

Modernity and Dualism in *Quicksand* and *Winesburg, Ohio*

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The turn of modernism in society was also a major turn for literature. According to University of Houston's literature professor Craig White, modernism can be characterized by the transition from traditions and collective identities to individualism and doubt (White). Through these transitions, characters in literature from this period often become conflicted between the idea of collective identities and individualism along with the prior traditions and the new transition into modernism. In the *Edith Wharton Reveiw*, Donna Campbell, professor and vice chair at Washington University's English Department, expresses the definition of modernism as “the impossibility of knowing a single truth, and the sometimes destructive—or comic—effects of placing one’s faith in reason’s ability to discover it; the failure of language to express such truths; and the transcendent power of the epiphany” (Campbell 1). Through these two definitions, readers can see how characters become conflicted. As they are transitioning, they are unable to know their true selves because they are stuck in the traditional idea of collective identities while fighting to reach an individualistic identity. Through the transitional challenge, their identities become fragmented and dualism in those identities arise. Characters in modern literature such as *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Quicksand* are seen facing these challenges of discovering identity. They face social and cultural issues—gender roles, racial conflict, etc.—that force them to be unable to discover themselves because they feel they must conform to the ideals of society.

Winesburg, Ohio is a novel written by Sherwood Anderson that contains multiple stories of separate characters who have no relation to each other except for the fact they are all facing

the challenges brought upon them by modernism. Many of the characters grew up in the world before modernism in which identities were collective. However, they also are living in the transitional world into the modernistic period, which leads them to search for more individualistic identities. While they want an individualistic identity, they start to feel alone by becoming individualists. Characters Elizabeth and Jesse are the most common in revealing these challenges of modernism. Elizabeth struggles with herself because she wanted the individualistic identity of being a singer and creating a life for herself, which shows the individuality of modernism. However, she was stuck in the traditional role of being a mother, and since women did not have as much freedom during the time modernism was prevalent, she was unable to discover her full individuality, which caused her to have a collective female identity as wife and mother. Jesse is another character in *Winesburg, Ohio* who is desperately searching for individuality through his relationship with God. While many do have a relationship with God, he takes his relationship to an extreme by wanting a physical sign from Him. Jesse also almost sacrifices his grandson for his religious relationship. Through this sacrifice, it is shown how the individualistic traits in modernism can lead to a fragmented identity if someone is unwilling to conform to society. Therefore, characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* face the challenges of modernism through transitioning from old ideals to modernistic ideals of identity and individualism.

Author Nella Larsen shows many conflicts or dualisms of identity in her novel *Quicksand* through the character Helga. Similar to Elizabeth from *Winesburg, Ohio*, Helga feels caught in her roles of wife and mother because she wants to seek out her own individuality. Before she was a wife and mother, however, she was often moving around the world trying to find a place in society where she felt she belonged. Once she became a wife and mother, she was forced to

stay in one place, which caused an inner conflict of mobility and stability within Helga. She often has issues finding a sense of belonging because of her heritage. By being mixed race, she neither feels at home with the African Americans nor the whites. Therefore, she is often subjected to the stereotypes that went with each race during that time in history, which causes her to be conflicted between blackness and whiteness. Helga refuses to conform to the stereotypes of blackness and whiteness, which reveals the individualistic characteristics of transitioning into modernism. However, by not conforming to the collective identities of blackness or whiteness shown in the traditional era prior to modernism, she often feels out of place in society. In order to deal with these conflicting dualisms, Helga turns to the American value of materialism. However, because of her mixed race background and association with materialism, she is often subjected to being called a “thing” when surrounded by the white community. Helga often turns to these materialistic items to define her as an individual. The problem with using materialism as an identity identifier is she is never in touch with her true identity because if she keeps turning to objects for happiness, she will never be happy because she will keep wanting more objects. Characters such as Helga are common in modern literature because they face identity crises relating to the transition from traditionalism to modernism. As a result of all of Helga’s conflicting dualisms, her identity is also fragmented such as the identities of Elizabeth and Jesse, which is a popular characteristic in modernism.

Characters found in *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Quicksand* are described with fragmented identities as a result of the novels' prominent theme of modernism. Authors Sherwood Anderson of *Winesburg, Ohio* and Nella Larsen of *Quicksand* reveal these struggles common to modernism through their characters. They all struggle to find the truths within themselves because they tend to reject the dualism in their lives, which can never lead to true happiness

because they are always conflicted. Some of the dualisms that appear in *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Quicksand* are between the male and female roles blackness and whiteness, mobility and stability, individualism and conformity, and materialism and spirituality; all of these dualisms take part in fragmenting the characters' identities because the modern society is faced with dualism of individuals and the changing of roles of these individuals within their societies.

Elizabeth and Helga both become identified by their familial roles as wife and mother. Doctor Kimberly Monda, English professor at Santa Barbara City College, wrote of Helga, "External and internal pressures toward self-sacrifice triumph as she becomes a mere extension of her husband and children, lost in escapist fantasies that allow her to tolerate remaining the object of their desires rather than the subject of her own," (Monda 23). Both Helga and Elizabeth make sacrifices by staying within their marriage. Helga also makes sacrifices for her family by staying in one place while Elizabeth makes sacrifices by not pursuing her dreams. However, rather than living through "fantasies," as mentioned of Helga in the previous quote, Elizabeth lives through her son because she wants for him what she could not have had for herself. She wanted him to pursue his dream, and pursuing his dream is what becomes her happiness. Women identifying themselves according to the men in their lives may be a suggestion of the lifestyles in that time period when women were often defined by men. Women had little say in any ordeals, men were the breadwinners, women had to marry and move in with their husbands instantly after moving out of their parents' homes—when they depended on their fathers—and women having opinions of their own was typically frowned upon. In other words, women had little independence of their own and were often dependent upon men, whether it be their husbands, sons, or fathers. As a result, Elizabeth and Helga both become defined by their roles as mothers and wives, and they lose their individualistic identities by living

through the identities of the men in their lives.

Simultaneously, Helga is often subjected to racism because of the color of her skin and the stereotypes which go with that color, which also causes her to be conflicted internally between her two racial backgrounds. Doctor Arne Lunde—an English professor at University of California-Los Angeles—and Doctor Anna Stenport—an English professor at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign—mention how when Helga is in Denmark, she rarely ever speaks her mind in front of the whites (Lunde and Stenport 229). She is often seen as “African American” even though she is mixed race and cannot identify with either. For example, when she was in Naxos, she was given the comment, “We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives.” Doctor Johanna Wagner—an English professor at Maastricht University—explains how this comment subjects Helga to be a decoration or “thing” (Wagner 138). However, she does not feel in place around the African Americans either because of the Jezebel stereotypes that are often placed upon African American women during modernism. Wagner suggests that Helga's love for color may be a way for her to express both sides of her “color” or ethnicity rather than keeping them divided (136). No matter the effort, she is constantly conflicted between “blackness” and “whiteness” as a result of being mixed race.

Helga often struggles with self-conflicts about her race. However, Alexander Goldenweiser, a professor and social scientist in the early twentieth century, mentions how this is a consequence of the fact that “Race is a state of mind” (Goldenweiser 127). He mentions the contradictions that exist in white attitudes towards mixed race and African Americans because whites are “most mixed of all” since they come from multiple heritages (128). From her constant state of mobility, mentioned later in the paper, she is often conflicted due to the different cultures she is exposed to. Considering she carries both “blackness” and “whiteness” within

herself, she is often conflicted on which to express because when she is with whites, she feels out of place due to her “blackness.” However, when she is with African Americans, she also feels out of place because of her “whiteness.” As a result, the only way for Helga to settle her inner conflict is to find a way to embrace her African American heritage and white heritage in order to accept herself as an individual. In other words, she must find a way to change her “state of mind” when it comes to her belief that she has to express her “whiteness” or “blackness” rather than be her true self by expressing both.

To repair her inner-identity conflict, Helga often turns to mobility in hopes of finding a connection to her dual identity mentioned above. Helga longs for a connection with her identity as well as some of those around her. However, she is often conflicted about whom she longs to be connected with. Wagner says, “With no ready-made familial or racial identity, she must create herself” (Wagner 135). In efforts of “creating herself,” Wagner suggests that her travels are associated with her needs of connection such as when she travels to a predominantly white area, she longs for connection with her mother, and when she travels to a predominantly African American area, she longs for connection with her father (134). Ultimately, coming from a mixed race background, she often struggles on whether to identify with “whiteness” or “blackness.” Perhaps if she realized she was not the only mixed race around, she would feel more in place around others whom are mixed races of African American and white heritages. However, Helga is expecting people to be of only one racial background, which is why she often feels out of place because she is expecting something that is uncommon to America.

Looking at the time of the story, readers can notice that race was a much larger notion in society compared to today. While race is still not considered equal today, when modernism was arising, African Americans were more acceptably seen as inferior to whites. Although, it seems

contradicting because few people in America come from one heritage because it is a nation built off of immigrants containing multiples races and cultures. It may be possible that the inferiority happening in society could have contributed to Helga's feeling out of place because no matter what she did, she still had the African American heritage within her. While race was much more complex, whites during that time labeled African Americans as having no white heritage, separating the African Americans from themselves despite their own multiracial backgrounds. The feeling of inferiority could have caused Helga to feel separated from society. It could be possible that she wanted to be part of the majority but felt like she never could as a result of the societal ideals of race. The idea of her feeling out of place in a world with people similar to her and whites seeing other races as inferior builds off of Goldenweiser's quote of race being a "state of mind" because she is the one who is psychologically setting herself apart from the others, even though it may be unintentional, because she is unable to accept herself as either part of the majority or minority. The lack of psychological connection to other African Americans or whites often sets Helga apart from the rest of society.

Because Helga Crane and the characters from *Winesburg, Ohio* express a unique individuality, they often have problems finding a place in society. Zhang Lihua, a lecturer in Beijing with a focus on American literature, discusses the people in Winesburg's "...eccentricity makes them lonely, urgently desirous for a companion to share their feelings or thoughts" (Lihua 301). However, this can apply to Helga as well because since she is often conflicted within herself about "blackness" or "whiteness," individuality or conformity, and maternal roles, she has difficulty finding her place or "home" in society. Helga and Jesse are similar in the sense that they each refuse to conform to society. Sherwood Anderson describes Jesse by saying, "He wanted terribly to make his life a thing of great importance, and as he looked about his

fellow men and saw how like clods they lived it seemed to him that he could not bear to become also such a clod,” (Anderson 33). His use of the word “clod” to describe the people around Jesse and the negative connotation given off shows how Jesse sets himself apart from others and is very similar to how Nella Larsen describes Helga’s feelings towards those around her. Therefore, neither want to conform to society, but often struggle with individualism as well as a result of their conflicted identities.

Despite the conflict, individualism and conformity must coincide to make up a society. When in Naxos, Larsen states of the school, “It had grown into a machine... for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms. Enthusiasm, spontaneity, if not actually suppressed, were at least openly regretted as unladylike or ungentlemanly qualities,” (Larsen 4). The lifeless description of the school suggests Helga does not want to conform into the drab-like society that she identifies “whiteness” to. However, as shown in the jazz club, she does not want conform into the Jezebel stereotype that was commonly associated with female “blackness” (59). Many people in society judge Helga the way she tries to judge herself—either African American or white. Therefore, she is seen as different or isolated from society. However, as Robert Maciver—a sociologist from 1970—mentions, society and the individuals are so closely tied that it is impossible to have one without the other (Maciver 58). Maciver’s comment is a criticism of the conflict between individuality and conformity that is seen within both novels. As Maciver states, “A society consists of beings related to one another in various ways, some superficial, some deep and vital. In social relations men are born, in them they live and develop. No one lives or dies to himself, and all are bound up in one unity by reason of their social relationships” (59). It seems odd that individualism seems to be a major conflict in both of these novels because individualism is one of the American values. It is something Americans pride

themselves on. So why would it be a conflict? It seems the characters within these stories have a difficult time accepting this reality because while they want to be individuals and do not want to conform to society, when they do reveal individualism, they feel out of place from society. Therefore, the conflict between individualism and conformity can never truly be resolved without accepting both as part of their lives. They are both individuals who make up a larger whole and conform to the norms and laws of the larger whole, showing individualism and conformity. Psychologically speaking, MacDougall—a sociologist from New York University in the early twentieth century—mentions how the ego cannot exist individually because it must express itself through one's social self (MacDougall 12). In other words, people in society live through individualism when they express the characteristics of themselves, but also live through conformity by following the laws and norms of society as a greater whole.

As defined by Zhang, grotesque is “characterized by bizarre distortions, especially in the exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features. The literature of the grotesque involves freakish caricatures of people's appearance and behavior,” (Zhang 302). Helga and the characters of *Winesburg, Ohio* can all be considered “grotesque.” Helga is considered grotesque because people in her society often view her for her “blackness” which is associated with the behavior of the Jezebel—loud and expressive. The people of Winesburg are grotesque because they often refuse to conform to the norms of society. Because of their unique individuality, the grotesque often have a longing to belong somewhere, and the difficulty to find a belonging causes them to lose themselves. The loss of identity through the lack of belonging is another conflict of individuality and conformity. While many of the characters shown in these two novels often fight for their individuality—whether it be in race, gender roles, materialism, or spirituality—they are a part of a larger society. How can they lose themselves from lack of

belonging when they do not want to conform and want to maintain individuality? The idea of the two being separated is in itself contradicting, which shows how they must coexist to create a larger society.

Since Helga and Jesse do not want to conform to society, they both find something else that consequently isolates them from society and begins to define them individually. Jesse often takes his faith in God too far by wanting a physical sign from him. He destroys his relationship with his grandson by wanting to make a sacrifice to God, which shows how powerful his faith has taken over him. While Jesse relies on his spirituality to define him, Helga relies on materialism. Wagner states, "Helga relies on material things to support and validate her" (135). In other words, Helga uses materialistic items to define her identity, but it leads to the problem of her constantly needing more, which is not an identity at all and can never lead to true happiness. An argument was made by Wagner of Helga's time in Denmark, "It is important to note that it is not her distant, Danish relations, Aunt Katrina and Uncle Paul, who provide a sense of belonging, but the material extravagance and the subsequent attention and admiration she receives that make her feel at home" (Wagner 135). The idea that Helga identifies herself with possessions, along with the continuous mention of vivid colors and decorations Helga enjoys, shows how Helga uses beautiful "things" to make her happy. Materialism is often the downfall of many Americans, like Helga, because it is impossible to be defined by "things." While your possessions may show social status, it reveals nothing about one's inner self. Considering its distinguishable place from the inner self, it seems interesting that it would become an inner conflict. However, similar to Helga, people who focus too much on materialism seem to lose their identities when they become obsessed with acquiring more possessions rather than self-development. In other words, Helga's identity with materialism and "things" as well as

Jesse's disproportionate identity through faith leads to both of the downfalls of their inner selves and true identities.

Helga may use materialism as a way to repress her inner conflicts of dualism. For example, while she may like to use color as a way to express her multiracial “colors,” black and white, she may also use materialism as a way to avoid dealing with her inner conflicts—blackness and whiteness, being defined by men, and individualism and conformity. She may use these items as a way to search for happiness because she believes that possessions will lead to happiness. However, as mentioned earlier, possessions have nothing to do with defining a person with the exception of their social status. Although, even social status does nothing to help define the person as an individual. Since possessions and materialism are set aside from the internal self, she may see having these items as the perfect way to avoid her inner conflict. Consequently, this would eventually lead to more conflict because materials do not define a person, and people who solely rely on materials to make them happy will never be happy because they will just want more. As a result, they will become so consumed with materialism that they will lose themselves as individuals along with their identities, which could be Helga's fate if she does not accept both sides of her dualisms as a reality and as part of her identity.

One of the main components of modernism is there is no resolution which most likely has relevance to why characters have a loss or fractured identity. With no resolution or proper ending, characters may not have a chance to grow and develop to reach their full potential or develop their identity. The loss of individuality through conformity or societal views is a prominent conflict seen in both *Quicksand* and *Winesburg, Ohio*. As seen time and time again, Helga is often seen as “different,” whether it be because of her mixed race or because of her

self-expression through vivid colors. Helga also struggles with discovering herself because she is unable to identify with neither “black” nor “white” as a result of her mixed heritage. She also struggles with the modern society through her role as a woman just as Elizabeth Willard does in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Through this struggle, Helga becomes somewhat isolated from society just like Jesse isolates himself from society as a result of his faith. In every instance, each of the characters loses a part of his or her identity by being forced into the roles of society or by rejecting the dual identities that are placed upon them.

Modernism is a theme in literature which often deals with unknown truths and fragmented story lines of which have no resolution. The unknown truths can often be found throughout *Quicksand* and sometimes within *Winesburg, Ohio* through conflicting dualisms such as male and female roles, blackness and whiteness, mobility and stability, the individual and society, and materialism and spirituality. Since the characters within these novels struggle with these dualisms, the novels fail to find a true resolution because the characters never discover their true identities. The authors, Anderson and Larsen, may have left out these resolutions in tribute to the evolving, modernistic world in which roles in society were changing, causing dualism within its individuals such as those shown in the novels. These resolutions are also often impossible to reach because many of these dualisms generally coexist to make up a society since the society was transitioning from traditionalist views to modernistic views. Having one without the other is not a true reality; consequently, characters' identities are often fragmented or lost because they want to find a more solitary solution. While it does not apply to everybody, the way people see themselves may be impacted by the beliefs of society. For example, Elizabeth and Helga identified themselves as wives and mothers because, at that time, mother and wife were the primary roles of women. Modern literature such as *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Quicksand* can

show how self-identity can be heavily influenced by the societies and cultures of which people live in.

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