

Douglass, offers order without subordination; he, like Douglass, uses grammar to express equality.

RELATED WORDS

Coordination and Subordination 45
Grammar 90

Subject-Verb 154
Voice 187

EXERCISES

1. Find parallel structures in an assigned reading and examine their function. What order is being established by them, and what equivalences are expressed by them?
2. In a compare/contrast essay, write a list of elements that are similar and different in the two things you compare. Then use parallelisms such as Douglass's to put into sentences those similarities and differences.
3. In a student draft, find equivalences—two ideas that are compared, two sentences that speak directly to each other—and express them in parallelisms.
4. In an outline for an argument list three or four reasons for your point of view. Then rewrite this list by using for each reason a parallel structure—the same sentence structure just with different words capturing the different points you want to make. For example, list four reasons to use parallelisms in your writing, and express those reasons in parallelisms.

Plagiarism

The Politics of Common Good and Private Property



He was a big, hulking man, with reddish hair and freckled face, evidently of the laboring class, though not successful, judging by the vague grime and poverty of his appearance. For a moment he made as if he would open the window; then he changed his mind and went to the door instead. He did not knock, but walked straight in. ("Mrs. Adis" 321)

He was a big, black man with pale brown eyes in which there was an odd mixture of fear and amazement. The light showed streaks of gray soil on his heavy, sweating face and great hands, and on his torn clothes. In his woolly hair clung bits of dried leaves and dead grass. He made a gesture as if to tap on the window, but turned away to the door instead. Without knocking he opened it and went in. ("Sanctuary" 15)

"I'm in trouble." His hands were shaking a little.

"What you done?"

"I shot a man, Mrs. Adis." (321)

"Ah's in trouble, Mis' Poole," the man explained, his voice shaking, his fingers twitching.

"W' at you done done now?"

"Shot a man, Mis' Poole." (15)

When Nella Larsen published her story "Sanctuary" in the *Forum* in January of 1930, she was at the height and abruptly at the end of her career. Larsen had successfully published several novels and had been the first African-American woman to receive a Guggenheim fellowship. But when readers noticed the similarities between her story and Sheila Kaye-Smith's story "Mrs. Adis" published in the *Century Magazine* in January of 1922—similarities both in specific details and in plot line—a scandal ensued from which Larsen never recovered. "Literary Dirt," wrote Harold Jackman to Countee Cullen on January 27, 1930, "Nella Larsen Imes has a story in *Forum* for this month called *Sanctuary*. It has been found out—at least Sidney Peterson was the first to my knowledge to discover this—that it is an exact blue print of a story by Sheila Kaye-Smith called *Mrs. Adis* which is in a book called *Joanna Goodens Marries and Other Stories*. The only difference is that Nella has made a racial story out of hers, but the procedure is the same as Kaye-Smith's, and Anne and Sidney have found out that the dialogue in some places is almost identical. If you can get ahold of the *Forum* and the Smith book do so and compare them. But isn't that a terrible thing. It remains to be seen whether the *Forum* people will find this out" (Davis 348). They did, publishing a reader's letter which, as some others, pointed their attention to the similarities; the editors investigated and allowed Larsen to respond to the charges.

In the April 1930 edition of the *Forum*, the editors published a defense of Larsen, telling their readers that they had examined Larsen's drafts and concluded that an "extraordinary coincidence"—such as the one when the incandescent lamp had been invented simultaneously by two different people—must have taken place. They also published an explanation by Larsen, in which she "[tells] exactly how [she] came by the material out of which [she] wrote 'Sanctuary.'" She writes:

The story is one that was told to me by an old Negro woman who, in my nursing days, was an inmate of Lincoln Hospital, East 141st Street, New York City. Her name was Christophe or Christopher. That was something during the years from 1912-1915. All the doctors and executives in this institution were white. All the nurses were Negroes. As in any other hospital, all infractions of rules and instances of neglect of duty were

reported to and dealt with by the superintendent of nurses, who was white. It used to distress the old folk—Mrs. Christopher in particular—that we Negro nurses often had to tell things about each other to the white people. Her oft-repeated convictions were that if the Negro race would only stick together, we might get somewhere some day, and that what the white folks didn't know about us wouldn't hurt us.

All this used to amuse me until she told some of us about the death of her husband, who, she said, had been killed by a young Negro, and the killer had come to her for hiding without knowing whom he had killed. When the officers of the law arrived and she learned about her man, she still shielded the slayer, because, she told us, she intended to deal with him herself afterwards without any interference from "white folks."

For some fifteen years I believed this story absolutely and entertained a kind of admiring pity for the old woman. But lately, in talking it over with Negroes, I find that the tale is so old and so well known that it is almost folklore. It has many variations: sometimes it is a woman's brother, husband, son, lover, preacher, beloved master, or even her father, mother, sister, or daughter who is killed. A Negro sociologist tells me that there are literally hundreds of these stories. Anyone could have written it up at any time. (41)

So these are the facts of the case as far as we have them; nowhere, in letters, archival materials, or other sources, do we come closer to the truth. There is no confession, only the documents above. How can we judge? Is this plagiarism? Or is Larsen's defense believable? On what grounds do we make such a determination? Those questions we leave up to the reader.

But Larsen's case—the actual stories, the editor's procedure, and Larsen's response—sheds interesting light on the issue of plagiarism itself. Whether truthful or not, Larsen's defense questions the idea of plagiarism itself. After all, when she explains that the story was actually part of black folklore, existing in hundreds of versions, she defers the origin of the story indefinitely (beyond even the moment Mrs. Christopher tells it to her between 1912 and 1915); she also refuses the concept that it could have any private ownership since "anyone could have written it up at anytime." This explanation challenges the very paradigm within which Larsen has been accused—moving her story out of a white written culture into a black oral culture, where ownership and originality are not relevant concepts. Indeed, she herself in the course of this explanation revises her understanding of authenticity, authorship, and origin when she begins to see her mistake in seeing the story as Mrs. Christopher's personal story, the telling and origin of which can be placed in time and space and author. She learns how to read the story not as "absolute" truth but as folklore, part of a racial commonwealth or common good that belongs to all black people and that has been shaped and reshaped hundreds of time. It is there for anyone to write down. Larsen's explanation of the production of her story then shifts her work into a context in which arguments about plagiarism become meaningless, inappropriate, even scientifically proven—through the confirmation of the Negro sociologist—to be naïve misreadings of the story and of black literary production in general.

Whether one believes that Larsen heard the story in this way or not, she does have a point about plagiarism. Plagiarism assumes a form of originality and own-

ership that is historically—and Larsen suggests here also racially and culturally—specific. In the introduction to his book *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism*, Thomas Mallon traces the historical moment in which plagiarism becomes a serious crime. First, plagiarism—the stealing of someone else's ideas and expressions—presumes that originality is a prime quality of written expression. In the history of writing that is a relatively new idea. After all, for most of literary history “the guiding spirits of the literary dead were deliberately conjured, a time before ancestor worship gave way to that form of youth-enthralment known as originality”(3). And “originality—not just innocence of plagiarism but the making of something really and truly new—set itself down as a cardinal literary virtue sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century”(Mallon 24). The virtues of imitation and emulation were replaced by that of originality and innovation. The reasons for this shift, were, according to Mallon, not so much abstract but rather very concrete. “One thing is clear: plagiarism didn't become a truly sore point with writers until they thought of writing as their trade”(3–4). And that change was created by a machine. “It was printing, of course,” he writes, “that changed everything, putting troubadours out of business. . . . The Writer, a new professional, was invented by a machine. Suddenly his capital and identity were at stake” (4). Thus a new world developed of ownership and competition with a good deal of “feuding and possessiveness”(4). When Nella Larsen defends herself by placing her story within an oral folkloric tradition, she reveals these precise historical foundations of plagiarism. She also distances herself implicitly from a white print culture, which claims writing as private property, and relocates herself within a black oral culture in which accusations of plagiarism are simply not relevant because the stories are common good.

Transposing this problem to contemporary college writing, we can see that things haven't gotten easier nor have the rules about plagiarism eased up. On the contrary, just as plagiarism arguably ruined Larsen's careers, plagiarism can expel students from school and go on their permanent record, threatening and even ending their careers. Plagiarism is the cardinal crime in academia; scholars are writers by trade, and their ideas need to be protected in a competitive environment in which original ideas determine salaries and tenure decisions. And students are writers by trade in which personal insight determines grades and access to jobs and graduate schools. So, here too, “capital and identity [are] at stake” (Mallon 4).

And yet, academic life is a mixture of an oral and a print culture. While writing papers follows the rules of print culture and private ownership, the classroom and the professional conference are oral traditions designed for the free exchange of ideas; they create as a group effort common ideas to be shared. And exams often test the students' ability to retell the common story of the course. So where do we draw the line? When is an idea free and when not? The Internet—as a new technology—offers a further formidable challenge to the distinction between oral and print culture. It offers endless wamounts of sources often without authors' names and an unprecedented

accessibility. Why then is plagiarism the cardinal crime in academic life and how can it be avoided? *

Looking at Larsen's story in relation to Kaye-Smith's reveals one important aspect of plagiarism: plagiarism is the theft of ideas *and* words—not just words. Larsen changes many (even most) words in her version—assuming she did indeed plagiarize—but the idea belongs to Kaye-Smith's since she published her story first. But what is the idea of the story? Larsen colors Kaye-Smith's words turning the story into a story about race rather than class; all of Larsen's "plagiarism" is indeed an act of creation and imagination—just not enough of it. Indeed, Larsen had long played with the idea of coloring a white story, and not knowing her true motives, it might well be that she is doing just that in this story. But is that enough to exonerate her? Plagiarism then defines the boundaries between originality and imitation in ways that are not always clear-cut. Where does creation begin? Where does theft begin? After all, just as fiction writers often learn by imitation, academics learn by summary and synthesis as well as by absorbing lectures, taking notes, and representing knowledge. Indeed, much of academic work is just that: representing knowledge gained and written up by others.* Neil Hertz concludes in a study about academic discourse and plagiarism that "the enforcement of legitimate boundaries is a gesture of scapegoating which reveals and projects repressed anxiety about the authority of the dominant position and its relation to the originality and authenticity of its own discourse" (quoted in Randall, 538–39). In other words, plagiarism is a capital sin in academic life because its prohibition protects a very difficult tenuous line. It draws a boundary between the communal and individual aspects of academic production—a boundary that allows for individual ownership of ideas within a communal effort of development of knowledge. A difficult task, indeed!

Yet, in this difficulty also lies the solution—not for the fiction writer but for the student and scholar. Many academic conventions ensure that we have a way of acknowledging what we have read, who has influenced us, where we have gotten our ideas and knowledge (see our entries on "Citation," "Quotation," "Footnotes"). The academic plagiarist fails to see that these acknowledgments are already a large part of his own accomplishment. Academic authority is predicated on the work of others—it is our response to others. If we steal from others we steal from ourselves, avoiding the dialogue that makes it possible for us to exist as academic thinkers. And our own response to other academic sources is what comprises our originality; our individual being on the page. As academics

*It is interesting to note that there are—just as Larsen implies—cultural differences in that regard. For example, student work in German universities emphasizes summary and synthesis much more than American universities do. American academic life—perhaps reflecting America's more youth-oriented culture—stresses originality more than European university life, which stays closer to its medieval roots.

we paradoxically need others to be ourselves; those who steal by denying these others erase themselves regardless of whether they get caught or not.

RELATED WORDS

Citation 32

Claims 38

Counterargument 49

Footnotes 81

Quotation 130

Summary 159

Synthesis 172

Work Cited 198

EXERCISES

1. Based on the facts as you see them here, write an argument that either convicts or exonerates Larsen from plagiarism. What definition of plagiarism is your argument based on?
2. As a class, develop a definition and a series of rules about plagiarism and acknowledgments. When, for example, should a thought presented in class by a student be cited or quoted and when does it freely belong to the group?
3. In a draft of yours, acknowledge as many sources as possible using citation, quotation, and footnotes.
4. Write three paragraphs in which you use a source: one as a deliberate plagiarism, one with some acknowledgment of the source, and one with fully detailed acknowledgment. Compare the effects of the three paragraphs.
5. Deliberately cut together a paragraph plagiarizing from Internet sources. Then produce a paragraph giving full acknowledgment to all the Internet sources used. Compare the results.