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Isolation and the Absence of Self

When one is incapable of reaching a particular ideal, loneliness and isolation often becomes an inevitable reality. This is the overall theme presented in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Carson McCuller's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. *Quicksand's* protagonist Helga Crane spends her life trying to overcome the kind of loneliness inherent with being biracial during a time when everything seems to revolve around race. Miss Amelia Evans, the protagonist in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, spends much of her life trying to find a balance between her masculine upbringing and her newfound femininity. These women are as unique in their feelings of isolation as they are in their respective surroundings, but they are both very much alike in their inability to reconcile pieces of themselves which never quite seem to fit together.

Both Helga Crane and Miss Amelia Evans essentially lead solitary lives. When their stories begin they have no strong family connections and no one to look at as a reflection of themselves. This undoubtedly contributes or intensifies their feelings of loneliness and isolation. This may be particularly true of Helga because she is seen as different and unique both inside and outside her family. As James Vayle says to her in reference to her black heritage, "you were always a little different, a little dissatisfied, though I don't pretend to understand you at all. I never did" (423). This lack of understanding underscores much of Helga's loneliness. She quite literally has no one in her life who truly understands her or her worldviews. Amelia, like Helga, is also seen as different and unique; however the description of her masculine appearance implies

that she may look similar to her late father. This suggests that she had at one time experienced a sense of belonging that Helga never really had the opportunity to experience. This seems all the more likely when one considers the implication that Amelia had been close with her father before his death.

Unlike Helga, Amelia is not depicted as someone who is searching for her identity or a sense of belonging. Similar to Helga's isolation in Naxos though, much of Amelia's isolation prior to Cousin Lymon's arrival seems self-imposed. This implies that she not only realizes she is different from most females, but is aware of how these differences may be perceived. As the town doctor, she does not seem to be completely out of touch with her nurturing, feminine side; however her unwillingness to treat female issues suggests that this is an altogether unfamiliar side. Given this unfamiliarity it would seem that she does not initially have the same fragmented sense of self that perpetuates Helga's loneliness. Amelia just simply lets her masculine side dominate. In fact, as Clare Whatling points out in her critical essay, she is "a woman who takes pride in the exhibition of her musculature" (2). Of course this seems to diminish somewhat upon Cousin Lymon's arrival. In fact it could be argued that his arrival is a metaphor for Amelia getting in touch with her femininity. He is an unknown, sensitive, and emotional relative that Amelia becomes attached to almost immediately. Through the café he pulls her out of her self-imposed isolation and she begins to soften in her interactions with the townspeople. Her personality begins to change due to his presence and it is pointed out that although "she still loved a fierce lawsuit, ...she was not so quick to cheat her fellow man and to exact cruel payments" (752). She even begins to wear a dress on occasion instead of overalls, which signifies, for perhaps the first time, the presence of a struggle between her two inner selves. This

is particularly evident in the unladylike manner in which she warms herself in front of the stove while wearing the dress. (Broughton)

Amelia's transformation from overalls to a dress mirrors Helga's transformations in Harlem, Copenhagen, and eventually Alabama. Both women are, literally and figuratively trying on new clothes, new versions of themselves in an effort to feel at one with others and with themselves. Of course once these efforts fail to bring about any real sense of personal assimilation they begin to detest a part of themselves. For Helga it is anything and everything associated with either her black or white heritage, depending on which one is causing her momentary discontentment. As George Hutchinson points out in his critical essay, "whatever identity [she] finds alluring in one setting proves to be a trap once she has the opportunity to 'try it on'" (8). Likewise, Amelia begins to feel trapped by her femininity, as is symbolized by the snowfall that keeps her inside. This sense of entrapment and personal discomfort eventually cause her to try to revert back to the familiarity of her masculinity as is seen in her preparations to fight Marvin Macy.

If Cousin Lymon does indeed represent Amelia's feminine side, it would seem then that her sense of loneliness primarily comes from within. He represents the part of herself that, once present, is difficult for her to part with for any length of time. As the novel's narrator indicates, "she always liked to have him near to her, and was prone to be terribly homesick when she had to go any distance away" (765). The concept of being lonesome for a part of oneself is something that consistently follows Helga throughout her life as well. This is exemplified not only in her general unhappiness with her surroundings, but also upon her realization in Copenhagen that she's "homesick, not for America, but for Negroes" (418). This is what essentially defines Helga's persistent loneliness. She is constantly without a part of herself, therefore she never feels

complete. Compounding this sense of isolation are the racial viewpoints she encounters in nearly every place she visits. In fact, as Hutchinson points out, “Helga is made to feel in many ways that she does not ‘fit in’” (11). She cannot ever fully embrace or even acknowledge both of her cultures simultaneously due to societal demands. This is evident in her conversations with Anne Grey and James Vayle about the intermingling of the races, as well as in the ways people attempt to mold her to fit their own cultural ideal.

The overpowering isolation that ultimately stifles these women is the result of a choice, not a choice between loneliness and companionship, but a choice of whether to continue their self struggles. Their identities have been shaped and defined by outside influences for so long that they essentially lose any sense of self, fragmented or otherwise. This makes it impossible for them to transcend their crises of identity so they simply conform to an ideal. For Helga this means continuing her life in Alabama. For Amelia this means the relinquishment of her masculinity once Cousin Lymon forces her to submit to Marvin in battle. After this fight the novel’s narrator denotes that “her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy” (p. 779). Amelia cannot function inside this newly acquired female persona any more than Helga can leave her children. Therefore both women remain stagnant and cope with loneliness in their own way. Helga seems to do this by having another child, while Amelia returns to a state of self-imposed isolation.

Although Amelia and Helga face very different struggles, the effects of their struggles are quite similar. They both experience the same kind of loneliness, frustration, and isolation that comes from falling short of an ideal that there is no hope of ever reaching. In many ways *The Ballad of the Sad Café* can be viewed as a frame for *Quicksand* and Helga’s experiences with racial identity because it draws several parallels between racial segregation and the segregation

of self. This is particularly evident at the end of the story in reference to the twelve mortal men who are of different races but are able to achieve harmony within the racially integrated chain gang. This conveys the significance of finding harmony within oneself despite loneliness or isolation facilitated by societal demands or one's own inner struggle. Moreover, this emphasizes that true harmony can only be achieved through one's own personal integration of self.

