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The Wings of the Furies: Teaching Nella Larsen and the American Literary Tradition

**ABSTRACT:** Nella Larsen, one of the pre-eminent novelists of the Harlem Renaissance and author of two masterpieces *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), is most often taught in African American literature courses. The thematic concerns, cultural references, and historical background of her fiction situate her work within the African American literary tradition. Less often explored is her relationship and debt to mainstream American writers, particularly Henry James and Edith Wharton. What do writers such as James and Wharton mean to Larsen whose project is to render black women's experience? This essay places her work within the American tradition through comparisons of her texts with James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1882) and Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). The numerous passages in Larsen that bear remarkable similarities to the language and style of passages from the earlier writers are closely scrutinized. The article suggests how students can work toward an understanding of literary influence, plagiarism (given the famous 1930 plagiarism charges against Larsen), and the fine line that separates them. Students are also encouraged to consider Larsen's motives for relying upon these literary models and what she achieves by doing so. She maps the narrative of the American heroine onto the life of a black female protagonist and in the process extends the parameters of American literature. Teaching the works of Nella Larsen in conjunction with James and Wharton sets up fascinating resonances and larger implications about literary influence and artistic ambition.

The works of Nella Larsen have found privileged places in the repertoire of texts that I have regularly drawn upon over the years as a teacher of American and African American literature. Larsen's novels have been prominently featured in a number of my courses, including an upper-level survey, African American Literature: The Major Writers; an upper-level genre course on The African American Novel; and a two-hundred level survey entitled Black Women Writers. In addition, I have used Larsen in a first-year composition course, The Craft of Writing, whose specific thematic focus was on the phenomenon of passing in all its various manifestations. In each of my courses, I find it useful to juxtapose either *Quicksand* or *Passing* to another text in order to provide a broader context for our analysis of the texts. For instance, in the Black Women Writers course I will juxtapose *Passing* to Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* or Andrea

Lee's *Sarah Phillips* in order to highlight the interpretive issues of race, class and identity. In The African American Novel course, which has gender as a primary category of scrutiny, I teach *Passing* with James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and assign a paper on the gender differentials within the experiences of racial passing. In the first-year course on *Passing*, I provide opportunities for students to make interesting and unexpected critical insights by connecting *Passing* with such works as John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* and Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

Behind this practice of juxtaposition is the belief that it is important for students to understand the relations one text may have with another and also to see texts as part of a literary historical continuum. This goal is established on the first day of class in my African American literature survey courses which are comprised of traditional undergraduates and occasionally a few graduate students in a master's in teaching secondary English program at my institution. The class is conducted as a discussion course, and at certain points that discussion is shaped not only to explore the texts but toward how these texts might be taught in middle and high schools. For this introductory session, I prepare timelines of American and African American texts. These timelines include authors and works ranging from the nineteenth century to the present. I adapt or reproduce charts from various standard anthologies of American literature. The two lists are separate but parallel. I ask the students to study the charts and to share what they notice. Of course, they notice how few black authors appear on the American chart. They also note with surprise how many writers appear on the African American chart and how many of their names are unfamiliar to them. Some students will express outrage at what they have not been taught in their previous literature courses.

Also on my agenda on this first day of class is to set up one of the important critical frameworks for the semester. I explain to the class that one of the advantages of teaching a discrete course in African American literature is to see how the texts relate to one another and how their commonalities allow them to create a literary tradition. These works share common themes such as identity

and freedom and tropes such as the mask and the trickster. I introduce the practice of "call and response," of one text answering the call of a predecessor. Here I draw upon Robert Stepto's classic essay "Teaching Afro-American Literature: Survey or Tradition," which I recommend to the graduate students in the class. Another relevant theoretical essay is Henry Louis Gates's introduction to *The Signifying Monkey*. These readings give the students a sense of how works are not isolated entities and how literary history is an ongoing, dynamic process.

As the class members examine the timeline of African American texts, I ask them to consider the texts in conversation and what they might say to each other. For instance, I pose the questions: What does Frederick Douglass say to W.E.B. Du Bois? What does Du Bois say to Langston Hughes? What does Richard Wright say to James Baldwin? What does Ralph Ellison say to Darryl Pinckney? How does Toni Morrison respond to all of them? These are questions that I have the students to note as points of reference for our work during the semester. To complicate the exercise, I ask the students to realize that these writers are also on the American literature timeline. The major issue here is: what do these writers say to the white canonical writers on the list? I emphasize that black writers contribute simultaneously to two literary historical narratives. How do they speak differently to the mainstream? What is the difference between the meta-narratives that these two traditions tell? Again, I urge the class to enter these questions into its notes for future reference.

One of the most important opportunities we have to apply these critical questions is the first day of our discussion of *Passing*. Larsen's short novel examines the intense and complex relationship between two childhood friends, Irene and Clare, who are able to pass for white in 1920s New York. We do close readings of the novel's first paragraph, which details Irene's discomfiture over Clare's letter which expressed a desire for a renewal of their old friendship, and also the first paragraph of the flashback second chapter in which Irene first encounters Clare in the rooftop restaurant. In both cases, I charge the students to pay attention to Larsen's references to colors: the purple ink of Clare's letter

and the color of Clare's frock. This last detail allows me to open up the discussion to the relationships that exist between texts. In this scene Clare is thus described: "a sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon" (148). I ask: What other novel uses the color green in a symbolic way? Sometimes I pose a more general question: What echoes of other novels do you hear in these early chapters of *Passing*? Immediately, the students make the connection to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which engenders lively and engaged interchanges. Most of the students in the class have read *The Great Gatsby* and have a sense of relief in being able to relate Larsen, an unknown quantity, to a text they know fairly well. Clare's green dress and the green light at the end of the Buchanan's dock both symbolize elusive dreams. What does the green light really mean to Gatsby? What is so unattainable about Clare's ambitions? Is her desire for whiteness and to transcend her past doomed to failure?

Both works participate in the construction of the myth of the American Dream. A comparison of Gatsby and Clare raises the question of what the American Dream means along racial lines. Is it the same for both black and white, or are there significant differences? The black students in my class, who are usually in the majority, are clear about the difference of black dreams in terms of realistic limits. Across this racial line, what would Clare and Gatsby have to say to each other? What do they have in common? This is one instance in which a black text is useful in interpreting the mainstream text. Setting Gatsby against Clare allows us to see that Gatsby himself is passing. If they both are engaged in the same endeavor, then how does gender complicate their passing? How easy is it for Gatsby to pass? Does Clare have to work twice as hard in her passing due to the dual nature of her agenda involving both race and class? Whatever differentials may be perceived in their passing, they both pay the ultimate price for their deception – death. In this they finally share an identity. The questions that have been outlined always generate profitable class discussion.

Once the connection between Fitzgerald and Larsen is made, students will be primed to be vigilant for even more correspondences between the novels.

This clearly enriches later class sessions. For example, they will notice how Larsen describes Clare in terms of her voice in the same way that Fitzgerald renders Daisy's. They also notice how significant actions in both novels take place in hotels, which registers the themes of social mobility and improvised identities. These common themes are the result of the novels' response to a shared historical moment. What else do they share being products of the American 1920s? Students are also surprised to see that certain African American and canonical writers have been contemporaries. With this line of interrogation students will see how much minority and mainstream texts have in common.

At this juncture, to examine another aspect of intertextuality, one might ask: Could Larsen, who published *Passing* in 1929, have read Fitzgerald's novel which was published in 1925? Could she be directly influenced by him? Students usually conclude that she did read her canonical contemporary because the similarities between the texts are so clear. The question then becomes – What does she learn from him and what does she do with this knowledge? One hopes that students can see that she recognizes in Fitzgerald the power of certain symbols, motifs, and themes, but also that she uses what she learns from him to serve her own purposes, among which is to argue for black respectability and to lend visibility to black women's lives. As such she is engaged in furthering the social and cultural work of the Harlem Renaissance, her particular literary context. Appropriating Fitzgerald, she speaks to white America, but on behalf of black America. Through the process of influence, imitation, and adaptation, she is engaged in deliberate acts of literary transformation.

When I teach *Passing*, I usually devote four days to it, three specifically for discussion and one for reflection and student presentations. The third day of class is quite full, devoted as it is to the students making cases for several theories as to the exact cause of Clare's death as well as the relative merits of the ending and its alternate version. However, I do make sure there is time to discuss the scene in Chapter Two of Part Three in which Irene contemplates the possibility of her husband having an affair with her friend Clare. Her confusion

and rage are compounded by her tacit pact not to reveal that Clare is passing as white. Irene and her husband in an earlier scene discuss how black people, out of racial solidarity, feel obligated not to betray their passing brethren. This racial loyalty bears heavily on Irene at this point because she wants to expose Clare's deception, particularly to Clare's racist husband, in order to exact revenge and finally to remove Clare from her life. She realizes that her desire to act individually as a woman to preserve her marriage is constrained by her responsibility to her race. I have the class focus on the following passage, which I sometimes present as part of a PowerPoint presentation of quotations from the text for that day's close reading exercise. I try to focus on two or three passages for close analysis in each class period. The passage reads as follows:

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her . . . A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or it might be, all three . . . . Sitting alone in the quiet living-room in the pleasant fire-light, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. (225)

After the class has discussed the various implications of Irene's racial and gender dilemma, I inform the students that this scene is very similar to a scene in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Some of the students may have read the novel in another course, but this can never be assumed. I take this opportunity to introduce a text that is not on the syllabus because I never get a chance to teach these two texts within my established courses. I still think it is important for students to make connections to other texts across periods and traditions. In fact, synthesizing literature from different periods and courses is expected of the majors by my department. My effort here is consistent with this objective.

I must synopsise *The Portrait of a Lady*, highlighting Isabel Archer's social conquest of Europe and her marriage to the aesthete Gilbert Osmond. I describe how she arrives at her fireside moment of revelation. I also provide excerpts from Chapter XLII and read to the class the relevant passages, such as the following:

For herself she lingered in the soundless saloon long after the fire had gone out. There was no danger of her feeling the cold; she was in a fever. She heard the small hours strike, and then the great ones, but her vigil took no heed of time. Her mind, assailed by visions, was in a state of extraordinary activity, and her visions might as well come to her there, where she sat up to meet them, as on her pillow, to make a mockery of rest. (484)

Immediately apparent is the similarity of the situations of the characters and their suffering over the suspicion of infidelity. To move attention away from this obvious parallel, I ask the students to consider the significance of the scene being set at a fireside. They make the connection to the idea of the hearth and domesticity and how both women are confronting the paralyzing boundaries of the defined gender roles of their time and class. Isabel and Irene also begin to perceive how their households and their marriages have been unsettled.

I also ask the class to picture the fireside scenes and to describe what impressions they register. They notice the wealth and privilege of the women in the novels. Both Isabel and Clare have the leisure that affluence affords, and both have servants who function in the background. This is important. I proceed to suggest that Irene's association with Isabel, through Larsen's intertextual relationship with James, allows us to read Irene in a particular way – as an upper middle class black woman. One of Larsen's projects, along with other women writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Jessie Fauset, was to reconstruct the image of black women, to give them the bourgeois respectability that history had denied them. The image of the upscale black woman, wife of a professional, and active in the community, would serve as an example of racial uplift and an argument for racial equality. To qualify this assertion, I also emphasize the difference in the two characters' racial and social statuses. Irene's position may be elevated within the black community, but it is always circumscribed by race. Her relative wealth is dependent on her physician husband whose prospects are determined by his status as a black man in 1920s America. In contrast, the point of Isabel Archer's experience is that she inherits a fortune and faces her fate

from a position without limits. Her whiteness becomes invisible, and her crisis becomes not a realization about her identity, as it is with Clare, but a philosophical meditation on the nature of freedom and choice.

Perhaps the most powerful insight gained from an examination of the two fireside scenes involves the races of the protagonists. Invariably a student will comment that Isabel is oppressed only a woman while Irene is doubly oppressed as a black woman, triply oppressed if class is also a factor. Students who have taken women's studies courses will be familiar with the concept of intersectionality, and I use this opportunity to explore the ramifications of this concept as applied to the novel. The idea of intersectionality maintains that black women's oppression stems from various forces, such as race, gender, and class, and the best way to understand that oppression is to see how these forces work together. In any analysis and critique of black women's oppressions, they cannot be separated as they operate in concert to determine the reality of black women's lives. This critical framework was brought to a high point of visibility by Kimberle Crenshaw's essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," which I enthusiastically recommend, along with the work of Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*), to all the students in the class. This is a crucial critical tool that they will be able to use throughout their college careers in courses throughout the curriculum.

The choices and actions of both Clare and Irene are shaped by their race and gender, but each woman negotiates these identities and the forces that oppress them in different ways. For instance, Clare's decisions to pass for white and to marry a white man are the result of her desire to rectify her sense of powerlessness. Irene creates a sense of security, which she as a woman would have difficulty achieving alone, by manipulating her husband into exercising career options that will support their affluence. Both maximize their possibilities within the parameters of their gender and race. I assert to my class that Irene's moment by the fire struggling with the competing demands of her racial and gender identities is a perfect illustration of intersectionality. Even more, the juxtaposition of the Larsen passage to James's accentuates the racial difference,

which may be Larsen's intention, and throws the specific nature of black women's experience into greater relief.

On the last day devoted to *Passing* in my courses, students give panel presentations on the novel. They work in groups of three or four, and their charge is to present the results of their independent research that in some way puts the novel into a larger context. The presentations on Larsen usually are heavily invested in her biography, particularly on the "Sanctuary" plagiarism scandal, which might have contributed to the precipitous end of her career. In most presentations, the students offer carefully supported arguments to assert her innocence.

It is at this point, or in the following class period, that I have intervened with an exercise that approaches Larsen's relationship with canonical writers in a way that raises more difficult and problematic issues. In Chapter One of Part Three of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Irene Redfield comes to the realization that her husband may be having an affair with her childhood friend, Clare. This is how Irene's reaction is described: "She shook her head, unable to speak, for there was a choking in her throat, and the confusion in her mind was like the beating of wings. Behind her she heard the gentle impact of the door as it closed behind him, and knew that he was gone" (217). Within those lines was an echo I was not able to place until some semesters later as I reread Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* for a first-year composition course I was teaching. In Chapter Fifteen of Book One, when Lily Bart is taken to task by her Aunt Peniston over her financial indiscretions and she realizes the full import of her situation, Wharton describes this moment as follows: "Lily went up to her own room and bolted the door. She was trembling with fear and anger – the rush of the furies' wings was in her ears. She walked up and down the room with blind irregular steps. The last door of escape was closed – she felt herself shut in with her dishonor" (172).

The situations and language are very similar, and one wonders about the relationship between these two passages. It is a relationship as deeply and fascinatingly ambiguous as any of Larsen's texts.

Clearly Larsen was familiar with Wharton's work as she was with most of the writers of her time. The list of her reading would include her peers in Harlem, the American expatriates in Paris, as well as the British and Irish modernists. In a letter to Frank Horne in 1926, she confesses to have recently read "Huysmans, Conrad, Proust, and Thomas Mann" (Hutchinson 208). Certainly she studied the novels of the American tradition, including Henry James and Edith Wharton. What complicates the issue of Larsen's erudition and sources of influence is her plagiarism case of 1930. She was accused of lifting the concept and details of her short story "Sanctuary" from "Mrs. Adis," a story written by British writer Sheila Kaye-Smith. It created a scandal in Harlem, but she was exonerated. Nonetheless, her reputation was tarnished.

I show the class the two wings of the furies passages and ask them to consider how they are related and how one might account for their similarity. I introduce a list of terms that might be applicable: influence, imitation, allusion, adaptation, parody, and plagiarism. These are terms most the students would be familiar with from previous courses in critical approaches and literary theory, particularly Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality. Literary influence acknowledges that all literature draws upon the body of work that precedes it. In fact, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains, invoking Eliot, the text itself is the vehicle of influence through which the literary past is read (122). Gates also iterates the modes of influence: "These elements [of influence] include texts that provide models of form, texts that provide models of substance" (122). He also notes that the function of influence is revisionary, that the indication of the influence is the way the text revises its antecedents.

When the students understand the narrative contexts of the parallel wings of the furies passages, they readily see how Larsen draws upon Wharton for the structure of the scene and the dramatization of female emotional crisis. I try to convey to the class the significance of what Larsen does here. She responds to a white text, and under its influence adapts it in order to give shape and expression to the experience of a black woman. The reference to the furies and to classical literature and mythology is suggestive. To situate Lily Bart within this frame of

reference makes sense as this is integral to Wharton's project of shaping her story into a female tragedy. The Furies have operated in similar ways for a number of American women writers, including Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. To add Larsen to this list through her use of this allusion is to place Irene Redfield's dilemma within a more general realm of women's experience. Yet its racial dimension can never be diminished. Larsen's use of the wings figure affirms an American tradition at the same time that its racialized specificity in being applied to a black character distinctly differentiates it. As Gates claims, it is the very variation in the responding text that is the manifest proof of influence. Larsen signifies on Wharton, and in doing so pays respect to her in an act of homage.

The term "signification" describes the way texts "speak" to one another to form their own discreet tradition. Signifyin', for instance, is a form of black linguistic practice whereby one speaker responds to the utterance of another and offers a variation often in the form of an insult or a putdown in order to gain an advantage. Gates uses this model to fashion a concept of an African American literary tradition whereby texts by black authors signify upon one another. In this way, Larsen through her racially ambiguous characters Irene and Clare in *Passing* signifies on nineteenth-century writers Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins in carrying forward the trope of the tragic mulatto. She also carries forward this character type from other white writers such as Lydia Maria Child. What does it mean for Larsen to signify on Edith Wharton? When we discuss these issues in class, students realize that a writer can belong to more than one tradition and perhaps many simultaneously. Cannot Larsen speak just as well to Wharton as to Hopkins? They also see the value of looking at a text from more than one perspective. For instance, one student, who wrote to me years after she graduated, expressed her anger at being limited to certain readings of African American texts when they are taught in American literature survey courses. She said she didn't get a feeling for the depth of black authored texts until she read them juxtaposed to each other in my course.

Another way that the similarity between Larsen and Wharton's references to the wings of the furies can be explained is through parody. Perhaps Larsen's approximation of the image of the furies is ironic and offers a critique of Wharton. Perhaps she is mocking Wharton through her mimicry. The only test for this possibility is close reading. When students closely compare the words of the two passages, as I direct them, they cannot find nuances and inflections that would indicate a parodic effect. I ask the class to compare the tone in the two passages. What I expect them to find and what I emphasize to them is that the two passages are similar in tone. Another indicator of parodic intent is the deflation of the original text. How do Irene's conflicted emotions reveal an excess in Lily Bart's? Instead of diminishing Lily's crisis, the intertextual relation seems instead to elevate Irene's. Indeed, what reason would Larsen have to ridicule Wharton? Wharton's prose here has a touch of the melodramatic, but instead of heightening it in order to highlight its excess, Larsen reproduces it – to her own ends.

Close reading of the passages reveals how much the two writers truly share. I myself do a demonstration for my class by going through the passages and showing how closely the passages resemble each other in terms of their diction. Here is the analysis I offer the class. In both cases, the characters have received a tremendous shock. Lily realizes that her Aunt Peniston will no longer support her or assist her with her debts. Irene realizes that her husband, Brian, is most likely having an affair with Clare, who is passing as a white woman. Both passages focus on the auditory impression of their emotion. The sound of the furies' wings is in Lily's ears. Irene registers "the beating of the wings" within "the confusion of her mind" (217). In both cases, this sound is accompanied by the suppression of another sense. Lily paces her room with "blind irregular steps" (172). Irene loses her voice. Even more telling is the sense of enclosure they both share. There are two references to closed doors in the Wharton passage. Lily bolts her door behind her and has the impression that the "last door of escape was closed" (172). Lily feels "herself shut in with her dishonor" (712). In the Larsen text, Irene's husband walks out of the room: "Behind her she heard

the gentle impact of the door as it closed behind him" (217). Clearly, the situations are similar, which would argue for literary influence, but the closeness of the language, which I impress upon my students, implies something else, that Larsen was looking to Wharton not just in conceptual terms but as a reference to create compositional effects. At this point, the issue of parody elides with plagiarism.

When I have shown the two passages side by side, I ask the class, "Is this plagiarism?" Sometimes I have asked them to apply the definition of plagiarism that my college uses in relation to its honor code. I ask them within the context of class discussion to take a definite position, and then to offer an argument to back up their claims. Utilizing this as an opportunity for them to exercise their argumentative skills, I also ask them to point to specific evidence in support. The range of student responses varies widely. Most will see the differences and similarities between the passages, but will not be bothered by them and consequently will not want to offer a clear answer. Others have found this an obvious case of plagiarism. One male graduate student was indignant; the case was so clear to him. I then ask, "What do we do with Larsen now?" His response was that she should be thrown out. I then invoke the importance of her work, its artistry, and what it means to American and African American literature. The best I usually get is a stalemate; the class is stumped by yet another dimension of ambiguity in an already ambiguous text.

This issue of the wings passages was taken up again by a student who had taken both my Black Women Writers class and my course on Hawthorne and Henry James. The majors in our English department are required to complete during the fall of their senior year a substantial work of scholarship. This essay is to demonstrate the student's progress through the degree, and it is to grow out of the upper-level courses she has taken. One goal of this endeavor is for the students to take a broad view of their study of literature and to synthesize the texts and issues that are most meaningful to them. The student in question conceived a project that perfectly achieved these objectives. For her senior seminar project, she wanted to focus on the interplay of autobiography and fiction

in Larsen's work. The particular issue that intrigued her was Larsen's ambivalence about her blackness and how this attitude manifested itself in her relationship to writers such as Henry James and Edith Wharton. She saw Larsen's literary project as a retreat from blackness and an embrace of the white mainstream. She wanted to document this movement away from blackness and toward whiteness by looking at the parallels between Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing* and James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. We worked together on the paper for a semester. I would pose to her certain questions to pursue and texts to consider, and then we would meet for hourly conferences each week. I would argue that the problems we outlined and the way we approached them would work equally well in any course in which Larsen is taught. This was one of my most rewarding teaching experiences. In this case my office became the classroom, and the pedagogical challenge was to direct and to support a bright and promising student whose independent study often became more independent than I anticipated. It was quite exciting to see what the student would discover or what turn her thinking about her subject would take.

At one point during this process, the senior students are required to give public presentations on their projects. The talks are fifteen minutes in length and often include handouts, visuals, and PowerPoint shows. Five minutes are then devoted to fielding questions and comments from the audience composed of their peers and members of the English department. The students are to incorporate the feedback from these presentations in the final revisions of their essays. My student's session went exceptionally well. She projected parallel passages from Larsen and James and Wharton to demonstrate the direction of her argument and research. Interestingly, the audience seemed reluctant to assign the term plagiarism to the similarities between the passages. Most saw them as merely influence. One of my colleagues memorably posed the question, "Why is it that black writers are accused of plagiarism when white writers are

not?"<sup>1</sup> The imputation of racism as the motivation for the questioning of the authenticity of Larsen's texts was provocative to say the least though not completely historically accurate as many of Larsen's accusers and detractors were black male figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Certainly, when we discuss the "Sanctuary" case, students often claim that Larsen was accused because of her race and gender. This is borne out by the facts. Davis in her biography of Larsen claims as much when describing the male reactions to Larsen's plagiarism scandal (348).

Even this consideration of the problematic nature of the charge of plagiarism could not diminish the evidentiary power of those parallel passages. This had been the starting point of the project. When the student first approached me about her subject, I gave her the wings of the furies passages and the charge to come to terms with their similarities. She went off to study the texts and came back with a stunning collection of quotations from Larsen, James, and Wharton. As it turned out, she had a remarkable facility for remembering lines from the novels she read for classes and had been making notes of them for several semesters. What she uncovered were not just occasional references to these other writers, but dozens of close approximations of their prose. Here are a few examples that might prove useful for scrutiny in the classroom.

Larsen's *Quicksand* delineates the search for identity of Helga, the biracial protagonist, as she moves from a black college in the South, to Harlem, to the Denmark of her mother's family, and back again to the South in a marriage to a black Baptist minister. In this passage from *Quicksand* Helga has moved to Harlem and, instead of finding the spark of newness and excitement she expected, falls victim to boredom and ennui: "Nothing seemed any good. She became a little frightened, and then shocked to discover that, for some unknown reason, it was of herself that she was afraid" (47). In Chapter Twelve of *Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel has just turned down a marriage proposal from Lord Warburton

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<sup>1</sup> This kind of question, which focuses on how black and white writers are treated differently by readers, critics, and publishers, is especially useful for generating student comment and debate.

and has brief second thoughts: "she was wondering if she were not a cold, hard, priggish person and . . . felt, as she had said to her friend, really frightened at herself" (165).

While Helga is living in Denmark, artist Axel Olsen proposes to her, and she is hesitant to answer: "Helga had moved back. Instantly he dropped his arms and took a step away, repelled by something suddenly wild in her face and manner" (87). Similarly, during Warburton's proposal, Isabel retreats: ". . . though she was lost in admiration of her opportunity she managed to move back into the deepest shade of it, even as some wild, caught creature in a vast cage" (162). After Helga rebuffs Olsen, she contemplates the repercussions of her choice: "Abruptly she was aware that in the end, in some way, she would pay for this hour . . . She wondered if for this she would pay all that she'd had" (87). After Isabel rejects Warburton, her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, offers her advice: "'There's room everywhere, my dear, if you'll pay for it. I sometimes think I've paid too much for this. Perhaps you also might have to pay too much'" (168).

One of the most compelling correspondences is between *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth*. At the end of the Wharton novel, Lily Bart, before she takes her last dose of chloral, reflects upon her lost opportunities:

It was not the stealing sense of sleep, but a vivid wakeful fatigue, a wan lucidity of mind against which all the possibilities of the future were shadowed forth gigantically. She was appalled by the intense cleanness of the vision; she seemed to have broken through the merciful veil which intervenes between intention and action, and to see exactly what she would do in all the long days to come. (298)

Compare this passage to one in *Quicksand* in which Helga has lost her last hope of a marriage that might save her: "And now she had forfeited it forever. Forever. Helga had an instantaneous shocking perception of what forever meant. And then like a flash, it was gone, leaving an endless stretch of dreary years before her appalled vision" (108).

In all these coupled passages, Larsen is not merely drawing upon James and Wharton for inspiration; she is relying upon them at the level of language to

move her narrative forward from point to point. The implication that Larsen plagiarized is clear. My student perhaps saw where her argument had to go, and in a move that surprised me, pivoted and abandoned this line of pursuit. In fact, she never included this material in her final paper. Instead, she focused on how the novels have similar plot elements, similarities that have also been detailed by Lay and Goldsmith.<sup>2</sup> What turned her project around was her discovery of an article by Beverly Haviland, "Passing from Paranoia to Plagiarism: the Abject Authorship of Nella Larsen." Haviland argues that Larsen in her story "Sanctuary" indeed was guilty of plagiarizing Kaye-Smith's story and offers an argument based in psychoanalytic theory. She claims that Larsen deliberately sabotaged the legitimacy of her authorship in an attempt symbolically to enact revenge upon the white mother who abandoned her.<sup>3</sup> My student was galvanized by this argument, so much so that the better part of her paper became a refutation of Haviland's position, and her zeal resulted in some interesting formulations and insights.

She offered an alternative interpretation of Larsen's reasons for using James and Wharton as literary models. Resisting the idea of plagiarism and psychological motives, she invoked Larsen's desire to be recognized and revered by her Harlem peers and by the white literary establishment. In her pursuit of excellence and greatness, Larsen refused to be limited by racial categories. Instead, she drew upon what she believed to be the best.<sup>4</sup> Larsen's veneration of the work of major canonical writers and the inspiration she drew and the lessons she learned from them in conceptualizing her own African American stories have two results: it seeks to break down boundaries between white and black

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<sup>2</sup> See articles by Mary M. Lay and Meredith Goldsmith.

<sup>3</sup> Haviland makes the following argument: "If Larsen did plagiarize (as I believe she did), this act of theft from a white woman who had an identity as an author can be understood as an act of aggression against her rejecting white mother" (304).

<sup>4</sup> Larsen was criticized for her imitation of these American writers. Some critics of the time found a falseness in her approach and made such comments as follows: "She [Larsen] . . . had gone to Mrs. Wharton and the elegant sophisticates for her lessons in writing. She insinuates, she interpolates, she reluc[s]" (Davis 328).

expression, and it also asserts a racial voice in general literary discourse. (I might also add that it raises another question ripe for student consideration: can one make a white story black and still tell the truth?) Ultimately, what my role was in this independent study was to facilitate the student's ability to read Larsen through her texts and her texts through her motivations. My student in a bold maneuver, concluded that Larsen's intention was not to plagiarize, but to pass, to move herself out of her conflicted biography and liminal identity and to write herself into the American literary canon.

A focus on the connections between Larsen, James, and Wharton has offered valuable learning moments for both my students and myself. I am somewhat surprised by my students' general reluctance to entertain the possibility of plagiarism on the part of a major author. Yet, I feel it is important for them to confront such a possibility as a way for them to clarify for themselves the exact nature of plagiarism as well as the nuances of literary intertextuality. I also want them to utilize their skills of close reading, judgment, and argumentation in the scrutiny of these examples. I am also gratified to see them discuss larger and more challenging issues, such as the workings of race and racism in the literary world, the nature of literary canons and their relation to each other. This kind of discussion also allows students to think of Larsen as a writer with specific motives and why she might have valued Wharton and James so much. What does a black writer learn from a white writer, and vice versa? On this point, student responses have ranged from identifying her as a sellout to her trying to overcome her internalized racism to her extreme literary ambition. I have found that these projects, exercises, and discussions allow students to talk and write about literature in more nuanced and sophisticated ways and to appreciate the complexities of authorship, identity, and literary traditions.

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