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Honors Project Proposal
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The Private Deaths of Women in Modernist Fiction

I intend to investigate the presence of suicide in transatlantic modernist novels by women, arguing that suicide in these texts is a gendered act. I'm curious to answer how and why this historical period of increasing liberty, and consequent visibility, seems to have prompted the self-erasure of female characters. Though thoroughly researched and shaped significantly by scholarship, my project will be grounded in four novels: *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, and *Passing* by Nella Larsen. These texts, all written by women, feature suicides of a woman or, in the case of *Mrs. Dalloway*, a suicide prompted by emasculation, suicides that are undeniably feminized and gender-oriented.

Though thirty years separate the publication of *The Awakening* from that of *Passing*, these texts are bound together by their shared political context, one in which the role of middle- and upper-class women changed irreversibly in America and Britain. Both before and after the First World War, women began to cultivate a public presence, sought the right to vote, and assumed professional, familial, and romantic roles that were previously unthinkable. Such radical shifts in society mirrored profound literary shifts; Victorian and realist narratives no longer sufficed to convey the new and complex contemporary experience, giving way to literary modernism. In addition, these novels share discussions of class dynamics, marriage politics, gender roles, and intense homosocial (and sometimes homosexual) relationships; that is to say, they all attempt to convey a portrait of the modern woman as one who, paradoxically, enjoys her escalating freedom and consequent visibility, yet ultimately feels as though she cannot survive it.

I expect that exploring these different portrayals of fraught female characters before and after the First World War will reveal an evolution of womanhood, situating modernist female characters on a private-public continuum without collapsing their experiences. Though these novels share similar tropes and context, they are far from identical, and I believe the differences between these four texts are essential to understand the complex and oftentimes contradictory roles of women during the modernist moment. These four books present women of different races, marital status, ages, and only the suicides in *The Awakening* and *House of Mirth* are of the female protagonist. The nuances between these texts challenge cursory notions of the modern woman and fleshing out the contradictions and complexities of these female characters will help me create a more comprehensive portrait of the modernist woman.

Though much scholarly thought has been dedicated to investigating modernism and women's role in it, there is a startling lack of writing about suicide in modernist works. A handful of scholars have considered suicide and mental health while reading canonical modernist writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Conrad; however, these analyses lack a gendered component and fail to explore suicide as a distinctly gendered trope for modernist writers, which my project seeks to do. Though my project focuses on the connections between the female gender and suicide, I want to be careful not to conflate gender solely with womanhood. My project is grounded in the notion that gender expectations are powerful regardless of sex, so although it may be implicit, my project suggests that the masculinity in Hemingway, Faulkner, and Conrad is complicit with the self-violence in their work.

In addition to complicating the understanding of modernist literary content, my project also raises important questions about the classification of modernism itself. All of my core texts were written in an ambiguous literary moment, a period some scholars categorize as the end of the long nineteenth century and others as proto-modernist. My project seeks to acknowledge this intersection. Rather than come down on one side or the other of literary periodization, I hope to approach and understand the literary landscape of these works as a coalescence of both Victorian and modernist impulses, a time in which female characters (and writers) enjoy the freedoms of their new political standing, but also harbor nostalgia and some degree of reverence for the past.

After a thorough introduction to my argument and context of these texts, my project will consist of four distinct chapters, each focusing on one of my core texts. The chapters will be chronological, because each instance of a feminine suicide both builds on and complicates previous examples. For *The Awakening*, instead of investigating a specific predecessor, I will argue that the text is modernist, but in crucial conversation with Victorianism, particularly in the sense it recapitulates the Victorian “New Woman.” Scholarship looking at periodization will be crucial for this section, particularly articles asserting a long nineteenth century or a long modernist era. Moving then to *House of Mirth*, my paper will argue that the story of Lily Bart continues to demonstrate the blending of Victorian and modernist impulses as well as reinforces central tenets of modernist womanhood, such as intense female friendship and courtship. In addition, it will bring up new questions about how social mobility alters the stakes for Lily and ultimately influences her death. I will also discuss the ways race becomes a factor in relationships and has the potential to “queer” members of a partnership. This chapter will be followed by an analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway*, which is indelibly influenced by the Great War. Consequently, this section will add to previous discussions of female friendship and marriage while introducing new insight on war trauma and how the war highlights and complicates questions of gender and public responsibilities. Finally, ending with a chapter on *Passing* will conclude my portrait of the modernist woman by bringing the trope of intense female friendship to fruition as well as challenging the conception of modernist women as white. Whereas race is tangential in *House of Mirth*, it is central to *Passing*; investigating how racial expectations intersect with gender roles to trigger the self-erasure of a biracial woman will simultaneously add richness to my portrait of the modernist woman while presenting the unique violence and repression women of color faced during this whitewashed literary moment.

My analysis of *Passing* will deliver me back to my central themes of visibility, social boundaries, periodization, and gender roles – and prompt me to ask further questions based on my newfound understanding. Though I will emerge from this project with a refined understanding of feminized self-violence in transatlantic modernist novels and the periodization of these texts, I wonder how masculinity will factor into my conclusions and if my analysis will have any bearing on other periods, such as postmodernism. Finally, though my paper focuses on the self-erasure of women, I’m curious to consider what their deaths leave behind and the role of grief and mourning in these texts and in this literary moment.

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