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Diplomová práce

Passing for White in Four African American Novels

Považován za bílého ve čtyřech afroamerických románech

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Abstract

This diploma work aims to analyze the conditions of lighter skinned black men and women (of mixed Caucasian and African American ancestry) who were free (not enslaved), before and after the Civil War and emancipation, as related in four novels written by black men and women. A multitude of issues surround the protagonists of mixed racial background who venture knowingly or unknowingly into the act of “passing for white”: the question of racial identity; variations of racism which motivate light-skinned mulattoes to “pass” as white; the question of which racial group would be appropriate for marriage, keeping the secret, and finally the essence of living their hybrid lives. The novels will be placed in their historical context of the mid- to late 19th century up to the 1920s including the ever-changing conventions as well as American society of that time.

Anotace

Diplomová práce si klade za cíl analyzovat podmínky míšenců, kteří byli svobodní v období před a po Americké občanské válce a emancipaci na základě čtyř románů vzniklých z per afroamerických autorů. Mnoho aspektů pocházejících z prostředí Afroameričanů ovlivňují rozhodnutí míšenců pro cestu, kde se ať už dobrovolně nebo nedobrovolně včleňují do “světa bílých”: otázka rasové identity; druhy rasismu, které vedou k tomu, že se míšenci rozhodnou “změnit” svou barvu pleti, popřít své kořeny, aby mohli založit “bílou” rodinu. Otázka udržení tajemství svého etnického původu a veškerá úskalí, která ústí v jakési hybridní, lživé životy. Novely jsou zasazeny do historického kontextu té doby.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This diploma deals with the racial passing, as it appears in novels of four African American writers: James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen, Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

Aim of my diploma work is to characterized the motives, ways and wiles of passing for white by African Americans before, during and after the Civil War in the United States. The diploma shows the general overview of all possibilities of passing, it deals with the crossing line from one life to another.

The diploma work explains all the risks and consequences of life in a never ending fear of losing everything, it describes the life in a lie and pretending, which are the integral part of racial passing.

This topic is interesting because in all its social, economic, politic or geographic aspects, which are presented in the four novels. Passing is not only the action of pretending being somebody else, it goes even deeper. It includes the denial of own roots, family and social background.

The outcome of my diploma is a general comparison of different styles of interpretation of the topic "Passing for white" from different point of view of four writers, dealing with various problems of the main characters, such a social, gender or economic.

At the beginning of my diploma I introduce the passing phenomena, the historical background and atmosphere towards Afro-Americans in the United States.

The main part of this diploma is the analysis of these novels: *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, *Passing* and *The House Behind the Cedars*. In every novel I analyze the conception of the writer while describing the passing for white experience.

In the end of the diploma work I summarize the different approaches of four writers and presenting the motives, ways and wiles of passing in individual novels through the main characters.

The last pages of my diploma contains the primary and secondary literature that helped me to look closely at a topic of passing for white and supported me in writing my thesis.

2 PASSING FOR WHITE

2.1 RACIAL PASSING - DEFINITION

Passing is a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he or she would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his or her misleading conduct. The term passing is often associated with African-Americans. In the era of slavery passing is one option to avoid being enslaved. Passing is also associated with the Harlem Renaissance. The ones who pass for white are often called "white Negroes". They are mixed-raced individuals that have a smaller amount of black blood in their veins.

African-Americans transform their racial identity to win and to be taken as the part of the white world. To be successful in passing means to be able to hide one's African origins and cultural and family background.

Professor Carlyle Van Thompson defines passing in his book *The Tragic Black Buck* as psychologically adaptive behavior and a performance that responds to America's systematic pro-white and anti-black ideology. In essence, passing is a strategy for survival and even socioeconomic advancement in the face of racial hegemony.

2.2 THE STRATEGY OF PASSING

There are many strategies to pass successfully. New total whiteness must be a priority and blackness must be denied in all aspects. That means that appearance only is not the key for passing. Denial of blackness includes also the behavior, education, or language. The appearance is maybe the most important, but not the only predisposition to enter a white world.

The visible phenotypes, such as hair texture, thin lips, light color of complexion or a high-bridged nose are the features of white majority. Accepting the white style of living is even more important. Colored individual who wants to pass for white must have a certain education. He or she has to be able to read, write, and have a general overview. That comes together with the usage of language. There has to be a certain

language predisposition to be able to pass. In all four novels, there is mostly the white father, who in one example leaves a large library to their illegitimate offspring. That should in my opinion prepare them for passing.

2.3 HISTORY AND BEGINNING OF PASSING

When we talk about the history of passing there are three significant eras of black and white violence according to Richard Maxwell Brown, the author of *Strain of Violence. Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism*.

- I. An initial phase of sporadic black revolts during the period of enslavement
- II. A middle, long-term era of mainly white-initiated violence (riots and lynching, especially) carried out to maintain post slavery white supremacy in America
- III. The cycle of massive urban rebellions in reaction to the economic, psychological, and physical violence suffered by blacks in the United States in the 1960s and beyond.

It is the second phase where passing figures first occur. It is because of defiance of black people against whites. White society deals with "disobedience" behavior towards white, like Thompson mentions some examples such as refusing to accept a subordinate socioeconomic status, speaking disrespectfully to whites or acting like a white man.

Especially the phenomena – acting like a white man leads to the thought of passing. Also there is another aspect leading to the possibility of passing which originates and links to violence in this era in the United States. It is a typification of black men and black women. In general black men are taken as rapists, black women are taken as promiscuous.

White man often raped black woman, which results in complexion "whitening" of black women's children, and consequently the possibility to pass.

2.4 PASSING IN LITERATURE

The topic of passing is often associated with the story of tragic mulatto, the question of the race and its mixing. Juda Bennett distinguished three interrelated types and representations of passing:

- I. The black-to-white passing narrative, beginning with antebellum works and peaking with the literary output of the Harlem Renaissance
- II. The parodic passing of the minstrelsy, but also the less negative and sometimes less obvious forms of racial impersonation or mimicry conveyed through music, speech, and even plot
- III. The contemporary obsession with gender passing is examined specifically for its relation to issues of race and racial passing.

In the four African-American novels which I analyze throughout my diploma thesis there are represented all three types of interrelation representations. *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* for example shows the case of the first type. Nella Larsen's *Passing* deals with the question of gender passing.

„What has been the significance of passing in America culture? In a survey of scientific studies, accounts in the popular press, and creative representations of race passing in American literature and culture, John Bayliss plots a trajectory of popular interest in race passing that emerges in late nineteenth century, rises through the first decades of the twentieth century, and gradually falls off in the 1950s. Most of the social science research – what little there is – dates from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, lagging somewhat behind the popular fascination with the phenomenon.“ (Kawash 1997: 126)

The topic of passing figure represents an interesting topics to many authors, both black and white. The most important authors dealing with the theme of passing figure are Mark Twain, Jean Toomer, Sinclair Lewis, Langston Hughes, Edna Feber, William Dean Howells, Nella Laren, William Wells Brown, Walter White, Frank Webb, Fannie Hurst, James Weldon Johnson, Kate Chopin, George Washington Cable, Geoge Schuyler, Frances Harper, Robert Penn Warren, Jessie Fauset, Charles Chesnutt, William Faulkner and Philip Roth.

The idea, fantasy, or threat of passing also is of various importance in works by Countee Cullen, Claud McKay, Thomas Dixon, Frances Harper, William Craft, Richard Hildreth, Pauline Hopkins, Thomas Page, Sutton Griggs, Gertrude Stein, Frank Yerby, Dorothy West, Rudolf Fisher, Julia Peterkin, and Sherwood Anderson.

3 CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

Charles W. Chesnutt (1858 – 1932), critically acclaimed for his novels, short stories, and essays, was one of the most ambitious and influential African American writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today recognized as a major innovator of American fiction, Chesnutt is an important contributor to de-romanticizing trends in post-Civil War southern literature, and a singular voice among turn-of-the-century realists who wrote about race in American life.

Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt is the first study to focus exclusively on Chesnutt's novels. Examining the three published in Chesnutt's lifetime – *The House Behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *The Colonel's Dream* – as well as his study explores the dilemma of a black writer who wrote primarily for a white audience.

Charles W. Chesnutt was a self-described "octroon," which means he was one-eighth black, seven-eighths white. He passed as white in Ohio for over twenty years and obtained a law degree, until he was "outed" as a Negro in 1901.

3.1 THE HOUSE BEHIND THE CEDARS

Those who pass have a severe dilemma before they decide to do so, since a person must give up all family ties and loyalties to the black community in order to gain economic opportunities. – F. JAMES DAVID, *Who is black? One Nation's Definition*

Before I start to present a little of the plot of the story, I would like to describe the motives of Charles W. Chesnutt to write a novel *The House Behind the Cedars*. He put himself in a very difficult position. He was aware, that if he wants to change the way of looking the Whites to Colored people, he had to write as an insider, but present the topic mostly to a white audience. His work is in this sense extraordinary and it is a new style of thinking about presenting the Colored peoples' lives. To make the story closer to the audience, he intentionally chose main characters very similar to white people. That means he wrote about lives of educated, mixed-race characters.

3.1.1 A STRANGER FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

The story of this novel starts few years after the Civil War. It is a fine morning when some man leaves the door of Patesville Hotel. The author emphasizes the look of a man, who is one of the most important characters in this novel from the plot point of view, moreover he is one of the main characters from the focus of this thesis.

The man is dressed in very clean-cut suit with patent leather shoes demonstrates high-bred features. Clean leather shoes is referring to a white man.

He is walking down the street and it becomes obvious from the beginning that he knows the North Carolina city from before, yet one does not know why. His name is John Warwick. The town clearly exudes an inequality between its citizens.

The first signs of inequality between people living in the town is in the first chapter called *A stranger from South Carolina*. Warwick is wondering if there is still the sound of curfew bell, which is the symbol of warning to all black people – slaves or free, to stay at home. He is wondering if there is still a punishment for those who do not stay at home.

Warwick is heading to visit Judge Straight. For the first time in the novel the difference of dialects appear, by which the author wants to emphasize the difference between the way of speaking of the African-Americans. I have to say, that it is difficult to read it. I would like to present an example:

De ole jedge has be'n a little on reg'lar sence de wah, suh; but he gin'ally gits roun' 'bout ten o'clock er so. He's be'n kin' er feeble fer de las' few yeahs. An' I reckon. (Chesnutt 1900: 4)

After Warwick fails to find the judge, he decides to meet him the next day. Warwick used to work for this judge. As a Colored man, he got a great opportunity to help him with the paper work, learn the law and thanks to his employer he traveled to South Carolina to conceal his black origin and become one of the white lawyer. According to Samira Kawash, the predispositions to be able to pass is certainly education. It is normal that Colored people were not able to read. They are not permit to read or write or educate themselves until after the Civil War. There had to be an

intervention of white man, who is trying to help a Negro to get this abilities to pretend he is white.

He was a son of a mulatta and white man. The secret could not be hidden in Patesville, but in another state like South Carolina, it was not known.

After the short visit of the judge, which was not successful, because he was not there, he went for a walk. He meets a light-skinned girl. Warwick is somehow impressed by her. He is following her to the part of the city, where they clearly does not belong. But is that really the truth? Warwick came to the Patesville and there is something mysterious, like he knows the town well, like he knows everyone. The first hitch we get is when he recognizes this girl as his sister Rena.

Charles Chesnutt's home was Fayetteville in North Carolina, and when he left, he also passed as white. We can assume that this is autobiographic feature. Patesville as Fayetteville in North Carolina.

The question which should be asked at this place is clear. Why does not he acknowledge his own sister? Why does she not recognize her older brother?

Matthew Wilson explains that Chesnutt is helping readers understand or appreciate the experiences of people who were radically Other. Instead of showing that the Others on the margins were fundamentally no different from the white, largely metropolitan readers at the center. It refers to Warwick's shoes, behavior, clothes and it will explain later also his presence in Patesville. The white man is following his colored sister from a distance and after some time he sees his old home.

The house stood on a corner, around which the cedar hedge turned, continuing along the side of the garden until it reached the line of the front of the house. The piazza to a rear wing, at right angles to the front of the house, was open to inspection from the side street, which, to judge from its desert look, seemed to be but little used. Turning into this street and walking leisurely past the back yard, which was only slightly screened from the street by a china-tree, Warwick perceived the young woman standing on the piazza, facing an elderly woman, who sat in a large rocking-chair, plying a pair of knitting-needles on a half-finished stocking. Warwick's walk led him within three feet of the side gate, which he felt an almost irresistible impulse to enter. Every detail of the house and garden was familiar; a

thousand cords of memory and affection drew him thither; but a stronger counter-motive prevailed. With a great effort he restrained himself, and after a momentary pause, walked slowly on past the house, with a backward glance, which he turned away when he saw that it was observed. (Chesnutt 1900: 9)

Warwick found this house so familiar, because it was his house and the old lady was his own mother. Warwick enters the house behind the cedars to say “hi” to his mother, who he did not see for many years. He is also meeting his sister Rena, the girl he was following earlier that day. The despair which his negro mother has in her voice speaking to him is slowly turning into the relief, that she can see her son again. The relief which is slowly turning into the real and unalloyed happiness.

The family is complete again. As he was away for almost 10 years, Warwick is surprised and amazed by the appearance of his little sister. He smothers her with compliments and says, she looks like she belongs among white people on the Hill. The term Hill is explained in Charles W. Chesnutt’s book as: “the Hill was the aristocratic portion of the town, - “instead of a poor”- “Instead of a poor young girl, who has the hill to climb.” (Chesnutt 1900: 14)

The Hill was the idyllic place a metaphor for a better life, where you could have a bright future. Everybody wants to live there and be part of the society of this community. However it is not possible, if you have a drop of a black blood in your veins.

The author also chose the name Hill from other reason. Hill refers to something high, that you should look up to. We can perceive this “Hill” as a top of society in this context. The top in terms of something unachievable. There is a way to get on the Hill if you are lucky “Negro”, but not the one in your town, but thousand miles away, but the happiness you find there is the same. Or not? That is what the book *House Behind the Cedars* deals with.

3.1.2 WARWICK'S PASSING

The House Behind the Cedars opens a few years after the Civil War, and the period is critical because it allowed Chesnutt to represent the process of becoming white within the parameters of what was then the existing law.

In South Carolina the law in 1879 was that anyone with one quarter or more of black blood was Negro, in 1895, that proportion was reduced to one-eighth. Thus Chesnutt has chosen a historical window between 1865 and 1879 when the 1831 racial law decision was still in effect. He is hearkening back to a period less racially repressive than when the novel was published in 1900, and he is trying to recover a part of the past that was being erased by the more rigid enforcement of the color line in the era of Jim Crow. (Wilson 2004: 88)

Warwick had escaped from military service and had not had to fight in the Confederate Army. He had met a widow from a wealthy family. He had been aiming for a white girl, whose family has certain prestige among the others. Nobody would ever be suspicious that he was hiding something. He had fallen in love with her and because of the war there not enough lawyers so his position had become very promising. They had got married and had had a child.

I was impressed by the way the author very realistically describes the meeting of the son, whom Mrs. Walden had not seen for such a long time. Both mother and her son were happy to see each other, but there is hidden sadness in the whole situation. It could be because if you want to achieve the Hill you have to abandon your family and your roots.

Warwick controls his behavior. This unnatural control in Warwick's utterance is when he replies to a simple question of his mother, Molly Walden, if he is happy.

Well, mother, happiness is a relative term, and depends, I imagine, upon how nearly we think we get what we think we want. I have had my chance and haven't thrown it away, and I suppose I ought to be happy. But then, I have lost my wife, whom I loved very dearly, and who loved me just as much, and I'm troubled about my child. (Chesnutt 1900: 16)

Emphasizing the first sentence this is the biggest difference between the understanding the whole situation and wanting something, Warwick and his sister Rena, which will both try to go the same path like her older brother and pass as white.

John Warwick asks if Rena will come back to Warwick's white world in South Carolina or not? Is it in best interest to take her away from her mother and give her the same opportunity like Warwick got many years ago? Is she ready to give up home and roots, which was making her herself? For what? Warwick's white wife died and he wished Rena to help him raise his son. Additionally, in Warwick's eyes, this was the only way to become somebody from nobody. The only way how to get on the Hill.

Is it really possible to break such close relation between the "only" child and her mother? Rena decides to do it and gets ready to leave her mother, home, hometown, hinterland but what is the most important thing is her past, which she will never be able to come back to.

A dark black boy, their neighbor, called Frank appears in a plot in the day of Rena's departure. Frank is secretly in love with her. He is supposed to help Rena with her luggage.

Frank offers Rena to pick her up if anything would happen and if she would like to return back home. This moment is the breaking point of mother's point of view. Seeing the future here with African-American boy is not what she wants for her only daughter. Yet her mother, Molly Walden, changes her mind and finally realizes that going away is life-breaking opportunity for her daughter.

There is an interesting shift in mothers thinking:

The idea of her beautiful daughter riding home from the end of the world with Frank, in a cart, behind a one-eyed mule, struck Miss' Molly as the height of the ridiculous – she was in a state of excitement where tears or laughter would have come with equal ease – and she turned away to hide her merriment. Her daughter was going to live in a fine house, and marry a rich man, and ride in her carriage. Of course a negro would drive the carriage, but that was different from riding with one in a cart. (Chesnutt 1900: 27)

To abandon the only daughter is now the only option to ensure her a better life. The old judge, the one who helped Warwick to get out of the chains of the colored people's destiny is quite skeptical about him taking his sister with him:

It is a pity, that men cannot select their mothers. My young friend John has built, whether wisely or not, very well; but he has come back into the old life and carried away a part of it, and I fear that this addition will weaken the structure. (Chesnutt 1900: 30)

3.1.3 RENA'S PASSING

Rena's first passing experience is cruel for her. Her brother places her in a boarding-school at Charleston South Carolina to learn to behave like a white lady. Rena takes a new name – Rowena Warwick. She is presented at a prestigious tournament, where she wins the first prize "Queen of Love and Beauty". She wins because of a white man, stranger called Sir George Tryon. Rena stayed at Charleston's school one year and after coming back to her brother, she could not wish a better entrance to a new community of brother's coworkers and friends. She wins her position and she is becoming a part of the white high society. "Your debut into society is a little more spectacular than I should have wished, but we must rise to the occasion and make the most of it. You are winning the first fruits of your opportunity." (Chesnutt 1900: 39)

Chesnutt is dealing with the topic, which is not presented in any other novel. It is passing with somebody, the passing of brother and sister side by side. He is focusing on the results in such a situation. Is it better to rely only on yourself? Is it better to share the secret?

When Chesnutt decided to write a novel primarily for that white audience, he tries to include the power of feeling, emotions, which will drag the audience in to the story. As Matthew Wilson points out, "He realized that he had to be less subtle but not so confrontational that he risked alienating his audience. In other words, he faced a complicated problem of genre and audience." (Chesnutt 1900: 60)

In *The House Behind the Cedars* Chesnutt presents the feelings of passing figures and the consequences of such a risks. Warwick describes how it feels to guard such a secret in white people's world.

Because of this knowledge, which the world around him did not possess, he had felt now and then a certain sense of loneliness; and there was a measure of relief in having about him one who knew his past, and yet whose knowledge, because of their common interest, would not interfere with his present or jeopardize his future. For he had always been, in a figurative sense, a naturalized foreigner in the world of wide opportunity, and Rena was one of his old compatriots, whom he was glad to welcome into the populous loneliness of his adopted country. (Chesnutt 1900: 45)

The end of Rowena's successful passing is quite ironic. She is about to get married to George Tryon. This is the time, when Rowena starts to miss her home, mother, and she would especially like to share her happiness with her. She starts to suffer from homesickness. Women with their feelings are not strong enough to take such risks. In the case of Rowena Valerie Smith points out: "Male slave narratives like Douglass's portray black men who embody not only "the journey from slavery to freedom, but also the journey from slavery to manhood." (Van Thompson 2004: 41)

3.1.4 BACK TO THE ROOTS

We are happy when we think ourselves happy, and with a strange perversity we often differ from others with regard to what should constitute our happiness. (Chesnutt 1900: 51)

Rowena cannot be totally honest with her future husband. Like in Larsen's *Passing*, her marriage will require her to keep her Negro ancestry concealed. Chesnutt's character must decide. On one hand there is the economic status, certainty of a white life and on the other hand the nostalgia. She is considering like every passing woman the future of her potential children. As a wife of a white man, her children would not be stigmatized as "illegitimate" as she and her brother were, and laws would not discriminate against her and her children.

Rowena's passing ends when she has dreams about her mother, who has become sick. She decides to go back home to Patesville and here is the moment where the white life crosses path with her past colored life. At this moment Chesnutt shows the feelings of a white man who realizes that his future wife is mulatta.

Chesnutt inserts his white character into the genre of the tragic mulatta narrative, and he assumes that the only way to obtain justice for African Americans is to attempt to mobilize white readers' feeling. But those sentiments are to be mobilized not only through the dilemma of the tragic mulatta, Rena Walden, but also through the dilemma of the central white character. (Chesnutt 1900: 63)

George Tryon, Rowena's fiancé is devastated because of the Rena's black roots. Immediately after his discovery, the official relationship is over. But as Rowena admits that she is mulatta, later in the plot shows George's not very moral intentions. It is not clear but it might suggest that George does not want to marry Rowena anymore, but she wants to meet her sometimes.

After the initial confrontation between George Tryon and his unmasked fiancé, the "racial disgrace" is kept private between a few people. Later, letters are exchanged and Rena denies her blackness, for octroons are white under South Carolina law. George Tryon's erotic interest in Rowena increases with her denial of blackness. In the result parting of their relationship, George Tryon appears to develop either dishonorable motivation behind his continued pursuit of Rena, or he still feels he is in love with her. His motivation is ambiguous. Ultimately, the utmost duty of a chivalric "gentleman honor" was to instantaneously protect women from assault. (Vránková, Koy 2007:98):!

. In the end of the novel there is a great shift in decision of Rowena – she does not want to pass anymore. Her brother passes alone and never returns home again. Rowena becomes a colored teacher.

3.1.5 THE QUESTION OF RACE AFTER THE CIVIL WAR IN THE HOUSE BEHIND THE CEDARS

Chesnutt is dealing with the race question throughout the whole book. But most of the comments about the attitude of Whites towards Colored people are in the chapter called *Mine Own People*.

Just before Sir Tryon realizes the truth about Rena he is having a dinner with Dr. Green who Tryon came to visit to Patesville. The normal conversation shows the attitude towards the freed slaves.

They have taken our Negroes and our liberties. It may be better for our grandchildren that the Negroes are free, but it's confoundedly hard on us to take them without paying for them. (Chesnutt 1900: 91)

The *House Behind the Cedars* shows in general most of the white men's opinion about colored people, except Judge Straight who was not racist and was a white man. They take them as inferior creatures while they take themselves as superior in blood and breeding.

The characters of the novel *The House Behind the Cedars* are chosen on purpose to shock and also teach white audience about the life of mulattos. This thought is captured by Matthew Wilson when he describes how Chesnutt extended the effect of the tragic mulatta genre to the privileged white male character, and he hoped that his audience would feel sympathy for Tryon and his love to Rena. In his novel Chesnutt tries to educate white readers about the "white negro" and show that there is no difference from the Others (Whites).

An advocate of racial mixing, Chesnutt focused his readers' attention in *The House Behind the Cedars* tactically on the sexual activities of the fathers. Because sexual attraction could not lead to marriage between people of different races at that time, all mixed-race offspring, according to the racist ideology, were presumed to be illegitimate. Chesnutt wants the readers to sympathize with feelings in terms like love, racism, race question.

Throughout the novel, then, Chesnutt carefully followed George Washington Cable's advice, taking the potential reactions of his white audience into consideration. By suggesting through Tryon's grief the possibility of utopian space to which Americans could be brought by racial amalgamation, Chesnutt was measuring the historical impossibility of what he would propose a few months after the publication of *The House Behind the Cedars* in "The Future American" series – that the only way out of the binary of racial superior/inferior

was racial mixing. And no matter how much success Chesnutt achieved in bringing his white readers into a sympathetic relation with Tryon and Rena, Chesnutt was also forced to admit that there was no way out of the racial trap, and someone – John Warwick, Tryon, or Rena – would ultimately be forced to disown family and history. (Chesnutt 1900: 93)

4 JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

One of the most prominent African-Americans of his time, James Weldon Johnson (1871 – 1938) was a successful lawyer, educator, social reformer, songwriter and critic. But it was a poet and novelist that he achieved lasting fame.

Among his most famous works, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* in many ways parallels Johnson's own remarkable life. First published in 1912, the novel relates, through an anonymous narrator, events in the life of an American of mixed ethnicity whose exceptional abilities and ambiguous appearance allow him unusual social mobility – from the rural South to the urban North and eventually to Europe.

A radical departure from earlier books by black authors, this pioneering work not only probes the psychological aspects of “passing for white” but also examines the American of caste and class system. The human drama is powerful and revealing – from the narrator's persistent battles with personal demons to his firsthand observations of a Southern lynching and mingling of races in New York's bohemian atmosphere at the turn of the century.

Revolutionary for its time, the *Autobiography* remains both an unrivaled example of black expression and a major contribution to American literature.

4.1 THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN

If the Negro author selects white America as his audience he is bound to run up against many long-standing artistic conceptions about the Negro; against numerous conventions and traditions which through age have become binding; in a word against a whole row of hard-set stereotypes which are not easily broken up.

James Weldon Johnson “The dilemma of the Negro Author”

In this novel, we are dealing with unknown and secretive narrator regarding his name, who is describing his life story, which is tragic, and, in a sense, also comic. This Ex-colored man is often toying with the ambiguity and the alternatives of both the often tragic and the comic nature of life. The main idea of this novel, in my opinion,

shows how comical it can actually be when pretend, that you are somebody else. We can notice, in many passages of the story, that when the protagonist is passing, it is some kind of a charade. The narrator shows that he is sometimes ridiculous to himself. His behavior is laughable, when he is a “white man”, but also it shows the tragedy when he realizes that living “the white life” is the only way to be taken seriously, to have a family, to marry the white woman he loves.

This story is a comical narration about serious topics which we can hardly understand these days. In the words of the author himself, the ex-colored man explores the psychological, social, and cultural dynamics of a black man struggling with his black and white identity.

I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions, and it is curious study to me to analyze the motives which prompt me to do it. I feel that I am led by the same impulse which forces the unfound-out criminal to take somebody into his confidence, although he knows that the act is liable, even almost certain, to lead to his undoing. I know I am playing with fire, and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating pastime, and, back of it all, I think I find a sort of savages and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society. (Johnson 1912: 1)

Carlyle Van Thompson, the author of *The Tragic Black Buck* says about this very beginning of his novel, that passing is a paradoxical performance, one which challenges the legal, economic, and social tenets of white supremacy, at the same time that it conversely reinforces the pervasive notion of white superiority. The significance of this paradox illustrates that the unique cultural productions of black people will disappear when individuals masquerade as white.

4.1.1 NARRATOR

The guide through the novel is the nameless narrator. The narrator and the main character in one person. This narrator describes a path through his life in the North, South and Europe as a physical journey and from a white boy to a black young

man back to end up as a white father as a psychological way describing passing and countervailing with his own identity. It also has didactic purposes: the author wanted white people's sympathy for understanding how black people felt.

There are more explanations, why J. W. Johnson chose not to give a real name to the narrator. One of them is to use the letter "X" as a symbol in meaning - fill a name you want. It could be anyone. There is another explanation – passing itself is shrouded in mystery, so the names in the Ex-Colored Man should be mysterious as well. For almost twenty years no one knew who wrote the novel, and it was thought to be a real autobiography.

The reader does not know the name of the narrator, he even does not know the names of the other characters in the book. The narrator never gives a proper name, the only truly proper names in the narrative are place names. Other characters are named by common nouns that describe the character or relate them to the narrator. Important characters of the plot are introduced in quotation marks. It is noticeable, when the narrator is talking about his friend from the elementary school "Shiny" or his employer and companion the "Millionaire"

All these names can be taken as a part of secrecy around act of passing, or as Samira Kawash points out: "Instead, the characters are like pieces on a playing board, playing out particular and discrete narrative functions in relation to the narrator." (Kawash 1997: 137)

4.1.2 ROOTS

The narrator's childhood whiteness is characterized as a condition of ironic misunderstanding. The boyhood is presented retrospectively. At first readers do not know that the narrator himself is colored. He does not know it either. He, as a child, sees some colored boys as a target of ridicule. His childhood emergence into racial consciousness is, and at the same time his emergence into self-consciousness. From the early boyhood the nameless narrator tries to decide whether he wants to be black or white.

I, the child of this unsatisfactions love. She told me even the principal reason for our coming North. My father was about to be

married to a young lady of another great Southern family. She did not neglect to add that another reason for our being in Connecticut was that he intended to give me an education, and make a man of me.(Johnson 1912: 19)

4.1.3 MONEY

Another throughout the whole plot of the novel is money. Money gives freedom, possibilities, education. Here the meaning of money has also enlarged meaning – money in the letter, which the mother receives every months constitutes the connection between two lovers, and the narrator's father and mother, and above all the responsibility of a father for his child.

The biggest importance of money, in context of passing, is the freedom. The narrator is playing with the idea of being wealthy and free. Yet in the bigger picture, it shows the view on democracy, the American way of life. It opens a question about the American society and its self-centered attitude towards the world.

Actually “Money” is the keyword for passing. To pass as a white man, as a “proper” American, brings better economic, social and respected position for life. James Weldon Johnson shows by making the analogy between the slave experience of Afro-Americans and the experience of those who pass for white.

4.1.4 EDUCATION

The ex-colored man is lead by his mother to work hard for himself. From the really beginning of his boyhood he has two teachers. One teacher teaches him how to play piano. Playing the piano and singing, well the music in general, is the biggest passion and an engine of the whole plot.

As busy as she generally was, she, however, found time to teach me my letters and figures and how to spell a number of easy words. Always on Sunday evenings she opened the little square piano, and picked out hymns. (Johnson 1912: 3)

The second teacher is there to teach him to read, count and introduces him the general knowledge of the main subjects. According to the narrator, when he is

describing his childhood, his life is divided between his music and his school books. And as it is obvious, the music takes up the greater part of his time.

At a very early age I began thump on the piano alone, and it was not long before I was able to pick out a few tunes. When I was seven years old I could play by ear all of the hymns and songs that my mother knew. I had also learned the names of the notes... (Johnson 1912: 4)

These songs are African-American gospel and spiritual music – black music. The piano teacher is white and teaches Bach, Beethoven and Brahms – white music.

The ex-colored Man is a gifted student and after his mother's death he still wants to go to college. His financial situation is not that bad. He stands in front of a huge decision about what college he should choose. There are two options for him – to chose the best and try Harvard, where he would spend all his money for one year, or study in Atlanta where the money he has would pay his actual expenses for at least two years. During the decision-making process there is an obvious fascination with the South. South in a sense of having a “magnetic” attraction to it, since he was born there.

Even though the influence of circumstances undergraduate studies eventually, there is still many skills he is going to gain. The narration of the ex-colored man shows, that to be able to pass is not only based on the skin color, but also there must be some groundswell of moral, cultural and linguistic qualities that are necessary to belong to another race. The author express it, as I perceive it, showing the intellect of ex-colored man for example by the ability to learn foreign languages, etc.

4.1.5 RACISM

The first notice about inequality is mentioned very early in the plot, it is actually at the very beginning, when the narrator cannot understand one fact. There is one classmate of his, he calls him “Shiny“. He is clearly the smartest boy in the class. During the years of studying he wins a lot of prizes, competitions, etc. As the narrator himself says:

Shiny was considered without question to be the best speller, the best reader, the best penman, in a word, the best scholar, in the class. He was very quick to catch anything, but, nevertheless, studied hard, thus he possessed two powers very rarely combined in one boy. I saw him year after year, on up into the high school, win the majority of the prizes for punctuality, deportment, essay writing and declamation. Yet it did not take me long to discover that, in spite of his standing as a scholar, he was in some way looked down upon. (Johnson 1912: 6)

Also the narrator mentions for the first time the term “Nigger”. The main protagonist does not know what the term really means. He knows that it is something bad, but he is not sure why. What is the real meaning of the word and why is it used to people of certain color and why are the teachers and the other students looking down on those who are Negroes? Here it is clear that the usage of this nowadays impolite word was used normally at that time. It was part of the society and social acceptable behavior. As the narrator does not know the meaning but was exposed to this word, he starts using it naturally.

He uses the “Nigger” word as the pejorative and racist designation. He calls some classmates niggers and after the situation, when he tells his mother and uses this word, his mother sharply reprimands him for using this signifier, though she does not tell him his own racial identity.

I was very much wrought up over the affair, and went home and told my mother how one of the “niggers” had struck a boy with a slate. I shall never forget how she turned on me. “Don't you ever use that word again” she said, “and don't you ever bother the colored children at school. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. (Johnson 1912: 7)

In the same chapter the ex-colored man, still as a small boy, realizes, that he was colored as well. There is a scene in the novel, where the teacher asks white students to stand up. Main character stands up too. He was said to sit down with the other blacks. He starts to think about the appearance of his mother, himself. At home he stares at himself on the mirror. In the fully racialized society of the United States, racial identity is an integral part of one's personal identity.

At this point of the plot narrator's double consciousness begins. He, for the first time, realizes, that the skin color is something irreversible and permanent. He is "blind" in seeing his own mother. Out of nowhere his life changed. I really liked the description of Samira Kawash, who is picturing this scene as the ex-colored man's quadroon mother, by denying his blackness and acknowledging his whiteness, projects her marginal and confused status onto her son.

For an instant I was afraid to look, but when I did I looked long and earnestly. I had often heard people say to my mother, "What a pretty boy you have." I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty, but, now, for the first time, I became conscious about it, and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size of and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. (Johnson 1912: 8)

After searching his own appearance, he suddenly see the lines of his mother's lips, face and curly dark hair. As for the first time, he realized the color of skin of his own mother. The most beautiful person in the world. He does not know, what it means, that she is a colored woman, and he is the colored child of hers. He only knows that he is going to be looked down upon as well as the much darker Shiny is. For the first time in the book, as a little boy, he is aware, that he is different.

From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized in it a great, tangible fact. And this is the dwarfing, distorting influence which operates upon each colored man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, nor even human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man. (Johnson 1912: 9)

Jacques Lacan explains this passage of the book as the identification of the self with an image external to the self provides a basis for identity by substituting the coherent image of the other for a complex, unstable self.

As he realizes that he is not white. The change in his behavior moves from the carefree young boy into a suspicious and reserved young man who is aware of his different position in everyday life. This begs the question how the other members of his class saw him as if he were in a new position? As the narrator explains, there was no change. The others still took him the same way as before. However, something broke inside of him and he was not the same for himself anymore. He was a new human being, a new person. The new person, starts to worry about everything, just because of the “change” of his skin color. He even starts looking differently at the others. He cannot understand, how the white people think, even though he well knows better how the white people think. There is an interesting pitch, where he realizes, that the others cannot understand him. From now on we can feel, that the narrator is not part of any community and refers to black and white people with the term “the others“. He does not identify himself with any side. The author explains his sense of loneliness, which took a great part in his life, since he realized the truth about him and his mother.

He does not find the company of colored man as satisfactory. Not because of the skin color, but because of the opinions, the way of thinking, etc. These are also the reasons for his lonely style of life. As he says:

I had had no particular like or dislike for these black and brown boys and girls, in fact, with the exception of Shiny, they had occupied very little of my thought, but I do know that when the blow fell I had a very strong aversion to being classed with them. So I became something of a solitary. (Johnson 1912: 10)

He is taking “them” as less than the rest of his classmates who are white. It may be because of the intellect, because of the behavior, or because he was one of the whites before, who were against them and now he is one of “them“.

4.1.6 CHANGE TO BEING COLORED

During his journey with the millionaire the ex-colored man has inner desire to represent the black race through his music, his experience. He wants to prove that Negroes are as good as beneficial for society as whites. The main character never

actually decided, whether he wants to belong among white people or black people. His constant internal struggle, fighting with his own identity, that is the reason he decides to go back to United States, especially to the South.

Was it more a desire to help those I considered my people or more a desire to distinguish myself, which was leading me back to the united States? That is a question I have never definitely answered. (Johnson 1912: 68)

The culmination of the narrator's geographical descent into blackness is achieved in Jacksonville, where he is welcomed into the cultured black middle class. (Kawash 1997: 143)

When the narrator, also some kind of spectator of a destiny of colored man, arrives to the South shows to readers the inside view of black people. Considering that the novel was first published in 1912, the narration from Negro's side, the actual feelings, the mentality, the most inner moments and thoughts of a colored man, makes this book so special.

The narrator's patient translation of theory into practice belies the mythical power of blood to make him colored. As opposed to the popular belief that black blood will always show itself through appearance or manner, the narrator suggest that blackness is acquired as a bodily discipline through study and repetition.

4.1.7 MILLIONAIRE

One of the most important character of the plot. The millionaire is the one who offers to the Ex-colored man some kind of freedom. The millionaire is a wealthy man, who is hosting private parties in New York City. He is the one who chooses the ex-colored man in the jazz bar in Harlem to work for him on Manhatten. The ex-colored man is playing jazz music on the piano for him. This occurs after a terrible scene in a bar, where one colored man shoots a white woman because he is jealous in front of the main character.

He takes the narrator and they became after a strange relationship good friends. He is not like most of the white Americans, and does not believe that Negroes are something less. On the other hand, he gives the ex-colored man a comment, that

he perceives him as a white man. The millionaire does not understand, that the ex-colored man wants to stop playing for him and go back and become a colored man that represents Negroes through their black music, and help to improve their position in society especially in the South.

My boy, you are my blood, by appearance, by education and by tastes, a white man. Now why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle of the black people of the United States? Then look at the terrible handicap you are placing on yourself by going home and working as a Negro composer, you can never be able to get the hearing for your work which it might deserve. (Johnson 1912: 67)

The millionaire, a Northerner is the first white man criticizing white Americans, talking about ignorance and reading between the lines stupidity of the system, where the humanity is missing. He refers to a sentiment, or some kind of narcissism.

This idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment, and you do not realize the fearful import of what you intend to do. What kind of Negro would you make now, especially in the South? (Johnson 1912: 68)

4.1.8 MUSIC

As I wrote before, music plays a great part of the story. Because of the ability of playing the piano, the Ex-Colored Man is so special and the narrator can tell “his” story. Without being able to play any music instrument in this story, I would not be able to talk about any of the passing on the psychological or physical level. Because music in this narration is the engine that helps the Ex-Colored Man to Europe, hence to succeed in his life as white man.

And that is also why, I need to describe the importance of this phenomena. The Ex-Colored Man starts play the piano as a little boy and starts with the rhythms of slavery songs, which he picks up from his mother. That is also, where the relation for admiration of ragtime music starts, in my opinion.

As the Ex-Colored man explains his emotion when he first hears ragtime music. He is amused. As he discovers a new dimension of music, from classical pieces is switching to this, as he himself identifies, barbaric music.

The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produced a most curious effect. (Johnson 1912: 46)

I would like to write few links about the ragtime music. As the Ex-colored Man says it is a novelty in New York at that time, and just growing to be a rage which has not yet subsided. It has origins in the questionable resorts about Memphis and St. Louis by Negro piano players, who knew no more of the theory of music than they did of the theory of the universe, but were guided by natural musical instinct and talent.

Now it is considered as the first completely american music, ragtime was popular towards the end of the 19th century and into the first two decades of the 20th century, roughly 1893 to 1917. Players of ragtime music often improvised crude and, at times, vulgar words to fit the melodies.

4.1.9 PASSING

In his decision to change his job, referring to a financial position and the need to have his lover with him. It happen after watching a black man get lynched and leaving his long-planned music career. He also changes his whole personal life.

“The change of job“ is not taken here as a proper meaning, but more as a metaphor. He decides to change the job – from colored man to become completely white. He finally accepts his role of a white man. I think that the words of Juda Bennett are adequate to reality, when she writes that to make living is necessity to become a white man with its supremacist, rising in the ranks of the order, marrying a white girl. She deals with a metaphor, where she says that everything is black or white – to quote the cliché – and the extremes of satire seem to perfectly critique the extremes of racist thinking.

In the following lines the narrator explains the reason why he decides to become an ex-colored man. It refers to the part of the book, where one of the colored man was convicted to be burned. This scene was for the ex-colored man such a motivation to become white, because Negroes were treated worse than animals. The inner struggle, and shame he is going through because of his decision is clearly expressed.

All the while, I understood that it was not discouragement, or fear, or search for a larger field of action and opportunity, that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals. (Johnson 1912: 90)

After taking his decision of becoming the white man, he is taking his whiteness with all that it gives. He wants to gain the most of the possibilities of being white. The narrator shows the importance of money again. According to the ex-colored man's opinion he makes up his mind to earn a lot of money and he wants to build a strong position among whites.

I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man's success, and that, if it can be summed up in any one word, means "money." (Johnson 1912: 91)

He keeps his word and assumes and plays his role as a white man with a certain degree of nonchalance, a carelessness as to the outcome, which made the whole thing more amusing to me than serious. The comical part of the novel, the charade while being white is actually living and joking with people around about his ethnic origin.

In his actor's performance, however, there is a small, but important crack, and it is a woman. His other decision-making process concerns his love is white, and she thinks he is white too. Can he bury his colored blood for the rest of his life? Can he marry her without her knowing that he is not white. It is easier to lie for yourself, but

he suddenly thinks about the risks of not being honest about his origin with her and the trouble it can cause her to marry a colored man.

On the other hand, he deals with the other inner question and it is, whether her love is strong enough to love him. Should he tell her or not? Is he good enough for her?

Now I began to doubt my ability to play the part. I watched her to see if she was scrutinizing me, to see if she was looking for anything in me which made me differ from the other man she knew. In place of an old inward feeling of superiority over many of my friends, I began to doubt myself. I began even to wonder if I really was like the men I associated with; if there was not, after all, an indefinable something which marked a difference. (Johnson 1912: 94)

5 NELLA LARSEN

Nella Larsen, one of the most acclaimed and influential writers of the Harlem Renaissance, was born Nellie Walker on April 13, 1891, in Chicago. In the 1910s she came to New York, where she worked as a nurse and as a librarian, and in 1919 she married a research physicist. She began publishing stories in the mid-1920s and published her first novel, *Quicksand*, in 1928. *Passing* came out the following year. Larsen was awarded a William E. Harmon Bronze Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes and a Guggenheim fellowship. Encountering personal and professional struggles, she was unable to have her third novel accepted for publication and by the end of the 1930s had stopped writing altogether. She worked full time as a nurse until her death in 1964.

Her mother was a light-skinned African American and her father was a Danish immigrant. Nella Larsen could pass as white but her sister could not.

5.1 PASSING

Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* looks back on a decade of passing. It gathers up a longer and larger history of passing to construct what might possibly be argued to be the first passing narrative conscious of its generic status.

The novel *Passing* deals with the race question as well as the women position within the family and society. Nella Larsen more than typifies the concern with racial pride. This narration also reduplicates the narrative of the tragic mulatto, a narrative which reverberates with racial angst and questionable racial politics. It is an interesting text with which to explore the theme of passing and to venture even further into questions of genre.

According to Juda Bennett, the author of the book *The Passing Figure* there are five similarities between Larsson's novel and most passing narratives. She describes four types of them. The first she calls a "chiascuro" or "Manichean" style that depicts the world primarily in "black" and "white", with particular attention to skin and eye color. The second similarity which Bennett describes is a polemic concerned with racial justice woven throughout the plot of passing. The third one is a return home,

almost of an atavistic nature, that actually structures the novel. The fourth similarity is secrecy and exposure orchestrated in order to create moments of surprise for both the characters and the readers of the novel. The last similarity is the death of the heroine.

5.1.1 PART ONE – ENCOUNTER

Irene Redfield, the main protagonist, tells her life story and her point of view on passing. She is actually not the one who passes, but she describes the passing life of the “antagonist” Clare Kendry. I am using quotation marks on purpose. Clare Kendry is a woman who passes as white and is a friend of Irene and at the same time her main enemy.

5.1.2 CLARE KENDRY

Clare has been passing for white. When her father dies she moves to her aunts, who are white and she “becomes” white as well. It gives her an opportunity to be white for the rest of her life. She is a beautiful woman and she knows how to use her beauty. Through her beauty and innocent dark eyes, especially in the description of Clare Kendry we can see the “Chiaroscuro” style. Nella Larsen delights in contrasting black and white. Often an intense or mysterious blackness of eye or a distinctive whiteness of skin will precede the explicit introduction of the passing theme.

Irene describes her at the very beginning of the plot, where we do not have any idea who she is. From the first lines of description of Clare it is obvious that there is a certain grudge a touch of rancor in Irene's words. The first mention about Clare's character is formulated in Irene's head, when she first sees her after many years in the restaurant. It is interesting to “observe” the first eye contact. Irene cannot recall Clare Kendry at the first time.

Catlike. Certainly that was the word which best described Clare Kendry, if any single word could describe her. Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive. And there was about her an amazing soft malice, hidden well away until provoked. Then she was capable of scratching, and very effectively too. (Larsen 1929: 10)

One day in New York Irene is tired and wants to rest a little. She goes to a restaurant on the roof, called the Drayton. This restaurant is only for white people. She herself has a light skin and as she admits, she sometimes pretends she is white. That day in Drayton her life is about to change. Her life gets a new direction, when she meets Clare Kendry after many years. Clare appears to be a rich white woman, because she came to the restaurant with a white man. The woman appeared to suspects Irene to be a mulatto and so she had no right to be at the restaurants for whites only. Irene starts to be nervous and she is wondering whether the woman may know that she does not belong there. As through the whole novel Larsson's narrator addresses the problems of identifying.

Very slowly she looked around, and into the dark eyes of the woman in the green frock at the next table. But she evidently failed to realize that such intense interest as she was showing might be embarrassing, and continued to stare. Her demeanor was that of one who with utmost singleness of mind and purpose was determined to impress firmly and accurately each detail of Irene's features upon her memory for all time, nor showed the slightest trace of disconcertment at having been detected in her steady scrutiny. (Larsen 1929: 15)

The narrator explains that Irene was always taken for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro.

5.1.3 PASSING IRENE'S VIEW ON CLARE'S LIFE DECISION, WOMAN X MOTHER

Larsen's description of Clare and Irene is a clear contrast. Two woman characters hold different points of view on life, the different ideologies. The contrast between them is present throughout the whole novel. Where both are trying to find their place and certain dominancy, both of them perceive in other levels. Clare is dominant in her behavior and self-confidence, she goes straight to what she wants and she gets it Irene is the character, understands dominancy as a woman, who has the certain and strong position in the relationship and marriage. She is more of the mother than woman.

Irene and Clare are in a sense antagonists of the novel, even in a plot so they stay beside each other as friends. Two of them meet at the restaurant and Irene cannot recognize Clare until Clare introduces herself to her, at that time the so-called friendship between them begins.

A moment passed during which she was the prey of uneasiness. It had suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't asked Clare anything about her own life and that she had a very definite unwillingness to do so. And she was quite well aware of the reason for that reluctant. (Larsen 1929: 22)

For the first time, different life paths became evident – one of a mulatta, who is permanently passing for white and a mulatta who is married to a colored man and passing just sometimes to make her life more comfortable, because she is also light-skinned.

You know, 'Rene, I've often wondered why more colored girls, girls like you and Margaret Hammer and Esther Dawson and -oh, lots of others-never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve. (Larsen 1929: 25)

Clare describes her position while living with her aunts who were white. She had to keep her secret and not tell anybody about it. She describes how hard that period of her life was and she did not want to be a burden for her family after her father's death.

Besides, to their notion, hard labour was good for me. I had Negro blood and they belonged to the generation that had written and read long articles headed: 'Will the Blacks Work?' Too, they weren't quite sure that the good god hadn't intended the sons and daughters of Ham to sweat because he had poked fun at old man Noah once when he had taken a drop too much. I remember the aunts telling me that that old drunkard had cursed Ham and his sons for all time.(Larsen 1929:

As it is the same situation like in other novels: the big issue is a better economic situation while passing for white. That is the motive for Clare to pass and hide her

African origins, delete her roots from her life and why she risks to live on the lie with her white, racist husband. According to her everybody wants money, as she says money's awfully nice to have and she admits that to Irene, that money is the main reason she has decided to pass. "Rene, that it's even worth the price." (Larsen 1929: 33)

In *Passing* Nella Larsen describes three women and all three have different life experience with passing and different opinion on that phenomena. While Clare is passing with all the risks, because her husband does not know about her black roots at all (and if he would realized, the marriage would be over and Clare would lose everything), Irene is reconciled with her position, with the position of her race. The third example of passing is, their common friend Gertrude, who is described in a pejorative way. She is not passing in the proper meaning. Her husband is white, but he knows she has a drop of Negro blood in her veins.

This contrast is present throughout the whole novel. Irene and Gertrude are living safe lives, where everything in their colored world is clear. The different position of Clare's status makes her most vulnerable, even if Larsen describes her character as the strongest.

"For Gertrude too had married a white man, though it couldn't be truthfully said that she was "passing." Her husband - what was his name? - had been in school with her and had been quite well aware, as had his family and most of his friends, that she was a Negro. It hadn't, Irene knew, seemed to matter to him then. Did it now, she wondered? Had Fred - Fred Martin, that was it - had he ever regretted his marriage because of Gertrude's race? Had Gertrude?" (Larsen 1929: 33)

Passing is unlike the other novels because the main character here is a woman, so Larsen is focusing on the role of woman as passer. The central theme is woman, mother, motherhood, family and submission.

The various opinions of three women characters - Irene, Gertrude and Clare vary according their social status. In the position, where her husband does not know she is a mulatta, Clare uncovers a topic unmentioned in other novels: Nobody can

control genes. Clare's biggest nightmare was that when she was pregnant her child might have negro features.

After taking up her own glass she informed them: "No, I have no boys and I don't think I'll ever have any. I'm afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too – too hellish. (Larsen 1929: 36)

The fear of negro features is so strong that Larsen emphasizes it using a word "hellish" when speaking about birth of child, which is most often associated with heaven. Gertrude is thinking about the same nightmare, even though her own husband knows her black ancestry. The explanation is easy. She wants her children to be white to have a better life. To be able to get a proper education, find a job and not to be discriminated by whites for Afro-American appearance. "Why, he actually said he didn't care what color it turned out. If I would only stop worrying about it. But, of course, nobody wants a dark child." (Larsen 1929: 36)

As those three women are talking about the color of their children and the consequences, Larsen puts to Clare's character a vicious behavior. She creates a mean character, who is actually considering herself inferior. She has problems to identify herself with Others – in a sense of African-Americans.

At that reply Clare turned on Irene her seductive caressing smile and remarked a little scoffingly: "I do think that colored people – we – are too silly about things. After all, the thing's not important to Irene or hundreds of others. Not awfully to you, Gertrude. It's only deserters like me who have to be afraid of freaks of the nature. (Larsen 1929: 37)

Clare is taking her role as a job. She becomes in her role a white supremacist. She takes "passing" as the lifelong duty as Juda Bennett describes in *The Passing Figure*. For Clare everything is either black or white – and the extremes of satire seem

to perfectly critique the extremes of racist thinking. Larsen is using twin characters, who can both pass. Ultimately, she express black self-hatred.

Larsen creates a dialectic between the racial transgressor and the racial conservator. Irene, a 'voluntary Negro,' haunts Clare with her rectitude; while conversely Clare teases Irene with her transgressions into white privilege. (Bennett 1996: 24)

To understand Clare's life and her position, the hypocrisy of her everyday life, Clare's husband, John Bellew expresses his feelings regarding race in the following passages:

"John Bellew came into the room. The first thing that Irene noticed about him was that he was not the man that she had seen with Clare Kendry on the Drayton roof." (Larsen 1929: 38)

"Hello Nig," was his greeting to Clare. --- "So he knew, then, that Clare is a Negro?"

"Well, you see, it's like this. When we were first married, she was as white as – as well as lily. But I declare she's getting darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger." (Larsen 1929: 39)

Clare – the symbol of ambiguity and instability depends on him. John is common racist character who forces readers to think about the racial questions in context with the colored women he is unknowingly surrounded by. He is so sure that his wife is not a colored woman, he can hardly think about it. For him it would be the end of everything and Clare knows that very well. In these lines, where John is talking about her people disparagingly, the reactions of the other two colored women are remarkable.

I know you're no nigger, so it's all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be. (Larsen 1929: 40)

Mr. Bellow emphasizes that in his perfect white world, there is no space for colored people. He does not know any. Nevertheless he says he knows some people who know them.

But I know people who've known them, better than they know their black selves. And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people." [...] "And you're sitting here surrounded by three black devils, drinking tea. (Larsen 1929: 41)

It was, Irene, thought, unbelievable and astonishing that four people could sit so unruffled, so ostensibly friendly, while they were in reality seething with anger, mortification, shame. But no, on second thought she was forced to amend her opinion. (Larsen 1929: 43)

After this rash words of John, Irene and Gertrude are put to a strange position. They cannot defend themselves as colored people. It is not because they do not want to do so, but because of Clare and her great secret. Irene says it herself. Clare, with her careless style of living does not care about anybody's feelings. Her selfishness quite describes her nature.

And mingled with her disbelief and resentment was another feeling, a question. Why hadn't she spoke that day? Why, in the face of Bellew's ignorant hate and aversion, had she concealed her own origin? Why had she allowed him to make his assertions and express his misconceptions undisputed? Why, simply because of Clare Kendry, who had expose he to such torment, had she failed to take up the defense of the race to which she belonged? (Larsen 1929: 52)

A little later later in the plot, Clare is changing completely from the self-centered person to a sensitive one. Is this the real her? Or is this just a game, where she plays vulnerable victim of her destiny. The character of Clare is difficult to understand, because the reader knows her past and that her life was not easy for her. Is her behavior the mirror of her past? Is she in the bottom of her heart a real victim? Certainly her marriage to a racist white man while passing secretly results the profound sense of loneliness:

But that did something to me, and I've been so lonely since! You can't know. Not close to a single soul. Never anyone to really talk to. (Larsen 1929: 67)

As Irene is a really nice person and she does not want to hurt anybody, she is thrown to a position, where she is Clare's best friend. There is the contrast. Irene in fact does not believe in advantages of passing. She is much happier as she is, taken for colored women. She is living careless life. Where everything is clear, transparent. She does not have to worry about anything. Her husband loves her and she loves him. They have beautiful family, respect among their own community and she does not want the superiority that Clare is putting to a pedestal. But in the other hand Irene can imagine, how Clare has to feel to live in a lie the whole time.

On other side there is, as Samira Kawash calls the eruption of desire. In her study she explains also the feeling of desire to be free like Clare and she hates her for it at the same time. "But Clare's passing body becomes for Irene the site of a rupture in the orderly structure of transparent identities." (Kawash 1997: 158)

Nella Larsen portrays a difficult character not only in Clare, but also in Irene. Irene's desire includes at the same time repulsion about the whole problem of passing.

Irene and her difficult character, where hostility and hospitality is mixing, takes Clare as a friend and threat. Yet the hospitality and pity win. That is why she introduces her to a dancing balls, where she is thrilled to see in New York, where colored people are meeting white people with no shame. Vice versa, they are meeting for fun to learn how to dance.

This, Irene told her, was the year 1927 in the city of New York, and hundreds of white people of Hugh Wentworth's type came to affairs in Harlem, more all the time. So many that Brian had said: "Pretty soon the colored people won't be allowed in at all. (Larsen 1929: 72)

She was annoyed, too, because she was aware that she had consented to something, which if it went beyond the dance, would involve her in numerous petty inconveniences and evasions. Not only at home with Brian, but outside with friends and acquaintances she needed to be on the look-out. She was mostly afraid to

introduce to her own husband. At first she is sure, that her husband would not agree with passing and from what Irene is saying about Clare, she is pretty sure he will not like her as a person.

But there is the tricky part of Clare. As I described earlier, Clare is like a cat, the same look, the same movement, the same attractiveness, which in her past opened the door for her, wherever she wanted to enter. “But Clare – she had remained almost what she had always been, an attractive, somewhat lonely child – selfish, willful, and disturbing.” (Larsen 1929: 73)

Clare loves the evenings at the gatherings, where nobody asks about her origins, she is like a fish in a river. She feels confident and also, probably for the first time in her life, she acknowledges, that some colored man are superior to white ones.

The first evening when Clare is invited to a dancing ball, Clare and Irene appear to become real friends. She is so attractive even to Irene. It is misleading. We can noticed some kind of Irene’s interest about Clare, not as a friend, but also as a women. She becomes her mistress in a way.

The erotics of this relation are the focus of Deborah McDowell’s reading, an extremely influential interpretation that forms the preface to the Rutgers University Press combined edition of *Quicksand* and *Passing* and has been perhaps the single most important factor in the recent revival of interest in this novel. (Kawash 1997: 159)

According to Kawash and McDowell’s there are dangerous sub-plots. The sub-plots they are talking about are meant in the sense of protolesbian relation, which is described by Larsen’s pen.

But undistinctive as the dance had seemed, it was, nevertheless, important. For it marked the beginning of a new factor in Irene Redfield's life, something that left its trace on all the future years of her existence. It was the beginning of a new friendship with Clare Kendry. (Larsen 1929: 79)

As they become friends and even Brian, the husband of Irene, eventually likes her. Irene is happy, that she can help her with her sorrow in her deluded life. She feels

happy that Clare does not have to pass all the time. Clare is going to the parties alone. Naturally her husband does not know. He cannot know. Irene is so secure with the friendship, that sometimes, when she cannot go, Clare and Brian are going alone.

She was generally liked. She was so friendly. She was so friendly and responsive, and so ready to press the sweet food of flattery on all. Nor did she object to appearing a bit pathetic and ill-used, so that people could feel sorry for her. (Larsen 1929: 80)

5.1.4 SUSPICION AND THE SPLIT IN LIFESTYLES

Irene's only certainty is a family: Her children, her husband, her home. She was working the values over her whole life. Her happiness is endless with Brian, with friends, even with the new upcomer – Clare. But, there is a new wind around, which starts to blow and is shaking her certainty and her dreamland.

Clare and her opinions are more or less more rational. She is a rational person. She is doing things she has to do, to get something of it. Her life values are different and completely hideous for Irene.

“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 that at her words. (Larsen 1929: 81)

She talked about her daughters as about something that had to be presented in her life. However, she talked about them like she does not feel much. She is not a prototype of a super mummy. Clare is a realist, so she at least is honest to herself and in one moment to Irene as well. As it is said in the plot many times, Clare gets what she wants.

“Can't you realize that I'm not like you a bit? Why, to get things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, 'Rene, I'm not safe.” (Larsen 1929: 81) There is a just a thin line between the suspicion and the reality, where Irene is feeling threatened by Clare. Irene questions Brian's fidelity. As I described the character of Clare, there is no surprised, that Irene becomes extremely jealous. There is a conflict between suspicion and the reality. Irene in those passages

of the book is described a little mad. There is rational Clare on one side and irrational side of Irene on the other.

The whole conflict between desire to be like Clare, the understanding that Brian wants Clare, and the hatred grows inside of Irene. The confusion leads to a disaster. "For a minute Irene hesitated, then turned her head, though she knew what it was that held Hugh's gaze. Clare, who had suddenly clouded all her days. Brian, the father of Ted and Junior." (Larsen 1929: 92)

The contrast is strongest between careless Clare, when she knows she can get everything she wants and now even more. She is slowly getting what Irene wants. Clare is undermining the certainty of Irene's life. From her character, whose main life values are children, it is not a surprise, that Irene is thinking only about her boys. She fears for her children, about losing her home, about losing her husband, in short losing everything.

Her mental and physical languor receded. Brian. What did it mean? How would it affect her and the boys? The boys! She had a surge of relief. It ebbed, vanished. A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn't count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle. (Larsen 1929: 93)

Her despair is rising even more. Thinking about losing everything drives her crazy. The worst for her is the suspicion though. There is no proof. She cannot say anything, and she cannot do anything. There is a kind of violence from now on in the plot, a hatred which comes from Irene's heart. She feels betrayed, by her friend, her mistress, her husband, and her very race. The suffering of position as a woman in the world, is according to Irene, cruel enough as the suffering from being a Negro. She talks about it for the first time in the whole novel after she gets the suspicion, that her husband is cheating on her with Clare.

Larsen describes through Irene's character the difficult position of woman being alone, not respected, not appreciated. She feels desperate about being "just" a wife, as she said without a man, the woman is taken as an obstacle, when he would leave her, she would lose everything, just as Clare would lose everything if her

husband realized, where and with whom she spends her free evenings, when he is away at business trips.

Sitting alone in the quiet living-room in the pleasant firelight, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children. (Larsen 1929: 98)

5.1.5 THE RACE AND THE RACISM

Irene's suspicion awakens in her mind for different scenarios. She would like to hurt Clare somehow. She would love for her husband to realize that she is a Negro. She would love the humiliation. She would love to see her suffer, just as much as she suffers because of her.

In her mind, she is losing the love of her life and she starts to be brutal in her thinking. That is a dramatic change in Irene's character. From being a nice, polite, wishing mother and wife, she is transformed into a jealous, angry, suspicious person. As she thinks about bad things that could happen to Clare, she would probably never do anything bad on purpose. However there are some coincidences, which will always happen in human's lives. The happy/unhappy coincidence is happening when she meets Clare's husband in the city, when she is shopping with an African-American friend. She has obvious negro features and could not be mistaken for a white woman.

He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own. She was sure, now, of the understanding in his face, as he looked at her again and then back at Felise. (Larsen 1929: 99)

As he meets her with a colored woman, so he starts to be suspicious too. Not just about the roots of Irene, but also about the ancestry of his own wife, Clare. He is convinced about the two worlds, one black and one white. For him there is nothing which could be in the middle. Here it is interesting how two completely different

characters become similar in a way of suspicion. As he starts to relate the Negroes to his own wife, also his world is slowly falling apart. For the whiteness in his family, in his life is something untouchable. The thought that a mulatta would ruin his perfect, superior white life is terrifying.

5.1.6 THE FINAL SCENE

Irene is crazy about Clare and her husband Brian. She starts to think clearly about the reality and tries to find a solution about the whole situation she puts herself into. She doubts her life values, she is thinking also about sharing her husband. She would be a mother for her boys, Clare would be the love of her husband. After all she becomes reconciled with her own destiny.

Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of their things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? (Larsen 1929: 107)

Better, far better, to share him than to lose him completely. Oh, she could close her eyes, if need be. She could bear it. She could bear anything. (Larsen 1929: 108)

At the final scene, where they all are visiting a Christmas party, suddenly Bellew, Clare's husband comes. "Then the roar of John Bellew's voice above all the other noises of the room." (Larsen 1929: 110) He invades the party and confronts Clare. He calls her "a dirty nigger!"

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking, daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost. What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. (Larsen 1929: 111)

The confusing moment, Clare standing by the window and Irene is standing next to her. All her thoughts were mixing in her head. She loves Clare and she hates her even more. She has to suffer, she cannot take her Brian. What does it mean for her, when her husband knows now, that she is a colored woman? Is she going to stay with them? With Brian? And what about Irene? What about boys?

In the midst of her wonderships and questionings came a thought so terrifying, so horrible, that she had had to grasp hold of the banister to save herself from pitching downwards. A cold perspiration drenched her shaking body. Her breath came short in sharp and painful gasps. (Larsen 1929: 113)

Irene pushed Clare down from the window of the top floor a tall New York building. Clare died. Everybody thought it was an accident.

6 FRANCES E. W. HARPER

A poet and essayist, Frances Ellen Watkins was born in Baltimore in 1825. In her childhood she had a comfortable surroundings and her uncle helped her to get a proper education on his school.

While working for a white family as a nursemaid, she read extensively and began writing poetry. She compiled her first collection of poems, *Forest Leaves*, in 1845. Her early associations with influential abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and William Still helped in the publication and circulation of her work. In addition to writing poetry, she traveled on the antislavery lecture circuit and sent the money she earned on these tours to her uncle in order to sustain the work of the Underground Railroad.

In 1860, Watkins married Fenton Harper and settled on a farm in Ohio. During her four-year marriage, she apparently gave up lecturing in order to raise their daughter, Mary, and Fenton's three children from an earlier marriage. After her husband's death saddled her with a large debt, Harper resumed lecturing for the antislavery cause, teaching, and writing poetry and novels in order to support herself and her family. *Iola Leroy*, published in 1892, may have been Harper's last lengthy literary work. In addition to antislavery, Harper was also active in the temperance movement. She wrote numerous poems on the evils of alcohol. She died on February 20, 1911 and was buried in Edenton Cemetery.

6.1 IOLA LEROY

The novel *Iola Leroy, Shadows Uplifted* deals with the indignity of slavery, the main theme in this novel is the rejection of a comfortable life, rejection of being a passing mulatta and fighting for the rights of colored people.

The novel is established in the era of the Civil War in the United States until its conclusion (1861 – 1865) and the era of Reconstruction (1865 – 1877). *Iola Leroy* was perhaps the best-selling black novel of the 19th century.

Francis E. W. Harper belonged to the women writers from 1890 to 1910 which was also called "the women's era". In her work Harper deals with numerous topics

such as feminism, slavery, social position of African-Americans, segregation or Christianity.

The main protagonist of *Iola Leroy* displays ties to the 19th century tradition of women's fiction. According to William L. Andrews, the title character of the novel confronts challenges to her moral and social ideals reminiscent of those that the heroines of popular white women's fiction had to contend with. These challenges are epitomized in Iola's decision, not once but twice in the novel, to reject the marriage proposal of a sincere white suitor, Dr. Gresham.

6.1.1 UNION ARMY AND THE CIVIL WAR

The novel begins at the secret meeting of slaves, discussing the progress of the Union Army and also the possibilities of their entrance to the army and participation in the Civil War. That time was the best time to join the Union Army, because the soldiers were settled just in the woods close to the house of their master.

The main characters at the beginning of the plot are Tom Anderson and Robert Johnson. These two are organizing how to join the Union Army. They are the ones who are gathering the information about the development of the war. There is also an important character of Uncle Daniel and his wife Aunt Linda who do not want to be freed from their master. Harper describes the diversity among slaves in a sense of responsibility to their family members or even to their masters.

During the dark days of the Rebellion, when the bondman was turning his eyes to the American flag, and learning to hail it as a sign of deliverance, some of the shrewder slaves, coming in contact with their masters and overhearing their conversations, invented a phraseology to convey in the most unsuspected manner news to each other from the battle-field. (Harper 1892: 8)

Harper is describing the feelings of the slaves. They can be loyal to their master, but only to a certain level. Still their master owns them and there is nothing better than to be free. Also there is another thing that Harper deals throughout the whole novel – family members. Slavery often divided the families. Children were sold from

their mothers and fathers. The era after the Civil War was the era of trying to reunite the lost family members, exactly how Harper describes it in her novel.

It isn't so good, but it might be better. I ain't got nothing ,gainst my ole Miss, except she sold my mother from me. And a boy ain't nothin' without his mother. I forgive her, but I never forget her, and never expect to. But if she were the best woman on earth I would rather have my freedom than belong to her. Well, boys, here's a chance for us just as soon as the Union army gets in sight. What will you do? (Harper 1892: 15)

A few evenings after their discussion about joining the Union Army, the Union soldiers established their headquarters near their home. For the first time Iola Leroy is mentioned in the plot. Iola is a slave belonging to a cruel master Tom. She is light-skinned and has blue eyes. Master Tom is acting really terribly to her and Tom Anderson wants to take her with them.

But dere's a mighty putty young gal dere at Marse Tom's. I wish I could git her away. Dey tells me dey's been sellin' her all ober de kentry; but dat she's a reg'lar spitfire; dey can't lead nor dribe her. (Harper 1892: 30)

6.1.2 IOLA LEROY'S DESTINY

Iola Leroy was a child of a white father, very rich slave owner. She was raised as a white child. Her mother used to be a slave of her father. They fell in love and she was sent to the North to school and after her graduation they got married. This secret about Iola's mother was not told to Iola and to Harry – Iola's younger brother. Iola was passing for white unconsciously. Iola was raised in happy family surrounded with love. When she was old enough, she was sent to the North as her mother to get on education. For the first time, she is confronted with the opinion that slavery is evil. Because of her father possessions and as family owning slaves, she paradoxically has a pro-slavery stance out of loyalty to her father.

When she was about to finish the school, Iola's father and mother went to the final ceremony. During their journey, Iola's father was infected by yellow fever and died.

His only friend and cousin, Alfred Lorraine, was selfish, eager, keen, and alert; also hard, cold, methodical, and ever ready to grasp the main chance to make money. He annulled his cousin's marriage with lola's mother and lola's mother and Harry lost everything, including their freedom.

As lola and Harry were unconsciously passing, it was a great change in their life. Alfred Lorraine sent for lola to her school and by using a trick he got her back down to the plantation in Louisiana, where she and her mother were enslaved. lola could at least save Harry by sending a letter describing the family situation.

6.1.3 JOINING THE UNION ARMY, REJECTION OF PASSING

Robert Johnson joins the Union Army together with Tom Anderson and lola Leroy. All of them join a Northern regiment. Robert is very keen and hardworking, intelligent, courageous and soon gains a respect of the lieutenant of colored company and other superior officers. Robert is light-skinned mulatto and having all those personal qualities, he is confronted by Captain Sybil, a white man, with the possibility of passing.

“Johnson” said a young officer, Captain Sybil, of Maine, who had become attached to Robert, “what is the use of your saying you’re a colored man, when you are as white as I am, and as brave a man as there is among us. Why not quit this company, and take your place in the army just the same as a white man? I know your chances for promotion would be better.” [...] “Well, Captain, when a man’s been colored all his life it comes a little hard for him to get white all at once. Where I to try it, I would feel like a cat in a strange garret.” (Harper 1892: 34)

Captain Sybil becomes a friend of Robert and they often discuss politics or religious topics. He is also the one who try to persuade Robert to pass. As he says: “[...] you do not look like them, you do not talk like them. It is a burning shame to have held such a man as you in slavery.” (Harper 1892: 35)

Robert is very strict about his position. As he says he is a colored man, he was born like one and he does not want to pretend he is not just to gain a better life, if it means he would lose himself.

The second rejection of passing concerns even on bigger issue. Lola works as a nurse in the army. She is very good at it and she is hard-working just like Robert. She becomes an object of Dr. Gresham's desire. Dr. Gresham is moved by Lola's behavior. He is surprised she kissed Tom Anderson, just before he died after a fatal injury on a battlefield. For him it was a strange thing to do, because as he said. He could eat with colored, sleep next to them, but to kiss a dying colored man is another level of sympathy. The Colonel explains to him that it is because she used to be a slave as well. Doctor cannot believe it. The light skin, good manners and ability to talk without the "Negro" dialect confused him.

Dr. Gresham did not know she used to be a slave. According to his words he cannot understand how a Southern lady, whose education and manners stamp her as a woman of fine culture and good breeding, could consent to occupy the position she so faithfully holds.

Dr. Gresham was a member of a wealthy and aristocratic family, proud of its lineage, which it could trace through generations of good blood to its ancestral isle. He had been deeply interested in Lola before he had heard her story, but after it had been revealed to him he tried to banish her from his mind; but his constant observation of her only increased his interest and admiration. (Harper 1892: 46)

Lola's character fascinates Dr. Gresham so much that even with his stand as a white man he asks Lola to marry him. She refuses. It is an act described by Andrews as ultimate decision that woman must make in nineteenth-century fiction, that is, whether and whom to marry, which Lola does as an African-American woman. Every choice she makes as a typical women's fiction heroine – how to recover her long-lost mother, how to support herself, whom to reject and accept in marriage – she considers in light of the fact that she has chosen to identify herself as a black person.

Also Lola's brother Harry refused to "pass" as a white man. After receiving the warning letter from Lola, he is wondering what to do next. He does not anywhere to go. There is an option of passing for white which he rejects. He knows that he would never find his mother and sister again, they would be never reunited. Instead of passing he chooses to join Union army.

[...] after I found out that I was colored, I consulted the principal of the school, where I was studying, in reference to the future. He said

that if I stayed in the North, he had friends whom he believed would give me a situation I could fill, and I could simply take my place in the rank of workers, the same as any other man. (Harper 1892; 152)

6.1.4 FAMILY MEMBERS

Basing her heroine's moral superiority on her dedication to the welfare of black people rather than on her superficial affinities with whites was Harper's way of arguing that even the most talented and privileged of black woman had to conceive of their traditional responsibilities to family as embracing the entire black community. (Harper 1892; xi)

Robert is injured and lola takes care of him. She sings a song that Robert knows from his lost mother. lola knows the song from her mother who is Robert's sister. At the end of the Civil War, lola and her newfound uncle are heading to the South to find their relatives.

Robert finds his mother and lola is still searching for Harry and her mother Marie. Meanwhile Harry is injured and when he wakes up next to him there is his mother. The family is partly reunited. The only wish of Marie is to find her daughter lola. Harry goes to various conferences and try to find her.

Time passed on. Harry and his mother searched and inquired for lola, but no tidings of her reached them. Having fully recovered his health, and seeing the great need of education for the colored people, Harry turned his attention toward them, and joined the new army of Northern teachers. (Haper 1892; 144)

He is sitting on one conference when there is an announcement that lola is searching for her lost mother and brother. lola and Harry are in the same room. The family is fully reunited. All three lola, Harry and mother Marie start to live together.

6.1.5 RACE AND OSTRACISM

Throughout the whole novel Harper is closely focusing on the topic of race. Through lola Leroy she tries to activate people in race question by encouraging reform of society through individual members "it is the inner life that develops the outer" (Harper 1892; xi) There is injustice presented on both sides – white and black.

What had we to be grateful for? For ages of poverty, ignorance, and slavery? I think if anybody should be grateful, it is the people who have enslaved us and lived off our labor for generations. (Harper 1892: 40)

The features of racism and especially ostracism are described when Lola moves to the North to her uncle Robert and tries to find a job. As she refuses to pass, she does not hide that she is colored so she cannot find a job. When she finds one, after short time she resigns or is no longer needed. The other colleague does not want to work with her in one shop. Or worse the respectful young men are changing the behavior towards her in very uncomfortable way.

Without knowing the cause, Lola noticed a chill in the social atmosphere of the store, which communicated itself to the cash-boys, and they treated her so insolently that her situation became very uncomfortable, [...] (Harper 1892, 155)

Even uncle Robert tries to persuade Lola not to tell the truth about her origins: "Well, if you will go, say nothing about your color." (Harper 1892; 156) Yet she feels too proud to not show that she is one of the colored. Ostracism is also the reason of the second rejection of a marriage proposal by Dr. Gresham. As he asks her to marry him, she answers that it is public opinion which assigns her a place with the colored people. The penalties of social ostracism exist in the North and the South.

Lola, fighting for the rights of her people finally gets married with a colored man, Dr. Latimer, and moves back to the South, where Dr. Latimer is needed.

The romantic ending of the novel is a feature of romanticism, but unfortunately the reality after the Civil War was different. The difference is visible comparing Francis Harper and Mark Twain who wrote a realistic short story called *A True Story, Word for Word as I Heard It*.

'Dis one too ole,' or 'Dis one lame,' or 'Dis one don't 'mount to much.' An' dey sole my ole man, an' took him away, an' dey begin to sell my chil'en an' take *dem* away, an' I begin to cry; an' de man say, 'Shet up yo' dam blubberin',' an' hit me on de mouf wid his han'. An' when de las' one was gone but my little Henry, I grab' *him* clost up to my breas' so, an' I ris up an' says, 'You shan't take him away,' I says; 'I'll kill de man dat tetches him!' I says. But my little Henry whisper an' say, 'I gwyne to run away, an' den I work an' buy yo' freedom.' Oh, bless de chile, he always so good! But dey got him—dey got him,

de men did; but I took and tear de clo'es mos' off of 'em, an' beat 'em over de head wid my chain; an' *dey* give it *tome*, too, but I did n't mine dat. Well, dah was my ole man gone, an' all my chil'en, all my seven chil'en—an' six of 'em I hain't set eyes on ag'in to dis day, an' dat's twenty-two year ago las' Easter.(The Atlantic: A True Story, Word for Word as I Heard it)

7 CONCLUSION

In my diploma I described the possible ways of passing according to the four novels *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, *Passing*, *The House Behind the Cedars* and *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*.

All four writers described the passing and the motives which lead the protagonists to pass or not to pass for white. Writers were not focusing only on the aspect of passing at a general level, through their narration they uncovered also the another level of passing and it is the personal experiences, which give the stories greater dimensions.

While studying this topic, the emotions and feelings sprang out of the books. All four writers' main protagonists are different characters coming from slightly different families, different background, but it is interesting to watch that the motives for passing are still quite similar. Freedom, economic and social status are the most important ones. With the exception of John Warwick, there is also the same depression among all protagonists who are passing and accordingly solitude, fear and uncertainty.

The first novel deals with the difference in passing between men and women. Warwick is the son of the colored woman and he decided to pass many years ago when his name was John Waldon. As he denied all his black roots, and built his new, false social status as a respectful white man, got married to a white widow and had a child. Suddenly his wife died and he came back to his home village Patesville to offer his sister Rena the same life, with the same opportunities as well as taking care of his young son.

To be offered such a great thing, she agreed and left with her brother to search for a better life for herself. Both siblings looked white enough, because of their white father, who also provided access to education, which from the very beginning refers to a general "phenomena" which all four novels have in common – the white father attempts to secure his children economically and wants them to be educated.

The House Behind the Cedars deals with integration of Rena into the "white world". With help of her passing brother at first she is very successful. She finds a nice,

loving white man, who wants her as his wife. That is actually the goal in passing. To fit among whites and to start “their” life.

Passing phenomena is divided in this novel into two parts – from man's point of view and from the woman's point of you. The mother of both main protagonists of the novel, Molly Walden, got sick and was dying. Rena could not stand the stress and anxiety. She broke the most important rule of passing – she did not forget about her roots. In this novel it is interesting that the author is writing about passing to introduce this topic so common among blacks, to the white audience.

The second novel I analyzed was *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. This novel describes a life of a young boy and young man who is crossing the racial line from one side to the other. It uses the advantages of passing, but sometimes his pride and love for the “Negro music” lead him back to his black origins. In this novel, the main topic is African-American music – Ragtime, which was actually the opening gate for passing.

This novel shows the life experience of a colored man with white features in many difficult life moments which he had to solve by passing. As the only protagonists of all novels had the opportunity to travel to Europe, which gave to the novel new dimension of passing. Only the novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* in written in Ich form.

The third novel written by Nella Larsen is called *Passing* and there is again a little different point of looking on the topic passing. The novel deals with two main characters Irene and Clare when Clare was passing and Irene was not. The two lives of colored women went collaterally side by side. Clare had a white husband who did not know about her origins and Irene on the other side had a husband who was black. Both women were so light-skinned they both could pass.

This novel focuses on the reasons why Clare chose to pass and Irene did not. Even more interesting was to watch how those two opposite life approaches could exist next to each other. The two contradictory worlds ruined each other. Hand by hand with the theme passing is a topic of feminism and hints of homosexuality.

The last novel I analyzed *Iola Leroy, Shadows Uplifted* is completely different story from the other three novels. In previous three novels the main protagonists tried

to pass to become a part of the “white world” to have certain benefits. To improve their social and economic status. *Iola*, the main protagonist of Frances E. W. Harper’s novel, presented the opposite direction in racial movement. *Iola* was born as a white girl, she had a brother and her father was a wealthy southern slave owner. *Iola* is sent to study to the North. She was for the first time in her life confronted with the opinion that slavery is bad thing. Her stand was clear, *Iola* is pro-slavery.

In fact, *Iola* was not white, her mother was a mulatta, who married her previous owner and as parents they decided that they will not tell their children about her origins. After *Iola*’s father death, her mother, her and her brother lost everything and were enslaved. This novel is the only example of unaware passing.

After she became a slave she started to deal with the situation of being colored. In my analysis I was dealing with the process which led even to the rejection of the marriage proposal from a white man. She accepted her role in this world and became completely part of the black community.

The aim of my thesis was to analyze four novels of African-American writers describe the term “passing for white”. I found the topic extremely interesting and sad at the same time.

8 CZECH SUMMARY

Diplomová práce popisuje proces, jak se z míšenců stali běloši na základě příběhů čtyř románů: “The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man”, “Passing”, “The House Behind the Cedars” and “Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted”.

Všichni čtyři autoři se zabývají ve svých románech tématem, které popisuje cestu z jedné kulturní a etnické skupiny do jiné. Knihy odkrývají motivy, které k tomuto rozhodnutí míšence nutí, ale na druhou stranu i problémy, kvůli kterým se těmito lidem přechod z jedné či druhé strany nepovedl. Autoři zkoumají toto téma na obecné rovině. Avšak díky tomu, že se jedná o romány, tedy o příběhy konkrétních lidí, dostává téma mé diplomové práce, tedy Považován za bílého nový, mnohem hlubší smysl. Díky příběhům jsem mohla analyzovat osobní zkušenosti hlavních hrdinů, i lidské pocity.

Během mé analýzy a studování tématu “Passing” jsem v románech spatřovala rozdíly jednotlivých postav.

Každý hrdina měl jiné kořeny a zázemí. Všechny příběhy ale něco spojovalo. Svoboda, ekonomický a sociální status, to jsou nejdůležitější důvody, které míšence k „přeběhnutí“ k bělochům dovedly. Také pocity jednotlivých hrdinů pramenící z „přeběhnutí“ byly podobné - samota, strach a nejistota.

První román se zabývá rozdílem mezi pohledem muže a ženy na otázku změny identity. Warwick je synem Afroameričanky, který se před mnoha lety rozhodl od základu změnit svůj život a začal předstírat, že je běloch. Popřel své černošské kořeny a vytvořil si novou identitu. Začal žít v jiné společnosti jako uznávaný mladý bílý muž. Warwick se ožení a zplodí syna s bílou ženou, která však záhy umírá. Dostává se stesk a Warwick se proto rozhodne vrátit do rodné vsi pro svou mladší sestru Renu. Nabídne jí nový život se stejnými možnostmi jaké měl on sám.

Rena s vidinou lepšího života souhlasí a odjíždí se svým bratrem za lepším životem. Oba sourozenci mají všechny předpoklady k tomu, aby nikdo nemohl zjistit, že skrývají černošskou krev. Jejich otec jim poskytl vzdělání a tím svým dětem zajistil možnost překročit rasovou linii a zařídit si poklidný život. Tento motiv také najdeme ve v ostatních románech.. Otec běloch, který přese všechno pečuje o rozvíjení svých

potomků. Podporuje je jak ekonomicky, tak poskytnutím studijních materiálů, nebo jiných subjektů, které napomáhají jejich rozvíjení, příklad klavíru v románu „The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man“

Kniha „The House Behind the Cedars“ se zabývá integrací míšenky do společnosti bělochů. Hlavní hrdinka Rena je hned od začátku velmi úspěšná a přesvědčivá. Najde si milujícího bílého muže, který ji požádá o ruku. Tím se přiblíží k cíli – vzdát se své původní identity, zapadnout mezi bělochy a zařídít si nový život.

V tomto románu se setkáváme se dvěma pohledy na problematiku přecházení mezi rasami - z pohledu muže a očima ženy. Matka obou hrdinů onemocní a pomalu umírá. Rena neunesla stres a úzkost, že není se svou matkou v jejích posledních chvílích a porušuje základní pravidlo – nikdy se nevracet ke kořenům.

Zajímavostí tohoto románu je také to, že ačkoli autor popisuje čistě černošské téma, tedy „passing“, počítá především s bílými čtenáři. Cílem autora je co nejvíce přiblížit problematiku záměn ras. Snaží se čtenářům objasnit toto téma z různých úhlů pohledu a vysvětluje myšlenkové pochody postav.

Druhý román, který jsem analyzovala „The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man“ popisuje život míšence afroamerického původu, který během děje několikrát překročí etnickou linii. Občas využívá výhody „passing“, jindy ho hrdost a láska k černošské hudbě svede zpátky ke kořenům. Právě hudba, Ragtime, hraje v tomto románu hlavní roli. Pro hrdinu románu se stává spouštěcím mechanismem pro opakované překračování etnické linie.

Tento román popisuje životní zkušenosti Afroameričana s europoidními rysy, který těžké životní situace řeší právě změnou etnické příslušnosti. Zároveň je tato kniha specifická tím, že její hlavní hrdina se jako jediný mohl podívat do Evropy, a pojem „passing“ tak dostává zcela jiný rozměr. Kniha „Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man“ je také jako jediná psaná ich-formou.

Třetí román, kterému jsme se při tvorbě své diplomové práce věnovala, napsala afroamerická spisovatelka Nella Larsen a jmenuje se „Passing“. Třetí román a třetí možný pohled na změnu rasové identity. Román se zabývá srovnáním dvou hlavních protagonistek Irene a Clare. Clare se vdala za bílého muže, který nevěděl o jejím

původu a Irene za Afroameričana. Irene přesto, že by se mohla vydávat za bělošku, tuto potřebu nikdy neměla.

Hlavním tématem, které rozebírám v rámci tohoto románu je důvod, proč si dvě dobré přítelkyně vyberou dvě různé cesty životem. Proč Clare zapřela své lidi a svůj původ a jestli se Irene žije lépe jako mulatce v upřímném manželství. Snad ještě zajímavější bylo sledovat, jakým způsobem dvě ženy z různých světů dokáží vzájemně fungovat a jak se postupně dva protichůdné osudy navzájem ničí. Vedlejšími tématy, kterými se Nella Larsen v knize „Passing“ zabývá je feminismus a částečně i homosexualita.

Poslední román, kterým jsem se ve své diplomové práci věnovala „Iola Leroy, Shadows Uplifted“ se vymyká třem předešlým. V případě prvních tří knih jsem se zabývala zkoumáním situace, kdy se Afroameričan snaží dostat mezi bělochy kvůli lepšímu sociálnímu a ekonomickému postavení a pro svůj vlastní blahobyt. Iola však představuje opačný směr rasové migrace. Iola se narodila jako běloška, měla jednoho bratra a jejich otec byl bohatý otrokář. Když Iola vyrostla, pošlou ji studovat na sever Spojených států amerických. Až tam je poprvé ve svém životě konfrontována názory svých spolužáků, kteří tvrdí, že otroctví je něco zlého. Její postoj je však jasně daný – Iola je prootrokářská z úcty ke svému otci.

Ve skutečnosti však je Iola mulatka. Její matka bývala otrokyně Iolína otce. Rodiče si však řekli, že svým dětem jejich pravý původ neprozradí. Zvrat v příběhu však nastává v okamžiku, když otec Ioly zemře a ona, její matka i bratr jsou zotročeni. V tomto románu se tak poprvé objevilo nechtěná změna rasy.

Poté, co se Iola dostala do otroctví, se začíná vyrovnávat se svou novou rolí, být Afroameričankou. Ve své analýze jsem se zabývala především tímto procesem, který vedl až k odmítnutí žádosti o ruku od bílého doktora, který se do ní zamiloval při společné práci ve vojenské nemocnici v době občanské války. Jeho ruku dokonce odmítla dvakrát. Iola, jako silná žena přijala zcela svou identitu a jejím jediným cílem se stalo najít zbytek své rodiny. Což se jí také povedlo. Našla jak svoji matku, tak svého bratra. Začala se angažovat v boji za práva černochoů. A tím, že sama odmítá přeběhnout k „bílé většině“ prochází řadou nepříjemných situací. Larsen ve svém románu nastiňuje problematiku rasismu, a ostrakismu.

Dle mého názoru jsem ve své práci dokázala dojít k cíli, který jsem si stanovila. A to analyzovat pojem "passing for white" ve čtyřech románech afroamerických spisovatelů. Toto téma mi přišlo nesmírně zajímavé, ale také velmi smutné.

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