

The word 'influence' then has changed: Modernity's Lost Female Voices

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Chapter I

Preface

This project hopes to name the patriarchal forces that influence what works and authors are included in the canon of Modernism. While some authors are deemed ‘worthy’ because of things that lie mostly outside of their control—ethnicity, heritage, education—others are deemed ‘unworthy’ based on the same criteria. Women writers in particular are often marginalized into oblivion and forced to work against myriad forces rather than being allowed the indulgence of simply working. However, these forces seem to allow modern women writers in particular to push against the boundaries of institutions in order to create. Their artistic works are sometimes unsuccessful, sometimes brilliant, sometimes misunderstood, and nearly always experimental. This thesis project hopes to chart the efforts made by four modern women writers in order to better understand their experiences.

Chapter II

Who is Modern?

Developing a working definition of Modernism is a task that many scholars find daunting. Modernists lived within a whirlwind of changes during the first half of the 20th century, and the dramatic social, racial, political, and psychological shifts of 1890-1950 served as breeding grounds for one of the most prolific periods of artistic production. One of the major problems in defining Modernism stems from the differences in opinion concerning the major figures of the movement. Modernist scholars tend to fall into three major categories based on their preferences, or at least on what they consider to be “true” Modernism. The first camp focuses on the actions within institutions, and typically describes Modernism as being brought about through the efforts of a few brilliant male artists. Writers like Ezra Pound and visual artists such as Man Ray would fall into this first patriarchal camp. When women are mentioned in this group, they are most often seen through an anti-feminist lens; they are courtesans and some are ‘honorary men,’ but none are given credit for creating Modernism. The second camp does discuss female Modernists, but only in reference to their male counterparts. This group is somewhat limited by its attention to gender because it represents women’s writing as an act of mimicking men’s writing. It discredits women who wrote during this time period because it looks at their work as though it has nothing unique to offer. The importance of a female representation of modernity is underestimated by this second group, which contains figures such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Picasso. The third group, however, attempts to define Modernism as a movement made in terms of other social groups and movements. This last camp provides the clearest and most inclusive definition of artistic

creation because it strives to see through the boundaries of race, gender, and class. However, in doing so, new boundaries and new margins come into existence. William Faulkner, Langston Hughes, and e. e. cummings are members of this third camp. The distinctions between these three camps groups are important to note in any study of Modernism, and particular in a study of female Modernists. Modernist women writers are often marginalized into oblivion by historians, scholars, and the canon. The classifications that these women are filed into do not accurately reflect the experiences of modernization or the experiences of an entire gender. By comparing the beliefs of these groups of scholars, a more thorough understanding of the movement and of its key players can be developed. As Modernism begins to take more definite shape, it becomes glaringly obvious that women are often unmentioned or too marginalized in relation to their modern efforts.

Before embarking upon discussion of the women who comprise the subjects of this study, it is crucial to discuss a few texts that contribute to my understanding of women's struggles with gender and race. In particular, Audre Lorde's "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," and Gloria Anzaldua's "Borderlands/La Frontera." Though both of these articles became pivotal texts decades after Modernism's golden age ended, they are considered pivotal texts within race-based and gender studies. In "Borderlands," Anzaldua discusses the precarious roles that women—particularly women who experience the pressures of cultural expectations—inhabit within societies. She calls this marginalized space "the borderland" between identities. For the author, that space is created on the borders of the Catholic religion, a rich Mexican-American heritage, the shame of Indian heritage, and her own homosexuality. In order to cope with

these conflicting identities, she says she must, “leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me” (Anzaldua 1017). She also explores the ways in which, “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to use through culture. Culture is made by those in power—men” (1018). This view of society as a patriarchal force to be dealt with is nothing new; what is innovative within Anzaldua’s work is her discussion of how women combat these stifling pressures. She states that as individuals within a marginalized or oppressed group begin seeing signs that their experiences are meaningful instead of meaningless, they gain “glimpses of what we might eventually become” and attain a sense of community. Despite these encouraging insights, “the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality still. One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration can take place” (1028). Lorde’s essay examines the boundaries that institutions and societies place upon people and the fact that these constraints create “a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future” (Lorde 854). Instead of forming communities, individuals within societies contribute to further marginalization and depletion of resources. Lorde suggests that,

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. (855)

These differences should not create the distances that divide reality from our perceptions, but they do. Lorde attributes some of societies social conflicts to the fact that the resources needed to produce art are given most bountifully to those who determine the worth of art—men. She writes, “When we speak of a broadly based women’s culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art” (855). Additionally, members of any society need to consider the artist and the individual obstacles that stand between the artist and the art’s creation and reception.

Both Anzaldua and Lorde encourage their fellow scholars and critics to engage with the artist and the artistic production by developing a relationship that exists outside of the boundaries of the patriarchy. Instead of viewing one another as foreign countries, individuals must recognize that the female experience for nearly all women is founded upon some key unwavering similarities. First, all women artists work with the resources that are within their reach. For some, this consists of printing presses and constant intellectual stimulation. For others, the creation process becomes a constant struggle between soul-searching and self-rejection. For all modern women writers, though, there is fear of rejection and of misconception. All modern women writers inhabited the borderlands between patriarchal subject and anarchist; woman manly and man womanly; sexually submissive and sexually liberated; traditional and modern. Rather than dividing up their works on the bases of class, color, and politics, it is crucial to recognize that the art produced amidst one of history’s most tumultuous periods truly impacts the ways in which all succeeding women artists think, obey, subvert, and create.

This literature review's first goal is to create a clearer definition of women's roles within modernity. Because so few women are key figures within critical studies of American, British, and Irish Modernism, utilizing the few canonized female figures as models of critical awareness, impact, and influence is crucial. Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, two of the most frequently analyzed modern women, provide basis for this study. By turning to the copious amounts of analysis done on each woman respectively, a deeper understanding of modern women writers can come forth. Additionally, developing an understanding of how two modern women succeeded in reaching literary greatness helps to combat prejudices within analyses and readings that ignore the female influence. Acknowledging the influences of these women helps fashion anew a more cohesive and complete vision of women writers of the early twentieth century. Like their male counterparts, the women writers of modernity are as diverse and multi-faceted as their influences, backgrounds, and the words they used to create their art. Once a foundation for this study of modern women writers is developed, women's influences upon modernity and upon one another can receive the credit and attention that they deserve.

Tradition of Patriarchy

The first camp of modernist scholarship, which I call the Tradition of Patriarchy, stands on the shoulders of Victorian patriarchal practices. In his essay "Virginia Woolf and modernism," Michael Whitworth helps define this first camp:

There is another significant tension between the terms 'modernism' and 'modernity'. The relationship between the two terms has conventionally been seen as antagonistic: though modernist writing is dominated by the experience of the metropolis, of technological innovation and the accelerated pace of modern

life, it satirizes and rejects the phenomena of ‘bourgeois’ modernity in favor of ‘tradition’, primitivism, and myth. (Whitworth 147)

This more patriarchal camp suggests that the traditions adhered to were ones established by great male minds of previous generations. As Jesse Matz points out in *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*, Modernism’s tradition begins with “pivotal statements of literary doctrine” (Matz 13). Matz writes that tradition “makes its first relevant appearance in Walter Pater’s Preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), which made the effort to ‘know one’s impression as it really is’ the key” (13). These impressions, though, are based on Pater’s writing and also on the work of Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and Joseph Conrad. These early works are continuously cited as the beginnings of Modernism. However, these authors could not keep pace with what younger modernists were producing. Despite their literary reputations, Victorians and early modernists needed to break through patriarchal barriers in order to create something truly original. Michael Levenson writes “The circle of [Modernism’s] initiates was closed not only against the unwashed public, but also against rival artists who were excluded from the emerging narrative of Modernism triumphant” (Levenson 2). As Julia Briggs explores in her article on Virginia Woolf’s “Novels of the 1930s,” Woolf, a daughter of this late Victorian, pre-Modern tradition,

...had shown her impatience with a particular kind of history, history as the ‘lives of great men’, of heroes and hero-worship: it was part of an imaginary quarrel that she had with her father about the *Dictionary of National Biography*, with its emphasis on the lives of men of action, and its indifference to the lives of the obscure and on women.” (Briggs 78).

And Woolf was correct in this assumption. As a subject, women were treated as predictable and simplistic. An essay by Leonard Woolf attributed most of these problems

to modernity's preceding generation. Leonard Woolf "showed how Thomas Carlyle's writings on hero-worship had provided 'the "philosophy" of dictatorship, "strong" government, and violence"' (79). These patriarchal traditions eliminate women from having agency and treat them not as actors in the Modernist movement, but as an impotent audience. Susan Watkins' book, *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*, discusses the role that the novel played in perpetuating the patriarchal tradition. Watkins writes,

From its inception to the present day, the novel has been a feminized genre in terms of readership, authorship, content and narrative structure. The appearance of the novel as a distinctive and recognizable literary genre in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries accompanied an increase in literacy (especially among women), and the rise of middle-class ideologies such as separate spheres for women and men and women's confinement in the home. . . . It required no special education in the classics to write a novel, unlike poetry. The traditional account of 'the rise of the novel' in the eighteenth century therefore links it to the gradual imposition of realism as normative. It emphasizes those male novelists, such as Fielding, Richardson, and Defoe, who shaped the genre in this way" (Watkins 2).

This male-dominated, traditional sense of modernity exists even in scholarship on important female modern writers. In the *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, the first chapter is titled, "Bloomsbury," and states of the group of men who comprised the Bloomsbury group, "their scholarship is unequalled," and that it is important to understand these men and their studies with G. E. Moore, "especially in so far as it concerns Virginia Woolf" (McNeillie 5). The fact that a study of one of the most prolific Modern writers—male or female—begins by discussing her lack of education in comparison to the company she kept is interesting. Given all of these factors, it becomes evident that tradition prevents women from being recognized as important literary figures. This becomes even more problematic when discussions of modernist poetry become wholly about male poets. In James Longenbach's, "Modern Poetry," the

discussion focuses on the work of Pound, Yeats, Eliot, Williams, and Auden.

Longenbach even discusses the “feminist aesthetics” of Pound and the necessity for him to represent female voice until “women decided to become more active” (Longenbach 98). The discussion does not go on to highlight the impact of Mina Loy, H. D., or even later female poets. It simply stops.

This selective memory also appears in David Trotter’s “The modernist novel,” an essay plagued by misogynistic assumptions. The belief that women were ‘inactive’ in Modernism’s creative deluge is appalling. Even if scholars did not consider women active in the creation of Modern art, why are they completely excluded from modernity’s social and political changes? The historical landmarks of Women’s Suffrage that occurred during the 1910s and 1920s, at least logically, should play just as much of a role in Modernity as pre- and post-war male narratives. However, many critics fail to see the similarities of these psychological, social shifts. Gender prevents them from accurately defining modernity.

The Tradition of Patriarchy camp focuses too narrowly upon the “men of 1914” and “modern masters” (Levenson 2). The representations of femininity that are discussed within this camp are created and governed entirely by men. While it is important to recognize the influence of this tradition on the subject matter, production, and tone of Modernist writing, it is not completely representative of *why* modern women wrote. The limitations of women’s education infuriated female writers, most notably Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein. Woolf was notoriously bad at math, and Stein, although admitted to medical school, performed poorly and dropped out. While the patriarchy attempted to confine women to the home, it also eliminated women from full participation in any

critical or scholarly discussion. However, without these limiting forces, many Modern women may not have had the drive and determination to write. Instead of looking at male Modernists as the emblems of the movement, perhaps we should consider them as companions to Modernist women writers. While some of the men adhered to previous traditions, others encouraged female writers—even when they misread them. There are uncomfortable implications in a study of modernity's literary voices. Sara Blair has stated that,

Anglo-American Modernism has been both celebrated and derided...but to complicate matters even more, we find the makers of Modernism spread all over the political map of twentieth-century Western Europe, England, and America: running with Reds; making political broadcasts for Mussolini; militating against the Ku Klux Klan; arguing for free speech and free love as well as free verse. (Blair 157)

Despite the fact that Blair's analysis of the modern is conscious of the wide-ranging social implications and influences upon modernity, it does not handle the particular matter of gender. But women were taking part in these conversations and diverging opinions and often found themselves carried away on waves that they did not particularly agree with. Others completely agreed with the patriarchy's treatment of other oppressed groups so long as upper or middle-class white women (or "honorary men") found audiences. Many critics who belong to this first camp choose to disregard either the need for a more inclusive racial or gendered canon, which is an issue that this paper hopes to address.

Women Writing to Women

The second camp is the Women Writing to Women camp. Many scholars find it easiest to first discuss modern women writers as reactionary. These scholars attribute the

creation of art to a somewhat violent reaction against the Tradition of Patriarchy. For example, Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* begins by creating a distinction between artists and women artists. She writes, "The question that predicates this inquiry is not 'What was it like to be a part of literary Paris?'—a question compulsively asked by both the participants and the analysts of this period—but rather 'What was it like to be a woman in literary Paris?'" (Benstock 3). Benstock's collection discusses the female participants within one of Modernism's most famous social and literary circles. However, the women are insulated from many of the things happening around them. Their struggles seem independent of one another and despite the friendships and influential relationships that Benstock alludes to, it seems that the only traceable influences were those that developed into homosexual relationships. Laura Marcus', "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf," discusses Woolf as a key representative of first-wave feminism.

Marcus states,

Her work has been used as key evidence and example in the most significant and recurrent feminist debates; 'realist' versus 'modernist' writing as the most effective vehicle for a feminist politics; the existence of a specific female literacy tradition and of a woman's language; the place of feminist 'anger' or radicalism; the feminist uses of androgyny as a concept... (Marcus 210)

Similar sentiments are echoed in Naomi Black's, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, in which Woolf is discussed as a hesitant feminist. As Black points out, "'Living differently' is how Woolf described her feminist goals" (Black 1). Black also discusses that,

The nature of Woolf's feminism is crucial to assessment of her writing, especially in *Three Guineas*. Many women thought, when they became women's movement activists, that the case they had to make—what had persuaded them—was, simply, obvious. Once understood, it would be accepted by everyone. However, most feminists in North America did not make the arguments that Woolf did. (7)

The differentiation that Black points out between European and Anglo-American Modernists creates yet another fracture in the definition and understanding of Modernism. However, other critics find the experiences and writings of different nationalities important in overall readings of Modernism. One major figure that helps to exemplify these differences is Gertrude Stein, who is often the only female Modernist other than Woolf who is given any critical attention. In *Gertrude Stein's Theatre of the Absolute*, Betsy Alayne Ryan claims that Stein's writing is a response to the same "profound cultural" changes experienced by Woolf and other female artists. Stein's artistic endeavors focused on "a new concept of time which came closer to a concept of space, a devaluation of language as it is traditionally used" (Ryan 1). Ryan then states that Stein's "concepts of time and entity, for example, preclude the use of language for anything other than exploration of the moment" (1). It becomes clear, when these writers are held side-by-side, that the experiences faced by individuals could be part of something larger. Each woman found voice by forcibly removing the patriarchy's stronghold, and writing as women on the brink of change.

Suzanne Raitt discusses the concept of creating the feminine voice in "Finding a voice: Virginia Woolf's early novels." Raitt writes,

'Voice', for feminist criticism such as this, signifies the immediacy of a woman's experience and her authority...but far from endorsing the project of expressing 'an authentic woman's voice,' Woolf's early work actually undermines the idea that voice, identity and body can be seen to express and coincide with one another in any straightforward and seamless way. It could even be said that her early work undermines many of the basic assumptions on which much feminist appreciation of her writing is based...even live voices do not uncomplicatedly locate a self." (Raitt 30)

Based on Raitt's claims, *Women Writing to Women* cannot be lumped into a category of "feminists," because the politics surrounding the pivotal figures of Modernist feminism are themselves unsure of what being female really means, and how to represent it accurately. Stein struggled with this, and sought to breakdown language at its most basic level in an attempt to refashion identity; Woolf gradually gained enough confidence and control of her writing to break down similar institutions. It becomes obvious that there are certain aspects of the literature that suggest that double-vision is necessary. Women were not just writing to women, but were writing to a carefully considered audience. And, whatever happened in the latter halves of their writing lives, these women began writing while they were participating in wider conversations. When we approach women Modernist authors as members of these larger, more influential transatlantic conversations, it becomes evident that something truly phenomenal was happening.

Transatlantic Societies

One way that the representation of women in writing complicates the Tradition of Patriarchy camp *and* the *Women Writing to Women* camp is that during Modernity, women experienced the same breakdown of boundaries that their male counterparts did. Marianne Dekoven's essay, "Modernism and gender," summarizes the vast amounts of critical work that fall into the first two camps by stating,

Despite the powerful presence of women writers at the founding of Modernism and throughout its history, and despite the near-obsessive preoccupation with femininity in all modernist writing, the reactive misogyny so apparent in much male-authored Modernism continues in many quarters to produce a sense of Modernism as a masculinist movement. Instances of modernist advocacy of firm, hard, dry, terse, classical masculinity, over against the messy, soft, vague, flowery, effusive, adjectival femininity of the late Victorians, abound" (Dekoven 176).

Dekoven's work accurately suggests that another avenue must be taken in examining Modernist women writers. An interesting and undervalued route to this breakdown of institutions can be seen among the American writers who played roles in the Harlem Renaissance. Nathan Irvin Huggins' *Harlem Renaissance* discusses many influential male writers, but also delves into Nella Larsen's irrefutable contributions to the movement. Huggins writes, "So the postwar years found traditional values in disarray. A very articulate and sophisticated segment of the white society appeared ready to stand everything on its head...Nella Larsen, native to the Virgin Islands and of African-Danish ancestry, explored through her novels the uncompromising dilemma of a cultured-primitive Negro" (Huggins 157). Huggins does not ground his study of the Harlem Renaissance in anything but the "Black Metropolis" of Harlem, and the progressive nature of the Talented Tenth (4). A vision of Larsen—and all Harlem Renaissance writers, for that matter—as incredibly modern becomes clearer when descriptions of Larsen are paired with well-established descriptions of Modernism. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's definition in particular provides a profound comparison:

Modernism is the supreme modern expression...Modernism is, clearly, more than an aesthetic event, and some of the conditions that lie behind it are discernable and clear. Yet it contains a highly aesthetic response, one which turns on the assumption that the registering of a modern consciousness or experience was not a problem in representation but a profound cultural and aesthetic crux." (Bradbury 29)

So, it must be asked, what makes the Harlem Renaissance so different from the blurred lines of 'Modernism'? Scholars have long categorized the Harlem Renaissance as a social movement propelled into existence by a select group of elitist individuals, much like the groupings of intellectual Europeans and Americans who "made it new" and felt that they

alone were gifted with the abilities—and rights—to bring about social change and rewards. The self-aggrandizing individuals on both sides of the ocean, en masse, belong to a certain race but were writing to a larger audience. For this particular study, the most important aspect of the Harlem Renaissance in relation to modernity is the group mentality. The topics covered in Harlem Renaissance literature are wide-ranging, but the voices are still struggling to be heard over the same roar of modernization. Instead of separating this movement from its WASP modern counterpart, a more interesting way of reading these literary genres is as different voices singing the same modern melody. Raitt points out that the female modern voice, “has an immediacy and an authenticity which writing lacks” (Raitt 30). Other, less appreciated female writers share this sense of immediacy, and should be discussed on the same level as Woolf or Stein.

Because a majority of literature on Modernism separates modernists into factions, the best descriptions of these transatlantic societies may be found in more socially-minded texts. The terms that Steven Watson uses to describe the creation of social movement, specifically the definitions from his book, *Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930*, state: “The Harlem Renaissance was primarily a literary and intellectual movement...the figures were not the first noteworthy [ones]...but they were simultaneously charged with creating art and bolstering the image of their race” (Watson 9). Watson also points out that, aside from a desire to depict, celebrate, and create myth from the African heritage, the other doctrines of the Harlem Renaissance were to discuss political propaganda and to embark upon candid self-revelation (Watson 10). These same tenets surface within virtually every modernist text; self-reflection, moments of being, epiphanies, and criticism of government powers and procedures color

virtually every modernist agenda—especially when discussing (or not discussing, rather), women’s roles in society. When Watson cites W. E. B. Du Bois’ description of the African-American as a state in which, “One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder,” he is careful to juxtapose it with examples of Harlem Renaissance writers who “were torn between complex social-psychological-aesthetic terrains of identity” (10), the very terrains inhabited by marginalized modern women writers. These terrains become known as borderlands by later feminist and social critics. During modernity, ‘two-ness’, or an even further fractured sense of self in some cases, forces individuals with unique cultural and maturation experiences to examine their lives in original ways. Sometimes, these examinations begin with something familiar like a narrative structure or a marriage-plot. But once individuals begin to feel secure and capable within their borderland spaces, they can combat their boundaries. And, in the cases of many modern women writers, combating boundaries took on interesting subversions and constructions.

Discussions of modern women can quickly develop into discussions of institutions. For example, Michael North’s *The Dialect of Modernism* discusses the need for breaking down institutions and recognizing modernity’s undeniable cross-pollination. North states, “without linguistic mimicry and racial masquerade modernism could not have arisen” (North 1). He also discusses the use of voice and “dialect” (2), as a means of bringing about “a breakdown of both the privilege and the standard enjoyed and the myth that there could be a ‘natural’ alternative” (1), to representational strategies of English-language modernism. If the barriers of gender, class, race, and Motherland no longer

exist then we are left with only the tongue and the subject matter, and are encouraged to look at these writers as parts of a whole. Women such as Mina Loy and Nella Larsen then become more than modernist personalities or hangers-on; their contributions to literature receive due credit and also alignment with modernity as a social movement.

A more socially aware mindset is critical in a discussion of gender and influence. In addition to its awareness of a society's oppressions and expectations, Woolf's critical work presents an interesting backdrop for the argument for transatlantic societies. In *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf discusses the need for periods of isolation, but also for community between women. *Three Guineas* is particularly influential to this change in Modernist thought because of its progressive ideas. When writing to a male audience, Woolf states,

Since marriage until the year 1919—less than twenty years ago—was the only profession open to us, the enormous importance of dress to a woman can hardly be exaggerated. It was her chief, perhaps her only, method of becoming Lord Chancellor. But your dress in its immense elaboration has obviously another function.” (*Three Guineas* 38)

Woolf goes on to discuss the peculiarities and ridiculousness of the patriarchy, and attempts to unite women in an opposition to the bells and whistles that “great modern masters” use to signify their self-importance. This rationale gives agency to the ignored because it creates unification along the lines of a shared enemy/oppressor. Yet despite attempts to create this a sense of community, women struggle with supporting one another and recognizing the shared oppression in tandem with differing experiences and backgrounds. Audre Lorde comments on the strangeness of this lack of awareness and points out that,

The literatures of all women of Color recreate the textures of our lives, and many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences. For as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt. To allow women of Color to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex. (Lorde 856)

While Lorde's argument focuses primarily on the inclusion of race within larger feminist conversations, the word "Color" could easily be substituted with other boundary words. For instance, the terms of "Class," "Age," or "Sexual Persuasion" dramatically influence the recognition of difference.

Really, then, the criteria that are most useful in assessing modern women writer's and their writing are fundamental and easily overlooked. For decades, modern women and their daughters have perpetuated a pattern of ignorance-as-bliss. However, in order to better understand modern women writers, the motivations behind these choices must be examined. As Michael Bell writes in the essay, "The metaphysics of Modernism," "The modernist generation, both critically and creatively, was centrally concerned with the relations between literary form and modes of knowledge or understanding" (Bell 11). While some of the women within modernity's more productive groups possibly consciously ignored the similarly oppressed, others attempted to understand by exploring the experiences of everyday women of different walks of life. This is mostly because "the question of living is crucial here since modernist literature is often concerned with a question of how to live within a new context of thought, or a new worldview" (12). In order to enhance or widen the worldview of an oppressed woman, she must occasionally affiliate herself with those who are similarly oppressed. And, she must occasionally participate in oppressing those who society deems inferior. Talking across oceans, above

the din of modernity, apart from class and nationality, and outside of the confines of the home, modernist women writers created their own niches, themes, and voices.

Marginalization did not silence the curiosity and penchant for self-expression that many moderns, perhaps especially women, desired. Careful manipulation of institutions became necessary in the creation of a feminine voice, a female-friendly microcosm of communication, and the development of language that expressed women's perspectives and realities.

Many scholars of modernity quickly realize that women artists do not receive a great deal of attention unless they are particularly outrageous or prolific. The few women who do receive scholarly focus are often a bit of both. Based on the literature, it is evident that women writers produced art at an incredible rate. Because of this fact alone, further study of modern women writers is necessary. Perhaps the lack of critical attention thus far stems from the fact that modern women writers often became writers through unconventional channels; they did not graduate from famous universities or study Greek with "great modern masters." Their modernization occurred through much different means. For decades, and with only a few exceptions, the modern women writer has endured the squelching and misrepresentation of her identity. She has been fractured and subverted by Modernism's leading men, but the actions taken by modernist women must be given the attention that they deserve. Current scholarship within the field of Modernism is now turning its attention to its female figures.

This study will focus on the two most prominent modern women writers—Woolf and Stein—in order to develop a context for understanding the steps that each woman took within her own writing in order to make her voice heard. In addition, I will argue

that lesser-known women writers—particularly Nella Larsen and Mina Loy—wrote fiction, poetry, and criticism of a tremendously high quality and in an undeniably modern way. Despite the characteristics of Larsen and Loy’s writing, though, both women have been marginalized so dramatically that they are rarely discussed. They are even more rarely discussed as possessors of the particular fiery literary power as their male counterparts. First, we must classify Larsen as more than a flash in the Harlem Renaissance pan; she was a modern woman writer whose education and personal struggles assisted her in creating some of Modernism’s most haunting and intuitive characters. Loy, who is primarily discussed only as a muse and companion for great modern male artists, will be approached as a contributing modern woman writer whose ability to gain access to some of the era’s most controversial political, philosophical, and artistic movements is remarkable. Loy’s scathing critiques of male egoists, particularly in her “Feminist Manifesto,” are still considered progressive even in the twenty-first century. Through their writings, all four women attempted to participate in conversations. They each used different linguistic and thematic strategies to communicate, but the artistry of each woman is evident in a comparative study. Despite the ways they have been classified in the past—and primarily because of the institutions that choose to either claim these women as their own or deny them access—I have found almost no discussion of these four women in tandem. This study will discuss the overwhelming similarities in the experiences and struggles of these women writers, and how those similarities play out in their literary contributions. Woolf’s chapter will focus on the shifts in narrative voice and representations of femininity within *Night & Day*, *Orlando*, and *The Years*, while Stein’s chapter will discuss style and authorial intent and use of the ‘continuous present’

within *Three Lives* and “Composition as Explanation.” Larsen’s chapter will then discuss *Quicksand* and *Passing* and its impact upon modern understandings of race, class, and the development of community. Loy’s chapter will explore the poems of the *Lost Lunar Baedeker* collection, while also discussing Loy’s very progressive feminist views in the collection’s critically undervalued non-fiction portion. Discussing these Modern women on a level playing field promises to yield an interesting and more inclusive discussion of the great “modern *women* masters” whose work has shaped all of female literature for the past century.

Chapter III

Woolf Writing Women

The distinctions between “feminist” and “anti-men” often become misunderstood, even by the most well-meaning scholars. In order to discuss women’s writing amidst modernity, a discussion of the pressures upon modern women is crucial since these factors shape the feminism that these individuals dealt with. However, assuming modern women experienced their femininity in a way that contemporary women can easily grasp is irresponsible. The advantages afforded to contemporary women—of education, lifestyle, and profession—were virtually nonexistent from 1890-1940—the very years in which male modernists published their most important works. The lack of education does not mean that there was ever a lack of intelligence, though. The ways in which current scholars discuss feminist issues when looking for the beginning of women’s rights do not always accurately reflect the situation. Texts such as *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway* are typically looked to as emblems of feminism when, really, their author intended for them to achieve much more than the one-dimensional political statement that they typically become today. By examining three texts never discussed in the same scholarly conversation and that fall at the beginning, middle, and end of Virginia Woolf’s writing, we can begin to envision the changes in self-awareness and societal views that Woolf experienced as a young modern woman, as an aging woman reflecting upon her maturation, and most simply, as a woman writing of women.

In the feminist document, *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf wrote of the fundamental differences between men and women by using a variety of methods. Chief among her most poignant rhetorical devices is her ability to satirize tradition and utilize

logical patriarchal arguments to defend her decisions and actions as a modern woman.

Unlike some critics, though, Woolf does not insult the experiences of her audience by assuming that men and women are capable of completely understanding one another. On the contrary, she writes:

Complete understanding could only be achieved by blood transfusion and memory transfusion—a miracle still beyond the reach of science. But we who live now have a substitute for blood transfusion and memory transfusion which must serve at a pinch. There is that marvelous, perpetually renewed, and as yet largely untapped aid to the understanding of human motives which is provided in our age by biography and autobiography. Also there is the daily paper, history in the raw. There is thus no longer any reason to be confined to the minute span of actual experience which is still, for us, so narrow, so circumscribed. (14)

The belief that men and women could coexist in understanding despite the incapability of complete submersion into one another's experiences is progressive. *Three Guineas* typically becomes viewed as an article of anti-war feminist propaganda. However, it is more accurate to describe it as a civil discussion concerning women's activities during centuries of male warring, land-grabbing, and unrest. Simply put, if men make decisions that women do not agree with and are not privy to, women do not necessarily need to support these decisions. The blood and memory that Woolf hopes to transfuse between the sexes is, as she admits, scientifically impossible. And, it is crucial to recognize that women were still not given the space to voice their own reservations or concerns about their nation's activities. Because women have no voice within the patriarchy, they must take other avenues to gain agency. And, what frees men and women from their divisions is something that can be *circumscribed*.

The concept that reading can provide an opportunity for individuals to momentarily inhabit and experience the life of another person is at work within Woolf's fiction, even in its earliest phases. "Mrs. Bennett and Mr. Brown" is a prime example of

this life-writing in which the rich inner life of an average person is imagined. When applied on a larger scale, Woolf utilized tradition and keen observation to examine lives that typically would not be included in a history of England or Leslie Stephen's National Biography. Instead of completely abandoning the traditional structures of the novel, Woolf used the novel as framework for experimentation.

As Woolf biographer Hermione Lee points out, "Virginia Woolf has a passion for 'lives of the obscure,' and for marginal, unvalued literary forms like memoirs, letters, and journals. These lives are, mostly, women's. When she writes about biography, she is also writing about feminism...for Virginia Woolf, a revolution in biography is also a sexual revolution" (Lee 13). In a reading of all of Woolf's major novels and short stories, it becomes obvious that her ability to immortalize undervalued or unvalued lives within her own writing becomes a cathartic process by which she also explores and defines the value that she placed upon the self. Three of Woolf's novels can be used to enlighten an understanding of her perceptions of women's place within society and also how the choices made by women affect the way that their lives play out. Woolf's journey through women's lives begins with Woolf's second novel, *Night and Day*, which serves as the starting point for Woolf's mission to find the feminine voice. *Night and Day* serves as the starting place for understanding Woolf as a woman writer because it was a novel that she was not particularly proud of and because it is the first novel that she wrote after a major psychological breakdown. Within *Night and Day*, Woolf's voice is highly experimental, sometimes apprehensive, but moreover original and beautiful. This feminine voice reaches its clearest and most beautiful tones within the pages of *Orlando*, where the patriarchal norms are turned upside-down and the confines of biography, character, and

plot become blurred. A more complete array of female voices constitutes a spectrum of feminisms, choices, and lives within one of Woolf's latest novels, *The Years*. Together, these three works provide scholars with a deeper understanding of how and why Woolf wrote women, and what her authorial choices did for both the writer and her female characters.

Striking Matches: *Night and Day*

Excavating her own voice from beneath the colossal weight of her heritage was presumably a great struggle for Woolf. In her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, Woolf undermines the tradition of the marriage-plot novel by presenting an engagement that quickly loses its excitement when the two parties, Rachel and Terrence, realize how much they dislike one another fundamentally. Despite the class-based belief that young people should pair off and marry, Rachel Vinrace recognizes that in order to adhere to this standard, she will need to give up what matters most to her—her music. Instead of allowing Rachel Vinrace to become the blushing, subservient Victorian bride, Woolf tells readers that Rachel's musical gifts are particularly wonderful and that music is what she *should* be pursuing. When her fiancé realizes that Rachel's playing is not simply for the listening pleasure of male audiences and that her interests are often dark, intricate, and something resembling masterpieces, he discourages her passion. Woolf then plagues Rachel with anxieties about the wedding, sickness, disturbing fever dreams, and a speedy death. The writing of the novel very nearly killed Woolf, who was deeply concerned about its reception and about the implications of publishing something that the reading public—which constituted of her brother Thoby's school friends—would not appreciate

or enjoy¹. Truthfully, it seems that Woolf did not want to embarrass herself. As a young writer and an heir to a weighty reputation, she most certainly did not want to be considered in the class of other female novelists whose marriage-plots were predictable and unchallenging. Because the novel was a “safe space” for women, Woolf’s use of the novel as the vehicle for her art attempted to both undermine the institution of the novel and to manipulate the traditions that comprise novel-writing. In a way, the risks taken by Rachel Vinrace in her attempts to become a successful pianist are the same risks that Woolf takes in her writing. The debilitating anxiety caused by the unknown—the daunting “what if?” of “will this work or not?”—forced Woolf to lean heavily upon her new husband, Leonard Woolf². Rachel Vinrace does not have a strong male to lean upon and, instead of flourishing and going on to create more masterpieces, she dies. When Woolf recovered from the psychological turmoil of *The Voyage Out*, the writing of her second novel, *Night and Day*, began.

It is well known that Woolf was incredibly interested in representing her own experiences through her writing. She was also very interested, as evidenced by various journal excerpts and essay writings, in the responsibilities of inheritance. Within *Night and Day*, Woolf explores the weight of her own inheritance, but also delves into the larger matter of free will and choice. The novel was published in 1919, just a few years after the marriage that freed Virginia Stephen from the shadow of her parents. (Curiously, Woolf notes in *Three Guineas* that women’s *only* choice “up until 1919” was marriage.) Everything about the early twentieth century urged moderns towards self-liberation.

¹ See Hermione Lee’s “Thoby” chapter.

² See Hermione Lee’s “Leonard” chapter within the biography.

Young men and women partook in joint intellectual discussions and encouraged one another to break with Victorian activities and restraints. *Night and Day* is the first instance in which Woolf herself begins to refashion the possibilities in modern terms instead of Victorian terms; this Woolf novel is not an apprentice work, but a new mode of artistic expression. This development of a new language within her second novel added depth to her writing voice and assisted Woolf in creating her unique style, which some have heralded as the first “true feminine sentence,” but which I argue should be considered one of the first true and richly detailed feminine voices.

Katharine Hilbery, the heroine of *Night and Day*, possesses characteristics of Woolf autobiography in her desire for autonomy. Katharine is confined to the museum-like Hilbery family home, where she serves as melancholy tour guide, curator, and authority on a family history that she does not feel a connection with. When Katharine encounters Ralph Denham, a man who admires her father and comes to tea with the family, she is confronted with male perspective for the first time. As Woolf states, “Denham had accused Katharine Hilbery of belonging to one of the most distinguished families in England, and if any one will take the trouble to consult Mr. Galton’s ‘Hereditary Genius,’ he will find that this assertion is not far from the truth” (*Night and Day* 30). Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, was the writer and editor of the *National Biography of England*, and the habit of measuring people’s worth through their “Hereditary Genius” would have been common practice within the Stephen household. The Hilbery legacy stems from Katharine’s grandfather, a great poet who haunts the Hilbery home in much the same way that Leslie Stephen haunted Hyde Park. During tea, Mrs. Hilbery’s instructs Katharine that, “I’m sure Ralph would like to see our things,

Katharine. I'm sure he's not like that dreadful young man, Mr. Ponting, who told me that he considered it our duty to live exclusively in the present. After all, what *is* the present? Half of it's the past, and the better half, too, I should say" (7). The sense of responsibility—both to her family and for the preservation of the family's legacy—begins on the first page of the novel and colors nearly every choice made by Katharine. Initially, Katharine's engagement to William Rodney promises that he will shoulder some of the Hilbery family burden. But as Katharine's passions for mathematics and learning grow, the divide between the choices she *should* make and the ones that she inevitably does make widens. Within *Night and Day*, Woolf is exploring the archetypes within Victorian culture. Like Katharine, Virginia Woolf was meant to carry the Stephen family torch through her wit and writings; that burden only became bearable through her union with Leonard Woolf and her consistent attempts at a literary murder of the "Angel of the House."

Night and Day was not a novel that Woolf was particularly proud of. As Suzanne Raitt discusses in the article, "Finding a voice: Virginia Woolf's early novels," Woolf felt that she only found her true voice in the writing of *Jacob's Room*, her third novel. Typically, "Critics have followed Woolf's lead in regarding *Jacob's Room* as a starting-point of some kind. Many monographs discuss the novels that preceded *Jacob's Room* only in passing, or not at all, and where they are given more sustained attention they are often dismissed as 'apprentice efforts'" (Raitt 29). However, certain scenes and characters within *Night and Day* are more than mere apprentice work; they help Woolf scholars learn how to read Woolf's later works, and they also provide strong examples of Woolf's developing feminism. Most importantly, Woolf returns to the marriage-plot

novel but finds a way to keep her heroine(s) alive and in supportive partnerships instead of confining marriages. This shift may have been enabled by the partnership between Virginia and Leonard—one that has fascinated Woolf and Modernist scholars because of its odd dynamics.

The accomplishments of *Night and Day* are often undervalued by scholars. This can be attributed to the novel's critical reception. Woolf's close friend and fellow Bloomsbury intellectual E.M. Forster stated, "none of the characters in N. & D. is lovable" (qtd. in Raitt 42). Contrary to what other novel writers were doing during the first quarter of the twentieth century, Woolf was not concerned with creating endearing characters. Instead, she was concerned with representing enduring, honest characters, which is something that many critics of *Night and Day* fail to recognize. Being endearing and honest sometimes mean being a bit "vague" and sometimes requires that characters avoid long-winded, Victorian-style monologues. The contrast created between the novel's two New Modern Women, Mary Datchet and Katharine Hilbery, is the most wonderful and dynamic aspect of the text. Their relationship forces both women to make life-altering decisions, and Woolf carefully builds their conversations in order to reveal certain strengths particular to each woman. While Raitt is one of the only scholars to really delve into the importance of Woolf's earlier novels, she states that *Night and Day* "concerns the courtships of Katharine Hilbery, Ralph Denham, William Rodney and Cassandra Otway" (39), when the truest courtship taking place within the novel is actually one of ideals and choices. By choosing different paths for their lives, the characters court possibilities—not necessarily one another. The fact that Katharine and Ralph marry is not due to their romantic love, but to the possibilities available to

Katharine if she marries Ralph rather than William. Katharine's mathematical genius is not encouraged within her home or within the confines of courtship with William.

However, Ralph presents a secure and encouraging partnership to Katharine while also providing an escape from the burden of familial responsibilities. William's marriage to Cassandra is one based upon mutual adoration; Cassandra is the less educated and impressionable young cousin of the Hilbery family and dotes upon William in a way that Katharine cannot. Because Cassandra *needs* William in a way that Katharine does not, William's masculinity is affirmed within his marriage to Cassandra. These marriages, then, are not based upon passion or romance. More often, they are based upon more self-serving desires.

The comparisons made between Mary Datchet and Katharine Hilbery reveal a great deal about Woolf's opinion of modern women. Katharine is described as having "the quick impulsive movements of her mother, the lips parting often to speak, and closing again; and the dark oval eyes of her father brimming with light upon the basis of sadness, or, since she was too young to have acquired a sorrowful point of view, one might say that the basis was not sadness so much as a spirit given to contemplation and self-control" (*Night and Day* 5). She is not "actually beautiful," only "striking" (5). Perhaps this is due to the fact that the combination of features that Katharine possesses "produced a very marked character, and one that was not calculated to put a young man, who scarcely knew her, at ease" (5). Katharine constantly fails at feigning her enthusiasm for her family, and also fails at being the ideal wife that Ralph Denham initially wants her to be. His declaration that "She'll do...Yes, Katharine Hilbery'll do...I'll take Katharine Hilbery" reads not like a profession of love than a commonplace decision made without

careful consideration. Katharine does not overwhelm Ralph—or anyone for that matter—with beauty or charm. It is the intensity and passion within her that impress Ralph, especially when he sees her on a busy street one afternoon:

In this spirit he noticed the rather set expression in her eyes, and the slight, half-conscious movement of her lips, which, together with her height and the distinction of her dress, made her look as if the scurrying crowd impeded her, and her direction were different from hers. He noticed this calmly; but suddenly, as he passed her, his hands and knees began to tremble, and his heart beat painfully. She did not see him, and went on repeating to herself some lines which had stuck to her memory: 'It's life that matters, nothing but life—the process of discovering—the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself at all.' Thus occupied, she did not see Denham, and he had not the courage to stop her. (132)

Katharine's lack of attention to Ralph Denham only strengthens his resolve that Katharine is the person with whom he can make the most profitable marriage. While he is confused and frightened by her, he believes the marrying her will help him to conquer her and to confirm something about himself. His friendship with Mary Datchet, who is also deeply in love with him, never becomes one of romantic affection. Ralph respects Mary, but also views her as the type of woman who might never marry. Mary is only twenty five, but "looked older because she had earned, or intended to earn, her own living, and had already lost the look of the irresponsible spectator, and had taken on that of the private in the army of workers" (42). Contrary to Katharine's more innocent and disorganized mannerisms, Mary's "gestures seemed to have a certain purpose; the muscles round the eyes and lips were set rather firmly, as though the senses had undergone some discipline...she had contracted two faint lines between her eyebrows, not from anxiety but from thought, and it was quite evident that all the feminine instincts of pleasing, soothing, and charming were crossed by others in no way peculiar to her sex"

(43). Mary's aged appearance, which is unsubtly attributed to "thought" and not fear, is crucial in understanding Woolf's writing of modern women. This comment seems to be ironic, and to favor Mary instead of Katharine, though. Katharine's thoughts drift haphazardly and do not add up to anything substantial while Mary's are continuously taking into account the well-being of others.

One of the novel's most subversive notions occurs in the spaces between Katharine and Mary. The differences between the two women are made particularly interesting by the conversations that the two women have in private, without the influence of patriarchal expectations. On one of the first occasions where Katharine and Mary meet, Katharine states, "I suppose you're one of the people who think we should all have professions" (54), to which Mary replies, "Oh dear no" (54). This is the first instance where real choices and ideals become a part of the plot. For Woolf, marriage was an inevitable part of life. Thus, it appears within her novels as something that does not require conscious choice, but will simply happen for all of the characters. But professions are more complicated. Katharine's passion for mathematics consumes her, and if she had the option to take a profession, we can assume it would be one which dealt closely with math—a subject viewed as inappropriate for women to study, especially at advanced levels. When Woolf reveals Katharine's mathematical skill, it is almost as if she is conveying a terrible secret to her readers:

When she was rid of the pretence of paper and pen, phrase-making and biography, she turned her attention in a more legitimate direction, though, strangely enough, she would rather have confessed her wildest dreams of hurricane and prairie than the fact that, upstairs, alone in her room, she rose early in the morning or sat up late at night to...work at mathematics. No force on earth would have made her confess that. (40)

The secret of Katharine's passions complicates her relationship with William Rodney and her entanglements with Ralph Denham. While William does admire her, and Ralph does find her suitable as a possible wife, Katharine knows she can only escape the patriarchal pressures of her family by marrying Ralph and removing herself from the familial gaze.

In contrast, Mary Datchet not only professes a career and passions of her own in a private capacity, but publicly works towards them. The initially contentious and uncertain relationship between Mary and Katharine softens and turns to one of mutual respect and trust when Mary realizes that Katharine admires her efforts in support of women's rights. Mary also receives affirmation of her own importance when Katharine states, "I think you're very lucky...I envy you, living alone and having your own things"—and engaged in this exalted way, which had no recognition or engagement-ring, she added in her own mind" (286). When Mary replies, "I don't think you've got any reason to envy me," Katharine's next statement conveys the "shallow, supercilious, cold-blooded, and cynical" views that Katharine has on life and love. These dynamics force both women to confront what their truest desires are. Katharine's unromantic ideals become evident when she states, "It came over me in the Tube the other day, what is it that makes these people go one way or the other? It's not love; it's not reason; I think it must be some idea. Perhaps, Mary, our affections are the shadow of an idea. Perhaps there isn't any such thing as affection itself..." (287). Mary Datchet, unlike Katharine Hilbery, believes in romantic love and affections. She also believes that people who love one another should be together, which explains her disclosure of Ralph's affections to Katharine. While Katharine can never possess her own space and her own things, she can absolutely possess the key to a freer life.

Mary's conversation with Katharine encourages Katharine's self exploration. Upon leaving Mary's home, Katharine thinks, "It's all so simple...there can't be any doubt. I've only got to speak now. I've only got to speak" (294). The consciousness of this statement represents an awakening of sorts; Mary's assurance of Katharine's position gives her the confidence to speak because the two women are of similar caliber and because Mary easily makes choices that Katharine is too cowardly to make. Later, after verbalizing what it is that will actually make her happy, Katharine thinks that "much depended, as usual, upon the interpretation of the word love; which word came up again and again, whether she considered Rodney, Denham, Mary Datchet, or herself; and in each case it seemed to stand for something different, and yet for something unmistakable and something not to be passed by" (331). Viewing various forms of mature, modern love allow Katharine to claim part of that love for herself. When she visits Mary and sees the rooms that Mary keeps and fills with an independent life, Katharine recognizes self-love. When Katharine finally claims Ralph as her own, Woolf writes, "With Ralph's eyes upon her, smiling straight back at him serenely and proudly, she knew, for the first time, that she had conquered" (416). This triumph is not one of conquering a man, but of making a choice that offers the most satisfactory options. For Katharine love is not about submitting, but about conquering.

This is contrasted by the affections that Mary offers people, particularly Ralph Denham. Mary's love is one of selflessness. She recognizes that allowing Katharine and Ralph to be together is her greatest act of love, and she therefore denies herself a romantic relationship and throws herself head-first into her work. When Katharine and Ralph are finally engaged, they walk past Mary's home and see that her light is on. In

countless scenes throughout the novel, Katharine, Ralph, and William barge in on Mary and use the sanctity of her private space to work out their own tribulations. But in this last instance, Katharine tells Ralph, “Is she alone, working at this time of night? What is she working at? Why should we interrupt her? What have we got to give her? She’s happy too. She has her work” (535). This final scene in which choice trumps the desire for love and marriage displays Woolf’s progressive stance on relationships. Women within Woolf’s novels are occasionally allowed to choose a path that does not require marriage. One can love a subject or a profession wholly, or one can love another person. Katharine chooses to inhabit the marginal space between wife and scholar while Mary completely cuts away the romantic part of herself. Mary’s ability to always speak the words that constitute the language of love differs drastically from Katharine’s almost complete inability to utter them, and this fundamental difference creates the most powerful and interesting relationship within the novel. While Woolf may have felt that she could produce something better than *Night and Day*, within the novel she, too, inhabits the quietude of Mary Datchet’s apartments and works through her problems concerning life and love.

“She looked at the ring. She looked at the ink pot. Did she dare?”: *Orlando*, choice, and human nature

The large gap of time that passed between the writing of *Night and Day* and *Orlando: A Biography* saw drastic changes in Woolf’s approach to her writing. The years between these two novels contain the writing and publication of Woolf’s two most famous works, *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is important to discuss the impact of these two novels upon their author for they directly affect her goals in writing

Orlando. First, Woolf noted that in *To the Lighthouse*, she had finally ‘killed off’ her mother. In her “Sketch of the Past,” she reflects on *To the Lighthouse* and states that when the project was finally over, “I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest” (*Moments of Being* 90). This exorcism of sorts finally allowed Woolf to explore other options within her writing; no longer was the apparition of her past governing her subject matter. She began freely experimenting with narrative structure, perspective, and plot. As Hermione Lee states in the “Maternal” chapter of her biography of Woolf, both of Woolf’s parents “died before she had begun to prove herself as a writer, but it is probable that her writer’s life was driven by the desire to say ‘look at me!’ to those two exceptional and critical parents” (Lee 94). By finally loosening the control that her parents and inheritance had upon her life and writing, Woolf could begin experimenting in innovative ways. In *Orlando*, Woolf begins enjoying herself tremendously.

Orlando is an incredibly unusual text. It has been critically discussed as a text that simultaneously deconstructs and reconstructs itself³ while it has also been widely analyzed as a transsexual, bisexual, or homosexual text. However, I believe that the events that occur after Orlando’s gender change speak to the abilities of women—not the inadequacies or the shortcomings of the ‘fairer sex’. In order to recognize these intricate aspects of social commentary, a study of the novel must begin by acknowledging that *Orlando* was originally a man, which is undoubtedly a contributing factor when critics

³ See Watkins’ “Poststructuralist Feminism” chapter.

and scholars marginalize or ignore this text. The masculine narrative that precedes the great gender change is not of interest within this particular study because the artistry and subtleties that make *Orlando* a masterpiece only come into play when Orlando “travels home to England after becoming a woman” and “is in an odd transitional state where she is learning the rules of femininity while not forgetting those of masculinity” (Watkins 110). However, when discussed in tandem, the narratives pre- and post-gender changes are incredibly similar. What shifts is the sense of belonging and personality. Unlike most men within literary and historical traditions, until the gender change, Orlando inhabited no real place. His landed position in England allowed him to shirk all responsibility and to embark on carnally motivated adventures. The freedoms granted by his male gender removed him from contributing to society in any real way. This is perhaps why the lewd sexual encounters, poorly planned marriages, and wastefulness of Orlando’s male nature are completely eliminated by the gender change. When the Lady of Purity, Lady of Chastity, and Lady of Modesty decide to reincarnate Orlando in a female form, they demand that Orlando shift his/her (for, this is a transitional period), views, morals, and virtues. Woolf writes, “He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but to confess—he was a woman” (*Orlando* 137). Because of this shift, Orlando can be considered a prototype for the New Modern Woman in the most literal sense. Woolf writes that, “his form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (138). Androgyny is incredibly important in the social and cultural aspects of modernity, but it is often limited to costume because gender is something that can be masked but not completely altered. Giving modern people the option to align one’s self

with either the feminine or the masculine is a freedom that is deeply personal but also independent of the patriarchy. Given Woolf's belief that, "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple: one must be a woman-manly, or a man-womanly" (*A Room of One's Own* 104), this gender-bending makes sense. The blending of gender and experience is one that many modern writers were exploring, but none were making the daring gestures that *Orlando* makes. Woolf writes that, "Thus, there is much to support the view that it is the clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking...Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex" (*Orlando* 188). The truest and most successful means of living, at least in Modernism, is found by consciously choosing to cross certain boundaries.

During the second half of *Orlando*, the now physically female Orlando is constantly associated with nature. These associations, or *moments of being*, come into play only once before Orlando's gender change. Woolf writes that the young Orlando was a "trifle clumsy" (17), and that in order to combat this problem within the boundaries of the home, he escaped to the open spaces of his family's land. Readers are shown his path away from the home, one that requires manipulation and careful footing, and that leads him to privacy among nature. Orlando reaches this private space and, "after a long silence, 'I am alone,' he breathed at last, opening his lips for the first time in this record. He had walked very quickly uphill through ferns and hawthorn bushes, startling deer and wild birds, to a place crowned by a single oak" (18). There are two very important factors at play within this initial nature scene. First, Orlando speaks—but to himself. Secondly,

he finds privacy and a place for reflection amidst nature. As the narrative continues and Orlando begins embarking upon new adventures, he loses this connection and reverence for nature. It only returns when he has fully embraced his female form and has begun to appreciate women's situations. Each time that Orlando encounters a new experience in her feminine body, it recalls a past experience that is sensory-rich but not memorialized in a way that is strictly associated with the male gender. For instance, when Captain Nicholas Benedict Bartolus offers Orlando, "a little of the fat, Ma'am? Let me cut you just the tiniest little slice the size of your finger nail" (155), Orlando experiences a moment of nostalgia that sends a "delicious tremor through her frame" and recalls "the indescribable pleasure with which she had first seen Sasha, hundreds of years ago" (155). This pleasure recalls the sexual empowerment that Orlando experienced as a male, which differs completely from the type of latent sexual power that Orlando possesses as a woman. When Orlando realizes that femininity requires different set of behaviors in order for a woman to be considered socially acceptable, she is outraged. After almost sending a sailor falling to his death after allowing him to glimpse her ankle, Orlando is angered that she cannot show off her legs—which are "among her chiefest beauties" (157). Instead of recognizing her new gender role and the rules that accompany it, she screams, "'A pox on them!' realizing for the first time, what, in other circumstances, she would have been taught as a child, that is to say, the sacred responsibilities of womanhood" (157). These "sacred responsibilities" begin to confuse Orlando because she is uncertain of which gender she identifies with; as she reflects on her predicament that,

"It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in. The comforts of ignorance seemed utterly denied her... Thus it was no great wonder if, as she pitted one sex against the other, and found each alternately full of the most

deplorable infirmities, and was not sure to which she belonged—it was no great wonder that she was about to cry out that she would return to Turkey and become a gipsy” (159).

When the beautiful female Orlando later rejects the Archduke, she laughs off this significant loss of power, security, and fortune, and again recites the words of her past life: “I am alone” (184). Woolf writes, “That silence is more profound after noise still wants the confirmation of science. But that loneliness is more apparent directly after one has been made love to, many women would take their oath” (184). Woolf seems to believe that women, because of their capabilities at feeling, recognize loneliness in a different way than men do. Orlando then begins contemplating the things that she is losing—“life and a lover” (185). The privacy that Orlando finds during this point in time is altered by her femininity; she is not only changed internally, but altered physically by that change. And, she cannot cope with the loneliness in the same ways that she could when she was a male. Instead of remaining in that quietude, within an hour of recognizing her privacy, she travels to London. London represented many things for Woolf, who loved the busyness of city life and explored it in many of her works. Because of her need for “life and a lover,” London is the perfect backdrop for the events that allow Orlando to *create* a life and to *choose* a lover.

Orlando masquerades as a man when she initially meets Nell. This does not bother Nell, though, who states, “the plain Dunstable of the matter is, that I’m not in the mood for the society of the other sex to-night. Indeed, I’m in a devil of a fix” (218). They develop a homosocial camaraderie that allows Orlando certain privileges—one of which is an entrance into a literary society that intellectually stimulates Orlando but marginalizes her based upon her gender. Mr. S. W. tells the women that, “Women have

no desires...without desires their conversation cannot be of the slightest interest to anyone. 'It is well known that when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other. When they are alone, they do not talk; they scratch' (219). It is through this observant female gaze that Woolf begins to exercise her own feminist beliefs. Rather than "scratching", the women that Orlando associates with take part in careful, interesting conversations, and Orlando's "pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied" (221). Therefore, the life that Orlando creates for herself is one that is independent and misunderstood by the learned men who rule the patriarchy. Rather than forcing these men to change their views, Woolf's feminists enjoy the solitude afforded to uninteresting subjects and develop their own form of society. Orlando is also constantly outdoors at this point in the novel, and marvels at how the "stars reflected themselves in deep pits of stagnant water which lay in the middle of the streets" (224) and the century is suddenly over. This positioning depicts time as something that Orlando is completely incapable of controlling; while she cannot alter things outside of herself, she can maintain a sort of inner sanctuary so long as it is quietly kept.

When the century ends and Orlando becomes a citizen of the nineteenth century, she suddenly realizes that everyone around her is married. She wonders aloud, "Whom can I lean upon?" which Woolf accredits not to Orlando, but to the "spirit of the age" (246). Orlando then plunges into nature. She leaves her home and walks with the "whirling and wheeling above her head" and notes that "she had not walked so far for years" (247). She then begins running and becomes entangled by her feminine garb, trips, and breaks her ankle. She lies on the ground and whispers, "I have found my mate. It is the moor. I am nature's bride. Here I will lie...I shall have wild dreams. My hands shall

wear no wedding ring. The roots shall twine about them. Ah! I have sought happiness through many ages and not found it; fame and missed it; love and not known it; life—and behold, death is better” (248). And, as she lays reflecting upon her life and embracing her place with nature, a man on horseback comes and rescues her. When he leaps to the ground and exclaims, “you’re hurt!” she retorts, “I’m dead, Sir!” (250). Woolf follows this exclamation with a break in the text and the sentence, “A few minutes later, they became engaged” (250).

Upon a superficial reading, it would seem that Woolf undermines all of the “changes” that Orlando undergoes. However, the relationship that Orlando forms with Shelmerdine is a harmonious one; like Orlando, Shelmerdine has also undergone a mysterious gender shift. But upon their marriage, Orlando becomes increasingly more domesticated. Her husband serves as her interpreter for things occurring in the outside world, and “makes a little model on the ground of the Cape with twigs and dead leaves and an empty snail shell or two” (257). Orlando gains a compassionate companion, but loses a bit of her independence. After their marriage is official, Chapter Six begins. The first three words reveal a great deal: “Orlando went indoors” (263). Woolf writes, “She was married, true; but if one’s husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And, finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts” (264). What Woolf continues in *Orlando* is the commentary that she begins in the pages of *Night and Day*. Women are given the opportunity to form their own social communities without the pressures of the male gaze, but they are also free to form partnerships that are mutually beneficial.

Orlando's marriage becomes a symbolic, superstitious one. Just like Orlando's evolving fashion sense, the spirit of the age dictates the "fashion" of marriage. The gold ring that Orlando dons almost immediately after the turn of the century is one that allows her to blend in with the other women of her time. When Shelmerdine comes into Orlando's life, they simply provide security to one another. The marriage does produce a child, but Woolf is careful to spend almost no time discussing the union or the progeny. The main focus in *Orlando* is simply upon the feelings, experiences, and responses of its title character. Through her marriage and the security it offers her, Orlando finally does gain the courage to write—which was something that he/she lacked the moral fiber to do regardless of gender. Marriage, at least in *Orlando*, offers unconditional acceptance. This authorial decision is revolutionary because, instead of becoming distracted by children or fixated on a patriarchal figure, Woolf remains concentrated upon Orlando and her growth. Orlando's voice is the most interesting and important one within the narrative, even if it takes a considerable amount of time and even a gender change for it to gain its full strength.

"What I mean is, we've changed in ourselves": *The Years*

The Years, published only four years before Woolf's death, begins at an end. Mrs. Rose Pargiter's impending death unsettles all of her children. Despite Woolf's cathartic handling of her parents' deaths, death is a common catalyst in many of her works. *The Years* follows the Pargiter family from 1880-'Present Day', which most scholars assume to be the early 1930s. The style of the novel is particularly innovative because its timeline provides Woolf with a loose structure conducive to thorough character development. By utilizing the comings and goings of an entire family, Woolf explores the intimate

relationships and the superficialities of understanding that define an individual's life. Eleanor Pargiter is the most thoroughly developed and interesting character within *The Years*, primarily because she is old enough to remember what used to be while still young enough to exist in the "Present Day." This liminal space allows Eleanor to reflect more broadly upon her choices, her responsibilities, and tangled familial ties.

In the novel's first chapter, "1880", the Pargiter daughters are understandably altered by their mother's death. The eldest, Eleanor, absorbs the familial duties and takes on the role of caregiver. Milly and Delia, the middle daughters, imitate adults, attempt to assist in running the household, and feign devastation. The youngest daughter, Rose, becomes a bit wild and independent, but also realizes that the outside world is a treacherous place. Delia recognizes and reflects upon the Pargiter family's largest problem when, at their mother's funeral, she notes that her father "was so stiff and so rigid that she had a convulsive desire to laugh aloud. Nobody can feel like that, she thought. He's overdoing it. None of us feel anything, she thought: we're all pretending" (*The Years* 87). This performative mourning is unusual in Woolf's work. Often, characters are dramatically changed by a death and cannot move past it. The Pargiter women acknowledge the death but, as in reality, continue living and meeting society's demands.

When the family is seen again, 11 years later, Eleanor is being hailed by her father as, "the housekeeper," and Woolf writes that, "they got on extremely well; they were almost like brother and sister" (92). Eleanor's activities with her "Committees" and Women's Rights take up a great deal of her time and it becomes obvious that the youthfulness she feels when doing what she loves is not perceived by others. While on

the omnibus, a man “sized her up; a well-known type; with a bag; philanthropic; well nourished; a spinster; a virgin; like all women of her class; cold; her passions had never been touched; yet not unattractive” (102). Eleanor then enters a shop and the owner thinks that, “it was such a pity that [Eleanor] didn’t marry—such a mistake to let the younger sister marry before the elder. But then she had the colonel to look after, and he was getting on now” (103). Eleanor gives up something in order to care for her father, and it becomes a point of frustration in their sibling-like relationship. As *The Years* moves along, Eleanor continues losing her youth. In “1908” her brother Martin remarks that, “She had lost something of her bright colour, he thought, glancing at her, and her hair had a tuft of grey in it” (150). Eleanor is seen reflecting on her age and on the omnipresent and excessively demanding age of her father a few pages later when she states, “How terrible old age was... It was better to die, like Eugenie and Digby, in the prime of life with all one’s faculties about one” (154). The chapter ends with Eleanor, Rose, and Martin discussing that the portrait of their mother is wearing thin and that a “little blue flower” that once graced the canvas has been covered over by time and lack of care (159). This lack of attention and care characterizes not only the material belongings in the Pargiter home, but Eleanor herself. Everything within the home begins declining simultaneously and Eleanor is too concerned with keeping the household running to realize the severity of their situation. She is also too busy playing “housekeeper” to pursue or live her own life.

When we encounter Eleanor in “1917,” she is visiting her cousin Maggie and her husband Renny in their small apartment on “one of the obscure little streets under the shadow of the Abbey” (279). They live in a manner that is described as cluttered and

shabby, but Eleanor finds herself quite at home and happy with them. Their friend Nicholas is of great interest to her and she is drawn to his passion for “the psychology of great men” and his resistance to the war (290). When the dining party is forced into the wine cellar/makeshift bomb shelter, the close proximity of the individuals catalyzes some emotions that Eleanor had never experienced. When the venture outside of their hiding place, Woolf writes, “Eleanor came into the drawing-room. It looked larger than she remembered it, and very spacious and comfortable...the fire was burning brightly; it was warm; it was cheerful” (293). This altered perspective seems to awaken something in Eleanor’s understanding of her position in the world. While she initially felt that she had nothing to say or to learn about the state of war, she suddenly yearns for understanding. She bursts out, “I’m glad I’m alive. Is that wrong, Renny?” to which he replies, “I have spent the evening sitting in a coal cellar while other people try to kill each other above my head” (295). Nicholas then begins discussing the New World that will be brought about by war. “Eleanor wished that he would go on talking—the man she called Nicholas. When, she wanted to ask him, when will this New World come? When shall we be free? When shall we live adventurously, wholly, not like cripples in a cave? He seemed to have released something in her; she felt not only a new space of time, but new powers, something unknown to her” (297). Eleanor then ends this internalized soliloquy with the mantra, “We shall be free, we shall be free” (297). But free from what? The awakening that Eleanor experiences is one that should have been the impetus behind her previous involvement with women’s causes. In all actuality, she does not become agitated to act out against the war, but to find something within herself. When confronted with impending doom on a personal level, the changes that the Pargiter women feigned after

their mother's death finally occur for Eleanor. This marks a change in all aspects of her life, and when readers meet her again in "Present Day", "Her face was lit up by the glow of the sun as it sank over London" (306).

In the spaces between "1917" and "Present Day," a strong friendship blossoms between Nicholas and Eleanor. The "vigorous" appearance that all of the family members silently reflect upon can be accredited to this friendship. Woolf makes it known that Nicholas is not interested in Eleanor in a romantic way; he is actually a homosexual who escaped persecution by coming to England. But Nicholas' presence gives Eleanor a confidence that is similar to the security felt between Orlando and Shelmerdine. Eleanor begins truly living only after her life is threatened and a solution is developed through an alliance with Nicholas. The entire Pargiter family gathers in "Present Day," and many are surprised by Eleanor's vivaciousness and the entertaining and traveling that pepper her old age. In a conversation with her niece Peggy, Eleanor discusses the portrait of her mother and says that "It was hidden by the dirt. But I can just remember it, when I was a child" (325). The picture has been cleaned and "the face, the dress, the basket of flowers all shone softly melting into each other" (325). Eleanor uncovers the things lying within and underneath and begins truly living.

The Years does not glorify Eleanor, though. Peggy considers her flighty and senile. Anytime Eleanor becomes cheerful or hopeful, Peggy finds fault with it. Woolf writes, "Eleanor gave the address to the cabman and sat down with a jerk in her corner. Peggy glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. It was the force that she put into the words that impressed her, not the words. It was as if she still believed with passion—she, old Eleanor—in the things that man had destroyed. A wonderful generation, she though,

as they drove off. Believers...” (331). Peggy’s attitude towards her aunt is one of judgment. She thinks, “Old age must have endless avenues, stretching away and away down its darkness” (332). Sadly, what Peggy does not recognize is that her choices—ones that are unconventional and independent—are very similar to Eleanor’s. Instead of looking to her aunt as a resource or a person who lived through a war, Peggy finds Eleanor delusional. Woolf writes of this missed opportunity in a way that brings great dissatisfaction to the relationship between the older and younger generations:

She was alone with Eleanor in the cab. And they were passing houses. Where does she begin, and where do I end? she thought...On they drove. They were two living people, driving across London; two sparks of life enclosed in two separate bodies...But what is this moment; and what are we? The puzzle was too difficult for her to solve. She sighed. (334)

When Peggy reacts this way, Eleanor sagaciously comments, “You’re too young to feel that” (335). However, this hopeful moment is thwarted by the dramatic distance between the ages. By exploring these intimate, poignant moments in the life of a family, Woolf is able to do the kind of writing that she experiments with for nearly all of her career—life-writing. *The Years* is the story of a simple woman’s life. Eleanor Pargiter experiences changes but does not always change because of them. Her life has its obligations and its little joys, but her moments of being allow her to free herself from the Pargiter family history.

In writing this novel, it seems that Woolf was attempting to untangle her own family history. The Stephen and Cameron families both encouraged females to find a place, but mostly to form a family. Eleanor Pargiter may not have married and procreated, but her life does influence the lives around her. And, perhaps because of her late awakening, she more fully appreciates and cares a great deal for her family members.

The choices made do not strip Eleanor of options, but bring about different ones. When the other women arrive at the family gathering, the comparisons made between them and the eldest sister is important; Milly has grown portly and somewhat repulsive; Delia is a fake Irishwoman; Rose is eccentric and almost an embarrassment to the family. Eleanor, because she was devoted to the family and because of her selflessness, seems to be rewarded for this sacrifice.

Feminism or something more?

In summation, Woolf's feminism changed over her lifetime. As she became more educated, more politically active, and more self-aware, those maturation became the stuff of her novels. Inevitably, the relationships formed between women speak more about Woolf's feminism than Woolf's non-fiction works do. While *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* are inarguably important, Woolf had already gained a strong female voice by the beginning of her career. The intimate portrayals rendered depict women's lives as meaningful, necessary, and misunderstood by patriarchal figures. By exploring these themes in an elongated, evolving manner, Woolf conveys a sense of purpose to her female readers and herself. Woolf's inclusion within a community ultimately influenced her to become the prolific critic and novelist that she was. Unlike the other women within this study, Woolf's Bloomsbury group insulated her from the marginalization that she would have likely faced had she not married Leonard Woolf. As many contemporary feminist and cultural scholars suggest, individuals who exist outside of the culture that they belong to experience a unique form of isolation. Woolf's desire to write about the average person on an average day could not differ more from her father's ambition to immortalize great deeds by great men. Without the inner conviction to

continue exploring the lives of the obscure through her writing and without the community of introspective and supportive artists whom surrounded her, Virginia Woolf's writing may not have ever reached the colossal strength and ethereal beauty that it inevitably did.

Chapter IV

Nella Larsen and the Writing of Social Isolation

As a modernist author, Nella Larsen is difficult to place. As a woman of African and European descent living in America, Larsen often found herself classified as an African-American. Her strained relationship with her white European mother and white step-family created conflict among Larsen's family situation from early on. While striving to construct a life that would release her from racial, gender-based, and social constraints, Larsen inevitably found it necessary to close herself off from the outside world. Critics are often fascinated with Larsen's mysteriously reclusive behavior during the later years of her life. Despite her positive reception into the Harlem Renaissance movement's leading voices, at the first sign of struggle, Larsen was abandoned by nearly everyone who once lauded her artistry. Removing herself from this unforgiving literary circle was Larsen's choice. Perhaps because of her swift exit from the spotlight, her two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, are misconstrued by the very critical perspectives that Larsen tried to avoid for much of her life. Larsen's work depicts a keen sensitivity to racial barriers and struggles—topics that were often too taboo to be included within mainstream Anglo-American literature of the early twentieth century but were commonly explored within African-American literature and other minority works. Larsen's race and background placed her in an interesting authorial position; she lived closely with whites and chose a career that was predominantly white, but self-identified as black. Her nursing career and education gave her many opportunities that other women—of any color—did not have. Her dedication to that profession was shaken only by what might best be described as an awakening of sorts in which Larsen felt “called” to a different lifestyle.

When Larsen viewed an exhibit of artworks created by African-Americans, her desire to explore her own identity overpowered the precarious social status that she inhabited as a biracial modern woman. The explorations that Larsen performs in her literature utilize race as one of the facets of modern life but also delve into issues of social status, education, and gender in a way that breaks through nearly every barrier that existed within literature at that point in time. Despite her ability to examine these analogous but very different vectors, her position within all of the communities that she encountered was of a woman looking in, not of a voice speaking for the masses. In order to create a voice that represented this marginalized experience, Larsen took on weighty subjects and played upon the ever-present fear of the unknown. For many reasons that will be explored within this analysis, Nella Larsen spent much of her life in a state of isolation. Recognizing and examining Larsen's social and racial isolation affords readers of her work a new and, hopefully, more complex understanding of her work as a novelist.

Critics often dismiss important attributes of Larsen's work because they read her novels as impossible or exclusionary. The middle-class black women who inhabit the world that Larsen writes of are mobile, well-educated, and well-spoken. Many of Larsen's contemporary critics began their analyses of her works by suggesting that Larsen's primary goal is to convince white audiences that blacks are living in equal luxury and capability. Based on the themes of her work, it is easy to see why leaders of the Harlem Renaissance 'Talented Tenth' social uprising would choose to support Larsen. W. E. B. DuBois stated in "Criteria of Negro Art":

We black folk...have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a desire to create, of a new will to be; as though in this morning of group life we had awakened from some sleep that at once dimly

mourns the past and dreams a splendid future... Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before.” (Du Bois 312)

DuBois then adds that the type of beauty that the African-American needs to create is the type of beauty that represents an ethical life and that reflects the aspects of African-American society that are truest. These criteria are juxtaposed against those that a white artist would use in their representations of an oppressed community; despite this difference, African-Americans are urged to align themselves with beauty that is essentially good. And Nella Larsen, despite the larger implications of her work, did fit DuBuis’ criteria. As an educated person of color who employed a traditional means of artistic expression and represented minorities within a beautifully constructed narrative, she was instantly heralded as a strong female within the ‘Talented Tenth.’ But it seems that involvement within social uprising was not Larsen’s primary goal. If it had been, it is likely that she would have continued writing in order to further promote the cause.

While Nella Larsen was not a member of the ‘Talented Tenth’, she was a biracial woman writing about modern marginalized groups. Larsen’s involvement with many different groups contributes to the fact that her work has been misunderstood since it first appeared in the late 1920s. In “Blue Notes on Black Sexuality,” Ann duCille writes that many of the key figures in the African-American movements of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly those energies that comprise the various aspects of the Harlem Renaissance (including the ‘social uprising’ groups, the return to folk roots groups, and those who decided to align themselves more closely with Anglos), found Larsen’s writing good, but not “bluesy” enough. duCille states that even decades later, “contemporary African

American cultural criticism is actively engaged in ‘recreating a romantic discourse of a rural black folk in which to situate the source of an Afro-American culture.’ And the quintessential sign of the folk source is the blues” (duCille 420). There is an attempt among contemporary cultural scholarship to return to the basics and often Larsen’s work becomes lost in the shuffle; it does not fit into any of the prescribed categories. For example, the work that Larsen produced does not exploit the female body or the female experience in the ways that the blues typically does. It does not attempt to position African-Americans in a type of folkloric Americana. Women within Larsen’s novels are given agency and often have priorities and dreams that often have nothing to do with men or sexuality. For Larsen, sexuality is not the only primal urge. Many female blues singers utilize sexual assertiveness in order to act upon what agency they do have, but many times, this agency is used to attain or re-attain a man. Sexual tension definitely exists within Larsen’s created relationships, but the overt and brazen femininity described in blues songs and the myth-making of the Harlem Renaissance does not define Larsen’s novels. Instead, it lurks beneath the surface and enhances the other narrative techniques that Larsen employs within her search for identity.

Examining social structures allows Larsen to comment upon some very modern situations. Many critics have read Larsen’s work as propagating a petit-bourgeois mindset amongst a group that was strategically attempting to empower itself through an examination of and a return to its folk heritage. It still representing its ability to crossover and function within the WASP culture of the early twentieth century. While her novels do contain scenes that present middle-class problems in an honest and candid way, critics seem to forget that Larsen was not necessarily attempting to contribute to the

Harlem Renaissance as an African-American. While the concept of ‘social uplift’ possibly inspired her to pursue a writing career, it does not seem that Larsen’s primary interest was in the politics or propaganda of the Harlem Renaissance movement. In particular, social uplift becomes an issue that leaves Larsen’s more active biracial characters cold. In particular, Irene’s involvement with various African-American causes and Clare’s inability to make an impact on anyone at Naxos hint at the experience of biracial Americans: if they are not fully one thing or another, they cannot participate in the progress of the race that they most closely identify with. This isolation becomes a constant barrier for Larsen’s characters.

For many years, various groups have manipulated Larsen’s texts in order to fit their own goals. But whether Larsen intended to make political statements or not is actually irrelevant. What she definitely was endeavoring to accomplish was a raw, unabashed exploration of the dual roles of woman and biracial individual through the conflicts and (often unsatisfying) resolutions of her novels. Instead of being the most important attribute of her writing, race becomes a factor that presents the same marginalization and isolation as gender, nationality, and class. By recognizing the various and complicated methods Larsen uses instead of fixating this study only upon the use of race, we recognize more complex themes within Larsen’s work. Larsen is most interested in exploring the ways in which undervalued or underestimated members of a group are able to manipulate, subvert, and function outside of patriarchal structures. However, these different channels of exploration also lend themselves to further discussion of race, gender, and marginalized groups in general. The displaced lives that Larsen explores do not end happily very often. Most frequently, while attempting to discover their identities,

these individuals find themselves forced into further isolation. Like many of her contemporaries, Larsen wrote about a group to which she did belong but only from an outside perspective.

Modernity allowed individuals who inhabited these outer borders of culture to gain distance from their homelands. Like James Joyce's writings on Ireland and Gertrude Stein's reflections on American identity, observing from afar can provide writers with an interesting angle; when they remove themselves from the pressures of their situations, they can view their societal constraints differently. The relief afforded through this distancing is not permanent, though. Often, characters realize that their identities are too closely tied with the very groups that oppress them. Later cultural critics like Gloria Anzaldua examine the experiences of borderland inhabitants. As Anzaldua discusses, sometimes leaving home is the only way to create a real life. Larsen left home early on and trained as a nurse. This independence allowed her to break with a family that reminded her of her isolation and difference on a daily basis. The idea of an unsafe or unpleasant home life reappears multiple times in Larsen's writings—especially when characters who have begun to feel secure within a particular setting recognize their isolation. Easy solutions and happy endings are nonexistent within Larsen's work.

Larsen's writing is lucid, clever, and filled with bits of autobiography that have baffled many researchers and scholars. It is entirely possible that this elusiveness is intentional. Nella Larsen was a very intelligent woman. She was also a woman who, somewhat notoriously, never spoke clearly or directly about her past or her feelings. Another possible reading of her novels suggests that Larsen's work reflects an artist who was more interested in things outside of herself after spending a troubled and

occasionally isolated life in reflection. This particular theory is helpful when reading scenes in which Larsen forces a character to choose between their notions of morality and their sense of self.

Acknowledging Larsen's unusual position in relation to patriarchal norms is crucial in an examination of her work. Although she was not governed by white males in the ways that some of her contemporaries were (because she was not considered white and also because she did not attempt to "pass" or enter into marriage with a white man), Larsen was manipulated by powerful members of the Harlem Renaissance. She also lived within a patriarchal society and inevitably felt its pressures, too. At a point in history when African-Americans were furiously creating art and attempting to raise the "Talented Tenth" up from the masses, Nella Larsen contributed, was lauded, and then pulled away. Contemporary readers must keep in mind that although scholars are quick to label her a member of the Harlem Renaissance movement, Nella Larsen was not necessarily attempting the same things as other African-Americans of that time; she was of African and Danish descent but never sought out an African-American identity in the ways that others did. And, although she did not become active in the political aspects of the movement that she is most closely associated with, her work became a part of its mission and success. While W. E. B. DuBois and others praised both Larsen and her work during the late 1920s, they were quick to abandon her.

In order to better understand Nella Larsen, I begin by classifying her in a simple way. Nella Larsen was a woman, a modern, and a writer. She had the unique experience of being raised in a family who she did not identify with or resemble. She was well-travelled and intelligent. Instead of completely weighing down this interpretation of her

work with social or racial expectations, my analysis will first focus on Nella Larsen as a modern woman writer. The other aspects of her experience and subject matter do influence this analysis, but we must first look at Larsen as a woman. And, in order to better understand her writing style, we must delve into her two novels. I must acknowledge previous criticism and state that I agree with certain recent analyses performed by George Hutchinson and Thadious Davis. There are aspects of Larsen's novels that are undeniably autobiographical. But, because her novels are too often read strictly as pieces of the Harlem Renaissance art collection, Larsen is often misrepresented and misread. The intricacies, language, and style of Larsen's novels are astounding and worthy of critical attention because of their artistry and because of the beautiful way that Larsen creates inter-character relationships. The same methods of expression and exploration used by members of high-Modernism are present within Larsen's art. Larsen was incredibly marginalized by her experiences. What is most important—and what is often overlooked—is that Larsen was a modern woman writer who was already established in another career but chose writing for a specific purpose that may forever allude scholars who are drawn into her stories. Despite the things that we cannot know, her subject matter and her careful observations and examinations are important because of their poignancy and because of their originality.

Above all, Larsen is honest about the wickedness of people's motivations. Because Larsen inhabits a space outside of patriarchal rule and does not need to depend upon men in order to survive, her writing accomplishes something very different from some of her contemporaries, and cannot be pigeonholed at all. Her interactions with the movers and shakers of the Harlem Renaissance must be considered in any study of her

work. The movement is often viewed as a blossoming of African-American voices within literature, but is now expanding to include “race-building and image-building, jazz poetics, progressive or socialist poetics, racial integration, the musical and sexual freedom of Harlem nightlife, and the pursuit of hedonism” (Watson 9). Larsen’s influence upon this particular definition of the Harlem Renaissance will be dissected within this essay in order to better understand why Nella Larsen’s novels have long been marginalized as tales of African-American experience instead of being included in the canon of literature that discusses the modern or, more particularly, modern woman’s experience.

Larsen Examines Passions: *Quicksand* and the quest for ‘my people’

In the extremely self-conscious novel *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen examines choices made by a biracial young woman, Helga Crane. As the novel opens, readers are introduced to Helga Crane and quickly realize that she is stuck. Helga teaches at a school for African-American children from affluent families, but is strikingly lighter and decidedly more fashionable than her “full-blooded” African-American colleagues. Larsen begins the novel with a discussion of Helga’s desire for an “even more soothing darkness” than the one she finds in the “audacious villainy” of novels that she reads voraciously (7). An avid reader and a believer in the power of education, Helga’s inability to reach her students and “inculcate knowledge into her indifferent classes” (8) leaves her incredibly frustrated by the machine that governs the Naxos school and the fact that “life had died out of it” (8). Her efforts to impact her students capsize and leave her yearning for an escape—one that requires both funding and permission from her fiancé, a

Naxos figurehead. Helga's liberation is necessitated by an impulsive reaction against the systems of racial uplift. Larsen writes that,

Much as [Helga] wanted to shake the dust of the place from her feet forever, she realized that there would be great difficulties. Red tape. James Vayle. Money. Other work. Regretfully she was forced to acknowledge that it would be vastly better to wait until June...But this reflection, sensible, expedient, thought it was, did not reconcile her. To remain seemed too hard. (14)

Thus begins Helga's struggle with finding place. More than a conflict based upon racial issues, Helga's dissatisfaction arises when she realizes that she is dissatisfied with her position as a modern woman. Although she is employed, she does not possess many choices or a great deal of freedom. Primarily due to her middle-class status and the social entanglements of an engagement, she cannot move easily or freely. While James Vayle was initially the "perfect" man for Helga because of his desire to marry her, upon their arrival at the Naxos school, James Vayle was "now completely 'naturalized,' as they used laughingly to call it. Helga, on the other hand, had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying" (11). Larsen's clear depiction of Helga's lack of position within the African-American community, a microcosm focused on educating the masses in order to eliminate the discrepancies between the schooling of black and white children, is particularly interesting. Helga's biracial identity excludes her from the in-group of the 'Talented Tenth' mainly because she cannot decide which group of "her people" she wishes to belong to; her progress and mobility do not entirely reflect upon African-Americans, but tie her to things that are more distant and exotic.

Helga's exoticism becomes eroticism during her travels to major American cities and abroad. In Naxos, Helga clothes herself in jewel tones and rich fabrics that she

cannot actually afford. Larsen writes that, “Most of her earnings had gone into clothes, into books, into the furnishings of the room that held her. All her life Helga Crane had loved and longed for nice things” (Larsen 10). The luxuries that Helga chooses for herself provide her with an aesthetically beautiful life but not a financially secure one. Her unpopularity at Naxos is due in part to her beauty but also in part to these indulgences; “‘pride’ and ‘vanity’ her detractors called it” (10). Helga’s so-called pride is one that adorns but does not necessarily intend to fetishize the feminine body. Larsen is careful to point out that it is Helga who enjoys beautiful things and attains them for herself. Instead of being depicted as a kept woman, Helga is her own woman. What Helga cannot accomplish on her own, though, is a position within any community. During every attempt to find work, Helga is asked for references that she cannot provide because of her dramatic departure from her previous employer. “‘References,’ thought Helga, resentfully, bitterly, as she went out the door into the crowded garish street in search of another agency, where her visit was equally in vain. Days of this sort of thing. Weeks of it. And of the futile scanning and answering of newspaper advertisements” (37).

Helga begins to recognize that without ties to a well-founded community, she cannot accomplish anything. She even begins attending church in the hopes that “some good Christian would speak to her, invite her to return, or inquire kindly if she was a stranger in the city” (37). Helga’s desire for community leads her to religion, but she quickly becomes dismayed when no one speaks to her. Larsen writes that “she became bitter, distrusting religion more than ever. She was herself unconscious of the faint hint of offishness which hung about her and repelled advances, an arrogance that stirred in people a peculiar irritation. They noticed her, admired her clothes, but that was all...”

(37). This 'offishness' diminishes when Helga begins working as an editor for the 'race woman,' Mrs. Hayes-Rore. Helga travels around the U.S. with her and assists in writing speeches intended for the betterment of African-Americans. Larsen writes that "these speeches proved to be merely patchworks of others' speeches and opinions... Ideas, phrases, and even whole sentences and paragraphs were lifted bodily from previous orations and published works of Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and other doctors of the race's ills" (41). Helga's strivings for independence and identity in America are met with only one option. She can either remain outside African-American society or she can assist in the uplift of the race by echoing the words of others. Within Larsen's novels, the lack of credit given to 'race women' and public figures is important. There are no women cited within the race woman's speeches. Instead of writing a hero's tale, Larsen provides insight into the methods that African-American women use to encourage and educate their contemporaries. Helga's sense of community is diminished by the beginning of spring in New York. She finds work at an insurance company based on Mrs. Hayes-Rore's recommendation, but finds that instead of assisting her in the creation of an identity, Harlem "filled her with restlessness" (50).

Larsen continues discussion of Helga's dissatisfaction within the affluent African-American community a few pages later. She writes that by the time summer rolled around, "Not only did the crowds of nameless folk on the street annoy her, she began to actually dislike her friends. Even the gentle Anne distressed her. Perhaps because Anne was obsessed by the race problem and fed her obsession" (51). The 'race problem' does not particularly alarm Helga because she does not identify herself exclusively as an African-American. Her struggles are related to how she is perceived by others but also to

her lack of freedom as a woman of limited means and grandiose expectations. If she is to reject and begin hating her whiteness, Helga will lose a significant part of herself. This is not something she is willing to do, and it is a choice that she is not forced to make because of a fortunate turn of events. When Helga's white uncle leaves her five thousand dollars, her "first feeling was one of unreality. This changed almost immediately into one of relief, of liberation" (57). Helga recognizes that the money frees her from "these despised black folk" and aligns her more closely with "my own people" (57). Her own people are, at this point in time, the individuals with whom she believes she should have been allowed to remain—her aunt and uncle in Copenhagen with whom she stayed during her youth. Upon deciding that Copenhagen will be her next destination, Helga clothes herself not in white, but in a:

...cobwebby black net touched with orange which she had bought last spring in a fit of extravagance and never worn, because on getting home she and Anne had considered it too *décolleté*, and too *outré*. Anne's words: 'There's not enough of it, and what there is gives you the air of something about to fly,' came back to her, and she smiled as she decided that she would certainly wear the black net. For her it would be a symbol. She was about to fly. (59)

Helga's determination to shed and agitate her ties to the black community through this costuming mark the beginning of a highly performative phase of the novel.

Through the donning of various colors and carefully selected silhouettes, Helga empowers herself and becomes the marginal figure that she had for so long avoided being. The black net that she dons not only allows her the feeling of flight, but catches certain things within its 'cobwebby' construction—including the complete disapproval of her black friends. While wearing the dress, Helga marvels at the beautiful Audrey Denney, a woman who is ostracized and considered somewhat of a race traitor by

Helga's cohort of pseudo-activists. When Anne and Helga publicly disagree about the intermingling of the races, Helga becomes captivated by the image of a mulatto woman romancing a black man. This relationship does not strike Helga as problematic; instead, it is attractive to her and seems to conjure up erotic feelings that she had long suppressed. Upon awakening from this daydream, she finds that her party has left her. Unalarmed by this act of rejection, she again watches Audrey Denney. Larsen writes that at this moment, "Helga gave it up. She felt that it would be useless to tell them that what she felt for the beautiful, calm, cool girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people, was not contempt, but envious admiration. So she remained silent, watching the girl" (63). Helga's own brazen act of performance is met with a vision of what could be through the image of biracial beauty and possibility.

This scene in particular helps readers understand that the options open to Helga in Harlem are even narrower than those in Naxos. Her escape to Copenhagen comes at a most opportune time. In viewing the image of a life that would provide her with ever-elusive inner and outer happiness, Helga recognizes that attaining it is impossible for her as long as she remains silent. In order to attain the beautiful things—now shifted from outer accoutrements to a sense of assurance, courage, and confidence—she must first find a voice. Helga believes this voice might be found in Copenhagen, amongst 'my own people.'

Upon arriving at her destination, Helga Crane's experiences are completely foreign. In particular, the fashions of Copenhagen directly contradict those of New York. Instead of being shamed or scandalized by Helga's darker complexion, her aunt and uncle, the Dahls, celebrate her exoticism. Helga's aunt tells her, "But you, you're young.

And you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression" (70). This conversation between the two women forces readers to question Fru Dahl's motivations because of its stark contrast to the costumes Helga donned at earlier points in the novel. When she learns that her old habits and fetishes are now welcome, Helga cries, "isn't it too gay? Too—too—*outré*?" This repetition of one of Anne's oppressive phrases connects her yearning for freedom to the indoctrinations of her African-American friends. Helga Crane might enjoy the finer things in life, but her personality and passions are highly malleable and are defined by her surroundings and the company that she keeps. Her voice, then, is still too easily manipulated by outsiders to speak up and claim any certain path for itself.

During her time in Copenhagen, Helga initially feels as though she is valued among "my people," but soon realizes that she is being commodified. Larsen writes that upon meeting Axel Olsen, Helga notes that the meeting, "conveyed to Helga her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock. Their progress through the shops was an event; an event for Copenhagen as well as for Helga Crane. Her dark, alien appearance was to most people an astonishment" (75). Helga's status as a hard-working, ambitious American girl is thwarted in Copenhagen. While she does not experience racism in the way she had experienced it in America, the attention paid to her beauty unsettles rather than flatters her. Instead of being a person of value, she is now looked upon as an exotic item that can be owned by a racist albeit kind nationality. Helga's experience in Copenhagen is the same isolated marginalization in a different costume.

This experience marks an important change in Helga's views of herself. When confronted with outright objectification, Helga finally begins to recognize the necessity for personal agency. She becomes irritated with the life in Denmark and, familiarly, finds everyone and everything there disagreeable. But her choice to leave Denmark instead of allowing Axel Olsen to bed but not wed or to 'purchase' her provides Helga with the agency and conviction needed for her to return to America. Even though to return "back to America, where they hated Negroes" seems an undesirable option, the choice to stay with Axel is worse. He tells Helga that, "You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am" (89). But this admission of love—if readers even consider it such—conveys Helga's precarious situation within Copenhagen society. Instead of being treated as a capable, worthwhile individual, Helga is displayed and adorned like some kind of precious stone. Axel's desire for her, then, is not one of passionate romantic love, but a patriarchal desire to attain something that is exotic, different, and admired by many. Helga Crane rejects his proposal for both an affair and, later, a marriage, and through this self-preserving act gains some sense of what she really needs. She tells her aunt and uncle, "I'm homesick, not for America, but for Negroes" (94).

While Helga Crane claims to make decisions based upon what will align her most closely with her 'people', I argue that race is not her biggest problem. She only believes race to be the deciding factor because she is so entrenched in a race-conscious culture. Rather than race, one of the largest trials that Helga must overcome is the lack of guidance that she receives from someone who genuinely has her best interest at heart.

Because matriarchal figures played so great a role in the arrangement and procurement of marriages and the navigations of society—even during Modernism’s more liberal decades—the fact that Helga is an orphan is her first, and possibly most significant, problem. The restlessness she experiences always occurs when she finds that whatever mother-figure she has latched onto is unsatisfactory. In order of appearance within the text, the list is as follows: The women of Naxos do not understand her and are not kind to her. Race women bore her. Anne is too obsessed with racial hatred and not sensitive enough to Helga’s biracial background. Fru Dahl’s desire to place Helga in a good marriage offends Helga’s sensibilities because she is unaccustomed to the ways in which women function in homosocial or even mother-daughter relationships. These unsatisfactory woman-to-woman relations leave Helga even more isolated from any sort of community. Because these relationships consistently fail, Helga turns to another kind of relationship once she begins her journey back to the United States.

When Helga leaves Denmark, Larsen places her aboard a large ship. Helga looks back at the land that she once looked forward to and wonders, “Why couldn’t she have two lives, or why couldn’t she be satisfied in one place?” (95). This scene allows Larsen to revisit the grand exit that Helga made from Naxos. In all situations, immediately after realizing that her reality does not match up with the idyllic life that she imagines, Helga flees. Fear of the unknown overtakes Helga and without someone acting on her behalf, her decisions become incredibly misguided and desperate.

Upon arriving back in the United States, Helga finds comfort in the company of “her people,” but does not experience contentedness. The passion that she feels for Anne’s husband is overpowering and Helga finds herself burning from the inside out.

When Helga and Dr. Anderson have an uncomfortable conversation in which Helga feels that he “belittled and ridiculed her” (108), she reacts with a fiery passion and slaps him across the face. The outbursts of emotion that occur during this phase of the novel can be read as indicators of a woman losing control. However, I believe that these honest moments in which Helga allows herself to act upon her inner passions free her from being objectified or as Larsen calls it, “belittled.” Larsen writes that Helga “wanted so terribly something special from” Dr. Anderson (109). I believe that rather than wanting something *from* him, Helga wants to be something special *to* him. Because maternal figures and homosocial relationships leave Helga feeling inadequate, misunderstood, and often incredibly jealous, Helga seeks out a patriarchal figure. Dr. Anderson’s presence throughout the novel becomes equated with possibility and safety, and even understanding. Helga views Dr. Anderson as an equal and a sympathizer, not a threat. The fact that Helga loses this opportunity to Anne causes her to search quite desperately for a replacement. She finds such a proxy in the character of the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green.

During the church scene, Larsen places a very frayed and vulnerable Helga in Reverend Green’s church service—clad in a wet red dress and burning with fever. Upon seeing her clothing, one churchgoer exclaims that Helga is “a scarlet ‘oman” (113) in need of salvation, supplication, and confession. Helga confronts the state of her soul while in Reverend Green’s church, and is horrified and exhausted by both the process and the findings. Interestingly, Helga is automatically assumed to be a “Jezebel” of sorts because of her dress. Fashion and simple vanities define Helga, a woman who has maintained both her chastity and dignity throughout every encounter with men in the

novel. These assumptions separate Helga from ‘her people’ within the church and, yet again, remove her from belonging to any in-group. Instead of finding strength within church, Helga (again) finds herself unsettled by religion. When she regains control of her emotions after the church service, she agrees to marry Pleasant Green and move south. Rather than continuing her struggle for identity, Helga decides that marriage to a simple man will provide her with some peace. This marriage initially promises to align her with African-Americans, but despite the fact that Pleasant Green’s religiousness rubs off on his wife, who “did not hate him, the town, or the people...for a long time” (119), the happiness does wear off. Instead of being an individual who feels fulfilled within herself, Helga becomes a ‘good’ southern reverend’s wife—something resembling the Naxos women whom she once despised for their plainness, lack of sophistication, and commonness. As the novel progresses, though, Helga begins to lose some of the charm and shine that once created conflict between her and other African-Americans.

The most haunting scenes within *Quicksand* occur during Helga’s marriage. In her attempts to be a good wife, Helga loses herself completely. She has too many children too quickly and is completely depleted of the energy and vitality that once gained her admiration. Margaret Sanger’s manifesto “Woman and the New Race” assists in an understanding of circumstances surrounding Helga’s seemingly endless string of difficult and painful pregnancies. Within the radical document, published in 1920, Sanger states that modern women are asserting their “right to voluntary motherhood” and that “birth control is the means by which woman attains basic freedom, so it is the means by which she must and will uproot the evil she has wrought through her submission” (Sanger 327). Given the impact that Sanger’s argument had upon women within modern societies,

Helga's submission to her husband's form of patriarchy and Larsen's representation of her pregnancies as cruel and isolating are troubling. Even when Helga is creating a family and a home with someone, she remains isolated from a group—one that she has played a pivotal role in creating. Despite her attempts to become like and guide the women in the congregation, Helga is ostracized. Her children do not ease this isolation. As she becomes more consumed with motherhood and finds that “there was no time for the pursuit of beauty, or for the uplifting of other harassed and teeming women, or for the instruction of their neglected children” (124), Helga also asks herself, “How did other women, other mothers, manage?” (125). Helga struggles during the birth of her fourth child within less than three years, and sinks into a coma-like state. Larsen writes that everyone was worried for Helga after the birth because of her instant detachment from society, but states that “Helga, however, was unconcerned, undisturbed by the commotion around her. It was all part of the general unreality. Nothing reached her. Nothing penetrated the kind darkness into which her bruised spirit had retreated” (129). This kind darkness echoes the same darkness that Helga longed for during her time at Naxos—the kind that allows the soul room to breathe and relax, but requires no real action or effort. Helga is allowed to rest within this darkness, but only for a few short weeks. As she gains strength, she makes plans to flee her family situation and abandon her children and her life as a reverend's wife. However, these dreams are never realized. Unlike past breaks from unsavory situations, Helga is too tied down by family and poor health to make any moves. The novel ends just as Helga becomes pregnant with her fifth child. This fifth child promises to be Helga's last and is commonly read as a death sentence of sorts.

The cycles that occur within *Quicksand* suggest that biracial women can become trapped within their indecision. However, the greater problem within this text is the general immobility of modern women. Helga makes sweeping changes only when she receives aid—mostly financial aid—from men. She is thwarted in all of her attempts to create a homosocial community, and then finds herself sentenced to a life as a vessel for countless children. Her body, spirit, and vitality are stripped from her. *Quicksand's* message rings true in the story of any race; Helga's biracial identity does not prevent her from having advantages nor provide more possibilities to her. As a modern woman, Helga Crane is confined and governed by her feminine dependence alone.

Setting Passions Loose: *Passing* and combating social norms

Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, is founded upon the same social expectations that exist within *Quicksand*. However, instead of focusing on one woman's experience within the modernized world of the 1920s, Larsen concerns herself with the bonds between women of color. Her two main characters, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, are both products of educated African-American families who live in inner-city Chicago during the 1910s. While Irene's family is dependable, Clare's is unstable and after the death of both of her parents, Clare leaves their community. The women share many common traits, including their incredibly light skin tones. Similarly to race within *Quicksand*, *Passing* depicts race as an exploitable commodity. Instead of being exploited by outsiders, though, the biracial women of *Passing* are given the opportunity to exploit themselves. While this initially seems empowering, it quickly becomes problematic. Clare and Irene both easily pass as white. Although Irene chooses to marry a significantly darker African-American man and coax her husband into becoming part of affluent

Harlem Renaissance society, she is aware that, “White people were so stupid about such things...they always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro” (11). In contrast, Clare has “dark, almost black eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin” (9), and chooses to pass as white and marry an incredibly racist white man. Throughout the novel the women are greatly concerned with race and the concept of racial identity. Larsen carefully orchestrates many scenes within the novel so that the advantages and threats of ‘passing’ are bared to readers in a problematic way. Many articles written during the 1920s and 1930s discouraged the act of passing and marked passers as traitors to the African-American race.⁴ Deeply pathetic stories of grieving families and broken hearts were used as propaganda against passing by white and black media alike. [footnote]. However, Larsen’s focus in the novel is not the act of ‘passing’ itself, but the threats of jealousy and desperation among a marginalized group of light-skinned African-Americans.

Passing begins with a letter. The letter is “a thin sly thing...furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Foreign paper and of extraordinary size” (5). Women and their letters were not necessarily viewed as threatening to the patriarchy during the early twentieth century. The sly letter that Irene receives is of no concern to the patriarchy and, because of the relationship between its sender and recipient and its contents, it is subversive in nature. A letter that appears innocent but could bring danger easily shakes Irene’s heavily controlled lifestyle. As the wife of a well-to-do African-

⁴ Among these are Frances E. W. Harper’s “The Moment of Regret,” James Weldon Johnson’s “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,” and Langston Hughes’ “Passing for White, Passing for Colored, Passing for Negroes Plus”

American doctor, Irene Redfield carefully constructs an image of security and affluence for herself, her husband, and their two boys. But the Redfield family is not as happy as they appear on the surface. Brian Redfield, Irene's husband, was persuaded into medical studies by his wife but finds that he is deeply unsatisfied and ill-suited to the pressures placed upon educated African-Americans. He complains to his wife that, "Uplifting the brother's no easy job. I'm as busy as a cat with fleas, myself. Lord! How I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways" (39). But Brian's happiness does not matter to Irene so long as their image is secure. His desires to travel to Brazil are treated with contempt and Irene tries to mother him rather than understand him. Irene associates her family not with happiness or love, but with financial and social security. Later in the novel Irene realizes that "she couldn't be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more?" (77). This desire for social standing among the African-American community drives Irene to become an ideal hostess but also fills her with jealousy towards women who are capable of deeper and more complex feelings. Women like Clare Kendry pose a serious threat to Irene Redfield not because they intend to steal love or attention away from her, but because the passions they feel could offer something more to Irene's husband and tear apart her well-structured security. Irene's security is isolating, though. Because she has had to force her husband into a role that he is unhappy with and because she makes a habit of 'passing' when alone, Irene does not seem completely secure within her own identity at any point in the narrative.

Much like her letter to Irene, Clare Kendry herself is sly and disarming. Her presence, like the paper she uses, is foreign and overwhelming. Clare exudes confidence and beauty, and in nearly every scene in which she appears, characters remark on her striking appearance and kind nature. As their reinstated friendship grows, Irene becomes increasingly envious of Clare's ability to effortlessly gain people's admiration. Irene remembers neighborhood girls talking of Clare's "having way," which enabled her to consistently gain the very things that she most wanted (14). This 'having way' does not immediately strike Irene as threatening; upon their first encounter after a twelve year absence, Irene simply remarks that Clare "seemed certainly to have succeeded in having a few of the things that she wanted" (14). Overwhelmed by Clare's beauty, Irene catches herself staring at her in the Drayton Hotel's restaurant. When Clare stares back, Irene does not place her but begins to grow alarmed that Clare knows Irene's race. Despite Irene's belief that African-Americans should marry within their own race, she does not think that it is wrong to infiltrate the whites-only restaurant. Irene enters the restaurant after asking for directions to a cool place to drink; the man who gives her directions misunderstands her race and suggests that she visit the Drayton. Irene allows a man to make this mistake and she acts upon it. While Irene enters because of someone else's error—thereby releasing herself from responsibility—Clare enters by lying outright. When Clare realizes that the woman staring at her is not only a fellow passer but an old friend as well. When Clare approaches Irene, Irene's cool demeanor soon melts away. Each time they interact, Irene is eager to please and appease Clare even though each interaction leaves her anxious and often angry. Clare's 'having way' is not lost on Irene. The spaces that Larsen uses for these interactions are always beyond the gaze of the

patriarchy. Men do not typically inhabit these spaces while the women are there.

Additionally, the spaces are often created and nested by their female inhabitants much in the way that Helga Crane fixates on the aesthetics of her rooms at Naxos. The appearance of luxury and comfort are incredibly important within *Passing* because they assist in the creation of a secure image.

The letter and the Drayton Hotel are the initial spaces where Larsen establishes the foundations of the novel's complicated homosocial relationship. In a subsequent scene, the two women meet at Clare's home for tea. Although Irene feels that she has been pressured into attending, as soon as she is greeted by Clare, Irene finds that her "annoyance fled. She was even a little glad that she had come" (23). The two women are accompanied by Gertrude Martin, another old friend from their childhood. Larsen writes that Irene's reaction is "Great goodness! Two of them" (24). Both women had chosen to marry white men. Gertrude's husband and his family were aware of her heritage, though, which does not assuage Irene's annoyance at "being outnumbered"; she experiences "a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well" (25). The talk quickly turns from domestic responsibilities and family life to the paranoia surrounding the color of unborn children. Gertrude and Clare both discuss the fact that "nobody wants a dark child" (26). Irene then adds tension to the situation by responding "in a voice of whose even tones she was proud: 'One of my boys is dark'" (26). Again, Irene becomes an isolated figure because she chooses not to pass. Within the walls of Clare's white husband's home, the three women participate in a type of secret race war. They are quite literally trespassing on white man's property by sitting down to tea within the home of a

man who cannot tell their true races. Within the space, the women are allowed to be truthful about their inner prejudices. Clare escalates the situation when she states, “I do think that colored people—we—are too silly about some things. After all, the thing’s not important to Irene or hundreds of others. Not awfully, even to you, Gertrude. It’s only deserters like me who have to be afraid of the freaks of nature. As my inestimable dad used to say, ‘Everything must be paid for’” (27). Clare’s slip of tongue reveals just how easily she can forget that she is one of the ‘colored people’, the same group whom her husband jeers and criticizes openly. The idea that everything comes with a price is foreign to Irene, though. Her actions are taken to procure a secure home; she herself does not actually pay any price. It is her husband’s lack of happiness that pays for her house and its furnishings. Because her happiness is not infringed upon, she fails to recognize that she herself pays as well. Instead, she treats Clare and Gertrude as though they are robbing the African-American race of something.

This subversive scene of modern femininity is broken when John Bellew arrives home. As he enters the drawing room, he greets his wife with, “Hello, Nig” (28). Both Gertrude and Irene are alarmed at this greeting and find that, “It was hard to believe that even Clare Kendry would permit this ridiculing of her race by an outsider, though he changed to be her husband. So he knew, then, that Clare was a Negro?” However, Irene and Gertrude quickly realize that John Bellew does not know his wife’s true race. The derogatory nickname stems from his observation that “When we were first married, she was as white as—as—well as white as a lily. But I declare she’s gettin’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger” (29). The ironic and deeply uncomfortable situation causes Irene to

respond unusually. Larsen writes, “Irene’s lips trembled almost uncontrollably, but she made a desperate effort to fight back her disastrous desire to laugh, and succeeded” (29). It is only when John Bellew explains his racist views that Irene becomes filled with hatred. As the three black women and one racist white man sit down to a civilized tea, Irene thinks that it is “unbelievable and astonishing that four people could sit so unruffled, so ostensibly friendly, while they were in reality seething with anger, mortification, shame. But no, on second thought she was forced to amend her opinion. John Bellew, most certainly, was as undisturbed within as without” (31).

Irene’s ability to recognize Bellew’s innocence and ignorance is interesting. This particular scene causes Irene to remove blame from Bellew despite the fact that she is “close to tears” (33). Instead, she blames herself for attending the “disagreeable afternoon” (33). She recognizes her isolation as the only non-passing member of the group but is also aware of Bellew’s isolation in his lack of knowledge. This sense of responsibility is particularly interesting because Irene does not assign blame to Clare. Clare is ultimately responsible for placing her ‘friends’ in a situation where they will be presumed to be white and will be forced, because of social graces, to smile and endure ridicule and blatant racism. I believe that Larsen intended to shock readers through Clare Kendry’s complicated living situation more than she wanted them to relate to Irene’s discomfort. The belittling encounter that Gertrude and Irene endure is fleeting compared to the day-to-day oppression of Clare’s marriage. The practice of passing, then, becomes one that is dangerous and often unsatisfactory to those who choose to ‘pass.’ Clare Kendry’s happy marriage is tainted by something she cannot control. Whether imagined or genuine, Clare’s husband notices the changes of her skin tone. Her own body becomes

her greatest betrayer. This contrasts interestingly with the process that the female body goes through within *Quicksand*. In *Passing*, women are dressed well but are not concerned with outer appearance. What they are more concerned with is the possibility that their bodies—the very keys that initially allowed them to pass—will begin changing and revealing their secrets or will become vessels for children whose color gives away their mothers' origins. This lack of control is what is most uncomfortable for the women within *Passing*. Their conflict is much more serious than race; safety and security are threatened by identity and color.

This first uncomfortable situation marks a change within the narrative. In each subsequent meeting between Clare and Irene, the two women gravitate towards one another, are kind and compassionate towards one another, and leave the encounter more entangled in their rekindled friendship. However, as Irene busily attends to her social events and to the uplift of the educated African-American community, she emphatically reminds Clare that the lifestyle she is leading is “not safe at all” (47), and is one that can negatively impact all who enter into Clare's web. Despite her apprehensions, Irene finds that she greets Clare, “Always with a touching gladness that welled up and overflowed on all the Redfield household. Yet Irene could never be sure whether her comings were a joy or a vexation” (57). While Irene seems to enjoy the company and feels more for Clare than she does towards her own husband, Clare's constant and endearing presence forces Irene to reevaluate her views on “passing.” The homosocial relationship between Clare and Irene is complicated by Irene's fear that her security will be shaken by Bellew or by someone else discovering Clare's passing. Irene's actions towards Clare are tolerant and somewhat maternal. Despite her desire to be friendly towards Clare, who she now views

as a victim of ‘passing’ and her own ‘having way’, when Clare becomes the topic of conversation and tension between Brian and Irene, the homosocial relationship is fractured.

Brian Redfield takes agency from his wife when he invites Clare to an event at the Redfield home without consulting Irene. Brian views Clare as a person who should be included regularly in the couple’s social circles because that is the precedent that his wife has established. When his wife exclaims, “Clare! What a nuisance! I didn’t ask her. Purposely”, Brian remarks, “Might a mere man ask why? Or is the reason so subtly feminine that it wouldn’t be understood by him?” (61). Brian Redfield acknowledges the complicated relationship between the two women while also defending *their* friend Clare. Irene’s frustration with her husband is only agitated by this discussion. She remarks immediately before their conversation that despite her efforts to help him in his career, he was “restless and he was not restless. He was discontented, yet there were times when she felt he was possessed of some intense secret satisfaction, like a cat who had stolen the cream” (60). Instead of attributing this shift in attitude towards her own lack of compassion for her husband and for his desires, she immediately suspects him of an affair with Clare Kendry. When she panics and lashes out at her husband—but does not accuse him outright—she is sickened by the fact that he would choose Clare Kendry. More than sickened, though, it seems that Irene is insulted by the contrasts between the women. At this point in the novel, Larsen has already established Clare’s ‘having way,’ but the traits that Irene fears in Clare have not been completely fulfilled by Clare’s own actions. They are merely Irene’s perception of Clare, and her perspective is compromised by her emotions. Upon realizing that her husband feels more for Clare than he does for her,

Irene loses control for the first time in the novel. The dramatic reaction that Larsen discusses also suggests that the allusions to Irene's desire—even if it is an unconscious one—for Clare is stronger than she realizes. Larsen writes, “She closed her unseeing eyes and clenched her fists. She tried not to cry. But her lips tightened and no effort could check the hot tears of rage and shame that sprang into her eyes and flowed down her cheeks; so she laid her face in her arms and wept silently” (63). Even in her emotions, Irene is deeply concerned with appearances and remains isolated by her desire to belong to the social progress of a race that she views as a burden. This reaction is interesting primarily because it is without real passion; Irene has already examined her relationship with her husband earlier in the narrative and found it passionless. It is at this point that Larsen also reveals that the Redfields sleep separately. Their complete lack of intimacy—either physical or emotional—allows readers more insight into their unsatisfying marriage and further complicates the desire that both Brian and Irene seem to harbor for Clare.

Her outburst of emotion is not one of desperation or loss, but one of rage and shame at her goals being undermined. Brian's desires are completely separate from his wife's, and Irene's reaction is directly linked with her inability to control her husband. In Larsen's novel, control is the key to survival. Irene's carefully controlled existence and reputation are shattered when she recognizes that her husband is his own person who can have his own motivations. Irene is then forced to play the perfect hostess in a very *Mrs. Dalloway*-type way; she must look to the routine and ritual of tea for control over her crumbling lifestyle. She must give parties in order to cover the silence around her and the violent reactions inside her.

Even the ritual of tea becomes a victim of Irene's rage, though. As she pours and entertains externally, she is boiling internally. Her internal stream-of-consciousness is particularly telling:

What did it mean? How would it affect her and the boys? The boys! She had a surge of relief. It ebbed, vanished. A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn't count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle. Rage boiled up inside her. There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay a shattered cup. Dark stains dotted the bright rug." (66)

Earlier in the novel, Irene finds validation in her own existence by reminding herself that her position as mother is of extreme importance. But as soon as she realizes that she is not completely in control, she finds herself alone and isolated. The crash and the shattered heirloom leave stains on her perfectly manipulated surroundings. Clare Kendry is the ultimate stain, though, because she could spread and take over Irene's brightly covered life. However, Irene realizes that despite the fact that "It hurt. It hurt like hell," it also "didn't matter if no one knew. If everything could go on as before" (67). Irene's main concern within the narrative is that of appearances. So long as she maintains the façade of well-to-do African-American society, she has what she needs. And in order to ensure the security of her position, she decides that John Bellew must somehow find out about his wife's race. Irene states that although she could contact Bellew herself, she finds herself "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" (69). Irene's relationship towards her race is just as complex as Clare's decision to pass; while one woman chooses to deny the

African-American race and deference to an (assumed) easier, happier life, the other is completely controlled by her devotion to the race.

Inevitably, Irene does take an action that solves her problem. When she encounters John Bellew in the street one day, she does not allow him to shake her hand but does give him the time to observe her and her very obviously African-American companion. The two women walk with their arms linked and their proximity to one another allows Bellew to recognize the traits that he had never realized before. Irene knows that contacting Clare and alerting her to the reality of the situation is the right thing to do, but she simply decides not to do it. Instead, “Irene was conscious of a feeling of relieved thankfulness at the thought that she was probably rid of Clare, and without having lifted a finger or uttered one word” (71). However, Irene *is* responsible for Clare’s predicament. Instead of allowing Clare’s body to give her away, Irene uses her own body as a weapon. When Brian, Clare, and Irene meet to attend a party with friends, Irene does not confess to the meeting with John Bellew, but asks Clare, “have you ever seriously thought what it would mean if he should find out?” (75). Clare’s answer is that freedom would be the result of Bellew’s knowledge about her true race. This freedom is the ultimate threat to Irene because she recognizes that it is the same type of freedom that Brian covets. It is the freedom to be a part of a group or a race without having any responsibility for that race. Because of this threat, Irene again decides to withhold information from Clare. However, Irene does realize that Bellew has most likely already realized the secret that Clare has ceased worrying over.

During the party, many characters comment on the height of the building and the fact that African-Americans have risen to the best floors and best views in the city. This

echoes the Drayton Hotel scene where the two African-American women trespass on a whites-only rooftop. The sense of achievement and high social status color the evening, and when John Bellew barges into the rooftop party and accuses his wife of being a “damned dirty nigger,” Clare calmly states, “Careful. You’re the only white man here” (79). This scene mirrors the first tea-time encounter between the light-skinned African-American women and Bellew. Once again, he is the only white man in attendance. But on this occasion, he is aware of his surroundings and also outnumbered. His isolation is pronounced and also presents a threat. Upon being found out and confronted with truth, Clare is surrounded with individuals whom she considers her in-group. Irene Redfield is appalled by the situation and mainly by Clare’s reaction: “It was the smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (79). And suddenly, Clare Kendry is gone from the roof. All of the partygoers are shocked and flee to see if anything can be done to help Clare, but Irene is frozen in place. One of her only thoughts is, “What if Clare was not dead? She felt nauseated...” (81).

Scholars have myriad views about *Passing*’s ending. Many believe that Clare Kendry simply leaned back and fell from the window, but others believe that Irene’s hand on Clare’s arm is laid there more forcefully than Irene admits. Larsen intentionally allows Irene to “forget” or block-out the information. Instead, Irene clings to her husband and appears just as shocked as the rest of the group. The reality of the situation is too much for Irene to bear, though, and “her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her

she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything as dark” (82).

The sensory overload that Irene reports is extremely similar to what Clare most likely experiences when she falls from the window; the sensation of heaviness, drowning, and a quick darkness. Because the two women are so closely linked in appearance and in their personal lives, Irene’s probable murder of Clare is also a kind of suicide. My reading of the novel is that Clare Kendry is pushed by Irene in the same way that the teacup is shattered by Irene at the party. In an attempt to defend her safety and her home, Irene Redfield becomes careless and violent. Clare ends up the victim of Irene’s unsubstantiated belief that Clare will actually ruin Irene’s life; while Clare could act out the threats that Irene imagines, there is never any indication that Clare will act upon the possibilities. And, by Irene’s own doing, Clare never has a chance to actually cause any damage.

Irene’s thoughts throughout the latter half of the novel are, “It didn’t matter. If everything could go on as before.” While these words are initially used to describe the affair itself, they also foreshadow the actions that Irene will take in the name of self-preservation. Despite the history between the two women, Irene Redfield’s carefully managed lifestyle and reputation are of greater importance than Clare Kendry’s life. In order to successfully maintain control, even an isolated one, Irene Redfield removes threats through force. By eliminating the embodiment of her husband’s desires to explore other places and enjoy life, Irene ensures that her family will continue in their goals to uplift their race.

Chapter V

Gertrude Stein's Deconstruction of Modernism

When most scholars think about Gertrude Stein, her reputation as an art collector and critic typically come to mind first. And, when viewing the canon of Modernism's most influential contributors, Stein's influence is palpable. Stein's ability to arrange meetings between great minds, inspire some of Modernism's most powerful works, and also completely discourage some artists from their craft was unparalleled. However, most of the artists within Stein's sphere of influence were men. As Corinne E. Blackmer suggests in "African Masks and the Arts of Passing," Stein has often been viewed as an influence upon Modernism's male voices but her influence on her own sex has "thus far received no critical attention" because of the commonly held belief that "Stein exerted little or no influence upon subsequent women writers" (Blackmer 232). However, many of Stein's most interesting and confounding characters are women. Stein aspired to represent various faces of femininity in a majority of her works, but many critics do not classify her as a writer who was influential upon other women. This critical approach begs for revision because despite the fact that Stein (somewhat rudely) separated women into the categories of "wives" and "fellow artists," she made an impression on everyone who met her.

There is evidence that, in addition to Stein's friendships with other women artists—some lengthy and some quite brief—she also developed mentor-type relationships with many of them. While Stein's guidance and encouragement may not have transferred into stylistic or thematic aspects of her female contemporaries, it seems that influence happened in much the same manner as many woman-to-woman

interactions of the early twentieth century—beyond or outside of the view and dominion of patriarchal powers. These subtleties allow women to participate in subversive actions within a sort of safe space. As of late, scholars are increasingly interested in relationships between women writers and especially between women writers within the confines and safety of the home. Stein, although often categorized as a sort of omnipresent force within Modernism, should also be discussed as a careful linguist and rhetorician. In order to exist and flourish within modern literary society, Stein had to employ certain linguistic subterfuges in order to reach her intended audiences. Despite Stein's reputation as a merciless critic and avant-garde writer, her particular linguistic and stylistic strategies are not as revolutionary or as inflammatory as many believe. "Steinese" toys with the concept of a 'continuous present' in much the same way that other modern women authors utilized the narrative characteristics of stream-of-consciousness, internal monologues as opposed to external ones, and gender role manipulation. Stein created a method of narration that best suited her vision of reality and, in doing so, encouraged and inspired other modern women writers to follow her lead. Her femininity provided her with certain linguistic traits that it seems influenced her contemporary women writers on a deep level.

An examination of Gertrude Stein's work as a modern woman writer begins with a discussion of the woman herself. Most basically, Gertrude Stein was an American expatriate who found freedom and much longed for admiration only when she was outside of her home country. Experiences within her Puritan American upbringing were tremendously influential upon her. And, America was obviously of great interest to her as most of Stein's writings deal with her reflections upon life in America. Like many of her

contemporaries, Stein's writing grew stronger when she distanced herself from her subject. When she put distance between herself and the oppressive power of her heritage, she began to fashion her own reality and identity. Prior to her migration to Paris, Stein was part of an upper-middle-class group of Americans who had no qualms about women entering the medical field. After a rocky stint at Harvard Medical School, Stein and her brother Leo decided that they were dissatisfied with American life and chose to leave for Paris. The years spent at Harvard Medical School forced Stein to recognize the power that patriarchal discourses have over their subjects and particularly over the oppressed. Despite her self-identification with strong males, Stein was still female in the eyes of the American patriarchy. Fleeing to Paris must have seemed the only logical option in a deeply unsatisfying situation.

The Steins moved into a house on the Left Bank and began to open their home to aspiring artists. Their artistic taste and interest in avant-garde and subversive artworks made them ideal patrons and collectors, and they spent much of their inheritance supporting and purchasing some of Modernism's greatest paintings. However, the move to Paris also gave Gertrude Stein room to breathe. With an ocean between their conservative American life and her freer, more liberal, Parisian one, Gertrude Stein began to grow stronger and to act upon certain desires that had caused her much trouble in America. One particular change was that Stein became involved in a domestic partnership with Alice B. Toklas. This relationship lasted for the rest of Stein's life and is part of Stein folklore. The lesbian partnership was not easy to enter into, though. Even in modern Paris, lesbianism was viewed as extremely taboo. As Shari Benstock explores in *Women of the Left Bank*, the women artists of modern Paris experienced some intellectual

freedom and “discovered themselves as *women* and as *writers* in Paris, charting experiences that were significantly different from those of their husbands, brothers, and male Modernist colleagues” (Benstock ix). But even in modernity’s Parisian golden age, lesbianism was viewed with tinges of disgust, disbelief, and dislocation. The reasons for traveling abroad were myriad, but often female expatriates fared better in Paris because, as Benstock points out, they typically arrived with some sort of inheritance or annuity—and Stein was no different. But this financial freedom did not equate social and sexual freedom. Despite entering into domestic partnerships and dedicated relationships, “The image of lesbians in both literature and life was constructed around notions of illness, perversion, inversion, and paranoia” (11). The social discomfort that many people exhibited towards lesbian partnerships did not sway Stein from uniting her life with Toklas’; on the contrary, they formed a domestic partnership that was modeled on a very gendered heterosexual marriage where Stein was the strong male figure and Toklas was the nurturing wife.

Because of the social stigmas, the home that Stein made for herself and Alice Toklas served as a safeguard against the prying eyes of a judgmental and often dismissive public. Their friends were always welcomed into the home and were privy to some of inner-workings of their home life, but never their private life. As Ernest Hemingway discusses in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*,

My wife and I had called on Miss Stein, and she and the friend who lived with her had been very cordial and friendly and we had loved the big studio with the great paintings...Her companion had a very pleasant voice, was small, very dark, with her hair cut like Joan of Arc...She saw to the food and drink and talked to my wife. The wives, my wife and I felt, were tolerated. But we liked Miss Stein and her friend, although the friend was frightening, and the paintings and the cakes the *eau-de-vie* were truly wonderful. (Hemingway 25)

Despite his admiration for Stein as a writer and authority on Modernism, Hemingway cannot see past the setup of the Stein-Toklas home. Parisians and expatriates alike seemed to be taken aback by the relationship between the two women. However uncomfortable their homosexuality made their friends and visitors, their home quickly became one of the greatest salons and studios of the early twentieth century. And, despite the discomfort that heterosexual individuals expressed towards lesbian partnerships, they continued to visit the salons and homes of lesbian artists, couples, and heiresses. This relationship between disapproval and complete submersion forces us to question the discomfort itself; did expatriates and Parisians disapprove of lesbian relationships simply because the patriarchy told them to do so, or was it fashionable? Either way, the contradiction placed Stein in a position of unique power.

Perhaps because of her desire to maintain privacy and order within her own home, homes and inner spaces play significant roles in Gertrude Stein's writing. Stein was interested in writing with Cubist techniques but also in creating stories that were the truest representations of human nature. Her work received many strong reviews. Some believed the Stein was taking too many risks with her distinct style. Others viewed her work as ingenious experimentation. Stein's work is often deemed unintelligible or frustrating in Modernism studies. Her influence is rarely second-guessed, though. But Stein's writing was something that she was not only devoted to, but something that she believed would change narrative style forever. Despite her skills as a mentor, reader, and critic, this essay endeavors to align Stein with other contemporary women—primarily because, despite the fact that Stein was often affiliated with powerful male Modernists,

she was still a woman writing. In contemporary criticism, critics often read Stein as a lesbian writer. While this reading can yield interesting insights, important things are lost when we become fixated upon Stein's lesbianism. My essay will look at sexual orientation, artistic expression and involvement, and social interactions evenly. One of Stein's greatest gifts as a woman writer is the power of observation. Much like Woolf, Stein's inclusionary/exclusionary marginal position within her social class allowed her to hear and experience many things without being allowed to participate in them. In order to explore Stein's contributions to Modernism as a whole and her influence upon her female contemporaries, this analysis will be focused on the essay, "Composition as Explanation" and the collection of short stories, *Three Lives*.

In the first work, Stein outlines the ideals of modern art. She also defends her own writing style. Stein's construction of sentences and narrative, often referred to as "Steinese", has perplexed and dazzled scholars since she began publishing her work. "Composition as Explanation" is particularly interesting as a female-written, female-read document because it was chosen as the final essay in Leonard and Virginia Woolf's publication, *Hogarth Essays*. *Hogarth Essays* is, quite progressively, bookended by women writers as Woolf's "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" was its opening text. The fictitious *Three Lives* has been analyzed at length since its publication. The book deals with the lives of the Gentle Lena, the Good Anna, and Melanctha—three women who endure tremendous social, personal, and racial pressures. In it, Stein explores the concept of a 'continuous present'—something she defines in the later "Composition as Explanation." However, in order to understand the implications of race, desire, and femininity within *Three Lives*, it is necessary to first understand Stein's unique writing

style. Her personal theories on artistic reception and composition are incredibly complicated despite the lulling, repetitive narrative structure that Stein employs.

“Composition as Explanation”: Carefully Delivered Opinions on War

In the essay, “Composition as Explanation,” Gertrude Stein presumably explores the essentials of artistic composition. Stein begins by claiming that each generation serves as both creator and audience to its own art primarily because, “There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking” (307). Stein’s essay was first delivered as a lecture at Cambridge and Oxford and was then collected and published by Hogarth Press in 1926. Therefore, her views on the matter of composition at the time that the essay is delivered have been shaped by the consequences of war and innovation. They have also been constructed based on her own writing of works like “Melantha,” which she mentions in the essay, and the massive *Making of Americans*. The essay is standard Steinese but does reveal some interesting insights concerning Stein’s approach to writing.

After beginning the essay by introducing her theory that composition only changes in the minds of those viewing it, Stein begins a discussion of war as composition. This inclusion is incredibly subversive but could easily be overlooked if the reader only looks for an explanation of Stein’s composition of self or of narrative. Stein proposes that since, like painting or writing, “war is a thing that decides how it is to be when it is to be done” (308), it meets the basic standards of composition. However, she differentiates these things by giving war a hint of personification; because wars are inherently part of humanity, they are going to happen with or without the assistance of an

‘artist’. When placed in such close proximity to other artistic compositions and preparations, Stein asserts that one war is never truly different from those preceding it because it still concerns weapons, political matters, and loss of lives. It is also never different from other compositions because it will occur when it is ready to—much like a great work of art. In a way, the fundamental pieces remain, but the players and audience shift. Reading Stein’s essay makes the discussion of composition as pre-destined and formulaic more evident. It also endeavors to subversively and subtly discuss the matter of war—a topic that, compositional or not, is discussed by a female member of a patriarchal society in a powerful way. Women discussing war in a candid way would have been uncomfortable for Stein’s contemporary readers. By creating a characteristically masculine comparison, Stein positions herself as an authority figure who can comment upon the state of the world without being distracted by gender roles or expectations. While defining her composition style is a goal of “Composition as Explanation,” Stein also endeavors to equate her expertise and experiences with male-dominated areas of society in order to enhance her credibility.

Rhetorically, “Composition as Explanation” is incredibly interesting. Even in the late 1920s, a woman writer commenting on the attributes of war must tread carefully. While Stein did not seem to fear retaliation or censure during any point of her life, she does practice some stereotypically feminine writing habits—especially in this attempt to define her own writing style and contributions to literature. Each time her writing begins to become more direct, she reverts to what I categorize as feminine gestures of elusiveness. Similar gestures are used by Woolf within *A Room of One’s Own* when she becomes frustrated by the poor food quality at women’s schools and embarks on a

rhetorical discussion of why some citizens are forced to subsist on nearly nothing. She states, “All was dim, yet intense too...the flash of some terrible reality leaping...For youth—Here was my soup” (*A Room of One’s Own* 17). These gestures suggest that although women writers gain strength through writing, they can become easily distracted or redirected by domestic details. I do not believe that this is what modern women writers believed, though. By expressing their frustrations and then diverting attention away from those grievances, modern women writers could continue cathartically writing through their experiences. Critical approaches allow for analysis and understanding. In Stein’s essay, even the formatting of the document builds towards conflict and then breaks away. However, she seems to have gained strength through the fleshing out of ideas. Her ability to classify herself as a powerful, female, but aligned with a male-dominated field influenced her contemporaries—particularly other women writers.

Early on in her essay Stein writes, “No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who also are creating their own time refuse to accept” (Stein 308). The subtext here is that no male—since Stein uses male pronouns exclusively in this document—can truly be innovative because his innovations are dismissed by those who would—and should—recognize and laud his creativity. While it may have been standard practice to use male pronouns when discussing matters such as war or art creation, every word that Stein chooses is deliberate and meaningful—even the simpler ones have a purpose. This becomes a pattern of argument within the essay. A majority of the paragraphs within “Composition as Explanation” begin by discussing the creative efforts taken by men in modern composition and then lead into discussions of war. Since Stein’s political stance on war is

not definitive, her comments about war become even more complicated. Her tone verges on condemnation at some points and acceptance at others. Based on these attributes, readers must consider that Stein's goals are larger than a mere definition of avant-garde writing. Is it possible that Stein's purpose was to gain control of narrative structures by aligning herself with a patriarchal combat and creative history? I believe that Stein's overarching purpose was to establish her own prowess as an intellectual and as a woman who could—and was determined to—write about extremely masculine subject matter. Additionally, I believe that Stein hoped to write about what was most important to modern peoples; marriage-plot novels that ended neatly did not suit Stein and neither did the pre-approved syntax of previously oppressed women writers.

In order to better understand Stein's intentions, we must decipher more of her writing. One of the essay's first complications occurs within her comment that, "Those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it as classical" (310). It becomes obvious that "there is almost not an interval" as we strive from age to age; literature is written, paintings are created, wars occur, on a constant basis that Stein labels the "continuous present". The first concrete attribute of Stein's theory of composition, then, is that it is always the same. The second is that it is markedly beautiful. However, great composition is only beautiful when it is a classic. And, in Stein's logic, "The characteristic quality of a classic is that it is beautiful. Now of course it is perfectly true that a more or less first rate work of art is beautiful but the trouble is that when that first rate work of art becomes a classic it is accepted" and the only important thing to the acceptors is that it is beautiful (310).

Readers must decide if Stein believes that her work is underappreciated at the time of its publication or if she believes that her success will only be realized after death.

At the time that this essay was written, Stein was undoubtedly invested in the success of many of her fellow Modernists. However, as Hemingway discusses in *A Moveable Feast*,

In the three or four years that we were good friends I cannot remember Gertrude Stein ever speaking well of any writer who had not written favorably about her work or done something to advance her career except Ronald Firbank and, later, Scott Fitzgerald. When I first met her she did not speak of Sherwood Anderson as a writer but spoke glowingly of him as a man...Miss Stein did not want to talk about his stories but always about him as a person. (Hemingway 60).

If we are to take this anecdote as even partial truth, it seems that Stein's desire to be both appreciated and needed may have, at least occasionally, clouded her critical vision.

Stein's perception of her own impact on Modernism was similar to her contemporaries in that each intellectual believed himself or herself superior to all of their fellow moderns.

In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein infamously stated, "Einstein was the creative philosophic mind of the century, and I have been the creative literary mind of the century." This quip is often included in a discussion of Stein's character, but this statement is no more inflammatory than things that Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf were saying. Stein's self-evaluation is important, but should be read in tandem with Stein's comments that real beauty is not recognized within its time and that real art is not appreciated during its most innovative periods. No one knew what the outcome of Modernism would be, but they could dream. Comments made by Stein about

subjects such as war and her own contributions to Modernism may have a certain rhetorical purpose. When we consider that Stein was toying with her audience, or at least utilizing shock value as a means of gaining attention for her work, we recognize that her unique narrative style was in itself a work of composition. Critics still refer to Stein and Steinese as acquired tastes. However, the impetuses behind her writing, boastings, and themes are more complex than some critics recognize. Stein's manipulations of language allow readers of her often difficult dialect to latch on to larger ideas within the text.

First, we can assume that Stein believed in her own concept of a composer's awareness. She writes that, "After life has been conducted in a certain way everybody knows it but nobody knows it, little by little, nobody knows it as long as nobody knows it. Any one creating the composition in the arts does not know it either, they are conducting life and that makes their composition what it is, it makes their work compose as it does" (Stein 312). Next, it can be assumed that the composition process must be natural—something that Stein emphasizes repeatedly within this essay and other discussions of the writing process. She states, "Here again it was all so natural to me and more and more complicatedly a continuous present. A continuous present is a continuous present" (313). In Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space*, he discusses Stein's use of two specific narrative devices. He writes that these two techniques were,

...beginning again and the continuous present. In an essay of 1926 ["Composition as Explanation"] her maddeningly repetitive narration explained as well as illustrated her message:

'Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series. Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing.'

The technique is evident from the first pages of *Melanctha* (1909) where she tells us, in very nearly the same words, twice that Rose Johnson was a real black negress, three times that her baby died, and twice that she laughed when she was

happy. The effect of this stuttering prose is to flatten out temporal distinctions and create an impression that all action occurred in a continuous present. (Kern 85)

Stein also suggests that the best way to begin is not to start over, but to simply begin at the beginning. In her case, this re-beginning consists of portrait making. Her word portraits are elusive, circular, and endeavor to represent the continuous present through a form of art that is not particularly malleable. Stein discusses this as, “In making these portraits I naturally made a continuous present including everything and a beginning again and again within a very small thing” (“Composition as Explanation” 314). This ‘very small thing,’ though, becomes a very large and complicated web of reactions, depictions, and patterns within *Three Lives*. The collected stories of *Three Lives* embody Stein’s innovative writing style and her desire to search women’s lives for the continuous present that she found in her own experiences. The main focus of the next section will be on the middle story within *Three Lives*, “Melanctha.” In “Composition as Explanation,” Stein provides a telling introduction to Melanctha:

In the beginning I wrote a book called *Three Lives* this was written in 1905. I wrote a negro story called *Melanctha*. In that there was a constant recurring and a beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present...(313)

Stein’s theories of composition, as evidenced by this passage, always provide Stein with creative rights. The use of ‘I’ is also important. Instead of waiting for the patriarchy to empower her and allow her to use their language to do her work, Stein left behind patriarchal traditions of storytelling and started anew. This act gives Stein the authority within all of her writings and is a necessary tool in understanding Stein’s approach to the women of *Three Lives*.

Three Lives: History Lessons on Women's Suffering

In *Three Lives*, Gertrude Stein discusses the lives of three women in her narrative style of continuous present. The lives of the Good Anna and the Gentle Lena mirror one another in that both women are American immigrants who survive by depending upon patriarchal society. The Good Anna is a German servant whose goodness ensures that she will always be employed. However, Anna suffers a great deal because she cannot stand the discrepancies between her ideals and reality. The Good Anna is repeatedly referred to as "The Good Anna," thus setting up a corollary between Anna's selfless goodness and the unjust selfishness of her employers, friends, and acquaintances. Throughout the first section of the book, The Good Anna lends money to those who can never repay her, works long hours as a servant and housekeeper, and falls in and out of love with women of her same social standing. The love that Stein writes of, though, does not seem to be one of romantic devotion. Instead, it is one based upon necessity. The Good Anna must love those around her because she is at least partially dependent upon them for socialization, comfort, and even employment.

Likewise, The Gentle Lena is subservient to her husband and family situation. The heterosexual relationship outlined in this third section of the book is most unromantic. Gentle Lena and her husband have an arranged marriage. They do not love one another but do have children out of necessity. As years pass and more children are born, the distance between Gentle Lena and her husband grows tremendously. Although she is a dutiful and capable wife, Gentle Lena has no real ambitions or dreams of her own. Stein's use of Lena's gentleness is often viewed as a harsh criticism. Instead of speaking out or changing her situation, The Gentle Lena sinks gradually into an

undesirable, draining family situation. Her condition would typically be described as helpless if Stein provided her with any agency at all. Instead, by the end of the story it seems as though Gentle Lena is devoid of all feeling and emotion.

The tales of *The Good Anna* and *The Gentle Lena* are told in similar manners. The women encounter certain activities on a daily basis and these reoccurrences anchor them to a continuous present. For both women the composition of life is unchanging. There will always be work to do, employers to please, duties to fulfill. There is no impetus for change. *The Good Anna* and *The Gentle Lena* are representative of a kind of paralysis that is similar to the varying states of atrophy captured in Joyce's *Dubliners* short stories. This concept of ambitionless ignorance is especially potent in the hands of Stein because she so skillfully utilizes language and diction as a symptom of the cyclical continuous present. Each woman is characterized by certain feelings, thoughts, and words in a way that becomes inescapable. The real problem with both stories is that the women desire nothing tangible. They are caught up in their own cycles and do not notice that there are other options. Through a feminist lens, these stories seem like cautionary tales. Based on these stories alone, it seems as though Stein believes that women should have desires. In previous eras, female desires—particularly erotic and intellectual ones—were discouraged by the patriarchy. Depicting women without larger desires as simple, gentle, and good robs these women of more interesting, powerful qualities. Their stories exist only within the continuous present and they never achieve greatness or heroism. Men's stories often take on a bildungsroman format while women's end as soon as an acceptable marriage is made. Desire and the ability and strength to act out desire is a uniquely male plot. Stein complicates this critique within the middle section of *Three Lives* where she

explores the opposite side of feminine experience and creates even more conflicts and continuous present patterns than in either of the other stories. In “Melanctha,” early relationship experiences and a clever manipulation of race allow Stein to explore the dangers of desire and feminine relationships.

One of the first works that Stein ever wrote was a story called *Q. E. D.* This story was based upon the first love triangle that Stein was involved with when she was a medical student. This autobiographical detail serves as the basis for a majority of the romances within Stein’s writing. Although *Q. E. D.* was published, it was not particularly well received. In “Melanctha,” Stein revisits many thematic and dialectic pieces of *Q. E. D.*, but places them within a different context. “Melanctha” places the more well-developed aspects of *Q. E. D.* amidst a racially charged backdrop. As Michael North discusses in *The Dialect of Modernism*,

Writers as far from Harlem as T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein reimagined themselves as black, spoke in a black voice, and used that voice to transform the literature of their time...If the racial status of these works is taken at all seriously, it seems that linguistic mimicry and racial masquerade were not just shallow fads but strategies without which modernism could not have arisen.” (North i)

Stein’s theory that great compositions were inherently controversial and subversive is interesting when paired with North’s discussion of African-American dialect and disguise as revolutionary modern practices. North writes that, “The real attraction of the black voice to writers like Stein was its technical distinction, its insurrectionary opposition to the known and familiar in language. For the artist occupied the role of racial outsider because he or she spoke a language opposed to the standard” (i). All of Stein’s efforts in creating and nurturing Modernism were opposed to the standards of the previous generation and to the confines of language in particular. Therefore, manipulating dialect

and race was a logical method by which Stein could represent a marginalized group in an innovative way. Modernism, at least in North's discussion of it, is characterized by the distinct methods that authors use in their manipulations of narrative, and one of the most important methods is a folk/African/African-American dialect.

Stein's use of this dialect allows her to break from the monotonous livelihood that she ascribes to immigrant white women. When she switches race, she is free to discuss the characteristics of that race and to use its unique patterns as a mask. Stein's involvement and friendship with Picasso was one that added to this experimentation with dialect. As North explores in the chapter, "Modernism's African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration," artists of European descent, like Picasso and Stein, "were attracted en masse to an African art they knew virtually nothing about and were mesmerized by the way African masks and statues dislocated all conventional artistic strategies" (North 59). The concept of dislocation is one of Modernism's hallmarks, but Stein and Picasso both used the specific type of African dislocation as a separate type of "transgression," one that they both explored openly with their very different modes of artistic expression. On his 98th attempt to paint Gertrude Stein's portrait, Picasso infamously "superimposed a flat, expressionless mask with two eye slits cut against the angle of the rest of the face and body, a mask derived from ancient Iberian reliefs he had seen at the Louvre" (61). The idea of a masked woman became the model for some of Picasso's most influential works—primarily *Les Femmes d'Alger*. North states that this interaction between Stein and Picasso is what led to the creation of Cubism. Together, Stein and Picasso found that they could "draw a line from African art to African-American language and literature without bothering overmuch about differences between the arts" (63).

Therefore, Stein's theory that composition can be manipulated is best displayed in her ability to take a story, position it upon a continuous present, and undermine its most basic principles. Stein's belief that "everything alike naturally everything was simply different and this is and was romanticism and this is and was war" (Stein 317), is deeply rooted in her experimentation upon race and is immortalized within "Melanctha." The war, then, shifts from one of larger proportions to one that concerns itself with producing the most innovative and meaningful artistic works.

"Melanctha" is the middle story of *Three Lives*. It is the longest of the three stories and concerns itself with the life of a young, light-skinned African-American woman, Melanctha Herbert. Stein begins the story by contrasting Melanctha with her friend and antagonist, Rose Johnson. Rose was, "a real black, tall, well built, sullen, stupid, childlike, good looking negress" (*Three Lives* 65). Rose's blackness is the kind that, although considered "real", is dimmed by the fact that she was raised by whites. In contrast to Rose, Melanctha is "a graceful, pale yellow, intelligent, attractive negress. She had not been raised by white folks but then she had been half made with real white blood" (66). Stein's attention to what is "real" and what would otherwise constitute a sort of passing is important because there is no such thing as "real" racially pure blood. Stein recognizes the impossibility of this claim—one that was likely made within many modern communities—and attributes most of Melanctha's struggles to this 'real white blood.' Both Rose and Melanctha are constantly reaffirming that they are not part of the group of "common niggers" and that they do not take part in the practice of "going around" with just any man (67). Within the story, Stein creates an immediate dichotomy between legitimately black individuals and "common" black individuals. The main differentiating

factor has to do with desire. As M. Lynn Weiss explores in “Among Negroes: Gertrude Stein and African America,” Stein’s work often discussed these dichotomies but “‘Melanctha’ steals the spotlight because it marks the beginning of radically experimental modernist writing and paradoxically employs offensive, reactionary stereotypes of black Americans” (Weiss 115). Weiss also suggests that in the story, Stein writes “literally and figuratively from the borderland” and that this approach “yielded new insights and encouraged formal (and social) innovation” (116). In Weiss’ reading of the story, the area that “Melanctha” discusses in “the borderland [that] parallels the mixed race and class of her characters just as it recalls the mixed origins of the narrative itself” (116). Despite the very important critical work within Weiss’ essay, the discussion is limited to race. Discussions of the novel are typically limited to race as though the African-American was the only individual capable of feeling the desire displayed within “Melanctha,” and Melanctha herself the only individual capable of being overwhelmed by desire. This reading eliminates discussions of gender from a reading of the work. Instead of marginalizing this text even further, the critical lenses of gender, class, sexuality, and race must be looked through with equal attention. Stein uses a subversive language in order to break from lingual traditions, but it is also important to acknowledge that she uses female characters engaged in both homosexual/homosocial relationships *and* heterosexual ones in order to more fully explore the concepts of love, meaning, and desire. Stein also uses shared marginal experiences in order to gain credibility.

Along with destabilizing language itself and undermining patriarchal norms by adhering to an elusive dialect, Stein constructs a new and incredibly complex definition of the Other that begins with her portrayal of Melanctha. Sander Gilman suggests that the

Other changes in Modernism because “Patterns of association are mostly commonly based on a combination of real-life experience and the world of myth, and the two intertwined to form fabulous images, neither entirely of this world nor of the realm of myth... Since analogies are rooted in a habitual perception of the world, they are understood as an adequate representation of reality... Analogy thus becomes the basis for the association between otherwise disparate categories (qtd. in Blackmer 239). Based on Gilman’s argument, analogies allow a culture to shape-shift and marginalize virtually every group. Blackmer simplifies Gilman’s theory by stating, “Thus Jews become types of blacks, lesbians become types of mulattas, and prostitutes, women, bohemians, and even cosmopolitans become associated in a web of analogy” (Blackmer 239). Simply put, all marginalized groups can find a common ground based on their marginalization. This concept is explored in later gender and culturally minded texts such as Gloria Anzaldua’s “Borderlands/La Frontera,” and Audre Lorde’s essay, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” Anzaldua writes that individuals who inhabit marginalized spaces begin to find themselves on the borders of many different cultures and must create their own understanding of the world in order to survive. Lorde adds to this concept by attributing the continued marginalization of these borderers to the patriarchy’s need for difference. While these essays occur after Modernism is over, they put the very tensions that Stein was most interested in into perspective. Stein was fully invested in forcefully changing the dynamics of composition while maintaining composition’s end product in the same way that she was interested in creating a life that suited her needs and desires while inhabiting a patriarchal society. Placing Stein within different social and political contexts yields different views of her art production and her

livelihood. Despite her slipperiness, she was always marginalized. In literature in particular, “literary artists from [marginalized] groups who seek cultural legitimacy must stress their sameness with a highly suspicious dominant discourse, while they simultaneously endeavor to express their rapport with an often equally suspicious minority discourse” (240). Stein’s standing within the literary community was one that she created by making herself indispensable to her contemporaries but also by being somewhat slippery in her own beliefs and practices. Stein’s “Melanctha” is the most profound example of the artistry and control that Stein exercised over narrative.

Melanctha Herbert suffers tremendously throughout her life story. Her suffering is discussed in a way that is similar to *The Good Anna* and *The Gentle Lena*, but Melanctha is not gifted with a kind moniker. She is without a label that protects her from judgment and exists outside of many patriarchal spheres simultaneously. Despite the fact that she is not “common”, Stein writes that “Melanctha Herbert had not made her life all simple like Rose Johnson. Melanctha had not found it easy with herself to make her wants and what she had, agree. Melanctha Herbert was always losing what she had in wanting all the things she saw” (*Three Lives* 68). In addition to always wanting what ‘more’ or ‘different’ or ‘everything’, Melanctha suffers because she “was always being left when she was not leaving others... [she] always loved too hard and much too often” (68). Melanctha has an extremely contentious relationship with her parents and despite being a dutiful daughter, she is unloved and unaccepted. And, to add insult to injury, Melanctha also has “break neck courage, and a tongue that could be very nasty...was quick in all learning, and knew very well how to use this knowledge to annoy her parents who knew nothing” (69). Melanctha exists outside of the control of her parents because of her

daring and because of her procurement of knowledge. Education frees her from dependence but it also gives her the desire to learn more and to have more.

The desire to know and to have encourages Melanctha to develop what Stein calls “wanderings after wisdom,” and what readers can assume are occasionally flirtations with men (74). These excursions help Melanctha realize that wisdom can only be procured from engaging in a deeply intimate relationship with another person. Even if this relationship ends after a short time, the wisdom gained from the interaction forever alters Melanctha’s life. Stein writes that “It was a wonderful experience this safety of Melanctha in these days of her attempted learning...Melanctha all her life was very keen in her sense for real experience” (74). While Melanctha is not overwhelmed with emotions during these wanderings, she does realize that in order to learn about how the world works, she must journey into it without cowardice. During her wanderings she befriends many colored workers, particularly one “serious, melancholy light brown negro” whom she grows to like very well. Stein positions this relationship as the first meaningful one in Melanctha’s loveless life and writes,

“all her life Melanctha wanted and respected gentleness and goodness, and this man always gave her good advice and serious kindness and Melanctha felt such things very deeply, but she could never let them help her or affect her to change the ways that always made her keep herself in trouble.” (76)

Melanctha’s entire problem is laid out in this continuous repeating present. Although she is filled with feelings, she is not transformed by them. The man is unnamed and is a passing figure in Melanctha’s maturation. But the fullness of feeling described in the above passage becomes a pattern within the story. Stein fragments and reintroduces the concept of Melanctha’s appreciation of goodness and gentleness many times throughout

the short story. Melanctha's desires separate her from attaining or embodying the goodness and gentleness that come so easily to ignorant woman like *The Good Anna* and *The Gentle Lena*.

Why would Stein represent Melanctha's life in this manner? If readers are to take Melanctha's life as anecdotal, then it seems that being a dutiful daughter, loving friend, and courageous woman are all poor qualities. It would appear that Stein is commenting upon the futile efforts towards self-improvement and independence that were being made by modern women. But when examining the text through different critical lenses, it becomes evident that more is at work than meets the eye. In a social way, Melanctha's suffering is due to her position—or lack thereof, rather—within her African-American community. In her attempts to teach Jefferson Campbell how to experience love through her particular brand of wisdom seeking and wandering, Melanctha becomes deeply unhappy. Jeff cannot accept that he is not the first man she has loved. He cannot accept that Melanctha may have taken slightly unsavory avenues on her own journey to knowledge and wisdom. As a member of the socially uplifted African-American community, Jefferson expects women to act a certain way. Melanctha's agency and desire offend his ideals about women.

Despite the fact that he loves her, he tellingly hides Melanctha's existence from his own family. Stein writes that, "Jeff Campbell, all these months, had never told his good mother anything about Melanctha Herbert. Somehow he always kept his seeing her so much now, to himself" (107). The fact that the most significant relationship in Melanctha's life is a hidden one is interesting. Problems arise throughout the story because people do not know that Melanctha and Jeff are in a romantic relationship and

they continuously reveal scandalous information to Jeff without intending to. The relationship is also doomed because of Jeff's decision to keep his "good mother" out of it. Unlike all of the other women within the novel, Melanctha's desires for things and people and love make her indefinable. She *does* good but cannot *be* good. The fact that Jeff's mother is good and cannot know about Melanctha reveals a great deal. Unlike Jeff's mother and women like Rose Johnson, who marry and attempt to adhere to conventions by having children and finding a feminine role, Melanctha is a mistress who remains outside of a patriarchal framework. She provides spiritual awakenings but cannot experience more domestic ones.

As Jeff and Melanctha repeatedly debate their love for one another (the text contains enormous sections of these conversations) Stein uses key phrases and dialect to deconstruct their relationship so thoroughly that nothing remains. Weiss writes that this repetition of the debate is Stein's attempt to "destabilize meaning, anticipating much-later deconstructionist theorists. Far from firmly establishing his certainty, when Jeff Campbell uses 'certainly' eighteen times in a single paragraph, he is in fact certain of very little" (Weiss 117). This deconstruction inevitably capsizes the relationship between Jeff and Melanctha and, despite 'teaching' Jeff how to love, Melanctha is tarnished beyond repair. It begins to ruin her slowly, though. Stein writes that, "Now Jeff began to have always a strong feeling that Melanctha could not longer stand it, with all her bad suffering, to let him fight it out with himself what was right for him to be doing" (122). The conflict between the private and public spheres becomes the central problem within the love affair between Melanctha and Jeff. As the conflict grows, Jeff finds that "he never could be honest now, he never could be now, any more, trying to be really understanding, for

always every moment now he felt it to be a strong thing in him, how very much it was Melanctha Herbert always suffered” (123). When Melanctha and Jeff finally do end their arrangement, it is to their mutual benefit. Jeff Campbell does not possess the ability to endure the “strong feelings” that Melanctha shares with him and Melanctha cannot tolerate being marginalized to the point of oblivion. In an attempt to regain control and find solace, she takes to her wandering ways again. Throughout the story, Stein heaps troubles upon Melanctha Herbert. The end of the story is no different. After leaving her relationship with Jeff, Melanctha becomes a constant doting companion of Rose Johnson. Yet despite her friendship with Rose and her engagement to Jem Richards, everything that Melanctha truly wants slips from her grasp. In her wanderings for wisdom, she gains a reputation as a “common” woman who does not share the morals that her lazy, worthless friends do. They inevitably desert her and Melanctha dies, alone, in a home for poor consumptives.

Melanctha’s only relation to the other women within *Three Lives* is that their lives all end in similar ways. After continuous presents spent in service to others and in search of truth, all three women die alone. The Good Anna is alone at her death and in her last moments longs for her closest friend, Miss Mathilda. Mrs. Drehten writes to Miss Mathilda that The Good Anna “died in the hospital yesterday after a hard operation...Miss Annie died easy, Miss Mathilda, and sent you her love” (*Three Lives* 62). Similarly, The Gentle Lena grows sicker and sicker as her story progresses. Stein writes, “Lena always was more and more lifeless and Herman now mostly never thought about her...The good german cook who had always scolded Lena, and always to the last day tried to help her, was the only one who ever missed her” (211). The deaths of these

three ordinary women reveal that Stein's views on the experiences of modern women were quite bleak. Modern women encountered severe marginalization, oppression, and lack of real opportunities.

“Nothing changes from generation to generation...”

In writing the lives of three average American women, Stein utilized dialect and oppressed groups in interesting ways. In examining her non-fiction and fiction, it becomes easier to believe that Stein coined the term “the lost generation”—a term that has become horribly threadbare over the past century. However, I believe that Stein's depiction of women's lives within *Three Lives* and her deconstruction of narrative structures within “Composition as Explanation” revolutionized the ways women are represented in literature. The cyclical nature of *Three Lives* becomes more palatable when it is paired with Stein's non-fiction descriptions of the creative process. Stein seemed to believe that all stories were the same. The stories of the Good Anna, Melanctha, and the Gentle Lena differ in their minor details only. All were women who, because of rigid social structures, were incapable of escaping their lives' predetermined patterns.

Chapter VI

Mina Loy's 'Perfection is infrequent'

Mina Loy was beautiful. But if Modernism has a habit of romanticizing its key figures, Mina Loy's reputation as inspirational muse to many influential thinkers and artists is no different. Loy acknowledged her own outer beauty but was not limited by it. She once stated, "The face is our most potent symbol of personality" (Loy 165). Loy's face was particularly captivating as the modernist movement sought to identify its "New Modern Woman." And, in some ways, Loy fit the bill. As a member of a particularly influential group of thinkers and artists, Loy "shared the glamour and notoriety accompanying this group's pursuit of artistic and personal freedom, and with her exceptional beauty, cerebral disposition, and cosmopolitan background, she was one of the most exotic of the artists gathered around..." (Kouidis 1). However, Mina Loy was more than mere muse. She was a contributing member to some of the key movements within Modernism and she was also a fierce poet and social critic. As time passes, Loy becomes further displaced and washed out by modernity's wake. Many forgot her completely once Modernism lost steam, even despite the fact that she was still alive and producing art installations in America until the late 1960s. She only resurfaced as an artist in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite the fact that Ezra Pound called her one of three people living in America during the 1910s and 1920s who "can write anything of interest in verse" (2), even in a tremendous and influential work such as *Women of the Left Bank*, Loy receives a mere 8 pages of critical attention. Her friendships are briefly mentioned in other chapters, but it is her physical appearance—she is one of the key faces featured within the volume's photographs—that comprises her most common legacy. Her

biographer Virginia Kouidis states, “Literary history...remembers Mina Loy, when it has bothered to remember, as an American modernist poet” (2).

So why do so many critics become distracted by her physical appearance? Shari Benstock argues against the marginalization of Loy in the section of *Women of the Left Bank*, “Publishing Histories: The Case of Mina Loy,” by stating that, “As women were excluded from these literary subgroups—except as they served as lovers or literary patrons—they were automatically denied access to publication opportunities” (Benstock 380). Benstock then states that the exception to this publication sexism was Eugene and Maria McDonald Jolas who “published a significant number of women writers, some of them not well known at the time and barely remembered now” (380). Benstock seems to attribute Loy’s ability to gain access to literary groups and publications to her art but also to her physical appearance. It seems that until the late 20th century, many scholars believed that there were few expatriate women publishing during Modernism. Gertrude Stein serves as the only exception to this rule—probably due to her influence upon her male contemporaries. Even in what many considered a liberal society, it was incredibly difficult for women to gain acceptance and support from their male counterparts unless they could make themselves indispensable.

If we are to take contemporary critics words for truth, Loy’s case is more than unusual. While she is often discussed as a beautiful, fashionable, and quick-witted personality, during her lifetime it was her poetry that received praise and support from the likes of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and other male Modernists. Loy became invested in the movement of Futurism and, subsequently, feminism, early on in her career. More than other female Modernists, Loy was heavily dependent upon the

patriarchy for access to knowledge and explanation of concepts that had previously eluded her. While her work attempted to break free from constraints of decorum and social expectations, she also found masculinity and women's attempts to attain some masculine power for themselves deeply fascinating.

As an artist, Mina Loy was an American Modernist. In an introduction to *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, Loy scholar Roger L. Conover introduces Loy by stating, "For a brief period in the twentieth century, Mina Loy was the Belle of the American Poetry Ball. By the end of the century, most had forgotten she was there at all" (Conover xi). Conover then attempts to piece together some of Loy's life. Loy always flitted around Modernism. Some of the greatest modernists—for example, Joyce, Stein, Pound, and Williams—credited her with either inspiring them or more directly influencing their art. She was an artist who found inspiration in working with electric light. She is often described as colorful and bold. She was close friends with artists like Duchamp. But there is an interesting factor of her modern experience that could explain her 'disappearance' despite the fact that she was alive and well in America until her death in 1966: despite all of the things that she was, Mina Loy refused to be classified and defined. Each time she began finding truth within one movement, she slipped out from under the patriarchal thumb of definition and began a type of re-invention that explored other movements and theories. She constantly eluded convention and sought her self-identity outside of norms. In short, "rather than allowing herself to be fixed by an identity, she interloped, using her various identities to transform the cultures and social milieus she inhabited. Feminist and Futurist, wife and lover, militant and pacifist, actress and model, Christian Scientist and nurse, she was the binarian's nightmare" (Conover xiii). In exploring Mina Loy's poetry

and short pieces of non-fiction for clues about her identity, we must keep in mind that Loy was possibly undermining everything that is typically understood about Modernism. This subversion does not seem to have any impetus other than Loy's desire to better understand herself. Kouidis states that "Mina Loy was fairly hard on herself" (4), and that she once told friend Carl Van Vechten that her life consisted of "shilly-shallying shyness—of an utter inability to adjust myself to anything actual" (qtd. in Kouidis 6). Her personality precedes her poems, but together these pieces work to add depth to Mina Loy's character. But who was Mina Loy before she became a poet whose work burned brightly enough to garner admiration from even the most misogynistic of contemporaries and then became virtually lost for decades?

Shedding Light

The basics of Mina Loy's identity do provide some insight on her ambitions as an artist. Recently, biographers have begun documenting the tribulations of Loy's life in attempts to understand her. Carolyn Burke writes that Loy was first and foremost "An Englishwoman who took American citizenship [and] studied painting in London, Munich, and Paris...by 1914, she had written many of the experimental poems that brought her to the attention of the American poets who published with her in the little magazines" of New York City (Burke 230). Loy's education was one that was typical for women of middle-to-high social standing; she was allowed to read what was given to her and to experiment with painting in a safe, patriarchal-approved manner. But as she began traveling with her first husband, British painter Stephen Haweis, Loy's curiosity and intellectual desires increased. Benstock states that as "a woman whose personal and intellectual development was directed by men, Loy's early writing established a dialogue

with these mentors...Futurist thought awakened Loy's intellectual needs, demands that she was unable to separate from her sexual desires" (Benstock 384). When Loy and Haweis settled in Florence in 1907, they soon became estranged and began leading separate lives. Loy became interested in Futurism at this time and also began having an affair with Futurist leader Filippo Marinetti. Loy later engaged in romantic affairs with other Futurists, such as Giovanni Papini, who became the subject of the "Love Songs" poems. Loy became disillusioned with the misogyny of Futurism by 1916, when she moved from Florence (where she left her children in the care of a nurse), to New York. [footnotes] She began acting, painting, and also penned a scathing response/critique to Futurism, "The Feminist Manifesto." It was in New York that Loy met and fell in love with "poet-boxer" and Dadaist, Arthur Craven. Craven was guilty of avoiding conscription and the two fled to Mexico, where they were married. Tragedy struck when Loy realized that she was pregnant in 1918. Unwilling to have and raise a child in Mexico, Loy and Craven decided that they needed to flee to Buenos Aires before the child's birth. He sailed off to make arrangements for their move in late 1918 and was never seen again. Loy waited for him as long as she could, but after the birth of her child in Mexico, Loy returned to Florence, collected her other children, and moved to New York in hopes of hearing news that Craven was alive. She became active in various Greenwich Village acting troupes, found-art collectors, and reconnected with old friends from Modernism's earlier days.

While most individuals think of Loy's physical appearance as her most remarkable feature, it is evident that Loy was a woman who endured a great deal of tragedy within her long life. She journeyed from the pinnacle of modernist admiration to

complete obscurity only a few years after achieving intellectual enlightenment. Her life story is remarkable and sheds light upon the power and ferocity of her poetry. This essay will attempt to discuss—not define—Mina Loy as a modern woman writer whose avant-garde approach to female sexuality and identity revolutionized the way that modern women communicated. Throughout her life, Loy was closely affiliated and dependent upon the intellectual work of Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes, among other prominent and now forgotten female voices. The conversations among these women undoubtedly influenced Loy’s approach to her own writing. In many ways, Loy’s style echoes Stein’s fragmented, circular continuous present. In others, it is incredibly self-conscious while unabashedly confronting issues that female dissatisfaction with sex, forbidden sexual desires, and the necessity for shifts in gender roles and expectations. Burke suggests that, above all, “Loy’s poems published in the New York little magazines during the war both stressed the cultural limitations imposed upon a woman’s vision of her potential and analyzed the psychological effects of her acquiescence in the feminine role, in ways that anticipate the contemporary psychoanalytic theories of femininity as a masquerade” (Burke 233). I argue that Loy’s achievements within her poetry and non-fiction “manifestos” are greater than anticipations; they are among the first instances of a modern woman exploring weighty social, gender, and political issues without fear of male retaliation. Loy’s “The Effectual Marriage,” “Songs to Joannes,” are exemplary of her exploration of sexuality while her “Feminist Manifesto” lays the groundwork for later feminist movements and condemns the Futurist’s disregard for women’s contributions to society. However, the poems of 1914-1920 are indicative of an interesting type of enlightenment; as Loy learned and lived more, she effectively created her own voice.

Instead of focusing on the commonly analyzed love poems, I will discuss the poems of “Futurism x Feminism: The Circle Squared” after discussing the implications of “Feminist Manifesto.” Instead of yielding the same results as other contemporary scholars, I feel that these pieces provide unique insights upon Loy’s femininity and the beginnings of a potent female awakening.

“Feminist Manifesto”: The beginnings of Modernist Feminism

Mina Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” (1914), was heavily influenced by the “Futurist Manifesto” of 1909. According to Kouidis, “the aggressive tone and shocking defiance of convention in Loy’s declaration echo Futurist manifestoes” (Kouidis, *Mina Loy*, 29). Loy’s connections to Futurism, though, were fraught with a dissatisfaction that colors some of her more well-known love poems. Loy was intellectually, and it seems, sexually, enlightened during the beginning of her affair with the Futurist movement and some of its leading men. But as Loy gained intellectual enlightenment, she also recognized that the types of sexual experience she desired were impossible because of Futurism’s belief that “It is plain that if modern woman dreams of winning her political rights, it is because without knowing it she is intimately sure of being, as a mother, as a wife, and as a lover, a closed circle, purely animal and wholly without usefulness” (Marinetti qtd. in Benstock 384). Loy’s writings have often made scholars uncomfortable because while they refute certain groups’ beliefs, they often absorb rhetorical strategies used by those groups. This is definitely true of “Feminist Manifesto.” The typography of the document is incredibly interesting; Loy toys with punctuation and inflection by enlarging certain terms and separating ideas in innovative ways. She also chooses to pose questions that are left unanswered—a method that is also explored in her poetry. The effect of this questioning

method is that readers either recognize that, as Loy states, “The feminist movement as at present instituted is **Inadequate**” (Loy 152), and also that readers are allowed to fill in the blanks created by Loy with their own beliefs.

“Feminist Manifesto” attempts to separate women from tradition. Loy commands:

Women if you want to realize yourselves—you are on the eve of a devastating psychological upheaval—all your pet illusions must be unmasked—the lies of centuries have got to go—are you prepared for the **Wrench**—? There is no half-measure—NO scratching on the surface of the rubbish heap of tradition, will bring about **Reform**, the only method is **Absolute Demolition**. (153)

Loy calls for women to remove their blind faith in social structures like economies and political leaders. Much like later critic Audre Lorde, Loy suggests that liberation can occur by forcing women to recognize their collective difference from men and exploit it. In the second line of this excerpt, it is important to note that “eve of a devastating psychological upheaval” could refer to Eve herself—the original woman and cause of woman’s sufferings and experiences.

But Loy does not seem to wish for women to dwell upon these tribulations and submit to patriarchal societies. Instead, they are told to begin examining what they really want; Loy posits that “Professional & commercial careers are opening up for you--” and then breaks the line of thought and questions, “Is that all you want?” (153). The typography of this question is bold, underlined, and emphatic. Loy utilizes these questions to jar women out of the monotony of reading, but the text also reads like a battle cry against oppression. Instead of wishing for things like small salaries and responsibilities, Loy urges women to desire more. She also demands that women recognize that women and men are not, in fact, equal—a

revolutionary/counterrevolutionary thought for early feminism. If women and men are not equal, then why should women struggle for and demand equal treatment? Loy carefully recognizes that the differences that separate men and women are incredibly important and worthy of celebration. And in a truly progressive maneuver, Loy states, “Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not—seek within yourselves to find out what you are” (154). Perhaps because Futurism shaped her early understanding of Modernism and modern life, Loy recognized that instead of women gaining rights through modernity, they were becoming ever more marginalized. And, as women activists looked to men to approve their empowerment, they were actually enabling further marginalization and oppression.

Recognizing that this oppression was becoming a ceaseless cycle, Loy brazenly tells women readers that, “As conditions are at present constituted—you have the choice between Parasitism, & Prostitution—or Negation” (154). These options echo age-old archetypes that women must exist within the realms of virgin, mother, or whore. In order to succeed in a modern world, Loy declares that women writers must recognize their limitations and then break through them by embarking on self-discovery. One of the main ways that Loy discusses changing the archetypes is through the re-definition of virginity. Loy proposes that the dichotomy between ‘the mistress & the mother’ be demolished by making sacrifices of which “the first & greatest sacrifice you have to make is of your ‘virtue’” (154). Virginity and virtue are commodities that women trade in order to gain security, and Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” proposes that by destroying the commodity, women are liberated. They can be regarded for their contributions to intellectual conversations and society rather than their benefit as breeders or sex objects. Although

Loy's proposal suggests that women can be liberated from the "man made bogey of virtue" by "unconditional surgical destruction of virginity through-out the female population at puberty"—an astonishing and somewhat violent act—it does not seem that Loy is actually serious. What Loy accomplishes through this shocking statement is a distinction between men and women. She states that women are only successful if they, by chance, trick the right man into marrying them—an embodiment of what she deems 'parasitism'. What the woman trades, then, is virginity and virtue for security. But what of happiness and self-worth? What of romantic love?

Loy explores the relationships between woman, man, and child towards the end of the "Feminist Manifesto". She suggests that problems arise within romantic relationships because, rather than seeking out love from her partner or child, "women must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved" (155). Women must also care more for their children than they do their sexual partners; in doing so, they focus their energies of creation on an entity that can thrive from "psychic development" (155). When women refocus their energies on offspring, they become more harmonious and ensure that "each individual should be the expression of an easy & ample interpenetration of the male & female temperaments—free of stress" (155). Loy also claims that maternity is a social responsibility. Since men cannot create life in the way that women can, "every woman of superior intelligence should realize her race-responsibility, in producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit or degenerate members of her sex" (155). Futurism perpetuates the idea that the strongest, most worthy members of a society should reproduce in order to outnumber weaker individuals. Simply put, Loy's version of her own femininity within this document could be deciphered as, "Good, worthy women

must have children in order to make up for the bad, unworthy women who are reproducing.” When members of this upper echelon choose to have and raise children, they biologically act out against a society which rewards all individuals instead of only those whose merit warrants survival. However, Futurism does not take women or their reproductive powers into account within its manifesto; “the scorn of women” becomes a mantra against strong females. Loy’s desire to reproduce and her urgings for other good women to do so also increase her value and her indispensability.

Based on Loy’s manifesto, the creative power that women possessed should be governed by women—not men. What Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” really proposes, then, is an androgyny of mind and spirit—a sentiment that is also explored in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Instead of adhering to the Futurist ideals that truly great women are just ‘honorary men,’ Loy urges women to achieve greatness through whatever means they can. If they cannot find harmony within the male-dominated world, they should recognize that patriarchal practices are fully dependent upon the women who are treated as commodities. As Loy states in the ending phrases of “Feminist Manifesto,” woman must shed the desire for comfort and instead,

Woman for her happiness must retain her deceptive fragility of appearance, combined with indomitable will, irreducible courage, & abundant health the outcome of sound nerves—Another great illusion that woman must use all her introspective and clear-sightedness and unbiased bravery to destroy—for the sake of her self respect is the impurity of sex the realization in defiance of superstition that there is nothing impure in sex—except in the mental attitude to do it—will constitute an incalculable & wider social regeneration than it is possible for our generation to imagine. (Emphasis Loy’s own, 156)

By removing emotions and expectations from patriarchal trading/purchasing practices, women can find harmony. Modern women, like their male counterparts, can contribute to

the modern world in myriad ways. They can also find sexual liberation by acknowledging sexual activity as a natural part of human life. Loy's exploration of her own femininity occurred within her artwork—both through paintings and through writing. Within the poems of the 'Futurism x Feminism: The Circle Squared' collection, Loy expands upon the ideals that she outlines within the "Feminist Manifesto" while also presenting anecdotes about woman and desire. The squaring of the circle most likely refers to Mariotti's allusion to the purposeless circular woman—an offensive objectification of the female body. In Loy's writing, when women confess to their desires and act upon them, they effectively inhabit the harmonious space between the genders and become greater than their bodies.

'And tame things have no immensity': Feminist Imaginings

In the first poem within the collection, 'Futurism x Feminism: The Circle Squared,' Mina Loy explores "Parturition," or the act of giving birth to offspring. The fact that this is the first within the sequence of poems is an interesting authorial choice; not only does it make the beginning of something new, but it gives woman the power of agency. The first lines of the poem state, "I am the centre/ Of a circle of pain/ Exceeding its boundaries in every direction" (Loy 4). Instead of being the victim of the patriarchy or embodying a Futurist ideology of the purposeless circle, women are the beginning of life. They are also burdened with supreme suffering. Within the poem Loy explores the agonizing conditions of women. The poem's narrator represents womanhood on a grand scale, stating, "I am the false quantity/In the harmony of physiological potentiality/To which/Gaining self-control/I should be consonant/In time" (4). Loy suggests that, when self-control is *gained*, woman can become her own entity. The narrator then journeys

attempts to utilize this vital difference between men and women as a means of empowerment.

While “Parturition” marks the acknowledgement of woman’s creative power, the third poem in the collection, “Three Moments in Paris,” speaks to the sexual empowerment of a female voice. Loy manipulates archetypal and stereotypical images of women within the poem while also celebrating sexual energies. The main concern within the first moment in Paris, called ‘I. One O’Clock at Night,’ is possession. Loy begins by stating, “Though you had never possessed me/I had belonged to you since the beginning of time/And sleepily I sat on your chair beside you/Leaning against your shoulder/And your careless arm across my back gesticulated/As your indisputable male voice

roared” (15). The male-female dynamics within this poem empower the man with the strength of upholding and physically supporting the woman who, sleepily, is privy to an intellectual conversation which she does not understand. She is complacent and comfortable with the fact that, upon dozing off on her man’s shoulder, she is awakened by the clearing of his throat and “caught the thread of the argument/Immediately assuming my personal mental attitude/And ceased to be a woman” (15). The speaker explores her own femininity, saying that she is “a mere woman/The animal woman/Understanding nothing of man” except that men embark on “cerebral gymnastics” that are nothing more than the “self-indulgent play of children” (15). As a woman, the narrator is allowed to lean upon the patriarchy but not to stand on her own two feet. Her duty is to rest within the “repose” that is explored within “Parturition” and, when she finds the patriarchy too brazen or loud, she is taken home and put to bed. It is very likely that ‘One O’Clock at Night’ speaks to Loy’s experiences prior to her

intellectual awakening. She does not participate, but simply sleeps through important discussion. However, an alternate view of this poem could be that the ‘cerebral gymnastics’ that men embark upon are truly meaningless. In the middle of the night, they disturb a woman who has more important things to do than observe and support male egos. Part II, or “Café du Neant,” Loy creates a dynamic relationship between death and romance. As two lovers view one another with “Eyes that are full of love/And eyes that are full of kohl” they create light yet also die slowly. The narrator speaks of “Nostalgic youth” and a yearning for “LIFE” amidst “this factitious chamber of DEATH” (16). The café becomes a death chamber of sorts as the “Little tapers leaning.../Stuck in coffin tables of the Café du Neant” blaze and melt down (16). The woman is given agency to smile “as bravely/As it is given to her to be brave” (17) amidst the inevitable decomposition of the scene, her love, and the lovers bodies. This particular piece of the poem has a cinematic feeling. Initially, the reader’s attention is overwhelmed by the café scene and candlelight. As the characters within the scene come into focus, it is the smiling woman who takes the lead. She is the central figure who has “concentric lighting focused precisely upon her” and, as she smiles, her own decomposition overwhelms her beauty. The “putrefaction” that Loy refers to is one of the last phases of decomposition—typically the point at which the body’s organs are completely liquefied. The connection between the melting coffin candles and the eventual breakdown of the woman’s body present an incredibly unromantic view of love. If romantic love is what all women are striving for, Loy’s presentation of love and death as analogous violates romance.

The third portion of “Three Moments in Paris” is ‘Magasins du Louvre’. Les Grands Magasins du Louvre was a department store in Paris that was established in 1855.

Conspicuous consumption and consumerism play a tremendous role in Loy's beliefs about feminism. During modernity, women were still partaking in the habits of consumerism that were established during the Victorian era and influenced by spectacles like the Crystal Palace. Loy's poem takes the notions of consumerism and equates them with the practice of trading or selling virtues. The first lines of the section are, "All the virgin eyes in the world are made of glass" (17). The poem then examines the "Long lines of boxes/Of dolls/Propped against banisters" and the costumed figures who visually consume the sights of the Magasins du Louvre. Within this section of poem, the virgin eyes are glasslike but are also genderless. But virgin eyes "alone have the effrontery to/Stare through the human soul/Seeing nothing/Between parted fringes" (17). And as two coquettes, dressed in fashions that are emblematic of modernity—a bowler hat, a camellia, and an iridescent boa—the look that they deliver to one another is one of chaste longing. The speaker, recognizing this look, states that while she notes their glance, her eyes "are inextricably entangled with the pattern of the carpet/ As eyes are apt to be/In their shame/Having surprised a gesture that is ultimately intimate" (18). The shame associated with sexuality—especially a sexuality that is so closely affiliated with the idea of consumption—represents yet another facet of femininity. Is shame inherent in sexual activity, or, like the glass cases and rows of dolls, is it something that is propagated by the patriarchy? Within these three separate moments in Paris, Loy allows her readers to recognize the varying degrees of sexual liberation that exist within one of Europe's most progressive cities. There is ignorance, decomposition, and shame. Rather than representing a fulfilling romantic love, Loy focuses on all of the ways in which love leaves individuals—primarily women—consumed, emptied, and unsatisfied.

In the poem, “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots,” Loy plays with the language of marriage. “Dots” are a term used for marriage portions or dowries. Loy’s central figure within this poem is virgins who do not have ‘dots’, or are without marriage possibilities. These virgins view men as threats and state, “Men’s eyes look into things/Our eyes look out” (21). Therefore, the men consume what the women cannot protect and cannot give away. Because the speakers are poor virgins, they have no real options. They say, “A great deal of ourselves/We offer to the mirror/Something less to the confessional/The rest to Time” (21). Virgins serve no purpose in society. They squander their youth and spend time “wasting our giggles” because they adhere to Victorian standards of femininity. Loy eludes this when, in the voice of the virgins, she states:

We have been taught
Love is a god
White with soft wings
 Nobody shouts
 Virgins for sale
Yet where are our coins
For buying a purchaser
Love is a god
 Marriage expensive
A secret well kept...
Somebody who was never
 A virgin
Has bolted the door...
Spread it with gold
And you carry it home
Against your shirt front
To a shaded light
With the door locked
Against virgins who
Might scratch” (22)

The virgins of Loy’s poem long to have agency. They are not allowed access to the world at large because they exist within a disenfranchised group. Their disenfranchisement

eliminates them from participating in real life. Unlike their male counterparts, female virgins must remain isolated from intellectual and social freedoms. Despite the fact that women were often confined to homes and easily managed spaces, the virgins cannot inhabit the domestic space of Loy's poem because, in order to do so, they must be admitted by the powers that have locked them out—primarily the patriarchy. For Loy, marriage does not represent a unification of two romantically entwined souls; it is a commodity only.

In one particularly avant-garde poem, entitled "Babies in Hospital," Loy speaks through a mother of two children—a "delightfully male" little boy and a little girl with "the atrophied/ woman-smile of your mother" (24). The speaker's main purpose is to acknowledge her love for her two children. However, because the mother feels trapped within her own role as mother and woman, she looks at her daughter with pity and fear. Her son is careless and a "bad little boy," but the mother expresses assurance that her son will—because of his brute strength and "gallant" nature—succeed in life. The son is unnamed within the poem but the girl baby does receive the name of "Elena." She is introduced within the first lines of the poem as, "Small Elena/Of shrunken limbs/And ample sex/Who/Having filched/The atrophied/Woman-smile of your mother/Scatter it/On the eating unseen/Tuberculous" (24). The clinical features of Tuberculous meningitis, or TB, consist of confusion, fever, headache, and, at least in modernity, likely death. The girl baby, because of her 'ample sex,' is condemned to die. She is also unwanted, which the mother figure confirms when she says, "You are very wise/Precocious coquette/Who never learnt to talk/To look at him/Before/Your semi-imbecile/Eyes shut/It is not given to each of us/To be desired" (25). Like the dolls that line the glass cases of "Magasins du

Louvre,” Elena’s capabilities are only to serve as an object that her brother can be kind to—if he so chooses. Her lack of voice and the fact that her only functions are technically involuntary ones speak to this complete lack of control. Elena’s frailty and fragile appearance leave the girl in the same position as the virgins; she is without hope or possibility for escape from the cycle that her mother is guilty of birthing her into. The mother figure rejects responsibility in the poem’s last lines: “I cannot be your mother/There are already/So many ignorances/I am not guilty of” (26).

If these early poems discuss the undesirable situations that women find themselves in due either to poverty, romantic ideals, and circumstance, then these are the very women that Loy is addressing in the beginning of “Feminist Manifesto.” Rather than looking to one another for assistance, these women consistently look to men to tell them what they are not. And, in the cases of the women from “Parturition,” “Three Moments in Paris,” and “Babies in Hospital,” looking to men for solutions proves fruitless. The mother in “Parturition” finds herself climbing ceaselessly onto further agonies. The various representations of femininity in “Three Moments in Paris” all experience sexual shame because their understandings of sexuality and life are prescribed to them by men. The idea of lost agency takes shape in “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots,” where women are incapable of escaping their virginity and also of entering the locked doors of wisdom and enlightenment. This hopelessness is expanded upon within “Babies in Hospital.” When these poems are dissected in tandem with “Feminist Manifesto,” scholars must ask themselves where Loy’s own romantic nature comes into play. In a majority of her early work, Loy finds that fate condemns women to suffering.

Loy begins exploring solutions to women's problems within the poem "The Effectual Marriage." Ezra Pound championed her writing and enjoyed this particular poem so much that "he reprinted it twice in his own edited version, retitled 'The Ineffectual Marriage.'" In the original version, the marriage of Gina and Miovanni is shown as an apparently successful example of the heterosexual arrangements that Loy denounced in "Feminist Manifesto" (Burke 234). Pound felt that "The Effectual Marriage" exemplified "logopoeia or poetry that is akin to nothing but language, which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas" (234). The poem, though, presents readers with a dissatisfactory union between two unfulfilled individuals. In a 1917 publication, "The Sexual Variety and Variability Among Women," Stella Browne wrote, "The realities of women's sexual life have been greatly obscured by the lack of sexual vocabulary... When she marries, or meets her first lover, she learns a whole new language, and often this language has been defiled in the mind of the man who teaches it to her, long before they met" (Browne qtd. in Peppis 561). This lack of sexual vocabulary is the largest conflict in Loy's poem. Loy writes that Gina and Miovanni knew that their privacy, signified by the closing of their door, was important. However, within the confines of their home and behind the closed door, they live separately. "In the evening they looked out of their two windows/Miovanni out of his library window/Gina from the kitchen window/From among his pots and pans/Where he so kindly kept her/Where she so wisely busied herself... Some say that happy women are immaterial" (36). The markers of femininity—primarily the kitchen and its accoutrements of pots and pans—are all property of the home's patriarch. From her kitchen window/prison, Gina "had her use being useful" and learns "at any hour to offer/The dish appropriately

delectable” to her husband who cannot busy himself with food or with his wife because—in a decidedly mocking anti-Futurist nod—he is “Outside time and space” (37). He is “magnificently man” and she “insignificantly a woman” and the two live in complete misunderstanding of one another. Sexual interactions strain the marriage as “Gina was a woman/Who wanted everything/To be everything in woman...Miovanni always knew her/She was Gina/Gina who lent monogamy” (38). And, without Miovanni’s needs, Gina would be another purposeless feminine circle. But Gina spends her days—when not serving her husband’s whims—wishing that “Miovanni would love her to-morrow/And as Miovanni/Never gave any heed to the matter/He did” (38). Sexual activities—because Gina does not possess the vocabulary to discuss them—are left up to the patriarch, who, like the brutal son in “Babies in Hospital,” can offer kindness or affection at his whim. The women within Loy’s poems are voiceless and aimless.

After Loy bares the problems within modern sexual relationships—particularly those with ‘enlightened’ men—she moves onto the last poem within the collection, “Lions’ Jaws.” Within “Lions’ Jaws” Mina Loy openly critiques the practices of Futurist men. While she does disguise their names by inverting some letters, many modern readers would have been able to discern exactly who she was criticizing. Loy writes that the “Latin litterateurs/rivaling Gabrunzio’s satiety/burst in a manifesto/notifying women’s wombs/of Man’s immediate agamogenesis/Insurance/of his spiritual integrity/against the carnivorous courtesan/Manifesto/of the flabbergast movement/hurled by the leader Raminetti” (47). She then speaks of herself as the “‘excepted’ woman” whose heart they “wheedle” their way into. It is easy to forget that, despite her anger and sense of helplessness in earlier poems, Loy was incredibly capable of speaking up for

herself. She does so in the garb of an alternate voice, one that expresses its anger at being betrayed and marginalized by the Futurists who become the “flabbergasts” within the poem. Loy writes:

These amusing men
discover in their mail
duplicate petitions
to be the lurid mother of “their” flabbergast child
from Nima Lyo, alias Anim Yol, alias
Imna Oly
(secret service buffoon to the Woman’s Cause) (49)

These amusing men are undoubtedly the Futurists who, despite her desire to be “the exception to Futurist contempt for women” (9), still refuse her entry into their inner circles. Loy scathingly mocks their practices and their lack of respect for women by sending out paternity petitions from aliases that are all obviously anagrams for her own name. This type of “dance of intelligence” is exactly what Pound celebrated within his analysis of Loy’s work. Logopoeia, then, is one of the greatest contributions that Loy made to Modernism. The fervor of her writing forced women readers to confront their own experiences. Loy’s work encourages liberalization and conversation between the sexes. Despite attempts to undo the war of the sexes and the battles for power, Loy finds that “The only point at which the interests of the sexes merge—is the sexual embrace” (154). This ideology empowered Loy and allows her poetry to maintain its potency. As one contemporary critic recently commented, “reading Mina Loy is one of the most direct encounters with modernism...liked defusing an old but still live time bomb” (Rasula 164).

Loy's Legacy

Kouidis suggests that Loy's romantic involvements and losses inspired the poetic satire and tone which Loy readers find marvelous. While these influences can be felt within the subject matter of certain poems, I believe that a more accurate discussion of Loy's abilities cites her intuition and relentless self-exploration as the driving forces behind her art. Loy's influences, which make her poetry both "distinctly feminine in its exploration of female oppression" and also "Futurist inspired in its aggressive assertion of selfhood and structural experiment," heighten the effectiveness of her work. Reading Loy is particularly powerful because her subjects are approachable on myriad levels (Kouidis 8). While the figures within her poems exist between categories and on the outer limits of society, she represents them beautifully. Loy's logopoeia and the sharp and biting qualities of her writing situate her among the most influential modern artists. While history seems to have forgotten about Loy's participation in the production of art, female readers have long imitated Loy's style. In a sense, Loy was simply too far ahead of her time.

Chapter VI

Summing Up

This project allows modernist scholars to recognize the fact that ‘influence’ is often misunderstood. While delving into the writings of these authors, it became evident that a more thorough academic discussion of these figures was necessary. However, that necessity for a larger discussion is something that was part of the inspiration for the project, so its evidence was really no surprise.

This thesis project has created a better understanding of the methods that Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Nella Larsen, and Mina Loy employed in their writings and in their desires to toy with the boundaries of patriarchy, race, and gender. These four women created discourse communities that utilized non-threatening tools to accomplish revolutionary things. Discourse allows us to equip ourselves with language that would have previously been thought too advanced, risqué, or distressing for female audiences. However, the figures studied within this thesis all took part in the creation of a discourse community that forever shaped women’s writing.

I hope to explore these discourse communities in future work. This particular project made it possible to see the inner-workings of great modern works that are never grouped together. The intertextual connections are present and, if given more attention critically, this type of study could advance the position of many modern female authors. This is a movement that I hope to be a part of during my PhD work and in my career as an academic.

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