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CONSUMER CULTURE, MATERIAL DESIRES, AND IMAGES OF WOMEN
IN AMERICAN NOVELS AND ART AT THE TURN OF THE 20th CENTURY.

By

Janna S. Tajibaeva

B.A., Russian Philology, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia, 1989

M.A., University of Louisville, 1999

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2012

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A Dissertation approved on

March 21, 2012

By the following Dissertation Committee:

Professor Annette Allen, Dissertation Director

Professor Joe Slavin

Professor Ben Hufbauer

Professor Diane Pecknold

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to
my mother Roza Tajibaeva,
to my husband Charles Ziegler,
and my son Alan Ziegler
who have given me invaluable support and encouragement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my dissertation director, Dr. Annette Allen, for her guidance during the course of my research, for her incisive criticism, careful eye, and thoughtful suggestions. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Joe Slavin for his mentorship and wisdom. His extensive knowledge, brilliant scholarship, and compassionate teaching have been a great inspiration to me. I would also like to thank Dr. Ben Hufbauer for his valuable insights and encouragements and Dr. Diana Pecknold for her contribution of time, ideas, and enthusiasm for this project. Special thanks to Gail Gilbert and Kathy Moore at the Art Library for their kind assistance.

I am most grateful for a happy marriage to my partner in life, Charles Ziegler, who is always the best person to share my ideas with. I am also blessed to have my most enthusiastic supporter, my son Alan, whose beautiful laughs and cheerful demeanor continuously brighten my world. Their love, patience, and support made this dissertation possible.

ABSTRACT

CONSUMER CULTURE, MATERIAL DESIRES, AND IMAGES OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN NOVELS AND ART AT THE TURN OF THE 20th CENTURY.

Janna S. Tajibaeva

March 21, 2012

This dissertation examines American consumer culture and its influences on images of women created in art and literature at the turn of the twentieth century. It is divided into four substantive parts and uses the methods and theoretical approaches from four separate disciplines: social history, social theory, literature and art. The study offers a cultural discourse of the period by analyzing the novels of Edith Wharton *The House of Mirth*, and *The Custom of the Country*, and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, and also looking into the paintings of American Impressionists and Realists. It interprets the fictional and visual portrayals of women in relation to the issues of display, spectatorship, material desires, and commodity exchange.

Chapter I provides a socio-historical overview of the period that gave birth to a modern consumer culture. It focuses on the rise of advertisement industry and the development of department stores that emphasized the acquisition of material goods and personal satisfaction. Furthermore the chapter explores how the commodity culture affected the place and role of women and why they became so susceptible to the demands of consumer capitalism.

Chapter II concentrates on Wharton's novels and studies how the fundamentals of the consumer culture shape the relationship between men and women in the society. It employs the paradigm of display and spectatorship to construe the social and psychological realities of the novels' heroines – Lily Bart and Undine Spragg. The chapter centers the argument on the issues of marriage, its price and function, because both women must marry not only to gain respectable social status but also to fulfill their desires for money, material goods, and enjoyments.

Chapter III studies Dreiser's novel and explores how society constructs the individual's identity by means of material desires. It draws upon Dreiser's metaphor of the "walled city," an axis of money economy and desires, to demonstrate how the novel's heroine Carrie Meeber appropriates the city's sights and sounds to fuel her consuming desires and dream of attaining happiness.

While Chapter II and III investigate literary representations of women, Chapter IV analyzes the range of women's images, from upper class to working class, in the paintings of American Impressionists and Realists. It discusses the iconography of women with regard to issues of fashion, consumption, leisure, and beauty. The chapter shows how the works of American artists, similar to writers of the period, reveal the effects of consumer culture and gender ideology of the period as women displayed, expressed, negotiated, and asserted themselves in a male-dominated culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Visuality, spectacle, and urban life are now considered to have been key features of modernity; consumer culture has taken its place alongside mass production as a factor determining the character of modern consciousness.”¹

Rebecca Zurier

This study examines how images of women created in art and literature at the turn of the twentieth century disclose a culture of all-consuming desire for material goods and social status as a way to achieve happiness. It is important to understand how in a society that increasingly valued accumulation the display of women’s appearance and behavior became the focal expression of commodified relations. In particular, I analyze how and why consumer culture affected the identity of women. The culture of conspicuous consumption created specific boundaries within which the place and roles of American women were defined. Women of the period were turned into the most visible icons of culture’s pervasive materialism. On the one hand they became active partakers of commodity culture by desiring beautiful objects and yearning to demonstrate refined tastes and ways of life. They constructed their self-image and social status through the purchase of products and services. On the other, however, these women’s beauty and appearances became their most important assets which they could display and use to

¹ Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and Ashcan School*, University of California Press, 2006, p. 39-40.

negotiate their roles and places in pursuit of money, leisure, and entertainments - as well as to attain a desirable marriage.

I investigate how American novelists and artists at the turn-of-the-century engaged in, reflected upon and challenged the material aspirations of society. By using the novels of Theodore Dreiser and Edith Wharton and the paintings of American Impressionists and Realists, this study aims to answer the following questions: How do the images of women created in the art and literature of the period relate to a culture of commodification, commercial exchange, display, and spectatorship? How did women's socio-economic status and existing gender relations contribute to their binary status of consumer and consumed? What are the common threads between literary and artistic expressions of the period that reveal American society's desires for abundance, possession, and display in regards to images of women?

There have been numerous studies that explore the themes of consumer culture, women and material desires. However, such research has been confined to separate disciplines - mainly social, historical, and literary. Furthermore, among the studies of American Impressionists only a few analyze the depiction of idealized women encased in the atmospheres of leisure and luxury and speculate on why such imagery was dominant at the turn-of-the-century. I argue that the Impressionists' images of beautiful women were visual expressions of material culture dominated by wealth and fashion. Similarly the representations of working class women in Realist paintings have not been interpreted through the lenses of consumer culture. I suggest that the depiction of both working class women and their affluent sisters in spite of different appearances and social settings manifest the same paradigms of display and spectatorship. In addition, by examining both

literature and art of the period, I intend to fully capture the representation of women within the confines of commodity culture. Artists and writers were active partakers of consumer culture rather than passive onlookers. They created visual and written records of the period, a powerful narrative of consumer culture, where material desires and accumulation dominated everyday life.

A critical discourse on the portrayal of women in art and fiction would not be complete without understanding the social history of the period that provides crucial evidence for this research. I demonstrate that taken as a whole social history, art and literature construct the definition of the feminine gender as an active consumer, as well as passive “decorative object” - and thus further reinforced the social conventions of the era. This interdisciplinary approach, the importance of which has been neglected, enriches the study by drawing attention to parallel developments in art and literature regarding images of women as commercial capitalism was rapidly transforming American society.

I have drawn on methods and theoretical approaches from four separate disciplines: social history, social theory, literature and art. First, by analyzing works about the rise of consumer culture, advertisement industry, and department stores, I explicate the social and historical contexts of the period. This thesis attempts to show why women became active partakers of consumer culture and how their behavior related to their socio-economic status and the dictates of commodity culture in general. Apart from critical literature, examples of advertisements from women’s magazines support my thesis. Secondly, through the textual reading of Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, I examine the issues of display, spectatorship, desire, and commodity exchange in relation to the lives

of women. I also consider Dreiser's and Wharton's own critical writings, autobiographical accounts and biographies that touch upon the subjects of material desires. Third, through the close interpretation of Impressionist and Realist paintings, I discuss the iconography of women, their settings and objects as a part of a general trend for decoration and display. These paintings, similar to the novels of Dreiser and Wharton, express the definition of feminine gender and the influences of consumer culture on the lives of women.

Chapter I focuses on the main social and historical facets of the rise of American consumer culture at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The purpose of this chapter is first to present an overview of the historical period, emphasizing the new developments in people's attitudes fostered by the ascending material culture. The works of social historians Jackson Lears, William Leach, and Alan Trachtenberg create a crucial foundation for understanding people's desires for self-transformation and dominance of the consumerist ethos. Lears in *Rebirth of a Nation* writes that as turn-of-the-century America was lurching headlong into industrial development, the power of money became central to everyone's experiences. "Men and women," he observes, "both could participate in the promise of regeneration through purchase – the fantasy at the heart of the embryonic consumer culture, the faith that paralleled (and sometimes parodied) the older promises of salvation."² Similarly William Leach has shown that by the 1890s America had evolved from the "Land of Comfort" into the "Land of Desire." "It was this upsurge in desire," he writes, "occurring at the deepest levels of consciousness and affecting all classes, that so strikingly marked the psychological turmoil of the period and

² Jackson Lears, *The Rebirth of the Nation – The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009, p. 52.

fostered greater freedom and inventiveness in display and decoration...”³ There was an emergence of the new commercial aesthetic of desire that became the foundation of the advertising industry. Advertisement stressed consumption, instilled desires, and promised satisfaction; its strategies became evident in everyday life - in signs, window displays, billboards, and department stores among other places. Alan Trachtenberg points out that advertisement offered a spectacle in which “reading and seeing provided access to a presumed and promised reality.”⁴ The rapid growth of magazines and newspapers provided a major venue for the advertising industry during this time. However, the most prominent materialization of consumer culture was the creation of department stores. Michael Miller and Robert Hendrickson provide fascinating histories on the growth and innovative approaches of the first grand emporiums – from Parisian *Bon Marché* to New York’s *Macy’s* and Chicago’s *Marshall Field’s*.⁵

In addition Chapter I will emphasize the issues of women’s role and place in commodity culture to which Thorstein Veblen and Charlotte Gilman Perkins offer insightful commentaries. Veblen was one of the first to discuss the shift from producer-oriented to consumer-oriented culture as an important category of social and economic behavior. In his 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, he defines American class structure, the phenomenon of consumerism, the ideal of leisure, and position of women. Veblen shows how cultural meanings are created within material objects and how a society constructs the individual’s identity by means of desire. He coins such terms as

³ William Leach, “Strategies of Display and the Production of Desire,” in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989, p. 102.

⁴ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and the Society in the Gilded Age*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 137.

⁵ Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981 and Robert Hendrickson *The Grand Emporiums – The Illustrated History of America’s Great Department Stores*, New York: Stein and Day, 1979.

“conspicuous consumption,” “conspicuous leisure,” “invidious comparison,” and “pecuniary emulation” that characterized American standards of life. Charlotte Gilman Perkins in her work *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, first published in 1898, addresses the existing economic relations between men and women, the issues of marriage, family, and home. Gilman observes that woman makes her living by marriage and thus creates her complete economic dependence on men. Both critics, however, identify woman’s social roles with that of consumer and her symbolic role with that of a commodity.

Such binary status of women has been also discussed by modern writers researching turn-of-the-century American culture. Victoria de Grazia in *The Sex of Things* argues that the acts of exchange and consumption have long been obsessively gendered as female. She writes that commercial artists sprawl idealized female figures “designing their forms and faces to elicit desirous gazes” and “marketing agents probe the calculations and caprices imputed to Mrs. Consumer.”⁶ Elaine Abelson has recognized the dramatic change in women’s position “as domesticity expanded beyond the confines of the individual household and the emphasis was increasingly placed on the new world of material possessions.”⁷ She writes that women “who had been excluded from significant economic activity” suddenly became central to that identity.⁸ The stores began to cater primarily to women consumers by developing a variety of amenities to prolong their shopping experiences. A similar viewpoint is expressed by Mary Louis Roberts who observes that for women commodity culture created a cultural shift from the

⁶ Victoria de Grazia, *The Sex of Things*, ed. by Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, University of California Press, 1996, p. 1.

⁷ Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 13.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 13.

privacy of their homes to the public arenas of shops, restaurants, parks, hotels.⁹ This meant that women had to put more emphasis on their appearance, display themselves, in order to be sustained in the world of fashion and social competition. Maureen Montgomery in her study on women and material culture rightly concludes that the paradigms of display and spectatorship became an integral part of women's lives where new marketing technologies of commerce, magazines, and mass-circulated daily newspapers emphasized consumption, fashion, and social status.¹⁰

Chapters II and III further expand on the issues of women within the dictates of material desires and commercial capitalism by analyzing the novels by Theodore Dreiser *Sister Carrie* (1900), and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913). I focus on Dreiser's and Wharton's novels because both authors explicitly depict the influences and effects of consumer culture on the lives of their female characters. The authors represent American culture at the same historical period – the juncture of modernity where the themes of consumption, desire and gender were explored. Despite contrasting socio-economic backgrounds and gender perspectives, Dreiser and Wharton both observed and depicted the same ways in which material culture could circumscribe the social and psychological realities of women.

Wharton was born and raised into an upper-class New York family and lived in the world of elaborate customs and privileges. In the words of R.W.B. Lewis, Wharton's biographer, it was a "safe, monotonous, and rigidly circumscribed" society. In many of her works Wharton chose to portray the subjects familiar to her own experiences – the

⁹ Mary Louis Roberts, "Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture," in *American Historical Review*, vol., 103, no. 3, June 1998, p. 818.

¹⁰ Maureen Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of leisure in Edith Wharton's New York*, New York: Rutledge, 1998, p. 117-118.

lives of fashionable elite society. "There it was before me," Wharton reminisces in her autobiography, "in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, such I had been steeped in it from infancy..."¹¹ As a child Edith "would watch, fascinated, as her mother swept out to her carriage, dazzling in her train and opera cloak, a spray of gems covering her hair."¹² At other times she would remember their drawing room with "white-whiskered gentlemen" and "ladies with bare sloping shoulders, low-cut bodices, and voluminous skirts."¹³ Later, as a prominent writer, Wharton would critically dismiss this society as "irresponsible pleasure-seekers" who could frivolously destroy people and debase ideals.¹⁴ In such an atmosphere she created her famous heroines Lily Bart and Undine Spragg whose lives had been trapped in the leisure class psychology of accumulation and display. These women employed marketing strategies by continuously displaying themselves and their possessions analogous to advertisements of material goods.

In contrast to Wharton's wealthy upbringing, Dreiser came from a large family of thirteen children living in the small town of Terre Haute, Indiana. Young Dreiser, dominated by his strict and religious German immigrant father, struggled to escape provincial boredom and sought a new life in the big city. Like Wharton, Dreiser also reflected upon his personal experiences in his writings. He made stories about the rise and occasional fall of young status-conscious men and women who were lured by the lights and glamour of big cities in fervent desire to transform their lives. Jackson Lears observes that Dreiser created a specific social, historical, and geographical locale of the

¹¹ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, New York: Appleton-Century Company, 1934, p. 206-207.

¹² R. W. Lewis, *Edith Wharton – A Biography*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975, p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 207.

urbanizing United States between the Civil War and World War I. Furthermore, Dreiser presented this history “not from any Olympian perspective but from inside out, from the perspective of clerks and shop girls striving to do more than merely survive in a baffling new world of threats and opportunities.”¹⁵ Lears rightly notes that Dreiser was able to depict the emotional aspect of “the rise of the city” – “the dimension of desire: for sensuous pleasure and luxury, for the intense experience that seemed lacking in everyday life, or at least for some fleeting facsimile of ecstasy.”¹⁶

The different life experiences of Dreiser and Wharton and different social strata that they portray in their novels fully captures the essence of American culture of the period. Their works and experiences further augment, enrich, and support the intention of this study. Both writers were deeply absorbed by the same encompassing changes brought by the rise of consumer culture. Specifically, they both reflected upon the prevailing social construct surrounding women’s appearance and behavior within the limits of material culture. The lives and attitudes of their main characters, Dreiser’s Carrie Meeber and Wharton’s Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, are permeated with the same desires for wealth and status. They portray women of diverse social realities – Dreiser’s small-town girl, Wharton’s upper class beauty and *nouveau riche* debutante – who nonetheless have one common story. These women, trapped in a money-driven culture, not only function as desiring consumers but they also become desired commodities in the eyes of men. I argue that these authors portray the heroines’ circumstances and their dilemmas as direct consequences of the culture that promotes money as the key measure of all things; thus the nature of these women’s material desires should be recognized as

¹⁵ Lears, p. 63.

¹⁶ Lears, p. 63.

socially constructed behavior. Peter Berger observed that society is nothing but a “human product” that “continuously acts back upon its producer” through the processes of objectification and internalization.¹⁷ By wishing leisure and luxuries these women aim to duplicate the desirable people and their lifestyles. In Berger’s definitions they “reappropriate” the surrounding reality into their own subjective domain.

Scholarship on Theodore Dreiser and Edith Wharton is vast, but for the purpose of my research, I concentrate on works that examine the lives of women within the context of increasing commercialism and consumerism, and construe the psychological aspects of desire. Clare Eby’s *Dreiser and Veblen: Saboteurs of the Status Quo* is one of the important books in the field and it successfully demonstrates how literature and social science can come together on the ground of cultural criticism. Through the works of Dreiser and Veblen, she analyzes the complex issues of commercial capitalism and its influences on behavior, identity, and self-transformation. Eby writes that the shift from production-oriented economy to a consumption-driven one created the psychology of desire. Both Veblen and Dreiser saw psychology and economics “as mutually constituting realms and believed the cultural critic must examine them in tandem.”¹⁸ She argues that Veblenian psychology, particularly the human tendency of “invidious comparison” and the resulting behavior of “pecuniary emulation,” illuminates the method of self-construction seen in Dreiser’s fiction, most notably in *Sister Carrie*. “Carrie’s wondering and desiring relationship to objects,” observes Eby, “is not a matter of greedy

¹⁷ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967, p. 3

¹⁸ Clare Virginia Eby, *Dreiser and Veblen – Saboteurs of Status Quo*, University of Missouri Press, 1998, p. 115.

consumption but of hungry self-creation”; in fact, Carrie’s growth occurs not in “knowledge” but in “desire.”¹⁹

It is not difficult to see how Eby’s argument on Veblen’s psychology of desire in relation to Dreiser’s novel can also be applied to Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. Veblen’s models are at the foundation of self-construction in consumer society and provide a theoretical framework for the discourse of human desire. Wharton’s heroines Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, similar to Dreiser’s Carrie Meeber, are also preoccupied with desire for money, social status and consumer goods. These women’s self-image is largely constructed by comparison with images of others. What motivates Carrie Meeber, Lily Bart, and Undine Spragg is not so much to accumulate desirable goods but to emulate desirable people and thus in turn become desirable themselves. The cultural criticism of Dreiser, Veblen and Wharton reveals how conspicuous consumption functions to circumscribe individual actions.

Dreiser’s novel also reveals the moment of important social and historical transformations taking place in the burgeoning cities. In *Sister Carrie* Chicago and New York present an important framework in which the lives of characters unfold. I apply Georg Simmel’s *Metropolis and Mental Life* as a crucial discourse for understanding the metropolis’s structures and its overwhelming forces that can shape a person’s life by imposing psychological conditions on the multitude of social and economic lives. One of the dominant features of the metropolitan life is the rise of consumer culture and subsequent creation of a multitude of new desires. Bill Brown in his article “The Matter of Dreiser’s Modernity” writes that “Dreiser occupies his place as America’s great novelist of desire because a host of passions – for success, for art, for power, for *things* –

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

converge, and each is expressed with something like physical ache of sexual desire.”²⁰ In his novels Dreiser presents the world of material existence saturated with desires, where things have triumphed over the spirit, over ideas and ideals.²¹ Brown observes that “the spirit” and sexual passion have no role in *Sister Carrie* – in fact they never interfere with Carrie’s desire for inanimate possessions. He also rightly points out that Dreiser is the writer most devoted to things – the detailed descriptions of hotels and restaurants, the interiors, city streets and mansions as well as scarves, jackets and skirts. I may add that the pages of Edith Wharton’s novels also present meticulous renderings of her character’s environments whether it is the opera box at the theater or the interior of a drawing room. They both depict the physical manifestations of material culture that dictate desire and where the events of the stories unfold.

Elizabeth Ammons’ book *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* explores the issues of class, gender, and women’s economic realities. Ammons was one of the first to define Wharton’s novels, especially *The House of Mirth*, as an “economic novel” that critiques women’s obstacles to freedom. She notes that Wharton came onto the American literary scene when the debate on “the woman’s question” was at its height, primarily focusing on two main issues - “marriage and work.” She writes that the essence of Wharton’s argument with America was her conviction that “typical women no matter how privileged, nonconformist, or assertive were not free to control their own lives.”²² For Ammons *The House of Mirth* is an exposé of American consumer culture where women become the display of man’s wealth and power by leading the life of leisure.

²⁰ Bill Brown “The Matter of Dreiser’s Modernity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed., by Leonard Cassuto and Claire Virginia Eby, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 93.

²¹ Brown, p. 84.

²² Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America*, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980, p. 3.

Similarly in *The Custom of the Country* the heroine Undine Spragg depends entirely on men's finances and support. Undine herself approaches marriage as a simple economic contract. She desires marriage because she hopes to achieve status, publicity and triumph. In Ammons' view Undine "is given her own stock exchange: the institution of marriage in which she herself is the stock exchanged."²³

Wai-Chee Dimock in her article "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" also approaches Wharton's novel from an economic standpoint. She writes that an all-encompassing business ethic and the principles of exchange are at the center of every social relation in the novel. "Investments," "returns," "interests," "payments" are the words that "animate and possess Wharton's characters, even in their world of conspicuous leisure." "The power of marketplace," Dimock notes, "resides not in its presence, which is only marginal in *The House of Mirth*, but in its ability to reproduce itself, in its ability to assimilate everything else into its domain."²⁴ Dimock concludes that within an all-consuming system of exchange not only are women turned into commodities but the entire fabric of social intercourse is commodified. Dimock's analysis also can be applied to Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* as well as Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*. They all reflect upon the lives of women within the imposed boundaries of commodity imperatives.

Chapter IV further develops the theme but this time by looking at the works of art. Similar to the novelists, American Impressionists and Realists at the turn-of-the-century were also preoccupied with representations of women. Ruth Iskin in her *Modern Women*

²³ Ammons, p. 107.

²⁴ Wai-Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," PMLA, vol. 100, no.5, (Oct., 1985), p. 783.

and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Paintings analyzes the relationship between art, women and Parisian consumer culture. She argues that art during the Impressionist decades was formed in the midst of radical changes in the modes of consumption and in the visual culture. Increasingly advertising images, fashion plates, and posters with images of fashionable women permeated modern everyday life and were inevitably linked to consumption. Thus the consumer culture together with visual culture of the period became an important context for French painters. Her research on Parisian consumer culture and depiction of women in Impressionist paintings provides a foundation to investigate similar developments in American arts and culture.

The works of French Impressionists, their styles and subject matters, were influential to the works of American painters. In particular the intense brushstrokes and the interplay of light and colors had been incorporated in the works of American artists, particularly in landscape paintings. Nonetheless in contrast to French painters American Impressionists were more cautious in their choice of subject matter. They shunned contentious themes of modern urban life by choosing to present aesthetically pleasing and elegant worlds of the upper-middle class. American Realists, however, similar to French Impressionists, were more openly engaged in depicting new social settings by offering distinctive visions of urban life. Rebecca Zurier rightly points out that in their works American Realists, namely Ashcan artists, presented the experiences “of a changing city at the height of urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and the emergence of the modern commercial culture of looking.”²⁵ Thus American Impressionists opted to portray attractive upper-middle class women while Realists preferred to represent ordinary women.

²⁵ Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City – Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*, p. 18.

During the years between 1880 and 1910 the images of beautiful and affluent women dominated the works of American Impressionists such as John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt, Frank Weston Benson, Joseph De Camp, Frederick Childe Hassam, William McGregor Paxton, Edmund Charles Tarbell, and William Merritt Chase. Enclosed in the sumptuous settings of their homes, beauty of their gardens, or engaged in upper class sociability, women in these works exhibit high social status, cultural refinement and conspicuous leisure. Frances K. Pohl in *Framing America: A Social History of American Art*, offers a valuable observation as to why decorative images of upper-middle class women were so prevalent during this period. He writes that the economic boom after the Civil War brought new wealth and thus the building of new elaborate homes. The interiors of these homes were marked by obsessive decorations. The window coverings, tapestries, rugs, delicately carved furniture, chandeliers, various pieces of china and porcelain, and gilded mirrors were all meant to subscribe to the unrelenting imperative of the day – conspicuous consumption. As the interiors of the homes became more profusely decorated, observes Pohl, “many of the paintings that hung within them became more decidedly decorative.”²⁶ The main emphasis of these paintings was ideal and beautiful images of woman. Pohl notes that in these paintings women “never engaged in any apparently meaningful activity, not even domestic; sometimes dressed in classical garb, more often in contemporary dress, sometimes naked,” but almost always situated in vaguely defined landscapes or interior spaces that always were recognizably upper-middle class.²⁷ These images of women became a part

²⁶ Francis K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art*, NY; Thames and Hudson, 2002, p. 268-269.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 269.

of the general cultural trend for decoration, accumulation and the showcase in which the display of art and commerce merged together.

In particular the paintings of Boston School Impressionists with titles such as *Girl Playing Solitaire*, *The Black Hat*, *The Red Kimono*, *The Crystal*, *The New Necklace*, and *The String of Pearls* suggest women's desire for elegant objects and communicate their own decorative quality. The representations of these women emphasize the notion that they were fashioned for the visual pleasure and satisfaction of the viewer analogous to the function of pretty objects that surround them. Art historian Bailey Van Hook provides a constructive discussion on the artistic representation of women by examining the cultural connection between femininity and art in her book *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914*. She suggests that depictions of women expressed the definition of the feminine gender and the ways women were perceived in American society – ideal, real, pure, beautiful, and decorative. In bourgeois culture, beauty, refinement, and grace were defined as feminine while nobility of character was found to be masculine. Thus feminine gender as leisure-bound or even ornamental made its decorative function in art more appropriate. “Due to their lack of importance in American society,” Van Hook notes “only women could easily function as passive decorations.”²⁸

In contrast Realists depicted working class women not so much in the privacy of their dwellings but in and about the city. These mostly young and single women held jobs during the day at factories and department stores but in the evenings they explored the burgeoning city by pursuing various entertainments. As they became active partakers of the growing commercial culture so did Ashcan artists capture them in places of recreation

²⁸ Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, p. 13.

and amusements. The visual representation of working class girls on city streets, in dance halls, shops, theaters, parks, and cafes recalls the historian Kathy Peiss' observation that "such women dressed in latest finery, negotiated city life with ease, and sought intrigue and adventure..."²⁹ As did their upper class sisters, the ordinary women turned into consumers of new styles, beauty and leisure. The strong emphasis on one's outer appearance was continuously encouraged by advertisements in newspapers and magazines as well as window displays. For working class women, as Nan Enstad argues, the stylish clothing and "their use of products was a central aspect of their self-construction and self-expression as women, as workers, and as Americans."³⁰ Moreover, in a culture of money economy and commodified relations, women's new styles of dress and appearances offered ways to escape the drudgery of work, draw attention to themselves, and have fun. The consumption of products and services allowed working class women to affirm their presences in public places and exercise greater autonomy. Consequently, the rise of consumer culture influenced the lives of women by creating new paradigms diverging from rigid Victorian values toward the direction of modernity's mandates. The works of American Impressionists and Realists can be interpreted as a response to a "rapidly urbanizing and incorporating society in which mass culture, spectacle, commercialism, and consumerism were fast becoming common denominators of modern experience."³¹

²⁹ Kathy Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working Class Sexuality, 1880-1920," in *Powers of Desire – The Politics of Sexuality*, eds., Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, Sharon Thompson, New York: Monthly Press, 1983, p. 76.

³⁰ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the 20th century*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 13.

³¹ Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America*, New Haven: Yale University press, 1996, p. 2.

My research shows the links between social history, social theory, art and literature in addressing the issues of women, material desires and consumer culture. I investigate the position of women in turn-of-the-century American society together with the artistic images of women created by novelists and painters, to understand how they expressed the dominance of a culture based on all-consuming desires. Through close analysis of Impressionists and Realists paintings and the textual reading of Dreiser's and Wharton's novels, I explore the ways gender was constructed and material culture was perceived and reflected upon. Moreover, I argue that in spite of different methods and the means of expression these discourses, nonetheless, have a unified theme. They consider women's socio-economic status and existing gender relationships that further reinforce their binary position – as consumer and consumed, purchaser and purchased. America's commodity culture shaped the lives of women who became integral components of the processes of commodification, spectatorship and commercial exchange.

CHAPTER I

AMERICAN CONSUMER CULTURE AND WOMEN AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

*“From 1890s on, American corporate business, in league with key institutions, began the transformation of American society into a society preoccupied with consumption, with comfort and bodily well-being, with luxury, spending, and acquisition, with more goods this year than last, more next year than this. American consumer capitalism produced a culture almost violently hostile to the past and to tradition, a future-oriented culture of desire that confused the good life with goods.”*³²

William Leach

American modern consumer culture has its origins in the late 19th century – the period that was characterized by dynamic forces of industrialization, incorporation, communication, immigration and urbanization that brought dramatic changes into society. These forces established an institutional basis for commercial capitalism which in turn gave birth to a distinct culture of consumerism. This chapter will present an overview of the cultural background that altered people’s attitudes toward work, leisure and consumption. In particular, it will emphasize the development of the advertisement industry and the rise of department stores as the two most significant features of consumer culture.

³² William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of New American Culture*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1993, p. xiii.

Furthermore this chapter will explore how this commodity culture affected the place and roles of women and why they became so susceptible to the demands of commercial capitalism. The analysis also intends to show how women's socio-economic status as well as their psychological yearnings related to the dictates of commodity culture. I argue that advertisement industry together with department stores, print media, and the visual culture in general aimed at upper and middle class women because they could afford the time and had the means to participate in conspicuous consumption. Material culture appealed to the desires of many women by promising glamour and luxury and overall transformation of their lives. By desiring beautiful objects women not only acted as consumers but also turned into commodities, "decorative objects," themselves. The notion of women's dual role in the culture of conspicuous consumption was first addressed by Thorstein Veblen, criticized by Charlotte Gilman Perkins and still raises challenging questions for contemporary critics. Above all the chapter aims to reveal the impact of consumerism and commodified relations on the lives of upper and middle class women during the years 1880-1910. In turn this chapter's inquiry will pave the way to a more detailed investigation on how the works of Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, the paintings of American Impressionists and Realists articulated the influences of consumer culture in regards to the images of women examined in the following three chapters.

The unfolding of the consumer culture at the close of the 19th century took place along with tremendous growth in the country's population and wealth. The orderly existence of American towns began to disappear, giving way to a frantic expansion of modern cities as centers of financial and industrial markets. Between 1880 and 1914 the

urban population of the United States grew fivefold, attracting native-born migrants from the countryside as well as European immigrants. Both groups flooded urban centers seeking employment and better fortunes. Jobs at factories, railroads, and service industries were quickly filled by cheap labor. The statistics of immigration to the United States are astounding – in the period between 1866 and 1900 there were 13 million new immigrants. In the span of these 34 years there were more immigrants than in the previous 250 years of American history.³³

Moreover, the discovery of a variety of natural resources such as gold, silver, lead, coal, copper, and iron ore contributed to the expansion of mining towns throughout the country, especially in Alaska, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Michigan, Montana and Utah. In 1859 there was an opening of the first oil well in Pennsylvania which provided a cheaper and more efficient alternative to more expensive whale oil used for lamps. The discovery of oil, however, would have a ripple effect on many industries by radically changing their mechanisms of operation. In particular, it would play a crucial role in the evolution of the automobile industry, creating a novel means of transportation.

Subsequently, technological advances together with the rapid growth of large-scale industries and manufacturing boosted the country's economy and its social development. The building of railroads, the utilization of electricity, and launching of telegraph and telephone not only shaped America's geographic expansion but also introduced advanced ways of travel and communication. The country's powerful entrepreneurial spirit together with new inventions further contributed to its commercial development. During this period banking, retail and service industries as well as

³³ Roger Daniels, "The Immigrant Experience in the Gilded Age," in *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles William Calhoun, Wilmington, 1996, p. 76.

publishing and advertising began to flourish fulfilling the needs of expanding businesses and consumers alike. The newly erected department stores and mail order catalogues emerged with a conspicuous variety of goods. They not only served the consumers' needs but rather actively played on their growing desires.

The expansion of industries led to the rise of large corporations and influential business figures. Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and J. Pierpont Morgan were among a few "robber barons" who accumulated unprecedented wealth and power. In 1890, 73 percent of the nation's wealth was held by the top 10 percent of the population. Andrew Carnegie wrote several essays and books including *The Gospel of Wealth* (1901) and the *Empire of Business* (1902) expressing his views on the culture of successful business. As a young Scottish immigrant who came to America in search of a better life Carnegie believed in the image of a self-made man, "from rags to riches," who could overcome any difficulties and succeed in life. He worshiped the entrepreneur-hero whose leadership and managerial skills contribute to the wealth of the nation. In Carnegie's ideology the material success of his class was equated with the social progress of the society. In his essay *Wealth* he discussed the changed conditions of human life over the past few hundreds years that created a wide gap between wealthy and poor. According to Carnegie such changes, however, should not be "deplored" but perceived as "highly beneficial." "We accept and welcome," Carnegie wrote, "... the great inequality of environment, the concentration of businesses, industrial, and commercial, in the hands of few, and the law of competition between these as being not only beneficial but essential for the future progress of race."³⁴

³⁴ Andrew Carnegie, "Wealth," in *The American 1890s – a Cultural Reader*, ed. Susan Harris Smith & Malanie Dawson, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 27.

Carnegie's business philosophy was closely tied with the popular theory of Social Darwinism endorsed by British theorist Herbert Spencer. Spencer applied Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory to the development of society. Social Darwinism preached the idea that society evolved and thus improved through a process of competition, the survival of the "fittest members." The dogma of Social Darwinism further acknowledged the gospel of wealth and success and the ideas of *laissez-faire*. Furthermore, the theory implied that poor and "unfit" members of society should not be assisted through charity or otherwise but rather let alone for the law of natural selection to prevail. As a result the weak persons will perish and the "fittest" people will survive and carry on in the improved society. "Meanwhile the well-being of existing humanity and the unfolding of it into this ultimate perfection," wrote Spencer, "are both secured by that same beneficent, though severe, discipline to which animate creation at large is subject: a discipline which is pitiless in the working out of good: a felicity-pursuing law which never swerves for the avoidance of partial and temporary suffering."³⁵ For Spencer "the poverty of the incapable," "the distresses of imprudent," "the starvation of the idle," and all the miseries and "harsh fatalities" are seen to be full of the highest beneficence of universal humanity – it "brings to early graves the children of diseased parents and singles out the low-spirited, the intemperate, and the debilitated as the victims of an epidemic."³⁶ Above all, Social Darwinism was a suitable system of principles for big corporations and business barons to justify their material success since it was equated with social progress.

³⁵ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics*, New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1954, p. 288-289.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 289.

The success of robber barons and their corporations was achieved through implementation of new technologies and managerial methods but also through exploitatively low wages and “cut-throat” competition. They collected enormous assets in coal, steel, oil, railroads and the financial markets of Wall Street. The immense fortunes were not only rapidly accumulated but conspicuously displayed.

The new class of wealthy Americans came to symbolize the most obvious sign of rising consumer culture. Their material success and consumption embodied pleasures and comforts and also set in motion the influential patterns of commodified relations and behaviors. The rich built expensive mansions where oriental rugs, European tapestries, Japanese screens, Chinese porcelains, gilded mirrors, mahogany furniture, sparkling chandeliers and art collections crammed together to showcase their owners’ wealth and power. Their luxury life styles, “grand tours” to Europe, expensive boxes at the opera, exclusive balls and parties, and extravagant fashions provoked people’s fascination and offered models for others to follow. Matthew Josephson vividly describes one of the New York balls given by Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1883. The details of the ball were meticulously presented in the press of both continents. “Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt was costumed as a Venetian princess, Mr. Cornelius Vanderbilt as Louis XVI, and his spouse as “The Electric Light,” in white satin trimmed with diamonds, and with a superb diamond headdress. In the drawing-rooms of the Vanderbilt place, with its cluttered interiors in Japanese or in French style, hung with flowing masses of pale red velvet, drapery which was embroidered with foliage and jeweled butterflies, the noble throng ate, drunk, and danced through the night.”³⁷

³⁷ Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934, p. 331.

The material progress and prosperity together with reigning agencies of the new culture had caused major transformations in people's attitudes toward work, leisure and consumption. Many critics have pointed out that the quest for self-pleasure and self-fulfillment overshadowed the traditional ethics of family and community values, moralities of work and self-denial.³⁸ The dictates of commodity culture increasingly focused on the acquisition of material goods and personal satisfaction. Its dominant features were desires for wealth, pleasure, and comfort as principal means of achieving happiness. Such desires were relentlessly promoted by new commodity environments where amusements and gratifications were central to people's experiences. Department stores, theaters, hotels, dance halls, and restaurants as well as a growing number of advertisements in magazines and newspapers insisted on possession and display. Accumulation of goods and services became a tool of self-transformation and measure of one's social worth.

Henry James shared the observations on the country's rising materialistic aspirations in *The American Scene* published in 1907. For James, who had just returned from a prolonged residence in Europe, the preoccupation of American society with showy accumulation and display was both shocking and depressing. He detected the affirmation of wealth everywhere around him. Walking on the streets of New York, he could not overlook the growing number of huge new houses that loudly and assertively confessed to their extreme expensiveness.³⁹ James acutely felt a sense of void especially in upper class gatherings immersed in the splendors of their environments. Their dinner parties resembled palatial feasts of absolute perfection. The settings and services were

³⁸ Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, ed., *The Culture of Consumption*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1983; William Leach, *Land of Desire*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

³⁹ Henry James, *The American Scene*, New York and London: Harper & Brother Publishers, 1907, p. 8.

complemented by conspicuous presence of glamorous ladies “glittering with gems” and “tiaras.”⁴⁰ “The material pitch was so high,” noted James, “that it carried with it really no social sequence, no application, but as a tribute to the ideal, to the exquisite...” that wanted “some sort of consecration.”⁴¹ For James everything unmistakably celebrated money - “there was money in the air, ever so much money- that was, grossly expressed, the sense of the whole intimation. And the money was to be all for the most exquisite things – for *all* the most exquisite except creation...”⁴²

Similarly Theodore Dreiser in *Sister Carrie*, and Edith Wharton in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, created powerful metaphors of wealth in the rising consumer culture, especially in New York and Chicago. Dreiser’s Chicago in its “entire metropolitan center possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep.”⁴³ Wharton describes New York’s Fifth Avenue as a “torrent of carriages surging upward to the fashionable quarters about the Park, where illuminated windows and outspread awnings betokened the usual routine of hospitality. Other tributary currents crossed the main stream, bearing their freight to the theaters, restaurants or opera...”⁴⁴ Both authors captured seductions and dangers of commodity culture with its struggles for power, and desires for money and love. In their novels they demonstrated how the economic status of their characters affected everything from erotic desires to a quest for wealth and status.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 157-158.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.158.

⁴² Ibid, p.186.

⁴³ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004, p. 129.

Newly rich and ordinary Americans relentlessly competed for social status and desired transformations in the culture engrossed by mass commodities. America turned into a land of possibilities and people from all walks of life embraced material culture at the heart of which was desire for money; in the words of social historian Jackson Lears people were captivated by the “mysterious power of money.” Lears argues that between the Civil War and World War I American society experienced a widespread yearning for regeneration – for spiritual, moral and physical rebirth. He illustrates American society of the period through Melville’s vision of “conniving confidence men and questing consumers rendered credulous by their dream of magical self-transformation through purchase.”⁴⁵ Money, comments Lears, was not only a means to keep people afloat or the key to the new realms of pleasure but became a mechanism for reinventing the self. The mysterious power of money through the promise of self-transformation financed fresh starts – the new sets of surface appearances.⁴⁶ In the period of great social mobility and status-striving desires money firmly held its magical powers. Furthermore Lears writes that in the quest for revitalization and renewal “fashion, so often dismissed as mere superficial display by moralists, turned out to be an instrument for refashioning the self.”⁴⁷ Lears’ analysis of American culture of the period creates an essential framework for understanding peoples’ desires for self-transformation that inevitably linked to the society’s growing materialistic ethos.

Similarly William Leach describes American society of the period as dominated by commodity culture. From the 1890s American corporate businesses together with key

⁴⁵ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009, p.56.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 56.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 56.

institutions, writes Leach, produced a “culture of desire that confused the good life with goods.”⁴⁸ Americans became preoccupied with “consumption, with comfort and bodily well-being, with luxury, spending, and acquisition, with more goods this year than the last, more next year than this.”⁴⁹ The national corporations, government agencies, department stores, banks, hotels, and museums, among other institutions, began to act together to create the “Land of Desire” where aspirations were redirected “toward consumer longings, consumer goods, and consumer pleasures and entertainments.”⁵⁰

Subsequently this period also witnessed the emergence of a new commercial aesthetic of desire and longing to serve the growing business needs. The new aesthetic, writes Leach, is manifested in window displays, fashion shows, billboards, electric signs and is enhanced by the visual materials of desire such as color, glass, and light.⁵¹ This commercial aesthetics, observes Leach, “carved out a wide terrain of desire and longing and contained elements of secular carnivalesque... it celebrated metamorphoses, the violation of boundaries, and the blurring of lines between hitherto opposed categories -luxury and necessity, artificial and natural, night and day, male and female, expression of desire and its repression, the primitive and the civilized.”⁵² Above all, Leach concludes, it expressed the direction of new commodity culture that challenged at its core the moral heritage of the nineteenth century.

The crucial role in the powerful rise of consumerist ethos was played by the advertising industry that boomed between the 1880s and 1930s. The plethora of goods

⁴⁸ William Leach, *The Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, NY: Pantheon Books, 1993, p. xiii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. xiii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁵² William Leach, “Strategists of Display and the Production of Desire,” in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880-1920*, ed. Simon Bronner, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989, p. 131-132.

and services created a solid foundation for advertising growth. Use of advertising emerged as a crucial marketing tool to introduce new products, penetrate the markets and fight competitors. Consequently advertising gave consumer culture prominence and visibility as well as defined its shape. There were also new developments in advertising strategies. Most importantly the advertisers moved away from old fashioned tendencies to simply present the information to new modes of aggressively shaping consumer desires through the promise of self-transformations. Thus the advertisements did not call upon people's reason but instead appealed to their sensuous pleasures and dreams. To attract customers' attention the ads persistently presented the products within the themes of glamour, luxury, and leisure as means of attaining fulfillment.

In *The Incorporation of America* Alan Trachtenberg writes that advertising stressed consumption, instilled desires and "endowed goods with the language of their own, a language of promise radically new in the history of man-made things."⁵³ It instilled the products with ideas, feelings, and status. Trachtenberg notes that advertisements presented themselves often "as small dramas, in word and picture, offering along with their message a vicarious experience of the satisfaction promised by the product."⁵⁴ In other words, the advertisement was a spectacle in which "reading and seeing provided access to a presumed and promised reality."⁵⁵ Similarly Jackson Lears, analyzing the advertising strategies of the period, comments that advertisers promised "wholeness or rejuvenation" and addressed those "immersed in routine work or domestic

⁵³ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and the Society in the Gilded Age*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 135.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 137.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 137.

drudgery; they held out the hope that life could be personally fulfilling; and they implied that one ought to strive for that fulfillment through consumption.”⁵⁶

By 1900 advertisements became an important part of America’s visual culture. Businesses, industries, stores, restaurants and theaters displayed their information through ads, signs and billboards. However, the majority of advertisements were presented in print media – newspapers and magazines. Newspapers grew rapidly during this period creating an enormous audience for the advertisement industry. In the span of thirty years from 1870 to 1900 the circulation of newspapers increased by 700 percent demonstrating the massive expansion of print media.

Several influential newspapers appeared during this period. Joseph’s Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* captivated their readers with adventures and drama of the rising metropolitan and industrial superpower.⁵⁷ Building his fortune on single-copy sales of his paper on the streets of New York, Pulitzer targeted a wide range of audiences including the growing number of immigrant readers. Nicholas Lemann points out that Pulitzer’s paper served up a blend of investigative reporting, instruction about city life, comics, adventure stories and soap operas about tycoons and crooks.⁵⁸ Furthermore, in 1882 Dow Jones & Co began to publish a financial newsletter delivered by messenger boys to its business customers.⁵⁹ In 1889 it became the *Wall Street Journal*. In 1896 Adolph Ochs bought the mostly unknown *New York Times* and turned it into the premier newspaper in the country.

⁵⁶ Jackson Lears, ““From Salvation to Self-realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930,” in *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, NY: Pantheon Books, 1983, p. 27.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Lemann, “Paper Tigers,” in *New Yorker*, 4/13/2009, vol. 85, Issue 9, p. 72.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 73.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 73.

In addition there were numerous smaller newspapers and city dailies that captured people's attention by concentrating on dramatic and romantic material. Without doubt such journalism roused people's interests and was intended to either shock or surprise readers. Most of the newspapers presented their material by incorporating bold headlines and also used artful clichés and photographs. There was also a rise of society journalism where reporters diligently wrote about ins and outs of the wealthy and famous people. Almost all Sunday papers devoted a special page to interviews with celebrities and the latest news and events in society. *The Post*, for example, offered their readers columns titled "Men and Women of the Hour," or "Public Occurrences." One of the leading journals devoted to society news and gossips was the New York based *Town Topics* established in 1885. The society columns not only brought the lives of the rich and powerful to the masses but essentially promoted their lifestyles, clothes and habits. As did commercial advertising, the society news in newspapers and magazines endorsed luxury and glamour by featuring photographs and chronicling the lives of elites.

Prior to the 1880s advertisements in newspapers were brief and took small spaces of four column-inches in size. In the following years, however, the size and appearance of ads improved dramatically. The simple informative texts submitted by merchants and traders were replaced by creative ads put together by professional advertising agencies. Furthermore, the newspapers began to rely on advertisement money as a crucial source of their income – a trend that still holds true today.

The circulation of popular magazines also grew dramatically during this period. It more than tripled, increasing from 18 million in 1890 to 64 million in 1905.⁶⁰ These

⁶⁰ Daniel Delis Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999*, Columbus: Ohio State University press, 2002, p. viii-ix.

figures mean that each upper-middle household on average subscribed to two to four different magazines. The popular magazines of general nature were *Collier's*, *American*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, *The Century*, and *Munsey*. Magazine advertisements not only became the best way to introduce new styles, goods and services but turned into the crucial sources of income and profit making for the magazine industry. In 1907 James Collins, addressing a congressional committee, captured the essence of existing relations between advertisements and magazines: "There is still an illusion to the effect that a magazine is a periodical in which advertising is incidental. But we don't look at it that way. A magazine is simply a device to induce people to read advertising. It is a large booklet with two departments- entertainment and business. The entertainment department finds stories, pictures, verses, etc. to interest the public. The business department makes money."⁶¹

In addition to the advertisement industry one of the most essential manifestations of consumer culture was the emergence of department stores. Influenced by Parisian shopping arcades, the American department stores became emporiums of consumption where abundance of goods were displayed and sold. Aristide Boucicault was the man who invented the first department store by founding the famous *Bon Marché* in Paris in 1852. In 1869 the *grand magasin* was expanded and moved to its new location on the Rue Babylone where it still exists.⁶² *Bon Marché* inspired the creation of department stores all over the world. Boucicault's innovations were revolutionary and became the fundamental rules for all future department stores. He let customers freely come and browse without any obligation to buy, promised "money –back-guarantee" by allowing

⁶¹ Quoted from Jackson Lears, *The Fables of Abundance*, New York: Basic Books, 1994, p. 201.

⁶² Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché- the Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 39.

people to exchange or return their purchases if they were not satisfied, and implemented the system of fixed prices. These ideas sound simple and are common practice today but for the 19th century they were truly innovative. But what was the most important in Boucicault's reforms was the incitement and a free reign of consumer desires.

Robert Hendrickson rightly concludes that nowhere was the influence of the original *grand magazine* greater than in America "where A.T. Stewart's, Wanamaker's, Macy's, Strawbridge & Clothier, Marshall Field, and other grand emporiums all credited Boucicault's advanced trading practices as the source of many of their ideas in their transition from dry goods or specialty stores to department stores."⁶³ Therefore many American merchants either themselves or through delegated observers studied the great original in Paris. Similar to *Bon Marché* the American department stores not only exhibited their commodities to attract the customers but provoked the state of desire that transcended people's need.

Between 1880s and 1920s many famous American department stores came into existence - *Marshall Field's* and *The Fair* in Chicago, *Wanamaker's* in Philadelphia, *Lord and Taylor's*, *Stewart's* and *Macy's* in New York, and *Feline's* in Boston. In contrast to the old fashioned dry-goods stores of the past the new stores were huge in scale. The massive space allowed department stores to display an enormous selection of items that were beyond customers' purchasing ability. Dry-goods stores, with their limited selection of commodities driven by the demand of their regular clientele and cautious business practices, simply paled in comparison with the new enterprises. Most of the stores had huge windows and were designed with large central courtyards flanked

⁶³ Robert Hendrickson, *The Grand Emporium: The Illustrated History of America's Great Department Stores*, NY: Stein and Day, 1979, p. 29.

by sweeping staircases. The colossal sparkling chandeliers, plush carpets, fine furniture, and lavish ornamentations were meant to project status and prestige.

The department stores invested heavily in their decoration practices. The display of goods in the store windows turned into a well developed art form or theatrical production. The use and manipulation of colors, glass and light directly appealed to shopper's visual awareness and had the power to rouse their imaginations and desires. Flowers, colorful garlands and fabrics of all kinds were employed to embellish the displays creating stunning physical and psychological effects. The overall notion was to construct a pleasing, festive environment, the world of fantasy for adults where they could forget about their problems and feel free to splurge.

When John Wanamaker's store was opened in Philadelphia it was reported that "the display of goods extended as far as the eye can reach, the riches of the world brought together from all lands, and representing all departments of art and industry, tastefully shown with advantage in the spacious and illuminated place – the whole place being light, bright and cheerful."⁶⁴ The department stores became the most visible manifestations of consumer culture, thus celebrating the capitalist ethos. The ultimate task of the stores was to present the commodities as desirable necessities and therefore to endorse one's self-indulgence. The high volume of goods, fixed prices, the freedom of handling the items as well as ability to return and exchange incessantly tempted the customers from all classes who were out and about shopping or window-shopping in the new downtown stores. In the culture of growing consumerism, shopping became one of the most popular activities. For example, by 1907 the number of shoppers who entered

⁶⁴ Quoted from Simon J. Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture," in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, ed. Bronner, NY: W. W. Norton and Co, 1989, p. 26.

New York's big stores was estimated at between 150,000 and 250,000 per day at the height of the holiday season.⁶⁵

Furthermore, the grand emporiums were not only putting products up for sale but offering a variety of other services. Customers could enjoy their time in tea-rooms and restaurants, listen to music or attend a theatrical performance, visit a picture gallery or demonstration of new products, as well as stop at a bank, a library branch or a post office. Essentially all the different amenities were meant to lure customers by creating places of pleasant experiences. As William Leach writes, the department stores became the powerful anchors for downtown civic life – “they were not only selling goods but also disseminating free entertainment, ideas, information, and uplift- sometimes of indispensable value to their communities.”⁶⁶

The department stores sought to be identified as places of culture where one could acquire taste and refinement. Wanamaker's articulated its cultural duty as follows: “The woman who arranges a room charmingly, who dresses to express her personality, or serves dinner with grace; the man who binds a book in good taste, or turns out a chair that is a pleasure... all are artists in their ways. So too is the store that lives up to its highest ideals.”⁶⁷ The department stores also became places of acculturating immigrants. They created and promoted the standardized “American look” as a mark of social acceptance.”⁶⁸ Over several decades younger generations of European immigrants would gradually acquire the American look that for them meant the fulfillment of their and their

⁶⁵ Barbara Weinberg, *American Impressionism and Realism- The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915*, New York: Harry H. Abrams, 1994, p. 274.

⁶⁶ William Leach, *Land of Desire*, p. 138.

⁶⁷ John Wanamaker Firm, *The Golden Book of the Wanamaker Store. Jubilee Year 1861-1911*, 1911, p. 245-246.

⁶⁸ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of the Nation: The Making of Modern America*, p. 122.

parents' dreams through successful adjustment and attainment of social status. This observation echoes Trachtenberg's poignant conclusion that consumer culture and its department stores created "a unique fusion of economic and cultural values: they were staging grounds for the making and confirming of new relations between goods and people."⁶⁹

The rise of consumer culture had a transformative effect on society as a whole but specifically it affected women, their social role and cultural image. On the one hand, woman's social role had been increasingly identified with that of consumer, but on the other hand, her symbolic role had been consigned to that of a commodity. Such binary status of women reflected their socio-economic status as well as the prevailing gender ideology of the period. Traditionally, women consumers, more than men, were thought to desire goods and services that were relentlessly promoted by advertising and marketing strategists. From the beginning advertisers together with businesses and industries recognized the importance of women's purchasing power. Women were the main consumers in their households though not always the sole users of the purchased products. Daniel Delis Hill writes that as much as 85 percent of all manufactured consumer goods were procured by women, suggesting that their purchasing power extended far beyond "groceries and gowns."⁷⁰

Hill also writes about growing conventional dynamics of gender and consumption by citing Christine Frederick's book *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, published in 1929. There Frederick gives an account of earning and spending in an American family of the period: "The American male himself often testifies that he labors in order that his wife and

⁶⁹ Trachtenberg, p. 133.

⁷⁰ Daniel Delis Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999*, Columbus: Ohio State University press, 2002, p. vii.

children should enjoy luxury and comfort. He seems to enjoy himself most at earning, while content to leave the pleasure of spending to his women ...”⁷¹ In effect there was a dominant cultural view that men worked to guarantee the women the prospect of conspicuous consumption.

The magazines of the period confirm the existing gender relationship circumscribed by commodity culture. For example, M.E. W. Sherwood in the article “Dress of an American Woman” written for *The Ladies Home Journal* in 1889 states that: “There is no doubt but that American women dress too much, and spend too much on dress. The American Husband, if he has the money, will never limit his wife.”⁷² Richard Le Gallienne in his 1905 article for *The Cosmopolitan* addresses the same issue and strongly criticizes women’s desires for display and money. He writes that men, in contrast to women, give little external evidence of their financial well being. “The men who make money, obviously, know its power, but they use that power with comparative mercy; but the women for whose luxury they have made it have no such modesty. Their eyes are like policemen’s clubs made of gold and inlaid with diamonds. With that brutal practicality which is one of the many paradoxes of the fairy called women, they have realized the brutal force of money...”⁷³

Similar cultural standards of the period that reinforced the dominant gender ideology were observed by French writer Paul Bourget in his impressions of American society in *Outre-Mer* of 1895. He wrote that the American woman is one “for whose service man labors, which he has decked with the jewels of a queen, behind each one of

⁷¹ Ibid, p. vii.

⁷² M.E. W. Sherwood, “The Dress of an American Woman,” in *The Ladies Home Journal*, August 1889, Vol. VI, No. 9, p. 2, American Periodicals Series Online.

⁷³ Richard le Gallienne, “The Poetry of Woman’s Smile,” *The Cosmopolitan*, August 1905, Vol. 39, No. 4, p. 343.

whose whims lie days and days in the ardent battle of Wall Street.”⁷⁴ The frenzied speculations in land, building of the cities, launching the trains and electric cars, and “all the formidable traffic of this country of effort and struggle, all its labor” are what have made possible this woman – “this living orchid, unexpected masterpiece of this civilization.”⁷⁵ Bougert clearly addressed the cultural dichotomy of the separate spheres of influence between men and women. Men were considered to be active participants in public arenas of business, industry and politics while women were relegated to the private spheres of their homes and family.

The conventional association of women with consumption has to be examined through women’s subordinate social, economic, and cultural positions in the society, especially their roles in the household and the division of labor. Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her work *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898) addresses the existing economic relations between men and women and examines the nature of woman’s inferior position in society. Marriage, Gilman observes, is perceived as woman’s proper sphere, her divinely ordered place, and her natural end. Woman is born, trained and exhibited for marriage. Consequently, woman’s physical attractiveness becomes a form of commodity that she has to sell in the marketplace to ensure her social status, wealth, fame, home, and happiness.⁷⁶ Gilman also writes that women had become practically prisoners of their homes, unable to work and have much of a meaningful public life, or engage in civic participation. She concludes that woman’s position is narrowed by a home that is always

⁷⁴ Bailey Van Hook, *Angles of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, p. 144.

⁷⁵ Paul Bourget, *Outer-mer: Impressions of America*, New York: Scribner, 1895, p. 108.

⁷⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998, p. 71

“guarded, protected, directed and restrained.”⁷⁷ Consequently woman’s nature was perceived to be weak, passive and dependent, in contrast to man’s strong, active and independent qualities. Gilman’s work gives a perceptive account on the socio-economic position of women and presents valuable cultural material for the analysis of the period.

The contemporary of Gilman and the social critic of the period was Thorstein Veblen. An eyewitness of many dramatic transformations of the country at the-turn-of-the-century, Veblen became the most ardent opponent of consumer culture. In his 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, he examines the issues of gender, economics and consumerism. Throughout his book he analyzes the conventional values of the upper and middle classes as they strove for respectability, wealth, and power. “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men,” wrote Veblen, “it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power *must be put in evidence*, for esteem is awarded only on evidence.”⁷⁸ For Veblen the unproductive consumption of desirable goods is honorable “primarily as a mark of prowess and a prerequisite of human dignity.”⁷⁹ He also concludes that for the great mass of people in any modern community the proximate ground of expenditures in excess is “not a conscious effort to excel in expensiveness” but rather is “a desire to live up to the conventional standards of decency in the amount and grade of goods consumed.”⁸⁰ Consequently the self-image of a person is largely created by comparison to the means of contemporaries and fashion became the means to express it.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. xii.

⁷⁸ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994, p. 24

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 44.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 63.

Veblen also examines at the impact of consumerism and commodified relations on the lives of women. He writes that within constraints of consumer culture and existing economic relations the position of women can be defined as binary- as a consumer and as a commodity. According to Veblen, the roots of women's commodified patterns of life can be traced to early history where women became valuable possessions of their male owners. "The ownership of women," writes Veblen "begins in the lower barbarian stages of culture, apparently with the seizure of female captives. The practice of seizing women seems to have been their usefulness as trophies."⁸¹ To Veblen this development had risen from "the desire of the successful men to put their prowess in evidence by exhibiting some durable result of their exploits."⁸² Hence the motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation – the invidious comparison of the owner with the other members of the group. In turn the practice of seizing women became a form of ownership-marriage resulting in a household with a male head. Likewise in a modern society, writes Veblen, the woman is her husband's chattel as she was her father's before her marriage and she consumes for the good repute of her household.⁸³ The purchase of valuable goods for herself, for her husband and the entire household provides the evidence of her husband's wealth and standing in the society as well as her own dependent and decorative function as a commodity.

The binary position of women as consumers and as commodities has also been discussed by modern writers researching the turn-of-the-century American culture. Victoria de Grazia notes that in western societies the acts of exchange and consumption have long been obsessively gendered as female. She writes that department stores and

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 16.

⁸² Ibid, p. 16.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 45.

commercial artists idealized female figures, designing their forms and faces to elicit desirous gazes. Women, de Grazia argues, “figure not only as the proverbial shoppers, *Ur*-decorators, the perennial custodians of the bric-a-brac of daily life but also as objects of exchange and consumption...”⁸⁴ Analyzing gender and consumption in socio-historical perspective de Grazia identifies two important structural changes that support the tendency to feminize the realm of consumption that had risen in the early stages of capitalist accumulation. The first was the division of labor in the work process and the concurrent identification of wage labor with male labor. According to Grazia this division reinforced “the differentiation between the household and the workplace, between female provisioners and male workers, and between consumption and production.”⁸⁵ The second involved the division of needs that distinguished the irrational and superfluous from those which were rationally articulated and acted on through normal political processes. The former, she writes, “tended to be identified with the female population, who by and large were excluded from electoral representation, whereas the latter were indentified with enfranchised males.”⁸⁶

Women’s socio-economic position, her roles at home and within society in relation to the issues of consumption and production, are important and need further analysis. With the rise of consumer culture the upper-middle-class household moved from the place of production to the center of consumption. Prior to technological advancements and the rise of food and clothing industries, the majority of goods were made at home. Being in charge of their familial realms women were busy making candles

⁸⁴ Victoria de Grazia, “Introduction,” in *The Sex of Things*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, University of California Press, 1996, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Victoria de Grazia, “Changing Consumption Regimes,” in *The Sex of Things*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, University of California Press, 1996, p. 15.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 15.

and soaps, sewing and knitting, baking breads or canning fruits and vegetables. But when most of the products could be bought at stores, the women's role shifted from being a producer to one of a purchaser. Alan Trachtenberg points out that this change meant that women's "domestic labor came to consist chiefly of budgeting and shopping rather than making."⁸⁷ Although American women did not earn the money as their husbands or fathers did, they nonetheless could significantly control the family expenditures.

In the same way an editorial in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine attests to women's "indispensable role" in the science of managing household accounts. The author writes that "every last trifle entering into household consumption" and "every stroke of work done in the household" have money value and present a bewildering array of figures.⁸⁸ Yet it is because of women's household work and the proper arrangement of these figures that "the science of the cost of living" becomes possible. Therefore, the author concludes, it is in woman's position and power "to elaborate this science and to perfect this economy."⁸⁹

At the turn-of-the-century the place of women in society was still bounded by conventions. There were virtually no economic opportunities for women in the outside world. Even though the country's rapid economic and social developments opened employment possibilities for women in nursing, teaching, factory and clerical positions their earning prospects and chances for growth were severely limited. The money-making professions in business, law, medicine and politics were closed to women and were the realms of their fathers, brothers and husbands. Furthermore women's property rights and

⁸⁷ Trachtenberg, p. 129.

⁸⁸ Editorial Comment, "A Woman's Proper Place," *Harper's Bazaar*, Jan. 1906, Vol. 40, No.1, p. 92.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

the rights to divorce were practically denied by law, thus making their economic survival mainly dependent on their parents and husbands.

With the rise of consumer culture, the women's function at home had changed from being the maker of goods to one of buyer. Consequently women had more time on their hands and in turn spent more time shopping – looking, thinking, deciding, choosing, and buying for home, family and herself. On the other hand, however, the overall position of women in society had not changed – women still could not obtain economic freedom and occupation within the confines of societal mores. Thus considering the position of women at home as well as in society, it is not hard to understand why advertisers and producers alike wooed women and why women became responsive to their calls.

First, women were part of the country's overall upsurge in consumption that was driven by people's desires for wealth, power and social status. Diane Barthel writes that America in particular glorified the desire of the common man to make it big and it was persistently supported with the cultural myth of the American dream.⁹⁰ For women, however, becoming beautiful was part of that dream. Barthel notes that fashion and standards of female beauty changed and "it was every women's civic duty – and duty to herself – to keep up with them."⁹¹

The turn-of-the century women's magazines clearly extrapolate on the subject of female beauty. The advertisement for women's facial cream, called "Bloom of Youth," is one of many examples (Figure 1). The large bold letters of the ad announce that "woman's beauty rules the world" and it is her power and her duty:

⁹⁰ Diane Barthel, *Putting on Appearances – Gender and Advertising*, Philadelphia: Temple University press, 1988, p. 16-17.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 17.

Kings, Emperors, Sultans, Millionaires, Statesmen, and men of influence all bow to women's beauty. Then it is not to be wondered at that women do all in their power to attain that wonderful charm. A clear, smooth, white, beautiful skin is far more attractive than the most costly costume. Laird's "Bloom of Youth" will remove all imperfections from the skin – tan, freckles and all other discolorations – leaving it clear and beautiful... Woman should use every legitimate means in her power to make herself attractive if nature has not been generous to her and blessed her with a clear, soft, beautiful skin. She should use some of the artificial means of attaining the desired look... ”⁹²

In much the same way the suggestion column in *Health* magazine titled “Beauty’s Nurses” advises women on the important aspects of diet, sleep, rest, fresh air and “how to” procedures of taking care of their faces to keep beautiful appearance. “Don’t rub the face with too coarse a towel,” warns the expert, “treat it as you would the finest porcelain, tenderly and delicately.”⁹³ But in the end what is most striking about the article is the connection the author makes between woman’s beauty and the capital of the marketplace: “Don’t forget that beauty is power. There is nothing more potent. *It is to a woman what capital is to a merchant.* Its absence is a misfortune; its culture wise and proper.”⁹⁴

Essentially for woman to be beautiful meant to be socially acceptable, and her attractive appearance in public was meant not only to encourage male attention but win her a suitable husband. Such interrelation between gender and consumption was also brilliantly captured by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In *Women and Economics* she argued that women’s overemphasis on physical attractiveness serves to ensure her economic survival. Thus woman’s attractiveness is a form of commodity that she has to sell on the marketplace to secure her position in the society. “From odalisque with the most bracelets to the debutante with the most bouquets,” noted Gilman, “women’s economic profit

⁹² Advertisement for Laird’s “Bloom of Youth,” in *Pictorial Review*, February 1903, Vol. 4, No. 5, p. 2.

⁹³ “Beauty Nurses,” *Health*, October, 1904, Vol. 54, No. 10, p. 340.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 340.

comes through the power of sex-attraction.”⁹⁵ In similar fashion, only 50 years later, Simon de Beauvoir in her 1949 book *The Second Sex* wrote that women’s supreme necessity is to charm a masculine heart and “most often no quality is asked of them other than their beauty...they must always be pretty to obtain love and happiness.”⁹⁶ Within the dictates of consumer culture, women’s outward appearance – their clothes and possessions - became the articulation of desirable status. Therefore the majority of women had to follow such social and cultural pressures if they wanted to succeed.

Secondly, consumer culture in general appealed to the desires of many women because it promised the fulfillment and transformation that were missed in everyday life. The products and services assured beauty, luxury, and glamour which in turn implied the escape from social constraints and daily routine. Many advertisers in their descriptions of products used distant geographic places, exotic names, historic events or famous persons to attract the buyers’ attention. For example, the “U-AR-DAS Bath of Benzoin” invited women to bath for relaxation and beauty as did the princesses of Ancient Egypt (Figure 2):

*The hieroglyphic writings of the ancient Egyptians have revealed the secret of the marvelously beautiful complexions of the far-famed Oriental princesses. The bath was by them considered of the first importance in promoting and preserving the charms of personal beauty. U-AR-DAS Bath of Benzoin takes its name from Uarda, the most noted of the Egyptians beauties, and the discoverer of the wonderful and beautiful properties of benzoin. It is possible for every woman of this day to enjoy the luxury and benefits of the bath as indulged in by the beauties of old.”*⁹⁷

The advertisement was accompanied by the depiction of elaborately dressed and jeweled princess surrounded by female attendants. The artist captured the moment when the royal

⁹⁵ Gilman, p. 63.

⁹⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, London: A Four Square Book, 1960, p. 29.

⁹⁷ Advertisement for U-AR-DAS Bath of Benzoin, *Harper’s Bazaar*, May 1905, Vol. 39, No. 5, p. 46.

woman is waiting to step into the bath which one of her servants is arranging for her. In the background the reader could see the tall colonnades of the palace flanked by an impressive statue of a sphinx.

Another no less exotic advertisement takes the reader to the Orient - the place that in the mind of a Westerner was associated with mystery, indulgence, and opulence (Figure 3). Here the artist presents a middle-eastern setting where palm trees, mosques and minarets frame the picture. At the center of the picture is an image of a woman, dressed in elaborate native costume, riding a camel. The ad is designed for the La Tossa Silk Company that promotes special type of silk called Rough Silks. "In the Orient, where richness, luxury and elegance are demanded of everything by woman," it reads, "Rough Silks have been for centuries the most highly favored dress material. Because of their peculiar beauty, the Rough Silks of the East have been extensively worn for the past few seasons by fashionable Europe and America. This fall they are more popular than ever before."⁹⁸

Pears' soap starts its advertisement by referring to its long history as the leading toilet soap of the past two centuries (Figure 4). The Pears' soap's claim to fame is that it existed and had been woman's best beautifier when George the Third was King, and before the great historic event of modern times, the French Revolution. "Pears' soap has been the choice of famous beauties, leading scientists, doctors and is the most potent of all aids to natural beauty – the beauty that alone can fascinate – the beauty of a soft, velvety, refined complexion."⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Advertisement for La Tossa Silk, *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1908, Vol. 42, No. 11, p. 1175.

⁹⁹ Advertisement for Pear's Soap, *Harper's Bazaar*, March 1908, Vol. 42, No. 3, p. 2.

It is easy to see that no matter what product had been advertised the message remained the same - the importance of beauty for women. Women not only were expected to be beautiful but they had continuously to preserve and cultivate beauty as their most potent asset. An advertisement for Pompeian Massage Cream provides one of the best articulations of these principles (Figure 5). The advertisement categorizes women's beauty into three kinds – “there is the prettiness of the young girl” that is “purely natural and spontaneous,” but it is fleeting at the best; there is also beauty of the matron, like a cultivated rose, it is natural and “has been retained and maintained with aid and care” and this is the beauty that lasts; there is also “sham beauty” that represents the “pitiable makeshift” of rouge and bleach that deceives no one.¹⁰⁰ Consequently the advertisements of the period focused on the second type of beauty, persistently conveying that with the purchase of various items – from dresses and corsets to creams and soaps women will be able to maintain their attractive appearance (Figure 6). Women desired to be beautiful not only to satisfy their own personal ambitions but also to display themselves for the pleasure of others. Martha Cutler in her 1908 article “The Well-Groomed Woman” reiterates woman's responsibility continually to look her best: “She who, as wife and mother, wishes to retain the love and admiration of her husband and children should fully appreciate the value of making herself as beautiful as possible always... A man always likes to be proud of his wife, and children of their mother. It takes time, but it is time well spent.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Advertisement for Pompeian Massage Cream, *Harper's Bazaar*, September, 1908, Vol. 42, No. 9, p. 929.

¹⁰¹ Martha Cutler, “The Well-Groomed Woman,” *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1908, Vol. 42, No. 10, p. 1020.

The world of commodities not only offered a wide variety of goods but it let women be in charge of choices and making decisions. Women's attachment to shopping might also be read as compensation in a society that excluded them from the main socio-political arenas. Consequently shopping gave women a sense of freedom by providing an emotional release from societal entrapments. Kristin Hoganson rightly observes that "the pleasure of boundless consumption deflected women's attention from the inequities encountered on the home front by reminding these women that, on the global scale of things, they occupied a position of privilege."¹⁰²

In reality, however, consumer culture did not give women a true sense of autonomy but rather diverted their longings to the world of commodities where accumulation, display, and spectatorship were the rules of the day. There is no doubt, as Lears points out, that many women were objectified in new ways by the leaders of consumer culture. He writes that "The emphasis on self-realization through emotional fulfillment, the devaluation of public life in favor of a leisure world of intense private experience, the need to construct the pleasing "self" by purchasing the consumer goods – these therapeutic imperatives helped to domesticate the drive toward female emancipation."¹⁰³ Lears concludes that the commodity culture and its advertisements promised women fake liberation and women accepted it. Likewise Rachel Bowlby observes women's consumption was "readily fitted into the available ideological paradigm of a seduction of women by men, in which women would be addressed as

¹⁰² Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007, p. 12.

¹⁰³ T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. by Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, NY: Pantheon Books, 1983, p. 27.

yielding objects to the powerful male subject forming, and informing them of, their desires.”¹⁰⁴

The dictates of consumer culture with its fashion magazines, department stores, and advertisements were crucial in creating women’s self-image. Fashion magazines such as *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, *The Home Journal*, *The Pictorial Review* and newspapers’ society columns carried news about the latest fashion trends. During this period fashion became a crucial part of mass market economy where ready-to-wear dresses and suits replaced the old traditions of tailor-made clothes.

The driving force behind the fashion industry was a quest for the new because in this period of great social mobility one’s outer appearance communicated material and social status. Leach rightly observes that fashion roused people’s restlessness and anxiety in a society where class lines were blurred or denied, and where people feared being left out and fought for status and wealth. The intent of fashion, he concludes, “was to make women (and to a lesser degree men) feel special, to give them opportunities for playacting, and lift them into a world of luxury or pseudo-luxury, beyond work, drudgery, bills, and the humdrum everyday.”¹⁰⁵

It is relevant to mention that men’s and women’s fashions differed dramatically in their expression and intent. Men’s dress fashion was elegant but also stressed comfort and practicality and was primarily made out of darker colors - blacks, grays, and browns. Women’s dresses, however, tended to be more colorful, complicated, luxurious, flowing, impractical, decorative and restraining. Veblen argues that the dress of women was meant

¹⁰⁴ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, NY: Methuen, 1985, p. 20.

¹⁰⁵ Leach, p. 91.

to demonstrate their “abstinence from productive employment.”¹⁰⁶ The woman’s styles of shoes and hats, as well as skirts and numerous draperies on the dress obstructed her movements and incapacitated her for all useful actions. In addition the corset, writes Veblen, is nothing more than mutilation of the body that purposefully lowers a woman’s vitality and renders her permanently and obviously unfit for work. Woman’s fashion with its decorative but restrictive characteristics furthermore reflected her position in society and her limited choices. The practicality of man’s fashion anticipated his time at work and business while woman engaged in conspicuous consumption and leisure.

Furthermore, the print media and retailers insistently commodified glamour as a means of attaining social status. Consequently, fashion played a crucial role in the lives of women and fashionable dressing was no longer the privilege of wealthy women but also women of modest means. They too could indulge themselves by purchasing a new hat or a scarf and also succumb to their desires with inexpensive versions of luxury such as fake furs or imitation jewels. Fashion’s intent and message was that women of all classes could participate in glamour and self-transformation.

All of the women’s magazines led comprehensive discussions on the newest styles of dresses suitable for various occasions. For example, one article in *The Ladies Home Journal* was dedicated to the meticulous description of proper gowns for opera, theatre and dinners, as well as for the afternoon reception or matinee, for driving and riding. “For large dinners women reserve their finest gowns,” writes Mrs. Burton Kingsland, the author of the article, as “they are subject to closer inspection and risk no

¹⁰⁶ Veblen, p. 105.

defacement as at dances.”¹⁰⁷ She also advocates that at home woman should be “guided in her manner of dressing by an even greater desire to please than elsewhere” because “her husband may be the most unobservant of men, but he will know when she looks neat and attractive, with her newly dressed, and some pretty arrangement about the bodice of her gown.”¹⁰⁸ The article even provides fashionable suggestions for the period of mourning:

*A widow in her first year of mourning wears woolen or silk-wrap fabrics, trimmed deeply with crape or with folds of the material, and for the street a jacket of cloth or of goods matching the gown, a crape bonnet – with tiny white ruche if desired – a very long crape veil and suede gloves. All black furs are worn. In the summer a widow wears nun’s-veiling, China crpe, Brussels net and black piqu, or white lawn with black ribbons in the morning.*¹⁰⁹

The department stores also publicized their new lines of fashionable clothing and catalogues in the magazines. “If you want to dress in style and buy goods right,” announces a Macy’s ad, “send for it (the catalogue – JT). We don’t even ask you for postage on this immense book. Why should we? We want you to know more about Macy’s great store – the largest under one roof in the world.”¹¹⁰

Furthermore, the external qualities of being well dressed were simply equated to one’s inner characteristics. The heroines of Dreiser’s and Wharton’s novels Carrie Meeber, Lily Bart and Undine Spragg knew only too well the rules of being well dressed. Fashion plays an important role in their lives as each woman strives hard to gain attention and social status by displaying herself in beautiful clothes. The columnist Mr. Mabie of *The Ladies’ Home Journal* explicates the expectations of society on why women must be well attired. “It is just as much one’s duty to be attractive as to be good,” he writes, “and

¹⁰⁷ Mrs. Burton Kingsland, “A Woman’s Proper Dress at All Times,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, July 1900, Vol. XVII, No. 8, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹¹⁰ Macy’s Advertisement, *The Ladies Home Journal*, November 1904, Vol. XXI, No. 12, p. 68.

dress and manners are of much greater importance than some people suppose.”¹¹¹ Mabie explains that woman’s dress is the expression of her life and her qualities:

*The woman who discards taste in dress is an evidence of frivolity, and makes herself conspicuous by reason of the inappropriateness or ugliness of her dress, advertises her one-sided notion of woman’s place and work in society. To dress intelligently and attractively, so far as one’s means permit, is just as much a part of a national and well-rounded life as to be truthful and honest. We owe to those who live with us the courtesy of being well dressed.*¹¹²

In addition the advertisements in magazines and newspapers aggressively targeted women’s choices on foods and home products. They attempted to present a beautiful world of possibilities and therefore encouraged women to make every effort in pursuing their dreams of attaining a pleasant social life through the means of consumption. Above all, the ads in newspapers and women’s magazines aimed to provoke the intensification of desires to shop in order to achieve the magic of renewal.

The magazines, nonetheless, not only addressed women as consumers but also women as readers. Popular magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCalls*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Ladies World* became women’s sources of information, advice and pleasure where they could find stories, entertainment and suggestions. There were articles and advice columns on different topics from how to decorate the house to how to educate children and entertain guests. The majority of women during this period were homemakers and reading magazines could have been a pleasant pastime to escape the routine and drudgery of everyday life. In addition, women’s magazines in times of rapid economic and social changes could possibly help many of their readers to define their place at home and the world around them.

¹¹¹ “Mr. Mabie’s Literary Talk to Gals,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, June 1903, Vol. XX, No. 7, p. 15.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p 15.

The department stores were also the world of women celebrating a new ritual of consumption. The stores became a common pursuit of women who wanted to get out of the house, escape dull domesticity, to see and be seen. Elaine Abelson writes that shopping and consumer spending not only emerged as an important component of urban middle class identity but shopping also “became woman’s work and woman’s recreation.”¹¹³ Store owners successfully catered toward the needs of women consumers but they also increasingly and relentlessly courted women as open-ended consumers.¹¹⁴ For example, women could bring their children and leave them at the store’s free child-care facilities while they could shop, meet friends for lunch or tea, or attend a fashion show. Such amenities were designed to turn shopping into a day-long activity especially appropriate for upper-middle class women. They had to consume not only to adorn themselves but also to learn to decorate their homes. The home was considered to be the feminine sphere where a woman could define herself by proudly displaying her taste and grace as well as to exhibit her husband’s social status. Department stores played an important role in woman’s aesthetic education where she could seek refinement and aspire to her ideals. Nevertheless woman’s decorative abilities and her own decorativeness served as confirmation of her man’s purchasing power and furthermore demonstrated his dominant position in the society ruled by invidious comparison and pecuniary emulation.

The rise of consumer culture created more activities for women outside their homes in the commercial public spaces. During the day, women were in and about downtown areas shopping at the department stores, lunching at the restaurants,

¹¹³ Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 13.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 39.

promenading on the fashionable streets, relaxing at the parks, visiting at the hotels, and attending the theaters. Mary Louise Roberts observes that in the new urban culture of arcades, boulevards, and department stores, “woman was inscribed as both consumer and commodity, purchaser and purchase, buyer and bought.”¹¹⁵ Consequently for women the cultural shift from the privacy of their homes to the public arenas constructed new modes of relationships rooted in the dynamics of display and spectatorship. The display and spectatorship in public realms put more emphasis on women’s appearance and incited the social competition. Both rituals, however, were nonetheless the expressions of desire to conform to the imperatives of commodity culture.

One of the central issues of Maureen Montgomery’s book *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York* is the correlation between display and spectatorship. Montgomery provides a fascinating study of upper class women at the turn of the century metropolis by analyzing contemporary etiquette manuals, society magazines, private correspondence, diaries, and memoirs. Montgomery writes that display was focused on the sexualized body of the woman while spectatorship was primarily a male activity. Moreover, at the turn-of-the-century gendered paradigms of display and spectatorship became integral parts of consumer oriented culture. Society women, Montgomery argues, “signified with their bodily presence and appearance high social class and respectability, which in turn reflected on their male provider’s monetary wealth.”¹¹⁶ The rules of display and spectatorship were closely linked to the new marketing technologies of commerce, magazines, and mass-circulated daily newspapers.

¹¹⁵ Mary Louise Roberts, “Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture,” in *American Historical Review*, vol. 103, no 3, June 1998, p. 818.

¹¹⁶ Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York*, p. 117.

High society, fashion, publicity, consumption, and leisure were interconnected with the advertisement and performance of class. The print media and retailers commodified glamour, life style and social status.

In addition, women's clothes had become a major dimension in the enactment of leisure, desire and class. "Hundreds of dollars," Montgomery writes, "were expended on gowns, dozens of hours were spent trying on clothes at couturiers, and immense labor went into the making and laundering of expensive gowns, which had only a short life in the wear and tear of winter season."¹¹⁷ The display signified woman's decorative role for the pleasure of a male spectator. Montgomery argues that primary reasons for women to display themselves was to explore her options and then ultimately to secure the desired marriage. For married women, however, the purpose of display took on a different meaning. It was no longer aimed to attract male attention with a view to marriage, writes Montgomery, but rather "intended to provoke in other men envy of the women's "possessor" – the man who paid for her clothes and jewelry."¹¹⁸ But above all, the reenactment of both rituals – the display and the spectatorship, were nothing else but the manifestation of desire. Montgomery's arguments on gendered paradigms of display and spectatorship have been brilliantly captured in the novels of Theodore Dreiser and Edith Wharton which I will discuss in the next chapters.

Remi Saisselin also addresses the issues of women's roles as consumers and commodities in his cultural history *Bourgeois and the Bibelot*. Saisselin explores the question within the framework of bourgeois accumulation for objects of arts as desire to possess and display beauty. Saisselin observes that the history of art in the nineteenth

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 125.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 128.

century might be written as the transformation of the work of art – “first perceived as aesthetic object and historical sign, into super bibelot calling for super prices.”¹¹⁹

Bourgeois culture formed an intricate relationship between woman, desire and the bibelot.¹²⁰ He argues that aesthetic education of woman reflected her aspirations for an ideal structure of taste, art and refinement. A woman decorating her home’s interior or shopping at the department store was moved by the same desire for and attraction to things and pleasure. “The accumulation of bibelots by women,” writes Saisselin, “was perceived as an aspect not only of their dominion over the home in the United States but also as a feminine weakness.”¹²¹ Thus the realm of art was perceived to be the realm of women since it answers to the feminine principle while the battle of the street exemplifies the male principle.

The phenomenon of the age is such, continues Saisselin, that woman and luxury became part of the same general trend of bibelotization. “Woman herself turns into a most expensive bibelot and yet is, at the same time,” he concludes, “a voracious consumer of luxury and accumulation of bibelots.”¹²² Consequently by turning into bibelot, as object of desire, woman becomes possessed, cherished and exhibited.¹²³ Saisselin’s fascinating study builds a foundation for further investigation of women’s position within the culture that is deeply embedded in the aesthetics of commodification.

Late 19th century America had experienced dramatic transformation from the traditional agrarian society of home-based economy, close relationships, and Protestant prudence to an increasingly urban, industrialized nation where competition and

¹¹⁹ Remy Saisselin, *Bourgeois and the Bibelot*, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984, p. xv.

¹²⁰ Bibelot (French) – describes a small household ornament or decorative object

¹²¹ Saisselin, p. 67.

¹²² Ibid, p. 53.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 62.

consumerism became its main driving forces. With the rise of consumer culture commodities began to play an ever-increasing role in shaping one's social identity and cultural ideals. The dictates of consumer culture were centered on the acquisition of material goods that articulated desires for wealth and status as a means to attain happiness. Such desires were persistently promoted by the soaring advertisement industry, print media and growing number of service businesses such as hotels, restaurants and department stores.

The consumer culture and production of mass commodities also brought changes into the lives of women. The culture of consumption had swayed women's move from the privacy of their homes to public arenas of life. For generations American women had been at the center of home production for their family needs. However, when most of products could be bought at stores, women's role altered from being a producer to one of a purchaser. Although the majority of women did not earn money they, nonetheless, could significantly control the family expenditures.

The shift in women's roles created new relationships between them and the dynamics of accumulation, display and spectatorship. Advertisement industry and department stores targeted women as the main consumers to purchase for themselves and their families. Consequently women became the most active partakers of conspicuous consumption and turned into the most visible symbols of consumer culture. They became part of a new commercial aesthetic of desire that would dominate the visual spaces of American society of the period.

In the culture of accumulation and display, women acted as consumers as well as commodities, the objects of desire in the eyes of men. Women's magazines and

newspaper advertisements and department stores promoted glamour, pursuit of beauty, and self-transformation through consumption. The desires of many women to look beautiful and fashionable reflected their needs to be socially acceptable, to encourage male attention, and win and keep a suitable husband. Women's imperatives of beauty had been clearly expressed through the advertisements of the period. Stuart Ewen argues that a noticeable proportion of magazine ads depicted women looking into mirrors. Women were reminded that it was their appearance and beauty that would ensure love, fidelity, and home security. In fact, he writes, women's survival "depended upon their ability to keep a husband, ads continually reminded women – or more precisely, the wage that he brought home to underwrite their managerial role."¹²⁴

Consequently women's socio-economic status and existing gender relationships reinforced their binary position - consumer and consumed, purchaser and purchased. The commodity culture created this socially-constructed phenomenon toward women who became inevitable components of the processes of commodification, spectatorship and commercial exchange. In the following chapters I will investigate how American writers and artists of the period engaged in, reflected upon, and challenged the dominant ideology of consumer culture and feminine subjectivity.

¹²⁴ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1977, p. 177-178.

CHAPTER II

FROM *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH* TO *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*: EDITH WHARTON'S WORLD OF DISPLAY AND SPECTATORSHIP

*"She [Lily Bart] was realizing for the first time that a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it."*¹²⁵

Edith Wharton

In the novels *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* Wharton documents the influences of the rising consumer culture and its consequences for people's ideas, choices, values, assumptions, and behavior. She depicts how the fundamentals of the consumer culture shape the relationship between men and women in the society. The main principles of consumer culture are advertisement and display of commodities to their ultimate advantage with a key intention of inciting desires and attracting potential buyers. At their core lies the paradigm of display and spectatorship – objects are displayed for viewers' or buyers' consideration. Similarly, though on a more intricate level, the patterns of display and spectatorship also govern the interests of men and women in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. Women, as commodity and objects, display themselves for the pleasures of male spectators. For women the major outcome of this interrelation is marriage – the ultimate business deal. As a result the institution of marriage becomes the mirror image of the business market as

¹²⁵ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, NY: Barnes and Nobel Classics, 2004, p. 180-181.

they both are ruled by the same principles of commodity exchange. Wharton details how the customs of marriage, affected by pervasive material culture, circumscribe the social and psychological realities of the novels' female characters - Lily Bart and Undine Spragg. The lives of these women are trapped in the worlds of money, power, accumulation, display, and spectatorship. Wharton uses material culture as a framework within which she both chronicles and criticizes the societal mores that assert women's appearance and behavior as the focal expression of commodified relations.

Elizabeth Ammons in *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* notes that at the time of Wharton's publication of *The House of Mirth* (1905), the culture at large boasted symbols of progress of modern women's freedom from Victorian strictures. "Woman could work outside the home in dignified occupations," Ammons writes, "she could marry whom she pleased, she could divorce if she had to, she could even swim and smoke cigarettes if she were truly daring."¹²⁶ In contrast to popular optimism toward the position of women in American society, Edith Wharton predicated a more sober reality. Ammons explains that the essence of Wharton's argument was her conviction that women, no matter how privileged or assertive, were not fully in charge of their lives and therefore "the American woman was far from being a new or whole human being."¹²⁷ For Wharton there was a cruel lack of fit between women's personal expectations and the social reality.

The turn-of-the-century American culture disclosed the mounting conflict between the lives *women wanted to live* and the lives to which *women had been consigned*. Ironically in the age of the New Woman most of the women were still bound

¹²⁶ Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, 1980, p. 2-3.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

by dominating social conventions. Progressive women like Jane Adams, Alice Hamilton, Frances Perkins, and Florence Kelley exemplified a new type of woman aiming to make significant changes in society. The majority of these women were upper or middle class, financially independent, well educated, white, single women struggling to obtain freedom and occupation within a society that severely limited their choices. Nonetheless, there were only a small number of activist women during this period and they were exceptions from the lives of the majority.

In her autobiography *A Backward Glance* Wharton writes about her own misfit into the frames of leisure class society where she had “tried to adjust” to a life of “wearisome frivolity” by “complying with the tastes of others.”¹²⁸ But she, nonetheless, felt overmastering “longing to break away from the world of fashion and be with my own spiritual kin,” with people who were “thinking and creating.”¹²⁹ Fortunately, as Wharton attests, her first literary publications “broke the chains which held me so long in a kind of torpor.”¹³⁰ But her literary success “puzzled and embarrassed” her old friends “far more than it impressed them,” and her own family “created a kind of constraint which increased with the years.”¹³¹ Furthermore, her relatives avoided the subject of Wharton’s literary works as though it was a “family disgrace” making her acutely feel their indifference. Only some years later when Wharton had written several books she “finally rebelled, and pleaded for the right to something better.”¹³² The prejudice against Wharton as a writer clearly expresses the limitations imposed by society on women’s ways of life. Nevertheless, Wharton was one of the few women who were able to break away from its

¹²⁸ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, New York: D. Appleton Century Company, 1934, pp. 123 -124.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 123.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 122.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p. 143-144.

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 124.

constraints by becoming a prominent writer as well as a financially independent woman. But the majority of women of Wharton's generation was still remained trapped within social conventions and was powerless to prevail over the crippling forces of "waste" and "the curtailment."¹³³

Women's social, sexual and economic realities were confined to the domain of marriage - such was the expectation of men and insistence of a society as a whole. Ammons writes that in Wharton's view marriage represented a patriarchal institution designed to aggrandize men at the expense of women.¹³⁴ Along the same lines Mary Papke notes that woman "could respectfully gain money and "leisure" only through marriage" and therefore her "first "work" was to construct or create a true woman self in accordance with ideological paradigms" by fitting herself to the "desired and desirable pattern."¹³⁵ Moreover the relationships between men and women reflected basic economic principles "of supply and demand in the marriage marketplace" as well as "self-aggrandizement, and unequal opportunity."¹³⁶ Numerous advice and etiquette manuals of the period provide the specifics on the norms of marriage and the limited and limiting roles women could play. Primarily they aimed to teach women how to be a good wife to her husband. Wharton was certainly aware of this type of literature that promoted women's compliance by explicitly defining the gender roles. One such book is *Good Form for Women – A Guide to Conduct and Dress on All Occasions* written by Mrs. Charles Harcourt in 1907. She writes that man's home "should have strong attractions for him than any other place in the world" and he "should look upon it as a haven of rest, an

¹³³ Ammons, p. 3.

¹³⁴ Ammons, p. 26.

¹³⁵ Mary Papke, *Verging on Abyss – The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1991, p. 13.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 13-14.

unfailing refuge from the cares and troubles and strife of the outer world.”¹³⁷ Thus she advises woman to fulfill her primary function, to serve her husband by pleasing and delighting him. “Let it be your daily aim,” she writes, “to have everything smooth and in order against your husband’s return from business. You must not only dispose of all your domestic difficulties, but also banish all traces of them from yourself. Insist on having the hour preceding dinner undisturbed in your own room and take the opportunity to refresh and compose yourself. No matter what have been the worries and annoyances of the day, let your weary husband find you fresh and pretty and cheerful.”¹³⁸ Cynthia Griffin Wolff concludes that Wharton “understood all too well the extent to which females had incorporated these fraudulent cultural narratives into their own “life stories.”¹³⁹ Thus Wharton, as an empowered artist, sets out to attack “the malignant process” by exposing the social contractedness of her female protagonists.

It is relevant to mention that Wharton’s own problems of married life must have played a crucial role in exposing the subject in her literary works. The suffocating atmosphere of her marriage to Teddy Wharton, whom she wed in 1885, has been discussed by many critics. Their marriage turned into a painful relationship of two vastly different people who lacked emotional and sexual closeness. Teddy’s fondness of sports and society contrasted to his wife’s intellectual yearnings and artistic sensibilities. R.W. Lewis suggests that Wharton’s allegorical story titled “The Fullness of Life” completed six years after her wedding to Teddy represents a fairly direct literary transcription of her

¹³⁷ Mrs. Charles Harcourt, *Good Form for Women- A Guide to Conduct and Dress on All Occasions*, Philadelphia: The John Winston Co, 1907, p. 206-207.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 206-207.

¹³⁹ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words – The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. xx.

marital life.¹⁴⁰ In the story the Spirit of Life questions a nameless woman who appears on the threshold of eternity. When asked about her earthly experiences, the woman laments that she has never known “the fullness of life.” “You did not find the fullness of life in your marriage?” asks the Spirit - to which the woman replies that her “marriage was a very incomplete affair.” As the story continues the woman describes her state of being through imagery of the house and its rooms. In Lewis’ view the passage provides “an almost nakedly revealing summary of her psychological and sexual relationship with her husband.”¹⁴¹

I have sometimes thought that woman’s nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whether they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.

“Her husband,” Lewis resolves “had never gotten beyond the sitting room of her nature...”¹⁴²

In addition to emotional and sexual deficiency the relationship between Edith and Teddy was weighed down by expressions of dependency. Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests that dependency was the dominant mode of the couple’s marriage. “Edith and Teddy,” she says, “had never had a great deal in common; the most reliable bond had been Teddy’s kindness and Edith’s dependency during the long years of sickness.” However when Edith persisted in getting well and taking care of herself, Teddy then “retaliated by becoming sick.”¹⁴³ As Edith steadily gained literary success and financial independence

¹⁴⁰ R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton – A Biography*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975, p. 65.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁴³ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, 1977, 103

so Teddy asserted his presence by spouts of neurasthenic behavior.¹⁴⁴ While Edith continued to develop her intellectual side, which was “least congenial to Teddy’s nature,” she moved further and further away from him.¹⁴⁵ Wolff concludes that the theme of unhappy marriage in her early fiction is almost too obvious to need mentioning. Consequently Whartons’ marriage with years of bitter misunderstandings and breakups finally ended in 1911 in divorce.

Henry James, years after Edith married Teddy Wharton, pronounced that she performed “an utterly inconceivable thing” and according to Lewis that was the opinion of her many other friends.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless Lewis also indicates the possible reasons behind her decision. By 1885, the year of her marriage to Teddy, Edith had already experienced the “bruising termination” of her engagement with Harry Stevens followed by the “bewildering silence” from another suitor, Walter Berry. Lewis reminds us that by then Edith was already turning twenty four – “dangerously close to the age beyond which the young women of her set became steadily less marriageable. And whatever her innermost opinion of the ways of New York social life, it had been drilled into her that marriage was the only real goal of the debutante.”¹⁴⁷ That was the choice, or rather lack of choice, for Edith Wharton and young women of all classes who had to marry to fulfill the expectations of their families and the dictates of the society.

It is important to note, however, that women’s lives had always been subject to patriarchy but with the rise of new wealth and consumer culture women’s status even more sharply projected their subordinate social, economic and cultural positions in

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 103.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 103.

¹⁴⁶ Lewis, p. 52.

¹⁴⁷ Lewis, p. 52.

society. Boundless consumption appeared to give women the sense of freedom through their choices of products and services. But in reality it only diverted women's attention from inequalities in favor of fulfilling their desires through purchasing. The pursuit and display of beauty, leisure and luxuries promised women magical transformations to attain desirable status. Overall the rise of material culture furthermore stalled women's drive for true liberation from the prevailing socio-economic constraints. Women not only became active consumers but inevitably turned into commodities for purchase— specifically on the marriage market.

Wharton was not the only writer who had a critical opinion of women's position and the price and function of their marriages. Other literature of the period also presents female characters whose married lives were subjected to patriarchal orders of power, status, and money. Henry James was probably the first writer of the period who explored such themes. In the novel *The Portrait of the Lady* (1880) his heroine Isabel Archer takes the center stage. Her originality, writes James, was that “she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own,” wishing to chose her own fate.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless after rejecting a few suitors she finally marries Osmond because the norms of society continued to put restrictions on her self-assertive nature. Isabel also marries Osmond because she dreams of a perfect marriage where she would play an important part – “she would launch his boat for him; she would be his providence; it would be a good thing to love him.” (357) Instead the marriage to Osmond made her feel suffocated and locked in his mind without regaining her freedom. As a result Isabel becomes one of Osmond's

¹⁴⁸ Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition, 24 vol., vol. 3, p. 87, NY: Scribner, 1907-1917.

possessions, as he expected her “to feel with him and for him, and to enter into his opinions, his ambitions, his preferences.”¹⁴⁹

Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* (1899) also explored the conflict between woman’s autonomy and social conformity. Chopin’s heroine, Edna Pontellier, trapped in a married life of boredom and domesticity, longs to find possible alternatives. Her search for self identity along with fulfillment of her erotic desires became doomed and defeated. Edna’s rejection of passive femininity led to her isolated autonomy and finally to suicide – a price she had to pay for her absolute freedom. Chopin’s novel shows that there was little or no prospect for women’s self-determination in a culture where economic and social systems forbid female autonomy.

Like Chopin’s heroine Frank Norris’ Laura Dearborn in *The Pit: The Story of Chicago* (1903) pursues the impossible and becomes a victim of reality. Laura Dearborn searches for her fulfillment in art and dreams of becoming an actress. She marries Jadwin hoping to find aesthetic beauty and love but becomes her husband’s neglected possession. Jadwin aggressively pursues his ambitions to make money and more money at the Chicago Board of Trade. Laura, affected by her husband’s incessant obsession with the stock market and his psychotic behavior, experiences a traumatic nervous breakdown.

Charlotte Gilman Perkins, one of the leading advocates for women’s issues, wrote the influential *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898) and *The Home* (1903). In *Women and Economics* she wrote that men make their living by work while women make their living by marriage. She argued that marriage is perceived as woman’s proper sphere, her divinely ordered place, and her natural end. It is “what she is born for, what she is trained

¹⁴⁹ James, p. 200.

for and what she exhibited for” and above all, the marriage is woman’s means “of honorable livelihood and advancement.”¹⁵⁰ Gilman also created fictional works and her story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) narrates the fate of a young mother driven into madness from excessive confinement to the domestic sphere. The story is an autobiographical account of Gilman’s *rest cure* prescribed by a famous doctor, S. Weir Mitchell, who treated many women including Edith Wharton. His regimen advocated bland diet, inactivity and isolation for women with emotional problems. Gilman’s narrative powerfully demonstrates physical pain and mental anguish of women’s house seclusion as well as her powerlessness to find life’s meaning for herself beyond domesticity and marriage.

Wharton’s personal experiences as well as the socio-economic situation of the period found their reflections in the lives of her literary characters Lily Bart and Undine Spragg. The stories of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg center on the issues of marriage - both women must marry to gain respectable social status but also to fulfill their own desires for money, material goods, and enjoyments. Their marriage desires are reliant on the amount of wealth men can provide them with. The social reality and the wishes of these women are a direct expression of the culture that promotes money as measure of all things. Both women are the products of the turn-of-the-century American society immersed in materialistic ethos of accumulation and display. To survive, attain and to maintain their social status both women must fulfill the society’s imperatives of conspicuous consumption and its standards of morality. Lily and Undine are not only products of their culture but they are its active producers. Peter Berger writes that society is a dialectic phenomenon – “it is nothing but a human product” and “yet it continuously

¹⁵⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 1998, p. 87.

acts back upon its producer.”¹⁵¹ Society, he argues, is a product of man “bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness.”¹⁵² But also within society through social processes “the individual attains and holds onto an identity,” and carries out “the various projects that constitute his life.”¹⁵³ For Berger the fundamental processes of individual developments include externalization, objectification, and internalization. Virtually all the choices and actions of the characters in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* are bound by commodity culture. Accordingly Lily Bart and Undine Spragg also pursue society’s imperative of money and appearance. In Berger’s terms they “reappropriate” the existing reality by internalizing the objective world “into the structures of the subjective consciousness.” What motivates Lily Bart and Undine Spragg is not only the possession of desirable goods but also the emulation of desirable people who possess wealth and power. Furthermore, by longing to have lives of leisure and luxury these women become products as well as producers of their surroundings. They act as consumers of conspicuous life-style but in doing so they also become consumed by others’ money and power and turned into decorative commodities.

Lily Bart’s and Undine Spragg’s desires to live the lives of luxury require an enormous upkeep. They, however, as the majority of women of their class, were unable to earn money on their own and their wants were contingent upon men’s finances. Ammons points out that these women have one thing in common – they are dependent on Wall Street and could not function without rich men’s favor and money. She writes that the whole system is designed to keep women “in divisive and relentless competition for

¹⁵¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967, p. 3.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 3.

that money and favor.”¹⁵⁴ In order to satisfy their consuming desires and leisurely indulgences these women must enter the marriage market and sell themselves for a highest bidder. However, the success of such transaction depends on women’s most valuable asset – their physical attractiveness. As Mary Papke succinctly remarks, that women’s appearance and self-promotion are necessary for both “profitable self-capitalization and effective social survival.”¹⁵⁵

Women’s beauty played an active and invidious part in defining their roles as pleasing and attractive. As I have discussed in Chapter I the magazines of the period clearly conveyed messages about the importance of female beauty.¹⁵⁶ Women were assured that their beauty was their power as well as their duty because to a considerable extent through their appearance they could achieve attention and love. As a result women’s task was to maintain their beauty if they wanted to marry and live well. Following the beauty dictates Wharton’s heroines Lily Bart and Undine Spragg must employ their attractiveness to captivate, charm, please, and hopefully win a suitable and wealthy husband. Their beauty is a form of commodity that they had to use wisely and effectively to secure the desirable social status as well as to ensure financial wealth. Thomas Loebel provides an insightful synopsis of women’s place in the society that clearly reflects the lives of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg. “Women are engendered for marriage,” he writes, “and the whole construction of gendered identity is about teaching women how to shape and deploy their physical assets for attraction and their public

¹⁵⁴ Ammons, p. 39.

¹⁵⁵ Papke, p. 117.

¹⁵⁶ Chapter I, p. 26-27.

personae for promoting men, while shoring up the blinders of consciousness necessary for believing that they are powerfully acting out self-directed behavior.”¹⁵⁷

From the time of their first public debut, through the courtship and marriage, women must follow the conventions of displaying themselves. The display essentially projects woman’s sex-appeal – her dress, jewels, manners, speech, taste, and behavior are all required elements of her public demeanor. The spectatorship, however, is mostly the domain of a man for whose pleasures woman must put on display.¹⁵⁸ In her autobiography *A Backward Glance* Edith Wharton writes about the long observed ritual of young women “coming-out” into the society. Families usually gave a series of entertainments for *debutante* daughters leading off with a huge tea and an expensive ball. Wharton vividly describes her first display as she was “put into a low-necked bodice of pale green brocade, above a white muslin skirt ruffled with rows and rows of Valenciennes, my hair was piled up on top of my head, some friend of the family sent me a large bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley, and thus adorned I was taken by my parents to a ball at Mrs. Morton’s, in Fifth Avenue.”¹⁵⁹ Following their first public debut Wharton and the young women of her set were invited to small dinners or lunches, went to opera, and balls.¹⁶⁰ In essence, the purpose of woman’s display before her marriage was to encourage male attention and eventually to seal a proper matrimony. Once married, woman does not cease to participate in the rituals of display. Married woman, however, is obliged to exhibit her husband’s wealth and power. She and her fashions, her jewels, her

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Loebel, “Beyond Her Self,” in *New Essays on The House of Mirth*, ed. Deborah Esch, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 111.

¹⁵⁸ For further discussion on upper class women display of leisure see Maureen Montgomery, *Displaying Women – Spectacle of leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York*, New York: Routledge, 1998, p.117-135.

¹⁵⁹ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 77.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 83-84.

children, her house, her carriage, her parties, her travels, her servants – are all meant conspicuously to testify to her husband's financial status.

The process of display and spectatorship puts a strong emphasis on woman's outer appearance. The woman who is beautiful and well-dressed becomes more noticeable and therefore more valuable. Woman's physical attractiveness and her fashions turn into her most potent assets that she uses to exhibit herself. Her dress and jewels represent a form of advertisement indicative of her position in the society. Similar to the principles of the business world the personal lives of these women are ruled by aesthetics of decoration and marketing strategies of display. Thorstein Veblen writing on the role of one's outer appearance rightly commented that to impress others one has to show an "expenditure on dress" because "our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observes at the first glance."¹⁶¹ The function of dress is not only a proof of one's ability to pay but also "it is a good *prima facie* evidence of pecuniary success," and "consequently *prima facie* evidence of social worth."¹⁶² Thus the self-image of the person is largely created by comparison to the means of other people around. Moreover, woman's overemphasis on her dress, its expression and intention clearly testify to her limited choices and present a further demonstration of her role as a beautiful object. Veblen criticized the overtly embellished nature and impracticality of woman's dress (Figure 7). Such type of dress was essentially meant to restrain woman's movements and limit her actions. "The high heel, the skirt, the impracticable bonnet, the corset, and the general disregard of the wearer's comfort which is an obvious feature of all civilized women's apparel," writes Veblen, "are so many

¹⁶¹Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Leisure Class*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994, p. 54.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, p. 104.

items of evidence to the effect that in the modern civilized scheme of life the woman is still, in theory, the economic dependent of the man.”¹⁶³

The rise of consumer culture provided more activities for upper and middle women in commercial public spaces. The new urban culture of department stores, restaurants, hotels, theaters, parks, and promenades, and newspaper publicity created new forms of relationships rooted in the dynamics of display and spectatorship. Christopher Gair rightly observes that the move of leisure class women into the public domain required a constant updating and conformity to the latest fashions.¹⁶⁴ Gair notes that prerequisites of appearance, the demonstration of women’s clothing and behavior, turned them into “a public spectacle, subject to the scrutiny of press, acquaintances, and fellow citizens.” The opening pages of *The House of Mirth* attest to that reality and trace its manifestations throughout Wharton’s book.

The novel unfolds with Lawrence Selden’s detailed observations of Lily Bart whom he meets by chance at New York’s Grand Central Station. His eyes, writes Wharton, “had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Bart” and “as a spectator” he has always enjoyed her.¹⁶⁵ Selden is captivated by Lily’s arresting presence that is “more conspicuous than in the ball-room” and stands out “against the dull tints of the crowd,” “shallow-faced girls in preposterous hats,” and “flat-chested women” (7). He cannot help but compare her with an expensive art object – her striking external qualities made him conclude that everything about her was vigorous and exquisite as though “a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay” (7). Was it possible, he asks

¹⁶³ Veblen, p. 70-71, 181-182.

¹⁶⁴ Christopher Gair, “The Crumbling Structures of “Appearances”: Representation and Authenticity in the *House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 43.2 (1997), p. 349.

¹⁶⁵ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004, p. 5-6. Subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

himself, “that she belonged to the same race? (7). He had a confused sense that “she must have cost a great deal to make” and there must be many “dull and ugly people who produced her” (7). Moreover Selden, as a careful and admiring connoisseur, does not fail to notice intricate features of Lily’s appearance – he focuses on “the modeling of her little ear,” “the crisp upward wave of her hair,” “the thick planting of her straight black lashes,” her “polished hand as a bit of ivory, with its slender pink nails”(8-10). Emily Orlando rightly observes that Selden “invests considerable energy in enjoying and consuming” Lily.”¹⁶⁶ Like a collector who would experience an aesthetic pleasure by looking and handling a beautiful work of art Selden “was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her [Lily’s] nearness”(7). Lily’s beautiful appearance made him realize the dinginess and the crudity of the average women and made him feel “how highly specialized she was” (7). Moreover, his objectification of Lily’s loveliness expresses his fascination with her as well as the desire for her.

Certainly Lily has been highly specialized to be a Perfect Lady – to adorn and delight. After all, writes Wharton, it was the life she had been made for – “every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it; all her interests and activities had been taught to center around it” (336). The corresponding thought was expressed by Gilman who also pointed out that women were “carefully educated and trained to realize in all ways her self-limitations and her self-advantages.”¹⁶⁷ The original title of the novel before it became *The House of Mirth* was *A Moment’s Ornament*. The latter clearly signifies the function assigned to Lily and other women in the society – they were expected to be pleasing decorative accompaniments in the world dominated by men’s

¹⁶⁶ Emily Orlando, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*, The University of Alabama Press, 2007, p. 55.

¹⁶⁷ Gilman, p. 86.

money and power. “She [Lily] had been fashioned to adorn and delight,” writes Wharton, “to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the hummingbird’s breast?” Similarly, thinking about Lily and observing her actions, Selden concludes that she is “the victim of the civilization which had produced her” where the links of her beautiful bracelet are nothing else but the terrible manacles “chaining her to her fate” (10). Lily’s circumstances embody the existing societal conventions where woman’s physical beauty was a measure of her value and the agency of display.

Lily knew very well that fashionable dressing is a necessary part of woman’s exhibition. She tells Selden that if she would look shabby, no one would have her – “a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don’t make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop and if we can’t keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership” (14-15). Martha Banta acknowledges the importance of fashionable dressing for Wharton’s heroines. She writes that “Wharton viewed women’s fashion as one of the more important markers by which she traced shifts in the social habitus occupied by her fictional characters in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century. The clothes with which her female protagonists adorn themselves *speak to where they are*” in relation not only to the physical geographies mapped by prevailing social strictures but also to historical chronologies.¹⁶⁸ Wharton describes Lily’s endless pursuits to look fashionable as each payment to dressmakers and jewelers was typically accompanied by a fresh order for things. For Lily money went out as quickly as it came in because she knew

¹⁶⁸ Martha Banta, “Wharton’s Women in Fashion, In History, Out of Time,” in *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, ed. Carol Singley, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 52.

very little of its value and “whatever theories she cultivated as to the prudence of setting aside a part of her gains, she had unhappily no saving vision of the risks of the opposite course” (119). Above all, as Clair Hughes rightly concludes in Lily’s world the social dictates reinforced the view that “cash and looks were inseparable” where seduction equated with work, marriage turned into a business deal, and dress became crucial to fiscal confidence.¹⁶⁹

Lily grew up in a family that lived beyond its means and struggled to keep up appearances under a “heavy thunder-cloud of bills” (34). The most vivid recollection of Lily’s growing up was the life of expenditure in which “the family craft glided down on the rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need – the need for more money” and she could not recall the time “where there had been money enough” (31). Lily’s mother was famous for the unlimited effects she could produce on the limited means – “living as though one were much richer than one’s bankbook denoted” (33). Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes that Lily’s mother had a “cold-blooded capacity to limit her private delicacies in pursuit of public display.”¹⁷⁰

For Lily and her mother to be rich is considered to be beautiful and cultivated while poverty is deemed to be utterly horrifying. Lily’s mother hated dinginess and perceived poverty “as a confession of failure that it amounted to disgrace” (37-39). In turn Lily was taught to guard against poverty’s terrible ugliness and recognize the “acquiescence in dinginess” as evidence of stupidity (96). Therefore throughout her life she was preoccupied with an “incurable dread of discomfort and poverty; in the fear of that mounting tide of dinginess against which her mother had so passionately warned

¹⁶⁹ Clair Hughes, “Consuming Clothes: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*,” in *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 9, Issue 4, 2005, pp. 387, 394.

¹⁷⁰ Wolff, p. 116.

her” (313). Jennifer Shepherd explains that Lily has inherited her mother’s pedigree, and “she has also internalized her mother’s obsessive preoccupation with being decently dressed” as assurance of social success.¹⁷¹ Moreover, Lily’s attitudes bear out not only her apprehensions of “shabby surroundings” but her incessant desire for the atmosphere of beauty and luxury – the only background she required and “the only climate she could breath in” (29).

After her father’s financial ruin the dread of poverty began to overshadow Lily’s untroubled life. The only way out of it was Lily’s beauty – “the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their lives was to be rebuilt” (38). Her mother studied Lily’s beauty passionately with a kind of fierce vindictiveness and “watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian” (38). Furthermore, she tried to instill in her daughter a sense of responsibility of what her beauty could achieve and warned her of awful consequences if she failed. As a result Lily was taught to consider a conventional rich marriage the sole end of her existence. However, after two years of hungry roaming among various relatives, Lily’s mother died unable to secure her daughter’s brilliant marriage. “People can’t marry you if they don’t see you,” she grieved, “how can they see you in these holes where we’re stuck?” (39).

Lily understood that her “beauty is only the raw material of conquest” and “to convert it into success the other arts are required” (38). And one of the important aspects of success was an effective display - a marketing strategy. Women could effectively advertise themselves in suitable places as well as in the company of people with whom she can comfortably be affiliated without compromising herself. In other words, woman’s

¹⁷¹ Jennifer Shepherd, “Fashioning an Aesthetics of Consumption,” *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Inferiors – Edith Wharton and Material Culture*, University of Alabama Press, 2007, p. 139.

social circle and places of formal sociability such as theater, opera, *tableaux vivants*, shopping, restaurants, dinner parties, balls, and travels function to create a favorable framework for her demonstration. Fundamentally in the world, ruled by all-consuming principles of exchange, woman's display is comparable to the advertisement of material goods. The more valuable are the commodities, the more elaborate techniques are used for their advertising and exhibition. Various embellishments such as colors, flowers, glass, lights, fabrics, boxes, and wrappings are employed to create objects' eye-catching appearance and to incite the viewer's desires. The higher the woman's social strata the more sophisticated are her ways of decoration, more costly are her physical environments, and more affluent are her acquaintances. The woman must be a part of elaborate social surrounding and must display expensive accessories to enhance her overall presentation and signify her worth.

Lily prized her beauty, treasured it, took care of it, and made use of it (54). Her love to exhibit herself in public was an expression of a desire to advance her powers in society and over eligible men. Lily was "always inspired by the prospect of showing herself in public" and she felt happy when she read the reflection of her beauty in appreciative looks around – the delicious confirmation of her triumph (124). Wolff explains that Lily "has long practiced the art of making herself an exquisite decorative object" and therefore she could "formulate no other desire than the desire to be seen in advantage" (127). What is more, as Lily learned to regard herself as an observed object, her sense of self is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others (127-128).

There are several scenes in the novel when Lily, as a skillful advertiser, experiences an intoxicating power of her own loveliness and feels invigorated when

being observed, watched, and admired. When she enters the opera in a striking evening dress, she feels the intensity of male gazes and the general stream of admiring looks (124). She became the center of attention - "Ah, it was so good to be young, radiant, to glow with sense of slenderness, strength and elasticity... to feel one's self lifted to a height apart by that incommunicable grace which is the bodily counterpart of genius"(124). One of the spectators and admirers of Lily's conspicuous display was Gus Trenor who "indirectly paid" for her new gown and opera cloak through his alleged investment gains he made on her behalf on the market.

Trenor, observes Wharton, "had never seen Lily to look so smarter in her life, that there wasn't a woman in the house who showed off good clothes as she did, and that hitherto he, to whom she owed the opportunity of making this display, had reaped no return beyond that of gazing at her in company with several hundred other pairs of eyes" (125). Her beauty not only incites Trenor's erotic desires but also provokes his possessive attitudes. He wants Lily all to himself without "other chaps" around her, he demands a private time with her, a nice quiet "lark together," in exchange for his financial favors. Later in the novel, Trenor traps Lily in his house and attempts to rape her claiming that "the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at the table"(155). His sexual demands, as Wai-Chee Dimock observes, are legitimated by "the language of marketplace, the language of traded benefits and reciprocal obligations."¹⁷² The power of marketplace, she writes, has the ability to assimilate everything else in its domain, becoming a mode of human conduct and human association - everything has price and must be paid for. Above all, Trenor's attitude signifies the existing gender relationship

¹⁷² Wai-Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," PMLA, Vol. 100, No.5 (Oct., 1985), p. 783.

ruled by men's purchasing powers where Lily's beauty becomes a desirable commodity for display and acquisition.

Lily's famous appearance midway through the novel in *tableaux vivants* furthermore denotes the paradigms of display and spectatorship. *Tableaux vivants*, the living pictures, were one of the most popular forms of upper-class entertainment in which society women could display themselves. The costumed women, and occasionally men, were carefully posed on the stage recreating well-known paintings or sculptures. In *The House of Mirth* there were several fashionable women who were invited "to exhibit themselves in a series of pictures" under the guidance of Paul Morpeth, a distinguished society painter (140). Morpeth, with a masterful use of draperies, lights, and shadows had created successful illusions - the "magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination" (143). The pictures, describes Wharton, "succeeded each other with the rhythmic march of some splendid frieze, in which the fugitive curves of living flesh and wandering light of young eyes have been subdued to plastic harmony without losing the charm of life" (143). In Wharton's world of display and spectatorship, the *tableaux vivants* suggest women's decorative traits similar to the art objects put on a view for one's visual pleasure.

The setting for the *tableaux vivants* is also significant – the Bry's newly built mansion is also a work of art put on a show, a public spectacle, and the manifestation of consumption. The house was "well-designed for the display of a festal assemblage," describes Wharton, "as one of those airy pleasure-halls which the Italian architects improvised to set off the hospitality of princes" (141). The assembled crowd, directly reflecting the fine surroundings of "gilded walls," "Venetian ceiling," "marble columns,"

and “damask-and-gold armchairs,” presented “a surface of rich tissues and jeweled shoulders”(141). In this plush atmosphere the paintings of old European masters Botticelli, Veronese, Titian, Van Dyck, Watteau, Goya, and Kauffmann had been staged. The *tableaux vivants*’s choices of subject matters represented women in a world of beauty, leisure, luxury, fantasy, and illusion. There were “a group of nymphs dancing across flower-strewn sward in the rhythmic postures of Botticelli’s *Spring*,” a brilliant Miss Smelden “showed to perfection the sumptuous curves of Titian’s *Daughter*, a young Mrs. Van Alstyne showed the frailer Van Dyck’s type of woman “with high blue-veined forehead and pale eyes and lashes,” there were also Kauffmann’s “nymphs garlanding the altar of Love,” Veronese’s “all shiny textures” and “pearl-woven heads,” and a Watteau group of “lute-playing comedians, lounging by a fountain in a sunlight glade”(143). “Gad, what a show of good-looking women,” concluded Ned Van Alstyne, one of the men in the audience. However, he would have preferred to see these women in a more revealing attitudes. Why, he asks, do they use all these decorative flounces “to cover up their figures when they’ve got ‘em” (148). Women’s display in *tableaux vivants* and their overall identification with works of art clearly articulate their main role in the society as to “adorn and delight.”

Preparing for *tableaux vivants* Lily was in “her element,” “her dramatic instinct roused by the choice of subjects,” and most of all she felt exhilarated “of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no more fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace”(140). She represented the figure of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s portrait *Mrs. Lloyd*. When the curtains parted the unanimous “Oh!” of the spectators was a tribute not to the brushwork of the artist but to

the “flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart” (144). “It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds’s canvas,” writes Wharton, “banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace.” Her pale draperies served to relieve “the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm” (144). Lily’s splendid display incited admiration from the public and her beauty “expanded like a flower in sunlight” in the warm atmosphere of praise (146). Emily Orlando writes that in exhibiting herself in *tableau vivants* Lily “attempts to barter her body with the goal of marriage in mind.”¹⁷³ Similarly Christopher Gair makes a valuable observation that Lily’s representation of *Mrs. Lloyd* is mediated by economics and fashion rather than aesthetics.¹⁷⁴ He points out that in 1905, the year of publication of *The House of Mirth*, Reynolds’s *Mrs. Lloyd* was in private collection owned by the Rothschilds. The voyeuristic gazes of the male spectators further confirm that Lily’s beauty and performance were no more than articles for consumption.

Watching Lily’s performance Selden was captivated by her soaring grace and eternal harmony of her beauty and he “felt an overmastering longing to be with her again” (145). The other male spectators were clearly transfixed by her physical body and sexuality. Lily’s light gown that revealed her curves generated a vulgar comment from Ned Van Alstyne. “There isn’t a break in the lines anywhere,” he observed, “and I suppose she wanted us to know it” (144). He also never “knew till tonight what an outline Lily has” (148). His statement plainly conveyed Lily’s sexual attractions initiated by the display of her body. Unfortunately it was not the first time Selden heard such remarks

¹⁷³ Orlando, p. 56.

¹⁷⁴ Christopher Gair, “The Crumbling Structure of “Appearances”: Representation and Authenticity in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 43.2, 1997, p. 353.

about Lily's appearance. "This is the world she lived in," he thought, "these were the standards by which she was fated to be measured!"(145).

Sim Rosedale was also captivated by Lily's arresting grace that she was able to show off so masterfully. Her appearance at *tableaux* "sent him off his head" as he wanted "to get Paul Morpeth to paint her like that" so the picture would appreciate a hundred per cent in ten years (168). As a wealthy Jewish investor, but an outsider to the elite circle of upper class society, Rosedale wants to marry Lily to get the best returns. He saw her beauty as a commodity that he could purchase - "I've got the money," Rosedale told Lily, "and what I want is the woman – and I mean to have her too..."(187). In his marriage plans Lily would become one of his expensive collections which would elevate his own standing in the society. Lily's beauty and her manners, writes Wharton, "appealed to his collector's passion for the rare and unattainable" (122). Rosedale wanted to show her off by decorating with all the diamonds he could put on her. Certainly Rosedale's attitudes reflect Veblen's criticism on the relationship between husband and wife in upper class society. The core purpose of women of the leisure class, wrote Veblen, is to signify the financial strength of her husband as a "chief ornament" among his various possessions.¹⁷⁵ After all, Lily's position was that of rare flower grown for exhibition and her ornamental qualities could hardly serve any meaningful purpose.

Lily rejects Rosedale's proposal because what she desires most is to succeed in upper class society rather than to marry a *nouveau riche*. She longed to a live life of "fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of the jewel" because of her own jewel-like rareness. The society was a crowded selfish world of pleasure seekers and at times it was brutal and self-engrossed (54). Lily ridiculed its

¹⁷⁵ Veblen, p. 35.

conventions and yet envied its people and wanted to sustain in their “charmed circle about which all her desires revolved” (54). “She liked their elegance,” writes Wharton, “their lightness, their lack of emphasis; even the self-assurance which at times was so like obtuseness now seemed the natural sign of social ascendancy”(54). For Lily they were “lords of the world she cared for” and to be with them she was willing to accept their standards, and limitations as well as their “contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as they lived” (54). She has been working scrupulously to stay in upper-class society because her desires for money, status, comfort, and leisure depended on generosity as well as caprices of her rich relatives and friends. Lily’s wishes to lead a beautiful life, her skills and morality were socially driven constructs reflecting the world of material culture.

Wharton depicts one of Lily’s customary visits to Bellomont – the country house of her wealthy friends the Trenors. This time Lily’s visit has a purpose of attracting the attention of one of the guests – the millionaire Percy Gryce. With the help of Judy Trenor the Bellomont becomes the appropriate stage for Lily’s display. She found herself “the center of that feminine solitude which envelopes a young woman in the mating season. A solitude was tacitly created for her in the crowded existence of Bellomont, and her friends could not have shown a greater readiness for self-effacement had her wooing been adorned with all the attributes of romance” (50). Lily knows that she must display all her charms to attract Gryce and must be ready with “fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her to life” (29). It is hateful fate, she thinks, but what choice has she? If she marries him, she contemplates, she would arrange her life as she pleased and would soar into that

“empyrean of security where creditors cannot penetrate” (53). Her desirous imagination told her that she would have better gowns than Judy Trenor and far more jewels than Bertha Dorset. The marriage would also change her roles in the society - instead of having to flatter, she would be flattered and instead of being grateful, she would receive thanks. She would identify with her husband’s vanity because “to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence” (53). However, Lily is already 29 years old and missed her best chances to strike a favorable match that would have brought her security and wealth. People begin to tire of her as she has been a perpetual visitor at her friends’ great country houses, dinners and parties. She became “a mere pensioner” of their splendor and began to feel the obligations of her position and the increasing sense of servitude” (29).

Lily’s physical attractiveness, her desires for attention, and her dependence on the favors of her rich friends made her socially vulnerable and led her to transgress the proper boundaries of display. She found herself at wrong places and at wrong times and in doing so Lily “had a fatalistic sense of being drawn from one wrong turning to another without ever perceiving the right road till it was too late to take it” (137). She was observed by Rosedale visiting Selden’s bachelor’s apartment. In turn Selden and Van Alstyne witnessed her leaving Gus Trenor’s house late at night while his wife Judy was out of town. Soon after, Lily was accused by Bertha Dorset of spending the night with her husband George Dorset at Monte Carlo. Eventually her conspicuously improper displays led to rumors which in time compromised her reputation. “It was horrible of young girl to let herself be talked about,” observed Lily’s aunt Mrs. Peniston, “however unbounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been

made” (136). Lily’s situation is the demonstration of the societal imperatives where the status of any woman can be in danger of disgrace if she does not have the protection of marriage. Charlotte Gilman Perkins rightly concluded that wealth, power, social distinction, fame, home, happiness, reputation, ease, and joy – all come to women “through a small gold ring.”¹⁷⁶ Perkins’ line of thought reflects one by Ned Van Alstyne who put forward a shrewd remark about Lily’s position: “When a girl’s as good-looking as that she’d better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly organized society there is not provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations” (168).

According to the rules of the business market damaged goods do not sell. Likewise women with a tainted reputation are not desirable on the marriage market. The truth about any girl, as Lily knows herself, “is that once she’s talked about she’s done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks...” (237). After many mistakes and setbacks Lily eventually slides down the social scale and becomes a discarded object. Her wealthy aunt Peniston disinherits her and her former friends close their doors to her. Loebel writes that unmarriageable women without means “are remaindered into the bargain bin and eventually excluded from the system altogether, they are discontinued.”¹⁷⁷ Lily’s altered position is clearly reflected in Rosedale’s attitude. A few months earlier his marriage to Lily would have been a prized catch for him but now it becomes a liability. Consequently, this time it is Rosedale who rejects Lily’s proposal of marriage as a losing venture. “I do not believe the stories about you – I don’t *want* to believe them,” he explains, “But they’re there, and my not believing them ain’t going to

¹⁷⁶ Gilman, p. 71.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Loebel, p. 112.

alter the situation” (271). An astute businessman, he collects only the best and does not deal with tarnished items. Over the years he has been carefully building up his wealth and social position and cannot afford to squander his hard work. Rosedale counsels Lily on the meaning of display by telling her that “the quickest way to queer yourself with right people is to be seen with the wrong ones; and that’s the reason I want to avoid mistakes” (271). At the end Rosedale offers to help Lily out by suggesting a loan - a business deal “such as one man would make with another.” But *The House of Mirth* and Lily Bart’s life, as Lillian Robinson reminds us, “is a testimony that no such arrangement can exist in a “good” society where the workings of capital invariably have a gender – and sex.”¹⁷⁸

In Wharton’s novel Lily was not the only woman who yearned to acquire status and whose life was governed by the imperatives of display. There were Welly Brys, Mattie Gormer and Norma Hatch - *nouveau riche*, status conscious women who desired the same elegance and luxury as women of upper class. These women also had to master the rules of proper display- socializing with the right people and in the right places if they wanted to succeed – essentially imitating the life styles of the upper class. Ironically, while Lily was working hard to secure her position in society, they in turn sought Lily’s company to advance their own image. They needed Lily’s presence and guidance because they “prized her for the very qualities they most conspicuously lacked” (251). For them Lily represented the world to which they all aspired. And Lily took “certain enjoyment in dazzling them by her fineness, in developing their puzzled perception of her superiorities” (121). Welly Brys’ efforts to host a party by inviting Lily and other society people turned out to be a valuable endorsement. After the event Welly Brys, writes Wharton, “at least had the satisfaction of figuring for the first time in the society columns

¹⁷⁸ Robinson, p. 358.

in company with one or two noticeable names; and foremost among these was of course Miss Bart's"(121).

Later when Lily began to socialize in Mattie Gormer's circle, she realized that it was an imitation of the lives of upper class - "a flamboyant copy" of Trenors, the Van Osburghs and the Dorsets. The difference was, however, in "a hundred shades of aspect and manner, from the patterns of men's waistcoats to the inflection of women's voices" where everything was "pitched in a higher key" - more noises, more color, more familiarity, and more champagne (247). Jennifer Shepherd notes that in commodity terms the social sets of Brys and Gormets were analogous to "knock-offs" in fashion industry.¹⁷⁹ She explains that the standardized machine produced knockoff "does not guarantee a perfect fit" of a custom-made couture article; similarly "the nouveaux riches do not "fit" the established leisure class of Lily and her peers."¹⁸⁰

Norma Hatch was also a rich but "unplaced" woman whose wants had centered on status and recognition. She had an almost "touching desire for Lily's approval" and wanted to do what was "nice," to be taught how to be "lovely"(293). Hatch's life took place within the gilded and over-upholstered rooms of the Emporium hotel and her aspirations were mostly culled from newspapers and fashion magazines. She, writes Wharton, "was aware of heights of elegance as well as depths of luxury beyond the world of Emporium" and was craving to reach it (291). Essentially all these women, no matter what class they belonged to, were obsessed by a perpetual desire for status where the rituals of display became the necessary parts of their lives. Lily's fate and the tragedy of other women are rooted in commodity culture where they must faithfully conform to be

¹⁷⁹ Shepherd, p. 141.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 141.

beautiful objects and demonstrate a “perfect state of complaint passivity” with “no hint of self-assertion.”¹⁸¹ Wolff writes that these women, striving to satisfy “society’s appetite for feminine delicacy,” have “retained no more than a hollow, empty shell of self.”¹⁸²

The display of upper class women also took place in the newspapers’ society columns. Similar to the advertisements of goods the stories and photographs of the wealthy promoted glamour, leisure and luxury. The life-styles of beautiful women, their dresses and jewels provoked fascination and offered to readers the dreams of desirable living. Maureen Montgomery acknowledges that the culture of display and newspaper publicity brought with them “the disadvantages of sexual objectification and external surveillance and extended discourses of control aimed at disciplining the sexuality of young women.”¹⁸³ In her novel Wharton depicts how society press *Town Talk* and *Riviera Notes* document Lily’s life (121, 168, 109, 229, 303). *Riviera Notes*, she writes, “emphasized the ideals of a world where conspicuousness passed for distinction, and the society column had become the roll of fame” (229). From time to time Lily “found herself figuring once more as the “beautiful Miss Bart” in the interesting journal devoted to recording the least movements of her cosmopolitan companions”(209). Nettie Struther, a working class girl, tells Lily that she watched for her name in the papers to find out what she was doing and what dresses she was wearing (333). Working at a milliner’s shop among other lower class women Lily discovered that they had “insatiable curiosity” of the world where she once lived. Lily, writes Wharton, never before suspected that she and her kind “were discussed in this underworld of toilers who lived on their vanity and self-indulgence” (303). For them Lily was “a star fallen from the sky,” they knew she had

¹⁸¹ Wolff, p.107.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 107.

¹⁸³ Montgomery, p. 167-168.

“gone under” and “true to the ideal of their race, they were awed only by success – by the gross tangible image of material achievement” (303).

In the end Lily, who grew up without the sustaining powers of family and traditions, was lonely and helpless. She was rootless and ephemeral – “a mere spindrift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them” (338). She was living in a culture where true relationships were lacking and beneath the surface of pleasantries and flatteries was concealed the “vile world” of gossips, ridicule, rivalry, and betrayals and people existed “like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance” (339). Lily was acutely aware that society did not turn away from her but “it simply drifted by, preoccupied and inattentive, letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favour” (277). She also recognized that society prized her beauty as a commodity but what it valued more and what could secure her status was money and marriage. As her finances and reputation began to diminish so did her position in society – it was marked by a slow descent from affluence to “servitude to the whims of others” and finally to the seclusion of a boarding house. After all, Lily failed to serve any practical purpose because she had no ability to remake her life as she was a helpless organism out of its narrow range. “And was it her fault,” asks Wharton, “that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature?” (319).

In the *The Custom of the Country*, published eight years after *The House of Mirth*, Wharton explores similar themes – the influences of consumer culture on the relationship between men and women, its role on marriage and the position of women. Moreover, the

later novel more sharply projects the growing powers of money. "The custom of the country," writes Margaret McDowell, "denotes the prevailing worship of wealth and power it signifies, a power that can reduce human beings to things and that measures them solely in material terms."¹⁸⁴

The novel also depicts the growing forces of social mobility and its influences on American culture. With the rise of new fortunes the new breed of men and women like Wharton's characters Peter Van Degen, Elmer Moffat, Indiana Fusk, and Undine Spragg had taken center stage. The newcomers, hungry for status and power, began to infiltrate the old society and alter its stagnant ways of life. Their desires for enjoyments, accumulation and display revised the time-honored traditions and patterns of behavior. Cynthia Griffin Wolff rightly observes that *The Custom of the Country* "is poised precariously upon the moment of change" and "the values that were revered have been sundered from the force needed to sustain them."¹⁸⁵ The old class, threatened by the *nouveaux riches*' invasion, had to negotiate its existence in the conspicuous culture of money and power.

One of the governing relationships between the old society and the newcomers was based on the rites of marriage. The institution of marriage, deeply penetrated by pervasive material culture, turned into a mutually beneficial business arrangement. On one hand, through the marriage the old families traded their names and positions for the money of *nouveau riches*. On the other hand, such transaction allowed newcomers to gain desirable access into the society and to secure their status. Ralph Marvell, the descendent of an old New York family, put forward an astute observation on the nature of

¹⁸⁴ Margaret McDowell, *Edith Wharton*, Twayne Publishers, 1976, p. 76.

¹⁸⁵ Wolff, p. 233.

such operations: "The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange."¹⁸⁶ He himself became a subject of a business bargain when Undine Spragg procured his name in order to be a part of an elite society. For Undine the marriage to Ralph Marvel was no more than a valuable acquisition - "now at least she was having what she wanted - she was in conscious possession of the 'real thing'" (62). Marvel's cousin Clare also became part of such a business deal by marrying the money of an "invader" Peter Van Degen. Dazzling in Van Degen's diamonds and motor cars but unhappy and repentant, Clare, as Wharton describes, "bore her broken heart from opera to ball" (48).

Undine Spragg's story is analogous to that of Lily Bart - both women center their lives on the issue of marriage. Furthermore, for them marriage translates into social status and also is contingent upon men's finances in order to fulfill their desires for leisure and luxury. Undine, like Lily, has to utilize the rules of display to navigate society and attract a suitable husband. However, if Lily had the advantage of being raised in society and skilled to be a Perfect Lady, Undine had to learn many things on her own. She and her parents came from Apex City, Kansas and settled in New York's *Stentorian Hotel*. The Spraggs moved to New York with a hope that Undine would meet and marry a wealthy society man. Even though Undine's parents were well-to-do and were supportive of all her ventures they, nonetheless, were strangers to the complex world of upper class society. Spraggs were one of the "rich helpless" families, stranded in the lonely splendor of a sumptuous hotel, "with a father compelled to seek a semblance of social life at the

¹⁸⁶ Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, New York: Bantam Books, 1991, p. 49. Subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

hotel bar,” and a mother “reduced to illness by boredom and inactivity” (8). Mrs. Spragg, as Wharton writes, had no ambition for herself but “she was passionately resolved that Undine should have what she wanted” (8). Likewise Undine’s father wanted his daughter to meet society people and “be with them all she can” (37).

By and large Undine’s sources of education, aspirations, and information on “how to” were society newspapers such as *Town Talk*, *Radiator*, *Sunday Supplements* and *Boudoir Chat* among others. She passionately poured over the daily press, learning the names of all of New York’s golden aristocracy, their parties and fashions (18). From newspapers and magazines she also found out about the latest trends employed by the “smartest women.” Reading *Boudoir Chat* she discovered that fashionable women use “pigeon-blood notepaper” embellished with silver monograms and drink hot chocolate for breakfast (12, 26-27). As a result Undine quickly implemented both novelties into her routine. Moreover, Mrs. Heeny, a society masseuse and manicurist, became Undine’s confidante and counselor on matters of proper sociability. Mrs. Heeny, writes Wharton, knew how to manipulate people’s imagination as well as their muscles. Her lively stories and her latest newspaper clippings on doings of society helped to break the Spraggs’ solitude of “long ghostly days” in the hotel (8). Mrs. Heeny, as she wished Undine to succeed, advised her to “go steady and you’ll get anywheres.” Moreover, similar to Rosedale’s warning to Lily about improper displays, Mrs. Heeny cautions Undine to avoid bad company. “The wrong set’s like fly-paper,” she tells Undine, “once you’re in it you can pull and pull, but you’ll never get out of it again”(9).

In her desire to launch a new life Undine demonstrated an insatiable energy and knack to learn important skills and manners, to be “stylish” and socialize with “swell”

people. Undine can transform herself by slavishly copying people around her. She is “passionately imitative” and knows how to “watch and listen,” and adapt herself to “whatever company she was in, of copying ‘the others’ in speech and gesture” as well as to reflect them in dress (13, 23, 102). Undine’s business-like adaptability, practicality and shrewdness help her to reach many of her goals. Not surprisingly she got her name after her father’s first lucrative market product – a hair-waver (50). Thus Undine came to symbolize the business itself by representing its potent forces of power, energy and initiative.¹⁸⁷ Emily Orlando observes that women of Wharton’s later fiction, which includes Undine, “are neither frozen not static: they are mobile, they are moving.”¹⁸⁸ In that sense, she writes, Undine can be considered a revised Lily Bart. Throughout her life Undine had been aggressively striving for status, publicity and triumph because her whole being could only thrive and be illuminated under the blaze of bright lights. “Undine’s beauty,” writes Wharton, “was as vivid, and almost as crude, as the brightness suffusing it... she might have been some fabled creature whose home was a beam of light” (14). Carol Sabora rightly concludes that “Undine’s behavior reflects the empty rituals of her society, while her sparkling beauty masks her obsessive self-indulgence.”¹⁸⁹

Undine, similar to Lily, understood that her beauty was not enough to succeed in society. “What was the use of being beautiful and attracting attention,” she brooded over, “if one were perpetually doomed to relapse again into the obscure mass of the Uninvited?” (32) She had to display herself at proper places where she could attract the attention of significant people. As a result she visits a fashionable art gallery and buys an

¹⁸⁷ Wolff, p. 233.

¹⁸⁸ Orlando, p. 88.

¹⁸⁹ Carol Baker Sabora, “Undine Spragg - the Mirror and the Lamp in *The Custom of the Country*, in *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors- Edith Wharton and Material Culture*, ed. Totten, University of Alabama Press, 2007, p. 266.

expensive opera-box. While at the gallery, however, Undine was more aware of people around her than the works of art. She “flung herself into rapt attitudes before the canvases, scribbling notes in the catalogue in imitation of a tall girl in sables, while ripples of self-consciousness played up and down her watchful back” (31). When displaying herself at the opera Undine felt “the quickening of the facilities that comes in the high moments of life” (38). Her consciousness, writes Wharton, “seemed to take in at once the whole bright curve of the auditorium, from the unbroken lines of spectators below her to the culminating blaze of the central chandelier; and she herself was the core of that vast illumination, the sentient throbbing surface which gathered all the shafts of light into center”(38) Eventually Undine’s efforts of exhibition paid off as she charmed Ralph Marvell, a scion of old New York family. Although she never loved Ralph, she married him to attain a desirable status. “It was pleasant, when she looked across the table, to meet Ralph’s grey eyes, with that new look in them, and to feel that she had kindled it; but it was only part of her larger pleasure in the general homage to her beauty, in the sensations of interest and curiosity excited by everything about her, from the family portraits overhead to the old Dagonet silver on the table – which were to be hers too, after all!” (58). Ralph’s adoration, writes Wharton, gave Undine “last refinement of pleasure as might have come to some warrior Queen born in triumph by captive princes...”(62).

For Undine the core purpose of life was a pursuit of public display. “She wanted to enjoy herself,” notes Wharton, and “her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity – the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and the sense of walking among them in cool security” (142). Like Lily, Undine felt

prolonged gratification when she has an occasion to show herself off. Her sense of self thrives with the revolving brilliancy under people's collective approval. As she presented herself in the dress of Empress Josephine at Driscoll's ball Undine experienced a delicious sense of triumph. "What could be more delightful than to feel that, while all the women envied her dress, the men did so much as look at it? Their admiration was all for herself, and her beauty deepened under it as flowers take a warmer color in the rays of sunset" (144).

The display of upper class women was associated with the works of art as it was generally considered to be the realm of the feminine where she could exhibit her aesthetic inclinations and beauty. While in *The House of Mirth* Lily represented Reynolds's painting *Mrs. Lloyd*, in *The Custom of the Country* Undine had her own full-length portrait painted. Undine, in contrast to Lily, expresses the measure of her own power by commissioning and overseeing her self-portrait.¹⁹⁰ She uses the display of her beauty to manipulate to her every advantage and thus acts "as architect of her own construction."¹⁹¹ In both cases the display of these women was staged by society artists. In *The House of Mirth* Paul Morphet was in charge of putting on a show of fashionable women, including Lily, for his *tableaux vivants*. *The Custom of the Country* presents another successful artist Claud Popple who in his "expensively screened and tapestried studio" painted wealthy and beautiful women. One of his merits, writes Wharton, was that he had "always subordinated art to elegance, in life as well as in his portraits" (119). Clearly Popple's main objective is to gratify the wishes of his consumers by presenting idealized images of women. Popple's picture represented Undine seated in a "monumental gilt

¹⁹⁰ Orlando, p. 91.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, p. 90.

armchair of pseudo-Venetian design” wearing something “faint and shining” as her hair “starred with a hard glitter of diamonds” (120). Such lavish setting and splendid costume project the world of leisure and luxury where the image of Undine becomes an inevitable part of the artist’s decorative scheme. Undine was not only pleased and flattered by the picture but thrilled about the possibility of displaying herself in new form and venue as she “saw herself throning in a central panel at the spring exhibition with the crowd pushing about the picture, repeating her name...” (126). As a capable self-advertiser Undine plans to contact her press-agent immediately so he can write about her portrait in the publicity column. Such triumph of display, writes Wharton, “left a glow in her veins” and obscured “all other impressions” (126).

Van Degen, one of the viewers of Undine’s portrait, offered a poignant observation on a difference between the depictions of men and women. “The great thing in a man’s portrait is to catch the likeness,” he noted, but “woman’s picture has got to be pleasing. Who wants it about if it isn’t? Those big chaps who blow about what they call *realism* – how do *their* portraits look in a drawing room? And what do they know about drawing-rooms, anyhow? ” (124). In contrast to such painters, he concluded, Popple “knows how we live and what we want” (124). Van Degen’s statement clearly reflected the cultural norms of the period that favored the images of idealized and beautiful women. Such paintings meant to be attractive and meant to incite viewers’ visual pleasure. As a result Undine’s portrait projected Popple’s artistic response to the dictates of material culture steeped in the powers of display and spectatorship.

Furthermore, Van Degen, inspired by Undine’s portrait and her beauty, desires her intimacy. He is eager to help her financially, as one way of inserting his closeness,

when she mentions her “material bothers” (128). Van Degen’s money, notes Wharton, gave Undine “peace of mind” and produced the thrill of liberation as she was blissfully launched into fresh expenses (129, 144). She, however, did not realize that Van Degen expected to be “paid back” for his financial support. His consequent behavior “had made it plain that the favor she had accepted would necessitate her being more conspicuously in his company”(143). Undine’s position with Van Degen resembles that of Lily with Trenor. Both men, Trenor and Van Degen, invested in Lily and Undine to generate the best results. It was unpleasantly apparent to Van Degen, writes Wharton, that his check to Undine “had evidently not brought in the return he expected” (145). As Trenor had done earlier, Van Degen demands Undine’s attention in exchange for his money. “Look here - the installment plan’s all right,” he confronts her, but ain’t you a bit behind even on that? Anyhow, I think I’d rather let the interest accumulate for a while” (146). The relationship between Undine and Van Degen furthermore demonstrates the power of the marketplace where, as Dimock explains, “private affairs take on the essence of business transactions, for the realm of human relations is fully contained within all-encompassing business ethic.”¹⁹² In her desire for money and conspicuous display Undine not only acts as a greedy consumer but becomes a purchasable commodity.

The lives of Lily and Undine, in spite of different backgrounds and social experiences, share many similarities. Lily and Undine are perfect products of the commodity culture where all their wants are centered on money. Even though money play a crucial role in their lives they, nonetheless, had never developed any interest or understanding of its value or sources. They expect to be handsomely accommodated either by their fathers or their husbands. While growing up, Lily had hardly seen her

¹⁹² Dimock, p. 783.

father by daylight as he was always downtown making money. He always looked bald, stooped, silent and tired. Because of father's earnings Lily and her mother had enjoyed their customary trips to Europe returning home with "gorged trunks" of purchases, summers in Newport or Southampton, and their times at dinners and balls. However, in this perpetual tug of amusement there had always been need for more money – and in some vague way, as Lily recalled it, "her father seemed always to blame for the deficiency" (33). After his financial ruin followed by his slow and difficult dying, he simply ceased to exist because he no longer was able "to fulfill his purpose" of a provider. Lily's mother sat at his bedside "with the provisional air of traveler who waits for belated train to depart" and Lily, unable to find any active expression of pity, "remained in a state of spectatorship, overshadowed by her mother's grim unflinching resentment" (36-37).

In later years Lily's dependence on money increased even more but not her awareness of its origins and worth. She approached Gus Trenor to invest for her but had no notion of the exact nature of such a transaction. Lily only understood that "her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself" and she will have "the assurance that this miracle would take place within a short time" (91). This "mysterious" investment, as Lily envisioned, will lighten her load and there will be no more need for economy and self-denial (91). Money was central to Lily's existence because living with the upper class required an enormous upkeep. "We eat their dinners, and drink their wine, and smoke their cigarettes, and use their carriages and their opera boxes and their private cars," she tells Gerty Farrish, "yes, but there's a tax to pay on every one of those luxuries" (282). In order to be a part of the exclusive set, Lily must

obey its rules – have enough money to play cards, go to the best dressmakers and have a right outfit for every occasion and always keep herself “fresh and exquisite and amusing” (282). Eventually Lily’s insatiable desire for money but her inability to make sensible judgments about it made her vulnerable and led to her downfall.

Undine also shows little knowledge on the matters of money. When her father talked about business, Undine’s eyes “grew absent-minded” as she was convinced that making money was man’s province – “what did men go ‘down town’ for but to bring back the spoils to their women?” (28). There had been a few “Fuses” about money in her family, remembered Undine, but she and her mother “had always got what they wanted, apparently without lasting detriment to the family fortunes. It was therefore natural to conclude that here were ample funds to draw upon, and that Mr. Spragg’s occasional resistances were merely due to an imperfect understanding of what constitutes the necessities of life” (29). Undine married Ralph Marvell erroneously thinking that he would be able to accommodate her voracious appetite for money. However, she later recognized that marrying herself to the “exclusive” she ended with “dowdy” while the future belonged to the “showy and promiscuous” (122). “If she had only had the means to live up to her opportunities,” Undine dreamed, “she would have been perfectly content with life, with herself and her husband” (143). But “the question of money was what chiefly stood between them” and made her leave Marvell. During the interval between her divorce from Marvell and her re-marriage to Raymond de Chelles, Undine “had learned what things cost, but not how to do without them; and money still seemed to her like some mysterious and uncertain stream which occasionally vanished underground but was sure to bubble up again at one’s feet” (316). And once more one of the most deepest

differences between Undine and de Chelles was the issue of money. De Chelles felt that Undine demonstrated “constitutional inability to understand anything about money” (316). “It was a proficiency,” explains Wharton, that no one “had ever expected her to acquire, and the lack of which she had even been encouraged to regard as a grace and to use as a pretext” (316). In the end she divorces de Chelles to marry Elmer Moffat, a *nouveau riche*, who spoke her language by knowing “her deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms” (341). At last, after all her miscalculations about money, Moffat was able to provide her with appropriate setting to embody her “rareness and distinction she had always considered she possessed” (349). Undine’s voracious appetite for money revealed her fundamental conviction that any social organization “which did not regard the indulging of woman as its first purpose, or to believe that any one taking another view was not moved by avarice or malice” (345).

The lives of Lily and Undine and their desires to own expensive things and display themselves replicate the culture of conspicuous consumption. However, their ability to consume is reliant upon men’s favors, power and money because they are unable to be financially independent. American mores, writes Margaret McDowell, “encouraged men to value women as possessions and to provide them with the resources for prestige and pleasure in return for their complaisance, companionship, and sexual intimacy”¹⁹³ Similarly Charles Bowen, one of the Wharton characters in *The House of Mirth*, provides an insightful observation and critique of the dominant gender ideology of time. “Why haven’t we taught our women to take an interest in our work?” Bowen inquires, “Simply because we don’t take enough interest in *them*” (131). He explains that the average American man looks down on his wife because he does not share with her the

¹⁹³ McDowell, p. 76.

real business of life, does not rely on her judgments in the conduct of serious affairs. Furthermore, Bowen thinks that men and women conform to an environment where all the romantic values had been reversed and remain mainly materialistic. In America, Bowen argues, the real *crime passionnel* is a “big steal” – “there is more excitement in wrecking railways than homes” (132). The actual life of men lies in their offices rather than in woman’s drawing rooms. Therefore, Bowen believes, making money remains men’s the true emotional center of gravity (132). The country’s passion for making money has preceded the knowing how to spend it, and the American man not only “lavishes his fortune on his wife because he doesn’t know what else to do with it” but also believes that it is all he owes her (131). Consequently excluded from the dynamics of business deals women have nothing to do but to preoccupy themselves by spending more money. Women avenge themselves in endless consumption by pretending to themselves and each other “that *that*’s what really constitutes life!” (132). Bowen comes to a conclusion that the money, the motors, and clothes are simply “the big bribe” a woman is paid to keep out of man’s way (132).

A woman who is excluded from the male sphere of making, inventing and shaping culture, observes Judith Fryer, is mostly “preoccupied with herself, with creating herself as an object, with considering her body in relation to costume and setting.”¹⁹⁴ Subsequently, such woman becomes fixated with her appearance because her beauty represents the most potent power to reach her goals. Lily and Undine feel confident when they look beautiful because they can only be happy and thrive under the sunlight of success, public praise, and admiration. Conversely when they experience setbacks their

¹⁹⁴ Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structure of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p. 104.

beauty shows the signs of deterioration. Lily's unsuccessful marriage pursuits, lack of money, dependence on the favors of her relatives and friends, and the accumulation of mistakes - all find a reflection in her appearance. She sat before the mirror "brushing her hair, her face looked hollow and pale, and she was frightened by two little lines near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of the cheek", she "stood gazing at herself for a long time in the brightly-lit mirror above the mantelpiece, the lines in her face came out terribly - she looked old; and when a girl looks old to herself, how does she look to other people", she walked quickly toward the little mirror above the writing-table "What a horrid looking-glass - it's all blotched and discolored. Any one would look ghastly in it!" (31,190,281). Lily's beauty is her main craft and its loss is the confession of defeat - "I can see the lines coming in my face - the lines of worry and disappointment and failure!" (281). Likewise when Undine's marriage to de Chelles becomes a disillusionment as being too conventional, dull and boring, her beauty began to lose its vibrant qualities. The change in her looks, writes Wharton, alarmed her - "her complexion was less animated, her hair less shining" (332). Undine "scanned the fashion papers for new scents and powders," "experimented in facial bandaging," "electric massages," and sought the advice of beauty doctors (332). Debarred from active participation in life Lily and Undine became obsessed with their looks and perceived their beauty as the only way available to control and transform their lives. Their desires to look beautiful express the culture's overall upsurge in consumption that was mainly driven by wishes for wealth, power and social status. In Peter Burger's dialectic terms Lily and Undine are both products and producers of their culture. The consumer culture is nothing but a human product but it also acts upon their producers by dictating their actions and choices.

Both novels articulate Wharton's criticism of a society preoccupied with external surfaces of display and spectatorship. Wharton's characters present the worlds of the endless *tableaux vivants* where they and their objects are part of the staged performances. *Tableaux vivants* are similar to the display of goods in the store windows. Both, influenced by consumer culture, turned into a well developed art form - a theatrical production. Shepherd writes about the growing hegemony of consumer aesthetic over the definition of fashion and beauty for a larger sector of American society. She points out that the "eye-catching and ephemeral *tableaux* of merchandise, shop window and in-store exhibitions increasingly influenced American taste toward aesthetics of consumption predicated on the transfer of value from an object to its representation and display."¹⁹⁵ The window displays with the use of various enhancements such as lights, colors, draperies are meant to incite shoppers' imagination and wants. Similarly, people's dresses, jewels, and houses, and overall surroundings are intended to demonstrate their wealth and power and provoke fascination and desires of spectators. Hotels, restaurants, balls, dinners, and operas create favorable settings for people to act as well as to watch, to look and be looked at. In addition they are intended to convey the commodified nature of glamour and luxury. Undine Spragg launches her social career in the Hotel Stentorian while later the restaurant Nouveau Luxe became her favorite place of exhibition. The Stentorian room was a showcase of expensive objects including "highly varnished mahogany," "salmon pink damask," "florid carpet," and "a gilt table with a top of Mexican onyx sustained a palm in a gilt basket tied with a pink bow"(3) and what is more the room, writes Wharton, "showed no traces of human use" (3). In turn the fashionable restaurant Nouveau Luxe embodied "unbounded material power" with an endless

¹⁹⁵ Shepherd, p. 136

perspective of “plumed and jeweled heads, of shoulders bare or black-coated, encircling the close-packed tables” (172-173). For Undine “the noise, the crowd” symbolized “the glare and movement” of life where days were “packed with excitement and exhilaration” (178). By the end of the novel Undine is preparing to host a party at her newly built sumptuous mansion. Here the dining room table displayed “gold baskets” heaped with fruits, “crystal decanters” with wine, and against the walls were “sideboards with great pieces of gold and silver, ewers and urns and branching candelabra, which sprinkled the green marble walls with art-like reflection” (396). Undine is the central character of this elaborate set and she, like an actress before her appearance on stage, “turned to give herself a last look in the glass, saw the blaze of her rubies, the glitter of her hair, and remembered the brilliant names on her list” (377).

The rituals of display and spectatorship also govern the lives of characters in *The House of Mirth*. Selden, observing a fashionable group of his acquaintances, cannot help but compare them to the performers on stage.

The equality of the air, the exuberance of the flowers, the blue intensity of sea and sky, produced the effect of a closing tableau, when all the lights are turned on at once. This impression was presently heightened by the way in which a consciously conspicuous group of people advanced to the middle front, and stood before Selden with the air of the chief performers gathered together by the exigencies of the final effect. Their appearance confirmed the impression that the show had been staged regardless of expense, and emphasized its resemblance to one of those “costume-plays” in which the protagonists walk through passions without displacing a drapery. The ladies stood in unrelated attitudes calculated to isolate their effects, and the men hung about them as irrelevantly as stage heroes whose tailors are named in the programme” (196).

In Wharton’s novels people, objects and settings are all part of the perpetual show of status and success. The most visible roles, however, were performed by women who had to advertize their desirability by demonstrated aesthetically pleasing decorative qualities.

In the end Lily's display efforts and her hopes to get married were futile while Undine managed to marry four times. Wharton writes that Lily "for all her hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax," and at times she was distracted by romantic visions of "worldly advantages" and "lost causes" (38-39). Lily toils hard to show herself off and attracts the interest of suitable men. But at the last stages of courtship she, nonetheless, tends to turn her interests elsewhere. "She works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed," observes her friend Cary Fisher, "but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on panic... Sometimes, I think, it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for." (201) Moreover, Lily's actions and choices, however, are still imbedded in the norms of her class and she is incapable of self-determination and powerless to manage her affairs. "I can hardly be said to have an independent existence," Lily concludes, "I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I find I was no use anywhere else" (326-327). Her prevailing passivity represents an overall downward spiral of the leisure class and the rise of the new fortunes and the new breed of people, *the nouveaux riches*. Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvel dream about things but essentially are incapable of profound changes. They are similar to James Joyce's characters whom he famously described as being in the state of paralysis. In this line of thought the central image of Lily's *tableaux* as Mrs. Reynolds offers an pertinent symbolism. Lily's *tableaux* is beautiful, it attracts attention and admiration, but nonetheless, it cannot act because by nature *tableaux* are always silent and motionless; they are not real art but only imitation.

In contrast Undine, like other newcomers Roseldales, Brys, McGormacks, Van Degens, Moffats, demonstrate insatiable energy for power and status. They infiltrate and rise in the old society by altering it's time-honored customs and patterns of behavior. Undine demonstrates "cold tenacity" and business-like initiative in all matters of life and most importantly approaches marriage as an economic contract. Ammons writes that Undine "accepts the commercial nature of matrimony and is willing to negotiate herself on the marriage market" and therefore she is able "to control her own life" (98). Similarly Emily Orlando notes that Undine oversees and orchestrates her own objectification and serves as the "architect of her own comodification."¹⁹⁶ The lives of both women, however, demarcated by the customs of marriage, replicate the worst aspects of material culture.

Wharton depicts how the lives of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, influenced by pervasive material culture, are governed by desires for conspicuous consumption. Both women must follow the intricate rules of displays if they want to succeed. Their appearances and actions had to take place within the appropriate social circles and the places of formal sociability. Lily's and Undine's beauty and their ornamental elegance not only expressed society's demands for femininity but also the dominant patterns of commodity culture. Similar to consumer objects that are displayed on the business market women also display themselves on the marriage market. In both cases the objective is to attract the best buyers and seal the transaction. Lily and Undine were highly skilled in exhibiting themselves and could only thrive as observed objects. They experienced exhilarating sensations when being watched and admired. Consequently, these women, preoccupied only with exterior surfaces of display channeled all their desires in the

¹⁹⁶ Orlando, p. 102.

relentless pursuit of money. Money was the governing agency of all their relationships and the measure of their social status, leisure and beauty. For Lily and Undine material success equated with overall means of achieving happiness. Their life choices, limited by men's power and money, turned them into greedy consumers with parasitic attitudes. "Lily's failures and Undine's successes," notes Carol Wershoven, "are two sides of the same coin; together their stories expose a debased and debasing world in which money as the only standard by which all other virtues and values are judged"¹⁹⁷ Moreover, Wharton both documents and condemns societal mores that reduce women's lives to mere decorative presences of material culture. By depicting the lives of her heroines, Wharton offers a remarkable illustration of the social and cultural constructions of femininity at the turn-of-the-century America. Wharton uses consumer culture as a framework for her novels because for her it is both physical phenomenon and a specific field of study as it represents "the vast universe of objects used by humankind to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social intercourse, to delight our fancy, and to create the symbols of meaning."¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Carol Wershoven, *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*, London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1982, p. 43.

¹⁹⁸ Quoted from Gary Totten, "Edith Wharton and Material Culture," in *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors – Edith Wharton and Material Culture*, University of Alabama Press, 2007, p.2-3.

CHAPTER III

AT THE GATES OF THE WALLED CITY: CONSUMING DESIRES IN THEODORE DREISER'S *SISTER CARRIE*

*"He [Hurstwood] began to see as one sees a city with a wall about it. Men were posted at the gates. You could not get in. Those inside did not care to come out to see who you were. They were so merry inside there that all those outside were forgotten... Pullmans were hauling them to and fro about the land, papers were greeting them with interesting mentions, the elegant lobbies of hotels and the glow of polished dinning-rooms were keeping them close within walled city."*¹⁹⁹

Theodore Dreiser (241)

"I guess she's [Carrie] struck it," he [Hurstwood] thought, a picture of the old shiny, plush-covered world coming back, with its lights, its ornaments, its carriages, and flowers. Ah, she was in the walled city now! Its splendid gates had opened, admitting her from cold, dreary outside."

Theodore Dreiser (328)

Dreiser's novels, including his first one *Sister Carrie*, depict material culture and its influences on people's behaviors, identity, and self-transformation. He portrays the rise and the fall of people's fortunes driven by quests for money, power, and status. The dreams and aspirations of Dreiser's characters are fueled by incessant desires for pleasures of life. Nowhere was the hold of such desires as powerful as in the big cities – in their everlasting showcase of glitter and gratification. The city, with its rapid

¹⁹⁹ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1970, p. 241. Subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

development of commercial capitalism and the rise of consumer culture, attracted people from all corners of life. Men and women, young and old flooded the cities in search of better opportunities. The cities, however, were not only places of immense wealth but of devastating poverty. The sharp divide between the lives of rich and poor furthermore incited people's desires to achieve financial success and status. In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser uses a powerful metaphor of the "walled city" where some live comfortably within its walls but others are outside, at the gates, dreaming and struggling to get into the city. The life of Dreiser's heroine, Carrie Meeber, is permeated with material desires and ambitions to be part of the city's "whirl of pleasure and delight" as a principal means of attaining happiness (229). Carrie's journey from a small town in Wisconsin to Chicago and then New York, and her subsequent rise to affluence is fueled by her consuming desires and personal gratification. By depicting Carrie's story, Dreiser illustrates the yearnings of many young lower-middle class women of the period for whom the acquisition and display of material goods became one of the dominant objectives of their lives. By longing to be a part of the city's leisure class and enjoy its luxuries, Carrie and women of her social strata turned into active partakers of material culture, becoming not only its consumers but its commodities.

In this chapter and throughout my study I explore how and why consumer culture affected the identity and behavior of many women. The material culture framed women's lives by creating endless consuming desires and providing temporary satisfactions without attaining happiness. Critics have discussed the role of material culture in *Sister Carrie* and its influence on the lives of the novel's characters. The important studies by Clare Virginia Eby, Amy Kaplan, Rachel Bowlby, Bill Brown, Jackson Lears, Walter

Ben Michaels, Blanche Housman Gelfant, and Dreiser's own autobiographical writings became guiding sources for my research and helped me to formulate my own arguments.²⁰⁰ Dreiser's scholars used various approaches including literary, biographical, historical, economic, and psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist to interpret the place of consumption culture in modern life and its affects on Carrie's choices and actions. I ground my work on these important scholarships but also suggest reading Dreiser's novel through the lenses of his contemporaries – sociologists Georg Simmel, Thorstein Veblen, and Emile Durkheim. These authors' sociological and psychological investigations of material culture provide a vital criticism of the period and the novel. I structure my discussion in relation to the turn-of-the-century metropolis, the center of money economy and commodified relations. The metropolis relentlessly provoked the multitude of new desires by promising glamour, leisure, and luxury and overall transformation of people's lives. I employ Georg Simmel's *Metropolis and Mental life* as a useful discourse for understanding the metropolis' social structures and its psychological powers over people. Furthermore, I refer to Thorstein Veblen's theories of "invidious comparison" and "pecuniary emulation" to understand motivations behind Carrie's ceaseless desires for material goods. She and other protagonists in the novel long for wealth and status but none of them achieves happiness. Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie provides an important argument in reading the damaging outcomes of commodity

²⁰⁰ Clare Virginia Eby, *Dreiser and Veblen: Saboteurs of Status Quo*, University of Missouri Press, 1998; Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, The University of Chicago Press, 1988; Rachel Bowlby, *Just looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, New York, Methuen, 1985; Bill Brown "The Matter of Dreiser's Modernity" and Jackson Lears, "Dreiser and the History of American Longing" In *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. by Leonardo Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby, Cambridge University Press, 2004; Walter Ben Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, University of California Press, 1987; Blanche Housman Gelfant, *The American City Novel*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1954; Theodore Dreiser, *A Book About Myself*, Constable and Co Ltd, 1929 and *Dawn*, Horace Liveright, 1931.

culture that robs people of sustaining powers of family ties and social institutions. Moreover, I attempt to show how Dreiser similar to Simmel, Veblen and Durkheim observed and portrayed the turn-of-the-century culture steeped in material desires where the processes of objectification, comodification, and anomie were so prevalent.

In *Sister Carrie* the city, first Chicago and later New York, functions as a framework where events and actions take place. Philip Fisher rightly points out that Dreiser “invented the figures and the motifs by means of which the city became visible as a cultural fact in America.”²⁰¹ Dreiser’s novel captures the moment of important socio-historical transformations taking place in the city – the rise of modern consumer culture that created a multitude of new desires. The modern metropolis became an axis of money economy and the embodiment of material culture.

Carrie, like many newcomers, is seduced by the lure of the big city, its dazzling life and opportunities that were missing in small towns. Like a “giant magnet” the city not only attracts people but overpowers them with the complexity of external forces – crowds, fashions, advertisements, stores, theaters, restaurants, and commodities of all kinds. The city, describes Dreiser, uses its “cunning wiles” to allure with all “the soulfulness of expression” and it has power to persuade with “the gleam of a thousand lights” (1). It has “a blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives,” which appeals “to astonished senses in equivocal terms” of superhuman forces (2).

Dreiser’s descriptions of the city’s powers over individuals reflect the study of his contemporary Georg Simmel. Simmel’s sociological work *The Metropolis and Mental Life* suggests a useful discourse for understanding modern urban life and its influences on

²⁰¹ Phillip Fisher, *Hard Facts – Setting and Form in the American Novel*, Oxford University Press, 1985, p.138.

people. Simmel examines how life in the modern city differs from rural life and how it affects a person's behavior, and he evaluates the patterns of interaction among people. "With each crossing of the street, with tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city," writes Simmel, "sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to sensory foundations of psychic life."²⁰² The rhythm of rural life and sensory mental imagery flows "more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly," and rests upon deeply felt emotional relationships.²⁰³ In small towns one knows almost everybody and has positive relations to almost everyone. In contrast, the life of the large cities displays "brevity and scarcity of inter-human contacts."²⁰⁴ Simmel defines the essence of metropolitan behavior as "a reserve."²⁰⁵ As a result of this reserve a person not only demonstrates indifference but sometimes feels "a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion," and even hatred toward others.²⁰⁶ On the other hand, however, this reserve grants to the individual "a kind and amount of personal freedom which has no analogy whatsoever under other conditions."²⁰⁷ Overall, an individual in the modern city experiences "the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions." Such a state of affairs results in continual intensification of nervous stimulation. Therefore the metropolitan man, observes Simmel, is set against "the threatening currents" and "discrepancies of his external environment" which could easily uproot him.²⁰⁸

²⁰² Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated and edited by Kurt H. Wolff, New York: The Free Press, 1964, p. 410.

²⁰³ Ibid, p. 410.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 421.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 415.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 416.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 416.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 410.

“The deepest problems of modern life,” Simmel asserts, “derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life.”²⁰⁹ The modern city continuously creates the tensions between the internal and external aspects of an individual’s life and therefore an individual has to constantly adjust to the complexity of external forces with heightened awareness. Subsequently the metropolis exercises an overwhelming power over one’s personal life – it is characterized by the prevalence of “objective spirit” over the “subjective spirit.”²¹⁰ In these conditions the individual is simply reduced to a “negligible quantity” and is unable to effectively cope with the outgrowth of objective culture. “The individual,” he writes, “has become a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of purely objective life.”²¹¹ Simmel concludes that the metropolis outgrows one’s personal life by imposing psychological conditions in the multiplicity of economic and social life to which a person needs to respond.

Similarly Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* portrays the overpowering influences of Chicago and New York on the lives of his characters. The dreams and desires of the protagonists, he maintains and demonstrates in his fiction, are socially constructed – they are the direct influences of external reality, most importantly the commodity culture. The display of the city’s wealth and pleasures not only emphasizes one’s shortcomings but also incites one’s longings for a better life. Dreiser writes that such socio-economic disparity produces a distressing state in the mind. It affects “badly upon the small” and like a chemical agent

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 409.

²¹⁰ Ibid, p. 421.

²¹¹ Ibid, p. 422.

it works the “desperate results in the soul of men” (214). The consequences, he concludes, are like “opium to the untried body” when the “idle phantoms” continuously lure and beckon (214). Fisher validates Dreiser’s portrayal by arguing that the city “is the metonymy of our total system of desires... The effect of being surrounded by objects, places, and persons that rent out being is to create around the body, everywhere one looks, the materials for fantasy and dreaming.”²¹² In his novel Dreiser unveils Carrie’s story through her responses to the aspects of city life - its material wonders and endless pleasures on one hand and distressing poverty on the other. Carrie’s mind is flooded by impressions of city life and its objective reality becomes a prevailing force of her personal life. Dreiser provides an acute analysis of his heroine’s feelings and behavior as she tries to establish herself in Chicago and later in New York by pursuing dreams of money and status.

The opening pages of the novel describe Chicago as the city of “widespread fame,” “adventuresome pilgrimages,” and many “growing commercial opportunities.” Dreiser writes that the city drew to itself all hopeful and hopeless – “those who had their fortunes yet to make and those whose fortunes and affairs had reached a disastrous climax elsewhere” (11). In the decade between 1880 and 1890 the population of Chicago doubled, reaching a staggering number of more than a million. Writing about Chicago’s rapid commercial-industrial developments in the late nineteenth century, Arnold Lewis describes the phenomenon of the Loop.²¹³ It was a business district, the heart of the city that was looped around by cable and horse cars. Most visitors, foreign and native alike, were stunned to encounter the hectic atmosphere of Loop, and its magnitude, speed,

²¹² Fisher, p. 133-134.

²¹³ Arnold Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow: Europeans, Chicago’s Loop, and the World’s Columbian Exposition*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

confusion, cacophony, order and heights.²¹⁴ The Loop's movements and intensity, writes Lewis, "subjected people within it to the overlays, intersections, collusions, and juxtapositions of an infinite number of magnified stimuli."²¹⁵ Speculation and commerce were the main objective of the Loop and thus "anything was justifiable here as long as it made a useful contribution to the success of business."²¹⁶ Furthermore, the metropolis' ambitious developments triumphed in its selection to host the World Columbian Exposition of 1893, celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. The Exposition was hosted in a "White City," awe-inspiring structures of Greco-Roman style overlooking Lake Michigan, and demonstrated industrial, technological, commercial, and artistic achievements of the human spirit. Furthermore by the turn of the century, the physical appearance of the city changed dramatically with new developments in architecture that used iron and steel framing. The metal framing allowed architects to create taller structures with more window space than masonry-supported buildings. The showpiece of Chicago's architectural achievement was a skyscraper – the extravagant manifestation of urban modernity. Carl Smith, observing the influence of the city's rising buildings on newcomers, writes that "The skyscraper seemed to suggest that all those people coming into Chicago on the train transferred the direction of their hopes directly upward."²¹⁷ Carrie was among the thousands of people looking up to Chicago in anticipation of great fortunes.

An eighteen year-old Carrie arrived in Chicago in the summer of 1889 from small town Columbia City. The huge metropolis with its range of imposing buildings, vast

²¹⁴ Lewis, p. 73.

²¹⁵ Lewis, p. 74.

²¹⁶ Lewis, p. 136.

²¹⁷ Carl Smith, *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination, 1880-1920*, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 122.

railroads, a crowded array of vessels on the river, and busy roads filled by people and street cars had a powerful effect on her. "The entire metropolitan center," notes Dreiser, "possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep" (12). From the onset of her life in Chicago Carrie expresses much greater expectations about the future. "A half-equipped little knight she was," observes Dreiser, "venturing to reconnoiter the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy..." (2). Dreiser's heroine had been immersed in desire and "dazzling, alluring" Chicago becomes a seat of her imaginations. Carrie's rural life appears mediocre in contrast to what the city could offer. She was mesmerized by Chicago's famous streets, stores, theaters, and restaurants. Its grand mansions and the lives of the rich made a profound impression on her. The sight of wealth and merry life of the city has awakened Carrie's desires to reach something higher and to live better. Time and again Carrie found herself gazing, wondering, delighting and longing. And all the while under the spell of the city's "hypnotic influence" the siren's voice of the unrestful was whispering in her ear (86). Her perception of Chicago reflects the experiences of many newcomers of the period venturing into the large cities. Jackson Lears rightly points out that Dreiser "implicitly recognized" the corresponding relationship between the rise of the city and the emotional dimensions of desire. Urban modernity powerfully and persistently aroused human longings "for sensuous pleasure and luxury, for the intense experience that seemed lacking in everyday life, or at least for some fleeting facsimile of ecstasy."²¹⁸ In the same line of thought Fisher argues that city "gives a map of the psyche,

²¹⁸ Jackson Lears, "Dreiser and the History of American Longing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. by Cassuto and Eby, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 63.

a quantitative account on the strength and complexity of the system of human desires at a given cultural moment.”²¹⁹

Carrie’s desires also represent Dreiser’s own youthful longings and many of her initial impressions of Chicago were drawn from the memories of his first arrival there in 1884. Dreiser writes that Carrie was “dissatisfied at home” because she knew by heart Columbia City’s “dull, little round” (11, 50). She, without money or skills, came to the city with hopes for happiness and pleasures. Like his fictional character, Dreiser moved to Chicago to escape the narrow life of a small town. Born in Terre Haute, Indiana into a family of thirteen children headed by a strictly religious immigrant father, Dreiser remembered his boyhood years as “one unbroken stretch of privation and misery.”²²⁰ His first days in Chicago were full of pleasing sensations and fascinating scenes. “The spirit of Chicago flowed into me and made me ecstatic. Its personality ... was a compound of hope and joy in existence... Cars, people, lights, shops! The odor and flavor of the city, the vastness of its reaches, seemed to speak or sing or tinkle like a living, breathing thing.”²²¹ Robert Lingerman writes that Dreiser like most second-generation children was full of American dreams of power and status.²²² He was raised on Horatio Alger myths and as a boy envisioned himself becoming another Andrew Carnegie or John D. Rockefeller by regarding “money as the key to a finer sphere... of beauty, luxury, fame and the love of women.”²²³

²¹⁹ Fisher, p. 132.

²²⁰ Dreiser, *Hoosier Holidays*, 1916 quoted from Richard Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907*, New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1990, p. 33.

²²¹ Dreiser, *Dawn*, New York: Horace Liveright, Inc, 1931, p. 159, 298.

²²² Richard Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907*, New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1990, p. 13.

²²³ *Ibid*, p. 13.

To supplement Chicago's show of affluence and luxury, New York was even more conspicuously rich. At the turn of the century, it was America's largest metropolis with the prime concentration of money and fame. "The sea was already full of whales," writes Dreiser about New York in *Sister Carrie*, "a common fish needs to disappear wholly from view – remain unseen" (214). The atmosphere of wealth and power was easily felt among "the magnificent residences, the splendid equipages, the gilded shops, restaurants, resorts of all kinds..." (214). Walking down Broadway for the first time, Carrie found herself in "fashion's crowd, on parade in a show place" of pretty women and men who love to "gaze upon and admire them" (226-227). She had never seen such "a crush of finery and folly" and a rapid succession of gleaming window shops - the jewelers, furries, florists, haberdashers, and confectioners. "The whole street bore the flavour of riches and show," notes Dreiser, "and Carrie felt that she was not of it" and thus she "longed to feel the delight of parading here as an equal" (227). The famous *Sherry's* restaurant also made a profound impression on her. The splendid dining chamber was decorated with the glow of glasses and the shine of gilt. The restaurant's milieu projected assurance and dignity which "was exceedingly noticeable to the novitiate" (234). A showy bill of fare displayed an array of dishes sufficient to feed an army and it was accompanied by prices that made "reasonable expenditure a ridiculous impossibility" (234). New York's display of wealth and fashion further agitated Carrie's material desires. The great awakening blow, writes Dreiser, had been delivered. It clinched her convictions that "she had not lived, could not lay claim of having lived, until something of this had come into her own life" (229). She resolved that she would not visit these places again until she looked better. Amy Kaplan argues that Carrie does not

remain “passive before the overwhelming evidences of her own powerlessness” but rather actively creates “significance out of the city’s impenetrable facades.”²²⁴ Carrie translates the city’s “intimidating social structures into sentimental language of consumption, transforming the city into a showcase for tangible commodities which speak to her.”²²⁵ Richard Lehan similarly observes that Carrie “takes her being from the city’s energy, intuits its material nature, intuits that its very flow is inseparable from the crowds that embody it.”²²⁶ For Carrie to be a part of the crowd “is to be a part of an urban process, part of its spectacle – to both observe and be observed in this play of life.”²²⁷

Dreiser experienced similar feelings when he first came to New York and visited its well-known Manhattan Beach, a fashionable resort for urban upper middle class. Businessmen, politicians, clerks, and their wives and daughters came to the beach for pleasures, display and fabulous spectacle. Lingermen notes that Dreiser admired the place even though he “sensed the vulgarity of all this prosperity around him, founded on trade and corruption.” Seeing all the wealth and enjoyments, Dreiser, like his heroine, came to a painful conclusion: “I have never lived until now.”²²⁸ Lingermen writes that the next morning Dreiser went back to Pittsburgh, where he resided and worked at the time, with determination to save up his money and return to New York. Later, when living in New York, Dreiser began to record the city’s life that was saturated with consumption, display and desire. Dreiser’s journalistic essays provide a vital documentary material on the culture so well described in *Sister Carrie*. He observed that nowhere but in New York

²²⁴ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 146.

²²⁵ Ibid, p. 146.

²²⁶ Richard Lehan, “*Sister Carrie*: The City, the Self, and the Modes of Narrative Discourse,” in *New Essays on Sister Carrie*, Ed. Donald Pizer, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 71.

²²⁷ Ibid, p. 71.

²²⁸ Lingermen, p. 141.

had he seen such a lavish show of wealth, luxury and power on one side and such bitter poverty on the other. There was “an endless line of degraded and impossible lodging houses, a perfect whorl of bums and failures” and then by way of contrast there were great hotels, Wall Street, mansions along Fifth Avenue, smart shops, and clubs.²²⁹ “I seemed everywhere to sense either a terrifying desire for lust or pleasure or wealth, accompanied by heartlessness which was freezing to the soul,” writes Dreiser, “or a dogged resignation to deprivation and misery.”²³⁰ In his reflections he also described the streets of New York lined with glimmering lamps and glittering shop windows, thoroughfares thronged with hurrying pedestrians and rumbling vehicles. Such procession, he asserted, “fascinates and hypnotizes the mind, so that reason fades to an all-possessing desire to rush forward and join with the countless throng.”²³¹

Carrie’s desires were not only fueled by the sights of splendor but also by the signs of poverty. The lives of the wealthy were visibly contrasted to those in misery. Rachel Bowlby rightly observes that capitalism of the 1890s had peculiar disparities. On the one hand there was “glamorous pleasure for those who can afford a spectacular city lifestyle,” but on the other “the economy of scarcity” was still a daily reality for those who lack power to buy.²³² As a result there were continuous tensions between pain and desire. “The pang of exclusion,” Bowlby writes, “goes with the wish to take part” - to participate and to possess.²³³ For Carrie the poverty was a constant reminder of the state to which she could be reduced at anytime. She could see those poor and oppressed

²²⁹ Theodore Dreiser, *A Book about Myself*, London: Constable & Co Ltd, 1929, p. 480.

²³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 480.

²³¹ Quoted from Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie, Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism* ed. by Donald Pizer, New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1977, p.397.

²³² Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, p. 61.

²³³ *Ibid*, p. 59.

working away their lives - “a shoemaker pegging at his last, a blastman seen through a narrow window in some basement where iron was being melted, a bench worker seen high aloft in some window...” (108).

It was also painful to witness many poor girls in faded and rugged clothes hurrying to and from their jobs (107). The scenes of the “underworld of toil” reminded Carrie of her own background and her father’s work at the mill. Her old father, writes Dreiser, “in his flour-dusted miller’s suit, sometimes returned to her in memory” (108). For Carrie the sight of poverty was not only terrifying and pitiful but also shameful. Poverty was associated with unworthiness and filthy appearance. Consequently being poor meant to live in ugliness and insignificance outside of the “walled city” and Carrie had no desire to defer life’s pleasures. Similarly Wharton’s heroine Lily Bart and her mother hated dinginess and perceived poverty “as a confession of failure that it amounted to disgrace” (37-39). Lily was taught to guard against poverty’s terrible ugliness and recognize the “acquiescence in dinginess” as evidence of stupidity (96). Carrie like Lily throughout her life is preoccupied with beauty and comfort and judged poverty as a dreadful way of life.

When Carrie first arrived to her sister Minnie’s Chicago apartment, she quickly recognized the “drag of a lean and narrow life” (9). The signs of poverty were everywhere – the walls of room “were discordantly papered,” the floors were covered with thin rag carpet, and the furniture had a “hurriedly patched-together quality” (9). Carrie also noticed that Minnie had changed considerably since she had seen her. She married Sven Hanson who worked as a cleaner of refrigerator cars at the stock-yards. Minnie turned into “a thin, though rugged, woman of twenty-seven, with ideas of life

colored by her husband's, and fast hardening into narrower conceptions of pleasure and duty..."(11). Carrie could also observe that Minnie's manner was one of "trained industry" with a "steady round of toil" (10). Similarly the shoe factory where she worked was a sordid place smelling of machine oils and leather and its whole atmosphere was crude and disagreeable (30). Staying with the Hansons and working at the factory only further convinced her that such places and lives were dull and commonplace. But no matter how much Carrie loathed poverty, she, nonetheless, could not think of going back to her boring little life in Columbia City. The thought of it made her very uncomfortable: "she almost exclaimed against it..." The poor clothes, worn shoes, and poverty in general seem to her more dire and more degraded, "be old-clothed and poor-appearing – never!" (76). Her heart revolted against commonplace struggle and privation, "Everything about poverty was terrible" (246). She came to the conclusion that beauty, interest and joy lay in the "great mysterious city," away from humdrum conditions (25).

Wandering through Chicago in search of employment, Carrie acutely felt her unworthiness and had fears of being rejected. She was weighed down by the "sense of helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force which she did not understand" (12). As she stood in front of businesses with "wide windows and imposing signs," writes Dreiser, "she became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was – a wage-seeker" (13). Carrie was also ashamed of her looks: her shortcomings of dress and manners were too evident because fine ladies "elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence" (17). Carrie's state of being replicates Dreiser's own experiences in the city. He remembered the time when his clothes were poor and his purse was empty, "I wandered helpless about, and in that period of pressing

distress... I sank to the bottom of human misery.”²³⁴ Dreiser, like Carrie, was an outsider at the gates of the “walled city” and dreamed that one day he too could achieve the beauty of life. “How often,” recalls Dreiser in his autobiography, “my hands beaten in spirit at least at those doors and windows on the other side of which I fancied joy or a hope of beauty to be. How often have I stood outside and looked in wishing and longing with a too full heart.”²³⁵

The visible contrasts between wealth and poverty effect one’s emotions, causing happiness or despair. The cause of such sentiments is not only rooted in economic divides but turns into a deeply psychological matter, the seat of desire. The city’s merry life constantly provokes one’s desires for riches and status. Dreiser describes such desires as something people can scarcely resist, “this desire to attend and be part of the great current of city life is one that seldom bases itself upon well mastered reasons. It is simply desire, and as such, seldom begs for explanation.”²³⁶ Lawrence Hussman observes that Dreiser employs a variety of terms to describe and translate desire. He refers to it as “mystic longing, unreasonable passion, or chemic compulsion,” but always the reference is to his characters’ unquenchable desire.²³⁷ Desire is the main protagonist of Dreiser’s stories. Jackson Lears also points out that Dreiser depicts “the terrain of human emotions” and the longings of his characters which provide “a map of desire for the fluid, status-anxious United States, where the hope for self-transformation hovered over the social

²³⁴ Dreiser, *Bohemia*, quoted from Theodore Dreiser *Sister Carrie – An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Donald Pizer, New York: W.W. Norton, 1970, p. 414.

²³⁵ Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn*, New York: Horace Liveright, Inc, 1931

²³⁶ Quoted from Theodore Dreiser *Sister Carrie*, ed. Donald Pizer, 1977, p. 398.

²³⁷ Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr., *Dreiser and His Friction – A Twentieth Century Quest*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, p. 12.

landscape.”²³⁸ Moreover, Clare Eby rightly concludes that in his novels Dreiser affirms the relativity of poverty and wealth and shows “how capitalism creates quasi-individual identity by endlessly producing desires.”²³⁹ Dreiser, she further argues, makes clear that desire, even though it emanates “from the individual, it is in fact socially produced.”²⁴⁰

Dreiser’s characters were not the only ones swept by the prevailing dreams to have money, success and status. Dreiser himself was equally seized by overwhelming materialistic ethos. “I was beginning to be caught by the American spirit of material advancement,” admits Dreiser in his autobiography. “Anyone could legitimately aspire to be anything in America,” he writes, “and nearly all aspired. Not to want to be rich or to be willing and able to work for riches was to write yourself as nobody. Material possessions were already the goal as well as the sum of most American life, and so one could not help feeling the state of isolation and indifference which accompanied a lack of means.”²⁴¹

The only way to placate such material cravings is to have plenty of money. For Dreiser’s characters money is central to their existence – it is the means of self-transformation and happiness, the prerequisite of fashionable life and looks. Walter Benn Michaels rightly articulates that desire fuels *Sister Carrie*’s economy. However, he also notes, such economy not only runs on money but on “impossibility of ever having enough money.”²⁴² Throughout the novel there are continuous refrains to Carrie’s longings for happiness that ultimately associate with money and pleasures it can buy.

²³⁸ Jackson Lears, “Dreiser and the History of American Longing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 65.

²³⁹ Clare Virginia Eby, *Dreiser and Veblen: Saboteurs of Status Quo*, University of Missouri Press, 1998, p. 108.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁴¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn*, New York: Horace Liveright, Inc, 1931, p. 293.

²⁴² Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism – American Literature at the Turn of the Century*, University of California Press, 1987, p. 44.

Fashion and luxuries require money and the power of money can make one beautiful and famous. Carrie's imagination and thoughts, writes Dreiser, have been persistently treading "a very narrow round, always winding up at points which concerned money, looks, clothes, or enjoyment" (39). "Ah, money, money, money!" contemplates Carrie, "What a thing is to have. How plenty of it would clear away all these troubles," "What a wonderful thing it was to be rich" (51, 234). Like others around her, Carrie's dreams are roused within the context of the modern metropolis and its irresistible manifestations of material culture. She found herself being pulled toward the world of money and commodity that the big city encompasses. Furthermore, Carrie craved money but her understanding of its worth and origins were vague. Her definition of money was simply based on observations that it was "something everybody else has and I must get it" (48). Edith Wharton's characters, Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, display similar outlooks toward money. Both women expected to have plenty of money without any interest or understanding of its value or sources. For Undine money had its own "mysterious" ways in which it would vanish for a while but then would surely "bubble up again at one's feet" (316). Likewise Lily dreams that her investments would be "mysteriously multiplied" and "this miracle would take place within a short time" (91).

In *Metropolis and Mental Life* Simmel also recognizes that money is the dominating force in the metropolis and thus the measure of all things. The metropolis is the seat of money economy with "multiplicity and concentration of economic exchange" that cannot be compared to "the scantiness of rural commerce."²⁴³ All intimate emotional relations between persons are founded on their individuality whereas in money culture, Simmel discerns, a person "is reckoned with like a number, like an element which is in

²⁴³ Simmel, p. 411.

itself indifferent.”²⁴⁴ The modern mind, he writes, has become more and more calculating and the days of so many people are consumed with “numerical determinations, with reduction of qualitative values to quantitative ones.”²⁴⁵ For Simmel, money-driven culture poses a threat to the individual’s integrity and independence. He observes that in consumption culture, money and its exchange value reduce all quality and individuality to a purely quantitative level. “Money,” he writes, “is concerned only with what is common to all: it asks for the exchange value, it reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How Much?”²⁴⁶ Furthermore, when money functions as “a common denominator” of all values it becomes a frightful leveler. Such situation, he warns, “hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their uniqueness and incomparability” in a way which is beyond repair.²⁴⁷ Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* reflects Simmel’s analysis of the metropolis and its material culture that influences a person’s behavior and interactions. The works of both authors provide a cultural framework of the period by exploring the psychological dimension of a city immersed in consumerism and money driven desires.

By employing Simmel’s assertions, one can see that money is a base of all relationships, “a common denominator,” in *Sister Carrie*. Carrie’s sister Minnie had invited her to Chicago “not because she longed for her presence, but because the latter was dissatisfied at home, and could probably get work and pay her board here “ (11). Minnie and her husband were counting on Carrie’s earnings since they expected to use a good portion of her salary toward payments on the land they had purchased. The Hansons

²⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 411.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 412.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 411.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 414.

had an ambitious goal of building a house of their own. Dreiser writes that for Sven Hanson the presence or absence of his wife's sister was a matter of indifference. He, however, figured out that Carrie's rent payment would not be a bad investment. In their quest for material gain, Minnie and Sven Hanson reveal very little warmth toward Carrie but rather display an exploiting attitude toward her. The Hansons counted on Carrie's four dollars to be paid at the end of each week. After paying the rent, Carrie could only keep fifty cents of her weekly earnings for clothes and amusements. She realized that Hansons expected her to work, pay the rent, and not complain. In the end they were unwilling to keep her when she became ill and lost her job. Carrie was a burden for them, the "attitude of the flat was fast becoming unbearable," and she hated to go back there each evening (43). It was clear to her that she was not welcome there anymore and the whole situation could not last any longer (43, 55). When Carrie finally left the Hansons she never looked back, as though they had never existed.

Carrie's affair with salesman Drouet was initiated by "two soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills" (47). Drouet procured Carrie's affection by the promise of pretty clothes, good food, a cozy apartment, and entertainments. His money, writes Dreiser, created a new world of fortune for Carrie. She envisioned buying a "nice new jacket," "pretty button shoes," "a nice pair of stocking, and a skirt..." In her wishes, writes Dreiser, she quickly got beyond the purchasing power of her bills (48). Drouet also won her over by his impressive outfits, "the purse, the shiny tan shoes, the smart new suit."²⁴⁸ Instantly her desirous imagination built up a "dim world of fortune" of which Drouet was the center. "It disposed her pleasantly," describes Dreiser, "toward all he might do" and she concluded that he was a "splendid fellow" (6, 45). Her observations and opinions of

²⁴⁸ Dreiser, p. 6.

Drouet convey her preoccupations with external appearances and money. “Ah, what was it not to have money!” thought Carrie, “Drouet must be fortunate. He rode on trains, dressed in such nice clothes, was so strong, and ate in these fine places” (45-46). Drouet’s urban sophistication and his money were such powerful inducements that Carrie felt “a strange tie of affection” toward him. In the end Carrie became Drouet’s mistress because his money promised the realization of her material yearnings and she always “followed whither her craving led.” (57) Amy Kaplan concludes that in the realm of extreme consumerism Carrie had “only her self to sell” in exchange for Drouet’s money.²⁴⁹

Drouet knew very well how to seduce Carrie because he himself had the same consuming desires for money, clothes and amusements. Drouet was “vain and boastful” and was “deluded by good clothes as one silly headed girl” (49). After all, for Drouet good clothes “were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing” (3). He loved to make advances on pretty women and took pleasure in “good eating, and particularly the company and acquaintanceship of successful men” (49, 32). He liked to visit upscale resorts such as *Fitzgerald and Moy* because he was lured by the pleasure and desire “to shine among his betters” and craved “the company, the glow, the atmosphere” (36). Drouet also enjoyed going to the theater primarily as the place to see and to be seen. Dreiser vividly describes the atmosphere of the theater and its impressions on Carrie and Drouet. The spectacle, he writes, pleased Carrie immensely and she imagined “far-off lands and magnificent people” (59). However, what impressed her and Drouet the most was the wealth and fashions of the theater crowd. The foyer of the theater was a showy parade of men and women “moving in a social crush, skirts rustling, lace-covered heads nodding...” and one could also observe “the clatter of coaches and the throng of the fine

²⁴⁹ Kaplan, p. 143.

ladies” outside (60). Drouet was as much “affected by this show of finery and gayety” as Carrie was (60).

In addition to money, the most recurrent symbol in *Sister Carrie* is clothes. For Dreiser’s characters, money is the necessary mechanism of self-transformation while clothes function as the supreme demonstration of such change. For example, from the start of their relationship Drouet urges Carrie to buy new outfits because for him they are the principal way to show one’s social position. Clothes for Dreiser’s characters, as F.O. Matthiessen sees it, are the “chief means of display, of lifting a character above where he was, and by that fact above someone else.”²⁵⁰ Likewise Donald Pizer writes that in *Sister Carrie*, clothes represent “an index of taste and social position.”²⁵¹ Furthermore, Blanche Gelfant argues that the possibility of becoming nothing, “disposed faceless figures in an urban crowd,” haunts Dreiser’s characters and therefore “they seek to fashion a distinctive self in the only way they can conceive - by wearing the latest fashion.”²⁵²

Simmel also examines the importance of a person’s appearance within the dimensions of metropolitan life. It is not easy to assert one’s own personality in the metropolis and therefore one must seize “upon qualitative differentiation in order somehow to attract the attention of the social circle...”²⁵³ Man, Simmel argues, “is tempted to adopt the most tendentious peculiarities, that is, the specifically metropolitan extravagances of mannerism, caprice, and preciousness.”²⁵⁴ However, the meaning of these extravagances does not at all lie in “the contents of such behavior but rather in its

²⁵⁰ F.O. Matthiessen, “A Picture of Conditions,” in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, G.K. Hall & Co., Boston, MA, 1981, p. 183

²⁵¹ Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser, A Critical Study*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976, p. 91.

²⁵² Blanche Gelfant, “What More Carrie Wants? Naturalistic Ways of Consuming Women,” in *American Realism and Naturalism*, ed. Donald Pizer, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.182.

²⁵³ Simmel, p. 421.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 421.

form of 'being different' and standing out in striking manner and thereby attracting attention."²⁵⁵ Simmel concludes that for many people the self-esteem and the sense of filling a position happen only "through the awareness of others."²⁵⁶ Simmel's arguments correspond to those of Thorstein Veblen on the importance of dress as evidence of one's success and worth. Veblen asserts that in order to impress others one must show the expenditure on dress because "our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance."²⁵⁷ One's self-perception is largely constructed by comparison to the means of others around. Hence fashionable dressing becomes the chief expression of a person's desires not only to attain but also to confirm social status and power.

Carrie, similar to Lily and Undine, demonstrates obsession with fashionable dressing because it "constitutes a generally understood language of society." Lily believes that "a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself" (14). Undine religiously reads daily papers and society columns to follow the latest fashions. The women's overemphasis on dress clearly testifies to their limited choices and further demonstrates their role as decorative objects of consumption. For Carrie, fine clothes "were a vast persuasion," writes Dreiser, "they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves" (75). With Drouet's approval, she purchases a complete new wardrobe. Drouet also instructs Carrie how to dress and present herself by pointing to fashionable women as examples to emulate. "Drouet had a habit," describes Dreiser, "of looking after stylishly dressed or pretty women on the street and remarking upon them" and Carrie instinctively felt a desire to imitate them (76). He takes a real pleasure in observing

²⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 421.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 421.

²⁵⁷ Veblen, p. 54.

“admiringly” Carrie’s makeover: “his face lightened as he saw the improvement. She looked quite smart” (54). For him Carrie becomes a commodity that he could not only procure but decorate to his own fancy. She represents his visual pleasure and the source of his fantasies. Irene Gammel suggests that “Carrie’s desire for beauty and clothes is not her own, but is always already mediated in her society’s power structures. It is usually male lovers who play powerful roles in the “mediation” of female desire...”²⁵⁸ She concludes that Carrie goes through a true transformation under Drouet’s tutelage which inscribes on her body not only Drouet’s but also society’s conventional ideals of femininity and perfect beauty.”²⁵⁹ Above all, as Blanche Gelfant points out, Dreiser’s characters by desiring to dress well “fulfill the function of modern advertisements by associating commodities with satisfaction and social class and creating, in their well-fashioned selves, enviable images for shopper’s avid eye to see.”²⁶⁰

In addition to Drouet’s tutelage, Carrie works on her image by adding “little things which the pretty woman who has vanity invariably adopts” – like tossing up her head or catching her skirts with easy swing (79). She was “naturally imitative,” describes Dreiser, and soon “her knowledge of grace doubled,” “her appearance changed,” and “she became a girl of considerable taste” (79). Undine Spragg is also “passionately imitative.” She too transforms herself by watching, listening, and copying others in dress, speech and gesture. Carrie’s and Undine’s adaptability helps them to achieve many of their goals. Both women demonstrate more active attitudes in shaping their lives. They are also part of monumental changes taking place in society, in particular the growing

²⁵⁸ Irene Gammel, “Sexualizing the Female Body: Dreiser, Feminism, and Foucault,” in *Theodore Dreiser Beyond Naturalism*, ed. Miriam Gogol, New York: New York University Press, p. 45.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁶⁰ Gelfant, p. 181.

forces of social mobility. Dreiser's small-town lower class girl and Wharton's *nouveau riche* debutante demonstrate business-like practicality to succeed and attain a desirable status. They both aspire to reach the life of leisure and luxury so conspicuously displayed by upper class women like Lily. Lily's fine fashions and manners are models for emulation and praise. However, her life, embedded in the rigid norms of upper class society, turns out to be powerless. Lily's lack of self-determination results in her inability to change – she eventually drops out of her upper class circle and finds she is of no use anywhere else (236).

Through the consumption of Drouet's gifts, Carrie enhances her appearance dramatically. She admires her own image in the mirror, the evidence of change. The mirror represents her vanity and symbolizes her desirous and narcissist nature: "She could not help feeling pleased as she looked at herself. "A warm glow crept into her cheeks," Dreiser writes, "The mirror convinced her of a few things which she had long believed. She was pretty, yes indeed... She caught her little red lip with her teeth and felt her first thrill of power," "She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie there than she had seen before" (54, 58, 70). It is relevant to point out that in contrast to Carrie whose mirror images confirm the continuous signs of enhancements, Lily's reflections show the marks of deteriorating beauty. "The lines of her face came out terribly," she looked hollow, pale, and old (190). The image in the mirror denotes Lily's disillusionments and failures (281). Both women perceive their beauty as a major resource for a successful life, while ugliness represents insignificance and unworthiness. Lily and Carrie become fixated with their appearances because beauty is their only capital, their means of profitable exchange. Consequently the desires of these women to

dress well and look beautiful express their convictions that they would ultimately be included in the charmed circle of wealthy and powerful and therefore would be happy.

The showcase of latest fashions and the place of immediate gratification, if one has money, is the department store. Elaine Abelson writes that the central focus of the department store was the creation of desire as it embodied a vision of trouble-free abundance; hence it “encouraged consumption and desire beyond immediate need and means.”²⁶¹ Abelson notes that “women entered the stores on their own, for pleasure and for necessity, but they were increasingly and relentlessly courted as open-ended consumers.”²⁶² Continually bombarded by material objects and images of what money could buy,” writes Abelson, “many women saw in the stores the possibility of authenticating their own social status and ambitions.”²⁶³ Furthermore, “surrounded with new sights, sounds and smells, and the lack of fixed boundaries” women felt the overwhelming temptation to buy and inability to control themselves.²⁶⁴ Abelson’s analysis helps us to understand Carrie’s emotions as she wanders through the aisles of the commodity paradise. She is captivated by a dazzling display “of trinkets, dress goods, shoes, stationary, jewelry... There was nothing there which she could not have used – nothing which she did not long to own. The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair-combs, purses, all touched her with individual desire...” (17) Dreiser details Carrie’s emotions as she carefully paused at each individual object from corsets to jewelry and affectionately touched all the fineries noticing their decorations and colors. “Her women’s heart,” narrates the author, “was

²⁶¹ Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store*, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 6, 63.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

warm with desire of them. How would she look in this, how charming that would make her” (51). The objects agitated her insatiable wishes to possess them all: “What would she not have given if she could have had them all... She would look fine too, if only she had some of these things” (51). Fisher argues that the display of goods defines “the process of yearning, choosing, and imagining the transformations of the self by things, by others, and by places that the city proposes.”²⁶⁵ For Carrie, clothes possess an ultimate power – they are the sources of satisfaction and transformation. Furthermore, in her world clothes are animate commodities and have the ability to persuade seductively. “When she came with earshot of their pleading,” notes Dreiser, “desire in her bent a willing ear,” “ ‘My dear,’ said the lace collar, ‘I fit you beautifully; don’t give me up,’ ” “ ‘Ah, such little feet,’ said the leather of the soft new shoes; ‘how effectively I cover them’ ” (75). In commodity culture, as Stanley Corkin argues, “objects acquire a disproportionate meaning” serving as “vital components of self-definition, seemingly filling a void created by the alienation of industrial life.”²⁶⁶

As was the case with Drouet, Carrie’s relationship with Hurstwood also revolves around money and clothes. Hurstwood, the successful manager of a prestigious Chicago saloon, also likes to display his expensive outfits. He wears “excellent tailored suits of imported goods, a solitaire ring, a fine blue diamond in his tie, a striking vest of some new pattern, and a watch-chain of solid gold, which held a charm of rich design, and a watch of the latest make and engraving” (33). Upon their first meeting Carrie notices that Hurstwood’s clothes were particularly elegant, “new and rich in appearance” consisting of excellent materials, “rich Scottish plaid,” “double- row of mother-of-pearl buttons,”

²⁶⁵ Fisher, p. 133.

²⁶⁶ Stanley Corkin, “Sister Carrie and the Industrial Life: Objects and the New American Self,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 33, Number 4, Winter 1987, p. 607.

shiny silky cravat, and soft black leather shoes (72). She eventually rejects Drouet for Hurstwood because the latter was not only dressed better but was “more clever in hundreds ways” and displayed fine manners. Carrie instinctively felt that Hurstwood was the “superior man,” “stronger and higher” (73, 82) while Drouet was simply “dull” and “defective” (73, 82-83). In her quest for wealth and pleasure Carrie erroneously fused together material and personal qualities. Consequently she attributed much value to one’s external qualities. She puts “worth, goodness and distinction in a dress suit,” comments Dreiser, and leaves “all unlovely qualities and those beneath the notice in overalls and jumper” (31). As a result Hurstwood, “the man of money and affairs,” becomes a new object of Carrie’s desires. For Carrie, Hurstwood’s appearance and money promise a new and luxurious life. The dress and manner of Hurstwood deludes her as to the height and luxury of his position. She believes that his attraction to her means the entrance to that higher world, “the walled city,” which she craved. In both cases Carrie’s desires for men were not sexual but materialistic. However, as Irene Gammel rightly emphasizes, Carrie has “to travel the road of sex – she has to sleep with Drouet and Hurstwood – in order to fulfill her sensualized desire for a nice appearance.”²⁶⁷

Hurstwood, driven by a desire to have Carrie and facing intense conflicts with his wife, is unable to find ways to resolve his affairs until chance leads him to take ten thousand dollars. He discovers the money in his employer’s unlocked safe. “There is a solution,” he thought, “the money would do it,” he could have great opportunities with that, “he could get Carrie,” and “could get rid of his wife” (191). On the other hand, he also was seized by the dread of scandal, police and the terror of being a fugitive. In the end, torn between trepidation and temptation, Hurstwood takes the money and runs away

²⁶⁷ Gammel, p. 44.

with Carrie to Montreal. His appropriated fortune, however, was short lived as he had to return the money out of fear of criminal prosecution. In addition his estranged wife seized all his savings and property. For Hurstwood, the loss of money, reputation, job, family, and friends foreshadow the inevitability of his life's downward spiral.

While settled with Carrie in New York, Hurstwood came to a clear recognition that without much money and the network of his friends, he is forced "to begin the battle for place and comfort all over again" (215). It was distressing for him to calculate money for the rent, food, clothes, and entertainment as he had been accustomed to spend freely in the past. The lack of money reduced him to a commonplace existence as he became "an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York" (214). With time, Hurstwood's refined dress and manners, that had been so attractive to Carrie, changed into shabby clothes, an unshaven face, and moody attitudes. Paralyzed by his failures and unable to forget his high life in Chicago, he turned into quite a "disagreeable figure" (248). "Each day he could read in the evening papers of the doings within the walled city," narrates the author, "In the notices of passengers for Europe he read the names of eminent frequenters of his old resort... Men whom he had known, men whom he had tipped glasses with – rich men, and he was forgotten!" Gradually Hurstwood sank into passivity while Carrie came to a tormenting conclusion that "she had never achieved what she had expected" (242, 228). Her life, confined to the narrow little flat, became stale and uneventful and she could feel nothing but gnawing discontent toward Hurstwood. With Hurstwood's failure to adequately provide, Carrie began to drift away from him in search of new opportunities.

Their deteriorating relationship further emphasizes Carrie's self-centeredness as she simply expects to have money, clothes, and enjoyments but does not offer any kind of warmth or moral support to struggling Hurstwood. Instead she is only attracted to what is successful and beautiful. When Hurstwood had been agonizing over the dissolution of his New York saloon and finding a new place of employment, she could only shrug in resentment: "Yet, what have I got to do with it? ... Oh, why should I be made to worry?" (256). When Carrie eventually lands a good paying job as an actress she, nonetheless, is unwilling to support Hurstwood. She became more consumed with the display of her looks and clothes and "the showy world in which her interest lay completely absorbed her" (322). Any sympathy for Hurstwood," notes Dreiser, "vanished with these newer urgings of decency" as she continued to glide "in the metropolitan whirl of pleasure" (284, 323). In the end she abandons Hurstwood, leaving him a short note and twenty dollars. "Dear George," it read, "I am going away. I am not coming back... I would not mind helping you, if I could, but I can't support both of us, and pay the rent... I need what little I make to pay for my clothes. I am leaving twenty dollars..." (320). Ironically and symbolically it was the same amount of money, Carrie first received from Drouet that began her rise in the city from a small town girl to a celebrity actress whose purse "was bursting with comfortable denominations" (323). The possession of money and its lack completely altered the lives of both characters – for Carrie it finally opened the gates of the walled city while Hurstwood was thrown outside as a discarded object. While Carrie, seduced by success and fortune, was busy accumulating "pretty clothes, pleasing trinkets," homeless, Hurstwood was reduced to begging for food and shelter (323). Donald Pizer poignantly concludes that Carrie had discovered the wonder of the city

while Hurstwood found its terror.²⁶⁸ Once considered a man of money and affairs, he became nothing. With the loss of money and clothes Hurstwood has “no exchange value” – he is a nameless body in the market economy.²⁶⁹ Above all, seen through Simmel’s lenses, the money not only dominates the lives of Dreiser’s characters but becomes a frightful leveler of all values that irreparably hollows out their lives and individuality. The relationships among the characters are not stable and all based on the purchasing ability of their pockets. True love and friendships are replaced by commodity relationships – everything is quantified and has a price.²⁷⁰

In the world where personal relationships are imbedded in commodity culture an individual becomes a commodity too. Dreiser not only chronicles Carrie’s desires for money and clothes but also portrays her as being an object of desire - herself a commodity for consumption. Stanley Corkin writes Carrie “is an object among other objects,” and “her humanity itself becomes commodified...”²⁷¹ Both Drouet and Hurstwood were attracted to Carrie’s youth, naiveté, and beauty. Drouet was a man who loved to make advances on pretty women and liked them to succumb to his charms. “His inborn desire,” notes Dreiser, “urged him to that as a chief delight” (49). Following the seduction of Carrie with money and pretty clothes, Drouet was pleased with the subsequent triumph, “oh, how delicious is my conquest” (68). Hurstwood, a married man, also drew near Carrie in anticipation of uncharted experiences. He equated her image with a lily, waxen and fresh, and he longed to have her.

²⁶⁸ Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser, A Critical Study*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1976, p. 84.

²⁶⁹ Gelfant, p. 183.

²⁷⁰ Lehan, p. 70.

²⁷¹ Stanley Corkin, “Sister Carrie and the Industrial Life: Objects and the New American Self,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 33, Number 4, Winter 1987, p. 608.

The manifestation of both men's desires is most apparent in the scene of Carrie's first successful amateur performance. "Both Hurstwood and Drouet viewed her pretty figure with rising feelings. The fact that such ability should reveal itself in her - that they should see it set forth under such effective circumstance - framed almost in massy gold and shone upon by the appropriate lights of sentiment and personality, heightened her charm for them" (137). For both of them, Carrie's performance on the stage was transformed into the means of enunciating their visual pleasure, fantasies and obsessions. This corresponding relation between female actress and male viewer brings to mind Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."²⁷²

Mulvey writes that cinema creates a source of pleasure – scopophilia. It portrays a "hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy."²⁷³ She discusses classical Hollywood cinema as embedded in patriarchal culture where images of woman on the screen, coded for strong visual and erotic impact, become a signifier for the male viewer's desire. Mulvey argues that in classical Hollywood cinema the visual pleasure and identification are essentially masculine. They reinforce the controlling position of the man, the holder of the gaze and submissive behavior of woman, who is portrayed as an object of male's desire or "to-be-look-at-ness."²⁷⁴ Mulvey's assertion that classical Hollywood cinema with its dominant male subjectivity emphasizes patriarchal oppression and cannot give the controlling power of the camera to a female gaze has proven to be problematic. The oppressively gendered approach limits not only viewers' but also critics' response to the film. In her later works,

²⁷² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16, Autumn, 1975, pp. 6-18.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 6-7.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 8.

however, Mulvey attempted to create a more nuanced account. She refined the notion of the female spectator and thus recognized that “masculine” and “feminine” cannot be determined as the essential viewing categories because they are socially constructed and historically shifting.²⁷⁵ Many other film theorists have also reexamined the polarized heterosexual imperative of the discourse that gave rise to the dominance of “the male gaze” and have argued that spectators’ identification is a far more complex system of social, historical and cultural interrelations.²⁷⁶

Nonetheless Mulvey’s analysis can be useful if placed within a specific historical period where women’s social and psychological realities were circumscribed by male power and money. For the majority of women beauty and sex were considered to be major components of their successes. Mulvey’s argument on women’s objectification through the “male gaze” and hence the projection of male desires is pertinent to my study in the way that it frames the images of women in a time where processes of commodification, display, spectatorship, and commercial exchange were so prevalent.

In Mulvey’s terms Carrie’s appearance on the theatrical stage represents “symbolic order” in which Drouet and Hurstwood can live out their desires. Both men’s rising feelings are sexualized in the text. Hurstwood could hardly control himself and gazed at her “with slightly parted lips” while Drouet was “beside himself,” “fidgiting with satisfaction,” longing to be alone with her at home (137, 139). Observing Carrie’s acting, Hurstwood thought that she was beautiful and “felt a keen delight in realizing that she was his.” (134) Hurstwood ultimately resolved that “he would have that lovely girl if

²⁷⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by *Duel in the Sun*,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana University Press, 1989.

²⁷⁶ The works of Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 and Kaya Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, New York: Routledge, 1992 provide useful critiques of the subject.

it took his all. He should act at once” and Drouet decided that he would marry her (139, 140). “The two men were in the most harrowed state of affection,” observes Dreiser, “they saw their idol, moving about with appealing grace, continuing a power which to them was a revelation” (140). Carrie enjoyed her acting success, she liked to be petted, “admired and sought for” (141).

Later Carrie’s performances as a professional actress also incited possessive desires from the men in the theater. There were “the portly gentlemen in the front rows” who felt that she was “a delicious little morsel” whom they would love to appropriate and cover with kisses (326). “All the gentlemen,” writes Dreiser, “yearned toward her. She was a capital” (326). Furthermore Carrie began to receive frequent notes from men, who being attracted to her beauty and fame, wanted to buy her attentions and love. “I have a million of my own right,” pleaded one, “I could give you every luxury,” and there “isn’t anything you could ask for that you couldn’t have” (333). In the eyes of Drouet, Hurstwood, and other men, Carrie functioned as a desired commodity for pleasure and satisfaction.

The role of Carrie’s beauty and its objectification by male admirers is analogous to those of Wharton’s heroines Lily Bart and Undine Spragg. All these women experience exhilarating sensations when being watched and admired. They learn to regard themselves as observed objects and therefore their sense of self is confirmed under males’ approving gazes. Lily is always inspired to show herself off and thrives when she elicits viewers’ praise. The *tableaux vivants* scene is one such example. With great enthusiasm, Lily seizes the opportunity to display her loveliness under the new light as Reynolds’ *Mrs. Lloyd*. Her successful presentation becomes a triumphant confirmation

of her beauty that “expanded like a flower in sunlight” (146). Similarly when Undine shows herself at the ball in Empress Josephine dress, she has a pleasing recognition that people’s “admiration was all for herself, and her beauty deepened under it as flowers take a warmer color in the rays of sunset” (144). Undine is also thrilled by the possibility of displaying her lavish portrait at the upcoming art show. The anticipation of the event “left a glow in her veins” and obscured “all other impressions” (126). As is the case with Carrie, the display of these women incites possessive desires from men. Watching Lily’s performance at *tableaux vivants*, Selden “felt an overmastering longing to be with her again” (145). For other male viewers, Trenor, Rosedale, Van Alstyne, she became an object of their erotic desires. They were clearly mesmerized by the sensuous curves of her body. Similarly Undine’s portrait in splendid shining costume provokes Van Degen’s desires. In time Undine, a married woman, accepts Van Degen’s attention because his money allows her to indulge in frivolous spending she craves so much. In all these cases, the attitudes of men signify the existing gender relationship ruled by their purchasing power. The physical attractiveness of Carrie, Lily and Undine becomes a desirable commodity for men’s acquisition. The objectification of these women clearly conveys societal mores where women’s physical beauty becomes a main measure of her value.

In her relentless quest for wealth and status, Carrie is in constant motion from Columbia City to Chicago to New York. The move from the Hanson’s to Drouet, then to Hurstwood, and finally to the luxurious rooms of Wellington Hotel, represents milestones of her upward journey. Each new phase of her life brings some sense of satisfaction but does not last long because the desire to have more pushes Carrie onward. The roots of Carrie’s desires are embedded in her surrounding environment as she constantly

internalizes and evaluates what she sees in relation to her present state. Consequently she constructs her self-image in comparison to the means of other people around. Carrie's feelings and actions reflect Veblen's social concepts of "invidious comparison" and "pecuniary emulation." In his work *On the Theory of the Leisure Class* Veblen writes that invidious comparison "is a process of valuation of persons in respect of worth."²⁷⁷ Hence the motive that lies at the root of ownership is nothing but emulation. People tend to observe, contrast and then attempt to emulate the lives and attitudes of desirable people.

From the moment Carrie arrived in Chicago her perception of herself is created by "invidious comparison" to others as she attempts to emulate clothes, manners, and lifestyles of desirable people. One of the strongest manifestations of this psychological process is described in the scene when Carrie first visits the wealthiest part of Chicago. Riding through the North Side of the city, Carrie was mesmerized by the display of luxurious mansions with richly carved entranceways and magnificent interiors. She gazed and gazed at the palatial houses "wondering, delighting, and longing" (86). If she could only "stroll up yon broad walk" and "sweep in grace and luxury to possession and command" then her sadness would flee. She was perfectly certain that inside these places were no care or unsatisfied desire, but only happiness (86). When Carrie came back to her modest rooms rented by Drouet, she clearly saw their "comparative insignificance." What is more, Carrie did not contrast them with "what she had had, but what she had recently seen" (87). "The glow of palatial doors was still in her eye, the roll of cushioned carriages still in her ears. What, after all was Drouet? What was she?" (87) Likewise New York's moneyed life – its "finery, merriment, and beauty" made a profound impression on Carrie. "Oh, these women who had passed by her, hundreds and hundreds strong, who

²⁷⁷ Veblen, p. 22.

were they? Whence came the rich, elegant dresses, the astonishingly colored buttons, the knick-knacks of silver and gold?... Amid what elegancies of carved furniture, decorated walls, elaborate tapestries did they move? ... Oh, the mansions, the lights, the perfume, the loaded boudoirs and tables!" (28) Carrie saw that these women were "spending money like water" and "she had scarcely enough pin money to indulge" (229). She was sure she had not seen it all but began to conceive a new idea of possibilities of New York.

Veblen argues that as long as the comparison is distinctly unfavorable, as the case with Dreiser's heroine, "the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot."²⁷⁸ When a person reaches "the normal pecuniary standard" of his class in the community, writes Veblen, he still cannot be completely satisfied. Similarly Carrie achieves certain comforts of living with Drouet and with Hurstwood but, nonetheless, she cannot be fully content because the vicious cycle of desires stirs all over again. For Veblen such dissatisfaction will turn into a chronic and restless need "to place a wider and ever –widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average standard."²⁷⁹ Eventually Carrie attains fame and money which she had been craving all along but achieves no fulfillment. In fact the narrative's recurring image of Carrie in her rocking chair, moving back and forth but going nowhere, symbolically points to the futility of her desires.²⁸⁰ For an observer, Carrie's upward journey from the dreariness of a small town to luxurious quarters in New York's Wellington hotel symbolizes the fulfillment of the American dream. But Dreiser cautions the reader about the elusiveness

²⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 20.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 20

²⁸⁰ Leon Seltzer, "Sister Carrie and the Hidden Longing for Love: Sublimation or Subterfuge," *Twentieth Century Literature*, May 1976., p. 200.

and temporariness of Carrie's established façade. In her heart she still remains desirous and unsatisfied.

As Carrie became a prominent actress, her social world expanded. However, she still could not feel any "warm, sympathetic friendship back in the easy merriment with which many approached her."²⁸¹ People were still disconnected and selfish, seeking their own amusement "regardless of the possible sad consequences to others." Metropolis, concluded Carrie, is a cold place socially, and she soon found out that money brought her nothing. Ironically, the world of wealth and distinction was quite as far away as ever. Carrie's desire for material wealth resulted from her desire to attain happiness. She had always believed that wealth and status would make her a part of the viable society, within the walled city, and thus she would be satisfied. However, her conviction proved to be wrong because her isolation and longings were still in place. Carrie's life that lacks any true fulfillment and meaningful associations directly reflects Emile Durkheim's ideas on the corresponding relationship between the rise of material desires and the state of anomie.

Durkheim, similar to Veblen and Simmel, studied connections between individuals and society to show how individual's acts derive from the social world around them. "Society is not only something attracting the sentiments and activities of individuals with unequal force," observes Durkheim, but "is also a power controlling them."²⁸² One of the complex manifestations derived from interrelation between society and an individual is anomie. The concept of anomie, especially its connection to a person's desires, is pertinent to this paper and needs further analysis. Durkheim argues

²⁸¹ Dreiser, p. 512.

²⁸² Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, New York: Free Press, 1951, p. 241.

that anomie happens in a society that does not have social standards and values which would limit individual desires. Anomie, he explains, “results from man’s activity lacking regulation” which in turn brings “his consequent suffering.”²⁸³ Individual desires, he observes, are insatiable by nature and therefore “they constantly and infinitely surpass the means at their command; they cannot be quenched.”²⁸⁴ Such insatiability “is rightly considered a sign of morbidity” because no living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means. Therefore society must establish confines on individual desires that would be fair and satisfactory; when, however, such regulations are missing people experience anomie. What is more, anomie develops when society goes through rapid economic changes that disturb its social equilibrium. Durkheim writes that in the state of anomie “society’s influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein.”²⁸⁵

He defines anomie as a personal condition caused by mismatch between individual circumstances and larger social mores. The increasing forces of industrialization and urbanization led to the expansion of commercial capitalism that dramatically altered personal relations and values. Durkheim observes that in modern society, especially in the spheres of trade and industry, anomie became a “chronic state.”²⁸⁶ “Industry,” he writes, “instead of being still regarded as a means to an end transcending itself has become the supreme end of individuals and societies alike.”²⁸⁷ There is no limiting authority but infinite extension of the market and liberation of desires. “From top to bottom of the ladder,” Durkheim continues, “greed is aroused

²⁸³ Ibid, p. 258.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 247.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 258.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 254.

²⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 255.

without knowing where to find ultimate foothold. Nothing can calm it, since its goal is far beyond all it can attain.”²⁸⁸ As prosperity increases so does individual desires – it is a perpetual state in search of “novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savor once known.”²⁸⁹ The endless pursuit without achieving satisfaction or creating a solid foundation for happiness results in the state of de-regulation or anomie.

Durkhiem also observes that in a state of anomie the traditional rules and the whole system of moral forces either lost their authority or are not in place.²⁹⁰ For generations religion had been a major source of consolation and taught people to be content “with their lot by informing them of the providential nature of social order.”²⁹¹ It also held out the hope “for just compensation in a world to come in return for inequalities of this world.”²⁹² Religion instructed people to subordinate themselves to higher interests rather than selfish desires and satisfactions. But in modern society religion lost its sustaining power thus reflecting the Nietzschean pronouncement on the death of God.

In addition to religion, government too lost its influence on people. Durkheim criticizes the government which “instead of regulating economic life has become its tool and servant.” It is no longer the guardian of individual contracts and “does not have any power to subordinate other social organs to itself and make them converge toward one dominant aim.”²⁹³ Consequently modern culture that does not have supporting powers of social institutions creates an anomic, uprooted, and lonely individual. Durkheim’s critical

²⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 256.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 256.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 253-254.

²⁹¹ Ibid, p. 254.

²⁹² Ibid, p. 254.

²⁹³ Ibid, p. 255.

scrutiny of modern society, its materialistic values, its fragmentation and individuality finds its reflections in Dreiser's novel. Seen through Durkheim's lenses, the world of *Sister Carrie* is materialistic and lonely. Carrie Meeber, George Hurstwood, and Charley Drouet long for money and status but none of them achieves happiness.

Throughout the narrative Dreiser demonstrates that the life of his heroine lacked any attachments or emotional associations. Carrie's early life in Columbia City is left vague suggesting the absence of any deep family ties. There is no mention of her mother, other siblings, or friends. In Chicago her relationship with her sister Minnie is portrayed as lacking warmth and affections. Meeting Carrie at the train station, Minnie gave her a "perfunctory embrace of welcome" that carried with her much of the grimness of shift and toil (8). In fact with her sister, notes Dreiser, "she was much alone, a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea" (8). One can interpret Carrie's interactions with her sister as an index of her relationships within the family. Living together with Minnie and her husband Carrie felt isolated and unhappy; she was even more lonely, the dull situation becoming harder to endure. When she finally left the Hansons, she never looked back for them, as though they had never existed. Likewise Carrie never searched for refuge back home in Columbia City. In no way did she ever mention or think about her family.

It is important to mention that the sense of connectedness to the family and the sustaining powers of society were also absent in Lily Bart's life. Throughout her life Lily encountered many setbacks that deepened her isolation. "The miserable clutch of solitude," writes Wharton, wounded her heart and she felt "being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years" (338). As the events of the novel progress Lily continues to experience an increasing and painful sense of loneliness – she

“couldn’t bear to be alone;” she “stood apart from the general movement, feeling herself for the first time utterly alone. No one looked at her, no one seemed aware of her presence; she was probing the very depths of insignificance,” she had “the doomed sense of the castaway who has signaled in vain to fleeing sails;” she “discovered an increasing sense of loneliness - dread of returning to the solitude of her room, while she could be anywhere else, or in a company but her own;” she “felt a sudden pang of profound loneliness;” and “the sense of loneliness returned with redoubled force...” (174, 236, 242, 311, 320, 325). In the end, Lily, unhappy and disillusioned, took an overdose of chloral to finally escape the pressures of her social environment. Carrie, in spite of reaching artistic fame and financial success, came to the same disquieting recognition that she was lonely and could not be happy.

Carrie’s interminable longings are dramatized throughout the novel although at times she is uncertain what she wants the most. “She wanted pleasure, she wanted position, and yet,” marks Dreiser, “she was confused as to what these things might be” (107). Donald Pizer suggests that for Carrie and other characters the search for pleasure and social position has been essentially a search for warmth. “The pursuit of warmth,” he writes, “results in temporary human connections, but eventually pursuit estranges men from each other as each figure shapes his life, or is shaped by life, in relation to the distinctive nature of seeking.”²⁹⁴ Similarly down beneath Lily’s desires for wealth and status was longing for warmth, comfort, love, connectedness, and a true community. “What Lily craved,” writes Wharton “was the darkness made by enfolding arms, the silence which is not solitude, but compassion holding its breath” (158). In one of the

²⁹⁴ Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser, a Critical Study*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976, p. 95.

difficult moments of her life, Lily begs Gerty Farrish, the only person who probably truly cared for her, to hold her in her arms “pillowing her head in its hollow as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child” (178). However, only toward the end of her life was Lily able to witness the “first glimpse of continuity of life” when Nettie Struther, a working class woman, invited her for a visit. Sitting in the warmth of Nettie’s kitchen and holding her newborn baby Lily came to a realization that the central truth of existence is happiness and love. With Nettie’s child in her arms, Lily felt that “the frozen currents of youth had loosed themselves and run warm in her veins” (339). The presence of a child manifests a profound symbolism of life and love. As Lily dies, it is a dream of Nettie’s child that came to her mind. When holding it, she felt the warmth and tender pressure of its body and at that moment she knew she was happy and the sense of loneliness had finally vanished” (342). Both Carrie and Lily, as seen through Durkheim’s analysis, are uprooted and lonely, have only fragmented relationships and thus experience anomie. Their circumstances, dilemmas, and outcomes are direct consequences of a culture that promoted money as the key measure of all things.

Carrie’s relationships with men, Drouet and Hurstwood, were instrumental to her rather than marked by love and devotion. Her involvement with Drouet quickly came to end when she met Hurstwood, a more financially promising figure. Similarly Carrie left Hurstwood when he could not support her any longer. Her social connections were also temporary and superficial. She spent her idle hours with Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Vance but had never experienced any sense of true friendship. Love and companionship were missing in Carrie’s life – instead all her contacts are rooted in commodity relationships. When Carrie finally reached artistic fame and her photo was published in the paper she

thought of buying a few copies but remembered there was no one she knew well enough to send them to. In the end she came to a painful conclusion that success and material comforts did not bring her inner peace or happiness. According to Durkheim, a person who endlessly pursues his or her desires without achieving any satisfaction or happiness is affected by a chronic state of anomy. By employing Durkheim's definition of anomy one can understand Carrie's state of being bounded by the world of material culture – its endless range of consuming desires without ever being content. Carrie's life is lonely, the sign of happiness is lost, and anomie pervades. She is the product of her culture and her desires were essentially socially constructed and reflect the fundamental realities of her environment. Carrie, as Richard Lehan sees it, will be subject to desire as long as she is part of her environment, the city which instills desires. "As the coda of the novel clearly tells us," he writes, "such desire will never be satisfied; the whole logic of the city is to excite and stimulate, to postulate a simultaneous realm of compelling possibilities."²⁹⁵

Dreiser's novel shows how cultural meanings are created within material objects and how a society constructs the individual's identity by means of desire. Carrie's dreams and aspirations are fueled by desires for the pleasures of life – to be part of the "walled city" and its alluring show of money and status. By longing to be a part of the city's leisure and luxuries, Carrie not only acts as a consumer of conspicuous life-style but also became consumed by Drouet's and Hurstwood's money. Carrie, similar to Wharton's heroines, Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, used her beauty as a form of commodity - the main capital of exchange to attain economic security. For these women, money became the governing agency of all their relationships and the measure of their social status, leisure and beauty. They were obsessed with exterior surfaces of display and therefore

²⁹⁵ Lehan, p. 72.

channeled all their desires in the relentless pursuit of money. For Carrie, Lily and Undine material success equated with overall means of achieving happiness. In contrast to Wharton's characters, however, in the end Carrie gained financial independence through her acting career. Nonetheless her upward journey was an exception to the lives of the majority of women. Bound by social and cultural constructions of femininity, their lives were still heavily dependent on men's purchasing powers.

Sister Carrie is Dreiser's fictional attempt to depict some of the effects of industrial, urban and consumer oriented American culture created in little more than a generation after the Civil War. He depicts the excitement and desolation of urban life where pressures to attain money and status often overshadowed conventional moral behavior. Dreiser's novel reaffirms the sociological critiques of his contemporaries Simmel, Veblen, and Durkheim, where the themes of objectification, material desires, consumption, and anomie permeate. Dreiser, in tune with Simmel, recognized the overwhelming forces of modern metropolis that can shape one's personal life by imposing psychological conditions in the multitude of social and economic lives. Simmel's view of "objective spirit" dominating the "subjective spirit" reflects Dreiser's notion of desire. Desire, more specifically consuming desire, is a dynamic force that controls Carrie's life. Each step of Carrie's upward movement is propelled by desire to have more. She constantly internalizes and evaluates what she has in comparison to the possessions of other people. Carrie's self-identity is constructed through what Veblen describes as "invidious comparison" and "pecuniary emulation." She builds her life by emulating and consuming the dresses, styles, and manners of desirable people. For Durkheim individual desires are insatiable by nature and cannot be satisfied. His analysis

clearly replicates Carrie's story in which sense of continuous longing and disappointments prevail. Durkheim writes that a person blinds himself by expectation "to find further on the happiness he had so far missed. Now he is stopped in his tracks; from now on nothing remains behind or ahead of him to fix his gaze upon. Weariness alone, moreover, is enough to bring disillusionment, for he cannot in the end escape the futility of an endless pursuit."²⁹⁶ The endless pursuit of desirable things without attaining fulfillment or happiness results in the state of anomie. Anomie finds a free reign in materialistic society where traditional systems of moral forces such as family, religion, and government are either absent or too weak to provide any sustaining support to individuals. All along Carrie believed that wealth and status would bring her into viable companionship and therefore she would achieve happiness within the city of her dreams. However, without real community, family ties, or meaningful associations Carrie remains lonely and unsatisfied. The image of Carrie rocking in her chair at the beginning and the end of the novel suggests the circularity of the motion, the futility of her dreams as she moves nowhere. Pizer writes that Dreiser wants his reader to understand that nothing has really happened to Carrie. Even though her outer conditions have changed she is essentially and morally the same and thus she will continue to search.²⁹⁷ The story's last lines bear the same thought: "In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel" (369).

²⁹⁶ Durkheim, p. 256.

²⁹⁷ Pizer, p. 67.

CHAPTER IV

CONSUMER CULTURE AND REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN PAINTINGS FROM 1880-1910

American artists, similar to the writers of the period, were influenced by the encompassing changes brought by the rise of consumer culture. This chapter will investigate how the works of American painters articulated the affects of consumer culture with regard to the images of women. As I have discussed in previous chapters the consumer ideology made transformative changes on society as a whole but in particular altered the lives of women, their social role and cultural image. The expansion of commercialized leisure and entertainment venues such as shops, theaters, restaurants, hotels, dance halls, parks, and promenades drew women into public arenas. For women the cultural shift from the privacy of their homes to public spaces constructed new modes of relationships expressed in the dynamics of display and spectatorship. By actively partaking in the processes of consumption, women turned into the most visible icons of consumer culture. The growing aspects of commercialization and consumerism also modified the visual culture of the period and placed women at the center of marketing strategies. Magazine and newspaper advertisements, posters, department store catalogues and window displays were saturated with images of beautiful and fashionable women. They intended to appeal to the desires of all women by promising glamour, beauty, happiness, and the overall transformation of their lives, and were crucial in creating women's self-images. It is not surprising therefore that the depiction of women became

one important subject of American art during the period. In their works artists often identified women with fashion, consumption, leisure, and beauty.

This chapter will examine how these images embody the contemporary attitudes and perceptions toward women. On the one hand, women's social role had been increasingly identified with that of consumer of products and services, but on the other hand, her symbolic role had been consigned to that of a commodity. The study sets out to investigate how such views reflected women's socio-economic status as well as the existing gender ideology of the period. Do they reinforce or challenge the traditional opinions on women's place and role in the society? The aim of this chapter is to interpret the range of images that not only provide a visual record of the period but help us to understand the prevailing changes in society where women's appearance and behavior was subject to the dictates of fashion and beauty.

There is a substantial body of literature devoted to the analysis of visual representation of women. The important studies by Sara Burns, Holly Pyne Connor, Bailey Van Hook, Linda Nochlin, Kathy Peiss, Kathleen Pyne, and Ellen Wiley Todd became guiding essentials for my research and helped me to formulate my own points of view.²⁹⁸ The sources I have consulted discussed the images of women concentrating on artistic, cultural, societal, and historical discourses. In this chapter I attempt to show that the prevalence of women's images in the works of American artists can be also interpreted in relation to the rise of consumer culture. I read the representations of women

²⁹⁸ Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), Holly Pyne Connor, ed. *Off the Pedestal: New Women in the Art of Homer, Chase, and Sargent*, (New Jersey: Newark, 2006), Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women*, (New York, 1999), Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Leisure in Turn-of-The-Century New York*, (PA: Temple University Press, 1986), Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), Ellen Wiley Todd, *The 'New Woman' Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street*, (California: Berkley, 1993).

as visual record of the period steeped in the processes of accumulation and display. Material culture became an influential force in affecting the lives of women and constructing their self-images.

The culture of consumption produced new modes of relationships articulated in patterns of display and spectatorship. According to Sarah Burns this culture put a strong emphasis on one's outward appearance and behavior which were increasingly equated with who a person was, displacing older notions of inner character as the true index of worth.²⁹⁹ "Appearances as means of announcing and decoding the individual," she writes, "assumed increasing importance. The social performance and the concept of the self defined by consumption- colors selected, ornaments chosen, taste in wallpaper and bric-a-brac – became the vehicles by which status and personality communicated themselves."³⁰⁰ Furthermore, consumer culture strongly endorsed the pursuit of leisure and entertainment as essential facets of modern urban life. For women it meant more times spent in public realms and subsequently more emphasis on their appearance. Griselda Pollock observes that "Women of fashion and marriageability were the desiring consumers of luxury goods, bought to turn themselves into the most luxurious and desirable object on the marriage market. They strove to become the objects through whose display men competed with each other in the stakes of class and wealth."³⁰¹

Women's fashions and possessions articulated enviable status and communicated their material worth and social success. Furthermore, fashionable dressing and

²⁹⁹ Sarah Burns, "The American Personality in the Age of American Impressionism," *Crosscurrent in American Impressionism at the Turn of the century*, ed. William Eiland, Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 1996, p. 46.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 46.

³⁰¹ Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt – Painter of Modern Women*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998, p. 56.

entertainments were no longer the privilege of wealthy women but were also available to women with modest means. They too could pamper themselves by procuring new products and satisfy their desires with inexpensive imitations of more costly merchandise. In addition the growing number of employed middle and lower class women could afford pleasurable activities such as going to the theater, dining, and dancing. These goods and services promised women the fulfillment and transformations that were missing in everyday life. They provided emotional release from societal entrapments and women could assert their agency through purchasing and by being in charge of leisure choices and decision making practices. The majority of women willingly conformed to the imperatives of commodity culture through the endless pursuit of fashions, beauty, and amusements. Wharton's upper class beauty Lily Bart and nouveaux riche debutante Undine Spragg together with Dreiser's small town girl Carrie Meeber represent women of various social strata who became active partakers of such processes. Material culture created the socially-constructed phenomenon where women became inevitable components of the processes of commodification, spectatorship and commercial exchange in their quest for leisure and entertainment.

In addition women's move into public arenas also articulated larger social transformations taking place in their lives. Marianne Doezema writes that the visual image of the American woman of this period "took on particular importance helping shape changing concepts of femininity and thus challenging the parameters of the women's sphere."³⁰² At the turn of the century more women aspired to get college education, pursue professional careers, and engage in political activism. Such actions

³⁰² Marianne Doezema, "Representing Women," in *Life's Pleasures – The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure, 1895-1925*, New York: Merrell, 2007, p. 75.

greatly challenged the traditional beliefs about women's role and place in society. The deeply rooted Victorian values identified women's place and role first and foremost at home where her talents and inclinations were fulfilled. Her vocation was to manage housework, raise children, support her husband, and also provide a moral and spiritual base for her family. Moreover, the home was thought to be a realm of the Perfect Lady where she could practice and demonstrate her sophisticated tastes, values, and culture. A 1913 decorating manual put it simply: "We are sure to judge a woman in whose house we find ourselves for the first time, by her surroundings. We judge her temperament, her habits, her inclinations, by the interior of her home."³⁰³ While American households were commonly regarded as women's sphere, the prosaic pursuit of money and career in the public was left to their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Such conventional notions about women began to change signaling a profound cultural shift away from clear demarcation between public and private spheres of life. With more activities outside the home women turned into prominent partakers of modern life. They built up their public roles through employment, education, social activism as well as leisure and entertainment. The influences of consumer culture on women's appearance and behavior were part of greater changes happening in society. The culture of consumption served as a powerful force reinforcing the societal standards and norms in relation to women's roles and place.

Turn of the century American paintings provide a challenging and yet pertinent focus for the discussion of commodity culture and its influences on the images of women. Two major artistic movements created a visual record of the period -- Impressionism and Realism. Both groups abandoned "the traditional notion that art must draw its inspiration

³⁰³ Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007, p. 13.

from myth, religion, history, or other art, inverting the academic emphasis on culture over nature.”³⁰⁴ Instead they captured the emergence of new social settings, habits, and ideals of their own time and place. One of the most popular subjects involved the depiction of leisure, recreation, and entertainment. Painters represented the vignettes of modern life in parks, cafés, operas, dance halls, shopping, and sport activities. In addition American Impressionists like their French counterparts created landscapes, figures, and genre paintings that emphasized beautiful settings with delicate observations of light, color, and atmosphere. Dynamic brushstrokes along with subdued or vibrant hues aimed to capture the fleeting moments of the day and timeless splendors of the world. The majority of American Impressionists, including John Singer Sargent, William Merritt Chase, Childe Hassam, Mary Cassatt, Frank Weston Benson, Joseph De Camp, Edmund Charles Tarbell, and William McGregor Paxton, came from affluent backgrounds. They illustrated the scenes and social environments that would safeguard genteel traditions in art. They avoided controversial subjects, such as the problems of urban life with its scenes of misery and depravation. Above all they aimed to create aesthetically pleasing and refined worlds of middle and upper class society. As a result they depicted idealized, attractive and elegantly dressed women in the beauty and luxury of their homes, being entertained at the opera, resting in the countryside, and strolling in the parks while enjoying the tranquility of perfect sunshine within idyllic settings.

Realists’ choices of social settings were different from Impressionists. In the mid-1890s a number of young American artists - William Glakens, George Bellows, Everett Shinn, Robert Henry, and John Sloan - turned their attention to the lives of ordinary

³⁰⁴ *American Impressionism and Realism: The Paintings of Modern Life, 1885-1915*, eds. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994, p. 5.

people. These artists became the core of an artistic movement called the Ashcan school. They disregarded Impressionist aesthetics and the sophisticated world of affluent people. Instead they enthusiastically embraced the robust energy of the modern city where working class people take center stage. Realists were more responsive than Impressionists in engaging new social trends like immigration and the growth of popular entertainment. Many American realists had a background working as illustrators for the press and therefore they were probably more attuned to the transformative developments of commercial life of modern urban America. In contrast to Impressionist works, Realist portrayals of women are neither idealized nor sheltered in secluded environments. As a result Realist images portray women as self-assured and independent, actively pursuing a variety of urban ventures.

Prior to the analysis of artistic works it is appropriate to recognize the influences of consumer culture on the role and place of the artists themselves. Burns in her book *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* writes about the processes through which artists “responded, reacted to, and were remodeled by new conditions of producing and marketing their work, and themselves, in rapidly urbanizing and incorporating society in which mass culture, spectacle, commercialism, and consumerism were fast becoming common denominators of modern experience.”³⁰⁵ She argues that in the culture of display artists had to use an arsenal of marketing and retailing strategies similar to those developed to sell vast quantities of merchandise. Analogous to advertisement strategies self-portraits, portraits of colleagues, illustrations and photographs in magazines and newspapers presented something of a corporate

³⁰⁵ Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 2.

appearance among artists.³⁰⁶ She writes that the visual representations of artists tended to emphasize elegance, good grooming, and sometimes a certain aloofness. There was an accent on the artist's dress, accessories, and demeanor that would suggest a secure and superior status.³⁰⁷ Artists paid special attention in demonstrating their works. Frames, picture-glass, and shadow boxes lined with crimson plush were among devices used by artists to create a seductive illusion of greater worth. In addition, networking became an even more important part of the artist's career. The American art market was highly competitive largely due to collectors' preference for European art works. The growing number of clubs such as *The Union League*, the *Manhattan*, the *Century*, the *Lotus*, and the *Palette* played a dynamic role in artists' social networking and building patronage with prosperous professional and business collectors.³⁰⁸ In the culture of rapidly growing commercialism and consumerism, artists reacted accordingly by networking, promoting themselves, and their works.

Moreover, the commercial success of artists depended on the appearance of their studios. Decorated studios with dazzling displays of beautiful objects and exotic bibelots arranged for maximum effect symbolized the artist's sophistication, material success and bohemian unconventionality.³⁰⁹ Burns writes that opulent interiors of the studios were inseparable from the image of flourishing, cosmopolitan painters in urban America. In a sense the artistic studio became a seductive wonderland of sights, sounds, smells, and textures. Burns makes a comparative analogy of artists' studios to department stores. "To sell their goods," she writes, "both had to perform and perfect the strategies of

³⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 35.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 35.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 28.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 49-50.

showman.”³¹⁰ Both environments encompass the universe of commodities and thus seek to awaken desire by appealing to the imagination through skillfully arranged things. Visitors to an artist’s studio or shoppers at department stores were presented with displays of glamorized objects for exploration and delight.

The photographs of William Merritt Chase’s studio on 10th Street, New York are good examples of such displays (Figure 8 and Figure 9). They reveal a lavish exhibit of objects from around the world – intricately carved pieces of furniture, tapestries, fabrics, carpets, shiny pieces of armor, statuettes, exotic masks, delicate porcelains, pottery, and paintings among many other things. One can only imagine a visitor’s entrancement and desire in the midst of this overwhelming array of commodities. Ronald Pisano writes that the exotic nature of Chase’s studio was undoubtedly planned to satisfy the artist’s own temperament.³¹¹ However, he continues, equally important “was the attention it generated, thereby attracting both pupils and portrait commissions.”³¹² The studio’s magnificent contents became a testimony to Chase’s fine taste and his conspicuous success. He, as Pisano observes, “shrewdly realized the value of outward appearance in his native country and had the intelligence, grace, and wit to make it work for him.”³¹³

Chase’s works *In the Studio*, 1880, (Figure 10) and *Interior of the Artist’s Studio*, 1880, (Figure 11) are two of the several paintings of his notable studio. There is no doubt that both paintings aimed to project much the same responses from the viewer as his real studio. Here the artist depicts a collection of costly articles neatly arranged against the central wall. *In the Studio* the delicate vases and plates, a model-ship, and statuettes are

³¹⁰ Ibid, 53.

³¹¹ Ronald G. Pisano, *William Merritt Chase*, New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1979, p. 13.

³¹² Ibid, p. 13.

³¹³ Ibid, p. 26.

displayed on an exquisitely carved credenza. The wall is adorned by shimmering fabrics and gilded frame pictures. A beautifully attired young woman, a visitor to the studio, is looking through a large old book placed on an Oriental rug. Similarly his work *Interior of the Artist's Studio* shows an array of decorative screens, large and small paintings, brass pots, Turkish carpets, and various art objects. Both paintings also demonstrate a skillful application of vivid colors and textures. Chase's real studio and his paintings of the studio present a visual pleasure and as Burns puts it they celebrate "the joys of seeing a material world full of delicately loving things."³¹⁴ Artistic studios like the department stores constructed a new commercial aesthetic of desire that dominated the visual spaces of American society of the period. Chase and other artists responded to the dominant ideology of consumerism by procuring and displaying material goods meant to reveal their proper social status and financial success. The lavishly decorated studios projected their owner's worldly sophistication and were meant to attract potential customers and collectors.

For many Realists the lavish display of costly objects in their studios was improper and went against their principles. Realists, as Burns point out, "distanced themselves from the taint of fashion and luxury that haunted the artists of high society" and thus they became "observers of the rituals of mass consumption rather than its celebrants."³¹⁵ For instance there is a stark contrast between Chase's studio and that of Joan Sloan (Figure 12). The latter represents a simple room stripped bare of any signs of decorous commodities. There are no carpets on the floor or tapestries and silks on the walls. Instead a few books, paintings, and some simple chairs represent the main

³¹⁴ Burns, 68.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 75.

possessions of the artist. George Bellows painting *The Studio*, 1919, (Figure 13) also illustrates a modest home studio. The room is simply arranged with a few paintings hanging on the plain white walls, a couple of pieces of dark furniture, simple curtains and bare floors. Bellows' home studio is a functional place that he shares with his family. While his family members are engaged in their daily activities, he is working on a portrait in a corner of the room. American Realists, identified with the working classes, rejecting the extravagant ambiance of the studios that was favored by their Impressionist colleagues. In either case, Burns rightly concludes, the environments of embracing or rejecting materialism constructed "a fiction of appearances," in which "the artist - a creature of commerce, after all - should chose to wrap himself."³¹⁶ Therefore consumer culture influenced not only the construction of artists' image but also their interpretation of popular subject matters, especially those of women.

A close reading of Impressionists and Realists representation of women reveals the period's conflicting outlooks toward them. Holly Pyne Connor writes that the diverse portrayals of women reflect the multiplicity of roles available to them as well as the competing attitudes they engendered. She rightly suggests that "during a period of tremendous social change and dislocation, artists infused their interpretations of emancipated women with their fears for the future as well as their optimism for the new century."³¹⁷ Some images of women disclose genteel traditions and depict them in conventional roles in the privacy of their homes or suitable leisure activities. Such portrayals chronicle societal mores that assert women's limiting roles within proper spaces. Others present women who convey a sense of independence by actively engaging

³¹⁶ Ibid, 76.

³¹⁷ Holly Pyne Connor, "Not at Home: The Nineteenth-Century New Women," in *Off the Pedestal*, ed. by Holly Pyne Connor, NJ: The Newark Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2006, p. 49.

in the world around them. The latter expressed the changing realities in women's lives and the emergent ideal of the "New Woman." Characterized as self-assertive, modern, athletic, and sexual, the New Woman stepped into the public domain and quickly became the subject of either admiration or criticism.

One of the most highly recognizable visual images of New Woman was created by Charles Dana Gibson and was known as the Gibson Girl. Appearing on the pages of popular magazines Gibson Girl symbolized modernity and liberation (Figure 14). Usually dressed in white waist-shirt and dark skirt, she became a source of emulation for many women who wanted to look attractive, healthy and independent. However not everybody was pleased with new woman's attitudes and behavior. Self-confident and independent women, who went to college, rode bicycles, played sports, and smoked cigarettes, were seen as a threat to the Victorian decorum of femininity and domesticity and a challenge to male authority. One may recall the fate of Wharton's heroine Lily Bart, whose liberated conduct compromised her reputation and led to a tragic downfall. Lily smoked, accumulated gambling debts, borrowed money, openly visited Selden's bachelor apartment and went to Trenor's house at night while his wife was out of town. Eventually her improper behavior led to rumors, disinheritance, and disgrace. Lily turned into a discarded object by the society whose norms were still deeply rooted in Victorian morals of marriage and respectability. Therefore no matter how assertive, intelligent, or privileged, women were still far from being in charge of their lives; the gap between women's personal expectations and social reality continued to persist. Turn-of-the-century American society was experiencing, as Kathy Peiss rightly describes it, "the complex passage from Victorian culture to modernism" that involved "a redefinition of

gender relations, what might be termed the shift from homosocial and heterosocial culture.”³¹⁸

Women’s increasing participation in public life was seen by some as “disruption and perversion of the accepted social order as well as male power.”³¹⁹ There were ‘respected’ critics who tried to convince themselves and especially women that too many activities were harmful to their health. They warned that too much studying or engagement in sports may damage women’s nervous and reproductive systems. Such opinions may have sounded as sensible advice since women’s nature was traditionally perceived as being passive, weak and delicate in contrast to men. A well known example is Dr. Weir Mitchell’s *rest cure* prescribed to treat women with emotional problems including Charlotte Gilman Perkins and Edith Wharton. He believed that active and intellectual women who experienced mental anguish could be cured by bland diet, inactivity and complete isolation. Even though women’s roles greatly expanded far beyond home and New Woman continued to push the existing boundaries by embracing novel activities and challenges, they still had to face many obstacles. Kirstin Ringelberg fittingly observes that during this period society’s mores were still shaped “by men and women in their thirties, forties, and fifties who grew up with more tightly defined gender roles based upon the standards of the Cult of True Womanhood and the ideology of separate spheres.”³²⁰ As a result the wide range of socio-historical changes in general and consumer culture in particular influenced American artists’ perceptions and representations of women.

³¹⁸ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Leisure in Turn-of-The-Century New York*, PA: Temple University Press, 1986, p. 6.

³¹⁹ Connor, 33.

³²⁰ Kirstin Ringelberg, *Redefining Gender in American Impressionist Studio Paintings*, Ashgate, 2010, p. 36.

The majority of American Impressionists increasingly identified upper and middle class women with domesticity, leisure, luxury, beauty and taste, and paintings of such idealized women were dominant from about 1880 to 1910. The quiet and private atmospheres of homes became feminine spheres of attractive and thoughtful women with time on their hands. These women, engaging their aesthetic sensibilities, were depicted playing musical instruments, crocheting, arranging pretty flowers, holding and looking at beautiful objects or simply gazing lost in their own thoughts. They also spent their time outdoors walking, sitting and daydreaming in nature. The majority of upper and middle class women did not work outside the home. The depiction of women alone in the privacy of their homes or in leisure activity outside the home implied that men were busy at work and only women could have time for such pleasant engagements.

Moreover, representation of fashionable leisure-class women reflected one of the cultural norms of the period. Bailey Van Hook writes that “the prevalence of “ideal” paintings of women is related to the elevation of culture and its equation with the constructed role of women in the late 19th century.”³²¹ The definition of art and culture coincided with the construction of feminine gender in the period. Alan Trachtenberg, discussing culture and society in the Gilded Age, points to the corresponding relation between culture, women, and leisure. “By culture,” he writes, “most thinkers of the period meant nonutilitarian activities and goods: the arts, religion, personal refinement, formal higher education.”³²² In effect, he continues, “the world implied leisure” – the energies which did not go into the making of a living thus expressing definite aspirations to rise above the mundane. Trachtenberg notes that the culture of the period contained a

³²¹ Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914*, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, p. 12.

³²² Trachtenberg, p. 142-143.

particular idea “as a privileged domain of refinement, aesthetic sensibility, and higher learning.”³²³ In turn, culture and refinement came to represent “aspiration, desire for better material life.”³²⁴ Furthermore, associated with leisure, culture seemed increasingly identified with the sphere of women away from the corrupting powers of competitive marketplace and the political arena.

The cultural standards of the period also reinforced the dominant gender ideology – the separate spheres of influence between men and women. Men were considered to be active participants in public arenas of business, industry and politics while women were subscribed to the private spheres of their homes and family. In financial terms men were supposed to earn money to maintain a certain social status their wives and families could display. Such cultural dichotomy was observed by Paul Bourget in his impressions of American upper class in *Antigone and Other Portraits of Women* in 1898. Bourget portrays the societal customs that center women’s lives in conspicuous consumption and display. The following passage has to be quoted at length as it vividly documents the culture’s material extravagances as well as prevailing gender ideology of the period.

Bourget recounts his meeting with Mrs. Harris at her villa in Newport:

*“Too many paintings and engravings loaded the too rich material of the walls; flowers, too many and too large, were shedding their leaves in too costly vases; too many little objects of English silver glittered on the tables, amid too many photographs of princes and princesses – all with inscriptions. And herself, Mrs. Harris, she was almost too beautiful, her lips too red, her teeth too well brushed, her hands too carefully manicured, with their extravagance of ring; and she wore a summer toilette so extremely stylish that she seemed a dressmaker’s advertisement, a living doll which some clever costumer had adorned for exportation.”*³²⁵

³²³ Ibid, p. 143.

³²⁴ Ibid, p. 160.

³²⁵ Paul Bourget, *Antigone and Other Portraits of Women*, NY: Books for Library Press, 1971 (first published in 1898), p. 51-52.

Mrs. Harris's lavish dinner, Bourget writes, "suited to disgust one forever with luxury" where "silver-gilt plate followed silver; a diner service of Dresden china worthy of museum followed a service of Sevres in green and gold with imperial arms" and "flowers alone must have cost a dollar apiece."³²⁶ All the women who were present at dinner demonstrated their splendid toilettes and sparkling "diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, rubies, as large as one's finger-nail, pearls as big as walnuts, the treasure of many rajahs."³²⁷ These beautiful creatures drank champagne, laughed and talked very loudly in the stately dining room and their chatter resemble those "exotic birds growing excited within some immense cage."³²⁸

Mr. Harris, however, compared to his wife's appearance, the costly possessions and exceptional magnificence of his house, looked plain and weary. A "pitiable aspect" he was, notes Bourget, "not old, a face of gray and leaden, the mouth tight closed with an expression of bitterness, the brown eyes dull, with frightful lassitude in them, the fatigue of mental tension lasting eighteen hours a day, during thirty five years..."³²⁹ "He seems so simple," Bourget observes, "What does he care to do? To make a display? He is dressed like a clerk. To entertain? He is never here. To pet his wife? If he is in love with her, he would not let her run away to Europe for eight months at a time, and he would be jealous of her admirer. What I would not give to be able to overhear the silent words that are spoken at this moment, behind that pallid brow!"³³⁰

Bourget's comments bring to mind the stories of Wharton's heroines Lily Bart and Undine Spragg whose desires were centered on money and display. Both women

³²⁶ Ibid, p. 53.

³²⁷ Ibid, p. 54.

³²⁸ Ibid, p. 54.

³²⁹ Ibid, p. 53-54.

³³⁰ Ibid, p. 55-56.

expected to be handsomely accommodated either by their fathers or their husbands. Lily had hardly seen her father by daylight. He was always busy downtown making money so that she and her mother could enjoy new purchases, parties and their routine trips to Europe. In her voracious appetite for money, Undine Spragg went through three marriages, each time hoping to acquire more wealth and status. The writings of Bourget and Wharton demonstrate that the lives of women and the institution of marriage were deeply penetrated by pervasive material culture. Women's role and place in the society depended upon men's riches and power. Women who could gain men's attraction as well as his wealth could afford luxuries and spend their times in leisure. In turn the ability to display better material life and leisure was deemed to be the mark of high social status as well as cultural refinement.

Thorstein Veblen wrote that leisure does not connote indolence but rather a non-productive consumption of time. He explained that time consumed non-productively signifies "a sense of unworthiness of productive work," and also serves as "evidence of pecuniary ability to afford the life of idleness."³³¹ Leisure class women not only did not work but were encouraged not to engage in any type of productive activity for the sake of their status. Propriety requires, he writes, that respectable women should abstain more consistently from useful effort and to make more of a show of leisure than the men of the same social classes. Women were permitted, or even required, to consume largely and conspicuously for her husband or other natural guardian. Veblen notes that such a woman is exempted, or debarred, from vulgarly useful employment in order to perform leisure vicariously for the good repute of her natural guardian.³³² The possession of wealth and

³³¹ Veblen, p. 28.

³³² Ibid, p. 45.

leisure is made apparent through women's fashions and through the display of tastefully arranged costly objects at home. Consequently the contemporary culture assigned a women's sphere "within the household, which she should "beautify," and of which she should be the "chief ornament." The good name of the household to which she belongs should be the special care of the woman through display of its "honorific expenditure" and "conspicuous leisure." In sum, the attention to conspicuous waste of substance and effort, concluded Veblen, is the sole economic function of the woman. Leisured women became the principal consumers in America's plentiful marketplaces.

American paintings of fashionable upper class women invoke such characterizations and cultural stereotypes of materialistic society. John Singer Sargent was probably one of the most influential artists on the subject and style. He was the most sought after portrait painter in both the United States and Britain at the turn of the 20th century. Sargent made his reputation and fortune as a portrait painter of striking women and influential men. Old aristocrats and new rich wanted their portraits done by Sargent. He, better than any other artist, represented the world of the rich, beautiful and powerful. Discussing Sargent's oeuvre, Elaine Kilmurray notes that his career "spanned half a century and witnessed massive social and cultural change. Some of his images have become definitive types and they are frequently read as quasi-documentary, even craven portrayals of his age. Sargent was painting a society in transition and it is perhaps unsurprising that his most energetic and assertive images are those of the nouveaux riches."³³³ His portraits of the magnificently attired women, the wives of prominent bankers, businessmen, and professional men, almost always displayed their sparkling

³³³ *John Singer Sargent*, ed. Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 129.

jewelry, fashionable gowns, and sumptuous settings. Surrounded by the accessories of wealth they projected the same aura of self-assuredness, privilege, and effortless elegance as in the paintings of idealized women. Samuel Isham, a well known art critic of the time, noted that Sargent's portraits not only represent the sitter's style of establishment but also "suggest approximately their annual expenditure."³³⁴ His penetrative analysis, Isham observed, was not only confined to the characters but to their "inanimate things" because his "silks, and velvets, the furniture and bric-a-brac are all eloquent."³³⁵

One of the Sargent's famous portraits was of Madame Pierre Gautreau titled *Madame X*, 1884, (Figure 15). An American socialite who married a French banker, Madame Gautreau was known for cultivation of her own self-promotion and display; she was after all a "professional beauty." She was famous for her exquisite profile, and was celebrated for her "sylphlike glides and effortless head turns," and "violet-tinged skin."³³⁶ Sargent depicted her arresting figure in a striking black dress with jeweled straps. The dress itself here functions as a symbol of feminine glamour and fashion. The simple setting with bare background suggests an artistic attempt to focus on the woman's elegant silhouette and her erotic beauty. The crescent tiara in her hair implies the figure's association with goddess Diana – the expression of Madame Gautreau's overreaching confidence. Susan Sidlauskas rightly observes that Gautreau's performance of self depends on the luster of her collective surfaces that become her substance – "her corseted body displayed in a fashionable gown, the glow of her colored hair, the gleam of

³³⁴ Samuel Isham, *The History of American Painting*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943, p. 434.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

³³⁶ Susan Sidlauskas, "Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*," *American Art*, Vol. 15, No 3, (Autumn, 2001), p. 11.

sensually reddened lips and ears, and, not least, the pale lavender finish of her skin.”³³⁷

Sargent’s portrait of *Madame X* was an icon of beauty and represented “a sign of fashion at its most extravagant and narcissism at its most insistent.”³³⁸

Sargent’s portrait of *Isabella Stewart Gardner*, 1888, (Figure 16) also projects the wealth and sophisticated taste of its character. Mrs. Gardner, an affluent and flamboyant Bostonian, was famed for her magnificent art collection, her love of literature and travels. She is painted in a fashionable black dress that tightly silhouettes her feminine curves. The dramatic v-neck opening of the dress and its short sleeves reveal her milky white skin. Gardner’s tiny waist is set off by a dazzling belt of pearls and rubies. The matching necklace of pearls with a large ruby pendant adorns her neck. Instead of depicting furniture and other decorative objects Sargent chose sixteenth century Italian cut velvet brocade from Gardner’s collection as a background to his painting. As a result her figure is spectacularly displayed against the intricate red and yellow patterns of the fabric. The ornate textile also brilliantly encircles Gardner’s head creating an impression of a golden halo that points to her glamorous presence.

Another example of Sargent’s extravagant women displaying their wealth and style is *Mrs. Fiske Warren and Her Daughter*, 1903, (Figure 17). Mother and daughter are shown in shimmering creamy satins and chiffon gowns against the dark background of lavish Renaissance carvings, elaborate gilt candelabra, and textiles. Sargent’s women in chic dresses and exquisitely tasteful settings served to create the quintessential world of refinement and style, and idealized femininity. Sarah Burns rightly concludes that in such paintings the material display took on new meanings and new energy in a modern

³³⁷ Ibid, p. 18.

³³⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

consumerist society where “the emerging advertising culture pervaded not simply the marketing of goods but the publicizing of individuals.”³³⁹

A remarkably different type of woman, however, appears in Sargent’s double portrait of *Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes*, 1897, (Figure 18). It is possible that in it Sargent had tried to communicate his ideal of a New Woman – modern, active and self-assertive. Edith Stokes’ self-confident and independent nature is illustrated through her clothe, the expression of her face, and her decided placement of her arm on her hip. Similar to Gibson Girl she is dressed in a waist-shirt, skirt and jacket and appears ready to go out and play sports. Her attractive face projects intelligence, health and vitality. Connor suggests that Stokes’ “beauty derives more from her clear complexion and animated demeanor than from expensive clothing and accessories that frequently appear in Sargent’s society portraits.”³⁴⁰ She has the unconventional look of the woman who likes to do her own things and is confident about her decisions. Her brightly lit figure dominates the work while the sketchy outline of her husband Isaac Stokes is shown in the background. Edith Stokes may symbolize the emerging ideal of the New Woman who is ready to take center stage.

William Merritt Chase produced a large and diverse body of work ranging from portraits, landscapes, still lives to outdoor genre scenes in impressionistic mode. His paintings of women *The Blue Kimono*, 1888, (Figure 19) and *Portrait of Miss Dora Wheeler*, 1883, (Figure 20) display the similar decorative characteristics that were so apparent in the depiction of his studio paintings. The variety of the costly objects in the

³³⁹ Sarah Burns, “The American Personality in the Age of American Impressionism,” in *Crosscurrents in American Impressionism at the Turn of the Century*, ed. William Eiland, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 54.

³⁴⁰ Connor, p. 46.

paintings could be found in Chase's own collections as well as homes of his patrons who could identify with such settings and costumes.³⁴¹ *The Blue Kimono* showcases a collection of spectacular objects – gold-tinted Japanese screen and wine vessel of polished bronze, a richly colored oriental rug, and a cozy divan with luxurious silk pillows. The viewer's attention, as the artist intended, is drawn to a young beautiful woman wearing a long blue Japanese robe tied with bright yellow sash. She holds a white fan and rests comfortably against the side pillows of a divan. By looking at Chase's painting one cannot help but observe the prevalence of material culture with its styles and fashions and with its governing principles of accumulation and display.

In the portrait painting Dora Wheeler (Figure 20) is seated in an ornately carved chair while wearing a luxurious outfit of brilliantly blue color trimmed with brown fur. In Chase's works, similar to Sargent's portraits, women's fashionability becomes the key subject of representation. Wheeler's beautiful blue dress projects a striking contrast with a golden drapery that hangs at the back wall. The drapery has an attractive pattern representing a mixture of flowers, butterflies, and birds. Beside Wheeler's chair stands an intricately designed low table with a large blue vase upon it. The vase is filled with bright yellow flowers. Like the representation of woman in *The Blue Kimono*, the figure of Dora Wheeler and the choices of colors and objects clearly suggest the artist's decorative scheme. There is an unavoidable correspondence between these women and beautiful objects around them. Costly items not only suggest women's social status and sophisticated taste but also their own ornamental value. However, apart from decorative role, Dora Wheeler also displays confident posture; her direct and intelligent gaze

³⁴¹ "The Studio," in *American Impressionism and Realism: The Paintings of Modern Life, 1885-1915*, eds. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994, p. 41.

advocate an independent and strong personality. She was Chase's student, who also received her artistic training in Paris, and later achieved prominence by illustrating books, greeting cards and designing stained glass. Wheeler's portrait is a good example of conflicting attitudes toward women's role and place in the society. Her fashionable dress and pricey articles not only suggest her consumer objectives but herself becoming an attractive display. But on the other hand she is also a 'new woman' who can be independent, can be in charge of her life, and has a career of her own.

Chase also turned to urban environments for pictorial themes of leisure and entertainment. One of his favorite subjects was the depiction of parks around New York. The quiet parks could offer a visitor an escape from the hustle of the city. Chase was able to create intimate glimpses of people resting, strolling or playing games. Most of Chase's park paintings exhibit affluent people, especially elegantly dressed women in self-absorbed attitudes taking pleasure in the tranquility of perfect sunshine among beautiful settings. *Prospect Park, Brooklyn* (1886), *Park in Brooklyn* (1887), *The Park* (1888), *Park Bench* (1890) are several of his park subjects. *Prospect Park, Brooklyn* is typical of Chase's park scenes where he presented an intimate atmosphere of urban retreat. In this particular painting the main focus is a woman seated on the bench with a baby carriage next to her. The massive green lawn and beds of colorful flowers are intended to frame a peaceful surrounding where she can enjoy quiet time and devote attention to her child. Similarly in his painting *The Park* (Figure 21) Chase portrayed a well-dressed woman resting on a bench in the park. The woman was pleasantly lost in the state of reverie until disturbed by the viewer's intrusion. Her solitary state was preserved by a formal arrangement of the painting. The whole foreground is empty of passersby, activities, and

noise. There are only trees and flowers nearby. In the distance, however, Chase depicted groups of people strolling and playing lawn tennis against the backdrop of emerging city buildings. The pink color of the woman's dress and hat match those of flowers behind her bench. The portrayal of women in parks suggests their symbolic equivalent to beautiful flowers that were meant to decorate these tranquil gardens. For Chase, parks were ideal themes not only because of their modernity but also because they were essentially artistic phenomena. Similar to his artistically embellished studio, the parks were carefully arranged accumulations of eye-catching elements – they both “were beautiful composites of bric-a-brac, man-made in the case of the studio, both natural and man-made in the case of the parks.”³⁴²

In addition, Chase depicted women and their children enjoying their leisure time in countryside or seaside as the titles of the paintings suggest - *Idle Hours*, 1894, (Figure 22) and *At the Seaside*, 1892, (Figure 23). In all these paintings women are upper class and fashionably attired. They wear white or pink laced dresses with tightly fitted bodices and pretty hats adorned with flowers. Like their graceful mothers children are also beautifully dressed in similar colors and patterns. The brilliant parasols decorate the perfect sceneries of harmony, comfort, and untroubled life. In these paintings the dominance of women of leisure implies the social reality of the time. Upper class women, untroubled by urban realities, were idling their hours in the privacy of the parks or country sides while men occupied public spheres of business and politics. In Veblean

³⁴² “The City – the Urban Scene,” in *American Impressionism and Realism: The Paintings of Modern Life, 1885-1915*, eds. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994, p. 144-145.

terms these women engage in conspicuous leisure, a non-productive consumption of time, and thus they also display their husbands' or fathers' financial capacities.

The depiction of leisure class women was a favorite subject for a group of American Impressionists called the Boston School. In their works, women enclosed in the beauty and luxury of their homes, led contemplative existences with little or no activity. The titles of the paintings – *The Black Hat*, *Girl Arranging Flowers*, *The Red Kimono*, *The Crystal*, *The New Necklace*, *The String of Pearls* represent exotic titles and consumer products. They also suggest women's desire for elegant objects as well as their own decorative quality. The paintings of Edmund Tarbell, Frank Weston Benson, Joseph DeCamp, and William McGregor Paxton demonstrate such subject matters. In 1915 the New York modernist Guy Pene du Bois accurately defined the Boston School subject matter and style. "The Boston group," he wrote, "is composed entirely of figure painters, painters of figures taken from the upper class and shown in environments of exceptional taste and refinement. These figures, when in action or seated, quite idly, in a well appointed parlor or porch, never do things and are never found outside the province of a lady. They sew – not shirts – read or write letters, finger the finest of grand pianos, or are caught behind in dainty negligee. They live serene uneventful lives, an unruffled and yet not a trying routine, their faces prove that: amid serene, dignified, tasteful surroundings."³⁴³ Similarly Bailey Van Hook observes that in such paintings women became signifiers of leisure, they have pastimes but not occupations.³⁴⁴ Thus the works of

³⁴³ Erica E. Hirshler, "Good and Beautiful Work: Edmund Tarbell and Arts and Craft Movement," in *Impressionism Transformed: The Paintings of Edmund Tarbell*, ed. Susan Strickler and Erica Hirschler, University of New England Press, 2001, p. 91.

³⁴⁴ Van Hook, p. 181.

the Boston School function not only as a response to a commodity culture but also reveal the ways gender was constructed in contemporary society.

The works of Frank Benson *The Black Hat*, 1904, (Figure 24), *Girl Playing Solitaire*, 1909, (Figure 25) and William Paxton *The Crystal*, 1900, (Figure 26), *The New Necklace*, 1910, (Figure 27), *The String of Pears*, 1909, (Figure 28), *Tea Leaves*, 1909, (Figure 29) and Edmund Tarbell *Girl Cutting Patterns*, 1894, (Figure 30) and *Arrangements in Pink and Gray*, 1894, (Figure 31) represent elegantly dressed women in sumptuous settings of riches and leisure. Posh furniture, exquisite china, Oriental screens, Japanese porcelain, colorful carpets, expensively framed art works, and various other objects suggest their owners' sophistication and elegance. In Benson's painting *The Black Hat* a gracefully proportioned attractive woman is preoccupied with her toilette by trying a new hat. Several pieces of jewelry on a mahogany table and shimmering laces and satins around reveal her fashionable attitudes. In *Girl Paying Solitaire* the sitter idles away her hours playing cards. She is purposefully positioned against the background of a splendidly decorated screen. The golden patterns of the screen compliment the scintillating fabric of the woman's dress. These works suggest an inevitable correlation between women and the objects around them. Women became part of their decorative environment while turning into rare objects themselves.

Paxton's work *The Crystal* is immersed in the warmth of harmonious colors and forms. The bright yellow color of woman's dress and its soft drapery mirror the light golden color of the sofa and its gentle curves. The main attraction of the work, as its title suggests, is the shiny crystal in the hands of the woman. The beauty and the fragile nature of the gemstone imply its owner's jewel-like rareness. In Veblean definitions a woman

was meant to “beautify” her guardian’s household and be its “chief ornament” as the presence of the crystal symbolizes in Paxton’s work. Likewise Paxton’s *Tea Leaves*, *The New Necklace*, and *The String of Pearls* and depict the women’s world of riches and leisure. In *Tea Leaves* two beautifully dressed women engage in essential social appointment over a cup of tea. The body language of a woman facing the viewer projects boredom as she clearly idles away her time sipping tea from a pretty teacup. Patricia Hills creates a vivid account of Paxton’s women’s social milieu. Powdered and jeweled and dressed in fine fabrics, she writes, the beautiful and young women in *The New Necklace* and *Tea Leaves* are “hermetically sealed from the cares of the world.” “The airless rooms,” observes Hills, “are heavy with the smells of camphor and tea, lemons and perfumes and furniture oils. Soft translucent films of color – gray, yellow and pink combined with brilliant Chinese turquoise create an exquisitely artful arrangement.”³⁴⁵ Paxton’s woman in *The String of Pearls* and Tarbell’s woman in *Girl Cutting Patterns* are absorbed by trivial activities. One is mesmerized by her new necklace and the other amuses herself with decorative schemes. The congruence of female figures and objects conveys the obsessive nature of consumer culture. Women not only acted as consumers who desire and possess beautiful objects but were transformed into desirable objects themselves. Furthermore, these images of women emphasize the notion that they were fashioned for the visual pleasure and satisfaction of men analogous to the function of pretty objects.

In the privacy of their homes these decorous and graceful women had been sheltered from an outside world of active participation. Robin Jaffe Frank argues that

³⁴⁵ Patricia Hills, *The Painters’ America, Rural and Urban Life, 1810-1910*, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1974, p. 107.

most male artists depicted these women “as both beneficiaries and objects of acquisitive male desire - as much a part of the display of wealth as the precious possessions invariably included in depictions of female idleness.”³⁴⁶ And while she is doing nothing, he writes, the viewer “is offered the mildly voyeuristic experience of admiring her beauty.”³⁴⁷ Consequently these leisured women came to symbolize the binary aspects of desire. They became the desiring consumers of handsome possessions and also turned into the desired objects to signify beauty and pleasure in the eyes of male viewers. Kathleen Pyne also points out that “the identification of the male viewer, patron or artist, with the female figure in her mysterious domestic sphere provided an imaginary release from, and a private resistance to, the aggressive, competitive mode of the masculine marketplace...”³⁴⁸

Joseph DeCamp’s *The Red Kimono*, 1919, (Figure 32) brings to mind Edith Wharton’s protagonist Lily Bart characterized as a rare beautiful flower grown for exhibition. DeCamp’s woman attired in a splendid kimono contemplates the flower in front of her. The outside world behind her window is far removed from the melancholic stillness of her interior. The cage above her with a bright beautiful bird may symbolize woman’s confined existence and limited freedom. Similarly Edith Wharton’s heroine Lily Bart compared herself to a captive in a gilded cage who could never regain its freedom. Bernice Kramer Leader rightly observes that the bird and the woman share similar fortunes – they are both “petted, pampered, delicate creatures who exchange

³⁴⁶ Robin Jaffe Frank, *A Private View: American Paintings from Manoogian Collection*, New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1993, p. 83.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 83.

³⁴⁸ Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996, p. 183.

freedom for the economic support of husbands and masters.³⁴⁹ Kristin Hoganson also writes that even though women had grounds to doubt wherever they were in control of their own destinies the consumer's imperium had a powerful grip upon their lives. "The pleasure of boundless consumption," she notes, "deflected attention from inequities encountered on the home front by reminding these women that, on a global scale of things, they occupied a position of privilege."³⁵⁰

The paintings of idealized and fashionable women in sumptuous settings with decorative accessories express artistic response to a consumer culture of accumulation and display. In these works women not only appear as consumers of beautiful objects but also turn into commodities themselves. Furthermore such paintings clearly express the gender ideology of the period. Analyzing the art of the Boston School, Bernice Kramer Leader suggests that their portrayals of traditional feminine ideals reflect the conservative social values of both painters and their Boston patrons. She writes that the conformity of many of the Boston images to a passive, domestic ideal is especially apparent when the real women of Boston were becoming increasingly active and visible in public life. "The idealized images of women as silent, solitary dreamers go beyond the genteel tradition's avoidance of anything harsh, ugly, or excessively emotional," Leader notes, they, however, seem "to contain an implicit criticism of recent political and social gains on part of Boston women."³⁵¹ Leader points out that the majority of Boston collectors were wealthy Harvard-educated professional men, members of conservative social, religious

³⁴⁹ Bernice Kramer Leader, *The Boston Lady as Work of Art: Paintings of the Boston School at Turn of the Century*, PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1980, p. 120.

³⁵⁰ Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium – The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2007, p. 12.

³⁵¹ Bernice Kramer Leader, "Anti-Feminism in the Paintings of the Boston School," *Art Magazine*, January 1982, p. 113.

and political establishments. Several of them belonged to exclusive historical and genealogical societies dedicated to the preservation of the past. Even though one cannot simply presume that all Boston painters and their collectors were anti-feminists, it becomes evident in Leader's research that they were traditionalists in regard to women's proper place and behavior. The paintings of ideal feminine, as Leader argues, aimed to "provide role models for Boston women by showing them how men would prefer them to behave."³⁵² Furthermore Leader concludes that "contemplation of the serene feminine images offered men peaceful refuges from wives who were often more energetic, sociable, and vocal than their husbands would like."³⁵³

American Impressionist styles and subjects remained quite consistent however, some artists who probably observed women's increasing dissatisfaction with their traditional roles aimed to reveal such feelings. Childe Hassam in addition to his modern cityscapes and architectural subjects, represented solitary female figures in their interiors. In contrast to other Impressionists some of the Hassam's women not only project idleness and boredom but a sense of melancholia, loneliness and longing. Immersed in the atmospheres of stillness and silence, his women are typically depicted next to the window either gazing out or turning away from it. In his *The Garden Table*, 1910, (Figure 33) the figure stands looking at the window while the expression of her face is hidden from the viewer. The elongated shoots of the house plants on the table in the middle of the picture replicate the woman's upright pose. The title of the painting as well as the patterns of her dress may suggest the woman's symbolic identification with the garden that can only

³⁵² Ibid, p. 118.

³⁵³ Ibid, p. 118.

subsist inside of the house. It also implies a woman's sheltered existence away from bustling world outside of her window.

In another of Hassam's work *The Breakfast Room*, 1911, (Figure 34) the figure is seated with her back to the window with a plate on her lap for peeling an orange. The sitter's kimono, a motif that was popular among the painters of the period, the vase of freshly cut flowers and a bowl of fruits imply the woman's decorative and delicate traits. *The New York Window*, 1912, (Figure 35) is considerably more solemn than either of the two previous paintings. The woman's slack pose, downward gaze, the passive placement of her hands, and her complete inactivity create an overall melancholic mood in the work. Hassam's paintings not only convey women's decorative quality and leisured life but also suggest a sense of dissatisfaction with a sheltered life. Bailey Van Hook is correct to observe that: "Without a role, without a narrative to play out, without a space enough to act in, women in decorative paintings were powerless. The decorative aesthetic separated the women into a static world from which the tensions and conflicts of the age, as well as its stimulations and enthusiasms, had been locked out. It was a world of art: hermetic, sealed, and protected."³⁵⁴

Other painters also tried to project women's longing in the stillness and solitude of their homes. Joseph DeCamp's *The Guitar Player*, 1908, Frank Benson's *The Open Window*, 1917, (Figure 36), William Churchill's *Solitude*, 1911, (Figure 37) are examples of works which invoke women's pensive state of mind and overall unsettling atmosphere of their interiors. Perhaps such dispositions are compelled by women's yearning for a change. Not all women engaged in the suffragist movement but it was clear that the majority of them yearned for purposeful lives not decorative presences. The artistic

³⁵⁴ Van Hook, p. 185.

images of these women are related to the literary characters of the period. One can easily imagine Dreiser's heroine Carrie Meeber in her rocking chair gazing at the window, lonely, dissatisfied, and hoping for a meaningful life.

Most of the painters of fashionable and idealized women were male artists with a few exceptions, such as Cecilia Beaux, Lilian Hale and Louise Cox. However, their representations of women did not differ dramatically from those of male artists - their teachers. Beaux's portrait of *Mrs. Lars Anderson*, 1900, (Figure 38) presents the strikingly graceful wife of a noted diplomat in her magnificent home setting. Beaux's public portraits similar to those of Sargent express the familiar materialistic tendencies. Lilian Hale's painting *Edition de Luxe*, 1909, (Figure 39) portrays a young woman looking through the pages of an expensive old book. The woman, her interior, the rare book, and the ornamental tree on the table all communicate the decorative qualities so dominant in the works of Hale and her male colleagues.

Another well known female artist was Mary Cassatt. Even though she lived and worked abroad, her contributions to the depiction of women of the period are very important. She focused on representation of contemporary life, especially in relation to the theme of modern motherhood and the leisure activities of upper class women. Cassatt created a series of works depicting the intimate spaces of interaction between mothers and babies. *The First Caress* (1890) and *Mother and Child* (1908) are among many such works. With a great sense of observation and emotional lyricism, Cassatt relates mothers' nurturing roles and children's playful curiosities. Moreover Cassatt does not glamorize or sentimentalize the subject of motherhood but rather presents compelling scenes of mothers' tender involvement with their children. In contrast to the paintings of

idealized and decorative women who hardly ever were depicted with children or in any other familial roles, Cassatt turned her attention to the realities of modern women's everyday life and quiet pleasures of motherhood. Analyzing Cassatt's rich body of works Pollock rightly concluded that Cassatt's females "did not attract an eroticizing gaze, precisely so that the viewer must encounter the painted figure as a subject, not an object, or a myth."³⁵⁵

Similar to her Impressionist colleagues, Cassatt also portrayed the world of upper class women engaged in their daily rituals of sociability in the familiar spaces of the drawing room, the theater or the garden. Her painting *Five O'Clock Tea*, 1880, (Figure 40) represents an elegant interior where two stylish women are seated in front of the tea table with a fine silver set and china. However, in contrast to the conventional representations of women that stressed idealized and decorative aspects, Cassatt's figures project considerable presence and dignity. Neither of these women is overwhelmed or oppressed by their interior space but rather project control and ease in their setting. In general women in Cassatt's paintings are not correlated to the objects around them but are given independent and prominent roles. Pollock observed that Cassatt's paintings did not portray "the fashionable surface of women, coupled with suggestively enigmatic sexual danger" but instead emphasized the figures' personalities.³⁵⁶

In addition, Cassatt created several stunning works inspired by the opera that had been a major cultural pastime for urbanites in Europe and America. Moreover, throughout the 19th century opera had widespread popularity among all classes in America. Toward the end of the century, however, the growing number of affluent and

³⁵⁵ Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt – Painter of Modern Women*, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1998, p. 16.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 16.

influential patrons began to redefine the opera as an elite art. They wanted opera to be performed in the native language of its composition – German, Italian or French to gratify a sophisticated elite class and guard it from a less educated crowd. Opera was a place where art, fantasy, dreams, and reality would come together. It was also a place to see and be seen - the place of ‘conspicuous’ display of one’s wealth, fashion and status. For example, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City after it was rebuilt in 1892 featured a Diamond Horseshoe – the 35 box seats that belong exclusively to its wealthiest shareholders and such clientele as the J.P. Morgans, Vanderbilts and Astors. Many important events in the literature of the period unfold at opera houses. For example, such scenes are intricately woven into the lives of protagonists in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*.

In the work *At the Opera*, 1879, (Figure 41) Cassatt paints a scene that masterfully discloses the psychology of voyeuristic impulses. Cassatt’s woman, seated at her loge and dressed in black, puts binoculars close to her eyes to pore over somebody at the theater or at the stage. She is too preoccupied to notice or deliberately ignores that she herself is being boldly stared at by a man across her loge. Ruth Iskin writes that Cassatt’s woman represents the changing social realities of modern mixed public space. She notes that the painting represents a modern’s woman’s uncompromising exercise of her gaze and active participation in modernity’s public spaces. Cassatt’s works, she concludes, “demonstrates that the determined modern woman is mobilizing her gaze, maintaining her composure and pursuing her spectatorial pleasures undeterred within a difficult terrain”³⁵⁷

³⁵⁷ Ruth Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Paintings*, Cambridge University Press, 207, p. 29.

In *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge*, 1879, (Figure 42) the artist presents a portrait of a dazzling woman comfortably reclining against her red velvet seat. Her elegant pink décolleté dress, graceful and relaxing attitude summon the image of a self-assured person who came to the theater to enjoy the atmosphere as well as to show off. If *At the Opera* portrays woman's agency through her act of looking then *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* represents a modern woman's agency in her performance of display.³⁵⁸ Cassatt like to her male colleagues depicted fashionably dressed upper class leisured women. However, in contrast to many decorative images of women, Cassatt's women convey an aura of intellectual engagement; they are confident and active participants of modern life. Her figures pursue their activities whether reading a newspaper or book with passion and intelligence, as in the painting *Woman Reading*, 1878, (Figure 43). They demonstrate the social and psychological world of the New Woman – her personal interactions, thoughts and preoccupations. In *Reading Le Figaro* (1878) she painted her mother deeply absorbed in reading a newspaper. Her mother communicates the image of a modern woman who is interested in contemporary issues whether, politics, art or business.

In general American Impressionists, avoiding controversial subjects, created aesthetically pleasing and refined worlds of upper class society. They depicted graceful aristocratic women in the atmospheres of leisure and luxury. Women's elegant upper class interiors display various costly commodities including exotic carpets and tapestries, delicate pottery and china, posh furniture, gilded frame pictures, and Oriental screens. These stylish women are also depicted relaxing in the serenity and beauty of parks and countryside. Upper class women, whether surrounded by valuable objects of their

³⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 32.

interiors or splendor and delicacy of the natural world, are meant to project refinement, grace and beauty. There is a certain correspondence between women and their surroundings, colors, and compositions. In such paintings women are not only associated with luxurious commodities but also became conspicuous consumers of beauty and leisure. Images of these women conform to culture's decorative schemes and reflect the pervasive nature of its material aspirations.

The most important challenge to the genteel traditions of American Impressionism was the works of Realists, namely the Ashcan School. Ashcan artists, like their Impressionist colleagues, were also influenced by encompassing changes brought by the rise of consumer culture. Similar to Impressionists, they articulated the effects of consumer ideology in the scenes of leisure and entertainment. However, in contrast to Impressionists, Ashcan artists depicted the lives of ordinary people instead of the refined worlds of upper class men and women. In their works, Ashcan painters offered a distinctive illustration of urban America stirred by its commercial energy. For example, George Luks painting *Hester Street*, 1905, (Figure 44) clearly communicates the vitality and diversity of city life. The artist illustrates a part of Lower East Side New York – a place of many immigrants, especially eastern European Jews. Hester Street was a long street lined with various shops selling everything from food and tool items to ready-made clothes and shoes. Goods were also sold from crowded stalls and wagons. One can only imagine the noise and crowds of shoppers hustling among various vendors, getting through the pushcarts and peddlers, while trying to buy or search for better bargains. At the center of Luks' painting is a figure of a toy peddler demonstrating his doll to groups of curious children and behind him is a butcher shop displaying in its window a row of

plucked chickens. In the front of the shop is a butcher in white apron talking to a young woman who just bought one of his chickens. There is also a group of men in black hats who engage in some discussion. A man in a light colored hat, a Baudelerian flaneur, stands apart from the swarming crowds and observes the ways of commerce and social interaction. Looking at the painting the viewer is reminded of analogous scenes described by Abraham Cahan in his novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) on the life of immigrant Jews and their commercial activities in New York.

A similar subject is depicted in Luks' work *Bleecker and Carmine Streets* which was also an immigrant neighborhood filled mostly with newly arrived Italians. Luks presented the district with shops and crowds in the evening. People, mostly women in long shawls that indicate their peasant origin, walk by brightly lit window shops. Near one of the shops there is a figure of the man talking to a group of women. As in *Hester Street*, Luks attempted to show the lives of ethnic neighborhoods whose activities are centered on the streets' commercial venues. In these paintings the streets project life, reality, and energy of the ever expanding metropolis. Analyzing the lives of working-class families, Kathy Peiss writes about the importance of streets as the center of their social lives. For many of them streets served as sources of cheap amusements - an after-dinner stroll to the park, window shopping, or simple gathering on "street corners, on stoops, and in doorways of tenements" became a ritual of relaxing and socializing after a day's work.³⁵⁹ Similarly Rebecca Zurier and Robert Snyder observe that for ordinary people leisure is often "set against a background of implied work, in recognition of the

³⁵⁹ Peiss, p. 13-14.

fact that recreation had to be carved out of the workweek and the space of the busy city.”³⁶⁰

With the massive growth of commercial industry at the turn-of-the-century there were more recreational places for the masses. Realists depicted popular establishments such as dance halls, amusement parks, picnic grounds, cafes, sporting events, circuses, parks and movies where working class men and women socialized by testing more liberated social behavior. The paintings of ordinary people and their activities express the nature and expansion of American urban culture. Vincent DiGirolamo rightly notes that the works of Ashcan artists evoke some of the biggest changes transforming American society “namely the contested triumph of industrial capitalism, the troubling tidal wave of foreign workers, and the flourishing of vibrant urban culture offering new patterns of consumption for the masses.”³⁶¹ George Bellows in his paintings *Outside the Big Tent*, 1912, (Figure 45) and *The Circus*, 1912, (Figure 46) successfully projects the lively atmosphere of new leisure activities. In *Outside the Big Tent* Bellows depicts a crowd of dressed up men and women who enjoy their evening at the amusement park. They attend fun activities, such as riding on the Ferris wheel and watching an artist perform on a makeshift stage. There are numerous brightly lit pavilions in the background that also offer more attractions. In the *Circus* the audience is captivated by the performances on the arena. A young woman in a golden costume demonstrates acrobatic maneuvers while riding a white horse. At the same time at the top of the ceiling, aerial gymnasts engage the attention of viewers with their breathtaking feats. Both paintings project a strong

³⁶⁰ Rebecca Zurier and Robert Snyder, *Metropolitan Lives: Ashcan Artists and Their Work*, Washington DC: National Museum of American Art, 1995, p. 27.

³⁶¹ Vincent DiGirolamo, “New York in the Age of Amusement,” in *Life’s Pleasures: The Ashcan Artist’s Brush with leisure, 1895-1925*, New York: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2007, p. 53.

contrast between light and dark in order to further emphasize the thrills and adventures of both places. Such popular establishments were actively patronized by lower and middle class people.

Like their Impressionist colleagues, Ashcan artists were captivated by urban parks and presented picturesque setting for their leisure subjects. Parks became vital parts of urban living especially for lower and middle class Americans. In contrast to affluent people who could afford retreats in country houses or fashionable resorts, ordinary people relaxed in the parks. For them parks provided an escape from crowded apartments, from hustle and bustle of the city, and pressures of work. George Bellows' *A Day in June* (1913), William Glackens' *May Day, Central Park*, 1905, (Figure 47), *Central Park in Winter* (1905), and *Skating in Central Park* (1910) are a few examples of people resting in the parks. Bellows and Glackens illustrate energetic sights where groups of people socialize, skate, sled, and play games. These works provide a striking contrast to the park scenes of William Merritt Chase. Chase's paintings mostly depict upper-class women in self-absorbed attitudes taking pleasure in the silence and tranquility of the park settings. Bellows and Glackens portray democratic crowds that regardless of age and status enjoy the outdoors and seek active pleasures rather than contemplative moments. The artists' spontaneous brushstrokes and vibrant colors convey joyous impressions and emphasize the dynamics of interactions and the freedom of class restrictions.

Other popular places of working class recreation were beaches. John Sloan's *South Beach Bathers*, 1907, (Figure 48) illustrates an animated company of young men and women enjoying a sunny day at the crowded beach. The painting, as Valerie Ann Leeds observes, illustrates "an increasing collusion and intermingling of classes and

gender... and loosening of social restrictions that made beachgoing a more popular activity.”³⁶² One cannot help but observe a significant difference in Sloan’s beach scene to ones represented by Chase. For example, Chase’s painting *At the Seaside* and *Idle Hours* illustrates fashionably attired women and their children decoratively arrayed in the private surroundings by the seaside. In contrast to Chase’s charming arrangements, Sloan’s work portrays the coarse atmosphere of working class leisure. Men and women display an easy familiarity while lounging on the sand, smoking cigarettes and eating hotdogs and crabs. The company’s attention is taken by a young woman standing at the centre and adjusting her hat. She wears a dark bathing suit that delineates the curves of her hefty body. Several men stare at her favorably, and the young woman exhibits ease and confidence. Her conspicuous behavior, self-assured look and a firm broad posture suggest that she is well aware of the attention she attracts. The image of a young woman not only functions as an object of male desires but also demonstrates an aspiration for greater independence and sexual expressiveness. Sloan aims to represent a modern woman who can be active, sexy and also in charge of the situation.

Realist painters also depicted another major leisure activity that related directly to the rise of consumer culture. Shopping in neighborhood stores or big department emporiums became a popular pursuit of many women. The stores lured women with a variety of merchandise and the burgeoning advertisement industry promoted new fashions, products, and good times. Women not only consumed for themselves but also for their households, and were also in charge of buying food and home products. For some women shopping provided a chance to get out of the house, a way to pass the time

³⁶² Valerie Ann Leeds, “Pictorial Pleasures: leisure Themes and the Henri Circle,” in *Life’s Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists’ Brush with Leisure, 1895-1925*, NY: Merrell, 2007, p. 45.

and escape a dull domesticity. Store owners aimed to effectively accommodate their needs and desires. An array of commodities and inventory of services, such as lunch rooms and childcare facilities, were meant to attract women for longer periods of shopping. Zurier and Snyder note that by the turn of the century large department stores like the ones in New York were known as ‘Adamless Edens’ equipped with amenities – restaurants, reading rooms, and ladies’ lounges – designed to turn shopping into a day-long activity, especially appropriate for respectable women.”³⁶³ In general for many women, shopping presented a world of possibilities and assured fulfillment that was missed in everyday life. Women’s desires for consumption can be also interpreted as compensation in a culture that excluded them from the main socio-economic and political arenas. Thus the consumer products and services appealed to the desires of many women by promising glamour, gratification, and self-transformation. Women turned into active consumers of beauty and fashion in a culture that put a strong emphasis on one’s outer appearance as it communicated material and social status. Moreover in the period of great social mobility, one’s outer appearance could play an important role in transformation of a person’s life. The story of Carrie Meeber is a good example of such processes where money and clothes play a central role. Carrie’s appearance and behavior changed considerably when she was able to replace her plain worn-out dress with stylish clothing. In due course her new smart looks helped her to reach a desirable social position and also gave her a chance to launch a successful acting career.

Ashcan artists depicted the period’s culture immersed in the acts of consumption and commodification where women played a central role by becoming its most visible

³⁶³ Rebecca Zurier, eds. *Metropolitan Lives : The Ashcan Artists and their New York*, New York: National Museum of American Art & W.W. Norton and Company, 1995, p. 150.

expressions. Joan Sloan in *Fifth Avenue, New York*, 1909-1910, (Figure 49) shows the street jammed with cars and packed with stylishly dressed women. Fifth Avenue became the place of the most expensive shops that also provided appropriate setting for one's display. In the foreground there is a close up image of two dashing women who came to shop as well as to show off their latest outfits. The scene brings into mind the impressions of Dreiser's Carrie when she first walked down New York's Broadway. Carrie found herself in the midst of a fashionable crowd – "a very imposing procession of pretty faces and fine clothes," in which all women "appeared in their best hats, shoes, and gloves and walked arm in arm on their way to the fine shops..."(226). William Glakens's *The Shoppers*, 1907, (Figure 50) portrays several well dressed women caught at the moment of looking and choosing items on sale. One of them is helped by a saleswoman who displays an article of clothing for her consideration. The scene suggests that these affluent women shop for pleasure and can afford the latest fashions.

For ordinary women, however, pretty clothes and amusements were not so easy to attain. Dresses and leisure activities cost money and lower class women had to juggle their expenses between buying food, paying rent and transportation, and spending their money on new clothes and fun. Although their incomes were small, they nonetheless desired to buy good clothes and enjoy all the pleasurable activities that urban culture had to offer. Everett Shinn's work *Window Shopping*, 1903, (Figure 51) conveys the shopping experiences of an ordinary woman. He depicts a plainly dressed woman who stands in front of the department store window gazing at beautifully attired mannequins. The mannequins' elaborate hats and fur-trimmed dresses advertise the latest styles and project a desirable image. The painting's composition communicates a psychological drama of

the moment. The figure of a lonely woman on a rainy night is contrasted to “other women” – the mannequins behind the glass of brightly lit window. There is a symbolic separation between the women of glamour and fashion and a woman of modest means who probably cannot afford the stylish outfits but yearns to have them. Shinn’s work communicates the significance of outer appearance in one’s social status as well as consumer culture’s prevailing rituals of display and spectatorship.

For many lower and middle class women, who were employed in households as well as garment, retail and clerical industries, the fashions of their affluent sisters were models for inspiration. They could follow the lifestyles of society women through magazines and newspapers and observe their outfits and manners in public spaces such as parks and department stores. Working class women could indulge themselves in the latest fashions by purchasing the cheap imitations of more expensive clothes. For them the purchase and display of fashionable dressing were a means to affirm themselves in a culture where outward appearance was a key expression of one’s individuality. Peiss observes that for these women “dress was a particularly potent way to display and play with notions of respectability, allure, independence, and status and to assert a distinctive identity and presence.”³⁶⁴ Like wealthy women who would demonstrate their elegant gowns at the opera or ball so could working-class girls to show off their outfits at dancing or amusement parks. For working women as for women of upper class fashionable dressing was a necessary part of exhibition. Lily Bart nicely articulated the role of clothes in woman’s appearance: “The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don’t make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are

³⁶⁴ Peiss, p. 63.

expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership" (14-15).

John Sloan's *Haymarket*, 1907, (Figure 52) brilliantly conveys the dynamics of display and spectatorship taking place at the entrance of this popular dance hall and saloon. He depicts a stylishly dressed woman entering the brightly lit door of the establishment. Her looks are scrutinized by a doorman and also by another man hanging at the door. The latter glances at her appreciatively as she walks by him. The two other smartly attired women follow her suit. Describing the place's reputation Sloan made a following note in his diary: "This old dance hall on Sixth Avenue, famous through infamy, was well-known hangout for the underworld. Ladies whose dress and general deportment were satisfactory to the doorman were admitted free. Gents paid."³⁶⁵ Sloan's women put on display their best outfits to attract attention and have fun. They, as Ellen Todd argues, "had to negotiate the new social spaces where sexuality and commercialized leisure was intersected."³⁶⁶ The frivolous intentions of these flashy women draw a disapproving response from a plainly dressed woman on the left. She walks away from the scene and gives a stern look to her young daughter who is captivated by the other women's fashionable appearances. Sloan illustrates the different modes of behavior between single girls and working mothers. Kathy Peiss notes that with greater job opportunities and diminished household concerns single women could afford more leisure time than did working mothers. While working mothers turned increasingly toward domestic tasks, she writes, "young girls achieved notoriety in the city as pleasure seekers – young factory hands, domestic servants, and prostitutes sought a life of finery,

³⁶⁵ David W. Scott and E. John Bullard, *John Sloan 1871-1951*, Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 1971, p. 100.

³⁶⁶ Ellen Todd, p. 22.

frolics, and entertainment.”³⁶⁷ Carrie’s account of her married sister’s narrow life and her own desires for fashionable life illustrate such disparity. Carrie noticed that her sister Minnie’s looks and manners changed dramatically since she got married. Minnie’s life, as Carrie saw it, became dull and commonplace and she herself turned into “a thin, though rugged, woman of twenty-seven, with ideas of life colored by her husband’s, and fast hardening into narrower conceptions of pleasure and duty...”(11). Furthermore, Carrie did not fail to observe that Minnie’s manners turned into those of “trained industry” with a “steady round of toil.” (10). On the other hand, Carrie and young girls who worked with her at the shoe factory centered their interests on money, men, clothes and amusements. They wished to be a part of all pleasurable activities that the “great mysterious city” had to offer.

The seductive world of urban entertainments offered women a chance to escape the shabbiness of their apartments and drudgery of everyday work. In their quest for adventures the pretty clothes played a main role. Single women wearing nice clothes could stand out from the rest of the crowd and had better chance of drawing attention. Vincent DiGirolamo writes that young working women had a moral fear of shabbiness and even though they had little spending money, they nonetheless perfected the art of display by showing off their figures and styles.³⁶⁸ For them, he continues, pretty clothes functioned as “investment in their search for excitement and a suitable mate.”³⁶⁹ Wherever young working women walked on streets, spent time in the parks, or visited stores and theaters they aimed to display themselves by “putting on style.” John Sloan’s

³⁶⁷ Peiss, p. 37.

³⁶⁸ Vincent DiGirolamo, “New York in an Age of Amusement,” in *Life’s Pleasures: The Ashcan Artist’s Brush with Leisure, 1895-1925*, NY: Merrell, 2007, p. 59.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 59.

Sunday Afternoon in Union Square,” 1912, (Figure 53) captures such engagements. The focus of the work is on two smartly dressed young women promenading around the fountain in New York’s Union Square. Both wear color coordinated outfits where hats and purses beautifully match the violet and purplish-blue of their dresses. Their flashy appearances and flirtatious gestures provoke quite a stir from people around. Two women seated on the bench to the left gossip about their looks. The intense glances of several men suggest the possibility of flirtatious interaction. Sloan’s women not only enjoy all the attentions but they also exhibit a sense of independence and daring sexuality. They assert themselves in commercialized urban culture that promises enjoyments through conspicuous consumption and leisure. Ellen Wiley Todd points out that many of Sloan’s paintings expressed “the open sensuousness of working class new women’s leisure pastimes.”³⁷⁰ In this way, she writes, “the artist made visible – even celebrated – one of the most controversial aspects of new womanhood: sexuality.”³⁷¹

The consumer culture was a powerful force eroding the older conventions of domesticity by inserting women into public spaces and encouraging physical mobility. For women going to work, shops, movies, theaters and simply walking on busy streets signified new ways of sociability and consumerism. All of these engagements, as Robert Snyder observes, encouraged women “to look beyond their homes and into the larger city for the framework of their lives.”³⁷² John Sloan’s *Renganeschi’s Saturday Night*, 1912, (Figure 54) captures such shifting realities in the lives of women. He depicts a group of lively young women who get together for a dinner at a restaurant. Their dresses and

³⁷⁰ Ellen Wiley Todd, *The New Woman Revised: Paintings and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street*, University of California Press, 1993, p 19.

³⁷¹ Ibid, p. 19.

³⁷² Robert Snyder, “City in Transition,” in *Metropolitan Lives – The Ashcan Artists and Their Works*, The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1995, p. 50.

behavior suggest that they are wage-earning women who are out to enjoy good meal and each other's company. In the past dining at a restaurant was primarily an upper class experience but at the turn-of-the-century such things began to change. With massive growth of commercial industry there were more dining options available – from fine restaurants to more affordable cafes and dining halls. Moreover, beforehand respectable women could not go to restaurants unaccompanied but that changed too. In this work Sloan demonstrates the ways consumer culture influenced women's behavior. He portrays a new generation of young women who affirm their presences in public places by actively engaging in various leisure pursuits and certainly enjoying more autonomy than did their mothers.

Ashcan artists also depicted new patters of gender relations that were shaped by the rise of consumer culture. Single working women wanted clothes and amusements but their small salaries tended to limit their wishes. As a result some young women turned to men for financial assistance and gifts. Kathy Peiss writes about the culture of "treating" when young girls traded their attention and sometimes sexual favors for men's support. She explains that the culture of "treating" was reinforced in the workplace through women's interactions with male supervisors, employers and customers, especially in service and sales jobs.³⁷³ Some managers of department stores advised shop girls "to find gentlemen friends who could buy them the clothing and trinkets that their salaries could not cover."³⁷⁴ The relation of women to male partners was based on material interests and thus demonstrated the prevailing powers of commodity culture. Women who could secure a relationship with a well-to-do man could enjoy fashionable dressing, good food

³⁷³ Peiss, p. 54.

³⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 54.

and entertainments. William Glacken's painting *Chez Mouquin*, 1905, (Figure 55) captures one such interaction taking place in a popular New York café. Glackens portrayed James Moore, a successful lawyer, accompanied by an elegant female companion. Moore had several attractive young ladies whom he took around and introduced as his "daughters."³⁷⁵ Marianne Doezema observes that Moore most likely "bought these women gifts, including fashionable gowns or money to buy clothing that would have been appropriate for outing, such as one depicted in *Chez Mouquin*."³⁷⁶

The rise of consumer culture created new places of leisure and entertainment. American Impressionists and Realists, reflecting the encompassing changes brought by commercialized culture, depicted the variety of popular places of recreation. As Ruth Iskin has shown the representation of consumerist activities was not limited to the processes of shopping, selling and buying but included much wider aspects of life.³⁷⁷ In addition to explicit illustrations of consumption, there were also implicit portrayals in scenes of cafes, theaters, picnics, parks, and dance halls in which consumption played a central role. Impressionists and Realists depicted such places by capturing the essence of their own time and place. Even though both groups were interested in similar subject matters their choices of social settings, however, were different. In general American Impressionists aimed to represent aesthetically pleasing and sophisticated worlds of affluent people. Realists, on the other hand, portrayed socially and economically diverse groups including those of immigrants and working class. Such distinct preferences most likely reveal the artists' own socio-cultural backgrounds. American Impressionists came

³⁷⁵ Ira Glackens, *William Glackens and the Ashcan Group: The Emergence of Realism in American Art*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1957, p. 54.

³⁷⁶ Marianne Doezema, "Representing Women," in *Life's Pleasures – The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure, 1895-1925*, New York: Merrell, 2007, p. 79.

³⁷⁷ Iskin, p. 3.

from well-to-do families and therefore tended to emphasize genteel traditions in their works. The modest upbringings of Realists painters made them recognize and take interest in the lives of ordinary people.

Furthermore, the expansion of commercialized leisure and entertainment industry drew women into public arenas of life and formed new modes of relationships based on display and spectatorship. The commodity culture put a strong emphasis on women's outer appearance as a means of expressing their social status, and material success, and also in constructing their self-image. Fashionable dressing appealed to the desires of women because it was associated with glamour and happiness in the burgeoning consumer culture. Moreover, women became visible and active partakers of various leisure activities. As a result in their works, American artists often identified women with fashion, consumption, leisure, and beauty. Impressionist painters chose to represent attractive and elegantly dressed women. They often portrayed such women engaging in upper class sociability either in the luxury of their homes, surrounded by costly objects, or outside enjoying the beauty of perfect sunshine and tranquility of nature's idyllic settings. These women, sheltered from the troubles of the world, displayed their latest fashions and conspicuous leisure. Realists communicated the powers of consumption on the lives of ordinary women who, similar to upper class beauties, also desired to have pretty clothes and to participate in the public world of pleasure. Compared to their affluent sisters, however, working class women emerge as being active, sexual, and independent. They embrace new styles and entertainments in order to display and assert themselves in public spaces. Fashions and fun gave ordinary women a chance to push the boundaries of their narrow lives and escape the drudgery of work. Although working class women

appeared to have more social freedoms, they were nonetheless similar to women of upper class in being economically dependent on men's money and power.

American Impressionists and Realists presented diverse portrayals of women that revealed the influences of consumer culture on their appearance and behavior. Moreover, the effects of consumer culture on images of women disclose competing ideals and changing concepts of femininity taking place during this period. Traditionally home was considered to be woman's natural place where she could fulfill her roles as wife and mother. Nonetheless some women began to challenge such limiting ways of life by acquiring public roles through education, employment, and social activism. Thus the diverse representations of women by American artists reflected their socio-economic status but also gender ideology of the period. The pictorial language of the majority of Impressionist artists presented a range of women's images in conventional and acceptable roles. The Boston School painters especially identified women with domesticity, leisure and luxury. In these paintings graceful and submissively quiet women, dressed in fashionable gowns and surrounded by costly objects, are not only conspicuous consumers but turned into pricy commodities themselves. Parallel developments are chronicled in the literature of the period. The pervasive material culture framed the lives of Wharton's heroines Lily Bart and Undine Spragg whose social and psychological realities are centered on money, accumulation and display.

In addition some of Impressionist works project the ideal of "new woman" who not only displays decorative qualities but also demonstrates a sense of confidence and independence. Sargent's portrait of Mrs. Phelps Stokes and Cassatt's depiction of women exemplify such new tendencies. Childe Hassam did not present the images of new

women but some of his works dealt with the confined nature of women's lives. His solitary female figures usually enclosed in the silent atmospheres of their homes project a sense of loss, anxiety, and melancholia. They are separated from the busy world visible outside of their windows. Even though these women seem to have everything at their disposal, they nonetheless are dissatisfied with hermetic existences and yearn for meaningful lives. In the works of Ashcan artists ordinary, wage-earning women take center stage. These energetic women desire to dress fashionably and partake in all entertainment activities emulating the lives of leisure class women. Amusements and fashions gave lower class women an opportunity to break away from dull routines and also presented a chance of upward mobility. Ashcan artists were able to convey these women's aspirations for self-reliance by setting up new patterns of social interactions. Both Impressionists and Realists, similar to the writers of period especially Wharton and Dreiser, used material culture as a framework in their quest to chronicle, question, or challenge the cultural mores toward women's role and place in the society. The range of women's images provides a visual record of the period and also embodies contemporary attitudes and perceptions about women's lives in which their looks and conduct became a focal point of commodified relations.

CONCLUSION

In examining turn-of-the-century culture, Anne Higonnet concluded that it “produced countless images of women, many of them consistent with one another, some of them contradictory, all of them powerful elements in the ever-changing definition of what it meant to be a woman.”³⁷⁸ Her statement expresses the complexity of social roles and cultural locales which were available to women and which were inseparable from the socio-economic reality of the time. Images of women created in art and literature of the period reveal the continuously challenging issues of gender, class and sexuality. These issues, as I have discussed them in this study, were even more sharply projected with the growth of consumerism and commodification of modern life. The burgeoning consumer culture had a profound impact on women’s choices, their values and behavior. As women turned into active partakers of fashion, beauty, and leisure so their lives shifted away from the privacy of domestic realms to the public places of heterosexual sociability. Women defined their tastes, styles, and social status by consuming the city’s sights, its goods and entertainments.

In their novels Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser chronicle the lives of women belonging to different social strata - a small town girl, a *nouveaux riche* debutante and an upper class beauty. These women nonetheless share a common story. Both authors depict

³⁷⁸ Anne Higonnet, “Images - Appearances, Leisure, and Subsistence,” in *A History of Women in the West*, eds. Genevieve Fraisse and Michelle Perrot, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 246.

the ways the lives of these women had taken shape in relation to men, to existing social constructs of appearance and behavior in a culture that was deeply steeped in material pleasures. Wharton unfolds these issues within the domains of high society. She knew first-hand the tight network of upper class culture, its rules and expectations. *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* represent fictional accounts of a fashionable society of which Wharton was part. For Dreiser the city, the axis of desire and money economy, becomes a stage where his men and women play out their fortunes. Growing up in a small provincial town, Dreiser, similar to his lower-middle class characters, was lured by the lights and glamour of the big cities. Like his heroine Carrie Meeber, he aspired to become wealthy and be a part of city's never-ending bustle of pleasures. Such dreams and actions express the city's overwhelming power over one's personal life. Simmel's observations underscore this, by noting that the metropolis imposes psychological conditions in the multiplicity of economic and social lives to which persons need to respond.

The term consumption stems from Latin "*consumere*" which means *to take up completely, to devour, to waste, and to destroy*.³⁷⁹ In relation to goods and money, the word connotes *to spend wastefully* and *to squander*.³⁸⁰ In Wharton's novels *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, the lives and styles of privileged society denote an allegory of waste. Jaded, spoiled and selfish men and women wander from one amusement to another finding no satisfaction. George Dorset, one of the protagonists in *The House of Mirth*, sarcastically describes the mind-numbing routine of his class: "Well, here we are, in for another six months of caterwauling...not a shade of difference between

³⁷⁹ The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Ed., Vol. III, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 801.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 801.

this year and last, except that the women have got new clothes..." (127). Essentially the lives of Wharton's characters, trapped in the consumer ideology of money and power, are wasted. What is more, women, excluded from meaningful vocations and having no significant alternatives, become the principal enunciations of such squander. This process reduces the lives of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg to those of pricy commodities available for purchase, adornment and delight.

The analysis of both character's lives clearly demonstrates the fundamentality of consumer ideology in constructing their subjectivities. Lily Bart's and Undine Spragg's actions and behavior are circumscribed by upper class system of sociability, leisure, marriage, beauty, and fashions. Both women, similar to the commodities on the business market, must effectively display themselves in order to attract attention of men and hopefully to seal the best marriage deal. For women the successful marriage signified a respectable social status and realization of their desires for money and enjoyments. Locked in the world of cash power, these women find satisfaction in displaying how much they could spend on jewels, dresses, on gambling, on never-ending parties, and on meaningless travels. All these things became essential prerequisites of their social status which Veblen identified as conspicuous leisure - a powerful purchasable commodity.

Lily's and Undine's notions of style, social competition, and the emotional pleasures of attaining material objects reflect the society's imperatives of acquisition and display. Their desires and needs are socially constructed phenomena. Both women not only exemplify the money-oriented traits of their culture, but also come to be its active producers. What motivates Lily and Undine is not only the possession of desirable goods but emulation of desirable people and aspiration to reach their lifestyles. Walter Ben

Michaels poignantly observes that “the logic of capitalism produces objects of desire only insofar as it produces subjects, since what makes the objects desirable is only a constitutive trace of subjectivity those objects bear...”³⁸¹ As a result Lily and Undine operate as consumers of leisure and luxuries but in doing so they also become consumed by others’ money and power and turned into decorative commodities. It is therefore not surprising that both women are fixated with their appearances since their beauty and fashions represent the most potent powers they can employ.

In the *House of Mirth*, Lily was not the only woman whose life was governed by the consumer imperatives of display and spectatorship. Welly Brys, Mattie Gormer and Norma Hatch represent the class of *nouveau riche* women who aspired to have the same manners and fashions as women from the upper class. With great determination, *nouveau riche* women imitate upper class lifestyles. Their fashions, houses, dinner parties and amusements are no more than the “flamboyant copies” of the elite society. In turn, working class women, like Nettie Struther, were also inspired and fascinated by the lives of beautiful and rich women. They diligently read society columns featuring glamorous photographs and chronicling the events of a privileged few. Ordinary women dream that one day they too could possibly experience the glimpse of that fine world. Nettie Struther names her daughter Marie Antoinette after the French queen and also hopes that she will be as lovely as Lily Bart whose life she follows in the papers (334-335). In both of her novels Wharton illustrates an American society where objects and women are part of the perpetual show of success and status; both of them had been assigned visible roles to play.

³⁸¹ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, University of California Press, 1987, p. 20.

Lily's physical attractiveness, her desires for luxuries and her dependence on the favors of rich friends made her life socially and financially vulnerable. Succumbed by scandals and intrigues and having no protection of money or security of marriage, Lily encounters a tragic downfall. As her reputation tarnishes, so the attention of men and society vanishes. In the world of business transactions, the damaged goods do not sell, they are discarded. Likewise ruined women lose their chance on the marriage market. Lily, as a powerless creature out of its familiar domain, was unable to change her habits and thus failed to serve any practical purpose. In contrast to Lily and in spite of all her transgressions, Undine attains the life of leisure and luxuries. The difference between the two was that the latter has had the safety of marriages and money. Even on the business market, violations are tolerated as long as the fines are collected. Translated into the language of society, it means that Undine Spragg and women like Bertha Dorset can maintain their moral attributes as long as they are backed up by their husband's names and cash. Undine appropriates the rules of a business market in her bets for new houses as well as new husbands. She succeeds by constructing her own objectification and uses it as a powerful agency for her material aspirations. She becomes, as Wharton acerbically puts it, a "monstrously perfect result of the system; the complete proof of its triumph" (132).

Dreiser's heroine Carrie Meeber has much in common with Wharton's Undine Spragg. What distinguishes them both from the rest of the characters is their mobility as well as adaptability to a new state of affairs. Undine's restless appetite for status and power and her insatiable energy drives her from Apex City to New York, to Paris, and back to New York. With each new move, she procures new husbands as well as new

dressess, jewels, and friends. Likewise Carrie, in her quest for better opportunities, nice clothes and amusements, moves from Columbia City to Chicago and then to New York. While along the way Undine changes her husbands, Carrie replaces her lovers. Each new stage of their lives brings them a sense of happiness and accomplishments but they are transitory. The relentless desires to have more and better continuously pushes them forward. The roots of Carrie's and Undine's desires are embedded in surrounding environments as they frequently internalize and evaluate their present state in relation to others. They compare their lifestyles and possessions to those of other people. Carrie's and Undine's feelings and actions reveal Veblen's social concepts of "invidious comparison" and "pecuniary emulation." People tend to observe, compare, and emulate the lives of desirable people. As long as the comparison is unfavorable, Veblen concludes, the individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present state.

Along the same line of thought, Durkheim writes that when a person endlessly pursues his or her desires for novelties and pleasures without achieving satisfaction or happiness, it results in a chronic state of de-regulation or anomy. For Durkheim the individual desires are insatiable by nature and cannot be quenched. The lives of Undine and Carrie reveal Durkheim's observations on the endless range of material desires and yet inability to achieve contentment. The concluding pages of *The Custom of the Country* and *Sister Carrie* exemplify such modes of existence. Wharton writes that Undine's fourth husband Elmer Moffat "had given her all she had ever wished for, and more than she had ever dreamed of having..." (376). Even though Undine had everything she wanted "she was not always happy" because "she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them" (376). Later she finds out that she could

not become an Ambassador's wife because of her divorces. Such discovery was a devastating blow to her ambitions as she had already envisioned herself being an Ambadress among all the splendors, and "all the banquets and ceremonies" (377). She learned, resolves Wharton, that "there is something she could never get, something that neither influence nor millions could ever buy for her" (377-378). As Undine came to the realization that she could never be an Ambassador's wife the more she craved to be one; she was convinced "that it was the one part she was really made for" (378).

Carrie's upward journey from the provincial town to the fashionable quarters of New York's Wellington hotel signifies the fulfillment of the American dream. As an actress she achieves fame and wealth. Over time, however, for Carrie applause and publicity had "grown trivial and indifferent" (368). With success and money came "adulation and affectionate propositions" from men who promised all the luxuries in exchange for Carrie's attention (333). "She smiled to think," writes Dreiser, "that men should find her so much more attractive" (333). She craved for such things before but now she could only respond to them with "coolness and indifference." (333). Nonetheless, as Dreiser points out, Carrie had learned that "in this world, as in her own present state, was not happiness" (369). The novel closes with an image of Carrie rocking back and forth in her chair but moving nowhere. In effect Carrie's desires for material things resulted from her desire to attain happiness. All along Carrie believed that money and success would bring her love and happiness but the end of her story proves otherwise. The lives of Undine and Carrie had been demarcated by material culture that continuously inflamed the desires for riches, but brought only fleeting satisfactions without reaching happiness. Love and companionship are missing in the lives of these

women. They are replaced by the drive for commodities that seemingly guaranteed the realization of their dreams but never quite delivered.

Paintings of the turn-of-the-century American Impressionists and Realists also illustrate the powers of commodity culture on the lives of women. The pictorial language of American Impressionists replicates the refined world of the upper class so masterfully recounted in Wharton's novels. It was not a surprising choice as the majority of American Impressionists had comfortable backgrounds and therefore preferred to portray the settings reflective of their own experiences. Their subject matter was mostly concerned with the lifestyles of beautiful and affluent women, their fashions and leisure. They presented women in aesthetically pleasing and refined social environments that safeguarded the genteel traditions. The majority of Impressionists identified women with luxury, taste and culture. These women, engaging their artistic sensibilities, spent their time reading, playing musical instruments, arranging flowers, holding beautiful objects, entertaining at the opera, relaxing at their gardens, or simply daydreaming lost in their thoughts. Such paintings project close connection between wealth, leisure, and culture which in turn are clearly perceived to be women's spheres. Consequently the ability to display better material life and leisure was meant to be the mark of high social status as well as cultural refinement.

The cultural stereotypes of women's role, place and appearances are exhibited in the portrait paintings of John Singer Sargent. He was one of the most sought after portrait painter's of his times. During his prolific career he created roughly six hundred portraits, the majority of which were commissioned by successful men, their wives and children. Sargent dramatically altered the genre of portraiture in America. Prior to Sargent the

majority of portrait painters in America strived to depict people's likenesses, express their modesty, and represent them within rather plain settings. In contrast Sargent's portraits, especially those of women, blatantly display glamour and magnificent surroundings. In his works, women, adorned by dazzling jewels and expensive gowns, exhibit the privileged world of prosperity and power. Sargent's portrait of Mrs. Gardner is one such example. Paul Bourget's perception of the portrait fittingly discloses its cultural significance and gender ideology of the period. Mrs. Gardner, is "an idol," writes Bourget, "for whose service man labors, whom he had decked with the jewels of a queen, behind each of whose whims lie days and days spent in the ardent battle of Wall Street."³⁸² Mrs. Gardiner is the embodiment of luxury and pride – the ultimate expression of her father's and husband's financial achievements. Furnished with their capital Isabella Gardner turned into an avid supporter of arts and culture in Boston. She was able to satisfy her cultivated tastes by amassing a remarkable collection of paintings, sculpture, textiles and furniture. In Sargent's portrait Isabella Gardner, adorned by pearls and rubies, displays herself against a brilliant textile work from her collection. Sargent's fashionable portraits created a visual record of the period and demonstrated people's ambitions, displayed the marks of their familial and class status and what is more they overtly announced the triumph of material. In a culture where display and spectatorship played a crucial role, society painters like Sargent served to publicize their patron's class and wealth.

Society painters play important roles in Wharton's fiction. In *The House of Mirth* "the distinguished portrait painter" Paul Morpeth has a crucial part in the culminating scene of the novel. Under Morpeth's guidance, fashionable women exhibit themselves

³⁸² Paul Bourget, *Outre-mer: Impressions of America*, New York: Scribner, 1985, p. 108.

in a series of pictures – *tableaux vivants*. Morpeth recreated the splendid paintings of old masters with an aim to demonstrate the attractiveness of women’s form and flesh. With Morpeth’s assistance Lily Bart was able to show herself in a new light under which her beauty and grace “expanded like a flower in sunlight” (146). The participation in *tableaux vivants* was one of Lily’s many attempts to effectively display herself with the goal of attracting a suitable husband. Another successful society painter Claud Popple was featured by Wharton in *The Customs of the Country*. Popple, she writes, received visitors in his “expensively screened and tapestried studio” that had “cushioned corners” and “elaborately furnished tea-table” with “most varied seductions in sandwiches and pastry” (119). Popple’s opulent interior is meant to project the artist’s success as well as to gratify the wants of his wealthy patrons. Popple, explains Wharton, always “subordinated art to elegance in life as well as in his portraits” (119). He depicted Undine Spragg in a shimmering dress that matched the “hard glitter of diamonds” in her hair (120). *Nouveaux riche* Van Degen, examining Undine’s portrait, appropriately concludes that Popple is a successful artist because he “knows *how we live* and *what we want*” (124). The portraits of fictional characters similar to Sargent’s representations of real people articulate their owners’ publicizing objectives as well as artistic responses to the dictates of material culture and its pressures of display.

The most conspicuous depiction of leisure class women were presented in the works of Boston school artists. The titles of the paintings such as *The Black Hat* by Frank W. Benson, *The New Necklace* by William Paxton, or *The Red Kimono* by Joseph DeCamp clearly suggest the value of commodities in the lives of women. Boston Impressionists almost always represented elegantly attired women among expensive and

exotic objects. On the one hand, the variety of costly articles from furniture, carpets, tapestries to porcelain, statuettes, and framed art works were associated with aristocratic life-styles. They also communicate women's active role in the world of culture and aesthetic refinement. Tasteful decoration of houses was one of the women's pursuits; they played significant roles in selecting, buying, and arranging the decorative commodities at home. On the other, while signifying leisure, the images of these upper-class women, were clearly equated with the pretty objects with which they were pictured. Moreover, surrounded by stillness and beauty of their rooms, these women are sealed off from the dynamics of the outside world. The prevalence of such decorative images of women in the works of Boston artists, as Bernice Kramer Leader suggests, expressed "the artists' desire for financial success" and therefore "conformity to the values of the upper class Bostonians who were their potential patrons."³⁸³ For Boston artists, she explains, the primary source of income was portrait paintings, and "the same prominent Bostonians who commissioned portraits frequently bought their non-commissioned female pieces as well."³⁸⁴ Boston painters, wishing to gratify the tastes of wealthy and powerful clientele, pictured feminine ideals of beauty and domesticity. Furthermore, such images of women reflect the artists' own comfortable backgrounds and express ideals and ideas they valued. Surrounded by expensive commodities the images of these women articulated the dominating traits of material culture and gender ideology of the period.

The works of other Impressionists such as William Merritt Chase and Mary Cassatt also represent the comfortable worlds of middle and upper class women. In these paintings stylish women pursue various leisure activities in the familiar places of a

³⁸³ Bernice Kramer Leader, *The Boston Lady as Work of Art: Paintings of the Boston School at Turn of the Century*, PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1980, p. 24.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 24.

drawing room, the theater or garden. For example, Chase's park scenes such as *The Park* typically illustrate elegantly dressed women in self-absorbed attitudes relaxing in the privacy of parks. Similarly Chase's seaside paintings *Idle Hours* or *At the Seaside* portray fashionably attired women and their children taking pleasure in the beauty of their surroundings. In these works upper class women, untroubled by urban realities, can afford to idle away their hours as they rely on material wealth provided by their husbands and fathers.

Mary Cassatt's subjects are almost exclusively female as she focuses on the themes of modern motherhood and the daily rituals of upper class sociability. Cassatt's women significantly depart from the decorative traits of her American colleagues by projecting autonomy, confidence and intellectual engagement. She raised the conventional mother and child theme to a new dimension. With a great sense of lyricism, she depicts the daily routine of mothers taking care of their children. Such images reveal an affectionate and nurturing bond between loved ones. Similar to other Impressionist painters, Cassatt illustrates the comfortable settings of everyday bourgeois life where affluent women display various leisure activities. They spent their times in public in the parks or theaters, or in the privacy of their homes drinking tea or reading. These women, whether entertaining at the opera or in the drawing room, demonstrate exceptional taste and refinement. Moreover no matter what these women choose to do they hardly ever relate to the objects around them, but rather are given independent space and prominent roles. One of the examples where such characteristics are clearly projected is *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*. Here Cassatt depicted a young beautiful woman at the theater lodge who is clearly enjoying the attention, the theatrical atmosphere and people with

whom she is socializing. Wearing shimmering pink evening gown and delicate pearl necklace the woman projects self-assured manners and vibrant personality. In contrast to passive figures of Boston painters, Cassatt's females project modern women's agency by being actively engaged in their surroundings and being in charge of their looks and manners.

Realist artists, similar to Dreiser, were fascinated by urban life and turned it into a central theme of their works. Rebecca Zurier and Robert Snyder write that in their works, Realists artists, namely the Ashcan school, engaged new social trends such as immigration, advertising and mass communication, popular entertainment and shifting gender roles. Ashcan pictures, they point out, "mapped out a new territory for American art by identifying moments of interaction between the people and the city and its massive culture of commerce."³⁸⁵ Like Dreiser, Ashcan artists such as John Sloan, Everett Shinn, George Bellows, and William Glackens, came from modest backgrounds out of small towns. They were drawn to big cities for opportunities and inspiration. Most of the Ashcan artists began their careers at the big-city newspapers by drawing illustrations, cartoons and advertisements. Dreiser's writing profession was also launched at the newspapers and magazines where he worked as a reporter and editor. Thus their comparable backgrounds and experiences may explain their interest in recording and interpreting city life – the subjects they knew and observed. The prevailing themes in both Dreiser and Ashcan artists are related to the issues of gender, consumption and modernity.

³⁸⁵ Rebecca Zurier and Robert Snyder, *Metropolitan Lives – The Ashcan Artists and Their Works*, National Museum of American Art, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1995, p. 13.

Realist artists, in contrast to their Impressionist colleagues, portrayed the lives of working women who are neither idealized nor sheltered in secluded environments. In their paintings, working class women are seen in and about the city actively pursuing all aspects of modern life. Shorter workdays and rising wages allowed women more opportunities for entertainments and fashionable clothing. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser provides a glimpse of working girls' world whose primary interests are centered on the desire to have fun. Girls at the shoe factory, where Carrie first worked, always discussed their leisure times. Carrie heard "high colored reports which girls give of their trivial amusements" and they also discussed young men "who took them about" (42). She also did not fail to notice that these girls "had more of their earnings to use for themselves than she did," and they "had been happy" (42). During her long hours at the factory, Carrie preoccupied herself with thoughts about "the city outside and its imposing show, crowds, and fine buildings" (31). In the evenings in order to escape her sister's "narrow, humdrum place," Carrie entertained herself by standing at the foot of the apartment stairs; she watched people on the street or went for a little walk (25). The seductive world of urban amusements attracted young women by offering them a chance to escape the routine of daily work and get out of their tattered apartments.

Similar to Dreiser, Ashcan artists presented the stories of working class women who, after toiling long hours in the city's factories and shops, wished to devote their free time to lively entertainments. These women in a bold and visible way insert themselves in the public spaces as active consumers of leisure and entertainments. They went shopping and dancing, watched movies, visited amusement parks, relaxed at the beaches, or simply paraded on the streets. Sloan's *South Beach Bathers* or William Glackens' park

scene in *May Day, Central Park* (1905, Figure 36) depict ordinary women enjoying themselves among their friends and male companions. Wearing their best outfits, they clearly take pleasure in socializing and playing lively games.

For working class women, pretty clothes played an important role in their quest for adventures. Single women wearing nice clothes could stand out from the rest of the crowd and had better chances of drawing attention and ultimately finding a suitable husband. For working women, as for their upper-class sisters, clothes became crucial investments for attaining a desirable status. The importance of clothing is precisely explained by Katherine Joslin in the following: “Dress functions as hieroglyph: its material presence drapes the body, revealing and concealing intricate patterns easily read by members of the tribe and clearly setting limits on those included and excluded from its web of meaning.”³⁸⁶ Tasteful dressing was an essential part of women’s self-construction and self-expression. The assortment and availability of mass produced clothing in upscale department stores or more modest neighborhood shops allowed women to play, create, and define their fashionable styles. John Sloan’s *A Sunday Afternoon* and *Haymarket* are examples of elaborately dressed women caught in the dynamics of display and spectatorship. In *A Sunday Afternoon* two young women, taking a pleasure stroll on a sunny day, draw the interest of several nearby men and women. Sloan’s young women proudly display their color-coordinated dresses, matching hats, as well as elegant purses and fancy shoes. Similarly in *Haymarket* several women dressed in their best outfits are going toward the entrance of a trendy dance hall and salon while men at the door stare at them appreciatively. Working class women aspired to dress like “ladies” whose styles

³⁸⁶ Katherine Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2009, p. 7.

they could observe in the department stores or theaters, or follow through fashion magazines. Nan Enstad rightly concludes that dressing in elaborate styles working class women “staged a carnivalesque class inversion that undermined the middle-class to control the definition of ‘lady’.”³⁸⁷ Moreover pretty clothes gave ordinary women an opportunity to create another “imaginative reality in which they were highly valued.”³⁸⁸

For single working women the purchase and display of fashionable clothing were the means to escape economic deprivation and create an illusion of carefree reality. Moreover, through pretty clothes, women desired to affirm themselves in a culture where outward appearance played an important role as a key expression of one’s individuality. Women’s attractive appearances became an essential commodity that they could use to negotiate the purchase of products and services from their male admirers. The custom of “treating” was a common aspect of interaction between men and working class women. According to Kathy Peiss, men treated their female companions “to drinks and refreshments, theater tickets” in exchange “for sexual favors of varying degrees” from flirtations to sexual intercourse.³⁸⁹ In Dreiser’s novel, Drouet was able to procure Carrie’s companionship by buying her new clothes, taking her out to dinner and providing entertainments. Carrie, on the other hand, bartered her youth and pretty looks for Drouet’s money and therefore secured a comfortable position. The works of Ashcan artists also projected such elements of sexual economy where women’s appearance carried a high value by soliciting the attentions of well-to-do men. William Glackens’

³⁸⁷ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the 20th century*, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 10.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁸⁹ Kathy Peiss, “‘Charity Girls’ and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working Class Sexuality, 1880-1920,” in *Powers of Desires – The Politics of Sexuality*, eds., Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983, p. 78.

painting *Chez Mouquin* offers an example of such interactions. It portrays James Moore, a successful lawyer, and one of his attractive young ladies whom he took around for dinners and entertainments. Most likely he bought these women gifts including fashionable dresses and gave them money in exchange for their companionship.

On the one hand, fashion and commodity culture restricted the lives of working women to being dependant, sexual and decorative. But there was an other side of the coin. The commodity culture allowed working women to achieve a certain independence and self-expression. By spending their time and money on clothes and amusements, women became active participants and shapers of American consumer society. As consumers, these women permeated the public places which were previously dominated by men or which they could not visit without a male's accompaniment. Such tendencies threatened the binary of public and private realms by eroding the gender ideology of the period and class restrictions. John Sloan's painting *Rengaleschi's Saturday Night* cleverly captures the shifting realities in the lives of women. It depicts a group of lively young women who get together for dinner at the restaurant without male partners. These women are clearly enjoying each other's company as well as their meals and drinks. Working women, as Nan Enstad explains, by using their wages for purchase of goods and services "laid claim to the practices and privileges of male wage-earners..."³⁹⁰ Working women actively sought to negotiate and redefine their roles and places in the society. Over the years as more women entered the work force there were more chances for their upward movement. Some women, mostly in the department stores and women's magazine industries, were able to rise to managerial positions while others developed small trades in dressmaking, millinery, and tailoring that could also bring decent pay. Dreiser's

³⁹⁰ Enstad, p. 178.

heroine Carrie launched a successful acting career and began to earn more money than her lover Hurstwood could provide. In the end their roles had dramatically altered when Carrie began to hand Hurstwood money so he could purchase groceries and pay the bills while she was out working. The consumer culture challenged the perceived notions of stable class and gender identities. Carrie is an example of working women's agency, self-determination and the possibility of upward mobility.

The rise of modern consumer culture created a multitude of new desires. The complexity of external forces such as fashions, crowds, shops, theaters, restaurants, and commodities of all kinds assured both upper and lower class women enjoyments through conspicuous consumption and leisure. Commodity culture reshaped women's world beyond the privacy of their homes and ultimately encouraged women to construct desirable self-images by putting a strong emphasis on their appearances. Wharton's and Dreiser's novels together with Impressionist and Realist paintings created powerful narratives of modernity by exemplifying artistic responses to consumer ideology of the period - the centerpiece of everyday life and a focal point of all relationships. The analysis of both art and literature disclose common threads in presenting images of women, the most visible icons of pervasive materialism, and their relations to the issues of commodification, commercial exchange, display and spectatorship. Furthermore taking together artistic and literary representations of women yields a fuller understanding of pleasures and pains of consumer culture, gender, and class matters. This research demonstrates that for women of all classes, no matter how affluent or poor, commodity culture became the ways to display, to express, to negotiate as well as to assert themselves in male-dominated society. This analysis also shows that consumer

culture, by being both oppressive and liberating, reinforced, reconciled, as well as challenged women's social position, economic dependence and sexual ideology of the period. The interdisciplinary approach of this work aims to present a fresh perspectives on turn-of-the-century American society steeped in material desires, and, most importantly, to disclose ideals and ideas about women's role in that economy and culture.

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Figure 1. Advertisement for Geo W. Laird's "Bloom of Youth," *Pictorial Review*, 1903.

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Figure 2. Advertisement for "U-AR-DAS Bath of Benzoïn," *Harper's Bazaar*, 1905.

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Figure 3. Advertisement for "La Tossa Silk," *Harper's Bazaar*, 1908.

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Figure 4. Advertisement for "Pear's Soap," *Harper's Bazaar*, 1908.

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Figure 5. Advertisement for "Pompeian Massage Cream," *Harper's Bazaar*, 1908.

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Figure 6. Advertisement for "Ferris' Corsets," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, 1902.

Figure 7. Advertisements for Women's Fashions, *The Delineator*, 1900 - 1901.

Figure 8. Photograph of William Merritt Chase's 10th Street Studio, New York, c. 1880.

Figure 9. Photograph of William Merritt Chase's 10th Street Studio, New York, c. 1880.

Figure 10. William Merritt Chase, *In the Studio*, c. 1880.

Figure 11. William Merritt Chase, *Interior of Artist's Studio*, c. 1880.

Figure 12. Group of Ashcan Artists at John Sloan's Studio, Philadelphia, 1898.

Figure 13. George Bellows, *The Studio*, 1919.

Figure 14. Charles Dana Gibson, *One Difficulty of the Game: Keeping Your Eyes on the Ball*, 1899.

Figure 15. John Singer Sargent, *Madame X*, 1883.

Figure 16. John Singer Sargent, *Isabella Stewart Gardner*, 1888.

Figure 17. John Singer Sargent, *Mrs. Fiske Warren and her Daughter*, 1903.

Figure 18. John Singer Sargent, *Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes*, 1897

Figure 19. William Merritt Chase, *The Blue Kimono*, 1888.

Figure 20. William Merritt Chase, *Portrait of Miss Dora Wheeler*, 1883.

Figure 21. William Merritt Chase, *The Park*, 1883.

Figure 22. William Merritt Chase, *The Idle Hours*, 1894.

Figure 23. William Merritt Chase, *At the Seaside*, 1892.

Figure 24. Frank W. Benson, *The Back Hat*, 1904.

Figure 25. Frank W. Benson, *Girl Paying Solitaire*, 1909.

Figure 26. William McGregor Paxton, *The Crystal*, 1900.

Figure 27. William McGregor Paxton, *The New Necklace*, 1910.

Figure 28. William McGregor Paxton, *The String of Pearls*, 1909.

Figure 29. William McGregor Paxton, *Tea Leaves*, 1909.

Figure 30. Edmund C. Tarbell, *Girl Cutting Patterns*, 1908.

Figure 31. Edmund C. Tarbell, *Arrangement in Pink and Gray*, 1894.

Figure 32. Joseph de Camp, *The Red Kimono*, 1919

Figure 33. Childe Hassam, *The Garden Table*, 1910.

Figure 34. Childe Hassam, *The Breakfast Room*, 1912.

Figure 35. Childe Hassam, *The New York Window*, 1912.

Figure 36. Frank W. Benson, *The Open Window*, 1917

Figure 37. William Churchill, *The Solitude*, 1911.

Figure 38. Cecilia Beaux, *Mrs. Lars Anderson*, 1900.

Figure 39. Lilian Hale, *Edition de Luxe*, 1909.

Figure 40. Mary Cassatt, *Five O'clock Tea*, 1880.

Figure 41. Mary Cassatt, *At the Opera*, 1879.

Figure 42. Mary Cassatt, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge*, 1879.

Figure 43. Mary Cassatt, *Woman Reading*, 1878.

Figure 44. George Luks, *Hester Street*, 1905.

Figure 45. George Bellows, *Outside the Big Tent*, 1912.

Figure 46. George Bellows, *Circus*, 1912.

Figure 47. William Glackens, *May Day, Central Park*, 1905.

Figure 48. Joan Sloan, *South Beach Bathers*, 1907-1908.

Figure 49. Joan Sloan, *Fifth Avenue, New York*, 1909-1910.

Figure 50. William Glackens, *The Shoppers*, 1907.

Figure 51. Everett Shinn, *Window Shopping*, 1903.

Figure 52. Joan Sloan, *The Haymarket*, 1907.

Figure 53. Joan Sloan, *Sunday Afternoon in Union Square*, 1912.

Figure 54. Joan Sloan, *Renganeschi's Saturday Night*, 1912.

Figure 55. William Glackens, *Chez Mouquin*, 1905.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

For

JANNA TAJIBAEVA

PERSONAL DATA

Birthplace: Kazakhstan

Languages: English – fluent

Russian – fluent

Kazakh – native speaker

German – reading knowledge

EDUCATION

- 1989 B.A./M.A. in Russian Literature and Language with concentration on 19th and 20th century Russian Literature, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia.
- 1999 M.A. in Art History, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.
M.A. thesis on *Old Testament Images in Islamic Manuscript Painting* (with distinction).
- 2012 Ph.D. in Humanities, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.
Dissertation on *Consumer Culture, Material Desires and Images of Women in American Novels and Art at the Turn-of-the 19th Century*.

POSITIONS HELD

- 1989 - 1992 Instructor of Russian Philology at Kazakh State University, Almaty, Kazakhstan. Lectured on 19th and 20th century Russian Literature, taught Old Slavic Language, Russian Language courses for Kazakh speaking students and also foreign students from North Africa and South-East Asia.

- 1992 - 1996 Instructor of Russian Language and Russian Culture classes at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
- 1993 - 1997 Interpreter and facilitator for professional groups of doctors, educators, and business managers from republics of former Soviet Union. Host organizations included Louisville International Cultural Center, Jewish Hospital, Spalding University, and Sister Cities of Louisville through U.S. Department of State.
- 1996 - 1998 Teaching assistantship in Art History Department, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY. Taught undergraduate courses on Introduction to Art, Ancient to Medieval Art, and Renaissance to Modern Art.
- 1998 - 1999 Research assistant to Dr. John Kleber, editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of Louisville* Project.
- 1999 - present: Program Coordinator, Sr., Arts and Sciences Dean's Office.
 - Managed the Liberal Studies Project and its CE&S Foundation grant that allowed the College to bring twenty five Distinguished Visiting Scholars from USA and abroad to campus for semester long visits to teach, conduct workshops, and give public lectures.
 - Administered Latin American and Latino Studies program's operations, budget, scholarships, special events, Panama overseas program, and designed and published newsletters.
 - Provided logistical support for various year- long events related to College of Arts and Sciences' Centennial celebration - creation of the Centennial folio of artworks, "Life of the Mind" lecture series, centennial gala.
 - Organizes monthly lunch and lecture series titled *Meet the Professor* to showcase and recognize the accomplishments, research and talents of the university's faculty in the fields of liberal arts and sciences.
 - Coordinates activities of The Center for Arts and Culture Partnerships. Plan and develop external and internal programming and special projects including - Oral history workshops, *Public Art and the City* conferences, *Photography: the Document* conference (2011), and history symposia *Land, River and Peoples: Louisville Before the Civil War* (2009), *Louisville, the Ohio Valley and the Civil War* (2010), *Pathways to*

Freedom: Kentucky and the Civil War (2011), and *Victory Achieved-Freedom Denied: From Civil War to Reconstruction in Kentucky* (March 2012). Carry out fundraising and publicity efforts, oversee budgets, and serve as liaison between U of L and Arts and Culture Partners in the community.

CONFERENCES AND PAPERS

- “Toyokuni’s Actor: A Window to Nineteenth Century Japanese Culture,” published in *Parnasus*, Vol. III, 1998, The Allen R. Hite Art Institute Journal, University of Louisville.
- 2010 - The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900. Presented paper on *Desiring and Desired Women* analyzing the images of women in the novels of Edith Wharton and the Art of Boston School.

AWARDS

- 1998 – Hilda Threlkeld Scholarship
- 1999 – Internship Awarded at Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation
- 2006 - Nominated for College of Arts and Sciences Award for Outstanding Performance
- 2010 – Nominated for College of Arts and Sciences Award for Outstanding Performance