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**“I Never Once Thought of Them”:
Retail Workers in American Department Store Fiction**

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**“I Never Once Thought of Them”:
Retail Workers in American Department Store Fiction**

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This dissertation focuses on an understudied category of turn-of-the-century American literature: texts that feature department stores and primarily highlight the position of the service workers who staffed them. In composing narratives situated mostly on the workers’ side of the sales counter, I argue, authors attempted to address perceived problems with consumer culture. Drawing upon the historical contexts of Progressive politics and women’s rights movements, this dissertation seeks a fuller understanding of how turn-of-the-century writers depicted the retail worker, responded to injustices of capitalism, and shaped popular opinions about consumer culture.

Chapter 1 analyzes popular fiction by Lurana Sheldon and Rupert Hughes to investigate the ways both authors depict hardships of department store labor and envision different possibilities for reform at these sites of consumption. I show that despite both authors’ sympathy for the plight of the shopgirl, they look to business owners and consumers rather than the suffering shopgirls themselves to mend the problems of capitalism. Chapter 2 turns to works of fiction that portray the shopgirl’s hard-won ascent to professionalism (in the position of buyer) as an ambivalent climb to middle

management. Readings of realist writer Edna Ferber and popular fiction author Charles Klein suggest that, whereas a work of realism takes a more pragmatic approach to the limits of professional success, popular fiction often employs an idealized marriage plot to complete the protagonist's ascent. Moving away from the realm of popular fiction, Chapter 3 examines two ambitious literary undertakings: Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and David Graham Phillips' *Susan Lenox* (1917). Reading *Carrie* from the perspective of the shopgirl (and in comparison with Phillips' *Susan*), I argue, can help us better appreciate the elisions and evasions that complicate the relationship Dreiser imagines between work and consumption. Moving briefly beyond 1920, a Coda considers Mary McCarthy's *The Group* (1963) and Steve Martin's *Shopgirl* (2000) to ask how we might better understand intersections of labor and consumption in our own moment. Finally, an Appendix provides an annotated bibliography that lists works of American department store fiction published between 1880-1920 as a resource for future scholarship.

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Introduction

One evening a group of department store employees were having dinner with me. Among them were sales-girls, an associate buyer, and one of the office force. I asked O. Henry to join us so that he might catch the spirit of their daily life. He leavened their shop-talk with genial, simple expressions of mirth as they told their tales of petty intrigue and strife for place amid the antagonism and pressure which pervades the atmosphere of every big organization. On leaving, he remarked to me: "If Henry James had gone to work in one of those places, he would have turned out the great American novel."

-- Anne Partlan (qtd in Moyle, *My Friend O. Henry* [1914], 16-17)

Looking Behind the Counter for a Literary Archive

In O. Henry's "An Unfinished Story" (1905), a department store shopgirl named Dulcie prepares for a rare evening on the town. Because her room and board consume the bulk of her weekly income, Dulcie rarely has the means to experience the "glitter" and "wonders" of New York City (180); in fact, she sometimes eats only marshmallows and tea for dinner.¹ Dulcie's typical existence, O. Henry illustrates, requires such restraint (in regards to food, clothing, and entertainment) that she has accepted a date with Piggy, a repugnant, opportunistic masher to whom she will no doubt be indebted at the end of the night. Buttressed by the prospect of a special night on the town, Dulcie "squander[s]" her last fifty cents of the week to purchase a "cheap," "imitation lace collar" and indulge in some licorice drops on this gay eve of her date (176). As the date draws nearer and Dulcie considers the implications of giving herself to Piggy that night, she cancels the outing she had longed to enjoy. Her moral victory over Piggy's crass advances seems to

¹ This story originally appeared in *McClure's* (August 1905). Page numbers here are from its reprinting in *The Four Million* (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1906).

portend a triumphant if constrained conclusion for Dulcie. Too soon, however, O. Henry informs the reader that Dulcie accepts Piggy on a later occasion and becomes, so to speak, a fallen woman, an act which O. Henry signifies with a telling omission: “and then— ” (183). With that, Dulcie literally falls off the page, and O. Henry turns from her unspoken sexual fall to what he views as the root of her tribulations. He concludes the story condemning not Dulcie but the department store owners who paid her such meager wages that she felt tempted to turn elsewhere for support.

The following year, O. Henry penned another tale of the department store shopgirl, “The Trimmed Lamp” (1906), which he described as “the other side” of Dulcie’s story (Smith 169). Like Dulcie, its protagonist Nancy spends her days behind a counter in a large department store. But in this story, O. Henry is more interested in the shopgirl’s life at the store, where she is surrounded by luxury, than in her more austere home life. During her long hours spent in this “great departmental school,” Nancy absorbs mannerisms, expressions, and taste from the wealthy clientele she observes (9).² Nancy is on the hunt for a wealthy husband, though she does not jump at the first chance that arises (she rejects one rich suitor because she has misgivings about his integrity). Instead, she bides her time, working and waiting, “eating her dry bread and tightening her belt day by day” (14), sustained by her proximity to “the fine world of good-breeding and taste” (17) within the department store. Unlike her fallen counterpart Dulcie, Nancy “[keeps] her lamp trimmed and burning” (18) and patiently waits before attaching herself

² This story originally appeared in *McClure’s* (August 1906). Page numbers here are from its reprinting in *The Trimmed Lamp* (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1907).

to a man. Nancy is rewarded for her forbearance with a marriage to a kind electrician whom she loves and who makes enough money to allow her to resign her position at the store.

These two complementary depictions of a department store shopgirl highlight, among other things, the poverty shopgirls often experienced as well as the luxuries that surrounded them at work. As these stories demonstrate, the department store provides fertile ground for O. Henry to explore the interiority of the vulnerable yet aspirational working girl. His interest in the space of the department store is so great that he suggests that Henry James could write the great American novel if he spent time in a department store. One implication of his statement, of course, is that realist heavyweight James might more successfully capture the spirit of American life if he were to shift his authorial gaze from the leisure class to the working class. Certainly O. Henry's "stories of the four million" bespeak his investment in depicting working-class characters.³ I would like to suggest, though, that there is more at stake in O. Henry's comment than a general call for attention to workers; more so than other sites of work, the space of the department store offers unique and distinct terrain for examining and interrogating the complex dynamics of American consumer culture. And although Henry James did not select the world of the

³ In 1906, Doubleday, Page & Co. published a collection of Henry's short stories under the title *The Four Million*. An epigraph explains the title: "Not very long ago some one invented the assertion that there were only "Four Hundred" people in New York City who were really worth noticing. But a wiser man has arisen—the census taker—and his larger estimate of human interest has been preferred in marking out the field of these little stories of the "Four Million" (np). The following year, Doubleday published another collection of Henry's short stories in *The Trimmed Lamp*, a volume with the subtitle "and Other Stories of the Four Million."

department store for his authorial *donnée*, a host of authors around the turn of the century did turn to the department store as a canvas to render stories of America.⁴

Taking for its subject, then, the space O. Henry once suggested could be the heart of American literature, this dissertation seeks to recover a little-studied archive of texts: fiction that predominantly features department stores and foregrounds the experiences of the mostly female workers who staffed such stores. As a space of literary representation, the department store brings together acts of both consumption *and* labor; it represents what might be thought of as the internal fault line of capitalism, where labor and consumption meet. Unlike general stores or small specialty shops, these majestic spaces arrange commodities like pieces in a museum, utilizing alluring displays, large plate glass windows, and the latest technology to illuminate their wares. Hiding in plain sight in these consumers' paradises are the staff, most notably the shopgirls, whose working conditions in many ways rivaled those of the sweatshop laborer; their jobs at department stores also potentially provided a path to economic self-sufficiency.⁵ The texts I have chosen to highlight in this study put comparatively less emphasis on the experiences of shoppers, a topic recent critics interested in literary depictions of consumer culture have

⁴ See Henry James's essay "The Art of Fiction," wherein he writes, "We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, what the French call his *donnée*; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it."

⁵ There have been numerous terms applied to women working behind the counter at department stores to sell goods, including shopgirl, saleswoman, saleslady, and clerk. The term "shopgirl" comes from England and, in the years this dissertation spans, carried connotations of lower class status (Benson 24). The term sometimes appears as "shop girl" or "shop-girl," although the Oxford English Dictionary does not parse different meanings between these variations. Even for a single author, usage of the variant spellings sometimes fluxuated, as seen with Dreiser's drafts of *Sister Carrie*, which includes all three spellings in some printings. My choice to use the term "shopgirl" as a label for women working in department stores arises predominantly from its utilization in so many of the novels I analyze. A secondary motivation for using this term comes in its overlapping signification of sweatshop workers, which supports my efforts to highlight the difficulty of the department store shopgirl's labor position and her close relationship to producers of consumer culture such as factory workers.

concentrated on, to focus instead on the liminal subject position of the shopgirl. As the examples of Dulcie and Nancy demonstrate, representations of the shopgirl reveal cultural tensions including those between work and leisure, poverty and wealth, and the role of women in public or domestic spheres.

In spite of its faded presence now, literature written about or featuring the department store around the turn into the twentieth century invokes topics that were central to the rapidly shifting landscape of urbanization and industrialization that characterized the modern era.⁶ As Anne Partlan's anecdote illustrates, numerous features of the department store strike O. Henry as compelling points of analysis, including the challenging labor of department store work, the opportunities the businesses provided for professional advancement, and the department store's iconic status within what Alan Trachtenberg has termed "the incorporation of America."⁷ Writers, as I will show, turned to the space of the department store to explore questions about gender, class, and consumer culture. Literature written about the department store demonstrates the ways in which authors understand female labor and its relationship to consumer culture. It can help us better understand to what extent the presence of sweatshop and department store workers shapes attitudes towards consumption. It also reveals the ways in which authors

⁶ In *The Modern Temper*, historian Lynn Dumenil traces the roots of twentieth century modernity to "the triad of rapid industrialization, sprawling urbanization, and massive immigration" in the late nineteenth century (4). Similarly, Jennifer Fleissner has characterized the "dizzying landscape of modernity" at the beginning of the twentieth century as one fueled by "urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of consumer culture" ("Women" 38). These features were all paramount to the successful rise of department stores.

⁷ Trachtenberg defines the "incorporation of America" as both "the emergence of a changed, more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control" and, more largely, as "a more comprehensive pattern of change" (3-4).

worked within their cultural and political contexts to imagine possibilities for labor reform. In other moments, this literature interrogates the efficacy of myths promising professional success in exchange for hard work. It deploys—and in some cases rejects—the marriage plot as an alternative to this difficult socio-economic climb. Even texts that relegate the figure of the shopgirl to the background, remaining focused instead on the scene of department store consumption, frame and contextualize the ever-present shopgirl. Finally, the diversity of the texts constituting this archive prompts us to ask to what extent a text's literary genre might shape or reflect the ways writers view and represent consumer culture and the labor that underpins it.

In this project, I have set out to accomplish three goals. First, and most broadly, I have undertaken to identify and compile an archive of fiction from the American turn of the century (which I delimit to 1880-1920) that utilizes the department store as a key element of their setting, plot, or characterization. As I will illustrate, the novels and short stories in this archive represent numerous genres, reveal the department store in a range of lights (from exploitative to dazzling to exasperating), and depict a variety of subject positions including exhausted shopgirls, conniving bosses, irritated male customers, enthralled female customers, and lecherous mashers. I have endeavored to include, to the best of my ability, a full account of such representations in the Appendix that follows this dissertation to make a comprehensive list of department store fiction both more available and more accessible to future scholars who might wish to pursue other lines of inquiry from those this study explores.

Within this archive, a group of novels and short stories that depict the figure of the shopgirl impressed me as an especially compelling yet overlooked subset of works. These texts, in which authors compose narratives mostly from the perspective of the workers' side of the sales counter, struck me as particularly vital for analysis because they feature a group of workers both American literature and American literary criticism often omits or obscures. Accordingly, my second goal in this dissertation is to bring texts that highlight the shopgirl into the scholarly conversation. I am drawn to fictional representations of the American shopgirl because of the urgency with which numerous authors turn to this figure to express concerns about the system of American consumer culture. At the same time, many of these texts seem to suggest that the American dream of hard work in exchange for success is indeed achievable for women seeking to become self-sufficient through urban employment. Taken together, the body of work representing the shopgirl generates ambivalence about the problems facing America as technology develops, capitalist business practices take root, and opportunities for women arise, all within the framework of consumer culture.

Problematic negotiations between accepting consumer culture and rejecting capitalism's ills continue to unfold in our contemporary era. The third goal of this project, then, is to articulate how better understanding the sites where labor and consumption converge will allow us to draw conclusions about early twentieth-century culture and also shed light on our own moment. Each chapter that follows reads fiction that raises questions about issues still extant and controversial in our current consumer landscape, including the treatment of service industry workers (Chapter 1), equal pay for equal work

(Chapter 2), and the invisibility of the workers who enable our consumption (Chapter 3). A close literary analysis of these texts from the turn into the twentieth century is particularly urgent, then, because they highlight a form of labor that has been consistently obscured in cultural and scholarly conversations alike.



Figure 1: Macy's Department Store in Herald Square, New York City, circa 1907

The World a Department Store

The department store is an ideal space for analyzing the problems of labor, class, and gender that turn-of-the-century authors identify as plaguing the scene of American consumption. Between the years of 1880 and 1920, department stores in America evolved from crowded dry goods stores to the glittering centers of consumption that marked such famed stores as Marshall Field, Wanamaker's, and Macy's (see Figure 1). The cultural and economic phenomenon of the American department store—as opposed to a general store or small shop—began appearing in America as early as the 1860s, and became popular consumer destinations around the 1880s, which is, accordingly, the earliest boundary I have chosen for this project. Most historians agree that by 1900 department stores were deeply ingrained in American culture.⁸ Between 1900 and 1914, many iconic department store buildings were constructed, and by 1920, department stores had assumed the roles of tastemakers in society (Whitaker 18). The department store's formative years in the United States lasted through World War I. In the 1920s, most of the influential department stores in America had already been built, and the increasing presence of chain stores and mail-order catalogue options diluted the centrality of the department store in American culture (Whitaker 16-19). Thus, this project's suggested

⁸ See Whitaker, Leach, and Trachtenberg. The rise of the department stores in America parallels many of the cultural shifts in America around the turn of the century. Historians are quick to point out that the culture of department stores, embodied by fads, spending, and instant gratification, is “starkly at odds with the old Protestant-American” values of work, thrift, and anti-materiality (Whitaker 11, see also Leach *Land*). One large force that historians credit for this shift in culture is the advance of technology, including lighting and plate glass, that helped facilitate the growth of department stores. For more accounts of the history of the department store, see Lancaster and Abelson, and for studies of labor that touch on the shopgirl, see Kessler-Harris and Vapnek.

end cap is 1920, as it will consider texts published throughout the apogee of the department store's influence on American culture.

Though other forms of retail shopping than the department store certainly existed at the turn of the century (despite the best efforts of large department stores to put them out of business and absorb their stock), unique features of the department store render it a particularly rich object of literary representation.⁹ The organizational structure of department stores, which divides different specialties from one another and appoints various parallel ladders of employee expertise across the departments, sets up an array of class mobility that echoes the class structure of American society. The opportunity for promotion to positions such as department buyer made department stores notable places for women to work as professionals and potentially to advance in careers. At the same time, the capitalist drive and mechanistic practices of these businesses engendered working conditions that could evince capitalism's more cutthroat aspects.¹⁰

In many ways, the world of the department store resembles a large and complex social system with parallels to the city itself, replete with a variety of services, classes, and cultural events. Siegel-Cooper in New York City attached their reputation to this image, advertising as "a city in itself" (quoted in Whitaker 160). Beginning in the late

⁹ Department store historian Jan Whitaker establishes a helpful distinction between department stores and other retail venues, pointing out that department stores both sell a variety of goods (dry goods, clothing, and household goods) and also offer services (advertising, delivery, window displays, etc.). Importantly, Whitaker defines department stores by their structural organization, wherein each department is run by a buyer in charge of that section, and all of the buyers work under the umbrella structure of the larger store, which manages store-wide services. She also points out that department stores at the turn of the century were regionally specific (as opposed to chain stores, which were national).

¹⁰ Trachtenberg considers the machine-like quality of working in department stores, which exhibited many similarities to the large-scale, mechanized, efficient, and rapid models of factory work (134).

1800s and expanding around 1920, department stores typically provided the following services for their customers: bathrooms, first aid stations, transportation to the store, free delivery, easy returns, restaurants, tea rooms, soda fountains, banks, and children's playrooms.¹¹ Some of the forms of entertainment department stores offered their customers included musical performances, radio broadcasts, fashion shows, art exhibits, and even lessons in bike riding in the 1890s (Whitaker 144). These services, stores hoped, would enable customers to shop more comfortably and encourage them to spend time at their stores. They also offered their space for local meetings (often for women's groups) and reached out to communities facing economic hardship (Whitaker 154-55, 156). Many stores separated bargain basements from higher-priced merchandise on the main selling floor, and there were also hierarchies within department store companies that catered to higher or lower end customers (Whitaker 31). From their small army of laborers to their bargain shoppers and wealthier patrons, the great department stores affected and involved large swaths of society.

One of the reasons I emphasize the importance of literature about the department store is because I am taking the space of the department store to be representative of larger social constructions.¹² Alan Trachtenberg, for example, has connected Gilded Age

¹¹ For more information, see Whitaker, Chapter 9. Whitaker provides an extensive and fascinating list of the services certain department stores offered customers, including: banks, barber shops, beauty parlors, bridal consultants, caterers, checkrooms, fur cleaning and storage, post office branches, sickrooms, theater ticket bureaus, travel bureaus, pharmacies, public library branches, real estate agencies, smoking lounges for men, and steam baths (220-221).

¹² Due to de facto segregation occurring nation-wide at this time, the so-called larger social constructions I argue that these urban department stores reflect are limited racially. While recent European immigrants could sometimes find work in department stores if they spoke fluent English, jobs in department stores were largely offered only to white workers (Benson 209, Whitaker 46-8).

transformations directly to the structure of the department store. In *The Incorporation of America*, Trachtenberg locates the department store at the heart of consumption, and he locates consumption at the heart of the incorporated city. He writes that “[b]y the end of the 1880s, such names as A.T. Steward and Macy of New York, Marshall Field of Chicago, Wanamaker of Philadelphia, Jordan Marsh of Boston had become virtually synonymous with the names of their cities” (131). The power of the department store to exist on the same level of recognition with the city itself speaks to a kind of municipal importance of these institutions. The parallels between the department store and a city are one of the reasons, this dissertation argues, that analyzing authors’ treatment of department stores can suggest a larger scope of relevance for their political and social views.

Trachtenberg’s work establishes a foundation for studying the department store in order to understand larger trends in American culture, and literary critics to follow have demonstrated the efficacy of applying this concept to turn-of-the-century American literature. In his article, “Shopping in Utopia: *Looking Backward*, the Department Store, and the Dreamscape of Consumption,” Matthew Beaumont locates the department store “at the ideological center” of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. He argues that the “dreamscape of consumption” embroiled in the department store renders Bellamy’s utopia effectively a mere “cosmetic reconfiguration of late nineteenth-century capitalism” (194). Thus, Bellamy’s vision of utopia, he argues, assuages the late-19th-century fears of capitalism’s unsustainability (particularly the resounding dissatisfaction of the disenfranchised labor class) by providing an alternative to the current system and at the

same time resists associations with communism by eliminating illustrations of the working class and of production.

Beaumont's analysis suggests that one reason why department stores are not typically utilized in conversations about labor exploitation is their frequent association with the often-feminized pastime of shopping. In his close reading of *Looking Backward*, Beaumont highlights Bellamy's technique of downplaying the associations between department stores and consumption in order to elevate them in his political project. Reading the shopping scene between West and Edith in *Looking Backward*, he notes that the plain exterior of Bellamy's utopian store conceals the commodification inside. On the interior, the commodities remain concealed as well, presented only partially as samples and detailed descriptions. Thus, as Beaumont illustrates, "[c]onsumption is thereby sublimated" (204) and, he argues, "liberated almost completely from its painful physical associations, especially with the process of material production" (207). In accounting for the novel's minimized focus on "material production," Beaumont's article provides one thoughtful answer for the pointed lack of emphasis on the presence of workers in *Looking Backward*. As Beaumont demonstrates, concealing consumption also involves concealing labor, and this analysis reminds us how intimately the two are entwined.

Gail McDonald extends the metaphorical structure of the department store to characterize the constructs of American psychology. In "The Mind a Department Store: Reconfiguring Space in the Gilded Age," McDonald uses the department store to illustrate a shift in conceptions of space around the turn of the century. She unites Henry James's observations in *The American Scene* (1905) with Wharton's advice in *The*

Decoration of Houses (1897) to indicate the rising phenomenon of blurred boundaries and widening spaces, which she describes as the “permeability of private space and the erasure of separate spatial functions” (230). McDonald connects this trend to buildings (notably, she illustrates, demonstrated by the department stores with inviting entrances, visibly permeable glass windows, wide aisles, and open floor plans) and, further, to trends in theories of human behavior (turning here to William James, whose theory of fluid consciousness McDonald reads as an “open floor plan of the mind” [244]). Where McDonald looks for novels with special concern for boundaries, malleability, and sizes of spaces reflected in department stores as metaphors, this study takes seriously representations of the department store itself as a space for reading the liminality, change, and reinvention that accompany the expanded boundaries McDonald studies.

This liminal space gives rise to a mixing of classes and genders and of labor and consumption all within the space of the store. Elizabeth Outka, like Trachtenberg, understands the department store as a social system that produces an intersection of classes. Highlighting the balance between mass commodification and individuated authenticity these stores embrace, Outka argues that the London department store Selfridges utilized a marketing strategy of the “commodified authentic” in order to tap simultaneously into high culture and low culture. By fashioning the store like a village and a site of domesticity, stores achieve a convergence of high and low culture that reframes their image from the “tainted position of contaminated other into the very heart of British culture” (323). Outka points out that this strategy of marketing a product’s nostalgic authenticity (with emphasis on the allure of the hand-crafted, locally-made

good) obscures the actual process of production and thus triggers the problems of commodity fetishism Marx describes, wherein the worker has become separated from the product of his or her labor. The link Outka establishes between nostalgia and commodification within the space of the store extends to American spaces of commerce as well, which were characterized by tensions and allegiances between old and new mores of gender and consumption within the space of the store.

A Tradition of Consumer Criticism

A powerful body of literary criticism generated in recent decades, spanning methodologies including new historicism, feminist theory, material culture studies, and thing theory, has focused on representations of consumer culture in literature. Novels written by Émile Zola and George Gissing have generated bodies of criticism surrounding department store fiction in a European or British setting. In the field of American literature, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) has become a focal point for writing about consumer desire in the space of the great department store. These studies tend to emphasize the perspective of the consumer or of the thing consumed. For example, Rachel Bowlby's work on consumer culture places Dreiser alongside Zola and Gissing to read the act of consumption from a feminist perspective. Her analysis of "forms of modern consumer subjectivity and the making of willing female consumers" (11) demonstrates that even as the modern advertising industry enacted a seduction of female customers, the role of the shopper nevertheless gave women visibility, agency, and pleasure. But a question of power relations emerges out of Bowlby's analysis that she

does not address. That is, if female shoppers are empowered through the act of consumption, which parties might be left disempowered as a result of these transactions?

In another important reading of *Sister Carrie*, Walter Benn Michaels connects Carrie's role as an enthusiastic consumer to what he views as Dreiser's "unabashed and extraordinarily literal acceptance" of capitalist economics (35). But where his critique engages the structure of capitalism, it remains more interested in consumers than producers. In fact, as Gavin Jones points out, influential readings of the novel by Michael Davitt Bell and Amy Kaplan, in addition to those by Michaels and Bowlby, highlight desire, spectacle, and rampant consumerism in their analyses of capitalist consumption rather than examining issues of poverty, deprivation, or material need, which I would align with a labor-focused reading (63). The pages that follow seek to examine representations of consumer culture—including *Sister Carrie*—by concentrating on both images of and telling absences of the workers who enable these consumer transactions. In this sense, I am returning to an earlier tradition of progressive criticism influenced by a Marxist focus on labor. But whereas these critics from the early twentieth century focused on the labor of actually producing commodities—labor performed, for example, by factory workers or coal miners—my interest is in the group of workers whose labor entails selling commodities.

This dissertation, then, prioritizes depictions of the people whose work sustains the economy of consumer culture over readings of consumers or the things they buy. Recent trends in literary criticism towards investigating relationships between people and material culture have yielded thoughtful analyses of consumers and the objects they

desire. The work of material culture scholars such as Bill Brown has produced valuable insights into of the role material culture plays in the lives of characters and the extent to which it creates, augments, explains, or hides the self, in addition to the role of objects in social and cultural dynamics. What this vein of scholarship does not help us do, though, is look behind the objects and their consumers to the men and women who produced them and thus enabled their consumer transactions. In the introduction to *A Sense of Things*, Brown urges critics to look beyond the explanation of commodity fetishism in reading relationships between objects and their consumers when he writes that “the human interaction with the nonhuman world of objects, however mediated by the advance of consumer culture, must be recognized as irreducible to that culture” (13). Defining his work in part against that of earlier proletarian critics, Brown resists reducing thing theory to a dynamic that can be “fully explained by the so-called reifying effects of a society permeated by the commodity form” (13). Brown does not deny the existence of the phenomenon of reification, but his scholarship takes care to point out that the production forces of labor are not the primary category of his analysis.

In many of the texts this dissertation reads, neither working-class characters nor authors evince much interest in the consumer objects they sell. One shopgirl protagonist, upon receiving a Christmas gift, disdainfully casts it aside because it reminds her of the painful hours she spent behind the counter aiding others in their own joyous Christmas shopping.¹³ Whether these texts overtly discard objects from their purview as Hughes does in *Miss 318* or simply rush past them in their haste to articulate the worker’s story,

¹³ See Rupert Hughes’s *Miss 318*, page 124.

as is the case in Lurana Sheldon's novels, the texts this dissertation reads are consistently more interested in the people who staff department stores than in the objects that fill them or the people who buy those objects.

A Counter-Culture Methodology

Because the department store occupies a unique position in which the world of labor directly confronts the world of consumption across a counter, it is an ideal venue from which to understand consumers' relationships not simply to the objects they purchase but to the chain of production that made their purchase possible and to the scaffolding of capitalism that structures this entire process. Reading detailed analyses of department stores offered by Leach, Trachtenberg, Brown, and others often reveals a disconnect between the ways historians and recent literary critics describe these stores (long reveries on the grand architecture, cutting-edge technology, stunning rotundas, and magical commodities) and the ways many fiction writers at the turn of the century describe the stores (hard labor, unfeeling crowds, constant drudgery).¹⁴ Facing this disconnect, it is useful to turn towards literary critics who have foregrounded labor in their work, even if they have not devoted attention to department store workers.

This dissertation takes seriously the group of workers who staff department stores as subjects of literary analysis. Recent studies by Gavin Jones, Eric Schocket, and Laura Hapke have worked to restore questions of class and labor to discussions of American literature. Schocket identifies class as the "silent member" of the analytic lenses of race,

¹⁴ In some instances, these reveries respond to emphases within texts, such as Brown's analysis of *Sister Carrie*; in other cases, scholars focus on the historical grandeur of the stores while overlooking injustices pointed out in both fiction and nonfiction from the turn of the century.

class, and gender (11). Jones too recognizes a history of resistance to discussing class in American literary studies. He observes a “notorious downgrading of class as a category of literary analysis” which he attributes to a “long-standing bias in American studies toward the multicultural questions of gender, race, and ethnicity at the expense of analyses of social class” (6). Jones’s assertion that class as a topic of study “has remained far less parsed, in literary theory and criticism, than companion categories such as desire and consumption” (2) once again underscores a trend in privileging the act of consumption over the workers who enable it in literary criticism since at least the 1980s.

One reason why class has remained notoriously slippery as a category of analysis is the resistance many Americans show to viewing themselves as members of the working or lower, rather than middle, class. Indeed, class identification is a malleable label and one that can be more relative than absolute. The position of the shopgirl in particular is liminally poised between sweatshop workers whose conditions echo their own and the moneyed consumers they serve.¹⁵ My readings locate shopgirls and clerks as part of the chain of labor, following the work done in mills and factories, that produces the consumer experience that culminates at department stores. After the agricultural laborers who grow the fibers from which the clothing is made, the sweatshop or factory workers who assemble the garments, and the transport personnel who deliver them to the department store’s back door, clerks and, more prominently in this dissertation, shopgirls,

¹⁵ In his studies of liminality, Victor Turner presents liminality as a temporary stage through which an individual moves during a social rite of passage. He writes, “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned...liminality is frequently likened to...invisibility” (95). In this sense, describing the shopgirl position as a liminal one not only locates her suspension between production and consumption but also emphasizes her potential movement over time to the position of wife or buyer through her work as a shopgirl.

performed the final steps of labor necessary to make the commodities available for consumption. Shopgirls, specifically, experienced many of the same physical afflictions that factory workers experienced, resulting from extended hours standing on their feet with very few breaks for sitting down as well as muscular exertions restocking goods that might be high up or very low to the ground. Work hours were similarly strict in some department stores, which limited vacation time and fined workers who were late or who missed work due to illness. In addition to these physical pains, shopgirls endured other forms of exploitation, including sexual advances from male customers or higher-up employees of the store and tolerating verbal abuse from female customers, finding themselves frequently in the position of commodified, dehumanized objects.¹⁶

In other respects, the environs of the department store distinguished department store work from other forms of labor available to women at that time. Historians parse a subtle difference in class-perception between shopgirls and factory workers or other working class laborers. Labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris highlights the gentility associated with the position of the shopgirl as a key difference from working at a factory or restaurant. Even if the pay were no higher, Kessler-Harris explains, a job in a department store would be considered more genteel than a job in a factory (we see a similar dynamic in O. Henry's "The Trimmed Lamp" when the protagonist enjoys the proximity to wealth her job in the department store allows her and contrasts that position with her friend's secluded job at a laundry) (124). Many scholars, including Susan Porter

¹⁶ For more information on the life of the shopgirl, see Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures*.

Benson and Lise Shapiro Sanders, describe the position of the shopgirl as a liminal one poised between the visibly concealed workers in factories and the financially empowered consumers standing across the counter from them. Recognizing the blurred boundaries of a shopgirl's position, I wish to highlight her solidarity with other working-class producers. Shopgirls stood at their counters for long hours, provided information about products, promoted sales by modeling clothing and arranging attractive displays on their counters, and remained in the stores often late into the night cleaning up and preparing for the next day's crowd. Thus, though shopgirls may occupy a position closer to the point of consumption than to the point of production, their role in a chain of labor categorizes them with the group of erased producers.

As I will show, shopgirls in American fiction are often outspoken about their subjugation. In this way, they differ from the fictional shopgirls in London that Lise Shapiro Sanders explores in *Consuming Fantasies*. Notably, the characters Sanders analyzes worked less frequently in department stores than they did in small shops such as millinery shops. Sanders argues that the figure of the London shopgirl "is the central locus for the playing out of fantasy and desire in late-nineteenth-century consumer culture" (13). The typical shopgirl narrative Saunders finds in British popular culture recalls aspects of the shopgirl narratives in this American archive: "a naïve but beautiful young woman, newly impoverished and forced to seek work, moves from the country to the city to find employment in a shop. There she suffers the hardships of too little pay, poor living conditions...and the perception that she is sexually available to her male coworkers and customers" (4-5). At this juncture, a key difference arises between

depictions of the shopgirls Sanders presents and those this dissertation analyzes. The “paradigmatic ‘shopgirl story’” (4) Sanders identifies is such: the shopgirl faces either a “downward trajectory into ‘fallen womanhood’” or “the upward trajectory into wealth...[and] returns to the store as a consumer” (5). Although some American narratives do follow this pattern (Dulcie’s fate comes to mind), more often, fictional American shopgirls take part in advocating or enacting reform before finding happiness (typically marked by an agreeable marriage to either a department store owner or a working class companion).¹⁷

The British-authored, American-set novel *The Shop Girl* (1914), by Alice Muriel and Charles Norris Williamson, provides an interesting case study for this tendency to find political critiques in American narratives. In making her argument that British shopgirl fiction is more concerned with the “slippage between selling and consuming” (13) than with the capitalist forces governing the shopgirl’s poverty, Sanders points to *The Shop Girl* (elsewhere titled *Winnie Childs The Shop Girl*, the title which Sanders uses) as an example of endless desire trumping political critique. Sanders locates a political strain in the novel, which “use[s] the body of the woman worker as a vehicle for

¹⁷ As fiction from Émile Zola and Katherine Mansfield indicates, representations of French, British, and American shopgirls tend to vary in the relationships they envision between shopgirls and consumption. In Rita Felski’s study of women and modernity, she identifies Zola’s French shopgirl Denise Baudu as a “premodern” figure who is “free of the compulsion to consume” (72). Sanders, on the other hand, reads British shopgirls such as Mansfield’s Rosabel (from the 1908 story “The Tiredness of Rosabel”) comparably as “paradigmatic consumer[s]” for whom desire structures their relations to their workplace (11). For instance, Sanders notes that in a moment where Rosabel “has the potential to operate as a mode of social critique,” Mansfield quickly turns from political engagement to escapism, “refusing to allow for fantasy as anything other than an escape from reality” (10). Indeed, “The Tiredness of Rosabel” highlights fantasy over overt political critique and evokes O. Henry’s “An Unfinished Story” without the sexual fall or the narrator’s concluding indictment of capitalist greed. This dissertation posits the figure of the American shopgirl as more of a post-consumer who alternately desires and rejects the commodities that surround her in the department store, wary of the emotional costs of production rooted in the matrix of consumer culture.

a critique of the politics of labor and capitalist production in the Victorian and Edwardian department store” (82). Rather than reading the novel’s political voice as revealing, though, Sanders instead aligns it with promises of romance that remain unfulfilled. She argues that complete reform is deferred and suggests that the “perpetual deferral...may itself provide pleasure for the reader” (96). Whereas I agree with Sanders that the prominence of desire and fantasy characterizes Katherine Mansfield’s “The Tiredness of Rosabel” (1908), I submit that the political voice of *The Shop Girl* is more important than Sanders supposes.

An interesting case of transatlantic writing, *The Shop Girl* is authored by a British husband and wife and published in America in *Munsey’s Magazine* (July 1914) and by New York publisher Grosset and Dunlap; it was also adapted into a “photo-play” by American production company Vitagraph in 1916. The novel features a plucky British woman named Win who immigrates to the United States in the opening chapter, and the main events of the novel take place in New York City as she struggles to establish a life for herself on the restricted salary of a shopgirl. Altogether, I would argue that the novel could be recognized as an American fiction, and to that end, it appears in this dissertation’s bibliography. Although it is true that, as Sanders points out, *The Shop Girl* ends with an engagement and the promise of, rather than a witnessed enactment of, reform, I contend that the presence of political imaginings such as this one that appear repeatedly in American narratives of the shopgirl function more substantially than Sanders implies. In addition to envisioning more effective healthcare for the poor, *The Shop Girl* emphasizes both the importance and the inevitability of capitalist reform within

the novel when the owner's son joins with Win to propose concrete changes to the store's business practices, much like those evident in the novels I discuss in Chapter 1. In other representations of American department stores, moments of political possibility are expanded into full utopian visions, successful transformations of an exacting department store into a Christian community, or workplaces where women are able to professionalize and prosper without the aid of marriage.

These examples suggest, as my readings will reinforce, that Progressive ideas were central to many works of department store fiction in American. Gwen Tarbox argues that the Progressive ideals of nineteenth-century women's clubs, which organized around the principle that collective efforts could solve social problems, inspired girls' fiction around the turn of the century. In her account, "clubwoman authors used their novels to teach young readers important lessons regarding self-interest, ambition, and cultural formation" (8). A similar emphasis on cultural transformations surfaces in examples of department store fiction. Tarbox connects the influence of Progressive-Era ideals in fiction to the increasing presence of women in public spaces. The influx of women into the public sphere not only for leisure but also for employment forms a significant context for narratives of the shopgirl.

Katherine Mullin draws upon these advances for women to demonstrate the potential for reading shopgirls as political advocates. In her essay "The Shop-Girl Revolutionary in Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima*," Mullin offers a dramatic rereading of Millicent Henning, arguing that through Millicent's position in "London's recently visible army of new women workers" (213) and her sexual as well as

professional prowess, “James presents his shop-girl as the spirit of a wider social change neither contemplated nor acknowledged in the Sun and Moon” (213). This reading of the shopgirl as political revolutionary locates political resonance in both a “socioeconomic and sexual revolution...located amid the simultaneous rise of a burgeoning new service economy and the increasing feminization of its workforce” (217). Even though *The Princess Casamassima* is set in London, Mullin’s argument that revolutionary “social transformation” (217) in the novel belongs to the shopgirl establishes a precedent for reading the political voices circulating through scenes of the American shopgirl and offers a suggestion of where O. Henry’s imagined Henry James novel could have ventured.

Scholars have not always viewed the shopgirl in such favorable terms. Aside from Mullin’s, the few critical discussions that do address literary representations of the American shopgirl tend to take her for granted as glamorous or upwardly mobile, or even as a sexual predator. This project repositions the shopgirl as a hard-working, ambitious yet exploited figure as seen through her representation in American literature. In her study of the worker in American literature, Laura Hapke describes the American shopgirl as she appears in fiction as “gold-digging,” “morally suspect,” “[s]exual opportunists,” and “allegedly vulgar women” (*Labor’s* 88). Hapke roots this claim in four texts in which a shopgirl character plays a supporting role.¹⁸ Few of the books Hapke cites as evidence

¹⁸ Hapke refers specifically to the following texts in her description of shopgirls in labor literature: M.L. Rayne’s *Against Fate* (1876), John Hay’s *The Bread-Winners* (1884), Henry James’s *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), Edgar Fawcett’s *The Evil That Men Do* (1889). These texts either fall before my time period (1880-1920) or feature the shopgirl in marginal, supporting roles as opposed to the central role of protagonist she takes in the texts I have selected for analysis. I cannot account for Hapke’s research

for these depictions match the titles I am analyzing for my own project. In fact, one of Hapke's examples is Millicent Henning, whom Hapke describes as "flamboyantly self-confident" (*Labor's* 88); it is this very self-confidence that Mullin persuasively reads as a sign of empowerment. Introducing this new collection of shopgirls novels presents fertile ground for reconsidering the shopgirl's contested identity in American literature.

As I consider representations of the department store shopgirl, I am particularly interested in the ways authors present her working-class story in relation to the American dream. Though this dissertation reads the figure of the shopgirl somewhat differently from the way Hapke has understood her, the larger scope of Hapke's project is, like Jones's, influential to my focus on labor.¹⁹ Hapke's *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* investigates representations of working-class consciousness in American literature between 1840 and 1990. In her wide-ranging analysis of the literature of labor, Hapke identifies a recurring strain of American exceptionalism in narratives of labor, which, she argues, repeatedly affirm the moral integrity and upwards class mobility at the heart of American exceptionalism. Hapke argues that even in novels enacting social

methodology to explain why she chooses these particular texts; it is fair to point out, I think, that she only discusses the shopgirl in a single paragraph within a longer chapter on the ladies of labor in antebellum through Gilded Age literature, hence her research likely did not target a comprehensive collection of shopgirl novels. Also, Hapke may have a broader definition of the shopgirl in mind than I do in this dissertation (a female clerk in any store or even factory worker as opposed to department store worker).

¹⁹ In addition to work by Hapke, Schocket, and Jones, Cindy Weinstein, Robert Seguin, and John Marsh have also examined American literature representing scenes of labor. In *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature*, Weinstein, like Hapke, reads representations of labor in nineteenth-century American literature against historical documents to investigate "the relation between work in a literary text and work in a market economy" (5). Seguin's study, *Around Quitting Time: Work and Middle-Class Fantasy in American Fiction*, reads the literature of the working class, with an emphasis on "the Marxian genre of narratives of commodification... in order to highlight hitherto underappreciated aspects" of class dialectics (10). Marsh's study of labor in modernist poetry, *Hog Butchers, Beggars, and Busboys*, contains a chapter specific to the service industry in which he focuses on the emotional toil of service in poetry by Langston Hughes and Claude McKay.

protest, this exceptionalism remains present, concluding that many of the novels she discusses stop short of criticizing the basic foundations of capitalism and instead reaffirm the American dream of success through dedicated labor.

As I will demonstrate, representations of the American department store evoke a more nuanced image of the American dream, an image that is bound up in the work of women. For some of the shopgirl stories I analyze, work at the department store can build, over time, into a profitable career. Novels that envision the professional success of a woman in the workforce rose in popularity, as Jennifer Fleissner has observed, in the early twentieth century. Portrayals of the shopgirl in which she rises from the gritty work behind the counter into a managerial position overlap with a group of fiction Fleissner has described as “white-collar-girl novels” (“Women” 53). In these stories, female protagonists (mainly American-born and white, Fleissner notes, as is also the case with most department store novels) strive to gain work in white-collar positions such as clerks or stenographers.²⁰ Fleissner casts their tales of work versus love as analogs for tensions between modernity and tradition (where female professional life evokes modernity and domestic love bespeaks tradition). If representing female characters as professionalized workers is a mark of modernity, then the shopgirl novels I analyze here shift gradually from Progressive-Era tales of labor abuse paired with traditional romantic conclusions to more modern narratives of working women who set out to make their own livings with or

²⁰ Further demonstrating the urgency of more projects like this one, Fleissner expresses regret that the white-collar-girl novels she analyzes have rarely been “seen as a significant strand in American realist fiction in the first half of the twentieth century” (“Women” 53).

without the aid of a man. As their political significations shift, these stories continue to engage important questions about American identity.

Representing the Department Store At the Turn of the Century

The archive presented in this dissertation constitutes a vibrant collection of texts, many of which were published between the years 1900-1914. It includes canonical works such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) as well as lesser-studied works such as David Graham Phillips's *Susan Lenox* (1917) and Charles and Alice Williamson's *The Shop Girl* (1914), and once-popular novels that are today essentially unread, including Lurana Sheldon's *For Gold or Soul? The Story of a Great Department Store* (1900) and Rupert Hughes's *Miss 318* (1911). Representations of department stores surface in utopian fiction, dime novels, short stories, popular periodicals such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, and in the presses of literary publishers such as D. Appleton & Company. In these texts, the figure of the shopgirl is often central to the work and to the critique encoded in her story. This diverse collection of fiction, written by a wide range of authors, recurrently presents the figure of the shopgirl to readers, who are themselves consumers (both of the novels themselves and of other goods they purchase), calling into question through her story the mechanisms of labor production that feed the department store's success.

As might be expected with an archive of this range, there are variations on the trope of the shopgirl. Some texts included in this archive emphasize the commodities on display in department stores over the workforce within them. Many of these texts are already a central part of the Realist canon. Kate Chopin's short story "A Pair of Silk

Stockings” (1897) presents the unexpected shopping indulgences of Mrs. Sommers, who utilizes the break from her daily domestic tasks to indulge her desires and prioritize self-care. Edith Wharton weaves small-town department stores into two of her regional novels, *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Summer* (1917). The stores do not play major roles in either novel, but they do signify a middle-class emblem of desire in these works and are notably absent from Wharton’s depictions of New York high society. These texts appear in the Appendix in the hope that they might provide useful context or aid future scholarship, but they do not comprise the bulk of my analysis here, as the terrain has already received notable critical attention.

Other more traditionally “literary” works to be found in this archive include two examples of naturalist writing that underscore (incidentally or intentionally) the invisibility of the department store shopgirl: *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox*. Both novels feature numerous scenes of department store consumption as they follow their protagonists through the American Midwest and on to New York, and both novels raise the possibility of their protagonists obtaining work as a shopgirl. Even though neither novel ultimately places its protagonist in the position of department store shopgirl, the shopgirl’s varying shades of presence in each story draws attention to the protagonists’ positions both as supplicant job hunters and as eager consumers in her midst.

Unlike many of their more canonical counterparts, less illustrious stories of the shopgirl relegate the dazzling commodities of the store to the margins. Rather than depict windows bursting with luxury, aisles dripping with silks, and shoes calling out to customers—all of which appears frequently in realist renditions of the department store—

authors of shopgirl stories focus their descriptive energies on the aching backs, hungry stomachs, and often-unrewarded efforts of the women working inside the stores. In one particularly stark embodiment of this emphasis, the shift in focus from dazzling spectacle to gritty detail follows the path of a character from window-shopper to employee of the store. A chapter of *The Shop Girl* (1914) moves from glamour to grit within the space of a few short pages as the protagonist, Win, seeks employment at a great department store. When she first encounters the building's edifice, Win thinks of it as a "crystal palace" (79) and admires the windows filled with enticing displays, but when she encounters the laborers she will soon join, the crystal palace becomes to Win "the cemetery of window-land" (81), a fragmented, hectic world the department store workers inhabit. While she remains unemployed, the novel depicts the spectacle of consumption through her eager and enchanted eyes, but once she begins work as a shopgirl, the commodities with which she interacts become dingy, cheap, and monotonous. Win's story subsequently focuses, as many of the other texts I will analyze do, on her daily struggle to live, work, and find happiness.

Shopgirl narratives such as O. Henry's "The Trimmed Lamp" and the Williamsons' *The Shop Girl* frequently appear in venues of popular fiction. "The Trimmed Lamp" first appeared in *McClure's* magazine (known for its muckraking), and novels such as *Miss 318* and its sequel *Miss 318 and Mr. 37* (1912), *For Gold or Soul*, and even *Susan Lenox* can be found serialized in family story papers, weekly magazines, and mass fiction presses. Some novels with shopgirl protagonists were even adapted into silent films, such as *The Shop Girl*, which appeared as a "photo-play" in 1916 (directed

by George Baker), and *Maggie Pepper* (Chester Withey, 1919), which was turned into a full-length feature film that is now lost.²¹ Many of these novels made popular gifts for the everyday reader, such as one copy of *Miss 318*, which is inscribed “To Dad- from Adelaide + Elizabeth.”²² In such varied and numerous venues of publication, these works reached wide audiences of American readers that included working-class families, middle-class consumers, Progressive reformers, and even in some cases the New York literary elite.

Some depictions of the department store in popular fiction paint it as a ladies’ paradise that is simultaneously bewitching to women and repellent to men. In *The Real New York* (1904), Rupert Hughes, who thoughtfully depicts the shopgirl elsewhere in his fiction, derisively sketches a harried visit to a department store—replete with long lines, crowded aisles, and distracted shopgirls—that leaves the man a “wreck” and his female shopping companion “a bundle of nerves” (34). Similarly, an intrepid male customer in George Hobart’s *Get Next* (1905) portrays a man fending off the crowds and prevailing upon a string of unhelpful sales ladies to purchase a gift for his wife; unsurprisingly, he leaves the store empty-handed (see Figure 2). Whereas these brief sketches elicit humor by satirizing the experience of shopping in a large department store, it is telling that longer U.S. narratives of department stores tend to focus on the figure of the shopgirl.

Many texts that feature a shopgirl protagonist are dime novel publications that position her as an alternately victimized or fortunate heroine. These representations

²¹ *Maggie Pepper* was also performed in 1911 as a play in the Harris Theatre on Broadway’s 42nd Street in New York and later was reprised in several forms, including a musical.

²² Private copy of mine.



Figure 2: Illustration from *Get Next!* (1905), by George Hobart, page 42

include Lurana Sheldon's cast of department store shopgirls from *For Gold or Soul* and *For Humanity's Sake*; the beleaguered Beatrice, of the collectively authored novel *The Great Wrongs of the Shopgirls: The Life and Persecutions of Miss Beatrice Claflin* (1880), written by three members of the Ladies' Philanthropic Society of Philadelphia, and Laura Jean Libbey's naïve cloak model, Lotta, in *Lotta the Cloak Model*. Well-known for her working-class heroines, Laura Jean Libbey has been described as the "most popular and successful" writer of working girl fiction (Peterson 20) and sold an

estimated 10-15 million books (Cox 158). References to her authorial image within other shopgirl novels attest to Libbey's pervasive influence. In *The Real New York*, Rupert Hughes flippantly invokes her body of work to describe the shopgirl's aspirations of class mobility: "She has had a Laura Jean Libbeyral education, and knows that all haughty shopgirls marry millionaires" (32). Charles and Alice Williamson evoke the same dreams of class mobility in conjunction with Libbey's name, albeit in more serious tone, noting in *The Shop Girl* that although one character reads "a novel by Laura Jean Libbey," she and her friends do not believe themselves to be "eligible heroines for their favourite authors...qualifying through pathetic struggles with poverty to become the brides of other millionaires" (97).

Another notable subset of department store representations probes problems of class mobility in America by focusing on the department store's organizational structure. These examples arise in the genre of utopian fiction and include Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* as well as Bradford Peck's *The World a Department Store* (1900). In that department stores, as I have already established, function as small-scale municipalities themselves, it is fitting that the space of the department store provides opportunities for utopian writers to imagine more perfect worlds. These works of utopian fiction surpass Progressive calls for labor reform and push further in their imaginative visions for society. In fact, the Nationalist political movement of Bellamy and Peck stood opposed to reform efforts that would limit the scope and power of the department store, instead promoting an expansion of the department store's structure to a national level that would render the entire country a socialist collective. This vision of

reform pictures the department store (literally, in Peck's case; figuratively, in Bellamy's) as the ideal government structure for a socialist society, ostensibly using this apotheosis of consumption to correct the problems it has engendered. Features of the utopian department store include the near-disappearance of the retail worker in Bellamy's utopia and the balanced representation of genders in Peck's. Peck's "imagining" is more than mere fantasy—as an owner of a Maine department store himself, he attempted to enact a real cooperative he describes in his novel in Lewiston, Maine. Though I do not examine them in detail over the following pages, these utopian books offer a glimpse of the large picture of what department store literature looks like in America 1880-1920.

Cultural representations of the department store in America are, in fact, so abundant that I have drawn necessary boundaries around this project's scope. One very large category of texts that remain outside the purview of this project is the trove of silent films that use the department store for their setting or feature a shopgirl protagonist. As shopgirls themselves were typical audience members in movie theaters, their representations onscreen speak not only about them but to them as well.²³ Films about the shopgirl ranged from dramatic warnings about the danger of acceding to a wealthy man's advances (*The Cup of Life* [Raymond West, 1915]) to a comedic farce about a pair of department store coworkers finding love on vacation (*Young Romance* [George Melford, 1915]) and even a plotline that mirrors many novels this dissertation analyzes, in which the beleaguered shopgirls are pushed to their limits through poor working conditions

²³ Kathy Peiss characterizes the leisure activities of working girls such as shopgirls as comprising "cheap amusements" including "emergent forms of commercialized recreation, such as dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theaters" (6, 5).

(*Shopgirls; or the Great Question* [Laurence Trimble, 1914], screenplay credited by some to the American silent film actress Florence Turner).²⁴

In compiling this archive, I have been attentive to distinctions between texts that circulated influentially within America and those that lay more firmly outside an American context. In these efforts, I have prioritized texts written by American authors or about American culture. There are, of course, many layers of cultural influence in the texts this dissertation features: Charles Klein, author of *Maggie Pepper*, is a British writer, as are Charles and Alice Williamson, authors of *The Shop Girl*; because these texts were published in America, I have included them as part of the archive reflecting cultural renditions of the department store in America. In some cases, novels that were popular with American readers but first published outside of America appear in the Appendix for reference. Notable examples of popular texts translated into English from European writers include Émile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) and Margarete Böhme's *The Department Store* (1912). Because both novels were popular in the United States, I have included them in the Appendix, but I have not prioritized them in my analysis due to their roots in European cultural contexts. Similarly, Lise Shapiro Sanders has analyzed representations of shopgirls in British culture, and I have not endeavored to replicate them here.

The chapters that follow investigate two prominent and often connected treatments of the shopgirl in American fiction: as mistreated laborer and as potentially

²⁴ Source: <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-florence-turner/> . See also: "'Shopgirls.' Miss Florence Turner's Remarkable New Venture," *The Bioscope* (21 January, 1915): 227.

empowered class transgressor. Additionally, they consider what happens when the shopgirl is pushed to the background of a narrative. In proposing that we turn to the little-studied narratives of the department store shopgirl, this dissertation examines historical and cultural contexts that produced them in order to better understand the critiques of labor practices, hopes for class mobility, and the shifting gender roles that resonate down the aisles of these fictional department stores.

The first chapter, “Progressive Reforms and Political Protest in Popular Fiction about the Department Store,” focuses on the relationships between labor reform, religion, and humanist ethics in popular fiction written about the shopgirl. In this chapter, I analyze dime novels of Lurana Sheldon and serialized fiction by Rupert Hughes to investigate the ways both authors depict hardships of department store labor and envision different possibilities for reform at these sites of consumption. Reading Sheldon’s *For Gold or Soul?* and *For Humanity’s Sake* in the context of the Social Gospel movement and the unfertile landscape of union activity in department stores, I trace her efforts to imagine reform from a divinely inspired solution to a potentially grass-roots movement. I argue that recovering Sheldon’s work reveals the capacity for imagination that writers brought to reform, including benevolent management, unionized workers, and conscious consumers. In spite of these imaginative solutions to labor injustices, Sheldon’s works remain themselves limited to structures of top-down reform that locate the power to make substantial changes with business owners rather than with working shopgirls.

I then turn to another set of texts that similarly draw upon the shopgirl figure to articulate the pressing need for reforms. I argue that Hughes’s *Miss 318* and *Miss 318 and*

Mr. 37 utilize religious and political appeals to a middle-class readership in an effort to change patterns of consumption and benefit the lives of shopgirls. Reading his novels alongside primary documents detailing outcries over holiday working conditions in department stores and meager regulations following the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, this chapter asks what happens when a work of fiction seeks to incite political change within the space of the department store. I show that despite both Sheldon's and Hughes's sympathy for the plight of the shopgirl, both authors turn to business owners and consumers rather than the suffering shopgirls themselves to mend the problems of capitalism. In this sense, the figure of the shopgirl functions more as a symbol to inspire labor reform while simultaneously serving as a compelling and winning protagonist to entertain readers than as a successful agent of reform.

The next chapter focuses on texts that imagine the shopgirl in roles of increasing power through workplace professionalism. In Chapter 2, "The Good Providers: Contested Visions of the Female Buyer," I examine works of fiction that feature a shopgirl who, after years of hard work and struggle, achieves the professional position of buyer. I argue that these texts ultimately portray the shopgirl's hard-won ascent to professionalism as an ambivalent climb to middle management. Reading Charles Klein's *Maggie Pepper* alongside short stories by Edna Ferber, this chapter looks at the intersection between women's work and marriage and considers what kind of impact the female protagonist's professional commitment has on her domestic life. In both *Maggie Pepper* and Ferber's "One of the Old Girls," female department store buyers become the breadwinners of their middle-class households and resist male suitors who threaten to deplete their resources.

Accordingly, I ask how the marriage plot functions when writers depict characters in this grey area of middle management. As readings of realist writer Ferber and popular fiction author Klein evince, this chapter suggests that a work of realism takes a more pragmatic approach to the limits of professional success whereas popular fiction employs the deus ex machina of a fairy tale marriage to complete the character's ascent. In doing so, I argue, examples of popular fiction from Klein and others evoke a sense of nostalgia by utilizing an old-fashioned (family-owned) business model to ensure both professional and marital success for the heroine who, once a shopgirl, now becomes a wife and store owner.

The third chapter, "Forgetting the Uncomfortable: Reading the Shadows of Department Store Labor in *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox*," moves away from the realm of popular fiction to examine two ambitious literary undertakings: Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and David Graham Phillips' *Susan Lenox*. These naturalist portrayals do not center as tightly on the shopgirl as the texts in Chapters 1 and 2 but instead depict her broader economic and social milieu. Reading the imprints of her existence, this chapter asks to what extent the presence of sweatshop and department store workers shapes attitudes towards consumption. Many key literary interpretations of *Sister Carrie* highlight consumerism and desire in their analyses of capitalist consumption rather than examining representations of labor that underpins that consumption. I propose that reading Carrie from the perspective of the shopgirl can help us better appreciate the elisions and evasions that complicate the relationship Dreiser imagines between work and consumption.

In order to better understand Dreiser's portrayal of labor and consumer culture, I pair my reading of *Sister Carrie* with an analysis of a text that in many ways recalls Dreiser's novel. The structural parallels between *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* (in plot, subject-matter, and characterization) usefully underscore the divergences between Dreiser's and Phillips's portrayals of female labor and consumer culture. Where Dreiser resists reading department store labor as strenuous or unpleasant, Phillips highlights not only the presence of the actively laboring shopgirls but also their exploitation. While aligning department store labor with the repetitive tasks, long hours, and poor conditions of the sweatshop, Phillips also denies its generative potential as a path to professionalization. Instead, he treats department store work as an extension of sweatshop labor and in doing so signals his grim view of women's work in the consumer industry.

Despite her active repugnance towards the labor exploitation she witnesses, even Susan Lenox forces herself to sublimate her political awareness in order to embrace the momentary pleasure of consumption. *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox*, then, both demonstrate the difficulty of acting simultaneously as consumers and labor advocates. In this sense, these novels problematize the efficacy of solutions proposed in popular fiction about the department store. Where Lurana Sheldon and Rupert Hughes, for example, draw upon the space of the store to present viable reform options to a concerned public of consumers, Dreiser and Phillips demonstrate that the acts of consumption and labor activism innately resist one another. Entrusting the agency for reforming consumer culture in the hands of the same people who shop for and consume the goods, they suggest, will often engender little more than a guilty conscience and a large shopping bill.

A Coda, “Looking Backwards, 2015-1920,” brings the question of the shopgirl to the present day by examining subsequent representations of the shopgirl and considering the legacy of the fiction featured in the previous chapters. Considering two novels that have been published since 1920, Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* (1963) and Steve Martin’s *Shopgirl* (2000), I ask how representations of the shopgirl have shifted since the early twentieth century. As fictional depictions of the department store shopgirl begin representing higher-class socioeconomic groups, the role of female retail work takes on a context very different from the turn-of-the-century sisters of sweatshop workers portrayed by Sheldon, Hughes, and others. The shifting terrain of consumer culture prompts us to ask which group or groups, if any, constitute this century’s analog to the shopgirl as the invisible laborer whose work enables our consumption but is eclipsed from our view.

This dissertation closes with an annotated Appendix that lists works of American fiction published between 1880 and 1920 that feature the department store in their plot, setting, or characterization. I do not claim that this list is exhaustive, but it is an extensive reflection of my research at this point. My hope is that the list might be of use to scholars who undertake research that draws upon the department store, particularly in exploring topics of a different nature from those I present in the pages that follow.

Chapter 1: Progressive Reforms and Political Protest in Popular Fiction about the Department Store

On May 6, 1890 a large group of New York City shopgirls gathered in Chickering Hall at a meeting, sponsored by the Working Women's Society of New York (WWS), to protest working conditions in the city's department stores. Led by middle-class men, the meeting obliquely featured one woman's voice when Mr. Archibald Sessions read a harrowing account of the "miseries of the poor women" working in department stores compiled by WWS secretary Alice Woodbridge ("To Help"). Woodbridge's thorough "Report on the Condition of Working Women in New York Retail Stores" details physical and emotional hardships ranging from exhausting working hours to repulsive sanitary conditions. The circumstances she reveals were so extreme that speakers at the meeting pronounced their reform efforts "a battle for humanity" to "struggle for the emancipation of these poor women" ("To Help"). The meeting's goal was to expose these hardships of the shopgirl's life to middle-class consumers who typically experienced department stores on the other side of the counter. But although reformers arranged the meeting to enlighten middle-class consumers, the majority of attendees were in fact shopgirls. Demonstrably invested in their own welfare, shopgirls attended in such high numbers that one news story observed "there were more shop girls than consumers or clergymen" in attendance ("To Better"). Speaking directly to these laborers, speakers encouraged shopgirls to "combine for their own protection" ("The Interests").

The concerns raised at the Chickering Hall meeting about department store labor

reform would reverberate not only through Progressive discourse but also through popular literature over the next two decades. Fiction that utilizes the department store for its main setting can help us understand some of the ways authors at the turn of the century grappled with the complexities of labor reform within America's consumer palaces. The service industry labor *behind* consumer culture is a phenomenon rarely discussed in American literary criticism that addresses consumerism at the turn of the century; such criticism has instead prioritized consumers' experiences and perspectives.²⁵ While the critical emphasis on consumer culture has been productive in American literary criticism, we risk losing sight of the laboring men and women who enable that consumption.

The two authors I will discuss in this chapter, Lurana W. Sheldon and Rupert Hughes, choose the department store as the centerpiece of their writing, utilizing this space where labor and consumption meet across the counter as an ideal public venue to consider possible models of labor reform. Their novels offer a counter-narrative to the scenes of glamorized consumption proffered by such writers as Theodore Dreiser. Instead, Sheldon and Hughes utilize the space of the department store expressly to illustrate hardships its workers suffer and to highlight necessary reforms within the massive, often-corrupt site of capitalist consumerism. Sheldon and Hughes both write for popular audiences through dime novels or weekly papers, and this chapter is interested in

²⁵ See overview of consumer-oriented criticism in Introduction. More recently, literary studies by Lori Merish, Gavin Jones, Eric Schocket, and Laura Hapke have reinvigorated discussions of class and labor in American literature. Whereas these important studies focus on factory workers and other occupations far removed from the site of consumption, my work turns to the moment enabling consumption immediately prior to consumer acquisition.

the manifestation of the labor problem in their writing for working- and middle-class readers. Both Sheldon and Hughes came of age in the 1890s, an era Richard Hofstadter identifies as formative for would-be Progressive reformers (166). Sheldon's and Hughes's writing about department stores demonstrates the extent to which turn-of-the-century conversations about reform both within and outside of the scope of Progressives shaped their work. These novels both depict and reshape the world of department store labor illuminated by the Chickering Hall meeting, pushing beyond existing nineteenth-century reform efforts to envision more just circumstances for female workers.

Analyzing two of Sheldon's out-of-print dime novels published between 1900 and 1901, this chapter begins by exploring the ways Sheldon worked within her cultural and political contexts to imagine possibilities of labor reform. I argue here that recovering Sheldon's work reveals the capacity for imagination that writers brought to reform; the visions Sheldon proffers for change in these novels include benevolent management, unified workers, labor-conscious consumerism, and labor unions that encompass both management and workforce. They demonstrate a shift in emphasis from religion to humanism as the guiding principle of reform. The focus on humanism in her second novel, I argue, allows Sheldon to explore a greater diversity of reform tactics, including worker-created unions. Yet if Sheldon's novels suggest alternatives to labor exploitation from within consumer culture, they also reveal the limitations of such impulses. Despite Sheldon's evident sympathy for the plight of the shopgirl, even the most radical changes her novels envision retain systems of top-down reform that largely leave the shopgirl herself disempowered.

This prescription of top-down reform extends to the novels of Rupert Hughes, which make similar appeals to middle-class audiences for consumer protection as a main avenue of reform. The second half of this chapter analyzes Hughes's literary appeals for labor reform within the world of the department store in two out-of-print novels published a decade after Sheldon's work. Written in the contexts first of the busy Christmas shopping season and then of the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory Fire, his novels seek to illuminate the labor problems facing the shopgirl and, through revealing their plight to readers, to stimulate changes in the consuming public. Like Sheldon, Hughes uses popular fiction to advocate Progressive reforms that would benefit the workers in department stores, and like Sheldon, his fiction too preserves a thread of criticism that reveals a deeper discomfort with capitalist practices driving the sharp class disparity revealed in his work.

These novels by Lurana Sheldon and Rupert Hughes fundamentally question the ethics and humanity of the capitalist system embodied by the figure of the great department store. Locating the sources of agency in labor reform at the site of consumption rather than labor or production, they offer plausible solutions for a morally concerned consuming public. Even though both authors hold back from fully transformative visions, and the Progressive solutions they do imagine leave the workers with limited power over their own improved conditions, Sheldon and Hughes explore important questions about what motivates reform and how it can be best implemented.

“To Grind Us Into The Dust”

Though her work has long been out of print, Sheldon’s writing was popular around the turn into the twentieth century with both lower- and middle-class periodical readerships. A brief sketch of her life demonstrates her investment in the lives of working women. Lurana Waterhouse Sheldon was born in Hadlyme, Connecticut on April 11, 1862 to Christiana Waterhouse Sheldon and Asa Sheldon. She received a high school education described in one profile as “the best education that a public and private school could give her” before leaving home at the age of seventeen (Free 41). Accounts of her life hint at “hardships” she faced after leaving home, and Sheldon herself later referred to her life as being very much “a typical dime novel” (Free 41, French 85). After high school, she worked a series of odd jobs ranging from writing and bookkeeping to laboratory work and “buying dry goods” (Free 42). When she was 20 years old, Sheldon began studying at the Woman’s Medical College of the New York Infirmary, leaving after six years due to what one profile described as “threatened nervous prostration” (Free 42).²⁶ Sheldon, who had been writing from a young age, claims to have earned her first pay writing when she was 21 years old (“Dear” 5); by the 1890s, periodicals across America featured her work. On November 20, 1904, at the age of 42, she married another writer, Isaac F. Ferris. A well-educated man who worked in the fields of journalism and law, Ferris was the grandson of the Reverend Isaac Ferris, a Chancellor of the New York University. Sheldon and Ferris moved from New York to Old Orchard Beach, Maine

²⁶ There is some discrepancy about this fact. Sheldon herself, in a letter written later in life, remembers her time in medical school as lasting two years (Sheldon letter in *Roundup* 1943).

around 1912, where Ferris worked as a judge in York County and also purchased two weekly Maine newspapers, *The Saco News* and *The Old Orchard "News,"* which Lurana Sheldon worked on with him for many years (Sheldon "Dear" 5).

Sheldon was a prolific writer who held a contract with Street and Smith publishers, wrote regularly for the *New York Times*, and appeared in "nearly every magazine and paper of prominence in the United States" ("Writers" 104).²⁷ Her poems, essays, and short stories were syndicated in newspapers across the country, republished in Great Britain and Germany, and even featured at the Chicago World Fair. When her husband bought *The Old Orchard "News"* and *The Saco News* in Maine, Sheldon worked as editor for the weekly papers, a position she held for over fourteen years (Coe 755). In 1902, one newspaper named Sheldon as a candidate for the title of "America's Fastest Author," citing a seven-month period over which she allegedly wrote 660,000 words (Brewster 7). Her writing had enough traction in the literary world that the writers for *The Dial* spoke of her (albeit not favorably). Despite *The Dial's* snobbish dismissal, other dictates of literary taste included Sheldon in their numbers: she appeared in the 1906

²⁷ Sheldon's publication history can be difficult to delineate, as she published under a variety of names, including her own maiden and married names, constructed pseudonyms, the names of other popular serial writers, and the names of popular actors. At times, Sheldon published essays and letters under the name Lurana Ferris, but much of her writing before and after her marriage—particularly her popular fiction—appears under the name Lurana W. Sheldon (aside, that is, from much of the work she did for dime novel companies that was published under pseudonyms). In an interview, Sheldon claimed the pseudonyms were sometimes intentional to distinguish her work in "high-class magazines" from the "pot boilers" she wrote to earn a living (Sheldon letter 4). But even if these works of dime novel fiction enabled her living, they were not without value to Sheldon; the interviewer (a noted dime novel collector and contributor for *Reckless Ralph's Dime Novel Roundup*) notes that Sheldon refused to sell him her collection of the dime novels she had penned, as they retained "sentimental" value for her (French 85). Sheldon passed away in Maine on June 11, 1945, at the age of 83, leaving behind the vague legacy of "author" as remembered in her obituary ("Mrs. Luranna Ferris"), the actual amount of and titles of the works she published destined to be indeterminable. In fact, there was so much inaccuracy and uncertainty surrounding Sheldon's identity that her obituary was printed in a local Maine newspaper misspelling her first name and misidentifying her age at death (see "Mrs. Luranna Ferris, Author, Dies at 85" in *Lewiston Evening Journal*).

edition of *The Ridpath Library of Universal Literature*, edited by John Clark Ridpath, her entry falling between entries on the Reverend Charles Monroe Sheldon (no relation) and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Sheldon fondly recalled this honor, saying that it was “the sort of write-up I like” (“Dear” 5).

Of Sheldon’s prolific career, the early years of the twentieth century belonged to the dime novel publishing powerhouse Street and Smith. In his survey of dime novels, J. Randolph Cox identifies Lurana Sheldon as a “major author” for many Street and Smith series, including *Boys of America: Stories of Romance and Adventure*; *Brave and Bold Weekly*; *Do and Dare: A Favorite Weekly of Young America*; *Love Story Library*; *Secret Service: Old and Young King Brady, Detectives*; and *Wild West Weekly: A Magazine Containing Stories, Sketches, Etc. of Western Life*. Sheldon even wrote stories about Jesse James for Street and Smith (Cox 144).

Sheldon’s identity as a writer was often invisible, suppressed by the suspicion that boys would not want to read stories penned by a woman (Sheldon “Dear” 4). Sheldon injects some playfulness into this part of her history, remarking “I wrote several Buffalo Bill stories. The last time I saw Mr. Cody (Buffalo Bill) he told me very smilingly that I had ‘ruined his reputation’” (“Dear” 4). Sheldon also remembers an instance in which she wrote a story for a Frank Tousey magazine that was published under the name of famous actor Marshall P. Wilder. Sheldon says, “I congratulated him on the story after it was published and the look of bewilderment on his face was funnier than any of his public grimaces” (“Dear” 4). Her chameleon-like ability to mimic other styles on demand speaks to a great facility with writing.

Not all of Sheldon's work for Street and Smith hid under the veil of a penname. Page 4 of *Street and Smith's New York Weekly* on April 28, 1900 quietly introduced "an author new to these columns," Miss Lurana W. Sheldon (her maiden name and full name at the time). Starting with the May 5, 1900 issue, the *New York Weekly* published Sheldon's novel *For Gold or Soul? The Story of a Great Department Store* serially over 14 issues concluding in the August 4, 1900 issue (see Figure 3). With the publication of *For Gold or Soul?*, Sheldon's name became a regular occurrence in the pages of the *New York Weekly*.²⁸

For Gold or Soul? depicts the hardships of New York City shopgirls and the transformation one department store undergoes to improve their treatment. A plot summary underscores the prominent position labor reform holds in the novel. As the story begins, protagonist Faith Marvin's family is suffering at the hands of "Messrs. Denton, Day & Co." Department Store. After the retail giant bankrupted her father's small bookstore, Mr. Marvin subsequently took his own life. The first chapter depicts (in cruel irony) the impoverished Faith applying for a position at the very same department store responsible for her family's diminished circumstances. Once hired, Faith experiences first-hand the harsh working conditions the store's employees face through her job as a cash girl. She befriends a seasoned but ailing shopgirl named Mary Jennings, who quickly enlightens Faith about their collective distress. Determined to continue

²⁸ Sheldon's name reappeared in October 6, 1900-December 22, 1900 for the novel *As We Forgive; or, A Tragedy of the Wires*, then in the very next issue for the December 29, 1900-March 9, 1901 run of *For Humanity's Sake: A Story of the Department Stores*, in May 11, 1901-July 20, 1901 for *Caught in the Whirlpool; or, The Waifs of the World. A Romance of the Metropolis*; and again August 24, 1901 through October 12, 1901 with *The Girl from Montana*.

working to support her family despite her deteriorating health, Mary dies in the midst of her shift to the shock of Faith and other witnesses to the tragedy. Horrified by this turn of



Figure 3: First installment of *For Gold or Soul?* in *Street and Smith's New York Weekly*, May 5, 1900

events, Faith resolves to transform the store. Through some serendipitously placed religious appeals, she wins the trust of Mr. Denton, the store's controlling partner, and convinces him to run his store more humanely. When a surprise family fortune absolves Faith from financial struggle, she voluntarily joins Mr. Denton in an advisory role to improve conditions for the store's employees. When these reforms threaten to drive the store into bankruptcy, patrons rally to support their fair policies and Christian values, leading the store to profitability and its employees to contentment and security. A coda to this consummate happiness solidifies the bond between employee and employer with the engagement of Faith to the store-owner's charming young son, Jim Denton.

Through Faith's employment, Sheldon unveils the exploitation embedded in the workplace of the department store. Sheldon's fictional shopgirls are subjected to putrid surroundings and arduous requirements. The atmosphere of the store, particularly in rooms designated solely for staff, such as the cloak room and cafeteria, is "unhealthy" (4) due to excessive "sewer gas" (4) and faulty "drainage, ventilation and unsuitable location" (13).²⁹ The building itself is not equipped to withstand possible fires and considered to be "a regular deathtrap" (6). Despite multiple warnings from the fire department, the building remains unequipped to quell fires because, as one worker explains, "the building is insured and so is the stock. What do they care about us!" (6). This privileging of business profits over humanity, including both workers and shoppers, demonstrates the clear boundaries Sheldon draws between the store owners and their

²⁹ All citations of Sheldon's novels appear by chapter number, rather than page number, due to the novels' complex serialization and reprinting histories.

employees and customers. Sheldon positions profit-driven capitalist leaders as the representative source of injustice in the store.³⁰

Sheldon depicts the position of shopgirl as a rigorous, physically demanding job that evokes many of the pains commonly associated with sweatshop labor. The shopgirls she depicts are locked into a relentless and inescapable system, “obliged to stand” for “long hours” and having only a “short time” for their lunch (13). On Faith’s first day working, she experiences “aching in every muscle” due to her “cramped” seating position and becomes “so tired and nervous” that she nearly cries (5). Faith discerns the long-term effects such conditions have on the girls, observing their “mostly pale, pinched” faces (5). An experienced shopgirl, noting Faith’s natural color when she joins the staff, predicts that “she’ll fade like all the rest of us, and it won’t take long either” (10). These bodily effects enable Sheldon to emphasize that the work of the shopgirl, perceived by some to be genteel, entailed arduous physical labor. The depiction of the shopgirl as pale and worn down is consistent with Sheldon’s depiction of shopgirls elsewhere in her writing. She unites the plight of the shopgirl with the labor abuses suffered by other segments of the working class and thus advocates for the shopgirl as a worker in need of the same protections as factory workers and other laborers.³¹

³⁰ Susan Porter Benson illustrates the complex networks of power within the department store, between “Managers and customers...[who] entered into shifting alliances with each other or with saleswomen” (6). Sheldon streamlines this dynamic to align customers and saleswomen against the store owners. Despite some concern for the protection of the customers, Sheldon sustains her focus on the shopgirls who work under such strenuous conditions.

³¹ Sheldon’s description of the department store shopgirls Marion Marlowe encounters in *Marion Marlowe’s Skill; or, A Week as a Private Detective* (1900) parallels Faith’s perspective. Entering a department store, Marion quickly observes “how tired the clerks looked,” including one particularly

Extending her depiction to the larger economic framework surrounding the department store, Sheldon traces labor exploitation back to the point of origin of the store's goods. Until Mr. Denton undergoes his change of heart, the owners eagerly acquire goods produced in the reproachable conditions of "disgustingly dirty" sweatshops that rely upon "underpaid labor" (25). Even though the garments are "permeated with disease," they sell for lucrative profits, yielding "an average of three hundred per cent on every garment" (25). The store owners admit that the sweatshop goods they carry are inferior to those they advertise but display no shame in "cheating their customers" (38) through practices that amount to "little more than thieving" (25). Certainly in this instance the sweatshop laborers referred to in the novel suffer more than the oblivious customers. Still, these examples illustrate various levels of manipulation and deception workers and customers face from the scheming store owners.

The grievances Sheldon's novel raises with department store labor recall the Progressive complaints voiced in Chickering Hall. Alice Woodbridge's report summarizes the shopgirls' position in language that could just as easily come from Sheldon's characters:

[W]e find that, through low wages, long hours, unwholesome sanitary conditions, and the discouraging result of excessive fines [...] the physical condition is injured (7)

As this rhetoric suggests, Progressive reformers such as Woodbridge were concerned with widespread social corruption, particularly as it affected working-class Americans.

"dejected-looking" worker (12). In fact, Deidre Johnson observes that Sheldon frequently depicts working-class, urban characters as thin and sickly.

To rectify these ills, they advocated for protective legislation and created organizations, such as the WWS, in support of workers.³² The “excessive fines” (5) Woodbridge describes, which quickly diminish already-meager paychecks, manifest in Sheldon’s novel through the relentless threat of fines that force one shopgirl to work despite a grave illness. The condition of overworked, ailing shopgirls in 1890 who “came out [of work] at night looking like corpses” (Woodbridge 3) echoes in Sheldon’s work through Mr. Denton’s regretful realization that his employees resemble “skeletons and lunatics and almost corpses!” (17). Sheldon’s fictional world recreates and then pushes beyond these historical complaints both in her portrait of unrest and in her tale of reform.

Embracing the dramatic panache of the dime novel genre and recalling the sacrificial deaths of nineteenth century reform novels, Sheldon stages a grim death that hyperbolizes the shopgirl’s mistreatment. Conditions in Sheldon’s fictional store are so dire that Mary Jennings, who is ill with consumption, dies in the store’s cloak room while working, succumbing to consumption both literally and figuratively (as a disease and at the hands of consumer culture). Evoking the ironic blindness that allows consumers to overlook the exploitation in their midst, Sheldon veils Mary’s deteriorating body in an absence of narration, emphasizing the commotion surrounding Mary’s death without focusing on the dying body itself. This “scene of the wildest confusion” includes panicked management, grieving shopgirls, and an outraged government inspector and

³² Hofstadter characterizes Progressivism as an effort towards “social and economic reform” that would bring “morality and civic purity” back to American society (5-6). Progressives worked to achieve legislation “focused on improving safety, the work environment, job security, and better pay” for workers, many of whom were women working in factories and sweatshops (Schneider 15). For more on Progressive reform discourse, see Hofstadter, Chapter 5.

details the movement of eyes “looking” and “gazing” from one horror to another (11). Instead of describing Mary’s worn body, Sheldon depicts her eyes. Before her death, Mary briefly opens her eyes, accepts God, and then peers directly at Mr. Denton, murmuring, “I—forgive—” before closing her eyes and dying (11). As the narrator characterizes this event, “Another life had gone out at the very dawning of its day; crushed out by the injustice and the greed of fellow-beings” (11). Government inspector Alma Dean asserts that Mary was “killed by this slavery” and connects her singular death to the “plenty more [shopgirls] behind the counters” who are equally vulnerable to the store’s abuses (10).³³ Mary’s assault of kindness, combined with the tragedy of her death, becomes a turning point for Mr. Denton, who eventually changes his business practices with the dying girl in mind. With Mary’s untimely death spurring Faith, Alma Dean, and even Mr. Denton to agitate for reform, Mary serves as a sentimental, sacrificial figure whose death instigates change.³⁴

The brutality and visibility of this event have lasting effects on the novel’s characters, ultimately underscoring the problems inherent in the profit-driven treatment of workers. Mr. Denton laments that the workers he employs “came to us, many of them, glowing with health...[w]e merely take advantage of their wretched conditions to secure

³³ Comparisons of shopgirl labor to slavery were not infrequent at this time, as reformers utilized comparisons to slavery for many injustices they found plaguing America.

³⁴ Mary’s death recalls conversion deaths from novels such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In this way, Sheldon merges the influences of nineteenth century reform fiction with the hyperbole of dime novels to create a melodramatic plotline in service of social reform. What distinguishes Sheldon’s novels from both female reform fiction and typical dime novels about working girls is that she draws upon the social concern of the former and the working-class milieu of the latter to not only expose the toil of shopgirl life but highlight consumer reforms readers could help implement. Furthermore, Sheldon’s novels portray a more active role for women than those previously outlined in reform fiction. Rather than remaining “spectatorial in nature” (Carlin 205), Sheldon’s female characters take active roles as government agents, proto-union representatives, and even business owners.

their services cheap...instead of bettering their lot we grind them lower and lower, until at last they die ” (17). With a similar emphasis on the whittling away of the body, Mary Jennings diagnoses the problem of labor for Faith and in doing so, prophesies her own death: “[o]ur employers look upon us girls as so many machines, created for the sole purpose of filling their coffers...[They] grind us into the dust because we are helpless!” (20). Faith’s mother similarly observes the connection between capitalist greed and the disintegration of the worker, lamenting, “They are destroying women’s souls as well as starving their bodies, and all to swell their own bank accounts and ride in carriages” (9). Capitalism, understood in these terms, wears down the bodies of its workers, who become yet another business expense, like the diseased sweatshop garments and out-of-date plumbing. This view also implicates consumers in the ills of capitalism, as they not only buy the goods on display in the store but also inadvertently consume the shopgirls themselves.

These problems at the root of capitalism apply similarly to other working-class jobs at the turn of the century, but a central feature of the department store puts it in an advantageous position to spark reform: the visibility of labor due to the over-the-counter exchange of goods from shopgirl to consumer. Workers producing fabric in mills or sewing shirtwaists in factories remain out of sight for eager consumers who enter the department store. But the store’s layout, which brings labor and consumption face-to-face, enables and encourages consumers in these novels to acknowledge the capitalist system they are supporting. Though the original sources of goods remain cloaked, customers face the tired, demoralized shopgirls a mere few feet in front of them, and in

For Gold or Soul?, they cannot avoid seeing for themselves the conditions of labor their purchases support.

In *For Gold or Soul?*, the crux of the problem Sheldon identifies in the department store becomes the seemingly insurmountable conflict between profit and humanity. After establishing the degree to which this system is broken, Sheldon envisions reforms that can successfully bridge the divide. The reforms she writes into the plot are triggered by changes within people, primarily the owner of the store who becomes inspired by God. Once he experiences a religious awakening, he quickly implements more humane business practices in his store. Secondarily, the support of a Christian consuming public keeps the store financially viable despite its removal of predatory policies. The question at the heart of the novel, then, underscores the philosophical question reflected in its title: must a store be run by a capitalist motivation for maximum profit, or can a store achieve success by remaining loyal to the morality recommended by Jesus Christ? Sheldon challenges readers to consider whether reforms in the spirit of religiously driven empathy are economically viable.

Locating Capitalism's Soul

The Progressive reform politics *For Gold or Soul?* engages to explore problems of industrialism in part emerge from a nineteenth-century wave of Christian thought that reacted to the same problems. The Social Gospel movement, scholars observe, fed into the Progressive instinct to right the wrongs of industrialization.³⁵ As the presence of clergy at the Chickering Hall meeting illustrates, Progressive reform movements around

³⁵ See Wright (107) and Jones (65).

the turn of the century contained an influential religious component, the urge to help fellow humans suiting both religious teachings and Progressive goals. The Social Gospel novel at the turn of the century invested itself in teaching readers how to use Christian doctrine to ameliorate these problems, and this body of literature can be seen as a precursor to and partner with labor fiction that investigated the same problems through political and, at times, religious means.³⁶

Focusing on tensions between capitalism and morality, *For Gold or Soul?* integrates many frameworks of the Social Gospel novel into its plot and characters. Social Gospel novels typically focus on middle- or working-class characters to explore two key problems: “the principles of ... the New Testament are inimical to the practicalities of laissez-faire economics” and “the church as an institution was becoming a secular social club” (Wright 104). As scholars note, Social Gospel novels include a spectrum of conservative and radical proposals, but a common thread for them all is an “important role...for the church or Christianity in responding to these critical conditions” (Lindley 57).

Examining several key features of Reverend Charles Monroe Sheldon’s noted Social Gospel novel *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (1897) can highlight the extent to which Lurana Sheldon (no relation) incorporated typical Social Gospel tropes into her

³⁶ In this vein, Carlin notes the continuity between social gospel literature and female reform fiction by writers such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Lucia True Ames Mead (212). For more on the Social Gospel novel, see Lindley and Graham. For broader overviews of religion in turn-of-the-century American literature, see Wright and Jackson.

novel.³⁷ The central plot of *In His Steps* follows Rev. Maxwell's congregation after he challenges them to approach all of their life choices by posing the question, "What would Jesus do?" Rev. Maxwell first considers this proposition to follow in Jesus's steps when an impoverished, unemployed Jack Manning faints in the middle of a church service and dies days later at the reverend's house. Though Rev. Maxwell was already religious, he determines that he had not been devout enough. Charles Sheldon's use of an innocent, abused victim of industrialization to spur personal conversion reverberates in Lurana Sheldon's scene of Mary Jennings' dramatic death. In Lurana Sheldon's writing, witnessing this tragic death propels Mr. Denton to reevaluate his behavior and run his business more morally. *In His Steps* also provides a framework for how to run a business as Jesus might. Mr. Wright, a merchant in *In His Steps*, realizes that to fully live as Jesus would, he should structure his business practices "for the purpose of glorifying God" and "for the good of humanity" (87). Lurana Sheldon does not import the co-operative restructuring of Wright's business, but her novel does subscribe to the belief that a business prioritizing Christian, humanist practices can survive profitably. And her allegorically named protagonist Faith Marvin parallels Charles Sheldon's devout characters seeking to follow in Jesus' steps.

In drawing upon Social Gospel literature, Lurana Sheldon samples and mimics some of its styles to achieve her own vision of reform. Ultimately, Sheldon remains less

³⁷ Lindley argues that limiting our understanding of the Social Gospel movement to the frequently discussed *In His Steps* deprives us of a large, diverse base of literature that is more complicated, radical, and diverse, especially in its treatment of women (71). I use Charles Sheldon's novel here to briefly illuminate some typical qualities of the Social Gospel novel. It is particularly pertinent to an analysis of *For Gold or Soul?*, because Street and Smith published both novels in the same *Alliance Library* series.

interested in religious conversion than in labor improvements, and her novel undercuts the necessary centrality of religion to reform. One key way she achieves this is by complicating Faith's proselytizing with the skeptical viewpoints of Alma Dean. Sheldon ironically titles the chapter introducing Dean "A Heavenly Inspector" (13) even though Dean doubts the efficacy of Christianity, and Sheldon names her character after the Spanish word *alma*, meaning soul. Devoted to aiding humanity, she locates the solution to injustice in the good will of people and the power of laws, both legal and social, they can establish. Dean believes that "the law of common decency" (32) can address all of the injustices laid out in the novel and relies on "fear of the law" enforced by municipal governments to carry out such impulses of decency. She admits that the owners of the department store do not seem to possess an expected fear of the law, noting that "these people seem deaf to everything but the jingle of their dollars" even though other stores comply with regulations "under no compulsion whatever" (13). Still, Alma Dean exhibits an enduring—and characteristically Progressive—confidence in the public's ability to feel guilt over injustices to the working class (Hofstadter 204). For example, she counters Miss Fairbanks's claim that no jury of people would ever stand up against the department store owners with her belief that "[i]f they could see what I have just seen they might possibly do it" (10). She believes in the power of personal witness detached from a religious intervention; for Dean, the injustices alone carry the power to convert capitalists into reformers.

Alma Dean's relationship to religion is less oppositional than it is indifferent, and Sheldon upholds her secular humanist perspective. Highlighting the extraneousness of

religion, Dean says, “I should feel sorry to think that a man could not do what was right without a divine suggestion. It would speak ill of his sense of honor or justice toward humanity” (32). Faith and Alma Dean are united, then, in their mutual reliance on feelings of humanity to address the injustices in the department store; they differ on the origin of that humanity. Of Alma Dean and Faith Marvin, the narrator observes, “They were the extremes of goodness, accomplishing the same ends, but each working on a theory incomprehensible to the other” (32). This narrative exposition evokes Sheldon’s own religious skepticism in an otherwise religiously driven narrative, as Sheldon does not criticize Alma Dean for her lack of faith but instead praises her for her devotion to reform. By including both Faith’s and Alma’s viewpoints in her novel, Sheldon is likely engaging her novel’s religious audience while maintaining her more skeptical personal beliefs. That she positions the two characters’ viewpoints as “incomprehensible” denotes a deep, unresolved tension between two different impetuses to reform.

What we do know of Sheldon’s biography suggests a complicated personal relationship with religion. Lurana Sheldon was a descendant of theologian Jonathan Edwards, but ironically her own beliefs border on atheism (Free 44). Publications appearing in *The Free Thought Magazine* and *Mind* detail her disdain for the deity so many Christian Americans revere.³⁸ When Sheldon discusses her views on religion, she has little patience for the perceived ineffectiveness of religion to solve injustices she

³⁸ She argues in “The Origin of Immorality” that religion is responsible for the continued subjugation of women, claiming that women have “clung tenaciously” to religion with the “fierceness of ignorance” that is responsible for the “slow development of intellect in women” (203, 202, 200). In another article, she concludes an investigation of God’s representation in the Bible with the assertion: “This is the God of the Martyr, of the Hypocrite, and of the Fool. We ask you, oh, man of reason and understanding, is this your God?” (“Is This” 217).

witnesses in the world. Sheldon summarizes her views of life and morality thus:

I have found the happiness of life in the companionship of books, animals and an occasional true friend and the satisfaction in dividing a dollar with one more destitute than myself. The rest is only a panorama of injustice and folly, a farce in which serious things, like child-bearing, are treated indifferently, and absurd matters like the salvation of a soul, which we do not know exists, are carried to the extreme of bloodshed and torture. (Free 44)

Sheldon characterizes religion as an “absurd matte[r]” because it bears no direct, material impact on people’s suffering. Injustices she saw in the world (particularly, perhaps, through her work in New York’s medical hospitals) further convinced Sheldon that “no such being as a God could exist” (Free 44). This phrase may be an overstatement by a partisan editorial staff, but Sheldon’s own words—“we do not know” if the soul exists—suggest at least agnosticism.

Many readers of *For Gold or Soul?* were likely proponents of the Christian faith. Described on its masthead as “A Journal of Useful Knowledge, Romance, Amusement, &,” *Street and Smith’s New York Weekly* offered writing for men and women, children and parents on topics including “adventure, romance, detective, mystery, and frontier serials” (Cox 192). In addition to entertainment, the *New York Weekly*, like other family story papers, contained Christian rhetoric, including articles by ministers and plots that appeal to Christian attitudes (Noel 238, 296).³⁹ Even Street and Smith’s dime-novel libraries suggest a Christian interest. Organized around themes or main characters to target different subsets of their audience, such as the boys’ *Diamond Dick, Jr.* series and

³⁹ Noel’s information about religion in family story papers comes from her 1954 study *Villains Galore...The Heyday of the Popular Story Weekly*. More recent studies of dime novels from Michael Denning and J. Randolph Cox rarely incorporate references to the audience’s religious beliefs or the ways the publications speak to those beliefs.

Sheldon's *My Queen* series for young girls, some libraries featured religious overtones. The dime-novel version of *For Gold or Soul?* appeared in two Street and Smith series: as #264 in the *Eagle Series* and #19 in the *Alliance Library*. The *Alliance Library* featured religiously themed works, including Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* (the first title in the series), as well as Reverend Cortland Myers' *Would Christ Belong to a Labor Union?* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. But *For Gold or Soul?* also appeared in the *Eagle Series*, which does not carry a particular religious association. Dime novel scholar J. Randolph Cox describes the *Eagle Series* as containing mostly "romance novels, many reprinted from earlier Street & Smith publications and from serials in the *New York Weekly*" (94). Cox further describes both the *Eagle Series* and the *Alliance Library* as series that are "not consid[er]ed to be dime novels because they do not generally contain an abundance of sensational fiction" (254). This description seems fitting for Sheldon's novel, as it focuses mainly on the day-to-day hardships of the working class, questions of both romance and religion coming secondarily.⁴⁰

Sheldon's separation from the religious views Faith espouses suggests that Sheldon uses Social Gospel precepts in this novel primarily as a strategy to reach her Christian audience and to persuade them that reform is both necessary and possible. Street and Smith's marketing placed *For Gold or Soul?* in the context of other religious writing. For example, Chapter 25 of the novel's serialized printing appears adjacent to an advertisement for religious books. This advertisement for "RELIGIOUS NOVELS,"

⁴⁰ This is not to say the novel is devoid of sensationalism; it includes a fortuitously happy ending, a long-lost fortune, fainting women, and a dramatic public death, but these devices are all in service, I argue, of her focus on reform.

priced at 10 cents each, includes the titles of four novels in the religiously themed *Alliance Library* series (including *In His Steps*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and *Would Christ Belong to a Labor Union?*) (*New York Weekly* June 30, 1900, 6).

Although events of *For Gold or Soul?* claim Christianity as an influential impetus of reform, the novel itself remains inconclusive on the necessity of religion in reform. Where Faith sees the hand of God in all of the reforms, Dean insists, “there are no changes here that could not have been effected by the law of common decency!” (32). In the novel’s final chapter, Faith observes that she and Dean “still differ a little in our notions and theories” about reform (40). Ultimately, Sheldon leaves Faith’s and Alma Dean’s spiritual differences unresolved even when reform has been achieved within the store. This concluding ambivalence about the role of religion in reform efforts suggests Sheldon’s more sustained interest in the reforms themselves than in their inception. Building on traditions with which her readers were likely already familiar, the religious impulses that appear in *For Gold or Soul?* function to access a larger social current of morality Sheldon views as integral to achieving and enacting reform.

“Some Startling Changes”

The reforms that ultimately take place in *For Gold or Soul?* exceed even the demands of activist groups at the time. Changes within the novel include improved sanitary conditions and better working conditions for the shopgirls, as well as more scrupulous attention to the store’s buying practices to increase fairness both to workers in factories and to the consumers of goods sold in the department store. The shopgirls earn higher wages and work shorter hours, including longer breaks and lunches that last a full

hour instead of the previously quick thirty minutes. These improvements were all issues that working women's activists such as the New York Consumers' League advocated, but they had slow success in actualizing effective protective legislation that mirrors what Sheldon implements fictionally (Vapnek 77). The Progressive movement eventually achieved "an impressive body of legislation" aimed at protecting workers from "the crassest abuses of industrialism" (Hofstadter 242), but these laws were not yet passed when Sheldon wrote this novel in 1900.

Despite Denton's "startling" (26) move to improve the conditions of his workers even at the expense of profit margins, the store remains distinctly capitalist, albeit less cutthroat. Sheldon's is a novel that focuses on reform not revolution. The reforms she depicts are enacted by the upper class and supported by the consuming classes; the workers and their traumas serve to elicit pity and anger, but they are not agents of their own change. Their conditions only improve when Mr. Denton initiates new business practices and chooses to implement government regulations, and the changes take a permanent form when customers respond positively by supporting them. The reforms Sheldon enacts in the novel alleviate the physical pains and mental anguish of the employees, but they do not alter or challenge the existing structure of capitalism and class organization. In fact, there is a distinctly paternalistic stamp on the book's idyllic ending wherein the employees see themselves as "one big family, with Mr. Denton for our father!" (40). Such evidence of paternalism hides the lurking class inequality as the exploitive system is perpetuated. In the sense that *For Gold or Soul?* celebrates employee happiness in the midst of sustained capitalism as a marker of success, the novel's political

conclusions are consistent with Progressive politics at the turn of the century. Though it was written on the early end of many Progressive reforms, much Progressive rhetoric looked to alleviate suffering and poverty while maintaining a capitalist economic platform.⁴¹

The unlikely outcome of an improved work environment for shopgirls, combined with Faith's engagement to young Jim Denton, at the end of *For Gold or Soul?* carries with it certain aspects of wish-fulfillment. As Michael Denning has argued, dime novels were written for the producing classes, grounded in real-life settings that echoed their readers' own conditions, but the narratives typically follow an unrealistic, utopian arc to please the longings of the readers. Sheldon's work replicates this dynamic by granting workers the resolution of a happy workplace where their concerns are taken seriously and their conditions improved; furthermore, the protagonist is the recipient of riches and a wealthy husband, filling out the idyllic Cinderella ending Denning describes in *Mechanic Accents*.⁴²

Readers of the *New York Weekly* spanned social classes (Noel 292), though Denning makes a convincing case that the main audience for family story papers was in the "producing classes" (45), including working girls such as the very shopgirls Sheldon depicts in her novel. Dorothy Richardson's first-hand account of life as a working girl in *The Long Day: The Story of a New York Working Girl* (1911) names shopgirls specifically as consumers of dime novels when she includes dime novels among the

⁴¹ See Hofstadter 240, Buhle 254, and Wolfe 380-383.

⁴² See, in particular, Chapter 10.

“literary tastes” of women who worked in factories and department stores (300). Though we can speculate about the ways readers would have approached *For Gold or Soul?*, its precise reception remains unclear. The novel’s reproduction in both *Alliance Library* and *Eagle Series* reprints indicates its commercial success, and Street and Smith continued to use *For Gold or Soul?* in Sheldon’s bylines to advertise her subsequent publications.

A Union of Shop Girls

Less than five months after *For Gold or Soul?* concluded, the December 22, 1900 issue of *Street and Smith’s New York Weekly* promised readers a “vigorous and pathetic” new story from Lurana W. Sheldon. Appearing in the following issue, *For Humanity’s Sake: A Story of the Department Stores* featured a sprawling illustration across the paper’s front page, depicting the active interior of a department store counter with inset images of men conducting business in an office and a woman crying at a grave (see Figure 4).⁴³ Spanning five full columns across the top of the page, this illustration was more expansive than the typical three-column width of the paper’s front-page images. The extensive cover art for this novel, along with the quick turnover between Sheldon’s *For Gold or Soul?* and this new story of a department store, suggest that *New York Weekly* readers were eager for more travails of department store life. For scholars, this second novel provides another point of access to Sheldon’s depiction of department store labor. Particularly, it presents an alternative model for labor reform from the religiously stimulated reforms in *For Gold or Soul?* In *For Humanity’s Sake*, religious conversion is

⁴³ The novel was published weekly between December 29, 1900 and March 9, 1901. I have found no record that it was published as an individual dime novel after this serialization.

no longer the primary mechanism of change. Though Christianity is still present in some characters' beliefs, Sheldon downplays the rhetoric of religion in this novel, and the conversion narrative that shaped *For Gold or Soul?* is absent. The novels' respective titles underscore this shift away from religion to humanism: they reposition the object of primary importance from capitalism or religion ("Gold" or "Soul") to the common plight of mankind ("Humanity's Sake").



Figure 4: First installment of *For Humanity's Sake* in *Street and Smith's New York Weekly*, December 29, 1900

The opening chapter introduces a spectrum of characters—spanning social classes—who play key roles in both the workplace and the plot: Dion Allison is a wealthy gentleman, recently heartbroken, who vows to give his life purpose by “be[ing] useful” (1); Mortimer Percival is a reformed rake hoping to marry an “angel” (1), whom he is certain he will find laboring in a department store; and recently orphaned Dorna Temple stands vigil at her mother’s grave before setting off for the city to make her own living working in a department store. These characters converge at Markle & Miller’s, the department store of the novel’s subtitle. Like *For Gold or Soul?*’s Denton, Day & Co., Markle & Miller’s is plagued by low wages, irrational fines, long hours, few breaks, child labor, poor sanitary conditions, and inadequate fire safety. All of the central characters work to change the conditions of the store, including the wealthy Olga Oliver, who is secretly the store’s rightful owner posing as a shopgirl to learn about their working conditions; Dion Allison, who becomes store manager; Mortimer Percival, who draws various social and government agencies to investigate the store; and a group of shopgirls who band together to advocate for themselves. This diverse group of characters and their friends join forces at the end of the novel “[f]or humanity’s sake” to overthrow the store’s management and establish a new “absolutely honest store” (32). The novel’s conclusion finds many romantic matches, including the engagement of Dion and Olga. But Dorna, who receives an offer of marriage from Dr. McCarroll, turns him down to devote her life instead to workers’ rights.

In contrast to a single figure’s religious conversion, Sheldon explores a greater diversity of reforms in this novel. The novel still echoes a general Christian concern

about the exploitative results of industrialization, but although religion fuels some characters' humanism, this novel is not a conversion narrative. For example, Sheldon describes Dion Allison, the manager whom the shopgirls initially fear, as a Christian philanthropist; her depiction of him, however, does not focus on his religious beliefs but instead traces his search for the most effective way to bring reform to the store. *For Humanity's Sake* depicts different ways activists—from wealthy philanthropists and capitalists to working women—might remedy these injustices. Despite Dion's relatively empowered position as manager, he initially finds himself at a loss for how to help, wondering, "How should he go about correcting a condition like this? The answer was not one that could be found in a minute" (8). He later fears, "It is not within human nature to surmount such appalling obstacles" (12). Eventually, Dion succeeds in realizing policy changes that would improve working conditions. He advocates higher wages, better fire-safety conditions, more humane treatment, less child labor, and improved sanitary conditions in break rooms.

Affluent reformers such as Dion Allison believe they can enact change by working within the store to change its policies. His friend Olga Oliver poses for months as a shopgirl, laboring and talking alongside other workers to better understand their circumstances so she can alter store policies upon claiming her rightful role as owner. Other philanthropists from their upper-class social circle call upon stronger government inspections to address the circumstances they find at the store and donate money to assist the workers. Although most of these characters merely utilize the power that comes with their class positions to help the workers, one character goes so far as to give up preaching

to become a worker. Dion approves of this transition of both work and class, pronouncing “There are preachers enough in the world; what we want is workers...unless one mixes freely with humanity one is apt to get narrow” (32). This focus on workers as valued members of humanity exemplifies the increased power and appreciation Sheldon assigns to labor in this novel.

In the most striking turn from her first department store novel, Sheldon also explores the possibility of worker agency in reform. Unlike Miss Fairbanks, who is silenced by fear in *For Gold or Soul?*, the shopgirls in *For Humanity's Sake* believe banding together is the most effective way to work towards solutions for their workplace hardships. When the women fear that their jobs might be threatened, Belle Rallston and her co-workers unite—albeit surreptitiously—to voice their concerns. In a meeting led by Belle, they rally together to “organize and pass resolutions” for “pure self-protection” (3). Both furtively at work and more boldly in the boarding house of one shopgirl, the group “plotted and planned” with the goal of protecting their positions and ensuring fair treatment amongst them (4). For example, when one employee receives a raise, Belle fears that the rest of the shopgirls will not receive similar benefits and thus objects that her raise “doesn’t benefit the rest of us” (7). Belle’s commitment to the “club” (3), which functions like a union, is rooted in the idea of collective survival and self-protection for herself and her fellow workers. As another member proclaims, “self-protection is the first law of nature” (5). To this end, the shopgirls have a “Mutual Benefit” which they use to support one another in times of hardship (they eventually use it to pay for the funeral of a worker who dies tragically in a fire at the store) (23). This union-like group of shopgirls

speaks the language of active resistance, vowing not to “submit” to the hypothetical firing of a shopgirl but instead to “Resent it, of course!” (15). Their willingness to change their own situation marks a striking difference between the group of shopgirls in Sheldon’s *For Humanity’s Sake* and those depicted in her previous novel. In *For Gold or Soul?*, Faith alone vowed to make changes, and even in her commitment to change, Faith felt guided by the overruling will of God. In *For Humanity’s Sake*, Belle Rallston and her coworkers—including heiress-in-disguise Olga—speak with determination against the abuses they face and act directly to make changes to their conditions.

When considering the role Belle Rallston’s club of shopgirls plays in the novel and for its readership, it is important to understand that, historically, department stores were unfertile ground for labor protest. There were few union opportunities for department store workers, especially women, around the turn of the century. In 1890, the Retail Clerks’ International Protective Association (RCIPA) formed through the American Federation of Labor to protect workers at the Clothing and Gents Furnishings and Shoe Store in Muskegon, Michigan (“Retail Clerks”). But this organization was “at best paternalistic and often outright hostile to the organizing of saleswomen,” and most members of the union worked for stores in the American mid-west and in smaller towns, rather than the urban stores in which Sheldon’s novels are set (Benson 269). Of these few union members, most were male: by 1920—a full twenty years after Sheldon published this novel—only 0.4% of department store shopgirls in America belonged to the union (most of these members, again, were from small towns); by comparison, 6.6% of American women in industrial jobs belonged to unions in 1920 (Benson 269, Schneider

65). Some unions, including the Retail Clerks Union, even excluded women by charging dues and other fees female workers could not afford on their salaries (Kessler-Harris 29).

Not only was union membership for shopgirls rare, but it also endangered their livelihood, as large department stores at the turn of the century were fervently anti-union. The great Chicago department store Marshall Field & Co. fired any workers, including children, associated with union activity (Leach 400 n.62). Stores were also known to utilize intricate spy networks to discover which of their employees were sympathizing with unions (Benson 269). Department store owners would even go so far as to lock “all but one set of doors” when union meetings were scheduled to discourage employees from attending (Kessler-Harris 35). It was not until the Great Depression when union efforts for department store employees improved, with women increasing their membership in RCIPA and the formation of a new labor union, RWDSU (Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union), in 1937 (Benson 269). Thus the stakes facing Belle Rallston and her fellow workers, in the setting of 1900, were high indeed, as the loss of their positions as shopgirls threatened the “fearful condition” of sweat-shop labor, prostitution, or starvation (24). Sheldon’s fictional creation of an all-female labor union within a department store presents an empowered and feminized view of reform.

The autonomy the women establish through their union is jeopardized when Dion, Olga, and their friends (both wealthy and working-class) join together in support of the shopgirls’ organization. This apparent union of classes to achieve reform obscures the ultimate power Olga retains as the owner of the company. Though the shopgirls are the ones who initially unite in union, the power to make change ultimately comes from the

capitalist. Even the kind Dion Allison finds that, by himself, he is not powerful enough to fix all of capitalism's problems, but in union with Olga and his wealthy friends, they can eventually transform the workplace.

The tension in this ending is that the shopgirls' union morphs into a venue for paternalist philanthropy. One of the wealthy characters declares in support of the union, "In union there is strength, and surely we are united!" (32), but the union of working girls and leisure class becomes a temporary erasure of class boundaries that threatens to erase the shopgirl within the narrative. Whereas the opening chapters of the novel detail the activities of Belle Rallston and her club of shopgirls, the closing chapters focus instead on the wealthy characters, only mentioning the shopgirls in passing. One shopgirl they speak of, Dorna, has "promised to devote [her life] to The Service" (33), but the reader only receives this information secondarily. Dorna is not there to detail her personal struggle and commitment to labor reform; instead, Olga, who had posed as a shopgirl but in fact owns the entire department store, speaks for all of the shopgirls when she adds: "We have all enlisted under the same grand banner. 'For Humanity's Sake' will be our motto for the future!" (33). As these are the final words of the novel, it is the voice of the store owner we hear last. This organizational structure reflects a sustained imbalance of agency: where Mary Jennings was physically consumed by her work in *For Gold or Soul?*, the shopgirls in *For Humanities Sake* are threatened with metaphorical consumption by the upper-class characters who dominate reform efforts.

Sheldon's reform-minded, mixed-class labor union functions within but also unsettles familiar discourses of Progressive reform. The class tensions that arise in *For*

Humanity's Sake as both working- and upper-class characters strive towards reform speak to similar anxieties within Progressive reform movements over assigning too much power to the working class. There is a way, then, to read the composite union in *For Humanity's Sake* as a more cooperative and radical solution than the conservative, top-down structure I have been describing. If we consider the labor union a fulfillment of what Florence Kelley once described as middle-class reformers "working with [working-class] people in reciprocal and mutual associations," then this union takes on a more radical quality as a step towards Kelley's socialist goals (Wolfe 382). Speaking in 1887, Kelley urged reformers to join organizations started by members of the working class and work by their side to strengthen the working class (and thus benefit socialism) (Wolfe 382). The union in *For Humanity's Sake* does feature workers and philanthropists working alongside one another, but Sheldon's narrative does not reveal the union in action after the philanthropists join, so it is difficult to conclude where agency truly lies. Sheldon's choice to end the novel with the voices of the wealthy characters suggests a privileging of their ideas and positions. But it is significant that Dorna refuses the marriage proposal of Doctor McCarroll at the novel's conclusion. In doing so, she retains personal sovereignty and sustains a symbolic gap between the classes, which suggests that the upper classes have not fully subsumed the workers.

The Trial of the Holidays in *Miss 318*

Ten years Sheldon's junior, Rupert Hughes was a multifaceted figure in early twentieth-century America, remembered primarily for his work as a music historian, film director, and writer. His writing included news articles, histories, short stories, novels,

plays, and screenplays. In this career, Hughes frequently chose to write about topics relating to work and social welfare, such as his novel about union leader Samuel Gompers (*The Giant Wakes* [1950]) and the noted series of books I will discuss in this chapter about the precarious working conditions of Miss 318 (née Lizzie Mooney) a shopgirl in a department store.

Born in Lancaster, Missouri on January 31, 1872, Rupert Hughes was one of 7 children (4 of whom lived into adulthood). His father, Felix Hughes, earned a successful living as an attorney and as president of the Keokuk & Western Railroad Company, and his mother Jean Summerlin Hughes was an advocate for the arts and humanities with her children (she herself wrote poetry, studied music, and read frequently [Kemmm 4]). The Hughes family achieved success in a variety of areas: Hughes's sister Greta and his brother Felix both became noted singers, his brother Howard made a fortune in the oil business, and Rupert himself earned respect and fame as a journalist, author, playwright, soldier, and film director (amongst other pursuits). He is also the uncle of the famed reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes, whose father was Rupert's brother Howard.

Hughes attended Adelbert College in Cleveland, Indiana where he worked for the college newspaper and the yearbook and earned his bachelor's degree as a member of Phi Beta Kappa in 1882. He earned a Master's degree in literature from Yale University in 1899 and moved to New York City to pursue a writing career. Hughes's first job in New York after graduate school was for the *New York Journal*, one of the New York City newspapers that attentively documented the labor tensions around the turn of the century.

In his biographical study of Rupert Hughes, James Kemm describes Hughes as a supporter of both women's rights and labor reform. One reviewer in 1912 cited Hughes's reputation as a "versatile" writer and "dramatist of the extreme realist left" (Rev. of *The Old Nest*). Hughes depicts the interior of the department store numerous times in his fiction, highlighting it most prominently in the two novels that focus on the shopgirl, *Miss 318* and *Miss 318 and Mr. 37*, both of which follow protagonist Lisette (as she refers to herself) through her travails at work at the counter of a department store. Hughes published a number of other novels involving the consumer and employee aspects of department stores, including *The Real New York* (1904), *Miss 381* (1911), *Miss 318 and Mr. 37* (1912), *Mrs. Budlong's Christmas Presents* (1912), and *The Last Rose of Summer* (1914).

As described in promotional material, *Miss 318* was Hughes' plea "for a safe and sane Christmas" (front matter to *Miss 318 and Mr. 37*). The novel first appeared in the month leading up to the Christmas holiday in the December 3, 1910 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. The opening paragraphs of text, which span the full three columns of the page, are flanked in both the first and the third columns by graphics: first, an advertisement for a corset sale taking place at the novel's fictional Mammoth Department Store and second, an illustration of a timid woman standing in a doorway (see Figure 5). These illustrations foreground both the hype of advertisement and the frailty of the shopgirl, both of which are prominent themes of the novel.

MISS 318

By RUPERT HUGHES
ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

EVERY DAY IS BARGAIN DAY AT
THE MAMMOTH

But there are bargains with bargains. Today, between the hours of 9 a. m. and 4 p. m., we shall sell 1000 corsets—only 1000 corsets, mind you! But they are the

Famous C. Q. D. Corsets

Self-reinforcing, first aid to the corsetmaker; the last word in elegance for the perfect or for the suggestive figure. Medium and high bust; straight hip effects; four bone supports. You have always paid \$3.25 for C. Q. D.'s. For seven hours you may have one of the 1000 masterpieces of the corsetmaker's art for

\$1.97

You will not believe it unless you see it.
You will not see it unless you come early.

been founded chiefly on her experience with it as it surged past or stagnated around her counter. She had read something about saintly mothers, gentle-souled wives and soft-spoken sweethearts in the engaging romances of Miss Laura Jean Libbey and Gessoway; but she had decided that, if women of good manners and amiable motives really exist outside of books, they had never chanced to deal with her.

These women could be womanly elsewhere; it was the headlong passion for exquisite things meeting within the narrow walls of financial limitation that made a Niagara of every bargain-rush. Miss Mooney was not far-sighted enough to realize and forgive this any more than her customers were magnanimous enough to blame her peevishness on her fatigue, or her afflictions of elegance on a pathetic desire to improve the lowly shabbiness of her origin. She was a self-made lady.

Women, as Miss Mooney knew them in dull hours or unfrequented aisles, were creatures who dawdled about asking odd questions, seeking impossible combinations, haggling like misers, buying neither wisely nor well, and mingling odious vanity with heartless rapacity.

Women, as Miss Mooney knew them in action, were horrible to contemplate. The bare announcement in the newspapers of a reduction of a few pennies in the usual price of any article was sufficient to bring down all the female in New York in one rutilant flood, as if a dam had burst. Every counter became a small Johnstown, assailed with frenzied greed, shocking manners and raucous, snarling voices.

Miss Mooney's acquaintances with men was limited. Only occasionally a well-dressed male wandered into the Mammoth, usually in tow of some woman who bullied him and nuzzled him pitifully. Such men as came along went so anxiously to their destinations and knew so exactly what they wanted, and hastened away so precipitately, that they were merely tantalizing.

Miss Mooney, knowing little of the male world, believed that ideal men existed, that they were numerous in the great realm outside the Mammoth. She longed for experience. She felt that she could not die without knowing, loving and being loved by somebody who was somebody—a lawyer, for instance, or a painter, a duke, or an actor. But she could devise no way of meeting any of these, and she was so distrustful of night that she hardly cared.

Meanwhile, to keep in practice, she encouraged the attentions of such men as swam within her ken during the day. She was gracious to the floorwalkers; she was chatty with the hourly lads in the hardware department or the polished youth in the haberdashery. Her manner with these was as different from her manner with her own sex as honey is different from quinine.

She particularly cultivated one of the floorwalkers, Mr. Percival Sterling, who boarded on her street. He was rather afraid of her, and the jealous minxes along the other

counters said that she had him hypnotized. But his nerves were usually so shattered after a day's bustling among the shoppers that he was not easy to rattle even in an evening. Still, Miss Mooney had hopes of him. Better a floorwalker in hand than two dukes in a book.

It was marvelous to note the change that came over her when Mr. Sterling sauntered past the counter where she stood. It was:

"Nice morning this morning, Mr. Sterling!" or "Was you to the Harmony Club last night? I would 'a' went, only 'm' sister Gotrood had to go and get attacked with lumbago," or "How's your cough this mornin', Percival?"

Everybody else, including all the floorwalkers, dreaded her sharp tongue and her rustic insolence. She would have been discharged years before, her sobriety quite



Figure 5: First installment of *Miss 318* in the *Saturday Evening Post*, December 3, 1910



Figure 6: Cover of *Miss 318*, published by Fleming H. Revell Company in 1911

Readers of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1910 would likely be a more middle-class group than the producing classes Denning characterizes as the dime novel audience. The *Saturday Evening Post* was a weekly news and story paper that circulated widely among middle-class families in the early 1900s. The *Post*'s editor from 1899-1937, George Lorimer, was committed to publishing for the "average American" and wanted the *Post* to celebrate values such as civic responsibility, social mobility, and hard work (Cohn 3, 10). By the time *Miss 318* appeared, the *Post* had expanded its readership beyond a male audience and was advertising to women as well (Cohn 65). For the *Post*'s readers, the "employees side of department store life" (Rev. of *Miss 318 and Mr. 37 Book Review Digest*) is not the everyday but instead a form of voyeurism. *Miss 318* was published as a novel in 1911 by Fleming H. Revell Company, a publishing company known for promoting Christian values (see Figure 6). Fleming H. Revell Company, which started in 1870, made its name publishing evangelical Christian literature but also published work for a wider audience, including "Sunday school workers, musicians, and others active in church work" as well as "women, youth, and children" provided the works they published possessed a "highly moral flavour" ("The History of Fleming"). The subtle vein of Christian morality, featured less prominently than in *For Gold or Soul?*, appeals to Revell's audience, who would be more likely to identify with shoppers than with shopgirls in the novel. The gap between Hughes's working-class characters and the narrator/reader is reinforced by the narrator's at-times diminishing treatment of Lisette's goals for upward mobility. In this section, I will explore the way the multiple valences of class evident in this book simultaneously urge consumers to think more

considerately about the working-class shopgirls while maintaining a separation between the life of the shopgirl and the life of a middle-class American, which is reinforced by Hughes's top-down vision for consumer-led reforms.

Challenging the stability of identity and class identification, the novel presents a protagonist of many names, each one indicative of her perceived social status. The title of the novel and the managers at the Mammoth Department Store refer to Hughes's protagonist as "Miss 318," her employee number at the store. Referring to shopgirls with numerical names was common in other shopgirl novels around this time, from Sheldon's *For Gold or Soul* (Faith Marvin is Number 411 and Miss Jennings is Number 89) to the Williamsons' *The Shop Girl* (Winnie Childs is No. 2884), and it was standard policy in stores to systematize their employees under this naming technique.⁴⁴ Longtime customers of the store speak of her in similarly dehumanized terms that identify her by her attitude at the counter, referring to her as "that vinegar-cruet" (12).⁴⁵

We learn in the first chapter of the novel that Miss 318's given name is Lizzie Mooney but that Lizzie prefers to be identified as "Lisette Mooney" and "if you wished to please her you would call her last name 'Moo-nay'—with the stress on the 'nay'" (13).

⁴⁴ We can also see this type of dehumanizing number system in place in prisons, as the famous Jean Valjean, #24601, in *Les Misérables*, demonstrates. Its focus on injustices facing the working class gave *Les Misérables* special meaning for American workers in the early 1900s. The March 1912 edition of *Life and Labor*, the monthly publication of the National Women's Trade Union League, includes the reprint of a passage from *Les Misérables* wherein Jean Valjean rescues Fantine from the streets after she has been unjustly fired from her position at work. *Life and Labor* explains that they featured this passage "because it shows the author's sympathy for the wrongs of women, his perception of the economic injustice back of these wrongs, and his indignation at the merciless enforcement of the laws [that] crush the helpless and the desperate" (Peck 82). This explanation could equally apply to the themes behind either of Sheldon's and even Hughes's novels on life in the department store.

⁴⁵ I will cite the pagination of the 1911 Fleming H. Revell edition.

Electing an appellation more fitting of a French aristocrat, Lisette self-styles her name to align with her own ideals. Hughes's narrator refuses such indulgences of fantasy and refers to her throughout the novel as "Miss Mooney." Hughes thus situates his protagonist firmly within America's working class, a move further underscored when he describes her as a reader of "the engaging romances of Miss Laura Jean Libbey and Company" (13). With this reference, Hughes ties Lisette to the dime-novel readers who formed Sheldon's audience a decade earlier.⁴⁶ Hughes associates the position of the shopgirl—and, more specifically, her social aspirations—with Laura Jean Libbey in other work as well; in *The Real New York*, he writes:

The New York shopgirl is perhaps distinguished above her fellows in other places by her contempt for shoppers. She has had a Laura Jean Libbeyral education, and she knows that all haughty shopgirls marry millionaires. (32)

The "Laura Jean Libbeyral education" Hughes attributes to shopgirls accounts for their class pretensions to progress, like many of their dime novel counterparts, beyond the position of shopgirl into the leisure classes. Hughes depicts Lisette with these same aspirations, from the fancifying of her own name to her efforts to impress the "aristocratic floor-walker" (44) who joins her family at Thanksgiving dinner.

Hughes utilizes a scene of Thanksgiving dinner, which occurs early in the novel, to demonstrate Lisette's aristocratic pretensions and draws a clear line from

⁴⁶ Laura Jean Libbey was a famous dime novel author who was most noted for her novels about working-class heroines who met with fabulous fortunes. See Joyce Peterson's "Working Girls and Millionaires: The Melodramatic Romances of Laura Jean Libbey" for more on Libbey's work. One of Libbey's novels, *Lotta, the Cloak Model*, is included in the appendix to this dissertation.

her position at the department store to her behavior at home. Much like O. Henry's shopgirl Nancy, who has learned from her high-class customers at the department store about aristocratic habits, style, and mannerisms, Lisette studies the customers around her and absorbs as much information as she can about a more refined way of living. This education comes to her possibly through the dime novel stories Hughes credits to her interests but also through her position in the multi-class world of the department store. The rest of her family, who hold working-class positions in other production-driven sources of employment, have internalized none of the pretensions Lisette pleads with them to display. In preparation for their Thanksgiving dinner, Lisette gives her family "lessons in table deportment" (45) that include instructions on proper attire (a coat and collar for her father; sleeves rolled down for her mother) and utensil use (forks, not knives, should deliver food to the mouth).

Hughes treats Lisette's class pretensions with levity and skepticism; it is clear that he has no plans to pair her with a wealthy prince charming. In keeping with this dismissive attitude, Hughes remarks upon the hopelessness of her lessons—for it is "technical instruction [her family] could neither understand nor perform" (46). Lisette's class pretensions both separate her from her family (who maintain disinterest in changing their mannerisms) and underscore her more fundamental likeness to them (despite her efforts, her airs remain unconvincing). Hughes's use of dialect in Lisette's speech patterns reinforces a gap between Lizzie and the class to which she aspires. Her very plea for graceful manners

comes out in noticeable slang: “Stick to the fork, maw—stick to the fork, for Gawsay—just this once” (46).

Miss 318 is, overall, less interested in class transformation than it is in illuminating the class position of the workers who fuel the Christmas-time consumer frenzy. A brief summary of the novel illustrates its emphasis on the positions of laborers. The novel begins at Thanksgiving and documents the Christmas season buildup for Lisette and her friends working at the Mammoth Department Store who look for love while battling the demands of holiday labor. Lisette has her sights on Mr. Percival Sterling, the floor-walker at the store whom she has invited to Thanksgiving dinner. At the dinner, Lisette introduces Mr. Sterling to her friend and neighbor Myrtle Crilley, whose family is on the brink of poverty, and Mr. Sterling offers the entire Crilley family jobs at the store. Working at the department store proves to be arduous labor for Myrtle, but Lisette guides her through the job, assisting Myrtle’s young siblings as well. Despite Lisette’s hopes of succeeding with him, Myrtle and Mr. Percival Sterling eventually become engaged. Sterling notes that a large part of Myrtle’s appeal is that she, unlike the strong and independent Lisette, appears to need a rescuer, and he, after all, is the story’s appointed knight in shining armor. Lisette is left alone and exhausted from the Christmas shopping rush. Ironically, Myrtle and Sterling give Lisette a Christmas gift to thank her for introducing them, even though Lisette wants little to do with material gifts at Christmas after slaving away to provide them to others. Her response to the gift is: “A Christmas present!—the noive of them!” (124). Hughes seems equally disinterested in the

gift and never even describes it for readers, de-emphasizing the commodities of Christmas in favor of the humanity laboring to produce them.

Hughes vividly describes the physical and emotional demands of labor facing Lisette, Myrtle, and the rest of the workers at The Mammoth. Much like the shopgirls Sheldon described a decade earlier, Hughes's characters experience bodily pain, physical exhaustion, and emotional discouragement. The work leaves them with "goaded muscles and harrowed spirits," and by the end of the day they are all "footsore, heartsore, back-sore, nerve-sore" (80). Myrtle, new to the hard labor of the shopgirl, becomes quickly exhausted by the work demanded of her. When a prostrated Myrtle finally faints in a chapter Hughes titles "Fag and Fret," Hughes renders her loss of consciousness in language dangerously evocative of death: she "simply ceased to be alive and swooned to the floor" (88). By the time Christmas arrives, even the veteran worker Lisette faces exhaustion. Waking up on Christmas Eve morning, Lisette "tore her protesting frame from the bed, groped to her wash-stand and beat her hot eyes with a cold wet rag till she had chocked them open" (103) before waking the rest of her family. Lisette and her sisters travel to work with hearts "squeezed so dry of cheer" and feet "squeezed so full of pain" (105). Illustrations in the book underscore the weariness afflicting the shopgirl, depicting the workers propping themselves against a railing by their elbows as they gaze wearily upon a thick crowd of shoppers below (see Figure 7). By the end of the Christmas rush, Lisette "limp[s]" (124) to her apartment and lays in bed "too tired...to wish for anything but what was about to be hers" (125). This most precious gift for which Lisette wishes is not a material item but the brief physical comfort of rest. As she prays in

a “whole-souled sigh”: “Thank God for the takin’ off of shoes! Thank God for sleep!” (125). The extreme exhaustion Hughes captures in this scene and the desperate need for relief facing his protagonist in this moment form a centerpiece of the novel for Hughes, who ends the penultimate chapter with these lines and personally autographed at least one copy of the book with Lisette’s prayer.⁴⁷



Figure 7: Illustration from *Miss 318*, depicting Lisette and a coworker staring down at Christmas shoppers

⁴⁷ See first edition (Fleming H. Revell 1911) in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, in which Hughes has inscribed the quote “Thank God for the takin’ off of shoes! Thank God for sleep!”

In conjunction with his depictions of the worker in pain, Hughes draws attention to the inadequacy of laws in place to address workplace injustice, particularly concerning child labor and working hours. Lisette herself has worked at the store since the age of nine, “for she dated back of the most recent child-labour laws” (42). However, those laws are not effective in deterring child labor, for though the youngest Crilley child is too young to legally work at the store, her mother simply states that she is fourteen, and she gains employment as a cash girl. The laws are also insufficiently written to protect children from long hours at the holiday season. As Hughes’s narrator sarcastically explains, “a kind provision of the New York child-labour law fortunately suspends the edict against night work from December 18th to December 24th...otherwise the younger children of the poor would be denied participation in the Christmas privileges of night work and overtime” (96). This burdensome overtime work is, in the eyes of the novel, the fault of inconsiderate consumers “who forget to shop till the last few days” and do not want “their gifts delayed in transit” (96).

Lisette’s resentment of Christmas is well-documented in the history of labor around the holidays. The Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago released a study of “The Department Store Girl” in 1911 that outlines conditions similar to those Hughes describes. Compiled from interviews with 200 shopgirls, the report describes 13-hour workdays for shopgirls during the two weeks leading up to Christmas. The report quotes shopgirls who, finally returning to their homes at 11:00 pm on Christmas Eve after working all day, sank to the floor of the streetcar, telling the conductor that they were “too dead to stand another minute” (Bowen). Ultimately, the report chastises both the

profit-driven stores and the over-enthusiastic shoppers for the hardships experienced by “thousands of employes [sic], whose weary feet and aching backs are the result of the mad rush to shop on the part of thousands of Christian people who are thus seeking to express the kindness and goodwill which our Christmas commemorates!” (Bowen). This gesture towards the hypocrisy brought on by a Christian holiday mirrors themes in Hughes’s *Miss 318* and even echoes complaints in *For Gold or Soul* about the behavior of self-identified Christian capitalists propagating harmful labor practices year-round.

There was an atmosphere of consumer morality in the early twentieth century that rallied around the Christmas shopping season in the effort to make changes to alleviate the shopgirl’s painful life. The most noted of these was led by the National Consumers’ League (NCL), which began campaigning for early Christmas shopping as early as 1906. Consumers’ League campaigns continued for over a decade in the form of magazine and newspaper campaigns, the personal distribution of flyers, and even in advertisements taken out by individual department stores who cooperated with the leagues (Andrews 28). Political cartoons published in newspapers across America in December of 1911 and 1912, the years following *Miss 318*’s publication, featured the shopgirl at the heart of a “Shop Early” campaign. Cartoons depict a haggard shopgirl sunk to her knees in the middle of a pile of wrapped parcels (see Figure 8), a pensive shopgirl facing a Christmas bugaboo which alleviates her concern when he spreads the message “SHOP EARLY” (see Figure 9), and a shopgirl with marks of distress on her face buckling under the array of goods in her arms and backing away from a massive crowd of shoppers (see Figure 10). In 1912, *The Survey* magazine, a publication of the Charity Organization Society of



Figure 8: "The Eleventh Hour Rush," *The Survey*, December 23, 1911

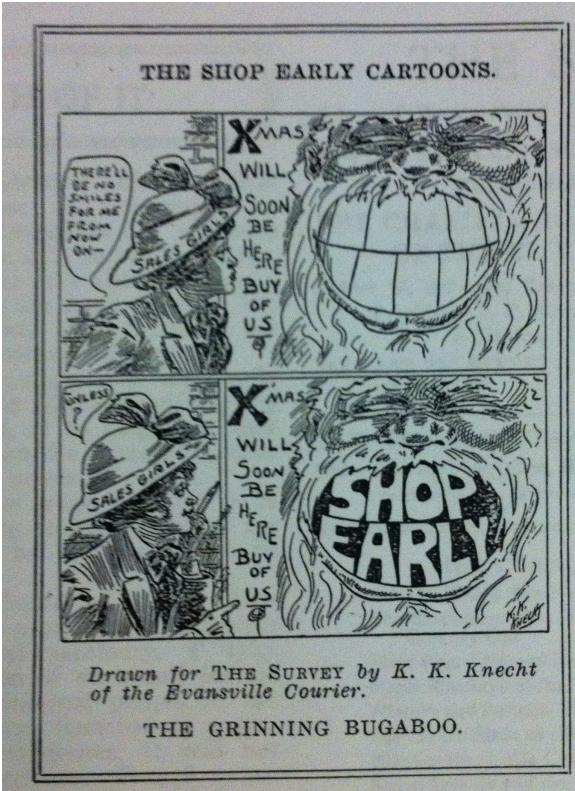


Figure 9: "The Grinning Bugaboo," *The Survey*, December 11, 1911



Figure 10: Portion of a political cartoon from *The Toledo Blade*, reprinted in *The Survey*, December 1911

New York City, announced that the “shop-early campaign is in full swing” (ad in December 7, 1912 magazine on page 276). The full-page advertisement, which focuses on the audience of the consumer, tells holiday shoppers that “your biggest gift of the holidays to the workers behind the counters” will be shopping early. This campaign,

featured in *The Survey* as a combined product of the *Survey*'s staff and the NCL, appeals to "Consumers' leagues, women's clubs, department stores, labor unions, newspapers, street-car companies, poets, cartoonists, salespeople and shoppers" to "all play a part in this philanthropic hue and cry of the holidays." The work Hughes achieves in *Miss 318* is a part of this larger spectrum of concern for the shopgirl, even if despite these wider efforts, a *New York Herald Tribune* writer later claimed that "Miss 318 probably did more to bring about early Christmas shopping than any other one thing" (quoted in Kemm 54).

Offering a corrective to the hardships facing the shopgirl, Hughes's ostensible goal with the publication of *Miss 318* (aside, of course, from entertainment and profit) is to use these depictions of exhaustion to encourage readers, who are also consumers, to alleviate the burden on the shopgirls by shopping early for their gifts and thus eliminating the exhausting Christmas rush.⁴⁸ In his forward to the 1911 Revell edition of *Miss 318*, Hughes describes the shopgirls that appear in his novel as "victims" (6), suggesting that something is wrong with the current, predatory state of consumer culture. Hughes claims that he is delivering a moral "truth" (5) to his readers in this novel, but he distances himself from the details of what constitutes that "truth." Hughes's ambiguity here suggests a purposeful avoidance of overt critique. He names Christmas as the holiday that

⁴⁸ In a reflection on her brother-in-law's work, Ruby H. Hughes remembers *Miss 318* as an example of a novel Hughes wrote "for avowedly social purposes" (28). She even claims—though this is difficult to quantify or ascertain—that *Miss 318* was responsible for educating an uninformed public "which had little realized the strain under which shop girls worked" and that the book itself "led to corrective action by owners and managers throughout the country" (28). Given the work of the NCL in the years leading up to the novel's publication, this claim of complete consumer ignorance before reading *Miss 318* seems a bit overreaching, but it does suggest that at least an undertone of his purpose in writing the novel was in consideration of real social change for actual living shopgirls thanks in part to his fictional Lisette Mooney.

presents the stated problems with consumer culture and labor, though as the subtitle “A Story In Season and Out of Season” states, the story transcends the single holiday, illustrating problems that persist in and out of the Christmas season. Furthermore, he is careful in his forward to point out that his novel “is in no sense at all a protest” (6) against Christmas (and certainly not, we understand, a protest against capitalism). Instead, he merely issues a “plea for Christmas *as it ought to be*” (6, emphasis mine). This plea gestures towards the possibility of a more perfect state of consumer culture but remains vague about the details of that possibility. Hughes’s multiple tiers of commentary were not lost on readers. A reviewer for *The Independent* found “[h]alf a dozen other morals [that] may be extracted from it beside the warning against late Christmas shopping” (705). Hughes does not directly say whether he is merely calling for more labor reform or incubating more utopian thoughts, but his novel suggests that there is a more extreme and insidious injustice in the labor of the shopgirl than the mere rush of holiday shoppers.

Hughes presents more pointed arguments against consumer culture through the characters of the Mooney family. He characterizes Lisette’s brother Pat, who is included in the chain of Christmas labor through his job as a messenger boy, as a “promising social disruptionist” (48). Pat contrasts his own family’s labor struggles against the ease of a wealthy lifestyle. He thus objects to giving thanks at Thanksgiving, complaining that “We’re all woikin’ like a gang of convicks whilst dem rich guys is swellin’ round in ottermobiles an’ eatin’ deir toikeys t’ree times a day” (48). This objection surpasses the consumer-driven problem of a holiday shopping rush and targets instead the class

inequality inherent in capitalism. Pat's complaint opens up a broader realm of critique than mere work hour adjustment, and his voice at the Thanksgiving table calls into question the class structure that allows for such a vast divide. Lisette later echoes his concern for income inequality when she reflects on the pleasures of Christmas: "But what about the children that wraps up the toys and don't get any? And the messenger kids and the swarms of other wore-out children that has to deliver the toys?" (66-67). Lisette is no doubt thinking of hers and Myrtle's family as well as the many other working-class children who seem systematically denied the type of holidays more privileged youths enjoy.

Lisette's own views on labor include both fundamental challenges to inequalities bred by capitalism and specific calls for reforms that would ease (if not restructure) the situation of many workers. In this reformist vein, she suggests that people simply shop less around Christmas time and more at other points in the year to provide more steady, less frenzied employment for the working class: "If all this time and money and work was spent on something useful, and spread over the year, it would give thousands of poor dubs jobs all the time, instead of grindin' 'em to death for three weeks in the name of religion" (70-71). Here her wish aligns with Hughes's forward in its appeal to consumers to help the plight of the shopgirl by changing their behavior. His picture of a more responsible consumption falls squarely in line with the reform goals of the National Consumers' League. Lisette also pushes her ideas of consumer reform to more extensive fantasies. Calling for more extreme legislation, she exclaims, "Christmas is a crime. They

otta be a lor against it” (71). Though said in jest, her desire speaks to the desperation and hopelessness Lisette feels by the end of the novel.

The competing voices in the novel—from Pat’s critique of capitalism to the narrator’s simultaneously protective and dismissive tone towards the working-class characters—capture the diverse responses to capitalist reform in the early 1900s. Even within the NCL there were debates over the desired extent and impacts of reform. Florence Kelley, for example, was a key member of the NCL who believed strongly in the Consumers’ League’s efforts to help middle-class women shop more ethically. The NCL achieved this goal through campaigns such as the White List, which listed all department stores using labor practices approved by the NCL. Even though she was ostensibly supporting a more humane form of capitalism in advocating the White List, Kelley was a self-avowed socialist who had studied in Europe and was a foremost translator of Engels (Wolfe 381). Other members of the NCL pushed against Kelly’s socialist views, arguing instead that the purpose of the Consumers’ League was to promote a more fair system of capitalism not to dismantle capitalism altogether (Wolfe 382). It is possible that Florence Kelley herself approved of *Miss 318*’s social lessons: a review of the novel published in *The Survey* quotes a “Mrs. Kelley” saying, “I wish that a million copies of this lively book might be given as Christmas presents this year.”

Reviews of *Miss 318* were widely positive. The American Library Association (A.L.A.) recommended it as a capsule component of burgeoning libraries. The *New York Times* review stresses the realism Hughes achieves with his writing, asserting that his knowledge of the shopgirl is “so intimate” that “[i]t would seem that Mr. Rupert Hughes

and the girl behind the counter some time or some place must have met” (762). Whether or not Hughes did directly speak with shopgirls, he did gather information for Lisette’s story from the consumers’ leagues that promoted the shop early campaigns in the early 1900s. Hughes recalls “ask[ing] the Consumers League for details as to hours, wages, and the facts” in his depiction of Lisette and her co-workers, privileging “accuracy and artistry” as foremost pinnacles of achievement in writing (Gordon 50). Other reviews of the novel site its educational effect in both informing the public about the shopgirl’s struggles and impressing upon them the extremity of those struggles. Reviewers from 1911 found *Miss 318* “illuminating where it is not startling” (*New York Times*) and “revealing” as a “cross section of the hard life of department store girls” (*Book Review Digest* 1911). They uniformly agreed that Hughes’s story of the shopgirl’s life formed “a powerful plea” (*ALA* 1911), created an “impressive” picture (*Survey* 1911), and effectively “compel[led] sympathy” from readers (*New York Times*). Hughes also earned high praise from a shopgirl, who said “she wished she could put a copy of it in every parcel” (Gordon 50).

The Impending Catastrophe of *Miss 318 and Mr. 37*

If *Miss 318* undertook advocacy work to relieve the shopgirl of physical exhaustion, its sequel, *Miss 318 and Mr. 37*, ventures into an even higher-stakes world of workplace peril. A heavily illustrated *Miss 318 and Mr. 37* appeared on the front page of the *Saturday Evening Post* on July 20, 1911 (see Figure 11) and concluded in the following issue, July 27, 1911. Fleming H. Revell soon published *Miss 318 and Mr. 37* as a novel in 1912. The sequel offers a more fulfilling romantic narrative for Lisette; more

importantly, Hughes heightens his explorations of capitalist injustice using conversations about sweatshop production and the specter of all-consuming fire to illuminate the rampant labor exploitation plaguing the department store beyond the scope of the Christmas rush. Written in the painful wake of the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire, *Miss 318 and Mr. 37* depicts what many perceived to be very real dangers threatening the working class.

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MISS 318 AND MR. 37

By Rupert Hughes
ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR WILLIAM BROWN

THE name she called herself—in the back of that head of hers, with its strange derangement of hair outside and the stranger dress inside—was Madamelle Liette Monet. The name her parents called her—in the back of the tenement, with the week's wash outside and the large family inside—was Lizzie Mooney. But she was called 318 in the Mammoth Department Store. The days were still short and this morning was yet dark, but Miss 318 was already at her post—and so were the four thousand other employees on the Mammoth payroll. And yet the enormous haze seemed filled with solitude. The scattered clerks only emphasized the vacancy. Hundreds of salaried men and salaried women were on hand, but there were no buy-men or purchase-women. The big doors were still closed against the advance-guard of the morning army mustered by the hangin' bells and already falling in line on the walk outside, pondering the lavishly displayed window-dressers had compiled during the night.

Against the onslaught of these Amazons, everybody in the Mammoth was making ready, from buyers' assistants and transfer men to packers, binboys and drivers—even the students in the boiler room.

Liette Monet's somewhat youthful hands were condensing the stock that had been dumped on her counter. They fluttered about the chaos of silver things, darning here and there like humming-birds among flowers. She was making her warm as alluring as possible and as "pret-a-belle"; for, once the enemy arrived, the action must be brisk.

Just back of her and a little above her, Constance, the charge girl, sat aloft in a tiny perogee. She also was at work like a bored chatelaine getting her ammunition handy. Soon she would be pined with money and merchandise from all directions, and she must load money and sales-slips into cartridges, shoot them at the distant cashier, make up the bundles, receive back cartridges of change and pass them down below.

Troops fluttered as fast as fingers as that hour, for each girl was her own newspaper. Constance had spent her evening at home with her parents—to her great regret. There were no headlines in her past yet a while. She must live on borrowed excitement—for she was still young. She turned to Liette for gossip:

"Was you goin' to a show last night, Liette, when I seen you pass our window all fixed up so elegant?"

"Uh-huh!" came the answer daintily through a mouthful of pins.

"Was't val or the movies?"

The pins came out.

"Movin' pictures! Me? I was took to a genuine theater."

"Ah, go on!"

"I hope to die!"

"Who was the dab you was with?"

"Me brother."

"Oh—pardon me!"

"You're entirely welcome. When we passed you he asked me who was the rag I spoke to."

"Is that so?"

There was silence for a while. Constance was properly insulted at being referred to as a "rag," and she strove to devise some appropriate retort; but all her inspirations led to the cutting edge, so she substituted a tone of patronage from behind a jaw:

"Could you see good from the nigger-Heaven?"

Liette shrugged off the insult.

"Nigger-Heaven! We was downstairs with the highboys."

"Ah, go on!"

"Hope to —"

"Since when's your brother had a job?"

"He ain't."

"Who said he bought? Me other brother's a scene pusher—just joined the union; so we went in on velvet, as guests of the management." Liette said this as she had just been shooting the chutes with the king.

"Do you or don't you?"—or whataya think?"

Liette was pleased to be proved above prude. She smiled.

"Anybody can get compe to that show, Constance. Me brother says he spends more time every day paperin' the house than he does shootin' the fates at night."

"Paperin' the house every day! Ah, go on! What'd they want put fresh wall paper on every day for?"

"You ain't wise to the theatrical language, Constance. That ain't wall paper—it's seat paper. It means fillin' the unsoled chairs with deadheads."

Constance shook her head meekly over the wonders of human ingenuity and human privilege.

"I was astin' you whether you thought your brother could slip me a pair of passes."

"Take it from me, Constance, you don't want 'em. Of all the punk shows that was ever gave, that one is the worst!"

"I'd love any show I could get a pass to. I've always wanted to know what compe feel like."

"Believe me, Constance —"

Constance would not be denied however.

"It couldn't be any worse than settin' round home every evenin' und hearin' Mer and Per jor ever the dollar he held out on her when he got his pay last week, or that two dollars she spent on a spring hat two years ago. See if you can't pull down a couple compe—won't you?"

Liette yielded amiably.

"Sure I will, Constance, if it's as bad as that. They'll be glad to have you. You'll fill a nest as full as anybody. And say, Constance, whataya think? I had a flirtation with the fireman."

"The fireman? Was he a fire?"

Liette gasped at such ignorance.

"Constance, you're positively illitrat! There's always a fireman on the job at theytimes."

"What's a fireman doin' without a fire?"

"That's the idea. He's just standin' round to nab it in the bud and keep the cattle from stamponin' it if they sniff a possible signpost."

"Is that so? Say, he must have a swell job—seem' a show every night and gettin' paid for it!"

"Well, that depends on the show. Seem' the same show about seven times in consecution—and that show of all shows!—must get on his knives sumpum awful. I guess he gets his pay all right, all right. But him and I had a little talk. It set me to thinkin'. This old buildin' of ours is nothin' but a package of invitations to a fire. Look at the blaze that made a fiery foxtrot out of the Equitable fireproof palace! It starts in the basement from a cigarette or sumpum, and they think they've got it out; and all the while old Mr. Fire is mawkkin' up the elevator shaft and gettin' busy on the seventh floor."

"Wait, if the place did start we got fire-drills—ain't we?"

"And who's drillin' the mels that rotate round here all day? Do you suppose the United States army could stop those hang-gain buzzards once they broke loose?"

"Well, in any way, look at the automatic sprinklers we got ever', where on the ceiling!"

"Automatic sprinklers! Don't you suppose they'd start a panic all by themselves? You know any woman would

Figure 11: First installment of *Miss 318 and Mr. 37* in the *Saturday Evening Post*, July 20, 1912

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The threat of fire hangs over readers before they even open the book. Published in hardback covers bound in red cloth and featuring an illustration of a fire hose on the cover, the material binding of the novel situates the reader in the world of fire fighting. Given the extensive public reactions in New York City after the Triangle fire in March 25, 1911, we can assume that the idea of a workplace fire was not far from early-twentieth-century readers' minds. Hughes titles the opening chapter of the book "The Red Menace," assuring readers that the idea of fire is ever-present and could manifest at any time. Hughes depicts the Mammoth department store, where Lisette still works, as a menacing space even without the threat of fire. Shoppers are "the enemy" (12), the workers handle their supplies like "ammunition" (12), and cash girls load money as a soldier loads a gun before awaiting the "shrapnel of change" (13).⁴⁹ On top of these war metaphors, Hughes layers the added danger of fire. Lisette, who met and "had a floitation with" a fireman on a visit to the theater the previous night (16), spends the morning talking about the possibility of fire in her workplace. Thinking back to her conversation with Mr. 37, as he is called at work, Lisette warns her friend that their department store is "a fire-trap" (19). Mr. 37 has cautioned her that the store where she works is "just waitin' like a fireplace all ready for the foist match to start it...every fireman knows the Mammoth. It's the nightmare of the whole force" (35). But before Hughes unravels the fire plot to its completion, he explores other failings of capitalism the department store cultivates.

Similarly to his work in *Miss 318*, which is ostensibly about thoughtful Christmas

⁴⁹ I will cite the pagination of the 1912 Fleming H. Revell edition.

shopping but raises deeper questions about the structure of capitalism, Hughes layers a deeper level of critique over his social goal of fire-safety awareness. While the Mammoth department store is still up and running business as usual, Hughes depicts an extended transaction at Miss 318's counter which provides insight into the perspective of the consumer.

Like the gaping mob that watches Lily Bart and her circle from the society columns, Lisette takes mental note of the high society by reading the paper, so when the wealthy socialite Mrs. Lancaster Verden and her daughter Priscilla enter the store, Lisette spots "her favorite heroines" immediately (46). She is so nervous to meet them that Hughes writes, "[i]t was like being presented at Court" (44-5). Lisette quickly engages the mother and daughter, who have come to buy a wedding gift for one of the family maids, in conversation about the goods. As Priscilla Verden notices the low cost of the goods, her mother provides some insights into the workings of capitalism and its frustrating contradictions:

"I'm afraid, Priss, that they're made by poor women who *work their fingers to the bone* day and night for a pittance...it's work like that that makes bargains like these."

Priscilla let the glistening fabric drop *as if she could feel in it the ache of weary fingers*:

"It sort of seems a crime to buy them, doesn't it, and encourage such cruel prices?"

The mother shook her head: "Still if nobody buys them, the poor souls won't get anything at all."

"That's so."

For a long moment the two women pondered *this ancient riddle in political economy*, while Lisette, who knew so much of poverty from the inside, stared at them with a sort of fascinated affection. (49, emphasis mine)

This touching and potentially transformative attention to production—such careful attention to production, in fact, that Priscilla can feel the throb of the seamstress’s fingers in her own hands when she touches the fabric—quickly fades when the Verdens, who need a gift for their maid, go forward with the purchase. And in fact, not only do they purchase one petticoat for their maid, but the guilt they feel in purchasing these products overwhelms them so much that, to compensate for that guilt, they “sought relaxation in the glorious tonic of extravagance. They bought petticoats enough to have smothered their Lucienne” (50). When Lisette complements their charitable work in the city, Mrs. Verden thanks her by purchasing even more merchandise at her counter. The consumer guilt the Verdens try to alleviate achieves only short-term benefits for Lisette, whose commissions are thriving that day—but as Hughes will soon reveal, commissions pale in comparison to preserving one’s life.

After the Verdens leave, the novel returns quickly to the theme of fire. Lisette’s fire laddie enters the department store and proposes marriage across her counter while buying her an engagement gift from her (Lisette, like the Verdens’ maid, receives a petticoat in celebration of matrimony). Mr. 37, unlike Percival Sterling, is “a real hero,” more so even than “the gorgeous dappernesses that played at heroes in novels” (83). It is precisely his job, which is a working-class position, that invests him with such value, because as Hughes writes, the fireman is “the poor folk’s demigod” (37). Mr. 37 works for a living, and as “[h]eroism was his job[, d]anger was his raw material” (83). When he finally proposes to Lisette, their engagement “packed her heart with comfort” (83). What would be a working-class-Cinderella ending in some narratives is buried in the middle of

this novel, as the title characters become engaged in chapter 11 (of 20 total chapters) before the narrative catapults towards more talk about fires. Even in the midst of Lisette's and Mr. 37's engagement, he warns her again that "[t]his store is one of the worst in New York" (71) and contemplates recent fire-related tragedies while listing steps he believes should be taken towards reform.

In addition to the firefighting Mr. 37, Hughes integrates a fictional survivor from the Triangle factory fire into his narrative.⁵⁰ The woman, Rosa Koplik, who appears traumatized and frail when she overhears Lisette discussing the possibility of fire, seems a "mysterious veteran of such historic adventure" (25) to her new coworkers. Eventually, Rosa tells them her story in dialect-laden English. She describes the fire occurring late on a Saturday, just as she and her sister were about to head home from work. Rosa relates the panic that subsumed the workroom as soon as someone yelled "Fire!": "averybody is jomp up and run—all ways at the same time. And soch a screaminck and soch a tairrible hurry to get out away...There is chairs spilled and machines is turn over and ronnink here and ronnink there" (86-87). Rosa describes the fire streaming up the ceiling and jumping to the machines and chairs in the workroom before she sees her sister's hair catch fire and the frightened girl jump out the window to her death. Rosa witnesses many other girls jumping out of windows, landing "like dolls when they fall to a floor" (87), but she

⁵⁰ The relationship between shopgirls at work in the city's great department stores and the tragic events of the Triangle Factory is stronger than simply Hughes's fictional link. Companies such as and including the Triangle Waist Company itself supplied department stores with their products. The offices of the Triangle Waist Company had a dedicated showroom for department store buyers on the tenth floor (Von Drehle 128), and the business practices of factories and department stores often relied upon one another. In reform efforts, supporters of shopgirl's rights, such as the NCL, also targeted the rights of factory workers (Wolfe 385).

claims not to have had the courage to jump herself. She does, however, toss her wallet out the window in hopes that her family could use the money inside if she did not escape. Rosa remembers a door the girls were frantically pulling to escape the fire but which refused to open. Her narrative ends when she describes finding herself on the building's roof where "young men's there with latter" saved her (88). The traumatic memory of the fire leaves Rosa "muttering with such shivering and twitching of shoulders and hands" (88) that Lisette regrets having roused her to speak of it.

Rosa Koplik's story of the fire matches in close detail to the events of the real fire, which broke out in the Triangle factory at the end of the workday on Saturday, March 25, 1911.⁵¹ Most of the women working at the Triangle shirtwaist company were young immigrants, many between the ages of sixteen and nineteen and had come to America from Russia, Italy, or Austria (Benin 124). In total, one hundred and forty six workers (most of whom were women) lost their lives in the fire.

⁵¹ The fire started when a match or cigarette butt set afire a bucket of scraps on the eighth floor of the Asch Building around 4:40p.m. (Von Drehle 119). As in Rosa's situation, many of the workers had either gone home or were preparing to leave when the word of the fire reached the ninth-floor workroom. In the short time between the start of the fire and the ninth floor's alarm, managers on the tenth floor and workers on the eighth floor had already made their escapes from the building; the workers on the ninth floor, who were alerted last, faced the gravest number of deaths. Within five minutes, flames quickly encompassed the ninth-floor workroom, leaving the roughly two hundred and fifty seamstresses little time and few routes of escape (Von Drehle 139). The workroom exits included an elevator and two doors, one of which lead to the building's Greene Street stairway and the other on the opposite side of the room, which lead to the Washington Place stairway. The door leading down the stairs at Washington Place was locked and thus allowed no escape. Some workers managed to escape through the Greene Street stairway, rushing up two floors to the roof, where help awaited (this is the escape Hughes imagines for Rosa). Others were able to take the elevator while operators made two to three trips to the ninth floor before the fire consumed this rescue path (Von Drehle 149). A few workers managed to exit down the narrow fire escape before the fire melted and mangled it, killing numerous workers in the process.



Figure 12: Two political cartoons depicting the locked door of the ninth floor during the Triangle factory fire, 1911. Both images are part of the Triangle collection at the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University.

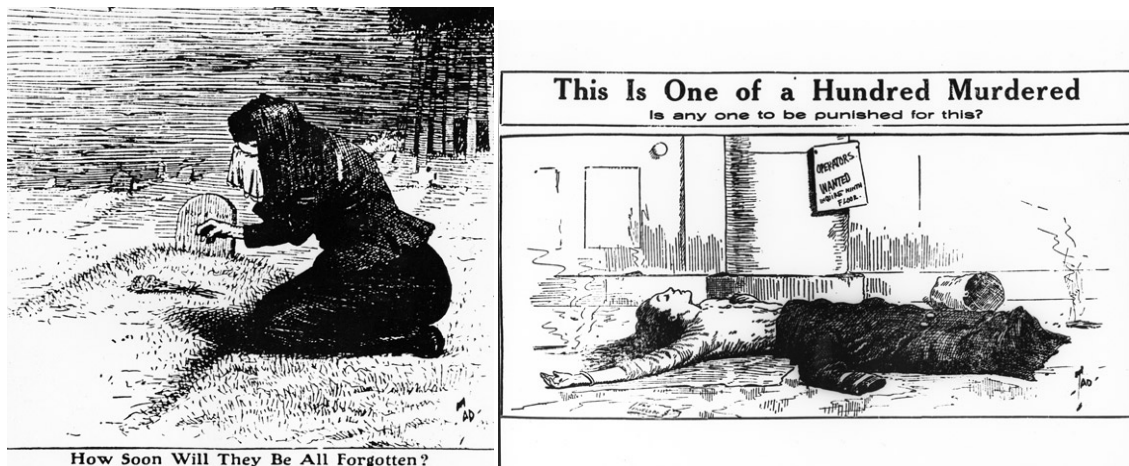


Figure 13: Two political cartoons depicting responses to the Triangle factory fire, 1911. Both images are part of the Triangle collection at the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University.

The public outcry over this atrocity was intense. In the weeks after the fire, unions

organized funerals and protests, journalists published investigations and accusations, and the public balked at the apparent negligence of factory owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris whose greed, they believed, led directly to the atrocious deaths (see Figures 12 and 13). Over the next year, the New York State legislature passed many new laws to protect workers. One such law, the Sullivan-Hoey Law, which passed on October 11, 1911, led to the creation of the New York Bureau of Fire Prevention. In the novel, Mr. 37 refers to the law as a “recent” bill that “helps some” (70), but he still complains about having not “half enough money, or half enough hands even to inspect the buildings” (70). In June of 1911, the New York State legislature also created a Factory Investigation Commission, which would be instrumental in the passage of thirty more fire safety laws in the time leading up to the New Deal (Benin 65).

In *Miss 318 and Mr. 37* Hughes acknowledges but ultimately critiques the effectiveness of these public reactions in the year following the fire. Mr. 37 notes that the Hoey Law was “jammed” through, but he fears that “it’s only a beginning” (70) of more urgent work that needs to continue. Acting as a mouthpiece for the book’s overt moral message, Mr. 37 insists that “the biggest job this country’s got ahead of it is reformin’ this fire business” (77).⁵² He goes so far as to assert that fire safety is “gettin’ bigger than the slavery question ever was,” again tying a labor problem to slavery (77). Lisette’s commentary on the fire casts a bitter critique on the reformers whose prior commitment

⁵² Mr. 37 lists a detailed set of recommendations for improving fire safety, including adding fire-walls, automatic sprinklers, stone fire escapes, and unlocked exits clearly marked from the buildings; de-cluttering aisles; separating elevator shafts from stairways; and removing revolving doors from store entrances (see pages 74-76).

to the issue has faded. She observes the enthusiasm Americans showed for change in the immediate wake of the fire: “everybody talked a lot, and speeches was made and letters was wrote to the papers and hard names was called, and grand juries shot out indictments like pop-corn” (93), and she angrily regrets that this enthusiasm evaporated too soon.⁵³ As Lisette phrases it, “the dinner-bell rang, and everybody said: ‘Forget it!’” (93). Lisette’s disappointment in the slow pace of reform and in the seemingly short memories of reformers convinces her that, as Mr. 37 also fears, only another fire will revitalize political work. Lisette believes that a fire in a department store would more effectively spur action than the factory fire did because a department store fire would inevitably claim more lives of upper class Americans; as she observes, and as Hughes demonstrates through the Verdens’ shopping trip, “[s]ome of the richest people in the land comes to places like these” (94). Lisette calculates that roughly twenty thousand people occupied the store at one moment representing social classes “high, low, and middlin’” (94); this figure is a staggering forty times as large as the estimated number of Triangle employees inside the Asch Building when it caught fire.⁵⁴ No doubt, Hughes hopes a fictional version of this fire will be enough to revitalize reform efforts.

⁵³ In reality, it seems that the effects of the fire have lasted many years. For example, many scholars credit Frances Perkins’ first-hand observation of the fire from Washington Square Park with so deeply impressing her that her work, including her contributions as secretary of labor to New Deal legislation, over the next four decades was rooted in these events (see Orleck, Von Drehle, Benin, and Stein). At the time she witnessed the fire, Perkins was the secretary of the New York Consumers’ League.

⁵⁴ In his meticulous study of the Triangle factory fire, David Von Drehle estimates that there were 180 workers on the building’s eighth floor, 250 workers on the ninth floor, and 70 workers on the tenth floor, totaling an estimated 500 workers in the Asch building when the fire started (119, 139, 129). Lisette’s estimate that 20,000 people might fill the department store is realistic. In a letter published in the *New York Times*, a New York fire chief emphasizes the public threat a department store fire would pose. He cites the open floor plan, revolving doors, flammable materials, and high occupancy, which he estimates at around twenty-two to twenty-three thousand people in the busy holiday season (quoted in Nathan 11).

Whereas Hughes distances Lisette's mannerisms from the wealthy class in *Miss 318*, he portrays her in the midst of the fire as a dignified and heroic facilitator, leading crowds of people to safety. As soon as Lisette smells the "sullen, treacherous, rattlesnaky smell" of fire in the air, she collects her thoughts and springs into action (96). Helping her panicked colleagues, Lisette guides them to their best chance of escape via the elevator and heroically sacrifices her place in the nearly full car to enable their safety. Rather than take the next car herself, Lisette instead turns to the crowd, "rebuk[ing] and command[ing]" people as needed to minimize the chaos (104). Hughes takes care to depict the unruliness of the crowds and the epic magnitude of the fire. In a series of metaphors, he compares the scene of the fire to Dante's circles of hell, to "the revelry of [a] drunken Cyclops" (101), and to a "red Niagara" (122). Amidst the frantic crowds of women who "fought and tore like battling harpies, each with a holy desire to save herself for her dear ones" (103), Hughes distinguishes Lisette by her composure, a trait she shares with Mrs. Verden and Priscilla, who calmly if fearfully ask for Lisette's help when they spot her on the balcony.

As he depicts the Mammoth fire, Hughes imagines a catastrophe similar to the Triangle fire. The scene of the fire pragmatically assesses how the ruin of the Triangle fire would impact a great department store in this reform era. Accordingly, there are sprinklers in the Mammoth, though not all of them successfully activate. There is also a fire escape, but the characters do not get a chance to test it, because that wall of the building collapses. The elevator, as in the Asch Building, provides the most effective

means of escape until it abandons the floor where Lisette and Priscilla Verden are stranded.

The same qualities of strength and independence that made Lisette an unattractive match for Percival Sterling complement Mr. 37's personality and position her as an equal in his heroic actions. Their reunion amidst the destruction of the store underscores how well paired the two are; Lisette and Mr. 37 work together to plot an escape for the three of them. When a blast of fiery air knocks Mr. 37 unconscious, Lisette, with Priscilla's help, moves him to the window where he regains consciousness and solicits help from men in the neighboring building (in their position, the iron gangplanks from one building to another that Mr. 37 detailed earlier in his list of ideal fire safety devices would likely have saved all three of them). Because no such saving gangplank is in sight—and the ladder offered from the men next door is too short—Mr. 37 attempts a risky escape via a rope he attaches between the Mammoth and the building next door. Lisette's bravery and selflessness again assert themselves as she insists that Priscilla leave the building first to return to her distraught mother. Her persistence convinces both Priscilla and Mr. 37 to comply with her plan, so Priscilla leaves her a diamond bracelet, and Mr. 37 leaves her “a look of devotion,” assuring Lisette, “I'll come back for you. You're a good sport, kiddo, and you've sure made a ten-strike with me” (122). The characters display further acts of bravery, Priscilla offering to drop her grip on Mr. 37 so he can quickly and assuredly reach safety, and Mr. 37 staunchly refusing her offer, determined to rescue Priscilla and return for Lisette. Before they make it across the rope to the other building, though, the fire asserts itself, breaking the rope's anchor on the Mammoth side, and consuming the

wall where Lisette stands: “a lethal blast of heat” knocks Lisette unconscious, and “the wall beneath buckled and split and tumbled outward and inward and downward” (123). Hughes’s narration captures the disorienting onslaught of the fire, and the chapter ends with the three characters’ fates unknown.

The narrative of the fire leaves off with the walls crumbling around Lisette, and Hughes’s narrator opens the subsequent (also the book’s final) chapter, claiming “the blessed privilege of omission” to leave out any further details of the fire (124). Readers are thus spared any more details of the general destruction—Rosa’s sobering tale earlier in the novel suffices to relay the atrocities fires inflict—and in his swerve away from “pitiless facts of that historic fire,” one cannot help but feel that Hughes is personally recoiling from the trauma of urban fires (124).⁵⁵ In the *Saturday Evening Post* publication of the novel, illustrations appear frequently alongside scenes of Lisette and Mr. 37 and the department store commerce, but once the fire subsumes the narrative, the illustrations disappear, another possible sign that reliving the trauma of the fire too intensely might be more unpleasant than entertaining for readers. Hughes never quantifies the damage the Mammoth department store fire caused, leaving instead an ominous chapter break for readers to fear for the characters’ lives. In the silence between the pages, Hughes contemplates the enormity of the fire (he makes readers wait three pages before discovering that Lisette, Priscilla, and Mr. 37 are all safe). In obliquely describing the aftermath, Hughes alludes to “mournful aisles” of dead bodies and “form[s] that [were]

⁵⁵ Hughes’s own home was destroyed by a fire on December 3, 1911, a mere seven months before this novel appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Hughes described the fire as “so sudden and so terrific, and our escape so narrow” that it underscored the value of “life itself” (Kemmm 55).

recovered” from the wreckage, much like those gathered after the Triangle factory fire (124). Lisette’s “smoke-blackened” body is found precariously protected under the support of a large steel beam and placed among the dead (124). Lisette’s temporary fate as a burned corpse recalls the victims of the Triangle company, many of whom were so badly burned that their family members identified them by jewelry (Von Drehle 182). Similarly, Mr. Verden picks Lisette out of the group because he spots his daughter’s diamond bracelet on her wrist. Unlike the fate of the 146 Triangle employees, Lisette is still alive.

The Verdens soon sort out the mistaken identity and locate their daughter, who is with Mr. 37 at a local hospital. The novel ends with Lisette’s learning that her fiancé is alive and Lisette’s sending messages of relief to her mother and her betrothed. On second thought, she asks the Verdens to bring her to the hospital with them so she can see Mr. 37 and “wouldn’t be distoibin’ ever’body s’much” with her requests (128), for she is consistently pragmatic, even in pain. That the novel ends without depicting the anticipated reunion between Miss 318 and Mr. 37 tempers in a way its otherwise ‘happy’ ending, which I label ‘happy’ because all of the protagonists escaped with their lives. Not only did Lisette survive, but she survived without being rescued by someone else. Even though Hughes pairs her with a paramount rescuer, Lisette orders him to rescue someone else first when he arrives to whisk her away. Ultimately Lisette does fall in the fire, and her life is only preserved by the graces of Hughes’s narrative. The words Lisette sends to her mother seem to encapsulate her metaphorical position as laborer across both of Hughes’s novels: “Lisette is all right—considerin’ that the Mammoth Store has fell on

her” (128).

Given the fate of the Triangle factory workers, Lisette’s story of survival may seem unlikely, and not all readers responded positively to the novel’s events. In their review of the novel, *The Nation* describes Lisette’s and Mr. 37’s roles in the fire as an “utterly preposterous series of incidents.” Most reviews, though, found wisdom in Hughes’s advocacy for reform. The *A.L.A. Booklist*, which also reviewed *Miss 318*, gave this novel another positive review, proclaiming it “a grave warning” about fire safety. Their review also couches Hughes’s work in terms of dissent, explaining that the “protest this time” concerns adequate protection against fires in department stores. *The Nation* approaches Hughes’s campaign for the necessary fire safety reforms with more skepticism. Their review enjoys the “humorous” depiction of Lisette but describes *Miss 318 and Mr. 37* as a “highly-colored tract” against “the inhuman risk taken by big ‘selling’ concerns like the Mammoth.” Both reviews comment upon the mixture of humor and tragedy Hughes employees to tell this story, but *The Nation* evinces more interest in being amused than in being lectured. The very fact that they quote Mr. 37’s criticisms of the American public without commentary suggests that perhaps they are either bored by or disinterested in his ideas, for their only remark on the fire itself is that it is “the expected thing.” Hughes’s biographer Rupert Kemm traces a tension between social activism and fictional artistry into Hughes’s later career, citing “concern about Hughes’s use of a message in his fiction [which] would be echoed many times as he increasingly devoted attention to social concerns and attempted to stir action against wrongs he thought should be righted” (57).

However artistically delivered (and I find a lot to be admired in Hughes's work), the social message urging fire safety in New York City work places was a useful one for the early 1900s. In spite of dangerous, destructive fires such as the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago in 1903 (which Hughes also references in this novel) and New York's Triangle fire in 1911, fire-safety regulations continued to be a concern. As demonstrated by the outcry after the Triangle fire, the public clearly noticed and cared, but Hughes suggests that they may not have involve themselves deeply enough to enact effective changes. His novel posits class as a key factor in how seriously the public considered fire safety regulation, as fires such as the Triangle mainly effect the working class. In *Miss 318 and Mr. 37*, Hughes illustrates the interdependence of the working and upper classes whether through the extended chain of consumer culture (sweat shop factories, department stores, and consumers) or through the physical existence of these people all in the same place, connected by the complex world of the department store. He uses the integrated class dynamic of the department store to reach readers on a human level that is free from social or financial qualifiers. In the fire he depicts, none of Mrs. Verden's wealth can get her daughter out of the building, and the smoke saturating her frame as she escapes from the fire virtually erases her social status for a time. In an inverse of Mrs. Verden's class erasure, Lisette is perceived to be the wealthy Priscilla Verden—until she begins to speak, and her diction reveals her working identity: "Lisette, the shrew, the toiler, the workaday daughter of the workaday poor" (102).

What remains most striking about reading Lurana Sheldon's novels alongside Rupert Hughes's novels is that these two sets of fiction written a decade apart for two

different audiences essentially make the same Progressive pleas for workplace reform while conveying more severe criticisms of capitalism—its effects, its fundamental unfairness and the class disparity it engenders. Both Sheldon and Hughes demonstrate to their working- and middle-class readers that labor conditions at department stores are fundamentally unjust, and both authors explore ways to alleviate the plight of the working class within the novel, suggesting to readers, based on the events of the novels, real ways they themselves can contribute to this cause. That the models both authors predominantly endorse are top-down seems at odds with the humanity, empathy, and liveliness they instill in their working-class protagonists.

Lora Romero provides a useful framework for considering the mixed tendencies found in these works. She has observed that “[w]e seem unable to entertain the possibility that... individual texts, could be radical on some issues (market capitalism, for example) and reactionary on others (gender or race, for instance). Or that some discourses could be oppositional without being outright liberating” (4). Deborah Carlin expresses a version of this binary when she notes that “women’s philanthropic novels embody progressivism and conservatism simultaneously” (205)—an assessment that applies well to Sheldon’s work. In the same vein, I suggest that we need not label Sheldon’s or Hughes’s work ‘radical’ in order to appreciate its labor advocacy. Though they do not present full socioeconomic transformation, their department store novels propose the kinds of “coherent social response[s] to obvious inequities” (220) that Carlin finds missing from typical philanthropic novels of the same era. These authors focus on reform within an accepted system of capitalism, but they articulate pressing concerns about capitalism’s

mores. As the question of who *really* controls the workers in a department store remains open, the advancement—and accompanying autonomy—some women found through climbing the ladders of professionalization captured the attention of the writers I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: The Good Providers: Contested Visions of the Female Buyer

I worked my way up, alone. I'm used to it. I like the excitement down at the store. I'm used to luxuries. I guess if I was a man I'd be the kind they call a good provider—the kind that opens wine every time there's half an excuse for it, and when he dies his widow has to take in boarders.

-Edna Ferber, "One of the Old Girls" (108)

When Mollie Alpiner was sixteen years old, she began working as a shopgirl at C.W. & E. Partridge Department Store in Chicago. Nearly three decades later, she would be known as the "merchant princess of Chicago" (Hungerford). The years in between were, for Mollie, a mixture of well-rewarded skill and fortuitous luck. She worked as a shopgirl for years, demonstrating "rare intuitive sense" and a "genius of salesmanship" in her work (Hungerford). When she was promoted to the position of buyer, colleagues attributed Mollie's rise to her skillful sense of the business.

Mollie was the head buyer for the underwear department until, in 1890, a kind of fairy tale (or dime novel) fortune struck her life. Charles Netcher, the owner of the store, fell in love with her and proposed marriage; Mollie accepted, and they were married in 1891. As Mrs. Mollie Netcher, she left her position of buyer at the store and became instead a full-time wife, mother, and manager of the Netcher home. But Mollie's business education continued despite her absence from the store. As the spouse of the store's owner, Mollie absorbed her husband's accounts of the goings-on in the store, and he frequently discussed his business strategies with her. Chronicles of her life claim that Mollie had such little interest in socializing that she often eschewed balls or visits with

acquaintances in favor of remaining home with her husband. Mollie herself reflected that these frequent talks with Charles Netcher provided “invaluable business training for me” (Corwin 39).

It should therefore be little surprise that when Charles Netcher died in 1904, Mollie was fully prepared to act as his replacement. Even so, local newspapers, such as the *Chicago Tribune*, displayed shock at the prospect of her ascension, doubtfully wondering if Mollie, a mere housewife, were qualified to “suddenly, without a word of warning take over the management of a business involving millions” (quoted in Corwin 34). Mollie did take control of the store (which was by then renamed the Boston Store), and under her aggressive leadership, the Boston Store expanded and thrived for nearly four more decades.⁵⁶

Female department-store owners like Mollie Netcher were infrequent but not unheard of in the early twentieth century. After a decade of successfully running a small store in Washington, D.C., Elizabeth Haines constructed a large building in 1892 at the corner of Eighth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue to house her growing business. The resulting Haines’ Department Store was the largest business in the neighborhood, containing “fifty stores in one” according to its advertisement (Levey). Haines advertised her store as “the largest store in the world built, owned and controlled by a woman” (see Figure 14). Similar accounts of women owning department stores around the turn of the century can be found from New York City, where Rebecca Ehrich established Ehrich’s,

⁵⁶ Under her leadership, Mollie Netcher was responsible for “vastly increasing its size and substantially building its sale volume” (Whitaker 186). In fact, her devotion to the store’s success perhaps led her to mishandle her late husband’s estate, as she was found to have placed her children’s money into the store rather than leaving it intact in accounts for them to access at maturity (Whitaker 186).

to San Francisco, where Mary Ann Magnin created I. Magnin store (Whitaker 186). Nevertheless, historians recognize that these women and others like them were exceptions; though beginning to enter the workforce, women were only marginally represented in the highest tiers of management in department stores.



Figure 14: Advertisement for Haines' Department Store

Mollie Netcher's initial rise from the entry-level job of shopgirl to the managerial position of buyer illustrates one of the few paths to professionalism available to women at the turn of the century. Moving up the corporate ladder of the department store from labor-intensive jobs such as cash girl and shopgirl to comparatively white-collar position of buyer requires a talent for business as well as a knack forecasting fashion trends.⁵⁷ In

⁵⁷ Though some historians, such as Ileen De Vault, classify shop-girl labor as lower-level white collar work, department store historians point out the wide gap between the physically intense labor of the

contrast to the novels discussed in Chapter 1, the fiction examined in this chapter depicts shopgirls rising to or already in positions of professional power that they have earned through years of labor and cultivated skill. Although these characters do not all achieve ownership of the store, they do consistently transcend the drudgery of shopgirl labor to be rewarded with management over their respective departments in the position of buyer.

The role of the buyer was a professional position that provided a unique path to the middle class for the few women who could land the job.⁵⁸ A buyer's job requirements varied by store but typically included managing staff, ordering merchandise, writing ad copy, and arranging displays (Benson 51). The position demanded skills such as style savvy, managerial oversight, business acumen, and creative vision, and the salary of the buyer reflected the capacity of the work. Buyers in a department store typically made significantly more money than the shopgirls who worked below them (see Whitaker p. 174 for examples). The buyers' more generous salary enabled them to enjoy a middle-class lifestyle, including nicer homes, private schooling for children, and flexible spending on clothes, food, and entertainment.

As a 1913 newspaper article makes clear, the "sudden change of women's occupation" in the early twentieth century constituted "a knotty problem in our modern civilization" (Alliot). For women not only working in department stores but climbing the managerial ladder to more professional positions, this integration into the male-

shopgirl (detailed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation) and the more clerical work of the buyer. Furthermore, the increase in wages inherent in the job of the buyer allows a class mobility decidedly lacking for shopgirls. Literary depictions of such class mobility and financial self-sufficiency are at the heart of this chapter.

⁵⁸ In the early 1900s, approximately one tenth of the buyers working in New York City were women (Whitaker 172).

dominated sphere of business amplified what was already considered a “knotty problem.” This chapter tracks the ways that authors represented the increasing power wielded by characters who work their ways up from shopgirl to buyer. Reading a novel by Charles Klein, *Maggie Pepper* (1911), alongside Edna Ferber’s “One of the Old Girls” (1911), I will show that writers used the department store to depict a form of professional status wherein the managerial ascent these characters achieve is at best an ambivalent rise to middle management.

The fiction discussed in this chapter remains sensitive to the limitations of these job opportunities as well as to the exclusiveness of the jobs. The positions Maggie Pepper, Effie Bauer, and similar fictional characters occupied would not have been available to women of color, newly immigrated workers without a firm mastery of English, or women without the business knowledge to successfully complete the job. Furthermore, even though professional jobs such as buyer were slowly becoming available to women, the positions were difficult to secure and allowed only limited leadership. Labor historians, including Lynn Dumenil and Wendy Gamber, point out that working women still faced tremendous challenges, including achieving a full transformation of gender norms in the workplace and obtaining actual control in the male-dominated managerial world of the department store.⁵⁹ These novels demonstrate that even the most empowering professional careers evident in department store fiction are enmeshed in limitations exercised around gender and social status. Thus the appearance of female professionals in Ferber’s “One of the Old Girls” and Klein’s

⁵⁹ See Dumenil, Chapter 3 (particularly pages 98 and 111-127) and Gamber, page 200.

Maggie Pepper evinces an optimistic vision of female independence and achievement even as these works simultaneously illustrate the very real complications of such positions.

As it considers representations of female professionalism, this chapter explores how the marriage plot functions when writers depict female protagonists in the ambivalent positions of middle management represented by the buyer. One iteration of the female buyer's romance plot, we will see, is that illustrated by Edna Ferber wherein the protagonist jettisons an offer of marriage in favor of maintaining her professional identity and financial independence. This plotline follows an arc Jennifer Fleissner identifies as a "new" storyline for female protagonists in twentieth-century literature ("Wharton" 465).⁶⁰ Rather than protagonist Effie Bauer's story ending either in marriage or in a fall from purity, Effie starts and ends with her career and the endless consumerism it affords. Her tale is one of a heroine whose "job wears her out, she yearns a bit for the comforts of husband and home—but she then gets distracted again" (Fleissner "Wharton" 465). In the sense that Effie's pursuit of a managerial career trumps the marriage plot in her story, Ferber presents a modern plotline for a female character that places an emphasis on her work life more so than on her domestic life. Even so, Ferber pragmatically portrays the limits of professional success by demonstrating the emptiness that can accompany single life as a career woman who compensates herself with

⁶⁰ Comparably, the "old" stories to which Fleissner refers include heroines who undergo either "a laborious program of self-improvement, culminating in marriage" or "a swift fall into seduction, terminating in death" ("Wharton" 452). The two O. Henry shopgirl stories that open this dissertation's Introduction, "An Unfinished Story" and "The Trimmed Lamp" exemplify these polarities. In contrast, the "new" plots Fleissner describes are those "of the ordinary life of the public woman in mundane new spaces such as the office" ("Wharton" 459), as we see in the fiction analyzed in this chapter.

consumerism. Although Effie's choice to place her career over marriage signals her modern femininity as a self-sufficient breadwinner, her role as a self-supporting consumer is, Ferber demonstrates, only mildly rewarding.

In an alternate iteration of the buyer's romance plot, Charles Klein unites the working-girl storyline and the marriage plot to validate his protagonist's professional rise while also providing her with a romantic engagement to the department store's owner. Klein employs the *deus ex machina* of fairy tale marriage to complete Maggie Pepper's ascent, and in doing so he fills in the gaps left by an uncertain future in middle management. The resulting "idealized" plot exemplifies what Fleissner has described as the "synthesis of old and new storylines" evident in some "white-collar-girl" stories, wherein a professional female character achieves success both at work and at home ("Women" 51).⁶¹ I argue in this chapter that Klein's story marries forms of the old and the new in other ways as well. In addition to the traditional romance plot he writes for his modern protagonist, Klein weaves a vein of antimodern nostalgia through this story of a modernizing department store. Elements of an antimodern plot surface in the medievalism of both the novel's European frame and the romantic adventures (including chivalry, a gunshot wound, and a hidden lover) that precede the denouement of engagement. Klein also utilizes an old-fashioned, family-owned business model to ensure both professional and domestic success for Maggie and thus evokes nostalgia by creating an increasingly outmoded business structure at the center of his novel of changing times.

⁶¹ Elsewhere, Fleissner writes that certain "'white-collar-girl' books...allow their heroines to find love in the workplace, imagining that the old and new feminine plots might form a whole" ("Wharton" 466).

I would like to suggest that these antimodern elements of *Maggie Pepper* function as palliating devices that temper the confusion brought upon by what scholars have termed a “dizzying landscape of modernity,” signified in Klein’s story by an intrepid career woman and the modern department store she comes to manage.⁶²

“Lingerie Over Love”

Edna Ferber is best known for novels such as *Show Boat* (1926) and *Giant* (1952), which were both later made into popular Broadway musicals as well as films. Ferber grew up in Appleton, Wisconsin where her father was the owner of a dry-goods store (an early precursor to the department stores she would later fictionalize). When she was only seventeen years old, she began working as a journalist for Appleton’s *Daily Crescent*, which marked the beginning of her writing career. As a reporter, Ferber was in close contact with the working men and women of her town. In her memoir, she recalls spending considerable time in the local department store chatting with the shopgirls for leads on breaking news and gossip. When she transitioned from newspaper reporting to fiction writing five years later, Ferber captured this community in numerous short stories she published. Her first collection of short stories, *Buttered Side Down*, was published in 1912. The collection depicts hard-working Americans in Chicago and mid-western America, and it comprised the earliest stories Ferber had published in popular

⁶² I use the term modernity here in its most general sense, following Lears, who utilizes it to “characterize the complex social and cultural changes” around the turn of the century (xix). In this same vein, Trachtenberg describes “near-volcanic change[s]” of the late nineteenth century (xiv), Bentley depicts “the dizzying spaces of mass culture” (15), and Fleissner writes of the “dizzying landscape of modernity” (“Women” 38) that carried through the start of the twentieth century.

newspapers and magazines, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Everybody's Magazine*, and *The American Magazine*.

“One of the Old Girls” is at the center of this volume.⁶³ In a book that focuses on working-class Chicago residents, “One of the Old Girls” examines a more professional line of work than many of Ferber’s other stories in *Buttered Side Down* do. The protagonist, Effie Bauer, is a buyer for Spiegel’s, one of Chicago’s large department stores. Ferber has spoken about *Buttered Side Down* as a group of stories “of working people, of the Little People, of those who got the tough end of life” (*Peculiar* 170). Whatever successes Effie achieves, her story remains a part of—not an exception to—Ferber’s larger collection. In this section of the chapter, I examine the ways in which Effie’s relative economic stability and personal autonomy come into conflict with elements of the sentimental marriage plot Ferber proposes and then discards.

In “One of the Old Girls,” Ferber reverses conventional gender dynamics by placing Effie in a traditionally masculine position of power. Effie is one of many “capable, wise-eyed, good-looking women one finds at the head of departments” (103). Her discernment and knowledge about trends in corsets enable her to rise from the position of shopgirl to buyer for the department. Effie confidently proclaims, “I could sell a style 743 Slimshape to the Venus de Milo herself” (109). In this position as buyer, she makes “something very comfortably over one hundred and twenty-five a month (and

⁶³ The story originally appeared in *The American Magazine* in 1911 under the heading, “The Triumph of Lingerie over Love.”

commissions)” (104).⁶⁴ Effie has grown more beautiful with age; she is a financially secure, attractive, and knowledgeable single wage earner.

In contrast to Effie’s gainful qualities, her romantic pairing in the story, Gabe Marks, has fewer attributes of success. Ferber introduces him to the story in the guise of a mock hero. She sardonically remarks that Gabe “qualifies” as the story’s “hero” because he just barely fulfills a Webster’s Dictionary definition. Turning to the Webster Dictionary for her understanding of the term hero underscores Ferber’s allegiance to practicality and her resistance to romantic fantasies. The dictionary definition she applies to the lackluster Gabe Marks is, “the person who has the principal share in the transactions related” (104). Referencing the events of the story as “transactions” identifies and describes human interactions (here the question of marriage) as financial arrangements more than as emotional relationships. Furthermore, the definition of hero Ferber applies to Gabe is also technically inaccurate, because Effie Bauer is the person with the truly “principal share” in the story’s events; she operates, based on Webster’s definition, as the hero of her own story.

As Effie Bauer is the successful buyer in a great department store and Gabe Marks is only a traveling salesman, Effie already has the advantage of position in their businesslike negotiations. She gently informs Gabe: “I’m earning as much as you are now. More” (109). To further underscore Gabe’s disadvantages, Ferber describes him as

⁶⁴ Susan Porter Benson’s study of department store workers indicates that an average buyer’s salary could be twenty times greater than that of lower-level department store workers (177). In 1913, for example, salesgirls working in New York City earned an average of \$7.25 per week; factory workers earned less, averaging \$6.25 per week (Benson Appendix C). Compared to these salaries, Effie’s fictional income of \$31.25 plus commissions each week places her in a notably higher income bracket.

“a trifle bald and in the habit of combing his hair over the thin spot” (105). In the matter of their romance, Gabe does not woo or rescue Effie as a fairy tale hero might; rather, “Effie permitted herself to be guyed” by him (105). Thus, even before his proposal, Ferber’s sentence structure establishes Effie as the person with the agency in their relationship.

When Gabe proposes marriage to Effie, his proposition threatens to displace her from the self-sufficient role she has carved out for herself. Effie’s reasons for turning Gabe down revolve around her desire to maintain autonomy as head of her own household. Concerned about how much money Gabe has saved and how their marriage would affect her own daily spending, Effie holds herself up as a model for responsible financial organization. She details her ascent through the business of the department store to her current success as a buyer, claiming, “if I was a man I’d be the kind they call a good provider” (109). As this quote underscores, even Effie understands the role of provider to be a traditionally male role. Nevertheless, she details to her suitor the many instances she has been able—successfully—to provide for herself over the years. Effie’s perception of providing revolves around money: a person who “opens wine every time there’s half an excuse for it” and brings in such significant income that without him “his widow has to take in boarders” to maintain her lifestyle (109). She warns Gabe that he would object to the size of her beauty expenditures (“you’d think I’d made a mistake and given you the butcher bill instead” [110]) but takes pride in her ability to make that distinction for herself: as a single woman, Effie can allot her money to face powder and hairpins instead of butcher meat if she chooses to do so.

Financial autonomy ultimately interests Effie more than romance does, and she consistently minimizes the importance of romantic gestures and emotional appeals. She acknowledges that “Love’s young dream is all right” but maintains that later in life, the practicalities of financing one’s lifestyle become more important than romantic notions (110). Effie rejects even metaphorical flowers, quipping to Gabe, “I’m not throwing bouquets at myself” (109). Gabe objects to her firmly un-romantic attitude: “A feller is got to propose to you with his bank book in one hand and a bunch of life-insurance policies in the other” (108). He insists that “lov[ing] a man” is more important than material concerns (110). But Effie, despite briefly changing her mind when she grows ill, stands by her commitment to the life she has built alone.

Ferber draws upon the language of literary genre to delineate Effie’s qualities in comparison to classic tropes of romantic stories which she rejects. Distancing herself from the romantic plots of sentimental literature, Effie self-consciously remarks, “I guess I haven’t refused you the way the dames in the novels do it” (111), as if she would speak more eloquently if she were a fictional character (presumably a fictional character from a sentimental novel). With this distinction, Ferber establishes a literary protagonist who breaks from the sentimental, romantic traditions of the past and instead takes up a mantle of twentieth-century female autonomy.

Ferber further reverses established gender norms in “One of the Old Girls” through her characterization of oldness. The word “old,” when used in reference to a single woman, has a history of connoting spinsterhood. In fact, Gabe invokes the word during his proposal, using Effie’s age as further enticement to marriage: after Effie has

refused him, he insists that he'll still love the "old girl" even as she ages (111). Effie herself uses the word "old" in a traditional sense after she suffers through Typhoid fever. Effie embraces connotations of frailty, aging, and deterioration when she refers to herself as "an old maid with the fever" (115). In the midst of her illness, Effie imagines what it would be like to share her home with a spouse; she and her hypothetical husband affectionately call one another "old girl" and "old man" (116). The juxtaposition within the phrase "old girl" maintains a wisp of youth as Effie still conceives of herself as a girl even as she envisions aging. Though Effie momentarily accepts Gabe's proposal, her brief acceptance is couched in concern about age and solitude.

Differing from Effie's own use of the term, Ferber recasts the word "old" in her narration to emphasize the experience and success that comes with accumulated age. In the places where Ferber's narrator employs the word, being old indicates wisdom and experience. She presents Effie's age as a attribute, rather than a defect: Effie is "an old girl and head of Spiegel's corset department...[who] had improved with the years, and ripened with experience. She knew her value" (104). Upon Effie's recovery from her illness, Ferber again utilizes "old" in this empowering vein: "The old sparkle came back to Effie's eye. The old assurance and vigor seemed to return" (118). This rejuvenation harkens back to Ferber's emphasis on writing about characters who "live" in the collection's Foreword: when Effie fears she might die and sees her strength and spirit diminished, Gabe's proposal takes on new life, and she accepts him in fear of defeat. But when she begins "to live" (n.p.), Effie quickly regains her independence.

After equipping her female protagonist with power, professionalism, and agency, Ferber solidifies her departure from a traditional romance plot by ending the story without a marriage. Instead, “One of the Old Girls” leaves Effie partnered with her financial income. Her final decision to refuse Gabe comes at the moment when, as she considers a new purchase, her coworker reminds Effie that she is lucky not to have a husband to “raise the dickens when the bill comes in” (120). This coworker emphasizes to Effie, “You’re your own boss” (119). Effie shrinks from the possibility that her autonomy could be constrained and quickly finalizes her decision not to marry. In this sense, Ferber updates narratives such as Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “A New England Nun” (1891) by moving the protagonist’s sacred terrain outside the home and into a field of business within the world of commerce. The story’s end, in which Effie turns down Gabe and purchases a new shirt waist for herself, likely inspired its tagline in *The American Magazine* as “The Triumph of Lingerie Over Love” (May 1911). Rather than yearning to stay home with her fine china and neatly folded aprons as Freeman’s Louisa Ellis does, Effie aspires to earn her own living and shop at her leisure, entering an endless cycle of consumerism as both buyer for and shopper at the department store.

Ferber’s Department Store

And yet, Ferber’s story urges readers to consider, to what extent is Effie’s a story of triumph? Her opportunities as a consumer, Ferber suggests, might not make up for the isolation and limited class transformation accompanying her mid-level job at the department store. Probing this deficiency, Ferber asks us to consider the implications of Effie’s decision to reject the marriage plot in favor of her middle management job. In

keeping with her commitment to realism, Ferber draws clear limitations around Effie's autonomous life—so much so that we should pause to take Effie seriously when she reconsiders her self-image during her illness, “I used to think I was pretty smart, earning my own good living, dressing as well as the next one, and able to spend my vacation in Atlantic City if I wanted to” (115). Effie's overt realization in this moment is that she is nevertheless subject to loneliness, but Ferber additionally suggests other ways that Effie might have over-estimated her position. As Effie's list makes clear, she values her success in material terms: a good salary, nice clothing, flexible travel. But Ferber demonstrates that in spite of her financial security, Effie is far from the top of the economic chain. If it were class mobility she desired, Effie is still inextricably tied to the working class both by her unmistakably worn out shoes and by her inclusion in this collection of stories about “the Little People” (*Peculiar* 170). Nor does Ferber think of Effie when she imagines boundless prosperity. Ferber describes her own writing as such: “I have never written...stories of the rich and successful” (*Peculiar* 170).

Effie's place of employment, the department store, indeed makes her independence uniquely possible, but it also marks her as a liminal figure. The job's proximity to luxury and her access to obtaining it contribute to Effie's appearance (apart from the well-worn shoes) “as one of the many well-dressed, prosperous-looking women shoppers” (103). Though Effie enjoys the privilege of shopping at this enticing emporium of consumer goods, the goods she buys are nonetheless marked as subpar. The hand-made, Irish eyelet blouse she decides to purchase at the end of the story is only available to her because it is on sale for being “slightly soiled” (119). Her proximity to the latest

trends enables Effie to dress fashionably (“just by looking at her blouses you could tell when Cluny died and Irish was born” [103]), but even her tasteful purchases “cannot disguise” her feet (103). The work that Effie does, even as a buyer, presumably wears down her shoes to undeniably convey class status.

Ferber’s ambivalence about Effie’s lifestyle extends beyond class to her personal community of friends. When Effie falls ill, she notes that her detached colleagues merely send flowers rather than visit and sit with her: “They’d have done the same if I’d died,” she remarks (115). Despite Effie’s observation that she does not share an intimacy with her co-workers like the one she might share with a husband, Effie is nonetheless surrounded by a system of people when she is working. Her friendships with co-workers not only aid her shopping conquests (they share inside knowledge of sales) but also provide companionship in her daily life (such as the lunch date she promises Miss Whitmore). The dissonance here underscores a clear divide between her home life and work life, indicating that not only is her work life more fulfilling but that when she is barred from it (through illness), she has little left to enjoy.

Even in her independent position as department store buyer and sole breadwinner for herself, Ferber does not promote Effie’s tale as a Horatio Alger-like story of American exceptionalism where Effie achieves the American dream of class mobility through skill and hard work.⁶⁵ The pragmatic if not pessimistic name of the collection roots the stories not only in the ground but *face down* on the ground. Akin to the phrase

⁶⁵ Eric Schocket has described American exceptionalism as a multifarious term that can, among other things, identify “a broad and unshakable conviction that the United States is free from class” (4). In this chapter, I employ the term to denote a belief that, through hard work and skill, a character can achieve wealth and status.

“the glass is half empty,” Edna Ferber’s title *Buttered Side Down* alludes to toast that has presumably fallen to the ground and landed with the buttered side down to the ground rather than facing up, wherein it might be rescued and still enjoyed by its preparer. To imply that the toast that falls buttered side down is beyond *rescue* engages a long-held trope wherein imperiled heroines are rescued by men in a charming, storybook ending. Positioning her own more realist work against such stories, Ferber resists these fairy tale endings. In the Foreword to *Buttered Side Down*, she writes: “ ‘*And so,*’ the story writers used to say, ‘*they lived happily ever after.*’ Um-m-m—maybe” (n.p., emphasis hers). She hones her skepticism to the “happily ever after” portion of the sentence, revealing neither an outright pessimism nor a resistance to rosy-eyed optimism. Truncating the aforementioned adage, she writes that these stories “stop just short of the phrase of the old story writers, and end truthfully, thus: *And so they lived*” (n.p., emphasis hers). Ferber’s heroines, she emphasizes, simply “lived,” happily or otherwise.

As her Foreword makes clear, Ferber equates large leaps of class mobility with fairy tales that have little grounding in reality. She asks provocatively if Cinderella’s prince never “found [her] manner redolent of the kitchen hearth” or disapproved of “her finger-nails and grammar” (n.p.). These material concerns about Cinderella’s body partnered with practical concerns about difference in class, including kitchen-manners and language use, press against the hypothetical desire that two people from different classes could form a happy and lasting union. Ferber’s objection to *Puss in Boots* similarly falls upon class lines. Ferber challenges the story’s assumption that “neighbors” would agreeably recognize *Puss in Boots*’ master and wife as wealthy members of

society and not insist recall his former identity as a “poor miller’s son” (n.p.). Ferber further suspects that the young master himself would be unable to enjoy his storybook ending because he would be too preoccupied “fum[ing] with chagrin” due to his neighbors’ likely inability to accept his family’s new position of wealth.

Ferber engages the trope of the fairy tale to alert readers that her short stories “make no such promises” of “glamour” and the lasting happiness that promises to accompany it (n.p.). Instead, Ferber highlights the pragmatism of her collection. Her emphasis on the “lived” experience of her protagonists as the way to most “truthfully” depict their stories stands in stark contrast to writers who engage in optimistic fantasy fulfillment in their plots, such as the dime-novel factory to which Lurana Sheldon belonged. It also suggests a lack of desire to fantasize about class mobility for the entrenched members of the working class. Most protagonists of the *Buttered Side Down* stories are working-class characters who begin and end their stories in the same position (frequently retail and service workers). She sometimes features more well-to-do characters—an actress in one story, a baseball player in another—but portrays no excessive glamour or happiness presuming to accompany those positions.

When the department store appears in this collection, Ferber depicts it as a site of desire that is unable to satiate her characters. In “Maymeys from Cuba,” the impoverished protagonist Jennie gazes hungrily into the window of a fruit store, but it is only when she enters the heightened atmosphere of the more massive and immense

department store that her desire mounts to a breaking point.⁶⁶ Ferber describes the atmosphere of the store's grocery department as "mouth-watering" filled with "a glorified mixture" of sights and smells (133). Gazing at these delicacies as she starves, Jennie watches a baker as he "kneads, and slaps, and molds, and thumps and shapes the dough into toothsome Scotch confections" (136-7) that presumably evoke her childhood in Scotland.

In this scene, Ferber overtly depicts the department store as a site of privilege. Jennie may ask for samples of food items, but without money to purchase anything, she is relegated to "nibbling" (136) small bites that serve to only ignite her hunger. This "madden[ing]" proximity to a wealth of food she desires but cannot obtain amounts to "agony" and "torture" (136). Unlike Effie Bauer, who has flexible access to her store's goods, Jennie is not so fortunate. She enters the store as an outsider who can only nibble "scraps of food" (136) and stare hungrily at the items she cannot afford to possess. In fact, her desire for the goods, driven by a physical starvation, finally prompts her to theft. Jennie's vantage point underscores the poverty striking many women in the urban landscape Ferber and other turn-of-the-century writers portrayed. Her decision to place "Maymeys from Cuba" directly after "One of the Old Girls" in *Buttered Side Down* throws Effie Bauer's relative privilege into even greater relief.

Ferber presents other minor department store narratives in *Buttered Side Down* that illustrate the ever-elusive rewards of workplace mobility. "The Frog in the Puddle"

⁶⁶ Though Ferber does not name the "particular store" (134) that Jennie enters, she does write that the Chicago fruiterer that inspired the story is directly across from Marshall Field's (*Peculiar* 170). Her fictionalized store is also located on Chicago's State Street, the same street that houses *Sister Carrie*'s The Fair.

follows the weary shopgirl Gertie as she breaks down one night over the stress of urban, working life. Gertie occupies a position between Effie's professionalism and Jennie's poverty. In this story, Ferber depicts the shopgirl who makes a scant living in the city and who is emotionally drained from the tireless and lonesome life that her work demands. "Oh, darn it! What's the use!" (4), Gertie exclaims one night as the exhausting, disheartening, and static pattern of her labor at the store overwhelms her. Gertie decides at the end of the story to retreat from her urban career path and return to the country to make a quiet life at home with an old flame. Gertie presents us with a potential alternative for Effie's plotline, one in which she prioritizes human relationships over personal financial success and consumption. The story reminds us that "One of the Old Girls" is not an unabashed celebration of feminist triumph but a mediated story of ambiguity wherein mobility has its rewards, but it also leaves Effie suspended in middle management, compensating herself with consumerism forever.

The Professional Ascent of Maggie Pepper

Maggie Pepper is a story that circulated for over a decade in the American imagination, although it is now out of print. Its author, Charles Klein, was an actor, playwright, and novelist. Born in England in 1867, he came to America in 1883 and published novels and plays in the United States. He created a series of hits on Broadway before passing away on board the RMS Lusitania when it was struck by German fire in 1915. Grosset & Dunlap published the novel *Maggie Pepper* in 1911, the same year it premiered as a play in three acts starring Rose Stahl as Maggie (see Figure 15). After first

appearing on Broadway, the stage adaptation toured across America.⁶⁷ The novel was also made into a movie in 1919, and in 1922 the still-popular story of *Maggie Pepper* was turned into a musical, *Letty Pepper*.⁶⁸



Figure 15: Scene from the play adaptation of *Maggie Pepper*, 1911

Like “One of the Old Girls,” *Maggie Pepper* depicts a shopgirl protagonist on the rise to a career as a buyer at a department store. When the novel opens, the eponymous Maggie Pepper has worked for fifteen years at a department store first as a cash girl, then as a shopgirl, and most recently as assistant buyer hoping, at last, for promotion to buyer.

⁶⁷ In 1916, Samuel French published the play script of *Maggie Pepper*.

⁶⁸ The musical *Letty Pepper* opened to mixed reviews and spent three weeks on Broadway before closing in May of 1922. George V. Hobart, who wrote the book for *Letty Pepper*, has featured the department store in his own fiction (see Appendix entry for *Get Next!*).

At a point in time when journalists were writing about women's "evolution" to positions of high power in the workplace (Hungerford), the fictional Maggie yearns to take on more responsibility and exercise more power in the store where she works. *Maggie Pepper*, I will show, mirrors Ferber's story in its mixed tendency to both uphold and undercut ideals of the American dream for women. The novel illustrates opportunities for achievement a hard-working shopgirl can attain while simultaneously reinforcing the existence of numerous obstacles to success facing career women in the early twentieth century. Where Klein demonstrates that the landscape of work only partially fulfills Maggie's dreams, he utilizes a marriage plot to complete her ascent, thus providing a satisfying alternative to the more realistic scenario Ferber depicts.

The possibilities Klein establishes for Maggie begin with the ladder of promotions she ascends at the department store. He establishes Maggie as a committed and reliable worker who "started in as a kid" and has "been on the job every working day since" (80). In addition to being a dedicated worker, Maggie is smart and capable. Holbrooke observes her to be "keenly intelligent" (76) in their first meeting. He later reflects that she "had more brains in her little finger than had all the rest of the establishment, including its head" (148). Though Joseph is no doubt captivated by more than just her intellect as they flirt—Maggie displays "a demure air of sagacity that fascinated the young man" (81)—Klein reminds readers that Joseph's impression of her wisdom is not colored by his flirtation. His authorial voice affirms: "Unquestionably, Joseph was right as to his buyer's brains" (148). Furthermore, Klein uses his narration to enforce Maggie's competency: "Her musical voice was charged with authority" (70) even when she is only the assistant

buyer. As the novel begins, and Maggie awaits her promotion, she is already poised with the authority she believes she has earned.

Maggie expressly believes in the American dream of fulfilled work and personal reward. She has not toiled fifteen years for the sake of work itself but in the hope of building a better future for herself: “She comforted herself with the conviction that in the days to come she would be repaid in overflowing measure for all that she had sacrificed” (137). What’s more, she views this dream as one that is equally inclusive to the female gender: “She devoutly thanked heaven that she lived in a generation when woman is permitted to win success for herself in business life” (134). Though Maggie does find “keen satisfaction in her work,” that pleasure is rooted in “dreams of a lively ambition” (134). More so than promotion within the store itself, Maggie hopes to become “a person of real importance in the world” at large (135).

Her confidence is well-placed, as Maggie proves herself abundantly qualified for the job as buyer. While Maggie fills in temporarily for the vacant position, she tends to “details concerning styles and prices and deliveries” (86). The work Maggie seeks to undertake as a buyer includes making calculations about products and conducting business with jobbers selling merchandise. Notably, this kind of white-collar work takes place in an office rather than the selling floor. In fact, the entire action of the novel’s dramatization takes place in the upstairs office and in Maggie’s home—none of the play’s sets consist of the magnificent displays on the floor of the store, shifting the audience’s attention away from enticing consumption and instead onto the professional position her work there entails as well as the impact that job has on her home life.

Through the business plans Maggie has for Holbrooke and Company, Klein positions her as a modernizing presence in an old-fashioned department store. Aligning her business strategy with a forward-thinking attitude that reflects the progressivism of a female professional in 1911, Klein portrays Maggie as a proponent of fresh ideas who plans to “turn things upside down” (83). Holbrooke and Company, prior to her improvements, was not one of the “up-to-date houses” but rather an “Old Curiosity Shop” (84). Maggie points out that the antiquated store is “behind the times...using old, mildewed methods” (83). Her comparatively “modern ideas” (190) for the store include injecting “music, life, gayety” (84) into the atmosphere and bringing in “the very latest and best from Paris” (84). Maggie believes that success for the business will come in embracing the new, the fashionable, and the luxurious. And indeed, the transformation she eventually brings to the store reflects these plans. Holbrooke and Company becomes “metamorphosed,” under her influence (149). Pursuing her goals for transformation, Maggie sees that the store is “completely restocked, and with consummate skill” (149). Thanks to her implementations, the store becomes marked with “a *cachet* of smartness” (149).

Further emphasizing that Maggie is more of a modern entrepreneur than a traditional damsel, the changes Maggie brings to Holbrooke and Company are not wholesome and honest; rather, they have the shrewd character of a businessman. Her improvements include “All the devices by which the proffer of something for nothing wheedles money from folk” (149). Not only does Maggie advocate these methods, but Klein clarifies that they “were speedily installed in their most enticing guise” (149).

Maggie plays the capitalist's game, maximizing profit squeezed from customer desire and careful strategizing. She is also capable of meeting male salesmen toe to toe in the "game" of buying (61). She describes their interactions as "tricky as horse-trading" but has full knowledge of their "little ways" and is able to successfully conduct deals for the store (61). These qualities align her more closely with male businessmen than with traditionally feminine attributes of purity, honesty, and passivity.

Maggie's capability as a business professional is reinforced by her desirability as a job candidate at another reputable store. When Maggie at one point resigns from Holbrooke and Company, she secures a job at "a firm of best repute on the Avenue" (204). Maggie has effectively established a reputation for her high quality of work, known to the stores as "Miss Pepper's work" (204), and the respectable store acts quickly to "secure her services" (204). Such widespread demand for her talents confirms that Maggie's value lies in far more than just the love of Joseph Holbrooke.⁶⁹

Even in the face of her demonstrable business aptitude, Joseph Holbrooke must come to Maggie's rescue at numerous points in the novel, making clear the tenuous nature of her presumed power as buyer. Klein underscores the ubiquity of male power that dominates the business environment. Before Joseph assumes control of the store, the manager Hargen wields the power to fire Maggie at any time and does, in fact, do so early in the novel (Joseph objects and promptly rehires and promotes her). Her

⁶⁹ Maggie, in fact, proves herself on an international level. The position Maggie takes intends to send her to Paris, a move that sets her not only outside the dress department and the entire store even of Holbrooke and Company but, more ambitiously, outside the entire country.

suggestions for larger changes to the store are filtered through the benevolent control of the male owner. The improvements Maggie suggests may have originated in her mind, but only Joseph, as the head of the store, has the power to permit and implement them. Though the changes are “devised and elaborated by the shrewd and ingenious Maggie,” Klein reminds us that they are only “accepted and made real by the receptive and industrious Joseph” (149). Without the willing consent of Joseph, her ideas would be no more powerful in Chapter 12 of the novel than they are in Chapter 5 when Hargen dismisses her.

Joseph Holbrooke’s power over the store’s operations underscores both the old-fashioned business structure it employs and the precarious position Maggie occupies as a mid-level employee. Holbrooke, as owner of the store, is the sole source of authority (rather than deferring to a corporate board of trustees or group of shareholders). The power differential between Holbrooke and his employees manifests in terms of social class as well as gender: “He was trying to imagine the meaning of that term [15 years] of servitude. How much of brain and body had this woman given to swell the fortune which he had lavished in careless prodigality, with never a thought for the toilers whence it was sprung?” (80). Despite Maggie’s work as a manager in the stock-room rather than the selling floor, she remains ominously connected to the work of a shopgirl, which she has conducted for years. She is able to quickly move back into the headspace of a shopgirl when providing advice about the job: “It’s just a matter of being on the other side of the counter—that’s all,” she offers (81). Maggie has been on both sides of the counter, and she has more recently been hovering over the counter as buyer for the department; her

perspective on the world of the department store is multifaceted and canny. Yet for all her knowledge, only the owner of the store maintains ultimate control over the establishment and over Maggie's job.

The Marriage Plot and the American Dream

The instability of Maggie's power at work suggests why the domestic power she does attain is so meaningful to her, and, accordingly, the marriage plot Klein introduces revolves around Maggie's desire to maintain autonomy. Whereas her male bosses retain control over her work at the store, Maggie occupies the chief position of sole head-of-household at home. As she clarifies to a co-worker, "The privilege of handing my pay-envelope to some fellow every Saturday night don't appeal to me—not a little bit. I want to make my own way, without being hampered by a masculine expense-account" (66-67). Maggie's rejection of a hypothetical husband who might infringe upon her paycheck echoes Effie Bauer's concern, and both women from these different works skeptically perceive male suitors as threats to their income and autonomy.

Where Maggie remains suspicious of male suitors, she welcomes her niece into her household. She acts as a surrogate mother to her late brother's daughter Margie, whose own mother had lured her into a life of petty theft and harlotry. The apartment Maggie is able to rent upon her promotion is an appropriate home for Margie. They live in "a snug place, neatly and tastefully furnished" that possesses "an air of homeliness" (113). The secondary meaning of the word "homeliness" again evokes the limitations to Maggie's position, as the rooms may be homey but are also homely. Klein clarifies for readers that the apartment is "not in the least luxurious" (113). Regardless, Maggie

derives “satisfaction” from this abode, confident that “here she could keep the girl comfortably, which she could not have done in her old rooms” (113). Maggie’s promotion to buyer, then, for all of its limitations, empowers Maggie to offer a home to her wayward niece. More than simply shelter Margie, Maggie also places her in a “select school” (152) to cultivate her knowledge and manners, and Margie is able through the short course of the novel to acquire “the niceties of breeding as well as things of common learning” (152).

Maggie Pepper’s niece quickly transforms into a well-mannered, middle class child; whether Maggie herself can fully achieve social mobility is another question. Ferber, who challenges the premises of so many class mobility fairy tales, would answer in the negative. Even Klein, who pens Maggie’s eventual engagement to the wealthy Joseph Holbrooke, indicates that Maggie’s attempts at transgressing her working-class upbringing are not quite achieved over the course of the novel. Before her promotion, Maggie read as many “books and magazines as she could afford” and studied merchandise at the store to learn the mannerisms of the middle class (135). Maggie attempts to teach herself “the most possible of training in mind and manners” (135). In spite of her efforts, Klein writes that Maggie nevertheless “mourned” the possibility of achieving “lady-like behavior” (152). Nevertheless, she pursues efforts to distinguish herself and makes effective use of her buyer’s salary to live a middle-class lifestyle. She keeps a maid to care for herself and Margie, and she continues to educate her “mind” and “manner of speech” (152) using Margie’s schoolbooks. In a matter of months, Klein writes, she makes “marvelous strides in her advance” (152), and he culminates her course

of self-improvement with her engagement to the wealthy Joseph Holbrooke at the end of the novel.

The romance plot that accompanies *Maggie Pepper* incorporates an element of fantasy to an otherwise believable tale of professional promotion. The problem with her corporate climb, Klein demonstrates, is that it will likely be halted before Maggie achieves her aspirations. Although Maggie believes her grueling labor to be only a temporary stop on the way to her inevitable success, her years of dedicated work and her expectation that she is “entitled” (60) to a promotion do not, in fact, gain her full social mobility; her crowning triumph is achieved only when she becomes engaged to Holbrooke at the end of the novel. The first half of the novel underscores the unlikelihood of her promotion at the store. When she is initially denied the job, Maggie fumes:

“you’ll slave from morning till night. You’ll put your whole heart and soul into your work. Then, some fine day, after years of drudgery, you’ll find yourself almost where you started. You’ll learn that you’ve just been going around in a circle—no progress; no future” (75-76)

Furthermore, she reflects upon the stunted momentum in her potential work trajectory: “it seems a little hard, after fifteen years, to be told that you must stop right here for the rest of your life, that there’s no chance for any further advancement” (79). Klein uses the language of forward movement (“progress,” “future”) to trace Maggie’s hopes in the same way that Maggie uses that language to describe her plans for the store. Both Maggie and the department store have space to evolve in the right setting, but the spiteful manager Hargen and the unjust parameters of the workplace threaten to forestall her ambition. The Cinderella element of her story finally aids Maggie in comprehensive class

mobility through marriage, wherein she is able to successfully evade the restricting webs of middle management through a cross-class, fairy-tale pairing with a wealthy husband.

In her achievement of professional affluence and social mobility, Maggie's gender complicates a traditionally male narrative of success in America. Rather than assuming a 'rightful' place, Maggie—a working-class woman who begins her life at the lowest station of labor—virtually takes over the male business sphere of the department store, overstepping the power-hungry manager. In a reversal of her earlier relationship with store owner Joseph Holbrooke, she even eventually assumes a different kind of influence over him when his marital plea to Maggie places him in her power rather than the other way around.

Even with its trappings of romantic fantasy, the trajectory of Maggie's professional success is not an anomaly; accounts of women climbing their way up in business were certainly not unheard of, as Mollie Netcher's life illustrates. Not only were women building a presence in business, but journalists of the time were casting their entrance into the professional workforce as an advance of feminism: one can "see the feminist movement hurrying homeward at the end of a strenuous industrial day" (Hungerford 471). In a *Munsey's Magazine* profile from 1914, Edward Hungerford writes about female architects, interior designers, and business owners, roles which prove to him "a definite evolution in the life of the land...bringing women into an entirely new social position" (483).

A year earlier, one review of *Maggie Pepper* uses this same language to describe Maggie's professional trajectory. A *Los Angeles Times* reviewer describes Maggie's

professional achievements as the shopgirl's "evolution to the position of buyer" (Alliot). The idea that a woman such as Mollie or a character such as Maggie can "evolve" into a business setting suggests a hopeful trajectory of continuity for women from domestic spaces to the public sphere and from manual labor to more influential roles in business leadership. Alliot frames *Maggie Pepper* as a play centrally linked to conversations about women's employment opportunities. His emphasis on Maggie's struggle to advance from an entry-level job to the position of buyer highlights Maggie's transformation at the heart of the play. Alliot points out in his review that many women are moving to big cities to seek employment and fears that, metaphorically, "thousands of little moths are burning their wings" when they fail to achieve success. It seems that, given his fear for the real-life women struggling through the job market, Alliot is pleased that Maggie is able to "mak[e] good" in the end. His review, coupled with journalistic accounts of women in business, finds realism to be a crucial aspect of Maggie's story, even if her conclusion is not the norm for working women in America.

Not all reviews of the narrative embraced its ending; some reviewers received the play's optimistic ending with more skepticism, questioning the likelihood of such a felicitous turn of events. A different reviewer from the *Los Angeles Times* challenged the believability of Maggie's standing up to Joe Holbrooke and resigning her position at the end of Act II (Chapter 16 in the book). In his 1914 review, Henry Warnack deemed the entirety of Act II to be "highly improbable."⁷⁰ He considers Maggie's taking the lead on

⁷⁰ Act II of the play version consists roughly of Chapter 11, titled "Maggie in the Making," through Chapter 16, "Maggie Resigns," in the book. In these chapters, Maggie takes her promotion as buyer and

the business ideas and telling Holbrooke how to run his company an “incongruous spectacle” (Warnack), though it is a spectacle he relishes as an audience member. Warnack proclaims his enjoyment of the play he finds purely fanciful, rhetorically asking, “what has the stage to do with life? Down with realism! Viva Maggie Pepper and all her tribe!” (Warnack).

Other objections to the work’s realism focus not on Maggie’s business aspirations but on her romantic connection with Holbrooke, as drama critics and shopgirl audiences alike questioned the improbable match. One performance of the play, in November 1911, was held for an audience composed entirely of New York City department store girls (about 900 girls, the *New York Times* estimates). The *Times* write-up describes the audience as captivated and amused throughout the show, with one exception: “It was only at the close of the last act that the applause was a little weak. But there was undoubtedly reason. Every girl in the audience knew every point about the shops, but not one of them had ever married the ‘boss’ and did not think she would have the chance” (“Maggie Pepper Entertains”). Based on the *Times* review, these shopgirls, who worked in the “cloak and suite departments” of New York City department stores (“For Girls Only”), found Klein’s depiction of daily life and language in the department store to be convincing; it was merely the buyer’s marriage to the owner at which they balked. Notably, the *Times* reporter does not note any resistance from the shopgirl audience to Maggie’s promotion; it is the romance, not the promotion, to which they fail to relate.

works with Joseph Holbrooke to improve the store. This is also the section where they fall in love, and at the end of Chapter 15 Maggie resigns due to the gossip that has arisen about their close working relationship.

A reviewer for *The Athenaeum* similarly noted a “feeling of unreality” in the “inevitable love-story” between Maggie and Joseph. This reviewer complained that Klein created a protagonist “with so many virtues” that she seemed unreal. It also follows, for this reviewer, that an “impressionable and wealthy” man would naturally fall in love with her, but he notes that such a happy ending “is conspicuous.” In perhaps a winking nod to his own plot, Klein writes in the pages of the novel that even Maggie herself “could not believe in the reality of the love [Joseph] offered” (253).

As Claudia Tate establishes, such romance plots can speak to a fantasy of class mobility.⁷¹ In this case, many fictional shopgirls such as Maggie Pepper practice elegant dialogue, study their higher-class customers, and read etiquette books to learn the characteristics of an upper-class lifestyle. In creating fantasy plots wherein the protagonist is elevated, on some level, by her marriage into a higher class than she previously occupied, authors including Klein reward the hard-working, abused shopgirls who have struggled to elevate their positions in the world and ultimately grant them—however unrealistically— the ability to transcend their working-class reality. The idealized marriage plot in *Maggie Pepper*, in fact, functions not only to facilitate Maggie’s social transformation but, as we shall see, to romanticize visions of corporate America as well.

⁷¹ In *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, Tate locates a political allegory in African-American domestic narratives through their inscription of prevailing Victorian social pursuits that were historically denied black citizens, such as “moral development, spiritual maturation, professional aspirations, and economic advancement of and of course social justice for black Americans,” into the marriage plots of the novels (11). In this way, Tate finds a political message about social mobility within the romance plots and argues that that political empowerment inspires and interests readers in the novels.

Locating Antimodern Nostalgia in the Twentieth-Century Department Store

Maggie Pepper is a novel that, to adopt Jennifer Fleissner's language, presents "a fairy-tale synthesis of old and new storylines" ("Women" 51). The novel leverages an old storyline of romance and domestic bliss in service of a newer tale of a white-collar working woman looking to secure professional success in the world of business.⁷² This blending of old and new tropes extends to the manner in which Klein depicts the department store as a business. Whereas Maggie Pepper's relative insignificance in the rungs of middle management can be attributed to increasingly corporatized structures of business in America, her plot with Joseph requires the older model for business that was fading away. Because Holbrooke and Company is a "family business," rather than a corporate entity composed of influential share-holders, a board, and a hired executive, Joseph remains firmly in control of his business's destiny—able to hire Maggie, able to promote her importance, able to potentially run the store alongside her.⁷³ In fact, the responsibility he feels towards embracing his legacy as department store owner drives him to leave his playboy antics behind and take his place at the helm of the store, where he turns to the enterprising Maggie for advice on how to properly reinvigorate his business. In short, Klein immerses Holbrooke and Company simultaneously in nostalgia and in the midst of rapid modernization.

⁷² Even Edna Ferber employs this narrative structure in other stories. In her trilogy of Emma McChesney books, she exemplifies what Fleissner labels "the most enjoyably fluffy of the fairy-tale scenarios" ("Women" 51). Emma, a traveling saleswoman representing Buck's Featherloom Petticoats, not only excels at her job selling petticoats but also marries the boss in the final volume. This conclusion, Fleissner observes, "enable[s] an ideal balance of home life and work" ("Women" 51).

⁷³ I should note that their family business still consists of shares, and Joseph forces the villainous, embezzler Hargen to sell his back to Joseph "at the market price" before banishing him from the company (314).

Twentieth-century trends in business moved away from a simple family-owned model and saw instead the increasing incorporation of businesses. As Alen Trachtenberg explains, “the advantages of incorporation were manifold, for it permitted a number of people to pool their capital and their efforts under one name, as a single entity” (82).⁷⁴ Many department stores followed this model of incorporation, and despite the impression some stores still projected of being family-owned businesses, increasingly few truly were. In fact, as one historian points out, department stores “sustained the illusion of family-run business longer than most other modern organizations” (Whitaker 187). This move away from the straightforward single-family-owned business to more “complex” and “mysterious” corporate structures obscured not only the positions of middle management but even the roles of business leaders (Whitaker 187, Trachtenberg 84).⁷⁵

The movement away from a family-owned model of business generated a locus of nostalgia around the family unit, where the family-run business thus stands as an emblem of antimodern nostalgia in a rapidly modernizing world. As T.J. Jackson Lears writes, “many Victorian ideologues did imagine the family to be a haven in the heartless world of capitalist competition” (15). Following Lears’s argument that the “growth of an urban market economy had undermined the home’s economic role” (74-75), the persistence of

⁷⁴ We see this structure in many fictional department stores that include multiple names in their store name to signify the conglomeration of capital that goes into the ownership. Examples include Denton, Day, & Company in *For Gold or Soul?*, Markle & Miller’s in *For Humanity’s Sake*, and Morris, Wyngate & Rowland in *Lotta the Cloak Model*.

⁷⁵ Trachtenberg further explicates: “With the corporate device as its chief instrument, business grew increasingly arcane and mysterious, spawning new roles intermediary between capital and labor, in middle management, accounting, legal departments, public relations, advertising, marketing, sales: the entire apparatus of twentieth-century corporate life was developed in these years and clouded the public perception of the typical acts of business” (84).

family-owned businesses, such as Klein's fictional Holbrooke and Company, that linked the family to the world of business and were passed on from father to son (and even inherited by new spouses) can be understood as a source of nostalgia for this declining formation.

The trope of the family-owned department store is not isolated to *Maggie Pepper*. In fact, unique, real-life narratives resembling Mollie Netcher's had many fictional counterparts. The dream of female store ownership via spousal proxy or direct inheritance is a familiar thread in the works of popular American fiction featuring the department store. This trope of ownership appears most frequently at the end of novels through the marriage of the shopgirl protagonist to an owner or heir to a department store (echoing the canonical example of Denise Baudu's marriage to Mouret in Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*). As we saw in Chapter 1, Lurana Sheldon's Faith Marvin becomes engaged to the son of store owner Charles Denton in the last chapter of *For Gold or Soul* in a marriage that promises to connect her directly to the store's ownership.⁷⁶ Winifred Child of *The Shop Girl* (1914) finds the same romantic fate at the end of Charles and Alice Williamson's novel. After working in the grueling position of shopgirl, she finally becomes engaged to the philanthropic son of the department store's owner and promises to use her influence and experience to effect change in the opportunistic establishment. In each of these instances, the department store in question has yet to embody a model of

⁷⁶ This is possible because Denton has already bought out his less-Christian partners by the end of the novel, leaving him in sole direction of the business to pass on to his son.

corporate distillation, and the comparably old-fashioned business structure empowers the female protagonist through a marriage plot.

In addition to facilitating the marriage plot that unites Maggie and Joseph, the nostalgia surrounding the department store in *Maggie Pepper* more explicitly engages forms of antimodernism that classify their story as a traditional tale of romance set amid modern times. A series of motifs woven alongside Maggie's efforts to become a buyer reveal modes of antimodernism operating within the modern framework of the department store. Utilizing aspects of adventure and romance to characterize their story, as well as bookending his novel with a European subplot, Klein taps into what Lears has described as a longing for romance, adventure, and the return to medieval days as a way of illustrating Joseph and Maggie's relationship alongside the more modern plot of her working career.

The frame Klein uses to open and conclude *Maggie Pepper* draws upon a European tradition of nobility and aristocracy that lend Joseph's actions—both occupational and romantic—an aura of medievalism. The novel begins in Europe where the French aristocrat Marquis de Brensac, an “excellent nobleman” (7), gives advice to the profligate American Joseph Holbrooke that triggers the story's events. From his castle on the Mediterranean, the Marquis tells Joseph that he finds meaning in life through “liv[ing] up to his family specialty” (12). Drawing upon his newfound notion of family heritage, Joseph leaves his exploits in Europe to return to the store in order to “follo[w] his duty to tradition and race as impressed upon him by that involuntary agent of destiny, the Marquis de Brensac” (76).

The European influence on Joseph's actions further serve to underscore those characteristics that Klein identifies as distinctly American. Klein draws a contrast in this section between an American pride in work and the European "art" of leisure (11). Joseph comes from "a long line of vigorous American workers" (9), and though his family's wealth gives him the privilege of leisure, Klein notes that Joseph has also inherited the family work ethic. In the midst of Joseph's "aimless prodigality" (8-9) in Europe, his blood "pulsed with subtle dissatisfaction" (9) at his idleness. Joseph's vitality recalls a symptom Lears has characterized of Victorian medievalism (as opposed to "modern enervation" [212]). In contrast to Joseph, who is stimulated by and drawn to the practical work that occurs in his family's department store, the marquis disapproves of discussing such common activity. Klein writes that Marquis de Brensac "would have been horrified by the bare suggestion of trade in connection with his most aristocratic self" (7). The marquis approves of working, but his line of work is notably more intellectual. He identifies himself as a "hereditary historian" (14), and he considers Joseph's line of work to be beneath him: "Trade of any sort remained something infinitely below his consideration" (17). For his part, Joseph cannot imagine "such tedious toil" as the historian's work, which he acknowledges is a better fit for "the blue-blooded marquis" (14).

Klein utilizes the amiable but divergent views of Joseph and the marquis as a source of humor, but they also serve to unify Joseph and Maggie and become a way to further validate their romance. As the marquis sits in his castle reading his antiquated books (the poems of Bertolome Zorzi [146], a memoir from the fourteenth century by his

own ancestor [300]), Joseph and Maggie work together on modernizing the store in New York. Through the lens of the European marquis, Joseph is still aligned with new money and has just recently “sprung of a line of merchant princes” (16); in this light, his match with the upwardly mobile Maggie Pepper is not so unlikely a leap.

Klein makes further use of antimodern sentiments through the medieval tropes of adventure that parallel the marriage plot at the end of the book. As events of the novel bring Maggie and Joseph closer together, Klein depicts the marquis as a sort of accidental European fairy godfather: “he was about to become a factor in the life-story of a modern maiden some thousands of miles distant from his castle and in a walk of life utterly unknown to him” (69). Ironically, the marquis laments the loss of medieval days when a man would fight to vie for the hand and “honor of his lady” (300). He believes that “Nowadays, even romance was become a lackadaisical thing, and adventure was wholly dead” (300). But Joseph and Maggie’s narrative across the Atlantic Ocean disproves this belief. Aside from bridging a class divide, Joseph gets shot (by Maggie’s nefarious brother-in-law) en route to winning her love; it is while nursing him back to health that Maggie finally accepts Joseph’s marriage proposal. Joseph and Maggie are living the very “wild adventure” (300) for which the marquis longs.⁷⁷ As if self-aware of their fantasy enactment, Joseph proclaims at the close of the novel that he plans to invite the Marquis de Bransac to the wedding. Maggie, in reply, quips that she “never did think

⁷⁷ This type of “romantic activism” is further evidence of what Lears has described as antimodernism (107). Joseph embodies the figure of the medieval knight displaying both “purity and ferocity” (Lears 113) in his morally upstanding treatment of Maggie and his aggressive treatment of Hergen: “There was fire in Joseph’s eyes, and his jaw was thrust forward, savagely. He looked capable of—anything!” (314).

much of those foreign titled chaps” but in the spirit of her happiness, she concludes “God bless the marquis” (317).

Unifying Maggie’s working-girl plot with the marriage plot that finally elevates her status, Klein identifies Maggie’s attempts at advancement with a kind of class mobility unique to American social mores. He writes, “Here, the shopgirl may ape the duchess” (143), and, more so, she may “do it to perfection” (143). Klein pointedly refuses to equate the shopgirl to the duchess, but he grants her the visual likeness. He also declares before their betrothal that Joseph is of “superior class” (144) to Maggie, maintaining a subtle class divide between them even as the characters themselves strive to erase and ignore it. Maggie may think little of “foreign title[s],” but she adheres enough to social codes that she does her best to align herself with Joseph through a course of self-improvement. Their union at the end of the novel, and Joseph’s proclamation that “we’ll live happy ever after” (316) suggests that she has been successful in her efforts.

Laura Hapke’s *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction* offers a useful paradigm to approach the questions of class mobility that run through *Maggie Pepper*. By investigating representations of working-class consciousness in American literature between 1840 and 1990 in a wide-ranging analysis of the literature of labor, Hapke argues that even in novels enacting social protest, the American dream of success through dedicated labor remains present. She even concludes that many of the novels she reads stop short of criticizing the basic foundations of capitalism to instead reaffirm the American dream. In *Maggie Pepper*, we see Klein both reveal the limitations of the

American Dream and sustain its potential promise through his deployment of both the working-girl story and the marriage plot.

Klein's merging of fantasy with reality works to repackage the story of a modern working woman as a traditional romance in the end. The department store itself stands in the center of Klein's dual impulses. As an old-fashioned store that undergoes a modern makeover from Maggie, the store both keeps up with the times and evokes times past. Its owner Joseph, who proudly proclaims to the Marquis de Bransac, "I, sir—I am an hereditary shopkeeper!" (15) exemplifies both an old-fashioned (by American standards) business legacy and, in the eyes of the European aristocrat, the crude peddler of commerce (or, as the marquis reacts, "a shopkeeper—ugh!" [16]). In wholeheartedly agreeing to marry her shopkeeper, Maggie both ties herself to the comforts of domestic stability by way of Joseph's inherited wealth and paves the way to obtaining unfettered access to the business she has been so keen to run. In the end, it does not matter if her story appears to some as an "incongruous spectacle" (Warnack, in his review of the play), because Klein tames her assertive feminism with a softening old-fashioned romance. Maggie's story creates a dual space for Maggie to be both intrepid professional and old-fashioned wife. It also, incidentally, pleased many audiences who welcomed, perhaps, a merging of storylines they enjoyed: as the same critic also declared, "Down with realism! Viva Maggie Pepper and all her tribe!"

Chapter 3: Forgetting the Uncomfortable: Reading the Shadows of Department Store Labor in *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox*

The plea was that of a gaunt-faced man of about thirty, who looked the picture of privation and wretchedness. Drouet was the first to see. He handed over a dime with an upwelling feeling of pity in his heart. Hurstwood scarcely noticed the incident. Carrie quickly forgot.

-Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (98-99)

“I must forget that, for I can’t be happy again until I do. I understand now why the comfortable people can be happy. They keep from knowing or they make themselves forget.”

-David Graham Phillips, *Susan Lenox* (I, 388)

When Susan Lenox walks into Sternberg’s department store with money to spend, she restricts herself to quiet purchases, selecting “plain, serviceable things,” including “the simplest of simple hats” (I, 387-8). This restrained scene of consumption from David Graham Phillips’ naturalist novel *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1917) interrupts a trying stretch of poverty for Susan. Earlier that evening, Susan and her friend Etta—cold, penniless, and out of work—had been “gazing hungrily” (I, 377) at the luxurious items on display in a department store window. Shopping, even modestly, moves a previously broken-down Susan to a state of pleasure. Warm and relaxed inside the store, she laughs and jests with her shopping companion and John for the evening—the aptly named John—as they walk around the store and poke fun at some of its wares. Her pleasure is soon interrupted when her John alludes to the forces of labor enabling her late-night diversion:

“I’m glad these poor tired shopgirls and clerks are set free.”

It was one of those well-meaning but worthless commonplaces of word-kindness that get for their utterance perhaps exaggerated credit for 'good heart.' Susan, conscience-stricken, halted. "And I never once thought of them!" she exclaimed. "It just shows."

"Shows what?"

"Oh, nothing. Come on. I must forget that, for I can't be happy again until I do. I understand now why the comfortable people can be happy. They keep from knowing or they make themselves forget." (1, 388)

John's reminder that the overworked staff of the store has been working late into the night evokes for Susan the underside of consumption. Their captivity at work in the store recalls Susan's own prior sense of imprisonment as a factory worker, and she confronts the need to compartmentalize the struggles of the working class away from the pleasures of consumption.

As Phillips suggests in this passage, carefree consumption and awareness of the difficult labor conditions underpinning that consumption cannot coexist. The "fascinating display of clothing" (I, 377) and "wonderful German party dress" (I, 388) exhibited in department stores can be experienced at the height of their mirth only when properly detached from the hands and legs and souls that put them there. Where Susan Lenox makes a conscious decision to sublimate the uncomfortable thought of hard-working shopgirls toiling late into the night in order to savor her visit to the department store, shopping enthusiast Carrie Meeber—Susan's precursor and in many ways fictional analog—overlooks the labor of the shopgirl entirely. In the iconic scenes of consumer desire Dreiser depicts in *Sister Carrie* (1900), wherein Carrie wanders through a

department store captivated by the items on display, she betrays none of the sensitivities to labor Susan demonstrates while shopping. And yet, both characters spend time working in factories that produce goods like those found in department stores; in fact, both protagonists almost become shopgirls themselves, though neither is hired to work in a department store.

This chapter examines the role played by the nearly invisible shopgirl in novels that keep her consistently in the background yet remain very much about her milieu. To address the relative invisibility of the shopgirl from much of our literary canon, this chapter focuses on two important works of American literary naturalism that include the shopgirl in their tales of female work, poverty, and aspiration while limiting her role to a nearly invisible place behind the counter. Reading Phillips's novel as a telling foil to Dreiser's, I seek to illuminate what the shopgirl's varying degrees of invisibility in *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* can tell us about the ways Dreiser and Phillips understand female labor and its relationship to consumer culture.

Sister Carrie is a novel that critics have examined through the lens of capitalism for many years. Key literary readings of the novel initially celebrated Dreiser's critique of capitalism through the plot of Hurstwood's decline. Critics such as Vernon Parrington and Alfred Kazin read Hurstwood's struggle to find work in New York and his descent into poverty as a forceful condemnation of capitalism. In his revisionary reading of *Sister Carrie*, Walter Benn Michaels argues against earlier readings of the novel as a critique of capitalism, contending that it is in fact an "unabashed and extraordinarily literal acceptance" of the capitalist economy (35). Focusing on the consumer desire that fills the

novel, Michaels contends that Dreiser ostensibly criticizes but ultimately participates in Carrie's "economy of desire" (35). Critics such as Philip Fisher and Rachel Bowlby have similarly focused on consumption in the novel, taking gender and consumer culture seriously to read Carrie's role as a consumer.⁷⁸ More recently, critics have brought renewed attention to the relationship between gender and labor in *Sister Carrie*. These critics have turned their readings of Carrie away from consumption and instead towards labor.⁷⁹ These approaches lay important groundwork for considering the novel's relationship to capitalism, its portrayal of consumer culture, and its commentary on women's work.

What these approaches stop short of asking, though, is to what extent the presence of sweatshop and department store workers shapes attitudes towards consumption. I propose that by reading Carrie from the perspective of the shopgirl, rather than reading her as the novel's personification of consumption and reading Hurstwood, or even the striking streetcar conductors, as its locus of struggling labor, we can better appreciate the elisions and evasions that complicate the relationship Dreiser imagines between work and

⁷⁸ Philip Fisher focuses on the material culture of *Sister Carrie* reading the city as a world filled with commodities that Dreiser uses as "indexes of fortune and value" for his characters (169). In *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, Rachel Bowlby reconsiders the meaning of shopping and consumer culture from a feminist perspective. Her analysis of "forms of modern consumer subjectivity and the making of willing female consumers" (11) demonstrates the way the modern advertising industry utilized male seduction of women while maintaining that the role of the shopper gives women visibility, agency, and pleasure.

⁷⁹ Nina Markov makes a case for reading Carrie not simply as a consumer but as a producer and as a member of the working class. In Jennifer Fleissner's chapter on *Sister Carrie*, she analyzes Carrie's representation as a working subject, deeming Carrie's career as an actress more than "sheer make-believe" and in fact rooted in a "real-world model" of working women (*Women* 180). Examining Dreiser's representation of working women in *Sister Carrie*, Laura Hapke places Carrie outside the frame of "the era's real labor turmoil" ("Men Strike" 105). Hapke demonstrates that Dreiser frequently isolates his female working characters from the "worker culture" that truly defined the "feminine work experience" ("Men Strike" 113).

consumption. This labor-focused reading is grounded in the world of the department store and in the figure of the shopgirl at the site where commodities that were produced in grueling labor conditions morph across the counter into dazzling icons of consumption. Reconsidering *Sister Carrie* from the perspective of the shopgirl who sells these goods illuminates the shadows of her position in the midst of rampant consumption and calls into question not only Carrie's biases but also those of Dreiser and of his readers.

Although neither novel thoroughly explores the position of the shopgirl, both *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* depict and engage the same types of economic, social, and moral questions present in department store novels of the same era. *Sister Carrie* was published contemporaneously with Lurana Sheldon's dime novels about department store labor, and Dreiser and Sheldon had experience writing for similar audiences, as they both worked for Street and Smith publishers.⁸⁰ Featuring energetic drummers, dour hiring managers, disdainful floorwalkers, and alluring merchandise, Dreiser's and Phillips' novels navigate similar urban labor and consumer landscapes as the fiction discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. But whereas the fiction featured in those earlier chapters focuses on the work lives of department store shopgirls, *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* engage mostly the periphery of the department store's elaborate setting.

The many parallels and similarities between *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* make the differences between their portrayals of female labor and consumer culture even more

⁸⁰ Fleissner also notes the similarity between *Sister Carrie*'s plot and Laura Jean Libbey's famed dime novel stories (*Women* 167). *Lotta, the Cloak Model* (1900), a department store novel by Libbey published the same year as *Sister Carrie*, also begins with the young country girl coming into the big city with hopes of working at a department store. Furthermore, Phillips' publication record, which includes the *Saturday Evening Post*, also overlaps with the popular fiction discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

revealing. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser offers an oblique representation of female department store labor by omitting it almost entirely from the novel. In doing so, he distances the scenes he does portray of commodity production in oppressive factories from scenes of indulgent consumption within department stores, amplifying the gap between labor and consumption. Whereas Dreiser refuses to merge labor exploitation and department store consumption, Phillips does so in very clear terms. *Susan Lenox* depicts the exploitation of department store shopgirls unambiguously while at the same time underscoring consumers' tendencies to mentally separate labor exploitation and consumer indulgence. Phillips forecloses the path to female professionalization via the department store, painting it instead as one of many sites of oppressive urban labor that casts women as sexual prey. *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox*, then, both show the difficulties of reconciling the pleasures of modern consumption with active support for improving the conditions of labor, but where Phillips makes this point overtly, Dreiser evinces it through authorial omissions. For both novels, it is virtually impossible for the books' protagonists to experience simultaneously the joys of consumption on the one hand and, on the other hand, empathy for or solidarity with the workers who make that consumption possible. In this sense *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* problematize the efficacy of solutions showcased in popular fiction novels from Chapter 1 that put the responsibility (and agency) for improving the lot of laborers in the hands of the same people who shop for and consume the goods laborers produce.

***Sister Carrie* and the World of the Department Store**

The backdrop of the department store plays a prominent role in Carrie's experience of Chicago. When Carrie moves from rural Wisconsin to the urban wonderland of Chicago, Dreiser peppers the landscape of the alluring city with prominent department stores. In Dreiser's original manuscript (published only after his death and hereafter referred to as the Pennsylvania edition) and the editions published in Dreiser's lifetime, Dreiser references many of Chicago's largest and most famous stores, including The Fair, Partridge's, The Boston Store, Schlesinger and Mayer's, and Carson Pirie, Scott, among others.⁸¹ Carrie applies numerous times for employment as a department store shopgirl, seeking work twice at The Fair before trying similar stores in the famed Loop shopping area. She fantasizes about working at The Fair and even lies to her sister about having "the promise of something" at The Boston Store (47).⁸² Carrie also experiences Chicago department stores as a consumer, shopping both on her own and later with Drouet. Additionally, Hurstwood once suggests that Carrie clandestinely meet him at The Fair to maintain anonymity when they first begin to see one another in secret. In *Sister Carrie's* narrative, the site of the department store provides opportunities for employment, self-fashioning, moral compromise, and even private meetings—but not, as we will see, labor exploitation.

⁸¹ In the 1900 edition, both Sea and Company and Partridge's are printed with alternate spellings to the historical stores, appearing as "See and Company" and "Partridge's" respectively; both store names are spelled accurately in the earlier Pennsylvania edition of the novel.

⁸² Page numbers for *Sister Carrie* quotations refer to the Norton edition of the novel with the exception of parenthetical citations where "Pennsylvania" precedes the page number, indicating quotes from the Pennsylvania edition of the novel edited by John C. Berkey, Alice M. Winters, James L. W. West III, and Neda M. Westlake.

The stores Dreiser chooses to feature in *Sister Carrie* were popular destinations for the everyday shopper rather than specialized, high-class establishments. The Fair, which is the store Dreiser most frequently and consistently names in his novel, vied for the position of largest, most popular store in Chicago. It was one of many “popular-priced stores” that lined State Street, also including The Boston Store and Siegel-Cooper (Whitaker 306). Historian Jan Whitaker describes The Fair as “a large Chicago department store in the bargain class” (111), that advertised itself as one of many “‘people’s stores’ that skipped frills and kept prices to a minimum” (32).

The Fair and other popular stores were of a different category from the iconic Marshall Field, which stands apart in Chicago as a beacon of luxury. Much of the merchandise sold at Marshall Field was of a high-end nature that “neglected one class of customer: the working-class woman” (Whitaker 21). This “lofty” store would have presented little opportunity for the inexperienced Carrie as either a customer or a job seeker (Whitaker 10). Eliminating Marshall Field from his novel, then, suggests a savvy class commentary on Dreiser’s part, as he situates Carrie in the realm of more popular, less upscale stores. It further serves to qualify Carrie’s fascinated idealization of The Fair as a naive impression indicating that she is still far out of touch with the wealth and power of Chicago.

Despite his precision in store settings, there remains a disjunction between the historical reality of the stores Dreiser represents and the manner in which he chooses to represent them. The general environments of popular department stores tended to be crowded and harried: they were “mobbed much of the time, with people scrambling for

goods on bargain tables” (Whitaker 11). This image of frenzied shopping differs greatly from the scenes Dreiser portrays in *Sister Carrie*, where Carrie walks unhindered along the aisles eyeing goods, cultivating desires, and observing with approval the other women in the store. This disjunction between Carrie’s experience in The Fair and historical depictions of the store underscores Carrie’s awe upon entering the store, which transcends any unpleasantness surrounding her; another possibility, of course, is that Dreiser himself simply spent little time in the Chicago’s department stores (or even that he, like Carrie, was more impressed by than judgmental of the stores’ surroundings).

In his representation of department store work, Dreiser places shopgirl wages within the realm of realistic albeit vague historical estimates. Carrie earns \$4.50 a week at the shoe factory and believes that her salary at a department store such as The Fair would be much higher (Pennsylvania 55). In fact, the salary of \$4.50 she receives in the shoe factory is in the realm of what a Chicago department store shopgirl could have expected to make in 1889.⁸³ Carrie could have earned a higher salary working at The Fair, but it is unlikely that the slight increase in her pay would have supported the kinds of expenditures she longs to make such as regular “visits to the theatres” (Pennsylvania 55).

⁸³ Department store wages varied depending on a number of factors, including particular position, worker experience, and hours employed. As Whitaker writes, “Around 1890, when the full-fledged department store began to emerge, the job of clerk was lowly, just a step above domestic service or factory work” (161). Both Woodbridge’s New York report from 1893 and Bowen’s Chicago report from 1911 denounce the low wages of department store shopgirls, claiming they do not constitute a living wage. Historian Susan Porter Benson locates a Boston saleswoman’s weekly salary at \$6.20 in 1880 and \$7.15 in 1908 (Appendix C). In her fiction, Lurana Sheldon places the salary at a lower quality department store between \$4 and \$5 per week (*For Humanity’s Sake* Chapter 3). An 1899 newspaper article testifies to these varied statistics, lamenting, “It is not possible to obtain trustworthy statistics as to the wages paid in department stores” (Handy). Perhaps more importantly, a shopgirl’s salary would depend on the quality of store, with low-budget, discount stores paying less than upscale stores that catered to the wealthier customers.

Drouet's relationship to the department store as a drummer further situates Dreiser's characters within the landscape of the urban department store. Drouet is intimately connected to the world of consumer culture through his career as a drummer, working as a salesman for the "large and prosperous" Bartlett, Caryoe & Company (33). Drouet's job would include selling trips to department store buyers across the country to persuade them to purchase the wares of Bartlett, Caryoe & Company for sale in their stores. When Drouet introduces himself to Carrie on the train, we learn that he takes great pride in his connection to this company, and his sense of self-importance infects Carrie: "He felt that it was something to be connected with such a place, and he made her feel that way" (5). Drouet enjoys not only the status of his affiliation but also the proximity to flirtation his job occasions. Drouet's job leads him frequently down the aisles of department stores and into the staff rooms, where he meets shopgirls and buyers through the course of his day; as Dreiser writes, "In the great department stores he was at his ease" (3) surrounded by amenable young shopgirls. Whether en route to his sales pitches or within the stores themselves, Drouet's frequent "trade pilgrimages" afford him many opportunities to meet and flirt with women (Pennsylvania 105).

Drouet's identity as a "masher," which Dreiser establishes in the first chapter of the novel, is tied closely to the figure of the drummer in other department store fiction. Drouet's work when he is out of the city looks very much like *Maggie Pepper's* Jake Rothschilds or Edna Ferber's Gabe Marks, all of whom are depicted as genial, flirtatious (to varying degrees), and successful in their jobs as salesmen. Dreiser further links Drouet to the cultural climate of the department store and of working class culture by

describing him as an “unattached masher” (Pennsylvania 106). This description associates him with flirtatious men of loose morals who frequently appear in other department store novels. Even Faith Marvin’s eventual husband in *For Gold or Soul?* is characterized as a masher early in the novel when he flirts so shamelessly with a shopgirl that he mockingly (but legally) marries her, all with no firm intention of commitment to the deceived girl. In keeping with these cultural depictions, Dreiser’s description of Drouet, Donald Pizer points out, “borrow[s] much of his wording from” (3 note 4) a passage in George Ade’s “The Fable of the Two Mandolin Players and the Willing Performer,” including a specific reference to one of the titular “Players,” Fred, who utilizes the department store as a site for flirtation. Ade writes, “In a Department Store, while waiting for the Cash Boy to come back with the Change, he would find out a Girl’s Name, her Favorite Flower, and where a Letter would reach her” (quoted in Pizer 392). Dreiser closely echoes this description when he writes of Drouet, “If he caught the attention of some young woman while waiting for the cash boy to come back with his change, he would find out her name, her favorite flower, where a note would reach her” (3-4). Drouet’s flirtatious nature, then, is tied to the space of the department store both within the novel and within the popular culture of the era.

Carrie’s relationship to the department store is similarly marked by desire, though her admiration of the women working in the store takes on a different nature from Drouet’s. Rather than attempting to seduce the shopgirls, Carrie yearns to become one. When she enters The Fair to seek employment, Carrie first encounters not only the “dazzling” (16) interior but also the shopgirls who work there. Carrie takes in their

“nature and appearance” and concludes that she “compares poorly” on both fronts (16). In appearance, Carrie finds them to be “pretty in the main” (16) and even “handsome” (17) in some cases. She is impressed with their clothing, which is “neat” and “in many instances fine” (17). Their attitudes reinforce the favorable impressions made by their appearances: these shopgirls have “an air of independence and indifference” and even, for some, “a certain piquancy” that seems to indicate a mysterious mastery of the city and its enchanting entertainments (17). Seeing these women, Carrie begins to think about “how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women” (17), and she feels simultaneously far-removed from these enchantments and determined to one day know them for herself. More than her desire for “each trinket and valuable” (16) in the store, Carrie “long[s] for dress and beauty with a whole heart” (17). Her sensitivity to her own poverty and her aspiration for a higher position in life come into sharp relief in the aisles of The Fair.

Carrie is persistent in her desire to work at The Fair. Though she is initially turned away when poorly dressed, inexperienced, and unfamiliar with the city, Dreiser charts a marked evolution of Carrie as consumer, city-dweller, and work-seeker through her marginally more successful second attempt. Her second interview at The Fair (depicted in more detail in the Pennsylvania edition) shows Carrie taken seriously as a viable candidate. Though she still does not land the coveted job as department store shopgirl, the reasons for her rejection on her second round of application are simply that it is out of season for hiring and there are no jobs to be had at the store. Dreiser writes that Carrie is taken seriously—she looks the part—and he demonstrates that she knows how to deceive

the hiring manager by (falsely) claiming prior experience in order to be a better candidate. Here, Carrie uses the same tactic of bluffing that Belle Rallston admits to using in *For Humanity's Sake* in order to gain her shopgirl position and, as Dreiser shows in the hiring manager's response, her strategy likely would have worked had there been an opening.

Dreiser undercuts Carrie's idealized view of a department store shopgirl with language indicating that his own perspective is less romanticized than Carrie's. The many qualifications Dreiser includes in Carrie's account of the shopgirls indicate that not all of the shopgirls at The Fair are as enchanting and lively as the women Carrie focuses on. Dreiser's language qualifies the positive impressions the shopgirls make on Carrie to show that these qualities only apply to some of the shopgirls in the store. Caveats include: "in the main," "some," "the more favoured," and "in many instances" (16-17), stipulating that other, less favored shopgirls in The Fair are neither pretty nor handsome nor well-dressed. These women remain unseen, as neither Dreiser nor Carrie dwells on those less fortunate workers. Though Dreiser's language makes clear that the shopgirls working at The Fair vary in appearance and manner, Carrie perceives these women as a group to be successful women working their ways up in the world and taking ownership of the store's goods that surround them. They all impress Carrie as self-sufficient, upwardly mobile, and stylish as a result of their location within the store. She views department store salesgirls as empowered agents of the world of consumption from which, at this point in the novel, she feels excluded. Her idealized view of these women is significant because it underscores her own naiveté about Chicago's work force, but at

the same time, it motivates Carrie to aspire to an ideal, and it further serves to suggest why Drouet's offer, replete with trappings of urban life she admires, is so appealing to Carrie.

As her first visit to The Fair demonstrates, Carrie has a very clear and specific (if glamorized) idea of who a shopgirl in a great department store is. Dreiser's utilization of the term "shop girl" is neither as particular nor as stable as Carrie's. Shifting between meanings to alternately label department store clerks, factory workers, and women working in the city in general, Dreiser resists specifying a coherent identity for the shopgirls that filter in and out of his novel.⁸⁴ In the novel's earliest usage of the term "shop girl," Dreiser applies it to women working in a store, such as the department store shopgirls Carrie admires. The term "shop girl" in these instances connotes a secure working position in the fine environment of the city's large department stores and is ensconced in the trappings of Carrie's fantasy of wealth, fashion, and comfort. As Carrie begins looking for work in Chicago and falls more frequently into the company of factory laborers, the term "shop girl" broadens to encompass the sweatshop workers Carrie joins. When Carrie passes through Spiegelheim & Co. hat shop, a sweatshop whose workers are "careless, slouchy, and more or less pale from confinement" (18), she observes a distinction between the working women at The Fair and the workers in this factory. Notably, she encounters this shop immediately after visiting The Fair, and the favorable

⁸⁴ Despite Dreiser's reputation for being sloppy in his language choices, his variations in usage here speak to a more deliberate reluctance to specify a coherent identity for the department store shopgirl.

impression of the department store shopgirls implicitly contrasts against these physically ailing workers. These women, Dreiser tells us, are “the lowest order of shopgirls” (18).

In *Sister Carrie*, then, there are different types of shopgirls, and from Carrie’s perspective, the difference is both marked and unsettling. The hierarchy thus established morphs Carrie’s shopgirl destiny from the aisles of the department stores that fascinate her to the rows of factory tables. Carrie remains highly attuned to the hierarchies as she continues working in the factory, and she hopes she is not perceived as a “common shop-girl” (39) such as her co-workers at the factory.

Despite his attention to a hierarchy of shopgirl types, there are yet moments in the novel where Dreiser sets aside pointed distinctions and instead uses the term to refer to working women more generally. As he already indicates when citing different “order[s]” (18) of shopgirl, Dreiser uses the term to apply to women who work in various types of shops, from the grand department stores to the seedy sweatshop factories. In a paragraph removed from the 1900 edition of the novel, Dreiser ruminates on Carrie’s aspirations in relation to other working women’s hopes:

Fine clothes, rich foods, superior residence, a conspicuously apparent assumption of position in others,— these she saw. She was no more clever in observing this than *any shop girl*. No matter how dull is the perception in other things, in such matters *all women* are clear. (Pennsylvania 97, emphasis mine)

His use of the term “shop girl” in this passage both labels Carrie as one such shop girl and implicates a large range of people—“all women”—in the motivations of “any shop girl.” In this universalizing passage, the shopgirls to whom he refers seem to extend beyond the specificity of a sales clerk in a department store or a sweat shop workers in a

factory; rather, in this passage, the general category of women who go to work in shops—whether stores or factories—in an effort to gain food, clothing, and shelter for themselves, fit this description.

It is not only Dreiser as narrator who conflates manifold working women into a single category; Drouet reads female laborers as similarly homogenized. Though he labels different job positions (a “store-girl” [51] versus “factory girls” [44]), Drouet elides any qualitative difference between them when he gestures with his hand to indicate the “inclusion of all shop and factory girls” (44) in his summation. Dreiser’s particularity of terms when describing Drouet, as opposed to the slippage seen elsewhere in the text, can best be understood by Drouet’s familiarity with these positions through his line of work. Yet even though Drouet (and Dreiser’s narration from his perspective) utilizes a variety of specific words to identify women who work in department stores versus factories, he nonetheless classifies these working women all in one category. The unifying trait Drouet seems to find in these positions is their low pay. As he explains to Carrie, “These girls...don’t get anything. Why, you can’t live on it, can you?” (44). This moment suggests that Drouet might understand the realities of department store labor as low pay for hard work; conversely, it could also merely be rhetoric on his part to persuade Carrie she would fare better as his mistress.

For Hurstwood too the term “shop girl” connotes lower class status, but as he applies the label to Carrie it becomes part of her appeal. Dreiser’s use of the term through Hurstwood’s perspective emphasizes a lower class position coupled with a desire to elevate one’s position as inherent to the aspirational shopgirl. Describing Hurstwood’s

“interest in Drouet’s little shop-girl,” Dreiser writes, “She had the aptitude of the struggler who seeks emancipation. The glow of a more showy life was not lost upon her” (82). Hurstwood views her former working position—for she has left the factory by this point in the novel—as wrapped up in ambition and hope for social mobility. He seems to fetishize the idea of Carrie as a shopgirl as a way of savoring his power over her and his ability to offer her the life she seems to desire. To be someone’s “little shop girl,” then, becomes a working-class status marker that makes her even more receptive to a relationship that promises upward mobility.

Despite the bustling landscape of department store commerce that fills *Sister Carrie*’s Chicago, Dreiser never makes Carrie a department store shopgirl. In many ways, *Sister Carrie* could have become one of the shopgirl stories discussed elsewhere in this study, but Dreiser writes a different novel, one which circumvents the labor of the department-store shopgirl to follow Carrie into the shelter of various male benefactors and ultimately out of Chicago.⁸⁵ As he turns to Carrie’s increasingly comfortable financial position, the department store appears in the novel only as a place of consumption where Carrie interacts with the objects of her fancy; once she reaches New York and begins her professional ascent as an actress, Carrie scarcely thinks of the shopgirls who work there. Indeed, by contrast with the books discussed in chapters 1 and 2, in *Sister Carrie* sales work barely registers as labor at all. Rather than representing another instance of grueling work, the position of the shopgirl functions in *Sister Carrie*

⁸⁵ Martha Banta notes the eagerness with which Dreiser removes Carrie from her working-class origins. She surmises that Dreiser is “much more interested” in Carrie as a consumer than as a producer of commodities (186).

to measure Carrie's own material success, city savvy, and class mobility before fading tellingly into the background.

Dancing Tables, Talking Shoes

From her arrival in the city, Carrie's relationship to labor is a tenuous one. Dreiser initially maps Carrie's future in Chicago along the lines of the working class, but when Carrie begins to embody this identity as a worker in the shoe factory, she increasingly resists classification with other working-class laborers. Dreiser appoints her as an incipient shopgirl before she even reaches the city, and though Dreiser continues to identify her as a worker—a "little toiler" (36)—in the early pages of the novel, Carrie is initially unaware of what that label even signifies. Walking down the streets of Chicago when she first arrives, Carrie feels a "wonderful" vagueness to labor (12) and assumes that work is associated with "the powerful and fashionable" inhabitants of the city (Pennsylvania 17). As Carrie becomes entrenched in working-class life, enduring tiring and discouraging interviews and then laboring painfully over the sewing machine in the shoe factory, she realizes her initial conception of work in the city had been an illusion. Carrie's life as a factory worker reveals itself to be unsustainable as she realizes that "[h]er idea of work" is "so entirely different" from the reality of it (29). Accordingly, Carrie acts to shape a new reality for herself. In doing so, however, she leaves behind almost entirely the memories of toil that characterize her early role as a producer of desired objects of consumption. When she emerges as an ardent consumer, she experiences articles of consumer culture—women's fashions, in particular—as detached from their production history.

Carrie quickly disassociates from her categorization as sweatshop factory shopgirl when she experiences the many discomforts of the factory work environment. Embodying the aching, tedious, and – to her mind—uncouth role of the worker in the shoe factory, Carrie attempts to differentiate herself from the other workers through her manners and taste. She most actively works to unsettle her characterization as a shop girl when the description denotes commonness. Carrie observes the ways other girls working at the factory speak: “It was, for the most part, silly and graced by the current slang” (29). Even more upsetting to her, the casual interactions between men and women in the factory shock her: “As Carrie listened to this and much more of similar familiar badinage among the men and girls, she instinctively withdrew into herself. She was not used to this type, and felt that there was something hard and low about it all” (29). Far from feeling the “flame of envy lighted in her heart” (17) as when she admired the shopgirls in *The Fair*, Carrie instead finds “indignation leap[ing] to her eyes” (29) when she is treated like another factory worker.

In an attempt to reject categorization with her co-workers, Carrie uses material goods to distinguish herself. When she purchases a new umbrella at a department store, rather than use Minnie’s “worn and faded” (39) one, Carrie hopes her purchase will clearly set her apart from the other women at the shoe factory: “She was not going to be a common shop-girl, she thought; they need not think it, either” (39). In the Pennsylvania edition, Dreiser follows this sentence with a passage in which Carrie ruminates on her social aspirations and her desire to see the city. The passage concludes with Carrie’s misguided determination that securing a job at *The Fair* would give her access to more

money (Pennsylvania 55). Indeed, Carrie concludes that work in the factory is not for her: “She felt as though she could hardly endure such a life” (29). Nor is Carrie the only one to intuit a divergence between the quality of life in the working class and her own aspirations; Drouet too upholds Carrie’s distinction as somehow apart from the working class. Gazing at her early in their relationship, he finds her “not like the common run of store girls” (51). Once she moves on from her employment in the shoe factory, Carrie indeed leaves working-class life and her temporary identity as a shopgirl far behind.

After leaving her sister’s austere home and moving into comfortable quarters with Drouet, only the sight of a former co-worker has the power to transport Carrie briefly back to her time as a worker. When Carrie, en route to the theater, notices this worker from the shoe factory on the street, the woman’s eyes serve as a synecdoche for her body as “a pair of eyes met Carrie’s in recognition” (56). Dreiser’s emphasis on the eye contact that passes between the two women as they recognize one another underscores the core of their connection stripped away from their varying modes of attire. Their most basic features are alike and connected; Carrie is only a tattered dress away from sitting at that machine. Despite—or perhaps because of—her proximity to a working-class life, it is only this visual reminder of a woman she once worked with that propels Carrie’s memory back to her time in the factory. None of the many trips Carrie takes to department stores prompt her to ponder the origins of the merchandise she admires there. But in this meeting on the street, confronted with a visual, human reminder of her work, Carrie finally does pause to consider her time at the factory and her change in position since leaving Minnie.

The nature of Carrie's reflection, which is rooted not in empathy for the working class or self-awareness of commodity production but in chilling dismay for the way she used to dress, evinces Carrie's preoccupation with clothing. The memory that passes over her as she notices her former colleague's appearance inextricably links factory work to attire: in one moment, both "[t]he old dress and the old machine came back" (57). Shortly before this encounter on the street, Dreiser reiterates the importance of dress to Carrie when he describes a shopping trip Carrie and Drouet take to Carson, Pirie, Scott. At the store, Drouet buys her a new ensemble that transforms Carrie into "quite another maiden" (56). Pleased with the metamorphosis this new clothing affords her, Carrie marvels, "She was pretty, yes, indeed!" and feels "her first thrill of power" (56). In stark contrast to the empowerment of being well dressed, Carrie's factory days are marked in her memory by the inadequacy of her clothing. Her own "rather faded" (24) clothing has been a point of shame for Carrie since she first saw the stylishly dressed women in The Fair and felt her own "shortcomings of dress" (17). Leaving the shoe factory after her first day at work, Carrie sees women in impressive clothing and feels "ashamed in the face of better dressed girls" (30). Her feelings of embarrassment fade as she is able—with the help of Drouet—to dress to her own satisfaction. Despite Carrie's transformation, memories of her "old dress" return when she sees the "poorly dressed girls" in their "faded, "loose-hanging," and "old" clothing (56). Indeed, when Carrie and the factory worker look in one another's eyes, Carrie feels "as if some great tide had rolled between them" (57). Carrie's moral choice to live with Drouet is implicated in this divide between the women,

but more pressing and important in Carrie's mind is the material difference in their appearance as they stand apart from one another on the street.

Carrie's moment of distraction vanishes when the wonders of the city divert her attention away from the shopgirl in the street and from her own past as a factory worker. The scene at the theatre that immediately follows Carrie's preoccupation is filled with "spectacle[s]" that absorb her focus: "colour and grace," a "show of finery and gayety," "the swirl of life" (57). These sights transfix Carrie, whose thoughts linger no longer on memories of factory life as she instead delights in the "fine ladies" at the theatre with their "rustling" skirts and "lace-covered heads" (57). In this scene, Carrie feels the thrill of acceptance among this crowd. Where Carrie notices the "white teeth showing through parted lips" of the women around her, Dreiser parallels the description with a comparable one of Carrie's own teeth "glistening through her smiling lips" (57). Drouet's complimentary "You look lovely!" further aligns Carrie with the "throng of fine ladies" (57) around them. Far from reinforcing Carrie's origins in the factories of working-class Chicago, the sighting of her co-worker before this night at the theatre further reinforces Carrie's distance from that old identity.

Carrie's hesitation to dwell on the quality of working life frames other experiences she has in Chicago as well. When faced with individuals who might evoke her working-class days of struggle, Carrie maintains her distance. In another scene closely linked to a theatre outing, Carrie, Dreiser, and Hurstwood pass a man begging on the street. Similar to her encounter with the shopgirl, whose eyes were the first feature to emerge from the flock of girls, this man's voice reaches through the crowd to Carrie and

her escorts. The man is an even more extreme example of poverty than the working girls from the shoe factory. His face is “gaunt,” and Dreiser remarks that he is “the picture of privation and wretchedness” (98). The good-natured Drouet quickly aids him with a dime and an “upwelling feeling of pity” (99), but Carrie is not so deeply moved. Unlike Hurstwood, who “scarcely noticed” the man and his pleas, Carrie, Dreiser writes, “quickly forgot” (99). Dreiser here implies that Carrie had first taken notice of the scene she was soon to forget, but he does not unveil her reactions or musings upon noticing the man. His focus in this sentence, which ends the chapter, is on the act of forgetting. Just as when she briefly connects with the factory worker on the street before immersing herself in the theater, Carrie is quick to sublimate thoughts about poverty and discomfort.

Her propensity to dissociate herself from her working past is most apparent in Dreiser’s extended narration about her relationship to fashion. In this passage, which opens Chapter 11, material objects verbalize their allure to Carrie by speaking directly to her, again pushing away thoughts of strife and dinginess in favor of comfort and beauty. Of a lace collar and shoes, Dreiser writes, “they spoke tenderly” to Carrie with an audible “pleading” that she keep and treasure them (72). Speaking “for themselves” as if they were autonomous people, the objects’ personified voices carry more weight with Carrie than the voices, eyes, and bodies of people whose work created the objects (72). The passionate diction Dreiser uses in this passage is heightened in the Pennsylvania edition, which contains an additional “Ah, ah!” preceding the “voice of the so-called inanimate!”

(Pennsylvania 98).⁸⁶ Dreiser's hyperbolic tone here affords the possibility of sarcasm as he ventriloquizes the "so-called inanimate" objects, but the aggrandizement of the shoes and collar in this passage nevertheless underscores the intense bond Carrie forges with the objects she acquires. Evoking Marx's famous speaking table, the new shoes call out to Carrie not as goods manufactured by tired workers with aching shoulders, wrists, and fingers but as their own magical entities that will transform her appearance.

Only briefly does Dreiser indicate that Carrie's valued articles of clothing are tinged with moral complexity. Contemplating the "method by which they came" into her life (72)—a reference to her relationship with Drouet—tempts Carrie to abandon the gifts of finery and return to her single life of struggle. Yet even that moralistic vein of thought does not prompt her to revisit the method by which the shoes were produced. When Carrie does think about her prior relationship to shoes, her memory is of the inferior shoes she once wore instead of the shoes whose upper halves she labored over on the factory's assembly line. The appeal of her conscience to leave Drouet's comfortable patronage and return to her "torn pair of shoes" conjures a vague image of the "hard work" and "suffering" that would await her (72). But even here, Carrie's thoughts remain indefinite and contain nothing to specifically recall a production history of the shoe. Even beyond the actual moment of their purchase, Carrie still cannot view her cherished acquisitions as mere commodities that were assembled in factories where she and others have worked to produce the contested consumer goods.

⁸⁶ Dreiser initially amplifies the voice of the inanimate in the Pennsylvania edition, where he instead uses the plural "voices"; it was revised (presumably by Dreiser or his editor) to the singular in the 1900 edition.

Rather than speak about their production or voice the labor of young women hunched over machines for hours, the shoes in this passage shower Carrie with praise. They flatter Carrie's own figure, enticing her into keeping them to enhance her appearance. Just as the lace collar compliments her with a focus on her pleasing appearance, the voice of the shoes highlights the comfort they afford her, emphasizing "how effectively I cover" Carrie's feet (72). Despite having once punched holes into leather to make shoes herself, Carrie does not here associate the "leather of [her] soft new shoes" with labor (72). Any memories she may have of the factory's "thick odour of fresh leather" (27), which contributes to the unsavory, "stale odours" (28) that permeate the building, remain sublimated.

Even as Carrie blocks out the repetitive labor required to produce shoes, Dreiser repeatedly returns to them as signifiers of their wearers' status. In numerous passages, shoes function as markers of social class that distinguish their wearers. For example, when Carrie notices the "elegance" of Hurstwood's "soft leather" shoes in comparison with Drouet's flashier patent leather shoes, the respective shoes lead her to determine that Hurstwood might be a more worthy partner for her upwardly mobile ambitions (69). Though Carrie takes careful notice of the materials that comprise their shoes, eyeing the respective sheens of the shoes' leather finishes, she gives no such consideration to their production histories nor to the human labor involved therein. Shoes measure Carrie's own social position as well. Dreiser uses them to track Carrie's ability to mimic the fashionable women Carrie and Drouet encounter in Chicago. Drouet admires and points out the "little feet" of "pretty women" they pass on the street (72). Understanding that

these women are “[f]ine stepper[s]” (72), Carrie imitates their walking patterns (73). Manipulating her own be-shoed feet to mimic those of the well-dressed ladies she admires, Carrie’s bodily maneuvers are accentuated by the shoes encasing her feet. Therefore, Carrie sustains her focus on the aesthetic benefits her new shoes—and other articles of attire—bring to her life instead of remaining mired in the weighty thoughts of the suffering, discomfort, and shabby appearance that accompany her fleeting memories of life in the factory.

Dreiser’s Strange Optimism

Carrie’s willingness to suppress thoughts of harsh labor conditions does not mean Dreiser himself avoids any similar knowledge. Like other socially conscious writers at the turn of the century, Dreiser takes note of labor exploitation and poverty within American society. As I will demonstrate, his language frequently mirrors that of writers such as Lurana Sheldon and Rupert Hughes in depicting instances of labor exploitation as well as consumers’ tendencies to overlook the exploitation underpinning their consumption. But where other writers in this dissertation locate such problems within the department store, embodied by the figure of the shopgirl, Dreiser—in his nonfiction writing as well as in *Sister Carrie*—does not see the shopgirl as an exploited worker; in fact, the figure of the department store shopgirl scarcely fits into his view either of labor or of urban hardship.

In a striking editorial from October 1896, Dreiser cautions against the very urge towards commodity fetishism that Carrie will enact fictionally with Dreiser’s ambiguous endorsement. Dreiser pointedly holds the “glitter” of the city against the “shadowy”

underworld of labor and poverty that underpins it. Although he empathizes with people who—just as he later characterizes Carrie—yearn to “join in the great, hurrying throng; to see the endless lights, the great shops and stores, the towering structures and palatial mansions” the city has to offer (Barrineau 191), he nevertheless identifies injustices rooted in these urban wonderlands and shines a light on workers he fears are both hidden by and overlooked in favor of urban grandeur. Dreiser composes a poignant and candid illustration of the division between the alluring world of consumer culture and the exploited working class that enables it:

Down in the dark earth are the roots, drawing life and strength and sending them coursing up the veins; and down in alleys and byways, in the shop and small dark chambers are the roots of this luxurious high life, starving and toiling the long year through, that carriages may roll and great palaces stand brilliant with ornaments. These endless streets which only present their fascinating surface are the living semblance of the hands and hearts that *lie unseen* within them. They are the gay covering which *conceals the sorrow and want and ceaseless toil* upon which all this is built. They *hide* the hands and hearts, the groups of ill-clad workers...If [these great walls] could be swept away, or dissolved, and only the individuals left in view, there would be a new story to tell. (Barrineau 192, emphasis mine)

In a series of contrasts, Dreiser sets labor and consumption against one another in distinct categories. Juxtaposing high and low, light and dark, large and small, Dreiser differentiates the “small dark” places seemingly buried underground like the roots of the plant—vital yet unseen—from the “luxurious,” “great palaces” that, unlike their buried counterparts, display a “fascinating surface.” This formulation makes ample space to recognize oppressed workers but only as separate from the opulent spaces of consumer culture. The figure of the shopgirl, whose labor occurs within the gaily covered walls of department stores, becomes necessarily excluded, then, from the throng of “hands and

hearts that lie unseen.” Visible as their bodies may be—indeed, because of their visibility— the labor of shopgirls remains hidden in Dreiser’s vivid description of unseen toilers.

As the above passage illustrates, Dreiser identified a need for certain workplace reforms. In issues of *Ev’ry Month*, he describes the “pernicious system” of sweatshops where workers slave away in “small, dark, foul closet[s]” from “dawn till midnight” (qtd in Barrineau 258).⁸⁷ He exhibits concern about “urban poverty” (Davies 7) and about the “nameless poor” whom, Nancy Barrineau argues, later take the shape of Hurstwood at the nadir of his decline (xxxix). He even wrote about a garment workers’ strike in October of 1896 and cautions young women drawn to the big city by the hopes of employment (historical analogues for Carrie): “To those who are infatuated with the thought of living in a city and of enjoying the so called delights of metropolitan life, the recent strikes in the [sweatshops] of New York may furnish a little food for reflection” (qtd in Barrineau 190-1). In a column for *Ev’ry Month*, Dreiser reprints a pamphlet circulated by the Coat Pressers Union in which the workers appeal to the public to help them in their “hour of need, misery and hunger” (qtd in Barrineau 193). Dreiser laments the “misereries” these workers endure as well as the “shades of suffering” and “grades of poverty” that mark society (qtd in Barrineau 192, 194).

⁸⁷ Even on this point his narrative voice in *Sister Carrie* is optimistic. Dreiser writes in *Sister Carrie* that working conditions in sweat shops such as the shoe factory where Carrie labors in the 1889 setting of the novel have subsequently improved their conditions under “the new socialism” (28) of Dreiser’s contemporary time period. The purportedly dated, untenable conditions he describes in the shoe factory where Carrie works in fact share much in common with the department store working conditions Lurana Sheldon describes in her contemporaneous 1900-1901 novels as well as those Hughes describes in his 1911-1912 novels over a decade later.

Similar concerns about workers surface intermittently in *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser meticulously describes the struggle Carrie undertakes to secure even the underpaid job at the shoe factory when she first arrives in Chicago, and he amplifies the struggle to secure work as he details Hurstwood's decline. Dreiser, as critics have noted, depicts the ravages of capitalism on the workers in Hurstwood's streetcar scene.⁸⁸ Notably, his writing about streetcar workers recognizes capitalist constraints and the need for, if ineffectiveness of, labor reform. Streetcar workers form a particular, male-centric portion of the labor sector he recognizes as needing reform.

Whereas Dreiser's writing about streetcar workers recognizes significant problems working men face, he only extends this evaluation to certain types of women's work he depicts in *Sister Carrie*. The line of continuity from the oppressed streetcar workers is strongest in his description of Carrie's work in the sweatshop. Though he dismisses sweatshop exploitation as an outdated problem, Dreiser is very adept at imagining the bodily dimensions of work in a sweatshop.⁸⁹ He describes the ache of Carrie's muscles as she sits hunched over the sewing machine for hours, becoming "one mass of dull, complaining muscles" after a few hours of work (28). He even pointedly

⁸⁸ See Parrington and Kazin. Jerome Loving connects Dreiser's later writing about labor to his developing political beliefs, linking Dreiser's increasing socialist sympathies in the 1920s to his portrayal of Clyde Griffiths as "a victim of social and economic forces beyond his control" in *An American Tragedy* (298). It is not until 1945 that Dreiser officially joins the American Communist Party (Loving 397).

⁸⁹ Three years after his writing in *Ev'ry Month* criticizing New York sweatshops, Dreiser published an article indicating his encouragement on the prospects of garment and other sweatshop workers when he wrote *Sister Carrie*. In this article, "It Pays to Treat Workers Generously," the condition of the suffering, invisible underclass seems greatly brightened for Dreiser through the lens of Patterson's factory, aberrant as it may in fact have been.

identifies the physical demands of acting in a chorus line when Carrie leaves her first rehearsal in New York “worn enough in the body” (270).⁹⁰

But unlike the authors discussed in my first two chapters and even, as we will see, Phillips, Dreiser does not seem to recognize sales work as a physically demanding or rigorous category of work. Perhaps due to their working environments within icons of consumer culture—large department stores, fancy restaurants—these workers appear to Dreiser to occupy the land of “luxurious high life” rather than “small dark chambers,” and as such their efforts do not register as difficult labor (Barrineau 192). The department store shopgirl at Partridge’s who helps Carrie try on a jacket appears to do very little work at all. Dreiser’s frequent use of passive language amplifies the erasure of the shopgirl in this scene. For example, when Carrie enters the store and spots the desired jacket, it appears in her hand as if by magic: “she got it in her hand” (51) through no discernable source of help. Dreiser does identify a small act of worker exertion writing that a “saleswoman helped her on with [the jacket]” (51). But when the jacket “by accident...fitted perfectly” (51) we again see Dreiser utilizing enigmatic language that mystifies consumption, blurring the role of labor involved in the process. The shopgirl reappears briefly when Carrie decides to purchase the jacket. Dreiser writes that she “went off” to finalize the purchase (52). Again, he gives no sense of what tasks the shopgirl is actually performing or where she goes to complete the sale before “[i]n a few minutes she was back” (52). With her return, Dreiser passively notes that “the purchase

⁹⁰ Jennifer Fleissner persuasively reads Carrie’s job as an actress in New York as a historically realistic and legitimate form of work (*Women* 180-1).

was closed” (52), and Carrie leaves the store. The act of consumption in this scene appears to be a magnetic coupling of Carrie with her desired goods that writes out the labor of the shopgirl almost entirely.

In contrast, a Laura Jean Libbey novel published in the same year narrates with more specific detail the work involved in department store sales. *Lotta, the Cloak Model; or, Life in a Department Store* (1900) features a scene depicting a much more active role of a shopgirl, the eponymous protagonist Lotta, in the potential sale of a coat. Working at the behest of a vindictive department head, Lotta models coats for a customer until “she could scarcely stand, and her arms were almost paralyzed” (150). The labor is intensive, requiring her to try on each coat, walk down the aisle to model it for the prospective customer, and then put each modeled coat away. Libbey attends to each step of this process. By the time Lotta is allowed to go home for the evening, she is exhausted. The fatigue and tedium of working in a department store as represented in Libbey’s novel—which also contributes to the melodrama of Lotta’s story—are absent from Dreiser’s depictions of department store shopping.⁹¹ Where Libbey’s novel highlights the activities and physical experience of the woman selling the coats, Dreiser animates the coat itself and emphasizes Carrie’s delight in desiring it.

Even Drouet’s job, which is itself a type of sales position, is not depicted as difficult work. Dreiser traces Drouet’s “fine success as a salesman” to his “geniality and the thoroughly reputable standing of his house” (46). Dreiser frequently references

⁹¹ Critics have noted various correlations between Libbey’s dime novels and Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. In addition to Fleissner’s observation that Dreiser’s “mysterious new world of rakes and temptations” mirrors Libbey’s fictional tableaux (*Women* 167), Davidson and Davidson establish a network of popular culture predecessors for Carrie that revolves centrally around Laura Jean Libbey.

Drouet's innate sense of humor, talent for socializing and storytelling, and overall "genial" nature (32). He also stresses that these agreeable social qualities are more responsible for Drouet's business success than any particular dedication on Drouet's part. Drouet's efforts at work extend no farther than "pursuing the routine of his satisfactory employment" (Pennsylvania 106), and his boss, Caryoe, finds him accordingly to be simply and precisely "a clever, successful business man" (47). Nothing more or less is required of Drouet to successfully fulfill his position, which speaks both to his fitness for the role and to the ease of its requirements. And indeed these qualities suffice to fuel Drouet's prosperous career in sales.

Similarly, Dreiser characterizes Hurstwood's job as manager at Fitzgerald and Moy's as more filled with fraternizing than with labor. Like Drouet, Hurstwood is affable, "capable of creating a good impression" in others, and though he also manages finances for the bar, he mainly "loung[e] about" to fulfill his duties (32). Dreiser attributes Hurstwood's keen ability to socialize with the bar's patrons to a chief "part of his success" (32). Working and socializing almost appear as one and the same for Hurstwood. The night he spends at the theatre watching *Carrie* in *Under the Gaslight* reads almost identically in terms of the crowd and tenor of his interactions to his nights working at the Fitzgerald and Moy's. Dreiser treats Drouet's and Hurstwood's respective positions in the sales and service industries as organic, effortless extensions of the worker's personality rather than as skilled and laborious exertions. It follows, then, that the department store shopgirl, working in an overlapping sector of sales and service,

would fall under a similar rubric in Dreiser's representation.⁹² Though Hurstwood and Drouet are far better compensated for their jobs, which Dreiser portrays as high-ranking professions, than entry-level service workers are, the idea of an ease in salesmanship extends to his depiction of the entry-level shopgirl.

A similarly instructive depiction of labor in *Sister Carrie*, the work of restaurant wait-staff, reinforces Dreiser's tendency to avoid recognizing the difficulties of sales work. In several scenes set in restaurants, Dreiser depicts the wait-staff alternately as insignificant figures relegated to the background of the scene or as tokens of luxury that contribute to the status of the expensive dining experience. When Drouet first invites Carrie to dine with him in Chicago, the waiter appears to hear his order and then returns "with an immense tray" (43), but it is Drouet who actively serves their meal to Carrie: he "fairly shone in the matter of serving," as he "cut the meat," "stretched to reach the plates, break the bread, and pour the coffee" (43). When Carrie dines with Ames later in the novel, Dreiser depicts the actions of waiters in more detail but still refrains from commenting on their labor. Enumerating their attentions to the customers and to the food, he writes that they "did all those little attentive things calculated to impress the luxury of the situation upon the diner" (228). Dreiser classifies this work less as the physical or psychological exertion of a worker and more as a commodity to be purchased. Carrie is "keenly aware of all the little things that were done—the little genuflections and

⁹² Dreiser's representation of women's work remains consistent in subsequent novels. In her analysis of female labor in Dreiser's work, Laura Hapke notes that Jennie Gerhardt's job washing laundry receives the same distanced treatment of female labor seen in *Sister Carrie*. This "decoupling [of] women and work" (Hapke "Men Strike" 110) extends, I would argue, even to *An American Tragedy* (1925), where Roberta's position at Griffiths Collar & Shirt Company functions more as a marker of her class identity than as an occupation of physical labor for her.

attentions of the waiters and head waiter which Americans pay for” (225). Again, the role of the service worker in this scene is secondary to the story of consumption Dreiser highlights.

Dreiser’s fascination in *Sister Carrie* with the world of consumption found in Chicago’s grand department stores and restaurants eclipses a potentially more detailed, attentive portrait of labor on the other side of the counter as arduous, even exploitative work. Many of his articles for *Success* and *Ev’ry Month* focus on success tales of corporate leaders or envision a specific element of the working class that excludes shopgirls. Take, for example, a profile of Marshall Field he wrote around the time period of *Sister Carrie*. In his profile, Dreiser repeatedly stresses Field’s rise through the ranks of capitalism from his “poor” childhood on a farm to his position as the head of Marshall Field & Company (Hakutani *Selected* 131). Dreiser’s sustained focus on Field’s ascent highlights the opportunity embedded in entry-level positions such as store clerk while ignoring the exploitation that too often characterizes these positions. In fact, as we have already seen, the store Marshall Field & Company is so upscale that the disparity between its owner and Chicago’s humble shopgirls is vast.

If Dreiser’s profile of Marshall Field embraces a rags-to-riches narrative wherein capitalism serves as a route to American success, his other writing in the years surrounding *Sister Carrie*’s publication evinces similarly optimistic narratives of American capitalism. Yoshinobu Hakutani notes how “easy [it was] for Dreiser to follow the well-established pattern of a Horatio Alger story” when he wrote for *Success* and even concludes that his writing for *Success* “lacked the sensitive approach that marked

his best essays” (*Selected* 30). In contrast to Dreiser’s late-in-life allegiance to the communist party, the turn of the century found Dreiser seemingly optimistic about the prospects of the American worker.

Whereas Dreiser briefly articulates concerns about factory workers in his late nineteenth century journalism, he demonstrates confidence that, by 1900, America was moving in a positive direction incorporating humane practices into the workforce. Donald Pizer cites an 1899 article Dreiser wrote as the source of his reference to “new socialism” in *Sister Carrie* (Pizer 28 note 2). The article, titled “It Pays to Treat Workers Generously,” examines the working conditions at John H. Patterson’s factory and was published in *Success* magazine September 16, 1899. In this article, Dreiser interviews Patterson about his adaptations to the National Cash Register [NCR] factory in an effort to increase the physical, mental, and moral comfort of his workers.⁹³ Patterson developed a reputation, which he relayed into a marketing strategy, for labor conditions that emphasized worker comfort.⁹⁴ Working conditions in Patterson’s factory included the use of chairs with backs as opposed to stools—a detail Dreiser used in depicting Carrie’s painful labor conditions perched upon a stool rather than a “swivel-back chair” or “foot-

⁹³ Patterson’s company provided medical care and offered numerous welfare programs to their employees; they limited work hours for men and women, beautified the surrounding factory grounds, and offered employee profit sharing, among other benefits (Sealander 23-26).

⁹⁴ Despite his seemingly generous business practices, Patterson was not universally acknowledged to be a benevolent capitalist. Multiple historians have described him as a “ruthless” businessman whose humanistic tactics were simply in service of larger profits (Bell 9, Sealander 34). Judge Howard Hollister, who sentenced Patterson to prison in 1913 for violating the Sherman Antitrust law, declared the actions of his company “despicable,” “mean,” “petty,” and “proceeding from a desire for gain that led them to forget everything else” (quoted in Sealander 34). Patterson’s sentence was later overturned, thanks in part for the assistance he provided to the town of Dayton, Ohio following a damaging flood in 1913 (Bell 9). Even Patterson acknowledges that his strategy of treating workers “generously” arose from the “selfish” motive of increasing his own business profits (Dreiser, “It Pays” 249, 251).

rest” (29). Although Dreiser’s interview style in the article, which consists mainly of Patterson’s extended response to Dreiser’s succinct questions, leaves a certain ambiguity around Dreiser’s own opinion, he provides a brief introductory paragraph preceding the interview that positions Patterson’s factory in a favorable light. Biographer Robert Elias concludes that Dreiser “seemed persuaded by Patterson’s paternalistic idea” (99).

Dreiser’s journalism around the time of *Sister Carrie*’s publication contributes to the sense that Dreiser favored a fair workplace setting while remaining optimistic that the American economy was auspicious to America’s workers. As scholars have asserted, Dreiser was hopeful about American progress in his journalism. Describing Dreiser’s outlook on American society around 1900, Robert Elias writes that many aspects of society, from improved housing for the poor to “the nation’s large-scale enterprises provided [Dreiser with] occasions for optimism” (100). Hakutani echoes this portrayal when he asserts that in the time Dreiser was writing *Sister Carrie*, he was “undoubtedly an optimist” (*Selected* 27). In Nancy Barrineau’s estimation, Dreiser was “a believer” that society would be shaped for the better by the technological changes of the era (xxxi). Scholarly accounts concur that, while cognizant of certain needs for workplace reform, Dreiser remained confident such reforms were both possible and underway (Hakutani, *Selected* 33; Elias 100). Amidst this optimism regarding the opulent, glittering lights of urban development, the difficult labor of the shopgirl remains out of Dreiser’s sight.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Lest we attribute Dreiser’s optimism about department store work to Carrie rather than to Dreiser himself, numerous historical records indicate that depictions of working conditions in department store novels by Lurana Sheldon and Rupert Hughes (among others) were more historically accurate than Dreiser’s depiction in *Sister Carrie*. Fictional representations of working conditions in department stores depicted by Sheldon and Hughes not only align with the Working Women’s Society of New York (see

Prioritizing those whom Dreiser's 1896 editorial refers to as the "individuals left in view" (qtd in Barrineau 192) when the allure of consumer culture fades is indeed necessary work, and writers such as Lurana Sheldon, Rupert Hughes, O. Henry, Edna Ferber, and David Graham Phillips similarly valued depicting the lives of working characters in literature spanning genres of realism, naturalism, and popular fiction. But where these writers turn to the world of the department store to answer pressing questions about labor exploitation and consumption, Dreiser finds little more than consumer fantasies in Chicago's luxurious department stores. In his inability to recognize shopgirl labor as such, Dreiser's work of realism contains a tellingly unrealistic strand.⁹⁶ It is a question left open, when Dreiser composes *Sister Carrie*, whether (like Hurstwood) he scarcely notices the labor of department store shopgirls or whether (like Carrie) he quickly forgets.

The Case of *Susan Lenox*

David Graham Phillips's *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1917) addresses the troubling tension between consumer culture and labor exploitation in a treatment that both mirrors and surpasses Dreiser's. Written over the decade following *Sister Carrie*'s publication, *Susan Lenox* shares similarities with *Sister Carrie* in plot, genre, and even

Woodbridge's report) but also reflect several other accounts of the era (see "A Salesgirl's Story" and MacLean's "Two Weeks in a Department Store"). Even a shopgirl's reflection in "A Salesgirl's Story," which indicates a range of work conditions among New York City's department stores from "first-class" to "cheap stores," attests to widespread problems with living wages and exploitation. At the very least, the timely issues raised in novels by Sheldon and Hughes were accurate representations of real problems with department store work that Dreiser's novel disregards.

⁹⁶ In this way, Dreiser does inject Carrie's plot with a kind of romanticism. Though I trace this lack of realism to Dreiser's own oversight in shopgirl labor conditions as opposed to patterns in his diction, my reading aligns with Sandy Petrey's conclusion that the Carrie plotline of the novel lacks the realism attributed to the Hurstwood sections.

protagonist characterization, but as Phillips' protagonist Susan navigates the Midwestern urban working class, he places her in factories, department stores, brothels, and tenements that take on grittier and more desperate levels of decay than those Dreiser portrays for Carrie.

Phillips, like Dreiser, was both a novelist and a journalist with roots in the Midwest. Phillips published work in popular magazines including *Success*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Harper's Weekly* (Ravitz 44, 49, 35). He made his name as a nationally recognized muckracker with a series of articles exposing the United States Senate.⁹⁷ In 1904, he began writing *Susan Lenox* and completed the novel shortly before his death in January of 1911. Negotiations between D. Appleton and Company and his sister Caroline delayed the novel's publication several more years, and *Susan Lenox* first appeared serialized in *Hearst's Magazine* in June 1915 (it ran through the January 1917 issue). Appleton published *Susan Lenox* as a 2-volume novel in 1917. Phillips had been drafting and returning to the manuscript for nearly a decade by the time of his death in 1911, and by the time the *New York Times* reviewed the novel in 1917, they dismissed it as "outworn and conventional falsity and...thoroughly vicious romanticism" ("Latest Works").

A brief précis of the elaborate plot highlights its similarities to *Sister Carrie*: Susan Lenox leaves her home at an early age and searches for work to keep herself afloat

⁹⁷ His "Treason of the Senate" articles, published in *Cosmopolitan* between March 1906 and November 1906, exposed various United States senators for colluding with corporate giants such as the Vanderbilts and legislating on their behalf. He wrote scathingly of the Senate's "tricky, stealthy and underhanded" behavior (quoted in Ravitz 85). The series was so popular that *Cosmopolitan* issues sold out during its publication, and Theodore Roosevelt deployed the term "Muck-Rake" in a speech directed at Phillips (Ravitz 83-87).

in the world. After enduring a long series of difficult jobs, ranging from factory work to prostitution, Susan eventually becomes a stage actress in New York City where she secures wealth and comfort. Like Carrie, Susan encounters department stores alternately as window-shopper, job applicant, and customer. She shops in department stores from Louisville, Kentucky and Cincinnati, Ohio to New York City. Early in the novel, Susan attempts to find work in a department store, though she is quickly intimidated by a disdainful floorwalker and leaves without making a formal application at the store. Like Carrie's sensitivity to being seen as a mere work-seeker when she first visits The Fair, Susan's venture into the department store to look for work leaves her feeling "put in her place" as "mere servility" (I, 291). The department store again appears as a reinforcer of class stratifications, reminding the jobless young woman how very little she has in relation to the rich environment around her. Susan never does work as a shopgirl in a department store, though she does work briefly as a cloak model for a wholesale clothing company in New York that sells its goods to department stores around the country. Phillips situates this work on the labor side of consumer culture in the same way Susan's work constructing boxes and hats in sweatshops contributes to the system of production that fuels department store consumption.

Echoing another quality of Dreiser's *Carrie*, Phillips depicts Susan's affinity for the clothing sold and displayed in department stores. Like Carrie, Susan is "delighted" with clothes and aspires to appear like the well-dressed "better" class (I, 108). An avid window shopper, Susan frequently gazes at dense and enticing displays in store windows. At one store, she is taken with the "gorgeous dresses and hats and jewelry, the thousand

costly things scattered in careless profusion” (I, 114). Another department store she passes on the street boasts a “fascinating display of clothing,” at which Susan’s eyes “gaz[e] hungrily” (I, 377). Though her body is literally starving for food at this point in the novel, the hunger Phillips describes within Susan is for beauty and luxury, and she briefly sates it at this window display. When she does shop, Susan is “thrifty” (I, 263), and her shopping habits are typically modest, as the items she selects tend to be “plain,” “simple,” and “sensible” (I, 263). Nevertheless, she also “enjoys herself” (I, 388) while shopping and is able to laugh and relax in a store. At times, she even forms bonds with the objects in the department store, such as the photograph she purchases because its image strikes a chord with her (II, 224).

Susan’s love is not simply for the articles of fine clothing in and of themselves but for the fusion of material culture with one’s personality. Watching an exquisitely dressed woman on the streets of New York, Susan yearns for “the kind [of clothes] that show what sort of person is in them” (I, 447). The unhappiness she feels in ripped and soiled fabrics of low quality does not simply arise from pretensions to finer things but stems from a more complex idea of the relationship between objects and their owners and a desire to appropriately embody her self from the outside. Peeling off a set of “tattered, patched, stained” clothing, Phillips writes, Susan kicks “her discarded self” away from her body (I, 390). For Susan, a new, clean set of clothing does not simply replace an old garment; it replaces an old version of her self and provides an opportunity for a new identity. Operating on the principle that “[t]he world judges by appearances,” Susan takes

all measures she can to avoid appearing poor in an effort to place herself in a higher class than her monetary holdings determine (I, 269).

The landscapes of consumer culture presented by Phillips and Dreiser diverge most distinctly when it comes to their depictions of factories, shops, and laborers who produce and facilitate consumption. Phillips details the abhorrent environment of sweatshop work in terms consistent with Dreiser's characterization—sickly odors, arduous bodily exertion, filthy surroundings—but Phillips' depictions of the sweatshops contain an urgency and an intensity that identify them as a pressing concern of the present day. Unlike Dreiser's optimistic remark that factories by 1900 were embracing a "new socialism," Susan understands the nauseating odors of the factories to be "inevitable" and ongoing (II, 60). The living conditions impoverished laborers are forced to endure, in addition to feeding the inherent greed of the capitalists, trap workers in a web of "[p]oor food, foul air, broken sleep—bad health, disease, unsightly faces, repulsive bodies" (II, 60). Without a larger systemic change to the home and work lives of these struggling workers, the factory system for Phillips stands little hope of improvement.

As he depicts the world of the department store, Phillips keeps the hard-working shopgirl at the forefront of his authorial lens. Phillips' perspective on shopgirls is significantly grimmer than that of *Sister Carrie*. He depicts them as exploited members of the working class in similar situations to sweatshop workers. The shopgirls in *Susan Lenox* work late hours for little wages. As we see in the scene at Sternberg's department store, Phillips depicts shopgirls as "poor tired" workers whose shifts are an enslavement

from which they must be “set free” (I, 388). He classifies them pityingly as “poor creature[s]” (II, 169) who are trapped in the same cycle of poverty as the factory workers and tenement dwellers Susan meets.

Even Susan’s work as a cloak model for the wholesale house of Jeffries and Jonas entails trying physical labor that forebodes ill-treatment. Utilizing her body to display and advertise the clothing she models, Susan “walk[s] up and down” manipulating her frame to display the wares “at all angles” (II, 22). Her workload mounts as the day continues, and Susan becomes “weighted with dresses and cloaks, furs” and other garments as her boss “pile[s] the work on her” (II, 24). The physicality of modeling in this passage echoes Laura Jean Libbey’s Lotta, who is similarly worked to a point of exhaustion while modeling clothing. In this instance, Susan finally collapses under the burden of the clothing and faints. In a reversal of a scene earlier in the day where Susan leans upon a pile of coats for support, the coats now weigh her down, and she crumbles beneath their physical weight.

Despite Susan’s admiration and appreciation for fine clothing, she is intimately familiar with the burdens of its production, and this tension between fetishizing commodities and acknowledging the human ills of capitalism forms the heart of Phillips’ commentary on consumer culture. As we have already seen, Susan articulates her own understanding of the problem as such: “I understand now why the comfortable people can be happy. They keep themselves from knowing or they make themselves forget” (I, 388). John readily dismisses the dilemma as merely a “thin[g] that can’t be helped” and should thus be forgotten (I, 339). Agreeing in this particular instance, Susan turns her back to the

problem and assents that because there is “[n]o use at all” worrying about it, she might as well forget (I, 339). The choice Phillips here poses is between enjoying the comforts and joys of consumer culture and embracing knowledge of its exploitative underside. He implies that knowledge of the manifold injustices comprising the production of consumer culture is within reach of any consumer, but most of the “comfortable people” do not—or perhaps cannot—allow themselves to internalize that knowledge. Doing so would render untenable the very comforts that guilt-free consumption brings them. Phillips’s department-store consumers must ignore the tired faces of dispirited workers all around them or else surrender their own enjoyment. Positioning Susan, who is highly sympathetic to the plight of workers (herself taking numerous turns in their shoes), as one such complicit consumer, Phillips probes the extent to which this is a resolvable problem.

Despite Susan’s own choice to set aside her knowledge and enjoy a night of shopping at Sternberg’s, she is not without empathy for the working class, and Phillips renders the women whose work sustains the consumer culture industry through Susan’s sympathetic perspective. Because Susan’s consumer experience is interrupted by her memories of work and her sympathy for the shopgirl waiting on her, Susan’s propensity to relate to workers ultimately challenges her ability to compartmentalize their struggles. Phillips lays the groundwork for this connection by placing Susan herself in the working class. From her experience in the box factory early in the novel, Susan feels deep sadness about her coworkers’ lot in life, which stays with her throughout the novel. Immersed in the working world of a sweatshop, Susan “s[ees] this life from the inside now—as the comfortable classes never permit themselves to see it if they can avoid” (I, 333).

Although her assessment of her coworkers is harsh—she is appalled by their standard of living—Phillips takes care to note that “Susan did not blame them” and in fact feels pity for them (I, 333). Her origin in a middle-class family places Susan as simultaneously separate from the other workers with her knowledge of what a more comfortable life looks like yet connected to them by virtue of working alongside them. These feelings extend to the coworkers she later meets at the hat factory where Phillips writes that Susan “felt herself—for the time—one of them” (II, 66). It is through this capacity for personal identification that Susan feels the tragedy of the monotonous, dirty, exhausting working life, and her “heart bled for them” (II, 66).

Susan actively links her experiences in factories producing consumer culture with the goods for sale in department stores. When she sees the items at the wholesale factory that are soon to be shipped to department stores, Susan is mentally transported to her time in the factories. The piles of garments “exud[e] the odors of the factory” and summon “before her visions of huge, badly ventilated rooms, where women aged or aging swiftly were toiling hour after hour monotonously—spending half of each day in buying the right to eat and sleep unhealthily” (II, 6). Her experience working in sweatshops, the knowledge she has gained about the lives of the working class and the production of consumer culture all attach themselves to the finished garments she sees. The resulting “visions they evoked—made her sick at heart” (II, 6). Her perspective contrasts with the “comfortable” consumers who ignore any inklings they might have about precisely how unhappily those goods that make them so happy were constructed.

Not only does Susan display empathy for workers, but she also acquires a shrewd ability to discern the price markups and clothing of poor quality displayed in stores. Through her work for the wholesale company, she learns about price increases as commodities make their way through the chain of production from factories to wholesale companies to department stores. The dress she wears to meet Mr. Gideon, for example, is listed for \$90 wholesale and would have a price of \$125 to \$150 in the department store. But even this expensive garment, Susan finds, could be “more tasteful” and “more effective” with further alterations (II, 32). Susan becomes aware of the poor quality of some department store clothing that “look[s] fairly well at a glance” but soon betrays the “cheapness of every bit of the material and labor that went into” it (II, 168). This increased insight into the production, marketing, and sales of consumer goods demystifies the material to Susan, though perhaps conversely its value lowers in her estimation rather than raises when attached to the humanity that generated it. For Susan, garments produced under the conditions of the factory are not more valuable for the human suffering they elicit but more contemptible because of it.

Phillips, then, begins to suggest that Susan could demonstrate the potential for a more mindful form of consumerism. In a scene late in the novel, Susan takes consumer culture into her own hands when she attempts a production-centered, do-it-yourself form of consumption that both saves her money and ostensibly minimizes a reliance on sweatshop labor for her purchase. Rather than purchasing a readymade hat, she opts to buy the materials to create one herself. Replicating the actions she once performed at the hat factory, she buys a large hat frame, tulle, flowers, a buckle, and a few other notions to

decorate the hat. Evoking the labor of her prior jobs, Phillips remarks upon the physicality of her endeavor: when Spenser asks Susan how she garnered such an outfit, she responds, “By all but breaking myself” (II, 291). By maintaining a line of continuity from her work in the hat factory to her own construction of the hat, Phillips provides a continuum that proposes a more thoughtful means of consumption. Phillips converts what was previously a “purely mechanical process” (II, 58) of factory-work into an inventive execution of craftsmanship that results in a “bewitching” hat (II, 291). We begin to think that, perhaps, Susan has discovered a way around the immoral products of the sweatshop factory after all.

Instead, Phillips’ reveals Susan’s inexorable dependence on the very structure of consumer culture she condemns. In her act of self-fashioning, Susan still purchases goods that others have had a hand in producing when she goes to one of the city’s big store’s to obtain her materials. Susan is not so disconnected from her past that she blithely indulges in consumption, but where she is not enthusiastic she is nonetheless tenacious. Passing from one counter to another, methodically selecting her wares from un-depicted workers, Susan embodies the role of the consumer, even “pounc[ing]” [II, 290] at one point on a particularly attractive purple buckle in the discount bin. Once her shopping is complete, she waits at her home to receive the delivery of her wares, presumably transported from the store by a driver such as Lisette Mooney’s father in *Miss 318*. Susan’s primary motivation in her creative endeavor is a desire to adorn herself with a new look while making a “wise investment” (II, 289), which she succeeds in doing by spending a mere \$23.67 for the materials to make both the hat and a matching dress. The thrift of her

purchase is perhaps admirable, but the fact remains that the goods she purchases in this scene have been produced somewhere by some one, and Susan gives not a thought to their origins as she shops, focusing only on the final product she will generate. Despite the sympathy towards workers and self-awareness about consumption she demonstrates throughout the novel, Phillips show that even a worker-turned-consumer like Susan cannot fully sidestep the wrongs of America's capitalist economy. Susan's do-it-yourself hat exemplifies the negotiation between partaking in consumer culture and resisting the ills of capitalism, wherein Susan mitigates some elements of worker victimization but cannot avoid profiting upon the erased labor of others.

Susan Lenox brings to a head the clash between carefree consumption and labor rights. In his narration and in the reflective thoughts and actions of Susan, Phillips lays bare the complicating underworld of consumer culture for readers. Rather than solve problems of consumer culture within his novel, Phillips highlights the moral difficulties tied to consumption and, extrapolated, to the larger American economy. Phillips presents labor exploitation as a systemic problem in America: "this modern system of labor," Phillips writes, is "worse than slavery" (II, 62). In this notably problematic comparison, Phillips hyperbolizes the damage of sweatshop labor located within a system that denies protections to the weak and underpaid workers at its lowest rungs. Nonetheless, he is incisive about the human damage caused by America's capitalist economy. Critiquing a system that rewards deception, Phillips writes of one struggling restaurant owner: "he remained honest—therefore, remaining in the working class, instead of rising among its exploiters" (I, 331). To be a success in this system, Phillips demonstrates, one must

exploit workers beneath them. Susan does her best to refuse to do so and spends the majority of the novel oppressed by poverty and male control. When she is offered a promotion at the hat factory, Susan declines the job because she does not view herself as an exploiter who would “goad” her tired colleagues into work (II, 66). She is warned that the only way to get ahead is to first “[m]ake others work for you” and then “[keep] all or nearly all the profits of their harder toil” (II, 66). Though she sometimes does so anyway, Susan is largely unwilling to exploit any bodies except her own. As a result, her struggles to find legitimate employment with a living wage lead her numerous times to commodify own body for survival.

The Sexualization of Women’s Work

The two novels this chapter has examined demonstrate how easily women’s work—in particularly the work performed by department store shopgirls—can be overlooked. *Sister Carrie* itself participates in erasing early twentieth-century working women’s labor on the other side of the sales counter, while *Susan Lenox* explicitly draws attention to how—and why—consumers prevent themselves from “knowing” about it in any deep or continuous sense. Whereas the fiction discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation establishes the department store as a site of female professionalism and class mobility, Phillips locates no such liberation in this form of female labor. Indeed, for Phillips, rather than serve as a possible source of income stability or advancement, department stores are part of a larger industry that casts women as sexual prey.

In *Susan Lenox*, Phillips paints a bleak picture of the economy of female sexuality through Susan’s alternating cycle of employment between legal jobs and underground

stints as a prostitute. Through her experiences, Phillips suggests that for working-class women there is little material difference between selling one's body directly through prostitution and yielding one's body to what he terms the "dreary and denigrating drudgery of 'honest toil'" (I, 369). Indignities—sexual and physical—are found in sweatshops alongside bordellos. Compounding the problem, the pay for legal work for women consistently falls below a living wage (whether in the box or hat factories or even in the wholesale house), thus pressuring independent women to "supplement—their earnings" in the "stealthy shameful way" (II, 5).⁹⁸

Phillips writes of the "painful and shameful truth" that women who are able to advance beyond the working class do so with "the helping hand of a man, and rarely indeed a generous hand" (II, 2-3). The implication that men with an *ungenerous* investment in a working-class woman are the only viable routes to success available to a working woman underscores the lack of choices available to working women regarding their sexuality. In *Susan Lenox*, men are "in absolute control of all kinds of work," even "honest toil," often leaving women in the necessary position of utilizing their sexuality in the workplace (II, 6). Susan and other women in *Susan Lenox* face little choice other than "openly or covertly using their charms as female to assist them in the cruel struggle for existence" (II, 6).

Demonstrating how blurry the boundary is between prostitution and socially accepted work, Susan's underpaid but legal job as a cloak model transforms (against her will) into an act of prostitution. Aware of the inevitable focus on her body, Susan does

⁹⁸ In *City of Women*, Christine Stansell discusses the historical roots of this trend in the nineteenth century.

her best to use her sexuality as “decently as might be” to secure work at Jeffries and Jonas, the wholesale clothing house (II, 3). Despite her efforts, this “honest toil” of modeling clothing for a wage soon becomes a financial transaction enacted over Susan’s sexuality. When Mr. Gideon, a buyer for Chicago department stores, expects Susan to accept his invitation to dinner, Susan intuits that “she must either accept the invitation or give up her position” (II, 24). At dinner, the social rendezvous becomes a physical one as Gideon clearly articulates his proposed business exchange: “Tomorrow I’m going to place a big order with your house, if you treat me right” (II, 40). The expectation placed upon Susan to sleep with this prospective buyer in order to secure a sale overwhelms her, and she accepts his offer. But she loses her position regardless, as she finds herself too disgusted and ashamed to return to Jeffries and Jonas.

The fine line between legal, socially sanctioned work and prostitution is a concern articulated in numerous other portrayals of department store work.⁹⁹ Utilizing the public space of the department store counter, which exposes shopgirls to the gaze of any interested man, novelists around the turn of the century consistently depict scenes of labor wherein the shopgirls are harassed in their workplaces. In *For Gold or Soul*, Faith Marvin endures an extended and unwelcome flirtation from Jim Denton; though he will eventually reform and become her husband, his bold stares and hyperbolic flattery when she begins working at the store characterize him first as her “insulter” (5). Working as a

⁹⁹ This tenuous line was a concern of reformers at the turn of the century as well. As noted in both Woodbridge’s and Bowen’s reports concerning New York and Chicago shopgirls in the 1890-1910s, reformers worried that the low wages offered by the stores would not be enough for the women to live upon and would force them, as Susan Lenox demonstrates, into other means of earning money on the side.

shopgirl exposes another fictional shopgirl, Winnie (Win) Child, to sexual advances of men visiting the store in Alice and Charles Williamson's *The Shop Girl*. Working at the counter of the toy department, Win is regularly subject to the unwanted flirtations of a would-be male suitor who effectively stalks her at work despite her repeated refusals. His status as a customer in the store grants him unlimited access to the woman behind the counter, whose duties require her to remain in his unwanted presence. This man eventually entraps Win in a secluded home where he nearly rapes her before she escapes. Lotta (of Laura Jean Libbey's *Lotta, the Cloak Model*) is also abducted as a result of her work in the department store when the manager who lusts for her colludes with her supervisor to kidnap Lotta and force her into matrimony (a plot happily foiled by her escape).

Other portrayals of department store shopgirls consider the women's vulnerability on the streets as they travel to and from work. In these instances, authors combat the assumption that their characters are inclined towards sexual dalliances with interested strangers. Traveling home from work, Faith Marvin is propositioned by her long-lost uncle (unaware of their familial relationship), who offers her money and security in her job if she promises to "be agreeable" (8). She fiercely rejects the proposal, deeming it an "evil deed" (8). Rupert Hughes's plucky Miss 318 defensively wields a hat pin to fend off an overly familiar man on the street as she and her friend travel home late at night after work.

For Dreiser, women working or looking for work in Chicago must constantly negotiate the desires of lecherous men. From Carrie's colleagues in the shoe factory to

hiring managers across Chicago, Carrie finds the male gaze carefully trained on her each time she endeavors legal employment. One man in the factory “ma[kes] bold to jest” with Carrie and offers to escort her home on her first day at work (30). Another manifests his attraction physically by “poke[ing] her indifferently in the ribs with his thumb” (29). Though a fellow shopgirl disregards his behavior as merely “too fresh” (29), Carrie is repulsed and offended by this onslaught of unwanted attention. Even women at work in Dreiser’s department stores face these attentions in *Sister Carrie*, as we see when Drouet flirts with the saleswomen on his sales trips with “one aim in view” (Pennsylvania 6).¹⁰⁰

Carrie’s search for work before leaving Chicago further illustrates Dreiser’s view of gender dynamics in the workplace. After parting ways with Drouet, Carrie hopes to avoid trading on her sexuality in order to secure a position. She is so determined to “earn her living honestly” (Pennsylvania 249) that when a hiring manager flirts with her, she is “grieved to think that her necessary bread might be bought by such a favor” (Pennsylvania 257). In a subsequent encounter, the “oily and crooked” man who interviews Carrie for a position with a picture-framing business similarly expects sexual favors in return for hiring her (Pennsylvania 257). Carrie finds the man “repulsive” and his job offer “wretched” (Pennsylvania 259). But at every turn, what Carrie considers the

¹⁰⁰ Though Carrie does not work as a department store shopgirl, Dreiser understood this position as well to be a target of the male gaze. In *Ev’ry Month*, he mentions a British comedic musical titled *The Shop Girl*, in which the eponymous shop girl appears as an object of the male gaze. In one of her songs, “The Song of the Shop (I Stand at My Counter),” the shopgirl sings the lyrics, “Oh, how they stare, And they frequently dare To wink at the girl in the shop” (Dam 44). It is unclear whether Dreiser saw the show or was simply aware of it, though he wrote approvingly of the musical’s comedic tone (Barrineau 299).

“intolerable circumstanc[e]” (Pennsylvania 259) of trading upon her sexuality for employment is more appealing than facing poverty and homelessness.¹⁰¹

Sexual exploitation, then, appears in literary representations of shopgirl labor as another form of the various indignities (also including low wages for hard labor and invisibility to the consuming classes) to which shopgirls are subjected. By juxtaposing the subjugation of the shopgirl against the pleasures to be found in consumption, *Susan Lenox* and *Sister Carrie* join other works of department store fiction in suggesting an inevitable moral failure of the American economy.¹⁰²

Conclusion

I have demonstrated in this chapter that *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* make clear—obliquely in Dreiser’s case, overtly in Phillips’ case—the challenge of reconciling consumer culture’s many appeals with the harsh labor conditions underpinning it. Although both novels point out this difficulty, neither one proposes specific changes that might alleviate it. In this sense, they differ from the novels discussed in Chapter 1, which explore potential solutions to the labor exploitation they depict. Where Lurana Sheldon and Rupert Hughes utilize the platforms of their novels to explore solutions to perceived injustices within department store work culture (through top-down reforms, consumer activism, or even worker unions), Dreiser and Phillips focus their novels more on the

¹⁰¹ When she achieves success in New York as an actress, Carrie is still the object of the male eroticizing gaze. Charles Harmon attributes her success on the stage to this gaze, which, he posits, “gives powerful men a chance temporarily to abandon the anxieties associated with freewheeling capitalistic endeavor” (132).

¹⁰² Bowlby’s argument that women in shopping culture are both consumers and objects of consumption reinforces this view.

trials of their protagonists than on proposed solutions to the broken socio-economic systems surrounding them.

In the absence of imagining potential solutions to the injustices their protagonists face, Dreiser and Phillips focus instead on the moral choices the characters make to navigate these hardships. Both novelists' emphases on a young woman making her way in the world where she lives demonstrate a governing interest in character psychology over political prescription. This sustained focus on the individual and exploration of character interiority yields more fully fleshed, complex characters in lieu of suggesting paradigms or paths for reform. This is not to say that Sheldon's Faith Marvin or Hughes's Lisette Mooney is lacking in personality, belief, or opinion; rather, the attention to characterization and plot in long "literary" novels such as *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* will accordingly yield more thorough and complex characterization than the brief space and quickened plots of dime novels and short fiction.

The tendency to prioritize characterization over policy prescription is particularly fitting, considering the literary goals of American realism and naturalism. The very definition of realism, articulated famously by Howells as "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material," specifically avoided advocating imagined solutions to existing social problems (966). Furthermore, Naturalism has long been understood as a pessimistic genre invested in bleak pictures of determinism and the evacuation of human agency. It is unsurprising, then, that realist and naturalist works are less likely to offer concrete paths to reform.

The provocative aspect of reading *Sister Carrie* and *Susan Lenox* against texts that do dedicate themselves to imagining reform is in locating precisely how and why Dreiser and Phillips do not suggest solutions. In Dreiser's case, which is amplified by his pairing with Phillips, this inquiry reveals a striking omission from his worldview that creates an unspoken absence in his novel. His minimization of the department store shopgirl in the interest of detailing consumer desire evinces the allure of consumer desire over the imperative to reform consumption—not simply for Dreiser or Carrie but in a larger cultural setting. As Phillips demonstrates with Susan, even informed and compassionate consumers are unlikely to avoid the inevitable shortcomings of consumer reform. These novels indicate that the crux of solving these problems may lie in combating not only capitalist exploitation but—and perhaps more importantly—consumer desire.

Coda: Looking Backwards: 2015-1920

This project illuminates numerous examples of American literature, from popular dime novels to canonical works of naturalism, that utilize the figure of the department store shopgirl to alternately highlight labor exploitation, consider consumer reform, and examine opportunities for female professional advancement in the years surrounding the turn of the century. What, then, has become of the shopgirl in American culture? Several representations indicate that her image persists well into the twentieth century. Raphael Soyer's 1936 painting *Shop Girls*, for example, depicts a group of tired women akin to the laborers featured in novels by David Graham Phillips, Lurana Sheldon, and others (see Figure 16). Soyer's *Shop Girls* presents an image of seven women leaving a department store after a presumably long day of work, their clothing rumpled and their expressions blank. As art historian Ellen Wiley Todd notes, "[b]y showing the shopgirl fatigued and in transit, Soyer takes a compassionate view of her historical plight as hard-working and exploited" (247).¹⁰³ The "historical plight" of the shopgirl was not made easier by the economic pressures of the Great Depression, which adversely effected wages and retention for department store workers (Whitaker 21). The strained economic market in the 1930s also ushered in a new category of store employees.

¹⁰³ In her chapter on the painting, subtitled "Raphael Soyer's Weary Shop Girls," Todd notes that Soyer chooses to portray a group of women whose tattered appearance resonates with a lower-class group of turn-of-the-century workers rather than the increasingly middle-class, professionalized saleswomen that appear in other paintings. She argues that, "with the choice of shopgirls over [Kenneth Hayes] Miller's department store salesladies, Soyer not only portrayed the typical effects of working life in Fourteenth Street's bargain emporiums and struggling specialty shops but also addressed the ambiguous, even inconsistent, gender and class conflict of the retail sales profession" (Todd 229).



Figure 16: *Shop Girls* (1936), by Raphael Soyer

Even as vestiges of late-nineteenth-century labor carried on, department store work was increasingly shifting to a higher socioeconomic bracket of laborers. Starting in the 1920s and continuing through the 1930s, this shift began to take place amongst the women who predominantly staffed America's great department stores. Instead of the hard-pressed figure of the shopgirl, the image associated with department store employees grew into more professional and middle-class categories. Kenneth Hayes Miller depicts these comparably more prosperous department store workers in

Saleswomen (c. 1934), where the workers he portrays bear a striking resemblance to the customers they serve in terms of both attire and complexion (see Figure 17). Not only was this new workforce composed of middle-class women, but these new employees were often college-educated as well. Susan Porter Benson writes that, “beginning in the 1920s and accelerating in the 1930s as high unemployment levels closed off more attractive alternatives, college women began to seek department-store jobs...[Many] became saleswomen in the hope of working their way up to a buyer’s position” (Benson 213).



Figure 17: *Saleswomen* (c. 1934), by Kenneth Hayes Miller

As the department store workforce shifted, so too did the terminology applied to them. Historians including Todd and Benson cite a movement in the 1920s and 1930s away from the term “shopgirls” and towards language such as “salesladies” or “associates” as the position became increasingly respectable (Todd 249, Benson 139). One historian identifies the hybrid workforce of the department store as consisting of “[b]oth working-class females and refined, middle-class, college-educated new women, who increasingly looked on work as a respectable pursuit” (Todd 229).

Putting the Bourgeoisie to Work in Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*

Exemplifying the figure of the educated, career-driven department store worker, Kay Strong Peterson stands as a central figure amongst the *mélange* of characters featured in Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* (1963). Although written in 1963, McCarthy sets *The Group* in the 1930s to depict a coterie of Vassar graduates following their graduation as they struggle to build families and careers amidst the economic landscape of the Great Depression. Most members of “the group” come from families who have lost their wealth (if not their status) in the Great Depression. As their jobs and consumer habits reveal, many of McCarthy’s characters come to understand themselves—ironically or sincerely—as members “of the downtrodden” (237). Turning to McCarthy’s mid-century representation of department store labor can help us better understand the legacies of the novels featuring shopgirl protagonists earlier in the century.

Like her fictional predecessors analyzed in this dissertation, Kay works diligently at the sales counter of a department store, hopes for a promotion, and even serves as

breadwinner of her household. After graduating from Vassar, she obtains a job at Macy's, where she earns \$25 a week working on the sales floor. Her job brings Kay and her husband Harald some much-needed income, although it leaves her concerned that she is performing her role as a wife inadequately, particularly concerning meal preparation. Kay's job certainly keeps her occupied.¹⁰⁴ Her friends later remark that Macy's employees are forced to work even on Lincoln's birthday, a holiday many others have free from work, because Macy's "cash[es] in on the fact that the other wage slaves get the day off" (175). McCarthy positions Macy's as a potential foe to labor in other respects as well, including an instance when Harald's participation in a strike stirs fear that Kay might be dismissed from Macy's, which accurately reflects the department store's notoriously unfriendly relationship to labor unions.¹⁰⁵ Kay is eventually promoted within the store to "junior executive in personnel" (395)—an advancement McCarthy's narration frames as "still toiling at Macy's" (395). Kay holds this job until her unintentionally extended stay in a psychiatric ward, during which time Macy's lets her go with severance. After Kay is released from the hospital, she has an interview scheduled with Saks Fifth Avenue before her death at the novel's conclusion. A testament to her career at

¹⁰⁴ Benson writes, "[d]uring the Depression saleswomen's hours increased both relatively and absolutely" and that women "who worked longer hours usually earned less per hour, even more so in stores than in factories" (198). Thus the marginal advantage entry-level department store workers once imagined their positions gave them over factory workers "narrowed or disappeared" over the years of the Great Depression (Benson 200). In some respects, factory work can still pay more than service work. In her on-the-ground research into working conditions at Wal-Mart, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich met a colleague who determined that a position at a plastics factory might garner \$9 an hour, a hopeful sum compared to the \$7 an hour she earned working at Wal-Mart (190).

¹⁰⁵ In fact, the "late 1930s saw renewed labor organizing and striking" from department store employees (Whitaker 182). Reginald Marsh's painting *End of the Fourteenth Street Crosstown Line* (1936), which depicts a group of saleswomen picketing outside Ohrbach's department store, was inspired by a real-life strike outside Ohrbach's department store on New York's 14th Street in 1935 (Todd 260).

Macy's, Kay's boss and "a whole delegation of her fellow-workers" (467) attend her funeral.

Unlike her underprivileged counterparts from early twentieth-century American literature, Kay enters the world of department store labor with a bachelor's degree and a father who is a respected physician. She is, in fact, part of a targeted group of workers McCarthy identifies for Macy's, which was "training a corps of upper-middle-class technicians, like Kay, to make the store into something more than a business, something closer to a civic center or permanent fairgrounds, with educational exhibits, like the old Crystal Palace" (77). Kay's status as a "technician" at Macy's rather than a "shopgirl" (a term McCarthy does not utilize) underscores the liminality of her class position at the department store, where she is both "wage slave" and a developing professional, "trained, along with other picked college graduates, in merchandising techniques" (2).

As Kay's work at Macy's intersects with her consumer choices and desires, McCarthy maintains an equally acute eye on the trappings of consumer culture and the financial struggles of working Americans. Kay and Harald live on a limited budget, which becomes even more restricted when Harald loses his job, making Kay the family's primary breadwinner. They argue about expenses for food items, apartment rent, and home furnishings. In one instance, Kay wrestles with whether or not to buy furniture for their new apartment at Macy's (using her employee discount), because she suspects that Harald and his socialist friends Norine and Put Blake would disapprove of the

extravagance.¹⁰⁶ Kay's consumer desires are consistently above her means, an instinct ultimately indulged by her friend Lakey, who buys her an expensive Fortuny gown (which Kay "always longed for...[but] never in her wildest moments could have afforded" [461]) for Kay's burial.

By simultaneously inverting the traditional class position of the department store shopgirl and maintaining the archetypal shopgirl's duties, challenges, and hopes, McCarthy creates a working class bourgeoisie that straddles the boundary between privation and privilege. A minor character who hyperbolizes Kay's liminal position is Mr. Andrews, Polly's father, who accepts work at "a thrift shop on Lexington Avenue" (387). After losing his fortune in the Great Depression, Mr. Andrews suffers a mental breakdown, divorces Polly's mother, and eventually moves in with Polly in New York. His reduced income does not match his lavish expenditures, and Polly becomes so hard-pressed for money to support him that she sells her blood at the hospital. These dire straits lead Mr. Andrews to accept employment in a second-hand shop that thrives on the selling of items such as "second-hand furs, children's clothes, old dinner jackets," which are available "thanks to the late unpleasantness" (code for the Depression) (387). After he accepts a position as assistant manager there, he brags, half-mockingly and in good

¹⁰⁶ In an entertaining scene, Norine's own trip to a department store fuels a disagreement between her and her husband. She shops at Bloomingdale's for arousing undergarments in an effort to seduce her impotent husband, but when the clothing fails to aid them in culminating intercourse, they redirect their frustrations into "a fight about how much [Norine had] spent at Bloomingdale's" (165).

spirits, “I find myself pleased to be a breadwinner. I’ve joined the working class. And of course Julia plans to exploit me” (388).¹⁰⁷

McCarthy’s novel is filled with characters who have moved down a few rungs on the economic ladder due to the Depression. As a result, educated, formerly wealthy people work in department stores, like Kay, or in sales, like Mr. Andrews, while maintaining their social standing at parties and clubs. McCarthy is acutely savvy about the crossing of class boundaries that occurs as her bourgeoisie characters become a part of the working class and bring with them a cloak of political self-awareness. Evoking a standing tradition of shopgirl narratives, *The Group* creates an updated and satirical portrait of American consumer- and working-cultures wherein privilege and subjugation are in constant flux.

Writing from the vantage point of the early 1960s, when department stores were still thriving places of commerce in America culture, McCarthy looks backwards upon a relatively prosperous era of the department store; but the years following *The Group*’s publication began to see the phenomenon of the department store diminish.¹⁰⁸ As Benson notes, after World War II the “department store no longer [held] an unchallenged place at the pinnacle of American retailing” (293). The rise of the discount store in the 1960s marked a clear point of decline for the department store’s reign. In 1962, Target, Kmart,

¹⁰⁷ His reference to his wealthy Aunt Julia, who helped him get the job, is both literal and symbolic. Mr. Andrews is a recently converted Trotskyite and champions the rights of workers fighting exploitation. More literally, though, Aunt Julia hopes to utilize Andrews’ position at the store to spot and covertly sell her valuable antiques at a reduced price.

¹⁰⁸ Even though employees faced tightened circumstances during the Great Depression, the stores themselves weathered the economic pressures and continued to thrive in the 1940s and even somewhat into the 1950s (Whitaker 21-25).

and Wal-Mart all opened their first stores, and within three years, discount stores surpassed department stores as the “number one type of retailer” in America (Whitaker 25). The once-iconic, grand department store buildings that resided in urban centers were increasingly rare as smaller branches spread across the country, often located in the increasingly popular site of the shopping mall (Whitaker 26-27). By the end of the twentieth century, large department stores were looked upon as relics of history rather than as relevant shopping mainstays. As Jan Whitaker describes the decline of the department store: “One store after another toppled in the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond, each in turn hailed as a landmark as it vanished” (28).

The Immaterial Work of Steve Martin’s *Shopgirl*

It may seem strange, then, after nearly a century has passed since the era of the shopgirl, that Steve Martin would publish a novella about a woman who works at the glove counter of a department store and name it *Shopgirl* (2000).¹⁰⁹ Martin’s story of a department store employee who is romanced by a wealthy customer begins in very familiar terms. The relative poverty of protagonist Mirabelle, who budgets her lunches and shops in the sale section, is less ominous than that of her turn-of-the-century counterparts, but the class difference between Mirabelle and the gallant gentleman who pursues her, Ray Porter, remains intact. Ray’s ability to help Mirabelle financially alleviates any feelings of guilt he might otherwise have about pursuing a relationship he

¹⁰⁹ The novella was later turned into a movie, also titled *Shopgirl* (Anand Tucker, 2005), which Steve Martin wrote and which starred Martin as Ray Porter, Claire Danes as Mirabelle, and Jason Schwartzman as Jeremy.

does not view as a long-term commitment.¹¹⁰ The story differs most from familiar tales of the prior century with Mirabelle's ending, which finds the protagonist neither with the wealthy Ray Porter nor alone in abjection, but instead with an age-appropriate man who is similarly working to build a career.

In *Shopgirl*, Steve Martin creates a saleswoman protagonist who, despite fulfilling similar service tasks and living on a tight budget, is nonetheless situated in a different class from her nineteenth-century shopgirl predecessors. Mirabelle works at the glove counter in a Los Angeles Neiman Marcus. Her work at the department store enables Mirabelle to make a living even if money is scarce and her expenditures are limited. Aside from \$39,000 of student loans, Mirabelle's biggest financial "problem" (2) is purchasing the expensive clothing she desires. But even this challenge is more or less resolved by combining her good taste with an eye for sales, so that "she manages" (2) well enough to live in Los Angeles on her budget and still dress tastefully.

Although Mirabelle is the novel's titular "shopgirl," she does not, ultimately, fit the nineteenth-century paradigm of the word. Nineteenth-century shopgirls, such as those portrayed by O. Henry, Lurana Sheldon, and David Graham Phillips, are often destitute, overworked, and one step away from utter poverty. Not only is Steve Martin's twenty-first century Mirabelle college-educated, but she also has a master's degree of fine arts.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ In this novel, sexual mores having shifted over the course of a century, so a broken heart is the emotional risk for Mirabelle, rather than a 19th-century shopgirl's potentially damaging reputation as a fallen woman.

¹¹¹ In this respect, Mirabelle is also unlike her coworkers at Neiman Marcus, who are not as highly educated as Mirabelle is. Mirabelle's education, Martin writes, makes her "a walking anomaly" at the store (5). Notably, Martin does not extend use of the word "shopgirl" to Mirabelle's coworkers. They remain, alternately, "perfume girls and shoe clerks" (5), "salesgirls" (13), and even "she-clerks" (22).

Working in a deserted section of the store, she rarely sees customers. The glove counter's location "in the Siberia of Neiman's" renders her position lonely, and its slow customer traffic seldom exacts much physical labor (3). Sometimes she leaves work with a sore back and tired feet from a day of standing over the counter, but otherwise, Mirabelle is relatively happy at work, where she "actually enjoys the monotony of Neiman's" (31). Moreover, her position as a saleswoman, Martin explains, is merely a day job and thus not terribly meaningful to her: Mirabelle "considers herself an artist first, so her choice of jobs is immaterial" (31).

The very immateriality of Mirabelle's employment underscores Martin's resistance to classify her as a permanent member of America's destitute working class. In spite of Mirabelle's looming credit-card and student-loan debt, Martin does not categorize her as one of Los Angeles's needy. Mirabelle, in fact, volunteers on weekends with Habitat for Humanity building homes "for the disadvantaged" (20). Although she undertakes this work more for the company than for the altruism, it reminds readers that, whereas there are people in Los Angeles suffering in penury, Mirabelle is simply temporarily inconvenienced, illustrating a common tenant of American capitalism that sees poverty or menial labor for the white, educated class as impermanent.¹¹² Her volunteer work emphasizes how solid a line Martin establishes between Mirabelle's financial difficulties and a classification of truly "disadvantaged."

¹¹² In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein writes about the "growing number of instances" in which corporations in the service industry seek to maximize employees working on a temporary basis for few benefits in lieu of employees who would enjoy steady work, benefits, and representation (231). She posits that "retail chains work hard to reinforce feelings of transience in their workers in order to protect this highly profitable formula" (233). One employee Klein interviews reiterates this internalized sense of temporary hardship: "Everyone thinks they are middle class even when they're making \$13,000 a year" (233).

The distinction Martin creates between Mirabelle's menial wages and a more abject form of poverty (one, for example, that might lead to homelessness or prostitution) makes his choice of title for the novella even more compelling. Martin applies the historically resonant term "shopgirl" to Mirabelle in the same spirit of irony with which Mirabelle herself consumes nineteenth-century fiction. Mirabelle reads Victorian novels about women who "are poisoned or are doing the poisoning" with a spirit of detached irony and entertainment, although "she finds that a part of her identifies with all that darkness" (4). In this respect, the shopgirl term does suit Mirabelle's periodic melancholy. Furthermore, when Martin pointedly labels Mirabelle a "shopgirl" within the text of the novella, he underscores a sense of constraint around her career dreams that echoes the sadness of her emotional life. Despite Mirabelle's ability to sell some of her drawings, her art "does not produce enough outside income to set her free from being a shopgirl" (31). The sense of confinement implied by her inability to escape shopgirl work is the strongest link tying Mirabelle to the shopgirls of the nineteenth century. Even so, by the novella's end, Mirabelle is released from this need and able to devote more of her energy directly to the art world.

Her love interest, the computer-coding millionaire Ray Porter, eventually frees her from her shopgirl status by paying off her debt and connecting her with a gallery job. Mirabelle leaves her position at Neiman's and becomes a receptionist in a San Francisco art gallery; she even makes strides in selling more of her own drawings. In a similar advance of career progress, Mirabelle's former fling Jeremy's amplifier business takes off, and he becomes a well-dressed, successful entrepreneur. Eventually Mirabelle is no

longer a shopgirl and no longer with Ray, and Martin pairs her with the more age-appropriate Jeremy who has grown, as she has, both more emotionally and financially stable over the novella's timeline.

Thus, Mirabelle can be both a “shopgirl” – with all of the destitute financial implications the term implies—and a nascent artist. Her ability to occupy the position of the shopgirl without ever truly *being* a shopgirl demonstrates the ideological frameworks that inform our conceptualizations of class boundaries as well as one's potential for mobility between them. Mirabelle's mounting debt and the extreme differences in income between Mirabelle and Ray remind us that America's class system is still very much intact, but the fluidity between class boundaries that Martin imagines here renders it nearly indiscernible and, consequently, easy to ignore. If Mirabelle can be well-educated and display a promising future as an artist, it is easy to overlook the fact that she is also heavily in debt, clinically depressed, and tied to a menial-wage job. In this respect, Martin's novel lacks the edge of social critique and advocacy for reform present in early 20th-century writers this dissertation examined.

As fictional representations of the department store shopgirl depict higher-class socioeconomic groups, the role of female retail work takes on a context very different from the turn-of-the-century sisters of sweatshop workers portrayed by Sheldon, Hughes, and others. However, Martin's Mirabelle exists in a context in which department store work has dwindled from its former popularity and thus might not be the most potent twenty-first-century counterpart to the fictional shopgirls this dissertation has discussed. As the large department stores of the previous century faded into the past, new forms of

retail and service have taken their place, with their own particular and compounding problems related to class mobility, wage stagnation, labor exploitation, gender inequality, and invisibility. To locate the twenty-first century equivalent of overworked, underpaid service labor with some hopes of professional promotion, it may, in fact, be prudent to look away from the department store to other venues of consumer culture for a more fitting legacy.

Invisible Work

Whereas department stores as icons of consumption may have faded from the prominence they once enjoyed in America, the consumer atmosphere that sustained them has grown even more influential in American society. As historian William Leach asserts, consumer capitalism still “appears to have a nearly unchallenged hold over every aspect of American life, from politics to culture, so much so that the United States looks like a fabulous bazaar to much of the rest of the world” (*Land* 388).¹¹³

The shifting terrain of consumer culture prompts us to ask which group or groups, if any, constitute this century’s analog to the shopgirl as the invisible laborer whose work enables our consumption but is eclipsed from our view. These groups of workers within the service industry today, I propose, include fast-food workers who are fighting for higher wages and more consistent hours as well as retail workers for big-box stores such

¹¹³ Leach illustrates a direct and inevitable link between turn-of-the-century consumer culture and modern consumer culture as he posits an ongoing legacy of consumer desire and corporate capitalism that was merely slowed down by the Great Depression and World War II. In 1994, he noted that the “distance between consumers and workers...has gotten wider,” citing low wage factory workers who produce goods in Third World countries (*Land* 386). I would add that, by 2015, we now have another mystifying element to our consumer behavior in the world of online retail.

as Wal-Mart who are also asking for higher wages and better working conditions. In addition to these service-industry workers, the men and women who work in shipping fulfillment centers to facilitate online shopping orders constitute perhaps technology's newest subset of disenfranchised worker.¹¹⁴ Fully cloaked behind mysterious buildings that exist to most consumers as mere abstractions, workers at these “immense,” “[c]old, cavernous” centers labor some days from dawn until dusk packing supplies and shipping them to customers who ordered them with a simple click of a button (McClelland).

Although consumer culture in the United States has undergone numerous transitions over the past century, Americans' readiness to overlook the service industry that facilitates their consumer transactions remains strikingly intact. The problems that shopgirl literature from the turn of the century raises, including minimum wage, work hours, women's rights, and the invisibility of workers, remain pressing in our modern consumer landscape. That they have shifted to other portions of the workforce further masks their continued threat to worker security.

In another interesting shift, writers seem to demonstrate a proclivity for the genre of nonfiction to express concerns about service industry labor. Now, rather than compose novels about shopgirls, authors seem more inclined to write nonfiction essays and books to give voice to the underrepresented service industry and invisible shipping fulfillment workers. Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001) gives readers a glimpse into the daily lives of workers at businesses including

¹¹⁴ Although workers at shipping fulfillment centers do not replicate the dynamic of the shopgirl-consumer relationship because they do not encounter consumers face-to-face, I nonetheless argue that this form of labor—particularly its increased invisibility in respect to the consumer—is a fitting legacy of shopgirl labor in our current technological age.

maid services, restaurants, nursing homes, and Wal-Mart. In a compelling piece of longform journalism—and the cover story for the March/April 2012 issue of *Mother Jones* magazine—Mac McClelland applies Ehrenreich’s on-the-ground strategy to a shipping fulfillment center. In the article “I Was a Warehouse Wage Slave,” McClelland reports on her undercover employment working at a shipping fulfillment center, describing the long hours, physically demanding work, and punitive penalties she and her co-workers would endure for a wage of “eleven something dollars an hour” (McClelland). Her depiction of the job shares eerie similarities with reports on shopgirl labor from Alice Woodbridge in 1893 and Louise de Koven Bowen in 1911. Ehrenreich’s and McClelland’s modes of investigative journalism also evoke the legacy of nineteenth-century female “stunt reporters” who “insinuated themselves into prisons, hospitals, asylums, circuses, and brothels” (Lutes 2) in order to expose injustices through the experiences of their own bodies.¹¹⁵

The bleak surroundings represented in Ehrenreich’s and McClelland’s twenty-first-century narratives of service industry work contrast tellingly with the glamorous environs of the department stores that exist (even if perversely in the background) in most shopgirl stories. The fiction collected and analyzed within this dissertation indicates that something seductive about the setting of the department store compels writers to

¹¹⁵ See Jean Marie Lutes’s *Front Page Girls* (Chapter 1) for a discussion of Nellie Bly and other nineteenth-century “girl stunt reporters” (13). One such female reporter wrote about her experience working as a clerk in a department store as part of a series on working women published in the *St. Paul Daily Globe* (Lutes 171n5). In Eva Gay’s article on department store work, she notes the low wages and long hours shopgirls endure, and she concludes: “There seems to be a perfect understanding between employer and clerk as to the amount of gratitude, humility and hard work which should be given by the clerk in return for a position in his store. But if the clerk is satisfied certainly no one else would wish to see such a harmonious arrangement disturbed” (Gay 9).

represent it and readers to indulge in its representation, even if the story is told from the worker's side of the counter. Recent television sensations *The Paradise* and *Mr. Selfridge*, both period pieces airing in America on PBS, bespeak a continued fascination with glamorous turn-of-the-century department stores.¹¹⁶ In landscapes such as dreary shipping fulfillment centers used for processing online orders, the charm of the department store (or even the carefully designed, pleasing graphics of a store's website) is stripped away in favor of economical, dull shelving, arranged for nobody's sight except the undervalued workers who tend to them. As the consumer landscape around us continues to transform, and as the labor that enables it becomes more invisible to and distant from consumers, it becomes ever more important that citizens and scholars alike foreground the experiences of an underrepresented working class whose labor scaffolds the society we inhabit.

¹¹⁶ Even films such as *Elf* (Jon Favreau, 2003) or the classic, still seasonally popular *Miracle on 34th Street* (George Seaton, 1947; remade in 1994 by Les Mayfield) have key scenes set in a department store, where the monotony of the work is overshadowed by the excitement of the surroundings there.

Appendix

The Department Store in American Literature, 1880-1920: A Bibliography of Fiction

The following is an annotated list of the fiction I located in my research that features scenes of the department store in American literature 1880-1920. The fiction that follows portrays scenes within department stores (from perspectives of both workers and shoppers) as well as depictions of department store employees within and outside of the space of the department store. I do not intend for this list to be exhaustive, but it is a complete account of the works I have located to date. For pertinent entries, I have indicated the chapters of this dissertation where the texts receive more extended treatment.

Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. 1888. New York: Dover, 1996.

Utopian novelist Edward Bellamy is one of the more canonical writers on the list, and *Looking Backward*, popular at the time of its publication, remains a part of scholarly conversations. The novel begins with protagonist Julian West's ruminations on the state of late-19th-century capitalism and the class disparity it has engendered (including the famous carriage metaphor, wherein workers pull a carriage while the wealthiest few sit atop it). West narrates his tale of falling into an extended sleep in 1887 and awaking in 2000 in the home of Dr. Leete and his family. As Julian learns about the utopian world America has become, he draws a series of contrasts to this futuristic society in comparison to late-19th-century America.

The absence of competition and class difference, along with the elimination of a downtrodden working class, is evident in the scene where Julian West and Dr. Leete's daughter, Edith Leete, visit a department store. The first description of the store is one of absence: "There was no display of goods in the great windows, or any device to advertise wares, or attract custom" (49). Bellamy's scene emphasizes the abundance of seating available in the stores, underscoring the comfort and ease of shopping. Bellamy also champions the minimized role of clerks in the utopian store (complaining that 19th-century sales clerks were too pushy and manipulative, convincing customers to buy things they did not need). In this society, the clerk only appears to fill out the customer's order when she is ready to check out. Bellamy does note that the gender proportion of shoppers in utopian 2000 remains similar to that of 1887, indicating that shopping is still largely a female venture (Dr. Leete refers to his daughter as an "indefatigable shopper" [48]). In this novel's consumer landscape, there is also an absence of

boundless desire, and the characters are satisfied living within their equally distributed means.

Böhme, Margarete. *The Department Store*. 1911. Trans. Ethel Coburn Mayne. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912.

Although this novel was written by a German writer and set in Germany, I include it in this bibliography for its popularity in America at the time of its publication (a review in *The Bookman*, for example, lauds it as “a distinctly remarkable book” [“The Department Store.” *The Bookman* 35.4 June 1912: 411]).

The plot of Böhme’s novel shares many similarities with Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Böhme depicts a large department store, the Müllenmeister Emporium, which swallows the smaller, surrounding businesses as it grows in size. She describes the store as a “monster” (243) and a “vampir[e]” (33) that stamps out the competition and leaves salesgirls “exhausted” (73). But she also depicts its appeal of the store, detailing the “spectacle” (73) of its selling floor, from the impressive architecture to the bustle of customers who resemble a “glowing kaleidoscope of ever new patterns and pictures” (465). One character speaks against the store’s treatment of employees, lamenting that the shopgirls’ proximity to “the gay finery of the big bazaars” blinds them from their plight and prevents them from advocating for benefits or striking (313); shortly thereafter, that same character accepts a job with the department store as in-house detective, demonstrating the all-consuming pull of the vast and magnetic store. A *New York Times* review of the novel concludes that “[a]pparently a department store in Berlin, magnificent, pitiless, immense, is not so different from a department store in New York” (“New Fiction: A Novel of Berlin and Stories of England and America.” *New York Times* 31 March 1912: BR184).

Chopin, Kate. “A Pair of Silk Stockings.” 1897. *The Awakening and Selected Stories by Kate Chopin*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert. New York: Penguin, 1986. 262-266.

Chopin first published “A Pair of Silk Stockings” in the September 16, 1897 issue of *Vogue*. In this short story, Mrs. Sommers travels to a department store with \$15. She intends to purchase shoes, fabric, and stockings for her children, but at the store she feels the luxurious silk of the stockings and decides to purchase some for herself. That brief experience with luxury prompts her to continue pampering herself, and she proceeds to purchase a new pair of shoes and gloves, some magazines, a nice meal, and a ticket to a play. Chopin describes Mrs. Sommers through the eyes of the waiter as “a princess of royal blood” (266). At the end of the story, she boards a cable car to return to the daily routine of her life after this brief escape. The final moments of Chopin’s story leave Mrs. Summers in a wishful state of suspense, as she longs for the cable car to “go on and on with her forever” (266).

Dean, Howard. *The Iron Hand: a Story of the Times*. New York, The Abbey Press, 1898.

In this novel, two medical students in love find themselves separated by a massive and heartless department store. After earning his M.D., Walter Nicol joins a partnership to start a great department store in town. The store prospers, to Walter and his partner Toump's financial prosperity, but in the process it forces many small businesses to close. One such business belonged to Nellie Jimmy's father, and his ruin leads to a quick deterioration of his health. Walter and Nellie are in love, but Mr. Jimmy's anger with the department store stands in the way of their romance. Nellie reluctantly leaves medical school to revive her father's business, only to sell it eventually to the department store and work for them. She also begins to associate with Walter's partner Toump, in the interest of maintaining her good standing and steady paycheck from the store. Her father hears rumors of their association and kills Toump in his sleep for revenge; shortly thereafter, he passes away after revealing his deed. Walter sells his share in the store, and he and Nellie marry and move away to start a new life together. Throughout the novel, Dean utilizes metaphors that cast the department store as an "iron-handed monster" (80); the offenses he outlines for the store include its monopolies over local business, low wages for employees, utilization of child labor, and poor-quality products.

Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. New York: Doubleday, 1900.

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is another example of canonical fiction featuring the department store. Protagonist Carrie Meeber moves to the city of Chicago to make her way in the world. After working a labor-intensive job at a shoe factory, Carrie accepts the help of first Drouet and then Hurstwood and lives as a kept woman. In Chicago, her first experience at a department store comes when she enters the Fair to seek employment; while there, she is transfixed by the goods for sale around her as well as by the dignified, albeit working-girl status of the shop girls, whose presence makes Carrie feel her own poverty even more acutely. She returns to the Fair later when Drouet gives her money to spend (though she does not spend it there) and she again admires the goods. After Carrie moves to New York City with Hurstwood, she embarks on a career in the theater that brings her fame and wealth (if not happiness) while Hurstwood's inability to maintain employment leads him to eventually perish on the streets of New York. For an extended discussion of the novel, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Fawcett, Edgar. *The Evil That Men Do*. New York: Belford Company, 1889.

In this novel, protagonist Cora Strang struggles to make her way in New York City before ultimately turning to prostitution and facing her death at the hands of a drunk acquaintance. When the story opens, Cora is earning money by sewing shirts, and after enduring a series of low-paying work in the city, she obtains employment at a department store through the help of Casper Drummond, who is hoping to woo her. Cora's work at Pillsbury's Emporium behind the ribbon

counter is physically challenging and pays very little. She earns \$6 an hour working from 8:00am until 6:00pm and rooms at a nearby boarding house. One of the shopgirls Cora befriends, Lily Luttrell, entertains Cora with her “saucy” (221) humor, but Cora remains wary of her loose sexuality (in Fawcett’s terms, Lily “ain’t good” [222]). Fawcett points out that many of Cora’s coworkers live with family members and are not working out of such dire need; he scathingly notes that “they would spend the last dime of their salaries in tawdry trash” they purchase (227). Fawcett also takes aim at the “silly novels and story-papers” that delude shopgirls into hoping for a fairy-tale marriage to a wealthy suitor. Through the dreariness of her labor, Cora is sustained by thoughts of Casper. After Cora yields to Casper’s advances and becomes his lover, she leaves her job at Pillsbury’s to live as a kept woman until her relationship with Casper deteriorates and she moves into the realm of prostitution.

Ferber, Edna. *Buttered Side Down*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1912.

Buttered Side Down is a collection of short stories that depict working-class men and women in Chicago and mid-western America. It is comprised of the earliest stories Ferber published in popular newspapers and magazines, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Everybody’s Magazine*, and *The American Magazine*. This collection contains numerous short stories set in or written about the department store. For extended readings of “One of the Old Girls” and other stories from this collection, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

“One of the Old Girls” tells the story of Effie Bauer, a buyer for the corset department at Spiegel’s. In this short story, old-time friend and traveling salesman Gabe Marks proposes to Effie, but she turns him down to maintain autonomy over her finances and lifestyle. After falling ill with typhoid, Effie envisions a potentially lonesome and bleak future, and she accepts Gabe’s proposal, only to reject him once and for all when contemplating a new purchase and reaffirming her financial autonomy. Rather than bind herself to a man who would presumably oversee her expenditures, Effie decides to remain independent.

Another story in this collection, “The Frog and the Puddle,” features a dispirited department store shopgirl in Chicago. Rather than place her inside the setting of the department store, Ferber depicts Gertie, who has become worn down by her job at the men’s glove counter, at home at the end of a long and lonely day at work. After a conversation with neighbor Gus, Gertie decides she will stop working in the city and return to Beloit, Wisconsin, where she hopes to marry a local boy and settle down.

“Meymeys from Cuba” features an impoverished protagonist, Jennie, who visits a department store and is struck by the abundance of delectable goods that surround her in the grocery department. Starving and delirious, she attempts to shoplift a

scone but is caught by another customer, and she faints with exhaustion in the midst of the crowd of shoppers.

---. *Emma McChesney & Co.* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1915.

In this, the third and final installment of Ferber's Emma McChesney stories (following *Roast Beef, Medium* [1913] and *Personality Plus* [1914]), Emma McChesney and T.A. Buck (the owner of T.A. Buck's Featherloom Petticoats) are married. The department store continues to figure into the backdrop of these stories, this time more as a place of casual consumption than as a place for conducting business (as it is in *Roast Beef, Medium*). Married to the wealthy Buck, Emma makes a concerted effort to become a "lady of leisure" (126) after the wedding, and as such, Ferber features her in the role of consumer "in the busy aisle of a downtown department store" (125).

---. *Personality Plus: Some Experiences of Emma McChesney and Her Son, Jock.* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1914.

This is Ferber's second collection of Emma McChesney stories (following *Roast Beef, Medium* [1913]). As this collection opens, Emma McChesney has become the secretary of T. A. Buck's Featherloom Petticoats. The presence of the department store remains mostly in the background in this book. I include this entry in this bibliography because of the close relationship Emma McChesney's rising professional career has with direct commerce with department stores.

---. *Roast Beef, Medium: The Business Adventures of Emma McChesney.* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1913.

One of Edna Ferber's more memorable characters, Emma McChesney is a mother and traveling saleswoman for T.A. Buck's Featherloom Petticoats, where she has worked for ten years. In this first installment of stories about Emma McChesney, department stores appear intermittently as places of business where Emma McChesney demonstrates her prowess. She reads the *Dry Goods Review* and outwits male sales representatives to prove herself "the best little salesman on the road" (99).

Glasgow, Ellen. *Life and Gabriella: The Story of a Woman's Courage.* New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916.

Glasgow's protagonist, Gabriella, goes to work in the millinery department of Brandywine & Plummer's department store in Richmond, Virginia. Despite her family's reluctance that Gabriella might lower her "station of life" (29) by working in a store, Gabriella's desire to earn money and thus secure her independence from a potentially unwelcome marriage prompts her to accept the position. In the hat department, Gabriella quickly establishes a reputation for her good "taste" (63) and is frequently sought out by shoppers. After she marries George Fowler and moves to New York City with her husband, Gabriella

establishes herself as a “success” (512) in the New York millinery scene. She later learns that Brandywine & Plummer’s has gone out of business and Richmond has “a new department store, with a restaurant and a basement” in its old location (505).

Grant, Robert. *Unleavened Bread*. 1900. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915.

In this novel, Grant portrays department stores with skepticism. His narration classifies large dry-goods stores as “huge establishments” that encroach on the communal structure of a city: “Central Avenue has long ago been appropriated by the leading retail dry-goods shops...but at that time it was the social artery” of Benham (18). When Selma moves from Benham to New York City with her second husband, she is impressed by the “bright and busy” streets lined with “brilliant shop-windows” that “bewildered and stimulated her” (107). Once she visits these stores as a consumer with a limited budget, her awe thaws to a mixture of desire and contempt: “She had visited the New York shops. These, in her capacity of a God-fearing American, she would have been ready to anathematize in a speech or in a newspaper article, but the memory of them haunted her imagination and left her domestic yearnings not wholly satisfied” (130). The lingering desire Selma feels to boundlessly consume (which is unsatisfied by her husband’s limited resources) stands, she fears, “between her and the free development of her desires and aspirations” (165). When Selma returns to “the New York stores” after her second husband’s death to decorate a wealthy companion’s home, she feels “free from the bridle of Wilbur’s criticism and unrestrained by economy” (270).

Hughes, Rupert. *The Last Rose of Summer*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1914.

Protagonist Deborah Larrabee is single woman still living with her mother while her schoolmates have married and had children; in town, she is known as a kind but plain older woman. Her life changes when she takes a job as a saleswoman in a department store to help her mother earn money. Spending time at the department store, surrounded by other people and luxurious things, Debby begins to take more interest in her own appearance, and her eventual transformation becomes the talk of the town. The story remains cognizant of the challenges department store labor can pose to women, but for Debby, the store has a more positive influence on revitalizing her once-listless life. As Debby simultaneously ages and prospers working at the store, she becomes the metaphorical “last rose of summer” who blooms when others around her are fading. Another store in town offers her the position of buyer; the owner of the store where she works proposes marriage; and finally, the man Debby respects most, a former resident of the town who has established a career in New York working for a wholesale house, proposes to marry Debby and take her and her mother to New York with him; she happily accepts his proposal.

---. *Miss 318: A Story in Season and Out*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1911.

Initially published in the *Saturday Evening Post* (December 3, 1910), *Miss 318* is a timely plea “for a safe and sane Christmas” (as described in promotional material). Hughes tells his story from the perspective of an overworked-yet-still-plucky shopgirl in the busy days before Christmas. For an extended discussion of this novel, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Lisette Mooney (known as Miss 318 at work) works at the bargain counter at a department store and looks for love while battling the demands of holiday labor. Lisette (whose parents call her Lizzie but who chooses to dress up her name) has her sights on Mr. Percival Sterling, a floor-walker at the store. They have been out together a few times when she invites him to Thanksgiving dinner at her home. She implores her family, all of whom are at the bottom rungs of the working class, to be on their best behavior at this dinner, though their colloquial mannerisms still embarrass her. At the dinner, Lisette introduces Mr. Sterling to her friend and neighbor Myrtle, whose family is struggling financially, so he offers her family jobs at the store. Working at the department store proves to be arduous labor for Myrtle, but Lisette guides her through the job, assisting Myrtle’s young siblings as well. Myrtle and Mr. Sterling eventually become engaged (Sterling notes that a large part of Myrtle’s appeal is that she, unlike the strong and independent Lisette, appears to need a rescuer), leaving Lisette alone and exhausted from the Christmas shopping rush. Ironically, Myrtle and Sterling give Lisette a Christmas gift to thank her for introducing them, though material gifts at Christmas are the last thing Lisette wants after slaving away to provide them to others.

---. *Miss 318 and Mr. 37*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1912.

Hughes published this sequel to the previous year’s successful *Miss 318* after a fire destroyed his entire home library in 1912. The novel first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* (July 20, 1912-July 27, 1912). The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York, which he references in the novel, occurred on March 25, 1911. The novel is highly concerned with fires, and it is no coincidence that the novel features a fireman, “the poor folks’ demigod” (37), as the eponymous Mr. 37. For an extended discussion of this novel, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Miss 318 and Mr. 37 opens two years after the events of *Miss 318* with Lisette still at her post in the Mammoth department store. She meets a fireman named Mr. 37 at the theatre one night, and after they exchange banter, he warns her that the Mammoth store is so susceptible to fire that it’s “the nightmare of the whole force” (35). At her counter the next day at work, Lisette and her co-workers hypothesize about what they would do if the store caught fire, and they discover that one of their coworkers was among those who escaped the Triangle Shirtwaist

Factory Fire. Later in the day, Mr. 37 comes into the department store and, in a comical scene of misunderstandings, eventually manages to propose to Lisette, who happily accepts his proposal. Soon after he leaves, the store catches fire, and chaos ensues. Lisette helps other workers and shoppers (including the wealthy Mrs. Verden, who had visited Lisette's counter earlier in the day) escape before becoming trapped herself. Mr. 37 eventually arrives and attempts to rescue her, but the building burns down before he can remove her. Hughes saves his protagonist from death in the end, as her blackened body is found alive among the recovered bodies from the store's debris. Relieved by her own health and that of her brave fiancé, Lisette sends her mother a message that she is "all right—considerin' that the Mammoth Store has fell on her" (128).

---. *Mrs. Budlong's Christmas Presents*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912.

Written the year after *Miss 318*, this novella examines Christmas from the perspective of a frenzied gift-giver. Each year at Christmas, Mrs. Budlong amasses gifts from the townspeople and displays them at her house for a public viewing that has become both town tradition and neighborly competition. After she and her husband inherit money from relatives, their small town expects abundant generosity from them at the upcoming Christmas. Mrs. Budlong becomes so distracted by the social and logistical obligations connected to the inheritance that she overlooks her traditional preparation of home-made Christmas gifts. Further complicating matters, she and her husband have not yet come into possession of the inheritance with which they might purchase gifts. After a series of unsuccessful attempts to alienate old friends in order to remove herself from their Christmas lists, Mrs. Budlong and her husband run to the local department store at 10pm on Christmas Eve to relent and purchase gifts for the entire town. Hughes portrays both the frenzy of the beleaguered shoppers as well as the weariness of the exhausted shopgirls working through midnight on Christmas Eve.

---. *The Real New York*. New York: The Smart Set Publishing Company, 1904.

Described by a 1904 *New York Times* review as a "guide story book," this novel mixes intricate details about the sites of New York City with a story about some tourists making their way through the city. An early scene in the novel takes place inside a department store. Mr. De Peyster, a native New Yorker of genteel class, follows Miss Collis, a visitor to the city whom he has met the day before on a train into New York City, into a department store. She tells him that she has "simply got to buy some—some things" (25) before she leaves for Europe. In fact, her shopping trip is so important to her that she resolutely withstands long lines, crowded hoards of shoppers, and disinterested, lackadaisical shop girls to make her purchase (though Hughes never details exactly what things she has purchased). When she rejoins Mr. De Peyster, who has been waiting near the door of the store and has nearly been trampled many times over, both exit the store in

sour moods and exchange tense conversation until they reach the pier where her boat has left without her.

James, Henry. *The Princess Casamassima*. 1886. New York: Penguin, 1987.

Although *The Princess Casamassima* is one of James's London novels (written in England and set largely in London), I am including it in this list in the spirit that James is still an important figure in the Americanist cannon. To that effect, the novel was published serially in *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 1885- October 1886) before Macmillan and Co. published the novel in America and England in 1886.

Hyacinth's childhood friend Millicent Henning has become a London shopgirl, working in the jackets and mantles department of a London department store (Patricia Crick's footnotes to the 1987 Penguin edition suggest that the "great haberdasher's" to which James refers is The Army & Navy Stores [595 n34]). James characterizes Millicent as "a daughter of London, of the crowded streets and hustling traffic of the great city" (93). Whereas some literary critics read Millicent as "flamboyantly self-confident" (Hapke *Labor's* 88), others view her as a revolutionary in her own right; Katherine Mullin argues that Millicent's "flamboyant self-assertion marks her out as the emblem of a markedly different form of social upheaval from that located elsewhere in the novel" (199).

Irwin, Inez Haynes. *The Lady of Kingdoms*. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1917.

As Elaine Showalter notes in *These Modern Women* (Feminist Press, 1989), Inez Haynes Irwin was "a well-known suffragist, journalist, and novelist...whose exciting life encompassed many of the radical themes of the modern era" (33). When researching her work, one should note that Irwin's name sometimes appears as Inez Haynes Gillmore (she and her first husband, Rufus Gillmore, divorced, and in 1916 she married William Henry Irwin).

The protagonist of this novel, Southward Drake, moves from her grandparents' home in rural Connecticut to New York City to pursue her dreams of independence and adventure. In New York, she encounters an exciting metropolis including department stores. When she first arrives in the city, Southward says she does not care much for shopping, although she accompanies her friend on a sizable spree, but soon, Southward herself is purchasing dresses that look like she "had bought those in Paris" (326). Irwin portrays an invigorating consumer experience for another character, Mrs. Crowell, whose small-town life realizes new possibilities when she encounters the world of consumer culture in San Francisco. Passing by "the big lighted windows" (468) of department stores as well as the other market spaces of San Francisco, Mrs. Crowell feels as if "she were trying to fill out the shape of her soul with a new cargo" (471-2).

Klein, Charles, *Maggie Pepper*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1911.

English-born author Charles Klein was an actor, playwright, and novelist. He created a series of hits on Broadway, including *Maggie Pepper*, which he published as a novel with Grosset & Dunlap in 1911, the same year it premiered as a play. The play, which starred Rose Stahl as the eponymous Maggie, premiered on Broadway and then toured across America. The novel was also made into a movie in 1919 and a musical, titled *Letty Pepper*, in 1922. For an extended discussion of the novel, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Maggie Pepper is the story of a spirited and determined woman who, after 15 years of working for the department store Holbrooke and Company, hopes to be promoted to the position of buyer. Although a corrupt manager initially denies Maggie the promotion, the store's owner, Joseph Holbrooke, intervenes and not only rehires Maggie but collaborates with her to transform the outdated store into a revitalized and thriving business. A subplot finds Maggie adopting her niece in order to shield her from her late-brother's irresponsible wife and criminal husband, James Darkin. Events culminate when Joseph Holbrooke realizes his love for Maggie, is shot by Darkin, and convalesces at Maggie's apartment, after which time they become happily engaged.

Ladies' Philanthropic Society of Philadelphia. *The Great Wrongs of the Shop Girls, The Life and Persecutions of Miss Beatrice Claflin*. Philadelphia: Barclay, 1880.

This novel was written collectively by a subcommittee of the Ladies' Philanthropic Society of Philadelphia. A committee of three women, Mrs. General George W. Fenton, Mrs. Victor Lorillard Jerome, and Miss Abigail Dodge Pierrpont, composed the novel in the spirit of other novels published by Barclay publishers (whose "efforts to reform existing abuses in this country through the medium of your excellent publications" the woman praise [see Letter preceding the text of the novel]). Aimed at "exposing the indignities" of shopgirl labor, the novel shadows its protagonist at work in one exploitative department store. The style of the novel recalls the melodrama of dime novels, as evinced by a summary on the title page that reads: "How Miss Claflin became the White Slave in the Gilded Dry Goods Palace of a Merchant Prince! Her Incarceration in a Private Insane Asylum! Two Years in a Mad House! How Patients are Treated Therein!" (n.p.). Depicting a sympathetic, wrongly afflicted heroine who is repeatedly diminished by the cutthroat bottom line of capitalism, this novel—at once highly sentimental and grimly realistic—espouses social awareness, labor reforms, and ethical responsibility towards working women.

Lewis, Sinclair. *The Job: An American Novel*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917.

In this urban story of a woman establishing herself in the business world, Lewis weaves department stores into the tapestry of life without featuring them in the

main plot of his novel. Lewis's successful businesswoman Una shops in the department store as a means of distraction from the day-to-day dullness of her life at the office. Hoping to make herself a brown and orange dress, Una goes to the dress-goods department and then to the music department where she daydreams about an imaginary boyfriend. In contrast to her positive experience at the store, where the shopgirl "laughs with her" (117), another character in the novel carries more troubled associations with department stores. Mamie Magen once worked at a department store in her youth and recalls the impatient, exacting nature of the floor walker who supervised her; she groups department stores with garment factory work in her recollections and reflects on the advantages of office work in comparison to these more uncomfortable positions. Una's friend Mrs. Wade also works at a department store to support herself and her child. Even Una's eventual husband, Julius Schwirtz, works with "department-store buyers" (36) as part of his job selling paint.

---. *Main Street*. 1920. New York: Signet Classics, 2008.

In his portrait of Carol's struggle between life in a small town and the more exciting pace urban America has to offer, Lewis portrays department stores as one of the allures of the big city. Carol travels to Minneapolis, where she "scamper[s] through department stores" (84) in order to furnish her new home in the small town of Gopher Prairie. Later, when she and her husband visit Minneapolis together, they have "all the experiences of provincials in a modern metropolis" (231). Her escape to the metropolitan wonders of the city entice her into an elaborate shopping trip, during which: "They admired the diamonds and furs and frosty silverware and mahogany chairs and polished morocco sewing-boxes in shop-windows, and were abashed by the throngs in the department-stores, and were bullied by a clerk into buying too many shirts for Kennicott, and gaped at the 'clever novelty perfumes—just in from New York'" (231). Lewis utilizes Gopher Prairie's Bon Ton Store to demonstrate the relativity of different sized department stores and corresponding consumer reactions. Even though it is the "largest shop in town" (51), the Bon Ton Store appears to Carol to be somewhat limiting. On first appearance, she finds it clean but not very busy, and she finds less to admire there than in the stores she encounters in bigger cities. In contrast, from newcomer Bea's perspective, Gopher Prairie's Bon Ton Store is "big as four barns—my!...[and] it would simply scare a person to go in there, with seven or eight clerks all looking at you" (54).

Libbey, Laura Jean. *Lotta, the Cloak Model*. 1900. New York: Street & Smith, 1907.

Prolific dime-novel author Laura Jean Libbey was known for her stories about working girls and sold an estimated 10-15 million books (Cox 158). *Lotta, the Cloak Model* was originally published in Norman L. Munro's *Family Story Paper* between September 29, 1900 and January 12, 1901 under the title "Lotta, The Beautiful Cloak Model; or, Light and Shadows Of Life In a Big Department

Store. Cordially Dedicated To The Young Ladies Employed At All The Big Department Stores Throughout The Country By Their Friend And Well-Wisher, Miss Laura Jean Libbey.” It was republished as part of Street & Smith’s *Eagle Library* in 1907 under the title *Lotta, the Cloak Model; or, Life in a Department Store*. For a brief discussion of Libbey’s portrayal of the shopgirl, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

The novel follows the beautiful Lotta Marlowe from rural Virginia to the big city of New York, where she becomes the victim of this deceiving city numerous times before finally settling into a life of happiness in the novel’s final pages. Lotta heads to New York to answer an ad for a cloak model in the department store Morris, Wyngate, & Rowland, and she eventually does get this position. Her time in the department store is characterized mainly by the hatred and jealousy her beauty arouses in the other women working there. The majority of this novel follows Lotta as she tries to make her way around the city and is drugged, kidnapped, and sexually assaulted. The novel is replete with sentimental and melodramatic plot twists and fainting women. In the end, Lotta does marry Lance Wyngate, the son of the department store co-owner, and her lame sister Emily marries Charles Rowland, co-owner of the store (who had actually loved Lotta and Emily’s late mother only to have his heart broken long ago when she married another man).

The parts of the novel that do involve Morris, Wyngate, & Rowland department store utilize a familiar cast of characters. Charles Rowland is a benevolent, wealthy owner. Lance Wyngate is the free spirited son of a department store owner who lives liberally off his father’s savings utilizing the store mostly to flirt with women (his only redeeming quality, really, is the depth of his love for Lotta, which develops over the course of the novel, and he finally decides to commit to her). Mr. Flint is the corrupt, manipulative manager at the store who embezzles money and uses his power to blackmail the female employees into going out with him. Ms. Grant is a vindictive department manager who has worked her way up in the store and now resents popular new girls. Lotta herself is the fallen-from-the-upper-class working girl who seeks employment in the department store as a means of self-support.

McHugh, Hugh [George Vere Hobart]. *Get Next!* New York: G.W. Dillingham Company, 1905.

Get Next! (published under the pseudonym Hugh McHugh) is one of George Hobart’s many humor books featuring the protagonist John Henry. Scholar Holger Kersten writes about the series: Hobart “cast a sardonic look at the world around him. John Henry, the protagonist, was an average American who, using the popular and slang-encrusted idiom of his time, described a wide range of

everyday occurrences and social events, leaving no doubt about his aversion to the pretentiousness and the superficiality of the world in which he lived” (45). This longer work features a brief vignette in which the cheeky male protagonist, John Henry, visits a department store to purchase a gift for his wife. He faces daunting crowds of shoppers, wry employees who further complicate his shopping efforts, and a giant store layout he finds difficult to navigate. His observations in the store are pejorative, at one point comparing the way women examine ribbons at the store to the way a “dog digs up vegetables in the garden” (38). In the end, Henry leaves exasperated without a gift for his wife. For an illustration from this book, see Figure 2 of this dissertation.

Merwin, Samuel. *The Honey Bee*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1915.

The protagonist of *The Honey Bee*, Hilda Wilson, is a buyer for the Hartman Store in New York. She has worked as a buyer with that company for 5 years (after 14 years in department store work) and earns a sizable \$8,000 a year; she is, by all accounts, a “very successful business woman” (30). When the novel opens, Hilda is in the midst of a buying trip in Paris, and she has just fended off an unwanted advance from an old client. She decides to take some long-overdue vacation time and remains in Paris. There, she strikes up a friendship with an American boxer and an American dancer and cares for an abandoned infant she encounters through these acquaintances. She then leaves for London, where she reunites with the love of her life (Harris Doreyn, her former boss at the first department store where she worked in Chicago). World War I begins while Hilda is in London with Doreyn but, as we see, the war has little effect on the unchanged Hartman Store in New York. After a year in Europe, and after Doreyn’s death from illness, Hilda returns to her job in the New York department store. Upon her return, she receives a warm welcome and feels a “sense of belonging” (458) through recommencing her work there.

O. Henry [William Sidney Porter]. *The Four Million*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1906.

This collection of short stories focuses on working-class characters in New York City. One of the stories printed in this collection, “An Unfinished Story” features a department store shopgirl protagonist named Dulcie who prepares for a date with an unsavory man nicknamed Piggy. Dulcie’s long hours and low pay at the department store have left her so hungry for a night of entertainment that she has accepted a date with this ill-reputed man. As she prepares for her date, she second-guesses her decision to spend the evening with Piggy and cancels their date. O. Henry ends the story, however, with narration announcing that Dulcie agrees at a later time to go out with Piggy and, he implies, meets her sexual fall that evening. O. Henry concludes the story condemning the department store owners who pay such meager wages that an employee of theirs felt the need to

seek other forms of financial support. For a brief discussion of “An Unfinished Story,” see this dissertation’s Introduction.

---. *The Trimmed Lamp and Other Stories of the Four Million*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1907.

In his biography of Porter, Gerald Langford writes that Porter sometimes struggled to create plots for his stories and that he enlisted the help of his close friend, the writer Anne Partlan, for “The Trimmed Lamp,” paying her \$40 for the plot (193). According to interviews with Partlan, she inspired Porter’s insights on the New York City shop girls, who were friends of hers, when she introduced them to Porter (see epigraph to this dissertation’s Introduction). For a discussion of “The Trimmed Lamp,” see this dissertation’s Introduction.

The short story from which this collection takes its title, “The Trimmed Lamp,” is about a department store shopgirl named Nancy who utilizes her position at the counter, in the presence of luxury goods and wealthy shoppers, to teach herself higher class habits, styles, and mannerisms. Nancy also talks to her friend Lou (who works in a laundry pressing clothes) about hunting at the department store for a husband whose wealth could improve her social status. In the end, though, it is Lou who marries a wealthy man and Nancy who marries a kind electrician with a steady income. When the women run into each other at the end of the story, we see that Nancy is happy with her loving husband, and Lou is living a comparably empty life despite her wealth.

Other stories in the collection that feature department store shopgirls include “The Purple Dress” and “The Ferry of Unfulfilment.” “The Purple Dress” tells the story of a kind and patient shopgirl, Maida, who has been saving her money to have a purple dress made for her to wear at Thanksgiving. When her coworker spends her own money on a fancy dress for the Thanksgiving dinner and in turn cannot pay her rent, Maida gives her friend the money she meant to use to purchase her dress. Without her desired dress, Maida skips the dinner (where she had hoped to impress the elegant head clerk Mr. Ramsay). But when she confesses that she cannot buy the dress after all, the sympathetic tailor gives it to her anyway, and she blissfully dons it for a walk in the rain where she runs into Mr. Ramsay, who is smitten with the sight of her, portending a happy ending for the pair.

In a story with a less hopeful ending, “The Ferry of Unfulfilment,” sleepy shopgirl Claribel Colby meets a prosperous suitor on the ferry after work but falls asleep as he attempts to woo her. He asks if she would ultimately prefer love or money, and when she drowsily says “Cash!,” he abandons his pursuit and leaves. She then wakes up from a dream about working at the counter of the department store (which had prompted her sleepy outburst) and wonders where the man has gone.

Peck, Bradford. *The World a Department Store*. Lewiston, Maine: Bradford Peck, 1900.

Bradford Peck began working in a department store as a cash boy at age 12, worked his way up at the store while taking classes at night school, and by the age of 27 opened his own department store, B. Peck Company, in Lewiston, Maine. Inspired by the political work of Edward Bellamy and other utopian writers of the time to re-envision society as a merging of Christian values and socialist distribution, he self-published *The World a Department Store* to spread his political message and included an appeal for financial support to create a real utopia in America on the last page of the book. Peck's organization, The Cooperative Association of America, really did exist (and, for a brief time, grow) in Lewiston, Maine between 1899 and 1912, when the cooperation dissolved. B. Peck's was eventually purchased (and incorporated) itself by the great department store Filene's in 1947.

In Peck's novel, the department store is a positive force of cooperative societal organization that provides an alternative to competitive capitalism. When the protagonist Percy Brantford falls asleep and wakes up 25 years later, he, like Bellamy's Julian West, awakens to a utopian society. This new form of society is structured around the compartmental organization of the department store, and as Brantford tours his new surroundings, one of the places he visits is the actual department store in the town. The scenes that take place in the department store itself are notably more subdued than scenes in novels where the capitalist machine of the department store is a center of pulsating crowds and desire. Instead, Peck's narration describes the absence of "frantic and almost wild" women pushing and crowding one another as they battled for goods as well as the absence of "bargain tickets" with multiple prices listed and slashed out to demonstrate the great bargain of each good (78). In fact, one of the only details he gives about the interior of the supply store is the "abundance" of chairs for both the customers and the employees (78). The emphasis on comfort and pleasure here applies to both employees and shoppers, men and women in his fictional supply store. Peck presents both male and female shoppers making purchases in the stores and notes that the male goods are housed in a different building from the female goods (also separate are home furnishings). In Peck's novel, desire for style and admiration for aesthetics exist, but the characters in his world are satisfied living within their means in a way Zola's, Hughes's, and Dreiser's characters, for example, are not.

Phillips, David Graham. *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise*. New York: Appleton, 1917.

Phillips began writing *Susan Lenox* in 1904 and completed the story just before his death in 1911. After negotiations between Phillips' sister Caroline and D. Appleton and Company, *Susan Lenox* first appeared in print in *Hearst's Magazine* June 1915 (and ran serially through January 1917). Appleton published *Susan Lenox* as a 2-volume novel in 1917.

Protagonist Susan leaves her home at an early age and searches for work to keep herself afloat in the world. She endures a series of difficult jobs, ranging from factory work to prostitution, and eventually becomes a stage actress in New York City. Susan encounters department stores alternately as a window-shopper, job applicant, and customer. In one key scene, as Susan and her companions shop late at night, she remarks that she must “forget” about the tired workers if she wants to preserve her state of consumer pleasure (I, 388). For an extended discussion of *Susan Lenox*, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Porter, Eleanor H. *Oh, Money! Money!* Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918.

Millionaire Stanley Fulton is looking to spread his wealth among his relatives, so he plots to observe them in order to gauge their worthiness of the sum he intends to leave. Watching Maggie Duff, he hears word of her good reputation through her work reforming an unjust department store. Daly’s, “a Hillerton department store notorious for its unfair treatment of its employees” plagues its shopgirls with long hours, low wages, and “nerve-wearing labor” (182). After Maggie is approached to donate to a pension relief fund created to support the shopgirls at Daly’s, she takes even more drastic action. She rallies “a crusade of women’s clubs and church committees...and threatened all sorts of publicity and unpleasantness if the wrongs were not righted at once” (183). Her actions, we learn, are successful, and Daly’s undergoes “a complete change of policy,” wherein “[h]ours were shortened, labor lightened, and wages raised (183). Porter notes the difficulties of department store labor elsewhere in the novel as she writes that one character’s work in a department store leaves her “all played out” (319).

Ralph, Julian. *People We Pass: Stories of Life Among the Masses of New York City*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896.

Julian Ralph worked as a reporter for the New York newspaper *The Sun*, and after spending time among the working-class residents of New York for his reporting, Ralph drew upon this material to compose short stories. In his description of tenement life, Ralph describes “shop-girls” as a category of women who utilize “proper” (55) speech, which they have learned in the stores where they work: “So the shop-girls became, and remain, the exemplars of a nice fashion in girls’ speech. They study the fine ladies whom they wait upon. They cultivate soft low tones and gentle exclamations and good grammar, as far as that can be picked up in disconnected fragments” (56). He also writes that “American shop-girls of far lower grade...dressed with as good an imitation of the fashions as many a woman of greater pretensions—a difficult thing, because the girls who do it have to find cheap goods that will do duty as the bases of styles which are created with cloths made online in high-priced patterns” (159). In some of Ralph’s stories, shopgirls

play major roles in the tale. The protagonist of “Dutch Kitty’s White Slippers” is a shopgirl in the “china-ware department of an uptown shop” who saves her lunch money and carfare (walking to work and skipping lunch) for a week in order to purchase herself a pair of white slippers to wear to a dance (132). In “Petey Burke and His Pupil,” Ralph presents a shopgirl named Norah who works as “first helper to the Head of Department of the Made-up Millinery Room in one of the great shopping stores” (159). Norah has “remarkable natural taste” (159) and internalizes the advice of her brother Petey for lessons in department.

Sheldon, Lurana W. *For Gold of Soul? The Story of a Great Department Store*. New York: Street & Smith, 1900.

Initially published in *Street and Smith’s New York Weekly* (May 5, 1900-August 4, 1900), *For Gold or Soul* tells the story of a young woman forced to work after her father’s death who ultimately becomes a catalyst in transforming the unjust environment of the department store where she works. For an extended discussion of this novel, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

The protagonist of this dime novel, Faith Marvin, is a formerly middle-class girl whose family has fallen on hard times since the department store Messrs. Denton, Day & Co. put her father’s book store out of business, and her father subsequently took his own life. The first chapter depicts (in cruel irony) the impoverished Faith applying for a position at the very same department store responsible for her family’s diminished circumstances. Once hired, Faith experiences first-hand the harsh working conditions the store’s employees face through her job as a cash girl. She befriends a seasoned but ailing shopgirl named Mary Jennings, who quickly enlightens Faith about their collective distress. Determined to continue working to support her family despite her deteriorating health, Mary dies in the midst of her shift to the shock of Faith and other witnesses to the tragedy. Horrified by this turn of events, Faith resolves to transform the store. Through some serendipitously placed religious appeals, she wins the trust of Mr. Denton, the store’s controlling partner, and convinces him to run his store more humanely. When a surprise family fortune absolves Faith from financial struggle, she voluntarily joins Mr. Denton in an advisory role to improve conditions for the store’s employees. These reforms threaten to drive the store into bankruptcy, but patrons rally to support their fair policies and Christian values, leading the store to profitability and its employees to contentment and security. A coda to this consummate happiness solidifies the bond between employee and employer with the engagement of Faith to the store-owner’s charming young son, Jim Denton.

---. *For Humanity’s Sake: A Story of the Department Stores*. Street and Smith’s New York Weekly. 22 December 1900 through 9 March 1901.

For Humanity’s Sake appeared in *Street and Smith’s New York Weekly* four months after the conclusion of *For Gold or Soul*. Sheldon’s second dime novel

about department store workers considers methods of reform from the varying perspectives of shopgirls, store owners, benevolent managers, and concerned philanthropists. For an extended discussion of this novel, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

The opening chapter introduces a spectrum of characters—spanning social classes—who play key roles in transforming the department store: Dion Allison is a wealthy gentleman, recently heartbroken, who vows to give his life purpose by “be[ing] useful”; Mortimer Percival is a reformed rake hoping to marry an “angel,” whom he is certain he will find laboring in a department store; and recently orphaned Dorna Temple stands vigil at her mother’s grave before setting off for the city to make her own living working in a department store. These characters converge at Markel & Miller’s, the department store of the novel’s subtitle. Like *For Gold or Soul?*’s Denton, Day & Co., Markle & Miller’s employees are plagued by low wages, irrational fines, long hours, few breaks, child labor, poor sanitary conditions, and inadequate fire safety. All of the central characters work to change the conditions of the store, including the wealthy Olga Oliver, who is secretly the store’s rightful owner posing as a shopgirl to learn about their working conditions; Dion Allison, who becomes store manager; Mortimer Percival, who draws various social and government agencies to investigate the store; and a group of shopgirls who band together to advocate for themselves. This diverse group of characters and their friends join forces at the end of the novel “[f]or humanity’s sake” to overthrow the store’s management and establish a new “absolutely honest store” (Chapter 32). The novel’s conclusion finds many romantic matches, including the engagement of Dion and Olga. But Dorna, who receives an offer of marriage from Dr. McCarroll, turns him down to devote her life instead to workers’ rights.

Shirley, Grace [Lurana Sheldon]. *Marion Marlowe’s Skill: or, A Week as a Private Detective*. My Queen: A Weekly Journal for Young Women. New York: Street and Smith, 1900.

Lurana Sheldon published a series of short dime novels for Street and Smith under the heading, *My Queen: A Weekly Journal for Young Women*. One of these novels, *Marion Marlowe’s Skill*, portrays the series protagonist, Marion Marlowe, working as a “private shopper” in a department store to catch shoplifters and disloyal employees. When Marion walks into one department store, she notices both the physical fatigue of the shopgirls and the unfriendly attitudes of some—one of whom is “cross and rude” to Marion (Chapter 7). Marion eventually uncovers a ring “of rascality” in which numerous clerks throughout the city partook in systematic theft (Chapter 14). After helping bring them to justice, she moves on from her job as detective to resume her musical studies and await the adventure planned for her in the next *My Queen* story.

Smith, Francis Hopkinson. *Felix O'Day*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915.

Smith's story of a penniless English nobleman, Sir Felix O'Day, who ventures to America in search of his estranged wife, Lady Barbara, includes several scenes of department store labor. Lady Barbara, under the assumed name of Mrs. Stanton, finds work as a needlewoman at Rosenthal's department store in New York to earn her living once she runs away from her deceitful paramour, Dalton. Lady Barbara completes most of this work from her home and brings the repaired garments in to the department store when she is finished. When she works on mending an expensive Spanish mantilla for a wealthy customer, Dalton steals it from her. As she is unable to return the stolen garment to the store, Lady Barbara's managers at Rosenthal's turn her over to the police for the theft of the garment.

Stead, W.T. *If Christ Came to Chicago! A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer*. Chicago: Laird & Lee Publishers, 1894.

Stead was a British newspaper editor who wrote a scathing account of Chicago in the late 1800s. Although technically a work of nonfiction, it is sometimes discussed in conversations of related utopian and social gospel literature (see Beaumont and Jackson, respectively), so I have chosen to include it in this list.

Stead names Marshall Field, whose department store Marshall Field and Co. was one of the largest in Chicago, as one of the problems plaguing the city. He classifies Field as one of the "deities of modern Chicago" (72) along with George M. Pullman and Philip D. Armour—all three millionaires and "greater gods" (74) upon whom Stead fears people mold themselves. He condemns Field for running a business so massive that he routinely puts smaller merchants out of business. Stead writes, "...when each fresh department was added to Marshall Field's stores it was as if a cyclone had gone forth among the smaller houses which were in the same line of business. When Marshall Field opened any new department...he would run it at cut rates so as to give him the command of the field...Against such a power, so concentrated in turn against each detachment of the enemy, or the competitor, nothing could stand" (76). Stead takes care to note that Marshall Field & Co. is not known to employ underage workers or offer such low wages that women are forced to supplement their income in other ways, although he condemns other stores for this practice and for the role low wages play in encouraging prostitution. Matthew Beaumont even points out that in the edition of this book published in London by "The Review of Reviews," of which Stead was editor, the frontispiece features "a scene from Matthew chapter xxi in which he expels the moneylenders from the temple. Encumbered with bags of money, a character that is clearly meant to resemble Marshall Field himself recoils clumsily from Christ's imperious gesture. In the background, behind Field and his grasping fellow plutocrats, looms a neo-classical department store" (196).

Wharton, Edith. *Ethan Frome*. 1911. New York: Signet, 2000.

The rural village of Starkfield, Massachusetts does not have a department store (instead, Ethan goes to Denis Eady's store and Mrs. Horman's store so get his provisions), but Mattie Silver, who comes to Starkfield from Stamford, Connecticut has a connection with the vast retail establishments. After the death of her parents and before moving to the Frome farm, Wharton writes, Mattie worked for six months in a department store. The job was not good for her ailing health: "her health broke down, and six months on her feet behind the counter of a department store did not tend to restore it" (53). Later, when Mattie plans to leave Starkfield, she tells Ethan she plans to seek work at a store again, despite his doubts about the "bad air and the standing all day" that accompanies shopgirl work (136).

---. *Summer*. 1917. New York, Signet: 1993.

In the second of Wharton's "two New England tales" (*A Backward Glance* 153), Wharton briefly mentions small-town department stores in the landscape of Nettleton, the city in the vicinity of Charity's village of North Dormer. When she and Lucius travel to Nettleton to watch the fireworks on the fourth of July, Charity stops in front of store windows to admire the displays. The "wide expanses of plate-glass" reveal "hints of hidden riches," including ribbons, hats, gramophones, bicycles, and dresses (87). Although Wharton does not in this passage identify the businesses as department stores, she later refers back to them as such. After Charity and Mr. Royall have been married and are stopping in Nettleton, Charity looks again into "the plate-glass windows of the department stores" and sees "the tempting display of dresses and dress-materials that had fired her imagination on the day when she and Harney had looked in at them together" (193). Rather than enter the store and buy the items as Royall has encouraged her to do, Charity walks away emptyhanded.

Wilkins, Mary E. [Mary Wilkins Freeman]. "A Tragedy from the Trivial" *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* August 1900: 334-349.

This story opens at the ribbon counter of H. F. Crosby's Dry Goods Emporium, where Charlotte May works as a shopgirl. Although Freeman utilizes the setting of a small-town department store, in keeping with her regional writing, the tasks of the shopgirl and the proximity to consumption her job entails remain consistent with larger, more urban department store depictions. Charlotte soon marries a factory worker, John Woodsum, and leaves her job at the store to focus fulltime on homemaking. Struggling to learn "the lesson of household thrift" (340), Charlotte leaves their home after an "absur[d] and grotesqu[e]" attempt to make her husband birthday cake yields a kitchen full of fallen cakes in baking tins and good china (344). She returns to her work at the ribbon counter of the department store for the purpose of earning the money to replace all of the wasted baking supplies she depleted in her baking disaster. She deprives herself of necessities

and even medicine to earn that \$15, and as soon as she can repay the sum, she returns home to her husband. Shortly thereafter, Charlotte dies of consumption, encouraging her husband from her deathbed to marry her economical coworker Eliza.

Williamson, Alice Muriel and Charles Norris Williamson. *The Shop Girl*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1914.

The Shop Girl first appeared in *Munsey's Magazine* in the Volume 52, July 1914 issue. It was written by British husband and wife Charles and Alice Williamson, though accounts name Alice as the writer and Charles as more of an advisor and collaborator ("Mrs. Williamson Asks a Question" in *New York Times* 7 March 1914, SM20). After its publication in 1914, the novel became a photo-play in 1916 directed by George Baker and produced by Vitagraph.

The Shop Girl follows British immigrant Winifred (Win) Child overseas to America, where she becomes a shopgirl at a prominent department store in New York City, The Hands. Onboard the ship to America, where Win works as a model for a dress designer to pay her fare, she strikes up a friendship with Peter Rolls, whose father built and owns The Hands. Win regretfully shuns him after Peter's social-climbing sister warns her that he is not to be trusted. Win strikes out on her own when she reaches New York City, and after a few promising jobs fall through, she ends up taking a position at The Hands as extra holiday labor. Win proves herself to be a sharp, smart worker, but nevertheless she struggles to live on the paltry wages of a shop girl. Win faces numerous propositions from philandering men she meets at the department store, including a gothic subplot where she is entrapped in a secluded home by a wealthy knave (thankfully, she uses her wit to escape). Peter Rolls eventually discovers Win working at The Hands and, through her, learns about the harsh conditions his father's employees endure. He demonstrates his commitment to reform to Win through a free healthcare facility he has recently established, and the two become engaged. They combine their efforts to persuade Peter Rolls Sr. both to bless the union of Peter and Win and to change his business practices (though the novel itself does not see that reform enacted—we are left only with the promise of it). The novel closes with Peter and Win's plan for marriage and their joint commitment, along with Peter Sr., to run with department store "[w]ith love" (345) in the future.

Zola, Émile. *Au Bonheur des Dames*. 1883. Trans. Robin Buss. New York: Penguin, 2001.

Though initially published in France, *Au Bonheur des Dames* was translated to English in 1883 and became widely read in America (for statistics on translation and publication: see Salvan, Albert J. *Zola aux Etats-Unis* [Providence: Brown UP, 1943]). In this canonical French novel, protagonist Denise Baudu moves to Paris with her younger brothers and takes a job at the department store Au

Bonheur des Dames to earn her living. Zola presents the department store from the vantage point of the worker, owner, and shoppers. Denise's work at the store is initially physically demanding and mentally discouraging as she faces challenging labor conditions and little hope of advancement. Eventually attracting the eye of the owner, Mouret, Denise works her way up at the store. Mouret is in the process of building a department store empire, expanding his business and buying out small artisans—including Denise's uncle—around the city. He socializes with the city's upper crust, whose women spend much of the novel shopping (or shoplifting, as is the case for the financially pressed Mme de Boves) at the store. Eventually, Mouret expresses his love to Denise and after much hesitation, she accepts him.

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