

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

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October 22, 2025. Larsen, concluded; Faulkner (1).

coming up

- ▶ midterm exam 1 1/3: in-class, closed book
- ▶ all short answer
 - ▶ identify and analyze passages from our texts
 - ▶ demonstrate understanding of key concepts
 - ▶ maybe one question on dates
- ▶ *mainly* drawn from material discussed in class

review

- ▶ Larsen's in-betweenness: modernism, melodrama, Harlem Renaissance
- ▶ the ending: multiple explanations
 - ▶ what Irene does is **subtracted** and then **disavowed**
- ▶ the problem of racial representation (“the racial mountain”)

Content note

- ▶ highly derogatory term cited on next slide

racial literary modernity

1891	Nellie Walker b. Chicago
1903	W.E.B. Du Bois, <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> (Chicago: A.C. McClurg)
1910–	Great Migration
1912–15	Larsen trains as nurse (NYC, Tuskegee)
1919	First Pan-African Congress, Paris
1922–25	Larsen works at NYPL
1922	Claude McKay, <i>Harlem Shadows</i> (New York: Harcourt, Brace)
1923	Jean Toomer, <i>Cane</i> (New York: Liveright)
1925	Alain Locke, ed., <i>The New Negro</i> (New York; Atheneum)
1926	Larsen, stories as “Semi Allen” in <i>Young’s</i>
1926	Carl Van Vechten, <i>Nigger Heaven</i> (New York: Knopf) (CVV is Larsen’s friend; cf. “Wentworth”)
	Langston Hughes, <i>The Weary Blues</i> (New York: Knopf)
1928	Larsen, <i>Quicksand</i> (New York: Knopf)
1929	<i>Passing</i> (New York: Knopf)
	McKay, <i>Banjo</i> (New York: Harper)
1930	Larsen receives Guggenheim fellowship; stops publishing
1964	Larsen d.
1980	Mary Helen Washington, “Nella Larsen: Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance,” <i>Ms.</i> (December)

terms of reference

When Clare arrived, radiant in a shining red gown, Irene had not finished dressing. But her smile scarcely hesitated as she greeted her, saying: “I always seem to keep C.P. time, don’t I? We hardly expected you to be able to come. Felise will be pleased. How nice you look.”
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(content note again)

One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone.

There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. “Nig! My God! Nig!” (91)

Felise, she saw, was holding on to his [her husband’s] arm, all the insolent nonchalance gone out of her, and the golden brown of her handsome face changed to a queer mauve colour. (93)

“Well, you see, it’s like this. When we were first married, she was 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)

what you know, you know

Well, it had happened. She knew it, and knew that she knew it.

She was surprised that, having thought the thought, conceded the fact, she was no more hurt, cared no more, than during her previous frenzied endeavours to escape it....

Or was it that she lacked the capacity for the acme of suffering? “No, no!” she denied fiercely. “I’m human like everybody else. It’s just that I’m so tired, so worn out, I can’t feel any more.” But she did not really believe that. (86)

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It was then, and then I saw Darl and he knew. He said he knew without the words like he told me that ma is going to die without words, and I knew he knew because if he had said he knew with the words I would not have believed that he had been there and saw us. (Faulkner, 27)

reading comp

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 - ▶ And how do you know?

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Pa's feet are badly splayed, his toes cramped and bent and warped, with no toenail at all on his little toes, from working so hard in the wet in homemade shoes when he was a boy.... Vernon has been to town. I have never seen him go to town in overalls. His wife, they say. She taught school too, once. (11)

"It means three dollars," I say. (17)

I always is fed me and mine and kept a roof above us (36)

Faulkner: no ordinary mind, no ordinary day

It was the sweetest thing I ever saw....

It was Darl. He come to the door and stood there, looking at his dying mother. He just looked at her, and I felt the bounteous love of the lord again and his mercy. I saw that with Jewel she had just been pretending, but that it was between her and Darl that the understanding and the true love was. (24)

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(multi-)monologue?

[Cora:] I could have used the money real well. But it's not like they cost me anything except the baking. (9)

[Darl on water:] It has to set at least six hours, and be drunk from a gourd. Water should never be drunk from metal. (10–11)

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[Vardaman:] It is dark. I can hear wood, silence: I know them....It is as though the dark were resolving him out of his integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components—snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniac hair; an illusion of a co-ordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an *is* different from my *is*. (56)

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First person/third person

[Jewel:] It's because he stays out there, right under the window, hammering and sawing on that goddamn box. (14)

. . . # tone

- ▶ What is the tone of Addie's deathbed scene (44–46)?

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Jewel, I say, she is dead, Jewel. Addie Bundren is dead (52)

[

Darl:] “Why, Addie,” pa says, “him and Darl went to make one more load. They thought there was time.” (47)

ESP again

You could do so much for me if you just would. If you just knew. I am I and you are you and I know it and you dont know it and you could so much for me if you just would and if you just would then I could tell you and then nobody would have to know it except you and me and Darl (51)

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He could do so much for me if he just would. He could do everything for me. (58)

Bundren talk

- ▶ What language is this book written in?

Bundren talk

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“I mislike undecision as much as ere a man,” pa says. (17)

“Ma aint that sick,” Jewel says. “Shut up, Darl.” (17)

Dewey Dell's dialect

The first time **me** and Lafe picked on down the row. Pa **dassent** sweat because he will catch his death from the sickness so everybody that comes to help us. And Jewel **dont** care about anything he is not kin to us in caring, not care-kin. (26)

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“But I declare she’s gettin’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out...” (Larsen, 29)

reading dialect

- ▶ languages have many **varieties**
 - ▶ they vary in lexicon, pronunciation, grammar
 - ▶ variation is often along lines of geographic and social division
 - ▶ dialects: associated with particular places/groups
- ▶ **every** variety has a grammar and is equally expressive
- ▶ some varieties have prestige as **standards** (school, media)
- ▶ some varieties are stigmatized as “broken,” “ignorant,” “dialect”
- ▶ **dialect writing** uses conventions to represent dialect speech, especially regional and minority speech

dialect, cont.

I tell him again I will help him out if he gets into a tight, with her sick and all. Like most folks around here, I done holp him so much already I cant quit now. (33)

Who would haue suffered him rather to perish with hunger an hundred times than that they would haue holpen him in his need.

A commentarie of Iohn Caluine, trans. Thomas Tymme, 1st ed. (1578), qtd. in *OED* s.v. “help, v.” (2025).

idiolect

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whose language?

[Jewel:] “Get the goddamn stuff out of sight while you got a chance, you pussel-gutted bastard.” (13)

[Darl:] He [Peabody] has pussel-gutted himself eating cold greens. (40)

“Vardaman”

In his inaugural address, [Mississippi governor] James K. Vardaman declared that the growing tendency of the negro to commit criminal assault on white women is nothing more or less than the manifestation of the racial desire for social equality...Vardaman said: “As a race he is deteriorating morally every day. Time has demonstrated that he is more criminal as a free man than as a slave.”... The governor also declares that the people of the nation should rise up and demand the repeal of the Fifteenth amendment.

Washington Post, January 20, 1904: 1. [ProQuest Historical Newspapers](#).

An effort to rid the Constitution of the United States of the Fifteenth Amendment will be made within the next few days by Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi. For twenty years Mr. Vardaman has been working to this end...In his propaganda for the disfranchisement of the negro he has lectured in nearly every part of the United States.

New York Times, December 20, 1914: 10. [ProQuest](#).