

KASIA BODDY

*“No Stopping, No Honing”:
Modernism’s Safety Razors*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, talk of “American invaders” preoccupied the British press. “The wolf is really amongst us this time,” Benjamin Thwaite warned readers; the “progress” of the United States had been nothing short of “triumphal.”¹ Serial jeremiadist William T. Stead agreed: “outstripped and overshadowed by the American,” the British would need to console themselves with “traditional glories,” such as Shakespeare.² The “invasion” which they evoked was, of course, not military but commercial: booming American manufacturers needed new markets, and “because of its accessible language, and the openness and size of its empire, Britain was the key destination.”³ “We have almost got to this,” lamented Fred Mackenzie in the *Daily Mail* in 1900:

The average citizen wakes in the morning to the sound of an American alarum clock; rises from his New England sheets, and shaves with his New York soap, and a Yankee safety razor.

And so the day begins. But Mackenzie, and Americanisation, are only getting started; leaving home, the British “citizen” cannot move except by “American-fitted railways,” “Yankee elevators,” and “a Nebraskan swivel chair.”⁴ Many of the items Mackenzie lists remain generically American, but particular brand

¹ B. H. Thwaite, *The American Invasion; or, England’s commercial danger and the triumphal progress of the United States with remedies proposed to enable England to preserve her industrial position* (London: Sonnenschein, 1902), p. 3. The American edition was entitled *An English View of American Progress*.

² W. T. Stead, *The Americanization of the World; or, the Trend of the Twentieth Century* (London: Horace Markley, 1901), pp. 2-3.

³ David Ellwood, *The Shock of America: Europe and the Challenge of the Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 22.

⁴ F. A. Mackenzie, *The American Invaders: Their Plans, Tactics and Progress* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), pp. 142-3.

names, such as Westbury watches and Quaker oats, are also named. Often, Stead notes, these did not displace existing products—did not, in other words, “invade” existing markets. Rather, the typewriter, sewing machine, linotype, phonograph, elevator, telephone, “incandescent electric light,” and—my focus in this essay—the safety razor were brand new “ingenious inventions.” American manufacturers, Stead argues, should therefore be considered as “benefactors,” comparable to “the missionary who introduces ploughs to a savage tribe which never used anything but the spade and hoe.”⁵ “We want these things,” he concludes, “We want them now.”⁶ It was a sentiment which many writers, artists, and filmmakers would come wholeheartedly to endorse. For the safety razor was not just one more technological innovation or consumer product; it entailed a fundamental rethinking of an essential masculine ritual and it provoked reflections on everything from efficiency and intimacy to the necessary conditions for comedy and tragedy.

I

In 1900 the safety razor was not new. Experiments in creating protective sheaths for straight razors had been made since the eighteenth century, and the phrase “safety razor” was first coined in the 1870s by Frederick and Otto Kampfe to describe the Star, a hoe-type razor featuring a wedge-shaped blade with one sharp edge and protected by a wire guard (Figures 2 and 3).⁷ This invention—described by Oliver Wendell Holmes as “a lawn-mower for [...] masculine growth”⁸—was a response to several cultural trends in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The first was the widespread desire to get rid of the paternal Victorian beard, leaving, initially, the dashing Edwardian moustache and then, by the early twentieth century, the “clean-shaven” face that has, more or less, remained popular to this day as a sign of hygiene and youth, but also, more

⁵ Stead, *The Americanization of the World*, p. 350.

⁶ Stead, *The Americanization of the World*, p. 352.

⁷ In the late eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Perret developed a razor guard—a wooden sleeve that went around the blade so that only the leading edge protruded—based on the design of a carpenter’s plane. See Gordon McKibben, *Cutting Edge: Gillette’s Rise to Global Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998), p. 5.

⁸ Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Our Hundred Days in Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), p. 17.

nebulously, of discipline, honesty and sociability. “It is a curious fact,” noted an advertisement for Williams’s shaving soap in 1901, “that nearly every President of the United States has shaved” (Figure 1). By 1912, even Tarzan, despite the inconvenience of doing so in the jungle, began every day by “scrap[ing] and whittl[ing] at his young beard to eradicate this degrading emblem of apehood.”⁹ If more men wanted to shave, they were also increasingly concerned with how to

WILLIAMS' SHAVING SOAP

The Leader Through 20 Administrations

MARTIN VAN BUREN — J. B. WILLIAMS — WILLIAM MCKINLEY

60 Years

If You Aspire to be President, SHAVE!

IT is a curious fact that nearly every President of the United States has shaved. About every President during the past sixty years has used Williams' Shaving Soap. It might almost be said that no one can hope to be President who does not use Williams' Shaving Soap. Certainly no one can know the luxury of shaving unless he does, and to know the luxury of shaving with Williams' Shaving Soap—to enjoy its thick creamy lather—to be free from the risk that lurks in impure and improperly prepared shaving soap, is almost equal to being President.

You may never be President, but you can “feel like a king” every time you use Williams' Shaving Soap.

Williams' Shaving Soaps are the only recognized standard for Shaving, and in the form of Shaving Sticks, Shaving Tablets, Shaving Cream, etc. are sold by druggists, perfumers and dealers in Barbers' Supplies all over the world. By mail if your dealer does not supply you.

WILLIAMS' SHAVING STICK, 2c.
LUXURY SHAVING TABLET, 2c.
YANKEE SHAVING SOAP (Brand of Ribbon Tablets), 6c.
SPES VIOLET SHAVING CREAM, 6c.
WILLIAMS' SHAVING SOAP (Ribbon's). Used in thousands of families as a toilet soap. Its delicate, emollient qualities make it generally safe and delightful for toilet use. Suggested for keeping the hands soft, white and smooth.
Trade Tablets for 2c. soap; 1 lb. package (8 round cakes), by mail, 6c.

LONDON
PARIS

THE J. B. WILLIAMS COMPANY
Glastonbury, Conn.

DRESDEN
SYDNEY

Figure 1. “If You Aspire to be President, SHAVE!” Advertisement for Williams’s shaving soap, with portraits of Martin Van Buren and William McKinley, *Collier's Magazine*, 16 March 1901, back cover. Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection (Library of Congress).

⁹ Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the Apes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 109. See, also, Christopher Oldstone-Moore, “Mustaches and Masculine Codes in Early Twentieth-Century America,” *Journal of Social History* 45.1 (Fall 2011): 47-60 (p. 53).

KAMPFE BROS.
INVENTORS AND MANUFACTURERS OF

THE MEDAL OF SUPERIOR MERIT

THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE 1884-85

STAR SAFETY RAZOR



EVERY MAN HIS OWN BARBER!
— SHAVING BY —
AN EASY AND CONVENIENT LUXURY.
NO DANGER
OF CUTTING THE FACE.

PATENTED
June 18, 1895, June 18, 1896,
June 27, 1896, June 18, 1897,
January 7, 1896, June 18, 1897,
May 21, 1896, May 21, 1897,
June 27, 1896, July 2, 1896,
June 18, 1896, August 1, 1896,
England March 6, 1897.

For sale by all the leading Hardware and
Cutlery Houses throughout the world.
This is the First Safety Razor, and the only one that has given
perfect satisfaction, and is endorsed by many prominent men.
8 Reade Street, NEW YORK, U. S. A.

Figure 2. Advertisement for the Star Safety Razor, 1895.



Figure 3. The Star Safety Razor.

do so while on the move. Travel, for leisure and for work, increased greatly in the late nineteenth century, and the safety razor was advertised as particularly suitable for sailors, salesmen, and tourists—all those who had to face the “danger [of] the lurch or motion” (Figure 4). Holmes’s endorsement of the Kampfe Star came after he’d used it on a transatlantic voyage: “The mowing operation required no glass,” he puffed, “could be performed with almost reckless



You can have an object lesson in the use of the Gillette on any sleeping car in America. Most men who shave on the train use the Gillette. They can shave quickly—with no stropping, no honing—shave smoothly and clean up all the corners, with no danger from the lurch or motion of the car.

A bridegroom on the Canadian Pacific acquired a three-days' growth of beard. Despair was written on his face. A kindly old gentleman loaned him a Gillette—and received the united thanks of two fond hearts.

Men who travel much become very practical. They go in for efficiency—get down to necessities.

Tourists and travellers are the staunchest advocates of the Gillette. It would be interesting to know how many thousand Gillettes are sold every year through their example and recommendation.

Be progressive. Keep a Gillette on your home washstand—take it with you when you travel. Spread around some of the Gillette sunshine. Wear the smile of the man who can shave without stropping or honing. Life is brighter when a clean face is an every-morning habit.

Write and we will send you a pamphlet—Dept. A.

King Gillette

GILLETTE SALES COMPANY, 60 W. Second Street, Boston
 New York, Times Building; Chicago, Stock Exchange Building; Gillette Safety Razor Ltd., London
 Eastern Office, Shanghai, China; Canadian Office, 41 St. Alexander Street, Montreal

GILLETTE SALES COMPANY, 60 W. Second Street, Boston
 Factories: Boston, Montreal, Lorient, Berlin, Paris

Figure 4. Gillette advertisement (drawing by J. C. Leyendecker), *Saturday Evening Post*, 3 September 1910, p. 48.

boldness, as one cannot cut himself, and in fact had become a pleasant amusement instead of an irksome task.” “So pleased” was Holmes with his mower that he took it to show the “distinguished tonsors of the Burlington Arcade,” although “half afraid they would assassinate me for bringing in an innovation which bid fair to destroy their business.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Holmes, *Our Hundred Days in Europe*, p. 17.

Star safety razor blades were made from forged steel and required frequent sharpening: “stropping” at home with a leather belt and then, eventually, “honing” at the barber or cutler. The next development in shaving technology was not about increasing safety, then, so much as convenience, and about exploiting the “attractive economics” of disposability.¹¹ King C. Gillette’s innovation was selling cheap blades that could be used a few times and then thrown away;

Gillette

Clean Fighters

THE millions of big, strong-limbed super-men who are fighting to save Freedom from the attacks of an arrogant enemy, are clean men in every sense of the word—clean fighters—clean of face—clean of action—clean-minded men fighting for clean ideals—fighting to make the world a cleaner place in which to live.

Ten million men who by birth belong to one or other of the Allied Countries are **Gillette** enthusiasts—men who shave every day with **Gillette** razors, not merely because the Army regulations demand clean-shaven faces, but because their own clean ideas favor the razor which gives the maximum of cleanliness in the minimum of time.

The Military authorities of the United States have set the hallmark of official approval on the safety razor by including it in the American soldier's kit.

That is a decision of more than ordinary significance, the meaning of which must be clear to every man. You can be quite sure that the American Army Chiefs would not have made this decision had they not been fully satisfied that a safety razor was a real necessity—was a winning factor in the great war.

Millions of **Gillette**s are at-the-Front, playing their part with conspicuous success and helping our men to win their battles.

Standard Set 21/-

GILLETTE Standard set, containing heavily-plated razor, a double-edge and a double-edged blade (2) shaving edges, in case, complete, 21/-.
Pocket Edition, Gillette set, in heavily-plated case, also at 21/-.

Write today for the new Illustrated Gillette Pocket. It will be posted free on request, Gillette Safety Razor, Ltd., 200, Great Portland Street, London, W. 1.

Gillette
SAFETY RAZOR
NO STROPPING NO HONING

Figure 5. First World War advertisement for Gillette.

that is, “no stropping, no honing” would be required. With the technical assistance of the inaptly named William E. Nickerson, he developed an ultra-thin, double-edged blade, stamped from inexpensive sheet steel, and he applied for a patent in 1901.

¹¹ McKibben, *Cutting Edge*, p. 6. Gillette was inspired by his friend Painter’s invention of a disposable bottle top. See Tim Dowling, *Inventor of the Disposable Culture: King C. Gillette, 1855-1932* (London: Faber, 2001), pp. 20-21.

First World War advertisements for Gillette.

September, 1918

Gillette SAFETY RAZOR

Aboard ship is no place to take chances with an old-fashioned razor

The Gillette makes shaving as safe, easy and comfortable on shipboard as in training camp. No danger of cutting yourself if a fellow bumps your arm when you're shaving. The Gillette is the real "once over" razor—delivers the velvet-smooth shave every time, under every conceivable condition. The service razor of fighting men everywhere.

Have you seen the new Gillette Sets specially made for the fighting man? Two of them are illustrated on this page. They were designed for members of the Gillette Organization in the Service—men who know what the fighting man is up against.

Simple and compact, fit the pack, the pocket or the ditty box. No straps or hinges to clutter up the kit. Blades always sharp, always ready. No Strapping—No Hinging. When a man wants new Blades he can get them in any Post Exchange, Ship's Canteen, or Y.M.C.A. Hut, here in America or overseas.

Our First Gillette service set—so constantly supplying the American Expeditionary Forces, Gillette Safety Razors and Blades are sold everywhere in France, England, Italy, and the Eastern battle fronts.

Here's the Way to Get 100% Efficiency Out of Your Gillette.
 1. Get the most satisfactory and most efficient razor and blades.
 2. Use the razor and blades in the most efficient way.
 3. Use the razor and blades in the most efficient way.
 4. Use the razor and blades in the most efficient way.

Gillette Safety Razor Co.
 151 Commercial Street
 Boston, Mass., U.S.A.

Gillette Safety Razor Company
 Boston, Mass., U.S.A.

**Gillette Safety Razor Company
 Boston, Mass. U.S.A.**

Figure 6.

**No Strapping
 No Hinging**

The Gillette on the Firing Line

OUT of the war-torn trenches there comes a remarkable letter. Written by a young officer to his uncle here in America, who had sent him a Gillette Safety Razor.

"I thank you very much for the welcome Gillette Razor," he writes.

"Not only myself but nearly all of my men are using this razor. It is passed around among them, and one may see men using it at any time of the day or night.

"Sometimes there is no hot water, but the razor works well without it."

"The razor has been used many hundred times, but it still looks like new and will outlast the war if it is not blown to pieces by some of the flying fragments of burning shells which often whistle about our heads."

Thousands of men under all the warring flags are using the Gillette Safety Razor—on the battle-field of the Marne, in East Prussia and the snow-blocked passes of the Carpathians.

It illustrates the adaptability of the Gillette to every man's habits, needs and circumstances. In little more than ten years, the Gillette Safety Razor has been adopted by men all over the civilized globe.

Gillette Safety Razors and Blades are sold in 145,000 retail stores throughout the world. Gillette dealers in every community. Gillette Razors, \$5 to \$20. Gillette Blades, 50c, and \$1 the packet—No Strapping, No Hinging.

GILLETTE SAFETY RAZOR COMPANY
 BOSTON, MASS.

TRADE **Gillette** MARK

Figure 7.



Figure 8. "Gillette Safety Razors Figure in Many a 'Close Shave'," *Gillette Blade*, March 1918, p. 15.

It wasn't until the First World War, however, that Gillette became a market leader. Again, technological invention profited from cultural changes. For many years British soldiers had agitated to abandon the compulsory growth of a chivalric military moustache, but this was only granted in 1916 when it was conceded that morale was more important than "hirsute adornment."¹² Moreover, even soldiers who retained a moustache needed to shave their beards, and Gillette's "compact \$5 kit with disposable blades" and a special khaki case (reputedly able to stop bullets) greatly outsold competitors which still required "cumbersome stopping attachments."¹³ What made Gillette, however, was the deal the company struck with the US army—which never had had a moustache rule—to supply shaving kits to every serviceman. The company immediately exploited the connection by issuing advertisements which pictured the razor "on the firing line" (Figure 7) as a piece of equipment essential as a gun, and by associating men who were "clean of face" with much more than just "clean fighting": they were "clean-minded men [...] fighting for clean ideals to make the world a cleaner place in which to live" (Figure 5).¹⁴

The reductive semantic insistence of this advertisement does not simply correspond to the standardisation of mass consumption that Gillette desired and indeed achieved: advertisements thanked "the Men of the Navy" for "introducing this American invention to the Far Countries of the World" (Figure 22). Many also worried that the ideology of hygiene—the suggestion that everything, from faces and fights to ideals and the world, should be "clean"—was itself invidious. In 1915 the German writer Werner Sombart published a collection of "patriotic sentiments" entitled *Heroes and Traders*, professions which he saw as firmly opposed. In one passage he noted that a Berlin newspaper had spoken "with a certain respect" of the habit of English soldiers to shave "even in the trenches." "That is sad," Sombart commented, "to pay attention to the removal of the stubble [...] amid such great events. Rather, every safety razor in the trenches

¹² Quoted in Andrew Horrall, "Charlie Chaplin and the Canadian Expeditionary Force," in *Canada and the Great War*, ed. Briton C. Busch (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), pp. 27-45 (p. 35).

¹³ McKibbern, *Cutting Edge*, p. 19.

¹⁴ See, also, David Clampin, "Commercial Advertising as Propaganda in World War One," *British Library Online*: <http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/commercial-advertising-as-propaganda>.

seems to be an ugly symbol of the English peddler's culture."¹⁵ The problem of that culture, for Sombart, is its emphasis on triviality; for John Dos Passos, however, the safety razor was a symbol of the "immense machine," the brutalising, as well as standardising, "Industrial system."¹⁶ In Dos Passos's 1921 war novel, *Three Soldiers*, Dan Fuselli encounters a new lieutenant: a "decent feller," he thinks, as he sees the man running a "safety razor obliquely across his throat" in front of a "nickel mirror" in a "clapboard room" that is filled with "a pleasant smell of shaving soap."¹⁷ And yet that domestic cosiness is misleading. Fuselli had joined the army thinking it would give him "a chance to do almost anything," but he has been summoned to the room simply to "straighten [it] out," and at the novel's end he is still "emptying ashcans," still on the "vast treadmill."¹⁸ *Three Soldiers* consistently describes men according to whether they are "shaven" or "unshaven" or "ill-shaven": shaving is part of the "treadmill" of industrial military life and by armistice its habits are so ingrained that when Andrews, the intellectual of the three, arrives in Paris, one of his first thoughts is that he needs to get a "shaving set."¹⁹ War and shaving are just different forms of "never-ending labor."²⁰

II

If it was an exaggeration to say, as one of his friends did, that *Three Soldiers* made Dos Passos "as famous as Wrigley's," the novelist's awareness of the branded nature of the visual landscape was certainly acute by the time he came to

¹⁵ Werner Sombart, *Händler und Helden: Patriotische Berinnungen* (Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1915), p. 101, quoted in Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 188.

¹⁶ John Dos Passos, *The Major Nonfiction Prose* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 34.

¹⁷ John Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers* (New York: George H. Doran, 1921), p. 63.

¹⁸ Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers*, pp. 43, 62, 303, 113.

¹⁹ Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers*, p. 429. In *1919* (1932), Joe Williams is given a Gillette by a corporal and told to "clean up smart." See John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 271.

²⁰ Dos Passos, *The Major Nonfiction Prose*, p. 34.

**Shave Yourself
with the "Gillette"**



Compact? Rather! So much so that when you travel you will hardly miss the corner of the dress suit case in which you tuck away my razor.

There is concentrated in this little device of mine a great deal of science. It has taken over 600 operations to bring a Gillette Razor set to its perfect state. I don't know of a single thing about it to-day that can be improved. It is loaded to the muzzle with perfection, and the minute you take it out of the box it is ready to go to work for you—*no honing—no stropping*.

Over a million users will attest how well it does its work. A twist of the handle enables you to have as light or as close a shave as you may desire. You cannot scratch or cut yourself with it.

When you use my razor you are exempt from the dangers that men often encounter who allow their faces to come in contact with brush, soap and barber shop accessories used on other people.

Like all good things, the "Gillette" has many imitators. Some of them have been audacious enough to steal some one of the many good points possessed by my razor. *All of them together, however, do not possess the merits of the "GILLETTE" as it stands perfected to-day.*

When you buy a safety razor get the best—the "GILLETTE." It will last you for the rest of your life. It is not a toy—it will always give you complete satisfaction.

The double-edged, flexible blades are so inexpensive that when they become dull you throw them away as you would an old pen.

Wm. L. Gillette

AN
IDEAL
HOLIDAY
GIFT

The Gillette Safety Razor set consists of a triple silver-plated holder, 12 double-edged blades (24 keen edges), packed in a velvet lined leather case and the price is \$5.00 at all the leading Jewelry, Drug, Cutlery, Hardware and Sporting Goods Dealers.

Combination Sets from \$6.50 to \$50.00

Ask your dealer for the "GILLETTE" to-day. If substitutes are offered refuse them and write us at once for our booklet and free trial offer.

GILLETTE SALES CO., 251 Times Building, New York City

Gillette

Safety Razor

NO STROPPING NO HONING



Figure 9. Gillette advertisement from the 1900s.

write *Manhattan Transfer* (1925).²¹ The novel's first section ends with a vignette in which an unnamed man sees an ad in a drugstore window:

At a yellowpainted drugstore at the corner of Canal, he stopped and stared abstractedly at a face on a green advertising card. It was a highbrowed cleanshaven distinguished face with arched eyebrows and a bushy neatly trimmed mustache, the face of a man who had money in the bank, poised prosperously above a crisp wing collar and an ample dark cravat. Under it in copybook writing was the signature King C. Gillette. Above his head hovered the motto NO STROPPING NO HONING. The little bearded man pushed his derby back off his sweating brow and looked for a long time into the dollarproud eyes of King C. Gillette. Then he clenched his fists, threw back his shoulders and walked into the drugstore.²²

The man purchases a “nickel-bright safety razor” and goes home to shave off his beard. To the horror of his wife and children, he emerges before them with “a face smooth as the face of King C. Gillette, a face with a dollarbland smile.” Dos Passos is alluding both to Gillette's famous remark that he wanted his face and signature to be as internationally recognisable as those on the dollar bill, and to the smooth blandness required to make dollars in America.²³

In one of the most idealised scenes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe features a Quaker mother and children “harmoniously” preparing breakfast while the father, “in the corner,” engages in “the anti-patriarchal operation of shaving.”²⁴ The point is not simply feminist—although Rachel Halliday is certainly in charge—but also a signal of genteel Christianity; the beardless Quaker Simeon is not to be confused with a bearded Jewish patriarch. The response of the shaven man's wife in *Manhattan Transfer*—

²¹ Virginia Spencer Carr, *John Dos Passos: A Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), p. 185.

²² John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (London: Penguin, 2000) pp. 21-2.

²³ McKibben, *Cutting Edge*, p. 22.

²⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 223.

The wife dropped like a laundrybag into the rocker and threw the apron over her head. “Oyoy, oyoy!” she moaned, rocking back and forth.²⁵

—suggests that the “small bearded bandylegged man” once was just such a patriarch. This succinct scene dramatises more than the power of advertising, then; or, rather, it dramatises the way in which that power is intricately linked to the losses as well as the promised gains of Americanisation. Of course Gillette was simply benefitting from a process that was well under way in the 1920s. In Abraham Cahan’s 1899 short story, “The Apostate of Chego-Chegg,” “wisps of silken beard” allow Michalina to identify Nehemiah as a “pious, learned Jew.”²⁶ In fact, he’s a rabbi. Sometime later, Michalina meets him again—but now he has transformed himself into Nehemiah the Athiest. “Clean-shaven and with close-clipped yellowish hair,” he seems “familiar” but only as an “insignificant little man.”²⁷ Shaving off one’s beard here—as in *Manhattan Transfer*—functions to dramatis the loss of distinctive ethnic identity required to become a “standardised” American.

But there is a still further stage in Dos Passos’s treatment of shaving. In *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), J. Ward Moorehouse—born on the 4th of July and offered throughout the eventual *U.S.A.* trilogy as an exemplary American—comes to an understanding of national economics (and therefore politics) while taking care of his facial hair: “He was shaving himself with a Gillette; why was he shaving with a Gillette instead of some other kind of razor?”²⁸ Moorehouse’s awakening to how advertising works does not launch him into a career as a Barthesian dissector of mythologies, however, but into one as a “public relations counsel.”²⁹ He rises spectacularly through the trilogy but when we last see him he’s a nervous wreck. And although, as another character points out, he has become “one of the sixty most important men in this country,” no one really cares about his misfortunes: “J. Ward Moorehouse isn’t a man ... it’s a name ... you can’t

²⁵ Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, p. 22.

²⁶ Abraham Cahan, “The Apostate of Chego-Chegg,” *The Century Magazine*, November 1899, pp. 94-105 (p. 97).

²⁷ Cahan, “The Apostate of Chego-Chegg,” p. 99.

²⁸ Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, p. 224.

²⁹ Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, p. 226.

feel sorry when a name gets sick.”³⁰ Moorehouse was partly based on the Public Relations pioneer Ivy Lee, but perhaps Dos Passos was also thinking of King Camp Gillette.³¹ By the early '30s, Gillette too was in ill health, having lost his fortune in the Wall Street Crash and his position in the company; he died in 1932 and was buried in a mausoleum “behind a plaque which bore his famous signature, King C. Gillette” (Figure 10).³² A month later, the company launched the rust-resistant Blue Blade—soon to become “the most famous double-edge blade ever produced”—with “King C. Gillette’s face [...] still on the wrapping” (Figure 11).³³



Figure 10.



Figure 11.

³⁰ Dos Passos, *The Big Money* (1936), in *U.S.A.*, p. 1144.

³¹ Moorehouse was partly based on Public Relations pioneer Ivy Lee, whom Dos Passos met in 1928 in Moscow. See “The Art of Fiction, No.44,” *Paris Review* 46 (Spring 1969): <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4202/the-art-of-fiction-no-44-john-dos-passos>. See, also, John Dos Passos, “Wanted: An Ivy Lee for Liberals,” *New Republic*, August 13 1930, pp. 371-2.

³² Dowling, *Inventor of the Disposable Culture*, p. 93.

³³ McKibben, *Cutting Edge*, p. 33.

III

In 1936, Dos Passos looked back on the change in American “habits” over the past twenty-five years and concluded that “from being a wordminded people we are becoming an eyeminded people.”³⁴ Advertisements relied on the word as well as the image, and none more so than the Burma Shave ads which, between 1926 and 1963, ran along American highways, in a staggered series of six signs: “one more little piece on a board and then further on two more words and the further on two more words and a whole lively poem.”³⁵ Poems like

HE HAD THE RING
HE HAD THE FLAT
BUT SHE FELT HIS CHIN
AND THAT WAS THAT
BURMA-SHAVE

or

THE BEARDED LADY
TRIED A JAR
SHE’S NOW
A FAMOUS
MOVIE STAR
BURMA-SHAVE³⁶

“delighted” the likes of Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. “It is possible,” Mike Chasar argues, that for nearly forty years, this was “the most public, widely read verse in America” (see Figure 12).³⁷

³⁴ Dos Passos, *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, p. 173.

³⁵ Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937) (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 225-6.

³⁶ Both of these are from 1934, quoted in Frank Rowsome Jr, *The Verse by the Side of the Road* (Battleboro, VT: Stephen Greene Press, 1965), p. 79. See, also, <http://burma-shave.org/jingles/>.

³⁷ Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 124 Thanks to Jeff Mackowiak for telling me about Burma Shave.

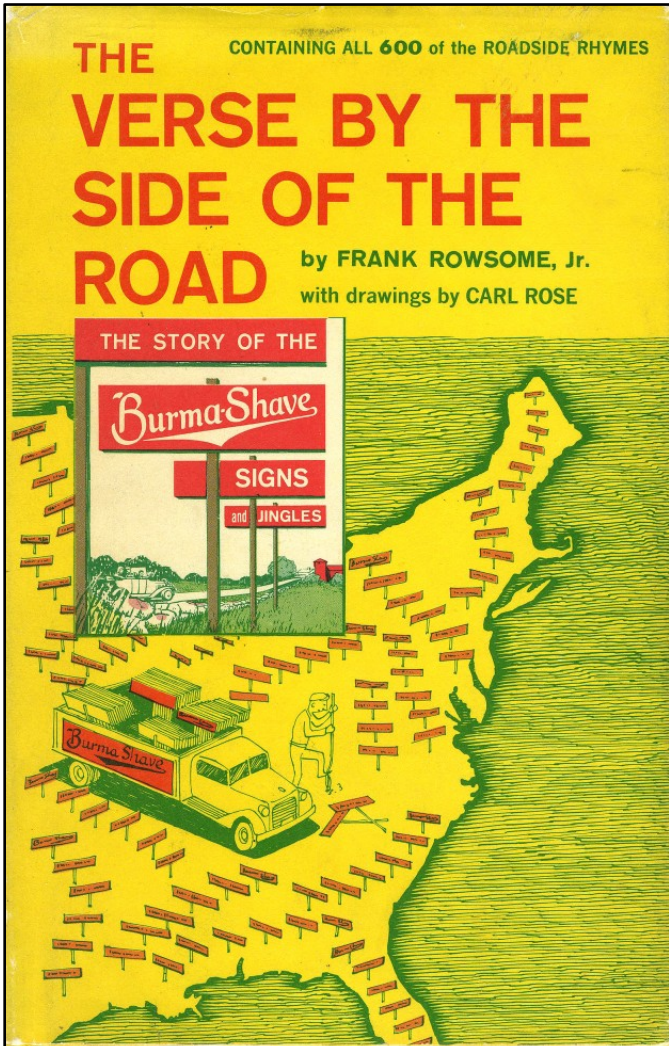


Figure 12. Frank Rowsome Jr, *The Verse by the Side of the Road* Battleboro, VT: Stephen Greene Press, 1965), front cover.

While alert to the visual landscape of advertisements, Dos Passos's own, "particularly responsive," eye had also been educated by filmmakers and painters who sought to transform that landscape into art.³⁸ Walking with Fernand Léger and Gerald Murphy in Paris in 1923, for example, enabled him to encounter "a freshly invented world," one in which commercial detail became abstract and strange.³⁹

The son of a luxury goods manufacturer, Gerald Murphy grew up with the iconography of modern advertising; before and after he went to France to "invent" the Riveria, he worked in product design and even patented a rival to the Gillette razor.⁴⁰ Today Murphy is best known as the model for Dick Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934), but he was also a set designer and sometime painter. Only seven of his fourteen French paintings still exist, "largely due to his own indifference."⁴¹ Taught by Léger to celebrate the "plastic values" of everyday objects such as soda siphons, ball bearings, and bicycle wheels, Murphy's paintings focus specifically on the iconography of his class and generation, the signs of streamlined modern transatlanticism that for Le Corbusier and others embodied a "new" and mostly American "spirit."⁴² In other words, Murphy "performed his nativeness"⁴³ by painting the particular objects that, in Le Corbusier's words, modern American life had "created": the ocean liner, the telephone, and, less heroically, the cocktail, "the fountain pen and the razor blade."⁴⁴

³⁸ Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 140.

³⁹ Quoted in Linda Patterson Miller, "Gerald Murphy in Letters, Literature and Life," in *Making It New: The Art and Style of Sara and Gerald Murphy*, ed. Deborah Rothschild (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 143-63.

⁴⁰ Eric Newby, *On the Shores of the Mediterranean* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 420; Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 122.

⁴¹ Peter Schjeldahl, "Modern Love," *New Yorker*, 8 August 2007: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/08/06/modern-love>.

⁴² Le Corbusier, *Towards an Architecture*, trans. John Goodman (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), p. 148.

⁴³ Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 94.

⁴⁴ Peter Gössel and Gabriele Leuthäuser, *Architecture in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1 (Köln: Taschen, 2001), p. 165. See, also, Le Corbusier, *Towards an Architecture*, p. 151.

Murphy's *Razor* (Figure 13), first exhibited in 1924, has sometimes been seen a precursor to Pop Art's—and in particular, to Claes Oldenburg's—experiments with scale. The canvas is 81 cm by 93 cm, but what's striking is the size within it of normally pocketable paraphernalia, carefully arranged as they are to form a heraldic composition, a kind of crest for the “modern American man.”⁴⁵ What



Figure 13. Gerald Murphy, *Razor*, 1924, oil on canvas, Dallas Museum of Art.

might we deduce about that man from this trinity of products offering safety from the mishaps of modern life? And how might he differ from *Ulysses*'s stately, plump Buck Mulligan, a figure located in the Dublin of 1904 and whose trinity instead consists of a “bowl of lather upon which a mirror and a [straight] razor lay crossed”?⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Matt Thomas, “The Heraldic Crest of a Modern American Man,” <http://submittedforyourperusal.com/2011/11/18/the-heraldic-crest-of-a-modern-american-man/>; Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 130.

⁴⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 1.



Figure 14.

The first item in this monument to modern risk aversion is a box of Three Stars safety matches: Murphy streamlined the design of a well-established Swedish brand, chosen here perhaps for its colour, the stars that evoke the American flag (also featuring on the sign to Murphy’s house, Villa America), and of course its emphasis on the number three (Figure 14).

Matches had been “safe” for a long time, but safety in fountain pens was a new idea. The pen Murphy chose to depict was a Parker Duofold (an offshoot of Parker’s 1912 Jack Knife Safety Pen, which had been marketed as “safe” for travelling because it didn’t leak on your white shirt). The Duofold, introduced in 1921, was distinctive because of its tough exterior (safe, the ads suggested, to throw out of planes and from the top of skyscrapers) and because it was so large. Known popularly as the Big Red, it was advertised as having an “over-size barrel [that] holds that extra ration of ink that can save the day in a crisis,” while its “‘Lucky Curve’ Feed [...] delivers the ink in sure-fire certainty” (another gun metaphor) (Figure 17). Yes, the pen was expensive—\$7.00—but, as one ad insisted, what was that against the \$25,000 deal you might lose while you search for a reliable writing instrument? Not what you might gain, mind, but what you might *lose*. Buy it now, the copywriter implores, or rather threatens: “you can never tell [...] what delay may cost you” (Figure 17). A small risk—spilling ink—has been reduced, but the emphasis is on avoiding a much greater one: failure to become rich.

Finally, then, we come to the object that gives the painting its title: the razor. As well as the influence of Léger, Murphy’s painting acknowledges a debt to cubism, and in particular, here, to Georges Braque’s 1914 *Still Life on a Table: “Gillette”* (Figure 18). One of Braque’s earliest experiments in *papier collé*, this collage combines wood-effect wallpaper with pieces of newspaper (including an ad for Gillette) and a wrapper for a Gillette razor. The work’s interest lies in the juxtaposition of different textures and shapes but the items are not randomly

Hurled 25 Stories to Cement - Picked Up Unbroken

People shipped to reach the top of the Parker Duofold Non-Breakable Barrel

George J. McElroy
Editorial Director

Jack Proof is a better guarantee than any maker can give you

You can't break the barrel of a Parker Duofold Pen and you can't break the barrel of a Parker Duofold Barrel. The barrel of a Parker Duofold Pen is made of a special alloy of steel and is so strong that it can be bent into a circle and will spring back to its original shape. The barrel of a Parker Duofold Barrel is made of a special alloy of steel and is so strong that it can be bent into a circle and will spring back to its original shape.

Parker Duofold
 THE PARKER PEN COMPANY - JAMESTOWN, WISCONSIN

Figure 15.

Non-Breakable Barrels Dropped 3000 Feet!

The Pen's Letter

For a year we kept secret the fact that Parker Duofold is made of "Durosteel" - a kind of steel that is so strong that it will not break.

Parker Duofold Pen and barrel are made of a special alloy of steel that is so strong that it will not break. The barrel of a Parker Duofold Pen is made of a special alloy of steel and is so strong that it can be bent into a circle and will spring back to its original shape. The barrel of a Parker Duofold Barrel is made of a special alloy of steel and is so strong that it can be bent into a circle and will spring back to its original shape.

Parker Duofold
 THE PARKER PEN COMPANY - JAMESTOWN, WISCONSIN

Figure 16.

The American Magazine 143

DISCOVERED BY MARY IN FLASHING PINKY BLACK TON-SET THIS BEYOND LAZARUS-AGED TO BARKEN TO MORG

While He looked for a Pen that would Write The Other Man changed his Mind

How a \$25,000 deal was lost!

—THE 100th Anniversary of Parker Duofold Barrel being saved the day

The pen which he mentioned to...
The pen which he mentioned to...
The pen which he mentioned to...

Parker Duofold
 THE PARKER PEN COMPANY - JAMESTOWN, WISCONSIN

Figure 17.

chosen. The references to Gillette—twice within the collage, and again in its title—suggests an engagement with the iconography of a newly available American brand, but the allusion to razor blades also provokes viewers to think about the painting’s cut-up construction and the sharp edges of its components.⁴⁷

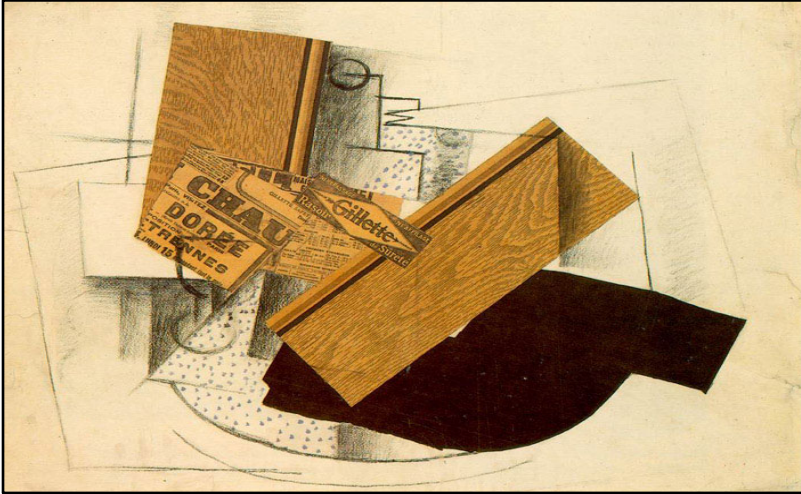


Figure 18. Georges Braque, *Still Life on Table: “Gillette,”* 1914
Charcoal, pasted paper, and gouache, 48 x 62 cm,
Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Although he too includes a cubist layering, Murphy’s interest in the razor seems less in the cutting blade than the handle, and less in the inclusion of fragments of the real than in mythologizing that reality, in the style of the ad-man. Indeed his two-foot-long painted safety razor might even have reminded Murphy’s contemporaries of a 1919 Gillette innovation called the “Big Fellow,” a model with an extra large handle which was marketed as offering “a man-sized fistful of shaving comfort,” particularly suited to those “with large capable hands” (Figure 19; note the cubist influence in the advertisement’s design). Taken together, this trio of objects suggests that safety and fastidiousness—and Murphy was famous for performing the “esoteric burlesque” of raking and removing seaweed from

⁴⁷ Corn, *The Great American Thing*, p. 107.

BIG FELLOW. Extra long-handled, heavily silver plated set of precision blades—\$3.00. Same set heavily gold plated—\$4.00. Ten Gillette Blades (twenty shaving edges) with each set.

A man-sized fistful of shaving comfort

THE Big Fellow is longer in handle and heavier in head—a man-sized fistful of beautifully machined and finished metal. And how gently and easily it shaves!

Eight out of ten college men in America shave with Gillette Razors. Eight out of ten men *after they leave college* stick to the Gillette for a lifetime of smooth, successful shaves.

GILLETTE SAFETY RAZOR CO., BOSTON, U. S. A.

TUCKAWAY. All the essentials of Gillette Shaving Comfort packed into the smallest possible space. The Tuckaway takes almost no room in an overnight bag—you can even slip it into a pocket like a cigarette case. Heavily plated case in silver or gold or desired, lined with purple velvet and satin. Complete with ten Gillette Blades (twenty shaving edges). Price—\$3.50.

NEW STANDARD. This remains one of the most popular of all our New Improved models. The case is covered with genuine leather and lined with purple velvet and satin. The razor is heavily plated in gold or silver as desired. Complete with ten Gillette Blades (twenty shaving edges). Price—\$4.50.

THE NEW IMPROVED
Gillette
 SAFETY RAZOR
 FIVE TO SEVENTY-FIVE DOLLARS

please mention BOY'S LIFE

Figure 19. "A Man-Sized Fistful of Shaving Comfort," *Boys' Life*, July 1928, p. 41.

THE NEW IMPROVED
Gillette
 SAFETY RAZOR

Do you know that eight out of ten college men use Gillette razors? Here's a tall fellow with large capable handle, wielding a man-sized fistful of beautifully machined and finished metal: the Gillette Big Fellow. It is the largest, heaviest and one of the most popular of all the Gillette models. Handily carried in sturdy metal, plated in silver or gold, priced at \$5.00. Twenty shaving edges (10 double-edged Gillette Blades) included. Other models at \$3.00 to \$75.00. Gillette Safety Razor Co., Boston, U. S. A.

please mention BOY'S LIFE

Figure 20.

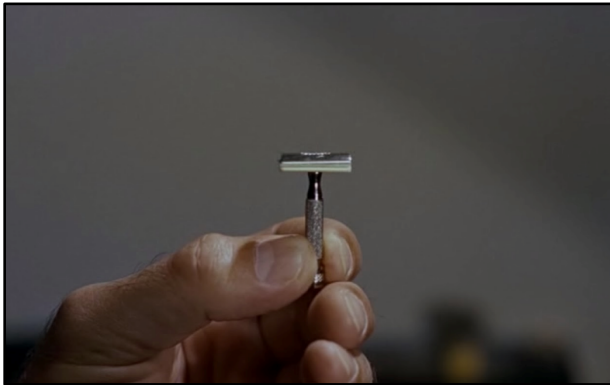


Figure 21. “I know I look vaguely familiar”:
North by Northwest (1959), dir. Alfred Hitchcock.

the beach at La Garoupe (shaving the landscape)⁴⁸—can, if writ large enough, become a form of machismo.

That play on scale also informs Hitchcock's use of the safety razor in *North by Northwest* (1959). On the level of plot, the narrative suggests the sort of transformation promoted by frontier-myth: an advertising executive takes on the identity of a spy and travels, incrementally, westward to be reinvented through adventure and romance. But if we focus instead on the bathroom scenes, we realise that Thornhill (Cary Grant) never really changes at all. He is pristine and (as James Mason says) "polished" throughout. Thornhill's (and Grant's) fastidiousness means that his suit and his face remain impregnable: dust is sponged off, stubble scraped away, and unlike his mythical alter ego Kaplan, he has no dandruff. On a train called the "Twentieth-Century," Thornhill encounters Eve Kendall (Eve Marie Saint) and her dinky razor—Hitchcock stops to give it a close up (Figure 21)—and when they arrive in Chicago, he goes to the railroad bathroom to shave, finding himself beside a man with a large cut-throat. The scene has a plot purpose (the shaving foam on his face conceals him from the men who are looking for him) and a certain irony (why bother with a safety razor when you're in danger of your life?). But it's also about faces, about the particular *brand* of masculinity sold by Thornhill, the advertising man, and by Grant, the actor—a brand summed up in Thornhill's response to Eve's asking why it took him so long to shave: "big face, small razor."

IV

I turn now from the iconography of the safety razor to its use, and in particular to changes in the habits and routines involved in the change from one shaving tool to another. In other words, I want to consider the safety razor in the period when it is no longer a mere icon but not yet a phenomenological "thing" to be meditated upon or "confronted",⁴⁹ the period of usefulness after it has "left the retail outlet and reached the hands of the final purchaser."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp. 14-15. Murphy recalled seaweed "four feet thick." See Calvin Tomkins, *Living Well is the Best Revenge* (New York: Modern Library, 1998), p. 31.

⁴⁹ Bill Brown says "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us." See "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1-22 (p. 4) A phenomen-

Looking again at ads from the late 1910s and 20s, it is clear that what is offered by the new razors is less safety (in the sense of avoiding the danger of injury and infection associated with the cut throat razor)⁵¹ than *saving*, in the sense of avoiding loss of time, money, and energy. In other words, the danger to be averted is that of inefficiency, of *waste*. One advertisement from 1917 aligned time saved in shaving with time saved in loading a gun. Soldiers do not only appreciate “the value of every minute” (Figure 23), we are told; they also recognise “the saving of small sums that count up to big ones, the habit of getting started on time—of doing a thing perfectly in the quickest way, with the fewest motions” (Figure 22).

The last comment recalls the “one best way” of early twentieth-century “scientific management” associated with Frederick Winslow Taylor and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth.⁵² Jill Lepore summarises the difference in their approaches: “Where Taylor dissected a job into timed tasks, the Gilbreths divided human action into seventeen motions, which they called ‘therbligs’—it’s an eponymous anagram—in order to determine the one best way to do a piece of work” (see Figure 24).⁵³ For example, as Gilbreth’s children explained in their memoir of efficient family life,

Suppose a man goes into a bathroom and shaves. We’ll assume that his face is all lathered and that he is ready to pick up his razor. He knows where the razor is, but first he must locate it with his eye. That is

ological approach can also found in Steve Connor’s *Paraphernalia*, where he talks about “magical objects” which “go beyond or spill or the side of” what they “merely” are or do. Never mind what they are “for,” he says; what’s interesting is the way in which some bit or piece, a button or a rubber band, can become a “mediator of meditation.” See *Paraphernalia* (London: Profile Books, 2001), pp. 2, 3, 41.

⁵⁰ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 57.

⁵¹ For example, Thoreau’s elder brother died of lockjaw after cutting his finger while stropping his razor. See Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 113.

⁵² See Lillian Gilbreth, *The Quest of the One Best Way: A sketch of the life of Frank Bunker Gilbreth* (1925) (Easton, PA: Hive, 1973).

⁵³ Jill Lepore, “Not So Fast,” *New Yorker*, 11 October 2009: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/10/12/not-so-fast>.

Gillette

Uncle Sam's Gunners

*are
the Best
Marksmen
in the
World*



THE discipline of the United States Navy tends to produce as clean a lot of fighting men as you'll see afloat or ashore.

Character-building begins with habits of personal care and cleanliness. And you're likely to find that your man has the Gillette Safety Razor as part of his personal kit, with its own definite place in his ditty-box.

THE sailor has a better idea than any other man of the world-wide popularity of the Gillette. He has bought his blades in every port of the Seven Seas. And the Gillette Company freely acknowledges its debt of gratitude to the Men of the Navy for their part in introducing this American invention to the Far Countries of the World.

If there is a man anywhere who is not enthusiastic over the Gillette it is probably because he has not caught the simple knack of using it.

There are thousands of young men just coming to shaving age. The Gillette will help them to form good habits—the saving of small sums that count up to big ones, the habit of getting started on time—of doing a thing perfectly in the quickest way, with the fewest motions.

Write for the New Gillette Catalogue. See the thirty styles of Gillette Safety Razors, \$5 to \$50. Gillette Dealers everywhere.

If You Live in Canada—write the Gillette Safety Razor Company of Canada, Ltd., 73 St. Alexander St., Montreal, for Canadian Catalogue and Prices.

Mindful Discovers in the dainty little Gillette used by the well-known seaman to keep his underarms white and smooth.

GILLETTE SAFETY RAZOR CO.
BOSTON, U. S. A.

NO STROPPING NO HONING

Figure 22. "Uncle Sam's Gunners,"
Literary Digest, 9 June 1917, p. 1812.

The men who know the value of every minute use the Gillette

Maybe a civilian can afford to loaf around a half hour or more listening for "next." But the men in khaki or navy blue know the value of the Gillette—the razor for *service* everywhere. Five or ten minutes for the "once over" Gillette shave—and a man is clean, braced up, right back on the job.

Have you seen the new Gillette Sets specially made for the fighting man? Two of them are illustrated on this page. They were designed by members of the Gillette Organization in the Service—men who know what the fighting man is up against.

Simple and compact, fit the pack, the pocket or the ditty box. No stropps or hones to clutter up the

kit. Blades always sharp, always ready. No Stropping—No Honing. When a man wants new Blades he can get them in any Post Exchange, Ship's Canteen, or Y. M. C. A. Hut, here in America or overseas.

Our Paris Office carries stocks—and is constantly supplying the American Expeditionary Forces. Gillette Safety Razors and Blades on sale everywhere in France, England, Italy, and the Eastern battle fronts.

Figure 23.


















	SEARCH		INSPECT
	FIND		PRE-POSITION
	SELECT		RELEASE LOAD
	GRASP		TRANSPORT EMPTY
	TRANSPORT LOADED		REST FOR OVER COMING FATIGUE
	POSITION		UNAVOIDABLE DELAY
	ASSEMBLE		AVOIDABLE DELAY
	USE		PLAN
	DISASSEMBLE		

Figure 24. The Gilbreth Therbligs, from Leon Alford, *Management's Handbook* (New York: Ronald, 1924).

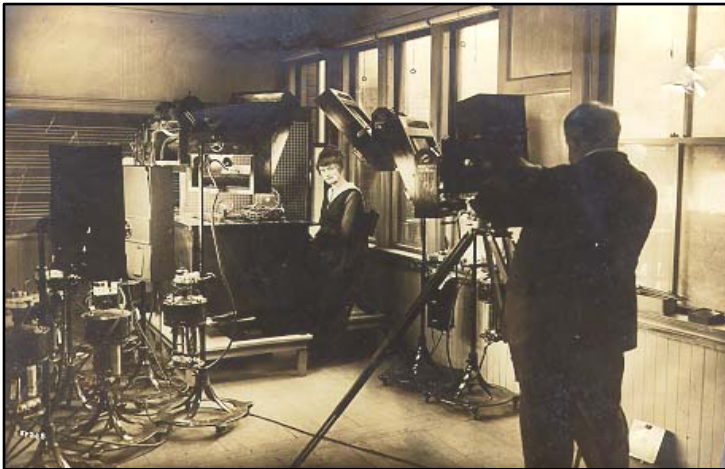


Figure 25.

“search,” the first Therblig. His eye finds it and comes to rest—that's “find,” the second Therblig. Third comes “select,” the process of sliding the razor prior to the fourth Therblig, “grasp.” Fifth is “transport loaded,” bringing the razor up to his face, and sixth is “position,” getting the razor set on his face. There are eleven other Therbligs—the last one is “think!”⁵⁴

The Gilbreths used film to study therbligs in the workplace, attaching electric lamps to hands, arms, and feet to create what they called cyclegraphs (Figures 25 and 26).⁵⁵ The purpose was to identify, and then eliminate, redundant motions. For example, Frank Gilbreth discovered that buttoning his coat from the bottom up rather than top down saved four seconds, and that by using two shaving brushes to lather his face he could cut 17 seconds off his shaving time. “Otherwise,” he told an interviewer, “your left hand is idle at your side. If it is employed in scratching your leg or in any useful purpose whatsoever, well and good; but if it is doing absolutely nothing, why not put it to work?”⁵⁶ Gilbreth also tried shaving with two razors, of different brands—one that was good for speed, followed by another that gave a closer shave—but, as his children record, that experiment didn't last long:

“I can save forty-four seconds,” he grumbled, “but I wasted two minutes this morning putting this bandage on my throat.”

It wasn't the slashed throat that really bothered him. It was the two minutes.⁵⁷

In the same spirit, advertisements promised customers an annual saving of \$52.00 and fifteen days (Figure 27), while *The Gillette Blade*—a company magazine for employees—went to town with calculations. Every razor, it argued,

⁵⁴ Frank Gilbreth Jr and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey, *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1948) (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 110-11.

⁵⁵ Some of these films are available at: <https://archive.org/details/OriginalFilm>.

⁵⁶ Fred C. Kelly, “The Man of the ‘One Best Way’,” *Popular Science*, December 1920, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Gilbreth Jr and Carey, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, p. 3.

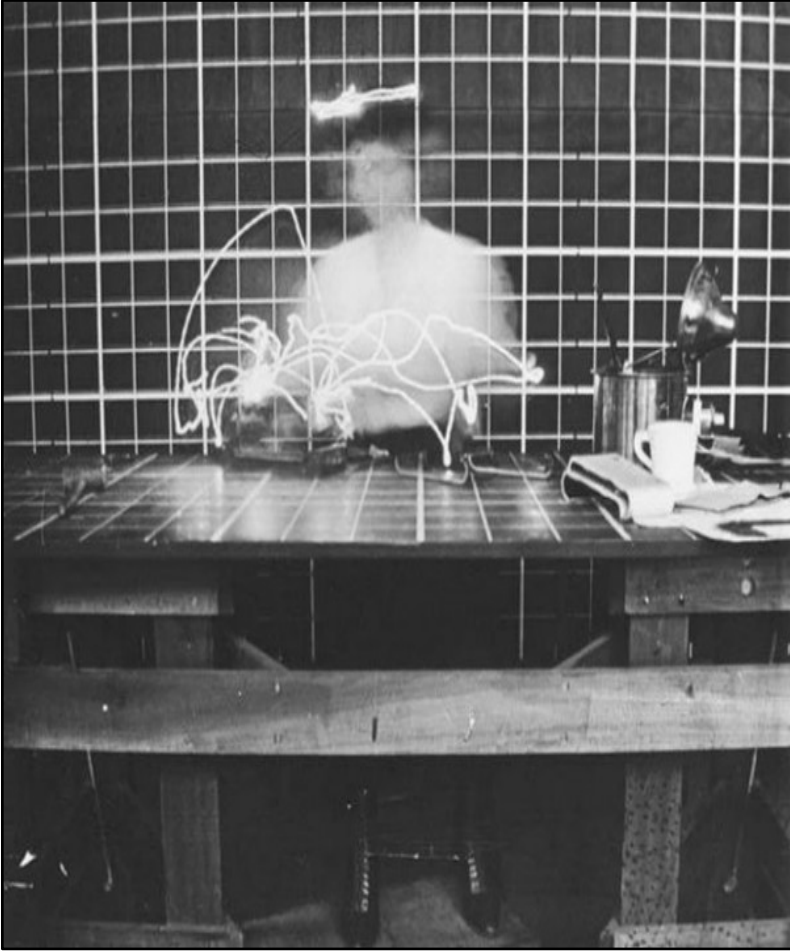


Figure 26. Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, "Efficiency Study" (1913).

FINE CUTLERY



The Dawn of "The Gillette" Razor Blade

The Gillette® blade is made of steel of neolithic hardness, fused and rolled into plate under a thermolytic heat and tempered by the most wonderful process of the 20th century.

12 BLADES: 24 KEEN EDGES
20 to 40 satisfying shaves from each blade.

"The Gillette" saves \$3.00 each year.
 "The Gillette" saves 15 days' time each year.
 "The Gillette" keeps the face clean, smooth, wholesome and free of rash.
 "The Gillette" blade can be raised or lowered on the guards to give a close or smooth shave.
 Triple silver plated set with 12 blades. } In Leather Velvet Lined Cases
 Quadruple gold-plated set with monogram }
10 extra blades, 20 sharp edges, good for a year, 50 cents.
At this low price no blades exchanged.
No hinges that rust. No clasps that break. No springs that weaken. One sturdy frame of mechanical perfection.
OUR NEW COMBINATION SET with razor, including soap and brush in silver holder for traveling men.

A full line of fine safety cases with razor sets and fittings now offered.
 Sold by Leading Drug, Cutlery and Hardware Dealers.
Ask to see them and for our booklet, or write for our special trial offer.
GILLETTE SALES COMPANY, NEW YORK CITY

Gillette Safety Razor
 NO STROPPING. NO HONING.

Figure 27.

©1908 by www.gillette.com



In 4 Minutes!

YOU CAN SHAVE WITH
"THE GILLETTE"

Then You are Ready for the Day with a Clean, Wholesome Face.
12 BLADES: 24 PERFECT EDGES.
THE WONDERFUL BLADE THAT HAS CHANGED THE RAZOR WORLD.
Truthful Letters from Constant Users Tell of the Marvellous Tenacity Strength of These Blades.
SINGLE BLADES HAVE BEEN USED 50, 60 AND UP TO 142 TIMES.

SAFE GILLETTE COMPANY
MASS.

SAFE GILLETTE COMPANY
MASS.

Triple silver-plated set with 12 blades	\$ 8.00
Quadruple gold-plated set with 12 blades	16.00
Quadruple gold-plated set with 12 blades and shaving brush	12.00
Single extra blades, 20 sharp edges, good for a year	7.50
Illustrated catalogue with 20 pictures and full text	35.00
Illustrated catalogue of 20 blades, having all these edges, for sale by all dealers at the outside price	.50

Sold by Leading Drug, Cutlery and Hardware Dealers.
 Ask to see them and for our booklet. ©1908 by the Gillette Safety Razor Co.

GILLETTE SALES COMPANY, 1101 Times Building, New York City.

Gillette Safety Razor
 NO STROPPING. NO HONING.

Figure 28.

represents a saving of half an hour of time spent in a barber shop, without saying anything about the money paid for service and tips. With an approximate number of 10 million customers this would represent a saving of [...] 5 million hours [...] which represents 500,000 working days of the labor of 500,000 men constantly employed, which is nearly twice the number employed by the U.S. Steel Corporation, which at \$3.00 per day represents a saving of \$1,500,000 per day, or for a year of 300 days, a saving to the United States of labor equal to \$450,000,000.⁵⁸

Of course, as Lewis Mumford pointed out, there is a great irony in products requiring “rapid replacement” being presented in this way: their aim, after all, was “not to save labor but to eliminate all labour except that which can channelled at a profit through a factory.”⁵⁹ But the contradiction was not something consumers worried unduly about. One satisfied customer was the British novelist John Buchan, and in 1922 he channelled his enthusiasm for his new razor into a novel called *Huntingtower*. The book opens with Mr Dickson McCunn, a fifty-five-year-old newly retired grocer, feeling “singularly light-hearted” at the thought of the time he was saving with his new shaving method:

A week ago he had bought the thing in a sudden fit of enterprise, and now he shaved in five minutes, where before he had taken twenty [...] Calculation revealed to him the fact that in his fifty-five years, having begun to shave at eighteen, he had wasted three thousand three hundred and seventy hours—or one hundred and forty days—or between four and five months—by his neglect of this admirable invention. Now he felt that he had stolen a march on Time. He had fallen heir, thus late, to a fortune in unpurchasable leisure.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ “Origins of the Gillette Razor,” *Gillette Blade*, March 1918, pp. 7-14 (p. 10). Before turning to business, Gillette had written utopian fiction, much in the spirit of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. Gillette’s *The Human Drift* (1894) imagines a city in which “technology has rescued mankind from drudgery.” See Dowling, *Inventor of the Disposable Culture*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilisation* (1934) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 282.

⁶⁰ John Buchan, *Huntingtower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 11. On Buchan’s “own discovery of the joys of the safety razor,” see Susan Tweedsmuir, *John Buchan by his Wife and Friends* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947), p. 287.

An enterprising “purchase” leads to “unpurchasable leisure” (a bit like Mastercard’s promise of shopping for “pricelessness”). And so McCunn sets off on a holiday that, when he joins forces with a gang of “fine laddies,” rejuvenates both him and the novel, which duly regresses from a 1920s suburban satire back into an Edwardian boys’ own adventure.

V

Dickson McCunn was never a habitué of the barber shop—hence his habit of appearing “at least one day in three, with a countenance ludicrously mottled by sticking-plaster”⁶¹—but for those who could afford it, shaving with a straight razor was best outsourced to professionals; that is, to barbers. The barber then was a kind of safety-device himself, skilled in the process of sharpening and wielding blades. In pre-Civil War America, African slaves often did this job, and the myth developed that they were “natural valets and hairdressers”: “there is something in the negro which [...] fits him for avocations about one’s person.”⁶² I’m quoting Amasa Delano, the narrator of “Benito Cereno” (1855) by Herman Melville. In the novella’s climactic scene a slave called Babo shaves Cereno, whom he is secretly holding captive.⁶³ Delano misreads everything about the situation; for example, seeing the “great piece of bunting of all hues” that Babo tucks beneath Cereno’s chin as a sign of the “African love of bright colours and

⁶¹ Buchan, *Huntingtower*, p. 11.

⁶² Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno,” in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987), pp. 47-117 (p. 83).

⁶³ Melville’s story derives largely from Amasa Delano’s *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in New Guinea*, but Sterling Stuckey argues that the shaving scene also “resonates with Ashantee practices, with Scottish Highlander practice at Prestonpans, with Admiral Nelson’s skeleton, and much more.” See *African Culture and Melville’s Art—The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 77. Another likely source is *The German Farmer: The Barber Shop in Uproar* by Dan Emmett, a minstrel show in which Pompey Smash, a black barber, sharpens his razor on floorboards, mutilates the face of a racist German farmer, and wipes the gore on his victim’s shirt. See W. T. Lhamon Jr, “Turning Around Jim Crow,” in *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface*, ed. Stephen Johnson (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), pp. 18-50 (pp. 31-3, 40). Jennifer Jordan Baker, meanwhile, reads Melville’s story as a parody of Beaumarchais’s *The Barber of Seville*. See “Staging Revolution in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*,” *Prospects* 26 (October 2001): 91-107.

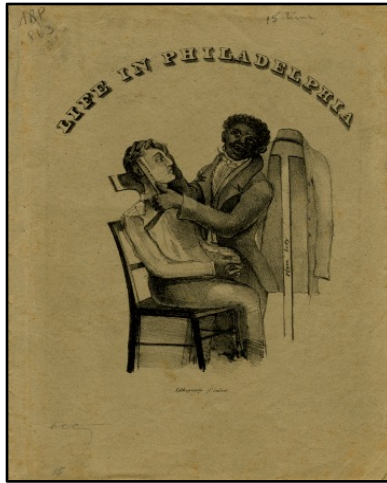


Figure 29. Anthony Imbert,
Life in Philadelphia, 1829-1830.

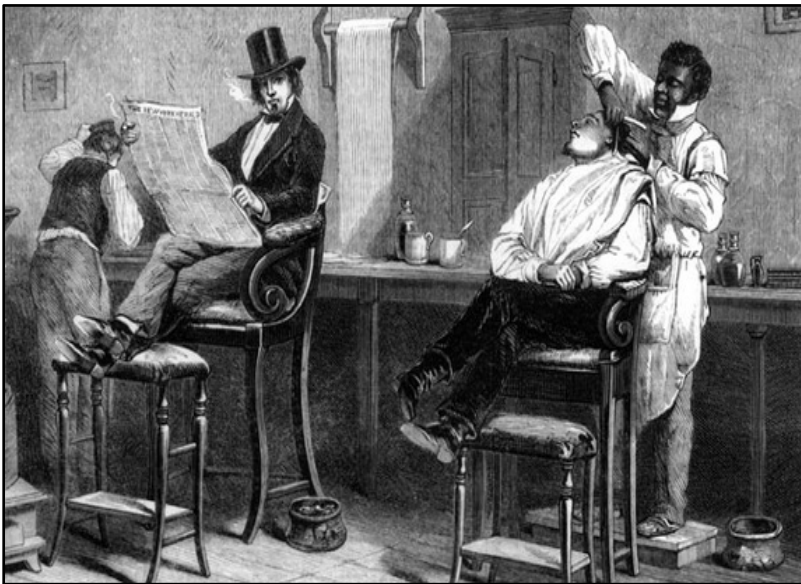


Figure 30. "A Barber's Shop at Richmond, Virginia,"
The Illustrated London News, 9 March 1861.



Figure 31. *Barbershop* (1894), dir. Thomas Edison.

	<p>Shaving Delight— Instead of the old-fashioned, tedious, painful method of honing, stropping or scraping and washing, instead of weary waits to be "next" in stuffy barber shops there is real luxury in the "safety" shave, at your home with</p> <p>The Gillette Safety Razor</p> <p>Absolutely safe. It is always ready, always in condition—requires no stropping or honing. Works smoothly on all faces, under all conditions. Each razor is good for 40 shaves; has 20 double-edged blades. After the 40 shaves, return the twenty blades to us, with 25 two-cent stamps and we will grind them in diamond dust, sending them back to you in perfect condition for 40 more shaves. If not satisfied after trial money will be refunded and no questions asked. If your dealer does not sell The Gillette, write us for booklet.</p>	
<p>Correspondence Solicited from Dealers. Exclusive Territory Given. GILLETTE SALES COMPANY, 1201 Manhattan Building, CHICAGO, ILL.</p>		

Figure 32.

show” rather than as a deliberate act of aggression against the Spanish flag.⁶⁴ The crux comes when Cereno starts to hint at the truth and Babo responds by drawing some blood. Finally, he completes the shave by rubbing some scented water on Cereno’s head, an action performed with such vehemence that Cereno again winces but that Delano interprets as Babo “evinced the hand of a master”: Don Benito sits “so pale and rigid now, that the Negro seemed a Nubian sculptor finishing off a white statue-head.”⁶⁵ Melville offers an ironic take on the stereotype of the negro as the “natural” safety-keeper of the white body—encapsulated in the ambiguity of “finishing [it] off”—and by the beginning of the twentieth century, this stock figure had been replaced by its antithesis: “the razor-wielding black criminal.”⁶⁶ What better inducement to shave at home did a white Gillette customer need?⁶⁷

In depicting the intimacy between Cereno and Babo, Melville also, however, highlights the more general “homoerotically charged” nature of the barber-barbee relationship.⁶⁸ And by the early twentieth century, it was a relationship that provoked some anxiety. At the very least, willingness to waste time and money revealed a lack of manly “self-respect.” “Shave Yourself,” exhorted Gillette, implying that the homosocial pleasures of the barber shop—commemorated in Thomas Edison’s early films (see Figure 31)⁶⁹—were less

⁶⁴ Melville, “Benito Cereno,” p. 84.

⁶⁵ Melville, “Benito Cereno,” p. 87. See Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville’s Art*, p. 73.

⁶⁶ Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 451. On the prevalence of this figure in Faulkner’s fiction, see Hoke Perkins, “‘Ah Just Cant Quit Thinking’: Faulkner’s Black Razor Murderers,” in *Faulkner and Race*, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), pp. 222-35.

⁶⁷ On the role of the barbershop in the “black commercial public sphere,” see Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Black Barber Shops in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 4.

⁶⁸ David Greven describes the shaving scene in “Benito Cereno” as “the most homoerotic [...] in antebellum American literature.” See *Gender Protest and Same-Sex Desire in Antebellum American Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 195.

⁶⁹ See also Edison’s 1897 “What Demoralised the Barber Shop” (the answer being women walking past and revealing their ankles): <https://youtu.be/3bP-fLW5P6Q>. As a child in Brooklyn Heights, Paul Auster “found it tremendously exciting that the barber who cut my hair [called Rocco] was the same man who had once cut the hair of the inventor of the

than “wholesome”: do you have time for conversation? Do you enjoy the “ladylike massage-finish of the tonsorial arist” and “the reek of violet water”?⁷⁰ Shaving was something that “big fellows” with large capable hands should do for themselves, and as quickly as possible.

The retreat from the barbershop then was a retreat from massages and violet water, as well as from “contact with brush, soap and barber shop accessories used on other people.”⁷¹ And yet if the imagined ideal was not to come into contact with other people at all, that seemed rarely to be possible, even in one’s own bathroom. 1920s fiction and film is filled with scenes in which men find it almost impossible to shave, not because of any problem with their new razors, but because they have to share a space (the bathroom) with their wives and children.

The bathroom was a relatively new setting for writers and filmmakers, indeed for many people: the culmination of developments in piped plumbing and pottery, sanitary reform initiatives, and the increasing demand for “conveniences” that had taken place since the 1890s.⁷² In 1913 Ezra Pound used the metaphor of water cooling in a “bath tub lined with white porcelain” to capture the “slow cooling” of “chivalrous passion” and, ten years later, included porcelain baths among the things that America might contribute to “general aesthetics.”⁷³ By 1925, most residents of big cities had become used to the comforts afforded by

lightbulb.” See *Conversations with Paul Auster*, ed. James M Hutchisson (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), p. 16.

⁷⁰ “Woman is the Great Civilizer,” advertisement for Gillette, *World’s Work*, November 1910, quoted in McKibben, *Cutting Edge*, p. 18.

⁷¹ Advertisement quoted in Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 98.

⁷² Maureen Ogle, *All the Modern Conveniences: American Household Plumbing 1840-1890* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996), pp. ix, 18. The OED dates the first use of “convenience” in this sense to 1883.

⁷³ Ezra Pound, “The Bath Tub,” in *New Selected Poems and Translations*, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: New Directions, 2010), p. 41; Ezra Pound, “Georges Antheil” (1924), reprinted as “Antheil” in *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* (Chicago: Pascal Covici, 1928), pp. 37-66 (p. 61).



Figure 33. "No hurry: A barber's invariable rule,"
Daily Mirror, 29 August 1922.

water pipes, hot baths, flush toilets, and constant running water, and, an approving Le Corbusier noted, the word “bathroom” was “entering everyday speech.”⁷⁴

But was one really enough? Having successfully sold one bathroom set, advertisers soon started marketing *second* bathrooms: 5-foot-square sanctuaries where a woman could “take her own sweet time—knowing it would not be remarked upon, confident that others were not being inconvenienced.” “Ample bathroom facilities are not,” Standard Plumbing insisted, “a luxury” (Figure 34). While advertisers appealed to women in need of “leisurely” time in front of the glass, male novelists and filmmakers focused on the man of the house, whom they depicted as a victim of bathroom congestion, unable even to shave in peace (Figure 35).

Oh how she had longed for a bathroom all her own—
—where she could take her own sweet time, knowing it would not be remarked upon—confident that others were not being inconvenienced.

How hard it is to use a bathroom on a schedule!

Leisurely washing, and splashing, and fluffing, and primping before the luxury glass—how much it has to do with beauty, poise, charm.

Give that girl of girls a bathroom of her own. There are sound health reasons. Delicacy, privacy—encouraging it. Avoid bathroom congestion, with its unfortunate disturbance to health habits.

Your Plumber will show you how the delightful bathroom at the right can be tucked away in a space five feet square—a closet—an odd corner.

And what it would mean to a girl—a boy—a guest!

Standard Sanitary Mfg. Co.
Pittsburgh, Pa.




When a man asks, overboard like a woman, a bathroom, demand one at a very modest price.



The man is better satisfied to avoid the all white ones with one solid floor, one window, and one door. The glass in the one small picture above are “Standard” “Dresses”.

Ample bathroom facilities are not a luxury

“Standard” PLUMBING FIXTURES



Facets and other Plumber’s and Carpenter’s tools. Also, a large amount of other plumbing and electrical supplies. Write for your catalogue.

Home Being—“Standard” Plumber’s and Carpenter’s tools. Also, a large amount of other plumbing and electrical supplies. Write for your catalogue.

Figure 34.

Sinclair Lewis set the tone in his 1922 novel *Babbitt*, which begins with an extensive description of the “royal bathroom of porcelain and glazed tile,” including “a sensational exhibit of tooth-brush holder, shaving-brush holder, soap-dish, sponge-dish, and medicine-cabinet, so glittering and so ingenious that they resembled an electrical instrument-board.” The eponymous hero, a mid-western real estate salesman, wants to enjoy this splendour—his “god was

⁷⁴ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today* (1925) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 41.

Modern Appliances”—but his family blaspheme, introducing “heathen toothpaste” and leaving the floor wet and the bath mat “wrinkled.” The scene shifts into slapstick, as Babbitt slips on the mat and bangs against the tub. Then he attempts to shave:

Furiously he snatched up his tube of shaving-cream, furiously he lathered, with a belligerent slapping of the unctuous brush, furiously he raked his plump cheeks with a safety-razor. It pulled. The blade was dull. He said, “Damn—oh—oh—damn it!”



Figure 35.

And so Babbitt tries to change blade, only to find that his wife has “hidden” it behind a box of bicarbonate of soda. “Then there was the problem, oft-pondered, never solved, of what to do with the old blade [...] As usual, he tossed it on top of the medicine-cabinet, with a mental note that some day he must remove the fifty or sixty other blades that were also temporarily, piled up there.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (London: Vintage, 2006), pp. 14-15.

Versions of this scene occur in all sorts of places. Take, for instance, George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* (1939), a novel, like *Babbitt* and *Huntingtower*, that consciously follows in the tradition of H. G. Wells's comedies of suburban male middle-age.⁷⁶ Insurance salesman George Bowling is introduced as he tries "to shave with a bluntish razor-blade while the water ran into the bath."⁷⁷ Perhaps the bluntness of his blade is a sign of the bluntness of his thoughts. It was an obvious metaphor but nevertheless amenable to make-it-new modernism. e. e. cummings went so far as to

suggest that certain ideas gestures
rhymes, like Gillette Razor Blades
having been used and reused
to the mystical moment of dullness emphatically are
Not to be Resharpened.⁷⁸

But the metaphorical sharpness of the blade notwithstanding, the act of shaving itself was considered to be meditative activity. Leopold Bloom, for example, shaves at night because it allows for "quiet reflections upon the course of the day."⁷⁹ For many people, argued the physician Martin Gumpert, "the time spent in the bathroom" is "the only time which they spend in complete privacy and isolation. Many important decisions are made in these few moments which

⁷⁶ The novel's protagonist George Bowling thinks *A History of Mr Polly* "seems to have been written specially" for him. See George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 124. Hugh Walpole introduced the British edition of *Babbitt* by describing Lewis's eponymous hero as "brother to our Mr Polly." See Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1922).

⁷⁷ Orwell, *Coming Up for Air*, p. 3. Orwell's world is one in which blades are always blunt or "bluntish"—something a scraping wind might be compared to. Nor is the purchase of new blades straightforward. Blanding's trip to a "big chain-store" exposes him to a bullying floor manager (and incipient Fascism). In *1984* (1949), the hunt for new blades provides Winston Smith with an excuse to roam the streets of London in search of "beautiful rubbish." See *Coming Up for Air*, pp. 3, 107, 13-16; George Orwell, *1984* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 5, 83.

⁷⁸ e. e. cummings, "Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr Vinal" (1923), in *Selected Poems, 1923-1958* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 12.

⁷⁹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 787. We also learn, in response to "What advantages attended shaving at night?", that it gives Bloom a "softer skin if unexpectedly encountering female acquaintances in remote places at incustomary hours."

remain for us for reflection and thinking without interference.”⁸⁰ In 1914, the *Daily Mirror* reported the case of a London stockbroker whose idea for “an ingenious financial coup” came to him, Archimedes-like, in the bath. The article considered others who’d had similar experiences, including the now-forgotten Edwardian novelist Charles Garvice. Garvice said that while bathing he felt “intensely musical” but that for story ideas, he was reliant on his morning shave. “The bare outline of my plots is shaped at night over a pipe, but while I am shaving the overnight ideas become clear and distinct.”⁸¹ In other words, what was needed was not simply privacy and relaxing hot water, but the kind of routine, automatic behaviour—automatism—that closes down the conscious mind and liberates the unconscious’s creativity. The process was not always successful, however; the end product not always worth shaving for. In one of her devastating marriage stories, “Mr and Mrs Williams” (1921), Katherine Mansfield describes the kind of suburban couple who embody automatism, before returning on the final page, bathetically, to their honeymoon and the moment when Mr Williams last had an idea. Mr Williams’s revelation is that he, Gerald, and his wife, Gwendolyn, share an initial. “Two Gs. Gee-Gee,” he happily declares; “shaving gives me ideas.”⁸² Perhaps so, or is it just that he’s shaving with a box of “Genuine Gillettes” (Figure 36)?

Others were equally sceptical about the ideas that might emerge from a shave. Nathanael West’s *The Dream Life of Bruno Snell* (1931) includes a scene in which a man searches “for yesterday’s emotions” while shaving: “Searched, that is, the pockets of my dressing gown and the shelves of the medicine closet. [...] I came from my search, as was to be expected, empty-handed.”⁸³ Perhaps automatism was *not* revelatory after all, just another “sluggish” habit.⁸⁴ In

⁸⁰ Martin Gumpert, *The Anatomy of Happiness* (London: Hammond, Hammond and Co, 1951), pp. 101-2. Gumpert was in fact discussing time spent on the toilet when constipated.

⁸¹ “Ideas in the Bath: Where a Stock Exchange Coup Came From,” *Daily Mirror*, 13 March 1914.

⁸² Katherine Mansfield, “Mr and Mrs Williams,” in *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 497-501 (p. 501).

⁸³ Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 23.

⁸⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 109.

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (also from 1931), the only idea that comes to Bernard, "standing with [his] razor in [his] hand," is a recognition of "the merely habitual nature" of his action. He congratulates his "hands, ironically, for keeping at it. Shave, shave, shave, I said. Go on shaving."⁸⁵ And yet that proto-Beckettian going on is precisely what men like Babbitt or George Bowling



Figure 36.

cannot do. Bowling's attempt at reverie is cruelly interrupted by his seven-year-old son screeching "I wanna come in," and so he begins his day with a soapy neck and an unpleasant feeling of being "sticky all over."⁸⁶

Even more than fiction, cinema—or rather, Cecil B. DeMille—established the bathroom as a comic setting. *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920) is about a man, Robert Gordon, who has two wives, both of whom hinder his attempts to shave. In the first scene, he looks for his razor only to find his wife's hairpin entangled with it (Figure 37).

⁸⁵ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 109.

⁸⁶ Orwell, *Coming Up for Air*, p. 8.

Thus we meet, early one morning, a certain husband with no more faults than most men and the usual amount of matrimonial resignation to fate.
Robert Gordon,
Thomas Meighan.

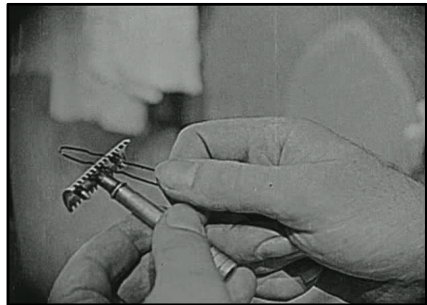


Figure 37. *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920),
dir. Cecil B. DeMille.



Figure 38. *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920),
dir. Cecil B. DeMille.



“Don't 'e love 'is
little wiff?”



“I do love you, dear
— but I'm shaving.”

Figure 39. *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920),
dir. Cecil B. DeMille.

Beth then enters the bathroom and continually walks in front of Robert to the cabinet mirror. Finally he retreats to a small handheld mirror (Figure 38). With no space within which to enact the wholesome modern ritual of the self-shave, Robert literally can't see himself in the marriage. His wife, as the intertitle insists, has taken his "liberty."

Robert leaves Beth for sexy shop girl Sally, only to learn "for the second time [...] that wives will be wives." The shaving scene is repeated but it's worse this time round: vulgar Sally is cloying and manipulative in a way that Beth never was (Figure 39). The film ends with husband and wife number one reunited (wives not being as disposable as razor blades) and also—we presume—the continuance of less than satisfactory shaving.

No one did it as well as DeMille, the "Bathtub King," but many directors reprised this scene.⁸⁷ Ernst Lubitsch allows objects to tell much of the story of *The Marriage Circle* (1920), whether depicting a cosy breakfast (for one couple) or wifely neglect and cruelty (for another). In the latter case, husband and wife again fight over the mirror; the woman, it is suggested—here and always—is vainly preening, while the man is trying to get a serious job done. Here, he is only able to shave when she leaves the house. While doing so, he looks out the window and is delighted to see her getting into a car with another man. The divorce court happily beckons (Figure 40).

There's no space here to say much more about these scenes, except to note how regularly they appeared; everywhere from *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), in which Cary Grant competes with Myrna Loy for the mirror (Figure 41), to W. C. Fields's slapstick *It's a Gift* (1934), where it's a teenage daughter who monopolises the bathroom mirror, forcing Fields to rely on a mirror hanging on a light cord while his son careers around on roller-skates. Fields uses a straight razor for added frisson and he comes perilously close to slitting his own throat (Figure 42). A remnant of silent cinema (and with its origins in *commedia dell'arte*), the carefully choreographed shaving scene was hard to give up.

⁸⁷ Phil A. Koury, *Yes, Mr. DeMille* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 316.



Figure 40. *The Marriage Circle* (1920),
dir. Ernst Lubitsch.



Figure 41. *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948),
dir. H. C. Potter



Figure 42. *It's a Gift* (1934),
dir. Norman Z. Macleod.

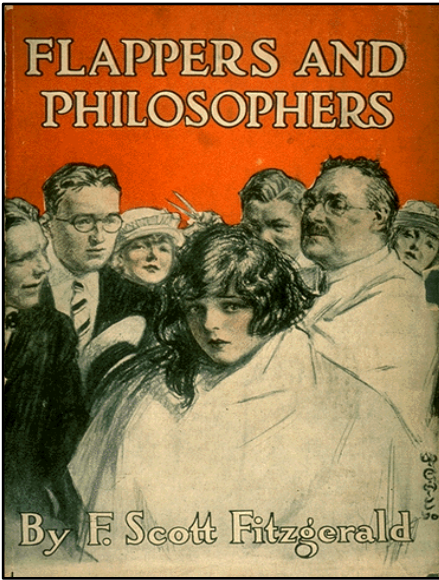


Figure 43. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Flappers and Philosophers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), front cover.

If men were so beleaguered in their homes that they couldn't even perform the “anti-patriarchal operation of shaving” (to recall Stowe's phrase), nor could they any longer find a woman-free refuge in a barbershop. During the 1920s, with traditional custom declining, barbershops began to offer their services to women—like F. Scott Fitzgerald's proto-flapper Bernice—in search of the bobs that *their* traditional hairdressers were initially too squeamish to provide (see Figures 43 and 44).⁸⁸ And once bobbed, women maintained their hairless necks—and their increasingly visible underarms and legs—with their own safety razor, the Gillette “Milady.”⁸⁹

A woman in the barber's chair provided, of course, another reliable source of comedy. In *The Great Dictator* (1940), a customer suggests that the barber, played by Charlie Chaplin, could boost his business by “fixing up the women.” The customer is thinking of mudpacks and the like, but Charlie, on automatic pilot, lathers up and begins to shave Hannah (Paulette Goddard) with his trusty cut-throat. The pleasures of this scene are not, however, simply those of silent clowning.⁹⁰ In a film structured around doubling—Chaplin also plays the

⁸⁸ On the “lively battle” between barbers and hairdressers, see Frederick Lewis, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (1931) (New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), p. 91. See, also, Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line*, pp. 160-64.

⁸⁹ The “Milady” launched in 1915, but had no real sales until the 1920s.

⁹⁰ The most famous shaving scene in the film, however, is when Chaplin shaves a customer in time to a radio performance of Brahms's Hungarian Dance No. 5. Stopping the razor blade is like bowing a cello. A similar scene also appears in Syd Chaplin's 1921 silent comedy *King, Queen, Joker*.



Figure 44. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Bernice Bobs Her Hair,"
Saturday Evening Post, 1 May 1920.

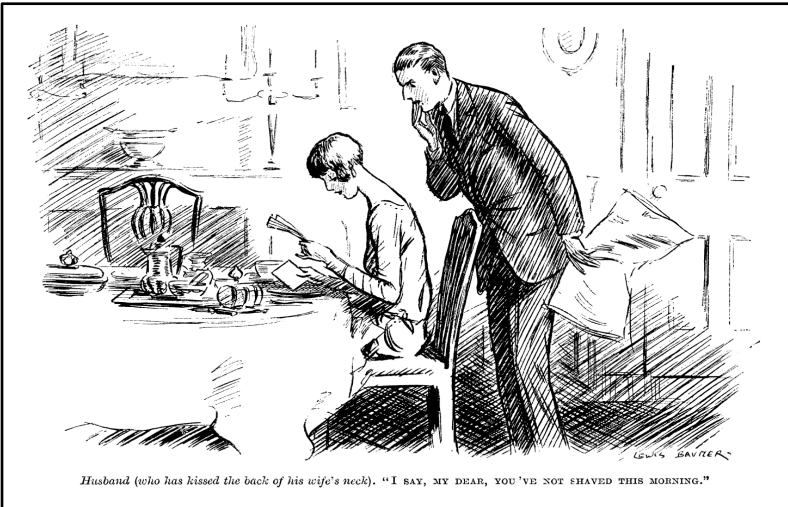


Figure 45. Lewis Baumer, "I say, my dear, you've not shaved this morning."
Punch, 20 May 1925.

eponymous dictator—the risky intimacy of the barbershop offers a benign counterpoint to the threat posed outside its walls. Outside, the distinction between Jew and Aryan is rigorously upheld; inside, there can be a little comic give between a man and a woman.

VI

The switch from the cut-throat to the safety razor, and the concomitant move from the sociable barbershop to the over-crowded family bathroom, was not—I've argued—as trivial as it might seem. The change of tool and venue was usually evoked by filmmakers and writers in order to allude to larger shifts in the roles of men and women in domestic life. It is not surprising, then, how quickly nostalgia developed among men for both the intimate homosociality of the barbershop and the phallic cut-throat razor. In 1901, W. T. Stead felt the need to argue that “the perfect tool represents an advance in civilization,” while “the clumsy and ineffective tool is a mark of barbarism.”⁹¹ By the 1920s, however, the mark of barbarism was exactly what was required—by T. S. Eliot, whose Sweeney Erect “rises from the sheets” he has shared with an epileptic prostitute and, in imitation of the orang-utan imitating a man in Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” stands as naked and erect as his straight razor—and by Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel in *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), where a straight razor slices across an eye to open it to surreal perception (Figure 46).⁹²

Real men and real art, those men insisted, were not safe. In 1926, Ernest Hemingway mocked Dorothy Parker’s “Résumé” of failed suicide attempts (a poem that begins “Razors pain you”⁹³) with an 82-line address “To a Tragic Poetess” that opens:

⁹¹ Stead, *The Americanization of the World*, p. 353.

⁹² Other descendants of Sweeney Todd include “H. Rumbold, Mater Barber,” a “barbarous bloody barbarian” who hones his blade “upon his brawny forearm.” See Joyce, *Ulysses*, pp. 392, 399. Banjo Paterson’s “The Man from Ironbark” (1892) offers a comic twist on the myth.

⁹³ Dorothy Parker, *The Portable Dorothy Parker* (New York: Viking, 1973), p. 99.



Figure 46. *Un Chien Andalou* (1928),
dir. Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel.



Figure 47. Norman Rockwell, “Barbershop Quartet,”
The Saturday Evening Post, 26 September 1936.

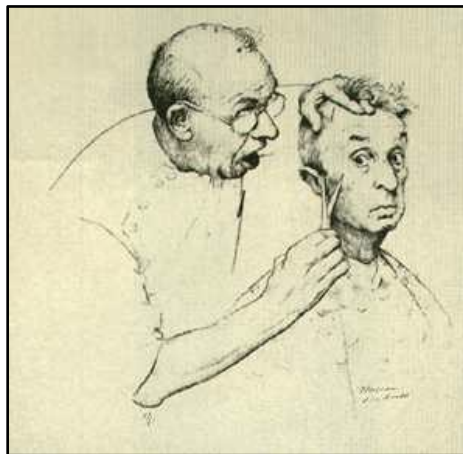


Figure 48. Norman Rockwell, *At the Barber* (1974).

Oh thou who with a safety razor blade
 a new one to avoid infection
 Slit both thy wrists
 the scars defy detection.⁹⁴

The safety razor, Hemingway suggests, is incompatible with tragedy, if not necessarily as a tool then certainly as a symbol.⁹⁵ It was a view that Vladimir Nabokov shared. “The Tragedy of Tragedy,” he argued in 1940, lay in the incompatibility between the form’s “dramatic determinism” and the conditions, and tools, of modern life. For example, it had become “extraordinarily difficult to stage a good suicide.”

It was feasible in the old days, when such symbolic instruments as daggers and bodkins were used, but nowadays we can’t very well show a man cutting his throat with a Gillette blade.⁹⁶

We can’t show it and when we hear about it, as we do in Nabokov’s 1962 novel *Pale Fire*, the mood is that of dark comedy. Becoming aware of the “crowning botch” of his life a man kills himself with a blade from an “unwatched garbage container.” This is a moment of “humanoid despair” not cosmic drama: “Enough of this. Exit Jack Grey.”⁹⁷

By that time, the kinds of tension I have been examining in modernism’s edgy preoccupation with the safety razor had more or less petered out. Expectations of

⁹⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *Complete Poems* (New York: Bison Books, 1992) pp. 87-9 (p. 87). Discussing his own suicidal feelings shortly afterwards, Hemingway wrote to Scott Fitzgerald: “Have refrained from any half turnings on of the gas or slitting the wrists with sterilized safety razor blades. Am continuing life in my original role as son of a bitch sans peur and sans rapproche.” See Ernest Hemingway, *Selected Letters 1917-1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (London: Granada, 1981), p. 232.

⁹⁵ Hemingway wouldn’t have known of the razor gang wars which were just beginning in Sydney, Glasgow, and, a little later, in Brighton. See Graeme Greene’s *Brighton Rock* (1938) and, on the Glasgow gangs, *No Mean City* (1935) by H. Kingsley Long and Alexander McArthur.

⁹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, “The Tragedy of Tragedy” (1940), in *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), pp. 323-41 (p. 332).

⁹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962) (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 234.

heroic tragedy were yet further deflated by the safety razor in Samuel Beckett's television play *Eh Joe* (1966), which turns on the invasion of a man's face seen in increasing close up by the voice of the woman who, Beckett said, "whispers in him."⁹⁸ Voice relates how the speaker tried to kill herself, first by drowning and finally, successfully, by an overdose of pills. It describes how, between these two attempts, she had got out "the Gillette", the bathos of which is immediately apparent when she says it is the make he'd recommended for removing "body hair." Now, Voice says, she "Takes the blade from the holder and lies down at the edge on her side," but "Cut another long story short doesn't work either."⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 103. Julian Murphet nevertheless argues convincingly against "the facile temptation to resolve 'woman's voice' [...] into a 'memory' as such." See Julian Murphet, "Beckett's Televisual Modernism," *Critical Quarterly* 51.2 (2009): 60-77 (p. 70).

⁹⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Eh Joe*, in *The Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove, 1984), pp. 199-207 (p. 206).