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## **The Tragic Mulatta Trope: Complexities of Representation, Identity, and Existing in the Middle of the Racial Binary**

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## **The Tragic Mulatta Trope:**

Complexities of Representation, Identity, and Existing in the Middle of the  
Racial Binary

**By: Maddie Stephens**  
Spring 2019

**Advised by: Dr. Schoenbach**

## Introduction

Race in America has been a fraught and contentious subject for centuries. Today, most scholars and scientists agree that it has been “convincingly refuted as a valid scientific category” and it has “never been a fixed or stable concept.” Rather, it is seen primarily as a “discursive formation responding to an urgent need at a particular historical moment” to uphold order or other political systems (Castillo 59). In other words, it is a social construct, with no significant biological bearing.<sup>1</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, scientists relentlessly attempted to codify the arbitrary category. Defining “whiteness” was a primary goal for politicians, scientists, and social theorists, a goal conceived as a way to support deep seated social biases associated with blacks, which in turn were used to justify slavery, strict segregation, and miscegenation laws.

Scientific research, a field dominated by white men, worked to prove black inferiority, answering a predetermined conclusion rather than pursuing a fair and unbiased hypothesis.<sup>2</sup> As, American paleontologist, Stephen Jay Gould explains, “The pervasive assent given by scientists to conventional rankings [black inferiority] arose from shared social belief, not from objective data gathered to test an open question. Yet, in a curious case of reversed causality, these pronouncements were read as independent support for the political context” (Gould 35). The public operated under the assumption, “If a scientist said it, then it must be true.” When such findings also confirm your own biases, it is easy to adopt faulty data as fact. A common

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<sup>1</sup> According to researcher Dr. J. Craig Venter, geneticist Dr. Herald P. Freeman, and scientists from the National Institutes of Health, genetic differences between humans are insufficient to irrefutably determine race. Many other scientists and scholars agree. For further scientific discussion of the concept of race, see Angier.

<sup>2</sup> Western epistemology ensures that knowledge is controlled by white men and thus knowledge validation processes reflect this group’s own interests. For further context, see Collins 253-254.

assumption was that African Americans were, “perhaps a separate species altogether,” (Diggs 3). This process of rendering African Americans as inhuman and as “other,” had a cascade of consequences, including but not limited to slavery, oppression, and blocked access to the protections of the law.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using the white male as a point of reference, “sciences produced an enormous system of discrete categories for defining and describing the variations from this presumed normal human subject,” and these assigned differences were ranked with hierarchical meanings (Diggs 5-6). Blacks fell at the bottom of these rankings and were often compared to primal species like gorillas so that scientists could push for not just cultural inferiority but also biological inferiority to justify the social and sexual segregation of the races (Gould 32). Blacks were even considered a “threat to social progress, and evidence of the potential for degeneration of the human race” (Diggs 6).

Working from within, civil rights activist and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois became a pioneer in understanding human society and the damage social systems can inflict on marginalized groups. He pushed beyond these scientific and social understandings of race, despite being born in a time where assumed black inferiority was widely accepted. In 1903, Du Bois famously declared, “the problem with the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois 2). Simply put yet profound, Du Bois summarized an age-old divide that plagues the United States even today. In his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois explores the psychological challenges associated with being black in America. He coined the term “double consciousness,” which is “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, or measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 4). This phenomenon explores how one may see one’s personal identity in contradiction to

the way the world sees you. Du Bois applies this concept specifically to the African American male experience, linking the racial identity with “twoness.” In Du Bois’s definition, being black and being American were two opposing identities, because national pride clashed with black inferiority. These beliefs left the African American man wishing, “to make it possible for a man to be both Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (Du Bois 4).

If “double consciousness” speaks to the African American experience, it speaks even more powerfully to one of America’s often overlooked populations when discussing racial identities: mixed-race individuals. That sense of twoness manifests itself in those who identify as biracial, shattering the color-line and falling on a racial spectrum rather than the black-versus-white binary so engrained in American society. Being white in America should make you superior but being black makes you inferior. How does one who is biracial exist as both? Historically, mixed-race individuals have been pushed to one side of the color-line or the other, forced to choose allegiance to a racial identity that shuns part of their whole self. As a result, they too experience their own form of “double consciousness.” In essence, biracial individuals live in perpetual contradiction.

Beyond double consciousness, mixed-race individuals live in “double identity,” having to navigate two separate races as well as multiple identity layers and perceptions. When gender is added, the situation becomes more complex. Specifically, mixed-race women bring added complications to the category of double consciousness. Thinking in terms of Du Bois’s “twoness” is not sufficient when looking at females who must contend with countless other limiting identity factors such as gender, maternal, and marital status, all of which immediately designate a woman as a dependent in need of a male protector. The dual relationship of being

mixed-race and a woman creates a multilayered plight, navigating far more than just “two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (Du Bois 4).

Such a layered identity in real life naturally became a difficult existence to transfer to the page, especially given the restrictive and oversimplified categories that dominated most discussions of race at the time. Patricia Hill Collins, a leading scholar on black feminism explains, “Traditionally, the suppression of Black women’s ideas within White-male-controlled social institutions led African American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and every day behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness” (Collins 251-252). The same can be said for biracial consciousness and representation. In the aftermath of slavery, the social and political shift that followed created more opportunities, though still limited, for writers of color and women writers. There was a natural increase in conversation about race in our transitioning cultural landscape. These changes challenged literature to exist as a space in which many of the shifting complexities of race relations in America could be unpacked and examined. Despite these difficulties, or perhaps because of them, mixed-race characters captivated audiences with their unique dilemma, simply by their very existence being unable to conform to the two-colored system so engrained in our society. In an effort to capture the life of an outcast, the trope known as “the tragic mulatta” emerged as the stock representation of a mixed-race individual.

The “Tragic Mulatta” is commonly defined as a female character of mixed-race that meets a tragic end of either social ruin, isolation, or even death. The term mulatta is the feminine gendered version of the term mulatto, believed to be derived from “mule” or the Arabic word muwallad, meaning “mestizo” or “mixed” (Raimon 6). Typically, such a character is mixed-race of black and white descent, often well-educated and light skinned, “mixed” with only one drop or

some small percentage of “negro” blood. Many American writers grew fascinated with this story line, using it to navigate the tumultuous race relations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Author Judith Berzon defines the tragic mulatta as, “the almost-white character whose beauty, intelligence, and purity are forever in conflict with the “savage primitivism” inherited from her Negro ancestors” (Berzon 99). Mixed-race characters acted as the “bridge” between two different communities – uneducated and impoverished blacks and affluent, “civilized” whites. Berzon explains, “The fact that many of these stereotyped characters are raised as... aristocratic white women and only discover their Negro blood as adults— allows white readers more identification with them than with full-blooded Negroes” (Berzon 100). Nearly being able to pass as white makes the fate of the character that much more crushing, establishing the “mulatta” label as an unjust and cruel limit on someone with undeniable beauty and social promise.

The complexity of race is reflected in the complexity of this trope. Although the tragic mulatta is recognized by many scholars as a standard recurring theme, the trope rarely shows up the in same way across a variety of works. Sometimes the “tragic” in tragic mulatto is sensationalized, focusing on inciting sympathy and pity from readers. Abolitionists writers often employed the trope in this way, vying for sympathy and acceptance of mixed-race individuals and the African American community, dubbing the character as “an agent for social change as much as an emblem of victimization” (Raimon 7). In other instances, the “tragic” in tragic mulatto focuses on the character’s often literal tragic life and ending. Rather than finding community, many mixed-race characters are trapped in limbo, unable to make connections or live as their full self in neither white nor black spaces. Instead of finding some sort of support system or greater life purpose, the tragic mulatta can feel so much isolation and despair, that she is led to depression and suicide.

Ultimately, the tragic mulatta functions as a liminal figure, still suspended as “an intermediate type [of race], a type that confused the binary categories of the two-color system” (Diggs 3). Because of its varying representations, the tragic mulatta does not fully exist in a pure form. The trope reflects the complexity of racial identity *and* the competing understandings of racial identity. Writers that use this trope attempt to communicate *their* vision of the mixed-race experience and, through them, their interpretations of race relations in America. But one author’s truth is not the whole truth. How can a writer fully depict an identity that historically was never truly recognized by society? (Furthermore, a society that went so far as to criminalize mixed-raced relations and biracial persons’ very existence.)

Overtime, various texts attempted to tackle the tragic mulatta trope. After the Civil War, the trope functioned, “as a device to investigate what place mixed-race persons [were] going to occupy in the new republic and indeed whether the Union itself [could] survive such profound division over race” (Raimon 5). But as we moved passed the turn of the century, more literature arose challenging the racial categories America historically reinforced, blurring not just the color-line, but also various other labels we assign to individuals. Specifically, with the tragic mulatta trope, the intersectionality, that being the intersection of multiple grounds of identity, in this case across race and gender being both black *and* white *and* a woman, creates an identity crisis that can challenge the limits of representation (Crenshaw 334). While the trope attempts to shape discussions around race, an insurmountable gap remains between what is attainable on paper and what truly occurs in the mixed-race lived experience, especially when considering the way different identities interact with one another. Just like a drawing, the sketch of the tragic mulatta can only provide one small, two-dimensional window into the multi-tiered home of that identity.

I will discuss three main works in this thesis: *Iola Leroy* by Frances Harper, “*Désirée’s Baby*” by Kate Chopin, and *Passing* by Nella Larsen. Each story employs the tragic mulatta trope but in various ways. While all three protagonists must contend with similar challenges brought upon by her mixed-race identity, the background, setting, and ultimate fate of each character varies dramatically, allowing each story to move beyond the supposedly universal trope. With *Iola*, Frances Harper creates the most traditional representation of the tragic mulatta, however her strong feminist values bring a fresh twist to the trope. With *Désirée*, Kate Chopin asks us to think of the artificial nature of the categories of race, as a racial identity is assigned to *Désirée* against her will. And with *Clare* in *Passing*, Nella Larsen reveals the true depth of isolation that faces a character who is accepted by neither a black nor white community, as *Clare* refuses to accept their categories of racial division and solidarity. Each character complicates the tragic mulatta trope, proving our accepted representations of mixed-race identity are based on a false universal notion. At the same time, the three works demonstrate the ways in which the tragic mulatta trope still benefits the discussion of race and identity in America, by helping the nation navigate these shifting categories as well as come to terms with the fact that these racial structures are actually fictions, just like the representations brought forth by these authors.

## Section I: *Iola Leroy*

Activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper pens one of the few hopeful narratives for a mixed-race protagonist in her novel, *Iola Leroy*. Born to free African American parents, Harper dedicated much of her life to activism and civil rights movements for blacks and women in America. Far ahead of her time, Frances Harper acted as, “a woman lecturer who refused to limit herself to issues considered suitable for women,” managing, “to confront the contradictions between advancing the cause of equal rights for her race and the predominately white movement for women’s suffrage” (Carby 66-67). Harper traveled across the country speaking on America’s “race problem,” and women’s rights, acknowledging a concept of intersectionality before the term had even been created. Her writing was thus extremely intentional in the way it approached race and the concept of womanhood, making her selection of the tragic mulatta trope more than just on trend with popular abolitionist works, but a strategic decision to represent the complexities of identity, community, and independence. While *Iola Leroy* stands as a classic representation of the tragic mulatta, Harper manages push Iola even further, making her more than a just a “colored damsel in distress,” but an independent thinker, undaunted by her identity.

Born in the Old South, Iola grows up ignorant of her mixed-race identity until the death of her father and a series of unfortunate events plague her and her family. Her white father, Eugene Leroy, and mulatta mother, Marie Leroy, live a life of isolation on a southern plantation to protect Iola and her siblings. All of the children are sent to boarding school in the North to avoid any suspicion and judgement. But a supposed “friend” and cousin, Alfred Lorraine, manages to steal Eugene’s wealth and property after his death, selling his wife and children into slavery. Through an elaborate scheme, Lorraine exposes Marie’s racial identity, getting a judge

to nullify her marriage to Eugene as, “a bad precedent, and inimical to the welfare of society,” a decision that, though horrifying, reflected the harsh reality of law in the 1860s (Harper 74).

Iola’s history aligns perfectly with the classic tragic mulatta checklist; she’s beautiful, educated, one-eighth black, and ripped away from her comfortable lifestyle, becoming a mistreated slave. When Iola learns of her racial background, the initial shock of her true identity has a paralyzing effect and deadly consequences for her family. Her mother slips into delirium, gripped by brain fever and her youngest sister, Gracie, follows suit, becoming ill and dying of nervous shock after the revelation. The intense anxiety over the mere thought of becoming a slave manifests itself into a physical disease that plagues the mulatta women of the novel. Typically considered “a middle-class white woman’s disease,” this hysteria, when linked with race, becomes a fixture of the tragic mulatta trope, required as a rite of passage for their fall from society (Birnbaum 8). Other women are discussed in the novel facing a similar scenario to Iola. Harper writes, “the knowledge of their tainted blood was more than they could bear” and that “they were as much killed by the blow as if they had been shot” (Harper 77). But Iola manages to handle the news, breaking from this classic, tragic mulatta collapse. Although she is still gripped by “a crushing anguish upon her mind” and “peals of hysterical laughter,” she persists nonetheless (Harper 81). Rather than allowing her to crumble like most tragic mulatta characters<sup>3</sup>, Harper pushes Iola to overcome her trauma, as she willingly embarks on a new life,

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<sup>3</sup> The tradition of the Tragic Mulatta I am referring to is generally complicated with no universal description or mandatory outcome. The first tragic mulatta character is often considered to appear in Beaumont’s novel, *Marie*. For further description, see Greiman 31, 84-84. Discussions of the tragic mulatta trope generally include other notable characters in works such as “The Quadroons,” by Lydia Maria Child (1842), *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852), and *Clotel* by William Wells Brown (1853). Many of the characters meet a tragic death, see Pilgrim.

determined to rebuild all that she has lost for herself, her mother, and all others burdened by a colored identity.

Many would consider Iola's actions after discovering her true race out of character for a woman of the 1800s. In the nineteenth century, "True Womanhood" was understood in relation to four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter 152). Such expectations pigeonholed women into support roles. In considering what is "appropriate" for a woman's place in society, race also plays a significant role into further subdividing these categories. America's understanding of gender and femininity consistently disregards the black woman or any woman of color. Beauty is linked to purity and purity linked to fairness, making our ideal picture of womanhood also equivalent to the ideal, dominant race: *white* wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters. Iola visually meets this standard. She has all the right qualities, described as one with a "beautiful, girlish face" and a "fresh, young voice [that] was strangely sympathetic as if some great sorrow had bound her heart in loving compassion to every sufferer who needed her gentle ministrations" (Harper 32). She approaches her work dutifully, demonstrating all the tenderness of a skilled nurse and supportive teacher, or other nurturing roles she encounters. These qualities make her palatable to white readers and they offer up an idealized version of femininity, in line with the Cult of True Womanhood. However, because she is unwilling to deny her mixed blood, she exposes herself to the harsh reality of a second-class existence. Common reactions from her coworkers included, "surprised and pained" looks, followed by them, "instinctively [moving] a little farther from her" as if her race were a disease (Harper 157). Racial stigma neutralizes any feelings of companionship or solidarity these women initially had with Iola, showing how blackness essentially negates womanhood and excludes women of color from a greater community.

Frances Harper does not passively discuss these questions and intersections of race and gender to simply thicken the plot of her sentimental story. Instead, Harper uses her tragic mulatta protagonist intentionally, allowing for topics of gender to be *integrated into* the conversation of race, in ways it has never been acknowledged before. Historically, black women had been excluded from the women's rights movement, in an effort to appeal to southern women and conservative lawmakers, whom, it was thought, would be unable to overcome the issue of race in addition to gender and ascribed social roles. Suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony struggled to recruit white southern women into the movement, as that population, "was totally preoccupied with protecting herself from being forced to accept her ex-slaves as social equals" (Carby 105). Harper understood this hypocrisy and argued, "when it was a question of race we let the lesser question of sex go. But the white women go all for sex, letting race occupy a minor position" (Carby 68). Harper uses Iola to communicate that lack of support she felt from white women activist who treated black women as, "the subject of a compromise in the formation of an alliance between Northern and Southern white women" (Carby 102). In this sense, Harper pushes the tragic mulatta trope beyond looking for sympathy for her race. Iola must also battle with other women who should be her allies. Harper strategically reaches for sympathy and support from within the female sex.

In attempting to break the mold, Iola seeks employment as one way to overcome social barriers preventing her from living a happy, independent life. But on top of having to defend her desire to find work, Iola is denied the few employment options available to women of the time in the supposedly accepting North. Iola readily embraces going to work, claiming, "every woman ought to know how to earn her own living" only to be countered by her uncle who deems it of "no necessity" (Harper 156). Despite his apathy, she manages to obtain multiple positions as a

saleswoman at various locations, all of which terminate her employment when her coworkers discover she is a colored woman. Even a Christian boarding home turns her away, in a grand display of irony (Harper 159). Incorporating these experiences into her story demonstrates another reason for the strategic use of the tragic mulatta trope: representing intersectional feminism – the way women of color experience the intersection of racism and sexism and, “how these experiences tend not to be represented within the [overall] discourses of *either* feminism *or* antiracism” (Crenshaw 333). Iola is discriminated against for both her race and her gender. The tragic mulatta is in a unique position to be able to articulate this experience and Harper uses it to her full advantage, showing how “black women...could not retreat into an abstraction of womanhood dissociated from the oppression of their whole people” (Carby 104).

Understanding her unique position, Harper strategically uses the tragic mulatta trope to try and overcome that instinctive negative reaction to people of color. Iola’s story is a chance for Harper to connect with white readers, “as a means whereby a reader could identify the plight of a people and their struggles against the institutionalized hierarchies of racial power” (Carby 74). As a result of using a pale face, “The white reader is able to imagine how [she herself] would respond to such a “catastrophe” (Berzon 100). Some critics dismiss the use of the mulatta character “as a concession to a white audience,” allowing oppressors the comfort of a character who looks like them and thus someone they can relate to on some level (Carby 63). But in considering the historical context of the times, taking on this large of a racial divide would be extremely difficult with a dark-skinned protagonist, given the deeply rooted prejudices that persisted long after the end of the Civil War. Iola must be of mixed-race to ensure she is not immediately disrespected and to ensure the desired sympathy can be garnered from white readers.

Furthermore, since the tragic mulatta, “is often an educated and cultured individual, [her] oppression is all the more difficult to endure” (Berzon 101). Iola’s disastrous circumstance breeds introspection and critical analysis of race relations in America from the white characters she interacts with in the novel as well as white readership. Harper uses Dr. Gresham, a white union army doctor, as a way to expose the hopelessness of slavery, while also magnifying all of Iola’s appealing qualities. While observing her one day, Dr. Gresham muses:

“She was young in years, but old in sorrow; one whom a sad destiny had changed from a light-hearted girl to a heroic woman. As he observed her, he detected an undertone of sorrow in her more cheerful words, and observed a quick flushing and sudden paling of her cheek, as if she were living over scenes that were thrilling her soul with indignation or chilling her heart with horror...her loneliness drew deeply upon his sympathy.” (Harper 46)

This dramatic internal dialogue dissects Iola and the negative effects past cruel treatment has on her daily disposition. The sentimental style contributes to our understanding of the text, prompting readers to share in Iola’s pain and feel what she feels. Dr. Gresham is able to read her so well because of her whiteness, stressed excessively in this passage. He knows exactly what she is feeling at a glance thanks to the fluctuation in her coloring. The complexity of emotions that she grapples with is reflective of the complexity of her racial identity. Not having a home or community causes extreme strife, something Harper spells out for her white readers through this scene. By linking a favorable face to a slave, Harper attempts to bring humanity back into a transactional system that treated an entire race like currency, while modeling for readers how to feel about slavery and unjust racism.

Additionally, Harper appeals to white readership with her use of sentimentality. Traditionally, to elicit an emotional reaction, the understood formula is, “sympathy will invoke sympathy, love will generate even more love” (Pelletier 255). Harper follows this template again with Dr. Gresham, who summarizes love’s effects best when he learns of Iola’s true race, thinking, “The deep pathos of her story, the tenderness of her ministrations, bestowed alike on black and white, and the sad loneliness of her condition, awakened within him a desire to defend and protect her all through her future life” (Harper 46). The language used to describe Dr. Gresham’s thoughts is heavily sentimental, painting a clear and direct picture of what he sees and feels as well as emphasizing idealized femininity. Harper’s use of sentimentality to get her point across capitalizes on the genre to connect with white readers and be direct with her message. Dr. Gresham’s character is representative of the moderate white reader Harper is targeting. His feelings for Iola parallel the feelings Harper wants to invoke in this target audience. Harper wants to call this community to action to support African Americans and serve as allies for people of color. The tragic mulatta is her device to do so, making Iola more than just a trope but a tool for social understanding.

But Harper does not exclusively appeal to white readers; she also creates a racial uplift narrative for her own people. Despite all her challenges, Iola manages to reunite her family, denying Dr. Gresham, and choosing her family over wealth, security, and social standing. That choice is something which all tragic mulatta characters must face and causes substantial anxiety and strife. The racial binary has such a strong grip on American society, making it difficult to exist on an unacknowledged spectrum. This color-line makes the label of mulatta a restrictive death sentence rather than liberating. Rationally, a person of mixed-race should be able to exist in multiple spaces, sharing heritage in white and black communities; however, white people

specifically react exclusively to that identity. Iola recognizes these limitations, challenging Dr. Gresham's proposal with the harsh reality, asking, "Should the story of my life be revealed to your family, would they be willing to ignore all the traditions of my blood, forget all the terrible humiliations through which I have passed? I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment" (Harper 89). Harper gives Iola agency and strength to deny his pursuits and celebrates her insistence on independence. Claiming her black heritage and subscribing to the one-drop philosophy is a point of pride for Iola. Her decision to embrace her blackness and uplift that community is one of the difficult choices tragic mulatta characters must make. The alternative is to concede to a lesser social class. Iola refuses to pass as a white woman and equates such a lie to a complete and utter betrayal of herself, her family, and her friends. Iola making this choice to embrace a marginalized identity *and* being successful transcends the typical understanding of the trope. This outcome is reflective of Harper's abolitionist agenda, strategically writing a positive story of hope and acceptance of mixed-race individuals while simultaneously showing black excellence and intelligence. Iola shows pride in her heritage and deep feminist values upholding her independence, giving America a new perspective of the capable black woman, unbroken by slavery.

While the tragic mulatta figure can create productive dialogue about race discrimination and gender bias, there are certain inescapable drawbacks to its use as well. In relation to race, even with the best intentions, depending on the perspective of the reader, it can still perpetuate colorism and understood racial hierarchies. Despite being a strong abolitionist, Harper plays into this racial hierarchy by making Iola light-skinned. Similar to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept, "The Talented Tenth," Harper believed in an "intellectual elite" within the black community needed to uplift the race both morally and educationally (Carby 84-85). Along with Iola, towards the end of

the novel, a group of doctors, Reverends, and teachers, many of whom are mixed-race, come together and discuss the future of the black community, in a chapter titled “Friends in Council” (Harper 187). These “friends in council” all fall into a light-skinned subset of the colored population. Their conversation centers on ways they can help the black community; however, for white readers, this mulatto group can be misinterpreted as the only people of color of any social or intellectual merit. Their skin tone by default subscribes to the already accepted racial biases of the period. No matter how pure or well-intentioned the goals of the group are, there is still a clear separation from other African Americans in the novel, not of mixed-race decent. These lines drawn in the novel reflect racial boundaries in real life.

Further, one of the ways Harper distinguishes Iola and these mulatto characters is through the use of dialect for members of the black community. Black characters like Aunt Linda are separated from the well-educated mulattos of the novel by their speech and actions. Newly freed slaves are more interested in self-directed labor in contrast with the more lofty aspirations of Iola and her peers, who seek to enter professional fields. When asked if she wanted to learn to read, Aunt Linda scoffs at the idea, responding, “No, chile, sence freedom’s com’d I’s e bin scratchin’ too hard to get a libin’ to put my head down to de book” claiming, “it would gib [her] de hysteries ef [she] war to try to git book larnin’ froo my pore ole head” (Harper 119,120). Representing Aunt Linda in this way makes the unfair assumption that freed slaves lacked the capacity or desire to seek out education and advancement opportunities. This clear division is deprecating to African Americans in the novel. Carby explains, “An important part of *Iola Leroy* was to act as a forum for and advocacy of an educated elite” but that objective alone partially reinforces the same racist ideology that Harper attempts to discredit: that pure blood is superior to “negro” blood (Carby 87). This separation insinuates that mulattos are the only ones in the

“intellectual elite” and taken to another level, function as a variation of the “white-savior complex,” or rather, “the light-skinned-savior-complex.”

Categories of racial difference exist on many levels, including within the black community. Harper intentionally creates a racial uplift narrative but in doing so, she still adheres to the fundamental racial divides America was built on. Harper clearly advocates for equality and equal opportunity while unfortunately upholding those same racial constructs. At the time of *Iola Leroy*'s publishing in 1892, Harper's views were still extremely progressive prior to the turn of the century. *Iola Leroy* stands as a positive representation of a tragic mulatta figure. Harper strategically employs the tragic mulatta trope to demonstrate the complexities and challenges associated with the intersection of mixed-race and female identities, while appealing to white readers in an attempt to cut through longstanding racial biases of the Reconstruction Era. While drawing upon the classic image of the tragic mulatta trope, *Iola* exceeds its traditional bounds, fighting for her independence and choosing to stand in strong allegiance to the black community. Even though certain racial hierarchies like colorism and the harsh racial binary remain uninterrogated, overall, Harper's variant of the tragic mulatta trope demonstrates its richness and promise as a tool for building awareness, sympathy, and solidarity.

## Section II: “Désirée’s Baby”

Kate Chopin’s work is often at the center of the conversation about women’s rights and the early rise of feminism based on her well-known novel, *The Awakening*, with its bold representation of female sexuality and questioning of socially prescribed gender roles. But *The Awakening* does not represent the entirety of Chopin’s contribution. Chopin brings a different focus to the tragic mulatta trope, one more directly rooted in questions surrounding female empowerment and solidarity. Born in St. Louis, Missouri as the daughter of an Irish immigrant and wealthy businessman who was also a slave owner, Chopin witnessed first-hand the plights of African Americans and the racial power dynamics that dictated southern living. However, Chopin’s father died while she was very young, leaving her to grow up in a matriarchy, “where women handled their own money and made their own decisions” (Toth 13). This upbringing undoubtedly contributed to Chopin’s feminist views which she highlighted in understated ways, producing protagonists that, “lived with an outward existence which conforms, but with an inward life which questions” (Toth 15). Such is the case in Chopin’s short story, “Désirée’s Baby.” Although this story focuses on a tragic mulatta character who turns out not to be of mixed-race, the psychological torment Désirée grapples with aligns perfectly with the trope. Chopin strategically uses a “tragic mulatta” protagonist to show the devastation linked to such a racial identity, as well as the competing reactions of fear and desire to “tainted” blood. Instead of using the trope as a way to break down stereotypes and racial categories isolating mixed-race individuals, Chopin uses the trope as a way to focus on the cruelty linked to women, especially those with such a racial identity, thus reducing the tragic mulatta to a martyr rather than a symbol of identification and hope.

As a white author, Chopin writes the story from the outside looking in, drawing on observation rather than lived experience. However, critic Anna Elfenbein commends her for, “looking on the thoughtless white world through the eyes of a woman of color” (Pegues 15). Chopin manages to pen such complicated stories so successfully by focusing her writing, “on the psychology of the individual rather than the social issue [i.e. slavery, miscegenation, and integration]” (Brosman 2). This strategy gave Chopin the space to represent the feeling of being mixed-race, without having to explicitly define some of the nuanced limitations of that lived experience. We only see Désirée at the turning point of her accused racial identity, as she processes the implications of being mixed-race rather than living the experience of a woman of color. In some ways, this makes Désirée’s character that much more powerful when discussing race in American literature. Her existence as a tragic mulatta is a true fiction, within a work of fiction, one that subverts the entire concept of racial identity.

In meeting Désirée, we immediately learn she is a mysterious character, in origins and identity. Found by Monsieur and Madame Valmondé as a child, even from infancy she enters the story as an item to be acquired rather than her own self. Her very name links her with this sense of being – she is a literally a thing to be *desired* and possessed. Elfenbein explains, “Désirée’s life depends upon being desired, but her life begins and ends with the antithesis of desire, abandonment” (Elfenbein 116). Despite her unknown origins, she grows to be “beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,” the perfect recipe for a lovely maiden in the South (Chopin 270). Here, we see idealized femininity stressed and coveted again. Just like Iola, Désirée exemplifies many of the values behind the Cult of True Womanhood, specifically submissiveness and domesticity, arguably the two most prized by society (Welter 162). She marries Armand Aubigny, a distinguished plantation owner with “one of the oldest and proudest”

names in Louisiana (Chopin 270). Chopin describes the marriage in a matter-of-fact way, highlighting Monsieur Valmondé, “grew practical and wanted things well considered” in giving her up to Armand. The marriage is a transaction, “the transfer of power from father to husband” (Elfenbein 117). Before the question of race is even presented, Chopin is already representing power dynamics and female subjugation. Désirée’s entire being is dependent on the men around her, be it her father or Armand, to claim her and take care of her.

When it becomes undeniable that Désirée’s child is mixed-race, the plot thickens and Chopin adds another layer of complexity to this representation of womanhood and domesticity. Armand starts acting coldly toward Désirée and cruelly to his slaves, as “the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him” (Chopin 272). Before Désirée is labeled a mulatto, here stands another example of her powerlessness, always at the whim of her husband’s moods. She clings to his affection, “When he frowned, she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God” (Chopin 271). Everything in her life hinges on Armand’s wants and commands. Immediately, Désirée exists in stark contrast to Iola. Married, submissive, and a mother, Désirée represents all that is coveted by the Cult of True Womanhood. In this sense, Désirée aligns beautifully with the tragic mulatta trope by being attractive not just in appearance but in socially acceptable behavior. She lives to please her husband and sustain the household while Iola dares to pursue independence in all aspects of life. Fundamentally, the two are extremely different but both are considered a tragic mulatta.

One afternoon, Désirée makes the connection between the appearance of their slave, La Blanche’s quadroon boy and her own baby, looking at them “back again; over and over” in disbelief, as the pieces fall into place. She confronts Armand, asking, “Look at our child. What does it mean? Tell me” (Chopin 272). Armand accuses her of being a mulatta, declaring she is

not white. This mere conjecture about Désirée's own racial background is enough to irrevocably stain her name. We are never allowed to consider Armand to be mixed-race, even though he is often described with a "dark, handsome face" (Chopin 271). This is another demonstration of his unyielding power and authority over her. He declares Désirée a mulatta and thanks to his male privilege, the accusation is accepted as fact. Being a male automatically establishes Armand as the reliable law of the land, with his claims valued over Désirée's insistent denial. His power over Désirée also stands as another representation of intersectionality. Armand's male privilege gives him racial superiority. That aspect of his identity layers on top of his potentially questionable racial identity, squelching any doubt that could arise over his own origins. Chopin uses his accusation as a way to further show how volatile identity is. Désirée becomes what a person of power tells her she is.

Désirée is immediately labeled as black, with the one-drop rule taking effect. She attempts to push back against her husband's accusation, pleading, "Look at my hand, whiter than yours, Armand," she laughed hysterically" (Chopin 273). Again, we see the hysteria setting in, a common thread amongst tragic mulattas at the time of their social downfall. Distraught over these implications, Désirée confesses, "I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live" (Chopin 273). No alternative solution can alleviate the horror of living as an accused black woman, raising a mixed child doomed to a life of exile. Author Dagmar Pegues explains there is a, "unanimous refusal of the possibility of a functional biracial family," from all the characters in the story not just Désirée (Pegues 16). This absoluteness is a testament to the unforgiving hostility felt by people of color, particularly those of mixed-race as the mere label holds enough power to destroy your worth as a human being. Unhinged by the thought of losing Armand,

Désirée quickly succumbs to overwhelming fears, as she is instantly cast out of her established social standing and “othered” into a class equal to livestock.

Shunned by her husband, Désirée surrenders herself to nature in the face of a life altering decision, presumably perishing within the thick, enveloping bayou with her child. She makes this decision despite having an alternative route at her disposal, which could have potentially offered comfort, security, and even happiness. Désirée’s mother offers to take her in, writing, “My own Désirée: Come home to Valmondé; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child” (Chopin 273). The promise of her mother’s love is not sufficient because of the way society has conditioned her to see life in black and white, in terms of happiness or misery. Despite this option, Désirée pursues a more drastic and permanent solution to her pain. Chopin makes a larger comment on the state of women in society with this dark ending. Rather than grapple with a nontraditional lifestyle, Désirée chooses to die by suicide but her death is far from a display of agency. It is in fact a reinforcement of woman’s limited means in society. The condition of women during the time calls for total conformity and a clear, established identity to qualify as a suitable housewife, loving mother, and respected member of society. Désirée concedes to these overpowering societal *and* racial expectations. She suffers simultaneously from marriage bondage, the duties of motherhood, and the shackles of racism, seeing more comfort in death than a constant battle against the social institutions which drive America.

It is a damning life sentence in which Chopin dramatically unravels with a last minute twist. Armand discovers a past letter from his mother in which she confesses, “I thank God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother... belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (Chopin 274). This evidence confirms Armand is mixed-race and that revelation further victimizes Désirée as not just a tragic figure but a

needless casualty as a result of a false assumption – a fiction. In this sense, Chopin comments on how race, though treated like some determinate factor of our lives, is often nothing more than a story we make up ourselves and make up about other people. Although damned by the racial accusation, Chopin places more emphasis on Désirée’s oppression as a woman rather than her oppression as a mulatta. Arguably, whether Désirée is white or black takes a secondary role in her dilemma, “since her very life depends on the whims, social class, and race of her husband” (Elfenbein 116). Armand’s accusation, rather than Désirée’s true racial identity is what kills her, confirming the public perception of one’s race is more powerful than its actual existence.

In this sense, Chopin is more radical than Harper in tackling the question of race. *Iola Leroy* is certainly progressive in its representation of blackness and mixed-race individuals, depicting a race of people in a positive way that historically had always been seen as less than, incapable, and unintelligent. But Chopin completely undermines the entire concept of race, showing how it is less about your skin color and more about your power, position, and gender in society. She strategically uses the tragic mulatta trope to achieve this goal as it, “disrupts the southern hierarchy, i.e. the distance between the colonizer and the colonized” (Pegues 18). Désirée goes beyond the traditional bounds of the trope; she is not simply a tragic figure, ruined and faced with a difficult decision; she is a symbolic martyr, refusing to claim any part of the fictional identity forced upon her. Her character represents the falsehood that is race in America.

Additionally, Chopin blurs the color-line with this story. Chopin accepts the given racial categories America enforces, however, she highlights that though we believe in such strict distinctions, America’s lived experience hardly reflects “racial purity.” Spinning blame unto Armand as the true mulatto, Chopin writes a narrative, “implying that Louisiana’s plantation elites are perhaps not quite so lily-white as they seem” (Castillo 71). Not only is Armand’s

mother confirmed to be of color, it is implied that Armand has further relations with some of the other slaves on the plantation. Désirée's notes Armand could hear the baby crying, "as far away from La Blanche's cabin," as if he frequents her space (Chopin 271). Additionally, La Blanche and other slaves like Désirée's nurse, Zandrine, are described as yellow in tone, suggesting mixed blood. The yellow color pops up again in the description of the plantation home itself, which is a, "yellow stuccoed house," serving as another physical marker hinting at racial mixing (Chopin 270). These details reveal, "there is no absolute distinction between white and black, but rather an imaginary line drawn by white men and crossed at their own choosing," or in this case, in their own homes (Arner 140). Armand may detest Désirée, thinking she is mixed-race, but the same standard does not apply to his own sexual relations. Such hypocrisy can be attributed to his male privilege, allowing for the sexual exploitation of female slaves without any risk of societal repercussions.

When considering the tragic mulatta trope, Chopin subverts a number of stereotypical assumptions by leaving Désirée's true racial identity unknown. Technically, Désirée is a false tragic mulatta, but her story pushes us to explore the frightening reality that something as arbitrary as race can destroy a life. We never get confirmation of her heritage and yet she still experiences the same downward spiral associated with the trope. One of the most chilling scenes in the story is the moment when Désirée walks off into the bayou:

"Désirée had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds. She disappeared among the reeds and

willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou, and she did not come back again.” (Chopin 273-274)

Chopin paints a heavenly picture of this white figure, both in clothing and in complexion, descending into darkness. Désirée is like a fallen angel, white and golden in comparison to her bleak surroundings. She is the ultimate sacrifice – a needless victim of unjust discrimination. Everything about her is thin and delicate, emphasizing how defenseless she is against the forces which are pushing against her: her husband, her perceived race, her gender, and her duties as a mother. Additionally, she walks through a deserted field, away from the “broad, beaten road,” representative of the accepted social norms.

This moment is Désirée’s one and only act of defiance, choosing to refuse her given label as a mulatta. But that choice kills both herself and her child. Chopin stresses to us, to defy such social norms and ridged categories leads to only one outcome: certain death. In comparison with Iola’s character, Désirée is not depicted so much as victim of her race, but more as a victim of her gender. The “twoness” Désirée most significantly suffers from is the combatting duties of being a submissive wife or a protective mother. In remaining a faithful wife, she must submit to Armand’s accusation and his will, requesting she leave the home. In remaining a protective mother, she must do what is best for her child, in saving her baby from a life of exile. Her decision attempts to fulfill both these roles but society fails her in providing a viable option she feels is bearable.

Unlike Harper’s racial uplift narrative, Chopin embraces the tragedy associated with the tragic mulatta, as Désirée fully falls victim to the trope both in her racial identity and her gender identity. The intersection of these two forces acting simultaneously against Désirée is impossible to bear. Harper allows Iola to exceed the scope of the tragic mulatta because of her feminist

views, writing an ending that shows the competency and potential of a woman of color. Iola establishes an ideal life for herself, hardly considered an option of mixed-raced individuals of the time, especially women of the time. In contrast, Désirée retreats from the tragic mulatta identity, refusing to claim such a racial identity and ending her life in the process. Both characters are considered tragic mulattas, yet both function on completely different planes – one rooted in freedom and one rooted in obedience. The only thing shared between them and the identity is their race, gender, and adherence to the social categories that mark them as inferior.

### Section III: *Passing*

Moving out of Reconstruction and into the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen puts a modernist spin on the tragic mulatta trope. Larsen was of mixed-race herself, born to a white immigrant mother from Denmark and a mulatto father from the Danish West Indies (Hutchinson 15, 19). She incorporates many racial themes and knowledge about the lived experience of mixed-race individuals in America into her writing. She grew up in Chicago and much of her work is believed to be semi-autobiographical, dealing heavily with racial identity and female sexuality. In Larsen's novel, *Passing*, her depiction of a Clare Kendry subverts much of what we believe to be true about the tragic mulatta. In fact, some critics argue Clare is not a tragic mulatta at all. Left to fend for herself at the young age of fifteen, Clare makes the decision to pass for white for her own self interests. But passing comes with extensive consequences. Although she controls how she is perceived by society, that choice prevents her from being able to live as her full self. At the end of the novel, Larsen paints a bleak picture surrounding mixed-race identity, dismissing racial uplift narratives like *Iola Leroy*, and complicating the tragic downfall of rejected marginalized characters similar to Désirée in "Désirée's Baby." Clare plays an important role in her own self destruction. Incapable of finding community, she knowingly lives in danger by passing into the white community. However, why is she forced into that liminal position in the first place? *Passing* gives us a modernist rendition of the tragic mulatta, who grapples with some of the same struggles of the conventional trope, but goes beyond the bounds of her identity by refusing to live just one life as black *or* white.

Clare Kendry is an anomaly in multiple ways. Shunned for her light skin from birth, Clare never once fits in to her surroundings. Even her friend Irene admits, "Clare had never been exactly one of the group" (Larsen 154). Clare grows up in an unstable home, motherless and the

daughter of an abusive mulatto father who works as a struggling janitor. After her father's death, she is taken in by her strictly religious and racist white aunts, acting as their personal servant. It was a damaging experience for Clare, but a necessary arrangement as she recounts, "I was, it was true, expected to earn my keep by doing all the housework, and most of the washing. But do you realize, 'Rene, that if it hadn't been for them, I shouldn't have had a home in the world?'" (Larsen 158). In their first meeting, Clare immediately goes on the defensive, trying to explain much of her choices for passing, claiming, "[She] was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem," something Clare had felt all her life, both while living with her father on the fringes of the black community and with her white aunts, taken in merely as a half-hearted gesture of the "good Christian" sisters (Larsen 159). Clare is well aware of the mixed emotions and judgment from her old black acquaintances. She inquires excessively about old friends from the past but allows Irene to side step her candid questions, telling Irene, "I won't make you tell me, because I know just as well as if I'd been there and heard every unkind word" (Larsen 154).

The narration of the story is crucial to our understanding of Clare and it also gives us a new representation of a community we have yet to explore in these three selected works: the black middle class. *Iola Leroy* takes place just after the Civil War, as America is moving toward economic opportunities for African Americans but that is one of the main issues Iola and her peers are grappling with – ensuring blacks have equal access to education, employment, and housing. Harper is representing the undertone of optimism found within the black community at this time, having just broken free from bondage. Because of this move, author Lawrence Aje explains, "during Reconstruction, fair-skinned blacks did not see the need to pass, as more social and political opportunities were made available to them," than ever before during what would be the first real attempt at freedom and equal opportunity for black Americans (Aje 3). In contrast,

*Passing*, published in 1929, opens up an entirely different landscape in regards to segregation and inequalities faced by African Americans. Progress is a false description of the state of the Union in the early 1900s. While slavery had been abolished, segregation and the Jim Crow Era were at their peaks, inhibiting blacks from decent housing and jobs, while confining them still to a second-class existence. In response to this new landscape, the Harlem Renaissance emerged and much of the art and literature of this period focused on the “New Negro” a separate trope moving away from the often over-dramatized tragic narrative so tightly ingrained in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The New Negro movement, “asserted that black Americans belonged to a unique race of human beings whose ancestry imparted a distinctive and invaluable racial identity and culture,” that many writers marked, “the beginning of a new phase of American history in which the production of black culture would assist African Americans in winning respect long overdue in the US and abroad” (Dawahare 23). Irene Redfield and her family represent a new understanding of what it means to be black in America, an understanding rooted in racial solidarity and owning your blackness. Living as a light-skinned black mother of two and married to Brian, a successful doctor, Irene and her family are representative of the new negroes while Clare remains more attached to the past tragic mulatta trope. This distinction of these two stock characters is important to how we view Clare, standing as the only remaining shell of the tragic mulatta trope with this new trend gaining prominence. But Clare exhibits traits of both tropes. Although she chooses to pass as white it is not because she is ashamed of her black blood. There is no internal question of her race and she is not shocked or moved to hysteria, as previous characters have been by a revelation that she has negro blood. In fact, the whole plot revolves around her wanting to reconnect with her black heritage. Initially, there is nothing “tragic” about Clare’s

outward identity and she is not limited by her race since she willingly breaks free from her original given race. In a practical sense, Clare, “makes no profound sacrifices, no deeply ethical choice for one race over the other. Her choices are entirely selfish and epicurean; she does what pleases her” (Hutchinson 299).

Most of what we know about Clare, we see through the eyes of Irene, who falls on the side of the black middle class. But Irene proves to be a complicated and unreliable narrator. Irene and Clare were childhood friends, however after Clare leaves to live with her aunts, Clare becomes a distant memory, quickly forgotten by Irene and other members of their community. “By funneling our perceptions of Clare and nearly all of the action of the novel through Irene as the center consciousness, Larsen makes Irene’s defense against the psychic disturbance Clare generates inseparable from our understanding” (Hutchinson 295). We cannot escape the uneasy feeling surrounding Clare and her way of life, but this feeling is clearly formed by Irene’s insecurities and her own fear and self-doubt. Everything about Clare feels unnatural and Irene holds back no ill feelings toward Clare, describing Clare quite bluntly as holding, “no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold, and hard” (Larsen 144). But even Irene, who is cautious of Clare is still captivated by her, adding, “And yet she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes on theatrical heroics” (Larsen 144). Irene is admittedly curious and drawn to Clare, indulging in Clare’s persistent attempts to reconnect despite her internal aversion.

Having a third-person limited narration enhances Clare’s mystery and helps to further demonstrate how isolated mixed-race individuals are in society. Clare’s story is told to us by Irene, who represents a conventional perspective about race and respectability. But Irene is untrustworthy, making false claims and shaky assumptions. Because of this, our own perceptions

are equally untrustworthy, designating a person's race and value based off their outward appearance. Larsen capitalizes on this modernist narrative technique, calling into question Irene's authority and symbolically calling into question society's authority to judge people on race. Additionally, Irene's character is representative of the black middle class but also the fears and racial conformity present in marginalized groups. Larsen shows part of the psychological damage associated with such long and brutal oppression left over from slavery. Irene obsesses over race and appearances; she is more concerned over maintaining the status quo and protecting herself and her black reputation than she is with her happiness or quality of life. Her negative feelings toward Clare are reflective of the way racism and the color-line adversely affect the black community, causing internal strife and anxiety.

Irene focuses intently on Clare's ambition and desire for "things." Clare passes as white in the interest of increasing her socioeconomic status, telling Irene, "You had all the things I wanted and never had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others" (Larsen 159). The "and others" is crucial here. The only way for Clare to surpass her peers is to cross over the color-line. For Clare and other characters in *Passing*, "wealth equals whiteness" (Dawahare 24). Larsen comments on the limited mobility of women in society, making marrying her wealthy white husband, John Bellew, Clare's best hope at advancing her quality of life, given her isolation and hidden racial identity. Clare is presented with the same choice that many tragic mulattas face but her decision is not one rife with guilt or torn emotions. Larsen pushes Clare beyond the set bounds of the trope, living for herself rather than her racial identity, deciding to pass, "not because blackness... represented victimization and powerlessness, but because of the class dynamics of social mobility in a racially segregated world" (Hutchinson 300).

Clare's blatant disregard for racial lines is something neither Iola nor Désirée manage to achieve. Both the latter characters live with the consequences of their racial identities but neither attempt to challenge the strict color-line. Iola stands in solidarity with the black community and Désirée accepts her fate as an outcast, refusing to live as a perceived mulatta but conceding to death rather than a second-class existence. Clare refuses to be pigeonholed into either race. She transitions from one community to the other on her own whim, with zero regard for the social norms which discourage such code-switching. She lives with, "a relative nonchalance (not unlike Larsen's own) about the racial barrier that most Americans religiously sustain" (Hutchinson 300). It takes an author of mixed-race to challenge the arbitrary binary system that rules over American racial boundaries. Living in the middle opens another line of understanding that many authors fail to consider.

Clare's agency over how she presents herself is impressive, something female characters typically lack, and a testament to the way Larsen viewed and experienced racial boundaries (and their falseness). Clare selects her identity for herself, wanting to be, "recognizable on her own terms and not on anybody else's" (McIntire 783). Irene is completely puzzled by this attitude, asking Clare, "What about background? Family, I mean. Surely you can't just drop down on people from nowhere and expect them to receive you with open arms, can you?" (Larsen 158). Irene's disbelief is representative of the black community's attitudes toward passing. Clare's decision equates to cheating the system and insulting her heritage. Such disloyalty is frowned upon within the black community, evident by an encounter Clare distinctly remembers with Margret Hammer, another childhood friend. Clare recounts, "My dear 'Rene, I assure you from the way she [Margaret] looked through me, even I was uncertain whether I was actually there in

the flesh or not” (Larsen 154). Just as easily as Clare transitions from black to white, she is quickly erased from the minds and hearts of her black friends.

But despite the strong disapproval of passing within the black community, Irene and others still help Clare maintain the lie. Historian Allyson Hobbs explains, “Passing was not a solitary act. It required other people who were willing to keep your secret, and a community that was willing to let you go and look the other way, even when it hurt” (Bates). Larsen validates this opinion, exploring the phenomenon with Irene’s musings. Irene poses the same thoughts to her husband, saying, “It’s funny about ‘passing.’ We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it” (Larsen 185-186). Even when Irene suspects Clare is having an affair with her husband, Irene stops herself from exposing Clare. Internally she is torn, as she contemplates:

“She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic.”  
(Larsen 225)

This passage stands as a prime example of Larsen’s modernist style, which is best equipped to portray the psychological strife associated with passing and mixed-race identity. We are inside Irene’s head, and can feel the internal back and forth as well as her doubts and desperation.

“Race!” is an intense statement that hits at the root cause of nearly all the conflict in the novel. Irene, the new negro, has a loyalty to her race that cannot be squelched even in the face of extreme jealousy and fear. It dictates nearly every decision she makes. Irene understands Clare

choosing to pass does not erase her blackness. Betraying Clare would be worse than Clare's choice to live as a white woman. It would not just be an injury to Clare but an injury to the sacred ties that link people of color. The shared experience of racial oppression creates a sense of community that cannot be fabricated or broken. That shared lived experience is so powerful, Irene even distinguishes that, "It's easy for a Negro to 'pass' for white. But I don't think it would be so simple for a white person to 'pass' for coloured" (Larsen 206). The black community can resent Clare for her choices but it cannot be rid of her completely. The long history of the one-drop rule lives on even into the 1900s, but it is transformed into something powerful – racial and community solidarity. Clare will always be able to claim, on some level, her black roots, due to mixed-race individuals being automatically lumped with African Americans. But Larsen does not mask the internal struggle that takes place in claiming a community. Irene having to "make a choice," between her race and her own interest, stretches the clear line separating mixed-race individuals and African Americans, something that historically is never fully acknowledged.

Regardless of negative feelings towards passing, there is still something intriguing about mixed-race individuals to the black community. We sense this in Irene's narration, constantly oscillating back and forth between disdain and admiration of Clare. At the Negro Welfare League dance, Clare is described multiple times as "golden" and "radiant," dancing with white and black men alike (Larsen 203). She is detested yet desirable, because blacks subscribe to the same racist ideologies ingrained into American society that taught them whiteness is superior and whiteness equals wealth. Critical race theorist, Kimberly Crenshaw, explains how minorities struggle to, "free their minds of the injurious mythologies of racial hierarchy," stating, "Ideology convinces one group that the coercive domination of another is legitimate" (López 108). Clare passes as white to advance both her social and financial standing and the black community recognizes and

validates that. She becomes the picture of wealth and thus a coveted item. Clare is not necessarily wholly accepted by the black community but she can still exist in their spaces and serve as an attraction, because, “her white body... functions socially as an abstract symbol of value” (Dawahare 34). Being close or acquainted to her also increases one’s own value and significance.

While the black community is infatuated by Clare, there is still a gap between mixed-race individuals and African Americans. Racism overtly isolates mulattas from the white community, but racial pride isolates them from the black community. Clare’s encounter with Margaret, “affirms the ethical triumph of black race loyalty,” and the complex views surrounding passing and its morality (Hutchinson 298). Instead of painting the black community as solely the victim, Larsen calls out its exclusionary treatment of mixed-race and light-skinned persons of color. As Mary Condé points out, “What is powerful and unexpected” in *Passing*, “is the sympathy which Larsen shows not for Irene, who remains true to her racial origins except for brief excursions, but for Clare, who betrays them” (Hutchinson 298). Acknowledging the isolation felt by mulattos from the black community undermines the common racial uplift narratives that dominated the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Larsen shows some limitations and exclusionary practices previously ignored in African American spaces. This candor is indicative of Larsen’s own lived experience as well as her modernist approach to writing.

The one-drop rule mandated all people of color be considered black, but rising black pride and the new negro consciousness started to redefine what it means to be black and in turn created divisions within the black community. (Justly so, as the experience of mixed-race individuals is not the same as that of a dark-skinned African Americans). However, having to navigate those divisions without the proper space or validation in one’s own unique racial

identity is traumatic and alienating. America's concept of race was still too limited to make room for biracial and mixed-race individuals on the color-line. Because of this liminal existence, towards the end of the novel, we start to see the tragic mulatta trope reemerge with Clare in this modernist lens. Clare remains in orbit of the black community but they never fully embrace her as one of their own, despite having expectations of loyalty and commitment to the race. As a result, Clare moving from black to white spaces and then back into the negro realm, enacts, "another series of shatterings – of herself, of her friendship with Irene, and of yet another convention (this time it is marriage)" (McIntire 786). Each time she transitions into a new community, she fractures part of herself to do so, never being able to claim her true self.

Eventually this splitting takes a toll on Clare and catches up to her in a dramatic closing scene that leaves readers shocked and in suspense. Clare falls multiple stories to her death from an open window, and whether or not she deliberately leaned back or was pushed is never definitively revealed. The third person limited narration again becomes crucial. Irene recounts the hectic events:

"One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone... 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." (Larsen 239)

The adjectives used to describe Clare are telling of Irene's conflicted heart. Clare's "white face" is linked with "torturing loveliness," just as her very existence causes pain for those less fortunate. The juxtaposition of these two images, the dreamy and the disturbing, summarize the

competing attitudes toward Clare. This internal monologue may be one of the few times we can trust Irene's narration, as she admits she was not sorry for her death. There is ample evidence to support Irene as a murderer, but who kills Clare is less important than what kills Clare. Race created this situation; it bred resentment, fear, and isolation. Regardless of if a character is black or white, "Every character in the book, we realize, is infected by the pathologies of a society that insists difference demands fear, fear requires lying, and that passing for what one is not is safer than telling the complicated versions of truth available in a racially stratified society" (McIntire 790). These shared sets of beliefs are what kill Clare and her death solidifies her as a tragic mulatta - one that meets an untimely end for no better reason than her misunderstood identity.

Despite attempting to straddle the color-line, Clare cannot willfully overcome the racial boundaries that dictate society. Neither black nor white communities understand her plight and though admired, Clare remains distant from any true form of acceptance or love. With the emergence of the New Negro, the tragic mulatta trope begins to fade from literature, however aspects of the trope remain applicable to the overall representation of the lived experience of mixed-race individuals. With *Passing*, Larsen shows with brutal honesty how mulatta women are isolated from both sides of the racial binary.

## Conclusion

In looking closely at these three examples of the tragic mulatta trope, we might conclude that what critics have considered a universal trope is arguably not a trope at all. Frances Harper, Kate Chopin, and Nella Larsen all create different representations of the tragic mulatta: one that thrives despite her identity, one that dies in denial of her given identity, and one that dies for refusing to choose one side of her identity. The trope pulls in such divergent understandings, and even contradictory directions in large part due to the complexities of the layered variables to being a woman *and* being of mixed-race. The intersection of various racial and gender identities proves to be incredibly difficult to encapsulate or summarize in simple terms.

The tragic mulatta trope also deals with the problem of representation, of trying to reflect the world's reality while simultaneously trying to push or change that reality. The way these authors incorporate the trope is just as important as the representation itself. Both Harper and Chopin in particular, allow their protagonist to exist within the limitations of race and limiting categories of difference, however both authors subtly challenge what it means to be a woman and what it means to be of color within those confines. In contrast, Larsen attempts to break down these categories all together, suggesting black and white is an insufficient way to view the world.

Additionally, different authors attack these questions from varying angles based on their backgrounds and lived experiences. As a black woman who lived through Reconstruction, Harper naturally gravitates toward a racial uplift narrative, reflecting her black roots and desire to give back to her own community. As a white woman who lived in the conservative South, Chopin focuses on female oppression and the difficult expectations placed on wives and mothers. And as a mixed-race woman living through the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen writes critically of

both white and black communities, arguing for acceptance from both sides of the color-line for mixed-race individuals.

While the trope appears differently in the work of each author, the one consistent message remains the same: no matter the decade or social landscape, American society fails to support mixed-race individuals as their full selves. These narratives reflect how rigid the two-color binary system is in our society and how we desperately need to acknowledge and explore those who fall in the middle. Mixed-race protagonists have a vital role in changing the narrative behind multiracial identities both in American society and beyond. One “trope” and the handful of stories we have discussed cannot begin to fully cover the plethora of lived experiences that follow various people of color. Millions of multiracial individuals are looking for stories that they can connect with on a deeper level. Novels and stories are often the first place many people look for inspiration, comfort, and companionship. When questioning your identity or place in the world, literature can validate your emotions, showing you that even in fiction, an author somewhere thought and felt the same way you did.

Further, what is communicated on a page can extend far beyond the reach of a classroom or a bookstore. As professor, Michele Elam puts it, “Literature doesn’t necessarily prescribe public policy, but it can both reflect and shape changing public sentiments” (Shashkevich 3). Each of the works I have discussed came at a pivotal moment in American history and all three reflect on and challenge our understanding of race in America. Literature gave them the space and platform to house these ideas, thoughts, and beliefs for the public to absorb. Though they are fictions, each story holds power and influence over their audiences and each story contributes to the way we view mixed-race identity. Society influences literature, and literature can influence society. The two are not mutually exclusive, making these representations and this trope one

important option of many vehicles for lasting social change. Ultimately, the complex engagements between social questions and artistic practice in these works give us an opportunity to reflect on the world as it is, and imagine it as it might be.

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