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"To Want and Not To Have": Gender in Modernist Writing

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In their novels To The Lighthouse and Quicksand, Virginia Woolf and Nella Larsen effectively use the narrative arcs of their characters and the language of their descriptions to suggest that changes in gender roles are incomplete and held back by traditional language and worldviews.

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Modernist literature is often defined by both a focus on modern topics, such as technological advances, changing views on gender roles, or the travel which was beginning to define "modern" life, and by experimental writing tactics, such as stream of consciousness narration and rapid movement through time. There is also typically some criticism of traditional ways of life. Authors like Virginia Woolf are well-known for their experimental writing and their social commentary. However, Woolf's social commentary in *To the Lighthouse*, focused as it was on white women in England, was not able to fully encompass the changing expectations on and views of women in the twentieth century. Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* seems to give a fuller picture in that regard, traversing physical and social spaces in a way that Woolf does not. The commonalities and differences between the two authors' approaches to gender can inform a reader of how modernist literature critiqued the modern era.

Both Woolf and Larsen draw out significant points of change and difference across their novels, Woolf in time and Larsen in space, inviting the reader to make comparisons as they leave one section of the novel and enter into another. The most obvious example of this difference in Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* is the death of Mrs. Ramsay in the "Time Passes" section, made more striking by the way that she dominates the narrative in "The Window" section of the novel. Mrs. Ramsay is the center of her household, and she represents a variety of ideals to both her family and their guests. In one example, as the two sit together, Mr Ramsay narrates that "he liked to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all. He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought. She was astonishingly beautiful" (Woolf 264). Mr. Ramsay thinks of Mrs. Ramsay's beauty and stupidity as being linked, and views both as positive traits in a wife. In fact, the progression of sentences here suggests that her lack of cleverness or understanding makes her more beautiful. As a character, Mrs. Ramsay represents a wider stereotype of the "correct" kind of Victorian woman, one who is ignorant in "male" subjects such as academia and proficient in feminine subjects, which are largely centered around her beauty. Despite any unhappiness in her life, she presents as the ideal woman up to the moment of her death.

However, despite dying, this character remains present in the minds of others, especially Lily Briscoe. In "The Window" section of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay's name appears most frequently in Lily Briscoe's consciousness, especially as Briscoe struggles to paint what she observes in front of her and turns towards her past memories of the spaces she travels in order to find inspiration. Reflecting on the time when Mrs. Ramsay wished for her to get married, she reflects that "She had felt, now she could stand up to Mrs. Ramsay – a tribute to the astonishing power that Mrs. Ramsay had over one. Do this, she said, and one did it" (Woolf 262). Despite the fondness that Briscoe expresses for Mrs. Ramsay in other places, the language Lily uses here suggests a view of the older woman that is more authoritarian. As Briscoe states she finally feels able to "stand up to Mrs. Ramsay" many years after her death, she clearly felt stifled by her in life. However, she

refers to her power as "astonishing," suggesting that, no matter how begrudgingly, Briscoe is impressed by the force of Mrs. Ramsay's personality and the power she was able to wield through it. Mark Gaipa puts forward the idea that "Mrs. Ramsay's death leaves Lily unprotected before Mr. Ramsay, who she must confront herself in 'The Lighthouse'" (Gaipa 13). Mrs. Ramsay is a traditional woman in that she does not even attempt to enter in spaces that are barred to her; however, she wields significant power in her household, both in her presence while she is alive and in her memory while she is dead. Unlike in the case of *As I Lay Dying*'s Mrs. Bundren, there is no replacement for Mrs. Ramsay when she dies, suggesting that there is a real loss when moving into modern gender roles, despite the gains that are made.

Quicksand's Helga Crane might further represent that absence, as she spends most of the novel without the husband and children that define Mrs. Ramsay, while also lacking a sense of place, purpose, or power in her life. Helga spends much of the novel slowly becoming dissatisfied with a place and then leaving it, which is largely the reason the book is so geographically diverse. Significantly, there is only one location where Helga ever returns: Harlem. Readers are aware that Helga is not typically well-liked; she possesses "an arrogance that stirred in people a particular irritation. They noticed her, admired her clothes, but that was all, for the self-sufficient uninterested manner adopted instinctively as a protective measure for her acute sensitiveness, in her child days, still clung to her" (Larsen 74). Helga is self-isolating, fervently intelligent, and frequently becomes irritated with even those who she thinks of as friends. These are all fair reasons for her to be somewhat unpopular. However, when she returns to Harlem from Copenhagen, she is described as "more than ever popular at parties. Her courageous clothes attracted attention, and her deliberate lure – as Olsen had called it – held it. Her life in Copenhagen had taught her to expect and accept admiration as her due" (Larsen 218). This is a dramatic change in others' view on her, but having read from Helga's perspective, it is clear that she remains largely unchanged as a character, except with perhaps a greater recognition of her desire to be around people of her own race. Her grace, love for clothes, and skill in conversation are consistent but the way she is received changes. It could suggest a reverse of the exotificiation she faced in Denmark; some of her personal foibles are excused because she has been to Europe and therefore gained people's interest.

On a less character-focused level, however, this change in how Helga is received could reflect a change that took place over a larger period of time during this period in the role of women. Helga's "courageous clothes" and "deliberate lure" are seen as assets rather than as things that should carry shame. The focus here on the words "courageous" and "deliberate" suggests a change from the ideals associated with a Mrs. Ramsay or a Victorian, who is purposefully passive and demure regardless of her feelings in order to maintain her role and what she sees as a functioning household. The "courage" of Helga's clothing here is also interesting because of the ways that, when she originally tries to wear her old clothes in Denmark, she views them as "too *outre*" (Larsen 150). Overall, these language choices to describe Helga might lend credence to the idea that discourse was changing to assert that a sharp and intelligent woman had some value that was, if not equal to that of a more demure wife and mother, at least present.

Lily Briscoe's fate also illustrates a significant change, with the results of her painting in "The Window" being entirely different from her results in "The Lighthouse." As she works, Mr. Tansley's phrase enters her mind:

> Can't paint, can't write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack should be. For the mass loomed before her; it protruded; she felt it pressing on her eyeballs. Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither. (Woolf 237)

She recalls the phrase that held her back at the beginning of the novel when it was said to her. Then, however, she seems seized by a kind of creative power, or leaves behind the sense of perfectionism that plagues her up to this point. Lily loses her self-doubt to some degree, or at least recognizes that she has the capability to work through it. This ability to overcome might be a change in just the character or a change in women in general. However, it could also be because of the change in art. In the realist art favored in the nineteenth century, Briscoe's precarious, spontaneous art would not have been recognized as artistically serious. As the new art forms of Cubism, Dadaism, and even Impressionism became more recognized, that art was moved into the category of "real" art. In addition, this shift in art form might imply an opening of the art world to

women, since formal training that was largely barred to them was no longer as much of a prerequisite for success.

Focusing specifically on the language referencing art here invites the reader to more closely investigate the ways in which Larsen and Woolf use language, especially in their descriptions, and how their diction illustrates more continuity between the traditional and modern ways of speaking about gender than change. When Helga has her experience in the church, one woman sees her revealing dress and cries out, "A scarlet 'oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los' Jezebel!" (Larsen 251). This phrase contains two allusions, one to *The Scarlet Letter* and one to the biblical figure of Jezebel. Both these allusions are very old but contain power, as demonstrated by the fact that this woman says them out loud and it sends the crowd into raptures. These original texts both continue a tradition of holding up "whores" as examples of what women should not be, and this tradition clearly has not disappeared, even in the supposedly more educated, enlightened context of the North. The two references are also to deeply religious texts, which suggests that religion is a deeply ingrained part of the entrenchment of certain traditional gender roles.

However, Larsen also demonstrates how non-religious, well-educated, and well-meaning people can uphold these same gender roles through Dr. Anderson's word choice as he attempts to convince Helga to stay at Naxos. According to Larsen, as Anderson attempts to explain what quality of Helga's is so ideal to him, he suggests that he "can best explain it by the use of that trite phrase, 'You're a lady.' You have dignity and breeding," a phrasing which sends Helga into a rage and drives her to reject him (Larsen 46). The words "trite" and "breeding" both seem significant in that character reaction, and lead the reader to certain conclusions regarding Larsen's thoughts on the implications of the word "lady." Lady is often used to convey a sense of respect, but that respect is deeply tied to successful performance of a certain kind of gender role. The use of the word "breeding" here suggests that there is a certain level of "goodness" or "ladylikeness" which one is born with. However, it is also a reference to the reproductive acts which are a woman's duty once she becomes a wife and mother, which is the inevitable fate of a proper lady. Using the word "trite" here implies a certain level of disdain for this concept of ladyhood and all its accompanying implications. Even so, the fact that the word is used as a justification to continue using the phrase without any further criticism suggests that labeling something as old-fashioned while saying it is not enough to erase its problematic implications. Mary Esteve suggests that there are several moments in the novel wherein "without wanting to deny or pass out of her race, her 'sudden attack[s] of nerves' indicate that she wills to pass out of its-and her-current (self-)consciousness, which suppresses 'enthusiasm' and 'spontaneity'" (Esteve 275). Here, Esteve is interested in Helga's relationship with her own race, suggesting the character believes that "African American consciousness" has been "reduced as she sees it become to a political conscience of race work" (Esteve 275). However, the rage Helga has at being described as a lady suggests that she is also pushing against the boundaries imposed on her consciousness as a woman, trying and eventually failing to escape the rhetorical and material confines of gender.

In addition to diction and some of the specific character choices in the novels, the choice in endings for Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, and Helga Crane gives greater insight into the authors' intended commentary on change in gender roles. Although there is a deep nostalgia and love for Mrs. Ramsay in the novel after her death, her last living moments as a narrator are moments of failure, which she interprets as success. Deciding not to tell Mr. Ramsay she loves him, despite sensing that he wants her to, she instead says "'Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go.' And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew" (Woolf 186). Mrs. Ramsay succeeds here according to her own standards; she maintains the boundaries that she wants and is still able to assure the happiness of others. That "smiling" and "triumph" are connected so deeply here suggests that a traditional woman's view of success is limited by the gender roles she has been forced into. While the rest of the novel will sustain a deep nostalgia for her presence, Mrs. Ramsay's ultimate failure to grant her son a trip to the lighthouse at the end of her living narrative complicates what that nostalgia is intended to imply.

This deglamorization is taken to its extreme in *Quicksand*, as Helga ends the narrative alive but with her spirit broken as her children are returned to her. After having spent the previous pages daydreaming about how she will escape from her life in Alabama when she gets well, the last paragraph of *Quicksand* reads "and hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child" (Larsen 302). The

paragraph is essentially one extensive sentence which hides its most impactful clause at the end. The sentence also completely excises any of Helga's internal thoughts; in a world where she is forced into the traditional role of the mother, she is denied the right to tell her own story. While some might see this as a too-rapid transition, Deborah Katz argues that "her focus on the sin of exposing a child to physical injury foregrounds the language of religion and the physical pressure that will convert her to black, Christian motherhood" (Katz 51). Even when Helga is performing as a modern woman, the language of tradition which permeates her worldview will eventually lead her to the ending of the novel.

Larsen and Woolf effectively use the narrative arcs of their characters and the language of their descriptions to suggest that changes in gender roles are incomplete and held back by traditional language and worldviews, even subconsciously. One could look for this conflict in other modernist literature, especially in novels written by men, and see if this complexity of thought around this topic applies. For example, one could question if William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* falls into a stereotypical view of modern life by having women's lives centered in the home, or if it simply reflects the realities of the world Faulkner was living in. Approaching the language he uses and the relative centrality of his female characters might give greater insight into these questions.

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