(RE)FASHIONING GENDER:
DRESS AS EMBODIED FEMINIST CRITIQUE IN MODERNIST WOMEN'S WRITING

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband and family. Without your unwavering love and support I could not have made it this far and would not be the person I am today. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation I examine early twentieth century women writers' use of fashion as a mode of critiquing gender, race, and class oppression. Through close reading of the novels of Nella Larsen, Edith Wharton, Anzia Yezierska, Radclyffe Hall, and Virginia Woolf, I explore how fashion in these works functions to emphasize elements of identity formation and conditioning. I argue that by taking up fashion as a tool for critique women writers were able to simultaneously challenge oppressive social structures as well as appraisals of women as unfit for serious analysis or literature. If fashion is considered trivial, then using it for something as consequential as a critique of modern culture's oppressive class, race, and gender structures was quite revolutionary. Using feminist theory and criticism on the social construction of gender, intersectionality, and women's writing, I maintain that the extensive use of fashion imagery in these works gave the writers a tangible means of expressing their beliefs about women's changing position in turn-of-the-century society. Because both fashion and women's political positions were changing rapidly at this time, combining the two in fiction allowed women writers to explore issues of identity and agency for women in modern culture.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Modern Fashion & Modernist Women's Writing

> Why am I calm & indifferent as to what people say of Night & Day, & fretful for their good opinion of my blue dress? – Virginia Woolf, *Diary vol. 1,* Monday, 23 June 1919
>
> Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us.
>
> – Virginia Woolf, *Orlando,* 1928

Women's fashion in the early twentieth century is arguably the most iconic symbol of feminism's influence on everyday life. The short skirts, free waistlines, and bob haircuts of the twenties flapper are often romanticized as the visual epitome of feminine liberation. Nonetheless, from a contemporary feminist perspective, we tend to dismiss the consequence of clothes as distracting from "real" women's issues.[1] In her now seminal text, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity,* Elizabeth Wilson points out that "[i]t is difficult to discuss fashion in relation to the feminism of today, because the ideologies about dress that have circulated within the women's movement seem never to have been made explicit" (230). Oftentimes, feminist debates have circumnavigated fashion, tending to address adjacent issues of gender norms, sexual agency, or bodily autonomy and, for Wilson, "[t]his may be one reason for the intense irritation and confusion that the subject provoke[s]" (*Adorned* 230). In general, fashion is not often

[1] Elizabeth Wilson argues, there is "[a]n unresolved tension between 'authenticity' and 'modernism' haunts contemporary feminism" (*Adorned* 231). She further explains the tendency for feminist arguments to position certain topics as the antithesis of feminism's goals, including but not limited to, fashion as one such area. "[T]he thesis is that fashion is oppressive, the antithesis that we find it pleasurable [. . .]. In all these arguments the alternatives posed are between moralism and hedonism; either doing your own thing is okay, or else it convicts you of false consciousness. Either the products of popular culture are the supports of a monolithic male ideology, or they are to be enjoyed and justified" (Wilson *Adorned* 232). Furthermore, this final note that pleasure in fashion is something to be justified is one that I will address below.

discussed as the primary focus of feminist criticism. It may be included as a contributing factor to discussions about gender, race, or sexuality; however, even in these instances fashion can be presented as more of a liability than an asset.

With this in mind, I believe that probing this tension presents a compelling opportunity to reassess feminist attitudes about dress and that literary criticism provides an especially fruitful medium for exploring such arguments. In this dissertation, I will discuss how a range of women writers in the early twentieth century used fashion as a rhetorical strategy in their fiction to address the social conventions of gender, as well as race, class, and sexuality. Furthermore, I believe this strategy is more than the stylistic preference of a few authors; rather, the descriptions of dress analyzed here are present across a wide range of anglophone fiction from the early decades of the twentieth century and in the memoirs and personal writings of women celebrities and artists of the period. My examination will cover the works of writers from 1905 with Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* to 1928 with works from Nella Larsen, Radclyffe Hall, and Virginia Woolf. In addition, I will discuss the career of Josephine Baker as a real-world examination of the mode of self-fashioning as I read it in women's fiction of the jazz age. An application of feminist theory and close readings of these texts present us with myriad examples of how fashion not only functioned as a means of social control, reinforcing dictates of femininity and social identity, but also provided an outlet for communicating more subversive ideas. Therefore, the goal of the arguments to follow is to suggest that the apparent preoccupation with fashion present in the lives and work of these women goes beyond expectations of femininity to introduce modern challenges to gender norms that would later emerge in the philosophies of feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler.

Furthermore, I argue that fashion serves as more than a *motif* in early twentieth-century women's writing and is rather a specific *mode* of writing that engages with the complex discourse of identity and modernity. I begin by acknowledging that, generally, writing about fashion is often grounds for women's writing being demoted from literary to middle- or low-brow, popular fiction. However, recognizing the power of fashion to not only set the parameters of what is considered feminine, as it has traditionally been argued, but to provide an outlet for rebellious self-expression creates a productive means to consider how feminism has permeated the everyday lives of women through the (not so) simple act of getting dressed.[2] Furthermore, making room for fashion in our discussion of feminist literature opens the door to productive reconsiderations of writing, and reading, fashion as a deliberate aesthetic choice. Scholars of modernism in particular often struggle with how to best address the feminine in women's writing of the period (Scott *Gender* 7). Within the Harlem Renaissance this discussion becomes even more fraught as black women had to fight doubly hard for the legitimacy of their own writing (McDougald 381). I believe that within this scholarly context, the fashion transformations of the early 1900s can be analyzed as more than a provocative pop culture phenomenon. Rereading raising hemlines and ditching corsets in fiction provides an opportunity to examine how modernist women in particular incorporated subversive style into their writing to challenge the social and political suppression of women, when their public voices and bodies were heavily restricted and scrutinized.[3]

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[2] While I acknowledge the fraught nature of utilizing the label of feminine, I particularly appreciate Parkins & Sheehan's definition, as they state "we take the feminine to consist of a constellation of significations, which is enacted through a broad range of behaviors, practices, and affects, and thereby becomes naturalized as belonging to female-bodied people" (Parkins and Sheehan 3). The elaborate further to say that "[f]emininity is an embodied orientation as much as it is a discursive construct" (Parkins & Sheehan 4), thus, as I will argue in this dissertation fashion bridges these two and particularly in writing is both discursive and material.

[3] I use the term modernist here to refer primarily to the time period in anglophone literary production from the late 1890s to mid 1900s. I do to an extent discuss the contested definitions and exclusiveness of modernism's definitions

The texts surveyed here range from 1905 to 1928, with the majority being positioned in the 1920s. (*The House of Mirth,* as the earliest text offers a useful background for gauging the trajectory of women's fashions and fates moving into the twentieth century, while *Orlando,* though published in 1928, serves a similar function in tracing fashions arbitrarily gendered legacies.) Overall, these works were written in the heyday of women's sartorial revolution in which feminine norms were being challenged in myriad ways. What's crucial to recognize here is that the meaning of these transformations in women's fashion extend beyond mere costuming. They forced society to adopt new standards of femininity to accommodate new shapes and styles. Hemlines revealed upper thighs when decades earlier women weren't even allowed to show their ankles. Women cutting their hair in shorter, more masculine styles was paired with a more widespread application and acceptance of makeup. Straight, androgynous silhouettes freed women from the confines of corsets highlighting their (artificially) womanly figures. As Buckley and Fawcett explain in *Fashioning the Feminine,* restrictive styles of the previous century meant that

> the body was encased in highly structured corseting that exerted a sheath-like control. The function of the corset and the aptly named sheath dress in the late-nineteenth-century fashion can be read in a similar way. Fashion, like art in this period, was concerned with the 'containment and regulation of the female body'. (37)

While many of these fashion transformations were stylistically unconventional, these changes also directly impacted women's bodies. The initially liberating changes quickly transitioned into a new set of standards few female bodies could accommodate without serious strife and even health risks, especially for women of color (White and White 188). I emphasize the body here

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in this introduction and at intervals throughout this dissertation where appropriate. However, the term is also a matter of convenience as the dates encompass the works discussed.

because I am not simply referring to the clothes women can take on and off as they choose.[4] Rather, I am interrogating how women's *writing on the body* – meaning both writing about the body and clothing's function as *writing* the body – portrays sex, gender, and race as all being imposed on woman's physical body over the course of her life through clothes. In this sense, fashion is a means through which one can attempt to disrupt the binaries pressing down on the body in a series of performances towards a constant state of becoming. Additionally, I believe Larsen's works (and the connections made at the end of this dissertation to Josephine Baker's performances) expand the modernist woman writer's scope beyond sex/gender critiques, to explore race and class as additional gray areas in which women were, and are, required to operate in order to be taken seriously.[5] Through the tangible examples of dress from the selected texts, these performances show how women have historically and simultaneously subscribed to and resisted cultural assumptions about femininity through fashion. Particularly in *Quicksand,* Nella Larsen uses the performative function of clothing to address the oppression of women, especially women of color; Larsen marks the periods of resistance, objectification, and subjugation the protagonist, Helga Crane, experiences with distinctive fashion choices, which is why I have chosen it to open this project.

Unfortunately, relying on the feminine in writing and living became a less and less popular mode of expression in the decades of feminism that have followed Larsen and her

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[4] In *Why Women Wear What They Wear?,* Sophie Woodward acknowledges that "In this Western discourse, the self is disembodied and immaterial. Phenomenological approaches (Merleau-Ponty, 1974) have critiqued the separation of the body and the mind by positioning the body as the existential ground of perception, culture and self-awareness. The importance of the body is paramount in any consideration of clothing; given that it is worn on the body, clothing needs to be understood as a 'situated bodily practice'" (16). The collection *Writing on the Body,* edited by Medina, et al., addresses this approach across a broad range of media.

[5] With respect to black women writers in particular the articles "Hard Romping: Zora Neale Hurston, White Women, and the Right to Play" by Adrienne Brown and Gregory Alan Phipps's "Breaking down Creative Democracy: A Pragmatist Reading of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand"* address the challenging exigencies of black women's literary production.

contemporaries. As Sara Ahmed points out in *Living a Feminist Life,* we can often "feel an obligation to 'de-girl'" in our current feminist moment (55). We tend to struggle with determining whether our "self-girling" is authentic or simply the product of our sex/gender conditioning and therefore err on the side of caution by casting the feminine aside. Just as Woolf speculates as to whether Austen felt compelled to hide her writing, this struggle can mean that venturing into feminine territory with feminist criticism can leave one feeling duty-bound to justify it. However, this avoidance of the feminine can create just as many issues as it solves when we seek to write and live as feminists. For this very reason, I am pursuing Ahmed's suggestion that we "might have to become willful to be willingly feminine in feminist spaces" (*Living* 55). I am willfully acknowledging the feminine in women's writing, and sartorial expression more generally, in an effort to disrupt the primarily negative conclusions contemporary analysis might jump to by avoiding or even overlooking women writers' carefully fashioned fictional wardrobes.[6]

Fashion is a site of transgression. Whether subconscious or intentional, the way one dresses has the power to control or to free; dress signals to society the extent of our willingness to participate in norms and power structures. It is certainly true, to say that some put more thought and care into clothes than others. However, it is equally true that society interprets dress according to the multiplicity of binaries it can represent, regardless of the wearer's intent. The concept of socially acceptable dress ensures that a person's clothes reflect the norms of gender, sexuality, race, and class as a way of clearly identifying and categorizing individuals and thus

[6] "Irigaray's response to this exclusion of the feminine from the economy of representation is effectively to say, Fine, I don't want to be in your economy anyway, and I'll show you what this unintelligible receptacle can do to your system; I will not be a poor copy in your system, but I will resemble you nevertheless by miming the textual passages through which you construct your system and showing that what cannot enter it is already inside it (as its necessary outside), and I will mime and repeat the gesture of your operation until this emergence of the outside within the system calls into question the systematic closure and its pretension to be self-grounding" (Butler, Bodies 45).

more easily enforcing social hierarchies. To place these two truths side by side can thus create a paradox for the subject who may or may not identify with the structures imposed by society's interpretation of their appearance, especially one they may return to the closet at the end of the day. When the autonomy of the human subject, and indeed their willingness to be perceived according to normative social expectations of gender or racial performance, comes up against fashion as a social signifier, boundaries begin to blur between where the interpretation of the clothes end and the person begins. Fashion is thus both sinister and alluring because, while on the surface a dress is just a dress, society's categorizing certain types of dress as feminine and others as masculine imbues clothes with the ability to reinforce power structures and maintain social norms.[7] Fashion then not only functions as an external marker of a subject's performance of their identity but also allows for wearers to utilize this function to their own advantage. Just as questions of sex and gender resist tidy definitions or universal truths, the clothes we wear both reinforce and resist binary forces at work in our lives by adhering to or flouting social standards as regard sex, gender, race, and class in the most visible, and therefore readable, ways.

Women and Fashion, Fashioning Women

In 1915, Charlotte Perkins Gilman serialized her treatise on *The Dress of Women*, in which she observes the immense power with which fashion compels one to comply with societal expectations.

> In the matter of clothing, which, as may be seen on the most casual study, is of the most vital importance to humanity, there is some mysterious and compelling power at work [. . .]. So heavy is the pressure of this force that many heroic persons engaged in great work

[7] Philosophy on modernization and culture, such as that of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, establishes these early fashion theory arguments with respect to capitalism and social control, however, as I will discuss regarding dress reform in the conclusion, there are caveats to applying these theories.

> for the world's good, and quite conscious of the evils of our methods of dressing, have deliberately given up the effort to decide on their own clothing, both as too difficult, and as so costly in the opposition and opprobrium excited by any efforts at freedom as to imperil the other work in which they were interested. (Gilman *The Dress of Women* 107-8)

Though Gilman addresses the compelling nature of fashion to thwart resistance to existing power structures, this only addresses one part of the equation. I do believe that Gilman's words are significant here in that, as with much of her work in both fiction and social commentary, she forecasts the kinds of arguments that would gain more traction with later feminist generations.[8] As I stated above, it is true that "[t]he gendered phenomenon of fashion reflects and reinscribes women's conceptual and material associations with spectacle, matter, consumption, mutability, irrationality, and conformity" (Parkins and Sheehan 5); however, I agree with Parkins and Sheehan in acknowledging that, along with compelling gender conformity, fashion "also provides a conditional site for negotiating and challenging such frameworks of gender" (5). In other words, although fashion does reproduce normative social constructs, it also provides the means for its own subversion.

This potential was exploited particularly successfully during the early decades of the twentieth century as women's fashions began to allow more practicality and freedom of movement. "Among the innovations of the last hundred years are knickers with a closed crotch; separates (tops and skirts that could be worn in different combinations); trousers; and, the great

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[8] For example, echoes of Gilman's *Women and Economics* can be heard in Friedan's *Feminine Mystique.* Interestingly, I do, however, find that Gilman's works also reflects backwards. Some statements in *Dress of Women* reflect harshly on women as mindless consumers and privilege reason in similar terms to Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* I also address these assumptions about women as reflected in the fashion theory of Gilman's contemporaries in the conclusion.

couturier Paul Poiret's stroke of genius, a dress that a woman could put on without assistance" (Hill "Frock Consciousness" para. 3). As Rosemary Hill's succinct inventory of women's fashion transformations shows, dresses for women at this time not only allowed for choices beyond *the* dress but also allowed women *to* dress more easily. All of these changes amounted to women's freeing up their movements as well as their time for pursuits other than the domestic and leisurely. As Hill notes, due to the strict gendering of clothing categories, these "innovations" were ones that had already been in place for men's clothing for some time. She thus suggests that "[t]his discrepancy between women's experience and men's may be one reason why dress has come to be seen as a predominantly female subject, or at least one that is expressed in female terms" (Hill "Frock Consciousness" para. 3).[9] What is interesting in Hill's observation is the implication that it is women's experience of clothing that influences their perceived preoccupation, rather than the other way around. Of course, it would be an oversimplification to then assert that without exposure to dresses or ornamentation, women would be more inclined toward strictly utilitarian dress.[10]

As Randi Koppen summarizes, women were less interested in either the reformers or the designers' vision for women's dress. Though in 1915 "[t]he loose-fitting, one-piece dress pioneered by German dress-reformers has been adopted and made fashionable by Paris couturiers such as Poiret, . . . 'the main want of the woman of to-day . . . a practical street dress and a 'business dress', remains to be met" (Anthony qtd in Koppen 15). On the surface, one

[9] These "innovations" also indicate the arbitrariness of the strict gender coding of fashion. As an even more pointed, and period appropriate, example of this coding, "in 1918, a magazine advised parents that pink was the more robust and hence the more 'masculine' color, like a boy with rosy cheeks who had been playing actively outdoors. Blue, on the other hand, was considered to be soft and demure, and hence more feminine" (Kaiser 176).

[10] This kind of argument comes with its own complications, namely the sexist dismissal of femininity. I will address utilitarian and androgynous fashion in more detail in chapter three and in the conclusion. For now, I will add that I believe the more compelling pursuit is deconstructing the masculine/feminine binary as it pertains to fashion and gendering.

might assume that the four dresses here – the reformers, Poiret's, the street and the business – are one and the same and perhaps, as a matter of function, they are. But what I find compelling here, is that the first two are dictated by those telling women what they should wear while the later are those women *want.* Or, as Koppen puts it "[w]ith a feminist understanding of the significance of everyday practice, Anthony [1915] defines the struggle of feminism as 'remold[ing] for woman's use the ordinary symbols of society', to most familiar of which are 'dress, money, and the vote'" (Anthony qtd in Koppen *Woolf* 15). In light of this definition, the significance is then less on the garments themselves and more on women's right to choose them for themselves.[11] Through the examples above I have aimed to illustrate how women in the early twentieth century wished to both determine their clothing choices free from gender restrictions while also taking pleasure in their clothing. This is often a difficult path for women to navigate as "[c]ulture stereotypes women to fit the [beauty] myth by flattening the feminine into beauty-without-intelligence or intelligence-without-beauty; women are allowed a mind or a body but not both" (Wolf 59).

In spite of these challenges, the evolution of fashion, particularly women's fashion, in the early twentieth century proves to be rich ground for analyzing how modern power structures aimed to control both the individual and cultural production. During this period a simple dress became anything but simple as color, coverage, silhouette, and material had specific connotations of gender presentation, sexual expressiveness, and racial and class appropriateness. Modernization theoretically democratized fashion by making new clothing more accessible, however mass-produced fashion also became more efficient at imposing cultural norms under the

[11] To this point, Kuhn and Carlson astutely observe that, in spite of women's attempted self-determination through fashion, "[f]ashion's acceptability in female creation of the self was constantly subject to challenge. As clothing reforms gathered steam during the nineteenth century, from the proposal of 'rational dress' like the Bloomer costume to concern over the injurious nature of tight lacing, women's garments were under the microscope, mirroring larger questions about female roles in society" (Kuhn and Carlson 6).

guise of style.[12] Nonetheless, women did manage to exert some force of their own on the edicts of modern fashion with the competing interests of social control and women's resistance resulting in a period of fashion that remains the subject of fascination in scholarship and popular culture to this day. While the flapper dress in all of its short, fringed, sexually provocative glory is perhaps the most ubiquitous image of fashion's revolution during the early twentieth century, many other changes to women's fashion were equally liberating, if a bit less sensational. Women's dress during the first few decades of the new century underwent rapid and dramatic changes including less restrictive under and outer garments that allowed more freedom of movement, a greater awareness of practicality in both dress and beauty trends, and the curation of concepts of personal style due to the availability and affordability of new clothing. The newness of each season's silhouette or hairstyle may have worn off quickly as well as worn out women, as they strove to keep up with ever changing fashion trends, either to stay in style or resist and stay ahead of them.

Interestingly, the novelty of these trends has not worn off in either scholarship or mainstream culture and iterations of illustrious 1920s style abound in contemporary criticism and popular culture. One of the most memorable recent tributes to early twentieth century fashion is the Masterpiece period drama *Downton Abbey.* The show was lauded for its meticulous attention to period detail as evidenced by the elaborate costume design, and in particular the inclusion of controversial turn of the century fashions as plot points throughout the series. Early in the first season Lady Sybil reveals a harem pants ensemble reminiscent of the then recent Ballets Russes costumes of Paul Poiret[13], which could also be views as the latest iteration of the bloomer

[12] See Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* for a detailed philosophical analysis of this phenomenon and Sofi Thanhauser's recent article "A Brief History of Mass-Manufactured Clothing" for a concise historical overview.
[13] Downton Abbey season 1, episode 4; Met Museum online archive "Fancy Dress Costume" Paul Poiret (1911)

costumes of the previous century (1.4).[14] This shocking fashion choice set the tone for the series and earned numerous accolades for costume design as well as significant scholarly attention. While the mediums of contemporary period drama are quite different from modernist women's fiction their treatment of women's fashion are intriguing here for two reasons.

First, the significance of costume design in film studies provides an excellent model for how fashion in literature could be approached differently.[15] Critics accept and expect fashion as a method of communicating complex meanings that further the rhetorical goals of the project and adequate attention to costume design can make or break a film. Take the example above: Sybil's daring style reinforces her emerging interest in progressive politics, in particular the vote, and foreshadows her later rebellions against gender and class distinctions through her occupation as a nurse and marriage to a working-class man, which are marked by their own distinct styles via a nurse's uniform and bobbed hair, respectively. These fashion elements enhance her character arc, and the shows overall aims to highlight the changing world of the early twentieth century.[16] I believe we can examine fashion in literature in much the same way. Not only does Edith Wharton's describing Lily Bart's dress in *House of Mirth* paint a more vivid picture for readers but it also reinforces our understanding of the "gilded cage" of proper feminine decorum and position she critiques throughout the novel. Perhaps we would grasp Lily's frustration with her lot as a young woman of limited means struggling to gain a solid social footing, however the

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[14] Nancy Troy's Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion gives a particularly interesting overview of the development of Poiret's career as a couture designer and his theatrical influences in particular.

[15] According to Gerald Egan "Studies of fashion and literature which appeared in the late 1990s and early 2000s [. . .] were enabled by a body of scholarship from outside of literary studies, one which in the 1980s reoriented the traditional disciplines of dress history and costume history to more far-reaching considerations of the cultural and psychological meanings of dress" one of the most popular being Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams* (Egan 5).

[16] Buckley and Fawcett note in *Fashioning the Feminine* that "'in so far as there was a spirit of emancipation [it] affected the conduct of the young, and particularly young women'. It was these women whose attitudes and values were to be scrutinized as their importance as consumers of clothes and popular forms of entertainment, such as dancing music and cinema began to be recognised" (Buckley and Fawcett 83).

depth of this struggle may not be fully felt were we not exposed to the pervasiveness of the sexual double standards Wharton critiques down to the very clothes on her back.

Second, I believe the contemporary fascination with this period of women's history and writing in film and television should signal that there are likely untapped avenues for literary criticism to examine in fiction from the period, one of which is the use of fashion.[17] Reading fashion in women's fiction of the early twentieth century as we might interpret costume design in film, opens up possibilities for exploring women's views about gender, social issues, and writing as yet underdeveloped in present feminist and modernist criticism. For example, to return to *Downton Abbey,* one evening's conversation in season two finds the family talking of a return to normalcy following World War I alongside a discussion of changing fashions. Thus, when Mary later asks whether anyone has "seen the boys' haircuts women are wearing in Paris" and a pointed discussion of the bob's, and perhaps Mary's, lack of femininity ensues, viewers can interpret these interactions in one of two ways (2.7). One could assume the scene creates a juxtaposition of the masculine, and therefore important, matters of post war society with the feminine, and therefore frivolous, matters of fashion. However, all parties participate in this lively exchange so we may alternately infer that both the uncertain interwar period and changing ideas about gender were equally important at the time.

Of course, this is just one popular example of the links between fashion and social issues at the turn of the century. Many more can be found in both film and in fiction. Another particularly timely example of both is the Netflix adaptation of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel

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[17] The collection *Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film and Television,* illustrates this possibility. As the editors' note in their introduction "this anthology also brings together different strands of scholarship connecting the history and theory of fashion with that of the study of literature. These individually rich traditions have tended to be conducted in the academy adjacent to each other. The first of these academic approached is the tradition of interrogating literature for what might be learned there about the social and cultural changes signaled by fashion and the way in which such change was generated" (McNeil, et al. 4).

Passing. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Larsen was in fact incredibly detailed in her descriptions of fashion in her writing and used fashion to reinforce complex critiques about race, class, and gender in her writing. She is also one of the few writers whose use of fashion is the subject of significant positive scholarship.[18] Given Larsen's own emphasis on fashion, and especially color, in her writing, it will be interesting to see what criticism emerges regarding costume design in the film, which is shot in black and white. Along with Larsen, this dissertation will engage in like critiques by exploring the descriptions of fashion in the fiction of Edith Wharton, Anzia Yezierska, Radclyffe Hall, and Virginia Woolf as well as that of cultural figures like Josephine Baker as a source of social commentary on gender, race, and class in the modernist period.

Fashion theory, even more so the scholarship that employs it, often reads fashion in spite of its feminine coding rather than resisting or critiquing that categorization. In literary studies, critics discuss the relationship of writers like Woolf or Wharton to fashion in terms of how their writing and personal successes somehow makes up for any accidental lapses into femininity via fashion in their works or lives. Their references to fashion are generally read uniformly, as participation in modern society's fashion complex, making room for scholars to argue that even though they talk about clothes their ideas are still interesting for other more intellectually important reasons. This line of thinking is problematic at best, and inherently antifeminist at worst, as it reinforces the assumptions that anything socially coded as feminine is less valuable, intellectually inferior, and frivolous. Modernist literary criticism that incorporates fashion theory often uses fashion theory that, while culturally significant at the time, also reinforces the sexism of belittling any expressed interest in fashion. Citing fashion theories' cultural critics, such as

[18] Butler's "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge" in Bodies that Matter is especially significant in this regard.

Flugel, Simmel, and Benjamin, can be useful, particularly given the growing capitalist concern of the modern fashion industry, both in the early twentieth century and now. However, these theories focus on the negative developments of fashion as a form of social and economic control through standardization without acknowledging the nuance and possibility for subversion that access to fashion as a form of expression provides.

Many feminist scholars have acknowledged this concern and elaborated on the necessity for attentiveness when working within these philosophies. In sum, these philosophies tended to reflect negatively on the maintenance of consumer culture as part of modernization and implicated consumer, i.e. women, in what they viewed as the deteriorating of modern culture.[19] A feminist approach then requires challenges to these assumptions. As Lauren Cardon argues,

> The problem with all these theories is that they cannot be universally applied: . . . Applying Veblen's theory of fashion among the leisure class, for example, does not adequately explain the character of conspicuous consumption among the leisure class during the gilded age in New York" (Cardon 8).

Cardon's suggestion here thus has major implications for the field, as Veblen's theory is in fact applied regularly in criticism on Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth,* as I will discuss in chapter two. Vike Plock reinforces this point, stating that with Flugel's theories "women were generally marginalised in debates that identified them as the receivers rather than the analysts of fashion's cultural imperatives" (*Modernism* 16). Following this logic, attempting feminist readings of women's operating as cultural analysts in this would be significantly undermined by an

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[19] As Elizabeth Sheehan summarizes in *Modernism A La Mode, "*[l]eading social theorists in Europe and the United States, including Herbert Spencer, Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and J.C. Flugel, presented fashion as a clue to the political, psychological, and cultural dynamics of modernity. For example, Spencer, Simmel, and Flugel claimed that fashion epitomized the tension between individuality and collective obedience that defines modern democracies. Benjamin described fashion's capacity to grasp and remake old styles . . . as a model for Marxian revolution. Fashion, in short, provided vital philosophical and political material for describing, imagining, and remaking modernity" (Sheehan 3).

employment of Flugel, or his peers', theories. Elizabeth Wilson argues this point quite effectively then when she alleges, while modern fashion theory

> regards fashion as a particularly pernicious form of consumerism [. . .] such a view is over-deterministic; that is it grants no role to contradiction, nor for that matter to pleasure. [. . .] All our pleasures become, according to this view, the narcotics of an oppressive society; and opera, pop music, thrillers and great literary 'masterpieces' should therefore logically be condemned along with fashion" (Wilson 52).[20]

While using modern fashion theory is helpful for avoiding anachronistic claims, we cannot ignore the inherent sexism of relying on the ideas of Flugel or Benjamin without challenging the problematic assumptions about gender and femininity in their texts.

It is at this problematic juncture that women's fiction from the period gives us an archive through which we can map women's attitudes about fashion in their own terms. Though a garment "is liable to behave in a way that is not in accordance with the wishes of the wearer, it is apt to seem a troublesome foreign body rather than an agreeable extension of the self" (Flugel quoted in Marshik p. 13), I believe fashion in the writing of women like Virginia Woolf and Nella Larsen provides an alternative to both the feminist and fashion theory of the period and opens a wider scope of possibility for understanding how ideas about gender and feminism have evolved over the last century. Therefore, this dissertation will explore women writers' relationships to fashion precisely because of its feminine connotations in an attempt to uncover how the women conceived of gender, femininity, and social norms beyond the notions available through mainstream fashion and feminist theory of the period.

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[20] Wilson refers explicitly to Baudrillard here, though she discusses other theorists in *Adorned in Dreams* as well. Along these lines, as Benedict Anderson points out in *Imagined Communities* "[t]he book was the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity", however, these theorists are do make distinctions between *literature* and *pulp* fiction, where they make no such allowances with fashion (34).

Women Writers, Fashion, and Modernist Literary Discourse

Literature reflects the society that produces it. With respect to the cultural politics of sex, gender, and sexuality, fiction can either reproduce, and thus reinforce, social norms or it can critique those norms. The function of art as a social product is generally accepted as a given in modernist studies and criticism unfolds according to this line of thinking. Literary modernism is a movement dedicated to resisting conformity in terms of style and content and a rejection (in theory) of commercial interests in favor of producing art that attempts to exist outside the norms of modern society. A paradox is inherent in this form of artistic expression since the art must demonstrate an awareness of the forces it attempts to resist in order to be successful. This created an artistic binary in which modernists defined their style by first labeling mainstream fiction as disposable entertainment for the masses and then asserting that their work was not those things through, at least the appearance, of an indifference to commercial success. Of course, when an artistic endeavor is defined by resisting the popular opinion, one must be ever alert to the impulses of popular culture.

Interestingly, fashion functions in much the same way.[21] "The power of garments, like the power of texts, is not reducible to their status as commodities, although one cannot simply disentangle modernism or *la mode* from capitalism" (Sheehan *Modernism* 4). Fashion not only reflects standards of beauty, social standing, and gender performance but also evolves as a result of resistance to the imposed expectations of conformity and style. Over time the gender binary in fashion has become more strict, with men's fashion becoming simplified and more utilitarian

[21] Plock further points to the hypocrisy of this stance, arguing "[i]f an excessive interest in fashion had little to do with men's conventional remits, it could of course, be employed to great effect in their writing to signal disagreement with accepted conventions and further emphasise the gulf between their work and popular literary productions. In the hands of male writers, fashion could be deployed, therefore, to work against cultural hegemonies and assumptions – a process that was much harder to emulate by anglophone women writers of the same period" (*Modernism* 15).

while women's fashion has followed a cycle of control and liberation. In other words, women's fashion trends enforce standards of femininity and demand a certain, unattainable, female aesthetic; women begin to resist by altering their personal styles to subvert said standards; and mainstream culture then begins to endorse these subversive styles as the new standard, thus re-exerting control.[22] Within this cycle, femininity is a moving target that forces women to remain constantly alert to society's current definitions regardless of their intention to either conform to or subvert the standard. Women must demonstrate an awareness of societies expectations for their bodies and appropriate forms of feminine expression in order to begin subverting femininity in the same way that writers must understand the precepts of form and style before challenging them in their works.

With respect to modernism, the analysis that follows may appear to include works and writers outside of the scope of that movement, particularly in that the prevailing opinion until fairly recently was that the modernists were predominantly a white male coterie. As with the recent critique of canon formation more generally, this narrow view of modernism as a small contingent of avant-garde elites has lately been shown to be an incomplete picture of the literary landscape of the early twentieth century that unfairly excludes all but a few writers' works as mere commercial literature. With this in mind, my argument in relation to modernism is twofold. First, I believe, as much contemporary modernist criticism has rightly asserted, this narrow approach to the period not only ignores a proliferation of equally significant creative projects as separate from and therefore less-than but also fails to acknowledge literary styles which fit well within the overall goal of individuality and "stylistic idiosyncrasy" of modernism itself (Plock

[22] An adequately thorough assessment of this (re)appropriation process is outside the scope of this project, however, I do work to acknowledge it wear appropriate, particularly in chapter four. See Susan Bordo *Unbearable Weight* and Sophie Woodward *Why Women Wear What They Wear?* for nuanced discussions of this cycle as it pertains to women's bodies and their self-fashioning.

Modernism 12).[23] As I have discussed above, the evolution of women's fashion in particular at this time can be read as a response to the modern world in much the same way modernists conceptualized their writing. Negative expositions abound on the rise in consumer culture, decadence and wastefulness, and seeming obsession with novelty of the growing cultural preoccupation with fashion, particularly against the backdrop of atrocities of war and urbanization at the time. Modernists aimed to combat the influence of commercialization on publishing by claiming to eschew commercial success in favor of artist innovation and styling their writing in contrast to what they conceived to be popular or mainstream.[24]

However, women's utilization of fashion as a means of self-expression and defiance of those same mechanisms of modernization should not be overlooked. Under the guise of innocent feminine occupation, perhaps preoccupation, the curation of a modern wardrobe allowed for items which subtly - or not so subtly - challenged mandatory gender norms in the form of revealing hems and necklines, non-constricting undergarments or confining silhouettes, cosmetics, and even pants or other traditionally masculine attire. As Sheehan explains "[f]ashion, like modernism, repeatedly breaks free of arguments that try to assign a single, overarching meaning to its prevailing form" (Sheehan *Modernism* 5). This rejection of tradition within women's fashion thus operates in much the same way as literary modernism by asserting the individual within an increasingly mass produced and amalgamous culture that reinforces conformity above all else. Essentially, the drive to dismiss the changes in fashion as mere novelty, fails to acknowledge the ways in which those changes were brought about at least in

[23] Bonnie Kime Scott is one of the foremost scholars on gender and modernism and her expansions of the modernist canon in *The Gender of Modernism* and the *Refiguring Modernism* volumes are essential for shaping the discourse on women's writing of the period, including in the selection of texts for this project.
[24] I believe Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* is especially useful as background on the intricacies of modernist publishing relationships, and women's vital role in the production of modernist literature as publishers as well as authors.

part by women's resistance to control imposed by previous notions of proper feminine style.[25] The resistance to imposed outside considerations of taste and style is of course a key tenet of modernist artistic expression.

The gap between the avant-garde and the haute couture is perhaps then less a matter of true difference in purpose or worth and more an indication of the privileging of masculine pursuits within the western white capitalist patriarchal society. Even so, scholarship which aims to dismantle the misogynistic purview of modernist criticism often contradicts itself in the continued tendency to discuss women's contributions in spite of their feminine overtones rather than because of them. This line of thinking ends up collapsing women's writing into the existing definitions rather than allowing such stylist differences to enhance our understanding of the artistic breadth of a modernism inherently preoccupied with depth. Thus, my second aim is to internalize what Plock calls modernism's "insistence on intellectual exclusivity" and explore how women writers, through making use of those feminine pursuits which supposedly excludes them from serious artistic endeavors, simultaneously worked against the limitations of modernism while enhancing its possible outlets for expression (Plock *Modernism* 18). Certainly, the inclusion of fashion within one's writing - or even on one's own body - as I have outlined thus far adheres to the goals of modernist artistic expression by signaling not a vapid fixation on the surface and the temporary but just those depths which modernism delved in seeking the self, outside of societies conforming forces. And so, what remains to be seen is just how women writers were able to create work that, knowing it would be measured against standards that

[25] In contemporary fashion studies, scholars acknowledge that the shifting fashions of the interwar period were not only due to the modern novelty fetish as fashion criticism of the time suggested. Rather they observe that "[i]n the context of the immense turmoil and insecurity generated by the First World War and by women's successful demand for the vote, femininity came under intense scrutiny between the wars. [. . .] Fashion was an important arena for the creation not just of images of modernity but also for the articulation of gender, and to some extent class identities" (Buckley and Fawcett 84-5).

inherently exclude and devalue it, explicitly incorporated that which on the surface contradicts modernist ideals but in actuality reveal the contradictions within the construction of those aesthetics. By utilizing the evolving discourse of women's fashion at the time, a sartorial narrative that worked to unbind women's bodies in tandem with social and political aims to free their fates as well, women writers could also strip away the veil of intellectualism and lay bare the hypocrisy of corseted definitions of modernist expression.

With the myriad negative associations attached to fashion and femininity, why then would women writers, already more likely to be dismissed by their male counterparts, not to mention the publishing world in general, have used motifs as culturally fraught as fashion and dress so frequently in their fiction? I argue that by taking up fashion as a tool for critique, women writers were able to simultaneously challenge the believe that women were unfit for serious analysis or literature and that fashion was inappropriately unimportant, precisely *because* they were using such supposedly frivolous themes to broadcast their appraisals. If fashion is considered trivial, then using it for something as consequential as a critique of modern cultures oppressive class, race, and gender structures was in fact quite revolutionary. The intersection of the paradoxes of modernism and fashion is therefore where I position this dissertation, in part out of necessity, as the discussions that follow must embrace rather than resist the ambiguities and contradictions that naturally arise in each of these areas individually and will be especially likely when combining them. For the purposes of my analysis, I believe modernism's professed rejection of commodification and mainstream aesthetics provides a convenient parallel to the social dismissal of fashion and feminine aesthetics as frivolous and insignificant. These overlapping critiques of modern culture open the door for meaningful discourse on the dismissal or exclusion of women's pursuits on multiple fronts, be they fictional or fashionable. More particularly, I am interested in

the additional layer of complexity that comes from performing not only a feminist interpretation of women and their clothes but also the double examination of women writing via a secondary critique of modernism and fashion theory.

Scope

The substantial use of fashion in the writing of women from this period demonstrates: an awareness of how their employment of fashion, either personally or in their work, would be critiqued regardless of its intricacies or specificity in that it didn't matter if they were upholding patriarchal values or challenging them; it provided a medium which, because of its dismiss-ability, could be overlooked depending on the audience, which would perhaps be convenient for putting forth ideas that challenged patriarchy because the patriarchy itself would be very likely to gloss right over such critiques in adhering to its own dismissal of women's aesthetics or supposedly feminine themes or values; the use of such fashion would of course also have been a gamble, since it ran the risk of causing one's work to be reduced to popular, domestic, romance, low brow mass cultural products but an awareness of this risk (Plock *Modernism* 15), and persistence in spite of it demonstrates a resistance to the demands of both the male dominated, exclusionary definitions of modernism and so called true literary artistic production and the demands of the writing culture of popular fiction at the time.

As with most discussions of women and modernism, Woolf is a central figure in the analysis of modernist women and fashion from scholars such as Sheehan and Koppen. While Woolf will be discussed later in this analysis, my aim in this study is to expand the scope of this line of inquiry to include a broader and deeper range of works and titles. Central to this argument is the work of Nella Larsen, and more specifically the novel *Quicksand*, for its saturation with fashion themes and references. The abundance of examples in Larsen's writing provides ample

opportunities to explore the multiple potentials of reading fashion in literature as commentary on gender, race, and class throughout this period. Ironically the fashion in feminist criticism has been to dismiss fashion; however, the limitations of arguments of definition and exclusion, which often lead to essentialism, in feminism are being challenged within current scholarship, opening the door for more diverse subject matter in feminist literary analysis including the employment of fashion and dress in women's writing that is comfortable with addressing both conformity/complicity and critique.

Several recent projects have helped to inform and narrow the scope of this dissertation both in the texts selected and the critical approaches. For example, Marshik, Celia Marshik's *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture* (2016) examines subjectivity and agency through the fashion and literary production from the Victorian into the modernist period. Marshik's analysis is particularly compelling in that she is "interested in complicating and exploring relationships among garments and human subjects - in getting a reader to think along with them about what objects mean and in what ways humans, too, are objects" (Marshik 9). This work provides an interesting cultural studies approach, with an emphasis on economic shifts, that parallels the progression of women's writing discussed by Gilbert and Gubar from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries.[26] Along these lines, Rosy Aindow's *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914* (2010) and Vike Plock's *Modernism, Fashion and Interwar Women Writers* (2017) also trace themes of fashion in women's writing in the Victorian and modernist periods, respectively. Aindow attributes the use of clothing in fiction to aestheticism and realism, stating "the dominance of realism throughout

[26] For example, Marshik's chapter on the holdover of the Victorian evening dress, and its potential dangers, provides a concrete sartorial example to the progression in women's fictional outcomes that Gilbert and Gubar outline in *The Madwoman in the Attic* and the *No Man's Land* volumes.

nineteenth-century fiction, for example, ensures that there was often a great deal of attention given to garments" but before this acknowledges that the fiction "registers such an obsession with the ambiguity of clothing as an expression of changing societal relations" (Aindow 9).[27] Plock then continues this discussion, arguing "women writers of the interwar period were not always fearful about clothes' tendency to destabilise the place of the human subject in the world of material objects" and instead acknowledges that "women writers of the period saw fashion first and foremost as an important agent in producing intersubjective relations – dynamic social processes that were rife with both perils and pleasures" (*Modernism* 22).[28]

In each of these studies, the writers address aspects of fashion and fiction but often emphasize issues of authorship and the parallels between literary and fashion production during these transitional decades. Some do address writing more intimately such as Clair Hughes *Dressed in Fiction* (2006) and Lauren Cardon's *Fashion and Fiction: Self-Transformation in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (2016). Rather than focusing on fashion specifically as a product of culture, Hughes and Cardon examine the discourse produced through fashion. Hughes points out that fashion in writing is "less a question of recording the shifts in the shape or movement of hemlines and collars, but more one of 'impressions', visual, tactile or psychological – never, however losing sight of the fact that those impressions are governed by material facts" (Hughes *Dressed* 10). Similarly, this dissertation examines the implications of fashion in women's writing as both cultural commentary and material reality. Finally, in

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[27] Schaffer & Psomiades also address the relationship between fashion writing and aestheticism nothing that "[a]nother definition of aestheticism implicit in many of the essays in [their] volume comes out of a Marxist cultural critique: aestheticism is not just a series of texts but also a particular historical condition of art in bourgeoise culture" (Schaffer & Psomiades 4). This connection between the movement and economic theories in the nineteenth century parallel the above discussion of fashion theory and modernism in the twentieth.

[28] Projects by both Koppen and Sheehan explore similar arguments to Plocks, with different foci. Randi S. Koppen provides a similar but targeted analysis of Virginia Woolf's career in *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity* (2011) and Elizabeth M. Sheehan expands Plock arguments to discuss modernism more generally in *Modernism A La Mode: Fashion and the Ends of Literature* (2018).

Cardon's analysis, positions writers as "interpreters of fashion. [. . .] who [have] mastered the semiotic power of clothing, [and] can use it to maneuver for greater privileges and freedoms" (Cardon 11).

While the work outlined above indicates a growing body of scholarship on fashion within literary studies, many of these critiques rely on methodologies other than the explicitly feminist. In contrast, I aim to employ an intersectional feminist framework that is *informed* by models of economics, authorship, and modernism.[29] Throughout this dissertation, I will perform readings of both dresses as objects and the act of dressing, because these semantic differences that so enhance our understanding of the inherent contradictions of the feminine and female difference can also clarify feminist interpretations of fashion. Furthermore, an intersectional feminist lens is necessarily a queer lens in that it requires that we think outside of binary, either/or thinking and analyses and allowing for multiple readings within a single text or garment aligns with these priorities. Queering these garments allows us to encounter them from a broader range of both/and interpretations including gender, class, sex, sexuality, race, subject/object, and consumer/consumed positions. As mentioned above, Cardon's is one work that does offer an extended analysis of the intersections of fashion, fiction, and, to some extent, feminism during this period though this study focuses more directly on the autonomy and identity formation of the

[29] In "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas", Patricia Hill Collin's cautions "Just as using Crenshaw to set intersectionality's canonical boundaries may be premature, designating selected theories and methods, especially one's own, as intersectional using an amorphous and perhaps idiosyncratic sensibility may be similarly shortsighted" (Hill Collins "Dilemmas" 11). She recommends "Instead, examining patterns in the new knowledge that has been produced under the rubric of intersectionality as an analytical strategy may be more productive" (Hill Collins "Dilemma" 11). In compiling this project, and in working the Dr. Ingram, citational practices have emerged as a key component of this kind of attention to intersectional praxis. Therefore, I have worked to acknowledge the necessity for representation within the works cited here. For example, my preference for citing Gilman's assessment of fashion over Flugel's as they pertain to women and black feminist responses to Woolf regarding women's writing. "Collectively, the patterns of emphasis (and the patterns of absence) within intersectional scholarship provide a template for seeing the benefits and costs of legitimation for intersectionality as a field of study" (Hill Collins "Dilemma" 13).

characters as individuals. My argument is more focused on the goal or purpose of wanting or needing to transcend these identities or categories in the first place. Thus, when a character performs a specific racial, sexual, gendered, or class affiliation or attempts to pass as or embody an identity other than that which society has assigned, I am interested in exploring the purpose of committing that kind of identity formation through dress as a form of self-fashioning.

Overview

First, I will discuss Nella Larsen's *Quicksand.* Though perhaps not her most famous work[30], Larsen's 1928 novel is arguably the most comprehensive example of fashion being used as a rhetorical strategy in the sampling of women's writing discussed here. Larsen describes the dress of her heroine, Helga Crane, in meticulous detail throughout the novel and the meanings of these details are often explicitly discussed with reference to their sexual or racial implications. Larsen's work is thus critical to my argument because her thorough attention to fashion provides a baseline for analyzing how other women and works' discussions of dress can be interpreted and a useful period alternative to the often sexist fashion theory of the time. Larsen's treatment of dress is also significant in that she covers not only issues of gender and femininity but also race, class, and sexual expression. I begin this chapter with a contextual discussion of women's writing more generally with black feminist responses to *A Room of One's Own* and Larsen's own self-fashioning as a writer. I also position Larsen's work within the larger context of the Harlem Renaissance and racial identity utilizing the work of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. My analysis thus reads Larsen's fashion through an intersectional feminist lens and argues that dress in the novel is integral to the success of her social commentary.

[30] *Passing* has received far more critical attention including a chapter in Butler's *Bodies that Matter* as well as the 2021 film adaptation starring Tessa Thompson and Ruth Negga on Netflix, which received significant critical attention.

In chapter 2, I will explore Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905) and Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements* (1923). The wealth of fashion references offered in these novels is almost on par with Larsen's as both Wharton and Yerzierska take care to emphasize the significance of dress as a means to an end for their heroines Lily Bart and Sonya Vrunsky, respectively. What is most interesting about these two works is the drastically different outcomes for each woman by the end of their journeys. Wharton's novel is steeped in her own critiques on fashion and consumerism.[31] Lily Bart's attempted rise in social standing is reflected in her fashion consciousness as she strives to look the part of the sparkling socialite over the course of the novel, but appearance ultimately fails to overcome the social prejudices and sexual double standards of upper-class society. Yerzierska, on the other hand, depicts a different chain of events when Sonya, is able to ascend the social ladder by dressing the part, but becomes disenchanted with that elite world of the wealthy wife and It Girl, of which Lily so desired to be a part. Interestingly, Sonya's rejection of high society does not extend to the fashion that go her there and the end of her story sees her working to make beautiful dress accessible. My analysis will aim to unpack how the stories of these women parallel the evolution of fashion in the decades between these two novels and the liberatory potential dress gained in that time, as well as women's progressing economic opportunities through politics and property.

In chapter 3, I will examine dress and gender in the novels *Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall and *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf. These two works are as equally infused with discussions of dress as those mentioned above but also lend themselves most particularly to a discussion of the complex potential for fashion to both enforce strict mandates of masculinity and femininity and provide individuals with an outlet for resisting such gender assignments. Both

[31] Wharton illuminates her own misgivings about fashion and authorship, similar to Woolf, in *A Backward Glance*.

Stephen Gordon and Orlando are obliged to dress according to their perceived genders by those around them and both demonstrate a deep awareness of the implications of complying with socially acceptable gender presentation through their clothes. Therefore, this chapter emphasizes divesting feminine and masculine from the gender binary and observes how changes in dress, and women's fashion in particular, during this period simultaneously aided and hindered the visibility and acceptance of queer individuals.[32] Though I will avoid applying contemporary terminology anachronistically where possible, such as those regarding gendered pronouns or trans identities, I will provide a discussion of how contemporary readers may understand the nuanced issues of inverted and lesbian queer identities addressed by Hall and Woolf in their fiction in the early twentieth century.

In chapter 4, I will move towards a discussion of fashion, the male gaze, and dress as a verb. This chapter will return to the novels named above to include readings of women dressing and being observed in their dress as well as considerations of the bodies of work (or, it could be said, bodies and work) of women writers. I will include a comparison of Willa Cather's 1920 short story *Coming, Aphrodite!* and the cultural phenomenon of Josephine Baker, especially the infamous banana skirt which made its first appearance in 1925. Here I will outline the differences between women and men writing women's dress and bodies and the inferences we as readers might make regarding the purpose or outcomes of such descriptions. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* serves as a useful model for analysis early in this chapter and detailed examples from the women noted above provide an interesting foil for the patriarchal systems of control Millett observes in literature by men. This chapter concludes my overall argument about women's (re)fashioning gender through a psychoanalytic discussion of the relationship between

[32] This chapter draws from period and contemporary commentaries on concepts of femininity including those of Joan Riviere (1929) and Jack Halberstam (1998).

dress and identity. My aim is to reveal the complex influence of dress on women's expression of bodily and sexual agency.

I will conclude with final thoughts regarding gender, fashion, and authorship. To allow for women's agency and control over their own bodies where possible I emphasize women's works over those by male writers, throughout this dissertation; however, I will draw comparisons here to criticism on notable male writers including D.H. Lawrence and F. Scott Fitzgerald to further illustrate my argument regarding fashion as *motif* versus *mode* of writing. Additionally, I will look ahead to potential further expansions of this work such as the fashion reform movements and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *HERland* as well as the function of fiction as theory. As outlined above, the following chapters will focus primarily on the more well-known novels from the period though connections to a wider catalog of works will be made where appropriate to demonstrate the circulation of a particular idea about gender norms, sexuality, race, or class beyond the sphere of the avant-garde into popular fiction and culture. The women and works discussed in this dissertation are selected as representative of an emerging cultural understanding of gender beyond fixed understanding of femininity and masculinity. I believe women's awareness of and resistance to gender norms evident in the cultural products of fashion and fiction illustrated herein forecast concepts of gender and performance that would be theorized by later feminist movements.

Chapter 1

"The highly important matter of clothes":

Self-Fashioning Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

> Described as a modern woman, Nella smokes, wears her dresses short, does not believe in religion, churches and the like, and feels that people of the artistic type have a definite chance to help solve the race problem. Her hobbies are doing her housework, and there is much to do to keep a five-room apartment so clean (and from the smell from the kitchen door she must be an excellent cook), sewing and playing bridge.
>
> - Thelma Berlack on Nella Larsen 1928[33]

In Nella Larsen's semi-autobiographical novel, *Quicksand,* she uses fashion throughout the text to reinforce her commentary on gender, sexuality, race, and class.[34] By cloaking her critique of complex social issues in a highly stylized narrative, Larsen creates a discursive wardrobe with which she can destabilize dominant ideologies through the act of trying on. Her protagonist, Helga Crane, is highly conscious of the performative aspect of her clothing, as she navigates the complexities of a society that is equally conscious of her womanhood, mixed-race, and middle-class background. As Emily Hinnov observes, "[g]iven the primitivist stereotypes projected upon African American women as oversexed, exotic creatures during the Harlem Renaissance era, [. . .] women writers' doubly conscious performance of self must have been

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[33] *Amsterdam News* review May 23, 1928 "New Author Unearthed Right here in Harlem" quoted in Larson, pg. 68.

[34] I acknowledge here that to label women's fiction as auto-biographical is an incredibly fraught claim. As Debra Silverman argues "[a]ll too frequently critics have tried to make sense out of novels by women through an examination of their lives. The assumption is that women always only write autobiography, an idea that has done much to marginalize novels by women writers. [. . .] This critical move is extremely problematic. Criticism that begins with the life can shed light on texts but frequently casts too many shadows.*"* (Silverman 606). Though I will discuss Larsen's background shortly as it is relevant to the general context of the novel, I will also generally aim to avoid drawing direct parallels between Larsen and her protagonist in my analysis.

challenging" (47). It is precisely this kind of "doubly conscious performance" that Larsen so thoroughly confronts in *Quicksand.* Larsen's narrative is not so much as a quest for identity as it is a searching for a place in which her heroine's identity feels stable and she maps this search through both physical location and performance, with clothes often binding them together.

Additionally, the fashion in novel is transformative, as at times clothes are liberating for Helga, like the dress that makes her look as if she is "something about to fly" (Larsen 42), while at others, clothes are forced on her as a means of suppression or objectification, and, again, these are often one and the same. In these cases, a dress that was once empowering that then becomes suffocating can be read to stand in for the struggle against how one is *read* by society, which for Helga oscillates between too white or too black, too sensual or too prim, too poor or too elite. Building on a close reading of Larsen's novel this study examines the significance of Larsen's consistently incorporating fashion to underscore her criticism of early twentieth century feminine ideals and racism. In spite of the oppressive forces at work in the novel, Larsen intentionally avoided the "tragic mulatto" trope of the period by emphasizing Helga's own agency throughout her struggles.[35] According to Bettye Williams,

> Placing self as subject and center in *Quicksand,* Larsen offers an exploration of how one's personal life is shaped by interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Using Helga as her voice, Larsen challenges [. . .] ideologies of African-American female victimization. [. . .] As a subject, Helga is not a long-suffering victim

[35] As Cheryl Wall argues, "Larsen's most striking insights are into psychic dilemmas confronting certain black women ("Passing for What "97). Though Helga Crane, or Clare Kendry in *Passing*, may initially "resemble the tragic mulattoes of literary convention[,] [. . .] On close examination, they become the means through which the author demonstrates the psychological costs of racism and sexism" (97). This also aligned with my own emphasis on Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* in this chapter and throughout the dissertation as a resistance to traditional narratives of women as (fashion) victims.

> but a diverse and intense protagonist who asserts her independence and self-will in the midst of struggle. (Williams 172)

It is thus vital to acknowledge that, although Helga's story is one of loneliness and struggle at times, she is not *passive*. I believe *Quicksand* is a novel of self-fashioning in which the subject navigates her own internal sense of identity while finding herself at odds with external assumptions about that identity. Furthermore, for my argument, acknowledging Larsen's intentional emphasis on fashion as a key theme in the novel highlights her ability to demonstrate a nuanced critique of the female body as a socially constructed site through which gender, race, and class intersect.[36] Helga shows tremendous self- and cultural-awareness throughout the novel as she frequently reflects on her feelings of (not quite) belonging at regular intervals. One of the significant patterns in the novel emerges when Helga finds it difficult to articulate her frustrations and thus turns to clothes as a representation or means of expressing herself.

Self-Fashioning

Identity and sense of self in *Quicksand* are incredibly unstable for Helga Crane. Larsen establishes this uncertainty in the opening pages and the feelings of uncertainty recur throughout the text. Initially, the sensation is indefinable, and Helga struggles to pinpoint precisely why she feels unsatisfied and often places the root of the problem within herself. As she contemplates her life in Naxos in the opening chapter, she thinks "[t]here was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted. Still wanted." (Larsen 11). This moment sets the tone

[36] Ann Hostetler makes a similar argument, noting that "[t]hemes of race merge with concerns of gender, for Helga's destiny is shaped as much by her sex as by the problematics of race" and arguing that "[t]he fascination with clothing and color that marks her character is an attempt to construct a female identity, to use her attractiveness as power" (Hostetler 35). My argument differs somewhat on this final point in that I believe Helga's fashion goes beyond sexual attraction in representing key racial and gendered expectations, such as the discussion of uplift and clothes below.

for the struggles to come because, though Helga has been contemplating her frustrations with Naxos and uplift, she ultimately places the fault within herself since those around her seem to willingly accept the conditions she cannot abide. There can be a tendency to assume that Helga Crane is frivolous, that she rejects larger issues because she is preoccupied with material concerns; however, I believe this moment emphasizes that she is *aware* of the fact that she is distracting herself from deeper frustrations of identity and belonging. There is intense depth to Helga's character in her introspections. On the one hand, she asks herself: "[b]ut just what did she want? Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell" and though she does desire those things she *does* know that "there was, she knew, something else" (Larsen 11). Though she desires these material comforts and attention, she is not satisfied that they are *really* what she wants out of life. On the other hand, it is "[h]appiness, she supposed" that she truly desires (11).

> Whatever that might be. What, exactly, she wondered, was happiness? Very positively she wanted it. Yet her conception of it had no tangibility. She couldn't define it, isolate it, and contemplate it as she could some other abstract things. Hatred, for instance. Or kindness" (11).

Helga's considering happiness an abstraction, and one that she has perhaps not personally experienced, is the foundation of her repeated self-fashioning throughout the novel. It is also significant that Helga *can* define hatred and kindness, while happiness remains elusive. While Helga may identify a "quality within herself" that will not be happy, the proximity of this reflection to her critique of Naxos (which I will discuss shortly) signals that it may be her

inability to belong, society's rejection of that quality, that is at the core of her struggle.[37] Helga fashion, then, can be read as an attempt to communicate that internal quality to the external world.

Joyce Kelley describes Helga's internal struggles as another kind of passing and, though Larsen addresses the concept more directly in *Passing,* her moving regularly throughout her journey, as well as her clothes, brings a tangibility to this intangible questing. "When Helga moves from place to place, her body is re-visioned by those around her as they 'read' her physical appearance in a new way. Helga adjusts her body and her clothing as she adjusts her geographic location, almost but not quite 'passing'" (Kelley 91).[38] As we learn over the course of Helga's journeys, the happiness she is searching for is belonging and acceptance. Helga desires the feeling that she fits in, not just in her appearance, but in her whole self. Larsen meticulously details the maneuvering required to try to find this place in the world, and it becomes clear by the end that being forced to sacrifice, hide, or perform part of oneself cannot satisfy this desire.[39] Even when Helga initially feels at home in a place, this sentiment is repeated in each new setting. In Harlem, where she must conceal her parentage, "it didn't last, this happiness of Helga Crane's" and she eventually "went through moments of overwhelming anguish. She felt shut in, trapped. [. . .] She became a little frightened, and then shocked to discover that, for some

[37] Larsen significantly connects happiness and conformity throughout these early passages. Just before this moment we are told that "Helga [. . .] had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying. She could neither conform nor be happy in her unconformity" (Larsen 9).

[38] Kelley's conception of passing is indeed more complex than one-directional white-passing. Passing here is more closely aligned with Pamela Caughie's definition. "Although passing is often understood as fraudulence or betrayal, as a sin against authenticity, authenticity is itself a historically- specific concept, one whose meaning and value were being challenged in the modernist era. If authenticity and identity are cultural conceits, not truths, then we can rethink "passing"" (Caughie 203). This understanding thus applies to Larsen's protagonists and Sonya Vrunsky in *Salome of the Tenements* in Chapter 2*,* as well as Orlando chapter 3.

[39] For Kelley, this struggle marks the novel as thoroughly modernist, and she argues "[t]he modernist innovations of the text largely emerge from Helga's internal struggles with place and from Larsen's efforts to capture these rapidly shifting alignments and perceptions of self" (Kelley 91-2).

unknown reason, it was herself she was afraid of" (Larsen 36). Because Helga is afraid of discovery, that her mixed race will unsettle her perceived identity, her contentment is unsettled as well. Then again among her mother's family, "[w]ell into Helga's second year in Denmark came an indefinite discontent. Not clear, but vague, like a storm gathering far on the horizon" (Larsen 60). This storm is Helga's confronting the fact that, though she has the comforts, clothes, and admiration she desired in the opening of the book, her position as an object of fascination is hollow, setting her apart rather than bringing her in. It is in this moment when Larsen also restates and revises Helga's initial concerns.

> Frankly the question came to this: what was the matter with her? Was there, without her knowing it, some peculiar lack in her? Absurd. But she began to have a feeling of discouragement and hopelessness. Why couldn't she be happy content, somewhere? Other people managed, somehow, to be. To put it plainly, didn't she know how? Was she incapable of it?" (Larsen 60).

That society forces Helga to feel her "lack" for not fully conforming to expectations is, of course, precisely Larsen's point. Helga's ability to perform an identity is only effective to a point because she is never fully able to be herself;[40] what she lacks is simply the ability to subordinate herself to become only the parts of herself which society will accept.

Just as place initially offers Helga the potential for happiness, her clothes give her a mode for achieving it; however, her clothes also function multiply in that, though she cannot control the attitudes and behaviors of those she encounters, she can control her own dress. "Throughout

[40] Wall describes this struggle as "the inextricability of the racism and sexism which confront the black woman in her quest for a wholly integrated identity" ("Passing for What" 97). Wall also links this self-fashioning with passing to sinister affect when she argues "Larsen's protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self free of both suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other. The tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition. Larsen's protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide. In one way or another, they all 'pass'" (Wall "Passing for What" 97-8).

Quicksand, Helga's choice of clothing, a kind of second skin, reveals the way in which she carefully places her body in each geographic location she inhabits" (Kelley 92). Though Helga does indeed "carefully place" herself, to this I would add that Helga does not always place herself in the way each location expects. As Kelley observes, "[h]er efforts echo Young's articulation of clothing's transformative potential: "character types I try on, situations in which I place myself imaginatively" (Kelley 92). This mirrors my own initial point about the transformative potential of fashion, and means that, for Helga, she is able to actively reimagine or refashion herself using her keen understanding of both social expectations and fashion. In each new place Helga encounters a new cultural and set of norms, which dictate how and to what extent she should (not) be biracial, black, or sexual. Given Helga's desire for happiness and approval, one might expect that her clothes would thus conform to those standards; however, the overarching theme to Helga's wardrobe across the text is one of resistance. Pamela Barnett observes that "Larsen's narrator lingers on the surfaces of the depiction, like a spectator herself. Although we are given access to Helga's thoughts [. . .], there are very few moments in the text where Helga seems to be speaking for herself. Everything is filtered through a third-person narrator who marks her distance from the protagonist." (Barnett 581). For the purposes of my argument then, I would add that Helga's fashion can be read as a kind of secondary narrator that often contrasts with her silence. Though she aches for acceptance, there is some part of her that will not fully yield to expectations; though she does not often verbalize her internal misgivings, she does articulate them clearly in the way that she dresses.

In the excerpt opening this chapter, journalist Thelma Berlack, gives a fascinating description of Nella Larsen's persona as she emerged onto the literary scene. This portrait is a seemingly incongruous hybrid of revolutionary thinker and traditional housewife. The

description was "written after the singular occasion in her career when Nella permitted someone . . . to interview her", which I believe serves as a concrete reminder of Larsen's persistent self-fashioning in both its content and rarity (Larson 67). On the one hand, many may note the apparent similarities between Larsen and Irene in *Passing*. On the other hand, I hesitate to use the interview as irrefutable evidence that Larsen's work is autobiographical. I believe there is a middle-ground from which we can see Larsen's simultaneously crafting the women in her writing while also curating a specific image of herself.[41] With this in mind, there are a few remnants of Larsen's carefully curated image that can add nuance to reading of Larsen's fiction as social criticism as well as her use of fashion in that process. Williams refers to many of the qualities listed in Berlack's profile and adds that she

> lived in defiance of the rules that most African-American women of her education and means were bound by. Moreover, her unorthodoxy led to open resentment from many African-American males who were loyal to the Garvey Movement and the NAACP. On one occasion, Walter White (active in the NAACP) chastised her for the insensitivity and "fondness for burlesque". (Williams 171)

Though knowledge of Larsen's life is limited, her attitudes and values remain quite clear (if sometimes complicated).[42] It is especially telling that she was not satisfied with women's being

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[41] This is reinforced by the fact that many mentions of Larsen are limited to the bio *she* wrote for the publisher of *Quicksand.* Much of the information available appears to come from other writers and acquaintances papers. *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer & Nella Larsen* (1993) by Charles Larson, *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance* by Thadious Davis (1994), and *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (2006) by George Hutchinson all address the limits of the biographical information available on Larsen as well as Larsen's intentional control over her own narrative. As such, I believe it is possible to make observations about the information Larsen *did* allow to circulate about herself as that image appears to have been crafted as carefully as her fiction; however, I do not believe we can firmly hold to the notion of her fiction being autobiographical when the biographical may also be semi-fictional.

[42] Larson points out "[t]he fact is that Nella Larsen was a rather outspoken person, as all of her letters attest. Clever, sarcastic, sophisticated, and abrasive, she held strong opinions which were likely to offend even her closes friends" (Larson 79). Davis's biography, in particular chapter 8 on her experience in Harlem, addresses Larsen's complex relationship to race and her own biracial identity, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

relegated to supporting roles in Harlem Renaissance political or literary circles while also letting it be known (or at least wanted people to think) that she did also enjoy more traditionally gendered roles in some aspects of her life. Larsen's brand of active self-determination supports my point in the introduction that feminist arguments need not dismiss or make excuses for the traditionally feminine. Although, as we see with Helga Crane, Larsen's combination of agency and social critique is messy and perhaps contradictory at times, the process of living and being in liminal spaces she describes is a powerful one. Through both Larsen and her heroines' resistance can be understood as an ongoing process of self-fashioning that, even when the outcomes are less than satisfactory for the subject, nonetheless establish a legacy of defiance and persistence.

In addition to being a dissenting voice in the overlapping debates on race and gender, Larsen's dual self-fashioning is evident from her pleasure in modern fashion as well. According to Larson, "[t]he few photographs of her that have survived confirm [. . .] that she dressed in colorful clothing and rather elaborate hats" (Larson 79) and Hutchinson notes that Larsen was a savvy curator of her personal wardrobe even into her little-known later life.[43] Larsen's ability to "make over" clothes translates to the pages of her books as well and, as Hutchinson maintains, "[a] woman's ability to dress herself in garments of her own choosing would always signify, in Larsen's fiction, her freedom and personal agency" (Hutchinson 41). This theme is apparent even in Larsen's relatively unknown early short fiction, "The Wrong Man" and "Freedom" (1926).[44] Although these stories are more conventional than her novels, Davis points out that but

[43] Nella Larsen was an expert at "making over" dresses as an adult, though her formal schooling never included instruction in sewing. She had an unusual appreciation for textiles and fashion, and she enjoyed exchanging clothes with friends or giving them away. In old age, living alone on a nurse's salary, she always had 'beautiful things,' but she got them cheaply in used-clothing stores, and she knew how to alter them and fix them up" (Hutchinson 41).
[44] "The Wrong Man" also includes "the dance setting, elaborately described" which not only" shows her concern with specific detail, bright colors, and the trappings of wealth" (Davis 176), but also appears in both *Quicksand* and *Passing*.

her narratives [. . .] reveal an internalization of male-constructed images of women as sexual objects" (Davis 174). It is not surprising, then, that Larsen would explore this construction more thoroughly in her longer fiction, especially *Quicksand.*

It becomes clear from the opening of the novel that fashion will play a crucial role in driving the plot as Larsen meticulously describes Helga Crane's clothing and rooms in sumptuous detail. The room is filled with the opulence of the period; elaborate cushions cover every surface and silk scarves are tossed over lamps. Helga's world is a riot of color and texture, and her wardrobe is no exception. When we first see her, she is reading, lounging carelessly "[i]n a vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules" (Larsen 4).[45] Even the description of her "skin like yellow satin" and "curly blue-black hair" mimic the descriptions of the fabrics (Larsen 5). While physical descriptions of characters aren't unique, in the case of Helga, Larsen's choices are more significant than simply painting a picture for the readers. She is establishing the role that appearance, and performance through textiles, is often Helga's primary means of expressing herself. In fact, Larsen tells us that Helga spends most of her money on clothes and emphasizes that "[all] her life Helga Crane had loved and longed for nice things. Indeed, it was this craving, this urge for beauty" (8).[46] By describing Helga's deeply personal

[45] In her critical biography on Larsen, Thadious M. Davis describes a letter in which Larsen describes her own reading rituals similarly, writing the ritual required "a Houbigant scented bath, the donning of my best green crepe de chine pyjamas, fresh flowers on the bed side table, piles of freshly covered pillows and my nicest bed cover" (Larsen qtd in Davis 210). Interestingly the book Larsen is settling in to read in this setting is Van Vechten's controversial *Nigger Heaven* (1926). As Davis points out "Staged with details of commodification to spark Van Vechten's identification with the familiar yest exotic scene [. . .], Larsen Imes's scenario also invites a voyeuristic gaze into an intimate moment in a middle class African-American woman's life. By describing the ceremony she concocted for reading, Larsen Imes emphasized note merely her sense of aesthetic pleasure [. . .], but also a measure of her affectations and the degree of her removal from ordinary African-American life. [. . .], Larsen Imes exercised her creative myth-making power over herself and over Van Vechten's image of African Americans" (Davis 210). While Davis uses this letter to explore Larsen's own complex internal conflicts with race and class, I believe it is also particularly interesting in light of both how she reproduces this scene with Helga in *Quicksand* and Irene's relationship with Hugh Wentworth in *Passing* with his objectification of Harlem black culture.

[46] This seemingly inherent desire for beauty is one that Yezierska repeats throughout *Salome of the Tenements* as well. While both Larsen and Yezierska occasionally refer to this urge in racial terms, both do appear to emphasize

attachment to aesthetic beauty, Larsen is setting up the tension she will face throughout her life between her own taste and the look that society will expect from, and even force on, her over the course of the novel.

After admitting her attachment to the prettiness of her surroundings we're given an early glimpse into this internal struggle as her aesthetic tastes, "had helped to bring, her into disfavor in Naxos – 'pride' and 'vanity,' her detractors called it" (Larsen 8). This reflection on the tension between Helga's striving for beauty and the standards of the society she lives in signals the beginning of what will be a continual struggle for her throughout the novel. It is important to recognize here that the disapproval of Helga's pleasure in dress and nice things is not solely based in charges of frivolousness, but also the result of racist notions of respectability and racial uplift ideologies. As Davis argues [i]n rendering Helga's active quest for agency and empowerment, Larsen infuses the text with a realistic treatment of the complexities of cultural experiences" (Davis 254). As I've just discussed, these realistic depictions of the struggle for self-definition in a racist and sexist society can prove thorny at times. Davis further elaborates that Larsen

> raises issues of privilege, otherness, marginality, and identity to provide a substantive conceptual core to the life of a woman who is socially constructed as black in a world in which the majority culture is white and in which the dominant representations of blacks' issue from whites. But she also uses those same issues to challenge the social roles available to the female in a patriarchal culture. (Davis 254)[47]

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aesthetic taste as a character trait independent from, and even at odds with, cultural stereotypes as I will discuss below and in chapter 2.

[47] I find Davis's language regarding race here especially useful to articulated Larsen's complex position within this discussion. Acknowledging that both Larsen and Helga are "socially constructed as black" allows for both women's feeling of limited belonging within the black community. Additionally, that "representations of blacks' issue from whites" is especially pertinent to their time in Denmark.

I believe Larsen mediates the nuances of such difficulties through clothes because they offer a tangible medium for navigating the intersections of race and gender. In *Quicksand,* Helga Crane partially attributes her marginalized position to "a lack of understanding on the part of the community, but in her present new revolt she realized that the fault had been partly hers. A lack of acquiescence. She hadn't really wanted to be made over. This thought bred a sense of shame, a feeling of ironical disillusion" (Larsen 9). In this reflection, Larsen draws attention to the challenges of resisting social norms, especially manipulation through shame in enforcing complicity with the status quo. Ultimately, Helga is striving for stability, an identity that "fits" but the outward forces of racism and sexism won't allow her that, so she chooses to focus on clothes, as a means of resistance and as an escape.

Respectability

As a teacher in the Naxos academy, a newly founded black school in the south, one might assume that she would be inclined towards uplift as the rest of her colleagues are. However, she bitterly resents both uplift and its manifestation in Naxos, and in fact "shuddered" upon recalling the accolades showered on the school by a visiting white preacher.

> [H]e had said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places, and that, said the preacher, showed good taste. (Larsen 5)

Though this preacher makes the black person's appropriate place a matter of "good taste" the inherent racism of this respectability rhetoric is obvious to Helga as the underlying ideology is one of subordination and assimilation. She witnesses the outcomes of this kind of thinking in her

teaching, sees the school as a "machine", and bitterly resents the "trivial hypocrisies and careless cruelties which were, unintentionally perhaps, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift" and "education as it was inflicted in Naxos" (Larsen 6-7, 40).[48] She feels these policies most keenly in their proscriptions on appropriate dress. She is contemptuous of the "dull" and "drab" attire of the other women at Naxos and recalls being lectured that "[bright] colors are vulgar" and "Dark-complected people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red" (Larsen 15). As noted above, dictating the very clothes on one's body impinges on women's agency and, thus, the insult is felt doubly here as a black woman being told to know her place. For many, like the Naxos women's dean who is known as "a great 'race' woman", compliance in this respect, and uplift in general, is understandable for avoiding negative attention (Larsen 15). For Helga, she examines the other women around her and recognizes her own deviance from their norms is part of what hinders her being accepted.

Her desire for clothes is, on the surface, Helga's way of avoiding, or distracting herself from, the question of race. But, it is also Larsen's way of addressing it because she *sees* the impact of racism in the uniform of her colleagues. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler discusses Larsen's exploration of the intersections of gender and race in *Passing.* She is adamant that

> though there are clearly good historical reasons for keeping "race" and "sexuality" and "sexual difference" as separate analytic spheres, there are also quite pressing and significant historical reasons for asking how and where we might read not only their

[48] According to Davis, "Larsen modeled Anderson upon Dr. Robert R. Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor" and "he also appears hemmed in by the school's philosophy of racial uplift and propriety. Although he recognizes the hypocrisy in the institution's racial stance" (Davis 262). Later in the novel Anne Grey will claim that Anderson indeed leaves Naxos because he "had been too liberal, too lenient" and was now "employed as a welfare worker by some big manufacturing concern, which gave employment to hundreds of Negro men", though Helga is unimpressed and skeptical of his 'Uplift' resume (Larsen 40).

> convergence, but the sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other (Butler 123).

Butler uses Larsen's explorations of how two mixed race women each navigate their simultaneous otherness as clear support for exploring how these two spheres converge on a single body in the cultural norms imposed and this point is just as applicable to *Quicksand,* as Helga rails against the standards of modest femininity imposed in conjunction with the principles of racial uplift. Helga questions the validity of such statements, whether they are really chosen by the black community, or if they are simply a way for them to avoid further attention, and criticism, from the white world.[49] She challenges these assumptions about black women's appearances, believing "something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green and red" (Larsen 16). While this description of Helga's fraught fashion choices appears deeply personal and individual to her, a closer reading of this moment reveals an unambiguous critique of uplift and how racism continued to plague black bodies, especially in the south (McDougald). As readers we recall that Helga is first described as wearing green and gold, two of the colors explicitly condemned by the Naxos administration. Even in private, Helga resists what she perceives to be unnatural obligations to an

[49] Alain Locke's "insistence on separating art and propaganda was grounded in the belief that the race was "at the interesting moment when the prophet becomes the poet and when prophecy becomes the expressive song, the chant of fulfillment."" (Locke qtd in Davis 245). Though Larsen does claim the "artist" rather than the "race woman" identity, she does rather explicitly engage in political critique, particularly of the ideologies within racial justice arguments. In particular, she clearly disagrees with Booker T. Washington's methods, (sarcastically) calling Naxos a "monument to one man's genius and vision" and claiming "[t]hese people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter. Harmony radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction" (Larsen 6, 16). While parts of this statement may be perceived as essentialism, Larsen does challenge stereotypical representations of black people by whites later in the novel, clarifying this as matter of free expression rather than essential or monolithic definition of blackness. White & White also address this issue at length in *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit.*

aesthetic that is designed to make her feel ashamed of drawing attention to her black female body.

She does attempt to appease while maintaining her own sense of self-expression but has limited success. Larsen's juxtaposition of politics and fashion throughout these early chapters solidifies her critique of the overlapping oppressions of racial and sexual restriction. After contemplating her frustrations with Naxos "[s]he came back to her own problems" and returns to contemplating how "[c]lothes had been one of her difficulties in Naxos" (Larsen 16). "[S]he had tried not to offend. But with small success, for, although she had affected the deceptively simple variety, the hawk eyes of dean and matrons had detected the subtle difference from their own irreproachable conventional garments" (16). Here Larsen details the minutia of Helga's appearance again noting that "the colors were queer", the details "odd", and even her shoes "made them uncomfortable" and her hats were "positively indecent" (16). By saturating this section in which she describes the problems with uplift with extended descriptions of fashion Larsen emphasizes the all-encompassing self-regulation demanded for acceptance within white patriarchal society. On the one hand, Larsen's repetition of fashion imagery in her text is also representative of the same barrage of images to which women are subjected in their daily lives as the industry expanded during this period. [50] Alissa Karl points out that "[d]rab, conformist taste is thus complicit with the black docility and obedience to white domination that Larsen links specifically to the U.S. industrial economy" (122). Here I would add that the parallel standardization of women's bodies through the growth of the fashion industry is also at play. Thus, these images reinforce that "Naxos is a "machine," [. . .] – the regulated production of American blackness in step with the mass-production techniques turning out the very nondescript

[50] She also repeats this process in Copenhagen where the white images of black women's bodies imposed upon Helga Crane are explored through lengthy descriptive passages, as I will discuss below.

clothes that they wear" (Karl 122); and, that part of the dramatic influence of fashion in the negative sense is that it has the power to wear women down with the sheer volume of images projected onto women's bodies. In spite if this suffocating situation, "Helga smiled inwardly at the thought that [. . .] [t]hey existed in constant fear that she might turn out in an evening dress" (Larsen 16). Larsen's stylistic choices in *Quicksand* are subverting several sets of standards at once in giving both pleasure and agency through fashion in spite of these multiple mode of social control.

Though I believe the evidence above suggests Larsen was vocal about issues of race she maintained that "[s]he saw herself as an artist, not a propagandist for the race" (Davis 245). In fact, one of the major debates of the Harlem Renaissance was whether art could, or should, function as just art or propaganda, or indeed whether the fight against racial tyranny needed art at all (Ziarek 195). As Du Bois put it, "how is it that an organization like this, a group of radicals trying to bring new things into the world [. . .] Can turn aside to talk about Art?" (Du Bois). Indeed, it can be difficult to justify creative endeavors when pressing social justice issues need our attention, however, we must also acknowledge, as Du Bois and the Harlem Renaissance writers did, that art can be as much an effective catalyst for change as political propaganda, sometimes even more so. What then makes Larsen's writing unique is that she challenged the criteria to which her art was supposed to subscribe. Rather than creating overtly political propaganda texts, she chose to emphasize the individual struggles for identity by subverting the oppressive standards imposed on her as a black woman and writer. By rejecting romance and the unambiguous resolution of conflicts in her novels, she offers an alternative avenue for black women's self-expression through self-determination and sexual expression (McDougald). While the recommendation was, from Du Bois and others, to reclaim the chivalric romance tropes to

repair the black male image, Larsen recognized that this style was still intensely oppressive for women (Ziarek 199).[51] Interestingly, Du Bois, "who was a bit of prude" reviewed [*Quicksand*] in the *Crisis"* acknowledging "Nella Larsen . . . has done a fine, thoughtful and courageous piece of work in her novel. It is, on the whole, the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of [Charles W.] Chesnutt." (DuBois qtd in Larson 75). It seems that regardless of her intent, Larsen's own marginal position within multiple cultural contexts translated to a consciousness of such problems within her text as well.

Though Larsen's novels are considered more modernist in their aesthetic and ambiguity, she clearly challenges the oppressive forces of romance and the images of the female body it reinforces.[52] The anti-romantic sentiment, coupled with the images of the female body through fashion that I have discussed so far, further challenges the idealized image of the feminine that was being shaken by the turn of the century New Woman. As Susan Bordo points out, the portraits of the modern woman are in no way indicative of what actual women look or act like, but nonetheless, "[these] images are teaching us how to see" (*Unbearable* xviii). They teach us how to see ourselves and how to see other women, which includes how we read women as writers and characters in literature. Larsen's work demonstrates an incredible consciousness of the power images of the female body have over our identities. "As *Quicksand* shows, the entanglement of romance, commodity, and beauty has tragic rather than liberating consequences for black women" (Ziarek 199). Though the choices Helga makes throughout the novel indicate a

[51] Shirley Moody-Turner's article "'Dear Doctor Du Bois": Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Gender Politics of Black Publishing" analyzes the "challenges she faced through a series of thirty-three letters she exchanged with W.E.B. Du Bois between 1923 and 1932" (47). Similarly, shifting leadership at *The Crisis* "meant that [. . .] the leading figures and the most influential ones in the literary movement were all males, some of whom, like Locke in particular, were not only chauvinists but misogynists" (Davis 159).

[52] As Ann Hostetler argues, although Larsen was "[o]ften compared with her prolific contemporary Jessie Fauset, [she] goes far beyond Fauset in both stylistic experimentation and the daring self-examination of her protagonist" (Hostetler 36).

subversive intent, Larsen deftly portrays the double-edged sword that is women's rebellious statements being reverted into sexualized images by society's reading of their bodies.[53] As Larsen's contemporary Margery Latimer put it, *Quicksand* "wakes you up" and "[y]ou see the great space between black and whites, and the elaborate mental barrier, and in the same moment you are conscious of the reason for it and the inhumanity of it" (qtd in Larson 76). Because Larsen demonstrates the difficulty in black women's self-expression being used against them, many of Helga's moments of resistance are combined with this kind of looming tension as we wait for the world around her to misread her intentions.

Aesthetics and Identity

The struggle for Helga to maintain control over her own tastes is especially evident when she makes her way to Harlem and the black intelligentsia she meets there. She is initially in awe of the style and sophistication she witnesses in Harlem as in many ways it is the polar opposite of the kind of black lifestyle she was subjected to in the south at Naxos. The aesthetic of 1920s Harlem feeds directly into Helga's need for beauty and style that Larsen describes in the opening of the novel. In Naxos Helga's high style intentionally sets her apart, but in Harlem she is intimidated by the prospect of fitting in. Once she has adjusted, she feels "joy at seeming at last to belong somewhere. For she considered that she had, as she put it, 'found herself.' [among their] sophisticated cynical talk, their elaborate parties, the unobtrusive correctness of their clothes" (Larsen 33). However, because her style is no longer going against society but is taking part, Helga begins to see another problematic side to the race problem and to fashion. Her misgivings about the decadent chicness of 1920s New York become clear as she observes her

[53] This is particularly true of Helga's more provocative flapper style dresses which refashioned to display and objectify her body later in the novel. I will also return to this concept in chapter 4 through the images of Josephine Baker.

hostess, Anne Grey simultaneously railing against the racism of the dominant white New York society while, perhaps subconsciously, assimilating to their standards of beauty and taste. Helga notes that though "[Anne] hated white people [. . .] she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race" (Larsen 37). Helga realizes that, although this new aesthetic suits what she had considered her own unique tastes, it is as equally oppressive as that proposed by uplift at Naxos, a sentiment widely felt within the writers of the Harlem Renaissance (Johnson, J.). "Barbara Christian argues that some writers, 'seeing the venom in the 'primitive' image, insisted that blacks were as conventional, perhaps even more conventional than their white counterparts. . . . The uninhibited, primitive female image was too reminiscent of the loose woman image for most women novelists to see any glamour in it'" (Christian qtd in Barnett 580). This appears doubly true in Larsen's portrayal of Anne Grey who espouses the kind of conventionality, while as a writer Larsen herself works against it through Helga.[54] Helga is faced with the challenge of acknowledging what she had thus far considered her own individual rebellions against society as a whole also have larger implications in how those choices either comply with or challenge racist and sexist stereotypes.[55] In *Willful Subjects,* Sara Ahmed suggests that "[if] we focus on why she disobeys, not on that she

[54] According to Bettye Williams This contrast demonstrates that "Larsen articulated Afrocentric feminist thought in her fiction. First, she situated race, gender, and class as interlocking systems of oppression. Second, by placing African-American women as subjects, she offered transformed images of African-American womanhood, especially with regard to one class – the intelligentsia" (Williams 170). William's point is particularly interesting in relation to Christian's about some writers' being conventional, as she argues "[u]nlike Jessi Redmon Fauset, who explored feminist concerns but bowed to social pressures and manners, Larsen exercised artistic integrity. Last, Larsen fostered a sensitivity to sexual politics" (170-1).

[55] This internal conflict is compounded when "[a]fter the first pleasant weeks, feeling that her obligation to Anne was already too great, Helga began to look about for a permanent place to live"; however, when invited to extend her stay "Helga didn't of course, require to think it over, because lodgment in Anne's home was in complete accord with what she designated as her 'aesthetic sense.'" (Larsen 34). The return of Helga's aesthetic pleasure is also an interesting now that there is sense of obligation attached, making her feel conflicted over things about which she once desired. This obligation will also return in chapter 2 for Lily Bart who feels similarly towards her hostess Judy Trenor.

disobeys [. . .] we might miss the significance of the charge of willfulness" (Ahmed, *Willful* 137). This is precisely the dilemma with which Larsen has Helga grappling throughout the novel. Until her arrival in Harlem, Helga was primarily focused on challenging style standards because they offended her own personal need for beauty. However, she must now consider why those standards are so oppressive, and for that answer she must look outside herself.

By centering her novel on a character of perpetual in-betweenness, Larsen is able to explore how the forces of early twentieth century racist, sexist, and classist ideologies intersect with overwhelming oppressiveness on the bodies of women of color. New York is particularly fraught in this respect as the proximity between Harlem and white New York bring up Helga's own concealed parentage.

> Of that white world, so distant, so near, she asked only indifference. No, not at all did she crave, from those pale and powerful people, awareness. [. . .] Their past contribution to her life, which had been but shame and grief, she had hidden away from brown folk in a locked closet, 'never,' she told herself, 'to be reopened'. (Larsen 35)

As mentioned previously, Helga's biracial background makes it difficult for her to feel a stable sense of belonging. Her rejection by her white family is more overt, but she also fears exclusion from black society if they were to learn of her white mother. When she does tell one person, her temporary patron Mrs. Hayes-Rore, it is clear that '[t]he woman felt that the story, [. . .] was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned – and therefore do not exist" (Larsen 31).

When she is first introduced to Anne, she then advises Helga: "I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won't understand it, and after all it's your own business. [. . .] [W]hat others don't know can't hurt you" (Larsen 33). This mirrors Helga's own

fear of something within herself that she initially feels in Naxos. By confronting these intraracial tensions "Larsen draws a line within the color line, pressing us to take seriously her heroines' racial liminality." (Walker, R. 166). Interestingly, Larsen troubles traditional passing narratives in *Quicksand* since, unlike Clare and Irene in *Passing,* Helga cannot pass as white; instead, she "feel[s] like a criminal" for concealing her mother's whiteness and passing as black (Larsen 33).[56] In Naxos Helga transgresses racial and gender expectations through her dress, whereas in Harlem she herself transgresses those lines and thus turns to dress as a means of escape.

As her infatuation with Harlem begins to fade, her feeling of not quite belonging returns and she considers whether it is American society that is to blame for her otherness.[57] With a timely check from her white uncle, she decides to visit her mother's family in Denmark. On the eve of her departure for her mother's home country, Helga's

> mind trailed off to the highly important matter of clothes. [. . .] There was a cobwebby black net touched with orange, which she had bought last spring in a fit of extravagance and never worn, because on getting it home both she and Anne had considered it too décolleté, and too outré. Anne's words: "There's not enough of it, and what there is gives you the air of something about to fly," came back to her, and she smiled as she decided that she would certainly wear the black net. For her it would be a symbol. She was about to fly. (Larsen 42)

This sartorial moment of Helga's is particularly significant for a number of reasons. First, though the book contains dozens of references to clothes and style (in its less than one hundred pages), it is the only time in which Larsen's explicitly describes Helga's clothes as symbolic. For many

[56] See note 6 regarding Kelley and Caughie's discussion of passing.
[57] As she peruses her wardrobe in the scene to follow, "clad only in a fluttering thing of green chiffon, she gave herself up to daydreams of a happy future in Copenhagen, where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice" (Larsen 42).

readers this may even be the first moment in which they notice Larsen's emphasis on fashion at all. By calling direct attention to this black and orange net of a dress, Larsen encourages readers to take note of her descriptions of clothes more carefully; she tips her hand, revealing her aesthetic strategy of fashion as a political statement. Second, the statement which Larsen makes with this dress does more than simply tell us that Helga will not let society dictate her identity; the dress is demonstrative of all of the modes of oppression pushing down on Helga's beautiful body. The color is the first tip as orange would certainly fall under the category of "unflattering" on a woman of her complexion according to conservative black society.[58] The dress is also deemed too revealing meaning that by wearing it Helga will be flaunting her sexuality, an inappropriate move labeling her a woman of loose morals unlikely to be respected or taken seriously as Barbara Christian notes above. In all, Helga's dress will draw a significant amount of negative attention and, as Larsen has strategically set this moment up through the previous fashion choices, Helga knows it. The symbolism of a bird about to take flight – the black and orange evocative of a phoenix rising from dying embers no less – is an added bonus, punctuating Larsen's use of fashion as a powerful tool for self-expression in the face of oppression.

Helga's final dress in Harlem transgresses standards of racial and sexual respectability. As Ziarek argues, "Larsen's aesthetic acts of trespassing not only contest the tragic entanglements of the color line, gender, sexuality, and commodification but also subvert the boundaries of the world *in which such violent entanglements operate"* (200). In *Quicksand,* as I have argued thus far, Larsen's "aesthetic acts of trespassing" are Helga's fashion choices, which are carefully detailed to illustrate exactly how Helga is feeling at any given moment. For Helga

[58] In Naxos, Helga remembers "[o]ne of the loveliest sights Helga had ever seen had been a sooty black girl decked out in a flaming orange dress, which a horrified matron had next day consigned to the dyer" (Larsen 15-6).

the answer to such questions about how and why she is being oppressed are especially complicated because she occupies a multi-layered state of otherness.[59] According to Linda Martin Alcoff in *Visible Identities,* because rage and gender "operate through visual markers on the body[,] [i]n our excessively materialist society, only what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth" (6).[60] Thus with Helga's racial identity what others don't *see* can't hurt her; however, since "[t]he truth of one's gender and race, then, are widely thought to be visibly manifest, and if there is no visible manifestation of one's declared racial or gendered identity, one encounters and insistent skepticism and an anxiety" (Alcoff 7). For Helga this anxiety begins to breed the same resentment as she observes the same hypocrisies she witnessed in Naxos. The turning point for Helga comes when she sees Audrey Denney at a nightclub. Helga notices "a girl in a shivering apricot frock" and takes in the loveliness, and strangeness of her appearance, especially her skin and dress (Larsen 45). "She was pale, with a peculiar, almost deathlike pallor, [. . .] [t]he extreme decolletage of her simple apricot dress showed skin of unusual color, a delicate, creamy hue, with golden tones" (45). Helga is intrigued and watches her with fascination until Anne Grey begins to criticize her, saying "[s]he ought to be ostracized"; "she goes about with white people [. . .] and they know she's colored"; and "she gives parties for white and colored people together. And she goes to white people's parties"; finally concluding

[59] Her mother was a white Danish woman and her father a poor black man from Chicago excluding her from acceptance in white society. She has rejected marriage to a respectable black man causing others to call both her blackness and sexual purity into question. Though she has money for clothes and beautiful things, she does not possess the wealth to occupy a place of privilege in the newly minted high society of the twenties

[60] In Alcoff's book, she points to a particularly timely court case from the 1920s in which a black woman, Alice Rhinelander, is sued on the grounds that she concealed her race from her white husband. "Her defense lawyer's strategy relied on the claim that the husband had to have known his wife's race when they had intimate relations before the wedding. To prove this, Rhinelander was asked by her lawyer and the judge to bare her breasts to the jury. The assumption operating here is that no one can completely 'pass' because there will always be some sign, some trace, of one's 'true' identity" (Alcoff 7). This this is perhaps more obviously relevant to Larsen's *Passing;* it is nonetheless important here to understand level to which this thinking was a deeply engrained ideology at the time Larsen was writing.

that, "[i]t's worse than disgusting, it's positively obscene" (Larsen 45). Helga feels herself implicated in this moment in part because she is drawn to Audrey, but also because she fears that same harassment being directed at her were Anne ever to discover her secret. This "slightly sickish feeling" is solidified into anger by Anne's response and – when Anne proclaims "I've nothing but contempt for her, as has every other self-respecting Negro" – Helga's decision to leave Harlem is solidified (Larsen 46).

The Exotic, Erotic Other

While Helga Crane's dressing herself as "something about to fly" offers a hopeful image for how she can take control of her life, and identity, across the Atlantic, that dream quickly unravels as she is subjected to yet another set of race and gender standards in Copenhagen. As soon as she arrives Helga is whisked away by her wealthy Danish family into a world steeped in the kind of style and beauty she has craved for all her life;[61] however, the luster of this sumptuous lifestyle quickly fades, just as it did in Harlem, when she realizes that she has essentially become an exotic doll for her aunt to dress up and Danish high society to admire. "In her [aunt's] mind she had determined the role that Helga was to play in advancing the social fortunes of the Dahls of Copenhagen. Larsen illustrates this destruction of Helga's beautiful fantasy through the destruction of one of her beloved dresses. Her aunt is eager to parade her niece but finds the black and orange dress, so outré in Harlem, "too high" and calling Helga "a prim American maiden [. . .] to hide such a fine back and shoulders" (Larsen 51). Helga's aunt encourages her to wear her most haute couture ensembles to tea when she first arrives, justifying this over-the-top statement by telling her that "you're young, And you're a foreigner, and

[61] In the novel this theme recurs throughout beginning in Naxos. In Copenhagen "to Helga Crane it was the realization of a dream that she had dreamed persistently ever since she was old enough to remember such vague things as daydreams and longings. Always she had wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things" (Larsen 50).

different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression (Larsen 50). Helga is put off by this overly bold fashion suggestion and even questions whether it might not be too "outré", the same adjective she and Anne had applied to the flying dress, to wear something so overly stylish to tea (Larsen 51). What becomes clear in this moment is that it is Helga's *skin* which her white family wishes to display. As many critics have observed, "Helga's relatives sculpt her into their white image of blackness – the black female exotic" and "[i]n Copenhagen, no one requires that Helga be a lady; instead she is made into an exotic female Other – symbol of the unconscious, the unknowable, the erotic, and the passive" (Silverman 610; Wall "Passing for What 102).[62] While Helga has been made to feel this otherness in Naxos and Harlem, the erotic otherness of the hypersexual black woman image now comes to the fore. These passages mark the progressively stronger converging of racist and sexist ideologies upon Helga's body. The dressing scenes that follow mark Helga's conflicting feelings about being objectified in this way. On the one hand, "[s]he was dubious, too, and not a little resentful," since "she had a deep faith in the perfection of her own taste, and no mind to be bedecked in flaunting flashy things" (Larsen 51). On the other, she is not only in a place that affords her all the beauty she could desire, but also one that appreciates her beauty (if problematically so), causing her to wonder at "How odd [. . .] and how different from America" European culture is (Larsen 54).

And so, Helga's resentment is momentarily assuaged by her pleasure in looking a certain way, however she is all too aware of the way in which her body is being objectified as a woman and exoticized as a black woman. In public, she "felt like a veritable savage" as people constantly stop to stare at the gaudily dressed young black woman (Larsen 51). Self-conscious at

[62] Silverman also draws significant parallels between Helga's arrival in Copenhagen and Josephine Baker's debut in the Revue Negre, which I will discuss in chapter 4.

the attention, "[h]er cheeks reddened, but both Herr and Fru Dahl seemed oblivious of the stares or the audible whispers in which Helga made out the one frequently recurring word "*sorte"* which she recognized as the Danish word for 'black"" (51). They simply delight in the effect her overlooked embarrassment has on her, proclaiming "high color becomes you, Helga. Perhaps tonight a little rouge" (52). This moment is especially interesting because, although her image is communicating a great deal, "Helga Crane said nothing" (Larsen 52). Though previously I have claimed that while Helga may remain silent, her clothes thus, speak for her and against the cultural forces that would stifle her self-expression; however, this marks a pivotal shift in this discourse. On the one hand, Hinnov agrees that Larsen "use silence as a means of articulating both silencing tactics and the strength of silence as a response to the prevailing culture" (Hinnov 49); but, on the other, Barnett suggests that in this exchange "[h]er silence signals the effacement of identity. The narrator as spectator offers us the surface of Helga's body; we do not have access to her psyche, her emotional or psychological experience of her world or herself" (Barnett 585). While, I agree with Barnett to a point, I challenge the notion that Helga's agency is fully erased and argue that Helga's internal conflict is remains apparent throughout the text. I believe her silence in this moment marks a shift towards complicity where before it has been a form of resistance, but I also read Helga's uneasiness with this position as well.

Thus, Helga is torn between the pleasure of being admired – as she so desired in the opening of the novel – and being displayed. This is especially poignant when Fru Dahl decides they "should cut a favorite emerald-green velvet dress a little lower in the back and add some gold and mauve flowers" (Larsen 51). The striking colors in green and gold, reminiscent of Helga's negligee in the opening of the novel, return; however, it is not her choice to wear it this

time, nor is she pleased with the dress being dismantled. Hinnov likens this tailoring to the male gaze, stating that Larsen

> suggest[s] that the male gaze continually places women's bodies on display, subjecting them to sexualization and manipulation. The female figure's physical and emotional self is cut up, fragmented, alienated, masked, muzzled, objectified, and ultimately silenced, essentially made into an exoticized art piece by relying upon constrictive tropes of race, gender, and sexuality to perform as docile within a patriarchal, white supremacist culture that does not value them for anything else. (Hinnov 59)

Indeed, Larsen does clearly articulate this when Helga discovers they "had indeed 'cut down' the prized green velvet, until, as Helga put it, it was 'practically nothing but a skirt.'" and she is simultaneously mortified and pleased as she admits "[s]he liked the compliments in the men's eyes" (Larsen 52). Though she initially took pleasure in her appearance in private, her body becomes both overly sexed and raced once she is subjected to the gaze of the outside world. In fact, Larsen again explicitly addresses Helga's subordination, as the women in particular believe she "was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (52). Helga is overtly objectified as a racial and sexual other, something to be admired and even desired, but ultimately of no real consequence. While one might assume that Larsen is making such statements for the readers benefit, so that we *get* the symbolism of Helga's attire again, she is careful to make Helga aware of her own objectification as well. Their treatment of her "conveyed to Helga her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock" (Larsen 54). In her self-consciousness, Helga become cognizant of the fact that her personal taste and self-expression, her own struggle for an identity and sense of belonging, are inconsequential

to a society that sees her as something to be dressed to fit their standards and consumed as an image of feminine beauty and exotic otherness.

In making these statements, Larsen's writing is challenging the assumptions that women are something to be possessed and that women should comply with the standards of femininity culture sets up for them, particularly when those racialized standards force one into the role of the exotic, erotic other. Her persistent use of clothes in *Quicksand* does not play into the conditioned consumption of fashion that was becoming even more a part of the feminine ideal at the time, nor does Helga's submission to such ideals last. Rather, Larsen repurposes fashion as a means to an intersectional feminist end by using clothes to critique culture instead of complying with it; however, in order to do this effectively, Larsen must also address the question of complicity within the text, which she does, again, with style. As Helga grapples with the discomfort, she feels at being so objectified as an "other", she is also induced to go along with the charade through a lavish shopping trip after which

> "it was almost in a mood of rebellion that Helga faced the fantastic collection of garments [. . .]. There were batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood red, sulphur yellow, sea green; and one black and white thing in striking combination. There was a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera cape. There were turbanlike hats of metallic silks, feathers, and furs, strange jewelry, enameled or set with odd semiprecious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels. (Larsen 54)

Although the passage is lengthy, I believe it's significant precisely because of its length, as it allows us to grasp the volume of fashion Helga is presented with in this new life as a veritable

living doll. Of course, this stunning list of beautiful colors, delicate fabrics, and glittering jewels is overwhelming for Helga and, in the end, it makes her, momentarily, forget her frustration at being told what to wear. "Gradually Helga's perturbation subsided in the unusual pleasure of having so many new and expensive clothes at one time. She began to feel a little excited, and incited" (Larsen 54). Helga has essentially been bribed into complying with her own objectification. Once again, Larsen has deftly drawn attention to how cultural forces work against women's self-expression by conditioning them to conform to society's accepted feminine ideal. As Simone De Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex,*

> woman is offered inducements to complicity. [. . .] the delights of passivity are made to seem desirable to the young girl by parents and educators, books and myths, women and men. [. . .] she is taught to enjoy them from earliest childhood; the temptation becomes more and more insidious. (157-8)

In *Quicksand,* Larsen systematically hones her critique of this "insidious" inducement for women to participate in their own submission and objectification, from the racist suppression of uplift to the overt sexualization and appropriation of black women's bodies.[63] By including instances in which Helga attempts to break with feminine norms through her fashion as well as moments when she is engulfed in their persuasive power, Larsen's use of fashion in the novel is crucial to grasping the full depth of her social and political message.

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[63] Kelley observes that in Copenhagen Helga "finds herself embodying the idea that the Naxos teacher were trying the erase: black persons as 'savages'." (Kelley 94). To this point, she offers an interesting catalog of the passage above in which she details the origins of each piece. "The clothes bought for Helga to wear do not represent one geographic locale; instead, exotic influences of Indonesia ('batik'), the Philippines ('Manila'), Africa ('leopard'), Southwestern Europe ('opera-cape' and ('high heels'), the Mediterranean region and Southern Asia ('turban'), and East Asia ('Eastern perfume') are 'mingled' as indiscriminately as the colors and decorations" (Kelley 94). "Helga is asked to wear such an assortment on her own body as if she is satirized for being a mixture of different cultures" (Kelley 95). As mentioned above, her family is imposing an arbitrary image of the exotic as simply non-white in their efforts to use her as a representation of an equally imaginary monolithic blackness.

(Re)Fashioning Writing

As I've explored above, women are often read by society as objects rather than autonomous subjects, and fashion plays a critical role in making this distinction possible. No matter how often women attempt to challenge standards of beauty imposed on their body through fashion, society takes those attempts and turns them into objects of desire or consumption just as often. Throughout *Quicksand,* "Helga has fought against the white world's definition of a Negro, knowing she is neither exotic nor primitive, [. . .] At the same time she has resisted male definitions of her womanhood. Having no foundation on which to base one, Helga never achieves true self-definition. If her quest ends in defeat, her struggle is nonetheless admirable" (Wall "Passing for What 105). I believe Larsen's ending the quest in such a way is especially significant in light of the evidence I've just explored regarding Helga's extensive use and experience of fashion throughout that journey. We imagine ourselves as happy, autonomous subjects and, if we are conscious of culture's enticing us to buy in, we tell ourselves that we choose our own images. If our self-expression just happens to fit within societies standards, then that just makes life that much easier. However, Bordo contends in *Unbearable Weight,*

> The general tyranny of fashion – perpetual, elusive, and instructing the female body in a pedagogy of personal inadequacy and lack – is a powerful discipline for the normalization of *all* women in this culture. But even as we are all normalized to the requirements of appropriate feminine insecurity and preoccupation with appearance, more specific requirements emerge in different cultural and historical contexts, and for different groups. (Bordo, *Unbearable* 254-5)

We are taught as women to regard fashion as something pleasurable and harmless, but we must be cautious of ignoring its power over our bodies. As Bordo points out, fashion normalizes a

wide range of oppressive standards for women regarding their size, their color, their sexuality, and even their class.

As such, I am highly conscious of the fact that fashion will always be a double-edged sword for women as a mode of self-expression as, I believe, was Larsen. Hewett discerns that Larsen is not optimistic at the prospect in *Quicksand,* as "Helga Crane may find a potential freedom in consumer culture, but that freedom is clearly not easily enacted. Unable or unwilling to place herself in any of her society's neat categories, searching for images of a satisfying femininity" (Hewett 364).[64] Hewett also places Larsen within a larger conversation with other women writers of the period, arguing that "Larsen – like Woolf, Hurston, and West – does not reduce the culture industry to a monolithic, repressive force on women's lives, but she finds it difficult to imagine completely transforming that industry's dreams into women's own" (Hewett 365). It is also significant that Larsen repeats these instances of Helga being judged for her clothes, as it is in those moments "where she had first felt the smallness of her commercial value" (Larsen 27). Just as we read into Helga's character through the fashion Larsen describes, we as women are read by society based on our appearance and the clothes we wear. Cycling though Helga's taking pleasure in clothes followed by her denigration because of them suggests that Larsen is not simply using clothes as an aesthetic motif. She is making a specific statement about the impossible position into which women are placed every day when they get dressed.

In *Quicksand,* Nella Larsen does not shy away from the feminine, as her novel is infused with fashion as a central theme, nor does she attempt to skirt the difficulty of taking on such a fraught topic as women's bodies and images in her work. The beauty of Larsen's critique in the

[64] Hewett further argues that Larsen's narrative "thus dramatized a division of loyalties that was ultimately deadening. The commercialized leisure of cabaret life briefly seems to offer Helga Crane an image of an active, adventurous femininity that might blur the boundaries of race and class, but it is also the influence of that same culture industry, displaced into a Danish setting, that reduces Helga to a stunt" (Hewett 365).

novel is that she embraces the difficulty of fashion as a mode of self-expression and of social regulation. What her writing unlocks, then, is the world of possibilities fashion presents for discussing the intersections of oppression at work on women's bodies. My work has been to provide a critical exploration, through Larsen's work as an essential early feminist writer, of the origins of women's clothing as a means of resistance that has informed a legacy of linking feminism and fashion from the roaring twenties through today's feminist fashion statements. [In addition to a discussion of style and "girling" within the context of women and writing.] Sarah Ahmed discusses the need for willfulness in pursuing difficult subjects, like this one, saying that "[she reflects] on experiences that are difficult and [does] not wish to resolve that difficulty (to resolve difficulty would be to lose proximity to what is difficult)" (20). I am not aiming to resolve the difficulty of navigating the intersections of feminism and fashion. What I am doing, instead, is willfully arguing that we acknowledge the utility of fashion as an aesthetic, and even a key platform, for addressing the complexities of feminist ideologies as the intersections of our world's oppressive forces continue to multiply. Unfortunately, relying on the feminine in writing and living became a less and less popular mode of expression in the decades of feminism that have followed Larsen and Woolf's. As Sara Ahmed points out in *Living a Feminist Life,* we can often "feel an obligation to 'de-girl'" in our current feminist moment (55). We tend to struggle with determining whether our "self-girling" is authentic or simply the product of our sex/gender conditioning and therefore err on the side of caution by casting the feminine aside. However, this avoidance of the feminine can create just as many issues as it solves when we seek to write and live as feminists. For this very reason, I am pursuing Ahmed's suggestion that we "might have to become willful to be willingly feminine in feminist spaces" (*Living* 55). I am willfully acknowledging the feminine in Larsen's writing, and women's sartorial expression more

generally, in an effort to disrupt the primarily negative conclusions contemporary analysis might jump to by avoiding or even overlooking Larsen's carefully fashioned clothes in *Quicksand.* Making the case that Larsen's novel relies on something as stereotypically feminine as fashion, as I am arguing here, it would be understandable for us as readers and scholars to hesitate in placing too much significance on the "girling" taking place in the novel.[65] However, I believe Larsen and her contemporaries took a much less antagonistic view towards the influence of women's self-expression through fashion.

Larsen's apparent preoccupation with fashion actually places her in excellent company as many other women writers of her day were similarly inclined. Sheehan contends that Jessie Fauset was also "a writer whose work is highly attuned to fashion, but who has never been particularly fashionable" (Sheehan "Fauset" 102).[66] As I have discussed with Larsen's work,

> Fauset's attention to sartorial trends has been offered as evidence that she is myopic and out of step with her times; Robert Bone infamously claimed that Fauset was a member of a black literary "Rear Guard" and that her third novel, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), "seems to be about the first colored woman in New Jersey to wear lounging pajamas". (Bone qdt in Sheehan "Fauset" 102)

Here Bone perfectly illustrates my point that women's writing is often oversimplified and dismissed if it includes fashion. Sheehan also maintains that "Just as Fauset's heroines manipulate textiles, so does Fauset take up, trip, and refit current and established narrative genres, including the marriage plot, the passing narrative, the fairy tale, the *Bildungsroman,*

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[65] This "girling" is in reference to Ahmed's point in *Living a Feminist Life,* which I discuss in the introduction.
[66] Here we could take Sheehan's point the mean that Fauset herself was not a fashionable person – which would be interesting considering Larsen's reputation as quite fashionable; however, she clarifies, "Fauset's extensive references to garments and her depictions of protagonists who work as seamstresses, *modistes,* fashion illustrators, and hairdressers help to situate her within the long-standing tradition of domestic fiction, which by the 1920s was popular but not fashionable" (Sheehan "Fauset" 137).

(Sheehan "Fauset" 137). This is precisely the thread of criticism I will continue throughout this dissertation as these patterns emerge across women's fiction from the period.

Perhaps most famously, Virginia Woolf demonstrates the same "frock consciousness" as Larsen and Fauset. In fact, she coined the term in her diary, in June 1919, writing ""my present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: & I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness &c." (Woolf *Diary, vol. 3* 12). In the same year *Quicksand* was published, Virginia Woolf gave two papers on the history of women's writing that would be published as *A Room of One's Own* a year later.[67] This now seminal feminist text offers much needed insight into why and how the traditionally feminine can be a useful literary mode of writing, and of being. Woolf reminds us that the "literary training" of nineteenth century women writers was limited to the educations they received in the home (64). She even goes so far as to ask whether women's writing, Austen's or the Bronte's even, is somehow less significant or suffers artistically as a result of limited life experience; she concludes that to dismiss women's writing summarily because of such limitations would miss the point of women's writing entirely (Woolf 65).[68] Woolf's discussion here not only fits within the spectrum of women's writing I am exploring here, it also lays the groundwork for criticism like this dissertation that aims to contest the divisive dismissal of feminine writing.

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[67] In exploring this pattern across Woolf's life, Cohen observes that "she uses frocks not to represent character itself, but to think about the modernist problem of how to represent character. Her attention to clothes has to do both with her desire to particularize female subjectivity . . . and with her broad interest in rendering the relationships between various exteriors and interiors. . . . Finally, Woolf explores consciousness, the ways that it is gendered and its relation to clothing and consumption by linking it to the representability of lesbianism" (Cohen 150). I will address this final point through Woolf's most elaborate, and imaginative, manifestation of "frock consciousness" in *Orlando* in chapter 3.

[68] Vike Plock restates Woolf's point as it relates to the modernist circles in which she herself wrote, nothing that still "[w]omen writers' professional authority was often premised, that is, on conditions that many of them wanted to supersede; an association with popular literary traditions that seemingly circumnavigated the public sphere entirely because they had both their origin and intended endpoint in the lady's drawing room" (*Modernism* 14).

While Woolf makes the case that women's writing was a still unknown entity in hers and Larsen's day, feminist scholars have since expanded on the arguments she laid out in 1928. As feminist theory developed in the latter half of the twentieth century the consideration of the role of the feminine and sexual difference in women's writing affords us the opportunity to examine Larsen's overtly feminine content in *Quicksand* in a new light. Pykett reminds us that women's writing, and independent women in general, at the turn of the twentieth century were paradoxically considered both hyper-feminine and overly masculine (155). However, we need not consider the feminine in writing as reinforcing the sex gender binary.[69] As Larsen incorporates fashion into her writing, we can alternatively read these feminine motifs as an implicit statement of fact. Allowing the feminine descriptions to serve as mental images of the state-of-affairs for the New Woman, frees Larsen from needing to explicitly state the ways women were being controlled by modern notions of femininity. This pragmatic treatment of the feminine in women's writing reminds us that just because traditionally feminine themes have not been used in the so-called great works of male writers does not mean that they are any less significant as artistic devices. Furthermore, black feminist scholars have since expanded on Woolf's argument and remind us of the unique challenges women of color face in being writers period, much less taken seriously. Both Alice Walker and Audre Lorde have offered responses to Woolf in their essays and have pointed to the limitations forced upon black women writers to achieve both the means to write and the status to be read (Walker 37; Lorde 116). For Larsen, fashion allows her to critique the limitations of both her race and gender on her writing in a way that can only be read if one is aware of the uniquely feminine language in which she is speaking these truths. To overlook Larsen's critiques is to read through the racist patriarchal language

[69] Mihaela Bacali's "'Feminine Writing' - The Evolution of a Concept" offers a concise but thorough exploration of this paradox.

which is to overlook the legitimacy of the feminine as a mode of communication. As a black woman writer in the (white) male dominated modernist movement, Larsen is operating within the language structures available to her which allow her to speak to those who may identify with herself and her protagonist.

Women can attempt to challenge beauty standards and start trends but in doing so we also run the risk of simply creating new ideals to which we'll be held. Women can refuse to cover up or be ashamed of their bodies but will likely be sexualized as a result. With each attempt at feminist critiques of fashion, we must be diligent in minding the risk of our efforts being undermined through commodification and objectification. Examining Larsen's work, and the work of others like hers, provides an opportunity to explore this paradox of feminist fashion. On the one hand, as Penelope Ingram reminds us, "[literary] and cultural texts are often implicated in the shoring up of cultural ideologies," and "we look into these texts expecting confirmation of identity categories" (Ingram 92). I believe it would be fair to say that as a society, and even as feminists, often unfairly assume this of women's writing in particular when it's themes and content rely on overly feminine ideals. However, if we reframe our analysis to consider how the feminine can be feminist, we are "instead [. . .] faced with the possibility of polyvalent bodies, identities that hold within them other possibilities, other ways of Being-in-the-world" (Ingram 92). Keeping in mind that *Quicksand* is at least semi-autobiographical, Larsen is likely drawing on her own experiences and those of the women around her as I discussed in the opening of this chapter. This recurring pattern of choice and commodification allows us to read beyond Helga's or Larsen's own individual experiences as well as the patterns in which women tend to find themselves being read as other than their selves. The effect of the constant commentary on Helga's appearance in relation to overarching cultural ideologies detaches the experiences from

their focus on Helga alone and, thus, they can be applied more universally. In some sense, Helga, thus, eventually gains her sense of belonging in the world. As Benjamin points out "by replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence" (1054). Here I am of course subverting Benjamin's original point, as this mass existence is not a positive outcome in his consideration, and I do think it is important to pause and acknowledge Helga's "unique existence", especially as it would be reductive and unethical to proceed as if her experience is representative of a universal black experience. But, considering how the experiences Helga goes through could be representative of a "mass existence," it seems all the more important that Larsen chose to fictionalize the intense, persistent, and repetitive social commentary on race and gender through fashion in her novel. By creating a stylistic reproduction of the cultural standards of her day, she makes the unique, fictional, existence of one woman adaptable to the struggles of the many during a period of racial and sexual oppression taking place during the early twentieth century.[70]

[70] Similar to Hewett, Jessica Rabin discusses women's writing women, arguing that "[r]epresentation – what is communicated, how, and by whom – is a key concern of [Cather, Stein, and Larsen]. In particular, all three see the complexity and potential problems inherent in men's attempts to portray women" (Rabin 105). This point is one I will return to in chapter 4 in discussing Cather's "Coming, Aphrodite!" and men's representation of women in the conclusion to this dissertation. As Rabin observes "In life, as in literature, men's attempts to comprehend and represent women produce a disappointingly "grim portrait" (O'Brien qtd in Rabin 106).

Chapter 2

On the Market:

Gender, Class, and Consumption in *The House of Mirth* and *Salome of the Tenements*

> What is certain is that today it is very difficult for women to assume both their status of autonomous individual and their feminine destiny.
>
> - Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (274)

Women are consumers of fashion, and, like fashion, women are also consumed. However, consumption and consumerism by and of women encompass much more than their shopping habits. Women are conditioned to be consumers while charges of frivolity and conspicuous consumption are frequently made as proof of women's economic ineptitude. Marriageable women are considered on-the-market, objects of desire to be acquired – consumed – in matrimony. Women must even be mindful of their consumption of food to maintain a fashionable figure.[71] In this chapter I will explore the complexities of women's consumption through an analysis of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements* (1923). In the discussion that follows, I will analyze how these writers have used dress in their texts to critique class inequalities as well as women's social mobility and economic (in)dependence. Both Wharton and Yezierska are known to have actively engaged in the discourse of women's social and economic opportunities over the course of their careers and their interest informs the awareness of such issues in their heroines of Lily Bart and Sonya Vrunsky, respectively. In the broadest terms both women seek financial security and social

[71] Losa Coar addresses this in "Sugar and Spice and All Things Nice: The Victorian Woman's All-Consuming Predicament" and, while their discussion focus more explicitly on food, Coar's development of the multiplicity of consumption imposed on women is a valuable metaphor for the cultural forces that control and manipulation women's bodies and behaviors.

acceptance – primarily through marriage - and express a keen interest in clothes as necessary apparatus for achieving their goals. However, I read these novels as taking intriguingly parallel but opposing trajectories explicitly signaled in the protagonists' clothing as they progress. While both use dress as a means to an end, Lily's clothes tend to confine and control, leading to tragedy, while Sonya's ultimately offer independence.

Together these texts are a perfect example of the double-bind of femininity and fashion through which the social forces of capitalist patriarchy blur the boundaries between agency and complicity.[72] I will discuss how women's dress provides a means for the accumulation of wealth as well as the contradictory position that women are conditioned to consume in this way. I believe this chapter can unpack some of the paradoxes of dress and fashion, particularly troublesome for feminist critics, while reinforcing my claim that fashion can be a powerful stylistic mode for coding women's opinions about gender and class that may previously have been overlooked or dismissed. As Elizabeth Sheehan points out, "[i]n academic and literary circles, fashion signifies inconsequence, frivolity, and a capitulation to market demand" (1). Therefore, this chapter analyzes how Wharton and Yezierska critique women's lack of financial autonomy and explore their limited economic opportunities in terms that acknowledge women's alternative modes of economic participation as well as their awareness of and resistance to conditioned consumption. I believe these writers use fashion as a medium for communicating the tangible realities of women's economic circumstances and illustrate both the positively and

[72] Nancy Armstrong contends that women in fiction embody "all manner of noncompliance" in pursuit of social mobility which "automatically puts her in violation of the principle that women are naturally subordinate to men thereby jeopardizing her appeal for men, the very appeal on which a woman's hopes for upward mobility rested. [. . .] [T]he result is two impossible choices, or what we call the double bind. If a woman, the protagonist of fiction could either remain in a servile position and retain her charm or elevate her economic position and sacrifice the very helplessness and submission that made her attractive to men" (Armstrong 102).

negatively gendered aspect of capitalist culture in the early twentieth century.[73] By examining women's writing, in addition to the writer's own opinions on class discourses, I can take a multilayered approach that addresses how women are read as characters, authors, and individuals in everyday society.

Like the previous discussions of race and gender, critique of women's engagement with class distinctions tends towards a slippage between personal and collective responsibility, which is why I find fiction provides useful and ethical material for analysis; it productively facilitates the exploration and application of complex ideologies like the issues of class and gender because both characterization and description are available as cultural objects of analysis and can withstand the burden of multiple interpretations, while avoiding some of the potential for tokenization or overgeneralization that may come from discussing real women's lives.

> [T]he double bind in which women such as Lily Bart found themselves was intricately tied to the new 'dynamics of modern consumption,' which 'significantly problematized and frustrated the contemporary ideological economy of romance [. . .]. Though women were imaginatively empowered by the ability to choose the perfect suitor in the same way that they would choose the best product, factors such as women's unequal access to employment simultaneously reduced them to commodities within the actual economics of marriage. (Shepherd qtd in Miller 53-4)

[73] Alissa Karl outlines the potential overlapping issues and inquiries relating to women and class in the introduction to *Modernism and the Marketplace,* including: "how individuals, social and economic classes, racial and ethnic groups, and genders are defined socially and politically as consumers [. . .]; the relationship of women to, and the definition of women in, consumerism and its corporate and capitalist frameworks; [and] the gendering and classing of consumer practices" (7). My arguments in this chapter overlap with some, if not all, of Karl's questions outlined here, though Karl's discussion focuses more on authors and publications while I emphasize literary analysis. I believe our approaches to the subject reinforce each other and further illustrates that there is an emerging awareness in the field of a more nuanced understanding and treatment of women's economic participation as more than a targeted consumer base.

It is precisely this double bind that is at the center of my analysis of fashion and class in the works of Wharton and Yerzierska as both protagonists are faced with the choice between subjugation and subversion through marriage and material. The analysis below explores how Lily and Sonya test both possibilities with mixed results and their experiences are often influenced by their clothing. In other words, attention to the descriptions of fashion reinforces examinations of the characters (non)compliance.

The use of fashion by these authors is crucial because while some readers and critics may still be quick to dismiss such inclusions as frivolous, feminine aesthetics, consumer culture's classification of fashion as both frivolous and feminine represents the extent to which capitalist patriarchy manufactures the methods for maintaining women's second-class status; women are trained to give fashion their attention with the understanding that society will criticize that attention. The fact that readers are inclined to dismiss clothes as mere description emphasizes how women's economic positions are also negligible and their opportunities are limited to forums in which they either give up control or exercise some form of *socially acceptable* agency. Within these impossible structures, women's prospects for self-formation in the early twentieth century economy of the self-made man are unimaginably fraught. For example, in *The House of Mirth,* "garments [are] material expressions of Lily's personality. They are highly personalised, infused with meaning and they are therefore far more than fashionable ephemera" (Plock *Modernism* 44). According to Plock, "[f]or Wharton, garments [. . .] have the potential to express the individual's 'heroic defiance of conventional prejudice' [. . .] with 'dress' as a manifestation of a possible site of conflict between fashion's idealizing guidelines and life's actual requirements" (Plock *Modernism* 44). In a summary of Baudrillard's critiques of fashion, Llewellyn Negrin notes that "in the context of capitalist society where one's social position is no

longer fixed at birth, commodities do not so much reflect but rather create status distinctions" (*Self* 113). Thus, as both critics observe here, fashion significantly impacts the formation of social status and identity. On the one hand, this observation is exemplified throughout both novels, as Lily and Sonya observe the ways in which fashion can either help or hinder social mobility. However, it is also important to note that while the idea that class itself can be fashioned and not simply reflected *by* fashion is true to an extent (as the assertion that it is "no longer fixed" is certainly debatable), this assertion does not take into account the overlaying social position of gender, the status of which remains quite fixed. Commodities thus create status to a degree; however, the mandates of gender, particularly femininity always already imposed on an individual dictate which statuses they are able to pursue in crafting the self.

The economic opportunities available to women explored here are thus dictated by the confines of both gender and class. *The House of Mirth* and *Salome of the Tenements* explore women's economic status from the upper middle class and working-class positions respectively. For Lily Bart in *House of Mirth,* marriage is the primary means of financial security available - with work a less desirable, and less attainable option - while for Sonya Vrunsky in *Salome of the Tenements* work is a necessity rather than a last resort. (Now, it is important to emphasize that this is not to say that poverty somehow affords Sonya more autonomy because she earns her own money, as this would perpetuate the same romanticization of poverty with which I charge her philanthropist husband John Manning later in this chapter.)[74] Rather, I will explore how gender dictates how both women navigate the issues of class unique to their own position. Specifically,

[74] Wharton also touches on the idealized, virtuous poor (though not to the same extent as Yezierska), during Lily's tenure at a millinery during which she encounters the realities of the working women's lives she'd originally romanticized. "[W]hen she had visited the Girls' Club with Gerty Farish, she had felt an enlightened interest in the working classes; but that was because she looked down on them from above, from the happy altitude of her grace and her beneficence. Now that she was on a level with them, the point of view was less interesting" (Mirth 251).

these women's apparent preoccupation with fashion and beauty is their primary channel for self-expression and greatest source of potential, be it social, financial, or sexual. Lily Bart frequently acknowledges her interest in fashion is primarily centered on its utility. She understands that her dress serves more than her own pleasure to the point that, when presented with a moment's solitude, "the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted. No one, however, appeared to profit by the opportunity; and after a half-hour of fruitless waiting she rose and wandered on" (Mirth 54). Negrin's discussion of the self and society reinforces this point as she observes that "[s]ince women's self-esteem and success have been seen to depend more on their looks than on their achievements, many women have tended to become obsessed with the fashioning of their appearance to the detriment of the development of other aspects of their self-identity" (115). With this in mind, the following arguments aim to explore women's complicity and resistance to consumption through fashion as grounds for critiquing capitalist power structures, while avoiding value judgements aimed at women as individuals or collectively.

The House of Mirth

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* encompasses the glitz and glamour of turn of the century New York Society and the novel's protagonist, Lily Bart, is its crowning jewel. Beautiful and beguiling, Lily has the world at her feet, or so it appears. Unfortunately, her story proves to be more tragedy than romance. Wharton's tragic heroine and her "great gilt cage" are often held up as the cautionary tale, the representation of the excesses of modern consumer culture.[75] Lily's

[75] This is arguably the most famous passage from *The House of Mirth,* to the point that the cage has become a common expression throughout scholarship on the era. "[T]he great gilt cage in which they were huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom" (Wharton *Mirth* 48).

cage is constructed from the expectations of gender and genteel society which dictate essentially every aspect of her appearance, behavior, and desires. Over the course of the novel, Wharton crafts an emerging awareness in her protagonist of the conditioning she has received since childhood designed to ensure her acceptance of the conditions of her captivity. Lily tests the strength of society's restraints, and her own strength is tested as well; as I will discuss shortly, though, she finds mainstream culture's powers of persuasion stronger than her own resolve. It is in fact, Lily's helplessness, her inability to resist society's expectations that makes her story so important because she represents the power of patriarchy to maintain control not through force but through coerced complicity. Fashion plays a key role in that coercion and Wharton demonstrates an acute understanding of its dangerous allure as both a source of personal pleasure and an agent of social control.[76]

> Wharton struggled against the popular images of femininity [. . .] even as she wore the fashions herself. What irritated her as a novelist and a woman was the fraudulence of [. . .] presenting a lavishly dressed female body, tightly corseted and yet supposedly agile. The heroines of her fiction suffer the misconception that a culture that would tightly lace the body would offer free social and political movement. (Joslin 35)

In *The House of Mirth,* Wharton investigates this frustration through Lily Bart's forays into self-determination as it appears that each time Lily is about to achieve her goals – the security and luxury of an advantageous marriage – a sudden surge of willfulness pulls her back from the brink of submission. The swift and substantial social backlash that follows such occurrences combined

[76] A.B. Wenzell illustrations "As the scholar Edith Thornton explains, Wharton lamented her decision to allow the illustrations into the printed book and confided to her editor William Brownell, "I sand to the depth of letting the illustrations be in the book - & oh, I wish I hadn't now." The salve her conscience, she insisted that several copies of the book be printed without the offending images for distribution to her friends. What she hoped for what the strength of language over illustration as she dressed her heroine in the sinuous folds of Parisian gowns" (Joslin 35). This perhaps points to why Wharton merely *suggests* Lily's dresses in the book versus detailed descriptions as we get in Larsen.

with Lily's self-reflection at these junctures outline Wharton's critiques of society's restrictive expectations and opportunities for young women at the turn of the century.

The Great Gilt Cage

As Wharton herself notes in *Backward Glance,* "the problem [in writing *The House of* Mirth] was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another" (206). Wharton is aware of the social tendency to dismiss a woman like Lily as just a silly, shallow girl, whose problems are insignificant and self-made. In giving voice to those problems in the novel in spite of prevailing opinions, Wharton is validating the concerns of women: "the answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys" (207).[77] Wharton's explanation here is significant in that the subject to which she is referring is not only Lily, the individual, but rather society as a whole. This emphasis on the "frivolity" of turn-of-the-century New York society allows for a more empathetic reading of Lily's struggle. As her would be suitor, Lawrence Selden, observes "[s]he was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (Wharton *Mirth* 7). Wharton's characterizations of women in the novel are also an exercise in contrasts across generation and social positions. For example, her aunt and guardian, Mrs. Peniston's own fashion - all-black ensembles that are severe but impeccable, high quality but also out of style - is not merely a reflection of her status as a widow; her clothes, and her

[77] Hughes suggests that *Mirth* "can, of course, be read as a companion volume to Theodore Veblen's satire of 1899, *The Theory of the Leisure Class"* (388). With reference to *The House of Mirth,* she also argues that "The modern representation of character may then include a characters' *experience* of clothes [. . .]. This in its turn will shape a character's self-image in relation to society. Yet the imperatives of self-adornment [. . .] consume Lily as she strives to represent an ideal of womanhood which no longer has any real basis. Her self-fashioning – undertaken in a place and period of apparently increased female freedoms – is fatally misinterpreted by a society whose only ideals are cash-backed" (Hughes *Dressed* 9).

mentality, are holdovers of the Victorian.[78] She and her relationship with her willful young niece are an interesting metaphor for the transition from the conservative values of the previous century. According to Ann Douglas, "Twentieth-century America is believed, if in pejorative senses, to be more "modern" than other modern cultures" which we could see illustrated in Lily's outlook, while the perspective of her aunt shows that "nineteenth-century America was, in certain senses also usually considered pejorative, more Victorian than other countries to whom the term is applied" (Douglas 5). The seemingly conflicting values represented by these two women in Peniston's Victorian sensibilities and Lily's modern frivolities demonstrate Wharton's own deep understanding of how cultural norms shape women's ideals and how those norms transformed significantly at the start of a new century. While claiming she is a mere cultural product would strip Lily - and, by extension, women like her – of any agency, acknowledging the power of society to destroy through seemingly frivolous means is a powerful statement.

Certainly, Lily is capable of thinking for herself, and her own internal conflicts within the structures of class and gender are shared throughout the novel. However, placing sole responsibility upon Lily to resist her own social conditioning allows society to deny the lengths to which it goes to maintain systems of power, namely women's economic subordination under patriarchy. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman asserts in *Women and Economics,* the class of women to which Lily belongs is one that "we have painfully and laboriously evolved and carefully maintained [. . .] to consume clothes, to consume houses and furniture and decorations and

[78] According to Lauren Cardon "Wharton writes with a degree of historical hindsight, exposing the increasingly liberal trajectory of American fashion over a period of thirty years. In both novels, [*The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*] the heroines are savvy interpreters of high fashion; though living at a time when elite fashion had extremely strict rules of propriety, these women enjoy the luxury of personal through fashion at a high personal and social price" (Cardon 13). Aunt Peniston is an interesting example of this statement as she is described as follows: "her grey hair was arranged with precision, and her clothes looked excessively new and yet slightly old-fashioned. They were always black and tightly fitting, with an expensive glitter; she was the kind of woman who wore jet at breakfast. Lily had never seen her when she was not cuirassed in shining black, with small tight boots, and an air of being packed and ready to start; yet she never started" (Mirth 95).

ornaments and amusements" (118). All of the women with whom Lily socializes are held by these parameters as well and Wharton's spectrum of women from the spinster Gerty Farish to the divorcé Carry Fisher provides a nuanced and impressively comprehensive overview of the regulation of women's behavior. Furthermore, the parameters of women's socially acceptable habits are on the one hand regulated among women, as I will discuss shortly, but also by the responses elicited in men. In describing the woman of leisure, Gilman adds that these women are conditioned "to take and take and take forever, - from one man if they are virtuous, from many if they are vicious, but always to take and never to think of giving anything in return except their womanhood" (Gilman 118). While Gilman positions women as the active subject here, I would suggest a slight alteration to this statement in that realistically – since men do hold both the social and financial power – women's most direct path to acquiring social or economic capital is through men. Thus, those indictments of either virtue or viciousness – which are applied to Lily and several other women by their peers – are suspect as well. Considering Lily's expected ignorance of finance, she is an astute observer of the economies of society. "[L]ike any marketable commodity, Lilys has an assigned value that is subject to valuation or depreciation, according to other people's appreciations" (Hidalga 264). An orphan of limited means, Lily's one real asset is her beauty and marriage to a wealthy husband is the only path available to her for exchanging the only thing of value she possesses into actual money.

Of course, as I will discuss later, Lily is aware that work is another possible avenue, as her friend Gerty Farish does. She doesn't deny the appeal of the freedom to live on her own that working could provide, however Lily is a pragmatist.[79] The lifestyle of a single woman is significantly

[79] Though some argue Lily lacks awareness of either herself or others, her reflections on Gerty's position indicate a shrewd understanding of the limited possibilities available to women. She acknowledges,"it was a hateful fate – but how escape from it? What choice had she? To be herself, or a Gerty Farish. [. . .] No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of

less luxurious than that of a society wife; while Gerty has her independence, she is notably plain as well so there is an assumption that she lacks the means to achieve the later.

Trading on her looks offers Lily a larger return on investment and it is no coincidence that a young marriageable woman is referred to as "on the market". Lily thus enters society as one beginning a career in finance. She also recognizes that there are costs and exchanges taking place via currencies other than cash. "Her enjoyment of her surroundings was, indeed, tinged by the unpleasant consideration that she was accepting hospitality and courting the approval of people she had disdained under other conditions." (Mirth 205). As Jesus Hidalga argues

> All this entails that a fundamental part of her being will always be alienated, that is, in possession of others. After all, turning anything into an object of speculation entails bracketing its *real* value and submitting it to an unpredictable and potentially unending chain of alien appreciations. Identity, the novel, implies, is a (quantifiable) social matter. (Hidalga 265)

As discussed in the introduction, patriarchy justifies the subjugation of women through claims of women's weakness, dismisses their interests as frivolous, and is able to do so precisely because patriarchy enforces those gender conditions. This is the true power of patriarchy, that it can shift blame onto its victims to alienate them, and thus maintain its own strength. Gerty Farish – the working girl foil to Lily's would-be socialite - is one woman in the novel who appears to be fully aware of women's conditions, perhaps because of her status as an outsider. As Lily's fragile foothold in society gives way, Gerty observes that "now all the things [Lily] cared for have been taken from her, and the people who taught her to care for them have abandoned her too" (*Mirth* 237). Gerty's pronouncement is in fact more true than she knows. As outlined above, patriarchy

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luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in. But the luxury of others was not what she wanted." (Mirth 23).

enforces beliefs, values, and behaviors upon women, establishes standards of femininity, however that conditioning is deceptive. One the one hand, complicity is said to promise security and belonging, but on the other that conditioning is a weapon of patriarchy. Femininity is not only an expectation but also an exception meaning women are expected to be feminine and that femininity is used to justify their otherness.[80]

Femininity is labeled as weakness, frivolousness, and attached to women so they can be controlled and disciplined. Femininity is encompassed in both appearance and behavior and in many illustrations is represented by degrees of modesty or purity – of dress and of action. For Lily this is particularly true as she is always observed as the feminine ideal. Or, as Wagner puts it, "[h]er ultra-intelligibility creates a different problem altogether. She is an *ideal,* an *original,* a feminine *icon* of culture that is so known for what her image represents that she is curiously caught in the stage of categories and labels. She is forbidden the privilege of invisibility. (Wagner 122). In the opening scenes of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, her protagonist Lily Bart decides to accompany Lawrence Selden to his rooms for tea after missing her train. Quite the risky, and racy, decision for an unmarried woman without a chaperone. While tea and conversation are certainly innocuous activities, Lily knows that appearances are everything and even notes that "she always paid for her rare indiscretions by a violent reaction of prudence" (Wharton *Mirth* 12). Lily's self-regulation in response to her "indiscretions" is a fascinating example of women's exercise of will as either willfulness or willingness. As Sara Ahmed contends in *Willful Subjects* "feminist history involves a history of becoming conscious of how troubling attributes such as willfulness fall, unevenly, on subjects. It is not simply that you are charged with willfulness; you become conscious of the violence of the charge" (90). Lily's self-

[80] This is what Guillaumin discusses in explaining that sex is established in order to justify sexism "[S]ocial groups are the *results* of relationships and not just the 'elements' of those relationships" (Guillaumin 168).

knowledge and that of the machinations of society in this moment of reflection set up the framework for Lily's behavior throughout the novel.

She has moments of attempted resistance to the expectations forced upon her as a young woman of modest, but not insignificant, social status which are countered by a fiercer adherence to society's rules after outcomes put her lifestyle and reputation at risk. Of course, she is spotted leaving the building putting her reputation at risk from chapter one, when she runs into another man, Mr. Rosedale, leaving Selden's; he asks her if she's been in town shopping, and she fabricates a story on the spot that she was visiting a dressmaker in the building (Wharton *Mirth* 13). While entirely plausible, this moment of self-preservation requires constant maintenance, illustrating the extent to which Lily is trapped in a society where any slight deviation from the norm places her reputation and thus her livelihood in danger. Interestingly this encounter also establishes fashion as a central theme in the novel as well. Even though the visit to her dressmaker is a fabrication, the positioning of shopping as the appropriate behavior against fraternizing as the inappropriate appears frequently in the text. Sex and clothes are inextricably linked from the opening pages as Lily's opportunities are enhanced and hindered by her clothes throughout the novel. The relationship between sex and clothes is really a subset of the more general association linking sex and money. Throughout the novel, Lily's financial standing is illustrated through her wardrobe, as for a young woman this is the primary means of acquiring wealth at the time. The distribution of wealth on the basis of gender is an important point of social criticism for Wharton in *The House of Mirth.* When Wharton describes Lily's living situation, she states that "it seemed to her natural that Lily should spend all her money on dress, and she supplemented the girl's scanty income by occasional ' handsome presents' meant to be applied to the same purpose" (Wharton *Mirth* 34). The logic of this assumption actually makes

perfect sense given the opportunities available to Lily. In acquiring a substantial wardrobe, she is supporting herself because it is through the employment of her wardrobe – showcasing her beauty in order to attract a husband – that she will achieve financial security in marriage. In the zenith of capitalism that was New York society in the early twentieth century, the economies of women are conducted in goods other than money. On several occasions Lily notes the payments required to gain entry and continued participation in upper class society. While she may not be paying her own way on the surface, she knows the costs accumulated as she moves within these circles.

After an evening of bridge at the Trenor's, Lily tallies her losses and balances her meager finances, an activity which leaves her distraught as she notices not only the dwindling of her money but also her beauty as the cost of such strains shows in the lines on her face as well as her receipts; "she was frightened by two little lines near her mouth" and "it seemed an added injustice that petty cares should leave a trace on the beauty which was her only defence against them (Wharton *Mirth* 25). This is the first instance in which we see that Lily is actually paying quite dearly in her quest for financial security. While on the surface seeking a wealthy husband may seem a lucrative endeavor, it is also an expensive one that Lily can scarcely afford. Furthermore, the suggestion that she is spending her youth and beauty, as well as money, to get it makes it a precarious venture as well. This is because Lily's appearance, not her purse, is her true source of capital. "Lily understood that beauty is only the raw material of conquest" so the possibility that that beauty could decline in value poses just as much a financial hardship as losing a game of bridge (Wharton *Mirth* 30). In other words, "[w]hat makes Lily's entrapment particularly binding is that she is both consumer and commodity within this system, a particularly paralyzing position" (Miller 52). She lends her beauty to social occasions and is

perhaps borrowing against it, indebting herself to wealthier individuals on the assumption that her hypothetical wealthy husband will provide the cash to match to social capital she brings to the table. Lily's beauty is not enough for the upper crust to accept her in their circles on its own and even though they welcome her and provide her with small inducements for participation, she must find ways in which she can exchange her charms for more material, and permanent, assets.

The exchange value of Lily's appearance is high, but on her own she lacks the social capital to craft the "raw material" into marriage material as it were. In other words, beauty determines Lily's opportunities, but "to convert it into success", i.e., marriage, "other arts are required" (Wharton *Mirth* 30). Those "other arts" Lily must employ are all the varied and complex modes of conformity and complicity that she endures in exchange for security. Lily has to not only be beautiful, but also flatter and entertain her friends, play bridge, and even serve as a social secretary for her wealthy, married hostess, Judy Trenor, in exchange for their admitting her into society. "It was one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality, and for the dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenished her insufficient wardrobe" (Wharton *Mirth* 23-4).[81] While, to women like Judy, this exchange may serve a purely social function, the frivolities of dinner parties, outings, and bridge, for Lily their prolonged hospitality is a forum necessary for her to meet the right man through whom she can solidify her position in society. Playing the game as it were – not only bridge but also the charade of social conformity - gives Lily the additional means required to showcase her "raw materials" to advantage to get a husband. She has beauty but also needs the appropriate setting which is provided by her

[81] Wharton repeats this point later when Lily first contemplates going to Judy's husband Gus for money. Not only must she entertain her married friends, but she must also rely on them as her primary means of borrowing money as a woman without access to other financial institutions. "To Miss Bart, in short, no such opportunities were possible. She could of course borrow from her women friends – a hundred here or there, at the utmost – but they were more ready to give a gown or a trinket, and looked a little askance when she hinted her preference for a cheque. Women are not generous lenders, and those among whom her lot was cast were either in the same case as herself, or less too far removed from it to understand its necessities" (Mirth 70).

hostesses in the form of their events and homes as well as the "dresses and trinkets" they provide for her. Lily's obligation to her friends then extends beyond gambling debts and outlines the precariousness of her position early on. In fact, I would argue that her social debt, accumulated in her wardrobe and list of introductions is just as significant as her financial one.

On the Marriage Market

In considering Lily's social endeavors thus far, my discussion has been focused primarily on *how* she manages her pursuit of social and economic security. It is, however, equally important to examine the *why* behind her thoughts and actions as well. As I mentioned previously, there is generational reinforcement of Lily's values through her aunt's conservative guardianship, but Lily's mother also plays a critical role in establishing the values that Lily is working to maintain. The portrayal of Lily's mother strongly resembles Gilman's description of the non-productive woman discussed above. In a series of flashbacks, Wharton describes Lily's mother as having a single-minded focus on appearances with being "decently dressed" at the top of the list; we also see that Lily learned to emulate her mother's standards when she insists on daily luxuries like expensive flowers (Wharton *Mirth* 26-7). Learning that eventually the Bart's would lose the means to provide the standard of living to which Lily and her mother had become accustomed, it becomes clear why Lily is so persistent in safeguarding her own future security in marriage. Furthermore, when Lily "remembered how her mother, after they had lost their money, used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: 'But you'll get it all back – you'll get it all back with your face . . . '", her anxiety over the significance of her appearance in achieving that goal makes perfect sense (Wharton *Mirth* 25). Through the example of her mother, Lily has internalized the compulsory material consumerism and lifestyle expectations necessary to her class as well as the belief that her femininity is her means of maintaining their approval. The

fierceness of her mother's convictions on this score is telling as well. Wharton describes Mrs. Bart's fixation on maintaining their family's lifestyle according to specific class standards as if a failure to meet such standards would be a moral failing, not just a financial one. For Lily this standard ensure that her upbringing prepares her for only one eventuality: that of a society wife.

> Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialised product [. . .]. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight [. . .] and was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among the social beings than in the world of nature? " (Mirth 264).

According to Travis Foster, then, "[m]issing in Lily's life is the ability to form her own subjectivity – or, in Wharton's terms, her circumstances – into an object of potentially transforming inquiry: in short, to enter an experience of critical self-consciousness" (Foster 1-2). So, even though Lily seems to subconsciously sabotage situations that would fulfill her need for security, we can see that the compulsion to continue pursuing a society marriage is not simply Lily's own desire for material comfort, but a gendered understanding of class obligation passed down to her from the previous generations.

After marriage, Lily's beauty – and fashion – would serves a different economic function. For unmarried women, clothes are something they spend on and with, in order to acquire a desirable marriage.[82] For married women, clothes are their only means of acquiring independent wealth – though, of course, that wealth is not entirely free from the control of men, since men provide the means for acquiring clothing – and the dictates of desire and property require the proper clothes to show wives as a display of their husbands' wealth. However, it is still true that

[82] In reading Lily's position, according to Lauren Cardon, "the fashion of the Gilded Age is therefore both a major cause of Lily's financial woes and the means by which she can secure her interests. Her propriety in dress stems from a studied practice of emulation, yet Lily's advantage lies in her knowledge of her own beauty and best features, and how to use clothing to simultaneously blend in and stand out" (30).

the clothes still function as a sort of capital for the wives.[83] "Ironically, many of the married women in the novel are portrayed as having the agency that Lily lacks to make choices. [. . .] However, they, too, are still trapped within the marital/material system, which is exchange-based and requires sacrifice" (Miller 54). For Lily's mother, we learn that she has little understanding, or indeed little desire to understand, of their family's financial situation beyond that of appearance. To Mrs. Bart, poor dress is the greatest of social sins and she clearly maintains the appearance of wealth through how she dresses herself and her daughter. We see the example set by her mother continued in Lily's own behavior as she indebts herself to first Judy and then Gus Trenor in pursuit of the proper clothes for the position in society that she imagines for herself. Wharton's portrayal of this specific set of values is especially nuanced in *House of Mirth.* Lily's family is neither truly impoverished nor wealthy enough to be free from any conscious awareness of the need for money, yet Lily's mother is contrasted nicely with Judy Trenor, who is vaguely aware that of course it must be terrible for Lily to have to be mindful of money matters but has no real inclination of what that actually entails.[84] In contrast Lily's mother is clearly aware of both the necessity of keeping up appearances and the significant cost of doing so, her self-consciousness and preoccupation shows her awareness of the fact that one really can't afford what society expects. This of course is about more than just dresses because while Lily's family cannot actually afford all of the clothes Lily's mother knows they need in order to be accepted by society it is also true that there is a cost to the conscience as well that requires her to accept those

[83] This is particularly true of Mrs. Dorset who, after being caught in an affair, appears next in public subdued, and apparently placated by a new gown. "Here was Dorset and his wife once more presenting their customary faces to the world, she engrossed in establishing her relation with an intensely new gown" (Mirth 187).

[84] Wharton contrasts Lily's deep anxiety about her status with the luxury of Judy's ignorance, observing "Judy knew it must be 'horrid' for poor lily to have to stop to consider whether she could afford real lace on her petticoats, and not to have a motor-car and a steam-yacht at her orders; but the daily friction of unpaid bills, the daily nibble of small temptations on expenditure, were trials as far out of her experience as the domestic problems of the charwoman" (Mirth 68).

standards as well. “Since she had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose; but the discovery put an end to her consoling sense of universal efficiency” (Mirth 261). This also explains why Lily is willing to accept that she must gamble and be amusing in order to receive the richer women’s cast offs and that her first inclination is to spend the money she receives on her wardrobe and a wardrobe case, and these actions demonstrate the gender conditioning she has received and actually be immersed in since birth.

Though, the gender complications of the marriage plot have been discussed it seems ad nauseum in the field, the social and economic aspects of the trope, rather than the sexual or emotional sides, warrant additional consideration through *The House of Mirth*. As Monica Miller explains “Lily’s inability to commit completely to this commodity-based system further immobilizes her; as a woman, she is a commodity in this system, and her realization of her own interpellation only makes her reluctant to act in complicity with the system, trapping her further” (Miller 54). As discussed in the previous chapter, a woman’s prospects within the marriage plot are less than satisfying, because, while the man’s quest is rewarded with self-fulfillment in the outcomes of the romance trope, the woman’s position within this ending is one of sacrifice rather than satisfaction. The arc of critiquing the mercenary machinations of marriage has a long history and it is here that we can continue the examination of fashion and marriage through an economic lens. Austen observed that “it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.[85]. In *Three Guineas,* Woolf points out that the daughters of educated men have an effect on society only in so far as they may be able to influence their husbands. While these parameters for marriage are hardly romantic, they are

[85] Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* p. 1

certainly pragmatic and appear to be of mutual advantage. Even Selden is aware of this necessity and acknowledges, "Lily might be incapable of marrying for money, but she was equally incapable of living without it" (Mirth 143). At a purely material level, with enough money a man may possess any woman he chooses and with such a husband a woman may possess some level of power. Unfortunately, while theoretically the "daughters of educated men" – or more generally, upper- and middle-class women - acquire influence through marriage, that influence is in fact a mirage (Woolf, *Guineas* 16). To this effect, Simon Rosedale openly states this to Lily saying that he wants the kind of social clout only marriage can buy; "if I want a thing I'm willing to pay [. . .] [a]nd it takes just two things to do that Miss Bart: money, and the right woman to spend it" (Mirth 154-5). As Hidalga argues, Rosedale sees Lily as "no more than a super-fine human merchandise" and, unfortunately, "[t]his commodification inevitably means that, much as she strives, Lily's individuality will never be self-centred, but will always be compromised by the mediation of other people's calculations" (Hidalga 265). The reality of marriage on these terms, or even that of material gains provided by men not given in marriage, is that security requires significant collateral via complicity.[86]

In regard to fiction, Gilbert and Gubar map the woman writer's striving towards an alternative to the limitations of the marriage or suicide outcomes available to our fictional heroines at the turn of the century[87]. In this case the specifics of economics within that larger

[86] Shinbrot makes a similar point, noting that "Rosedale offers Lily entrance into a closed system of exchange that negates entirely the openness and fluidity of the aleatory universe that has made Lily so malleable and adept at improvising. Denying possibilities – whether to fail or succeed – puts to an end the creative potential to reinvent, to exercise free will, and to acknowledge the [pg] precarious edge on which life is balanced; and it is the denial of this above all else that makes Rosedale's solution seem so base" (Shinbrot 54-5).

[87] In *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Gilbert and Gubar note that "even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures which both their authors and their authors' submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable. Of course, by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to

commentary on marriage are my primary focus in this chapter. Namely, how marriage provides for but also restricts women's financial opportunities and how fashion both plays a vital role in facilitating marriage and functions as an opening for some semblance of financial autonomy and independence, even if problematically so. Fashion is a means to an end through which Lily, and in the next section Sonya, enhance their opportunities for acquiring advantageous marriages; they expend considerable resources to this end, with Lily indebting herself to other women and to Gus Trenor in order to obtain clothes and Sonya literally trading on her marriage prospects with a pawnbroker by showcasing her beauty in a designer gown. For both young women, marriage would provide them resources to then acquire additional clothing which would function as their only means of acquiring property. This interpretation of marriage, specifically women's using marriage for economic gains, again recalls Gilman's charges of women's conditioning to "take" without "giving anything in return except their womanhood" (118). Guillaumin however offers a different interpretation in pointing out that society shamelessly takes from women without reservations, asserting that "where women are concerned, though, there is no need to be covert. They are common property" (176). This perspective enables us to see that, while, on the one hand, Lily's and Sonya's marriage plots are designed to fulfill their social and financial aspirations, on the other, theirs is not the only position we should be critiquing in this arrangement. Together these arguments signal the necessity for suspending individual value judgements on such issues, and Guillaumin's argument is an important reminder that in the social and sexual exchanges of capitalist patriarchy women's obligations do still exceed their receipts.

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accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them" (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 77-8). Lily certainly falls into this category as she falls prey to this dilemma as I will discuss shortly.

Obligations

In *The House of Mirth,* Lily's obligations unquestionably outweigh her brief periods of material comfort. While Lily shows moments of self-knowledge and social wariness, she often exemplifies a, perhaps willful, naïveté regarding the entanglement of sex and money mentioned earlier. She observes the financial and sexual maneuvers of the divorcee Carry Fisher, but she carefully avoids acknowledging that such associations could result from her own financial pursuits outside the bounds of matrimony. Lily does receive assistance from other women, including her friend, Judy Trenor; however, when she solicits Judy's husband, Gus, for financial guidance, she consciously ignores that there is any different between the two situations, which of course there is.[88] While Judy's generosity with Lily provides both with social advantages and I've discussed above, the interaction with Gus does not operate on these same terms: there is an expectation of sexual privileges, not merely social ones. Though the agreement is unspoken, both parties are aware of the obligations such a transaction incurs, whether Lily fully comprehends them or not. In her discussion of sexual obligation Guillaumin explains that "[t]here are two main forms which this *physical sexual usage* takes: that in which there is a non-monetary contract – marriage; and that which is directly paid for in cash – prostitution" (Guillaumin 184). This dichotomy breaks down Lily's financial situation quite efficiently. First, I would point out that, while marriage "is a non-monetary contract" here, marriage does also take on a transactional quality in that there is the assumption of financial security therein. For Lily, both the prospect of marriage and her relationship with Trenor, the two available avenues for financial

[88] Lily makes a calculated move to ignore what she knows will likely be the implications of her request and in her desperation "in her inmost heart Lily knew it was not by appealing to the fraternal instinct that she was likely to move Gus Trenor; but this way of explaining the situation helped to drape its crudity, and she was always scrupulous about keeping up appearances to herself. Her personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent, and when she made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain closed doors she did not open" (Mirth 72).

security, thus create a sexual obligation.[89] As discussed earlier, the illusion of security through marriage is that women never actually acquire influence or financial security in the same way that men do, and so Lily's extramarital exchange, while initially financially beneficial, ultimately provides even less security than marriage may have.

With the indefinable debt to Trenor lurking in the background, Lily's initial pleasure at spending the money she believes she's earning is a satisfying distraction. Once Lily has money of her own, or at least thinks she does, her impulse is to buy clothes for the coming season, in particular, a new opera cape (Wharton *Mirth* 98). Early on she expresses apprehensions that others may notice the "trace of Judy Trenor" in the cast-off gowns she wears (*Mirth* 98). This trepidation that others may perceive the imprint of a dress' previous owner also calls to mind the idea of the fashion plate, in which women may see themselves or others in the vague impression of a style. As Sharon Marcus explains regarding these images:

> the plates make fashion, often associated with a sexually charged "inconstancy," into a respectable version of promiscuity for women, a form of female cruising in which strangers who inspect each other in passing can establish an immediate intimacy because they participate in the common public culture of fashion. (13-4)

As a prominent woman in New York society, Judy Trenor actually functions as a form of fashion plate. The inspection of friends and strangers alike could easily reveal traces of her in past plates. Lily's hesitation at this possible intimacy between the styles she has previously worn, and their

[89] Lois Tyson argues "[a]s a commodity, Lily's value is exchange value – she has worth only to the extent to which, and in the ways in which, others deem her worthy of some sort of expenditure" and "Lily has fashioned herself to resemble one of the rarest and most expensive items on the market: the *object d'art"* (Tyson 4). Along the lines of Guillaumin's point, 'her self-image as art object reflects and supports a psychological structure that is at odds with the psycho-sexual requirement of any marriage in which sexual, if not emotional, intimacy is an implicit condition of the contract. *Objects d'art* are commodities that are seen but not touched, and Lily's desire to be an art object reflects her desire to be admired from afar, to be viewed without being touched" (Tyson 4). This creates the whole debacle with Trenor, because Lily cannot maintain this position according to Guillaumin's idea of *usage*.

new wearer is therefore justified. Marcus's point here is also intriguing for this specific example because the suggestion of sexual promiscuity highlights the obvious irony in Lily's situation since Judy is most certainly still perceptible in the new gowns Lily purchases with money from her husband.[90] Still, Lily and takes pleasure in building her wardrobe independently as clothes one of the few ways, really the only way for women like Lily, for a woman to accumulate wealth.[91]

Lily's accidental sexual entanglement is exemplified in the new opera cloak she buys, as her pleasure in this garment is soiled when Gus confronts her at the opera foreshadowing their later encounter in which he makes plain his expectations. Wharton's description of this transformation highlights both Lily's pleasure in her new clothes and the inherent threat they pose to her reputation, and even her physical safety.

> If Lily's poetic enjoyment of the moment was undisturbed by the base thought that her gown and opera-cloak had be indirectly paid for by Gus Trenor, the latter had not sufficient poetry in his composition to lose sight of these prosaic facts. He knew only that he had never seen Lily look 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. (Mirth 103)

This cloak represents the paradox of fashion's power. At the time women have no means of financial independence or independent wealth. Lily's aunt manages her finances – though it is of

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[90] The preoccupation with being promiscuous, or "fast" appears early in the novel with respect to clothes when Judy warns Lily: "[d]on't wear your scarlet crepe-de-chine" for fear of scaring off Percy Gryce (Mirth 40). Now, her newly purchased clothes raise further suspicions of "fastness" and, according to Mrs. Peniston, "[t]he modern fastness appeared synonymous with immorality" (Mirth 112).

[91] I address this previously and in my article discussing of Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Delia Blanchflower* as even a conservative woman like Ward recognizes the complications of women's lack of financial independence.

course important to remember that it is really the agents employed by her aunt who do this – and once married that responsibility will shift to her husband. From a financial standpoint she has had no agency to manage her own financial situation, so in purchasing this cloak for herself she has exerted unaccustomed autonomy which is a source of pleasure in its own right, in addition to the aesthetic "poetic enjoyment". However, she has circumvented the rules in this display of financial independence and society, and, via Trenor's sexual desire, seeks to discipline this moment of nonconformity. Celia Marshik explores this ability of garments to shift from sources of pleasure to peril in the discussion of the evening gown, explaining that it "emerged as a key player in assemblages that endanger women" and asserting that "the gown thus seems less desirable than risky, less enviable than an example of the limits of human control" (34). Lily's control is undoubtedly limited, as this encounter marks her final descent into social and financial ruin.

After a terrifying confrontation with Gus Trenor, Lily seeks comfort from Gerty Farish. These women, initially so far apart socially, are each enlightened by the experience of Lily's humiliation. For Lily she wakes to find "her evening-dress and opera-cloak lying in a tawdry heap on a chair" and is overcome with fresh shame, as the "finery laid off is as unappetizing as the remains of a feast, and it occurred to Lily, that at home, her maid's vigilance had always spared her the sight of such incongruities" (Mirth 148). The moment when Lily sees her clothes piled in Gerty's chair concludes this critical transition in the novel when Lily's eyes are fully opened to the cracks in the system she's never fully been able to penetrate. She's been aware of the fact that everything is not as shiny as it appears all along of course. Perhaps the most famous lines of the novel are those noted above in which Lily reflects on the gilded cage of society and how though the door remains open, few possess the will to leave its confines. Similarly, this is

the first view of Lily's clothes not on her body and signals her departure from the social circles in which she wears them. In the plainest sense, the discarded dress is a metaphor for Lily's own ruined opportunities. These garments look bright and shiny on display just as in theory marriage, or simply belonging to society in general, seemed ideal on the surface, but, in reality, are a carefully fabricated illusion. Finally, it is also telling that Lily notes that her maid has shielded her from this tawdriness which is a nod to Lily's own naïveté to the concerns of working-class woman, like her friend Gerty, who don't have the luxury or privilege to ignore these realities of class. In contrast, though, Gerty also gains some insights into the social apparatuses of gender, of which Lily is all too aware. Reflecting on Lily's shattered reputation, Gerty "[realizes] for the first time that a woman's dignity may cost more to keep 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" (Mirth 149).[92] In describing the reflections of both women, Wharton points to the broader implications of Lily's experience. Wharton has woven together the complexities of women's financial dependence, complicity, and social expectations to critique the enormity of the social forces at work on women's lived experiences, the culmination of which in Lily's case costs not only her dignity, but her life. Lily's death at the end of the novel by (accidental) overdose articulates the lengths society can achieve in controlling women's opportunities.

In the end, Wharton leaves readers with one of the most extensive descriptions of Lily's wardrobe, though the catalog is one of regret, rather than pleasure.

[92] Gerty's realizations about Lily are also reflected later when Lily also reflects on the inner workings of New York society and "had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung. For a moment she found a certain amusement in the show, and in her own share of it: the situation had an ease and unconventionality distinctly refreshing after her experience of the irony of conventions" (Mirth 241)

> She had a few handsome dresses left – survivals of her last phase of splendour [. . .]. The remaining dresses, though they had lost their freshness, still kept the long unerring lines, the sweep and amplitude of the great artist's stroke, and as she spread them out on the bed the scenes in which they had been worn rose vividly before her. An association lurked in every fold; each fall of lace and clean of embroidery was like a letter in the record of her past. (Wharton *Mirth* 278).

Lily's bittersweet reflection then shifts into acceptance as she seems resigned to the fact that the lives these dresses represent are no longer hers. "She was startled to find how the atmosphere of her old life enveloped her. But after all, it was the life she had been made for: [. . .] She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty" (Mirth 278). Though the basis of Lily's undoing is circumstance and rumors, she lacks the power to protect or restore her reputation and so neither her experience nor her dresses offer any real path to redemption. Just before her death, Lily's brief indiscretion with Seldon comes full circle. In their first meeting she tries to explain the confines of her circumstances and defend her pursuit of both marriage and fashion, saying "the clothes are the background, the frame if you like: the 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.'" (Mirth 11). On the night she dies, she visits him once more and confesses "I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish-heap" (Mirth 270). Selden, and likely many a reader, initially sees Lily's social complicity, her pursuit of marriage, as a choice that she could resist with sufficient willfulness. However, this final assertion convinces Selden, and us, of the complex counterbalances that

society deploys in response to even her slightest flinch of nonconformity.[93] Still, this outcome is one that many critics find unsatisfying as it offers ample criticism of the damage inflicted by the structures of patriarchy but no promise of an alternative destiny of positive outcome to strategic resistance. As Gilbert and Gubar memorably note in *Madwoman in the Attic,* "for a 'fallen woman,' trapped in the distorting mirrors of patriarchy the journey into death is the only way out" (Gilbert and Gubar 284).[94] Fortunately, as women and fiction moved further into the twentieth century the opportunities of both became more diverse. In the discussion the follows, I will compare the trajectory of Wharton's tragic heroine with that of Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements.* As mentioned early on, Yezierska's Sonya shares some aspirations and experiences with Lily Bart. However, their distinctly different class positions provide a new perspective on their shared gender.

Salome of the Tenements

In *Adorned in Dreams,* Elizabeth Wilson engages both Lily's tragedy and Sonya's triumph as she boldly asserts that

> fashion, with its constant change and pursuit of glamour enacts symbolically the most hallucinatory aspects of our culture, the confusions between the real and the not-real, the aesthetic obsessions, the vein of morbidity without tragedy, of irony without merriment,

[93] As Lauren Cardon observes "[t]he dresses in this scene recall Lily's conversation with Selden at the beginning of the novel, particularly her assertion that her clothes are 'the frame,' the costumes she dons to perform a role for their social circle. When Selden discovers Lily, her clothes are put away, and he is left alone to observe and read her as he had done when she was alive [. . .]. Selden's inability to read Lily may stem in part from his own prejudices – his unacknowledged susceptibility to gossip and social convention – but it also stems from Lily's inability to reveal herself" (Cardon 37). The clothes may have been a frame, but that frame did not encompass her true self. Rather it encompassed her self-representation which has been carefully constructed according to the constraints of social conformity and need.

[94] Particularly from an economic perspective: "Lily's tragic ending offers two convincing readings. Her death reaffirms that true power resides in the social milieu and, particularly, with the men whose 'invisible' work on Wall Street undergirds the fashionable society. In either case, the fact that Lily's ethics can only remain true in death suggests the inability of society to accept all types of women" (Van Slooten 261).

> and the nihilistic critical stance towards authority, empty rebellion almost without political content. (Wilson 62)

Upon wearing her first truly beautiful dress, Yezierska's protagonist, Sonya Vrunsky exclaims "It must be all real – you – me – me dressed up in my dreams" (Yezierska 27). She is overjoyed by the sense of pleasure this small luxury gives her and in this we hear the echoes of Lily Bart's "poetic enjoyment" of her opera cloak. The contradictions of fashion Wilson describes here are perhaps terrifyingly accurate, in particular the "nihilistic critical stance" of women poised in opposition to capitalist patriarchal authority as I've just outlined the previous analysis of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). Moving now towards a discussion of Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) I will now examine other aspects of Wilson's point, including fashion's shaping of reality and aesthetic desires. Yezierska's text is perhaps more straightforward with detailed descriptions as well as forthright statements about class, gender, and race throughout the dialogue and usefully there are moments in the text which directly parallel moments in Wharton's novel. In the analysis that follows, then, I will bring in comparisons when appropriate while also maintaining a focus on the new and unique assessments of gender and class that Yezierska provides. Moving forward almost twenty years, Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements* explores many of the same themes as *House of Mirth*, but from a working-class perspective. Like Lily, Sonya Vrunsky is an orphan seeking an advantageous marriage who recognizes that the proper clothes can help her achieve that end. However, Sonya's disadvantage is more immediate than Lily's. The comparison of these two texts is valuable because the parallels between these two women's stories illustrate the changes for women over the first two decades of the twentieth century as well as the consistent economic restrictions of gender. The class differences between these protagonists add nuance to the

argument as well. Though the stories share similar trajectories the dramatically different outcomes open for discussion myriad possibilities for interpretation as to how opportunities for women changed during this time while also acknowledging the extent to which class alters those possibilities. Furthermore, Yezierska's novel incorporates the issues of gender and economics explored in *House of Mirth* as well as the issues of racial uplift addressed in *Quicksand.*[95] The heroine is once again drawn in by the security and luxury that an advantageous marriage promises.

Aesthetics of Desire

In the initial meeting between Sonya and her future husband, John Manning, they take in each other's appearances with great attention to the details of the other's dress. Sonya is overcome by the "cultured elegance of his attire", and she notes each luxurious detail of his figure recognizing the quality of the cloth and craftsmanship (Yezierska 2). Manning similarly takes in Sonya's appearance and to his eye her simple suit "[o]f severe blue serge, shiny from wear, there was about her dress the nun-like austerity of the intellectual East Side" (3). In both responses Yezierska demonstrates both characters' romanticization of the other's position. Neither seems to fall for the actual person in this relationship but rather the ideals the other represents. Sonya falls for Manning's philanthropy believing that his desire to help the poor aligns with her own belief that she deserves the social uplift he is offering. Interestingly, Sonya's initial observation is qualified by Manning's contrasting with his surrounding as "[h]is finished grooming stood out all the more vividly in this background of horrid poverty" (2). This statement

[95] As Katherine Stubbs acknowledges "since the reprinting of Yezierska's major works of fiction in the 1970s, critics have largely focused on Yezierska's exploration of the difficult position of women in traditionally patriarchal Jewish families; the feminist implications of her work have been well explored. But what is not often recognized is Yezierska's fascination with the American class system and its signifiers" (Stubbs 157), which is precisely what I hope to explore here.

is a powerful example of Yezierska's use of fashion to represent the conflicting views of class in the novel. Initially this juxtaposition is a positive one for Sonya - though it clearly establishes the irony of Manning's philanthropy from the beginning for readers – and she is drawn to Manning's obvious finery because of course it is a visual representation of his wealth and comfort, which become an aspirational image of escape from poverty. Sonya's own views on poverty and class are clearly complicated and she demonstrates a kind of internalized classism when she professes herself above what she sees as the grosser sensibilities of those around her in the tenements. Sonya will eventually come to recognize the hypocrisy manifested in Manning's appearance, but her first response to desire that luxury for herself is understandable given her own meager circumstances as evidenced by her dress in this first meeting. Furthermore, Sonya's perceiving these seemingly minute differences in quality is critical to the overall critique that takes place throughout the novel; she forms a more complete understanding of how access to certain qualities of goods is carefully guarded to maintain class differences, even while giving the impression of attempting to bridge those differences. In particular, Yezierska gives great attention to the distinction between ready-mades for the masses and custom pieces for the elites with the discussion of such garments facilitating more pointed critiques of class disparity in general.

Yezierska does not shy away from overt class commentary in the dialog between Manning and Sonya throughout the novel. After their marriage in particular, the disparity in their own experiences becomes evident. Sonya may be idealistic in her love and expectations for marriage, but she becomes frustrated as she realizes that Manning's own professed politics reveal the naïveté that his wealth and privilege has afforded him. Manning proves to be quite stubborn in his insistence that there is no real difference between classes and attempts to use their

marriage as proof of the ability of "democratic understanding" to overcome social and economic difference. Sonya, on the other hand, asks "how can there be democratic understanding between those who are free to walk into steerage and the steerage people who are not allowed to give one step up to the upper deck?", maintaining that, while in theory his assertion that the difference is arbitrary is true, there are in fact very tangible realities in place that enforce difference whether he chooses to acknowledge them or not (Yezierska 120). Indeed, on their own these conversations may feel didactic considering Yezierska's own political and educational activities over the course of her career.[96] William Courtney, author of *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (1905), criticizes this style of writing and asserts that "[t]he female author is at once self-conscious and didactic. [. . .] When she lifts her eyes from the page which chronicles her own life to the big world which is going on around her, she instinctively takes her own view, and lets it colour all that she writes" (Courtney xiii). The problem with Courtney's assertion – aside from the patronizing tone - is that it is wrong that "her own view" should shape the material she writes. Yezierska's firsthand knowledge of her subject, not least of which is her experience as a woman, makes her uniquely well informed to critique the systems of class and fashion within which she has operated. Furthermore, these "self-conscious and didactic" discussions are not the only way that Yezierska illustrates class commentary; throughout *Salome of the Tenements,* fashion makes visible the disparity in wealth and perspective between Sonya and Manning. As DuPlessis more cogently argues

> these fictions [by women writers] contain embedded elements from "assertive discourse" – genres like sermon, manifesto, tract, fable – to guide or inform the action. In line with

[96] Yezierska was an active socialist and many scholars speculate that her own romance with education reformer John Dewey influenced her portrayal of the Manning in *Salome*. Wilentz notes that "[a]ll of her writings [. . .] reflect that relationship and what she saw as the failure of the dominant group to accept poor/Jewish/immigrants as equal citizens on their own terms" (xiv).

> the general use of the narrative as a teaching story, elements like character and plot function mainly as the bearers of propositions or moral arguments, whose function is to persuade. The characters may be flat because they represent compendia of typical traits, or because they function like manifestos, bringing undiscussable messages. Characters in these teaching stories are like socratic questions; the ideas, not the characters, are well rounded. The fiction establishes a dialogue with habitual structures of satisfaction, ranges of feeling, and response. (DuPlessis 179)

Here DuPlessis neatly sidesteps evaluative remarks pertaining to generalizations about style in fiction, and instead explores the rationale behind the quirks of writing like Yezierska's. I would argue that this work falls into the categorization a new kind of fable or fairy tale as *Salome of the Tenements* takes the real-life Cinderella story of Rose Pastor and Graham Stokes and retells it with an alternative ending in which the princess finds fulfillment in work rather than marriage. This is also a contrasting story with the kind of cautionary fairy tale of the willful girl Ahmed describes as a tool for gendered conditioning of will, because this willful girl, Sonya, overcomes authority (Ahmed 1-4; Wilentz x).[97]

Continuing to lean into the moralizing aspects of Yezierska's novel. Sonya's willfulness and willingness are, as she romanticizes her philanthropist husband as a savior, stubbornly deflecting signs that he may not live up to her lofty expectations. Many of Sonya's east side peers questions Manning's motivations and effectiveness as a patron, but it is the designer Jacques Hollins who expresses that skepticism best when he tells her "playing with poverty is

[97] According to Botshon, "instead of perceiving this novel as a story of the evolution of a New Woman written by a feminist author, contemporary reviewers discussed its value solely as an immigrant narrative written by an immigrant author. [. . .] Similarly, many of today's scholars who analyze Yezierska's works also read them within a predominantly immigrant sensibility" (235). In this analysis, I aim to address Botshon's perceived gap in addressing Yezierska's feminist economic critiques.

more exciting than knocking golf balls" (Yezierska 30).[98] Hollins shares this assessment with Sonya upon learning the dress she's asked him to design is intended to get Manning's attention; he does not question Sonya's desire for the dress but rather that the dress somehow makes her more deserving in Manning's eyes. He scoffs at Manning's settlement work as a hobby for his own personal edification and doubts it purpose of elevating anyone other than himself.[99] Indeed, Manning's impression of Sonya as mentioned above is equally romanticized and establishes his idealized image of the virtuous poor. In her worn ready-made suit, he intellectualizes her appearance equating the forced simplicity of her class with a moral goodness and resistance to vanity and excess. In Hollins' dress, Manning feels his impression of Sonya is confirmed conflating the simplicity of both garments because this fits his initial assumptions and conveniently failing to acknowledge what would be an obvious difference in quality between the two garments. Sonya will later resist this image herself and her desire to dismantle it is what ultimately leads her to begin designing the kind of quality garments worn by the wealthy and making them available to working class women. However, in the beginning she makes over her rooms as well to craft a setting that matches the quality and appeal of her new gown, and it is this simple, but expensive, setting that furthers Manning's own misconceptions about her circumstances, and the tenements in general. Seeing her expensively made over room

> "Why, it's the glory of poverty that it enforces simplicity!" responded Manning earnestly. And so eager was Sonya to please the man she loved, to mould herself into the form he desired, so all-consuming was the urge to act the part he approved, that for the moment Sonya actually believed she was simple because she was poor. (Yezierska 73)

[98] This line is repeated on page 139 as well when Sonya herself confirms the suspicion further emphasizing Yezierska's point on the matter.
[99] I will revisit this point later when Sonya questions Hollins' operating within that same system, raising himself from poverty to design only for the wealthy.

Their interaction is a fascinating example of how engrained their understandings of class are in this moment. Sonya's rooms were simple before with peeling paint and cheap colorful curtains because that's what she could afford. The look of simplicity, in her new furnishings and her dress, require great expense and energy on her part and while they have the desired effect romantically, the unforeseen side-effect is that they reinforce Manning's illusions about poverty.[100] He tells Sonya that he "must have simplicity" and "had to get away from people who waste themselves on unessentials [. . .] that leaves so little time for the spirit" (Yezierska 74). This false equivalency between his desire for simplicity and the necessity of doing without further reinforces the skepticism about his motives with the settlement, particularly when he launches into a speech on how he will "teach the gospel of the Simple Life" by teaching those in the ghetto to furnish their home and dinner tables with minimal cheaply made goods and asks Sonya to join him in teaching her neighbors to make their own clothes (Yezierska 75). Internally Sonya notes the great expense she's gone to and recognizes that he is severely misguided in these ideas, however her own internalized classism complicates her response.[101] Her personal taste is to gravitate towards the aesthetic Manning describes however they have very different understandings as to how that's achieved, he believes it a virtue of poverty she a luxury of the

[100] The expense to which Sonya has gone to achieve Manning's idea of the simplicity of poverty is significant; though "She had achieved the vivid simplicity for which she had longed all her life. [. . .] The simple couch-cover looked like cheap burlap but for its delicate color and soft weave she had paid more than a week's salary. "Seven dollars a yard only for the plainness of it! Only for its sensuous quietness" (Yezierska 65).

[101] Sonya's shrewd awareness in this scene is especially interesting: "You like the working-girl in her working dress," Sonya wheedled. "You like her with the natural sweat and toil on her face – no make-up – no artifice to veil the grim lines of poverty?" "Exactly!" he beamed enthusiastically, unconscious of any shadow of hypocrisy. "Poverty and toil are beautiful crowns of the spirit and need no setting off" (Salome 74). Harrison-Kahan articulate the irony of Sonya and Manning's situation quite neatly; they argue that by "[e]xposing the hollowness of white and immigrant identities, *Salome* deconstructs the binary between the original and its imitation by divesting authenticity of its claim to origins, ironically revealing the labor involved in constructing 'simplicity'"(Harrison-Kahan 319).

rich.[102] This is an important distinction because it emphasizes that class is not just enforced financially but through fashion as well.

Ready-Mades and Couture Culture

One of the most complicated fashion threads through the novel is Yezierska's descriptions of the differences in style between the inexpensive ready-made fashions of the East Side and the simpler custom designs of the wealthy. Though Manning is convinced that Sonya's exquisitely simple designer gown is homemade, she knows it "would have cost a customer a thousand to fifteen hundred dollars, depending on the income of her husband" (Yezierska 75). This discrepancy between their two viewpoints is critical to Yezierska's overall argument about the settlement systems as a whole. Leading up to this moment Sonya observes the styles around her on multiple occasions with distaste at their showy cheapness, a style which Manning is clearly aware of as well, though he seems determined to hold Sonya up as an exception. He believes "the working-girl could be vastly helped by instructing her to avoid the gaudy, vulgar styles and showing her how beautiful it is to be simple", to which Sonya responds that "they buy those gaudy styles because they're cheap and ready-made" (Yezierska 75). Though he appears not to understand the concept, the upper-class at this time was indeed aware of the trends among the poor at this time, generally looked down upon ready-made clothing sneered at what they saw as the working class dressing above their station; furthermore, the encouragement of consumer culture among the working class specifically served a political purpose in placating the poor

[102] According to Edmunds, "the life-transforming power assigned to this aesthetic aligns Yezierska's working-girl protagonists with a transcontinental avant-garde project to reconstitute art as the basis of a new daily life. [. . .] Occupying and amplifying and international space *within* American mass culture and the American working class, her fiction mobilizes and immigrant Marxism that seeks to fuse rather than oppose the radical claims of gender and class" (Edmunds 408). This parallels Larsen's claims that the artist can help to solve the race problem as discussed in the previous chapter.

amidst the growth of socialist and communist movements (Thanhauser).[103] Therefore, this conversation encompasses Manning's determination to impart the appearance of prosperity onto the tenements without necessarily affecting real change as well as Sonya's internalized classism.[104] Sonya does also experience some internal conflict in these moments, which builds over the course as their relationship as she becomes more intimate with both Manning and the settlement.

The differing quality of garments available between 5th avenue and the east side represents the kinds of tangible class differences Sonya is talking about when she expresses skepticism about Manning's notions of democratic understanding. Yezierska's attention to fashion down to the details of styles, colors, and fabrics as well as modes of production and consumption illuminate the scope of the social gatekeeping mechanisms in place to maintain capitalist power structures. The notion that certain fabrics and styles designate class distinctions is in fact centuries old by this stage in history as is their utility for character development in fiction.[105] However, the theoretical democratization of dress brought about through mass production complicates the discussion.[106] After seeing Manning's finely tailored suit, Sonya becomes frustrated with the quality and styles available in the shops near her lamenting that the

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[103] This is something Yezierska herself would likely have been aware of given her own involvement with both socialism and working conditions in sweatshops at mentioned in the introduction by Wilentz: "Through her work at the settlement house and her role as an educator, Yezierska was first allowed entrance into the world of the higherups. This experience increased her political awareness and radical sensibility about the problems of liberal reform, informed by her earlier employment in the sweatshops" (Wilentz xiii).

[104] Thanhauser also notes that during the expansion of the ready-made market in the early twentieth-century "[b]uying mass-produced clothes was touted as a way to "Americanize" immigrants", which is particularly telling here given the topics of anti-Semitism addressed in the novel as well.

[105] *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature* edited by Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson (2007) is one of the most comprehensive studies on the subject of fashion and writing and provides a useful timeline for the relationship across historical periods since Beowulf to present.

[106] These are the issues discussed by Simmel, Benjamin, Barthes, & Veblen synthesized in the introduction. The arguments here hopefully illuminate the working class and women's perspectives, granting more agency to the individual for their pleasure in fashion consumption where previous arguments tend towards shaming such behaviors.

flashy colors and embellishments are distasteful compared to the standards of those in fashion with the wealthier women. Her interaction with the shopgirls in this scene is interesting because they show contrasting opinions from within the working class. They take Sonya's tastes as snobbery and tease and laugh at what they see as pretentiousness telling her to go up to 5th avenue or better yet one of the exclusive designers all of the society women go to. Where Sonya finds fault with East End fashions, her peers naturally take offense at her pretentions and bombard her with sarcastic comments such as "Why not go up to these millionaire stores on Fifth Avenue? There you might maybe find your 'simple' Vanderbilt styles", "Maybe a plain store on Fifth Avenue wouldn't have anything 'simple' enough for the likes of *you.",* and" Why not better go to Jacques Hollins direct? He got those 'simple' nothings in hats and dresses that costs fortunes" (Yezierska 15). While the shopgirls' remarks are intended mockingly, Sonya's taking them literally is what leads to the moment discussed above in which she mimics those "Vanderbilt styles" part from aesthetic aspirations but also from a knowledge of the class status they imply, bur which will never actually be conferred through dress.[107] On the surface, this scene could easily be skimmed as the kind of stereotypical backbiting ascribed to jealous

[107] Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* unpacks how social embarrassment functions as an effective means of conditioning, attaching shame to certain styles and materials thus conferring status based on the appearance of expense. Veblen notes that "[i]t is not only that one must be guided by the code of proprieties in dress in order to avoid the mortification that comes of unfavorable notice and comment, though the motive in itself counts for a great deal; but besides that, the requirements of expensiveness is so ingrained into our habits of thought in matters of dress that any other than expensive apparel is instinctively odious to us" (112). These "habits of thought" are apparent in both Lily and Sonya's behaviors in these novels indicating their ability to reinforce class hierarchy through the appearance of fashionableness and wealth. However, " while *Salome of the Tenements* invokes many of the issues surrounding ready-made clothing, the novel attempts to revise the system of class distinction upon which many upper-class commentators relied. While Yezierska's text preserves the fundamental distinction between couture and ready-made, this preservation is not a reification of the distinction between upper and lower class. Rather, by effecting a series of rhetorical slippages between the aesthetic, the erotic, and the political, Yezierska attempts to present clothing as an art form independent of economic contingencies and class divisions. What motivates this effort to deny the economic basis of clothing as a commodity is a desire to sanction the production and consumption of clothing as sources of pleasure and as the means of self-expression" (Stubbs 164). Yezierska's vision of fashion is *actually* democratized because it challenges the inherent class distinctions created by mass production.

women; however, taking time to break down this shop scene can give readers a more nuanced understanding of the overall themes of class and gender in the novel as well as more subtle readings of Sonya's professed prioritization of beauty.

Sonya's rejection of the fashions available to working class women thus has more to do with social conditioning and the status they represent than the styles themselves. Symbolically Sonya is aware that certain fashions cause their wearers to be read as certain types of women. As Barthes points out in *The Fashion System,* fashion is an "image system constituted with desire as its goal" and we see in Sonya that that desire is internalized so naturally that it becomes undetectable; she feels it a pure desire for aesthetic beauty, not because class is irrelevant to her but because the class implications are so firmly and subconsciously rooted that "it is not the object but the name that creates desire; it is not the dream but the meaning that sells" (Barthes System xii). Though Sonya is insistent that it is the dream of beauty that draws her to 5th avenue styles, she frequently acknowledges the wider meaning-making taking place through these garments. She questions whether wealthy women truly appreciate the artistry of their luxurious wardrobes and expresses frustration that "[r]ich women with no worries on their heads but how to catch on to men, they don't care what price they lay down for a dress so long at it'll make them shine different." (Yezierska 15). Sonya says this without a trace of irony, though as readers it may be difficult to differentiate between her observations about the upper class and her own actions in this moment. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, to her, there *is* a difference. These dresses mark Sonya's exclusion from their world. She is consumed with "how to catch on to a man"; however, she has latched onto the idea that it is acquiring the dress that will confer the status necessary to enter his sphere.

Ultimately, Sonya knows that what Hollins' dress gives her deep down is a willingness to go along with this order of things; though her material circumstances aren't truly altered by the gown, the illusion of wealth and the possibility that that image could lead to a wealthy marriage are enough to buy her complacency, for a time. One of the most memorable lines in the novel comes during another of Lily's expositions on fashion when she announces

> All I want is to be able to wear silk stockings and Paris hats the same as Mrs. Astorbilt, and then it wouldn't bother me if we have Bolshevism or Capitalism, or if the democrats or the republicans win. Give me only the democracy of beauty and I'll leave the fight for government democracy to politicians and educated old maids. (Yezierska 27)

Sonya has just outlined exactly how class and gender conditioning function. Fashion operates as a pleasurable distraction and when effective gives the wearer a justification for complying with circumstances not in their best interests.[108] This statement perfectly encapsulates exactly what consumer capitalism hoped to achieve by pushing ready-made fashions on the working-classes. Yezierska carefully crafts Sonya's character so that these philosophical moments come across as emotional outbursts, without much thought or care from the speaker. This is strategic as discussed above, because were these statements made in all seriousness they would qualify as grounds for dismissal, particularly knowing Yezierska's own involvement in just such issues in real life.

Though Sonya herself doesn't enjoy the styles of the East Side shops, she is perhaps aware that these are the styles marketed to her class – as Yezierska certainly was - and thus rejects them in part because she understands their signifying class distinctions, not just aesthetic ones, which is why she defends them to Manning. One of the most telling manifestations of this

[108] The final mention of "educated old maids" is also interesting here as it calls to mind Sonya's critic Gittel Stein as well as the difference in perspectives between Lily Bart and Gerty Farish.

difference comes when Sonya goes to her first fitting with Hollins. she is apprehensive and ashamed because she realizes that the dress he's making for her may be of the highest quality and most exquisite style, but she will still have her ready-made undergarments beneath the gown.

> As she removed her suit in the gorgeous dressing room the horror of being seen in her coarse cotton undergarments "made it black for her eyes." Suddenly she saw undergarments and every little detail of the toilette laid out on the dresser – obviously for her – even shoes and silk stockings. The understanding, the delicacy of this big-hearted giving marked Hollins as a being above the oppressive charity she had known as a child. (Yezierska 27, emphasis in original)

Her relief is overwhelming then, when she finds that Hollins has discretely outfitted her with the proper lingerie as well. In this instance we see that clothes really do go beyond the surface, both literally and metaphorically and Sonya's class consciousness cannot be fully overcome by changing her outward appearance. The rough quality of her cheap undergarments stands in for the crudeness of Sonya's circumstances which may be hidden by a fine dress, or a wealthy marriage, but nonetheless remain in her consciousness. As readers then we must recognize that it's never just about the clothes. It is also significant that Hollins is the one to recognize this need to replace all layers of her attire since he himself went through the same process in taking off his former identity as Jaky Solomon to put on the new "Anglo-Saxon" self of Jacques Hollins.[109]

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[109] Botshon in particular addresses the issues of race and passing within immigrant culture but also notes that "to circumscribe Yezierska into a discourse of immigrant literature is to elide her debt to popular culture and segregate the author from the larger world in which she lived and interacted. [. . .] The immigrant in other words, must change to fit into the new nation. The feminist, however, seeks to transform society itself, liberating its cultural forms from patriarchal ideologies. Yezierska herself – and her protagonists – comingle aspects of both of these identities; her new and modern creature is a transformative subject, willing to yield to certain aspects of assimilation, but only if the nation agrees to change with her and expand its roster of possibilities for citizenship. This particular bargain is hardly a comfortable one. For Yezierska, such a juxtaposition produces unresolvable conflict and, in her narratives, endings that are replete with ambivalence" (Botshon 235-6). This kind of unresolvability is precisely the kind of tension which I explore in relation to women and fashion in this dissertation. Many of the conflicts between gender, sex, race, and class I discuss remain as yet unresolved either in the arguments here or socially today.

Even though no one but Sonya, and readers, sees this transformation beneath the dress it functions as a reminder that the kind of consumerism among the working class being encouraged at this time was designed to give the illusion of prosperity, a consolation for continued poverty, without materially improving one's circumstances.

This strategy is indeed effective as Sonya is "intoxicated" by her transformation and feels empowered, if only temporarily, by it and revels in her "release from the itching shoddiness of ready-mades – the blotting out of her personality in garments cut by the gross. Never before had her clothes been an expression of herself- she an expression of her clothes. It was like being free from the flesh of her body" (Yezierska 33). By providing an intimate glimpse into the complexity array of emotions attached to this experience, Yezierska is highlighting the depth of class and gender conditioning attached to fashion; what began as an apparently frivolous endeavor – needing a new dress to seduce a crush – becomes a significant moment of self-reflection over how the material aspects of women's circumstances so thoroughly condition their thoughts and behaviors. The itching could also be a metaphor the irritation of poverty and powerlessness, while Sonya's delight in the relief from such sensations highlights the dual control and subversion possible through clothes.

Of course, historically, the more usual feminist analysis of undergarments is decidedly negative, particularly with reference to the decline of corsets during the first two decades of the twentieth century. However, I believe the scene where Sonya contemplates her lingerie provides a more nuanced approach to how we might interpret fashion in keeping with the overall argument of this dissertation. On the one hand there are the issues of restriction, confinement of the body and of class, but, on the other, there is the pleasure of private luxuries for the simple aesthetic and sensory enjoyment of the experience. Helpfully this experience is one that Wharton

incorporates in *The House of Mirth* as well, further reinforcing my observations on the subject. Alone in her rooms at the Trenor's, Lily Bart takes pleasure in soaking in her surroundings away from the others and in particular takes comfort from her toilette and delicate slip laid out for her. Clair Hughes underlines the intricacies of enjoyment and anxiety hidden in this tableau, observing that

> It is the "bedroom-scene" of a woman "ravished" by pleasures she knows to be short-lived by which she longs to be able to stabilize. Wharton focuses on lingerie, not only because such garments allow us a voyeuristic intimacy with Lily, and suggest the extra luxury of hidden consumption, but also because women's fashion at this period, with its lavish use of lace and soft fabrics, aspired to the condition of underwear, underwear itself having become more important; [. . .] These garments are not to be too closely and indecorously described; they remain as yet mysterious and detached from Lily, waiting to be worn and enjoyed in a solitude the reader may not share" (Hughes 390).

This description brings together the disparity in both Lily and Sonya's circumstances and can also be a metaphor for the internalized standards of beauty, femininity, and consumption as only they experience the aesthetic pleasure of these garments. Each woman enjoys the garments in the moment; however, neither can fully silence the external noise of social expectations or financial insecurity. What's more, in both women's cases there is also the implication that others have actually seen these garments - even though we as readers know there is no voracity in these accusations – and, having seen them ourselves, we become aware of the exposure and vulnerability of both women's exposed femininities and reputations.

Yezierska's detailed accounts of the experience of shopping in working-class neighborhoods versus visiting a designer for the rich also gives a more intimate picture of the act

of consuming, which is not generally included in critiques of the rise of consumer culture. The particulars and pleasures of shopping are as much a part of the acculturation as the fashion objects themselves. As Alissa Karl points out in *Modernism and the Marketplace* "Once a predominately upper- and middle-class activity, shopping as entertainment and pleasure also extends through the class spectrum in the interwar period, as the masses are invited to participate", which is highlighted by Yezierska's descriptions of ready-made fashions and East Side retail shops (Karl 18). The exploration of both *House of Mirth* and *Salome of the Tenements* illustrates and complicates this notion still further as we see Lily and Sonya both enjoying the pleasures of shopping from their divergent perspectives. Lily's enjoyment of shopping in pre-war New York and Europe demonstrates the beginning of this development; however, Sonya's dissatisfaction with the quality of mass-produced goods demonstrates the problematic evolution of consumerism's shifted emphasis from the goods themselves towards the act of consuming. With the availability of fashion and shopping to a wider range of class standing in the marketplace gives the appearance of democratization of fashion the tangible differences in quality make clear the reality that access does not equate with equity. While shopping stages a few key moments in Lily's character development, the form and function of shopping across classes is developed more extensively in *Salome of the Tenements.*

Modern Progressivism

As discussed in the previous section, fashion can give unintended impressions over which the wearer has little control. Lily felt the pitying eye of her friends when they perceived the previous owners in her hand-me-down gowns as well as their suspicion of her new garments as the assumed profits of promiscuity. In *Salome of the Tenements,* Sonya experiences similar humiliations with the added notes of increased classism and ethnic stereotypes. Though Sonya

may take pride in her appearance initially, she is quickly forced to recognize how readily others will turn her appearance against her. Initially empowered, Sonya is quickly subjected to ridicule and her dress is sexualized by those around her. A jealous Gittel Stein tells her "[p]awn your Hollins dress and stand yourself before your millionaire only in your diamond necklace. Maybe then, you'll get him" while the rich women at their wedding reception are much the same remarking that while "the East Side girl hasn't the clothes", "she needs none, my dear . . . she gets the man she wants . . . without them" (Yezierska 58;128). Sonya's temporary pleasure is transformed as her desires are sexualized because dressing always carries the implication of undressing as well. Just as Lily's opera cloak becomes a source of anxiety, Sonya is not credited with ascending the social latter by means of aesthetic ingenuity but of sexual obligation; her clothes do not confer the privileges of wealth, only the image of it, leaving her reputation unprotected from the sexualizing of her motives.[110] Again, we see that part of fashion's power lies in its ability to both placate and subordinate the individual by carrying with it the social controls of class as enforced by these women. Yezierska illustrates this point still further in her portrayal of those professed to be helping the poor in the novel as well. The images of dress and philanthropy are powerful in this novel and communicate how a working-class woman like Sonya has been conditioned from a young age to feel as strongly as she does about status reflected via clothing. Yezierska is able to enlighten readers to the nuances of how charity work, like that of Manning's settlement, cultivate class distinctions as opposed to the assumption that such work would break them down.

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[110] According to Katherine Stubbs, "[t]here were at least two salient reasons why women, rather than men, tended to be the focus of moralizing discourse around the ready-made garment. The first reason was the function of the material difference [. . .], the capacity for counterfeit was performed more visibly in the styles of women's clothing. The second reason concerned visibility and perceived sexual availability of young working-class women in American society; such women, stereotyped as morally loose 'gold diggers,' might, it was feared, snare a man of a higher social class" (Stubbs 162-3).

The judgmental charity women Sonya's encounters in her childhood and later as an adult working with Manning are shown to offer insincere consolations with expectations of gratitude that are enforced using shame and humiliation. When Sonya solicits Hollins help for a dress she looks back on these experiences with antipathy when she tells him "You couldn't be like those kind of rich ladies who felt they saved my soul when they handed me down an old pair of shoes or cast-off corsets – and expected me to gush my gratitude to the end of my days" (Yezierska 29). As readers we sense both irony and a cry for empathy in this statement. Of course, she is at first unwilling to see the same attitudes in the work of her intended with his bluster about the wonderful simplicity of poverty. However, this also gives a deeper understanding of Sonya's desires for something that is beautiful and wholly her own. As I will discuss shortly, there is a classist assumption that the poor should not desire goods and that any want or indulgence marks one out as undeserving. Sonya is in a no-win situation then as she experiences both gender and class norms forcing her into submission by painting her desire for a new dress as a shameful sexual pretension. Reflections on charity are another point which Yezierska repeats throughout the novel as Sonya experiences the more intimate details of Manning's settlement.[111] She has been on the receiving end of this kind of philanthropy and has intense feelings of apprehension at finding herself on the other side of this exchange. When faced with the prospect she thinks to herself

> "If she could only tell him of the wrongs and injustices she has suffered since she was a child! The dark days when the friendly visitor of the charity office called. The gifts of

[111] According to Goldsmith Sonya's position as both a recipient of charity and now the patron intentionally troubles the dynamic she experienced. They note that "the ambivalence surrounding Sonya's Americanization is suggested in her critical gaze at the dress and make-up of an immigrant girl [. . .]. Yezierska differentiates the female Americanizer repression and assertion of female sexuality; Sonya's rejection of both positions underscores her liminal status. Having acceded to the role of Americanizer through her marriage, she is not yet fully Americanized" (Goldsmith 39).

> cast-off clothes from the kind rich ladies. The free dispensaries, the working girls' homes. All the institutions erected to help the poor. She had gone through them. She had known the bitter, biting, galling shame of them." (Yezierska 43)

Having gone through this ritual humiliation herself, she cannot bear the thought of subjecting the women around her to it. In these moments she is reminded of the visual cues she received as a child impressing upon her her inferior station. Marshik also outlines the implications of charity garments in *At the Mercy of their Clothes,* unpacking the ways that both the garments themselves and the giving of them work to enforce class differences (21).[112] This kind of discussion requires careful consideration of the internalized classist language in place when discussing consumer culture and poverty. What's most important to recognize is the double-bind of class conditioning and the use of shame to ensure compliance from several angles. A common response is that those in poverty shouldn't desire what they cannot afford. Or, to put it another way, that they should learn to be content with their lack while in the same breath also accept that they will be shamed for that lack. Manning's social workers in the settlement cultivate this belief in their courses on making do saying "you can't afford plum pudding. Wouldn't you rather have a cheap dessert than none at all?" and avowing that "for the sake of the worthy poor, we must guard against imposters" who would dare to serve their family really eggs or butter. What's often overlooked in such a statement is the condescension of such a mentality since the cheap dessert enforces the value system, particularly when it is held up as the only acceptable option. "Middle-class social workers encouraged working-class immigrant women to emulate the bourgeois and elite through adapting new patterns of consumption and refashioning their bodies according to an Anglo-

[112] According to Marshik in *At the Mercy of Their Clothes,* "between the wars, a range of writers depicted used clothing as particularly able to compromise individuality. [. . .] [T]hey suggest that part of the original owner stays with the a garment that he or she wore" (175). This connects to the traces of Judy Trenor in Lily's gowns as well.

American ideal, yet resented their success. Here Yezierska satirizes both Sonya's and the elite women's dependence on class emulation" (Goldsmith 38).[113] The high-handedness of "giving" the poor an appropriate object of desire – be it cheap desserts or ready-made dresses – also attaches value judgements to such objects in that any display that is not the obvious mark of poverty, for which one can then be shamed and made to feel inferior, one will also be shamed for and thus subordinated by another route.[114]

Sonya is not interested in this kind of performative philanthropy and believes she can find a solution in providing the high-end styles of 5th avenue at an affordable price point. By making style a matter of choice, whereby the available styles are not dictated by price point, Sonya's alternative to the charity work she's experienced shifts the meaning making function back to the wearer. In *The House of Mirth* "[a]s an insider, Edith Wharton was uniquely qualified to describe 'fashionable New York'" therefore her perspective takes on the gendered implications of women's expected "frivolous" preoccupation with shopping as evidenced by Lily's instinct to shop with the money she receives from Trenor (Beer vii). While, Yezierska, who did not enjoy this privileged insider status, made her observations based on the class disparity inherent in the growing shopping culture of the period, which was informed by her own work in settlements and sweatshops and as an education and political reformer (Wilentz xiii). Even so, one might assume that simpler styles would designate lower economic standing while ornate and elaborately designed pieces would signal wealth and indeed this was generally the case throughout history.

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[113] Regarding settlement houses: "[t]he turn-of-the-century settlemtn house was the source of a great deal of Jewish American literature of this period, as many participants later wrote about their experiences as clients, workers, or critical observers of this foundational pedagogical environment. An enduring symbol for the fraught process of assimilation and for the patron-client relations between 'uptown' and 'downtown' Jewish constituencies, the settlement house was a site through which key period debates over Americanization, identity, and literary value were waged, particularly as these concerned the vexed issue of Jewish representation" (Fisher 84).

[114] It is important to note here that this mirror the double-bind of gendering fashion consumption in which women are both expected to show and accept ridicule for an interest in fashion.

However, the ready-mades of the twentieth century the distinction in craftsmanship made the reverse true.[115] Clothing made quickly out of relatively cheap materials generally benefited from the addition of embellishment, color or pattern in order to mask any deficiencies in the quality of the materials, whereas more expensive materials could show to advantage without the need for such strategic ornamentation but required quality craftsmanship. Sonya experiences this first-hand when she makes her first dress as an apprentice. She imagines the garment but finds it challenging to mold the cheap fabric into the shape and style she desires.

> I want that beautiful plainness that only the rich wear. A dress that looks simple enough for the poor only that it's different" [. . .] What she wanted was a costume, plain enough for everybody but distinctive enough to make it effective for any occasion. She wanted the wearer to have the joy of a dress that could be slipped on in a moment and yet give the luxurious sense of a fitted gown. A supple, clinging thing in everyday serge. (Yezierska 169)

Sonya has tasked herself with combining her diverse experiences of working-class utility with the designs made available only to the wealthy. Here she is also challenging Hollins' internalized elitism because though he was raised out of poverty through fashion design, he designs only for the wealthy women thus upholding the existing class disparity and the assumption that individual's ability to afford quality goods is based solely on their own ability raise themselves up rather than creating a more equitable system overall.[116] When the pair begin designing such

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[115] This was also reinforced with the rise of designers like Coco Chanel who, as the popularity of Poiret's opulent designs began to decline, managed to perpetuate an aesthetic of luxurious simplicity.

[116] Okonkwo argues that "by offering the fictive yet pivotal Sonya Model as a categorical statement of her authentic literary aesthetic, she was indirectly yet indelibly defining her novels' creative and critical reference point. In other words, any critical assessments of her immigrant fiction must recognize the author's 'form,' her literary style and intentions" (130). With this in mind, Sonya's actions can be differentiated between the kind of assimilationism of either Solomon or Manning.

gowns, and a life, together she vows that "[she]'ll never be content to work with [him] only for the rich. Beautiful things should be for those who long for beauty. There are millions on the east Side dying for a little loveliness, and they *never, never* have it" (Yezierska 177). In the end Sonya rejects Manning's illusion of uplift in both his settlement and their marriage. She admits to herself that "she had been willfully blinded herself to what was going on in the settlement" because of her romantic idealized version of him. She convinced herself that the fairy tale she imagined "humanize[ed] the most inhuman activities of philanthropy" even though she had personally experienced the humiliation his brand of charity triggered as discussed above (Yezierska 138). For Sonya however her disillusionment does not result in defeat as Manning's failings motivate her to strive towards real change. Manning's settlement offers help on the surface, but Sonya has observed that their mission is not so much directed towards improving the quality of life for those living in the tenements but rather conditioning them to become contented with going without the same quality which Manning himself enjoys. Though he justifies this work to himself through his romantic notions about the moral purity and simplicity of poverty, this mentality allows him to ignore the fact that his efforts do little to alleviate class disparity because they focus on placating want rather than truly meeting the community's needs.

Sonya is not pacified by this line of thinking nor, interestingly, is she satisfied with her own improved situation when others still lack for basic necessities let alone small comforts.[117] Readers might naturally assume that Sonya would willingly leave her old life behind without a

[117] Fisher addressed Yezierska's position on education and settlements noting that "the novel posits a direct link between the settlement's methods of acculturation and John Manning's cold, passionless character. [. . .] Yezierska pillories Progressivism and scientific rationality, depicting the settlement house as a superficial and misdirected institution" (96). Fisher continues this point, arguing that "across Yezierska's body of work, [. . .] she continued to put the settlement house and allied reform institutions at the center of her narratives as she consolidated her often oppositional authorial voice in the early twentieth century" (96). Dan Shiffman also addresses Yezierska's education work in "'The Kindling Breath of Another Mind': Anzia Yezierska's Critique of American Education." Particularly her personal and professional relationships with John Dewey.

second thought since she is so single-minded in her pursuit of her savior; however, her own entrée into wealth actually makes her more empathetic towards those around her. Though she bemoans the grubby cheapness of her own circumstances in the beginning, having felt firsthand the difference that something as simple as a fine dress can make in terms of respect and confidence, she develops a firm belief that access to quality clothing can play an important part in enriching the lives of everyone and should not limited to only those with the most to spend on it.[118]

> The fashion system as we know it had begun to evolve in the mid-nineteenth century when Charles Worth set up his couture house in Paris, where he was gradually followed by other designers in an expanding couture culture. [. . .] High fashion by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was still a middle and upper-class pursuit. Those engaged in it were moneyed and often part of upper-class pursuit. (Fawcett 146)

Yezierska challenges this state of affairs by having Sonya work to democratize fashion not by producing ready-made replicas but facilitating access to the couture originals beyond the elite. This move also challenges the generalized charges brought by critics against fashion and consumption because the approach provides a more nuanced argument regarding the problem of mass-produced culture.[119] Rather than emphasizing society's complicity in consuming those

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[118] According to Sheehan, during this period "negotiating the right relationship to fashion was part of the work of cultural and political belonging", which is emphasized by Sonya's insistence on a new dress in order to gain Manning's attention (Sheehan 6).

[119] Edmunds connection Sonya's tastes to literary modernism, arguing that "Sonya seeks to popularize a modernist aesthetics among the masses. [. . .] In fact one of the most striking aspects of Sonya's modernist aesthetic is how fluidly it draws on and lends itself to competing social visions during the course of the novel. Behind these competing visions stands a relationship, emerging internationally, between modernism and the state – one very much tied to the project of reconstructing everyday life but not to any one model for doing so" (Edmunds 412). Okonkwo furthers this point by stating that "Yezierska strongly objected to modernism's masculinist insistence on form, abstraction, and emotional restraint, and would not adapt her techniques and concerns to the period's literary aesthetics" (Okonkwo 130). With this in mind Yezierska's modernism is reflective of the proposed expansion of the categorization I discussed in the introduction.

goods, Yezierska's heroine addresses the deeper issues of classism behind that consumption and questions the limited access to the work of art in its original form in the first place.[120] "[I]n the midst of the ready-mades of Grand Street, a shop of the beautiful – that's to be my settlement!" (Yezierska 178).

Conclusion

The critique of women's complicity naturally extends to their writing as well as critics, both historical and contemporary have expressed a tendency to disparage women's subject matter regardless of its appropriateness. Both Wharton and Yezierska were opened up to such criticisms as I've touched on above, though for different reasons. Wharton acknowledged that she felt it necessary to defend her choices when a piece slipped into a feminine vein of interest; after all, her contemporary, William Courtney proclaimed that "[w]hatever may have been true of preceding ages, it is an arguable thesis that the modern novel is written by women for women. [. . .] in which the attitude, the treatment, the philosophy, and I may add, the ignorance of life are all unmistakably feminine" (xiv). It is this attitude to which Wharton is responding in the passages from her autobiography *A Backward Glance,* noted in the beginning of this chapter, when she justifies her frivolous subject to her apparent critics, and likely to herself. After all, "[w]omen were implicitly situated as both the consumers and producers of pulp, of "insubstantial" and evanescent popular literature and culture (Mullin 144).[121] However, there is another key point to make here which we have seen illustrated in the heroines examined here and that is the supposed "ignorance of life". The implication that women lead lives of ignorant,

[120] Here I am alluding to Benjamin's work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction specifically.
[121] Mullin also helpfully observes that Virginia Woolf made similar arguments regarding the devaluing of feminine themes in literature. "Woolf's defense of "the trivial" as an appropriate subject for women writers responds to this argument by opening up the question of what might be a fit topic for modernism. In her own literary practice, and in the work of other women modernists, we can see a sustained focus on a "female" world that explores with seriousness what might otherwise be damned as trivial" (Mullin 144). Rather than constantly defending one's right to be and create what one likes, the practice of simply doing becomes subversive.

frivolous bliss is of course a convenience of the patriarchy; a vital function of gender is to keep women in this position through just such disparagement as Courtney hurls at women writers. For, as we see with Yezierska, though women's political involvement was becoming a bit more mainstream, her overt social commentary would have shocked many readers, so movement away from the ephemeral and feminine is not a viable path either. Charlotte Perkins Gilman articulates this catch-22 quite neatly when she says that "Social conditions, like individual conditions, become familiar by use, and space to be observed. This is the reason why it is so much easier to criticize the customs of other persons or nations than our own. It is also the reason why we so naturally deny and resent the charges of the critic" (Gilman 79). It is difficult to resist the urge to defend oneself; however, acknowledging that this urge is a distraction that serves those in power more than those in a defensive position can lead to more productive work.

For example, Claire Hughes responds to a reviewer's complaint that Wharton's writing so much about fashion in *The House of Mirth* makes it ephemeral by saying that "the impression is understandable, but in fact there is only one *described* dress in the whole novel" (385). At first it hardly seems possible that Hughes' observation is correct – Afterall, I've just explored the fashion in the novel in detail – however for the most part this is true.[122] Wharton discusses fashion in the abstract and in passing throughout the novel; she gives sufficient detail to paint an image but no more so than one might encounter in DH Lawrence or F Scott Fitzgerald's novels. Extraneous detail is unnecessary and absent as she's more concerned with overall affect and impression these images convey about her protagonist and the society in which she lives. No doubt, attitudes about women's writing nonetheless colored original and contemporary readers'

[122] I would argue that there are a few garments described in the novel including a grey dress for church, a summer dress for walking, and her infamous *tableaux vivant* gown, though I do agree that none receive any copious descriptions beyond a line or two.

interpretations of *House of Mirth* when Wharton's contemporary asserts that "It seems to me to be a fact that a passion for details is the distinguishing mark of nearly every female novelist. Such a limitation has its drawbacks, but one must accept the defects of one's qualities. Many female writers have done their best to escape beyond the bounds of illuminative detail, but very few have succeeded" (Courtney x-xi).[123] Even without excessive detail, there is an assumption that Wharton's novel contains it based solely on her subject matter, as well as her status as a woman writer.[124] Hughes goes on to emphasize that "given the near-absence of concrete detail in these scenes, the *impression* of fashionable excess is work considering, particularly in view of the highly particularized account of dress that Wharton herself was to give in *The Age of Innocence"* which is indeed cause for careful consideration as the male protagonist of that novel is as preoccupied with the details of women's dresses as are the men at the tableaux while the women seem more occupied with the general requirements of appearance and fashionability in the novel ("Consuming" 386). Joselin reinforces Hughes point here stating that "Wharton gives us a delicate sketch rather than a heavy drawing" even when Lily's dresses are all that she has left at the end of the novel (Joslin 35). Wharton's general descriptions of gowns give Mirth a sense of timeless when combined with the generational trauma of gender conformity these experiences remain prescient and relevant to contemporary audiences as a means for how much, or little, has changed for women in terms of opportunities and beauty standards over the last century. However the discussion above illustrates how the general relationship of women to fashion is more significant than the details themselves and actually allows the willing reader to

[123] Interestingly, while Courtney doesn't mention Wharton directly here, he was a contemporary of Wharton's, the above quote first appearing in 1904, and the anonymous critic cited by Hughes comes from a 1905 review of the book. These remarks emphasize the prevailing attitude towards women writers and feminine themes in their writing in particular further supporting my overall claim that the arguments made via fashion in these works are subliminal and may be overlooked by readers not in tune with – or willing to acknowledge – the perspectives of women.
[124] A feeling she shares with her heroine who's accused of seducing men with no justification other than the men's interest in her.

see the commentary represented therein without having to wade through an overage of ornamentation. It is impossible to ignore here the exact reality Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own* as "men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women" feel the need to provide commentary and pass judgement on women's work (Room 27-8;29).

Throughout *The House of Mirth* and *Salome of the Tenements,* we encounter the vast array in which women's experiences of gender dynamics and economic (in)dependence are influenced by their clothes. In some cases fashion is an opportunity through which the novels' protagonists strive towards freedom from the confines of society. In others, Lily and Sonya find themselves bound by their clothes when they experience ridicule and insecurity based on those same garments. With all the potential outcomes they've experienced from a simple dress – social and financial debt, public shame, physical threats – it's amazing they managed to get dressed at all. In *Adorned in Dreams,* Elizabeth Wilson describes the insinuations of fashion into the fabric of daily life affirming that

> We live as far as clothes are concerned a triple ambiguity: the ambiguity of capitalism itself with its great wealth and great squalor, its capacity to create and its dreadful wastefulness; the ambiguity of our identity, of the relation of self to body and self to the world; and the ambiguity of art, its purpose and meaning. Fashion is one of the most accessible and one of the most flexible means by which we express these ambiguities." (Wilson 14-5)

The examples analyzed here have represented the entanglement of these ambiguities in a variety of configurations. For women in particular this has meant gains in one area generally signals a tightening in another. For Lily, the financial independence to purchase her own clothes or personal expression through fashion as an art in the *tableaux viviant* comes as the sacrifice of her

reputation and ultimately her rejection by society.[125] Interestingly, Sonya manages to maneuver in such a way that she is able to gain financial independence by pursuing fashion as an art form in a way that suits her desires. How then can we account for such dramatically different outcomes?

I believe the protagonists in these two novels reflect women's expanding opportunities at the turn of the century as well as demonstrate the narrative transformations present in early twentieth century women's writing. Women's rights were by no means assured but small steps towards political and financial autonomy through access to the vote and the professions marked an easing of restrictions on women's lives. Furthermore, the confinement of women's bodies was easing as well, generating at least some measure of hope alongside the frustrations of second-class citizenship. Charlotte Perkins Gilman noted in *Women and Economics* in 1898 that if you

> Put a corset, even a loose one, on a vigorous man or woman who never wore one, and there is intense discomfort, and a vivid consciousness thereof. [. . .] But the person habitually wearing a corset does not feel these evils. They exist, assuredly, the facts are there, the body is not deceived; but the nerves have become accustomed to these disagreeable sensations" (Gilman 77-8).

Gilman is referring here not only to the restriction of the body by fashion but calling our attention to women's acclimation to the confinements of gender. She also astutely notes that the "body is not deceived" and neither is a woman's consciousness, but an awareness of one's subjugation does not necessitate rebellion; it can often simply be as irritating as a chaffing garment. Lily at the opening of the twentieth century falls prey to this problem as she's aware of her own limitations but the means to escape them elude her. Though Lily acknowledges

[125] I address the tableaux dress in detail in chapter 4.

throughout that she is not fit for labor, I would argue that she is doing the job she was raised to do from birth. This avenue gives women more agency in that it acknowledges not that they are simply not trained for labor therein painting them as victims, but rather that they are shouldering a significant form of social labor. This labor supports and maintains the economic interests of those within her set, though she does not benefit financially from that labor. When she does attempt her own financial gain in exchange for that work, the tasks she performs for those around her are then demeaned and weaponized against her reputation, and life. A fate shared by others such as in Kate Chopin's *Awakening,* Lily's demise is somewhat ambiguous and perhaps most often described as an accidental suicide; overwhelmed with the prospect of blazing a trail other than the one for which she was raised – marriage to a wealthy man and the acquiescence that goes along with it – it is no wonder that simple sleep would be a welcome escape from the labor of fighting tradition. In the end she falls victim to the traditional marriage plot. Gilbert and Gubar famously critiqued this nineteenth century narrative in *Madwoman in the Attic,* but moving into the twentieth acknowledge that narrative structures began to shift just as I've discussed in comparing these two novels here. They point out that in the twentieth century women writers attempt a revised strategy in tackling the battle of the sexes observing that they "women's works [. . .] frequently imagine female victory either through duplicity and subterfuge or through providential circumstances" (Gilbert and Gubar *War of the Words* 66-7).

Chapter 3

(Re)Fashioning Gender in *The Well of Loneliness* & *Orlando*

> [T]o have a style means for the most part to be conscious of making a choice. To choose a style is to engage in a performance, an act of willed self-definition. From our writing to our clothing, we make ourselves, our characters, through such choices. Sometimes we think – naively or idealistically – that the self has been given, that it is a hard core of being that comes with us from birth through our genes or some spiritual fountain [. . .] At other times, we realize that we fashion ourselves and also, more pointedly, that everything we do reflects and also constitutes who we are. (Garelick and Spiegelman 6)

Thus far I have discussed women and fashion with the assumption of the subjects as women being without question. This is not to say that I believe deconstruction work to be more or less significant than the analysis of difference, rather, I have analyzed how women experience and consume fashion as a result of their identity as women because that approach was more productive towards the overall goal of the preceding chapters.[126] Now, however, I would like to queer that analysis but exploring how the ambiguous or fluidly gendered subject fashions their identities through dress. In other words, I am interested in how women fashion their very identities *as* women through fashion. In many ways, these gendering experiences are a response to the same set of external gender conditions as previously discussed regarding fashion and difference. In others, though, the protagonists of Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf to be discussed here trouble the internal responses to such conditioning. In particular I am interested in

[126] I do discuss sexuality with reference to Larsen's *Quicksand* and the sexual(ized) woman in the first chapter, but that analysis does not specifically address the comingled relationship between gender and sexuality as this chapter will do.

how women experience their clothes in relation to their gender identity. This quote above poses an interesting set of questions with which to approach the subjects of *The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando.* On the one hand, Garelick and Spiegelman's assertion that we "make ourselves [. . .] through choices" is appealing; we want to believe that performance is "an act of willed self-definition" (6). Judith Butler explores this via a phenomenological critique of gender and aims to "examine in what ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts" ("Performative" 403). These acts, however, are not solely initiated as independent choices or exercises of will. Rather, consciously, and unconsciously, social constructs are always already manipulating these acts since, as Butler summarizes Simone de Beauvoir,

> to be a woman is to have to *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of "woman," to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler 404-5)[127]

I appreciate Butler's synopsis here because she synthesizes Beauvoir's point with her own attention to the material body, which offers a productive means for understanding how women are subjected to both internal and external coercion. Including the body in our understanding of compulsory gender conformity, and heterosexuality, further troubles the notion of choice and is critical for the analysis of *Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando* that follows. Complicity can be masked as the appearance of choice because this becoming requires participation, but that participation is not altogether voluntary. Fashion blurs this distinction further, because while the manipulation of the body is possible – either for the purposes of conformity or defiance – dress

[127] I explore Beauvoir's claim that women are offered "inducements to complicity" in the conclusion to chapter 1.

offers a more mutable medium for altering physical performance. Fashion contains possibilities for immediate, ephemeral, and multiple performances and the extent to which changing one's style changes one's self allows for an interrogation of whether it is in fact possible to "try on" gender.

However, the appearance of choice within the social construction of gender is not the same thing as *actual* self-determination, or self-fashioning. As Jagger summarizes, "Butler aims to show that all identity, whether queer, straight or trans, is performatively produced and no-one can simply 'be' outside of this process" (149). In other words, any person's identity is performed in relation to essentialist binary constructs whether those performances conform or not. However, *The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando* offer interesting perspectives on gender performance as to whether one could possibly escape that process. In particular, criticism on both texts tends to position them within a transgender methodology, and in light of Butler's point "would seem to place transsexuals in an unwelcome double bind and an unwelcome political position of destabilizing the binaries" (Jagger 150). This means that even performance that fits the binaries destabilizes when it fits them in the wrong ways by not appropriately, or normatively performing the right configuration of sex and gender via the body and/or performed masculinity/femininity. Both texts articulate this double bind, with *Well*'s Stephen Gordon repeatedly asked some variation of "[w]hat in the Lord's name are you?" and as we learn of Orlando "he was a woman" (Hall 144; Woolf *Orlando* 87). As Ann Heilmann observes,

> Transgender and transsexuality go some way towards illustrating the complexities of the categories 'woman' and 'women as material (or positional) subjects'. [. . .] Transsexuals may encounter dual forms of essentialism, in continuing to be viewed through the lens of

> their original sex [. . .] while at the same time facing gender stereotypes about their new identity. (79)[128]

This is evident in both texts as Stephen experiences the essentialism Heilmann describes, while Orlando subverts it. As I will discuss shortly, I am not necessarily inclined to impose contemporary transgender methodologies in this chapter as I will be probing the spectrum of sex and gender identities throughout, particularly with Orlando; I am concerned with exactly what Heilmann illustrates here and that is how the trans individual – or inverted, as they were understood by Hall's and Woolf's contemporaries – experiences the essentialism of a heteropatriarchal culture from multiple angles depending on their appearance and place. I believe clothing in both works aids in this exploration. For example, In *Orlando,* Christy Burns argues, "the effects of Orlando's transformation through the ages – marked especially by his/her changes in clothing – execute a parodic deconstruction of essentialist claims" (Burns 343). In other words, Woolf is also aware of the binary language inherent to these kinds of discussions because our vocabulary for trans identity was – and still is – limited to the symbolic order of heteropatriarchy.

Rather than struggle to find another way of articulating altogether, both Hall and Woolf literally fashion images that demonstrate how difference can be experienced as detached from traditional labels of man and woman, masculine and feminine, queer and normal, and applied visually she crafts a queer mode of self-fashioning that enables the wearer to express the self outside of essentialist labelling.[129] In all this chapter is not particularly preoccupied with

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[128] Heilmann cites Chakraborty's assertion that "all essentialism is strategic" which I think is absolutely the case in this chapter and dissertation as a whole (Heilmann 83). Dismantling essentialism - particularly the seeming necessity for binary, essentialist language in writing about issues of sex gender and sexuality – would detract from the overall goal. Really, I am aiming my analysis and understanding how clothing functions as essentialist in society and how these writers queer that social function by playing with the "normal" order of fashion.

[129] According to Burns, "in the process of writing her novel, Woolf weaves together two competing approaches to biography: the attempt to define an essential self and the modern project of retracing the construction of a changing

maintaining distinctions between – or even defining – sex and gender either as they relate to the protagonists of these two novels or in general, first, because this is outside the scope of this dissertation, and second because the blurry boundaries between the two is precisely the territory I will tread moving forward. According to Chris Coffman, "*The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando* [. . .] engage in a rhetoric that enables them simultaneously to play to and to exceed official discourses on gender and sexuality of their day (in the case of *The Well),* and even to sidestep them outright (in the case of *Orlando*)" (Coffman para. 6). For Stephen, she is dissatisfied with the limitations of her assigned sex and wonders where she could be a man. For Orlando, s/he changes sex but remains unperturbed by the anatomical realities of the situation, finding it instead more convenient to perform either male or female-ness as the situation warrants.

Well of Loneliness

Radclyffe Hall's controversial novel, *The Well of Loneliness,* provides a different perspective on Women's and fashion from the examples discussed in previous chapters. This is because Hall's protagonist, Stephen Gordon, does not conform to traditional gender presentation. While both Stephen and the women in previous chapter are operating within a system of gender oppression, the objective here is to analyze not only how fashion helps or hinders Stephen in navigating the restrictions of her gender but also how it reinforces or resists the construction of gender itself. In the examples that follow, I believe Hall challenges the assumed naturalness of gender through Stephen's dress as well as the limitations of her opposition; in other words, I will argue that while Stephen employs fashion to resist gender conditioning heteropatriarchy appropriates non-compliance as its own means of subordination. This is accomplished by the

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subjectivity, which stems most recognizably from Freud's influence" (Burns 344). What's more interesting is of course the play we can apply to the word essential here as the "essential self" would in fact be the core identity of a person free from the confines of essentialism.

cultural responses to Stephen's dress throughout the novel and the ways in which a lack of acceptance inhibits her social participation and ultimately destabilize her relationships. Stephen's non-conformity highlights fear as one of the key ways that society maintains power structures through gender. When Stephen behaves and dresses in ways that do not perform a socially acceptable version of woman, those around her react negatively, and "it was fear that aroused their antagonism. In her they instinctively sensed an outlaw, and theirs was the act of policing nature" (Hall 110). In this observation, Hall shows an awareness of how gender, while constructed, is fabricated in such a way as to appear natural. Therefore, Stephen is perceived as unnatural and the unnatural is something to be feared and protected against. Interestingly, Hall contrasts the social response with her counter point that suggests it is in fact Stephen's performance that is the natural one. Twice, Hall claims that Stephen was "like some primitive thing conceived in a turbulent age of transition" (Hall 52; 150). This observation calls to mind a natural state of being with the term primitive as well as suggesting a moment of evolution. If Stephen is then perceived as the natural result of evolution, then it is the human policing of that nature that becomes unnatural for Hall. Of course, while Hall's belief gets at the heart of the social construction of gender, the conflict between nature and human power structures – between who Stephen is and who culture tells her she must be – creates a perpetual state of inner turmoil for the protagonist. In particular, the insistence on biological sex as both natural rather than assigned and as determining one's gender, Stephen is frequently described as at odds with her body and "all her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit" (Hall 187). Because she has limited means of resolving her identity conflict, Stephen

resorts to fashion as an avenue through which she can embody her gender identity authentically.[130]

Additionally, Hall's insights into the turn of the century concept of sexual "inversion" in the novel represent a critical moment in cultural gender discourse as evidenced by the profanity trial mentioned above. As with most banned books, censorship is generally a good indication that a writer is doing something right and, in spite of efforts to censor *The Well of Loneliness,* the novel thrust subversive sexological claims into the mainstream consciousness. While Ulrichs and Krafft-Ebbing are both discussed as being in Sir Philip Gordon's library,[131] Hall's narrative seems to follow more along the lines of Havelock Ellis's arguments. As Taylor points out, "Ellis is keen to distance himself from what he views as some of the more unscientific pronouncements" and "[i]n marked contrast to Krafft-Ebing's findings, Ellis rules out the idea that an inversion of sexual instincts manifest itself in an inversion of secondary sexual characteristics" (Taylor 289). In other words, sexuality and sex are two separate identity categories to Ellis, which challenges the notion that the mannish lesbian is the lesbian, an assertion often made about Hall's arguments in *Well*. Furthermore, "Ellis also challenges Krafft-Ebing's believe that women who appropriate masculine signs are automatically sexually inverted, arguing that this practice might be motivated by reasons other than sexual desire for women" (Taylor 289). This is much more akin to modern understandings of trans and sexual

[130] I use the pronoun "she" here intentionally for three reasons. The first, and most practical, is that Hall uses she throughout the novel and I will continue to do so throughout this chapter for the sake of consistency. Second, I hesitate to apply contemporary pronoun usage anachronistically, though I believe it could be argued that Stephen would likely not have used 'she' if given the opportunity as modern gender vocabulary allows, nor, I think, would have Hall. Finally, because Woolf does use "she", "he", and "they" in *Orlando,* I think it is useful do let this distinction stand as it further demonstrates the function of fashion as an alternate vocabulary for articulating gender non-conformity where language does not.

[131] Ulrichs locked in a drawer on pg. 26; Krafft Ebing hidden behind a row of books on pg. 204

identities.[132] This is a critical distinction because the twentieth century concept of inversion and our twenty-first century understanding of trans identities are not interchangeable. I do agree ethically with modern trans criticism that validates Stephen's identity as a man, especially given *The Well of Loneliness*'s significance as a cultural milestone for trans representation, however, for the purposes of this chapter I find it more productive to employ the lens of "inversion". Although, inversion theories offer an incomplete and problematic representation of both gender and sexuality by conflating the two and reinforcing (rather than destabilizing) heteronormative gender stereotypes, I believe this fraught vocabulary is actually incredibly useful for representing how heteropatriarchy fortifies itself via institutional binaries. Halberstam makes an interesting point in this regard in *Female Masculinity* by arguing

> as we shall see in *the Well of Loneliness,* John [Radclyffe Hall] linked her masculinity or manhood not simply to men's clothing but to a sartorial aesthetic that actively opposed the notion of a "true sex" by equating gender and costume. [. . .] but clothing and costume and 'masquerade' were not the same things for John, and she seems not to have equated her costumes with masquerade. Masquerade for her, seems to have been about passing. (Halberstam 90)

This is interesting because it reminds us that neither Hall nor Stephen is "passing" as men, rather they are performing manliness in their dress because this is a reflection of their identity; more than dressing up or being seen a certain way, gender itself is a form of dressing up that does not necessitate external acceptance (though the issue of disapproval is important to the text as well). Furthermore, Halberstam's claim supports my approach to resist identifying Stephen as he/man

[132] Noble similarly addresses the typically glossed over nuances of what could be argued as "the 'collisions' between *the Well of Loneliness* and the sexologists, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis, constitute a productive moment for female masculinity" (Noble).

because doing so could unintentionally reinforce a binary reading and overlook the queer nuance behind Stephen's costuming. So, while inversion itself was problematic, it is not necessarily responsible to assume Hall's employment on the concept is equally troublesome. Esther Newton does something similar in the article "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian"[133] insisting that Hall's employment of inversion does not necessitate binary interpretation. Newton notes that "[f]rom about 1900 on, this cross-gender figure became the public symbol of the new social/sexual category 'lesbian.' Some of our feminist historians deplore the emergence of the mannish lesbian, citing her associating with the medical model of pathology" (Newton 560). I however believe, as Newton argues here, that this approach oversimplifies Hall's own portrayals and ignores the other characters who do not embody their lesbianism "mannishly" as Stephen does.[134]

Dressing Up

> Yes, of course I'm a boy. [. . .] I must be a boy, 'cause I feel exactly like one. (Hall 20)

As a child, Stephen enjoyed playing dress up; the difficulty was she enjoyed dressing up as a boy. Like most children she would deck herself out and act out the scenes from her favorite books, which in her case tended to be about historical heroes.[135] When she is younger this

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[133] Newton clarifies this terminology, explaining that "by 'mannish lesbian' (a term I use because it, rather than the contemporary 'butch,' belongs to the time period I am studying) I mean a figure who is defined as a lesbian *because* her behavior or dress (and usually both) manifest elements designated as exclusively masculine" (560).

[134] As I will explore in the examples below, Hall portrays more than the "mannish lesbian" represented by Stephen in the novel. The secondary characters of Mary, Valerie, Barbara, and Jamie, just to name a few, are indicative of a diverse spectrum of gender and sexuality represented in the novel which tends to be overlooked in criticism focused on the protagonist in isolation.

[135] Hall notes specifically that as a child Stephen "[a]t one time she had very much liked being read to, especially from books that were all about heroes" but that later – around the age of seven in the novel – "such stories so stirred her ambition, that she longed intensely to live them. She Stephen, now longed to be William Tell, or Nelson" (Hall 19). This small shift in her childhood – from the enjoyment of books to identification with them - can be read as a milestone in her identity formation similar to that which I'm analyzing through her relationship to clothes. Given her (Stephen's, but also Hall's) chosen profession as a writer, her relationship with books – specifically the strong personal identification with their characters – highlights the importance of representation, a gap which Hall herself sought to fill with this novel. It is also worth noting, that, like her taste in clothes, Stephen's inclination towards what would be considered boyish is not discouraged by her father as it is by her mother; Sir Philip actually offers

doesn't seem to be cause for much concern and most of her performances are interpreted as simple play, if a bit odd. Her nurse comments that "[s]he is a queer kid, always dressing herself up and play-acting – it's funny" and in general her play is interpreted as harmless (Hall 20).[136] However, for Stephen this play is a much more meaningful part of her identify formation; on the one hand she is having fun acting out her favorite books but, on the other, she is also dressing and behaving as she sees her heroes doing because she identifies more closely with them than she does the girlish options presented to her. Stephen's situation does seem unique as it appears that external policing of her behavior is minimal, particularly at home. Stephen does however seek validation for this performance and finds the dismissal of her dressing up exceedingly frustrating. Hall describes the emotional toll of one such interaction between Stephen and her beloved Collins, a housemaid and her childhood crush, in which Collins tells her "I know you're a boy, but I've got my work to get on with. Run away" (Hall 20). Stephen is crushed to be dismissed in this way, not only because of her affections and desire for Collins attention but also because the remark is not a serious acknowledgement of her boyhood but rather humoring what Collins perceives as playacting. Stephen's actions in response are telling as she proceeds to

> slink upstairs thoroughly deflated, strangely unhappy and exceedingly humble, and must tear off the clothes she so dearly loved donning, to replace them by the garments she hated. How she hated soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and small coral beads, and

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Stephen a "new picture-book about hunting" and a "nice print of young Nelson" as rewards for good behavior (Hall 36). The treatment of books here, particularly in childhood, is especially significant given the current trend of anti-gay book banning in schools and libraries. Stephen's attraction to these characters helped her articulate her identity (rather than in some way corrupting it) and in actuality had far more to do with the normative social construction of gender than any perceived queer content, demonstrating the pointlessness of such policing as if reading somehow causes queerness.

[136] keeping in mind, of course, that the use of queer isn't necessarily a reference to sex or sexuality as in modern usage; nonetheless the play on the term is enjoyable as a contemporary reader. Additionally, my own use of the loaded term "harmless" here is intentional because normative culture does in fact label these behaviors as harm*ful.*

> openwork stockings! Her legs felt so free and comfortable in breeches; she adored pockets too, and these were forbidden – at least really adequate pockets.[137] (Hall 20)

This scene is telling for several reasons. It is upsetting for Stephen, when she tells others that she "must be a boy, 'cause [she feels] exactly like one" and they brush her off (Hall 20). As a child she doesn't quite have the means to articulate her feelings beyond this simple statement and her confusion at feeling misunderstood on this score is evident in the observation that she is "*strangely* unhappy". As Judith Butler points out, "[g]ender is [. . .], a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" ("performative" 405). Stephen is a child discovering who she is and even from a young age she feels herself at odds with her gender though unable to articulate that conflict. The naturalness of expected behaviors and dress have always been in place so her growing awareness of them creates a feeling of wrongness. Butler elaborates on this, stating

> [t]he tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress. ("performative" 405)

Though Stephen rightly attributes that *wrongness* to the classification of herself, her behaviors, and her clothing, her natural response is at odds with the world as it is presented to her. Because of the way gender is constructed, the external conditioning is coded as natural, and her own

[137] Though not strictly necessary, it is hard to resist at least acknowledging the mention of inadequate pockets in women's clothing, as any contemporary reader and wearer of such items can sympathize with this frustration. How, nearly a century later, have we not at least been granted access to decent pockets?

internal resistance is thus painted as the unnatural variable. It is also helpful that Butler not only describes genders as fictions but also uses the language of fashion in construction, materials, and styles to make that argument. Even if we are able to sense that these constructs are fabricated, their power to conceal that fact makes it nearly impossible to explicate. In Stephen's case this struggle manifests in dressing up; the "corporeal styles" and "embodiment" of the "discrete and polar genders" are how she understands the world, so her performance fixates on these categorizations. In other words, it is not necessarily true to say that Stephen is actually a boy and therefore loves certain clothes and hates others because, of course, the assignment of clothing styles along the gender binary is as arbitrary as the binary itself; Stephen senses that being assigned "girl" is inaccurate but must work with the options available to her for articulating this difference. Furthermore, this is not that Stephen's choice reinforces gender but that, because the gender binary is culturally imbedded as a choice of either/or, gender reinforces itself by orchestrating her behaviors so that even resistance to gender conditioning forces one's defiance to take on the appearance of compliance.

Finally, it is the combination of play and clothing that gives Stephen a physical means of expressing how she feels. Through this we see that both are an integral part of identity formation and gender conditioning, which, for Stephen, are in conflict. There is a clear demarcation between play and reality in the passage above. When she fails to receive validation for her performance as a boy, she resigns herself to performing a girl. Though her dressing up is not overtly prohibited, the covert reinforcement of which behaviors and clothes are play and which are proper and therefore "real" is powerful. As long as Stephen goes back to being a girl when she is done playing, all is well. The details of "the garments she hated" is also telling. The girls' clothes are described in detailed terms that are primarily aesthetic in contrast to breeches and

pockets boys are allowed which provide functionality and freedom of movement. Hall's description is thus showing that from childhood Stephen has an unconscious awareness of women's confinement relative to men's freedom.[138] As Stephen gets older, the emphasis on clothing as a reflection of her gender conflict becomes more pronounced as she begins receiving more overt signals that her preferred dress is part of a significant tendency toward social nonconformity. While her dressing up continues, her inquiry shifts slightly as do nature of the responses she receives. For example, when confiding in her father, "She would say: 'Do you think that I *could* be a man, supposing that I thought very hard – or prayed, father?' Then Sir Philip would smile and tease her a little, and would tell her that one day she would want pretty frocks" (Hall 26). Where Stephen used to assert that she was a boy, in this instance she asks if in the future she "*could* be a man." Because her prior assertions have been indulged as play, she begins to question whether her desires are possible. Her father attempts to deflect the question by teasing her – which further reinforces the idea that her preferences are just play – and, though in general he enables her at home, here he signals that conformity is the feasible resolution for her long-term. In fact, after this conversation, Hall reveals that Stephen's father has been reading the

[138] While the "functional" argument made against women's clothes is a significant one in feminist criticism, it is somewhat tangential to the point I'm arguing here. Many of these arguments tend to focus on fashion as a problem with androgyny as the solution and could be productively applied to discussions of other works, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *HERland.* I am more interested in analyzing how Hall navigates the ways in which clothing is coded as either male or female as a reflection of behavioral norms and how nonconformist dressing can function to detach the labels masculine and feminine from male and female. Traditionally, "masculinity one must conclude, has been reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies" (Halberstam 269). This cultural assumption extends to dress as well, with strong delineation between clothes for male bodies labeled as masculine and those covering female bodies feminine. The examples of female masculinity here then trouble that application. Though Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* is the most definitive source on this particular dilemma, I believe Elizabeth Grosz articulates the problem facing Stephen in *Volatile Bodies* when she says "[g]ender is not an ideological superstructure added to a biological base. Masculine or feminine gender cannot be neutrally attributed to bodies of either sex. Therefore, in agreement with Gatens (1990), it becomes clear that the 'masculinity' of the male body cannot be the same as the 'masculinity' of the female body, because the kind of body inscribed makes a difference to the meanings and functioning of gender that emerges" (58). I believe fashion troubles this point, situated as an embodiment of gender identity that is not quite part of the body but not separate from it either. Thus, masculinity via fashion becomes a matter of passing rather than being, as Stephen now knows.

work of sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and he observes "the indefinable quality in Stephen that made her look wrong in the clothes she was wearing, as though she and they had no right to each other" (Hall 26-7).[139] Though her father has some knowledge of sexual "inversion" – as transsexuality was understood at the time he is reluctant to share this knowledge with either his wife or daughter. This may be explained by what Grosz calls "[t]he problematic of sexual difference" which "entails a certain failure of knowledge to bridge the gap, the interval, between the sexes. There remains something ungraspable, something outside, unpredictable, and uncontainable about the other sex for each sex" (Grosz 208). As a father at the turn of the century, Sir Philip's acceptance of his daughter influences his parenting, however, his incomplete knowledge their difference (compounded by convoluted psychological theories) prevents him from confidently encourage his daughter to go out in the world as she is. Even acknowledging that girls' clothes "look wrong" on her, he is unable to fully articulate this, thus lets assuring her that she will want dresses one day stands in for telling her outright that she must eventually accept that she is a woman.[140] This is further reinforced when Stephen discovers her beloved Collins kissing the footman. To Stephen, she, a pretend boy, has been rejected in favor of a real boy, cementing her disillusionment as she laments "[w]hat was the good of dressing up any more – what was the good of pretending?" (Hall 28).

As Stephen moves into her teen years, the descriptions of dress emphasize feminine clothing and, in particular, her resistance to it. Though Hall still makes note of her wearing pants

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[139] After his death, Stephen also discovers a copy of Krafft-Ebing's work hidden on his shelf and is wounded, exclaiming "You knew! All the time you knew this thing, but because of your pity you wouldn't tell me" (Hall 204). That pity is certainly what influences this interaction between father and daughter.

[140] Hall rather reinforces this point again later when he tells Stephen "I've brought you up very differently from most girls, you must now that" (Hall 61). He also reiterates that, though he's allowed her to express herself freely at home, she will eventually have to conform, instructing her "you've now got to prove that my judgement's been sound [. . .] when you're older you're going to become a fine woman; you must my dear – I love you so much that you can't disappoint me" (Hall 61-2). He is empathetic towards her struggle but ultimately his fears for her future outweigh this understanding.

regularly, primarily while riding, this shift marks the transition period from child to woman that requires a more strict compliance with gender norms as a requirement for social belonging. When Stephen is seventeen, she and her mother regularly do battle over her attire. Their confrontation over clothes is also one of Hall's most overt statements about the significance of clothes in the novel. She says, "it was open warfare, the inevitable clash of two oppressing natures who sought to express themselves in apparel, since clothes after all, are a form of self expression" (Hall 73). What then becomes clear from the arguments between mother and daughter is that some forms of self-expression are more acceptable than others. We are told "sometimes Stephen would appear in a thick woolen jersey, or a suit of rough tweeds surreptitiously ordered from the excellent tailor" and "[s]ometimes Anna would triumph, having journeyed to London to procure soft and very expensive dresses *which her daughter must wear in order to please her,* because she would come home quite tired by such journeys" (Hall 73, emphasis my own). Though Stephen's wearing the dresses could be interpreted as her simply showing appreciation her mother's efforts on her behalf, it is not a stretch to assume there is a deeper meaning behind the actions of both parties, and Stephen was often "reduced to submission by Anna's disappointment, always more efficacious than her mere disapproval" (Hall 73). While her father is aware of the modern (at the time) understandings of gender, he fails to share that knowledge with her mother and as a result Anna Gordon is afraid for her daughter's future if they don't teach her to be like other girls (Hall 53). Both parents express anxiety over Stephen's place in society, but their actions on this account are often at odds and further confuse Stephen's already difficult position. On the one hand, her father is fairly permissive, but he undercuts this tolerance by adding future limitations that she will one day need to be a lady and

dress accordingly.[141] Her mother, on the other hand, takes a more pragmatic approach by attempting to reinforce more normative behaviors and dress on her daughter at home in the hopes that her daughter can avoid rejection.[142] Stephen's desire for approval thus further complicates her already tense relationship with her clothes. Indeed, the dress her mother brought home "seemed to have acquired an enormous importance" because while Stephen was "longing intensely to rend it, to hurt it, longing to hurt herself in the process, yet filled all the while with that sense of injustice", in the end, she "donned the new dress with infinite precaution" and "very penitent hands full of deep resignation" (Hall 74).

Suit(able) Dress

Stephen's reaching majority marks the beginning of yet another period of self-fashioning. She "was twenty-one, a rich, independent woman [. . .] But nothing much happened, beyond the fact that Stephen now dressed in tailor-made clothes to which Anna had perforce to withdraw her opposition" (Hall 129). This milestone, while offering financial independence through her inheritance, offers little real independence beyond the ability to buy her own clothes. In the previous chapter, I discussed Lily Bart's impulse to buy new clothes when she acquires some small wealth, so it is interesting to continue this point in seeing that Stephen's inclination is the same when she acquires a much more substantial and stable income. In Lily's case we can conclude that she needs clothes in order to continue participating in upper class society. For Stephen, on the other hand, she has a position already, and the clothes tend to actually isolate her from society rather than earning her acceptance. Though one woman is conforming and the other

[141] See previous note.

[142] Later on, Stephen's parents see her governess as a foreshadowing of their daughter's future but whereas her father insists "[m]arriage wasn't the only career for a woman. Look at Puddle, for instance; she'd been at Oxford – a most admirable, well-balanced, sensible creature [. . .] Anna scoffed: Yes, indeed, he might well look at Puddle! She was what came of this higher education – a lonely, unfulfilled, middle-aged spinster" (Hall 111).

is not, and although Stephen's wealth does offer her some material security against social condemnation, both are limited by their sex in terms of what money can buy. Even though Stephen resists in the kinds of clothes she purchases, she is still regulated in that she is prevented from doing anything else with her income. [143]

In addition to the financial limitations, these two characters also share a preoccupation with the clothes themselves. As I discussed previously, women are conditioned to be consumers of fashion, their consumption is guaranteed by both their limited financial autonomy and their expected gender conformity, and their inferiority is maintained by patronizing their compliance. What then makes Stephen's compliance interesting is that she is resisting the gender conformity requirement in one regard – she is consuming the wrong kind of fashion – she is still displaying the concern for her appearance considered appropriate for women. Although she is spending her money on clothes as a women should, she is buying "tailor-made" suits rather than the "soft dresses" her mother induced her to wear when she was younger. Nonetheless, she enjoys buying clothes and is fixated on the minutia of her wardrobe. Around this time, Stephen also experiences the first (ill-fated) romantic attachment as an adult when she falls in love with the wife of a neighbor, Mrs. Angela Crossby. Unfortunately, their affair ends in disaster when Angela eventually outs Stephen to buy her husband's trust and distract from her extra, extramarital affair with Stephen's childhood nemesis. In the beginning though, Stephen is eager to please and finds herself preoccupied with what she will wear when she sees Angela again, comparing her own wardrobe to that of Angela's husband. "She became much more anxious about her appearance; [.

[143] While Stephen inherited an income from her father, acquiring property would not have been possible for her until 1926 (Parliament). She does eventually live independently in Paris, however that decision is also a means of gender regulation as her mother gives her an ultimatum after her affair with another woman and is, therefore, not entirely of her own choosing. With this in mind, I believe it is reasonable to argue that Stephen is disposing of her income as she wishes, i.e., on clothes, within the confines of women's property law.

. .] she went through her clothes. They were old, for the most part distinctly shabby" (Hall 136). (This simply will not do since, upon meeting Ralph Crossby, "Stephen noticed that he was immaculately dressed in a grey tweed suit that by rights should have been shabby. But everything about him looked aggressively new" (Hall 133).) With this realization Stephen determined

> [s]he would go into Malvern that very afternoon and order a new flannel suit at her tailor's. The suit should be grey with a little white pin stripe. She ordered not one new suit but three, and she also ordered a pair of brown shoes; indeed, she spent most of the afternoon in ordering things for her personal adornment. She heard herself being ridiculously fussy about details, disputing with her tailor over buttons; disputing with her bookmaker over the shoes, their thickness of sole, their amount of broguing; disputing regarding the match of her ties with the young man who sold her handkerchiefs and neckties – for such trifles and assumed an enormous importance; she had, in fact grown quite long-winded about them. (Hall 137).

Hall's lengthy shopping montage here is valuable because her attention offers multiple interpretations, because socially it presents a bit of a conundrum. As Jack Halberstam describes, "Stephen positively wears her sexuality, and accordingly the novel dwells in luxurious detail on her fetish for men's clothing and the ways in which she covets and wears it" (99). The function of suits thus serves not only an aesthetic purpose for Stephen but a means of articulating her identity. I especially appreciate Halberstam's explanation of the linguistic function of fashion in the novel when he claims that "[a] sartorial semiotic provides this novel with its system of knowing and unknowing, concealment and disclosure, and the trace of secrecy in this text involves no secret desires but the secret female body – Stephen's body – which of necessity

remains covered. [144] It is particularly this *knowing* that interests me – of Stephen and, later, Orlando – as dress tends to make both subjects both easier and more difficult for others to *know,* because their dress often troubles the assumed knowing. Or, as Alcoff so succinctly states: "genders may have indeterminate borders, and some individuals may appear ambiguous, but in the case of gender, many people believe that if one could lift the person's skirt, or peer down their shorts, the matter would be closed" (Alcoff 7). Therefore, according to gendered readings of fashion, the clothing listed represents masculine tastes, while the length of the list displays feminine fixation. We may initially find this sequence an endearing display of nervousness and new love, but, because society insists Stephen is a woman, is it a display of masculinity that should be punished or femininity that should be reinforced? On the surface, although her physical gender performance is non-conforming, her behavior can be interpreted as normative, however, I would argue this interpretation can be pushed further. I do not believe it is possible to read her physical and behavioral gender performance separately. Afterall, is it only women who experience this level of self-consciousness?[145]

Resistance in one respect must inherently bring the other into question as well. By this I mean, if Stephen's performance – choice of dress – is masculine is it really accurate to label her behavior –enjoyment of clothes – as feminine without further interrogation? Perhaps one could

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[144] I believe Halberstam's reading of *Well* is in fact quite similar to my own in that he works within the multiple intersections of gender, sexuality, and masculinity, where a significant portion of the scholarship tends to assume trans identity. Halberstam argues: "I want to focus on the relations between the invert and her male costume and argue for the importance of recognizing an elaborate construction of gender, sexuality, and self that takes place through a dressing that is not exactly cross-dressing [. . .] to posit a gender identity that constitutes itself through clothing, not simply fetishistically, but in such a way as to equate nakedness with binary sexual and gender codes and the clothes self with the construction of gender itself" (Halberstam 99).

[145] For arguments sake, we could also bring in Sedgewick's *Epistemology of the Closet* to note that, if Stephen were a man, the interpretation would be dependent upon the frequency of such proclivities. If he displayed an overt passion for fashion, he would be labeled a dandy and his sexuality may be called into question; if, however, it was a one-time offense, the display is simply a sweet show of regard, rather than an erring into femininity. Ultimately, that consideration would yield the same conclusion as follows.

answer in the affirmative, *if* I were arguing that someone must be either feminine or masculine in all respects; happily, though, I am by no means denying Stephen's ability to perform both masculinity and femininity freely. Rather, I believe this question gets at the core of how gender expectations are constructed, meaning it is easier to deconstruct our reading of clothing as either masculine or feminine – we can acknowledge that those assignations are arbitrary – however, our interpretation of attitudes towards clothing is not often given the same treatment. As Esther Newton tells us, modes of dress like Stephen's, or Hall's, were more nuanced that a simplified mannish lesbian trope might imply, and women dressed as men for a variety of reasons:

> In the nineteenth century and before, individual women passed as men by dressing and acting like them for a variety of economic, sexual, and adventure-seeking reasons. Many of these women were from the working class. Public *partial* cross-dressing among bourgeois women was a late nineteenth-century development. Earlier isolated instances of partial cross-dressing seem to have been associated with explicit feminism (e.g., George Sand and American physician Mary Walker), although most nineteenth-century feminists wore traditional women's clothing (Newton 558).

Newton also tells us that the prevalence of sexologist ideas on inversion at the turn of the century seems to have narrowed the understanding of such practices resulting in the "mannish lesbian" trope; she therefore asks that we consider carefully: Did doctors invent or merely describe the mannish lesbian? Either way, what did this mythic figure signify, and to whom?" (Newton 558). Following from the discussion of Butler above, determining whether the preoccupation with fashion is masculine or feminine, in alignment with other aspects of gender performance, is a distraction orchestrated by patriarchy to shield itself and enforce the persistence of binary thinking even as we attempt to deconstruct it. So, is it possible to discourage Stephen's non-

conforming style without also discouraging her consumption of fashion? Furthermore, can Stephen be patronized for enjoying fashion if she's consuming the wrong styles of clothes? Afterall, how can society police, reinforce, and subordinate her behavior simultaneously? Furthermore, "[s]ince in England in the 1920s, fashion-conscious women of all sexual persuasions were obliged to 'cross-dress' by donning boyish or mannish attire and by cutting their hair short, we must be receptive to the multiple interpretive possibilities of the performance of female masculinity" (Doan 667). Heteronormative society can't neatly interpret these mixed signals; my reading of Stephen's behavior, thus, insists on a queer interpretation that argues: both gender-normative clothing and labeling women's enjoyment of clothes as feminine are cultural assumptions fabricated to justify sexism, therefore Stephen's selective compliance frustrates heteropatriarchy's self-confirmation process by resisting binary logic altogether.[146]

When Stephen enters her next relationship, her clothes again take on a special significance.[147] Stephen meets Mary Llewellyn while serving as in the ambulance corps during the war. Though discouraged from forming an attachment, after an intimate holiday to recover from the traumas of war during which they finally embrace their love for one another, Mary moves to Paris with Stephen to build a home together. It is during this process of homemaking, that Stephen's clothes shift meaning once again as the intimacy between the two women is reflected in the intimacy of dressing. In the opening scene of book five, they watch each other in

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[146] I acknowledge that, in general, I am primarily interested in how gender difference functions via fashion for the purposes of this dissertation, however, I do believe *The Well of Loneliness* lends itself well to a deconstruction methodology; therefore, I find it productive and relevant to pursue that line of inquiry here as this discussion demonstrates feminist critiques of fashion can be not only be used to examine difference but also to dismantle it. This exercise synthesizes the commentaries of Butler, Grosz, and Halberstam above and Guillaumin in the previous chapter.

[147] In fact, descriptions of clothes are conspicuously absent from books three and four of the novel between Stephen's leaving home after the ruinous affair and her romance with Mary Llewellyn. This could partly be explained by the war years; however, I believe the link between relationships and clothes here not insignificant. Interestingly, Stephen's writing is also a primary focus of those intervening years, and I will return to this observation later in the chapter when I discuss Orlando's belief in "life and a lover" as prerequisites of good writing.

the mirror and, as Stephen dresses, Mary notices the "line of her thighs" and "curve of her breasts" as Stephen "had taken off her jacket and looked very tall in her soft silk shirt and her skirt of dark serge" (Hall 321). Since Stephen's wearing pants is a focal point in books one and two (in fact, she seems to have insisted on wearing pants when she was younger[148]), the skirt here can be read as a more fluid approach to gender performance in her post-war life. The fact that Hall herself practiced the same kind of cross-dressing as her heroine is arguably one of the primary pieces of evidence critics point to when describing the book as autobiographical. Though I would grant the novel more complexity than that owing to its inclusion of a spectrum of female and lesbian experiences, I do believe her own dress as a writer is notable here given the present discussion. Here we can look to Hall's own fashions during this time to illuminate Stephen's sartorial shift towards skirts. Photos from 1923 show Hall wearing "breeches" publicly

> indicating a gradual acceptance of trousers as a part of women's dress for a few, very specific, occasions. Trousers were not, however, generally accepted as women's wear until the 1940sor 1950s and Radclyffe Hall never wore them as formal dress, although there are some private photographs of her wearing them during the 1930s. (Rolley 57)[149]

Although women's dress was more permissive in the interwar years, pants were still considered somewhat sensational. So, as Laura Doan asks:

> is Hall fashionably Modern or a mannish lesbian? The answer – and the point – is both. Just as a boyishness allowed young women and girls to pass or play-pass as boys,

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[148] It is one of Ralph's primary objections to his wife's friendship with her, as he proclaims, "She's appalling; never saw such a girl in my life; comes swaggering round her with her legs in breeches" (Hall 151).

[149] Laura Doan advises caution when discussing cross-dressing as Hall and Troubridge performed it, given that there were simultaneous discourses of gender, sexuality, and mainstream fashion transformations taking place. Doan claims that "[b]iographers who neglect to situate their lesbian subjects against fashions of the 1920s thus inevitably misinterpret their subjects" (Doan 686). Therefore, it may be necessary to read Hall's dress as both subversive and fashionable, since "[d]ressed in a masculine mode, Hall and Troubridge courted the public gaze at first nights and other public events. Sightings of the pair reported on the society pages suggest that they were regarded as women with the utmost fashion sense" (Doan 689).

> twenties' fashions allowed older women – past the age to be taken as boys – to pass as the masculine 'look.' Older women who flirted with the 'look' would have been more likely to be taken for fashionable than lesbian. The modern look and the Lesbian look would not converge until the trial of *The Well of Loneliness"* (Doan 686).

It is interesting that both Hall and her heroine comply with the obligatory skirts during this time, but it is also important to note that doing so was neither necessarily a complicity with gender norms nor unfashionable. For Hall, and I would argue Stephen as well, the prevailing fashions allowed a greater freedom to wear more masculine clothing as adults; however, that fashionability may also conceal the fact that the performance was not fully satisfying for the wearers. With this in mind, I would argue that the urge to wear pants can be read as a matter of fulfillment. As a youth, Stephen's outlets for her gender expression and self-fulfillment are limited to her wardrobe, but in a fulfilling relationship strict rejection of normative fashions may not be strictly necessary as her relationship also serves to affirm her gender expression to some degree. It is also worth mentioning that as the couple is unpacking, Mary inventories her lover's wardrobe of suits, ties, pajamas, and other mannish paraphernalia including "the heavy silk masculine underwear that for several years now had been worn by Stephen (Hall 322).[150] So, Stephen does still maintain a high degree of masculine gender performance but is comfortable internalizing – quite literally, in the form of underwear – aspects of that expression allowing her to display some willingness to comply with the dominant women's dress of the day.

As Rolley points out, "an understanding of contemporary fashionable and acceptable dress, as the mean against which any deviation is measured, is obviously vital to an interpretation of 'lesbian' styles" (56). Since Hall personally identified with the concept of "inversion" as an

[150] (These are mentioned one other time, need to find the reference) This example complements the analysis of Sonya and Lily's undergarments in the previous chapter as well.

amalgamation lesbian sexuality and masculine gender identity, we can understand that for her sexual and sartorial expression are merged as well.

This was not uncommon among expatriate women in Paris at the time as Shari Benstock points out in *Women of the Left Bank,* historically critics believe

> [t]term 'inversion,' used by these women to describe their own sexual inclinations, meant for them not only the desire for someone of the same sex, but the more pervasive need to duplicate heterosexuality within the homosexual relationship and to play out the sexual ambiguity of a woman in man's clothing seducing another woman to lesbian love. (Benstock 173)

Stephen and Mary's homemaking would seem to confirm this assumption and clothing is a core part of how they establish their roles within the relationship. Early on, Mary asks, "Who's been looking after your clothes" and we're told that "[s]he was at the stage of being in love when she longed to do womanly tasks for Stephen" (Hall 323). She enjoys watching Stephen dress and although "Mary had seen her do all this before, many times, [. . .] to-day somehow it was different; for to-day they were in their own home together" (Hall 323). Stephen's reflections during this early stage are similar, both in subject matter and sentiment, as "[t]he most mundane things were invested with glory; shopping with Mary who needed quite a number of dresses" (Hall 325). Overall, these behaviors do appear to follow heterosexual gender norms and could confirm the above assumption since Hall reports that while they're about these everyday activities "A few people might stare at the tall, scarred woman in her well-tailored clothes and black slouch hat. They would stare first at her and then at her companion [. . .] there would be a few smiles, but on the whole they would attract little notice [. . .] it was post-war France" (Hall 326). On the one hand, this certainly represents the prevailing ideas about the mannish lesbian as

discussed thus far during the period, however it is, unfortunately, a somewhat reductive portrayal of Hall and her novel, particularly in light of the spectrum of lesbian experience represented in the novel. Benstock goes on to clarify this, explaining that "[a] pervasive misconception about these Paris women rests in the insistence on their similarities" and "such typecasting along lines of gender and sexual orientation erases the important differences among them, marking a division according to sexual orientation that is itself sexist" (Benstock 174-5). Benstock's assertion here aligns with my analysis of Stephen's first suits and lesbian relationship above and further challenges the insistence upon a singular definition of "the" Paris lesbian of the 20s.[151]

Nevertheless, "[b]ecause *The Well* explicitly connects Stephen's subjectivity to the early twentieth-century sexological category of 'inversion' [. . .] Hall's novel has been a frequent object of 'turf wars'" (Coffman para. 7).[152] For this reason, throughout this discussion I have aimed to explore the multiple potential readings of Stephen and her clothes throughout the text, while resisting the urge to offer my own assessment of how either Stephen or Hall did or might identify. In doing so I believe I have managed to acknowledge, as Coffman describes it, "the ultimate irreducibility of Hall's book and of Stephen's character to simplistic categories of

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[151] Butler addresses this issue at length in *Gender Troubles,* noting that "the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy" (Butler *Gender* 31).
Doan points out that, perhaps like Benstock appears to do, Gilbert and Gubar "gloss over national differences among a diverse group of lesbian writers to speculate on the political motivations underlying some female modernists' fascination with gender and costume" (Doan 667); Doan emphasizes that "For the most pragmatic of these female modernists, gender fluidity was the name of the game, and masculine dress was one way to 'usurp male privilege." Gilbert and Gubar rightly posit a connection between women's agency and the appropriation of male clothing, but their reading clarifies neither how individual wearers might have assumed different 'male costumes' for various reasons nor how onlookers might have seen in each wearer something completely different" (Doan 668). I believe Newton's article further clarifies this point, making it important to recognize that a broad spectrum of lesbian and masculine presentations existed where perhaps the mannish lesbian label overlooks this.
[152] Newton describes this "turf war" particularly well, first asking: "[w]hy does this novel make so many lesbian feminists and their allies squirm? Unable to wish Radclyffe Hall away, sometimes even hoping to reclaim her, our feminist scholars have lectured, excused, or patronized her. [. . .] The 'real' Radclyffe Hall lesbian novel, this argument frequently continues, the one that *ought* to have been famous, is her first, *The Unlit Lamp* (1924). Better yet, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) should have been the definitive lesbian novel. Or Natalie Barney's work, or anything but *The Well"* (Newton 559).

identity" (para 7).[153] Of course, I think it is a testament to the power of the text that lends itself to a spectrum of sex, gender, and sexuality analyses and, perhaps more importantly, is still a critical queer representation text. While the Stephen's fate is a tragic one, her loneliness is one that ultimately allows for solidarity for others, regardless of critical interpretations. As Stephen's beloved governess and companion reminds her "all that you're suffering at this moment I've suffered. It was when I was very young like you – but I still remember" (Hall 205). In spite of that suffering, a century later there may be more hope gleaned from Puddle's words

> [y]ou're neither unnatural, nor abominable, nor mad; you're as much a part of what people call nature as anyone else; only you're unexplained as yet – you've not got your niche in creation. But some day that will come, and meanwhile don't shrink from yourself, but just face yourself calmly and bravely. (Hall 154)

Looking ahead to Orlando, it is interesting to consider how their different outcomes function for readers and scholars. Katherine Costello posits that

> [i]f thinkers have struggled over how to identify Stephen based on her complex relationship to her femaleness, is it possible that the novel is, in fact, a demand to readers to unmoor identity from sex and to rest instead in what I call 'sexual indeterminacy'? A deliberate suspension of knowledge about a body's sex[.] [. . .] If identity no longer required a determinate sex, the 'no-man's land of sex' in which Stephen finds herself would no longer be lonely or, indeed, deadly, but would instead be reissued as legitimately inhabitable. (Costello 3).

It is this deliberate suspension of knowledge that I now examine in Woolf's *Orlando* and demonstrate how dress allows for this habitable position of "sexual indeterminacy."

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[153] Coffman does this in his article by simply describing Stephen as "a strongly masculine, female-bodied person" (Coffman para. 7).

Orlando

"[T]here could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (Orlando 3).

While Hall's novel explores the toll of being other than society demands, Woolf's *Orlando* approaches the subject from a somewhat different angle. Because Woolf's text transgresses expectations of both time and gender, she is able to illustrate the historicity of gender as a construct, as explained via Beauvoir and Butler above. Throughout the narrative, Woolf observes the changes in gender performance according to what is considered beautiful and fashionable across four centuries. In the opening of the novel, in the seventeenth century, Woolf establishes that Orlando is in fact "he" while pointing out that his appearance would likely be considered feminine to a twentieth century reader. This may suggest that there is something inherently male about Orlando, and that the "fashion of the time" simply maintained different standards of what was considered masculine and feminine, however, because the novel brings that maleness into question as well, Woolf is setting up a parody of both sex and gender. Though Orlando's apparent unending youth is certainly fantastical, it is telling that Woolf establishes the change from man to woman to be the miraculous element in their life, with no real attention paid to the passing years other than the change in monarchs; because patriarchy is so deeply entrenched in society's functioning, the idea that a body might confound that system is the more puzzling element. Through *Orlando,* I explore the ways in which Woolf provides valuable commentary on the fashioning and maintenance of the sex-gender system and successfully unravels that construction through the character of Orlando who defies representation along binary logics.

Building on the discussion of gender performance above, I argue here that not only gender but also sex is a myth constructed to establish and maintain heteropatriarchy.[154] I believe the language of myth is particularly useful here in that mythologies serve a meaning-making function through which society develops a vocabulary for and establishes cultural norms and social structure. Along these lines, sex is the myth designed to establish heteropatriarchy and gender the norms and practices which maintain that belief and power structure. If we acknowledge: (1) that the social contract of sexual identity is not only "representation" whereby "one body or agent is taken to stand for a group of diverse bodies" – dividing all bodies along the male/female binary – but also "metonymical representation of a complex body by a privileged part of that body" – identity determined by reproductive anatomy (Gatens 81), and (2) that "gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes and if that significance is codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception" – i.e. compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction –, then "within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex distinct from gender" (Butler 407). Here Gatens discussion of social contract theory and the body politic is particularly useful when combined with Judith Butler's exploration of the act of gender performance in that, together, we can understand both sex, as the reduction of the body to its reproductive capacity, and gender, as the embodiments of sex, as simultaneously codified through heteronormativity.[155] As a mythology then, gender, and in particular heteronormativity, is the reifying of the sex myth in that the cultural significance of sex becomes the survival of the human race. Because sex is the myth placing the reason for our continued existence on

[154] Though the discussion that follows is based primarily on the arguments of Gatens and Butler, my argument also aligns with that of Guillaumin (discussed in the previous chapter) in that, rather than sexism being a response to sex, sex is constructed in order to justify sexism.

[155] Gatens also conveniently begins these arguments in the context of seventeenth century philosophy which neatly aligns with our first introduction to Orlando's experience of/against the social contract of sexual identity during the period (80-3).

reproductive anatomy and is "codetermined" with gender performance via heteronormativity, the reification of heteropatriarchy is thus articulated by the sex-gender binary mythology as a vocabulary of "being." In other words, heteropatriarchy is the social contract whereby society agrees to believe the ontological myth of sex by participating in gender performance and heterosexuality.[156] Woolf troubles this significantly in *Orlando* then by imagining a being whose sex and gender refuse to participate in this vocabulary but nonetheless participates in reproduction.[157]

Because *Orlando,* is a fictional biography Woolf is able to sidestep conventions of genre as well and pause to provide her own analysis on the subject of sex. On the one hand, this allows Woolf to make many of the observations about her own writing as I have done with the novels discussed prior to this, which grants a unique opportunity to participate in a dialogue with the writer and her text simultaneously. On the other, this creative stylistic transgression allows Woolf to avoid the kind of moralizing she seems to have objected to in Hall's conventional novel structure. Conveniently, Woolf makes many of her critiques through the medium of clothes throughout the text as Orlando refuses to settle or be neatly categorized as either man or woman. In fact, "it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; [. . .] she was a man; she was a woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each" (Orlando 100). As Nancy Cervetti argues, Woolf's novel works against the concepts of inversion as "Orlando disdains the loss or partialness implicit in a singular gender identity; she refuses the anxious need to clearly define. S/he never feels or

[156] This also explains the fear discussed in the beginning of the previous section as an ontological anxiety.
[157] I think it is important to note that I will not take great pains to grammatically disentangle sex and gender further in this analysis since, in acknowledging - as Butler does - that sex and gender are codetermined, it is neither necessary nor indeed possible to do so. I will generally use sex throughout as a matter of convenience and consistency with Woolf's text, though the term does tend more precisely to encompass sex-gender in her usage.

suggests 'a woman trapped in a man's body' or 'a man trapped in the body of a woman'" (166). Instead, Cervetti argues, "Orlando codes his dress according to practicality or sexual desire" (166). Woolf takes what Hall first began in *The Well of Loneliness* and explore what it might be like for a person to live in the space of trying-on rather than trying to belong. Although Orlando is a sci-fi fantasy novel of sorts so this may allow for the kind of exploration that is less likely to be consumed if presented as reality.[158] By suspending the realities of time Woolf is also able to suspend the realities of sex as well so that we might imagine what a person like Stephen's life might be like were they able to truly and simply 'be' rather than being a certain kind of being. This calls to mind again the "essential" identity discussed in the introduction.

S/he's Got Legs

One of Woolf's most pointed (and humorous) critiques of sexual double standards centers on Orlando's legs.[159] In fact, mentions of Orlando's legs are the most prominent, recurring descriptions of his appearance in the beginning of the text, and a sudden awareness of how her change in sex alters their perception marks Orlando's understanding of the cultural subordination of women from both sides as it were. Though the biography spans four centuries, the twentieth century preoccupation with legs is prominent in Woolf's writing, and Hall's as well. According to Pamela Caughie this signals to a wider generic convention as

> *Orlando* shares a number of motifs and themes with other transsexual narratives, in addition to the requisite sex change. There is the synecdoche of the leg whereby a single

[158] As Prosser argues "*Orlando* is not about the sexed body at all but the cultural vicissitudes of gender. As h/er narrative propels h/er through four centuries of history, Orlando is free to move beyond h/er body – quite queerly, to break through the limits of the flesh; *The Well*'s protagonist, by contrast remains as trapped in her sexually inverted moment as she is in her body" (168). While, as I have explained above, I believe sex and gender are less readily distinct than this point may suggest, the comparison of the two is useful for understanding the positions of each.

[159] This section also neatly introduces blurred line between clothes and the body, especially regarding (un)covering the body, to be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter.

> appendage comes to signify sexual identity, both masculinity and femininity, at different points in the narrative as in history. ("Temporality" 512)[160]

Caughie's point thus brings together the biographer's fascination with Orlando's legs over the course of the text into a new perspective when considered alongside the discussion of Butler and Gatens above. To this point I would also add with regard to the temporality of Woolf's writing that this social fixation was also due in large part to the significant changes in women's fashions in the 1920s; as women were beginning to show them either in shorter skirts or pants, this was a shocking revelation both in the exposure of skin and in the suggestion that women had legs in general (as centuries of western women's fashion masked the offending appendages entirely), the implication being that an awareness of a woman's legs naturally precludes a knowledge of what's (not) between them. Owing to the perceived indecency of a woman's disclosed leg, the different ways that both writers treat legs is an interesting aside to fashion at the time and the control of women's bodies.

The analysis of skirts and pants addressed in *The Well of Loneliness* above offers some insights into this conversation, and Woolf's treatment of both legs and their coverings continues the discussion. In *Well,* the question of Stephen's gender stuck on the issue of her legs quite often as she got older. When she was young, people would observe "[d]oesn't Miss Stephen look exactly like a boy? I believe she must be a boy with them shoulders, and them funny gawky legs she's got on her!", establishing the otherness of her body as not fitting the proper mold of what a young girl should look like, to which "Stephen would say gravely: 'Yes, of course I'm a boy" (Hall 20). Such interactions when she is younger parallel those surrounding her clothes as outlined above because, as she gets older, her boyish legs become less acceptable, as did her

[160] Caughie's article provides an interesting comparison of Woolf's fictional biography with the actual biography of Lili Elbe (referred to as Einar Wegener in the title).

boyish clothes. This is of course due to the fact that, as Stephen's father reminded her, she may be raised like a boy, but she must grow up to be a woman, and therefore be sexualized. According to Elizabeth Grosz "Bodies themselves, in their materialities, are never self-present, given things, immediate, certain self-evidences because embodiment, corporeality, insist on alterity", which I believe is important to acknowledge that the materiality of Stephen's body is indeed more unstable, particularly when she is younger, than one might assume (Grosz 209). Interestingly, Grosz continues pointing out that the alterity of the body operated multiply as "the heart of the psyche lies in the body; the body's principles of functioning are psychological and cultural" (209). For Stephen, the alterity embodied by the body's functions emphasizes her conflicting materiality over the course of her life. As a child her legs are exposed dressing up as a boy, while riding astride, and in the shorter skirts of girlhood but, eventually, this exposure is no longer acceptable because allowing anyone to perceive (the space between) her legs may as well suggest outright sexual promiscuity. Given the disturbance caused by Stephen's riding astride, and all the sexual baggage that comes with it, it seems fitting that when Orlando becomes a woman and rides out of Constantinople leaving her life as a diplomat behind, she too "swung her leg over" without a second thought, though this moment is actually only a midway point in a long line of references to Orlando's own legs (Woolf, *Orlando* 88). Keeping this in mind, as Gilbert and Gubar insist, "Orlando's sexchange is not a fall" (*Sexchanges* 344). Rather, to continue from Grosz's point Orlando's change is marking the shift in her body's psychological and cultural functioning which aligns with the other changes taking place over the course of a fantastical life. In other words, "it is simply a shift in fashion, so that Woolf associates it with the shifts in literary style and shifts in historical styles, which remind us that, like Orlando, all is in flux, no fixed hierarchy endures or should endure" (Gilbert and Gubar 344).

Though descriptions of Orlando's clothes during his life as a man are limited, mentions of his legs, particularly women's fascination with them, are a prominent feature. Woolf's use of Orlando's legs in this way is thus an interesting reversal of the sexualization of women's legs. In his second meeting with Queen Elizabeth, she takes in the appearance of Orlando as a young man with an appraising eye and "when she saw his legs she laughed out loud" thinking that "he was the very image of a noble gentleman" (Orlando 10). She then bestows upon him the order of the Garter in an intimate moment of physical contact and exposure (Woolf *Orlando* 10). The moment establishes Orlando's legs as his most attractive feature, and also sets up the comparison that Orlando herself with note later. This scene is played out several times over Orlando's years as a man such as when the Archduchess Harriet seductively dresses his leg in a shin piece from a suit of armor and Woolf again reminds us "that he had a pair of the shapeliest legs that any Nobleman has ever stood upright upon has already been said" (Orlando 70). Indeed it has, as apparently everyone is obsessed with Orlando's legs as their accolades continue into his political career when he is promoted and "[t]he envious said that this was Nell Gwyn's tribute to the memory of a leg" though "it is likely that it was his merits that won him his dukedom, not his calves" (Woolf 79). [Although this doesn't stop gossipers at the ceremony celebrating his appointment noting, again, "Such a leg!" (Orlando 81).] With this profusion of leg related inuendo, Woolf seems to be deliberately playing with the idea that women's legs are sexualized by objectifying Orlando the man's legs before he becomes Orlando the woman. To return to Grosz's discussion

> Alterity is the very possibility and process of embodiment; it conditions but is also a product of the pliability and process of embodiment; it conditions but is also a product of

> the pliability or plasticity of bodies which makes them other than themselves, other than their 'nature,' their functions and identities. (Grosz 209)

It is interesting here, then, to consider Orlando's body as other than its 'nature' through this sex change. Because both time and the body function other than expected in *Orlando,* I would argue that Woolf's text exemplifies they ways in which bodies are manipulated to justify otherness rather than assuming that otherness is somehow natural or self-evident.

In fact, it is an awareness of how her legs are perceived when she is returning home to England that signals Orlando's understanding of how she will be treated differently as a woman. Though materially Orlando's legs remain unchanged, culturally her body is read as if they were. Just as she rides astride while leaving her diplomatic post, when she acquires the skirts and other accoutrements of a proper English lady for her voyage home, she becomes aware of the hinderances of her sex that she had not experienced as a young man with lovely legs. Ever the attentive biographer, Woolf observes

> it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs [. . .] that she realised with a start the penalties and privileges of her position. But that start was not of the kind that might have been expected. It was not caused, that is to say simply and solely by the thought of her chastity and how she could preserve it. In normal circumstances a lovely young woman alone would have thought of nothing else; the whole edifice of female government is based on that foundation stone; [. . .] But if one has been a man for thirty years or so, [. . .] one does not perhaps give such a great start about that. (Orlando 97)

The nuance of this passage brings to light not only the dawning awareness of how Orlando will be treated differently as a woman, but also of how arbitrary that treatment is. Orlando acknowledges that as a woman she *should* be vigilant about protecting her virtue, however,

because she has only recently become a woman, she has not received the requisite conditioning to make her so. Here Woolf highlights the virginal young woman is in actuality a learned performance rather than a natural state of being.[161] This realization is reinforced when a while later Orlando, annoyed at the revelation that she must now be preoccupied with "being chaste year in and year out" [. . .] "tossed her foot impatiently, and showed an inch or two of calf" causing a nearby sailor to nearly fall to his death as the shocking display (Orlando 99). The new necessity to be chaste and modest is puzzling to Orlando because it is not a natural behavior, but an external expectation. Although the "privileged part" of Orlando's body has changed, nothing else about it has and neither has Orlando herself changed.

The contrast between Orlando's changed sexual anatomy with the rest of her unchanged body and mind is a powerful image that highlights the illogical assumption that a single part is expected to define the whole, and in this case shift the entire self to its polar opposite. The unnaturalness of this system is baffling and though Orlando initially thinks she must now cover up, the prospect frustrates her, since

> her legs were among her chiefest beauties. And she fell to thinking what an odd pass we have come to when all a woman's beauty has to be kept covered lest a sailor may fall from a mast-head. [. . .] realising for the first time what, in other circumstances, she

[161] Though by the end of the text Orlando appears to navigate this liminal embodiment with nonchalance I believe it is worth considering whether the psychological dilemma is resolved as easily as the sartorial one. Gilbert and Gubar do claim "Orlando has the best of both sexes in a happy multiform which she herself has chosen. And in accordance with this visionary multiplicity, she inhabits a world where almost anyone can change his or her sexual habits at any time" (Gilbert and Gubar 345). While this is perhaps a "utopian" approach to the gender questions, it is interesting to consider that, existing outside of and in all time, Orlando somehow transcends patriarchy as well. In their body Orlando is able to do and be whatever they choose because they are aware of those categorizations. However, I would add the caveat that in fact Orlando also experiences the worst of both genders because she reflects that many of the opinions she held as a man are in fact fabricated and so demonstrates an awareness of them that becomes challenging to resist. As Orlando herself puts it "Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires' she reflected; For women are not (judging by my own shot experience of the sex) obedient chaste, scented and exquisitely appareled by nature. They can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline" (Orlando 99).

> would have been taught as a child, that is to say, the sacred responsibilities of womanhood. (Orlando 100)

By maintaining that Orlando's legs are still aesthetically pleasing, Woolf is bringing to the forefront the double standard attached to them when, as a young man, Orlando's legs could be displayed proudly but, as a new woman, she must now be afraid and ashamed to show them.[162] Orlando's legs are just legs, but when she is perceived as a woman they become sexualized and it is her responsibility to avoid sexual attention, not men's responsibility to control it. That these "responsibilities" are something that must be learned is indeed central to Woolf's critique of gender in the text. While Orlando "was horrified to perceive how low an opinion she was forming of the other sex, the manly, to which it has once been her pride to belong" many of the sentiments expressed in throughout this reflection on Orlando's legs are ones Woolf explores further in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (Woolf *Orlando* 100).[163] According to Sheehan, "Woolf reveals that patriarchal and state power produce the distinction between garments subject to fashion and those (such as uniforms and ceremonial dress) that are supposedly immune to it", and "much of Woolf's work encourages a fashion-conscious mode of

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[162] Orlando's legs also bring to mind contemporary conversations surrounding rape culture, and victim blaming in particular.

[163] The reflections discussed here are only a sampling of the extensive discussion on the sexes perception of each other Woolf writes in this brief section of *Orlando*. For example, the observation that "[t]o fall from a mast-head [. . .] because you see a woman's ankles; to dress up like a Guy Fawkes and parade the streets, so that women may praise you; to deny a woman teaching lest she may laugh at you; to be the slave of the frailest chit in petticoats, and yet to go about as if you were the Lords of creation" on page 100 of *Orlando* bears a striking resemblance to Woolf's discussion of men's egos and dress in *Three Guineas* on page nineteen. (This specific passage is predicting what Orlando will do later laughing at the Archduke when she cheats at their game (117) then drops a toad down his shirt (118) in the plot of the "biography" however it is also indicative of the larger argument Woolf makes about men's self-conscious control over women's circumstances.) In many respects Woolf appears to be exploring multiple avenues for articulating her critiques of women's subordinate position in society in each of these three texts and, while *Orlando* is a parody it still carries the sharpness of those critiques quite clearly in her trademark interludes within the text. Additionally, most descriptions of Orlando's dress as man are of military or noble distinction. Such as at his promotion: "the Admiral placed the Collar of the most Noble order of the Bath round his neck, then pinned the Star to his breast; after which another gentleman of the diplomatic corps advancing in a stately manner placed on his shoulders the ducal robes and handed him on a crimson cushion the ducal coronet" (Orlando 82). This description parallels Woolf's outlining the military dress garb in *Guineas* as well.

perception, which can sense the uneven texture of the social fabric" (Sheehan 9).[164] In all I believe this encounter, and the discussion of legs in both *Orlando* and *Well* point to the challenges of articulating the material consequences of gender oppression, not just in terms of wealth or property (though this does impact both Stephen and Orlando as well), but those imposed on the physical body as well.

As I've discussed previously, it is this difficulty that makes clothing a useful language for communicating one's positionality. Furthermore, as I demonstrated in this chapter in particular, they serve as both a conduit and a buffer for social critiques and conventions. At this turning point in the text Woolf explicitly addresses this idea when describing how Orlando does not really *feel* the change until she dons conventional women's clothes for the journey home. With this sudden inner turmoil brought to the surface "[t]he change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us" (Woolf *Orlando* 120). Here Woolf acknowledges the multiple functions of clothes, in particular how our identities are read through them. I am especially interested in the kind of mirroring that Woolf implies here, that not only are we ourselves are read through our clothes, but they also provide a means for more tangible understanding of society as well. For Orlando, it is not when she wakes as a woman in Turkey that she understands this new position, but once she "bought herself a complete outfit of such clothes as women the wore" ("the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank") the possibility that her relationship to society, and its to her, may now

[164] Interestingly, Sheehan also argues that "Woolf's work does not however, endorse fashion as a form of production, consumption, or political expression" (*Modernism* 9). This is a sticky topic for many scholars who have difficulty reconciling Woolf's own use of fashion, particularly in fiction, in contrast to her professed positions in *Three Guineas* or "Modern Fiction". Interestingly, I believe the reflections in her diaries discussed in the introduction and chapter 1 should remind us to perhaps acknowledge and accept the contradiction rather than letting these statements limit the discussion.

be transformed (97). “It is a strange fact, but a true one that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought” (97). What’s interesting is that she doesn’t actually describe the clothes, just that they’re the kind a woman would wear so they give her an awareness of her sex and social rank rather than her professional rank like clothes had done previously. The contemplation goes on for four pages about what these clothes mean and how she now thinks because of them, but perhaps most interesting is the physical limitations she now contemplates. Orlando’s thoughts are conflicted between pleasure and frustration making her wonder at the allure of complicity.

> [T]hese skirts are plaguey things to have about one’s heels. Yet the stuff (flowered paduasoy) is the loveliest in the world. Never have I seen my own skin to such advantage as now. Could I however, leap overboard and swim in clothes like these? No! Therefore, I should have to trust to the protection of a blue-jacket. Do I object to that? Now do I? (Woolf *Orlando* 98)

Unlike Stephen, Orlando does not necessarily object to her appearance in women’s clothes. As I will explore shortly, Orlando’s difficulties as a woman are those presented by the legal and social limitations, not that she has a desire to be other than she is or what he was before. She seems comfortable in her appearance in either regard and thus determines to simply perform that which is most convenient at the time. Therefore, “[a]lthough the clothes control Orlando as she adjusts to womanhood, she is well aware that she is the one who chooses the clothes” (Burns 351). Indeed, though she finds the adjustment challenging there is an acceptance. When she returns home, navigating her new identity and prey to new property lawsuits and suitors, negotiating this change is tricky as we see through her new clothes as an English lady. The social and material consequences indeed seem more pressing than the personal or bodily.

> I am losing my illusions, perhaps to acquire new ones,' and she paced down the long gallery to her bedroom. It was a disagreeable process and a troublesome. But it was interesting, amazingly, she thought, stretching her legs out to her log fire (for no sailor was present), and she reviewed, as if it were an avenue of great edifices, the progress of her own self along her own past. (Woolf *Orlando* 112)[165]

In acquiring new illusions, though, Orlando does not merely aim to replace a male demeanor with the female. Rather, I would argue that when Orlando "reviewed [. . .] the progress of her own self" sought to synthesize rather than revise her mode of being in the world, which becomes apparent as her change is a process rather than a precise moment and one in which she moves fluidly through cross-dressing. What's perhaps most interesting in Orlando's choice to dress as either man or woman is that s/he is also not the only character to do so. For both Stephen and Orlando then, we can view their own self-perceptions, or moods, as reflective of their fixed positions (or lack thereof in Orlando's case), according to Sheehan's interpretation of Heidegger: "moods underscore that Being is cast into a particular time and place that determine the contours and possibilities of its existence" (Sheehan 40). When applied to fashion like that in Woolf's

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[165] In the film she is not just mentally but also physically navigating her home situation in a wide dress having to shuffle sideways to pass through gaps in the furniture. This moment also calls to mind Oscar Wilde's thoughts on women's dress as an interesting aside given Orlando's own musings as a write and aesthete. A summary of Wilde's opinions begins "In a recent lecture delivered by Oscar Wilde, be remarked that the laws of beauty and proportion should be taught to children as a daily lesson. If this were done he had no doubt that a very few years would see the total abolition of the many erroneous ideas which enter into an average individual's conception of the beautiful in dress. For instance, it would soon be ascertained that the female waist is not naturally a right angle, as dressmakers now fondly suppose" (London 12). Ironically, this excerpt is bisected by a fashion plate illustrating exactly this aesthetic where a woman's "promenade costume" shows the back bustle of her skirt stick out at an absurd right angle from her corseted waist. The article continues saying that "the lecturer went on to say that it was hardly necessary point out the vast injury done to health by this false idea that the smallness is a criterion of beauty" (London 12). The article does go on to discuss his dictates of ideal proportion, pointing particularly to Greek statues, and to color and the like so while the standards of Eurocentric beauty and prettiness overall are not actually challenged by Wilde in this lecture the acknowledgement of the harmful practices of altering women's bodies to be as small as possible is revolutionary. While the nineteenth century focused on small waists the twentieth century fixation on small busts would not doubt produce the same damages and derision from the writer. He seems to be pointing to a universal aesthetic of complementariness like Sonya in Salome. (Oscar Wilde on Ladies dress London Journal 1 Jan 1886. This is repeated in his Philosophy of dress which is the lecture this writer is summarizing.)

writing, “dressing and knowledge seeking are not mutually exclusive [and Woolf’s writing] contrasts these two anxious activities and traces gendered hierarchies between ways of knowing, including dress, literature, religion, politics, and science” (Sheehan 41). Thus, we can read Orlando’s dressing, and that of her lovers, as such a knowledge seeking process.

Disguises

Given that Orlando’s story is framed as a biography, this knowledge seeking process is one for the readers as well. Thus, when Woolf subliminally makes us question his gender in the opening of the book, she immerses the readers in this process alongside Orlando, seeking to discover whether s/he is a (wo)man. As many scholars have noted the narrator/biographer/Woolf “seems to protest too much” (Cervetti 116; Craps 177), yet, because they *know* that Orlando is (fe)male over the course of their life, their own certainty at that moment is parodic in that they also know that he will not always be. This moment not only interrupts the story, indeed before it has begun, but also interrupting our assumptions about Orlando before they have become firmly established as well. Or as Stef Craps neatly observes, this move “the sly introduction is representative of the novel as a whole, which forces us to reconsider virtually everything we thought we knew about gender and sexuality” (Craps 177-8). When Woolf plays with language again as Orlando wakes to find herself a woman the interpolation is not only more direct but also encompasses the slippages of time, gender, and language together.

> Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory – but in future we must, for convention’s sake,

> say 'her' for 'his', and 'she' for 'he' – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle" (Orlando 87).[166]

In bringing to mind the notion that Orlando *is* their past-present-future self at all times, rather than one or the other in moment on a timeline, Woolf subverts the possibility for definition, by either the biographer or the reader, affording Orlando complete self-definition. Indeed, the text as a body also aids this process as the past-present-future Orlando is contained within the book just as within their body; both Woolf's writing and Orlando are therefore self-determined. Burns makes this claim as well, noting that "the pronouns – their, his, her – are comfortably accommodated in a single 'identity' determined by memory chains, a further mark of the disidentification present in identity. That is, there is a certain plurality and mark of difference always present in this identification (Burns 350). Importantly Burns also emphasizes that these slippages are ones which we – Woolf, biographer/narrator, reader – are aware of but for Orlando "initially the change in external, physical being has no impact on the self's internal identification" (Burns 350).[167] This physical *being* appears to bare no significant weight for

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[166] Graydon's explanation of terminology is particularly helpful for explaining the type of language I use throughout and sums up why this chapter is uninterested in deconstruction labels perse and more inclined to examine how a body may navigate within/out that terminology at any given moment via the embodiment of sex, gender, and sexuality. "[T]he term *gender* is used to refer to one's own sense of gendered self, regardless of genitalia. This implies that gender can be constructed, that we have choice, and that gender is mutable. The term *woman* may feel exclusive to some people who do not identify as female. When I use the words *women* and *woman,* it is the broadens sense possible and with all the vastness that can be implied and conjured; thus, *women includes* both assigned female at birth (cisgendered or non-trans) women, transgendered women, and anyone who identifies as a woman and female – however that looks, has been, and is for her. I use '*she'* and '*her'* throughout the book, while occasionally using s/he or they" (Graydon 3). It is also important to note that both Hall and Woolf use sex primarily throughout their writing which is why the anachronistic assignment of gender language is not altogether helpful and sometimes confusing to apply. Furthermore, both novels address the cultural preoccupation with genitalia as the primary defining feature of one's identity regardless of whether that is labeled as a gender, sex, or sexual identity. My use sex is not ignoring the fraught nature of that label but rather for simplicity's sake remaining consistent with the texts of this analysis as the deconstruction of binary labeling is beyond the scope of this project. (Though I retain the right to practice slippages of my own between sex and gender in writing as granted by Woolf and since maintaining the distinction is not critical to my argument.

[167] This refers to one of the most memorable reflections in the novel, in which "Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let

Orlando, though, as I discussed above, she begins to realize society's drive to confirm her sex runs contrary to her own self-knowledge.

Stef Craps thus argues that Orlando's "unveiling [. . .] exposes as a metaphysical illusion the notion that gender identity is an intractable depth or inner substance. No bare, naked, essential truths are revealed in this passage; obscurity still functions" (179). Though an unveiling, the revelation of Orlando's naked female form, should serve as a confirmation to the question raised with the opening line, the affect is in fact quite the opposite as all but Orlando remain unknowing, or unsatisfied, as to their *true* nature. As Craps continues, "Orlando is composed of a multiplicity of selves none of which can lay claim to being more authentic or essential than the rest. [. . .] What is revealed in the moment of unveiling, then, is the arbitrariness and instability of the binary system of gender definition" (Craps 179). Given this instability of language and the body, one might assume that clothes would help to inform or resolve this process via the dressing-knowledge seeking process discussed above. However, as this pursuit is frustrated as well, since "to give an exact and particular account of Orlando's life at this time becomes more and more out of the question" because "[t]he task is made still more difficult by the fact that she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another" (Woolf *Orlando* 141). Through Orlando's unwillingness to be fully knowable to society, or to readers

> Gender becomes a cultural performance shown to be historically, even geographically, contingent and in the service of the regulatory systems of reproduction and compulsory heterosexuality. Anticipating Judith Butler's claim that gender is a stylized repetition of

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biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since" (Orlando 88).

> acts through time, the novel demonstrates possibilities for gender transformation in the arbitrary relation of these acts and in their parodic repetitions (Cervetti 168).[168]

I would argue that in fact it is the inconsistency of these repetitions that troubling gender as well since Orlando repeats multiple possible gender configurations as "she founds it convenient". This choice on her part, thus, conceives of a performance somewhat beyond Butler's own assertions in that Orlando does in fact "try on" gender. Though the consequences of such a state is perhaps more realistically played out in *Well* as the "world had achieved its first real victory" in wearing down such resistance, for Orlando "[s]he had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive" (141).

Orlando is not the only one whose sex is concealed in the novel. In fact, his first love, Sasha perfectly encapsulates the historically and geographically contingent performance Butler and Cervetti point to. Orlando smitten with Sasha from the moment he sees her, though he is in fact unsure whether she is a man. Just as the "fashion of the time" blurred our first encounter with Orlando, neither the figure nor the fashion do anything to give away the sex of his desired.

> a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity. The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-

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[168] Detloff and Helt make a similar argument in *Virginia Woolf Miscellany,* stating: "[l]ike Judith Butler, who in *Gender Trouble* noted the power of parody to undermine the 'naturalness' of gender norms, Woolf demonstrates (even more playfully) how the parodic spectacle of gender performance calls into question less spectacular forms of gender performance (what we might call the unremarked everyday doing of gender)*"* (3).
As mentioned in my earlier discussion of Butler, Orlando's giving birth is another disruption of this process, the assumption being that if one does not conform to the sex/gender binary neither would one reproduce. Particularly since Orlando and Shelmerdine have a child as a result of their physiological ability to do so while *also* destabilizing both of their gender identities, I would argue that *Orlando* disrupts heteropatriarchy's existential anxiety underlying compulsory heterosexuality.

> coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person" (*Orlando* 18).[169]

Though the sex is unclear, the sexual attraction is evident. This is the first instance after those opening lines when Woolf very explicitly parodies gender norms and introduces not the fluid sexuality that will accompany Orlando's later gender fluidity as well. "Even when the external dress clearly signifies 'man' or 'woman', the text delights in erotic confusion regard what 'body' is under the garments, how that 'body' has come to be, and how it performs" (Cervetti 166). At first though, Orlando is bound by a normative response and the quick back and forth as Orlando tried to establish his unknown beloved's sex offers a previous of the very notions which Orlando herself will later confound. Initially, he decides "alas, a boy it must be – no woman could skate with such speed and vigour" he laments the assumption and "was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question" (Orlando 19). But, almost immediately, he changes his mind, observing: "no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea. [. . .] She was a woman" (Orlando 19). Though on the surface this scene may be read as highly normative it is worth examining more closely since "[s]exual determination is thus not secured prior to affection in Woolf's novel, but *fixing* gender becomes an important part of courtship, at least prior to the twentieth century" (Burns 352). So, though initially Orlando may be compelled to heteronormative performances, Woolf does begin troubling it before he becomes a woman. Burns expands this point, arguing that "[a]s Woolf approaches the modern era, she ironizes gender stabilization and comes very close to valuing homosexual love explicitly" (352). This becomes apparent in both the figures of Archduchess

[169] Fashion in the 20s being boyish even though this is the 1600s also calls to mind the Russian inspired ballet russe Poiret outfits discussed in the introduction.

Harriet/Archduke Harry and Orlando's husband, Shelmerdine. Harriet/Harry and Orlando are (un)known to each other in multiple configurations. As a man Orlando finds himself pursued by "the figure of a very tall lady in riding hood and mantle" who "resembled nothing so much as a hare" (*Orlando* 69). When Orlando returns to England, she encounters the archduchess again and learns she is actually the archduke (114). With both Sasha and Harry their sex is also masked and unknowable through their dress. It seems, I would argue, that this past knowledge of others' changeable forms functions to queer both Orlando's sexuality and her own dress practices – as they've modeled non-normative modes of expression for her. This point is further established when the archduke tells Orlando, "[f]or to him, [. . .] she was and would ever be the Pink, the Pearl, the Perfection of her sex" (Orlando 115). This being, of course, the ultimate in irony as neither he nor Orlando has been "properly" sexed.

Woolf concludes this play between the sexes with Orlando's marriage to Shelmerdine. Though again, at first glance the match may appear as a move towards normativity in Orlando's life as a woman, I would reflect back to the notion that Orlando is at all times, all versions of herself. While she and Shelmerdine appear to be a heterosexual couple, both Orlando's persistent gender play and their own *knowing* of each other troubles this assumption. As Shelmerdine and Orlando get acquainted "an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously" and they each exclaim that the other is *other* than they assumed (*Orlando* 164). This uncertainty continues but does not hinder their romance. Even after Orlando "is pronounced indisputably, and beyond the shadow of a doubt": *female,* the disbelief remains, but possibility emerges as well (166).

"Are you positive you aren't a man?" he would ask anxiously, and she would echo.

> "Can it be possible you're not a woman?" and then they must put it to the proof without more ado. For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other's sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they put the matter to the proof at once. (168)

This moment seems to be signaled by neither dress nor physical appearance but by a sudden "understanding" of the other as the only proof necessary. Neither is the revelation reducible to a simple switch that would maintain the heteronormative pairing. Rather, I argue, their union encompasses sex as both/and, since, just as Orlando is multiply gendered, s/he knows the same unknowability in Shelmerdine without the necessity for any unveiling. Viewed in this manner, I believe Woolf's parody reaches its ironic climax in a marriage that destabilizes gender categories rather than confirming them. As Pamela Caughie describes it: "[e]ventually the power of bodily mimesis, and the pressure of Victorian convention, compel her to love and marry a man, though one whose gender is as suspect as Orlando's" (514). (Orlando was "positively ashamed of the second finger of her left hand *without the least knowing why"* (*Orlando* 155, *emphasis mine.*) "Even this acquiescence, though, is presented not just as a performance of femininity, and a subversive one at that, but as indispensable for her writing. [. . .] Here Woolf articulates her own strategy in this narrative, her ability to write freely" (Caughie 514).

(Re)fashioning Writing

Although "Woolf seriously doubted Hall's qualifications as an artist, finding her work too polemical" (Parkes 435), I believe it is useful to conclude this examination with a final turn to fashion and writing for both Hall and Woolf, as well as their protagonists. I have for the most part emphasized fashion and relationships throughout my discussion; however, I could just as

easily have explored a parallel narrative across the two texts in which fashion and writing are the focus. It is, of course, gender and writing with which Hall and Woolf are concerned but, by now, I have established fashion as a useful language for articulating one's identity and as a metaphorical writing on the body. I do acknowledge that Woolf was skeptical of modernized fashion and consumer culture and "the use to which clothes [. . .] had been put by patriarchal and non-democratic political movements" (Plock *Modernism* 209). But as Plock argues "her writing also shows us that [. . .] she regarded clothes as important props that mediated desires for affiliation" (Plock *Modernism* 209). This in part accounts for her critique of Hall since "Woolf's objections to *Well* were not limited to an ostensibly aesthetic sphere; they also highlight crucial differences among women in questions of sexual politics, questions which are ultimately inextricable from aesthetic ones" (Parkes 435). In particular, "Woolf seems to have been reluctant to publicly endorse the image of the "mannish lesbian" (Parkes 435-6). Considering her resistance to the monolithic lesbian image, Orlando, therefore, offers an alternative to that representation as it "mocks all normative sex and gender codes, destabilizing the very grounds on which sexological and legal discourse through which Hall's trial was conducted" (Parkes 436). In other words, Woolf was interested in creating a "narrative within the consciousness of a character, not so much to explore the social or moral 'meanings' of dress as to convey what it is like to wear, to observe, to 'undergo' dress" (Hughes 8).[170]

Side by side the novels thus offer two somewhat separate but oft overlapping portrayals of being in the world as women. On the one hand, in *The Well of Loneliness,* Stephen is assured

[170] Woolf's own complicated response to *The Well of Loneliness* is also interesting to consider here. According to Prosser: **"**at the trial of *The Well* in November 1928 Virginia Woolf was mulling over similar concerns about the relations between identity and narrative, substance and form: "What is the difference between the subject & the treatment?" (168). Similar to Hughes, Prosser notes, "Woolf's question at the trial suggests the very difficulty in making this distinction between aesthetics and subject, narrative and identity; it suggests I think an intricacy of treatment and subject, of body and narrative" (168).

that she "may write with a curious double insight – write both men and women from a personal knowledge. [. . .] For the sake of all the others who are like you, but less strong and less gifted perhaps, many of them, it's up to you to have the courage to make good" (Hall 205). In this moment, I believe Hall states her purpose for writing. Though Woolf, and critics, may be frustrated by what appears too pessimistic, "[u]nlike Orlando, Stephen is trapped in history; she cannot declare gender an irrelevant game" (Newton 570). As Newton affirms "Cross-dressing for Hall is not a masquerade. It stands for the New Woman's rebellion against the male order and, at the same time, for the lesbian's desperate struggle to be and express her true self" (Newton 570); to this I would add, Hall writing realistically on the lesbian experience of exclusion and isolation, if misunderstood, achieves its purpose in not conforming to aesthetics but to her own understanding. On the other hand, neither is Woolf's work entirely free from critique. While Coffman argues that "Woolf's experimentalism involves not so much an escapist evasion of the question of embodiment as it does a critical interrogation of it" (para. 15), acknowledging the difference in form is critical to an ethical comparison of the two in order to avoid reductive readings of either. An analysis of these works can trace the thread of gender expression from within the existing structures of heteropatriarchy in *The Well* to imagine the possibilities of escaping those structures in *Orlando.* In this way I believe it is not necessarily misguided to consider *Orlando* "escapist" if one considers how it may articulate, predict even, a theoretical deconstruction of gender and how it might function. Though Coffman argues that Woolf "presents multiple explanations for Orlando's change of embodiment and leaves the truth-value of each undecidable" *because* she "[refuses] a plot focused on realized or thwarted transgender longings" (para. 14), I would concede that *Well* also destabilizes the "truth-value" of the sex-gender binary in Stephen's own non-binary presentation. In the end, perhaps the matter of

representation and writing, like Stephen's and Orlando's sex, remain unresolvable and so, as Woolf announces: "let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can" (*Orlando* 88). Afterall, "when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth. [. . .] Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact" (Woolf *Room* 6).

Chapter 4

Reading and Writing Women's Bodies: "Coming, Aphrodite!", Josephine Baker, & (Un)Dressing the Body

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous "Medusa" 875)

In the previous chapters, I have addressed how women writers, from Larsen to Woolf, used fashion to reinforce arguments on gender in their works. In these instances, I have discussed how the clothes signify the positionality of the women wearing them in the white, capitalist heteropatriarchy of the early twentieth century US, England, and France. I have illustrated how descriptions of fashion in these texts function to embody intersectional feminist critiques of women's cultural subordination. In some cases, the women's dress adds support to the criticism put forth by the text as a whole. In the others, fashion communicates the often conflicting relationship women have to their clothes. With an awareness of the symbolism beneath our clothes, the fashions discussed thus far have demonstrated the potential for clothes to engage readers in a secondary discourse within the text that subverts assumptions about fashion's ephemerality and represents substantive claims about sexual politics. As Cixous urges above, "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing" ("Medusa" 875). I believe the use of fashion enables women to do just that. Fashion represents a common language women receive through the social construction of gender that demands their consumption of and complicity in fashioning norms of femininity and sexuality. Thus, by

adopting dress as a mode of communicating *in* writing, these writers "bring women to writing" using the very conditioning intended to divert them *away from* writing. Cixous' statement is especially useful here when she points out that, with respect to writing, women are "driven away as violently as from their bodies" because, just as fashion can restrict and engender women's ambivalence and even hostility towards their own bodies, patriarchy denies women's authentic relationships with their own bodies replacing material with myth ("Medusa" 875). With Cixous' charge in mind, in this chapter I question whether, and – if so – how, women can represent an ethical relationship to their bodies through dressing in both their writing and lives. To do this I will first draw brief attention to the moments of dressing – in the verb form – appearing in the works discussed for their dress – as subject/object – thus far. I will then explore the relationships between fashion and flesh through (un)dressing and nudity in both fictional and celebrity contexts in the short story "Coming, Aphrodite!" by Willa Cather (1920) and the fashion of Josephine Baker, especially the infamous banana skirt (1926). I believe discussions of Cather's story and Baker's own life, particularly on stage, significantly overlap in the ways in which both Cather's protagonist and Baker as a celebrity are subjected to the male gaze and attempted subordination as Other and how both resist objectification through the self-fashioning of (un)dressing as an embodied "writing" of the body. By pursuing this final avenue of inquiry, I may open the door for a broader discussion of women's fashion during the period as a cultural and rhetorical phenomenon that demonstrates emerging feminist ideologies pursued into the twenty-first century.

Of course, I understand that to discuss women's bodies in this way can conjure charges of essentialism, however, I believe writing women's bodies can be read outside of strict binary language, even through fashion, as I showed in the previous chapter. I also believe this is

particularly true in the context of Cixous' argument as society would divide women from their actual material bodies in favor of a mythological "true" female body but that women writing women's bodies, both within and against essential representations of difference, emerges as a mode of expressing her self authentically, both symbolically and corporeally.[171] In fact, it is this multiplicity of potential corporeal representations that makes a discussion of women's bodies. I agree with Cixous when she observes of women that

> what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible. (Cixous "Medusa" 876)

This is important for a nuanced understanding of her arguments when she says "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man" as this is not necessarily an essentialist argument because she is framing it as a matter of self-definition. When I examined Woolf's observations on women's writing above (in both *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*), I explored this possibility as well. If we understand that writing by men about women represents the construction *woman,* then alternatively woman writing herself represents her "individual constitution" as she imagines herself. This approach to gender and writing thus reasons for self-identification and disrupts automatic binary signification of femininity as representative of a homogenous female identity. Furthermore, this line of thinking implies that men's identity formation turns inward as well rather than holding up women as an oppositional other in writing

[171] Cixous deflects the charge of essentialism particularly well in "Laugh of the Medusa", ensuring that "first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the "dark" – that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute – there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say" (876).

and culture.[172] Or, as Cixous puts it "it's up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us once men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly" ("Medusa" 877).

Traditionally, i.e., through writing by white men, representations of women's bodies have centered on the sexualized, and racialized, object. In contrast, my discussion of women's bodies through Cather's "Aphrodite" and Baker as "Black Venus" uncovers the potential for material representation of an autonomous sexual subject. bell hooks explores these possibilities in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and cites Gail Faurshou's contention that "the colonization and the appropriation of the body as its own production/consumption machine in late capitalism is a fundamental theme of contemporary socialization" (qtd in hooks *Black Looks* 71).[173] Fashion, of course, plays a critical role in this appropriation by constantly shifting the terms of appropriate self-fashioning through the "production/consumption" of images through which gender is read and reified. Provocatively hooks affirms the negative potential of fashion particular to black women's bodies by emphasizing that "in contemporary postmodern fashion sense, the black female is the best medium for the showing of clothes because her image does not detract from the outfit; it is subordinated" (hooks *Black Looks* 71-2). Fashion does indeed subordinate women's bodies, particularly black women, by representing socially constructed images of stereotypes which strip women of individual identity. Sheehan plays with the material language of fabric, texts and bodies arguing, "[t]exts and textiles thus reinforce and compete with each

[172] This is the kind of resistance to the Lacanian symbolic that Margaret Homan's suggest as woman's language in *Bearing the Word* as well.

[173] As Naomi Woolf argues "If the beauty myth is not based on evolution, sex, gender, aesthetics, or God, on what is it based? It claims to be about intimacy and sex and life, a celebration of women. It is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power" (Wolf 12).

other as ways of soliciting and directing erotic and imaginative attachments to objects and between bodies, thereby remaking the social fabric" (Sheehan 11). In this chapter the text of the body and the present or absence of textiles further complicates this erotic interplay through dress and nudity. Furthermore, my argument is not to deny the harmful potentialities of fashions as a mode of social control over women's bodies. Rather, I am curious as to how, by acknowledging the terms of fashion as appropriating women's bodies, women can also reappropriate fashion as a means for resisting and subverting that control. In other words, I aim to strip feminine stereotypes of essentialist readings in favor of an examination that uncovers how one might - in (un)dressing the body - do as Irigaray suggests when she claims that "one must assume the feminine role deliberately" and in doing so "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it." (76).

In the works discussed thus far, there is one image in particular which illustrates the interplay between the fashion and the socially perceived body: Lily Bart's performance in the *tableaux vivants.* Throughout the novel Lily is praised for her beauty. Seldon confesses her allure seems to derive from the fact she's "such a wonderful spectacle", and tells her: "You are an artist, and I happen to be the bit of colour you are using today. It's part of your cleverness to be able to produce premeditated effects extemporaneously." (Mirth 58). With one hand he suggests her successful self-fashioning, but with the other he reduces her to an object of fascination. Johanna Wagner describes Lily's position as thus unlivable. Wagner takes Butler's notion of intelligibility and posits that Lily embodies it in the extreme; "the phenomenon of the body so seen, so visible, that it is ultra-intelligible: the body of the ideal woman" (Wagner 117). Lily is indeed labeled as the ideal throughout *The House of Mirth,* yet the status affords her no satisfaction or resolution. As a result, Wagner argues, she "is so intelligible that [. . .] Lily has

found her life unlivable through exactly that which should make her life the most livable of any *body."* (Wagner 117). When held to an idealized standard her reality becomes the impossibility of living up to an expectation to which she never agreed in the first place. Lily's ultra-intelligibility is fully realized in the *tableaux vivants* when she is intentionally displayed in this ideal position for society's consumption. Summarizing Emily Morse Symonds, Margaret Stetz explains that in these performances

> women were, she suggests, well aware of being used as inspiration and decoration and even contemptuous of the role of *tableaux vivants,* [. . .] But they remained more conscious still of the limitations imposed by the norms of their social sphere – norms dictated by both gender and class – and grateful to the aesthetes, who brought variety to their restricted lives. (Stetz 26)

With this understanding of the *tableaux,* we can read Lily's portrayal of Reynolds's *Mrs. Lloyd* as both her submission to her idealized status and her attempt to gain some, temporary, measure of pleasure or livability from it. Lily does experience both self-satisfaction and anxiety in her moment on display. She beams to herself knowing "[n]o other *tableaux* had been received with that precise note of approval: it has obviously been called forth by herself, and not by the picture she impersonated" (Wharton *Mirth* 120). As *Mrs. Lloyd,* Lily merges, at least temporarily that body of the ideal woman with her own, "and the completeness of her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power" (120). However, just before the curtain "[s]he had feared at the last moment that she was risking too much" in exposing herself so fully (120).

Though Lily is clothed, the suggestion of her body *revealed* by those clothes is sufficient to imply her nudity. As Anne Hollander explains in *Seeing Through Clothes,* "no proper female nude lacks an erotic message whatever its degree or method of idealization; [. . .] this message is

carried in the visible relation of the nude body to its absent, invisible clothing" (87-8). Because Lily's body is that of the idealized woman, the suggestion of nudity is sufficient to communicate her erotic potential.

This is especially true in that this moment blurs art and reality to suggest that Lily's body is not her own but rather an image of her ideal erotic potential.

> Since the erotic awareness of the body always contains an awareness of clothing, images of bodies that aim to emphasize their sexual nature will make use of this link. They will tend to display the emphatic outline, posture, and general proportions of a body customarily clothed in fashionable dress, so as to make it seem denuded" (Hollander 88).

So, although Lily privately triumphs in her momentarily centered self, the responses to her appearance reduce her self-fashioning to her sexual appeal. Upon seeing her, one man exclaims "'Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" (Wharton *Mirth* 119).[174] Thus Lily's status as spectacle resumes, subverting her brief force of agency in initiating the display. Selden's reaction, both to Lily and the spectators is also significant in that his character tends to represent both the suitor and the artist, as will Don Hedger in the coming discussion of "Coming, Aphrodite!" Hearing the reaction to Lily's appearance, Selden realizes "this was the world she lived in, these were the standards by which she was fated to be measured!" (119). In other words, he becomes aware of her ultra-intelligibility and "[i]n the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life" (119). Hovet and Hovet interpret this scene

[174] Both Hollander's and Wharton's mention of the "line" of the body as an ideal are emblematic of Wilde's notion of ideal dress: "There was no reason, however why the beautiful lines of the Greek costume should not be followed. [. . .] They also recognized that the human form is the best foundation on which to compose a dress, and they followed the lines of that form as far as possible. They suspended their garments from the shoulders, recognising that the waist is too delicate a curve for the purpose. We (that is, the ladies) form an artificial ledge at the waist, and suspend garments from that" (Wilde, London journal 14). This 'line' is also one applied to Eden Bower in the following discussion of "Coming, Aphrodite!"

"within the context of the Emersonian rhetoric of vision," which given Selden's philosophies allows for a reading of this seen in which "this form of entertainment merely makes explicit the centrality of the male gaze in bourgeois society" (348). Though Selden has positioned himself as spectator throughout their relationship, he now realizes Lily's subordinated position in such an exchange. Hovet and Hovet argue that "*with the exception of Lily,* the women who participate are engaging in a visual, public performance of the death of selfhood. They use well-known artistic images of the feminine to make themselves transparent" (348, emphasis mine). However, I would argue that Lily is not exempt from this assessment given the previous statement from Wagner. Lily has always already been transparent and therefore has no selfhood to submit. It is this question of selfhood and intelligibility that I will now investigate through the figures of Eden Bower in Willa Cather's short story "Coming, Aphrodite!" and the image of Josephine Baker.

Coming, Aphrodite!

"Her voice, like her figure, inspired respect, - if one did not choose to call it admiration" (Cather 11).

Willa Cather's "Coming, Aphrodite!" is a short story in her 1920 collection, *Youth and the Bright Medusa.* Her protagonist, Eden Bower (Aphrodite), is a young woman newly arrived in New York enroute to Paris to begin a career on stage. "In this story, Cather presented her readers with a fully-realized depiction of a young, single woman happy in her physicality, aware of her body and its desires, and who makes free decisions about her own sexuality, unencumbered by social taboos or conventions" (Hamilton 857). Eden is open and unashamed of either her body or sexuality. Though, as the story's title reveals, she too is the ultimate in idealized female bodies, she does not find her intelligibility unlivable. As Lily took to the stage in the *tableaux,* Eden appears to appropriate her idealized position in fashioning a career as a

performer. Eden Bower's empowered position has led critics to mark the story as a significant milestone in *writing women* as, "[b]efore Cather, few American authors, male or female, had ever attempted such a healthy, honest, and complete fictional representation of female sexuality" (Hamilton 857). The pivotal plot point in "Coming, Aphrodite!" is Don Hedger's spying on Eden's naked body. In a fit of artistic frustration Hedger, begins rifling through his closet and discovers a peep hole created by a knot in the wood paneling between their adjoining rooms. Apparently, "without realizing what he was doing" he looks through and is surprised to find his neighbor "wholly unclad, doing exercises of some sort before a long gilt mirror" (Cather 14). Rather than look away in embarrassment at the intrusion, he watches. Hedger's gaze transgresses not only the boundaries of their apartments but of privacy as well. Though Eden's nude movements represent a physical intimacy, it is with her self, and this uninvited voyeur violates her private space and by extension her body. Cather's use of both the mirror and the male gaze in this scene represent an intricate play between the boundaries of image and self. On the one hand, Eden's movement of her naked body (seemingly) alone can be read as representative of the kind of movement Cixous calls for in the quotation at the opening of this chapter. Separated from outside "readers" of her body, Eden's being alone in and with her body potentially disrupts socially controlled representations allowing for autonomous self-embodiment. The possibility here is Eden's empowerment to express her body and experience its materiality removed from proximity to any socially constructed Other to which it might be compared. As Luce Irigaray explains in *This Sex Which is Not One,*

> [t]o play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself - inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible,' of 'matter' - to 'ideas,' in

> particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in-by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (76)

Eden's enjoyment of her own image in the mirror appropriates her intelligibility in articulating her self to herself through a self-imposed gaze. On the other hand, Hedger's intrusion in this moment is the obvious representation of masculine logic interjected into the scene to interpret and objectify and thereby reassert dominance over her body. The mirror, interestingly, represents a kind of middle ground then, in which either or neither is possible.[175] Assuming herself free from the social "gaze" Eden could reclaim her own image with her movements, unencumbered by neither the material reality nor the social implications of fashion, "putting herself . . . into the world" on her own terms and thus (re)"write her self" (Cixous 875).

As I will discuss shortly, I believe Cather certainly suggests this possibility as Eden is unashamed of her bodily or sexual power, even when the unseen gaze is revealed, however, I also read Cather's unconsented intimacy between Eden and Hedger as her pragmatic acknowledgement of the social/sexual tensions created by the (re)appropriation of women's bodies. "Hedger did not happen to think how unpardonable it was of him to watch her. Nudity was not improper to any one who had worked so much from the figure" (Cather 14). He excuses his voyeurism on the grounds that he is an artist as if she were a model, but these explanations don't hold up given that the situation is not one in which she has agreed to subject herself to his gaze, either as an artist or as a man. As Ann Hollander notes: "[n]akedness, with its meaning enhanced by clothing has lent itself to notions of ideal beauty and of natural reality, and it can

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[175] Marshik's notes that, in Elizabeth Wilson *Adorned in Dreams,* "Wilson's formulation positions fashion in place of Lacan's mirror; in offering an ideal that stabilizes the self, she claims, it provides a permanence that anneals the woes of physical bodies, mortality, and psychic insecurity" (Marshik p. 16-17). This formulation and the play of a stabilized nude self also inform my reading of Irigaray here.

express not only the loftiest abstract concepts but the most personal physical feeling" (87).[176] For Hedger, it would appear that that which he had previously conceived of only in the abstract now expresses a materiality which he had previous found unintelligible. Hedger at least subconsciously acknowledges that his interest is based on his role as the later as his aesthetic interest in her figure is sexual rather than artistic "and he continued to look, simply because he had never seen a woman's body so beautiful at this one, - positively glorious in action" (Cather 14). Cather includes a detailed description of Eden's figure as Hedger's gaze runs down the length of her body, and his "fingers curved as if he were holding a crayon; mentally he was doing the whole figure in a single running line" (Cather 14).[177] The connotation here is vaguely sexual, an image enhanced by the rest of his body language as he lurks crouched in a closet suggesting both perversion and repressed sexuality. Cather's narration gives glimpses into Hedger's thoughts, but it is less clear whether he is aware of these thought processes himself. What is clear is the lack of shame or embarrassment for either party during this strange interlude. For Hedger he is absorbed only in the figure before him with little thought to the consequences or implications of his behavior, while Eden is entirely comfortable with her nudity and (perceived) solitude.

> It did not occur to him that his conduct was detestable; there was nothing shy or retreating about this unclad girl, - a bold body, studying itself quite coolly and evidently well pleased with itself, doing all this for a purpose Hedger scarcely regarded his action as conduct at all; it was something that has happened to him . . . The pull of that aperture

[176] Hollander also emphasizes that "the durability of the female nude image in art derives specifically from its extra erotic freight", which for Hedger becomes the apparent compulsion to continue his intrusion (Hollander 87).
[177] (See note 3). The image here of tracing the lines of Eden's figure also draws an interesting parallel to the men's discussion of Lily Bart's exposed figure as not having "a break in the lines anywhere" (Wharton *Mirth* 109). Both instances diminish the women's bodies to their shapes and outlines, which are essentially empty, implying the internal substance is less significant than the image or space they occupy.

> was stronger than his will, - and he had always considered his will the strongest thing about him. (Cather 16)

Cather's assessment of both characters here offers a fascinating and nuanced commentary on the objectification of women's bodies as it is Eden's behavior, and not Hedger's, that is shocking. Hedger's total lack of awareness implies men's objectifying behavior, even without consent, is considered permissible. Even in the supposed privacy of her own home it is Eden's nudity that is perceived as inappropriate in this scenario and it becomes her responsibility to guard against this gaze, to keep her body properly clothed. The "fault" is placed on her in her boldness and invites his gaze against his will, when really the willingness in question should be hers. Hedger's observations on her coolness and comfort with her own body implies that she should in fact be uncomfortable and chaste and that even alone embodying her sexuality is the truly transgressive act. Eden does not participate as expected in this exchange. Rather than an immobile figure to be translated and transgressed in art, the combination of her nudity and movement invites scrutiny and suspicion as her nakedness asserts active ownership of her body versus allowing openness to passive consumption. On the surface Hedger's perverse watchfulness draws attention to the violation of women's bodies through society's appropriating them as sexual objects at all times, however, Cather's subtlety in describing Eden's improper being in her own body highlights the threat of women as sexual subjects.

Cather's scrutiny of the perceived wrongness of women's open sexuality is reinforced through Hedger's anxieties towards women throughout the story. Hedger is initially wary of his new neighbor and is generally irritable at what he considers Eden's intrusion into his space and routines. He also demonstrates an ambivalence, an anxiety, towards women and believes the (clothed) women he sees in everyday life "all to be artificial and, in an aesthetic sense,

perverted" (Cather 17). Cather's explicit use of the word perverted her imparts a wonderful irony to his reflections given his daily furtive surveillances of Eden. By deflecting the corruption onto women, Cather critiques the kind of victim blaming that shames women for arousing men's sexuality and bolsters the rhetoric of rape culture underwriting heteropatriarchal domination of women's bodies and sexuality. Marilyn Arnold unpacks Cather's frank sexuality in Eden, remarking that "[u]nlike her female predecessors, Eden Bower is the *whole* woman. No remake of the famous mythic goddesses [. . .] Eden is all of them and more; she is elemental woman, she is sexual" (248).[178] The interplay in ideal and real is twofold in that Arnold plays with the "Aphrodite" title but also articulates that while Eden is erotically idealized her expressive *sexuality* gives her wholeness where repression would reduce her. Furthermore, Cather assesses the negative stereotypes attributed to women as frivolous consumers that were also prevalent, particularly among the modernist artistic scene of the period. Hedger's clearly denigrating views demean women as materialistic and shallow while privileging the aesthetic of the idealized woman.

> He saw them enslaved by desire of merchandise and manufactured articles, effective only in making life complicated and insincere and in embroidering it with ugly and meaningless trivialities. They were enough, he thought to make one almost forget woman as she existed in art, in thought, and in the universe" (Cather 17).

Hedger's condescension in this passage is a direct reflection of the intellectualized view of fashion, and by extension women, popular among modernists in their critique of the mechanized,

[178] Arnold also claims that "[c]learly, Eden anticipates Marian Forrester of *A Lost Lady,* but her sexuality is more open, joyous, harmonious, unconscious, essential than the rather desperate sexuality of an aging Marian Forrester. Those of Cather's detractors who have ceremoniously pronounced her priggish either have not read, or have not understood, "Coming, Aphrodite!" (248). The mention of *A Lost Lady* also sparks an idea that future iterations of this project could explore the element of age in Cather's novel and perhaps Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway.*

capitalist, modern world.[179] This viewpoint also highlights the false dichotomy between fake women – who are in fact actual real living women – and the idealized *woman.* To Hedger, he believes that *woman* is real when in fact she is the patriarchal construction reinforced in the art and thought in which he participates. Here Cather is emphasizing that this constructed universal *woman* is a fabrication by placing her in proximity to women as they are perceived in the very process of performing that false universal. In this juxtaposition, Cather is thus able to emphasize the double bind of women's being held to a standard for which they will be damned.

The passage above is also significant in that it reflects many of the attitudes held by male modernists towards popular, i.e., women's, writing as well as towards women in general as evidenced in "art" and "thought" from the period. For example, some might draw superficial parallels between *Coming, Aphrodite!* and the works of D.H. Lawrence given the shared bold scenes of nudity and sexuality. However, I would argue that there is a significant difference between what Cather does through Eden's body versus the treatment of women's bodies by Lawrence. As I will discuss below, Cather created strong female characters and challenged notions of shame and guilt regarding women's sexuality through women like Eden or Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady* (1923). As Gilbert and Gubar note, across Cather's work "her implicit question reminds us once again of the male modernist anxiety about female Babel to which so many of the women of letters [. . .] were responding through their construction of fantasy languages" (*War* 251). In "Aphrodite", that language is expressed through Eden's materiality and her autoerotic display. In contrast, the nudity in works like Lawrence's primarily emphasizes *male* sexuality and in which women's bodies elicit rather than experience arousal. Thus,

[179] I address the sexist undertones of these arguments, such as those of Simmel and Benjamin, in the introduction to this dissertation. I believe awareness of the way such critiques of modern capitalism malign women along with fashion, like Cather demonstrates her, predicts the Marxist feminist responses to capitalist critique decades later.

Hedger's anxieties about women are interesting because they also sum up many of Lawrence's arguments about women and about art. [180] Sharon Hamilton describes a scene in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow,* where a pregnant woman, Anna, dances naked in her room, much to her husband's dismay though the young woman claims she is free to do as she pleases in her own home (863). Hamilton parallels this interaction with Eden's display before her mirror upon which Hedger intrudes, however, I would argue that these scenes are quite different. Hamilton argues that "Anna's sense of power in this scene relates, as Lawrence's description shows, to her physical freedom" (Hamilton 863). While I do agree to an extent about Hamilton's assessment, I think it's important to note that Anna's behavior is policed here. Her husband demands an explanation and even though she claims her right to do so the very fact that it is questioned is significant. In contrast Don Hedger is an unwelcome voyeur into Eden's pleasure in her own body and Cather makes it clear that he has no right to view, let alone critique, her. Though both women are watched, one claims freedom while the other experiences it.[181] Hamilton does make similar arguments, though is perhaps limited in the parallel with Lawrence, because Anne's resistance is undercut by Lawrence's treatment of the scene.

Nonetheless, the comparison of the two writers' works is beneficial for the purposes of my argument as it allows for an assessment of the ways in which two similar scenes can differ dramatically based upon *how* they are written.[182] According to Hamilton, *The Rainbow* was quite

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[180] Cather on the other hand later places this viewpoint in opposition to Eden's own views on artistic success. Though Hedger and Eden eventually become involved, it is interesting that it is artistic differences – and not his perverted revelations – that separate the couple. I believe this also demonstrates Cather's own skepticism about the "purity" of modernism over commercially successful writing and about the purpose of art in general which I discuss later in this section.

[181] Although, I will concede (as I've discussed above) that Hedger's judgement of Eden's nudity dampens the effect of her self expression as well.

[182] I emphasize *how* here in part because it sidesteps the more slippery questions of *why*, which suggests intent. I will however address intent, or rather why authorial intent is outside the scope of this project, in the final thoughts concluding this dissertation. This *how* also emphasizes the interpretation and impact both on the reader and as a cultural product in perpetuity.

sensational and Lawrence maintained the provocativeness of Anna's nude, pregnant body was the source of much of the public consternation (Hamilton 862). Based on this assumption, Hamilton claims that "[a]lthough Cather is not generally associated with the kind of radical modernist moves Lawrence made through frank depictions of human sexuality in his fiction, she should be" and suggests Anna's baring it all in front of her husband inspired Cather's depiction of Eden (Hamilton 863). While I do agree with the assessment that Cather should be granted the same critical weight as a modernist[183], I would challenge the consideration of Lawrence's sexual content as radically modernist. To elaborate, advocating free expression of sexuality was certainly a hallmark of modernist values socially and aesthetically, however, to suggest that "Cather's depiction of a woman freely dancing, alone, for herself, and in the nude, in "Coming Aphrodite!", allowed her to add her own voice, and agreement, to Lawrence's earlier assertion that people should be able to do as they like in their bedrooms" flattens the very apparent distinctions between the two scenes (Hamilton 863). The description of Eden here perfectly encapsulates the feeling of liberation embodied in this scene, but labeling it as an extension of Lawrence's point detracts from its true significance, which is that Cather was indeed adding her voice to those calling for women's sexual freedom. Furthermore, I would contest the notion that Lawrence's was one of those voices.

As Kate Millett points out in *Sexual Politics*

> The sexual revolution had done a great deal to free female sexuality. An admirably astute politician, Lawrence saw in this two possibilities: it could grant women an autonomy and independence he feared and hated, or it could be manipulated to create a new order of

[183] A statement which Bonnie Kime Scott makes emphatically in the *Gender of Modernism* and *Refiguring Modernism* volumes, though would likely challenge the notion that Cather, or her peers, should be given serious scholarly attention as modernists *because of* their works' similarities to that of their white, male peers.

> dependence and subordination another form of compliance to masculine direction and prerogative" (Millett 241).

Based on Millet's assessment of Lawrence's views on female sexuality, I would then argue that his claim was not that "*people* should be able to do as they like in their bedrooms" but that *men* should, and that women's sexual liberation enabled them to do so more freely, i.e., with less resistance (Hamilton 863, emphasis mine). Therefore, Cather's depiction becomes the more radical for challenging both prudery and patriarchy. I believe this distinction also illustrates Cixous' assertions about women writing women addressed previously, particularly as regards sexuality. Though plenty has been written about women's sexuality, with Lawrence's writing as a prime example, according to Cixous "[m]en still have everything to say about *their* sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity" (Cixous 877, emphasis mine). With Cather's "Coming, Aphrodite!", Eden's sexuality is *for* herself and her own pleasure, whereas the female sexuality as Lawrence describes it is free to be subordinated.[184]

This discussion of Cather and Lawrence is also interesting in light of the eventual conflict between Eden and Hedger over art and performance. When the couple parts Hedger insists to himself that they fought about "an abstraction" (36), but, as a woman, Eden is more pragmatic, telling him: "you know very well there's only one kind of success that's real" (Cather 38). Interestingly these disagreements have emerged throughout my analysis through Lily and Selden, Larsen, and more generally the complex economies of women writers within the male dominated

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[184] According to Millett *The Rainbow* "contains the key to [Lawrence's] later sexual attitudes; here is the explanation, and perhaps even the root of his final absorption in "phallic consciousness" and his conversion to a doctrinaire male-supremacist ethic" (Millett 257). The scene discussed above is in fact one of the *many* instances of female sexuality in *The Rainbow,* all of which highlight Lawrence's deep seeded anxieties about women's autonomous sexual liberation. As Millet puts it, "It is important to know that he began in the midst of the feminist movement, and that he began on the defensive" (Millett 260).

modernist sphere. Andrew Jewell describes Cather's own sentiments, which are not unlike Larsen's discussed in chapter 1.

> She articulates the clear distinction she sees between the imaginative writer and the reformer, the accomplished artist and the useful political thinker. [. . .] Cather thought both art and politics were best served when artists left political activism alone and political activists left art alone. (Jewell para. 39)

Cather also appears to acknowledge that Hedger's "art for art's sake" ideology is not one that Eden can afford. Therefore, neither art, nor love it would seem, can overcome the material necessity without accompanying privilege. Ultimately, "love is not enough; he loses her in the end when she denies her sexual nature in order to market her talent in the name of art. For all their oneness in sexual union, their definitions of success are worlds apart" (Arnold 249). Thus, while Eden significantly resists gendered sexual prohibitions, Cather's heroine experiences material limitations imposed in other ways. Though, to Arnold's point, I would suggest that Eden rather markets her sexual nature as her talent through her "Aphrodite" stage persona, the result of which is perhaps ambiguous. Though she has achieved the success she wished Hedger could understand it appears, "after years of spectacular success in Paris," Eden returns to New York changed (Cather 42). The story ends with a close up:

> Eden Bower closed her eyes, and her face, as the street lamps flashed their ugly orange light upon it, became hard and settled, like a plaster cast; . . . Tomorrow night the wind would blow again, and this mask would be the golden face of Aphrodite. But a "big" career takes its toll, even with the best of luck. (Cather 44)

Though this "toll" remains vague, we might infer any number of challenges for a woman on the stage. Perhaps sustained intelligibility, the *tableaux* of performing, does eventually force a death of selfhood in *be*coming Aphrodite.

Black Venus

> One has only to invoke her name (no, even just hint at the barest gestural outline of her figure) and all that she stands for – the racist and sexist history of objectification and of desire that makes up the phenomenon of European Primitivism or, conversely, the idealization of black female agency – immediately materializes. (Cheng 2-3)

The name Josephine Baker conjures a whole host of complex and contradictory images. Artist and activist. Trailblazer and trope. Baker's is an image that continues to defy definition and has long since transcended into the realm of cultural iconography. As Cheng's statement above suggests, analyses of Baker's myriad representations encompass the full spectrum between charges of negligent complicity to radical subversion of racial and gendered stereotypes. Indeed, it is perhaps difficult to assert that a hypersexual black woman dancing half naked in a skirt made of bananas is anything other than an overtly racist stereotype on the surface, however, that is precisely what I intend to do here. There is a tendency in criticism on Baker's career to avoid looking too closely at these paradoxical images and instead focus on her later politics as justification that her "explicit, liberal agenda . . . redeems her legacy" (Cheng 38). Interestingly, that is precisely the kind of criticism I have been working to avoid throughout this project. Afterall, many of the same arguments are made regarding women's employment of fashion in writing; women's writing is significant *in spite of* its dependence on fashion. I believe this makes Baker the perfect final figure for addressing the fraught but fruitful relationship between women's fashion and fiction. In many ways Josephine Baker is a compelling bridge between

women's writing and their lived experiences since in many ways she embodied an array of fictions throughout her career.

In the following exploration of Baker's controversial fashions, particularly the infamous banana skirt, I hope to do as Cheng suggests and "apply pressure on what constitute agency versus spectacle at the much more unruly site of expressive racial and sexual fantasy" (Cheng 39). I find this approach useful because it embraces the idea that, while not necessarily tidy, interrogating Baker's problematic performances allows for a more nuanced and wholistic representation of her image than circumventing them altogether.[185] Many of Baker's stage and film costumes do employ fetishized representations of black women's bodies and "[w]e might say that fetishism was the theme *and* the mode of her career" (Cheng 39). I like this articulation of Baker's professional *use* of fetish and I believe it parallels my overall goal of articulating how dress can be read as both the *theme* and *mode* of women's self-fashioning. With this in mind I think it is also important to note that I do not find it imperative to make hard distinctions between complicity and subversion and, in general, I find that questions of agency and intent are murky at best for the kind of analysis I am proposing.[186] Since most of the evidence I consider is either complicit or subversive depending on where one assigns intent, I suggest an alternative in which one allows for an act to be *both* complicit *and* subversive. Therefore, I argue that acknowledging

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[185] In general, accounts of Baker's life and performances (of which there are many, including Baker's own) tend to either work to find ways to excuse perceived complicity with racist, sexist tropes or avoid acknowledging them by keeping detailed descriptions to a minimum. To me, this seems like a disservice since it is the minutia of Baker's (self)fashioning that is truly fascinating.

[186] Cheng makes a similar argument in the critical biography *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface.* She affirms, "the interesting questions is not one of Baker's agency (indeed, the question of her self-construction or self-representation is complex by nature, given her professional obligations and the social world in which she succeeds), but *how the terms of agency and performance must be nuanced* in a context where the question of consent is seriously compromised" (Cheng 42). According to Cheng intent "does not get us away from the problem that, when it comes to the spectacle of the stereotype, execution and parody look uncomfortably similar" (Cheng 42). As critics, I believe we have an ethical responsibility to our subjects to lean into this discomfort in order to engage a complete, rather than one-dimensional, representation. Furthermore, on the subject of comfort, I would argue that doing otherwise appears "uncomfortably similar" to appropriation for the sake of advancing our own (selective) arguments. "Subversion, after all, replays rather than sidesteps the fetish" (Cheng 42).

the potential for what I will call subversive complicity points back to Irigaray's suggestion that embodying the feminine (and, I will add, racial) stereotype deliberately "convert[s] a form of subordination into an affirmation" (76).[187]

For many scholars, Baker is a source of fascination because of the contrast between her wild stage personae and her glamorous celebrity image. For example, in an article on the "Dialectics of the Banana Skirt", Sowinska observes that "[s]haking her scantily-dressed behind on stage, Baker exploited European eroticization of the black body only to deconstruct this self-constructed image on the Parisian streets" (para. 2). While this speaks to the performative aspects of Baker's self-representation, there is room for clarification on a number of points. First, I would argue that while Baker does exploit the European fetishization of her body, that image is not a self-constructed one but rather a socially-constructed one which she subverts, as I discuss above. Second, I believe the primitive African dancer and the civilized black celebrity are two sides of the same racist coin. On the one hand, Baker's performance of the hypersexual savage fetish allowed her to capitalize on the rampant negrophilia in interwar France.[188] On the other, the kind commentary used above that positions the stylish ingénue image as the deconstruction of racial stereotypes actually overlooks the fact that this image also plays into racist ideologies of respectability politics.[189] Baker's own words emphasize this point since she "confessed [to] feeling like a 'circus animal in a fancy dress'" (Baker qtd in Sowinska para. 34). This remark is incredible in its irony since it is the fancy dress that makes her feel like the animal. While

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[187] I believe this continues along the same line of reasoning as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s concept of signifyin' as well as Sara Ahmed's willing/willful continuum.

[188] Petrine Archer Straw's book *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* provides a comprehensive assessment of the French obsession with (a colonial perception of) blackness during this period.

[189] I believe Baker's outrageousness both on and off the stage challenged the respectability politics, and foreshadows what Brittney C. Cooper names the *dis*respectability politics of contemporary black female performers, which I will discuss briefly later in this chapter. I also acknowledge that Baker's other political activities do engage in some other aspects of the racial uplift conversations of the time, however, uplift more generally is somewhat outside the scope of this project.

critically the dehumanizing effect of the primitive costuming is the more natural conclusion, the fact that the civilized fashion draws this response as well highlights Baker's awareness that her racialized performance did not stay within the boundaries of the stage. Through this example, Sowinska clarifies the previous point and suggests that in continuing the perform this civilized image in the "fancy dress", Baker, "[c]omplcit with her own objectification, . . . exposed her body even more and intentionally participated in the creation of it as an ideological artifact" (para. 34). Thus, in playing this role of the shining black starlet Baker is employing the kind of subversive complicity that challenges racial stereotypes by parodying them.

Baker's discomfort above is also reminiscent of Helga Crane's conflicting emotions in Copenhagen, which Larsen defines as "incited." This articulation of complicity as incitement emphasizes the pleasurable aspects of compliance. Indeed, for Helga,

> [t]hat was it, the guiding principle of her life [. . .]. She was incited to make an impression [. . .]. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired. (Larsen 55)

Like Baker in her fancy dress, Helga felt like a "veritable savage" dressed extravagantly for her first tea in Copenhagen, yet, the attention eventually leads to her accepting the terms of that objectification. Specifically, after the racial tensions of America, flattering attention – if still problematic – is preferable and "Helga Crane's new existence was intensely pleasant to her; it gratified her augmented sense of self-importance." (Larsen 55). Read together then both Baker and Helga Crane seem to have accepted their own objectification, particularly because there does not seem to be the need to subvert or repress part of oneself, be it sexuality or blackness.

Returning to the banana skirt, this costume can then be viewed as a remarkable merging of both of these images into a single sartorial performance. "Bananas on Baker's hips are always accompanied by drooping jewelry on her neck - projecting a savage and a star persona in one image" (Sowinska para. 36).[190] In fact, the banana skirt ensemble calls to mind the catalog of Helga's randomly exotic wardrobe with luxurious jewels and green dress reduced to nothing but a skirt. According to Cheng, "The banana skirt, with its supposedly transparent (racial and erotic) joke, stands as both a reduction and a redundancy in the allegorical network embedded in the scene" (*Second* 48). The over-the-top primitivism of the banana skirt is the epitome of the European colonial mythologized notion of blackness that Helga also experiences in Denmark. As Silverman explains, the banana skirt was part of an overall effort to "blacken" the Revue Negre to accommodate these colonial tastes. As Cheng argues, the skirt joins "the unwieldy cycle of identification and disidentification unleashed in the encounter between the supposed subject and the object of Primitivism" (48). Even though Baker performs the skirt – and Helga wears the clothes – the (dis)identification present in their awareness of the performance masquerading as authentic blackness makes the garment inherently unstable, and perhaps, thus explains the inability to easily categorize is. Through the banana skirt, "Baker offers not only a case study or a symbol of colonial projection but also an embodiment of the very crisis of differentiation founding that imperial desire" (48).

[190] Before addressing this further, I would like to pause to acknowledge that the use of racially problematic language is especially prevalent in the criticism on Baker - i.e., savage, primitive, civilized, exotic, etc. I am also aware of my own usage in above. This underscores the nuance required to ethically address her image and body, as I have attempted with fashion throughout this dissertation. Labeling items or bodies as savage/civilized is especially fraught, as can be the use of feminine as I've elaborated previously. It is significant to note that my usage of this terminology is in full awareness that I am describing the colonial understanding or stereotype of savage not an actual or 'natural' savageness. Baker plays into the assumptions hold a mirror to them through her performances. By using said language with the intention of deconstructing it I am attempting to do the same.

One element of Baker's banana skirt performance that is especially intriguing is the element of comedy, as Cheng suggests above, that implies a parody of the colonial fetishization of her black body. Daphne Brooks suggests that "Baker's comedic rendering of the primitive allowed her to create not only parodies of primitivist understandings of black femininity but also gave her the means to carve out her own space to imagine herself in the public sphere" (cited in Sweeney-Risko 507). The comedic elements of Baker's performance are perhaps overshadowed by discussions of the erotic display of nudity in the banana skirt; however, acknowledging the play in Baker's movements and expressions, as well as the provocative, does suggest a parodic undercurrent. Biographer Bennetta Jules-Rosette actually identifies five "strategies of image and identity construction" in Baker's performances which "worked within the genre of the French music hall" while also making herself "unique" (49).

> (1) exoticizing race and gender; (2) reversing racial and cultural codes and meanings; (3) displaying difference through nudity, cross-dressing, song, and dance; (4) exploiting the images of difference; and (5) universalizing the outcomes to allow the performative messages to reach larger audiences. (Jules-Rosette 49)

Interestingly, many of these strategies also appear throughout women writer's treatment of fashion and gender performance and I've examined thus far. Furthermore, the self-fashioning within existing genres provides a compelling comparison between women's writing women and women's actual operating within colonial and patriarchal cultures. This is of course not to suggest that those outcomes are always gratifying or successful. For example, Helga experiences performances such as Baker's at a circus similar to the Revue Negre. "Helga Crane was not amused. [. . .] She felt shamed, betrayed" (Larsen 61). Where Helga has accepted their fetishizing her blackness in luxurious clothes, she identifies the parallel between her dress and

the dancers' performance so that their attentions become degrading when her observing others illuminates how whites have been observing her (Larsen 61). Helga's internal conflict as a spectator to the primitivist display also emphasizes the significance difference between the individual's appropriation of a stereotype, as with Baker's banana skirt performance, and how society may read that performance.[191] Cheryl Wall intuits that this inner turmoil is understandable, as the American performers cause her experiences of racism at home to resurface and, though she initially finds the European ideas more appealing, Helga realizes she "has become a 'stage Negro' herself" thus emphasizing that her experiences have been another kind of racism; "[a]fter this experience, her thoughts of America are filled with outrage at the way blacks are abused; in fact, she never thinks of the United States except in relation to race" (Wall "Passing for What" 102).[192] For Helga, her escape is broken down by this performance because being reminded of America, makes it impossible for Helga to continue performing a manufactured blackness because it unveils both the inauthenticity of the construct and her personal conflicted racial identity.

On the other side of this experience, though, is Baker's position as one of the 'stage Negroes' Helga resents. For Baker,

> Set between the racist disrespect she experienced in Europe and the United States and the respect she longed for as a professional dancer, she used her clothes and costumes to

[191] This problematic element of parody is present throughout the previous chapters as well. For example, Orlando's gender performances are as likely to be read as essentialist or gender conforming by scholars as they are subversive.
[192] In particular, Wall's observation makes clear Helga's repeated attendance at the performances shows an extended probing of her feelings about race as she has experienced it in America and abroad. "But she returned again and again to the Circus, always alone, gazing intently and solemnly at the gesticulating black figures, an ironical and silently speculative spectator. For she knew that into her plan for her life had thrust itself a suspensive conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings" (Larsen 62).

> create a disrespectability politics that gave her the space necessary to explore her identity on her own terms. (Sweeney-Risko 507).[193]

Whereas Helga's tendency is to avoid conflicting self-images, Baker's performances probe those tensions through parody and *disrespectability.* This disrespectability is best exemplified in both women's responses to the experience of black performance in music and dance. Helga is swept away in the Harlem nightclub before her departure, but "when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her" (Larsen 44). Though Helga resists and resents the respectability politics of uplift she is not entirely free from their rhetorical influence. As Hinnov infers, "[h]ere Helga resists categorization as a typical "savage," over-sexed black woman; her total abandon in the dance would only reinscribe that sensationalized, exoticized stereotype of the black female primitive (a la Josephine Baker)" (Hinnov 57-8). I believe Baker on the other hand challenges this notion but reclaiming that savage over-sexed stereotype through Brittney Cooper's concept of disrespectability politics addressed here. Baker herself describes the feeling of her debut performance in Paris as being "[d]riven by dark forces I didn't recognize, I improvised [. . .] I felt . . . intoxicated" (Baker qtd in Jules-Rosette 48). Rather than working from the position that a behavior confirms the stereotype, this disrespectability politics enacts a way of being that reclaims the behavior – like dancing or sexuality – from the implication of savageness altogether.

In many ways Baker's self-fashioning adds further nuance to the previous discussions of women's performance of race, gender, and sexual identities. In particular, her ultra-intelligibility

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[193] Here Sweeney-Risko is referring to Brittney Cooper's concept of "disrespectability politics from the article "Beyond Respectability" which demonstrates the process through which one appropriates and subverts respectability politics by performing overtly sexually and racially coded stereotypes which thus mocks the validity of those images.

as a 1920s icon makes it challenging to differentiate between the image and the individual. Where the protagonist's *read* in this study perform and appropriate identities as well, their interpreted agency in doing so is still fictional and thus available specifically *to be* read in these ways. Reading Baker on the other hand poses more challenging questions of ethical engagement with her as a subject.[194] Therefore, I would like to conclude by acknowledging Josephine Baker's influence on the fashion imagery of the twenties. For example, while Baker's banana skirt is perhaps the most infamous, "on the same night [in April 1926] the banana skirt was revealed an hour later Baker returned and, wearing a grass skirt, she performed the Charleston on a polished mirror, her knees twisting in and out in a dizzying blur" (Schroeder 40). While the banana skirt is perhaps the more infamous, the grass skirt ensemble sparked immediate trends in young women's fashion that summer.

> according to fashion historian Susan Hannel (2005), the 1920s signature drop waist, fringe style dress looks remarkably like a stereotypical African grass skirt. [. . .] A cover of *Life* magazine from 15 July 1926, offers an example of the relationship between the New Women's shortened skirt and primitivist interpretations of Africa. In the forefront of the picture, a woman with cropped hair and a drop waist, pleated skirt dances the Charleston. (Sweeney-Risko 505).[195]

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[194] For example, the myriad biographies on Baker each examine a different persona while acknowledging that her *self* is filtered through the multitude of images, interpretations, and agendas of other's perceptions of her *being* Josephine Baker. Jules-Rosette's *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image* explicitly acknowledges that the biography is of the *icon* rather than the *individual,* which Jules-Rosette questions as a possibility. In contrast, the popular *Jazz Cleopatra* by Phyllis Rose is the romantic interpretation akin to the roaring twenties flapper imagery and *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* is filtered through the intimacy of her adopted son Jean-Claude Baker as co-author. Baker's subjectivity has thus informed my examination of Baker's *images* above in *conversation* with the literature as opposed to performing a separate critical biographical study, which I believe would also be a stylistic departure from the overall cohesiveness of this project.

[195] "These skirts were famously seen at French colonial expositions, such as the one held in Paris in 1925, the year that baker would break into her first 'Danse Sauvage' in La Revue Negre" and the magazine cover also included "a repeated image of a primitivist rendition of an African warrior, complete with grass skirt and spear. The warriors dance in the same manner as the flapper and repeat the movements of her body. As Hannel argues, the repetition

As Sweeney-Risko points out, images like the *Life* magazine cover "[connect] popular African American dance culture to orientalist motifs already made famous by those like Poiret in the 1910s, 1920s designers such as Chanel, Patou and Vionnet" (506).[196] Baker's image, while on the one hand was problematically race and sexualized, was also the height of couture as her outrageous stage costumes became the inspiration for mainstream women's fashions to the point that "[y]oung Parisiennes began to copy Baker's closely cut hair" (Schroeder 40). The daring trend brings to mind the conversation from Downton Abbey in the introduction: "'Are you a boy or a girl?' people frequently asked. In response, Baker just smiled" (Schroeder 40). This response encapsulates the representation of women's relationship to fashion I have explored over the course of this dissertation. I noted in the introduction that images of the twenties flapper tend to inform a romanticized and even frivolous interpretation of fashion in the period. From the short skirts and bobbed hairstyles worn both confidently and self-consciously to the wide range of other styles in these texts, I believe seeing how those images were infinitely more complex than our contemporary notions of fashions also informs our understanding of women's own identities as equally multifaceted during the period. As a celebrity figure, a fashion icon, and a black woman, I believe Baker's identity has come to occupy an interesting liminal space between reality and fiction which represents my wider argument about women's self-fashioning at the turn of the century. Much Like Larsen's self-fashioning, and indeed that of any of the fictional

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between the black men and the white woman in the picture emphasizes the relationship between her fashionable attire and unleashed primitive allure" Sweeney-Risko 505).

[196] Chapter 16 of the biography *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* includes anecdotes of these designers clamoring to dress Baker as well including the evolution of a dress she designed that Poiret included in his collection thus reviving his dwindling career. This again points to the amalgamation of diverse cultural imagery as the primitive and exotic as addressed by Kelley in chapter 1.

It is also important not to romanticize these images as this appropriation of African art and culture motifs was not uncommon in other areas during the period, as even Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group "was entertained with "coon songs," Negro spirituals sung by American Henrietta Bingham, and conducted lively discussions of the relationship between blackness and Postimpressionist art" (Hinnov 49).

heroines included here, discussions of Baker necessarily rely on carefully manufactured information that portrays a specific image of Baker as simultaneously ultra-intelligible *and* unknowable.[197]

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have explored how women writers in the modernist era treated fashion in their fiction, and their daily lives. This examination has exposed experiences of complicity and resistance, gender and racial oppression, class and sexual freedom, queer sexuality and heteronormativity, objectification and liberation. Through close readings of specific references to clothes and dressing I have worked to probe the contradictions that fashion presents to demonstrate that the potential for dress to function not only as a means of social conditioning and conformity, but also a tangible mode of self-determination. Therefore, my approach to this investigation has tended towards a generous and open reading of fashion rather that what I perceive as a tendency towards skepticism or dismissal within the scholarship. This is not to say that my arguments have encompassed only the positive potentialities of fashion; my hope is that I have managed to illustrate how these women explored and exploited the inherent contradictions in clothing as a dynamic medium for enforcing and reading dominant social structure *and* for self-expression that subverts, appropriates, and parodies those ideologies. The purpose of this kind of inquiry has been less concerned with concrete resolutions to questions of agency and subjugation, and instead aimed to emphasize possibilities for multiple readings within a text or garment as self-fashioning or cultural criticism. Overall, I believe my analysis has encompassed the myriad ways in which fashion can offer a material means of articulating

[197] Specifically, here I am arguing that Baker's celebrity and iconic status as *the* representation of the period brings together my previous discussions of unknowability of Larsen and Orlando as well as intelligibility of Lily Bart and Eden Bower.

complex identities where communicating such struggles in the abstract can be unsatisfying or reductive within the binary logics of language. Though a wide collection of works may also benefit this discussion in that they *contain* detailed and significant references to fashion, I chose the texts considered here because they represent a narrowly defined range of works that I consider to be *about* fashion.[198] As the earliest work, Wharton's *The House of Mirth* was useful as a kind of cultural touchstone for situating the historical and social transformations of women's prospects in gilded age New York. *Mirth* thus informs the attitudes about class and gender in *Yezierska's Salome of the Tenements* as well as the racial divide between Manhattan and Harlem in *Quicksand* given its apparent invisibility in the earlier works. The social conventions and gender expectations Wharton explores are also surveyed in Stephen Gordon's childhood in *The Well of Loneliness* and Orlando's experience of Victorian England. Furthermore, while Lily Bart's dress generally serves a mercenary function to gain social approval, the fact that each of the other protagonists expresses a deeply personal desire for self-expression through their clothes points to the significant shift enabling individual tastes as the century progressed.[199] Larsen's *Quicksand* opens my survey of fashion and writing because I believe it encompasses the multiple intersections of dominant culture that can and do converge on women's bodies. Helga Crane experiences simultaneous burdens of gender, race, class, and sexuality that continue to shift and realign as she moves either geographically or metaphorically in her (un)willingness to comply with cultural demands. I conclude with the discussion of Baker in connection to *Quicksand* in order to emphasize the realities which Larsen represents. Like *Mirth* shows, at least partially, the

[198] The selected works are also conveniently situated in close proximity to each other in their dates and/or geographies.

[199] I believe this point is sometimes overlooked when considering the "democratization" of dress at the turn of the century as, generally, discussions emphasize the availability of mass-produced clothing. Thought the prevalence of more uniform styles like those of Chanel are usually synonymous with the period there was in fact a wider range of styles available as evidenced by Doan's discussion of masculine – though not necessarily androgynous – styles in the 1920s as discussed in chapter 3.

foundation from which women's experiences would emerge in the twentieth century, this final section on Josephine Baker completes that arc as a real woman, and perhaps the most iconic image of the period, who experienced and was *read* in many of the same ways as these fictional women. Though I aimed to address the multiple functions of fashion in writing within this selection, there are two points that I do not address in this dissertation, which I would like to explain briefly here.

(Wo)men Writing Women

First, I have intentionally worked within the scope of literature about women *by* women. Though an argument like Cixous's that "there is such a thing as *marked* writing" is perhaps peripheral to this dissertation, I do believe it is important to recognize that in general, and within the history of modernist scholarship, women's writing is still often subordinated to men's;

> woman has never *her* turn to speak – this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change,* the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures (Cixous "Medusa" 879).

In fact, given the examples from other critics' analyses of men's writing below, there does appear to be a distinct difference in the ways in which men and women represent women and fashion that would thus confirm the notion of *marked* writing, and which bears further exploration in future. Additionally, Bonnie Kime Scott observes in *The Gender of Modernism*: "In their critique of culture, modernist women persistently bring up issues of gender, whereas men assert that the masculine is what should be advanced, [. . .] and are not particularly

interested in seeing this attitude as gender conditioned" (Scott 7).[200] As I mention in the introduction, Millet's sexual politics is a useful model for this dissertation because she argues that literature reinforces and constructs our social power structures. My dissertation is following a parallel trajectory of how women use literature, and fashion, differently in their fiction to resist sexual politics rather than reinforcing it. The fashion examples I discuss, even those that are controlling women in the narrative, are critiquing the domination of women either explicitly in subversive fashion or implicitly through the damages to identity via compliance with gender norms.[201] Canonical literature by men, can tend to reinforce gender power dynamics especially sexual domination as discussed above in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*.

Some of the projects similar to this one have included work by male writers. For example, in chapter 4 of her book *Fashion and Fiction,* Lauren Cardon examines women's fashion works from Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Hemingway. In this analysis she notes that in general fashion tends to mark women as objects of desire rather than their autonomy as protagonists. Cardon also observes that while "*The Great Gatsby* has become so synonymous with 1920s fashion that numerous fashion spreads inspired by flapper styles have been themes around the novel. [. . .] Surprisingly, [. . .] the novel does not feature many actual descriptions of women's clothing." (Cardon 116). In general, Cardon's analysis reveals that the women in these works are *fashioned* in their relationships to the male protagonists, rather in their own

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[200] Scott refers to Cixous as well here, nothing that "[t]he separatist treatment of women that flourished in the 1970s remains defensible. It is useful when one is hypothesizing a women's tradition (see Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*) or attempting to release women's creativity from male influences (See Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa")" (7).

[201] It is of course important to note that this is not necessarily true of *all* women's writing. "It is well known that the number of women writers [. . .] has always been ridiculously small. This is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of female writers we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women" (Cixous "Medusa" 878). Kime also notes that some modernism women advanced masculine aesthetics as well in the passage cited above (7).

characterizations. “Faulkner’s modern woman is superficial and rash, while Fitzgerald’s is haughty and aloof. Hemingway’s modern woman, in contrast, is sexually magnetic and destructive” (Cardon 130). Similarly, in “No Room for ‘Women of Fashion’”, Loretta Clayton argues that, in *Woman in White,* Wilkie Collins

> promotes an aesthetic agenda that overrides any real possibility of sisterly solidarity among the female characters, who are divided into two camps based on the male hero’s predilections: the desirable who rejects conventional fashion and the reviled who embody a commonly maligned Victorian type, the coquette or “woman of fashion”. (Clayton 181-2)

While these two critics address the men’s distinct writing of women and fashion primarily by degrees of desirability, Elizabeth Sheehan curiously avoids gender entirely in her chapter on Lawrence in *Modernism a la Mode.* Sheehan makes an abrupt shift in her lens when transitioning from a discussion of Woolf to talking about Lawrence. She notes that "while Woolf’s texts use fashion as a tool for thinking and feeling one’s way, Lawrence’s describe and aspire to garments’ capacity to excite, exalt, and prioritize the body” (Sheehan 68). Though this point is similar to both Cardon’s and Clayton’s above, Sheehan avoids addressing gender throughout the chapter. Interestingly, she positions Lawrence’s work as informing new materialism and acknowledges that the field “draws from a wealth of feminist work that examines the dynamics and legacy of femininity’s association with matter and corporeality in contrast to masculine form, intellect, and rationality” (Sheehan *Modernism* 71); however, she does not draw from this field herself and tends to privilege Lawrence’s masculinist ideologies such as: “depictions of dress [in Lawrence’s] novel expose the economic logic of matrimony and the corrupting effects of

feminine consumer culture on heterosexual desire" (Sheehan 79).[202] Like the previous studies showed, Lawrence's work too tends to emphasize fashion in terms of sexual desire. Overall, I believe these studies illustrate that, while some male writers incorporate fashion in their work it appears to be more normative in objectifying or categorizing women rather than dislocating gender identities.

Androgyny

Next, the concept of androgyny is one which I have not addressed previously in this dissertation. Androgyny relates to my analysis both in its relationship to fashion, in particular the functional arguments against women's fashion, and as a potentially nonbinary gender performance. Indeed, as I will discuss briefly here, some feminist criticism – both of fashion and the works I've explored – tends to privilege androgyny over discussions of feminine performance. In general, my analysis has deviated somewhat from this tendency for two reasons: (1) though purportedly nongendered, discussions of the androgynous tend to, in actuality, privilege the masculine under the guise of practicality; and (2) as a result, discussions of androgyny can either intentionally or inadvertently reinforce sexist stereotypes regarding femininity in that androgyny is equated to a lack of femininity for women, though not in the reverse as a lack of masculinity for men. In theory, as Iris Young outlines, "'Androgyny' named the ideal that many feminists theorized, a social condition in which biological sex would have no implications for a person's life prospects, or the way people treated one another" (Young 13). What becomes problematic, though, is that such arguments do not always examine the co-determined nature of sex and gender, therefore leaving the treatment of femininity (whether liked

[202] Furthermore, though Sheehan makes these references to feminism in general, the chapter itself does not employ a feminist methodology, notably avoiding Millett's discussion of Lawrence in *Sexual Politics.*

to gender or not) unexamined.[203] I believe the treatment of androgyny can be similar to the discussions of modern fashion I addressed in the introduction in that there is a tendency to dismiss the feminine as frivolous or insubstantial. On the one hand, androgyny is applied to modern women's fashions, which were, in fact, still significantly gendered, primarily marked by a shift in silhouette from the curvy Gibson girl and the appropriating of traditionally masculine cuts or accessories such as jackets or ties. As it relates to 1920s fashion, Elizabeth Wilson addresses the myth of the androgynous flapper, noting that the flapper image was in fact sexually alluring because she blended masculinity while maintaining femininity. She notes that this image was fashionable because,

> paradoxically, exaggerated masculinity or femininity may be less sexy than a sexual presence tinged with ambiguity. This is not necessarily the same as androgyny; [. . .] it is rather that the mysterious quality of their allure comes in part from a hint of manliness at the very heart of their feminine presence. (Wilson 120)

I touched on this briefly in discussing Radclyffe Hall's complex cross-dressing as both an expression of sexuality and mark of fashionability. Given that the term has been applied to both presentations, it is perhaps advisable to consider whether androgyny as a term is as unstable as the sex and gender terminology I discuss in chapter 3.

On the other hand, androgyny is used to describe the *functionalist* movement within economic and feminist critiques of fashion, which aesthetically and, yes, functionally imagine quite different garments from those of the flapper. Specifically, according to Lewellyn Negrin,

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[203] Young speaks to the difficult in incorporating femininity, stating: "'[f]emale' is a more useful category than "feminine" for feminist theory, it seems, because the feminine is more hostage to hegemonic discourses. I think that distinguishing concepts of female and feminine in gendered social experience is both plausible and useful. The first refers more to living out materialities of bodies, while the second refers more to gendered social conventions. [. . .] Experience and social structure often make the difference between them undecidable. I think that reflection on feminine meanings that are often devalued by dominant norms sometimes provides a basis for social criticism." (Young 6).

"[u]ntil recently, most feminist critiques of women's fashion have been underpinned by a functionalist paradigm in which fashion has been criticized for failing to obey the principle of practical utility" (Negrin "self" 99).[204] Overall, these arguments advocate for a more "rational" or "natural" approach to dress that "eschewed adornment designed to enhance the sexual allure of the wearer" (Negrin "self" 99). Charlotte Perkins Gilman's harsh critiques of fashion are especially useful here for understanding how these arguments were articulated during the modernist period. Interestingly, she explicitly advances a masculine mode of dress, stating that, while for them "there is little to choose" because "it is even more difficult to make them show particularity in dress" and "the man's dress, with all its limitations, is far nearer to the needs of the real basis, the human body. He must have freedom of movement, he must have some power and skill" (Gilman *Women and Dress* 110). As she sees it this is the preferable mode and "[h]e could not, conceivably, be made to wear anything that crippled him in action, like the 'hobbleskirt,' or the stilt heel" (110).

At face value, this argument is indeed rational; however, it is Gilman's critique of *women* that follows that becomes problematic

> A sadder, more pitiful, more contemptible spectacle it would be hard to exhibit, than these millions of full-grown human creatures hurriedly and continuously arranging and rearranging their hair, their clothes, their hats, their shoes, their very fingernails – because someone has so ordered. There is not a murmur of resistance, not a moment of criticism. (111)

[204] In this categorization, Negrin includes suffragists, Veblen, and Beauvoir – whom I will address shortly – as well as later twentieth century feminists. According to Elizabeth Wilson, "Numerous writers, notably Thorstein Veblen (1957), [. . .] have criticised fashion precisely on the grounds that it is irrational. Such critics have demanded of 'modern dress' that it be as rational and scientific as the age is, or was, supposed to be. The British Dress Reform Society spoke openly of 'rational dress' and the exaggerated and restrictive forms of nineteenth-century women's dress were especially rejected on these grounds" (Wilson "Fashion and Modernity" 11).

Given this expressed contempt for women's adornment, Gilman's descriptions of dress women's utopia in her novel from the same year (1915), *Herland,* are not surprising with simple cotton tunics, trousers, or unitard style pieces (*Herland* 18; 28).[205] What I find particularly interesting here is Gilman's frustration that women seem to "[make] no resistance at all." (*Women and Dress* 111). This does align more with the criticisms of women's fashion I've mentioned previously, I believe I can now confidently assert that women were in fact making significant resistance, particularly her fellow writers.

Perhaps the most significant example, would be Woolf's *Orlando* as it paints a similarly utopian portrait of de-gendered fashion possibilities but with quite obviously different strokes in offering a deconstructive parody of gendered dress, rather than an outright rejection or preference one way or the other. According to Marie Allégre, Woolf's imagined androgyny in *Orlando* can be read "not as a simultaneous combination (or fusion) of the 'feminine' and the 'masculine', but as a dialectic, a constant play between roles that are themselves highly contextual and never immanent" (para. 7). This is an especially intriguing interpretation, especially when combined with Beauvoir's conception of the androgynous world and my discussion of Orlando and Shelmerdine's marriage above. Megan Burke summarizes that "Beauvoir's brief reference to the androgynous world of the future appears as she reimagines the reproductive heterosexual couple" (Burke 9). According to Burke, Beauvoir's "promise of a new future" in this androgynous world "necessitate[s] an intense change in the different ways in

[205] They were girls, of course, no boys could ever have shown that sparkling beauty, and yet none of us was certain at first. We saw short hair, hatless, loose, and shining; a suit of some light firm stuff, the closest of tunics and knee breeches, met by trim gaiters" (Gilman *HERland* 17). "The garments were simple in the extreme, and absolutely comfortable, physical, though of course we all felt like supes in the theater. There was a one-piece cotton undergarment, thin and soft, that reached over the knees and shoulders, something like the one-piece pajamas some fellows wear, and a kind of half-hose, that came up to just under the knees and stayed there – had an elastic top of their own, and covered the edges of the first. Then there was a thicker variety of union suit, a lot of them in the closet, of varying weights and somewhat sturdier material – evidently they would do at a pinch with nothing further. Then there were tunics, knee length, and some long robes. Needless to say, we took tunics" (Gilman *HERland* 28).

which sexual difference can be lived" (Burke 10).[206] In sum, these varied notions of androgyny as it pertains to by body of research are intriguing. I bring this up not to immediately trouble my own arguments, but rather to probe where I might continue pursuing their depths.

Final Thoughts

In this dissertation, I have argued that clothing allows a writer to make explicit critiques of women's positions against patriarchal power structures. I have also observed how both writing and fashion are preoccupations for these women as well as often overlapping modes of articulating one's self to and in the world. Across these texts, the function of the garment is not fixed and even the same garment can have multiple readings within a single reading. Neither are garments serving a negative function in these texts as representations of women's oppression and objectification. They bring in a complex and layered commentary where characters can mask and reveal their identities and ideologies as they choose. I believe my readings serve a larger purpose of establishing women in fiction as active subjects, rather that passive objects at the mercy of restrictive sexual identities or clothing. In many ways applying feminist readings over object ones, the clothes themselves are an extension or representation of the autonomy or lack thereof of the wearer. Sometime the wearer is choosing these things, sometimes there are external pressures that impose readings other than those the wearer intended, sometimes the wearer is not the one choosing the clothes. In this case the act of dressing or being dressed supersedes the dress itself. My research has revealed complex and interwoven cultural criticism by these writers as they negotiate: (1) how and why characters are interested in or preoccupied with their

[206] I recognize this discussion is perhaps a bit sticky; however, I believe it is interesting to consider in looking ahead to future developments in my research on *Orlando,* and this project as a whole. I do find Burke's exploration of a less discussed area of Beauvoir's theories interesting in that one can read Orlando's final, fluid identity in her conceptions: "Beauvoir's own understanding of the lived body seems to give us reason to think that an androgynous world would offer other modes or styles of assuming one's situation. Indeed, throughout *The Second Sex,* Beauvoir's discussion of dimorphic sexual difference refers to the way contingent bodily differences are amplified and converted into necessary structures of experience in a given social world" (Burke 14).

identities within a racist, classist, and sexist society, *and* (2) how fashion, style, and dress help them to achieve, mask, or transform that identity in relation to existing power structures towards more authentic self-fashioning. While some writers like Larsen and Woolf resist the polemic, I argue that their fiction articulated women's discontent with the status quo and advanced ideas that continue to inform feminist thought today. Regardless of intent, the potential for these feminist readings based on understandings of how women's fashion was evolving at the time put contemporary feminist appraisals about race, gender, economics, and sexuality into cultural circulation, initiating the eventuality of their emergence into the theory of feminist discourse.

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