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Transportation in Modernist Fiction

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Modernist travel fiction, like non-fiction travel books, incorporated innovations and technologies as they changed the landscape of travel. As travel itself changed, so did the literature that reflected it. Anderson, Faulkner, and Larsen all explore different modes of travel and the effects of that travel on their characters.

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The modernist period of literature, spanning roughly from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, was a direct response to changes in daily life brought about by industrialization. Many changes were due to innovations such as factories and machinery, as well as a significant increase in accessibility to travel via improvements to transportation technology. People flocked to cosmopolitan cities in search of modern job opportunities and were able to move between cities relatively quickly in search of employment. In addition to job prospects, people were also able to travel in search of a sense of home and community. While defining home's connection to travel writing in *Keywords for Travel Writing Studies*, Rune Graulund writes, "One needs to move away from home, presumably, or towards home, in order to engage in travel […] Accordingly, home is often the reason we set out to travel in the first place" (Graulund 117). This sense of belonging and self is the reason why many characters in modernist literature began their travels. In Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio,* William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying,* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, travel signifies a shift concerning modernity. The method of transportation, distance traveled, and destination can help one understand characters' relationships to modernity and how they situate themselves within the modern era.

Industrialization brought with it new and more accessible means of transportation. Railways, automobiles, and steamships increased people's access to travel longer distances in a shorter amount of time. This increased human mobility. In *Keywords for Travel Writing Studies,* Charles Forsdick describes the shift from animal-powered travel to new travel innovations provided by industrialization:

> When first deployed, mechanization was minimal, and travel largely depended on individual human mobility, the harnessing of the elements or power provided by animals […] The introduction of steam and the invention of internal combustion (and then jet) engines revolutionized travel, not least in terms of speed, distance and its wider availability. (Forsdick 266)

Travel became more consistent. Rather than relying on the unpredictability of the weather or access to animals, travel innovations made scheduled traveling easier to incorporate on a daily basis. The wider accessibility of travel led to an increase in regulations regarding travel, particularly international travel. Paul Fussell illustrates how these regulations impacted the travel book genre in *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*:

> The speaker in any travel book exhibits himself as physically more free than the reader…It resembles a poetic ode, an Ode to Freedom. The illusion of freedom is a precious thing in the 20's and 30's, when the shades of the modern prison-house are closing in, when the passports and queues and guided tours and social security numbers and customs regulations and currency controls are beginning gradually to constrict life. (Fussell 203)

Non-fiction travel books increased in popularity as travel became increasingly regulated. While general availability to travel increased, so did the "red tape" associated with it. This created a wider demand for books about travel, so readers could vicariously experience traveling without leaving the comfort of their homes. This also impacted modernist fiction. Modern literature frequently responded to the new innovations and technologies connected to travel, which led to a rise in the popularity of non-fiction travel books and also correlated with an increase in fictional travel books . As more opportunities arose for people to travel, so did opportunities for characters. In *Travel and Modernist Literature: Sacred and Ethical Journeys* Alexandra Peat writes,

> [M]odernist literature is obsessed with depicting space and the movement between spaces, and the consistent recurrence of the trope of travel highlights the critical need to acknowledge modernist travel fiction as a richly varied genre that responds to an important cultural turn. (Peat 3)

Modernist travel fiction, like non-fiction travel books, incorporated innovations and technologies as they changed the landscape of travel. As travel itself changed, so did the literature that reflected it. Anderson, Faulkner, and Larsen all explore different modes of travel and the effects of that travel on their characters.

Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson depicts life in a small Ohio town from many different perspectives. Each of the twenty-two short stories shifts to focus on a different member of the community. However, the novel seems to push George Willard, a young writer for the local newspaper, as its ultimate protagonist. The novel takes place in and around the small town of Winesburg, but the last chapter "Departure" focuses on George beginning his journey by train away from his hometown toward the city. Anderson writes, "His trunk was packed for departure. Since two o'clock he had been awake thinking of the journey he was about to take and wondering what he would find at the end of that journey" (Anderson 151). While we never get to see what the world beyond Winesburg holds for George, we can imagine, as he did the night before he leaves for the city, where his journey might take him. Graulund suggests that travel is interwoven with concepts of home. To travel, one must leave home. However, this is complicated when one is traveling with the intention of not returning: "To travel then, may in fact be to engage in a figurative quest for home, even as one moves away from it in physical terms" (Graulund 117). George's departure from Winesburg begins his quest for a new home. He sets out with the intention of starting his life in the city. The idea that George's life has only now begun, as he leaves his small town behind for the more modern city, reflects George embracing modernity.

This is further emphasized later in the chapter:

> The young man, going out of his town to meet the adventure of life, began to think but he did not think of anything very big or dramatic […] when he aroused himself again and looked out the car window the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood. (Anderson 153)

This solidifies that for George, Winesburg was the beginning or "background," suggesting that it is only through leaving his small town that his life truly starts. He was unable to "meet the adventure of life" until he left. This mirrors concepts of the epic quest or journey where a hero must leave home to accomplish great things. Tiffany Messick relates George's journey to that of the epic hero in "Epic on an American Scale: Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio," writing:

> George Willard serves as Anderson's epic hero who carries forth the hopes of the nation and restores ritual. Others, in their imagination, imbue George with their expectations for the future. Embodying their hopes, George becomes the only individual who can travel forward. Their ambitions are dependent upon him, just as Aeneas bears the hopes of those who perished in Troy and as Odysseus bears the hopes of the Greeks. (Messick 5)

Like Greek epic heroes, George sets out on his journey toward the city with anticipation not only from himself but from other residents of Winesburg who came to see him before his departure. It seems that Anderson ushers George, and subsequently the reader, into modernity, but leaves the rest of the town behind. The specifics of his journey are up for interpretation as the novel ends before George reaches any kind of destination. Winesburg is stuck in the past, at least compared to the modern city George is bound for. The rest of the townspeople, by choice or external circumstances, are unable to leave Winesburg and therefore are unable to embrace modernity the same way George is. George becomes Anderson's figure for modernity, and as the protagonist, George allows the reader to travel with him into the modern era in hopes of a better future.

Instead of leaving the journey towards modernity to the reader's imagination, *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner presents this journey as its central plot. The novel begins with the death of Addie Bundren, wife of Anse and mother to four sons, Jewel, Daryl, Cash, and Vardaman, and a daughter, Dewey Dell. To honor her dying wish, the Bundren family must leave their small Mississippi farm and travel forty miles to bury Addie in her hometown of Jefferson. The Bundrens are poor and their farm is old-fashioned. On the whole, they live a very traditional lifestyle. While a few of the Bundren children have adopted some more modern interests, Anse in particular seems to have a very negative attitude toward modernity. Early in the novel, Anse says about roads:

> ...the Lord put roads for traveling: why He laid them down flat on the earth. When He aims for something to always be a-moving, He makes in long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when He aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man. And so He never aimed for folks to live on a road…He aimed for them to stay put like a tree or a stand of corn. (Faulkner 36)

Anse's distaste for roads directly correlates with his distaste for modernity at this point in the novel. He doesn't want to leave the farm because he thinks people were meant to stay in one place. Anse's promise to Addie to fulfill her request is the only reason he reluctantly sets his family out onto the road. The trip's already considerable length is exacerbated by the fact that the family travels by cart and mule, carrying six people and a rotting corpse. Patrick O'Donnell highlights the nature of the road as a metaphor in "The Spectral Road: Metaphors of Transference in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*." He writes, "The fading, circuitous roads of the novel can be seen as metaphors for the act of metaphor in which meaning is borne or transferred from one point to another, they suggest that the unfolding significance of the journey turns upon itself and falls into question, making the outcome of the journey ironic" (O'Donnell 61-62). As opposed to George Willard of *Winesburg, Ohio*, who willingly and eagerly begins his journey to the city, the Bundrens' reluctance to travel emphasizes their ties to traditional and old-fashioned ways. They set out on this trip out of necessity and obligation to the dead Addie. This makes their journey to and arrival in Jefferson ironic, since they inch closer to Jefferson's modernity with every step, even though they hadn't intended to.

With only a short stretch of their perilous trip left, the Bundrens' wagon is passed by a symbol of modernity: an automobile. Faulkner writes, "A car comes over the hill. It begins to sound the horn, slowing. It runs along the roadside in low gear, the outside wheels in the ditch, and passes us and goes on" (Faulkner 228). The Bundrens are literally, and figuratively, being "passed" by a metonymy of modernity. Their life-threatening forty-mile trip in the wagon is juxtaposed with this faster, easier mode of transportation. After spending over two hundred pages reading about the Bundrens' painstaking trip

in the wagon, the fact that they are passed so quickly by a car, which is the first car reader's have seen in the novel, is almost comical. The reader is so used to the wagon as the standard that it's almost surprising to remember that cars existed in this period. The Bundrens' lack of modernity is reflective of the rate of industrialization in the South compared to the North. In "Southern Modernists and Modernity" from *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South,* David Davis says that "...the United States modernized unevenly, and cities, factories, and innovations were clustered primarily in the Northeast… only one of the nation's twenty largest cities was in the South, New Orleans, and the majority of Southerners were still rural" (Davis 88-89). The Bundrens' traditional lifestyle was not unique among Southerners, as modern innovations and technologies spread more quickly among the Northern states. The wagon reflects their rural way of living while the passing car signifies what could be in store for them in the future.

The Bundrens' eventual arrival in Jefferson results in a shift in their relationship to modernity. While Jefferson isn't a large city, it is comparatively more modern than the Bundren family farm. After burying Addie, Anse gets himself a set of false teeth with Dewey Dell's money and uses them to attract a new wife. He quickly succeeds at this and introduces her to his children as the new "Mrs. Bundren," effectively replacing Addie less than two weeks after her death. The replacement Mrs. Bundren doesn't come empty-handed. Cash narrates:

> And then I see that the grip she was carrying was one of those little graphophones. It was for a fact, all shut up and pretty as a picture, and every time a new record would come from the mail order and us setting the house in the winter, listening to it, I would think what a shame Darl couldn't be to enjoy it too. (Faulkner 261)

Anse's new wife brings with her an object of modernity: the graphophone. This appears to be one of the first modern objects that the Bundren family owns. The new Mrs. Bundren is comparatively more modern than her predecessor and seems to embody modernity. It is only after their trip to Jefferson that the Bundrens, and particularly Anse, can embrace the graphophone, a symbol of modernity. The family seems to accept this change quickly following Anse's lead.

The Bundrens' reluctant and slow trek toward modernity from their rural farm home reflects the South's slower pace of industrialization. While the North had many large cities, factories, and other modern settings and innovations, the South adopted these at a much slower rate as it relied on agriculture as its main economic source and was still recovering from the Civil War. Davis writes,

> *As I Lay Dying* illustrates the inherent contradiction of Southern modernism - the tension between literary experimentation and lagging social provincialism…works of Southern modernism that depict life in rural, agricultural, and traditional regions antagonize modernist mainstream. In Southern modernism, cubism and cotton coexist uneasily. (Davis 88)

Faulkner's choice to center his novel in a rural Mississippi county instead of a large cosmopolitan city challenges typical modernist tropes. The Bundrens only begin integrating modernity into their lives at the novel's end, and take a forty-mile trip by wagon to get there. Faulkner uses their travels to mirror the psychological journey the Bundrens take in order to finally embrace modernity and reflects the South's overall slower rate of adopting modernity.

While Anderson and Faulkner both use travel to denote modernity linearly, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* challenges our understanding of travel in relation to modernity. *Quicksand* follows Helga Crane, a mixed-race Black woman who struggles to find her place in the world. At the start of the novel, Helga is a teacher at an all-Black school but is deeply unsatisfied. She quits her job and moves from Naxos to her childhood city, Chicago, where she is rejected by her White uncle and his family. She then gets a job and moves to New York City, where she discovers the Black community in Harlem. While Helga is content for a little over a year, she soon begins to detest her surroundings and once again longs for a sense of belonging somewhere. Helga's uncle writes her a letter encouraging Helga to

visit her Aunt Katrina in Copenhagen, Denmark. He leaves Helga a significant amount of money and then cuts all ties with her. Helga takes his advice and uses the money to travel from New York City to Denmark by boat, hoping to leave the racism and racial politics of America behind. Helga is embraced by her White Danish family and is paraded around the all-White community as an "exotic" wonder. Helga is happy once again, but it is fleeting; eventually, discontent creeps back into her life. She begins to miss the Black community in Harlem and finds the Danish locals' ogling less charming than when she first arrived. After returning to America for what was supposed to be a brief visit for a wedding, Helga does not make plans to return to Denmark. As Helga contemplates her sense of belonging, Larsen writes:

> This knowledge, this certainty of the division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive. It was, too, as she was uncomfortably aware, even a trifle ridiculous, and mentally she caricatured herself moving shuttle-like from continent to continent. From the prejudice restrictions of the New World to the easy formality of the Old, from the pale calm of Copenhagen to the colorful lure of Harlem. (Larsen 98)

Helga's sense of belonging is intimately tied to location and travel. She longs for connection with the Black community but simultaneously desires freedom from the violent racism of the United States. Despite having the resources to travel, Helga cannot settle in one place. She is trapped in a never-ending search for home and belonging, mirroring her struggles as a mixed-race person living between two cultures. In "Essence and the Mulatto Traveler: Europe as Embodiment in Nella Larsen's 'Quicksand,'" Jeffery Gray notes, "European exoticism was preferable to American racism, but the ground of selfhood she looked for could no more be found in Europe than anywhere else" (Gray 268). Helga's identity as a mixed-race Black woman makes it impossible for Helga to feel completely "at home" or satisfied anywhere, as she faces oppression and discrimination in different forms everywhere she goes. Helga longs to have community but struggles throughout the novel to sustain it long-term, whether that's with the Black community in Harlem or her family in Denmark. Despite having the time and resources to travel extensively, Helga cannot seem to find her place in the modern world.

Helga's quest for home and belonging doesn't end when she returns to Harlem. Instead, she feels more isolated, eventually sparking her to seek out a sense of belonging through religion. Helga converts to Christianity, marries Mr. Reverend Green, and moves into his home in a small Christian town in Alabama. Similar to her initial feelings of satisfaction upon her arrival in Harlem and Copenhagen, Helga feels as though she finally found her place. Larsen writes,

> Helga did not hate him, the town, or the people. No. Not for a long time. As always, at first, the novelty of the thing, the change, fascinated her. There was a recurrence of the feeling that now, at last, she had found a place for herself, that she was really living. (Larsen 119)

Helga's travels bring her an initial sense of truly beginning her life, similar to George's feelings about his life starting upon his departure from Winesburg.

However, this feeling never lasts long for Helga. Slowly, she begins to resent her life in Alabama, particularly after she has children. Helga works tirelessly as a housewife and mother with no reprieve. She becomes disillusioned with religion and dislikes the rural small-town environment, all while growing more weary. Helga begins to fantasize about escaping her life in Alabama. However, her love for her children makes it difficult for Helga to truly commit to leaving. Of Helga's children, Larsen writes,

> No. She couldn't desert them. How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become? [...] It was so easy and so pleasant to think about freedom and cities, about clothes

> and books […] It was so hard to think out a feasible way of retrieving all these agreeable, desired things. Just then. Later. (Larsen 136)

Instead of moving forward toward modernity, Helga actually moves backward. For most of the novel, Helga has the freedom and resources to travel. Suddenly, her marriage to Reverend Green and subsequent children take that freedom away. Helga trades her life in the modern big city for a tiny rural community in the South and is unable to escape. Gray points to the significance of this shift:

> The transformation of Helga from strong, independent, and charismatic world-traveler to born-again, rural, baby-making drudge is abrupt if not incredible. I would suggest a reading of this ending as an undoing, as both de-aestheticization and disembodiment. The "New World" itself has often been viewed as an undoing of the constructions of Europe, rather than a construction in itself. Helga, then, as she moves from Europe to America, is stripped of the embodiments which had constituted her in Denmark, and is left, on American soil, with (what she sees as) the bottom line of the physical, which she had spent her adult life rejecting. (Gray 267)

While Helga's travels continually reflect her search for herself and belonging, Gray suggests that Helga completely loses her sense of self in Alabama. In Harlem and Copenhagen, Helga's sense of identity is shaped by her surroundings as she adapts to and situates herself within them. However, she is completely stripped of her identity in Alabama and is merely reduced to the physical and emotional labor she can provide as a housewife and a mother. In this way, Helga moves backward away from modernity, both in the literal sense of the small rural town she is trapped in and figuratively as she trades her previous freedom for the strict, gendered role of housewife. In *Race and Displacement: Nation, Migration, and Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, Debora Katz notes, "Whereas previously, her transatlantic movement allows her to escape the bodies of black communities, now her body reinforces the permanence of her imprisonment in this black rural town. Ultimately, Helga's transatlantic crossings do not save her from a devastating fate" (Katz 53-54). Although Helga's access to and frequency of travel far surpasses George Willard or the Bundren family, Helga's continued dissatisfaction with her life ultimately leads her to lose that access.

Larsen complicates the relationship between modernity and travel by showing us a character who is never satisfied. Instead of traveling toward modernity, Helga moves away from it. She cannot find her community despite constantly searching for it, even across oceans. Helga, unlike George Willard or the Bundren family, does not end her story with hope or excitement for the future. The novel ends by stating that Helga had her fifth child, suggesting that there is no feasible way out of this situation for her and that this cycle will only continue. Larsen emphasizes the impact being mixed-race has on Helga in relation to her sense of self and home. Had Helga not struggled to find her place within and in between the White and Black communities, perhaps she wouldn't have committed so rashly to Reverend Green, thereby avoiding her subjugation in Alabama. While Helga's initial access to travel theoretically should allow her to truly find her place, as she can go anywhere, ultimately this access doesn't prevent Helga from making some poor decisions. Larsen highlights that even those who seem the most modern and well-traveled can end up stuck in a rural, traditional lifestyle.

Anderson, Faulkner, and Larsen all incorporate travel into their modernist novels. The place of departure, arrival, mode of transportation, and general access to travel can illuminate our understanding of character's relationships to modernity. George embraces the cosmopolitan city at the end of *Winesburg, Ohio,* and correlates modernity with hope and excitement for a better future. The Bundren family take a slow, reluctant, and dangerous journey to Jefferson but are finally able to accept a sliver of modernity by the end of *As I Lay Dying*. Both of these works connect travel directly with modernity and progress. However, Helga Crane's worldwide travel in search of self and belonging in *Quicksand* eventually leads her to become trapped in a rural, Southern town – an antithesis of modernity. Her access to travel is stripped away through marriage and children as she ultimately journeys away from modernity and is unable to escape. Larsen highlights the complicated experience Helga has in finding

her sense of self due to her racial identity, and this affects the decisions she makes which trap her by the end of the novel. Larsen, unlike Anderson and Faulkner who both focus on White characters, illuminates the complexity of identity and self and its connection to race, subsequently changing an otherwise linear path toward modernity. Ultimately, all three authors use travel to signify changes in their characters and their relationship to the modern era, allowing readers to consider their own place within this ever-changing world.

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