becomes the wife of a white man and the mother of a mixed-race daughter.

10. It is not disclosed clearly in the story that Clare's mother was black; however we can infer this when Irene says that Clare inherited her Negro eyes from her mother. In fact, Clare's eyes are the only hint to her blackness.

11. The "one drop-rule" was a historical term in the South of the United States that defines as black any person with as little as a single drop of "black blood". It was used as an ethnic intensifier with the aim of exploitation of black people by white people. This source of information is available at <http://www.afn.org/~dks/race/wright.html>

12. According to Thadious M. Davis "*the tar-brush*" is a reference to African ancestry; derived from the descriptive saying, "Black as tar" (DAVIS, 1994, p.117).

Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot* has as its central point the study of what she calls: "the female figures neglected by classic psychoanalysis and submerged in traditional narrative", the mothers (HIRSCH, 1989, p.3). In reality, Hirsch understands that mother, as a social role, as of crucial importance to a society, since for her "women's mothering is a social structure which affects all the other structures" (HIRSCH, 1989, p.20). For this reason, Hirsch decides to examine in narratological theories how this important character, the mother, is presented and read. However, she realizes that, "narratology has left aside the experience of the mother and the daughter and the work of women's writers" (HIRSCH, 1989, p. 54). With the intention of solving this problem and putting into evidence this very important experience of the mother and the daughter, Hirsch seeks in some classic narratives [as Oedipus, Demetrius and Persephone among others] and Sigmund Freud's 1908 essay *family romance* a way to explore this topic.

Taking Freud's notion of *family romance* as a reference, Hirsch aims at reframing it in order to apply to some narratives in which maternal repression is presented. She suggests, as a beginning, a close reading of Freud's essay in order to create, as an alternative, a *female family romance*. By using the term *family romance* as a reference, Hirsch intends to "focus at once on the discursive and imaginative role that a family plays in our narratives and the particular shape and nature of familial structures in particular narratives and social contexts" (HIRSCH, 1989, p. 9). Furthermore, Hirsch reads Freud's essay as a 'paradigm' for the 'theory of fictionmaking' (Hirsch, 1989, p. 55). For this reason, it is necessary a reading of Freud's definition of *family romance*.

Freud asserts that the conflict over authority between child and parents is one of the most crucial for the child's development. This process of development undergoes two stages. At first, the child's deeply and most important desire is to be similar to his/her parents (that is, the one of the same sex), and to become big as his/her father or mother. Then, as soon as the child starts to understand that their parents are not extraordinary and incomparable as he/she had at first supposed, he/she imagines that he/she might be a stepchild or an adopted child. The child's imagination aims at being free from its parents that are not so good as they think before, then the child replaced their parents imaginatively for others, in general of a better social position. At the end of this stage Freud gives us an explanation about the development of fantasy and introduces us to gender distinction. Hence, he says that the boys tend to feel hostile impulses against their

fathers more than mothers, having an intense desire of being free from him more than from her. In this aspect, the girl's imagination tends to be much weaker [in terms of options for replacement of parents in comparison with boys]. It is possible to perceive that Freud's notions of fantasy and mythmaking, present in *family romance*, do not open space to the girl's participation because it is based mostly on the conflicts over authority between father and son. For this reason, Freud claims that the girl evinces a weak imagination. As soon as the *family romance* reaches its second stage, the child becomes aware of his/her parents differences in terms of their sexual relations. At this moment, in Freud's terms, the child realizes that '*pater semper incertus est*' and the mother is '*certissima*', in this sense, the *family romance* undergoes a reduction – the maternal origin is seen as something immutable and the father's position as the only option for replacement. Since the mother is '*certissima*' and, according to this perspective, the child should replace imaginatively - the same sex parent, the girl lacks this option. The father, categorized as '*semper incertus*', does not provide fantasies of illegitimacy which is the basis for creativity and imagination. If the mother's proximity makes this source of fantasies impossible, Hirsch understands that it is necessary to extrapolate this perspective as a form of providing the "opposition between generations" and freeing the girl's imaginative play, thus the figure of the mother might be removed from the fantasy. In light of this, Hirsch understands that Freud's *family romance* "clearly implies that women need to kill or eliminate their mothers from their lives, if they are not to resign themselves to a weak imagination" (HIRSCH, 1989, p. 56).

Once the girl eliminates the maternal figure from her life, she should center her fantasies on the father or brother, male figures that hold the "keys to power and ambition" (HIRSCH, 1989, p.56). Departing from this perspective, Marianne Hirsch observes that nineteenth-century female narratives, in an attempt to escape weak imagination, portray the heroines' lives apart from their mothers'. Some narratives silence the maternal figures with death; others reduce these figures to an inferior condition: weak and poor without sufficient resources to maintain a family and depending on the charity of others. Some narratives ally the mothers's absence to the association to a comprehensible man who would give the heroines a certain patriarchal power which Hirsch calls fraternal plots. However, the modernist writers comprehended that if the heroines silence their mothers, they would not have a role model that they could either follow or reject. Thus, Hirsch comes to the conclusion that a mother's presence rather than her absence, in the life of the daughter might help in the daughter's choices and

improve the possibility of transformation. It is possible to say that Larsen's narrative portrays a fraternal plot; her heroines, in an attempt to obtain a certain patriarchal power, associated themselves to men of a better social condition than theirs.

Furthermore, Marianne Hirsch sees mothering as a text, a story, or a plot. In approaching this sensitive subject as a story, she aims at investigating the formation of the female subject in discourses of motherhood and daughterhood. Hirsch raises questions about the meaning of femininity. She posits that there are differences among women that should be taken into account in order to understand the female universe. The distinction is not only between male and female, but the distinction between female individuals in terms of maternal roles such as "childless woman and mother, mother and daughter" (for the discussion of *Passing* I include black mothers and white mothers) in order to challenge the perspective of woman as a singular, unified, transparent category (HIRSCH, 1989, p.12 - 13). Besides positing that there are differences among women and that, therefore, this category cannot be generalized, Marianne Hirsch questions the difference between "*What is a mother?* and *What is maternal?*" (HIRSCH, 1989, p.13). Marianne Hirsch's questions, regarding the difference between "maternal" and "mother", remind me of a scene in the novel in which the three childhood friends - Clare, Irene and Gertrude - in an attempt to fill in the gap of the years in which that they were separated, tell their stories. One of the issues approached was mothering to each woman demonstrates a different position. In Clare's case, for instance, who hides her blackness from her husband and passes for white, pregnancy and the possibility of giving birth to a dark child is a nightmare as she says: "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark" (LARSEN, 2003, p.36). Hence, for Clare, maternal love is replaced by fear, strain, and terror. Gertrude, although being married to a white husband who is aware of her blackness, agrees with Clare and says: "but, of course, nobody wants a dark child", taking for granted that all of them partake in the same opinion. Yet, Irene, whose husband and one of her sons are black, disagrees with them and demonstrates being proud of the fact that her son is black. In a single scene, there are three black women, three different marriages, the same context, but divergent points of view; which demonstrates a good example of plurality of women and the impossibility of generalization that Hirsch advocates.

Nancy J. Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* is another important tool to understand the process of individuation of a female subject. She claims that the early experience

between mother/daughter is of paramount importance to help in the daughter's individuation and self-formation. At first, the infant (male/female) sees him/herself as part of his/her mother, but as soon as this mother starts to distance herself from the infant, frustration develops, an important feeling that would permit him/her to perceive his/her mother as a separate being. Additionally, the association with a male figure, such as the father, in the earlier period of life, helps in the process of individuation. The infant generally sees the father as a separate being and a competitor for the mother's love. According to Nancy J. Chodorow, the father's figure also represents activity and power in contrast with the passivity and powerlessness represented by the maternal figure. In fact, Nancy J. Chodorow states that, for a growing child, the mother's distance represents "independence and individuation, progress, activity, and participation in the real world" (CHODOROW, 1999, p.82). Although disagreeing with Nancy J. Chodorow when she inscribes female as powerless and passive, I see a positive perspective when she argues for the need of an association between father and mother in childrearing as a solution to change this view of female powerlessness and passivity as we are told,

Children could be dependent from the outset on people of both genders and establish and individuated sense of self in relation to both. In this way, masculinity would not become tied to denial of dependence and devaluation of women. Feminine personality would be less preoccupied with individuation, and children would not develop fears of *maternal* omnipotence and expectations of *women's* unique self-sacrificing qualities. This would reduce men's needs to guard their masculinity and their control of social and cultural spheres which treat and define women as secondary and powerless, and would help women to develop the autonomy which too much embeddedness in relationship has taken from them. (CHODOROW, 1999, p.218)

The advantages of the experience of shared parenting between both parents (independent of the genre male/female) encompass some positive factors such as a reduction of women's household and mothering duties, and the possibility of change in the discourse in which women are seen as inferior to men. Besides, Nancy J. Chodorow's perspectives on gender identification posit that a girl becomes feminine by learning "what is to be womanlike in the

context of this personal identification with her mother and often with other female models (kin, teachers, mother's friends, mother of friends)" (CHODOROW, 1999, p.175). Hence, women need good female role models in order to become strong and powerful, otherwise they are condemned to weakness. Within this perspective it is possible to infer that even though Clare has been absent as a mother, she has been a positive female model to her daughter through her attitudes as a determined and courageous woman.

Two themes will converge in the analysis of *Passing* – race and mothering. The text presents Clare Kendry Bellew and Irene Westover Redfield, two black mothers whose lives were connected in childhood, separated in adolescence and reunited in womanhood. Clare possesses "ivory skin" and "pale gold hair" some characteristics that permit her access to the white community (LARSEN, 2003, p.28). The narrative shows that once Clare's father and mother are presented in her life, she is seen as a black individual. Yet, when they are absent, her blackness disappears. Within this perspective Larsen presents what Ginsberg calls "the positive potential of passing", since, crossing the color-line as soon as it is convenient, Clare challenges identity categories and boundaries. *Passing*, the novel and the action, calls into question the "foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency" the individual who employs 'passing' has the opportunity of experiencing "multiple subject positions" escaping exclusion and oppression (GINSBERG, 1996, p.16). Both protagonists along the story have the opportunity to pass and prove that racial categories can be easily contested. Irene, for example, argues that

white people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was *alone* (the italic is mine), had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro (LARSEN, 2003, p.16)

Again, the absence of a reminder of the character's blackness provides her disguise into whiteness; similarly to Clare whose parents' absence means whiteness, when Irene is alone she acquires the opportunity to pass, to become white before the dominant society.

Clare and Irene as mothers provide a different reading of this female role. The former seems to be content with her condition spending most of her time dealing with her sons and preoccupied with their well being. The latter, on the other hand, does not seem to be so involved in mothering since her daughter is, most of the time, in charge of other people such as her father's relatives and also school matters. These two perspectives will be the focus of what follows.

3.1 CLARE: SELF-CREATION AND LONGING

Considering that mothering and self-creation might require exclusivity, Clare's efforts for independence entail a rejection of her maternal duties. The incompatibility of these two experiences, in the life of a female individual permeate the story. Clare, who is herself a mother, acts in relation to her daughter as an absent mother, similarly to her own mother. Being a motherless daughter and a negligent mother, Clare has the necessary freedom to carry out her self-fulfillment, her own evolution.

As a child Clare was categorized as black; however, the only mark of her blackness is her "Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing [...]" an inheritance of "her grandmother and later her mother and father" (LARSEN, 2003, p.29). Among the black community she was seen as "never [being] exactly one of the group" (LARSEN, 2003, p.20). Hence, blackness does not provide her with attachment. Among her white relatives, Clare was threaten and antagonized. This hostile environment forces her to make a decision "to get away and to be a person and not a charity or a problem" (LARSEN, 2003 p.26). Clare's determination corroborates what Hirsch advocates in *The mother/daughter plot* "the image of self-creation – women giving birth to themselves, determining their own course" (HIRSCH, 1989, p. 166). In the story Clare gives birth to herself and determines her own course when she leaves her aunt's house to marry John Bellew. She tells Irene that she had married John Bellew, a white racist man, for self-interest, as we are told, when he: "turned up from South America with untold gold, there was nobody to tell him that I was coloured" (LARSEN, 2003, p.27). Clare tells Irene that she had decided to have the things she "wanted and never had had. It made [her] more determined to get them, and others" (LARSEN, 2003, p.26). Not knowing of her blackness, John gives Clare monetary security that permits access to some benefits, such as to travel to some different countries and cities, to have some beautiful and expensive dresses and jewels that were out of her reach in her childhood.

Since childhood, Clare demonstrates she is a determined individual. Once she longs for something, she manages to obtain it without worrying about the means that she will employ to reach what she wants. As an adult, Clare's attitudes do not change. She continues to be demanding, challenging and daring. Recounting the circumstances of Clare and Irene's reunion in

Chicago, at the Drayton hotel, the narrator shows us Clare is a woman whose challenging and daring attitudes do not have boundaries. Clare confesses to Irene that she had crossed the color line since she had a chance, and for her passing¹³ is a trifle action that could be done by many people: “You know, ‘Rene, I’ve often wondered why more coloured girls, girls like you ... - oh, lots of others – never ‘passed’ over. It’s such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve” (LARSEN, 2003, p.25).

Clare, as it seems, wants to escape the seclusion that mothering and marriage represent. She eventually becomes a wife and a mother, but she does not want to end up entrapped by these two institutions. Davis sees Clare as “an aggressive individual who seeks self-satisfaction without the timidity society instills in female. Despite the existence of Margery, her ten-year-old daughter, she does not elevate the needs of her family above her own” (DAVIS, 1994, p.314). The only preoccupation that Clare demonstrates about her husband is if he is in or out of town, because when he is out she is free to visit Irene in Harlem. The fact that Margery’s position in Clare’s life does not seem to demand concerning and priority reminds me the young Larsen who, similar to Margery, should find her way alone without the assistance of a mother. Thadious M. Davis reads Clare as a modern and desirable female figure whose attitudes challenge and subvert the social structures:

In Clare, Larsen images a woman who has completely broken with her past, has refashioned herself, and feels no guilt about her decisions and actions. She represents the desirable and also the dreaded in the female: the desirable, in that Clare separates herself from the untenable in her existence; and the dread, in that no social strictures can hold her in (DAVIS, 1994, p. 314-315).

¹³. Passing according to Elaine K. Ginsberg means “as the term metaphorically implies, [that] such an individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary – indeed *trespassed* – to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other” (GINSBERG, 1996 p.3).

Throughout the story, it is possible to perceive a sense of loss and longing that marks the novel's very substance. When Clare hides her blackness to marry John Bellew this action symbolize Clare's denial of her racial ties. When she starts to long for black people, for kinship and decides to come back to the black race, it is an attempt for reunion with her ancestry, her family. Clare's endeavor to return to the black community might be misunderstood by her friend Irene who sees Clare as "selfish, cold and hard" (LARSEN, 2003, p.10). Maybe the close contact with loss does not allow space for Clare to develop romantic and loving attitudes: on the contrary, it develops in her an eternal longing for things, and for people.

Clare is not a common heroine who accepts her destiny. She is a woman who challenges everything and everybody and refuses entrapment. She writes her own destiny and does not accept advice from anybody. In fact, Clare does not worry about the consequences of her acts, as she says: "One risk more or less, if we're not safe anyway, if even you're not, it can't make all the difference in the world. It can't to me. Besides, I'm used to risks" (LARSEN, 2003, p.67). The critic Martha J. Cutter, for instance, claims that Larsen portrays Clare with this daring and challenging personality in order to call into question the permanence of some institutions such as marriage, motherhood, and religion, as it is possible to infer from this description: "Clare refuses to play by the rules that Irene and others believe in so firmly. And a player who refuses to play by the rules calls those rules into question, suggesting that they are not permanent, fixed, and closed but changeable, unstable, and open" (CUTTER, 1996, p.90).

Based on Marianne Hirsch's interpretation of Freud's *Family romance* it is possible to say that Clare does not have any problem in developing her imagination, her sense of creativity, since she does not have anyone to block her. In fact, she mentions this when she reports to Irene that she did not need to explain her origin to John Bellew and his family, but, if it were necessary, she would, "I have a good imagination so I'm sure I could have done it quite creditably, and credibly" (LARSEN, 2003, p.25). Thus, since the beginning of the narrative it seems that Clare has dreamt that she was a powerful woman who could do whatever she wants in order to define her own course; she crosses the color line, runs away from her aunts' house to marry John Bellew, and returns to associate with black people through her friend Irene. However, she misses what Hirsch called the ideal solution to female narratives, a role model to follow. Therefore, she ends up entrapped in her own loneliness and her eternal longing for something that she could not name, just feel.

3.2 IRENE: THE SEARCH FOR STABILITY

By changing the focus of this analysis to Irene, it is possible to observe that she was raised in a traditional family structure with a mother, a father, and two brothers. These parents took part in her life until adulthood, but it seems that her father's presence and influence is stronger than her mother's. She never mentions anything substantial of her relationship with her mother. Irene's mother does not have a voice in the story, similar to Clare's. As a matter of fact, Irene's family structure does not seem to be efficient in order to give her a sense of stability and security, something that she longs and searches for throughout the story as this excerpt shows: "to her, security is the most important and desired thing in life" (LARSEN, 2003, p.107). Her mother also dies, but when Irene was a married woman. Although she stood by Irene's side until she got married, her presence does not seem to be very effective in her life. In reality, Davis claims that Larsen's depiction of mothers' in *Passing* is not enough to provide a substantial influence in the heroines' self-formation as this statement shows:

Mother's are noticeably absent from the formative years of Clare and Irene. Although the mothers of both are mentioned, they do not figure as models for their daughters' perceptions of motherhood. Indeed, it appears that in an unspecified way, each daughter is responding to a lack of intimacy with a distant mother by inventing for herself a way to be maternal (DAVIS, 1994, p. 318).

Irene demonstrates throughout the course of the story to possess a sense of continuous anxiety and insecurity. She worries about her appearance, her actions, and her marriage. In fact, Irene classifies herself as someone "practical and determined" (LARSEN, 2003, p.63). Irene as a mother is overprotective. She does not want her sons to get in contact with the problems of her

society such as racism and lynching. For her, if they are apart from those issues, they will not suffer. In addition, in her opinion, her sons are too young to approach and think about issues like sex. As an overprotective mother and wife, Irene does not find time to think about herself as a subject, on the contrary, she becomes an object of her husband's and sons' needs.

Differently from Clare, Irene was totally raised in a black community; her family and friends are black. When she gets married she chooses a black man, and she advocates that she is proud of being black. Yet, she also portrays white features that allow her some furtive adventures in 'passing'. Irene does not cross the color line definitely because according to her "she has everything she wants" as a black woman, thus, she does not need to become white as Clare does to acquire amenities (LARSEN, 2003, p. 28). She just passes for convenience as in the first scene when she meets Clare at the Drayton Hotel where black people are not allowed to enter.

In Irene's point of view Clare is selfish, however, she herself demonstrates to be the most self-centered and domineering person in the story. At first, she does not want to help Clare be in contact with the black community saying that black people pertain to her as this excerpt shows: "[she] found it hard to sympathize with this new tenderness, this avowed yearning of Clare's for 'my own people'" (LARSEN, 2003, p.51). Irene refuses to move to Brazil [a country which Afro-Americans believe to be free of injustices and segregation] with her husband because as she says: "she belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted" (LARSEN, 2003, p.107). She insists on maintaining a marriage of appearances although she is aware that she does not love and is not loved by her husband. She also imagines that she can be in charge of her husband's life and decisions as it is possible to see here: "She had only to direct and guide her man, to keep him going in the right direction" (LARSEN, 2003, p. 58). In short, Clare is an individualist, and, differently from Irene, she does not want to manipulate other people's lives, on the contrary, she wants to define herself.

In fact, Irene demonstrates to be a dedicated mother; she does everything in the name of her sons' happiness as we are told: "we mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children" (LARSEN, 2003, p.68). However, her unconditional maternal love is exaggerated. In reality, Irene seems to forget that the real world is different from a fairy tale; it is not as perfect as she presents it to her sons, and the real world has some wickedness that she insists on hiding from them. Irene lives in a segregated USA full of incomprehension, prejudice and racism, but the discussion of these subjects is prohibited before her sons. Indeed, Irene does

not comprehend that a conscious parent should prepare his/her children for life, presenting them the real world as it is, and helping them deal with wickedness. Thadious M. Davis sees Clare and Irene's attitudes toward motherhood as an answer to their deprivation of "matrilineal heritage that nurtures and nourishes". For her, Clare and Irene: "have instead developed male development: they move into maturity by accepting and seeking separation, competition, and individuation as a way of succeeding in the adult world" (DAVIS, 1994, p.323). Clare demonstrates male development in her independent attitude and Irene in her struggle for maintaining her family together almost playing the role of a father trying to decide what is better for her sons, and for her husband, interfering in her husband's career, in his decisions. Throughout the narrative we perceive that Irene is closer to her father than to her mother, as he seems to be more present than her. Similarly, Clare's childhood was influenced by her father. This male development claimed by Thadious M. Davis might be explained by Nancy J. Chodorow's observations that

Mothers come to symbolize dependence, regression, passivity, and the lack of adaptation to reality. Turning from mother (and father) represents independence and individuation, progress, activity, and participation in the real world: "It is by turning away from our mother that we finally become, by our different paths, grown men and women (CHODOROW, 1999, p.82).

The second time that the two old friends [Clare and Irene] discuss motherhood, Irene tries to convince Clare to stop visiting Harlem in order to avoid future problems and the argument that she uses is that Clare is not thinking about her daughter's well being, Clare's response to such worry is that "Children aren't everything" (LARSEN, 2003, p.81). For Clare, motherhood is only a detail in her life, and she can have more if she is free of this obligation, or responsibility. She also adds "there are other things in the world, though I admit some people don't suspect it" (LARSEN, 2003, p.81). Actually, Clare believes as she has said before "that being a mother is the cruellest [*sic*] thing in the world" (LARSEN, 2003, p.68). Although, Irene demonstrates an unconditional love towards her sons, she ends up agreeing with Clare as her thoughts show:

“Clare put into words that which, not so defined, was so often in her heart of late” (LARSEN, 2003, p.68). Indeed, both friends do not know how to deal with motherhood; they are reproducing something that might be in their memory as daughters, because according to Chodorow a mother reproduces with their children the relation that she had with her own mother. If Clare’s mother had abandoned her, in Clare’s opinion, this attitude might not be incorrect. Therefore, she could act the same way with her daughter. Analogously, if Irene’s mother was present in her childhood Irene should be with her sons.

Even though Irene believes that a mother should be present, she is aware that for a long time a mother functions as an object in the hands of husbands and children, as she says “A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn’t count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That’s all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle” (LARSEN, 2003, p.93). Irene puts into words the anguish of most women who become mothers and dedicate their lives to their husbands and children, yet realize that marriage and mothering sometimes can mean entrapment. According to Thadious M. Davis, Irene’s fears “reflect her absorption of patriarchal culture. Her attention to her father, husband, and sons shapes and displaces her sense of self, her possibilities and potential, her values and worth” (DAVIS, 1994, p.316). Irene might imagine that by being a daughter, a mother, and a wife, she must place the feelings of these men before her own. This wrong interpretation might be the cause of her eternal search for stability.

Clare and Irene demonstrate different readings of race and mothering. Their understanding always portrays an exaggeration since they overemphasize one aspect of these issues and deny the other. As mothers, Clare exaggerates her lack of commitment, while Irene does so with the excess of commitment. For Clare, mothering means absence, liberty, and release. On the other hand, for Irene it means commitment, guidance, and security. Their comprehension of mothering might be based on their experience as daughters and this experience among absent mothers must not be sufficient to give them the maturity to grasp the real meaning of this institution. The real meaning of mothering in fact is really difficult to grasp as I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter when I refer to Hirsch’s inquiry about the difference between a mother and the maternal. Viewed through common sense mothering means nurturance, nourishment, education, comprehension, love, however, this view is oversimplified; mothering may imply more than these. The real comprehension of this institution also depends on whether a

person chooses to become a mother or if it is an imposition of society that demands this role from women.

Race, on the other hand, is another subject that disturbs Clare and Irene. Clare, at first, seems not to be bothered by her race. When she decides to erase her black ancestry and become a white woman before white society, it is an easy task for her. Nevertheless, time passes and this mark is difficult to erase completely; she becomes nostalgic of blacks, as she says “You don’t know, you can’t realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh” (LARSEN, 2003, p.71). Irene, on the other hand, chooses to live as a black woman, marries a black man, and has black children and friends. However, there was a time in which she desired not to be born a black woman, as this excerpt shows

Sitting alone in the quiet living-room in the pleasant firelight, Irene Readfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham’s dark children (LARSEN, 2003, p.98).

Race, as presented, disturbs these women’s sense of self. The simple fact that they belong to both black and white race lead these women to an inner conflict in which they do not know what race to choose, what race they should pledge allegiance to.

Larsen mixes two subjects that make women’s life difficult in a racist patriarchal society: mothering and race. First of all, mothering restricts women’s possibilities of individualization, because this role, apart from being an unpaid occupation, requires a mother’s dedication and time, and it does not entail advantages regarding power [for power I mean economic power]. Regardless of being white or black, the simple fact of being a woman puts the person in an inferior condition related to man. [Although some evolutions in terms of equality, women are still threatened by patriarchal ideas of women’s inferiority]. Besides, blackness helps to decrease their chances of social and economic development. Larsen demonstrates with this narrative that one of the options for the mixed-race individual’s social and economic

development is abandonment of the black race, yet this abandonment also means displacement, pain and inner conflict. Once the heroine chooses this path there is no return without pain; in Clare's case her return means death. At the same time that race separates Clare from her family in life, it reunites them in death.

According to Thadious M. Davis, Larsen illustrates in the novel *Passing*: "a loss of faith in the past, in friendship, in family, particularly a matrilineal heritage" (DAVIS, 1994, p.329). In a way I agree with Larsen because by being aware of Larsen's life story it is possible to comprehend Larsen's loss of faith towards friendship, family and motherhood. However, it is also possible to read this novel as an attempt of reconciliation between blood ties, between friends. Generally we solve our problems by revising them, seeing what might be done in a different way in order not to commit the same mistakes again. Although my reading of *Passing* presents women in negative positions in Afro-American society, it is impossible to deny that this novel also has a positive proposition in terms of subversion. This narrative must be read as a subversion of old verities and beliefs that human beings can be categorized by their race, gender and social condition. Larsen's protagonists subvert those verities crossing the color-line as it is convenient and showing that such an action is so simple, and so easy to employ that nobody recognizes their heritage. Besides, they become women and mothers who challenge the social structures of their society. Although, these heroines present some psychological problems such as insecurity, selfishness, and instability, they may serve as models to call into question some old-fashioned assumptions that women are passive and dependent. Clare and Irene, in their particular way, prove that they are women whose wish-fulfillment depends exclusively on themselves. Their husbands are only instruments to acquire things.

4 *PASSING AS A FORM OF DESIRE*

With the opening scene of her novel, *Passing*, Nella Larsen foments the reader's curiosity to pursue its reading. The novel starts with a mysterious letter that Irene receives. Such a letter disturbs and annoys her as she says "she was wholly unable to comprehend such an attitude towards danger as she was sure the letter's contents would reveal; and she dislikes the idea of opening and reading it" (LARSEN, 2003, p.9). The tension that this letter provokes in Irene might be the same one that provokes the reader, who becomes curious and anxious to know what is written in it, and who is its sender. This feeling of suspense caused by this opening scene of the novel might be what Peter Brooks calls the arousal of a desire taking on shape, desire to read the text, and seek its ending. As was mentioned in the introduction, this chapter is mostly concerned with the interrelation between desire and plot. As a theoretical support to this analyzes Peter Brooks's understanding of plot and desire developed in his book *Reading for the Plot* is extremely important to understand this narrative and the force that drives this third person narrator to tell the story of these two protagonists. In fact, the force that drives the narrator and motivates us to read a story and discover what is at stake in this story can be named desire. For Brooks, desire is "the motor forces that drive the text forward" it also "connects narrative ends and beginnings, and makes of the textual middle a highly charged field of force" (BROOKS, 1984, p. xiv). Fictional narratives, claims Brooks, throughout the history of Western societies stimulate a reflection on plot in order to confer understanding of our society and ourselves.

Reading for the Plot, as the name implies, according to Brooks, is about "plot and plotting, about how stories come to be ordered in significant form, and also about our desire and need for such orderings." For Peter Brooks, narrative might be seen as "systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality" that help us to provide signification to our lives mainly in terms of limits of mortality, of ending (BROOKS, 1984, p. xi). Every individual knows that his/her life will end up in death, however, nobody knows how, when, and what is going to happen until it ends. It is possible to assert that such structure of life is similar to a narrative structure; once we start reading a story, the opening paragraph generally instigates us to

solve the mysteries that permeate a narrative in order to reach its meaning, that is generally at the end when we reach full completeness. In addition, Peter Brooks claims that “plot is the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality” (BROOKS, 1984, p. xii). Therefore, we seek in plots and in narratives for the signification and interpretation of the text due to a feeling of closure that we lack in real life.

In order to comprehend how narratives work on us, as readers, and or as writers, it is necessary to understand plot and desire better. Plot, for Peter Brooks, is a “scheme or machination”, “an embracing concept”, a plan that designs the intention of narrative; it can also be “a structure for those meanings that are developed through temporal successions” (BROOKS, 1984, p. 12). As it seems, plot encompasses a wide range of significations, intentions and structures in order to confer meaning, explanation, and understanding to man’s life. In the novel *Passing*, when the narrator presents us Irene and the mysterious letter, what might his intention be? Is it to instigate our curiosity, or is it a form to present the other protagonist that took part in Irene’s past? These are questions that we might ask ourselves when we start reading *Passing*.

Peter Brooks does not deny the great contribution that the formalists, structuralists and narratologists (such as Greimas, Todorov and Barthes) gave to the study of the narrative, however, these theories and theorists do not advance in some important aspects that Brooks believes are crucial to the analyses of the narrative. He sees narratological models as “excessively static and limiting” whose main interests are “minimal narrative unities and paradigmatic structures”. As a matter of fact, Brooks is interested in what he considers a negligence of narratology, that are “the temporal dynamics that shape narratives in our reading of them, the play of desire in time that make us turn pages and strive toward narrative ends” (BROOKS, 1984, p. xiii). In order to pursue a wide understanding of these temporal dynamics that give form to the narratives, Brooks researches first in narratology, more specifically in Barthes works. For Brooks, the union of Barthes’s two codes: *proairetic* and *hermeneutic* found in *S/Z*, might be deciphered as a source of movement. *Proairetic* regards the sequences and logic of the actions, *hermeneutic* seeks answers and wonders about the veiling, the meaning that occurs when the narrative reaches its end. *Hermeneutic* also concerns what Barthes calls, “a dilatory space”, a space for the tension, the suspense, and the expectation. In this sense, Peter Brooks defines plot as an interrelation between *proairetic* and *hermeneutic*, because the union of these two codes arranges the elements of the narrative in order to provide meaning and significance (BROOKS,

1984, p.18). Besides this union also brings a certain dynamics to the reading which Brooks claims is one of the contributions of Barthes to the study of narrative structure. However, for Brooks, Barthes fails in not pursuing “the questions of temporality raised by the irreversible nature of the proairetic and the hermeneutic codes”, aspects that Brooks assumes to be very important to give more dynamism to narratives (BROOKS, 1984, p.18).

In the exploration of each of these codes, I find the basis for asserting that, according to the *proairetic* code, the narrator in *Passing* presents the sequences of facts that initiate the story presenting Irene, as this excerpt shows “it was the last letter in Irene Redfield’s little pile of morning mail” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 9). Hence, this same narrator uses the *hermeneutic* code to instigate the reader’s curiosity leading him/her to a “dilatory space” presenting a “long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl [which] seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it” (LARSEN, 2003, p.9). Here it is possible to see the union of these codes – the sequence of the actions and the suspense - in order to give meaning and movement to the narrative, to the reading of the story.

Taking into account that Peter Brooks’s interests in plots go beyond the mere study of forms and structures that narratology and structuralism offer, he goes further and searches in psychoanalysis, more specifically in one of Freud’s essays, *Beyond the Pleasure Principal*, for what he did not find in the theories mentioned above, that is, “models that would be more adequate to our experience of reading narrative as a dynamic operation” (BROOKS, 1984, p. 47). Freud’s contribution to Peter Brooks’s studies on plot and desire is associated to his idea that the most unconscious desire of human beings is the search for closure, for death, for the return to their origin. Death, for Freud, “is inscribed under the notion of Eros: that is subtended by the death instinct, the drive of living matter to return to quiescence of the organic, a state prior of life” (BROOKS, 1984, p. 51). In this sense, if narrative plot intends to be a symbolic signification of human beings’ lives, the accomplishment of the desire for narratives confronts the limits of the narrative, the end, similar to real life that possesses limits and margins or the end [that means death in Freud’s sense], as Peter Brooks says, “The telling is always in terms of the impending end” (BROOKS, 1984, p. 52).

Since plot is the arranging line and intention of narrative, reading for the plot, says Peter Brooks, is a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text. Although Peter Brooks understands desire as a concept that is too broad and at the same time too banal to be

defined, he describes it as something that gives form, generates dynamic and force to the narratives. In addition to it, desire is “always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun” (BROOKS, 1984, p. 38). In order to widen his understanding of desire, Brooks seeks in psychoanalysis the answers for his quests. For him, there might be “a correspondence between literary and psychic dynamics, since to an important degree we define and construct our sense of self through our fictions, within the constraints of a transindividual symbolic order” (BROOKS, 1984, p. 36). For this reason, the notion of Freud’s precepts about human beings’ instincts related in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* added to Brooks’s ideas on plot helps us to expand our comprehension of the interrelation between plot and desire.

Nineteenth century literature suffered influences of the power of the machines and engines which take part of that context and promote a feeling of movement in the narrative. For Brooks’s “the self-contained motor, working through combustion – typically, the steam engine – also corresponds to the emerging conception of human desire” (BROOKS, 1984, p.41). Such influences allied to Freud’s ideas about desire, provide the appearance of new heroes and heroines called by Peter Brooks as “desiring machines”. These heroes and heroines under the influence of ambition produce and maintain narrative movement towards desire, venturing the self onto the universe of desire imagined and performed. Although *Passing*’s scenario is the early twentieth century, it still manifests some influences of these “desiring machines” of the nineteenth century. Clare and Irene, for instance, are heroines who live under the influence of ambition “a force that drives them forward” in search of their objectives (BROOKS, 1984, p. 39). Ambition leads Clare to cross the color line in order to acquire the things that she aspires, as she says, “you had all the things I wanted and never had had. It [ambition] made me more determined to get them, and others” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 26). And it also made Irene to pursue the most desiring thing of her life, security.

As a final remark of Peter Brooks’s contribution to this thesis, the excerpt below presents a summary of his ideas about narrative as desire that I believe will widen the understanding of plot, narrative, desire, and the interrelation of both

Narratives portray the motors of desire that drive and consume their plots, and they also lay bare the nature of narration as a form of human desire: the need to tell as a primary

human drive that seeks to seduce and to subjugate the listener, to implicate him in the trust of a desire that never can quite speak its name – never can quite come to the point – but that insists on speaking over and over again its movement toward that name (BROOKS, 1984, p.61)

The quotation above serves as a possible construct of the meaning of narrative as a form of desire on part of the reader and the narrator. The protagonists of *Passing*, for example, possess this source of unnamed desire as the interpretation that follows will present.

4.1 *PASSING*: AS A METAPHOR

The third person narrator with the assistance of the *hermeneutic* and *proairetic* codes invites us readers to the universe of *Passing*, more precisely to the mind of these two enigmatic heroines, Clare and Irene. The plunge into this text might confer a symbolic expansion of the understanding of our own world, and of our own problems. Yet, such understanding might not be as clear for us readers as it is for the narrator, therefore, it will be necessary to decode its codes and decipher its enigmas disguised as metaphors throughout the narrative. With the assistance of Peter Brooks's ideas in his *Reading for the Plot*, I believe that the trip throughout this narrative can be a rich adventure similar to Alice's adventures into the fictional world of Wonderland, which is difficult and full of metaphors, though such a journey of self-discovery is important to enrich her growth and maturity.

Nella Larsen's novel offers an intriguing and enigmatic title, *Passing*. Many readers who go through this text may wonder what this title means. A look up in the *Oxford Dictionary* might give these definitions "that something is ending or that somebody is dying" however, such definitions do not provide sufficient subsidies to decipher this enigmatic title. As we start reading *Passing*, the protagonists Clare Kendry Bellew and Irene Westover Redfield bring out their understanding of 'passing'. Clare sees it as "a frightfully easy thing to do" (LARSEN, 2003, p. 25). On the other hand, Irene calls it a "hazardous business" (LARSEN, 2003, p. 24). Since this novel ends up with the death of one of the protagonists, readers might imagine that the title has to do with it, with this death; however, this interpretation is simplistic, a close reading of some researches about 'passing' might be helpful to find out a reasonable interpretation.

As a matter of fact, the word 'passing' as well as the title of the novel, carry many significations, for instance, as Elaine K. Ginsberg observes in *Passing and Fictions of Identity*,

passing in American history associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent "white" (...) "such an individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary – indeed *trespassed* – to assume a new identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other (GINSBERG, 1996, P.3).

Thadious M. Davis presents in the introductory text of the novel that ‘passing’ is “the movement of a person who is legally or socially designated black into a white category or white social identity” (DAVIS, 1997, p. viii). From these points of view, it is possible to say that ‘passing’ may be the desire that some individuals have of being white, as Martha J. Cutter argues that ‘passing’ “is a strategy to be a person”, of escaping boundaries and prejudice, desire for adherence to a culture that would provide privileges. Actually, Martha J. Cutter argues that “only when ‘passing’ becomes a subversive strategy for avoiding the enclosures of a racist, classist, and sexist society does it become truly liberating” (CUTTER, 1996, p. 75). As soon as the reader is aware of these significations and interpretations, he/she can make some assumptions of what is going to happen throughout the narrative and what might be its outcome. A search for the meaning of the metaphor of the divided self in terms of belongingness – white or black might be undertaken, in the sense that metaphor names one thing with the name of another on the assumption of a relation of similarity of the comparison between the two things. For Martha J. Cutter “ ‘passing’ becomes the ultimate mechanism for creating a text that refuses to be contained, consumed, or reduced to a unitary meaning” (CUTTER, 1996, p. 76).

The novel is divided into three parts: Encounter, Re-encounter and Finale “similar to a theatrical performance”, in Thadious M. Davis opinion (DAVIS, 2003, p. x) and each part of the story presents four chapters. As I have mentioned before, the story starts with a letter. This letter leads Irene to dive into the past, and presents us Clare, her childhood friend. The first part of the novel, in reality, displays a sensation of coming and going into the story, of a trip through time and space. The very beginning provides a sensation of movement, temporally and spatially. With Clare’s letter in her hands, Irene plunges into the past, at about twelve years early, in Chicago, and presents us “a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa”(DAVIS, 2003, p.9), then she returns to the present, in New York, at her house, in the year of 1927, thus, with Clare’s letter in her hands and with the last sentence of the letter in her mind “that time in Chicago” (DAVIS, 2003, p.11) Irene’s thoughts leads her to two years earlier, 1925, in Chicago again, when she encounters Clare by chance in a hotel. Indeed, it is possible to perceive that the narrator favors the character Irene, being detrimental to Clare due to the fact that most of the narrative is part of Irene’s memories and thoughts. The manifestation of the movement of the story can be perceived by Irene’s memories and through the introductory paragraphs of some chapters that present description of time, season and weather.

Taking into account that this novel ends with the death of one of the protagonists, one way of trying to understand this death might be via various metonymies spread along the narrative, since, metonymy, according to Peter Brooks, is “a figure of linkage in the signifying chain: precedence and consequence, the movement from one detail to another, the movement toward totalization under the mandate of desire”, thus, it urges a close attention to the details that this narration presents (BROOKS, 1984, p.91). Although the narrative appears to be simple and of easy understanding, it hides much information that only an attentive reader may identify. It is possible to perceive that some chapters in the story possess some interesting opening paragraphs, which present the weather, seasons and time. These descriptions are perhaps some hints that the narrator presents in order to pass this feeling of exchange, cross-over, emphasized by Peter Brooks as a source of constructing meaning, of hinting at transformation, because every time those descriptions appear, something happens in the story, in fact, something that bothers Irene’s life, as this excerpt from the opening paragraph of the chapter two of the first part of the story shows

Chicago. August. A brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun pouring down rays that were like molten rain. A day on which the very outlines of the buildings shuddered as if in protest at the heat. Quivering lines sprang up from baked pavements and wriggled along the shining car-tracks. The automobiles parked at the kerbs were a dancing blaze, and the glass of the shop-windows threw out a blinding radiance. Sharp particles of dust rose from the burning sidewalks, stinging the seared or dripping skins of wilting pedestrians. What small breeze there was seemed like the breath of a flame fanned by slow bellows (LARSEN, 2003, p. 12).

The description of this hottest of days in summer is loaded with metaphors that give attributions of human characteristics to inanimate things, such as “brutal staring sun”, “buildings shuddered as if in protest at the heat”, and “dancing blaze” engendering a feeling of discomfort, or of annoyance, as a premonition of something that would happen. Indeed, it is possible to perceive that every time that the narrator starts a chapter with a description of the weather, similar to this one, Clare and Irene’s lives are interconnected. As it seems, the weather represents Irene’s disturbance due to Clare’s presence in her life. For example, right after the description above

about the weather, while Irene, “was on her way to a sixth place that right before her smarting eyes a man toppled over and became an inert crumpled heap on the scorning cement” (LARSEN, 2003, p.12), such an event allied to the heat of the day leads Irene to the roof of Drayton hotel where she meets Clare, a childhood friend that she had not seen since adolescence. In fact, descriptions similar to this one appear along the story every time that Clare’s presence is manifested in the narrative, either in person or through a letter. The weather in those descriptions generally is extremely hot, or cold, or unstable. It seems that the weather influences Irene’s moods, it appears as premonitions that something dangerous and disturbing might happen. The way the weather bothers her is similar to the disturbance that Clare’s presence causes in her life. At first, the narrator presents hot days, hence as time passes, the seasons and weather change as well as the tension among the characters.

Hence, the third chapter of the Encounter starts with this description “on Tuesday morning a dome of grey sky rose over the parched city, but the stifling air was not relieved by the silvery mist that seemed to hold a promise of rain, which did not fall” (LARSEN, 2003, p.32). In fact, this introduction presents unstable weather which foreshadows rain. The same scene in which Irene visits Clare at her hotel also indicates an unstable situation, a possible revelation of Clare’s secret. Indeed, Clare did not inform Irene that her husband was uncompromising and racist. As soon as he appears in the hotel, John Bellew calls Clare as Nig¹⁴ in front of Irene, this situation provokes an atmosphere of tension as Irene comments “it was hard to believe that even Clare Kendry would permit this ridiculing of her race by an outsider, though he chanced to be her husband”.

¹⁴. The word nigger is a very pejorative way to address a black person. It was a very harmful insult at Larsen’s time. If you call a black person a Nigger you are offending this person.

Then Clare asks Bellew to explain why he chooses this nickname for her, thus, the explanation comes “when we were first married, she was as white as – as – well as white as a lily. But I declared she’s getting’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger” (LARSEN, 2003, p.39).

After this explanation, Clare inquires Bellew what might happen if he discovered that she is colored. The answer to this is “I know you’re no nigger, so it’s all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I’m concerned, since I know you’re no nigger. I draw a line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be” (LARSEN, 2003, p.40). With all these justifications in relation to the word nigger, Irene decides to question “so you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew?” However, the answer just increases the tension as it is possible to see here “you got me wrong there, Mrs. Redfield. Nothing like that at all. I don’t dislike them, I hate them ... they give the creeps. The black scrimy devils” (LARSEN, 2003, p.40).

This scene, similar to the unstable weather, produces an uncomfortable sensation ‘a dilatory space’, in Barthes terms, a climax which disturbs the heroines. Since John Bellew ignores the blackness of his wife and her friends, the more he expresses his aversion for Negroes, the more the tension increases. Such a stifling situation promises a revelation that does not happen, similarly to the promising rain that does not fall.

A day after this impasse, in which Irene is returning to her house in New York, a letter from Clare, arrives. This letter just increases Irene’s indignation of what had happened at the tea-party the day before at Clare’s hotel. Right away, Irene’s reaction before the letter is to destroy it, as if she were destroying Clare’s presence from her life

With an unusual methodicalness she tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares that fluttered down and made a small heap in her black crêpe de chine lap. The destruction complete, she gathered them up, rose, and moves to the train’s end. Standing there, she dropped them over the railing and watched them scatter, on tracks, on cinders, on forlorn grass, in rills of dirty water (LARSEN, 2003, p. 47).

This passage demonstrates that Irene wants to be free from Clare and from the letter which she destroys completely as if she were destroying the memory of that humiliation that she faced at that tea party because of what Irene calls “Clare’s innate lack of consideration for the feelings of others” (LARSEN, 2003, p.46).

The first chapter of the Re-encounter part initiates as follows: “such were Irene Readfield’s memories as she sat there in her room, a flood of October sunlight streaming in upon her, holding that second letter of Clare Kendry” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 51). Two years have passed after that encounter by chance in Chicago, yet, Irene still “retain(s) that dim sense of fear, of panic” that Clare’s presence provokes in her (LARSEN, 2003, p 51). The weather seems to be mild, neither very hot nor very cold, similar to Clare’s menace, which in Irene’s opinion is not very clear. At the beginning of the following chapter Irene still seems to be annoyed by Clare’s second letter, then she tears up the letter, as if she is, in a symbolic way, eliminating Clare from the story, from her life, repeating the same scene in which she tears Clare’s first letter. In Peter Brooks’s point of view

Repetition creates a return in the text, a doubling back. We cannot say whether this return is a return to or a return of; for instance, a return to origins or a return of the repressed. Repetition through this ambiguity appears to suspend temporal process, or rather, to subject it to an indeterminate shutting or oscillation that binds different moments together as a middle that might turn forward or back (BROOKS, 1984, p. 100).

In Irene’s case it is possible to infer that this repetition means a return of Clare’s repressed fear, and of Bellew’s racist’s words. Readers may wonder why Clare’s presence disturbs Irene. What is the reason for this annoyance?

The first chapter of the Finale part presents a description of the passing of time “the year was getting on towards its end. October, November had gone. December had come and brought with it a little snow and then a freeze and after that a thaw and some soft pleasant days that had in them a feeling of spring” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 85). Such a description provides

indications that everything seems to be all right and reaching its end, similar to the year that is finishing. However, on reading the second paragraph of the same chapter it is possible to perceive that Irene is not content with this weather: although mild, it seems to be out of place, or even out of season, as she says “she didn’t like it to be warm and springy when it should have been cold and crisp or grey and cloudy as if snow was about to fall. The weather, like people, ought to enter into the spirit of the season” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 85). We may wonder why this season is presenting unstable weather. Will it be a premonition of something that might happen? Actually, Irene’s life appears to be out of place, similar to the weather, for, as the narrator says “she was weary and depressed. And for all her trying, she couldn’t be free of that dull, indefinite misery which with increasing tenaciousness had laid hold of her” (LARSEN, 2003, p.85), in reality, what is bothering Irene is Brian, her husband, as we can see here “it was as if he had stepped out beyond her reach into some section, strange and walled, where she could not get at him” (LARSEN, 2003, p.86). From this perspective, the weather can be seen as a metaphor of Irene’s marriage; apparently it seems to be perfect, though as the narrative advances to its end, it is possible to perceive that there is no love between them as Irene presents “a feeling of absolute unimportance ... Actually, she didn’t count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 93). Actually, Irene suspects that Brian is interested in Clare and this suspicion leads her to compare Clare with the weather, by blaming her for all the troubles that her marriage is facing, as she says “Clare, who had suddenly clouded all her days” (LARSEN, 2003, p.92).

In this same chapter a symbolic event happens. When Irene is offering a tea-party for her friends, she breaks a cup; indeed, it was not a common cup as this excerpt shows:

It was the ugliest thing that your ancestors, the charming Confederates ever owned I’ve forgotten how many thousands of years ago it was that Brian’s great-great-grand-uncle owned it. But it has, or had, a good old hoary history. It was brought North by way of the subway. Oh, all right! Be English if you want to call it underground. What I’m coming to is the fact that I’ve never figured out a way of getting rid of it until about five minutes ago. I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it for ever. So simple! And I’d never thought of it before (LARSEN, 2003, p.94)

Since Irene is disturbed by the fact that her husband might be interested in Clare, and that she wants to be free of this feeling of insecurity, or free of the one who provokes this feeling in her. By reading the description of this broken cup it is possible to perceive that this special cup is a metonymy of Clare herself. Interestingly, Irene is talking to her white friend Hugh Wentworth, and, thus, when she mentions “your ancestors”, she may be referring to the white English people who came to America, the same ones from whom Clare might have inherited her white blood. When she says that she “never figured out a way of getting rid of it” [she might be thinking about Clare, to be free of her], she says that she had an inspiration. She “had only to break it”, [only to kill Clare] and she “was rid of it for ever”, [rid of Clare].

In the last chapter in which all the events come together to the final outcome, the opening paragraph presents terrible weather, as it is possible to see here “the next morning brought with it a snowstorm that last throughout the day” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 102). It seems that the weather foreshadows something bad that will happen. In reality, the narrator seems to be preparing the terrain for the last scene of the story, framed by terrible weather. While Brian, Irene and their children are having dinner, Brian mentions a lynching about which he had read in the newspaper. This sensitive subject provokes a quarrel between him and Irene, because she does not want their children to be aware of such things. In the scene that follows, Brian and Irene are at Felice’s house party, in which Clare falls out of the window. Some critics say that Clare falls down the window; others believe that Irene pushes her. With the chance of rereading this novel many times, I have found clues that indicate Irene as Clare’s killer.

Larsen creates a narrative which gives the impression of simplistic comprehension; however, as soon as we reach its end, it urges a return to its beginning in order to see what was missing in its middle to acquire full comprehension. Rhetorical devices such as metaphors and metonymies are spread throughout the narrative to indicate Clare’s death, in fact, symbols of fragmentation such as torn letters, a broken cup, and a story of a lynching, become metonymies of Clare. These devices seem to be pieces of a puzzle, and once we put them together, it is possible to solve the puzzle. The final scene in which Clare falls out of the window and dies, her broken body presents similarities to the man who faints in the beginning of the story, to the letters that were torn into pieces, to the cup that broke, and to the lynching.

Although it is not said explicitly in the text that Irene kills Clare, a close reading of all the story especially of the last scene of *Passing* provides indications of her guilt. George

Hutchinson, for instance, is the one that reads Irene as Clare's killer. For him "Larsen's masterful use of the third-person narrator limited point of view justifies itself most brilliantly in the resolution, which leaves Irene both saved and damned, a tragic villain" (HITCHINSON, 2006, p. 297). In not presenting a clear resolution to this end, to this death, Larsen is emphasizing what Hutchinson calls "the conspiracy of silence and blindness about how it came about", because he understands that "the cause of Clare's death will never be accepted in consciousness" (HITCHINSON, 2006, p. 309). Thus, what is at stake here is not who kills Clare, but why does it happens. For this reason, the next part of this chapter, in which the character's relationship is presented, might be helpful.

4.2 CLARE AND IRENE: SUBJECTS OF DESIRE

Larsen's two heroines Clare and Irene represent the urban Afro-American women of the early twentieth century. They were women who struggled with gender and racial problems in patriarchal and racist society, but the crucial problem of their lives is racism. Being part of a society that separates facilities and people by the color of their skin, Clare and Irene, in order to pursue their desires, employ a racial strategy to subvert the *status quo*. Indeed, the revelation of these heroines's identity brings to light a racial strategy, 'passing'. It is possible to assert that as passers, Nella Larsen's heroines criticize, what Davis calls, "a societal insistence on race as essential and fixed". Both heroines, Clare Kendry Bellew and Irene Westover Redfield, represent racial flexibility. They were "women who choose their racial identities" (LARSEN, 2003, p. ix), for instance, Clare crosses definitively the color line while Irene passes now and then. In so doing, Clare and Irene present 'passing' as a useful liberation. Once they are passing it is difficult to identify their racial heritage, for example, when the narrator presents Clare as "an attractive-looking woman ... with those dark, almost black, eyes and the wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin" (LARSEN, 2003, p.14), he did not give us sufficient subsidies to identify "the status, and the race of the blond beauty out of a fairy tale" (LARSEN, 2003, p.75).

When reading Clare's words in which she declares that she "was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, [she] wanted things. [she] knew [she] wasn't bad-looking and that [she] could 'pass'", it is possible to perceive that she is presenting her justifications for 'passing'. Clare, as it seems, desires to be someone, "to be a person", to escape boundaries, to acquire things, thus 'passing' becomes a strategy to have access to the things that are denied to a colored individual. At first, she passes for a white woman in order to marry John Bellew, as she says "when Jack ... turned up from south America with untold gold, there was no one to tell him that I was coloured ... the day that I was eighteen, we went off and were married ... nothing could have been easier" (LARSEN, 2003, p.27). Actually, 'passing' in Clare's opinion is "such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve" (LARSEN, 2003, p.25), Clare's reasons to

use race as a performance might be because the roles attributed to race are so easy to question. As the ones that Irene presents when she was ‘passing’ at the beginning of the story, for example, she suggests that racial difference infers ‘silly roots’ such as “finger-nails, palm of hands, shapes of ears, teeth”, as though in the absence of these roots the individual could not be identified, could not be classified as black or white (LARSEN, 2003, p.16).

Once Clare fulfils her desires and becomes an upper-middle class woman who travels around the world and acquires the wanted things such as valuable jewelries and expensive dresses, she turns her desires into other ones, she wants “to see Negroes, to be with them, to talk with them, to hear them laugh” (LARSEN, 2003, p.71). In fact, this heroine, as a subject of desire, provides indications that although ‘passing’ helps mixed-race individuals to disguise their real heritage and acquire things, this practice also brings loneliness:

...For I am lonely, so lonely ... cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life ... You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of ... It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases ...” ... “and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago... (LARSEN, 2003, p.11).

The quotation above presents desire and ‘passing’ in a close relation with lack¹⁵, indeed, lack and desire can be seen as virtually interchangeably. If someone does not possess the desired object, he/she may develop a feeling of constant desire.

15. According to Lacan “in constructing our fantasy-version of reality, we establish coordinates for our desire; we situate both ourselves and our object of desire, as well as the relation between. Our desires therefore necessarily rely on lack, since fantasy, by definition, does not correspond to anything in the real. Our object of desire (what Lacan terms the "objet petit a") is a way for us to establish coordinates for our own desire. At the heart of desire is a misrecognition of fullness where there is really nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections. It is that lack at the heart of desire that ensures we continue to desire. To come too close to our object of desire threatens to uncover the lack that is, in fact, necessary for our desire to persist, so that, ultimately, desire is most interested not in fully attaining the object of desire but in keeping our distance, thus allowing desire to persist. Because desire is articulated through fantasy, it is driven to some extent by its own impossibility”. This source of information is available at <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/theory/psychoanalysis/lacandesire.html> and was accessed on October 25th, 2008.

Lack, in this sense, alludes to the incompleteness of the individual. Desire, in short, corresponds to the necessity to have, to hold, to retain, to possess, to own, to keep, and to control the wanted thing. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that desire demonstrates what we want, and if we want, it is because something is missing; it may influence our sense of identity. Besides, once desires are accomplished, as in Clare's case, a part of her is lost; in this case, we can see it as her blackness. Therefore, accomplishment, in this sense, also means loss. For this reason, I named Clare and Irene as subjects of desire, since I see them as individuals who desire and lose many things. Through 'passing' these heroines disguise their real selves and have access to social goods and status; however, they lose part of themselves.

Irene, differently from Clare, refuses to admit her attraction to 'passing'. She even states that she does not need to pass because as she says "I've everything I want" (LARSEN, 2003, p.28). However, in her first appearance in the story, she is passing at a restaurant at the Drayton hotel [a place that does not allow colored people to enter]. Contradicting her statements, it seems that she feels happy and comfortable at "being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below". In this sense, Larsen presents 'passing' more than a strategy of survival, but as an escape from the injustices and atrocities of the real world, similar to the lives of the heroines in a fairy tale. Irene's way of life provides the impression that everything is alright, that she does not need to cross the color line and marry a white man to have the things that Clare has. On the contrary, she wants to show Clare that "some coloured men were superior to some white men", such as her husband Brian (LARSEN, 2003, p.75).

Under this pretence, Irene is 'passing' for a happy woman. Socially, she seems to be the committed happy wife of a prosperous doctor. She fights against the possibility that someone would discover that her marriage is not a happy one, that her family is not perfect, that as she says "it hurt like hell. But it didn't matter, if no one knew" (LARSEN, 2003, p.95). In fact, Irene suffers alone because of a feeling of mistrust that begins when she discovers that Brian had invited Clare to tea that Irene is preparing without consulting her. Indeed this feeling of mistrust initiates from the moment Clare appears in Harlem, in her household.

Actually, Irene desires more than anything else to be secure as she says "security was the most important and desired thing in life ... She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband" (LARSEN,

2003, p.107). In order to fulfill her desire for security Irene pretends that her life is perfect, that her marriage is a success, as she states

She assured herself, because she understood him so well, because she had, actually, a special talent for understanding him. It was, as she saw it, the one thing that had been the basis of the success which she had made of a marriage that had threatened to fail. She knew him as well as he knew himself, or better” (LARSEN, 2003, p.58).

In contrast with Irene’s desire for security, the narrative sets Clare’s longing for freedom. Through Clare, Larsen creates a heroine who disrupts this sense of security that Irene ardently longs for and pursues throughout the novel. Clare’s independent attitudes seem not to owe allegiance to anything and anybody. And it is something that she does not hide from Irene as she states ‘I haven’t “any proper morals or sense of duty... Why, to get things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away” (LARSEN, 2003, p.81). Such a statement sounds like a menace to Irene. When Clare says that she can throw anything away, is she referring to her marriage? To her daughter? When she says that she wants something badly enough, is Clare referring to Brian? These are questions that Irene might have formulated.

After Clare’s appearance, Irene demonstrates she is not as content with her life, her race, or her marriage. Everything seems to be affected by Clare’s presence, as it is possible to see here

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic (LARSEN, 2003, p.98).

For Martha J. Cutter “Clare seems to have this effect on people: her presence destabilizes their role inscription” (CUTTER, 1996, p. 86). However, the person most affected by Clare’s presence in this novel is Irene who according to Cutter “believes in the fixity of social and racial roles”. She abhors the idea of being unsafe, of losing her husband, and as she states, “was she never be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to remain as it was?” (LARSEN, 2003, p.57) Indeed, in Martha J. Cutter’s opinion “Larsen’s imagery implies that without her identity as the wife of Brian and the mother of his children, Irene has no identity at all” (CUTTER, 1996, p.89). With this assumption it is possible to say that Irene does not live her life, but, her family’s life, thus, she is not a full subject, but an object of her husband and sons. In this sense, it is possible to say that Clare’s autonomy clashes with Irene’s dependence on a family.

Unlike Irene, Clare believes “that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe”, therefore, “...what does it matter? One risk more or less, if we’re not safe anyway, if even you’re not, it can’t make all the difference in the world. It can’t to me. Besides, I’m used to risks” (LARSEN, 2003, p.67). With this statement, it is possible to observe that Clare seems neither to fear nor love anything or anybody; she just uses her husband, her white features, and her daughter as subjects of her desire. In this sense, Clare’s husband, daughter and even her race do not seem to have any importance in her life. In so doing, she challenges the social structures such as marriage, race, and motherhood that Irene believes should be fixed and unchangeable.

From the beginning, Irene recognizes the distinctions between herself and Clare. Indeed, she states that she and Clare were “strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitious. Strangers even in their racial consciousness” (LARSEN, 2003, p. 62-63). Irene desires security, stability, unitary racial identity [you are black or you are white, you cannot be both]. Clare refuses a singular identity that defines her as a married woman, as a mother. She also denies divisions of race. She does not want to be classified as black or white; she wants to be free of these denominations and move from one race to another.

In reality, Irene demonstrates, since the beginning, to be the most affected by this racial conflict. In the final scene of *Passing* when John Bellew appears at Felice’s house party and reveals Clare’s secret, such revelation seems not to affect Clare, she “stood at the window”

smiling “as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her”, Irene on the other hand, see Clare’s smile as a menace

It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm. [...] she couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free.
 Before them stood John Bellew, speechless now in hurt and anger. Beyond them the little huddle of other people, and Brian stepping out from among them.
 What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly.
 One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone (LARSEN, 2003, p. 110).

The description above presents Irene’s lack of control and despair, in an impulse she “laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm” and “she couldn’t have her free”. Even if the gesture provides indications of Irene’s guilt, it also makes clear that the third person narrator is favoring Irene in detriment of Clare due to the fact that Irene refuses to remember what really happened. And the narrator, when describing the room full of people, in which the events take place, makes sense out of the fact that there is no eyewitness to the episode of the falling scene. The questions about the death were addressed to her. And the answer was very convenient “she just fell, before anybody could stop her. I -” (LARSEN, 2003, p.114). However she ends her sentence with one “I” and a “dash”. What does she mean by that “I” and “dash”, is a question for which nobody knows the answer, and I imagine that not even Irene knows.

Larsen creates two heroines who mirrored their desires in each other, one pursuing the opposite objective of the other. This pursuit creates events in the text that create a source for a paradox – freedom, autonomy and liberty confronted with security, confidence, peace of mind, and guarantees. These heroines present this conflict faced by an individual divided by two different racial impulses in a hostile environment. These heroines are divided selves, the white and the black part, one desiring to be the other and none of them finding a reasonable ending to their problems, to their conflicts.

Considering all the issues handled in this chapter, it is possible to say that Larsen's psychological approach to cultural and racial conflicts in this feminine universe of *Passing* provides indications that such issues are so delicate that it is very difficult to find a resolution for them, or as Brook's observes in *Reading for the plot*, we "never can quite come to the point" (BROOKS, 1984, p.61).

5 CONCLUSION

Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* initially presents an instigating title and plot, and intriguing heroines. For those who have never heard about 'passing' the first contact with this title might excite curiosity. The novel possesses a plot which is not extensive in terms of length [114 pages], but it is intense in terms of content. Delicate topics such as racism, sexism, religion, and mothering take part of the universe of *Passing*, as well as of Larsen's biography. The two heroines, Clare and Irene, require the reader's attention to their complicated frame of reference and life story.

I began the analysis providing a synthesis of the Afro-American people of the late 19th and early 20th century and focused on a historical moment, the uplifting of racial consciousness, named the Harlem Renaissance. This analysis also presented what George Hutchinson calls "the biography of the color line", Nella Larsen's life story. These historic and biographic tools aimed at being as a background panorama to some issues that appear along the novel.

Larsen's historical environment, antagonized by the rules of Jim Crow codes and social inequality, is perhaps the best material to understand the context in which this novel is presented. Larsen as the daughter of a white mother and a black father in a society which ruled interracial marriage as illegal, might be seen as a product and a reminder of this illegality. Although she was raised in this hostile environment, and was separated from her family as an adolescent, Larsen found a way to succeed as a nurse, a writer, and a middle class married woman. In reality, Thadious M. Davis sees Larsen as a "proud, struggling woman who by means of work and effort made her own way up the social and class ladder, and who wrote out of a need to create herself and affirm her place" (DAVIS, 1994, p. 460). Larsen succeeded because she demonstrated courage to challenge her fate; similar to Clare, she did not accept the status of a cursed "daughter of the indiscrete Ham" (LARSEN, 2003, p.26). Though she was threatened by her society and own family, Larsen found strength to sublimate her sorrows through her writings. This might have happened because Larsen partook in a historic moment of reformulation of old conventions and traditions, and of racial consciousness.

In an attempt to grasp the female dilemma within this sensitive universe of race and mothering, I drew support for the works of Marianne Hirsch and Nancy J. Chodorow that focus on female psychology in terms of the mother/daughter relationship. These theoreticians open the discussion about the difficulties that women face in order to become full subjects instead of objects of their children and husbands. In reality, social structures such as mothering and marriage often limit women's opportunity of independence.

Hirsch, for instance, investigates female subject formation in the discourse of motherhood and daughterhood. Studying literary texts from different moments in the history of Western society, Hirsch claims that more than gender difference [male or female] within the female universe, there are other distinctions that should be taken into consideration in order to confer meaning to these two questions – what is being a mother? And what is the maternal? Regarding the heroines of *Passing* as models of mothers or the maternal [or mothering and nurturing], it is possible to say that even Clare and Irene do not know the answer to these questions. Clare demonstrates to be merely a female parent of a child, while Irene tries to act as a mother to her children. As it seems, the maternal is deeply related to nurturing feelings more than simple physical caring [that is implied in mothering] towards a child. Thus, the maternal has a close relation to the desire of becoming a mother, something very different from the mere capability of giving birth to a child. Thus, the way Clare lives her life and presents her desire does not open any space for maternal love, besides the fact that, it is something that she might not have experienced as a daughter.

Chodorow understands female individuation and self-formation in relation to the early experiences between mother and daughter. In her opinion, this early experience is crucial for the development of the infant, however she does not discharge the father's participation in this experience. For her, the participation of both parents in the process of self-formation would bring to the infant possibilities of a positive individuation in which the female individual would not feel inferior in relation to the male. Chodorow also posits that a girl becomes feminine through repetition, by learning “what is to be woman-like” reproducing values and attitudes that she learned with her mother, sisters, or other female models that took part in her universe. In light of this, and taking into account the two protagonists of *Passing*, it is possible to assert that, although it seems contradictory, Clare demonstrates she is a good role model and Irene does not. In spite of being the one who was described throughout the story as an insensible and selfish

individual, Clare demonstrates to be, in fact, a good example of a powerful and determined woman. Irene, who advocates abnegation of her wishes in order to become a good mother and wife, turns into a killer.

My thesis followed with a reading of *Passing* in the light of Peter Brooks's ideas about plot and desire found in his book *Reading for the Plot*. For Brooks the plot serve as "systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality" (BROOKS, 1984, p. xi). In Brooks's point of view, fictional narratives confer meaning, signification and explanation to man's life. Most of the time, we seek in the plot the understanding of the text due to a feeling of closure that we, as human beings, lack in real life. Brooks understands desire as something that gives form, generates dynamics and force to the narratives. Due to the meaning conferred to plot and desire it is possible to understand *Passing* as a form of desire; the desire to tell the story of these longsuffering heroines - Clare and Irene - to denounce a crime, to seek for a way out, to confer meaning to a divided self in terms of belongingness – black and white.

As I've shown throughout this work, it is possible to perceive that this biographic / historic, psychological, and narratological journey was not in vain. In terms of division of races, Larsen demonstrates the artificiality of this social structure. She contests the politics that are involved in its foundation. In relation to mothering, due to her context, one in which women were seen as reproductive in potential, Larsen's characters never think about the possibility of avoiding pregnancy. They just demonstrate their fears and abjections of giving birth to a black child, since at that time, mothering was not seen as an option, but as the natural consequence of being a married woman who must become a mother in order to leave descendants, in order to raise a family.

The last but not least important topic is about 'passing'. Larsen's novel with these complex issues of race and 'passing' can be seen as a register of that moment of the golden days of racial discussion and self-awareness in American culture. It also brings light to new perspectives of this practice of 'passing', as Thadious M. Davis observes, 'passing' nowadays embodies other interpretations, 'to pass' turns into a common practice as a "general descriptive verb indicative of masking or disguising any aspect of identity, such as class, ethnicity, religion or sexuality, implying as well an unmasking or exposing of one viable construction of a cultural identity" (DAVIS, 2003, p. xxx). In this sense, it is possible to assert that, in a society in which appearances are worth more than essence, to show a real self might require courage, something

that only a few people are endowed with. Thus, it is convenient for a subject to pass for someone that follows the patterns of a determined framework in order to be accepted. But Larsen exposes the tragedy that 'passing' can bring about. Even if the characters might present a positive value associated to resistance this experience also brings to the individual a void in terms of belongingness.

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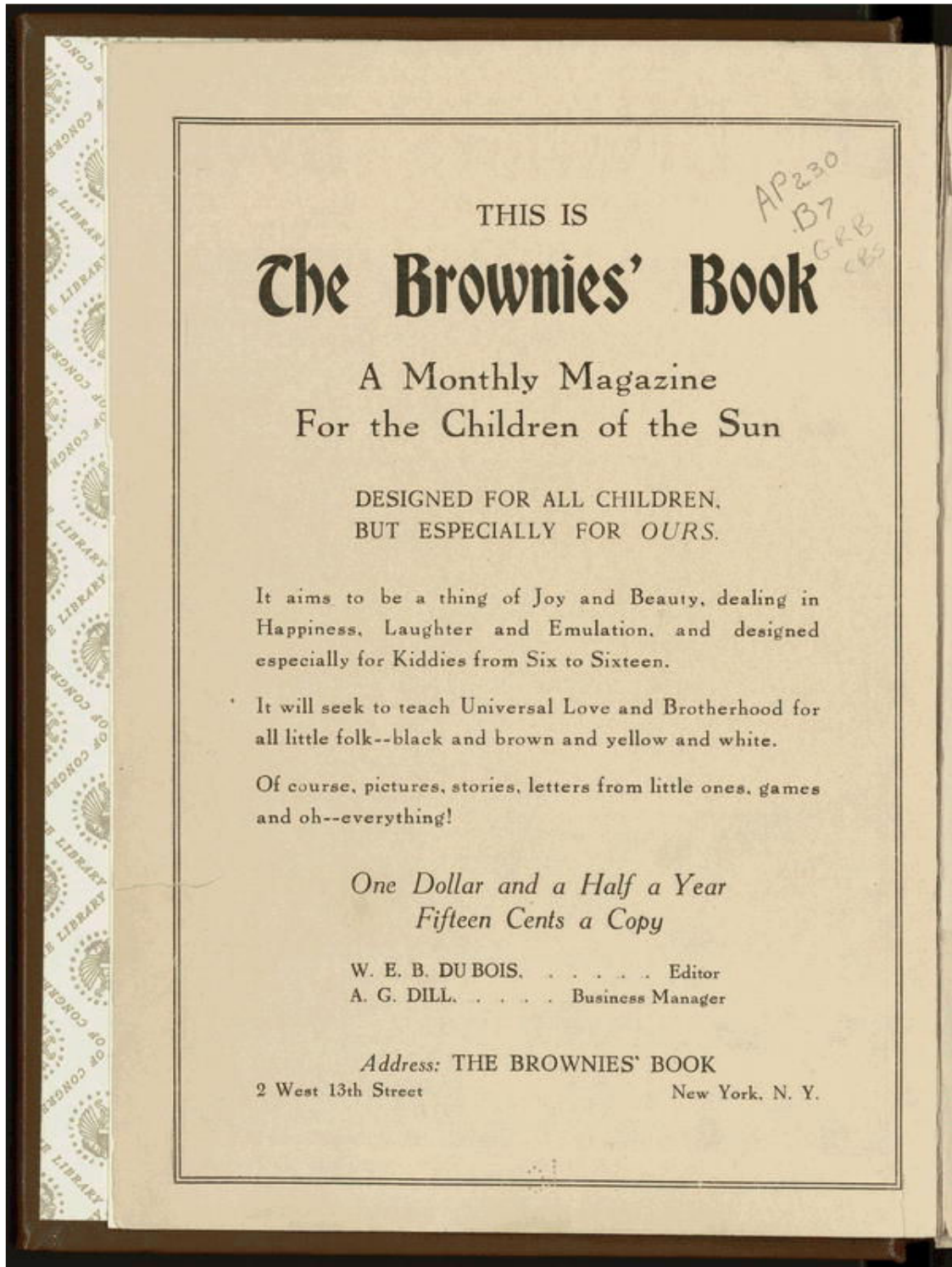
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ANNEXES



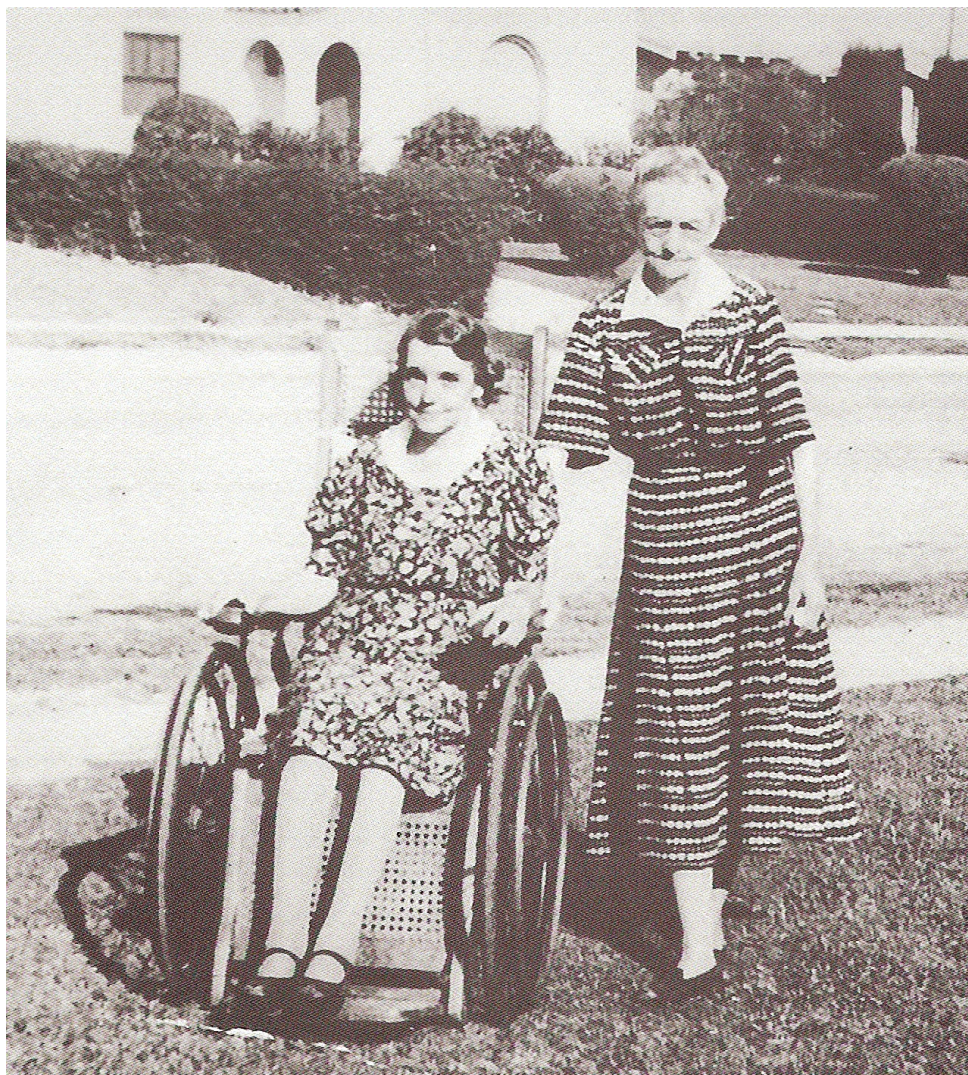
ANNEX 1. *The Brownies Book* a monthly magazine for children. Larsen initiates her career writing to this magazine. Taken from < <http://lcweb2.loc.gov> > (Access on December 3rd, 2008).



ANNEX 2 – Clover Hill High School by Nichole Frazier. Image from the black history museum cultural center. Taken from <<http://questgarden.com/61/11/9/080222070226>> (Access on December 3rd, 2008).



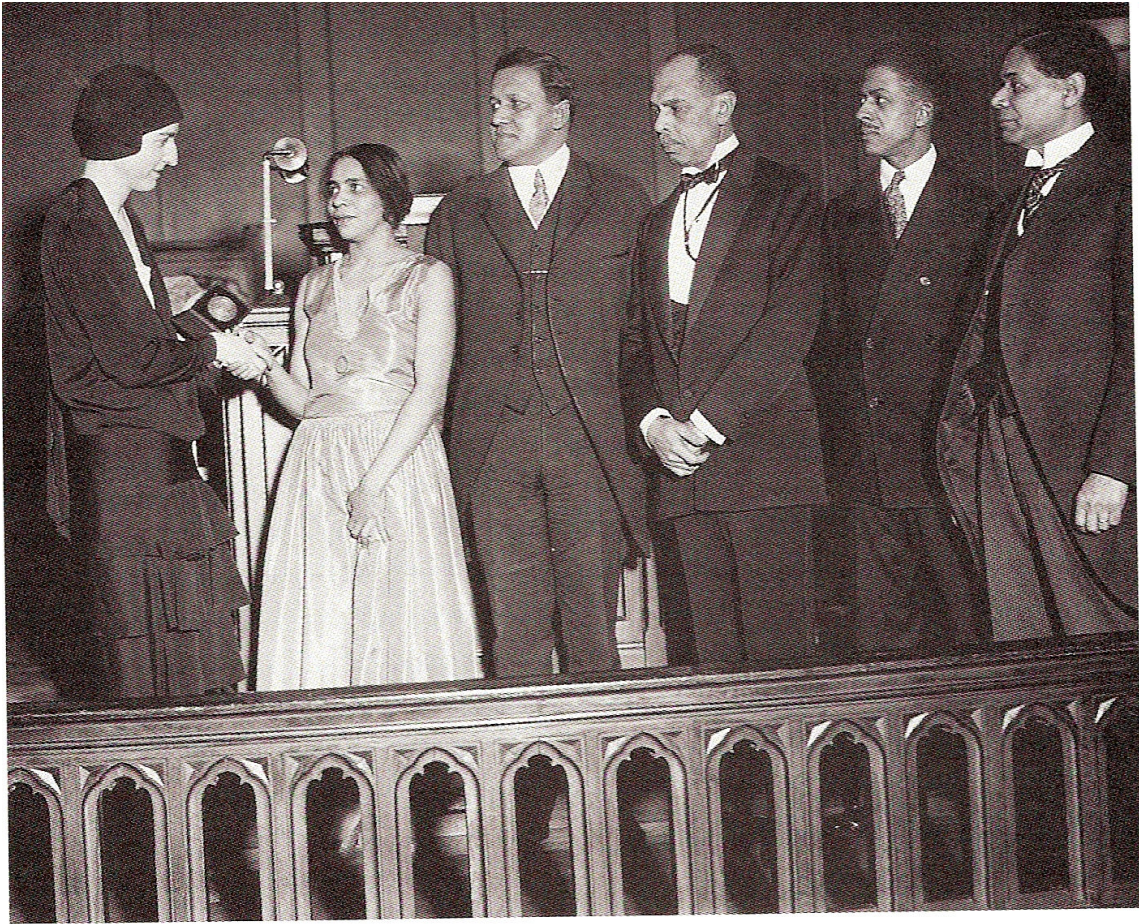
ANNEX 3 - Nella Larsen, circa 1930. Photo by Ben Pinchot. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Taken from <http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/143/Nella_Larsen_a_landmark_novelist> (Access on December 3rd, 2008).



ANNEX 4 – Anna Larsen Gardner and Mary Larsen, Nella Larsen’s mother and sister in Santa Monica, circa 1950. Photographer unknown.. Taken from *In Search of Nella Larsen*, p.470.



ANNEX 5 – Front and back views of Nella Larsen’s 1928 Harmond Awards Bronze Medal in Literature. Photographs by Keith E. Jacobson. Copyright Keith E. Jacobson .Taken from *Nella Larsen Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*, p.196.



ANNEX 6 - Larsen receiving the Harmond Award bronze medal, 1929. from left to right, Helen Harmon, Nella Larsen, Channing H. Tobias, James Weldon Johnson (standing in for Claude McKay), George E. Haynes, and unidentified man. Copyright Bettmann/Corbis. Taken from *In Search of Nella Larsen*, p. 314.