The Gender of Modernism

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During the 1920s, when Harlem was black America's culture capital and the “New Negro” was in vogue, Nella Larsen grappled with the complexity of being a modern black female. Born in Chicago during its headlong rush into modern development, she was the first of the twentieth-century black women writers whose sensibility was completely urban and whose understanding of fiction was thoroughly modern. She was born in the 1890s, when Chicago propelled itself by means of the Columbian Exposition (1893) into an unparalleled acceptance of urban modernity. With little appreciation for life outside cities and no nostalgia for the past, she encountered the South too late in her formative years and too early in her middle years to be impressed by either its folklore or its folk legacies. Her arrival in the New York of the 1910s anchored a fascination with urban existence that both characterized and stabilized her adulthood.

Described in a 1928 newspaper story as “a modern woman, for she smokes, wears her dresses short, does not believe in religion, churches and the like” (Berlack), Larsen became acquainted with modernist authors through her training at the Library School of the New York Public Library (1922–1923) and her job at the 135th Street branch library (1923–1926), where “New Negro” writers of the older generation (James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, W. E. B. Du Bois) and the younger (Gwendolyn Bennett, Countee Cullen,
Langston Hughes) gathered for readings. She associated with a number of the new artists, particularly Rudolph Fisher, Aaron Douglas, Arna Bontemps, and Wallace Thurman. Along with them, Dorothy Peterson, and Harold Jackman, she joined Jean Toomer’s Harlem group for lectures and demonstrations in Gurdjieffian philosophy.

An additional influence was her friendship with white novelist and critic Carl Van Vechten, who in the 1920s was often in the forefront of “new” tastes and directions, such as “Negro Harlem,” Walt Whitman, and Gertrude Stein. Upon beginning to write fiction in 1926, Larsen envisioned her work as a part of the new, the modern, and the avant garde, largely represented by Van Vechten and his New York set (Isa Glenn, Avery Hopwood, Witter Bynner, William Seabrook, Fannie Hurst, and a host of other literati). His cosmopolitan readings and his literary friendships with Stein, James Branch Cabell, Elinor Wylie, Joseph Hergesheimer, Ronald Firbank, and others known for experimental works helped shape Larsen’s fictional emphasis on ironic, sophisticated themes. Van Vechten’s own novels, including his controversial Nigger Heaven (1926), about Harlem, inspired her particular talent for satire, for depicting social mores and their often debilitating effects on women. In the mid-1920s, Van Vechten was responsible not only for introducing Larsen to famous writers and other celebrities but also for bringing her first novel to his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf.

Before Van Vechten, in the early 1920s, her first literary mentors, Jessie Fauset and Walter White, were responsible for initially encouraging her to write fiction. Fauset, literary editor of the Crisis, and White, assistant to James Weldon Johnson, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, were both prominent in fostering the literary and cultural Harlem Renaissance. White’s objection to T. S. Stribling’s portrayal of blacks in Birthright (1922) led him, Fauset, and Larsen, with the encouragement of H. L. Mencken, to begin novels on the realities of black life. Though White completed The Fire in the Flint (1924) and Fauset There Is Confusion (1924) before Larsen began her novel, they helped to direct her toward unexplored areas of racial fiction. Both also forwarded her literary ambitions by including her as a budding writer in Harlem’s “New Negro” social and cultural activities. By the time her first novel appeared in 1928, Larsen functioned with ease in “the myth world of the twenties” (Osofsky 187), on both sides of 110th Street.

Despite her identification with what Alain Locke, godfather of the Harlem Renaissance, termed “the talented few” (47), those who were in Du Bois’s formulation “the talented tenth” of the race, Larsen recognized that neither class privilege nor caste position could protect women from the external and internal circumstances that impede their development, circumvent their ambition, and fragment their personalities. Her two published novels, Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929), have at their center the same issues that feminists today explore: gender identity, racial oppression, sexuality and desire, work and aspiration, marriage and ambition, reproduction and motherhood, family and autonomy, class and social mobility. Her intricate explorations of the per-
sonal consciousness and psychology of women transcend the limits of a single fictive character because on a subsurface level they address the condition of, and ambivalence toward, women in an emergent modern society. Both novels are marked by discourses on female desire and allegories of repression.

Helga Crane, the educated mulatto heroine in Quicksand, searches for self-definition, societal recognition, and sexual expression. Her odyssey through a richly textured contemporary scene ranges from the rural South and the urban North to cosmopolitan Scandinavia and encompasses basic questions of a woman's place in relation to self, family, and society. One major issue mediating the conclusion is a woman's control over her own body and reproduction. Barely functional after the birth of her fourth child, Helga becomes pregnant with her fifth. Her position in the psychic quagmire that had threatened her existence all along graphically illustrates the negative impact of marriage and motherhood on a woman's desire for autonomy and self-affirmation. Although Helga Crane fails in her spiritual quest, she becomes symbolic not merely of "the tragic mulatto" (Christian 53) but primarily of the restless energy and relentless search endemic to modern identity in general and to female identity in particular.

Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, light-skinned blacks and psychological doubles in Passing, represent the contrasts between one woman's safe, secure, middle-class life of servants, bridge parties, charity balls, and smart fashions and another woman's risk-filled, daring existence on the edge of danger and duplicity, between the "sacrificial," self-denying roles as wife and mother and the "selfish," self-seeking person. Racial passing is only one of the concerns (Wall 105–110; Tate; Youmans). In rendering Irene, the central consciousness of Passing, Larsen experiments with stream-of-consciousness technique and narrated monologues to explore the darker side of personality (jealousy, anxiety, rage) cloaked in material comfort and social respectability. She was an early reader of James Joyce's fiction, and in 1927 requested a copy of Ulysses from a friend traveling in France.

The lasting strength of Quicksand and Passing, as Larsen's friend and fellow Gurdjieff disciple Dorothy Peterson (a language teacher, translator, and actress) attested in nominating her for a 1929 Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes, is "interpreting feminine psychology"—a strength that ironically may have undercut her chances for winning, both in 1928, when the first-place gold medal went to poet and novelist Claude McKay and the second-place bronze medal went to Larsen, and in 1929, when no gold medal was awarded but the second-place bronze went to her mentor Walter White. Yet her skill in handling the psychology of female character, particularly the psychological depths charted in her subtexts, is precisely what has attracted contemporary feminists to her work (McDowell; Washington 159–167; Davis; Dearborn 55–60; Thornton).

Larsen's knowledge of modernism extended to the impact of the new scientific findings on human relationships. Married in 1919 to a research physicist, she combined an awareness of "new science" with an interest in creative
writing. Her husband, Elmer Samuel Imes, was a pioneer in infrared spectroscopy. In exploring the means of studying the structure of molecules, he verified the applicability of the quantum theory to radiation in all parts of the electromagnetic spectrum. His experiments on the rotational energy levels of hydrogen fluoride was a turning point in modern scientific thinking because it demonstrated the general application of the quantum theory to more than a few limited fields of theoretical or applied physics (Fuson; Spady).

Imes's work on relativity fostered Larsen's interest in the randomness of human experience. She was aware of the changing nature of human relationships and of the contemporary efforts in literature and science to understand human psychology and personality, especially theoretical conceptions about the relative value of both experiences and events. Her own personal and social history, however, contributed to her emphasis on the present and future and caused her to privilege social evolutionism, thereby allowing for change, mobility, and transmutation.

Larsen's will to create and her determination to become all that she envisioned for her ideal self are seen in her career shifts and job changes. She worked her way through the Lincoln Hospital School for Nurses in the Bronx (1912–1915) and supported herself before and after her marriage as a nurse during a period when nursing was developing as a profession for women and nurses were organizing progressive associations, demanding respect for their work, and expanding their options by working first for suffrage and then, after 1920, for voter registration as a means of affecting a change in their collective condition as women.

An avid reader throughout her life, Larsen attempted to bring together her private interests with a public career by becoming a librarian in 1923. Although library work was more suited to her literary interests, she soon discovered that she had both the will and the opportunity to become a novelist. Her movement from nurse to librarian to writer demonstrates a personal search for class position, meaningful work, social prestige, and full self-expression that was not unlike Helga Crane's in Quicksand.

Larsen was one of only two black women novelists who came to prominence during the 1920s; the other was her mentor Jessie Fauset. Unlike Fauset, Larsen drew the models for her fictional creations from both the Harlem Renaissance and the New York avant garde, and she did not write cultural or literary essays. Though she published two book reviews and one rebuttal to a review in the Messenger and Opportunity, she confined her work primarily to the novel.

One of her rare ventures into the critical essay was her defense of Walter White's novel Flight (1926). Frank Horne, a young poet, panned the book for its inadequate and illogical development of the main character, Mimi Daquin, a New Orleans creole of color who passes for white but ultimately returns to her race. Horne's most negative criticisms were directed against the novel's stylistic deficiencies and the novelist's poor writing skills. In response to the personal attack on her mentor, Larsen composed a detailed statement that is,
in effect, self-revelatory of her stake in the modernist camp. Addressed to
Charles S. Johnson, editor of Opportunity, her letter (reprinted below) displays
the knowledge of literature that had prompted him to enlist her as the respon-
dent to Horne. Published in an abridged version in the September 1926 issue
of Opportunity, the letter also reveals her attempt to use the idea of relativity
in connection with works of fiction.

Much like her fellow “New Negro” authors, Larsen was a prolific writer
of letters. In her extant correspondence, she occasionally touched upon her
position as author in relation to modernism, and she typically linked herself
to experimental, primarily male, writers. Although she is sensitive in her nov-
els to the condition of women in a patriarchal society and to the limitations on
female aspirations in a sexist and racist world, she rarely addresses gender
issues in her personal correspondence or signals an awareness of the chang-
ing conditions of women in modern society.

One example is her 1925 letter to Carl Van Vechten (also printed here) on
the publication of Firecrackers, his novel treating the paradoxes of love. Larsen
reveals the breathless excitement of mid-decade New Yorkers, the exuberant
sense of possibilities awaiting fictional exploration, the sensuousness of physi-
calities captured in writing, and the sheer pleasure of being part of one’s own
milieu. She evokes the idiom and mood of the central figure in Van Vechten’s
novel The Blind Bow-Boy (1923), Campaspe Lorillard, a sophisticated New
Yorker who struggles against losing her independence to the equally indepen-
dent Gunnar O’Grady, a man of numerous exotic careers, including fur-
naceman and acrobat. In the sexual duel between the two, Campaspe is the
victor because she accepts sex, passion, and intercourse in the relationship
without relinquishing her essential self. Larsen alludes to the sexual themes
and the colorful action, but she singles out the portrait of Edith Dale, a char-
acter from Van Vechten’s Peter Whiffle (1922) based on Mabel Dodge Luhan,
and the death of Countess Ella Poore Nattatorrini, the title character from his
Tattooed Countess (1924). Despite her silence about gender-specific issues in
Firecrackers, Larsen found one basis for her empathetic reading of it and other
novels, such as White’s Flight, in the portraits of modern women.

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Letter on Walter White's *Flight*

Mr. Charles S. Johnson,
127 East Twenty-third Street,
New York City

My dear Mr. Johnson:

I have before me Mr. Frank Horne's amazing review—in the July issue of Opportunity—of Mr. White's latest novel, "Flight." I do not like this review. In fact so violently do I object to it that I am moved to put pen to paper to state my reasons for objecting. Surprise, that a reviewer apparently so erudite should have written such an unintelligent review. Anger, because such a book had been given to so an ununderstanding a person for review. Pity, because the reviewer had so entirely missed the chief idea of the book.

I pass over your reviewer's main reason for exasperation with "Flight," the fact that he had hoped some day to write a novel on this subject, because it is not at all pertinent to the review. A bit naive, of course, and usually "not done," but still unimportant, and certainly no business of your readers.

It is the blindness, not the abuse which annoys me. I doubt if ever Mr.
Stuart Sherman or Mr. Carl Van Doren, supposing they had shared your reviewer's feelings, would have treated "Flight" so roughly. My quarrel with this very interesting piece of literary criticism is that seemingly your reviewer lacked the ability or the range of reading to understand the book which he attacked with so much assurance.

May I quote a little from the review as I go along?

"Mimi Daquin is a character worthy of a novel; she deserves a treatment of a kind to place her beside Maria Chandelaine, Mattie Frome and Salammbo." Just why, I wonder did your reviewer choose the passive French-Canadian girl, the trapped Mattie, and the Salammbo of ancient Carthage, with whom to disparage the rebellious, modern Mimi? Certainly, these are for their own environments and times, excellent characters. But, so is Mimi for hers. And would not Galsworthy's unsurpassable Irene Forsyte, or Jacobsen's Maria Grubbe have been more effective for purposes of comparison as well as for disparagement? They, like Mimi Daquin, threw away material things for fulfillment of their spiritual destinies.

"There is in her travail the lonely vicissitudes of a lost race..." Which "lost" race? It is here that your reviewer stumbles and falls. It is here that we detect his blindness. It is here that we become aware that he fails to realize that this is the heart of the whole tale. A lost race. Yes. But I suspect that he refers to the black race, while Mr. White obviously means that it is the white race which is lost, doomed to destruction by its own mechanical gods. How could your reviewer have missed this dominate note, this thing which permeates the whole book? It was this, that made Mimi turn from it. Surely, the thesis of "Flight" is "what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

"Then too, we must conjecture that he leaves this girl at the most critical stage of her career." We do not conjecture anything of the kind. We know it. And we were meant to know it. Authors do not supply imaginations, they expect their readers to have their own, and, to use them. Judging by present day standards of fiction, the ending of "Flight" is the perfect one, perfect in its aesthetic colouring, perfect in its subtle simplicity. For others of this type, I refer your reviewer to Sherwood Anderson's "Dark Laughter," to Carl Van Vechten's "Firecrackers," to Joseph Hergesheimer's "Tubal Cane."

"She leaves a white world with all of its advantages of body and spirit... to go back to 'her people'..." Here it is again, your reviewer's inability to grasp the fact that Mimi Daquin came to realize that, for her, there were no advantages of the spirit in the white world, and so, spiritual things being essential to her full existence she gave up voluntarily, the material advantages.

"How," asks your reviewer will she "adjust on a lower cramped scale a life that had become so full, how compensate for the intense freedom of being white?" Again, I point out that her life had not been full, it had, perhaps been novel, but not full. And I resent that word "lower", and in a lesser degree the word "cramped". I maintain that neither is applicable to Negro life, especially among people of Mimi's class. Inner peace compensated her for the "intense freedom of being white". Some people "feel" their race, (even some Negroes).
[Crossed through line illegible.] Mr. White evidently does, and so, has given us Mimi Daquin. [Deleted line.] I come now to your reviewer's complaints about the author's style. He grumbles about "lack of clarity", "confusion of characters", "faulty sentence structure". These sins escaped me in my two readings, and even after they had been so publicly pointed out, I failed to find them. Even the opening sentence, so particularly cited, still seems to me all right. But then, I have been recently reading Huysmans, Conrad, Proust, and Thomas Mann. Naturally these things would not irritate me as they would an admirer of Louis Hemon and Mrs. Wharton. Too, there's Galsworthy, who opens his latest novel with a sentence of some thirty-odd words.

To my mind, warped as I have confessed by the Europeans and the American moderns, "Flight" is a far superior piece of work than "The Fire in the Flint". Less dramatic, it is more fastidious and required more understanding, keener insight. Actions and words count less and the poetic conception of the character, the psychology of the scene more, than in the earlier novel. "Flight" shows a more mature artistry.

It may be that your reviewer read the book hastily, superficially, and so missed both its meaning and its charm.

N.d. [August 1926]. Walter White Correspondence. NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

Letter to Carl Van Vechten

Dear Carl,

This is a tardy "thank you", but for the past month it has seemed always to be tea time, as the immortal Alice remarked, with never time to wash the dishes between whiles.

What things there are to write, if one can only write them. Boiler menders, society ladies, children, acrobats, governesses, business men, countesses, flappers, Nile green bath rooms, beautifully filed, gay moods and shivering hesitations, all presented in an intensely restrained and civilized manner, and underneath the ironic survival of a much more primitive mood. Delicious.

It is nice to find some one writing as if he didn't absolutely despise the age in which he lives. And surely it is more interesting to belong to one's own time, to share its peculiar vision, catch that flying glimpse of the panorama which no subsequent generation can ever recover. I think "Firecrackers" is really a very important book.

Nice too, to meet some old friends. Thanks for the peep at Edith Dale. I think you were horrid to the countess.