

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

A mulatto is defined as “the first general offspring of a black and white parent; or, an individual with both white and black ancestors. Generally, mulattoes are light-skinned (Pilgrim). Mulattoes are considered in a midway position between black and white, which makes them encounter difficulty in adjusting themselves in society because years before the Civil War when slavery was still in practice, United States’ people were classified based on skin color, and there were two classes consisting of the superior white and the inferior black (George).

Generally mulattoes were gifted with light skin, which enabled them to join the upper strata of white society. In the end, white people were threatened by the increasing number of light-skinned mulattoes as most light-skinned mulattoes adopted the attitude of whites toward the lower caste and took advantage of the social and economic opportunities that their lighter skin afforded. The whites also felt the need to maintain “pure blood” that finally made them treat mulattoes the same as they

treated the black people, as shown in a legal regulation at that time: “by the antebellum period all of the states had imposed stringent regulations on miscegenation and had relegated mulattoes to the same status as “pure” blacks” (George). Light-skinned mulattoes were often tempted to pass for the white to gain higher social status and materials, which was why most of them faced a problem whether to accept their true identity as black or to pretend to be white (Covert). Based on the above facts, I have chosen to analyze two novels written by Nella Larsen and Frances E. W. Harper, in both of which talk about the same issue: women of multiracial off-springs who try to establish their identities.

The first author is Nella Larsen. She is the first African-American writer who was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship for creative writing. Larsen wrote not only novels but also articles about Danish games which were published in some magazines. Even though she only wrote two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, her works are of extraordinary quality that earned her high appreciation from her contemporaries. Alice Walker praises both *Passing* and *Quicksand* as “Novels that open up a whole world of experience and struggle, absolutely absorbing, fascinating, and indispensable” (“Passing”).

Passing written by Nella Larsen has been considered as “a work so fine, sensitive, and distinguished that it raises above race categories and becomes that rare object, a good novel” as reviewed by W.B. Seabrook in *The Saturday Review of Literature* (“Passing: The Novel in Focus”). Appearing as a story of a light-skinned mulatto woman who tries to define her identity, this novel is undoubtedly considered

a dramatic story about race and self identity. *Passing* also provides an example of some of the best writings of the Harlem Renaissance.

The second author is Frances E. W. Harper. She is an American author, a journalist, a poet and a professional lecturer. Aside from *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*, Harper published books of poems entitled *Forest Leaves* and *Poems of Miscellaneous Subjects*. She has given a great contribution in the literary world as she uses her writings to fight racism. Moreover, she made strong feminist statements that she was considered as “one of the colored women of whom white women may be proud, and to whom the abolitionists can point and declare that a race which could show such women never ought to have been held in bondage” (Reuben). Her short story *The Two Offers* was the first short story published by an African American.

A story about a light-skinned mulatto woman trying to define her identity also appears in Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*. The novel, which was written in the late 19th century, has received many critics and praises. It was regarded to be “the most impressive novel by an African-American prior to the twentieth century” (Reuben). It is a “splendid novel, broad and useful portrait of society during reconstruction from the black point of view” (“*Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*”). This is why the novel becomes the first widely-read novel to deal with the African American experience during slavery.

I have chosen to analyze the portrayal of protagonists in both novels as the two of them deal with the same problem regarding their identities. Moreover, the authors have different ways in presenting their characters, especially in the way the protagonists deal with their identities as light-skinned mulatto women.

Characterization is really important as “it is actually characterization that moves the story along, because a compelling character in a difficult situation creates his or her own plot” (Bernardo).

Statement of the Problems

1. How do the authors portray the protagonists?
2. What are the purposes of the authors in creating such characters?

Purpose of the Study

1. The purpose of the study is to analyze how the authors portray the protagonists.
2. The purpose of the study is to reveal the purposes of the authors in creating such characters.

Method of Research

I use the library research that includes reading and understanding the primary texts which are the novels and other references, in order to make an objective and a non-superficial analysis in the process of the study. Next, I analyze the portrayal of the protagonist and the purpose of the author in creating such character in each of the novels. Lastly, I draw some conclusions from my analysis.

Organization of the Thesis

The organization of the thesis is divided into four chapters, which are preceded by Preface and Abstract. Chapter One is Introduction, which contains Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Method of Research, and Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two contains the analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. Chapter Three contains the analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*. Chapter Four contains the conclusion of the analysis. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and Appendix, which consist of the summary of the two novels and the biography of the authors