

# **Quicksand and Passing Study Guide**

## **Quicksand and Passing by Nella Larsen**

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## Plot Summary

In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane, a young Mulatto teacher in a Negro school in Naxos, Georgia, is born of a white mother and black father. Deeply lonely as a child, she has not been able to identify herself as either white or black. *Quicksand* opens with Helga's decision to leave Naxos and move to Chicago because she is tired of the racial politics of the school. She announces her resignation to the school's principal, Dr. Anderson, to whom she is very attracted, breaks her engagement to a teacher named James Vayle, and leaves Naxos, relieved.

In Chicago, her formerly-reliable white Uncle Peter has a new wife, who rejects Helga due to her mixed race. Helga, alone and broke, finds work with an educated, wealthy woman named Mrs. Hayes-Rore, who asks Helga to edit her speeches on racial equality. Helga travels with her to New York and decides to stay on, living with a new acquaintance, Anne Grey, a wealthy Harlem socialite. Helga revels in her new life in New York, working for an Negro insurance company and attending social functions with Anne. But, eventually, Helga becomes tired of Anne and of the race-conscious culture in Harlem and leaves for Denmark to live with her Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul. There, she is treated like a wealthy, beautiful peacock. But after she rejects an unfortunate marriage proposal, Helga tires of her privileged, formal Danish life, and misses Negroes. Anne Grey marries Dr. Anderson, and Helga returns to Harlem for their wedding. After having a brief hope that Dr. Anderson loves her, he rejects Helga. Now desperate, Helga finds God and meets the Rev. Pleasant Green, whom she happily marries the next day. They move to Alabama and live in poverty; by her fourth child, Helga renounces God during a serious illness related to childbirth. She realizes how much she hates her husband and her life and makes plans to leave, but the story ends with the birth of her fifth child, and we are left to assume that Helga is forever doomed to poverty and misery.

*Passing* is the story of a Mulatto woman whose skin is so fair that she made the decision to "pass" as a white woman. Beautiful, fair-skinned Clare Kendry has married a bigoted white man and has lived an adult life of wealth and privilege, but she secretly longs to be back among Negroes. When she meets a childhood friend, Irene Redfield, Clare begins working her way back into the company of blacks, unbeknown to her husband. Although Irene questions Clare's motives and does not trust her, she is strangely drawn to Clare, who is very persuasive. Clare joins Irene's social circle and eventually has an affair with Irene's husband. When Clare's own husband learns that Clare is really a black woman, he storms a party and confronts her. In the hubbub, Clare mysteriously falls from the 16th story window to her death. There is the possibility that Irene has pushed her, although it is not clear whether Irene is simply distraught and thinks she did it, or whether she deliberately pushed her. The story ends with the reader questioning which of the women was truly mentally disturbed, and whether it was worth it for Clare to take the risks to get what she wanted.

Both stories deal with the practice of "passing," which was a common practice in the 1920s, when so many black women were products of white men's brutality toward black

women, and when Negroes began to own and strengthen their culture in places like Harlem. Larsen's adult characters tend to be well-to-do and educated for the most part, but all are starkly aware of the plight of blacks in America, and racism is a strong theme.



# Quicksand, Chapter One

## Quicksand, Chapter One Summary

Elegant, 20-year old Helga Crane is at home in her lovely living room, which is tastefully furnished and appointed, and a tranquil haven from her stressful job. She feels insulated here from the gossip of the school where she works in the southern town of Naxos. Recalling the sermon she heard earlier in the day about how persecuted the Negroes have been, Helga is angry and wants to leave here forever. Helga does not like the ineffectiveness of her teaching, of the strict negro education system, and the way in which her school has become a black showplace where an attempt is made to turn black children into white. Everything is done without spontaneity, and she knows the students' true natures are being suppressed. She has decided she is unfit for teaching in this oppressive system where the authority structure is condescending, and her own personality is not allowed to thrive.

She decides to ask her Uncle Peter, her mother's brother, for financial help, since all her relatives on her father's side hate her. Helga prepares to leave Naxos, in spite of her promise of marriage to James Vayle, who had fit into the school system nicely, while she had not. She feels their relationship has deteriorated and that her inability to adjust is disturbing to James. Without proper family ties, Helga finds Negro society as stratified and complex as white society, and she knows James' family disapproves of her.

## Quicksand, Chapter One Analysis

Helga is obviously quite disturbed by the decision she is making, given her choice to ignore the breaking vase, the state of her house when she finally goes to bed, and the inner-battle she seems to be fighting. Helga loves beauty and beautiful things, yet is not respected in this community because she is, apparently, a whitish woman trying to fit in with a black culture. She knows ending her engagement will be the end of any social standing she may have acquired in Naxos and realizes she will be better off leaving this place and all the frustration that seems to go with it. She feels she has failed her in her inability to adapt, or acquiesce. She has been lonely in the past, but this life, and this person, do not fulfill her enough to settle for her present circumstances. She seems like a woman who spends all her money on lavish, extravagant things, so she is not particularly prepared financially for this exodus, but seems to realize she has no choice.



# Quicksand, Chapters Two and Three

## Quicksand, Chapters Two and Three Summary

Helga is staying in her room. A fellow teacher, Margaret Creighton, comes to check on Helga and is concerned that Helga's cutting her ties with the school might hurt her career. Helga feels the school should be shut down and is even more determined to get on a train and leave this very day; she is "in love with the piquancy of leaving."

In Chapter Three, Helga makes her way across campus for a twenty-minute meeting with the new principal, Dr. Anderson. She gathers her poise and waits, unconcerned, as she observes the colorless clothing the employees are forced to wear. Helga prefers vibrant color.

Helga explains to Dr. Anderson that she hates hypocrisy, cruelty to students and teachers, backbiting and spying, and general pettiness that looms like a venomous disease here. He asks if she might not want to stay and fix it, but she feels she is disliked and suppressed. He feels she is too sensitive to such a common thing as injustice in a community and wants her to stay to give what she has in service to the school. Noting the effect of Dr. Anderson's gray eyes and almost convinced he is right, Helga over-reacts to his compliment that she is a "lady," angrily telling him her father was a gambler and her mother a white immigrant, perhaps not even married. She tells him she is leaving and does not belong here. She has probably misunderstood what he was saying, but her anger seals her decision.

## Quicksand, Chapters Two and Three Analysis

Unable to define the happiness she is seeking, Helga renews her decision to leave Naxos in search of that happiness. Helga has a vision of herself that is complex. On one hand she feels she is better than these petty, back-biting people, and on the other hand, she is ashamed that she has no family or breeding and that she comes from questionable circumstances. She is angry at the school system and Naxos but mostly angry that she does not fit in and just as convinced that she does not want to fit in.

Dr. Anderson tries to convince her that "service" is the most important thing, especially when sense of "values, proportion," and "appreciation of the rarer things in life" are needed at the school. Helga seems almost pleased to be able to shock him with the truth of her background, even though she lives her life in such a way that she tries to hide her background, choosing a more upscale sense of style and affluence. When Dr. Anderson suggests she has dignity and breeding, her shame evaporated and pride took over — her point apparently being that having a good family does not determine who we are. But his comment about how bad circumstances do not destroy good "stock," angers her because still, he is not judging her by her merits, but presuming she comes from a good family, which she does not.



# Quicksand - Chapters Four and Five

## Quicksand - Chapters Four and Five Summary

On the train, Helga is having second thoughts about having left Naxos and cannot stop thinking about Dr. Anderson. She is sad that she may have maligned her mother, a Scandinavian woman whose happiness turned into poverty and sordidness. Helga recalls her misery with white step-siblings and an argumentative stepfather, and how even then, she understood the need her mother had to remarry. Helga's mother died when Helga was 15, and Uncle Peter had sent her to a school for Negroes, where she became increasingly alienated and lonely. She realizes she would never have married James Vayle, even if she'd stayed in Naxos because she did not really love him.

Helga manages to get a sleeping berth at twice the price after being rejected upon her first request for one. She goes to sleep reliving the "angry, half-truths" she had told Dr. Anderson, realizing he might have understood if she had shared honestly with him.

In Chapter Five, now in Chicago, Helga stays at the YWCA. She walks to Uncle Peter's house and is met by a hostile new wife, who tells her not to come to the house again, denying that Helga is Peter's niece, since Helga's mother was never married to Helga's father. She runs away, devastated, seeing herself as "an obscene sore" in the lives of her relatives. Still, she understands her uncle's wife's need to reject her. All of Helga's demons come back to haunt her. Back in her room, Helga finds new hope, thinking she might get work at the library. She feels a new enthusiasm for being a part of Chicago.

## Quicksand - Chapters Four and Five Analysis

Helga has made a rash move based on the belief that she could count on her uncle. Now, having experienced the same kind of rejection she lived through as a child with white siblings and stepfather, she is on her own entirely. Although the rejection is painful, she is finding something liberating about having no one to depend upon but herself. With a stroke of optimism, she realizes there are many opportunities in Chicago and lets her anger and sadness slide away momentarily, realizing this is her only home, the city where she was born.

Helga is mixed up, running on emotions and fears without any particular direction. She does not know what she wants, only what she does not want. She seems determined to leave her unhappy past behind but cannot stop thinking about it. The author does not specifically say so, but it is clear that Helga misses her mother.





# Quicksand - Chapters Six and Seven

## Quicksand - Chapters Six and Seven Summary

Helga goes job hunting. Although highly qualified to work in the library, she is rejected. Putting it off until she has very little money left, Helga finally visits the YWCA employment division, which places women with references as housekeepers. She is not qualified even for those jobs and searches for two weeks. She finally gets a note from the YWCA director telling her that she might get a job as a traveling companion to a lecturing female, who will pay her expenses plus twenty-five dollars in exchange for some help with her speeches.

Mrs. Hayes-Rore, Helg'a's future employer, is ill-dressed and harried, a board member for the YWCA. Helga wants this job, if only for the reference. The women at the YWCA tell Helga to join them for dinner, and they will tell her all about Mrs. Hayes-Rore.

Helga learns Mrs. Hayes-Rore is a wealthy widow of a Chicago politico, who has prestige in Negro society. Her speeches, which Helga corrects and condenses, are focused on racism. Helga tearfully shares her life story on the train, but Mrs. Hayes-Rore appears to clam up. Helga decides to try staying in New York, and her employer offers to help her, since she knows people there. They are headed to Anne's house, who is the widow of Mrs. Hayes-Rore's husband's nephew. Helga is warned not to mention that her mother was white.

Anne Grey is elegant and wealthy. Mrs. Hayes-Rore introduces Helga as her little friend whose mother has died. Anne has Helga shown to her room.

## Quicksand - Chapters Six and Seven Analysis

Helga is finally panicking over her lack of money. Since she burned her bridges in Naxos, her lack of references and the interviewers' perception of her as arrogant is not helping her. She is unaware that she emanates indifference through her superior attitude. Even when she is offered a job, Helga is angry that the clerks still assume she is unemployed, and her pride is overblown. Helga judges Mrs. Hayes-Rore by her appearance, as she does everyone. When she has finally secured employment, she lowers herself to being kind to the YWCA employees, and realizes how likable they are.

In Chapter Seven, Helga superstitiously sees "Fortune" as a personified force. Now that she knows Mrs. Hayes-Rore has money, she has a different opinion of her. Helga still becomes hardened and angry when she has to explain her lack of family, but Mrs. Hayes-Rore's willingness to connect Helga with Anne makes Helga grateful. The tiny twist in the story they tell Anne makes Helga feel "like a criminal," since her mother has been dead for quite some time, but she is relieved to finally be with someone who she feels is within her social class.



Although Helga, while supposedly searching for a job, found herself shopping for things she decided she really could not afford, we see her later with the "rare tapestry purse," which she was admiring in an earlier shopping trip. We can assume that she does not have much self-discipline when it comes to buying beautiful things and not much practical, common sense.



# Quicksand - Chapters Eight and Nine

## Quicksand - Chapters Eight and Nine Summary

Employed in New York City, Helga is happy in black Harlem. She is now among new friends whose political beliefs are like her own, and she is more confident. She is close friends with Anne Grey, who offers Helga a room in her home, which is aesthetically pleasing to Helga in its elegant architecture and expensive furnishings. With a busy new social life, Helga never intends to reopen the fact that she is half white. She is pursued by men of wealth and status in Harlem. She has forgotten about James Vayle and only occasionally thinks of Dr. Anderson. She no longer feels the smallness of her youth and fees free here, admitting that money isn't everything.

But, Helga, in Chapter Nine, begins to be restless with an unidentifiable discontent about her life. She is experiencing now what we would call depression, having lost all interest in living and feeling a fear of her own self. She again begins to feel estranged from her friends and no longer likes them, including Anne Grey, who is absorbed in cynicism over the social inequality, and has turned her disdain for it into racism against whites. Anne hates everything about white people and wants racial equality above all else, yet she copies their clothing and their lifestyles, and actually dislikes the negro ways of dressing, talking, dancing and music, which seems inconsistent to Helga.

At a Harlem health conference Helga sees Robert Anderson again, who suggests they share a taxi. He wonders if she is still seeking something, and her anger overtakes her attraction to him. When he calls on her days later, Helga leaves the house, conflicted in her feelings. She finds herself bored at the meeting she attends and tired of talk about racism. When Helga arrives home, neither Anne nor Dr. Anderson are there, but Anne tells her the next day that Anderson has left Naxos and now lives and works in New York.

## Quicksand - Chapters Eight and Nine Analysis

Helga's new life is pleasing to her and meets her fantasized requirements, but her comfort only lasts for a while. Now that she has things the way she wants them, she begins to be depressed and withdrawn, her anger at everything and everyone overwhelming her sense of pleasure. The issues she felt strongly no longer interest her and, in fact, irritate her. When Dr. Anderson appears, Helga once more sabotages herself by being obnoxious toward him and pretending she does not care about him. There is foreshadowing in the fact that Anne is not home when Helga arrives; we can assume she is out with Dr. Anderson, on whom Helga skipped out. In Naxos, it was obvious that she was feeling oppressed and needed a change of scenery. It was also understandable that Chicago offered her nothing in terms of pleasure and support. But here in New York, living in a luxurious home with a woman of status who likes her,

having a good job and a busy social life, Helga still is not satisfied and still does not feel like she is home.



# Quicksand - Chapters Ten and Eleven

## Quicksand - Chapters Ten and Eleven Summary

Depressed, Helga has begun to see other Negroes as fools. When she receives a polite letter and \$5,000 from her Uncle Peter, along with his apologies for ending their relationship, she realizes that she has been "yoked" to black people, and she feels a certain sense of alienation from their culture. She feels that it was not simply skin color that makes people kin, but something deeper. Helga decides to go to Copenhagen to visit her white Aunt Katrina, who had begged to have custody of Helga when she was a troubled child. Helga feels she will be approved of and admired in Copenhagen and looks forward to another change.

In Chapter Eleven, the night of the welcome-home dinner party for Anne is hot and sultry. Helga goes with a group of friends to a club in Harlem where they spike drinks from their own flasks. The extraordinary music has lifted Helga to a new consciousness, but she tells herself she is not a jungle creature and refuses to dance. Helga is amazed at the huge variety of complexions and hair color among Negroes, and the mixtures of nationalities. Her enjoyment of the music wanes when she sees Dr. Anderson sitting with Audrey Denney, who has lately shown a preference for mixed company of white and black. Audrey disgusts Anne, who assumes that the two races do more than dance together at Audrey's parties. Anne thinks Audrey should be ostracized, but Helga secretly admires her for her courage to ignore racial barriers.

However, Helga realizes that she is envious of the girl's relationship with Dr. Anderson, and she leaves the club alone and unhappy, feeling misunderstood.

## Quicksand - Chapters Ten and Eleven Analysis

Helga's growing inner conflict is because she is both black and white. She wants to belong to one race or the other, but once she finds her place, she longs for the other culture which represents the other half of her genes. She is torn between loving blacks and hating them, hating whites and loving them and does not feel confident enough to simply accept people for who they are because she has never accepted herself. She feels betrayal when she hears someone speaking evil of white people, yet she is tired and disgusted with the blacks' ongoing discussions surrounding their lack of racial equality. The turmoil inside keeps her angry and unapproachable, and she alienates people who she would like to be close to, due to her unexplained hostility. She is now about to switch over to the other side where "there are no Negroes," hoping to find a sense of belonging in Denmark that she did not find in Harlem.



# Quicksand - Chapters Twelve, Thirteen and Fourteen

## Quicksand - Chapters Twelve, Thirteen and Fourteen Summary

Helga happily leaves New York on a ship, glad to be away from the people to whom she had grown an aversion. The ship's purser remembers her crossing with her mother as a young girl. In the ship's environment she feels free and like she belongs to her self. Helga suspects and wonders if she may have been in love with Dr. Anderson. She is met at the dock by her aunt and husband, who welcome her graciously.

Twelve: Now in her aunt's home, Helga is in the beautiful, lavish surroundings she loves and feels this is where she belongs. Her aunt wants Helga to be dressed exotically. They buy her jewelry, and she feels like a savage to be dressed up so loudly. People stare at her and she feels on display like a pet dog but enjoys the attention. Her aunt dresses her in a skimpy dress and puts rouge and bracelets on her. Helga is not one of the Danes, but only an attraction.

Thirteen: A very affected, theatrical man, the artist Herr Axel Olson says Helga is amazing and marvelous, and peruses her like a piece of merchandise. He plans to paint her portrait, though Helga has not been consulted or involved in the decision. The arrogant Olsen has arranged a shopping trip for Helga. Her blackness is an astonishing sight to the Danes who stare at her. Olsen chooses a wildly colored, outlandish wardrobe for her, paid for by her aunt. Helga grows to like her life as an attraction and feels the black people in America did not know how to own their own tastes but want to be more like whites. Helga feels important and aloof, and her memories of being black in America are dark, disturbing and painful.

In Copenhagen, even the poorer districts are clean and there are no tatters or beggars. Helga attends many social gatherings, eating smorrebrod, drinking coffee, and learning to ice skate. She spends a lot of time with Axel Olsen, who is painting her portrait. Although her aunt and uncle are encouraging more, Axel does not seem personally attracted to her.

Fourteen: Helga's aunt and uncle begin to nudge her toward marriage and feel Helga needs to stop wasting her time. Helga has familiar feelings of coldness and dislike rising up during lunch, when a friend, Fru Fisher, denigrates American music and mixed nationalities.



## Quicksand - Chapters Twelve, Thirteen and Fourteen Analysis

In two short chapters, Helga goes from being elated, feeling at home in her new life and once more in her right place, to sinking into fear, misery and uncertainty. Although she has been given a lot of much-needed attention by the Danes, she realizes that she is something of a side-show, but she even cheerfully settles into that role, due to her need for the attention and admiration. She has been living a dreamy life in Denmark, fully supported and lavishly kept by her aunt but now finds out that her aunt and uncle have been possibly scheming to get her married off. She is crushed and has the old feelings again of not belonging and of beginning to hate those around her.

We learn that Katrina thinks her sister was a fool to keep Helga when she remarried.

Although she is interested in Herr Olson, she is more concerned about why he has not taken a more personal interest in her. His interest is strictly from an artistic perspective. When she admits she does not know how he feels about her, her aunt becomes frustrated. Suddenly, Katrina does not seem the kind, motherly type that she was when Helga arrived. Although it would make sense for her aunt to want her to marry, Helga feels crushed by the realization that, again, she is not wanted. Helga is extremely insecure as a result of being rejected as a child, and does not know where she belongs in the world.



# Quicksand, Chapter Fifteen

## Quicksand, Chapter Fifteen Summary

Helga is unhappy again and puzzled by it. She feels like a peacock; she is upset to hear that Anne is going to marry Dr. Anderson. She does not want to return to America where Negroes are treated as less than second-class citizens and forced to beg for their natural rights. At a vaudeville show, American Negroes sing ragtime music, and delight the Danish audience, but Helga is not amused. She feels hatred and shame for them and feels Negroes do not admire themselves, proved by their negative imitations of themselves and their need to be equal. But she returns again and again to watch the Negro performers, feeling her conflicts but not willing to look too deeply into herself.

Helga wanted Axel Olson to propose to her but now suspects he is uncomfortable with her race, so she has given up trying. He has made inappropriate comments to her; she feels if he had honorable intentions he would have spoken with her uncle. Now he has proposed to her, and although she does not seriously consider marrying him, she feels it will be good to keep him around to shop with and be seen with. Personally repelled by him, she dislikes him in every way. He asks why she did not respond to his earlier overtures. She tells him that in her race those suggestions are not made to decent girls. Axel compares Helga to a prostitute and himself as the highest bidder. Helga firmly rejects him, telling him he waited too long and that racial trouble would plague them if she married a white man, especially now, after this conversation. After Axel Olson comments on the tragedy of his loss of her, he leaves. Helga knows his portrait does not resemble her but looks wicked and wild .

## Quicksand, Chapter Fifteen Analysis

Helga's restlessness is triggered by flashes of reality about her true situation. She cannot forget she is white, and cannot forget she is black. Now in an environment where she is admired and highly regarded, she feels like a peacock and an oddity. The performances of stereotypical Negroes at the theater has disturbed her in a deeper way than she will admit to herself. She realizes she is still seen as one of them and that she is still a negro, despite her lifestyle among whites. This social structure is so entirely different from the one in Harlem, it is almost surprising how much Helga has taken to it. But, she cannot ultimately give herself over to it. She encouraged Axel's attention and almost relishes rejecting him.

She has hoped for Axel's proposal and has pretended not to hear his leering gestures toward her, but even when he finally gets to the point where he feels he must marry her because he is so entranced by her, she suddenly realizes how unattractive he is and how much she truly dislikes him. He proposes in spite of his prejudice, and calls her a prostitute. She tells him she is rejecting him because he is white.





Helga is nostalgic for America. After all her deep anger and hatred for the racism in America and how Negroes are forced to beg for their inherent rights, she begins to long for America.

Again, we are reminded how difficult it is for Helga to look inside, search her soul or go any deeper than her surface emotions.



# Quicksand, Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen

## Quicksand, Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen Summary

The Dahls are disappointed that Helga rejected Axel, and Olsen is now in the Balkans trying to get over it. Helga's refusal has caused tension and even evoked a heartfelt conversation with her uncle, who is normally quite reticent. Helga would do anything for them but this, and this is really all they wanted her to do. The social life continues for Helga, but she begins to consider Anne's invitation to New York. Helga misses being around Negroes and finally understands, and even forgives, her father for leaving to go back to his own people.

The Dahls are truly sorry to see Helga leave for Anne's wedding, but they expect her to return, and Helga expects to return. They all feel things might be different then. As the ship departs Denmark, Helga feels regret and fear.

Ch. Seventeen: Helga leaves the home of Anne and Dr. Anderson, a bit miffed that Anne does not beg her to stay. Anne, however, senses the delight that her new husband feels around Helga and feels slightly threatened by Helga's attractiveness. Helga has not returned to Copenhagen as planned and is enjoying the "comic tragedy" of Harlem. She realizes these are her people and enjoys the free-wheeling lifestyle as compared to the stiffer, more formal one in Denmark, even though Harlem is cruel and uncertain. Helga feels somewhat superior to the satisfied blacks and dislikes the patriotic ones, thinking their zeal pathetic. But she enjoys the freedom from anxiety of her stately life in Denmark. Helga now blames Axel Olsen for her return to America, even though she knows it is not his fault. Helga knows she will never marry a white man, but also knows that she, herself, is a fool.

## Quicksand, Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen Analysis

The Dahls are somehow flattered by Axel Olsen's proposal to Helga and feel their own status in Copenhagen society might have been elevated if Helga had married him, so they are disappointed in her. Her uncle Poul's refined manner and affinity for keeping things on the surface finally breaks under his frustration with Helgel, but Helga's tears immediately close him back up, since he thinks any show of emotion is uncivilized. These are very stuffy people for whom society and wealth mean everything. Their affection for Helga is almost like that of a show dog - she is beautiful and trainable and behaves well among them, and they hope she will bring them a prize, like Axel Olsen.

Anne has given Helga mixed messages about wanting her in New York and is all too aware of Helga's allure. It is interesting that in these two chapters, Helga's former

attraction to Dr. Anderson has not come up at all, even though he is now married to Anne, who Helga considered her best friend.

Helga puts pressure on herself about returning to Denmark, but that is what Copenhagen represents for her — pressure. Although she enjoyed living in white, upper-crust society, the tension was absurd compared to life with the Negroes in Harlem.



# Quicksand, Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen

## Quicksand, Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen Summary

Helga finds herself just as attractive in Harlem as Copenhagen. Anne now keeps her at a distance, resenting that she has become so "white" in her appearance and demeanor, and feels Helga is somewhat disloyal to their race. Dr. Anderson, who Helga now dismisses as inferior after having been proposed to by Olsen, is also a barrier between Helga and Anne. At a party, Helga asks to be introduced to Audrey Denney, whom Anne dislikes intensely because she mingles with other races.

Helga spots James Vayle, her former fiance in Naxos. James feels it is the need to be among other blacks that keeps them returning to America from Europe. He is now assistant principal at Naxos. He tells Helga he does not like the mingling of white men with blacks. Helga tells him she does not want marriage and does not want to bring more children into the world, but he argues that the "race is sterile at the top," meaning that if educated blacks don't have children, the poorer ones will continue to have them. He tells Helga he intends to propose to her again. She brushes him off. Later, Helga bumps into Robert Anderson, and they kiss passionately. Helga becomes angry and pulls away from him.

In Chapter Nineteen, Helga wakes up and realizes the impact her kiss with Dr. Anderson has created in her. She stays on in Harlem, wanting to come to the end of whatever this might mean with him. He finally tells her he wants to see her alone. When they meet, Helga admits she wanted to see him as well. However, he blames his behavior at the party on the cocktails, and she felt belittled and ridiculed. She slaps his face and leaves, getting very drunk that night. She realizes he will maintain his good image of himself no matter what and resigns herself that he is gone forever from her. Her future looks dreary to her.

## Quicksand, Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen Analysis

Helga is flying high in Harlem, with her flair and confidence gained from being different from those around her. She has somehow kept herself from feeling anything about Dr. Anderson's marriage to Anne and has even written off her best friend to a degree, wanting to meet the woman who Anne has loudly detested. Helga even gets the chance, again, to marry James Vayle, which she shuns. After her encounter with Dr. Anderson, she cannot think about leaving until she understands what is between them. Thus, we see that the lack of mention about her feelings toward him earlier has only been a pretense to cover her lingering affection for him. It is possible, even, that she was devastated by his marriage to Anne, but we do not know this.



Her encounter with James Vayle elevates her even higher in her false sense of superiority. She feels sorry for James, and lets him know she is not interested in marrying or having children, even though he is still very interested in her.

Slapping Dr. Anderson is Helga's ultimate expression of her frustration and humiliation about his marriage to Anne, and the fact that she has always known there was something between herself and him.



# Quicksand, Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One

## Quicksand, Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One Summary

Helga is intensely depressed and isolated. She is not suicidal but realizes that her self-assurance has been crushed by Anderson's rejection. She goes out in the heavy rain and wind, walking the street, unable to get a taxi. The wind blows her into the flooded gutter. She finds a lighted mission where a gospel choir is singing and praying. At first she sits and laughs, but the people help her to a chair and Helga begins to cry without restraint. The congregation is singing, crying and praying; they identify her as a Jezebel due to her red dress, inviting her to come to Jesus. The preacher and congregation pray for her soul and become carried away. She is interested in the "writhings and weeping" of the women, and the preacher who chants with them. Horrified, as though she has entered another world, Helga is also fascinated and begins to feel a resonance inside her from the chanting and singing. Feeling sick, crying for God's mercy, she feels a calmness and a desire for simple, uncomplicated happiness.

In Chapter Twenty-One, when Helga leaves the mission, the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green escorts her home. She is interested in his calmness and his focus on spirit and soul-related matters. Shocked at her own mental meandering about him, she knows that the moment of ecstasy she experienced in the church is the only one she had ever had, all else being material possessions. Knowing that no one else would care anyway, she considers taking a chance with Reverend Green for the happiness and stability he represents. Thinking back over the steamer that has left for Denmark, her final encounter with Dr. Anderson and her need for a Power that might be interested in her, she becomes obsessed with marrying the heavy-set, yellow-skinned Reverend Green. She decides not to fail, and will use her distress, fear and even sexuality if necessary to convince him, and perhaps God.

## Quicksand, Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One Analysis

It is predictable that after going so far into her overly-confident and somewhat snobbish identity, that Helga was due for this break in her personality. Realizing that all of her decisions and actions have gotten her nothing but misery, she succumbs to the mysterious process of being "saved" and allowing herself to consider marriage to someone she does not even know. Her initial response to the writhing, wailing people in the church is one of fear and disgust. But, as her senses surrender to the chaos, she finally experiences a momentary release from all of the ego-related confusion that has plagued her for years. She is now thinking that only God can make her happy, and that Reverend Green is God's representative.



Reverend Green responds to Helga's attractiveness like other men, and she is amazed that she could possibly have even this man. Even though the author has hinted that the man is not at all attractive, yellow, with "huge ears and long hands," Helga is caught up in her desperation for happiness. The chance to return to Denmark has again passed her by. She has lost Dr. Anderson and James Vayle forever, probably has lost Anne's friendship and feels she has nowhere to turn. With Reverend Green, she feels she will have both man and God.



# Quicksand, Chapters Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three

## Quicksand, Chapters Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three Summary

Helga marries Reverend Green and moves to Alabama with him. Religion has become real to her, as has her status of preacher's wife. She feels she has done the right thing and is feeling good about herself, accepting the poverty, and looking forward to helping people. She imagines bringing her knowledge of clothing and home improvement to the parishioners, but the hard-working women consider her uppity and meddlesome and ignore her advice. Flamboyant Clementine Richards, who wanted to marry Green, holds contempt for Helga.

Helga enjoys having a house and husband and feeling right with God. She is able to ignore Rev. Green's loud eating, dirty fingernails and bad grooming. "In some strange way she was able to ignore the atmosphere of self-satisfaction which poured from him like gas from a leaking pipe." She is happy for now.

As Chapter Twenty-Three opens, Helga is ill and nauseated, and the light, happy days of the past seem long ago. She has borne three children within twenty months — twin boys and a delicate girl, all of whom she treasures and adores. Her sons bring light to everything in her life that has confused her in the past. However, she is pregnant again and her husband admonishes her to have more faith, that God had showered her with numerous mercies. Their home has become disorderly, Helga has become untidy, the children unwashed, and Reverend Green's interest in her is only between pregnancies. Other adoring women in his congregation offer them food, as Helga is too sick to cook.

The laboring, overworked women feel Jesus is helping them, and they all take their misfortune in stride, assuming they will rest when they die. Helga finally gives herself up to greater faith to get through it, and it helps shield her from the awful reality of her life. She stops complaining and gains the admiration of the neighbors. Her faith now allows her to put the responsibility on someone other than herself.

## Quicksand, Chapters Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three Analysis

As we might have expected, her initial happiness and glow begins to wear thin when the reality of life sinks in for Helga. Life in Alabama is one of struggle and harsh conditions, and now she is without possessions and comforts, having to deal with ordinary life and a certain degree of squalor. She feels the Reverend belongs to her.





These sacrifices are pleasing to her at first, but, of course, eventually it becomes too much when she is continuously pregnant and not feeling well. All her good intentions are put aside due to the rough conditions of her life, and again, all she has to turn to is God. Now, her children are her possessions. What is helpful to her about her faith is that it lightens her own burden that she has carried her entire life and makes it easier to keep going, knowing that none of this is her responsibility or her fault. Her faith also makes her feel like a better woman than she has been in the past.



# Quicksand, Chapters Twenty-Four and Twenty-Five

## Quicksand, Chapters Twenty-Four and Twenty-Five Summary

Birthing her fourth child has left Helga with no energy for living or for the child. The pain of labor has affected her brain, and she floats along the edge of consciousness. Helga takes stock of all the people in her life and analyzes them deeply. When she is awake, she recoils from her husband's touch and realizes she hates him. The "vastness" of the universe has come between them. Helga has realized that through her suffering, God has not been there, and that life is only a disappointment for Negroes. Again, Helga is shocked at what she has gotten herself into and feels she has been deluded and idiotic about the truth of the white-man's God. She is not even able now to pray for Reverend Green's death, since God does not exist. Helga cries some over bringing black children into a cruel world, but her nurse, Miss Hartley, helps her and keeps her resting and protected from visitors.

Her infant has died, but Helga feels only relief. She is making a plan. Reverend Green tells Helga the congregation is holding a celebration of her recovery. Miss Hartley agrees to read to her and Helga comments that she cannot call Jesus of Nazareth to mind.

In Twenty-Five, as she recovers, Helga realizes again what a fool she has been to choose this life and feels she has paid dearly for it. She sees that even the illusion of religion was better than this reality, and she is angry for getting herself into a quagmire again. She feels white man's religion is a bad joke God played on the blacks, making them believe that they will be compensated for all their suffering when they die, which makes them accept it. Helga mumbles imperceptibly about these thoughts, and her nurse wants her to get more sleep, concerned about a relapse.

Helga is determined to become strong enough to get out of this situation. Ashamed of her marriage, she knows this is all her own fault. She now hates the neighbors. She thinks about how to hold on to her children and escape from this place and the husband she hates; she knows she could not desert them. Thinking of the freedom and pleasantries of the past, and how she might retrieve them, she sleeps and dreams.

Just barely out of bed and able to walk around again, she begins to bear her fifth child.



## Quicksand, Chapters Twenty-Four and Twenty-Five Analysis

Ill and depressed Helga has no life force left for healing. She spends many days unconscious, perhaps by choice. The reality she awakes to is more than she wants to face and is too weak to face. Her repeated cycle of thinking she has found her answer, then becoming disillusioned and finally hateful and angry has repeated itself over and over again. For the first time, Helga allows herself to think past the surface and really analyze some of her friends and her decisions while she lies in bed. She is even clear-minded enough to analyze religion and decides it is simply a pacifier for those who are dealt a life too difficult to deal with otherwise. She is self-punishing again, when only a short while earlier she was almost proud of her faith and took refuge in it. In the long run, neither love, nor possessions, education, status or even God can take the place of self-knowledge, and Helga's misfortune is to be born at this time in history and being neither fully black or white, being somewhat unloved as a child and a very strong-willed, immature young woman. The author's implication is that Helga is doomed to repeating this cycle forever.

# Passing, Chapter One

## Passing, Chapter One Summary

Irene Richfield has received an extravagant-looking letter from Clare Kendry, postmarked from New York. Irene remembers their childhood friendship, Clare's drunken, violent father and Clare's ability to stay focused on her self and her own need to keep sewing a dress. When Clare was fifteen, her father's body was brought home; Clare's reaction was an angry outburst. Clare once clawed boys who made fun of her father; Irene compares her to a cat with superior strength and a soft, hidden malice. Clare's letter reveals her desire to see Irene and mentions their former meeting in Chicago two years prior, which brings a flush to Irene's cheeks, somehow bringing up feelings of humiliation, rage and resentment. Irene has no intention of seeing Clare or helping her revisit the past she had turned her back on years ago.

## Passing, Chapter One Analysis

The large Italian stationery and purple ink of Clare Kendry's letter, as well as her somewhat careless handwriting, implies to the reader that Clare is perhaps flamboyant and perhaps daring. Irene reflects about Clare's way of "walking on the edge of danger," which triggers Irene's memories of Clare avoiding the danger of her violent father and tending to her own needs. Irene recalls Clare's anger and Irene's ambivalence now about opening Clare's letter may imply that she is slightly afraid of Clare. Clare's letter apparently expresses her longing for her old life among blacks and evokes a defensive response in Irene that we do not yet understand.



# Passing, Chapter Two

## Passing, Chapter Two Summary

Irene recalls shopping in Chicago on a hot day. Hot and feeling faint, she goes to the top of the Drayton Hotel where there is a breeze. Enjoying her cold tea, solitude, and coolness, she sees a rather elegant white woman, who sits down, her male companion bidding her goodbye.

The woman finally gets up and approaches Irene, saying she thinks they know one another. She addresses Irene with the childhood name of "Rene," but not until Clare laughs does Irene remember her. Irene recalls last seeing Clare when relatives took her away after her father's funeral. She recalls the rumors of Clare being seen with rich white men, and the implication among her friends that Clare was selling herself for a great deal of money. The gossipers had mentioned Clare "having" way.

Clare asks Irene what people have said about her over the years, but Irene becomes embarrassed. Irene's father had gone years ago to check up on Clare, but her aunts said she had disappeared. The two sit together and Irene discusses her own life and her family but does not ask Clare about hers. Clare, who is married with two children, invites Irene to lunch or dinner but knowingly rejects Irene's half-hearted invitation to a weekend gathering, a relief to Irene.

Irene is curious about Clare's transition. Clare tells Irene how easy it is to pass as white. Clare says her aunts made her work very hard and tortured her with religion. Clare, being a poor child, escaped her aunts' home and secretly married a rich man.

Clare says she has everything she wants, except a little more money; she clearly married for money. Her smile warms Irene, and they part, agreeing to meet again. But Irene later scolds herself for making that promise to someone who deliberately left their shared lifestyle. She decides not to try to contact her. She is "through" with Clare.

## Passing, Chapter Two Analysis

Irene Richfield is obviously somewhat well-off, since she is traveling and shopping and frustrated by the human bodies around her in the city. She is used to comfort, as illustrated by her escape to the more refined air on the rooftop restaurant of a fine hotel, perhaps in shock over seeing the collapsed man on the sidewalk.

We know now that Irene has olive skin but is not as white as Clare. Perhaps Irene, too, is "passing" as white or Latino but has not abandoned or denied her Negro roots as Clare has. The author has also let us know that Clare has an inappropriate flirtatiousness, although she does claim to be married with two children. Clare's white aunts finished raising her after her father died, a man who was educated but failed somewhere along the way, perhaps due to alcohol.



In the moment that Clare rejects Irene's invitation to go to Idyllwild, the understanding between them is struck, that they live in two different worlds, and Clare crossing into hers would be too messy.

Although Clare has a seductive sort of sweetness about her, Irene is determined to keep her distance, knowing that Clare has many sides to her personality. Clare's smile is disarming somehow and is mentioned several times; it seems when she smiles, all negativity disappears and she becomes lovable. It is interesting to note that Irene sees Clare's mouth as "tempting." Clare is not portrayed as someone who is necessarily trustworthy. Still, Irene is strangely curious about Clare's lifestyle.



# Passing, Chapters Three and Four

## Passing, Chapters Three and Four Summary

Irene refuses to take Clare's phone calls but finally gives in and is persuaded to meet Clare at four. Gertrude, another old friend, is there as a surprise. Gertrude is Negro but married to a white man. Gertrude has become overweight and lost her beauty. She and Clare discuss their children, and Clare says she will never have another after having Margery, since she was terrified the entire pregnancy that Margery would be black. Gertrude agrees about the tension and states that no one would want a dark child. Irene, offended, says that one of her boys is dark and that her husband would not be able to "pass."

Clare's husband enters the room, and he is not the man who Irene saw Clare with at the hotel. He greets his wife, calling her "Nig." He explains his joke, that Clare keeps getting darker, and that one day she might wake up and be a "nigger." They all laughed heartily, knowing for sure now that John does not know of Clare's background, but he seriously states that there will be no "niggers" in his family ever. He says he hates the "black, scrimy devils," and so does Clare. Irene feels tempted to tell him he is sitting among three of them, but she holds back for Clare's sake. They discuss Irene's husband and his medical practice in New York. Irene mentions his obsession with South America.

When they are out of the building, Irene and Gertrude exclaim how dangerous and daring it is of Clare to live this way and to not forewarn them about John's prejudice. He made them both angry, and Gertrude feels Clare will pay a price some day for this lifestyle.

Chapter Four: Alone, Irene is furious at Clare and has a strange sensation about Clare's mocking and menacing facial expression. She realizes she should not have gone to see Clare. As she readies for her return to New York, Irene receives another letter from Clare, asking for forgiveness, and saying that she is not so sure she has made as wise a choice as Irene. Irene tears up the letter and tosses it from the train, eager to get home to see her boys and Brian, whom she hopes is not restless again to be in a new place. She plans to never see Clare Kendry again.

## Passing, Chapters Three and Four Analysis

They all laugh about a friend, Claude Jones, who has converted to Judaism, but Irene reminds them that maybe he was sincere about it and did not do it for his own gain. This subtly insults Clare, whom they all know has "passed" and married for material wealth. Clare mentions that she has returned to the states only intermittently with her husband, John Bellew, who is an international banker.

Irene has always been curious about Clare's hidden volatility, her strange courage to face and even encourage danger around her, and her buried anger. But more than that,



she is fascinated by Clare's beauty and magnetism, and her ability to persuade others, including Irene, to do exactly what she wants with them. Clare has learned to get what she wants at all costs, even if it means living a lie. Both Irene and Gertrude, whose negro heritage is not a secret, are much more comfortable about their lives and are astonished to see Clare living this way with a bigoted husband who has no clue about her roots. Clare stands by and watches her husband unknowingly brutalize these women by talking badly about blacks, and somehow we sense that she gets some sort of satisfaction from it, knowing that they will not give away her secret. Again, she courts danger. Irene knows that the best thing to do is to stay away from Clare because she is a dangerous person, careless of the feelings of others.

It is not a mistake that the author mentions, again, Brian's yearning for something different, as well as Clare considering the possibility of having done something different.





# Passing, Part Two, Chapter One

## Passing, Part Two, Chapter One Summary

Now, two years later, Irene receives another letter from Clare, asking to see her, saying she misses her own people. After what she went through in Chicago, Irene does not want to see this person who "wants her cake, as well as that of others." She does not believe Clare has any interest in or affection for the negro race, and Irene wonders why she did not speak her truth to John Bellew. She is still very suspicious of Clare and her motives. Brian finds Irene cursing and running late, with Irene telling him she will not see Clare, remembering Clare's husband calling her a "nigger." For some reason, Brian tries to talk her out of her anger toward Clare and tells her black people always come back to their race. But he finally agrees that the whole thing with Clare is unhealthy.

Brian subtly expresses, again, his dissatisfaction with his job, and Irene, again, feels threatened and guilty over insisting on their staying in New York. She feels the need to divert him by making some kind of change, and when she brings up Junior's exposure to sexually-tainted jokes at school, Brian explodes with his demand that Irene not molly-coddle the boy. Brian feels it is good for Junior to know that sex is a joke. Irene was hoping Brian would take Junior off to some exclusive school in Europe, which would provide a break in the monotony and unhappiness.

Irene realizes this attempt to divert his attention has failed and her own anger has made it worse. Although he loves her in his "slightly undemonstrative way," she is still afraid Brian will leave her for that remote place he subconsciously would rather be. She wants him to be happy, but only on her own terms and within her own structure.

## Passing, Part Two, Chapter One Analysis

It is interesting that Brian is almost defending Clare subtly and seems to be encouraging Irene to see her.

In her own way, Irene is something like Clare. She wants to manipulate her situation so it will continue to suit her, and she will do whatever it takes to make Brian see things her way to keep him from insisting on doing what he wants to do with his life. She sees any way other than her own way as a threat. Perhaps Irene's deep resentment of Clare is that she sees her own flaws in Clare's self-centered behavior.

Brian's bitter comments about sex being the greatest joke in the world imply that he and Irene no longer have a sexual relationship. He feels it is better for Junior to know this so that he won't be disappointed later on. Irene does not respond to this tirade, but the reader knows there is something amiss.



# Passing, Part Two, Chapter Two

## Passing, Part Two, Chapter Two Summary

Irene is offended that Clare needed to use a PO box as a return address, implying that Irene would be indiscreet. She throws Clare's letter away. Irene feels they have nothing in common now, and a barrier of peril lies between them.

Irene ponders the characteristics of her sons — Junior, much like her, is practical and determined, but Ted had a demeanor like his father's, perhaps hiding his true feelings to avoid confrontation. Irene is afraid, again, of losing Brian to his own desires, in spite of her constant trying to make everything right.

Clare Kendry comes to the door, and Irene tells her it just isn't right, that she should not take "silly risks." For just a moment she realizes the heights and depths Clare is willing to go to get what she wants. Irene tells Clare it is not safe to come back, and that she and Brian have discussed this. Clare says it was that incident that has made her so lonely, and Irene apologizes to her. Clare cries, envious that Irene is free and happy and safe. Irene reminds Clare of the potential consequences to her daughter, and how Margery might never forgive Clare if she found out, not to mention Jack's attitude. A call comes in from Hugh Wentworth, a famous author. They discuss the Negro Welfare League dance, which he will be attending. In 1927 New York, so many white people are attending Negro events, Brian jokes that blacks will eventually have to sit in Jim Crowe sections again. When Clare questions why Wentworth would come, Irene tells her that he comes to see Negroes, just like she wants to do. Irene refuses to invite her, but Clare announces she will attend, regardless. Irene tries hard to dissuade her, suggesting possible unpleasantness and begging her to see reason, but Clare is determined. She wants to see Negroes again and hear them laugh. Clare finally consents. She takes Clare upstairs to meet her sons.

Annoyed with herself for being manipulated by Clare again, she is not looking forward to telling Brian. Thinking of all the small inconveniences this was going to create for her, Irene thinks again about how Clare manages to get what she wants, regardless of the cost to others. She does not seem to be someone who carries the wounds of life, but remains an attractive, selfish child.

## Passing, Part Two, Chapter Two Analysis

It is difficult to assess how genuine Clare is about her need to be with Negroes again, though the pain for her could be real. However, knowing how self-focused she is, there is something very suspicious about her pressing herself on Irene. But Irene, in trying to keep her own life orderly and managed the way she wants it, finds Clare's intrusion annoying and unnerving. Unable to resist Clare's well-practiced tears, Irene finds it hard



not to have compassion for her and finds it impossible to be firm with her, even when Clare is not making sense.

Clare's strange mention that she would like to kill her husband provides a foreboding peek into her tormented personality.

It is understandable that Clare does not feel free and, in spite of it being her own doing, Irene cannot hurt Clare's feelings. However, it may be that Clare's feelings cannot be hurt; she has insulated herself as part of her survival technique, as evidenced by her response to her father's abusiveness earlier in the story. It is ironic that Irene tells Clare that no one is ever happy or free or safe. Allowing Clare to enter the inner parts of her home and meeting her sons may be symbolic of Irene's allowing herself to become far too vulnerable.



# Passing, Part Two, Chapters Three and Four

## Passing, Part Two, Chapters Three and Four Summary

Brian's response to Irene's announcement that Clare was coming to the dance was a "not quite derisive smile." On the evening of the dance, Irene finds Clare downstairs with Brian, the two having introduced themselves. Clare is overdressed, but stunning. Brian is nice to Clare, which pleases Irene. Clare dances with men, both white and black. Hugh Wentworth would like to meet Clare and complains that the black men are always more attractive to white women, as his own wife dances about with black men. They discuss how "passing" is easier for blacks than whites. At the end of the evening when Brian wants to take Clare home, Irene says she has already arranged for the Wentworths to do so. Irene has told them nothing about Clare's secret.

After that dance, Clare becomes a regular visitor to Irene's house, winning the admiration of the children and making friends with the help. Brian now seems comfortable with her, although he claims not to think Clare is beautiful. Clare is strangely quiet at their private dinner parties but talkative and well liked otherwise, garnering sympathy from others. She usually comes around when her husband is out of town, but she is scheduled to go with him to see their daughter who is at school in Switzerland and is not happy about leaving New York.

Clare does not seem particularly fond of children in general. She tells Irene she hasn't "proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do." Clare goes on to tell Irene that she would hurt anybody and throw anything away to get what she wanted, and that she is not safe. Irene objects to this statement, but Clare's "having" nature stays with her. Clare cries for an unknown reason.

## Passing, Part Two, Chapters Three and Four Analysis

These two chapters set the tone for what is about to come. Clare, with her "having" ways, has wormed her way into the Redfields' household, has made friends with the family and Brian, and now openly admits to Irene that she is ruthless and lacking in morals. Her silence at their dinner table, contrasted with her lively personality in other social situations, is curious, but it is becoming quite obvious in the author's tone, that Irene is now looking back on what seemed to be an innocuous period of time but which is, in reality, turning into a nightmare.

Clare's crying at the end of Chapter Four indicates that there is some kind of pain she is hiding from Irene and foreshadows trouble.



# Passing, Part Three, Finale, Chapter One

## Passing, Part Three, Finale, Chapter One Summary

Irene is depressed. Returning home, Irene wonders if the only thing bothering Brian is his desire to go to Brazil. Brian is unhappy and restless, and seems to have a secret. He has withdrawn into a state where she cannot read him. Irene takes a nap, tired from sleepless nights and anxiety. Brian wakes her and tells her Clare is downstairs. He stares at her as though he is staring through her. Irene says she purposely did not invite Clare to tea because the occasion is for Hugh, and Clare is not Hugh's favorite. Brian feels Hugh thinks he is god and admits that he invited Clare, thinking that Irene just forgot. Irene is furious and is suddenly struck with a knowing panic. When he leaves the room, she cries with shame and rage, thinking she has been a fool.

Irene forces herself to smile and get through the tea and visitation, unable to face squarely what she suspects. Clare looks beautiful, as usual, but is somewhat withdrawn. Irene's friend Felise notices Clare is not herself and suggests she go clothes shopping.

Irene is so overcome with her rage watching Clare seductively speak to Felise's husband, she purposefully drops her tea cup, and Hugh Wentworth tries to take the blame. But Irene tells him she broke it deliberately because it was an ugly old family heirloom of Brian's and she has always disliked it. Brian has a medical meeting and Clare cannot stay for dinner. Irene's pain is almost unbearable, but she thinks of her boys and decides it does not matter.

## Passing, Part Three, Finale, Chapter One Analysis

Irene has finally put together the pieces of Brian's affair with Clare, and her rage is too overwhelming to sort it out. She has not had the time to puzzle through it but instinctively knows what has been going on, and forces herself to play the part of wife and host to her company. She is in a nightmarish state of mind, and the afternoon has taken on a surreal quality. She is polite and kind to Clare but sees Brian and feels like she has never really seen him before.

Her dropping of the teacup is out of anger toward Clare and her phoniness but also out of a feeling of being unnoticed and unimportant. Although Larsen does not tell us directly, it is clear that Irene's chatter and exaggerated behaviors are noticeable, and she is not being as covert with her emotions as she thinks.



# Passing, Part Three, Chapters Two and Three

## Passing, Part Three, Chapters Two and Three Summary

Irene, in her turmoil, tries to think she might be wrong about the affair, since she has no real evidence, but she cannot quite convince herself that it is not true. Clare has returned to her other life, her husband being back home. Brian has completely withdrawn, but Irene tries to assume it is the same old longing that he has always had and does not involve Clare.

It occurs to Irene that she has the means to remove Clare from her life entirely. For the first time, Irene wishes she had not been born a Negro, since people suffer for themselves and for their race. Irene decides she does not need John Bellew to know that Clare is part black, but he needs only to know that she has been spending her time in Harlem. Ironically, while shopping with Felise on a stormy day, the two women literally run into John Bellew, who realizes immediately that Felise is black. Irene later wishes she had introduced Felise to him as Clare's husband, but the opportunity is lost, as he obviously is disgusted and repulsed. However, this brief meeting may mean the end of Clare for Irene, and she is not able to tell Brian about it because she is afraid it will serve as a warning to him, as well. She is concerned that perhaps Bellew will divorce Clare. She even considers what it would be like if Clare died. Brian leaves the house, and Irene thinks about the past and the children and of times they would never have again. She is anxious for March, when Clare will sail out with her husband.

## Passing, Part Three, Chapters Two and Three Analysis

A time of relative peace is still a period of torment for Irene, who is not entirely convinced that her suspicions are correct. Or, she knows the truth but has managed to avoid facing the reality of it.

John Bellew, who hates Negroes, has obviously had a moment of epiphany, seeing Irene and Felise huddled together in the wind and rain. It is interesting that, although he continued to hold his hand out to Irene, it is Irene who declines to shake his hand, seeing the expression on his face.



# Passing, Part Three, Chapter Four

## Passing, Part Three, Chapter Four Summary

On a snowy day, Clare calls and leaves the message that she will be able to attend the party at Felise's. At dinner, Brian attempts to explain the white man's hatred toward blacks, but Irene shushes him more than once, admonishing him about talking about such things in front of the boys when they are still children. Brian feels that if they have to live in this country they need to know these things. Junior has been called a "dirty nigger" already, and the two of them argue. He reminds her that he wanted to get them out of this hellish country long ago, but that she objected, and she cannot expect him to give up everything. Irene wonders if he is referring to Clare.

Clare arrives. Jack has gone to Philadelphia. Concerned at how close by that is, Irene asks Clare what she would do if her husband found her out. Clare says that if that happens, she will live in Harlem, that her daughter is the reason she has held back. If her marriage becomes broken, she is free. Irene takes this as a warning.

Irene sends her downstairs to talk to Brian, who is mad. No longer frenzied about the two of them, she allows herself to know that everything has happened between Clare and Brian; she is tired and unable to feel anything. She knows now she only wants security and tranquility for herself, her boys and Brian.

Irene knows she and Brian belong in New York, and that she will not go to Brazil. She wonders if she has ever really loved Brian. She wants to maintain the shell of her marriage and feels she can bear the knowledge of what he has done as long as she does not lose him. And, Clare will be gone soon. Irene does not alert anyone about her encounter with Bellew because if Clare were free, anything might happen. She is glad she pretended not to know Bellew.

Felise lives on the seventeenth floor of a building with no elevator, so the three have to walk the stairs. Irene notices their glances. At the party, Irene is quiet and wants only a small drink. She asks to open a window because it is warm in the apartment. Suddenly, John Bellew enters the room, calling his wife a "damned dirty nigger." In the confusion, Clare smiles faintly, and Irene goes to her, laying a hand on her arm. In an instant, Clare is gone out the window. It is unclear whether Irene pushed her or she went on her own. As Irene goes down the stairs with Brian's coat, she momentarily fears that Clare will not be dead, but she is. Irene sobs with thankfulness and Brian tries to comfort her. Brian thinks perhaps Clare's husband shoved her, but Irene protests that Clare just fell before anyone could stop her. Irene faints and feels Brian lifting her.

## Passing, Part Three, Chapter Four Analysis

There is really only one short passage that informs us that Irene really did push Clare out the window. "Should she go back out there to them? She hadn't thought of them, of



afterwards, of this. She had thought of nothing in that sudden moment of action." Apparently distraught over the possibility of watching Clare's marriage dissolve, thus freeing her to steal Irene's husband, Irene instinctively just gets rid of Clare at the most opportune moment in a swift motion that no one sees. Later, when Irene "sobs with thankfulness," we know for sure that this was her intention.

One of the many ironies of this story is that it is not Clare who is crazy, although she is the one we suspect to have wild tendencies. It turns out that her fear of losing her husband has driven Irene crazy enough to destroy her friend. Her actions reveal that she is more dependent upon and attached to her lifestyle than anything in the world and will kill to preserve it. She seemed to have regained some sense of resolve and peace about their affair, but in actuality, she had just girded herself to do whatever necessary to hold onto what she wants, just as she has described Clare throughout the years — self-centered and focused on her own needs, regardless of the needs or feelings of others.

Although the proposed focus of this story is black women passing for white, it devolves into a story of a jealous love triangle and the psychological portrait of a woman scorned. Irene's hatred toward and fascination with Clare is certainly connected to Clare's ability to pass as white, but her extreme final response to Clare is a result of jealousy and humiliation.





# Characters

## Helga Crane, Quicksand

Helga Crane is a very complex character. She is a mulatto, born of a Danish mother and black father. An educated teacher, Helga has a restless spirit and is not satisfied with teaching in an all-black school in Naxos, GA. Due to her mixed racial heritage, she is drawn to the exotic and sensual side of life as a black in the Harlem renaissance, as well as to the formal, stuffy life of a white aristocrat, as she experienced during the period of time spent with her aunt in Denmark. Throughout her life she searches for her true self, but her happiness is fleeting and always melts away into a restless anger, hatred and depression until she finds a new possibility.

Helga is at times disgusted with the constant struggle for racial equality and sees the plight of blacks in America as oppressed and depressing. However, she craves the company of "Negroes" and, with her restless spirit, is unable to resist going back to Harlem after having lived the life of a wealthy socialite in Denmark.

Helga is sexually confused, as well. Her libido is strong and exotic, and she advertises herself by dressing in striking colors and outfits that draw attention to her beauty. In the presence of black music in Harlem, she feels herself part of the jungle and truly touches a very deep level of her Negro self in that environment. However, Helga is snobbish. Through the Caucasian aspect of her personality, she tends to look down upon the silliness and victimized status of American blacks and sees herself as superior. Her inability to totally identify with either blacks or whites causes her to reject men who are attracted to her because each brings out the other side in her. In Denmark, she is treated like a "peacock," lovely to look at and dressed in beautiful, outlandish clothing that makes her fascinating to those around her. However, the high-society artist who paints her portrait, although he is in love with her, cannot help talking to her as if she is a natural whore because of his ignorance and unfamiliarity with her culture. She is repulsed by his attitude and wants to be seen as someone with a different set of morals than those that are assumed to be held by blacks. Further, she finds him repulsive.

Helga chooses, again and again, not to look inside and discover what makes herself tick. She wants to live on the surface in her moment-to-moment judgments and therefore never really understands why she does the things she does. She has been in love with Dr. Anderson for years but was always abrupt and cold to him, and has never bothered to stop and think about why she thinks of him so often. After being rejected by him, she swings into desperation and into the pits of depression. In this state, she finds herself having a spiritual experience in a negro mission. Now in love with God, she impulsively decides to marry the minister the following day without even considering that she does not know him at all. She is searching for a purpose for her life and cannot recognize that it is enough just to be Helga Crane.



Helga goes with her new husband to live in poverty in Alabama and realizes, as always, that she truly hates him and her environment, but because she continues to have children, she is ultimately doomed to live there forever in misery. She is a tragic figure who had great potential but who could not "find" her true self.

## **Dr. Robert Anderson, Quicksand**

Helga's meeting with Dr. Anderson, who is the head of the school in Naxos, reveals him to be a smooth and congenial, although somewhat condescending, man. When Helga explains her reasons for wanting to leave Naxos, Dr. Anderson explains to her that in every community there is hypocrisy and injustice but something she might discover with maturity, is that most people tend to form a shell that allows them to live with those things. Dr. Anderson suggests that Helga might consider herself an asset to Naxos, since she does not approve of the behaviors there; this begins to soften Helga's ego. However, when he uses flattery, suggesting that Helga has dignity and breeding and that she comes from good stock, Helga sees through his shallowness and enjoys slamming him with the truth about herself. He clearly demonstrates the snobbery that she detests in this school, and helps finalize her decision to leave.

Although he only appears again later in Helga's life, Dr. Anderson plays a key role in this story. Throughout Helga's young adult life, she often thinks of Dr. Anderson and his gray eyes and wonders about him. When he appears in Harlem, she continues to treat him as though she cares nothing for him, and when he marries her close friend Anne, Helga steels herself against any feelings for him. It is an odd coincidence that he would appear from Naxos and end up marrying Helga's roommate, but it is not clear whether he has done so to hurt Helga or to get closer to her, or if there is any emotional reason besides his love for Anne. Regardless, if Helga has ever experienced love, it is for Dr. Anderson, even though she shuns him and avoids him and has the desire to "wound" him. He continues to work for the cause of black people, which she finds disgusting.

In his drunken carelessness, the married Dr. Anderson kisses Helga at a party, which inflames her and stirs up her feelings for him after all these years. Rather than return to Denmark, she stays in New York to find out where the kiss might lead, but when he finally talks to her alone, Anderson blames his actions on the alcohol. His insensitivity is fully exposed at this point.

## **Reverend Pleasant Green, Quicksand**

Reverend Green is a not-so-good-looking preacher who is stunned by Helga's interest in him. His interests are not pure or selfless, but Helga sees him as her salvation in a world that is too harsh for her. When Helga, devastated and raw from her pain, has a religious experience, she thinks may have found the safety of God in Green. He goes along with the idea because she is pretty and young and he is sexually attracted to her. He takes advantage of Helga's "seductive repentance" and moves her to Alabama where he is accustomed to having women around him who admire and serve him. He is



a pompous man who maintains a superior attitude among his poor parishioners. He does not bathe, nor does he do much physical work, but he is smug and dramatic in his preaching. When Helga becomes ill from pregnancy and childbirth, rather than help her with cooking and household chores, he depends upon the adoring women of his congregation.

Reverend Green forgoes any striving for better living conditions in the confidence that all rewards come after death. His life is much more comfortable than those around him, and he uses his position as a preacher to cushion his own miserable condition.

Reverend Green's decision to marry Helga was no more based on love than was hers; however, as a preacher, he was aware she was miserable and desperate and took advantage of the opportunity. His relationship with God is not necessarily sincere.

## **Katrina and Poul Dahl, Quicksand**

Helga's Danish aunt and uncle are most receptive to her living with them in Denmark. They are a social-climbing couple focused on their status in society and looking for any opportunity to raise their station. When Helga shows up, the Dahls dress her up in what seem to be costumes, taking her out and showing her off like a prized pet. Since there is not a lot of obvious racism in their culture, they see Helga as a novelty that they can offer society and that will, hopefully, bring them something in return. They do love Helga in their own way, and Katrina exposes Helga to friends and parties. What is not clear between them and Helga is that their ultimate desire is that she find an appropriate husband; they do not expect her to stay with them permanently. Helga lives with them like a child who has finally found her family; she accepts their generosity and hospitality but does not realize what their expectations are.

When Helga rejects the proposal of marriage by an esteemed artist, her aunt and uncle are very disappointed in her. Katrina has suggested many marriage possibilities, all of whom would bring great amounts of money into the family. Helga feels as though they have paraded her like a peacock, and, although she has enjoyed the attention, it is clear Katrina and Poul Dahl have used her for their own gain. Katrina feels that if Helga is not looking for a husband, she is wasting her time.

## **Axel Olsen, Quicksand**

A talented painter with a somewhat small role in this story, Axel Olsen is a complex character whose marriage proposal to Helga sends her running, again, for psychological shelter.

When Olsen meets Helga for the first time, he rudely studies her features as though she is a work of art herself. He maintains a theatrical bearing in his black cape and a wide artist's hat and in his pomposity, will paint portraits only of certain people. With "stupendous arrogance," Olsen picks out a bizarre, colorful wardrobe for Helga and spends much time painting her portrait. Olsen keeps any feelings he may have for



Helga to himself with the exception of an occasional suggestive remark and keeps her guessing as to whether he likes her or just sees her as a good subject. Olsen tends to pay "florid compliments in questionable taste," and Helga suspects a deep abiding racism in him. Although Helga is initially quite interested in him, when he finally proposes to her, her affection for Olsen has already disappeared, and she sees him as spoiled and childish, disliking everything about him. Based on his improper suggestion to her in the past, his marriage proposal is something like a concession that he make because he is so physically attracted to her. Olsen tells her she has the soul of a prostitute; Helga assures him he will not own her. He is devastated by her rejection, but his painting of Helga makes her look wicked and wild, which is the part of her that he is actually drawn to in a seedy sort of way. The Dahls consider Axel Olsen a great catch for Helga due to his status and are disappointed in her when she turns him down.

## **Audrey Denney, Quicksand**

Audrey Denney, a character the reader does not get to "know" firsthand is referred to in the story as a way to illustrate the deep reverse racism that existed in Harlem. Audrey Denney is a gregarious society figure in Harlem, who freely associates with white people at Negro events, dancing with white men and mingling with both races. Anne Gray, who is an advocate for Negro rights, outwardly hates Audrey and resents the fact that she mixes so easily, and seems so guilt-free about it. Helga Crane, who is both black and white, is fascinated with Audrey Denny and at one point asks to meet her. Audrey represents a threat to blacks who were working toward "uplifting" their race. There is some brief discussion in the story about whether Harlem blacks are striving to emulate whites, or striving to become stronger in themselves. Anne's vehement dislike of Audrey is connected to Audrey's defiance of the unspoken rules. Larson portrays her as someone who is not only amenable to mixing with whites, but who is considered blatantly traitorous to her race with her behavior.

## **Irene Redfield, Passing**

Irene is Larson's main character in "Passing." We see her going about her life with precision, trying constantly to gloss over her husband's true desires and fill his life with family and propriety as a substitute. Irene is openly black, although she is fair skinned. Her ambivalence about seeing Clare again is interesting in several respects. She seems almost sexually attracted to Clare, who is cunning and lovely, but Irene is also wary of Clare, knowing that Clare is living dishonestly as a white woman and remembering Clare's questionable past with men.

As a wife, Irene has obviously cut her husband off sexually, and his desire to move to South America is something she is constantly dodging and hoping will go away. She has her life the way she wants it and Clare's intrusion into her world is somewhat unnerving for her, since her husband is obviously not content with his life. Since Irene saw Clare with a man who was not her husband during their meeting in Chicago, and had heard rumors about Clare's possible prostitution in their earlier years, Irene may have been



afraid of Clare's moving in on her husband from the beginning, although that is not mentioned outright. She simply warns Clare that her presence in Harlem society could be "dangerous."

Although Irene is bothered by Clare's presence and does not trust her, Irene seems somewhat obsessed with her. Irene sees herself as a better person than Clare, since she works with charities and for the cause of the black population. However, Irene's goodness and self-sacrifice may also be simply a facade to maintain her self-identity, which she perceives as superior to Clare. In the end, it is Irene who is unable to deal with life and its challenges. As she fully perceives the threat of Clare's existence in her life, now knowing that Clare is taking away her husband, Irene believes she must eliminate Clare entirely and somehow is able to push Clare out the window.

## **Clare Kendry, Passing**

Clare is a very light-skinned mulatto woman who has chosen to "pass" as a white woman. She is married to a wealthy white man and moves in the white circles of society in Chicago. She is raised by an abusive, alcoholic father. After spending some time with religious relatives, Clare sets out on her own to "pass" as a white woman, determined to have all the wealth and privileges she had missed as a child. Clare has come into contact with an old childhood friend, Irene Redfield, who, although fair skinned, has chosen to claim her negro heritage and is moves in black society.

Clare lives a lie and yearns to back among her own kind, and in her charming and domineering way, uses Irene as a conduit to return to her true roots. Clare has learned how to get what she wants, regardless of who she may hurt. She moves into Irene's life, becomes friends with Irene's children, and begins attending Irene's social functions. She has an affair with Irene's husband, even though she claims Irene is her best friend. Clare is cunning and her lifestyle reveals her ability to live in dishonesty, since even her own husband does not know she is Negro, and actually calls her "Nig" as a joke. Clare is careless with her secret, however, and lives on a razor's edge with her bigoted, racist husband, even putting her friends at risk of revealing her truth to him.

When Clare's husband finds her at an all-Negro party and the truth is exposed, Clare either falls, jumps or is pushed out the window. The Reader see her as getting her just reward for her manipulations but also realize that it is not Clare who is the most disturbed character, but Irene.

## **Brian Redfield, Passing**

Brian's character is used as a way to illustrate his wife, Irene's, absorption in her own life and her singular desire to look good in society. Although he is a successful doctor, all Brian really wants to do is go to South America and live. But Irene fears this desire in him and tries to gloss it over at every opportunity. Brian's displeasure with his own life is obvious, despite the fact that he attends the social functions and goes along with Irene's planned lifestyle. When one of their sons makes inappropriate remarks about sex, Brian



explodes at Irene's concerns and sarcastically says it is good for the child to learn that "sex is a joke." Clearly, Irene has denied Brian intimacy, and he is resentful and angry. Clare's appearance in their lives is a bright spot for Brian, since Clare is spontaneous and more fun than Irene. Brian feels trapped and unappreciated by Irene. He wants only to take his sons and move to Brazil where they will not face the bigotry that awaits them in the U.S., but Irene is controlling and makes sure she gets her own way, in spite of his wishes.

## **Katrina and Poul Dahl, Quicksand**

Katrina Dahl is the sister of Helga Crane's mother. Helga's mother was an American immigrant who married an abusive black man, Helga's father. Helga's aunt has always loved Helga and at one time wanted to raise her when things went badly for her sister. When Helga comes to Denmark as a young woman, she is warmly welcomed by her aunt Katrina and her husband, Poul. However, the Dahls move in a societal structure that involves climbing the ladder of status. When Helga rejects the offer of marriage from a wealthy, prestigious artist, her uncle Poul has a blunt conversation with her, expressing his disappointment and expectations of her. It turns out that all Katrina and Poul have really wanted Katrina to do in Denmark is to find a wealthy husband who would increase their own status. They are nice, warm people but definitely have their own agenda when it comes to Helga.





# Objects/Places

## Harlem Renaissance

During the 1920s, when the end of slavery had finally truly taken hold and more blacks in America began to gather wealth, blacks tended to congregate in the Harlem district of Manhattan. There, the new generation of African Americans generated their own culture, playing their own music, doing their own dances and developing their own society and traditions. A class structure developed and many of the wealthiest African Americans resided in large old homes in Harlem. Members of New York's hip class of white people began to visit the nightclubs and gained an appreciation for the music and dances. There was an enormous amount of unfair discrimination against black people outside of Harlem, but within that neighborhood, the people became somewhat self-sustaining and comfortably closed themselves off from Caucasian customs and lifestyle, enjoying lives of their own making among their own kind.

## American South

Naxos, Georgia is where Helga Crane was teaching in the beginning of *Quicksand*. The school where she is employed considers itself a progressive Negro school, since the educators are focused on reforming the black children and molding them into citizens who can behave like white people. This improved education will supposedly make them more civilized and give them a better life as adults. Naxos is the exception, and Helga Crane sees the hypocrisy that exists in the attitudes of the staff there, since they are not truly accepting the children for who they are, but trying to "fix" them. She describes Naxos as having "unhuman loveliness," with its avenues, trees and parks.

On the other hand, the small town in Alabama where Helga Crane ends up with Reverend Green is just the opposite. The black women there are glorified by their poverty and hard work and feel that all their rewards will come to them in the end when they die. They do not respect Helga's need for beauty and refinement and see her as silly and affected. They are almost content with their lifestyle, since it will bring them recognition from God later on. Racism does not seem to be an issue with them at all.

In contrast, New York's Harlem houses every type of African American — poor, wealthy, snobbish and humble. There is more of a sense of acceptance in Harlem, although people are also constantly working to end racism. However, blacks in Harlem freely dance, make their kind of music, and dress the way they want with much more freedom of expression than in the South.

In Denmark, black people are a novelty and a curiosity and, although there is not the same brand of racism as in the U.S., there is still a certain condescension toward Helga Crane because of her unusual color.



## Denmark

Helga Crane, whose mother was Danish, has the opportunity to go to Denmark and live with her mother's sister Katrina. Larsen paints a picture for her readers of a very structured, refined society in Denmark in the twenties, much like that of other European countries. In Katrina's world, money, wardrobe, social gatherings and status is of supreme importance. Larsen does not give us much of a look at the lives of Danes who are not wealthy, but the fanciful circles that Katrina and Poul move in are quite fussy, extremely conscious of manners and customs, and the relationships remain superficial. Helga floats about in this fashionable atmosphere as a "peacock," since she is quite different in terms of skin color and background. She is a curiosity to the upper-crust Danes, who see her as beautiful, mysterious and exotic but never quite their equal. Through many formal luncheons and dinners and social events, Helga is a bright novelty for these reserved socialites. Having Helga in their midst serves to make them feel a bit daring, as though they are breaking through some kind of social barrier. Of course, Katrina and Poul have great expectations that Helga will connect them, through marriage, to a higher rung in society by marrying someone with even higher status than their own. Larsen portrays Danish society as shallow and somewhat foolish in their somewhat absurd sense of righteousness and propriety.

## Naxos School

In the beginning of the story, "Quicksand," Helga Crane teaches at a school for black children in Naxos, Georgia. Although the school is designed as a progressive, cutting-edge educational institution to help educate blacks and raise the standards of African Americans, there is bitter backstabbing among the staff and a condescending attitude toward the children. Helga feels that what they are teaching is not reaching the black children and that the teaching methods are ineffective. Naxos children are taught to "stay in their place." The white preacher who had visited the day of Helga's decision praised the Naxos school for teaching blacks to be respectful towards the predominant white society. He also expressed his hope that they would know when to stop and not to become "avaricious and grasping." In other words, they were advised to remember their place and just be thankful for their "duty to be satisfied in the estate to which they had been called, hewers of wood and drawers of water." In other words, they are being taught not to step on the toes of the white man and to remain good little servants. Helga is appalled at the applause offered for this speech.

The school is apparently a live-in school that houses the students and teachers. Helga notes its "air of self-righteousness and intolerant dislike of difference." Helga feels "Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and rigid as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove our ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong.'"





## Negro Welfare League

In "Passing," it is also known as NWL. The Negro Welfare League is a charitable organization in which Irene and Brian Redfield are active. It actually serves as a social outlet for blacks who are better off than others, and sponsors teas and dances to raise money to help other black Americans. Although the intention is honorable, it comes off as a pretentious, elitist group that wealthy people like Irene Redfield use as a way to feel better about themselves.

## YWCA

Young Women's Christian Association was where Helga Crane lived while looking for a job in Chicago in the story, "Quicksand." Staying in a tiny room, she eventually made use of the YWCA's employment services to secure employment as a speech editor for Mrs. Hayes-Rore, who eventually took Helga to New York with her. The women at the agency generally help domestic servants find jobs and turn out to be quite friendly and helpful, once Helga allows herself to know them.

## Chicago

Chicago is where Helga Crane goes when she leaves Naxos. Chicago is windy, dirty and very busy. Helga feels lost and alone; she has trouble finding a job there, and the atmosphere is quite gray and depressing. She becomes deeply lonely before meeting Mrs. Hayes-Rore and is quite happy to leave Chicago for good, knowing that her Uncle Peter, who had helped her through school, was no longer available to her.

Chicago is also the setting for the first meeting between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Visiting her family in Chicago, Irene is trying to escape the dreadful downtown summer heat and goes to the top of the luxurious Drayton hotel to have iced tea in the cool rooftop lounge. Clare Kendry shows up, and they have a conversation. Eventually, Irene has a very unpleasant experience at Clare's hotel room in Chicago. Irene Redfield grew up in Chicago and remembers the unfortunate childhood of Clare Kendry when they were children. Irene's father still resides in Chicago, and she is here on a visit. Chicago is not portrayed as a place where one wants to be or stay in Larsen's stories, simply because the experiences of her characters there are not necessarily very positive.

## Religion

Although religion is not addressed in "Passing," it is a primary element in "Quicksand." Helga Crane lives a life of desperation looking for peace and happiness and becoming terribly unhappy with each situation to which she had eagerly looked forward. At her most discouraged and depressed moment, she happens to stop in at a mission where she is surrounded by boisterous worshipers who want to help her. She has the



experience of being "saved," and finally allows all her angst and fear to melt away in the arms of these caring people. Because of this, Helga is convinced she has finally found her way through becoming a Christian. She marries a pastor the next morning and moves with him to his poverty-stricken surroundings in Alabama, still convinced that her work now is for God, and that she has a duty now to help those around her. When she finally falls into the expected unhappiness and depression to which she is prone, she renounces God and regrets her decisions, deciding that she actually hates her husband and all the people around her, with the exception of her children.

The people of the small town in Alabama, on the other hand, feel religion is their salvation and that when they die, God will reward them for their struggles. Larsen's ironic message here is that even God cannot save us from ourselves.

## **Smorrebrod**

Smorrebrod are tiny dainty Danish sandwiches that are customarily served at every tea and meal. Although the Danes primarily drink coffee, Helga notices that these small sandwiches are present at every social event she attends in Copenhagen.

## **Maria Kirkepladds**

The upscale district in Copenhagen where Helga Crane's aunt and uncle, Katrina and Poul Dahl, reside.



# Themes

## Racial Oppression

During the 1920s, African Americans were finally free to pursue their own livelihoods; however, being a minority that was generally hated and ridiculed by the dominant white culture, they were engaged in a constant struggle to make enough money to live, settling primarily for the lowest paid jobs, and tolerating abuse and disrespect. In "Quicksand" and "Passing," Nella Larsen shows us the remnants of the abuses of slavery, through American women who were both black and white, and who had to learn to survive in a world where they were accepted as neither. Much of the mulatto population in those days was a result of abusive white "masters" impregnating black slaves, who were used for sex, as well as labor. These half-white women and their descendants often learned how to "pass" as white because their skin was lighter and, as in the case of Clare Kendry in "Passing," lived in deceit in order to enjoy a higher standard of living.

In Quicksand, Larsen's protagonist often views the efforts to "uplift" her race as condescending and tiresome. Helga feels that all the racial bickering, resentment and work on behalf of the African Americans is an effort not so much for equality as an effort to be the same as white people. Because of her unique heritage, Helga becomes disgusted with Mrs. Hayes-Rore's preaching about racial equality, and later finds Anne's attitudes toward racial equality to be tiresome and irritating. Even the school at which she taught in Naxos, which was established to raise up the blacks in stature in society, was disgusting to Helga, since they do not celebrate the uniqueness of the black children but tried to suppress and change it.

Of course, Helga Crane gets a dose of racial oppression when she goes to Alabama and lives in pure poverty among blacks who do not work to better their lives but who, instead, see their suffering as the road to freedom to their final reward. They have not moved beyond the slave mentality and are still slaves among themselves, not expecting or working toward anything better. Helga's problem is that she has seen both sides of life and forgets, each time, that the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence.

## Repressed Sexuality

"Quicksand": Helga Crane has a complex set of problems in terms of her sexuality. Although others recognize an exotic quality in her, she is inclined to hold back sexually because she does not want to be identified in that way. She is offended by Axel Olsen's insinuations and tells him that among her race, gentlemen do not speak that way to decent women. She held James Vayle at a distance sexually. When she finally reached the point of wanting intimacy after the kiss from Dr. Anderson, he rejected her. Of all the men with whom she could have been intimate, Helga ends up with Pleasant Green, who seems repulsive and unattractive to her.



"Passing": It is known that in the 1920s when these stories were written, women addressed one another in more intimate and affectionate terms. However, Larsen implies that there may have been a great deal of sexual energy between Irene Redfield and Clare that was suppressed and was more than just friendly affection. Irene is attracted to Clare several times in a sexual way, from being overcome by Clare's beauty, to noting the quality of Clare's lips and the effect that Clare's presence had on Irene physically.

Clare's letters to Irene seem to suggest that she misses her more than one would miss a friend, although it is her society that Clare is missing, as well. Whether Irene purposely ended Clare's life is not clear, but the impossibility of their relationship may have been a factor in Irene's terrible fear and frustration.

It is also interesting that Irene's husband makes a comment about sex being a joke, and how their son should know this before he gets involved with women. Obviously, he is not satisfied with their intimate relationship, but has no way to deal with it than to have an affair and make bitter, sarcastic remarks. It is not clear why Irene has shut him out, but it may be that Clare's surfacing in her life has something to do with it.

## Passing

In using the term "passing," Larson is making reference to many aspects of the characters, in addition to passing as Caucasians. Irene Redfield passes as a black woman of society and breeding. She has married a doctor and structured her life to look like the ideal, upper-class family who is involved in socially correct causes and is well-adjusted. But, in fact, this facade is very carefully constructed and protected by Irene who is not a happy person herself, and whose husband would really rather be somewhere else. Although she has chosen to be open about her African American background, she imitates the life of Caucasians and pretends to be emotionally stable. In the end of the story, it becomes clear that Irene has only passed herself off as a stable woman and is actually calculating, jealous and controlling, far beyond the level of Clare Kendry.

Clare Kendry, who actually is passing for white in her marriage and lifestyle, is honest when she says she yearns for her own kind and begs to become involved in Irene's family life and social circle. But Clare is devious and disloyal, living a life full of deceit. Clare pretends to be loving and kind and passes within Irene's world as a sweet, caring individual with whom Irene's husband actually falls in love. But Clare comes from a background of poverty and dysfunction and has transformed her external self in every possible way by keeping company with rich white people and passing as one of them. Her own husband, who is a racial bigot, has accepted her facade as a white woman without question until he finds out the truth. In fact, an irony of this story is that the only character who remains true to himself is the least likable one, Clare's disgusting husband.



Brian Redfield, Irene's husband, does his work as a good doctor and participates in Irene's work for the Negro Welfare League, a condescending organization that touts its work to improve the plight of the black population. Secretly, Brian is unhappy in his marriage to Irene, who withholds sex and manipulates him. Brian's dream and desire is to live in Brazil; he is unhappy and restless and tries to be an attentive husband, but is simply pretending and going through the motions. He is an easy mark for Clare, who has a way of seducing and complimenting men and melting their resistance with her pale beauty.

Perhaps Larsen is making the point that everyone is "passing" in some way; that we all hold feelings and flaws that we hide from those around us.

## Color

Nella Larsen does not simply explore the implications of skin color in her two stories, but uses color as symbolism for everything from exotica and daring to innocence. Helga Crane's lack of color, both black and white, is at the basis of Helga's angst. Helga's daring and artistic nature is expressed through her red and black decor, Chinese rugs and and vividly-colored clothing, which her colleagues see as vanity and and pride. A colleague who sees Helga's "startling" green and gold negligee is amazed. As Helga's resolve to leave Naxos increases, the orange sun dissolves into pale yellow. Helga sees the women at Naxos as drab and dull in their navy blue, black and brown and recalls the dean declaring that "Bright colors are vulgar" for colored people.

Helga loves and longs for more color and equates it with the black race's joy of motion and laughter. Dr. Anderson's grey eyes are a source of intrigue and attraction for Helga, as well as a little frightening. Helga sees black people in tones of gold, bronze, orange, taupe, mahogany, copper and yellow throughout the story. Her uncle's red-faced maid, dressed "primly" in black and white, has replaced "Rose," the maid Helga remembers. Scenes which reflect her depression and sadness contain leaden gray, misty black, and dull white.

The woman who saves Helga from poverty in Chicago, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, is described as "lemon" color. The lovely Anne who is Helga's anchor in New York, is first seen in cool green implying a sense of peace and security, and Helga admires Anne's cream-colored decor more than once. Audrey Denny, a woman who freely mixes with blacks and whites, is dressed in apricot instead of a primary color, i. e., she is somewhere in the middle in terms of race, accepting and welcoming both

Axel Olsen in Denmark paints Helga with a number of garish colors, revealing his fascination with what he sees as her exotic, prostitute-type nature. Finally, when Helga is at the end of hope and depressed beyond help, she appears in church in a bright red dress and is immediately seen as a sinning Jezebel.

Larsen uses color through Helga Crane as a way to illustrate emotions, judgment, and atmosphere as well as to tell the story of a mulatto woman who has no specific color.

## **Escape From Poverty**

In both *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Nella Larsen weaves into her stories the concept of escaping poverty and the illusions of living a privileged life.



# Style

## Point of View

Both *Quicksand* and *Passing* are written in third person narrative from an omniscient point of view. Although *Passing* is written primarily from the view point of Irene Redfield, Larsen is still an omniscient narrator who reveals the story and, bit by bit, gives us the true picture of her characters.

Nella Larsen is not a subtle writer, since she often tells us what her characters are thinking, and even describes their traits, rather than revealing them. For example, Larsen tells us that, "The tragic cruelties of the years had left her a little pathetic, a little hard, and a little unapproachable." We learn this about Helga throughout *Quicksand*, but Larsen makes it a point to tell us these details as well.

Where Larsen is more subtle is in her descriptions of the sexual lives and urges of her characters. Since she lived in a time when these matters were not openly discussed, she describes the sexuality of her characters through events such as Helga's feeling of being in the jungle while she watches people dance, and her meltdown in church while wearing her red dress, always observing them in her role as omniscient narrator. In addition, the relationship between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry in *Passing* is highly sexual but presented through suggestion and undertone. But these, perhaps, make up Larsen's only subtleties. She tells us clearly what each character is thinking and feeling, as well as describing them from an omniscient viewpoint.

## Setting

Both *Quicksand* and *Passing* are set in the 1920s. In *Quicksand*, Naxos (an anagram for "Saxon" according to the editor) is located in Georgia. Helga notes the trees and walkways and the sunshine there, as opposed to Chicago, where the streets are dirty; the weather is bad, and Helga feels the most lost and lonely. The windy, gray weather and garbage blowing in the streets does not make Chicago appealing. New York, and in particular, Harlem, is more colorful, busy and interesting, and this is where Helga spends the majority of her time in the story. She holds down a job here, lives in a very upscale, beautiful home with her friend Anne, and finds friends and a social life within the black culture of Harlem. Helga eventually is disgusted by the constant racial consciousness in Harlem and decides to go to Copenhagen to live with her aunt and uncle. Copenhagen, at least in the social world of her relatives, is white, clean, calm and sedate, with a high degree of refinement and civility.

In *Passing*, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry have the first meeting of their new connection on a hot day at the top of a beautiful hotel in Chicago, where only wealthy or prestigious people are allowed. However, Irene is only visiting Chicago, the city of her childhood. Clare was raised in Chicago and continues to reside there, although she is



now married to a wealthy man and lives in an entirely different atmosphere from the one in which she grew up. Irene's father still lives in Chicago. We do not know much more about Chicago in this story, with the exception of it being a large, busy city. Irene and Brian Redfield live in New York City. They, too, are wealthy and are part of the upper crust of African-American society. Their home is lavish, complete with a maid named Zulena and white servants. Irene spends a considerable time in this story out shopping in the city.

The apartment of Irene's friend, Felise, is at the very top of a six-story building, from which Clare falls. There is no elevator and the party-goers are forced to take the stairs. We see New York in this scene in the middle of winter, with snow on the ground.

## Language and Meaning

Nella Larsen reveals an extensive vocabulary and a text-heavy style for a female writer of her time. In addition, she uses detailed descriptions to reveal the nuances of her characters' personalities. At a time when there were not many black women authors, Larsen manages to give her readers layers of depth and colorful scenes with intriguing words. There are no words spared and, at times, the sentences are somewhat awkward, covering a lot of ground. Larsen also consistently uses a density of emotional words and phrases. In even the first few paragraphs of Quicksand's Chapter Four, for instance, are phrases such as: "languid breeze, wounds of the spirit, medieval torture, ugly mutilated creature crawling horribly over the flying landscape of her thoughts, futility of her effort, piercing gray eyes, power, compelling, jolted into a rage so fierce, so illogical, so disastrous, despondent, shameful contrition, detested, discourtesy, rudeness, insidious implication, sordidness, tragic cruelties, pathetic, grievous, savage unkindness, malicious hatred, aching misery of soul." This is true for most of Larsen's writing; she leaves no stone unturned so that her reader may know the depth and extremities of the emotions and situations being experienced by her characters.

Although this heavy style makes for somewhat slow reading, Larsen couches, but does not bury, clues and blatant hints in her long descriptions that foreshadow events to come. In *Passing*, she notes Clare Kendry's "having way" more than once, which foreshadows Clare's "having" Irene's husband for herself.

In a more obscure way Larsen alerts us to Irene Redfield's true intentions when she writes, "It was only that she wanted him to be happy, resenting, however, his inability to be so with things as they were, and never acknowledging that thought she did want him to be happy, it was only in her own way and by some plan of hers for him that she truly desired him to be so. Nor did she admit that all other plans, all other ways, she regarded as menaces, more or less indirect, to that security of place and substance which she insisted upon for her sons and in a lesser degree for herself." Only obscure because of its style, in this long-winded paragraph, we realize that Irene Redfield is quite selfish and wants her family's happiness strictly on her own terms, feeling her security threatened by anyone's interference in her plans.



## Structure

Bundling these two stories in one book may have been a bright idea on the part of the editor, Deborah McDowell. *Quicksand* and *Passing* were two important novels written by Larsen, and they have similarities in theme and meaning, as well as setting.

However, *Quicksand* is a much longer and more sweeping story, covering the span of Helga Crane's adulthood, while *Passing* covers only a short couple years in the lives of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. *Quicksand* covers twenty-five chapters and is 135 pages in length. *Passing* begins with Part One - The Encounter, which covers four rather short chapters and continues with Part Two - The Re-Encounter, which covers another additional 61 pages.

This edition of the book provides an extensive Introduction and Notes, as well as Explanatory Notes and a bibliography. These supplemental sections are helpful in understanding Nella Larsen's possible intent, as well as the time in history in which she wrote.



## Quotes

"This was, he had told them with obvious sectional pride, the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country, north or south; in fact, it was better even than a great many schools for white children. And he had dared any Northerner to come south and after looking upon this great institution to say that the Southerner mistreated the Negro. And he had said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxo Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places and that, said the preacher, showed good taste.: Quicksand, Pg. 3

"Memory, flown back to those years following the marriage, dealt her torturing stabs. Before her rose the pictures of her mother's careful management to avoid those ugly scarifying quarrels which even at this far-off time caused an uncontrollable shudder, her own childish self-effacement, the savage unkindness of her step-brothers and sisters, and the jealous, malicious hatred of her mother's husband. Summers, winters, years, passing in one long, changeless stretch of aching misery of soul." Quicksand, Pg. 23

"Mr. Nilsen has been very kind to you, supported you, sent you to school. But you mustn't expect anything else. And you mustn't come here any more. It — well, frankly, it isn't convenient. I'm sure an intelligent girl like yourself can understand that." Quicksand, Pg. 28

"She began to make plans and to dream delightful dreams of change, of life somewhere else. Some place where at last she would be permanently satisfied. Her anticipatory thoughts waltzed and eddied about to the sweet silent music of change. With rapture almost, she let herself drop into the blissful sensation of visualizing herself in different, strange places, among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated and understood." Quicksand, Pg. 57.

"They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For a while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature." Quicksand, Pg. 59

"The charm of the old city itself, with its odd architectural mixture of medievalism and modernity, and the general air of well-being which pervaded it, impressed her. Even in the so-called poor sections there was none of that untidiness and squalor which she



remembered as the accompaniment of poverty in Chicago, New York, and the Southern cities of America. Here the door-steps were always white from constant scrubblings, the women neat, and the children washed and provided with whole clothing. Here were no tatters and rags, no beggars." Quicksand, Pg. 73

"From those about her came a thunder-clap of joy. Arms were stretched toward her with savage frenzy. The women dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing. Those who succeeded in getting near to her leaned forward to encourage the unfortunate sister, dropping hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bare arms and neck. The thing became real. A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand, and to become very easy. Helga Crane felt within her a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known." Quicksand, Pg. 114

"And so in the confusion of seductive repentance Helga Crane was married to the grandiloquent Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, that rattish yellow man, who had so kindly, so unctuously, proffered his escort to her hotel on the memorable night of her conversion." Quicksand, Pg. 118

"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-brush. They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbors, or even to mention the south side. You may be sure that I didn't. I'll bet they were good and sorry afterwards.' She laughed and the ringing bells in her laugh had a hard metallic sound. 'When the chance to get away came, that omission was of great value to me.'" Passing, Pg. 159

"So you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew?' But her amusement was at her thought, rather than her words. John Bellew gave a short denying laugh. 'You got me wrong there, Mrs. Redfield. Nothing like that at all. I don't dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she's trying to turn into one. She wouldn't have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. Not that I'd want her to. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils.'" Passing, Pg. 172

"And you're trying to make a molly-coddle out of him. Well, just let me tell you, I won't have it. And you needn't think I'm going to let you change him to some nice kindergarten kind of a school because he's getting a little necessary education. I won't! He'll stay right where he is. The sooner and the more he learns about sex, the better for him. And most certainly if he learns that it's a grand joke, the greatest in the world. It's keep him from lots of disappointments later on." Passing, Pg. 189

"Remember, there's Margery. Think how glad you'll be to see her after all this time.' 'Children aren't everything,' was Clare Kendry's answer to that. 'There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don't seem to suspect it.' And she laughed, more, it seemed, at some secret joke of her own than at her words." Passing, Pg. 210



"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. There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human like a beast in agony. 'Nig! My God! Nig!' A frenzied rush of feet down long flights of stairs. The slamming of distant doors. Voices." Passing, Pg. 237



## Topics for Discussion

Is Nella Larson attempting to admonish or warn her readers about inter-racial marriage through Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, and/or through Clare Kendry? What is the thrust of her message?

List some of the cultural markers in the story which reveal that *Quicksand* was written in the 1920s. How have these changed?

Is Helga Crane's biggest problem simply the fact that she is of mixed races, or is there a deeper problem that plagues her? If so, discuss what that might be and find examples.

What is the author's purpose in ending the story without telling us Helga Crane's next move?

Helga Crane seems luckier than many African Americans, but her life is still plagued by racism. What are the instances of racism that influence and hurt Helga?

What are some other meanings for the term "passing" with respect to Larson's characters? Are they passing in other ways besides racially?

Explore the relationship between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Are there overtones of a sexual nature to their relationship, or was this just the way women spoke of one another during Larson's lifetime? What clues are there that make a case for a lesbian attraction between them, if any?

If it seems that Irene Redfield is the more stable of the two women in *Passing*, why is that so? What device does Larsen use to lead us to believe that?

Clare Kendry's husband has a strong racial hatred. Why would Clare choose him?

How is Irene Redfield culpable in the outcome of the story, besides the fact that she may have pushed Clare? How did she contribute to her own problems?