

Being Whitefaced:

Female Writers in the Society in the Case of Nella Larsen and Edith Wharton

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Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't "belong." (*Quicksand* 8)

In portraying her heroine as a *deracinée* in "Negro society," a society that is "as complicated and rigid as the highest strata of white society," the figure Nella Larsen (1891-1964) had in mind might have been Lily Bart, the heroine of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*: a penniless orphan in the Old New York, which "resent[ed] so much as having given its protection to those who have not known how to profit by it" (104). Larsen's works, not only in terms of their highly crafted writing style but also their theme of conflicts between individual and society, show affinities to Wharton's writings.

In this essay, I will attempt to place Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) into a dialectic with Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1904) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), and thus cast a new light on the two writers' ideas of authorship. Examination of the motifs of wearing black and white face in these novels will clarify how these writers develop novelistic techniques to represent the way in which marginalized individuals construct identity in the middle ground of conflicting social imagery. This motif reflects development in the author's own idea of authorial subjectivity. *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth* depict the way in which the heroines struggle and fail to establish artistic identity against prescribed gender roles. In turn *Passing* and *The Age of Innocence* focus on the male and female who imposed the imagery onto the heroines in the former novels, by making them protagonists this time, tracing their failure.

It is not my intention to prove any biographical connection between the two writers. There is no evidence that their lives actually crossed; while Larsen as an apprentice writer might have been exposed to Wharton's best-selling novels,

the reverse might not be true. Larsen criticism does not consider the writer's relationship to Wharton. When Thadious Davis argues that the "artificiality" in Larsen's writing resembles Wharton's style, it is as "the stylistic antithesis" to the sexual issue Larsen tried to approach (328). However, as recent Wharton scholarship redefines Wharton's style as a combination of the sexual dynamics that lie beneath the polished writing style, this dualism requires revision.¹ Dualisms that appear as artificial and natural, ascetic and sexual, mainstream and minority, and ultimately White and Black become dismantled.²

Hence I will suggest to examine these two female writers in regards to the awareness which they have in common: their construction of authorial subjectivity as a female writer in their respective "Societies" and its incorporation of conflicting layers of class and gender identities. Larsen's writings are inseparable from her strong self-consciousness of her mixed racial heritage, yet this consciousness is not entirely reducible to race. As a writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen tries to express her individuality "within the constraints of respectable womanhood in black middle-class terms" (McDowell xvi). Her concern about the authorial subjectivity shaped in the middle ground of society stratification is similar to Wharton's. Wharton remained a member of the aristocratic old society in New York, which was by the early twentieth-century was taken over by "new New York," an industrial, nouveau-riche society. Later in her life, she choose to live in another marginal state, thus as an American in the European society.

To consider various images of white and black face that surface in these two writers' artistic standpoints, the image of theatrical society and of wearing faces that Nathan Huggins uses provides a suggestive guideline. He points out the parallel in the vulnerability of identity construction in the upper class Americans in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the Harlem Renaissance:

White men's selves depended on blacks being less than men; the wholeness of the black person too often rested on his accepting that white judgment and achieving applause through self-denial and self-depreciation. But real achievement for white men, too, meant an acknowledgement of superior European culture, thus, a self-denial and self-depreciation of a different kind. All was a jumble of masks and costumes covering naked uncertainties. (274)

Huggins hence dismantles the racial dualism of Black and White, opening it up to the interrelationship of “black” as marginal and “white” as hegemonic. Seen in this light, it can be said that although Wharton and Larsen seem to be at the two extremes in the social spectrum, their concerns coincide in understanding the identity construction as social masking in a theatrical society, and authorship as the right to look at the Other, determine its identity, and consequently judge its value. Larsen and Wharton wrote about black and white in the society, as well as within the individual; their authorial identities are shaped through their explorations in the variations of white/black classifications that are constantly revised in the exchange of gaze in society.

1. Blackfaced Female: *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth*

Quicksand tells the story of a woman’s self-creation, hence her artistic endeavor to go beyond the role allotted to the women by society. As Marita Golden argues, Helga is an emotional nomad (vi), who “could neither conform, nor be happy in her conformity” (7). Disgusted by the hypocrisy in Negro education, she leaves Naxos. She moves to Chicago, and then to Harlem, to Copenhagen, and back again to New York, following her impulse in search of the individual self, which is conceived to be different from the social self:

There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted. Still wanted.

But just what did she want? Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn’t know, couldn’t tell. But there was, she knew, something else. (11)

Larsen offers the portrait of an artistic woman, who feels entitled to an ideal self that she cannot name, and yet knows that it is different from the material happiness that society can offer her. This anxiety manifests itself as the “anger” and “discontent” without reason that possess her in the very moments when she finally finds a place in the society. Helga follows the impulsive desire that constantly swings between her attachments to the society and her hatred toward its restrictions. The figure that comes closest to her is Lily Bart, the heroine of *The House of Mirth*. As Lily’s friend says, she is another emotional

nomad:

“That’s Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic. [...]

“Sometimes,” she added, “I think it’s just flightiness—and sometimes I think it’s because, at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for. [...]” (189)

Lily’s “flightiness” is similar to the same artistic impulse that liberates Helga from of her social restrictions. Yet for Lily, this impulse becomes the source of anxiety:

She seemed be to a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained. (148)

The two heroines feel conflict within themselves: between the social self who wants comfort and the individual self who pursues idealistic beliefs. In comparing these two protagonists, it becomes clear that each of their endeavors work toward opposite goals: Helga is using the society she finds herself in to define what is not her, pursuing her individual self by escaping from restrictions. Lily is trying to cling to the society, trying to tame the “abhorrent being” inside her. This contrast is also reflected in the symbols that suggest the rigidity of the society. Whereas in *Quicksand* the contrast is made between Helga’s colorful and sophisticated objects, and the colorless and dull environment, Lily is entrapped in the concrete and immovable image of the drawing-room, a symbol of social confinement, and her aim is ultimately to “arrange the furniture just as one likes” (8).

The relationships between the dilettante male and the protagonist are significant in both novels. The two writers show authorship as the right to represent and judge in the figure of dilettante artists, who claim their authority by projecting their ideals onto the socially marginalized female. Alex Olsen’s admiration of Helga is parallel to Lawrence Selden’s idealization of Lily. As Selden urges Lily to fashion her artistic self so that he will be able to own her as the muse that enables them to achieve the imaginary “republic of the spirit” (68), Olsen’s admiration for Helga essentially stems from his desire to create

and possess her as a sexual primitive. What might be analogous in the heroines' relationship to them is self-consciousness as female professional writers whose careers were shaped by their interactions with their literary mentors: Larsen had Carl Van Vecten, an author of Scandinavian origin (Davis 10-6) whose relationship is comparable to that of Wharton and Henry James.³ Both Van Vecten and James treated their respective protégées as merely black female / American female authors.

The portraits of the heroines placed in the center of the story become important symbols of the position that the female artists were trapped in. In these portraits, Lily and Helga are treated purely as idealized femininity, in which their admirers see the protagonists' "true" self:

The picture—[Helga] had never quite, in spite of her deep interest in him, and her desire for his admiration and approval, forgiven Olsen for that portrait. It wasn't, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. (89)

Compare this to Wharton's *Tableau Vivant* scene:

Here could be no mistaking the predominance of personality—the unanimous "Oh!" of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brush-work of Reynold's "Mrs. Lloyd" but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart. She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself.[...] Its expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part. (134)

In these portraits, in which the heroines are conformed to the ideal beauty that is desired by the artist, the two writers represents the heroines' artistic identities as vain entities that can exist only in the gaze of the Other. Helga's discontent with her portrait contrasts the mutual interchange of desire between Lily and Selden that takes place in the Lily's *Tableau Vivant* scene. It reveals the hollowness of Lily's desire to self-create, which is fulfilled only within an idealized sexual stereotype. Wharton emphasizes that Lily and Selden's belief in their own power to transcend social constraint through artistic endeavor is a

mere illusion. Larsen stresses the violence in the act; representing this illusion as that imposed by the male artist, and appalled reaction with comments of the people around her.

Eric Lott's observations about the nineteenth century American blackface minstrelsy provide useful insights into these interchanged desires. Using Slavoj Žižek's concept of "the Other," Lott claims that blackface minstrelsy is an enjoyment organized through fantasizing the other's special pleasure. This pleasure is "excessive" sexually and culturally. He finds parallels in Homi Bhabha's notion of "American Ambivalence," an entanglement of impersonation/incorporation that involves the taking/disavowal of pleasure at one time (482). Lott further clarifies the role blackface minstrelsy played in creating "Whiteness" as a socially-constructed identity, whose genealogy can be traced back to homosocial desire among white bohemians, and later categorized into actual racial binaries. The "black" face is the mask of the other's face, in which people find the outlet for their sexual desire that cannot be openly displayed. Hence in these picture scenes, the two writers reveal the sexual desire hidden in the masculine authorship. The male artists make the female artists into blackface minstrels.

Yet however much the two writers criticize the masculine artists who neglect the heroine's artistic subjectivity, they fail to suggest "female" authorship as an alternative. In both novels, the heroines do not achieve any constructive bonding with other female characters. This reflects the masculinity that is incorporated in these writers' authorship. As Janet Malcolm reads self-differentiation from the other female writers in the apparent misogyny in Wharton's novels, women are characterized as obstacles to the protagonists' self-creation. Wharton put female faces on the actual forces that expel the heroine from the society, using the drawing-room imagery effectively. The stability of the social confinement is represented in Aunt Peniston, Lily's guardian, who seems as if she were a part of the furniture in her drawing-room (38). She perceives Lily as "a contagious illness in the house" that contaminates her furniture (127). Women in the society are symbolic obstacles; at the extreme, Wharton attributes irrationally monstrous powers to Bertha Dorset, who feels threatened by Lily's beauty.

On the other hand, Larsen concentrates more on portraying the individual psychology of women. Women in the society are looking at Helga as a "black" woman who provokes sexual desires. For instance, Anne fears Helga's nameless sensual quality that evokes a "shameless impulse" (95) that threatens the

position she gained by marrying Robert Anderson. This portrayal of women in society shows the dilemma of Larsen's identity construction. As Richard Wright used the term in criticizing Zora Neale Hurston, blackface was the symbol of Black authors' performance of blackness. Larsen identified herself as the opposite, as one of the "niggerati" (Davis 167), the term Hurston used to criticize Wright in response for his middle-class gentility. Larsen was a woman in the society herself; the social norms that constrained Larsen hindered her from seeing Helga as the ideal female artist. Through Irene in *Passing*, Larsen explores the psychology of this kind of whiteface female characters in detail.

final scenes of these two novels reveal the two authors' hypothesis of the alternative form of the artistic authorship. They both end with their protagonists' failure in their attempts at self-creation. Although the heroines' endeavors began with refusals of marriage from suitors who would secure the position in society, the final scenes reduce both of them to the classical association between the feminine with the maternal. *Quicksand* reduces Helga to the endless child-production that finally suggests her death in childbirth. Also the final scene of *The House of Mirth*, in which Lily on her deathbed envisions Netty's baby in her arms, indicates her longing to be a mother (323). Lily finally transcends the split in her identity, but only by envisioning Netty's husband as the idealized potential male beyond the powerless dilettante male. As Elaine Showalter argues, Lily's death and refusal of the dilettante, even within its limitations, can be interpreted as the necessary consequences of the actions of beautiful, sensitive yet talentless women from whom Wharton tries to differentiate herself in establishing her own identities as a professional author.

Helga's death reveals the social constraints in Larsen's authorial subjectivity. Helga's nihilistic death shows that she also fails in transcending the social norm. She keeps on running away from social restrictions until the end. Helga's marriage to the vulgar preacher is a way to get away from society by turning to the God on whom she can put "the entire responsibility" (126). Yet finally, she loses faith in religion and goes back to dreaming of the images of freedom that society could offer her (135). The two writers' search for the possible forms of female artistic subjectivity continues in their later works that I will discuss, reversing the power structure represented in the novel as the heroines' roles as blackface performers.

2. Whitefaced Female: Passing and The Age of Innocence

Passing and *The Age of Innocence* revisit the issue of artistic authorship by portraying the two individual's self-creation and their failure. But this time they see it from the different viewpoints. *Passing* focuses on the female in the society, *The Age of Innocence* focuses on the dilettante male. By tracing the psychological blackfacing in their identity construction, the two writers reverse the white/black dualism that entrapped the heroines in *The House of Mirth* and *Quicksand*.

Larsen expands the concept "passing" to represent the basic act of the identity construction. The critics agree that the primary concern of this novel is not a racial issue; Larson argues that it is a story of marital stability (xviii) and McDowell reads it as a story about sexuality, seeing Irene's obsession with Clare as homosexual desire. Both views capture the essential elements in Irene's struggle. The former addresses Irene's endeavor to maintain the white self, and the latter addresses Irene's struggle to hide her black self. The "passing" that Larsen depicts in this novel embraces the dynamics of two interacting selves. As Clare is passing, by choosing an identity and playing the role in order to go across the boundary, Irene is also passing, by putting on the social face to oppress what is socially considered black. Larsen depicts the way in which Irene projects her psychological passing onto Clare's social passing, to re-examine the power structure that took place in the picture scenes of the former novel: the authorship as the right to project desire onto the others.

In the two symbolic imageries in the opening scene, Larsen sets up an entwined image of black and white that coexists within the heroine, Irene Redfield. One is the letter from Clare Kendry. Written in an "illegible scrawl" on foreign stationary, the letter seems "out of place and alien," contrasted with "other ordinary and clearly directed" letters. "[F]urtive and flaunting" at the same time, the letter causes the "perplexity and annoyance." Described with attention to its ambivalent details which are charged with exotic sensuality, this letter shows what Clare would mean to Irene later in the novel. The letter is a symbol of female writing concealed in the envelope, suggesting the connection between the sexual identity and authorial subjectivity; so Irene "disliked the idea of opening and reading it" (143).

Then Larsen meticulously extrapolates the image of black and white using the contrast of architecture concreteness and the amorphousness of

protagonist's desire. This image is followed by Irene's reminiscence of meeting Clare on a day when "brutal staring sun [was] pouring down rays that were like molten rain [...] making the outlines of the buildings shuddered as if in protest at the heat" (146). The image of sunshine that penetrates constructions, together with Clare's letter, determines the two-fold passing themes that is the main concern of this novel: Irene's fear of losing the social white mask that covers her repressed self. Architecture and the characters' psychology are paralleled in *Passing*. Scared by the street that "ha[s] a wobbly look" that evokes "nebulous thoughts" in her (147), Irene escapes to the nearest hotel for "safety." Being black / Black is to be the inferior—not allowed to be in the white/ White place.

Wharton also uses the opening scene of *The Age of Innocence* to map out the basic structure of the novel. The first night of the Opera is a dramatical setting where two imageries amalgamate: the society as theater where gazes interchange, and society as the architecture, whose structure is as solid as the historical opera house. The hero enters the theatrical space where the members of the society are represented as "the boxes," as architectural components. Note how Newland Archer perceives the beauty and innocence of his fiancée, May Mingott, in the opera aria:

"The darling!" thought Newland Archer, his glance flitting back to the young girl with the lilies-of-the-valley. "She doesn't even guess what it's all about." And he contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possession in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity. "We'll read Faust together...by the Italian lakes..." he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honey-moon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride. (6)

In Newland's gaze on May, Wharton captures the mixture of artistic dominance and sexual desire of the Tableau Vivant scene in *The House of Mirth*. The theatrical setting dramatically portrays the artificiality of the society; even the opera area that impressed Newland much is "German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists [...] translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences" (4). The attention of the audience is torn between the artificial reproduction of human emotion on stage and the uneasy presence of Ellen Olenska in the Mingott box, the flesh-and-

blood woman in an “unusual dress” (7); at the same time predicting that Ellen will be the stigma in this theatrical society.

Larsen depicts the moment in which the protagonist’s self-conscious fear and longing become obsessions to the Other. Larsen elaborates the classic love-triangle into a literary setting to represent how unstable identity flows with the desire of masking faces: Brian and Clare become two “beautiful” others that stimulate Irene’s desire, fear and envy, whose presence reminds Irene of her true self masked behind the social self. Irene and Olsen are similar because they project their socially repressed desire onto the socially marginalized female.

Being beautiful, lively, and recklessly pursuing her happiness, Clare becomes another emotional nomad like Helga. In contrasting Clare’s direct language with Irene’s language full of prohibitions, Larsen captures the way in which Irene talks about her psychological passing in referring to Clare’s social passing. Irene tries to reduce Clare, who simply cannot be “reasonable,” to “a child,” a person unfit for mature society (200). The definitive contrast is made when Clare neglects her motherhood whereas Irene clings to the role of mother, pursuing the concern illustrated in the last scene of the former novel.

Clare reminds Irene of her being in the middle-ground of social and sexual status, devoid of the sensual pleasures. Clare’s reckless act of social passing made Irene conscious of her mask and it stimulates both of Irene’s fear of breaking the harmony and her desire to reveal her black sexual self that is hidden beneath. Clare becomes Irene’s obsession because she seems to be Irene’s negative, thus being in the middle ground of conflicting identities, but not bound by them. Irene obsessively connects Clare’s beauty to her face under the mask. Irene is looking at Clare as Olsen saw Helga; she’s looking for the “black” in Clare:

The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft luster. And the eyes were magnificent! dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them.

Ah surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic. (161)

Irene is associating black with sensual beauty, and presents Clare's beauty as a combination of the secret and social selves. Clare's face is conceived as "an ivory mask" behind which lurks "a scornful amusement" (157). This shows conflicting feelings similar to these expressed in relation to the letter earlier in the novel. Clare's face stimulates Irene; it is "[p]artly mocking, it had seemed, and partly menacing. And something else for which she could find no name" (176). To refuse the "unrevealing" (174) white face of Clare is to refuse the nameless threat in Clare's gaze, which is the reflection of Irene's own desire: "the chances were one in a million that she would even again lay eyes on Clare Kendry. If, however, that millionth chance should turn up, she had only to turn away her eyes, to refuse her recognition" (178). Thus Clare for Irene becomes a symbolic "face"; a combination of white, righteous face and a black face with penetrating eyes, as the projection of Irene's identity.

Irene's husband Brian becomes another Other onto whom Irene's desire is projected. He seems to have no need to conceal his black self. He maintains his socially respectable status in the Black society. He is proud of their race and identity, to the extent that he has intentions to free himself from constraint by giving up his own society. Irene's obsessions with these two Others culminate in imagining an affair between Brian and Clare. It should be noted that the affair is presented as a symbolic act of Irene's obsession, for there is no evidence of its existence. By imagining the sexual bond between Clare and Brian, Irene tries to alienate and possess the sexual desire projected onto them. Clare's "ivory face" that is "beautiful and caressing" yet "[u]nrevealing [...] [u]naltered and undisturbed by any emotion within or without" (220) makes contrast to Brian's simple self that seems "bare" to Irene. In this scene, Larsen reverses the blackface setting. As blackface minstrelsy played by White actors worked to highlight the beauty of whiteness beneath, Clare's gleaming blackness, damnable yet seductive, is stressed because it is hidden beneath her White face.

The sexual implication in the triangle of desire in *Passing* becomes more explicit in comparison with *The Age of Innocence*. By making the dilettante male who idealized the heroine in the former novel the protagonist, Wharton explores more deeply the sexual exploitation in the masculine authorship. May and Ellen develop into others who reflect Newland's repressed desire. Exotic Ellen is developed as a symbol of Newland's freedom from the social restrictions. He becomes attracted to Ellen's European maturity: her sophistication, elegance, and ultimately sexual freedom. May, his fiancée and later wife, accordingly

becomes the symbol of purity and innocence of the American society that oppresses Newland.

However, the plot shows us that Ellen and May, two society girls from the same family, are not essentially different from each other, and that Newland has only been initiated into the accepted roles of wife and lover. The novel shows the discrepancy between Newland's perception that never goes beyond of the stereotypical dualism of the dark lady / white virgin, and the two womens' true selves. Criticism to his false authorship is made as the harsh backlash from the two females he idealized. Facing Ellen's accusation that he is making her into his mistress, Newland appeals to the lure of the idealistic transcendence:

"I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that –categories like that—won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter."

She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. "Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there?"[...] (238)

In having the idealized woman refuse the "country" which carries reference to the "republic of the spirit" which appeared in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton reverses the power structure that took place in the former novel, entrapping the desire cast on the artistic female by the male artist and reversing the gaze onto him.

In many ways Newland is a symbolic figure because his characterization shows that Wharton's concern is also about debunking the masculine authorship that constrained her. The hero is an entrapped "innocent" male artist who fails in his self-creation because of contemporary social restrictions, whose name resonates with that of Isabelle Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Wharton is alluding to her literary mentor; dismantling the European superiority to America, and debunking the assumed masculine superiority in the literary authorship. To stress this point, he is named "Newland" evoking the image of America, and moreover is described as a son of "the true Newlands." Also a reference is made that his family is known to have features of "certain faded Reynolds portraits" (28). Referred here is Reynold's "Mrs. Lloyd," the female imagery Lily played in the Tableau Vivant scene in the former novel. The dilettante is entrapped in the picture, in which he confined the female

protagonist in the former novel.

In the ending of these two novels, the two protagonists' failure is represented as banishment of the idealized other, thus their idealized self. Newland's desire to be free from social limitations appears as his desire to remove its symbolic presence; he starts to wish the death of his wife in order to get a life unconstrained by the social restrictions. The accident that breaks Newland's attempts to free himself is May's pregnancy. The maternity acts as social restriction to the male character. He is resigned to his conventional self, unable to break the social barriers. Wharton, in the figure of Newland Archer, who is forever separated from Ellen by the distance of two flights, shows the universal fate of the individual resigned to the social order and failure in self-creation.

Clare's death becomes a form of symbolical suicide and homicide for Irene, because Clare is Irene's other self. By presenting this death as an accident blurred in Irene's memory, Larsen highlights the symbolic meaning of Clare's death. The homicidal tendency to get rid of Clare is the reversed desire to possess her, in order to protect herself from this threatening presence. Its meaning is stressed by highlighting the symbolic scene in which Irene breaks a teacup that she could never figure out "a way of getting rid of" (222):

Her mental and physical languor receded. Brian. What did it mean? How would it affect her and 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.

Rage boiled up in her.

There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup.

[...]

"Still," she went on with a little laugh that didn't, she was sure, sound the least bit forced, "I'm perfectly willing for you to take the blame and admit that you pushed me at the wrong moment. What are friends for, if not to help bear our sins? Brian will certainly be told that it was your fault." (221-2)

Irene's frustration to be reduced to the social role of mother culminates in her rage that results in crushing the cup. In this scene, in which the object that belonged to "the charming Confederates" is destroyed with the help of a White

writer Hugh Wentworth, Larsen gives the clue to understanding the ending scene:

For the first time she was aware that Bellew was not in the little group shivering in the small hallway. What did that mean? As she began to work it out in her numbed mind, she was shaken with another hideous trembling. Not that! Oh, not that!

"No, no!" she protested. "I'm quite certain that he didn't. I was there, too, as close as he was. She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I—."
(242)

If Irene admits that Bellew pushed Clare out of the window, the horrible "that," thus the "black" idea that she is working out in her mind will reveal. Just as Irene used Wentworth to conceal her desire of getting rid of Clare, Clare's racist husband will become Irene's White confederate in killing Clare. In her attempt to keep her psychological whiteface, Irene socially finds herself as an analogue to the bigot who never accepts the values other than his own. Hence Irene closes her eyes, losing her authorship forever.

In conclusion, by reconsidering Nella Larsen and Edith Wharton's works from a feminist point of view, the similarity in the construction of their authorial identity becomes clear. The two writers' identities as a professional artist conflicted with their position in the society as respectable females, as well as with traditional, masculine gendered notions of authorship. In the protagonists' struggle against the social blackmasking, the writers explore the way to establish their own authorial subjectivity. Their strategies are different: Larsen ultimately found the blackmask inside her. For Larsen, writing was a way to explore and consolidate conflicting selves. The unfortunate end of Larsen's career might demonstrate the impossibility of her task. For Wharton, writing was the way to transcend the conflicting selves. She fortified the mask of professional, aristocratic writer, achieving the masculine authority later in her career. In the light of Larsen's failure, Wharton's success as an author becomes clear. In a way, she was a highly professional whiteface performer.

Notes

- ¹ This trend started with the discovery of the "Beatrice Palmato fragment" which treats the incestuous love relationship republished in R.W.B. Lewis' biography in 1975. For the detailed examination of this piece in relation to Wharton's writing technique, see Cynthia Griffin Wolff's biography (544).
- ² Chapters on Edith Wharton and Nella Larsen in Elizabeth Ammons's *Conflicting Stories* are the first to place these two writers in a tradition of cross-racial literary scholarship of American female authors. Meredith Goldsmith's article closely examines similarities in the plot of *The House of Mirth* and *Quicksand*. The suggestive observations on both authors and their works provided by these essays inspired me to examine closely the transition between two of their representative works, so that we could see the two writers' affinity more thoroughly both from formalistic and thematic points of view.
- ³ For discussion on Wharton's authorship in relation to her mentors, see Nyquist.

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