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“Exploding in Slow Motion: Nella Larsen's Characters and the Metaphor of Passing”

Nella Larsen, her texts, and characters have been labeled, mulatta/o, mixed, biracial, of multiracial or multiple identification, mestiza/o, and *flâneuse* or female *flâneur*, because of their mix of white and black identities. The concept of *passing*—which refers to the practice of biracial or light skin African Americans living as whites—can be applied to other aspects of life, such as class, sexual orientation, marital life, cultural affinity and any other context that requires assuming full identity when, according to the system or the community, the individual has multiple identifications. In a way, refusing to belong to one race, gender, class, civil or legal status is refusing the idea of being classified or catalogued like a book in a library. Nella Larsen was the first African American librarian in New York, a job that according to Karin Roffman influenced Larsen and her characters; in “Women Writers and their Libraries in the 1920s” Roffman argues that in her texts Larsen “questions how institutions develop and how individuals respond to different systems of organizing knowledge.” (203)

Characters that successfully pass for a long time live comfortable, like Clare in the novel Passing; however when the act of passing fails the characters get hurt or completely destroyed, either physically or morally. The best example is also Clare, who dies at the end of the novel when she can no longer live as white, but in the less studied story “The Wrong Man” Larsen presents the moral destruction of the woman, who passes as the happy wife of a rich man, but ends up confessing to a stranger that she was poor and had a lover when she was single.

But why does Larsen deal with the metaphor of passing and most of her characters fail

in one way or another? Perhaps the failure of passing is actually the way the characters refuse classification. In this paper, my goal is to identify the passing scenes in Larsen's texts, then analyze in how many ways the characters pass or reject classification, and then propose a deconstructionist examination of the contradictions created while passing. In my opinion, it is possible to take the metaphor of passing and the allegory of the classified knowledge at the library and present (examine) them in slow motion (from several perspectives) to find out what systems each character has rejected. The focus will be on the feminine characters in the novels Quicksand and Passing, and the couples in the three short stories—"The Wrong Man," "Freedom" and "Sanctuary."