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A Question of Unity: Doubled Identity in Virginia Woolf and Nella Larsen

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References:

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Modernity, as represented through the literary modernism of Virginia Woolf and Nella Larsen, can be thought of as a new way of experiencing “experience,” one that denotes the categorization of identity with inner consciousness as well as exterior fact. Thought experience is as important as the material facts of existing—if facts are defined as those material reflections of how we imprint ourselves upon the world. How does our consciousness of ourselves define what happens to us and how we act? Can we exist as unified selves once we recognize an internal–external, objective–subjective division? In this thesis, I argue that Woolf and Larsen’s explorations on gender, while falling within the modernist representation of text-as-experience, problematize the dualist possibility of a unified self.

This analysis of Woolf connects her to a unified double consciousness of gender; that this particular expression of gender is consistent with modernist sensibilities of duality that reflect external and internal experience; and that Orlando is a strong case study to use in documenting and problematizing Woolf’s essential paradox—that a consciousness can be unified and divided simultaneously. I also argue that Larsen is not so accepting of the prospect of a unified internal-external experience. The women in Larsen’s novels—because of the necessity of negotiating around the caricatures of the tragic mulatto literary tradition—remain complicated, divided selves.

This work is an attempt to examine why and how Woolf and Larsen scrutinize the modernist representation of a dualist experience, and the importance of their explorations of gender as demonstrating divisions of identity.