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FABRICATING IDENTITIES: DRESS IN AMERICAN
REALIST NOVELS, 1880 - 1925

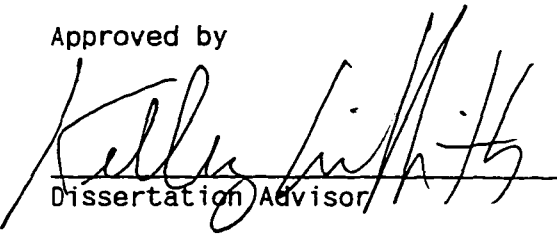
by

Carolyn L. Mathews

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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MATHEWS, CAROLYN L., PH.D. *Fabricating Identities: Dress in American Realist Novels, 1880-1925.* (1996)
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The vital connection between self and the clothed body forms the basis for this study of representative American realist novels set during the decades spanning the years 1875 to 1925. American social history of these decades is marked both by the swelling of a middle class defined through respectability and by the emergence of a consumer culture that promised through its proliferation of images and commodities that the "good life" was within the reach of all. This history sets the scene for these literary works. In examining female characters' attempts to construct selves outfitted for this new social order, I argue that in these characters' quests to move beyond the domestic sphere, a model for social change emerges.

Through focusing on novelists' descriptions of clothing and through mapping out the cultural grid that brings symbolic meaning to these descriptions, this study aims toward recreating what Mikhail Bakhtin called "the social atmosphere of the word." A complex weave of cultural meanings is illuminated through attention to dress and to the social backdrop against which it etches its fashion statement. Unravelling the "living dialogic threads" weaving themselves around images of draped and bustled skirts, gigot sleeves, or serpentine teagowns, a reader can begin to expose the warp of social class and gender expectations integral to selfhood and examine the emerging constructions of the female self.

In the novels selected for this study--Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton's *The House of*

Mirth, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*--various female characters accept, challenge, contradict, or oppose the social forces impinging upon self. As each takes from a closet of possibilities the womanly practices and womanly images that suit her, some select in a willy-nilly fashion a hybrid ensemble that pulls from opposite ends of cultural poles. This new ensemble--partaking in dominant forms but rearranging and thus amending them--works to outfit at least some of these fictional characters for change. Informed by Bakhtin's socio-linguistic theory of the novel, reception theories that examine triadic models for meaning-making, and work of material historians and cultural critics, this study provides a model for using images of dress as a tool for interpreting literary texts.

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Chapter One

The 'vital touch of *becomingness*':

Dress, Self, and Social Change

In a key scene of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer and Madame Merle debate the seemingly trivial question of dress as they begin to unravel a deeper enigma. "What shall we call our 'self'?" Madame Merle demands. "Where does it begin? where does it end?" Then proposing that the self "overflows into everything that belongs to us" (172), Madame Merle asserts that her self is "in large part ... the clothes [she] chooses to wear" (172). In her view, clothes *do* make the woman.

For James's Madame Merle clothing *becomes* the self as the self becomes the clothing. In this dialectical relationship between garment and wearer, the becoming garment pleasingly clothes its wearer, but it does much more: it initiates a *coming to be*. Becoming clothes, like some magical cloak picked up and slipped on, mysteriously transforms the wearer. He or she becomes someone new. Florence Winterburn's 1914 treatise, *Principles of Correct Dress*, acknowledges the power of clothing to metamorphose the wearer. Advising women to use as their guiding rule for the selection of gowns the "vital touch of *becomingness*" (emphasis hers 68), Winterburn proposes that a gown's cut, color, and fabric should act as a boon to the wearer's body type and complexion. Such attention to "toilette," she maintains, enables the wearer to take on "the character belonging of right to [the] raiment" (178). Then retelling an old tale

of a princess transformed into a beggar by a change of clothes, she writes, "The very speech and sentiments of the poverty-stricken wretch became her own, impossible to be improved while the fetters of rags hung about her" (180). Clothing, through the process of becomingness, once again makes the woman.

The idea of *becoming* encapsulates ideas central to my study of dress and the female self in American realist novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Functioning throughout this study both as a metaphor for examining the relationship between dress and self and as tool for discussing the female self in process, *becomingness* calls attention to questions that found answers in competing visions of nineteenth-century womanhood. What was thought to be suitable, fitting, and appropriate of females in terms of their actions and appearance during the decades surrounding 1900? And was the female self ever, as Isabel Archer insists, separate from the world around it? Related to these questions of fittingness in female actions and appearance are questions about women's *coming to be*. Near the turn into the twentieth century many women were attempting to construct visions of self that might take them beyond the confines of the domestic sphere and into professions and meaningful work. The novels that I have chosen for this study of self and dress--Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*--present a narrative of women in the process of becoming. While James's Isabel Archer becomes a lady, his Henrietta Stackpole becomes the owner of a newspaper. And although both Chopin's Edna Pontellier and Wharton's Lily

Bart suffer death in their attempts to become either autonomous or successful, Dreiser's Carrie Meeber, Cather's Lena Lingard, and Glasgow's Dorinda Oakley each construct selves suited to prosperity, meaningful work, and self-sufficiency. The novels in this study, then, tell stories of women in pursuit of becoming costumes, outfits that can simultaneously complement their characters and fittingly dress them as they construct new versions of self. As novelists, James, Chopin, Dreiser, Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow each intentionally or unintentionally comment on outfitting the female self for social change. For America, too, was in the process of becoming.

I

[Exit, stage right, the Producer, hawking his goods]
 [Enter, stage left, the Consumer, who begins scanning the aisles]

America, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, was undergoing profound social changes. Historians and social critics alike have summarized the changes in terms of economic shifts--the shift from scarcity to abundance, the shift from a disorganized entrepreneurial capitalism to the organized corporate capitalism of our own day, the shift from a producer-oriented culture to consumer culture.¹ In the lives of many Americans these changes meant relocation, different modes of work, and increased exposure to people from other cultures. No longer primarily a society of craftsmen, farmers, and independent workmen, America was quickly becoming a nation of laborers, who lived increasingly in swelling urban areas. Statistics register these changes. While farmers made up 47.4% of the work force in 1870, by 1920 they made up only 27% of total workers (Schlereth?). And while expansive growth typified American urban

centers throughout the nineteenth century, after 1850 cities swelled in population by 75%. By 1910 New York had 5 million residents and Chicago, two million (Kasson 73). Of the one-million-plus new Chicago residents from the years 1880-1900, nearly 400,000 were foreign-born (Hoyt 284). For many people, the cyclic rhythm of agrarian life gave way to linear movement from place to place and to days punctuated by the factory time-clock and to hours spent performing monotonous tasks detached from the whole of production. Readers see in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* the lower echelons of such modes of production, which were based on the scientific management of work and division of labor, what is typically referred to as the rationalization of labor. The women workers in the millinery shop where Wharton's Lily Bart works do not fashion whole hats; rather, each performs one of inter-related small tasks: "Look at those spangles, Miss Bart," the forewoman says, "--every one of 'em sewed on crooked" (*House* 380).

Such division of labor meant the separation of manual work from mental work--to use the standard clothing metaphor, the cleft separating blue-collar from white-collar jobs. The vast increase in white-collar positions--managers, planners, clerks, engineers, financial experts--as well as an increased demand for professionals changed the social structure by creating a class new to the nineteenth century. Those of this new "white-collar," middle class, because they possessed power but little or no land, lacked a clear ideological framework for defining themselves as a distinctive and respectable group. Wanting to distinguish themselves from the working class, often because they themselves had only recently risen from that class, these groups quickly embraced an elaborate code of

manners borrowed from European aristocracy but adapted to suit American life and ideals. This code ritualized social interactions, prescribing--among myriad other forms--that women call and leave their cards between noon and 5 pm on the reception days of other households and that men's movements in hat-tipping be directed by awareness of class and gender. Reception cards especially demanded attention to intricate rules--who was of high enough rank to merely leave a card in return for a call, where on the card the young lady's name was to appear in relation to her mother's, when a social inferior was in danger of overstepping boundaries by initiating interaction with those above her.² Kasson points out that existing collections of card receivers and calling cards attest to the widespread observance of these rules in both major cities and small towns well into the twentieth century (173-74). While nineteenth-century middle-class Americans fervently embraced rituals of "good form," they just as heartily embraced a work ethic that set them apart from those of inherited wealth, the American "aristocracy" descended from prestigious early colonists. Within the novels chosen for this study, representatives of America's emerging middle-class figure quite prominently. James's Caspar Goodwood, for example, has invented "an improvement in the cotton-spinning process" and is described as one who "like[s] to organise, to contend, to administer," one who possesses the "art of ... managing men" (105). Chopin's Leonce Pontellier works as a broker and worries over rules of correct form that his wife calls "trifles" (71), and Cather's Jim Burden works as lawyer for the railroad and professes American progress. The emergence of the American middle class with its ideology of striving and upward mobility figures as a conspicuous strain in novels of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and throughout this study I will address the construction of America's middle class, its cult of respectability, and the ways in which social class directs characters' actions.

The emergence of a new middle class and changes in the organization of the workplace coincided with inventions that improved production and made possible a host of new products. The concrete changes in American family life that resulted from increased production can be gaged by the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia where seventy-five women in the Woman's Building displayed recently patented inventions that would create new directions in homemaking. With goods mushrooming at an unprecedented rate, desire for the "good life" marked by modern conveniences and beautiful things surged. Industrial processes that made elaborately decorated home furnishings possible at relatively low cost increasingly put home decor and "art" within the price range of middle and working-class Americans. Chromolithographic images, judged by those of the upper middle class as a prime offender in the "debasement of high art and culture" (Schlereth 194), put "art" on the walls of all. Lily Bart's relatives who "live like pigs" display one such mass-reproduced copy of Cole's *Voyage of Life* in their "dingy" drawing-room (Wharton, *House* 39), and in all of the novels within this study, descriptions of commodities crowd the pages of the texts, just as material objects packed American drawing rooms and brimmed tabletops and shelves. Increasingly, *things* defined American daily life.

This shift that put material goods increasingly at the core of daily life is often described as a shift from a producer-oriented culture

to a consumer culture, the exit of the independent craftsman and the entrance of the shopper. Goods once scarce were now plentiful, and money--formerly stashed away for rainy days--was now spent. This period marked the advent of two American institutions of consumer culture--the department store and the mail-order catalogue. Modelled architecturally on the great glass edifices of the Universal Expositions (like Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exposition), the department stores were dazzling spectacles of plate glass and electric lighting that offered beneath one roof, all the things one might imagine or desire. An immigrant, Mary Antin, in 1898 wrote of the "dazzlingly beautiful palace called a department store" (qtd. Schlereth 148), and as Rachel Bowlby points out, these elegant, desire factories *were* palaces--"palaces of consumption" (2). Thomas Schlereth, using the writing of a shopper from 1892, summarizes the appeal of department stores:

The principal cause of the stores' success," one shopper wrote in 1892, "is the fact that their founders have understood the necessity of offering a new democracy, whose needs and habits" are satisfied "in the cheapest possible way," providing "a taste for elegance and comfort unknown to previous generations." (149)

While department stores offered any commodity imaginable under one roof, the mail-order catalog companies proffered the same wares between the covers of their "wishbooks." The first mail-order catalog, issued in 1872 by Aaron Montgomery Ward, was followed in 1896 by Sears, Roebuck and Company. Offering furnishings and domestic wares, farm and sports equipment, practical clothes as well as ball gowns and Sunday best, these companies eased the path to consumerism for those in isolated rural areas

or for those who preferred the convenience of shopping by mail.³

The expanding abundance of goods that lay at the center of American daily life during the waning years of the nineteenth century makes commodities the defining component in American social history of this period. These goods provided impetus for work, they filled one's leisure hours with recreational shopping, and they entered the mundane, day-to-day existences of men and women, becoming a part of an emerging way of life. As goods became increasingly important, historians suggest, one social order was giving way to another. Within the emerging consumer culture, self was taking on new contours and a different meaning.⁴

II

[Mr. Autonomous Transcendent Self assumes subdued stance upstage;
Mr. Fragmented Self and Mr. Performing Self enter
in the company of the Misses New-Women, who carry books, shopping bags,
and/or the manuscript of a book-in-progress]

The self of America's emerging consumer culture was, according to cultural critics like Jackson Lears, Walter Susman, and Christopher Lasch, no longer the unitary, autonomous self of an earlier age. The emerging social order demanded a more interdependent self, a shift that cultural critics link to the fragmented tasks of the workplace and the interdependence of a market economy. A person's public performance and appearance became increasingly crucial in the wake of changes that took people away from the communities where they were born and well-known. Self-presentation--the adherence to codes of dress and manners--was of more consequence when men and women constantly came in contact with the unending hordes in urban areas, and the image a person cut before others became increasingly important as changes in publishing put images

continually before the eyes of an eager public. Of even more consequence than mobility and expansion of cities, the attractive packaging of commodities and the proliferation of images from advertising and the popular press made presentation of self a pressing concern.

Aspects of self never before articulated emerge in the writings of nineteenth-century thinkers like William James. David Jerome Levine, in *Theories of the Self*, examines the major writings on self from the seventeenth century forward, and he notes that James's *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, reflects significant changes about self. Never before had a theorist suggested that possessions and other people become a part of the self through emotional investment and involvement (Levine 74); never before had anyone professed that what people are for themselves is significantly determined by what they are for others (Levin 77). While Levine poses no explanations for these shifts in perception of self, they undoubtedly point to the historical changes discussed above. James's additions, which drastically altered boundaries of the perceived self, define a self well-suited to life in urban centers, where individuals faced crowds of strangers, a separation from friends and family, and a pace of life quite different from the unwavering rhythms of rural America. In its most negative sense the interdependent self could consist of, as Christopher Lasch says, "little more than its 'image' reflected in others' eyes" (59). But the interdependent self also suggests a recognition of humans as profoundly social beings, a view that William James expressed when he wrote:

No more fiendish punishment could be devised ... than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned

round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead,' ... a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief. (218)

Because James based his analysis on the actual sensations perceived by himself and others with whom he discussed his ideas, his empirical study provides insight into the way Americans near the turn of the century actually experienced self. Setting forth the notion of not one self, but many, James divides the self into what he calls the Empirical Self (itself broken down into multi-faceted Material, Social, and Spiritual Selves) and the Pure Ego which synthesizes the stream of selves and binds "individual past facts with each other and with itself" (321). He insists that all that a person calls *me* and all that is identified as *mine* constitutes the Empirical Self, and like his brother Henry's Madame Merle, he sees clothes as very much a part of this self:

In its widest possible sense, ... a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. (emphasis his 279)

Because our emotions become invested in objects and people, he says, these things outside the self are pulled inside and become integral parts of the totality of self. James singles out clothes as a material good fully appropriated by the material Self: "we ... identify ourselves with them," he writes (280). While James's typically nineteenth-century method of classifying and placing in hierarchy the various parts of the material self would seem sterile if summarized, a certain commonsensical tone

pervades his writing, persuading the reader to consider the validity of his distinctions:

[The scenes of our home] are a part of our life; its aspects awaken the tenderest feelings of affection; and we do not easily forgive the stranger who, in visiting it, finds fault with its arrangements or treats it with contempt. (280)

While the Material Self is all that is *mine*--body, clothes, and possessions--the Social Self comes from the recognition a person receives from others. "Properly speaking," James writes, "*a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind*" (emphasis his 282). The Spiritual Self, also a multiple faculty, includes moral sensibility and conscience, the will, and the inner play of thought. Of more importance to James than either the Material Sel(ves) or Social Sel(ves), the Spiritual Self is the "*Self of selves*" (emphasis his 288). James's investigation of the Spiritual Self entailed his close observation of the feelings accompanying his thoughts. Tracing his physical sensations during thoughts of acceptance and rejection, attending and consenting, memory and those that require logical reasoning, he concludes, "In a sense, then, it may be truly said that, in one person at least, the '*Self of selves,*' when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of ... peculiar motions of the head or between the head and throat" (288). James suggests that in a fundamental way the *self* can be shown to exist because it is *experienced* as self, and the mind/body split, he shows, is an arbitrary distinction.

The Spiritual Self as well as the Material Self, and all the myriad Social Selves come under the control of Pure Ego, the *I am*. This final part of self synthesizes the stream of thought that diverges at each instant and appropriates that instant into an unbroken stream of consciousness. The parts of the self are knit together, he says, through a *sense* of continuity of the stream and thought, a *sense* of the continuity of our perceptions of experience. He denies emphatically any sort of "absolute Unity" (318).

Of primary concern to William James were questions of morality in an age when the multiple self faces competing claims. James's theory validates the arguments of present-day historians who point out that the twentieth century's preoccupation with self (a preoccupation so prevalent in American literature of the Modernist period) is firmly rooted in the social changes of the nineteenth century. The crisis of moral authority that accompanied America's shift to a consumer culture was sparked in part by a breakdown of traditional religious beliefs. With authority moving away from a controlling God, the moral center fell more firmly within the individual. At the same time, though, Darwinism was hurling a massive blow to individuals' concepts of selfhood by arguing humankind's affinity with animals (Susman 272). As more and more people glutted urban areas, daily life increasingly seemed beyond the control of the individual. Thus, at the point in history when moral authority was moving inward, away from God and toward decision-making determined case-by-case in a more personal manner, individuals' feelings of autonomy were *lessening*. William James addressed such concerns when he wrote, "We hear, in these days of scientific enlightenment a great deal of discussion about the

efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given us why we should not pray" (301). Moral dilemmas made prayer a necessity for William James, but for more and more Americans, religion was failing to provide answers. "In the emerging social system," Lears writes, "the autonomous self seemed no longer Promethean but fragmented, defined according to the needs and demands of others" (34).

While Lears acknowledges that the *emerging* self of the new consumer culture was a self defined according to the "needs and demands of others" (34), he does *not* stipulate that his description articulates the sort of self experienced by most *women* throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, while historians have discussed the impact of the crisis of moral authority and of consumer culture on the lives of Americans in general, they have yet to fully investigate how these changes influenced *women's* senses of self. Nineteenth-century women, socialized to become self-sacrificing wives and mothers, were often obliged to view self *primarily* through their relations with others.⁵ By and large, nineteenth-century women existed without aspects of self that men were able to take for granted. Possessing no legal identity and few opportunities for economic success, they depended upon marriage for security and property, and even personal effects like clothing were interpreted by thinkers like Thorstein Veblen as a sign of the husbands' social standing rather than possessions of the wife. In short, the autonomous, transcendent self had never been a female self, a fact of nineteenth-century women's lives that should complicate present-day discussions of the nineteenth-century's supposedly unprecedented interdependent self.

Too often discussions of the nineteenth-century self are focused on the *male* self and are couched in a rhetoric that denies the differences between the lives of men and women during the nineteenth century. Even William James made "our wife and babes" a part of the Self, thus seeming to forget that women, too, might be numbered among his readers. James's writing shows no anti-feminist bias, and his assumptions seem to stem from discursive conventions and from his personal approach to his material. Present-day social critics who posit a male self as the norm are far harder to understand, given the work of feminist theorists who have pointed up the fallacy of such positions.⁶ A case in point is Christopher Lasch's critique *The Culture of Narcissism*. Lasch's deep pessimism about what he calls the "collapse of authority" at the end of the nineteenth century seems to stem from anxiety over the changing role of women. Romanticizing family life of an earlier, unspecified time, Lasch follows the lead of Freud in attributing the fragmented, narcissistic self to the mother's "suffocating" but "emotionally distant" attentions to her child. Lasch argues that the damaged and narcissistic self infused the culture at large, creating a "culture of narcissism." This narcissistic self, he insists, replaced the self-made *man*. Clearly, the self that Lasch examines is the *male* self. Had he meant the female self, he would have seen that the outlook for women at the end of the nineteenth century seemed not nearly so bleak!

Because women had never possessed the sort of unitary, autonomous self that was crumbling in the wake of vast cultural changes, late nineteenth-century women were in many ways benefitting from this crisis of cultural authority. With authority shifting away from traditional

religion and toward science, nineteenth-century feminists could argue women's innate, biological equality with men.⁷ And with the very bones of patriarchy rattling in the breakdown of traditional social arrangements that heretofore had anchored women firmly within the home, middle-class women could now seek education, employment, and alternatives to marriage, options that had not been open to them earlier in the century. While at mid-century, only seven occupations in the US had been open to women, of the 369 occupations listed in the 1890 census, only nine had *no* women represented (Banner *Women* 6). Even more telling is the shift in marriage status of American women during the 1890s. Only 51% of the first generation of college women ever married, and the percentage of never-married American women reached its all-time high between 1880 and 1900, when it fluctuated around 10% (Shade 16). In terms of their becoming, middle-class women were becoming less hemmed in by economic dependence as they were becoming professionals with meaningful work--doctors, ministers, lawyers, artists, teachers, nurses, social workers. Often referred to as the New Woman, the middle-class, college-educated and often professional woman benefitted from the cultural upheavals marking American society. For working class women, who as a group had been a part of the work force since before mid-century, economic dependence remained a vast problem, given differences in wages of men and women workers. Yet consumer culture, because it made its appeals across the board to all classes, acted to democratize buying, making home decor and the latest fashions no longer solely the province of the wealthy. Clothing, in particular, offered working class women at least limited avenues for challenging class boundaries.⁸ Women of all classes were no longer waiting in the wings;

they, like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, were assuming center stage, performing as never before.

III

Recasting Consumerism / Allowing the Buyer to Act
 [The scene: A photographer's studio. The villainous scoundrel,
 Consumer Culture, sits for a portrait.
 The backdrop is an enlarged photographic image
 of women shoppers in a store.]

Without a doubt the position of consumerism in the emerging culture of the nineteenth century is a problematic issue, and throughout this study I examine the role of commodities in the shaping of social class and thus of self. Because much of the scholarly work on consumer culture tends to limit our understanding of the complex function of material goods within society, I work throughout to recontextualize consumer culture so as to investigate more fully the meaning of these goods to those who used them. While I partially agree with Stuart Ewen's assertion that the new "American type" of the late nineteenth century was "defined in terms of capitalist production, a 'commodity self'" whose needs for social success, self, leisure, and work could be met in the marketplace (*Captains* 47), Ewen's critique omits a very important perspective. In focusing attention solely on production and the manipulative tactics of advertisers, he forestalls any discussion of what consumer culture actually meant to the men and women who purchased commodities. Ewen rightly indicts those early advertisers like Paul Nystrom who wrote that the social bonds of the modern age would be provided over-the-counter and that any other course for individuals would lead to "inevitable" ostracism and the loss of esteem and job security (95). Yet by highlighting only manipulation of

consumers and in viewing the commodities themselves as escapist, pacifying, and morally corrosive, Ewen's critique fosters--to use a slightly mixed-metaphor from photography (and melodrama)--an overexposed picture of a villainous consumer culture. Omitting the experience of buyers--who were, by the way, increasingly female--or in seeing them as simply a coerced and conforming mass, these critiques provide bold contributions that nonetheless leave the entire picture too starkly black--in photographic terms, "burnt".

By metaphorically redeveloping the photograph of consumer culture that has been produced by critics who overexpose the production aspects, a different image emerges. If we focus instead on the area of the picture where the consumer stands making choices and using goods, we begin to see images emerge on a surface once burnt black.

Clearly, Americans at the turn of the century experienced the world of goods as something other than the conspicuous consumption that Thorstein Veblen so unconditionally scorned in his 1899 *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, a study that has become the touchstone for subsequent studies of American consumer culture. An example of one such consumer is Anna Kuchen, an immigrant woman, who provided an oral history of her early-twentieth-century move to the US.⁹ She tells of working as a servant before her immigration and of carrying home the bright packaging from imported American products. In her descriptions of the bits of paper ferreted away to use as decoration for her home, I hear a love of color and imagery that qualifies the assertions of critics of consumer culture. I do not deny that Anna Kuchen's subjectivity was entwined with commodities, but I would argue that Anna herself experienced an aesthetic

satisfaction that improved the quality of her life. To redefine consume culture is to allow consumers like Anna Kuchen the agency they assume when they use commodities as a means toward some end.

Investigating the consumer as an active agent--the actor--allows feminist scholars an opportunity to examine meaningful connections between consumer culture and the changing roles of women. Because gender is so often ignored, many critics of consumerism never point out, for example, that women within this emerging social order were for the first time leaving the confines of the domestic sphere to venture into public space alone. Such freedom for females was a marked change,¹⁰ and the fervor with which etiquette manual writers felt compelled to prescribe women's behavior in public suggests the anxiety created by a loosening of earlier barriers. Women were told that when they entered public spaces--the street or the burgeoning department stores--that they must exercise extreme caution against the rude ogling of spectators. While in the previous era "true ladies" never walked on the street alone, these later etiquette advisers amended the rule, revealing a need for self-protection that comes with increased freedom. One etiquette adviser noted,

The true lady walks the street, wrapped in a mantle of proper reserve, so impenetrable that insult and coarse familiarity shrink from her.... By her pre-occupation [she] is secure from any annoyance to which a person of less perfect breeding might be subjected. (qtd. Kasson 129)

Women's increased autonomy was accompanied by emancipation that came, too, from the commodities themselves--goods so often ridiculed in critiques of consumerism. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in one of her many feminist lectures

of the 1850s, told of a congressman's wife who owned an ill-equipped kitchen. She told the woman:

Go out and buy a new stove! Buy what you need! Buy while he's in Washington! When he returns and flies into a rage, you sit in a corner and weep. That will soften him! Then, when he tastes his food from the new stove, he will know you did the wise thing. When he sees you so much fresher, happier in your new kitchen, he will be delighted and the bills will be paid. I repeat--GO OUT AND BUY!¹¹

While to women of the twentieth century a fresh kitchen demeanor may not sound particularly liberating, to the women whose days were spent almost solely in service to their families, the convenience of commodities must have offered a vital form of emancipation.

By refocusing attention on the consumer, this study aims to place commodities themselves within the whole of the social process. When William James insisted that possessions become a part of the self, he did not write of objects as if they are ends in themselves or merely the means by which we emulate others. Rather, like contemporary ethnographers who recognize the power of material possessions to carry meaning, James suggests that things have meaning and that people use this meaning to construe and construct their identity within a social world: "Not only the people," he writes, "but the places and things I know enlarge my Self in a sort of metaphoric social way" (294).

IV

Costuming the Players / A Rationale for Reading

Standard ethnographic practice assumes that commodities, when examined within the whole of the social process, reveal meanings related

to a culture's social system. Both embedded in the intimate day-to-day subsistence of human lives and embedded in a system of meanings somewhat akin to language, material goods in a very concrete way represent the given culture.¹²

I began this chapter with Henry James's account of a "seemingly trivial question of dress." I have argued, though, that far from being trivial, female dress can be seen as crucial for understanding the emerging changes in the female self that both Henry and William James signal. A clear rationale for such an approach emerges from the work of present-day historians of material culture and from Mikhail Bakhtin's discursive theory of the novel.

Historians interested in the interrelations of material objects and human behavior look to objects as signifiers of the belief patterns of the individuals who made, bought, or used them, and for scholars like Thomas J. Schlereth, objects embody meaning as they convey meaning. "Words," he notes, "are useful only to those who share a common core of experience particulars." In his arguments for engaging past cultures by looking beyond the written word--i.e., beyond formal or informal historical documents--and by looking toward concrete objects, Schlereth suggests that material objects allow the researcher to make *affective* contact with past cultures. By the same token, then, *words*--like those in the literary works by American realists under consideration--when examined from the context of material culture, should become saturated with new meanings. Bakhtin, in his explanation of how the word comes to mean, recognizes that the living utterance takes shapes at a "particular historical moment in a socially specific environment" (276). The word, in dialogue with "alien

words, value judgments and accents," is shot through with meanings alive at a given moment--as he says, the utterance "cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance" (276). By examining the particulars of material culture--in this case, clothing--readers can begin to re-create the "social atmosphere of the word" (Bahktin 277).

An example from Wharton's *The House of Mirth* provides a case in point. As Lawrence Selden leads Lily Bart through the New York streets, he compares her with other women among the throng. As they pass "sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats," he meditates on the "dinginess, the crudity" of other women. The words *preposterous hats*, for most readers of the late twentieth century, provide visual images but fail to carry the meaning they carried when Wharton penned them in 1904. Outside their historical moment and socially specific environment, they seem little more than descriptive detail. By recreating the social atmosphere of these words, we come closer to hearing the weave of meanings that infused them near the turn-of-the-century. Historian Nan Enstad's study of working girls who "played the lady" brings alive the dialogic threads in the words *preposterous hats*. Enstad shows that working class women at the turn of the century parodied the dress of ladies by choosing huge hats with lots of trim. Hats--very preposterous hats--Enstad says, were a major signifier for this group. The women whom Selden sees hail from the lower classes, a detail that will enter into my discussion of Lily's demise in Chapter 4. Attention to dress--in this case, the preposterous hats--illuminates the complex weave of meanings infusing these words. We come

closer to releasing their full meaning when we unravel the threads to expose at least some of the "thousands of living dialogic threads, woven ... around the given object of an utterance" (Bahktin 276).

More than any other material good that might conceivably be examined as a means of uncovering this social atmosphere of the word, clothing lends itself to my study of the female self in Realist fiction. Because women's fashions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries changed year by year with sometimes radical variations in bustle use, sleeve design, and overall silhouette, characters' choices of garments presents with great magnitude the historically specific moment that Bahktin discusses as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the novel as a literary form. Moreover, because fashion historians have linked this period's vast changes in women's dress with the changing societal roles of women,¹³ attention to details of dress can reveal meanings related to my notion of women's *becoming*, of their approaching a selfhood distinct from one defined strictly in terms of domesticity. Because clothing is gender-specific, an analysis of dress can uncover meanings related to gender roles and relations, to women's changing perceptions of self, and to the role of male spectators in creating gender expectations.

Clothing likewise provides a medium for discerning those values that enter into the construction of social class.¹⁴ Just as cultural assumptions about gender infuse all the background incidents and relationships that culminate in self, so too do cultural assumptions about class. During the period surrounding the turn into the twentieth century, working class women's experiences, as women's history scholars have shown,

were markedly different from those of middle-class or upper-class women.¹⁵ Thus, in this sense, my use of the phrase *female self* is too limiting, for it seems to imply some monolithic construction that applies to all women. Throughout this study I attempt to specify social class, as when I noted above that middle-class women were entering professions. As I discuss the given literary texts, I attend to historically specific constructions of social class. While questions of gender initiated my study, the study itself led me to recognize the profound influence of social class. I found that the "woman question" of the late nineteenth-century--manifested in women's becoming New Women--often involved class issues even more directly than those of gender. Here, too, clothing provides a fitting tool for examining holistically the ways in which class and gender intersect in the female self.

Individuals' clothing has since medieval times been determined at least in part by their social status. England's well-known sumptuary laws of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tried desperately to govern consumption along class lines, offering only earls and others of higher rank the freedom to wear purple silk or to choose the color gold, regardless of fabric.¹⁶ In specifying no velvet above the waist for women whose husbands were not at least knights, such laws clearly aimed at maintaining class boundaries, an issue still of concern in America in the 1880s and 90s. Although feudal landlord's donning yards and yards of sumptuous fabric had given way by the time the economist Thorstein Veblen wrote in 1899 of the social and economic purposes of "elegant dress," the reasons motivating fashion choices, he assumed, had not changed over time: "Elegant dress serves its purpose of elegance, not only in that it is

expensive, but also because it is the insignia of leisure.... [I]t argues ... that [the wearer] consumes without producing" (171).

While measures like sumptuary laws of earlier times made quite obvious the attempts of the European aristocracy to safeguard their position of privilege, Veblen firmly believed that social codes of late-nineteenth-century America made conspicuous consumption, especially of magnificent clothing, a pre-requisite of "decency" (115) and that these requirements acted to draw lines of distinction between social classes. While I fault Veblen for assuming only one motive behind consumption, he well understood how intricate codes of dress, behavior, and good taste consistently undermined America's myth of a fully democratic society that guaranteed equal chances for mobility to all. Only those who possessed, seemingly by birth, the knowledge of these codes could hope to compete for their share of the American Dream pie. John Kasson's study of manners in nineteenth-century America shows how the inequalities of American society were turned onto the individual so that self-control, self-discipline, and self-cultivation became the primary goals of those who hoped to earn a portion of that pie. If, like William Dean Howells' Silas Lapham, one was not sure whether to wear one's gloves into the dining room or which of the myriad forks to choose when the portion was at last so elegantly served (Kasson identifies twenty-nine types of forks, each with its own purpose [190]), wealth alone was no measure of one's social "worth." In the absence of a system of inheritance, members of the middle classes in the name of civility and self-discipline mimicked the codes of European aristocrats in an effort to set themselves apart from the lower classes; as Kasson points out, nineteenth-century Americans experienced a "rising

standard of refinement prescribed ... as well as an increasing segmentation of roles, behavior, and feeling in public and private alike" (7). Explicit and complicated codes of female dress that specified the proper attire for the hours of the day, for indoor or outdoor events, and for the particular activity constituted an integral part of "correct form." As fashion historian Marybelle Bigelow points out, garments meet the needs of an "established social order" (3), and attention to details of female dress in literary works can help lay bare the system of class and gender construction during a given period.

While class and gender constitute primary components in the forming of self, a method that investigates the cultural aspects of selfhood need not ignore the more personal aspects. Regardless of the role played by society in the construction of self, this self is experienced as personal; thus, Ellyn Kaschak's view of the self as a social construct that becomes personal seems a particularly fitting definition. Melding together the social and the individual aspects of self, such a definition allows for reciprocity between external cultural forces and the internal traits that we tend to think of as a sort of inner core of being. In this reciprocal relationship, external forces shape the self as the self internalizes them, making them its own. In the process, possibilities emerge for social change. An individual woman, for example, might refuse the package of womanhood handed her intact. She might with challenge, contradict, or oppose any part of this package of womanly practices and ideal womanly images. As she chooses some practices as her own, but rejects others, she forms a sort of hybrid womanhood that partakes of the dominant view but amends it somewhat. A study of clothing can reveal the inner tensions and

ambivalences that women felt regarding gender and social class during the decades under consideration. As fashion theorist Fred Davis points out, "Clothing comes to share in the work of ambivalence management as much as does any other self-communicative device at our disposal" (25). Fashion historians and theorists alike have explored the self-expressive qualities of clothing¹⁷, and Jane Gaines perhaps best articulates the roots of dress as self-expression as she examines costume discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Of early twentieth century writings, she argues,

[I]n the discourse on costume, dress, like an expression of emotion, seemed to grow out of the mysteries of the body. This close association with the body helped to construct costume as behavior, an indicator which in popular usage could subsume the social, moral, and psychological. (187)

While some historians have implied that dress as self-expression is a uniquely twentieth-century notion, the claim seems at best arbitrary and at worst unfounded.¹⁸ Thomas Carlyle's belief that clothes function as vehicles of the soul indicates an acceptance of clothing as signifiers of self, thus making problematic assumptions that clothing in the nineteenth century aimed at anonymity. And while Henry David Thoreau's maxim "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes" establishes his non-materialist and anti-fashion stance, he nonetheless understood the self-expressive qualities of his beloved suits that at first his tailoress refused to sew. "Every day our garments become more assimilated to ourselves, receiving the impress of the wearer's character," he writes (21-22). Thoreau dismisses Fashion, but he does not dismiss clothing. Meriting a segment of text in *Walden*, Thoreau brandishes his belief that his garments express his self.

Thoreau's belief in the self-expressive qualities of his out-of-date suit finds philosophical grounding in a Platonic understanding of the unity of form and contents. During the nineteenth century, the resurgence of neoplatonism lay beneath the obsession with identifying "types," a task that attempted to categorize people, sometimes using dress as a signifier. Because the popular press of the period churned out article after article that classified types of Americans or types of women or the varieties of racial types, readers at every level of American society were exposed to a popularized version of Platonic thought.¹⁹ Nineteenth-century discourse, regardless of its particular topic, makes use of typology. In the literature of the period, readers are alerted to the appearance and character of Howell's Silas Lapham when he is identified as the "type of the successful American," and in each of the realist novels considered in this study, "type" enters as one means of portraying individual characters, with dress coming in as support for the classification. James seems to be poking fun at Henrietta Stackpole, the woman journalist of *The Portrait of a Lady*, when she wants to write a piece on Ralph Touchett, who is "a beautiful specimen" of his type; "There's a great demand just now for the alienated American," she tells Isabel. Yet James depends upon this very classification system when he characterizes Mr. Touchett by his American physiognomy and Isabel Archer by the epithet "American girl." James describes Isabel in this way: "Like the mass of American girls Isabel had been encouraged to express herself; her remarks had been attended to" (56). This description, as well as his portrayal that consistently calls attention to her independence, identifies her as the American girl type, a type receiving much press exposure throughout the

1870s and into the early twentieth century. "The American girl," wrote Englishman James Muirhead, "strikes me as individual, as varied;" to essayist Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, the American girl had "more vivacity, more character, more freedom of speech and manners" than any other girl in the world²⁰.

The neoplatonism inherent to the nineteenth century's classification of types shows itself in several of the texts in this study. Perhaps the best example occurs in *The House of Mirth* when Wharton's Lily Bart creates her tableaux of *Mrs. Lloyd*. Choosing to portray Mrs. Lloyd because the "type [is] so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself" (*House* 178), Lily, in true neoplatonic style, aims for unity of form and content. The essence of aesthetic theories of the nineteenth century aimed at creating this unity of form and content, of spirit and matter. Thus, self-expression and aesthetics are inextricably linked in the discourse on dress. Because Fashion, according to Thoreau, forestalls efforts to make one's outer form of appearance signify one's inner spirit, he insists that "it cannot be maintained that dressing has in this or any country risen to the dignity of an art" (26). Thoreau's profession that choices in clothing should be expressions of self simultaneously reveals his desire for dress to be elevated to an Art that can unify one's outer form with one's inner substance. By and large, the discourse on dress during the second half of the nineteenth century consistently appraised clothing from an aesthetic standpoint that simultaneously recognized the self-expressive qualities of dress. By dressing in accordance with artistic principles,

the wearer simultaneously dressed in ways to enhance--to become--his or her character.

The titles alone of manuals on dress reflect the prevalence of dress as an expressive art form; among many others are *The Art of Dress* by Mary Eliza Joy Haweis (1879), *The Art & Ethics of Dress* by Eva Ulney Farnsworth (1915), and *Art in Dress* by Lydia Bolmar (1916).²¹ Approaching dress and fashion primarily as art persists today in the works of such noted fashion historians as Anne Hollander, who in *Seeing Through Clothes* argues that dress must not be studied primarily as cultural by-product but as an art form: "[C]lothes must be seen and studied as paintings are seen and studied" (xvi). Studying dress as a historically influenced visual art, Hollander argues that the art of dress entails the "creation of images with the visible self as its medium" (311). Of the connections between dress and art, she writes,

[D]ressing is an act usually undertaken with reference to pictures--mental pictures, which are personally edited versions of actual ones. The style in which the image of the clothed figure is rendered--in whatever representational art is most comfortably consumed and absorbed as realistic at a given time--governs the way we create and perceive our own selves. Such images in art are acceptable as models because they are offered not as models at all but as renderings of truth. (350)

Recognizing representations of the body as historically specific, Hollander argues that art and images have always taught people the formula for dressing. Hollander's argument is certainly believable, and because for nineteenth-century wearers garments were so often chosen according to "artistic principles," the aesthetic and self-expressive dimensions of dress will figure into my discussion of clothing and the female self.

Aesthetics, and the implied link to self-expression, is, of course, no innocent category. Because any discourse functions to authorize particular sets of beliefs, throughout this study I examine the cultural assumptions underlying aesthetic principles. A telling example of the inseparability of art and ideology appears in Charles Blanc's *Art in Ornament and Dress*. Published in 1877, three years before *The Portrait of a Lady* made its first appearance in *Atlantic Monthly*, Blanc's text provides a segue into my discussion of James's novel in Chapter 2. Both texts engage discussions of aesthetics that simultaneously expose ideological undercurrents. Of concern to both writers was the changing role of women.

Blanc's concern grows out of the changes he had witnessed in France during the decades of industrial expansion that made problems of urban France very much like those of urban America. Vast changes in communication, I might add, made the French fashions he describes pertinent to America as well. Even cheap imitations of French designer fashions were sold mail-order in America with a lag-time of only about six months to a year (Blum 3). Thus, Blanc's fashion critique of the previous decades of French fashion relate to women's fashion on both sides of the Atlantic.

Blanc first describes the fashions of previous decades and then the fashions of his own day when he writes,

[The women] dressed their hair and themselves as though they were always to be seen in profile--now the profile is the outline of a person who is not looking at us, who passes and would avoid us. The toilet became an image of the rapid movement which bears the world onwards, and which threatens to carry away even the guardians of our homes. They are to be seen at this day sometimes clothed and closely buttoned like boys, sometimes adorned with braid like soldiers,

walking on high heels which throw them forwards, hastening their steps, cleaving the air, and hurrying their life as though to swallow up space, which in turn, swallows up them. (274)

Eschewing the changes he observes in female dress first from an artistic perspective, Blanc reads the silhouette of his own day as a signifier of more profound changes. To modern eyes, the bustled, narrow, elongated form of the 1870s appears if anything even more restrictive than the wide, sweeping costumes of the previous four decades, but to the eyes of at least this one nineteenth-century male, new directions in dress, which fashion historian Joan Severa calls the most "rapid and dramatic a transformation in a woman's silhouette" of the entire nineteenth century (301), seemed supremely threatening. After forty years of emphasis on the front of the costume, the elaborated, bustled backs and drawn in, gartered sides must have jarred spectators, who only received the wearer's fashion statement as she walked away. Nonetheless, Blanc's judgment reflects far more about changes in female behavior than about aesthetics.

As I move into my discussion of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* I examine primarily the concept of the lady in the portrait, for in choosing to persevere as a lady and follow her duty, Isabel Archer opts for remaining defined by the dominant views of womanhood for her day. In my narrative of women's becoming, Isabel provides the starting point, the place from which a different sort of woman might emerge. The social change that surfaces through the stories of Isabel Archer, Edna Pontellier, Lily Bart, Carrie Meeber, Lena Lingard, and Dorinda Oakley occurs at a metaphorical crossroads where past forms of the female self meet new ones. Standing at the crossroads, each character has the option

of accepting the package that the past hands her and continuing on down the road. Isabel Archer, carrying that package in a lady's carriage, makes such a choice. With Isabel's friend, Henrietta Stackpole, however, the hybrid makes a not-so-brief appearance in James's work. A curious mix of cultural categories, Henrietta's character suggests options other than that of accepting present forms. The garments of social change appear, but not as if by magic, for hybrid constructions of womanhood, in their willy-nilly mix of old and new, outfit women for a very real sort of becoming.

In each of the subsequent chapters, I examine the female self at the crossroads where the past attempts to hand intact to the present its package of womanly practices and images. Within the confining interiors of that package, social class disperses its own host of expectations. Thus, when the bundle comes into the hands of the female characters in *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, *Sister Carrie*, *My Antonia*, and *Barren Ground*, the codes of behavior and dress so integral to class construction seem inseparable from expectations of gender. In Chapter Three, I examine Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Chopin's Edna Pontellier refuses the package. When the past attempts the transfer, she leaves the road altogether, swimming to her death wearing no garments at all. In Chapter Four, Edith Wharton's Lily Bart arrives at the crossroads to find a package labelled with a note: "Don't live like a pig." Offered several seemingly identical packages, she chooses the one that looks the most tasteful. But looks are deceptive. Wharton's *The House of Mirth* presents problems of morality in a changing world, and by examining Lily's decision-making process, I show how an opera cloak wraps pigs in opulence

and how hybrid constructions interfere with Lily's desire to take the package that would make her a rich man's wife. In Chapter Five, I examine Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, focusing on the crossroads where the high life meets her low working class origins. Taking any package that might take her toward the high, Carrie fashions a self for success. In Chapter Six I use Willa Cather's *My Antonia* to examine what at the turn of the century was termed "the immigrant problem." Two female characters stand at the crossroads between a European past and an American future, and the package of womanly practices handed them by America's past comes thickly wrapped in assumptions about non-Americans. Finally, I examine in Chapter Six Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*. Glasgow's Dorinda Oakley accepts the package from the past, then unwraps it to blatantly disclose its contents. Choosing only those parts of womanhood suited to a victorious becoming, she fashions an overtly feminist self.

Notes

¹Thomas J. Schlereth's *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life 1876-1915*, Walter I. Susman's *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, and Jackson Lears' *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* discuss these economic shifts marking late nineteenth-century American culture.

²For information on calling rituals and calling cards, see Kenneth Ames' *Death in the Dining Room* (35-41), Thomas Schlereth's *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life 1876-1915* (118), and John Kasson's *Rudeness and Civility* (173-74).

³Thomas Schlereth provides information on mail-order catalogs in "Mail-Order Catalogs as Resources in Material Culture Studies."

⁴Historians and social critics agree that *self* is a historically specific construct. Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* provides discussion of philosophical strands of thought, showing the transformation of concepts of self from the ancient to modern. Walter Susman, in *Culture as History*, argues that a particular vision of self is basic to each cultural order. Susman's discussion of the shift from nineteenth-century America's concern with "character" and the twentieth century's concern with "personality" illustrates the influence of social order on self. Historian Cushing Strout's "Personality and Cultural History in the Novel" argues that concepts of identity vary across time and that to understand the historical and cultural meaning of personality, the historian needs to look outside his or her discipline to literature. Jerome David Levin's *Theories of the*

Self provides discussion of the major theorists of self from the seventeenth century to the present. Jackson Lears, in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* discusses shifts from autonomous to interdependent selfhood, and Christopher Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* discusses shifts in self brought on by the twentieth century. Ellyn Kaschak's *Engendered Lives* shows that though *self* has varied across time and cultures, gender, the "most centrally meaningful principle on our culture's mattering map" (211), has been ignored in discussions of these changes.

⁵For discussions of nineteenth-century constructions of womanhood, see Barbara Welter's *Dimitry Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, William G. Shade's "A Mental Passion: Female Sexuality in Victorian America," and Christina Simmons's "Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression." Two works by Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America" and *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, provide background on women's responses to nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood.

⁶See, for example, Mary Field Belenky's *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. Also, see Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*.

⁷See, for example, Rosa Mayreder's 1913 *A Survey of the Woman Problem* and C. Gasquoine Hartley's *The Truth About Woman*.

⁸Nan Enstad, in a lecture at UNC-Greensboro, argued this point about working women and consumer culture.

⁹Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen discuss Anna Kutchen's oral history in *Channels of Desire*. Reading her experience as one of falling to the manipulative tactics of American producers, they write, "Before Anna even set foot in America, her subjectivity had become intertwined with the brand names and products of a young and burgeoning consumer society" (27).

¹⁰John Kasson in his excellent study *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* makes this point about women and public space.

¹¹Stanton's lecture is quoted in Lloyd Wendt's and Herman Kogan's *Give the Lady What She Wants*.

¹²Mary Douglas, in *The World of Goods*, looks at consumer culture from an anthropological perspective. She provides a model for determining the meaning of material goods that depends on drawing the relations between all the goods. She writes,

Goods ... are the visible part of culture. They are arranged in vistas and hierarchies that can give play to the full range of discrimination of which the human mind is capable. The vistas are not fixed: nor are they randomly arranged in a kaleidoscope. Ultimately, their structures are anchored to human social purposes. (66)

See also Grant McCracken's *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*.

¹³Late nineteenth-century fashion commentators were quick to draw links between dress and women's rights. Helen Gilbert Ecob, in *The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application to Dress of the Laws of Health, Art, and Morals*, articulates her purpose as follows:

The intense interest which is beginning to manifest itself on the subject of dress marks an epoch in the social history

of woman. It indicates that she is ready to put away childish things and to be governed by reason and conscience. The movement is fraught with promise to the coming generations and to civilization. To help in anywise the struggling minds and hearts of my countrywomen toward a true emancipation of body, as well as of intellect and soul, is the purpose of this volume. (5).

See also "Symposium on Women's Dress" in the September and October 1992 issues of *The Arena* and "The Rational Dress Movement: A Symposium" in an 1894 *The Arena*.

Fashion commentators from the 1920s consistently viewed changes in fashion within a social context. H. Dennis Bradley, for example, in *The Eternal Masquerade* argues that domination and war strongly influence modes of dress. See also Elizabeth Hurlock's 1929 *The Psychology of Dress: An Analysis of Fashion and Its Motives*.

Many present-day fashion historians have made the link between women's changing modes of dress and their position within society. James Laver, in *A Concise History of Costume*, notes that nineteenth century dress aimed at clearly differentiating the two sexes, with "mid-nineteenth century [being the] high-water mark of male domination" (184). Margarete Braun-Ronsdorf, in *Mirror of Fashion: A History of European Costume, 1789-1929*, notes that clothing always reflects "the spirit of its age" (7) and that the desire for equality of the sexes found expression in skirts that revealed knees; thus, women were "emphasizing their freedom of movement and thus their independence" (7). See also Anne Buck's *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories*, Lee Hall's *Common Threads: A Parade of American Clothing*, Sandra Barwick's *A Century of Style*, Elizabeth Ewing's *Dress and*

Undress: A History of Women's Underwear, and Ewing's *History of Twentieth Century Fashion*.

¹⁴For an analysis of clothing history with attention to social class, see Chapter Four of Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen's *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*.

¹⁵See, for example, "Sexual Geography and Gender Economy: The Furnished Room Districts of Chicago, 1890-1930," by Joanne Meyerowitz, who shows the differences in sexual mores among working-class and middle-class women. Elizabeth Hampsten's rhetorical analysis of the personal writings of Midwestern women explicitly contrasts experiences and modes of expression of working-class and middle-class women.

¹⁶For information on England's sumptuary laws, see *Channels of Desire*, by Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen (84-88).

¹⁷Lee Hall, for example, writes,

We may look upon dressing as an art form and make our decisions about daily dress as expressions of self and creativity; we may thus ally ourselves with other fine and applied arts. Or we may use clothing to announce our political and social views and to dress in accordance with our beliefs and values in relation to ecology, religion, social propriety, or political theory. (1)

Jane Gaines, in "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story," provides an excellent discussion of the self-expressive qualities of dress, linking the notion to historical changes during the late nineteenth century. Iris Marion Young discusses the complexity of regarding clothing as self-expression in her feminist approach that addresses problems created by the "male gaze." Attempting to allow women

to recover clothing from the male gaze, she defends clothing as a private and self-expressive medium.

¹⁸While Gaines's article "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story" provides an excellent discussion of the expressive qualities of dress, her work--based on historical studies by Richard Sennet and Walter Susman--tries to draw clear divisions between nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitudes toward dress. She writes, for example,

The problem of the public self which made immediate impressions and the true self which was within, was dealt with in the possibility of personality management and improvement which historians of modern society find emerging at the turn of the century. (185)

She argues that there is a continuity between inner self and outer self in the twentieth century that did not exist during the nineteenth century.

Richard Sennet likewise inaccurately argues that "a sense of the discontinuity between the person and the dress, or the belief that the true self was quite safe from public eyes" marked the nineteenth century. Such discontinuity did sometimes exist, but in trying to make categorical judgments about the function of clothing during a particular period, historians and fashion theorists run the risk of forcing distinctions that leave unsaid the various functions of dress.

¹⁹Any reader of nineteenth-century discourse is well aware of the emphasis on "type" in the popular press and in literary works. Martha Banta's exhaustive study *Imaging American Women* examines the influence of the philosophic/scientific concept of "type" during the nineteenth

century, showing how American's preoccupation with "type" effected people at every level of society.

²⁰Martha Banta quotes these writers as well as many others who wrote of the American girl type (99-100).

²¹Other late-nineteenth-, early-twentieth century manuals on dress that share an emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of clothing include *The Art of Beauty* by Mary Eliza Joy Hawais (1878), *Dress* by Mrs. (Margaret) Oliphant (1879?), *The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application to Dress of the Laws of Health, Art, and Morals* (1892), *Woman as Decoration* by Emily Burbank (1917), and *Art in Dress* by P. Clement Brown (1922).

Chapter Two

The Lady in James's Portrait / Womanhood on the Move

James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is set during the same decade that the Frenchman Charles Blanc was seeing the profound transformation in female dress that he read as a sign of a transformation in women's roles. Bemoaning the new emphasis on the back of women's costumes, he saw it and the vertical silhouette of these fashions as "an image of the rapid movement which bears the world onwards, and which threatens to carry away even the guardians of our home" (274). Blanc's image of toilets in fast motion achieves a sort of cinematic effect, quite different from a portrait. The portrait, a fixed representation, which "combines the conventions of behavior and appearance appropriate to the members of a society at a particular time" (Brilliant 11), stops and frames time. The lady in the portrait will remain always static, always conventionalized, always enduring in formal stillness. Cinematic images, on the other hand, capture movement itself, making movement the primary component in a viewer's reading of these images as he or she arrives at meaning. The portrait painter Thomas Eakins, during the period of James's writing was experimenting with photography as a means of capturing movement, and his work in portraiture and action photography attests to nineteenth-century interest in these starkly different forms.²² The fixed representation of portraiture and the rapid movement of cinema capture metaphorically what James achieved in creating his protagonist Isabel Archer and her friend Henrietta Stackpole.

and she hopes Isabel will seriously consider "the next great offer" she gets, unless, as Mrs. Touchett says, "you adopt permanently the Bohemian manner of life" (122). Like most young women of her era, Isabel Archer has been sheltered from concerns over money, but such concerns lay at the heart of reform groups in America who were making connections between women's oppression and their economic dependence.

"The inequality of woman finds its origins in marriage," one member of the Association for the Advancement of Women wrote. "To make political equality possible to her, social equality of the sexes must precede it; and as marriage is the backbone of social life, the backbone of social life must be broken" (qtd. Leach 190). Writings of no less a figure than Henry James, Sr., provided the counterargument to such positions; the elder James distinctly feared the breaking of the backbone of marriage, and in 1874 he wrote frequently and fervently about marriage.²⁴ Staunchly advocating submission to sacred bondage, he opposed those who were fighting against the ban on divorce:

The law is ... just, and even good, though it slay me. Yes, death at its hands were better than life at the risk of its dishonor at my hands. So I abide by my marriage bond. I see very well that the bond ought to be loosened in the case of other people.... But as for me I will abide in my chains.
(qtd. Habegger 87)

The words of James's father prefigure Isabel Archer's sacrifice to duty, and through his novel, the younger James examines marriage with an eye to the concerns voiced by reform groups about women's economic dependence. With Isabel Archer, James offers an interesting twist on this whole question of marriage and economics. When he plots his novel in such a way

as to make Isabel Archer an economically independent heiress, he makes possible her doing what most other women could not: she is not obliged to find a husband to support her. She can avoid the trap that the Association for the Advancement of Women was calling the "inequality of marriage." When Isabel Archer becomes an heiress, James poses auxiliary questions to Ralph's initial query, "what was she going to do with herself?" Asking, in effect, what an economically independent American woman does once she is freed from thoughts of marriage as economics, James forces attention onto the self behind the actions. And throughout the narrative of Isabel's life--her inheritance, her courtships with Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, and Gilbert Osmond--James forces his reader to consider the novel's basic interpretive question: Why does the independent Isabel Archer end up in a marital prison cell, and once she recognizes her own entrapment, why does she return to it? Notwithstanding Isabel Archer's early professions about clothing, James weaves costumes quite carefully into the portraits that provide answers to readers' questions. In examining Isabel Archer's relationship with dress, I find a shift in Isabel's conception of self--a move from a transcendent self to an awareness of the self as a part of the social world. And in examining at the end of this chapter James's Preface to the New York edition, I find a more profound shift as the New Woman unseats the lady.

II
Portrait of an Independent American Girl

Isabel Archer first appears in tableaux framed by the doorway of the Touchett's British estate. She wears "a black dress" and stands at the threshold to the garden "bareheaded, as if she were staying in the house--a fact which convey[s] perplexity to [Ralph Touchett]" (25). With this description, James establishes Isabel's relation to her clothing that persists throughout the first half of the novel. While Habegger reads Isabel's "still wearing black" as a sign that she continues to mourn her father's death after the passage of over a year, there is little reason to decode her attire in this way. Ladies' walking costumes--suits worn anytime a woman of taste ventured into public--tended throughout the 1870s, 80s, and 90s to be black; as one etiquette manual writer noted in 1882, "The glaring colors and 'loud' costumes once so common have given place to sober grays, and browns, and olives; *black predominating over all*" (emphasis added Young 326-27). Far more telling of Isabel's character (and of her attitude toward dress) is her shedding her hat as soon as she has parted company with Mrs. Touchett upon her arrival at Gardencourt. Here, as later, Isabel evinces her disregard for clothing. Read against her later comments on the arbitrariness of dress, her hatless head graphically announces her belief that clothes--in this case, the discarded hat--impose a limit on her self: "[I]t's not my choice that I wear [clothes]," she later tells Madame Merle; "they're imposed upon me by society" (173).

In her exchange with Madame Merle on the self-expressive qualities of dress, Isabel sets forth a romantic *theory* of the self that never quite

materializes in practice. Telling Madame Merle "My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me," Isabel suggests that the self is separate from its surroundings. While Madame Merle insists that self overflows into everything around it and that there is "no such thing as an isolated man or woman" (172), Isabel rejects the power of circumstance to influence the self. The self of Isabel's *theory* is an autonomous and transcendent self in keeping with the philosophy set forth by Emerson in 1842: "You call it the power of circumstance, but it is the power of me" (192). Her opinion in some ways typify concepts of self that pre-dated the immense changes besetting late-nineteenth-century America. In socio-economic terms, Isabel's theory of self suggests the disorganized entrepreneurial capitalism of the early nineteenth century--an era of self-made men and independent producers who worked out of self-owned workshops. From the outset Isabel, in the tradition of Puritan-republicans of an earlier age, is fond of her liberty and gives "an impression of having intentions of her own" (63). The self she envisions can powerfully rise above what Madame Merle calls "the envelope of circumstances" to insure in true Franklinesque style that morality and self-presentation intertwine: "Her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce; she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was" (54). According to Isabel's theory, things are as they appear, and morality and life choices are self-evident; the self of her theory is a very American self--but of a previous age. More importantly, it is a very *male* conception of self that has little in common with the lives of women who were dependent on fathers and

husbands for economic security and who most often defined self in terms of others--as wives, daughters, mothers.

Critics have discussed the gap between Isabel Archer's theory and practice, but few have examined this gap in terms of both social class and gender.²⁵ While Isabel's theory of self falls right in line with American transcendentalists, her self in practice stems from American class and gender expectations of the late nineteenth century. In terms of William James's theory of self, Isabel's own theory acknowledges a Spiritual Self but it thoroughly omits any Social Selves. The designation *lady*, however, is a markedly social distinction, and because James blesses Isabel with this title, he acknowledges a fact of Isabel's self that she herself denies. If we are to fully understand the gap between Isabel's theory and practice, we must first examine the notion of *lady*, for indeed, the first portrait of Isabel Archer, when she stands framed by Gardencourt's doorway, establishes one very important fact: she is not, according to etiquette advisers of the nineteenth century, a "true lady".

The degree to which hat-wearing was standard practice for women in the nineteenth century shows itself in etiquette manuals of the period. The manuals' writers so thoroughly presume a woman's wearing a hat *any* time she steps outdoors that they never stoop to say the obvious. They attend, instead, to the type of hat or bonnet to wear for various activities.²⁶ With Isabel's hatless head, then, James calls into question her sense of propriety. Similarly, when she makes "no offer to advance or to speak to Mr. Touchett" (27), her action confuses Ralph for the second time within the first minute of his cousin's visit. Although Ralph is later described as "imperturbable" and as wearing "a kind of loose-

fitting urbanity that wrap[s] him about like an ill-made overcoat" (229), even he finds Isabel's non-conventionality baffling. A sense of propriety, John Kasson has shown, most defined America's middle class during the nineteenth century; thus, when James shows Ralph's confusion over Isabel's manners, he seems intent on marking more than simply differences between American and European custom. In America, as in Europe, women were expected to wear hats, and multiple pages of American etiquette manuals review the proper forms for greeting others. Even by American standards, Isabel displays manners that would be distinctly unladylike.

James does differentiate between American ladies and European ladies, however. Common American usage of the word *lady* connoted any woman who conducted herself with the dignity and social grace of those belonging to the wealthy, leisure class; British English, on the other hand, often used the term to connote a title of aristocratic rank, designating the wife of a knight or baronet, or the daughter of an earl, marquess, or duke. Almost always it meant a woman of wealth and leisure.

When Mr. Touchett tells Isabel that she is a lady but he is no gentleman, he means that as an American, she is permitted her native title of distinction; as an expatriate American living in England but having no aristocratic connections, he is simply rich, not a gentleman. The contrast between American and European ladies is underscored when Henrietta Stackpole announces during a discourse on the superiority of American hotels that she likes to "be treated as an American lady" (89). Implying that American hotels treat her as such while British hotels do not, Henrietta exposes the more extreme social cleavage distinguishing

British society. Lest readers miss the point, Mrs. Touchett tells Isabel that Miss Stackpole "talks so much too loud" and conducts herself like one who "has lived all her life in a boarding-house" (88). American "ladies," it seems, are simply middle-class women, a fact underscored in Ralph's judgment that American hotels are "middling" (88). Treated in America with the respect she thinks a "lady" deserves, the not-quite-lady-like Miss Stackpole seems to a Europeanized American like Mrs. Touchett a detestable product of "boarding-house civilisation" (88). Yet the loud Miss Stackpole does not conduct herself with the dignity prescribed by even the American etiquette manuals. A woman who talks loudly, one writer cautioned, shows herself to be not only "excessively vulgar" but also "the most severe misconception" (qtd. Kasson 124). Neither Isabel Archer nor her friend Miss Stackpole thoroughly embraces social conventions.

In theory, Isabel embraces romantic non-conventionality as a matter of course, telling Ralph that she is "not in the least stupidly conventional" (59). James, however, has alerted readers to Isabel's tendency to theorize. In *practice*, she acts out of "an unquenchable desire to please" (40), and any lack of propriety on her part seems totally unintentional and more a lack of awareness of the impression she makes than a premeditated disregard for rules of etiquette. When Isabel early in the novel wishes to stay up late and Mrs. Touchett coldly reprimands her, Isabel's ambivalence about any freedom that might come from unladylike behavior shows itself: "You were very right to tell me then," she contritely responds, "I don't understand it, but I'm very glad to know it" (66). While Isabel's theory of a transcendent self unrestrained by conventionality describes the operative theory of self

during an earlier point in American history, her practice reveals very much the sort of Social Self that William James observed. This self, as I argued in Chapter One, was a new development in theories of the self and was tied to American's move to consumerism; thus, Isabel's *practice*, her continual drive to please, which underlies all her actions, signals the presence of a self very much defined by the class and gender expectations of her *own* age. Etiquette manuals from the second half of the nineteenth century--books like *The Art of Pleasing*; like *The Gentle Art of Pleasing and Manners; or Like Happy Homes and Good Society all the Year Round*--advised middle-class readers about the importance of pleasing, and John Kasson shows how the art of pleasing was for America's new white-collar middle-class "the first step to both financial and social success" (68). Quoting manuals such as those listed above, Kasson writes,

[Etiquette advisers] insisted that the market itself obeyed not simply iron laws but moral ones.... Showing [that] respect to others combined Christian kindness and self-interest, one writer declared: "politeness is power, and ... for the ambitious man there is no surer road to the highest places ... than through good manners. Contended another adviser, "No one quality of the mind and heart is more important as an element conducive to worldly success than civility--that feeling of kindness and love for our fellow-beings which is expressed in pleasing manners. (68-69)

Isabel's art of pleasing takes a distinctly middle-class form. But her drive to please is likewise a gendered desire, one that pre-dates the emergence of America's middle class. Because American women had since the time of the Puritans been socialized to please, for middle-class women of the nineteenth century, imperatives to please were doubled. Kasson points out that while men were given much instruction in managing anger and conducting disputes, far fewer were provided for women:

The gap is significant: while both male and female advisers urged men to curb their tempers, they apparently assumed women had less of a temper to curb and were, both by nature and social circumstances, less disputatious. (160)

John Ruth's 1879 *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society* includes a section on "Duties of the Wife" and presents advice for wives on avoiding "causes for complaint" (201) and living peacefully with "a man of hasty temper" (294). By "seeking in every possible means to prevent [the husband] from committing [himself]" (204), the woman *pleases*, thus following duty and increasing her chance of happiness. When Isabel requests that Mrs. Touchett inform her anytime she seems to take "too much liberty" (67), she is responding to her aunt's belief that American girls have been allowed to behave in ways that Europeans do not find pleasing in women. Significantly, Isabel takes as her first models of behavior the "quiet and reasonable and satisfied" sisters of Lord Warburton. "I mean to try and imitate them," she says (73).

Isabel's desire to please, as well as her "unquenchable desire to think well of herself" (53), make her the perfect raw material for further "cultivation" and "refinement." Raised by an indulgent father, who "gambled freely" and provided for his daughters "no regular education and no permanent home," Isabel has been at once "spoiled and neglected" (40). Provided with spotty advantages like study abroad with governesses judged by others to be "very bad ones" or in French schools judged "superficial" (40), Isabel has lived a more privileged life than the decidedly middle-class Henrietta Stackpole, who must work for a living and seems to Isabel "a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy" (55). Having

only been partially schooled in the refinements that would make her as privileged as she imagines herself to be, Isabel has had "everything a girl could have: kindness, admiration, bonbons, bouquets, the *sense* of exclusion from none of the privileges of the world she lived in, abundant opportunity for dancing, plenty of new dresses" (emphasis added 41). Isabel has been--in theory--a lady. When she takes real English ladies as her models of correctness, she moves a step *away* from freedom, nonconventionality, and the transcendent self. She moves closer to becoming the lady in the portrait.

Because Isabel is so intent on pleasing, she seems predisposed to opt for ladyhood at the expense of liberty. James once again points up the gap between her theory and practice when he writes of her "love of liberty ... as yet almost exclusively theoretical" (143). Upon arriving in England she already possesses some of the refinements required of an American-style lady. Purveyors of American-style gentility emphasized the egalitarian aspects of achieving genteel behavior when they told readers that "as real a lady may be found plying her needle, or labouring in a manufactory, as in the most splendid drawing room" (qtd. Kasson 57), but the key to such success lay in pleasing others, a key that Isabel Archer possesses in excess. While her desire to please leads her first to emulate the passive and pleasing sisters of Lord Warburton, later she chooses a more dangerous model in Madame Merle, whom she considers "the essence of the aristocratic situation" (164). Isabel's imagination creates in Madame Merle the very definition of "greatness": "To be so cultivated and civilised, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it--that was really to be a great lady, especially when one so carried and

presented one's self" (164). Coming to see Madame Merle as possessing a refinement that she herself lacks, Isabel admires and envies the dazzling Madame Merle:

Our heroine had always passed for a person of resources and had taken a certain pride in being one; but she wandered, as by the wrong side of the wall of a private garden, round the enclosed talents, accomplishments, aptitudes of Madame Merle. She found herself desiring to emulate them, and in twenty such ways this lady presented herself as a model. (163)

Madame Merle, painted as a character possessing only Social Selves and seemingly devoid of an inner core or Spiritual Self, choreographs Isabel's courtship and marriage to Gilbert Osmond, and readers might well ask why the independent American girl chooses such a model as Madame Merle.

III The Private Garden of Ladyhood

Incidents from Isabel's early life help explain her choosing as a model a woman who seems to exist only as a Social Self, a self completely at odds with the transcendent self that rises above social circumstance. Although from the start, Isabel recognizes that Madame Merle seems to "exist only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her fellow mortals," the lady's perfectly pleasing manner attracts Isabel. Examination of Isabel's early rejection of institutionalized learning helps explain not only her choice of Madame Merle as a mentor but also her devotion to the seemingly incompatible impulses that most define her self --her love of liberty and her desire to please and be thought well of. Readers are told that as a child Isabel "protested against the laws" of

the Dutch House, where she might have received "a foundation of knowledge," had she not been allowed to quit the school and stay home. Remembering the hum of children's voices floating from the school's open windows, she thinks of the event as "an incident in which the elation of liberty and the pain of exclusion were indistinguishably mingled" (32). Primed for suffering, given the incompatibility of freedom that is at once painful exclusion, Isabel is stuck between the immovable rock of cultivated ladyhood and that place so hard for women to reach--liberty. Isabel's feelings of being excluded from the private garden of a lady's accomplishments feed her desire to find the gateway into such exclusive space, and when Gilbert Osmond appears, she loves him for all that he *seems* to promise. Yearning for both freedom and enclosure within a lady's garden, Isabel imagines herself well-suited for marriage to the man whom her cousin calls a "sterile dilettante"; to Isabel he looks like another perfect embodiment of the "aristocratic life," a formula she defines as "the union of great knowledge with great liberty" (354). In theory, she imagines herself included in the "private garden" where the "talents, accomplishments, [and] aptitudes" of a lady like Madame Merle can be hers (163), and this inclusion would simultaneously bring her the elation of absolute liberty. She can have her liberty cake and eat it, too, using correct form and a silver fork artfully crafted for just such pastry.

A second childhood incident, according to critic Carole Vopat, determines Isabel's desire to emulate Madame Merle and to make other choices that ultimately lead her toward her imprisoning marriage. In tracing Isabel's adult actions and attitudes to a childhood incident when her father abandoned his young daughters in Neufchatel, Vopat convincingly

argues that Isabel's obsession with avoiding fear and shame began with this experience of which Isabel protests too loudly "even in this irregular situation ... she had been neither frightened nor ashamed" (40). Using a psychoanalytic approach, Vopat maintains that Isabel's idealism --her disarming a fearful world by continually believing her own version of incidents--ultimately leads her to choose ladies like Lord Warburton's sisters or like Madame Merle as her models of perfection. "[I]n Isabel's own version of things, the perfect self in an ideal world need never entertain stronger than pleasant 'sensations'" (43), Vopat writes. In other words, the lady need never feel fear or shame. Had Vopat recognized the behavioral demands of ladyhood, her argument would be even stronger, for American social history explains just how powerfully shame shaped actions during the nineteenth century. Showing how "embarrassment became a normal, even essential, part of American urban life" (114), John Kasson traces a rising threshold of shame that acted as "a powerful instrument of social regulation, guarding privileged social pathways and taking the place to some degree ... of older codes of social deference" (114). These older codes, like the rural South's chivalric code of honor or the English countryside's code of gentility, depended upon hierarchical ranks ordering positions of status within the society; rank acted to tie one's identity and behavior to one's place in the hierarchy. The sensitivity to embarrassment, Kasson argues, "reflected the unstable, altered context of honor, shame, and reputation in the market economy and democratic ethos of the nineteenth-century city" (114). The etiquette books, which appeared in vast and unprecedented numbers, carefully drew lines of

"correct" behavior, promising relief from "the shameful uncertainties of self" (115). As one adviser declared,

Etiquette is the machinery of society.... It prevents the agony of uncertainty, and soothes even when it cannot cure the pains of blushing bashfulness. If one is certain about being correct, there is little to be anxious about" (qtd. Kasson 115).

While Isabel can facetiously accuse Lord Warburton of judging her a "barbarian" who has "never seen forks and spoons" (68), her jibes perhaps veil a fear of shame like that which distinguished America's middle classes during the nineteenth century.

The desire to always observe "proper form" marked what has been called the American middle-class "cult of respectability." Proper form meant that in all actions, one maintained gender ideals, avoided even by recognition any vulgarity, maintained privacy at all times, and managed the body and the emotions so that all bodily processes were denied and all emotions hidden. A product of this culture wherein any lack of civility was rude and any rudeness a "social obscenity" (Kasson 115), Isabel displays her fear of shame in her desire never to see anything "vulgar" (33), "do anything wrong" (53), "make [a wrong] impression" (75), "show too much" (59), seem "wanting in delicacy" (91), or "expos[e] ... her possible grossness of perception" (221). Forms of the word *shame* (40, 53, 190, 203, 222, 245, 271, 331, 379, 381, 400, 469 among others) or descriptions of Isabel's blushing in shame (66, 247 among others) appear far more often than do allusions to freedom. Clearly, for most Americans, especially those advocates of liberty and selfhood like Isabel Archer, the

rising threshold of shame created a "built-in identity crisis" (Berger, et.al. 92).

IV Slippages in Meaning: The Problem of Misreading

Isabel's marriage to Gilbert Osmond and her return to their imprisoning marriage at the end of the novel can best be explained by her conceptions of "lady" and "gentleman," and by her naive belief in the oneness of manners and morals, beauty and truth, form and content. Sincerely believing that Osmond's exquisite taste and obsession with correct form signify a devotion to "truth and knowledge" (353), she mistakes "a part for the whole," only realizing too late that she has entered "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation" (353). In other words, Isabel misreads. In linguistic terms, she believes that the signifier and the signified are fused, that language has a one-to-one relationship with reality, and that meaning never slips. Because she herself "would be what she appears" and "appear what she [is]" (54), she naively assumes that all people can be read as simply as she would be read. But James is careful to make problematic Isabel's method of arriving at meaning, inserting a comment by the novel's narrative voice: "the effect [Isabel] produced upon people was often *different from what she supposed*" (emphasis added 56). The element missing in Isabel's suppositions about meaning is the role of the interpretant, the term Charles S. Peirce used to signify the importance of a third party who receives and interprets signs.²⁷ Because she fails to recognize that those receiving her "impression" bring to their reading

of it their own experiences and meanings, she remains unaware that she creates a different impression than she intends. This same omission leads her later to misread Osmond's appearance, for she fails to realize that she herself has brought to that reading her own belief that form and content are one. James makes explicit the problem of accurately reading impressions during Isabel's night vigil of Chapter 42:

[Osmond] admired her--he had told her why: because she was the most imaginative woman he had known. It might very well have been true; for during those months she had imagined a world of things that had no substance. She had had a more wondrous vision of him, fed through charmed senses and oh such a stirred fancy!--*she had not read him right*. A certain combination of features had touched her, and in them she had seen the most striking of figures. (emphasis added 351)

Isabel's misreading of Osmond is a misreading of his appearance, which, of course, includes his dress. Although she argues with Madame Merle that clothing does not express self, her opinion of dress seems to fall straight in line with Thoreau's belief that because Fashion distorts the unity between outer form and inner spirit, it has taken on the aspect of an indifferent deity. "We worship not the Graces, not Parcae [the Fates], but Fashion," Thoreau writes. "She spins and weaves and cuts with full authority. The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveller's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same" (25). Isabel's proclamation about clothing would have more accurately stated her meaning had she said that Fashion, not clothing, is a "limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one" (173), for indeed, throughout the novel Isabel uses impressions from appearances as she busily categorizes the types around her (220). Although Isabel's misreading of Osmond does not necessarily begin with his

dress, her romantic conviction that Fashion distorts no doubt feeds her original impressions of him. Osmond, we are told, "dressed as a man dresses who takes little other trouble about it than to have no vulgar things" (194). In other words, Osmond is no dandy, no monkey in a traveler's cap; he seems to ignore Fashion. But does he? He certainly does not ignore style.

The combination of features that so touch Isabel, we are told, include "a high but well-shaped head," a "fine, narrow, extremely modelled and composed face," and a beard,

cut in the manner of the portraits of the sixteenth century and surmounted by a fair moustache, of which the ends had a romantic upward flourish, [giving] its wearer a foreign, traditionary look and suggest[ing] that he was a gentleman *who studied style*. (emphasis added 194)

Present-day fashion theorists would identify Osmond's seeming disregard for fashion as the style of "calculated underdressing," a mode of dress typical of men "in cosmopolitan upper-middle-class circles" (Davis 65). Thorstein Veblen observed this sartorial mode during the waning years of the nineteenth century among the leisure classes of Europe and America. He maintained that the method of advertising one's wealth and leisure "undergoes a refinement when a sufficiently large wealthy class has developed, who have the leisure for acquiring skill in interpreting the subtler signs" of taste and expenditure (187). This calculated attention to taste, he wrote, results from the upper class's tendency to exclude lower classes even as "spectators whose applause or mortification should be sought" (187). James's Gilbert Osmond, as a man who studies style, indulges a sort of reverse chic that is so thoroughly tasteful as to

appear to the untrained eye to be an *indifference* to dress and fashion. Adulation of lower class spectators would be insulting to him in just the sort of way Veblen describes, and Isabel comes to this realization when she contemplates how he requires that she think of him "as he [thinks] of himself--"as the first gentleman in Europe" (353). Had Isabel been more attuned to the subtleties of dress, she might have known that what appeared to be a disregard for Fashion and a concomitant to the pursuit of transcendental ideals like truth and knowledge was in fact a hyper-awareness of style that respects form alone. For Osmond, being the "first gentleman in Europe" means "altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude" (354), and his disdain of the masses whose adulation would signify a breach of good taste, stems from his tabulating his exact position on the social hierarchy. Judging himself to be superior in taste, "the first gentleman" aims to impress only those who top him on the social hierarchy:

[His being the first gentleman in Europe] implied a sovereign contempt for every one but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied.... Osmond had talked to Isabel about his renunciation, his indifference, the ease with which he dispensed with the usual aids to success.... She had thought it a grand indifference, an exquisite independence. But indifference was really the last of his qualities; she had never seen any one who thought so much of others. (353-54)

Osmond's *thinking of others* implies his use of those beneath him as low-Others; he studies the "base ignoble world ... [which] one was to keep ... forever in one's eye, in order not to enlighten or convert or redeem it, but to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority" (353).²⁸

Ralph Touchett, also reflecting on Osmond's motive for creating "calculated" effects, alludes to this drive to exclude others:

To surround his interior with a sort of invidious sanctity, to tantalize society with a sense of exclusion, to make people believe his house was different from every other, to impart to the face that he presented to the world a cold originality" (234).

Ralph's description of Isabel at this point in the novel reveals just how far his young cousin goes to remold herself into the sort of aristocratic lady that would complement a gentleman like Osmond. Not opening her reception days to every one, Isabel has an "evening in the week to which people were not invited as a matter of course" (323). Living with "a certain magnificence" that only a few within her circle are allowed to see, Isabel seems totally changed, yet Ralph judges that his cousin, who has "no faculty for producing studied impression," shows the "hand of the master" (323). While earlier in the novel, Isabel argues that her clothing expresses her dressmaker, the changed appearance of her "portrait" suggests that it now expresses her "master":

Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament. The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was *the fine lady who was supposed to represent something*. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond. (emphasis mine 324)

James's critique here prefigures what Thorstein Veblen observes in *Theory of the Leisure Class* when he likens wives to servants, husbands to masters, and women's dress to the elaborate livery of footmen. The wife, who according to Veblen functions as the "chief menial" within the

leisure-class household, dresses to serve as an emblem of her husband: "The women being not their own masters, obvious expenditure and leisure on their part would rebound to the credit of the *master* rather than their own credit" (emphasis added 179). While James's use of *master* obviously alludes to the concept of portraiture and Isabel as an art object, it simultaneously connotes *husband*, a sense he underscores when Isabel thinks of visiting Ralph, despite Osmond's aversion to it:

She had not as yet undertaken to act in direct opposition to [Osmond's] wishes; he was her *appointed and inscribed master*.... [C]onstantly present to her mind were all the traditionary decencies and sanctities of marriage" (emphasis added 379).

With Osmond as master, Isabel dresses as a lady who would most complement the man who studies style.

Extant garments from the 1870s, designed by the Parisian couture Houses of Worth, Pingat, and Doucet, illustrate the sort of massively trained gown that James's heroine might have worn. Designing exquisitely distinctive creations for European royalty and nobility, for ladies of the French court, and for wealthy Americans of "old" and "new" money, these couture houses influenced fashion world-wide. The most well-known of these, the House of Worth, provided the leading modistes of Europe and America with garments to use as models and, according to fashion historian Elizabeth Coleman, excelled at "overstatement, sometimes extending ostentation into the realm of vulgarity" (7). For this reason, although Worth was the designer of choice for the wife of Henry Adams and of James's friend, Edith Wharton, this English-born fashion arbiter would not have likely been the choice of James's fictional heroine. Worth gowns

would have been too much the rage and too conspicuous to please a master and connoisseur like Gilbert Osmond. Designer Emil Pingat, less well-known in his own day and almost totally unrecognized today, epitomized the designing dressmaker's art, according to Coleman. His flawlessly crafted clothes, "murmuring elegance rather than shouting affluence" (177), were considered by many to be the "most select" offered by the Parisian houses. One of Pingat's 1885 designs, a low-necked, sleeveless evening ensemble of blue-black plain silk velvet features the sort of heavily draped bustle area that James's Ralph Touchett suggests in his description of Isabel. This Pingat creation, subtly embroidered with stylized flowers in gold and silver thread and delicately trimmed at the train with Chantilly lace (185), provides a visual coordinate to Ned Rosier's portrait of Isabel, who looks "high and splendid" in her black velvet, as she stands "framed in the gilded doorway" like "the picture of a gracious lady" (303). While she forms the picture of the perfect lady, James's protagonist continues to feel only the oppressive and confining qualities of such gowns and would never have rhapsodized as did the actual Mrs. Henry Adams, who wrote of her Worth gown, "[It] has come home and not only fills my soul but seals it hermetically. Still it has enough air about it to prevent suffocation" (87).

Little in Isabel Archer's existence after marriage works against suffocation, yet while she allows Osmond to fashion her exterior to suit his conception of a true lady, she refuses to totally efface self for him. Although "he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance" and he tells her several times that she has "too many ideas and that she must get rid of them" (352), by the time of her all-

night vigil, she knows that the two of them are irreconcilably split, for "the vital principle of the one [is] a thing of contempt to the other" (349). Osmond's increasing scorn for Isabel primarily entails a disdain for her American middle-class taste and manners. Having originally pursued her because she "qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand" as Lord Warburton's (253), he learns after their marriage that she has "a certain way of looking at life which he [takes] as a personal offence" (352). Even before their marriage Osmond faults Isabel for her lack of reserve, her "high ragged note ... what he call[s] random ravings," her "too precipitate a readiness" (254). Etiquette manuals of the nineteenth century speak to such readiness, calling argumentation from a woman "one of the most disgusting sights in nature" (qtd. Kasson 161). Women given to readiness were advised with anecdotes of those who had broken themselves of bad habits: "A lady who was much given to hasty speaking broke herself of the habit by saying inwardly, 'What if Nellie should die?' Nellie was her only child, and lived to complete the good work" (qtd. Kasson 161). Isabel makes the "concessions, in gracefully yielding to the will of another" that etiquette manuals of the period advised (qtd, Kasson 161), and she learns to act in accordance with Osmond's rules, the "certain things they must do, a certain posture they must take, certain people they must know and not know" (James 354), but concessions are not enough. Isabel lacks aristocratic "tradition" (354). Osmond's actual proprietorship over this rigid system of fixed rules that accompanied European rank-ordered societies is put into question, with James suggesting that Osmond simply appropriated European traditions upon his

family's expatriation from America. Thus, Isabel's scorn for adopting tradition not one's own unless it is of "a thoroughly superior kind" (355) infuriates the form-driven Osmond all the more, and their mutual scorn festers.

V

Pushing Back the Skirts: Isabel and Puritanism

Midway through Isabel's all-night vigil of Chapter 42, she arrives at an understanding about some of Osmond's traditions. There exist "certain things she could never take in," things "hideously unclean" that Osmond takes for granted. James's word choice in explaining this realization seems particularly curious: "some of his traditions [make] her push back her skirts" (355). Recent critics have misread Isabel's skirt reference; critic Annette Niemtow, for example, reads "push back the skirts" as *push up the skirts*, an action Isabel "cannot" indulge, and she footnotes another critic who reads the metaphor as *pushing down the skirts* (387). While both of these readings emphasize Isabel's chastity, neither takes into account the skirts of the 1870s and thus neither recognizes the full significance of this very important phrase.

Beginning in the 1870s, women's skirts required wearers to push them back anytime movement disturbed their neat, orderly, and *straightened* appearance. Denouncing Osmond's acceptance of the illicit sexual behavior of the Countess Gemini and others among the aristocratic circle, Isabel uses a figure of speech that would have communicated precisely as written to readers of James's period. Using a uniquely 1870s' action that conveys the same meaning as a more clichéd clothing action metaphor—"straight-laced,"

Isabel is so thoroughly appalled by thoughts of adultery and things "unclean" that she is compelled to straighten her appearance. The low bustle and cascading trains of the period 1876-1880 required adjustment--first a straightening of the closely cut narrow front and then a pushing back of the elaborate back--anytime an attired woman side-stepped, rose from a seated position, or maneuvered in any way other than in a straight line and in the "modest and measured gait" advised of ladies.²⁹ Isabel's desire to tidy herself when she even contemplates the adultery of others goes far in explaining why she cannot and does not leave her imprisoning marriage to escape with Caspar Goodwood at the novel's end. Placed alongside the pattern of meanings related to clothing elsewhere in the novel, Isabel's pushing back her skirts in response to a mere thought becomes an action encoding meanings about her past, her sense of self and morality, and the sort of lady James has represented through *The Portrait*.

Early in the novel, Isabel resolves "to leave the past behind her," making a vow that readers are prepared for her to break, given James's noting that she had "a great many times" experienced this same desire. Throughout her travels, courtships, and marriage, she continues to carry with her her New England past, taking along, as noted earlier, the fear of shame, as well as the simultaneous love of freedom and desire for inclusion that began in childhood. These qualities, as well as her New England sense of morality, follow her into her married life with Gilbert Osmond, and when she is exposed to the adulterous affairs of those among Osmond's circle, they immediately call to her consciousness emblems of American morality, the Puritans: "She was not a daughter of the Puritans, but for all that she believed in such a thing as chastity and even as decency" (355).

Although Isabel disavows Puritanism, she certainly endorses Puritan virtues, and three articles on the New England 'type' of woman, the first two published in 1878 in the *Atlantic Monthly* and the later one near the turn of the century, laid out the traits of these daughters of the Puritans. Marked by spirituality, industriousness, practicality, a disregard for fashion, and a propensity for "useful work" (qtd. Banta 53), the New England type seems in some ways a prototype for Isabel Archer. Isabel's reflections early in the novel speak to her need for useful work. Readers learn that Henrietta Stackpole has in the past been Isabel's "model," because the young journalist "offered so high an example of useful activity" (54). In terms of Isabel's own vocation, James notes that Isabel has no "resources" like Henrietta's talent for interviewing and writing but that she still seeks without particular direction some useful work:

[Isabel's] resources were of the obvious kind; but even if one had not the journalistic talent, ... one was not therefore to conclude that one had no vocation ... and resign one's self to being frivolous and hollow. If one should wait with the right patience one would find some happy work to one's hand. (55).

After her imprisoning marriage, the need for "doing" persists, but the doing still lacks certain focus:

She could never rid herself of the sense that unhappiness was a state of disease--of suffering as opposed to doing. To "do"--it hardly mattered what--would therefore be an escape, perhaps to some degree a remedy.... It seemed to Isabel that if she could make it her duty to bring about [the marriage between Lord Warburton and Pansy Osmond] she should play the part of a good wife. (341)

Like the New England women of Mrs. M.E.W. Sherwood's *Atlantic Monthly* pieces, duty marks Isabel's life and actions, and James underscores again and again Isabel's concern for "duty" (180, 291, 334, 341, 348, 354, 361 among others). Isabel's disavowing Puritanism is, of course, a sexual reference, not one that disputes her sense of duty, and a third article about the New England type of woman notes an assumption that perhaps prompts Isabel's disclaimer. According to this second writer, the New England type is often a spinster and an "idealist in all things having to do with the spirit;" her spirituality, however, twists her sexuality, and according to this writer, she is victim of "undirected impulse" (qtd. Banta 55). James immortalizes the repressed sexuality of the New England type with Olive Chancellor of *The Bostonians*, and while his beautiful heroine Isabel Archer shares Olive's idealism, he seems intent on having her *not* share Olive's sexual repression. Although critics have debated Isabel's sexuality, with some arguing that she avoids leaving with Caspar Goodwood out of sexual fear,³⁰ Robert White very convincingly shows through examination of the use of sexual discourse of the nineteenth century, the powerfully sexual side of Isabel's character. Although Isabel pushes back her skirts, tidying herself in response to sexual thoughts, these thoughts revolve around sex *outside* marriage, *adulterous* sex. She is more a daughter of the Puritans than she realizes, given the counsel Cotton Mather offered in his 1741 text on woman's behavior. In *Ornaments for The Daughters of Zion* Mather sanctions sexual desire for women with a reference to a wife's "sacred fire ... [that] flames especially towards the Man of her Desires" (103). He includes this discussion of sacred fire in his section on sexuality and child-bearing, indicating that erotic pleasures

within marriage were encouraged. Only those erotic pleasures sought outside of marriage are held up as anything other than behavior that is righteous in Mather's manual for virtuous women. Nineteenth-century Americans clearly harbored misconceptions about Puritanism, and although etiquette advisers of the period might dispute Isabel's sense of propriety and judge her other than a "true lady," Cotton Mather from the century before would have certainly judged her a "virtuous woman."

More important than even Isabel's acknowledging her New England morality is her revision of self that her skirt-pushing implies. Significantly revising her relationship with her clothing, this action shows that Isabel is no longer separate from her clothing. Thus, she betrays the fallacy present in her former belief of a transcendent self-- a self separated from its social circumstances. Earlier in the novel Isabel vehemently opposes the notion that clothing can express the self, but now she uses dress to register contempt. Her skirts, like her facial expression, voice modulation, and other parts of the material body, are knit into her very thought process. With her straightening action, Isabel, as William James would put it, assimilates into the kernel of Thought the "*represented* parts of the Self" (emphasis his 323). Such assimilation of one's represented parts constituted for William James the "firm basis on which the consciousness of personal identity would rest" (323). In other words, the self does not transcend its "envelope of circumstances." In using her skirts as self-expression, Isabel undercuts with practice her theory of a transcendent self.

With her skirt-pushing, Isabel seems aware for the first time in the novel that she has chosen practice over theory. While clothes might be "a

limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one imposed on [her] by society," when she incorporates them into her self, she, in effect, accepts barriers and limitations as facts of life in a social world. As Madame Merle put it, "There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances" (172). In very concrete terms, Isabel has learned that as a part of a social world, the self must recognize other people and a society fraught with barriers and dangers.

James underscores Isabel's realization of a social, non-transcendent self when she arrives in London to attend her dying cousin. She remembers a similar evening when she had walked "unattended" from Euston Square to Piccadilly:

[T]here was something terrible in an arrival in London. The dusky, smoky, far-arching vault of the station ... the dense, dark, pushing crowd.... She remembered she had once liked these things; they seemed part of a mighty spectacle in which there was something that touched her. She remembered how she walked away from Euston ... five years before. She could not have done that to-day, and the incident came before her as *the deed of another person*. (458-59)

The other person, William James might say, was a self unaware of its place in the social world. The passage from the earlier incident reveals Isabel's lack of awareness of others who might lurk in the dark. She feels a sense of "thrill" in this unchaperoned journey. While her insistence on walking alone puts her sense of propriety into question, it also emphasizes her misreading of possible dangers. The Isabel who would later misread Osmond's dress as a sign of transcendental idealism misreads the "shining dampness" of the city at night as mere spectacle that she can safely

observe unscathed. Once she learns that the world is not always as it appears and that she does not exist in transcendent isolation, she reads the city more accurately. She sees dangers that make barriers and limitations a necessity. Given Isabel's sexual scruples, London by gaslight would reveal scenes, too, that would make her push her skirts back once and then again for good measure.³¹

Accepting her skirts as a part of her Material Self and seeing that her Material Self exists in a social world, Isabel forms the portrait of a lady that James acknowledges as a true lady. Significantly, her skirts when she arrives at Gardencourt at the end of the novel are still slightly inappropriate: "That is a very odd dress to travel in," Mrs. Touchett tells her (465). Wearing some variation on "black brocade," Isabel tells Mrs. Touchett that she left Rome quickly, taking the first dress in her wardrobe--obviously not the "plainly indicated ... traveling-suit" advised by John Ruth, author of the 1882 *Our Deportment* (284). For James, the true lady stands on no false proprieties and is thus immune to any "superficial embarrassment"(460). Confessing her misery to Ralph, she loses "all her shame, all wish to hide things" (469). But because she is who she is--a New England lady and daughter of the Puritans--she must in the end submit to her matrimonial duty and return to her master:

Marriage meant that in such a case as this, when one had to choose, one chose as a matter of course for one's husband.... [M]arriage meant that a woman should cleave to the man with whom, uttering tremendous vows, she had stood at the altar. (441)

James's use of *to choose* in this passage recalls the scene early in the novel when Mrs. Touchett tells Isabel of her impropriety in staying up late

with the men. "I want to know the things one shouldn't do," Isabel tells Mrs. Touchett. "So as to do them?" her aunt asks. "So as to choose," Isabel answers (67). Manners (like dress) are limits, and one is free to choose to defy superfluous rules without superficial embarrassment, James suggests. But if a woman leaves a man who has broken no law, has not committed "a crime" (350), she betrays a vow, a principle, a sacred duty. The true lady chooses as a matter of course to choose with her husband, for marriage imposes a limit that she accepts when she takes her marriage vows. Cotton Mather's advice to the daughters of Zion well articulates James's notion of the true lady: "[I]n every lawful Thing she submits her Will and Sense to [her husband's] act *as if* there were but one Mind in two Bodies" (emphasis added 89). Mather's qualifying "*as if*" is significant, for elsewhere in the text he acknowledges the existence of abusive husbands, whom the virtuous woman suffers to the glory of God; her Will and Sense remain free in God while she submits in action. The virtuous wife, like "a Dove, that will sooner die than leave her Mate" (Mather 94), fears her husband as she fears God.

But what if the woman does not fear God? What if she lives in an age when moral authority is in crisis and when voices all around her speak in the loud and brazen tones of the New Woman, asking as Henrietta Stackpole does, "Why don't you leave [your husband]" (399)? Mather's *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* illustrates well how Puritanism institutionalized the sex/gender system of Puritan society by turning ascribed gender roles into wills of God, but in an age when women like Isabel have the "moral horizon of a Unitarian minister" (356), the control of God's will has diminished and control, if there is to be any, must come

from within the individual. James astutely recognizes with his novel the struggle of wills that marriage entails and recognizes, too, the lack of liberty a woman experiences when she must act in accordance with her husband's will. Thus, he makes Isabel's decision to follow duty an auxiliary of acting in accordance with her New England self. With freedom to choose, she chooses exclusion in the garden of the true lady. In the end James stands firm with Henry James, Sr., who wrote of marriage, "The law is ... just, and even good, though it slay me. Yes, death at its hands were better than life at the risk of its dishonor at my hands" ("Morality" 2). Isabel chooses this sort of death in marriage because by doing so she can harmonize her appearance with her concept of duty. She becomes a "true lady" and a "virtuous woman."

VI

Fishing in the Stream of Consciousness: The Preface to the New York Edition OF Henrietta Stackpole: Becomingness and Social Change

James's portrait of Isabel Archer resists the social changes besetting nineteenth-century America, yet the novel itself realistically acknowledges them. Because James was an astute observer of social life, his novel registers the upheavals in gender relations and the problems of marriage as nineteenth-century women experienced them. He registers, too, women's desire for vocation and meaningful work, a yearning that coursed beneath the surface of women's day-to-day lives. In the Preface to the New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* James discusses his artistic process, distinguishing between his subject--Isabel Archer--and the "extravagances" like Henrietta Stackpole. In differentiating these two

characters, he likens Isabel to the queen ensconced in her vehicle of form and the extravagances like Henrietta to those who tread the "dusty road" beside or behind the "carriage of the royal[ty]" (emphasis added 13). Then he apologizes for allowing Henrietta Stackpole "to pervade" (13), and dismisses her as a literary mistake: "As for Henrietta ... she exemplifies, I fear, in her superabundance, *not an element of my plan*, but only an excess of my zeal" (15). His 1907 Preface ends, not with any discussion of Isabel Archer, but with an attempt to explain away Henrietta, who according to James, "must have been [in 1880] a part of my wonderful notion of the lively" (15). I find James's disclaimer thick with meanings pertinent to my own discussion of women's becoming.

First, James situates Isabel Archer in the 'high' position; she is the French queen while Henrietta Stackpole is likened to the culturally 'low'--"the fishwives who helped to bring back to Paris from Versailles, on that most ominous day of the first half of the French Revolution, the carriage of the royal family" (13). Within my study of realist novels, the binary oppositions of high and low, which are encoded across social class, the human body, geographic space, and the human psyche, appear frequently as an analytic tool for reading late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century culture. Using as a model the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, whose *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* exactly shows how cultures "think themselves" by way of the cultural categories high/low, I map out the way these categories intersect across domains. As the cross-connections between social class, the human body, geographic space, and humans' internal landscapes emerge, the web of meanings embedded in language are released.

James's metaphorical comparisons for Isabel and Henrietta, for example, can be mapped out so that social class, gender, and Henry James's psychic make-up emerge to reveal nineteenth-century anxieties over social change. In James's analogy Henrietta functions in the 'low' position to Isabel's 'high'; she is a fishwife, Isabel is the queen. This high/low opposition repeats other oppositions that appear in *The Portrait*; most significantly it repeats Isabel's 'low' position at the worst of her marriage when she subordinates herself totally to Osmond. Henrietta is present *not* as an actor in her own right but as an auxiliary who functions to represent something about the one whom she serves. As one of the "fishwives," Henrietta is one of many, operating not as an individual with "true agency", according to James, but as part of the scene so that the more important and individualized character, Isabel, can appear all the more fully. Moreover, lacking individual agency, Henrietta, as one of a group, is merely a class.

So what class of person is Henrietta Stackpole, the character who will not stand still? Socially, Henrietta is decidedly middle-class American, an interesting choice when we place her beside the heiress and lady who would be James's queen. And in terms of gender she is decidedly a New Woman with a career ("a scribbling woman," as Nathaniel Hawthorne would have said). Initially inserted into the narrative as an auxiliary, intended only as subordinate by which to point up Isabel Archer's character, she nonetheless insists herself upon the narrative like some pervasive odor that just refuses to go away: "I have suffered Henrietta (of whom we have indubitably too much) so officiously, so strangely, so almost inexplicably, to pervade," James writes. James's attempt to explain

the inexplicable fails, and his character, whom he calls an "anomaly" (13) slips through the cracks of his would-be explanation. All he can say is that she is "lively," that the international scene intruded on him as did Henrietta, but that "that *is* another matter" (emphasis his 15). And thus he ends with, "There is really too much to say" (15). In a sense Henrietta again railroads her way into James's prose, destroying his intent within his Preface just as she intruded upon his "plan" for the novel.

It is worth mentioning, I think, that James uses the railroad as a metaphor for his conception of *The Portrait's* characters. Describing their coming to him as if "by an impulse of their own" to help him answer the question, "Well, what will [Isabel] do" (emphasis his 12), these characters metaphorically arrive by train, just as Henrietta Stackpole arrives in *The Portrait*. And oddly, just as James himself arrives at this interesting metaphor within the Preface, Henrietta intrudes on his text again in conjunction with thoughts about cohesion:

[The characters] were like the group of attendants and entertainers who come down by train when people in the country give a party; they represented the contract for carrying the party on. That was an excellent relation with them--a possible one even with so broken a reed (from her lack of cohesion) as Henrietta Stackpole. (12)

In telling readers later that Henrietta is meant to be merely "amusing," James identifies her as one of the entertainers, not one of the attendants, a distinction that certainly maintains class boundaries. Miss Stackpole, who is so loud, so deficient in "a sense of privacy" (82, 86), so "wanting in delicacy" (91) so critical of the elite (123), and so much the product of "boarding-house civilisation" (88) that the people in the country could

not abide her as an attendant--well, Miss Stackpole just seems simply too much for her creator.

Ralph Touchett, the character most often identified as James's mouthpiece in *The Portrait*, identifies the problem with Henrietta that made James want to explain her away after twenty-four years. The passage begins with Isabel emoting about there being "something of the 'people' in Henrietta," a reference to the proletariat, reinforced sentences later when Isabel says she always feels compelled to take Henrietta as an ideal, "not so much in respect to herself as in respect to *what masses behind her*" (emphasis added 87). Then Isabel rhapsodizes Whitman-esque style about the rivers and prairies and country "spreading till it stops at the green Pacific": "A strong, sweet, fresh odour seems to rise from it, and Henrietta--pardon my simile--has something of that odour in her garments" (87). With great, wry humor, Ralph inverts Isabel's high-flung description of her friend with "Henrietta ... does smell of the Future--it almost knocks one down" (87). Henrietta, the woman of the Future, is pushy, indelicate, and impertinent. Too active to stand still for James's tableaux, she sweats profusely, smelling up the *armpits* of her garments. With this inversion, social class and a type of woman become transcoded onto the human body. And no true lady has smelly armpits. But worse than her smell, according to James, has been Henrietta's persistence in trying to upstage dear Isabel, who has learned so painstakingly the lessons of living in a changing world and has chosen dutifully the freedom that comes in embracing one's suffering. No wonder James felt compelled to explain Henrietta away.

James does not play out his metaphor of the French queen and the fishwives. Had he said all there was to say, rather than stopping midstream in his thought, he might have continued, pointing out, even, that his date 1876, America's centennial year, was his way of asking what independence means for American women--women who in 1907 still did not have a part in the democratic government set forth with the American Revolution, had not become economically independent, had won property rights in only a few states. Then he might have pointed out that he (in the guise of Ralph Touchett) gave his American girl an inheritance so as to remove that prime problem of women's lives (according to all those Association of Women women). Sadly, in the end, he learned from Gilbert Osmond that economic independence means little because even smart women are deceived. But he felt compelled to elevate Isabel, whom he had come to love. Because she proved herself a true lady and a virtuous woman, he would immortalize her, make her a queen, and ensconce her in a carriage like one that appeared in that other Revolution (speaking of Revolutions). But wait, (Henry says to himself, but not to us), the queen gets ripped from her carriage, the fishwives disperse into the crowd yelling "Sansculotte" and then come back later as the middle-class wearing dark man-tailored walking costumes, and, thus, Henrietta as fishwife comes out better than the queen in the end, which means that that loud and indelicate character has inserted herself into the analogy that was supposed to dismiss her.

James, of course, knew his history, and his failure to follow his analogy to its logical end seems curious. One might venture to guess that the thought of the New Woman unseating the American lady was one of those thoughts in the stream of James's consciousness that he felt anxious about

binding to Thought. ("That Thought"--the capital T kind--"is a vehicle of choice as well as of cognition," William James wrote.) Not wanting to appropriate a revolutionary New Woman into Thought, James leaves the hook dangling in the stream, and he leaves the fishwives there on the dusty road with Miss Stackpole. My own conjecture, given the wonderful fit between the fishwives and stream of consciousness, is that James did in fact intend to engage the thought of profound social change and women's place. His love of Henrietta Stackpole comes through every time she refuses to stand still for one of his famous tableaux. James's intent, though, seems less important than the message encoded in his words. With Henrietta Stackpole, James provides a New Woman who will buy a newspaper with the legacy his mouthpiece Ralph Touchett leaves her. She will go on being loud, inquisitive, indelicate, and perplexing. At the end of *The Portrait* Henrietta tells Isabel of her upcoming marriage and of her relationship with her future sister-in-law:

"[Lady Pensil] is supposed to be a master mind. She thinks she knows everything; but she doesn't understand a woman *of my modern type*. It would be so much easier for her if I were only a little better or a little worse. She's so puzzled; I believe she thinks its my duty to go and do something immoral.... *And she'll never understand my mixture--never!*" (emphasis added 463)

Too much a mixture of 'high' and 'low' to fit neatly into cultural categories, Henrietta Stackpole is a hybrid construction. Her indelicacy makes her appear without morals, yet she "isn't immoral enough" to justify Lady Pensil's ire. Loud and prone to ask impertinent questions, she is nonetheless "crisp and new and comprehensive as a first issue before the folding" (79). Compared by Osmond to "a new steel pen--the most odious

thing in nature" (401), Henrietta, as scribbling, steel pen, emerges primed to displace Lady Pensil. And the New Woman rises thorough, efficient, and self-possessed, ready to eclipse the lady.

"You know I never have admitted that she's a woman," Gilbert Osmond says of Henrietta Stackpole. As a connoisseur of traditional forms, he like Lady Pensil, cannot understand a woman of Henrietta's "modern type" (463). Mixtures elude them, and they find hybrids incomprehensible. Perhaps the strongest endorsement James provides of Henrietta, the woman whose garments smell of the future, is Osmond's disdain, a loathing shown most forcefully when he tells Isabel,

"Miss Stackpole strikes me as a kind of monster. One hasn't a nerve in one's body that she doesn't set quivering.... She talks as a steel pen writes; aren't her letters, by the way, on ruled paper? She thinks and moves and walks and looks exactly as she talks.... I hear her all day long. Her voice is in my ears; I can't get rid of it. I know exactly what she says, and every inflexion of the tone in which she says it. She says charming things about me, and they give you great comfort. I don't like at all to think she talks about me--I feel as I should feel if I knew the footman were wearing my hat." (401)

The lowly fishwife enters as lowly footman in Osmond's metaphorical reading of Henrietta, and by putting the words in the mouth of so sinister a character as Osmond, James leads his readers to contemplate social change and the role of the hybrid in forging it. Because they resist Osmond, most readers would move closer to accepting Henrietta and hybrid forms of womanhood.

Challenging conventional forms by tossing together 'high' and 'low' into a creation that innovates, the hybrid form initiates changes of profound social consequence. Because of its unique mix, the hybrid

facilitates acceptance, easing the public toward emerging social forms. Challenging without thoroughly rupturing, transforming without moving outside the social structure, hybrid constructions push social boundaries, creating distinctive shapes for the future. With Henrietta Stackpole, Henry James dispenses with conventionalized forms; she is not a lady, and she will not sit for a portrait or stand in tableaux. Rather, she, with her toilette in fast motion, "rustle[s]" and "shimmer[s]" (76), cutting a cinematic image of womanhood on the move. By comparison, portraits of ladies seem to be merely relics, representative artifacts of a past age.

In the next chapter, the search for a new form of womanhood continues. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier fabricates a utopian vision of the future even as she is offered other alternatives. The hybrid in Chopin's work appears in the guise of seemingly opposed characters--Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle. With these characters Chopin fashions womanhood in transition, and as Edna Pontellier rejects the role that Isabel Archer so dutifully fulfills, these hybrid characters offer options other than upper-middle-class propriety and wife-as-property. In Edna's unsuccessful struggle to resolve contradictory claims, Chopin suggests an aesthetics of social change.

Notes

²²Barbara Novak, in *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience*, discusses Eakins' research with Eadweard Meybridge's chronophotographs at the University of Pennsylvania in 1884. This work resulted in the "invention of a camera with two disks in front of the lens, one revolving eight times faster than the other," which has been credited by scholars with anticipating the motion picture camera (197-98).

²³Nancy F. Cott's *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* provides a concise summary of the nineteenth-century woman movement as the starting point for her study of twentieth-century feminism (16-20). An excellent source for information on domestic issues and feminism is William Leach's *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society*. See also Ellen Carol Dubois's *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America*.

²⁴Robert White's "Love, Marriage, and Divorce: The Matter of Sexuality in *The Portrait of a Lady*" and Annette Niemtzw's "Marriage and the New Woman in *The Portrait of a Lady*" provide valuable discussion of Henry James, Sr. and his writings on marriage. Alfred Habegger's excellent discussion, "The Fatherless Heroine and the Filial Son: Deep Background for *The Portrait of a Lady*," combines biographical, cultural, and historical background on James's novel. Habegger's article influences my reading of *The Portrait*.

²⁵Tony Tanner's "The Fearful Self" suggests that the "theorizing, idealizing" part of Isabel is derived from her reading of German thought, "the very source of American transcendentalism" (70-71). He suggests that

Isabel's journey in *The Portrait* is one from "an uncommitted, undefined self" toward identity (67). Richard Chase's "The Lesson of the Master" examines Isabel's "romance of the self" that "requires that self-fulfillment shall take place only at a high level of abstraction" (26), thus suggesting the gap between abstraction (theory) and her "ordinary vulgar circumstances of ... life" (26). Christof Wegelin's "The American as a Young Lady" examines the Americanness of Isabel's failure to account for Gilbert Osmond, and Marion Montgomery's "The Flaw in the Portrait" discusses the gap in terms of "one romantic extreme to the other, from vague freedom to blind duty" (65).

More recent criticism examines the role of gender. See, for example, Alfred Habegger's "The Fatherless Heroine and the Filial Son: Deep Background for *The Portrait of a Lady*," William Veeder's "The Portrait of a Lack," and Beth Sharon Ash's "Frail Vessels and Vast Designs: A Psychoanalytic Portrait of Isabel Archer."

Michael T. Gilmore's "The Commodity World of *The Portrait of a Lady*" provides valuable information on the division of blue-collar and white-collar workers and of women as commodities.

²⁶See, for example, Emily Thornwell's *A Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility, In Manners, Dress, and Conversation* (1856), John A. Ruth's *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society* (1879), and John H. Young's *Our Department; Or, The Manners, Conduct and Dress of the Most Refined Society* (1882). Common directives on hats include those like Young makes when he directs women tennis players to choose a hat with "a broad brim, so as to shield the face from the sun" since she will not be able to carry her parasol during the game.

²⁷Charles S. Peirce was a colleague of William James's, and his ideas about meaning-making seem to have greatly influenced Henry James. For a discussion of the James-Peirce connection, see Dana J. Ringuette's "The Self-Forming Subject: Henry James's Pragmatistic Revision." For a discussion of the interpretant, see *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)*, especially "Letters to Lady Welby" (413).

²⁸I introduce with the term "low-Other" a concept developed throughout *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, by Peter Stalleybrass and Allon White. Stalleybrass and White demonstrate that cultures "think themselves" through the use of hierarchies, and that the most powerful socio-economic groups generally "gain the authority to designate what is to be taken as high and low in the society" (4). They show that low-Others are "defined as such by the high precisely to confirm itself as 'high'(4). Such self-confirmation describes exactly what Gilbert Osmond does in his exclusion and "contempt for every one but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied" (353).

²⁹Emily Thornwell advises ladies how to walk in her *The Ladies Guide to Perfect Gentility*.

³⁰Richard Chase suggests that Isabel possesses a "deeply repressed sexuality" (23), and Tony Tanner suggests that Isabel finds Caspar Goodwood's kiss near the end of the novel "a shattering experience" (80).

³¹Pierce Egan's *Life in London*, published in 1821, set the conventions for nineteenth-century journalistic sketches of urban lowlife. His work motivated myriad investigative reports that gave "gaslight tours" of urban poverty, vice, and crime. Kasson discusses the American versions

of the genre, including books like *New York by Gas-Light* (1850), by George G. Foster (72-80).

Chapter Three

Fabricating the Solitary Self:

Dress in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

In 1898, at the time when Kate Chopin was writing *The Awakening*, the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall was completing one of the first studies to examine the motives behind choices in clothing.³² Style of dress, he determined, provides the wearer with a way to conform to the expectations of society at large. Hall's study acknowledges the social content of dress, suggesting that dress is relentlessly linked with one's social identity--those aspects of self that can be symbolically communicated to others.³³ This symbolic communication of self forms the implicit assumption for Kate Chopin's use of clothing in *The Awakening*. From Chopin's first description of her protagonist Edna Pontellier "drawing up her lawn sleeves" (21) to Edna's final acts of changing into her "old bathing suit" and then casting even these "unpleasant, pricking garments from her" (136), clothing etches the boundaries of Edna's life. Clothing sketches, too, alternate social identities that Edna refuses to "assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (77).

Because social class and gender underlie the choices wearers make, the garments that Edna rejects during the course of the novel as well as the nakedness she embraces in the end are powerfully inscribed with political meanings. Garments within Chopin's novel profess marital status, class affiliation, and economic role, and they articulate the complex system of appearance being worked out by nineteenth-century

America's "society at large"—the middle classes, who desired to distance themselves from workers precisely because they themselves sometimes emerged from the working classes. By placing Chopin's descriptions of dress within their historical contexts, a bold power of signification emerges in her images of muslin gowns and gauze veils, on the one hand, and images of prunella gaiters or bare feet on the other. Edna's rejection of her upper middle class social identity and her refusal to assume alternate available identities structures my reading of dress in *The Awakening*. Tracing the lines of the characters' dress, I draw out the alignment of nineteenth-century American power relations, suggesting ways in which class helped determine the sort of self women might fabricate.

The novel's first scene sets the framework for clothing as signifier for self and, in the case of Edna Pontellier, selfhood determined through marriage. In her drawing up of the sleeves made of lawn, a sheer linen or muslin, Edna sees her own hands only to realize the absence of her wedding rings. Edna experiences her own body from within the context of marriage, an implication made explicit in Mr. Pontellier's looking at her "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property."

Upset that she is "burnt beyond recognition" (21), Mr. Pontellier initiates Edna's inspection of her hands and arms, but Chopin makes no mention of the condition of her skin. Leaving Mr. Pontellier's hyperbolic accusation to stand as her state, she thus calls attention to Edna's lack of subjectivity, showing her character as one whose very selfhood depends upon identity grounded in her marriage, an identity that makes her the property of her husband. Rings, the symbol of marriage, quickly become symbol of a woman's lack of self-ownership, and throughout *The Awakening*,

Chopin critiques women's status under Louisiana's Napoleonic Code, still in force in the 1890s and still making the wife and all her accoutrements the property of the husband (Culley 118). When later that evening Edna sits crying outside the resort cottage, she wears a peignoir too flimsy to absorb her tears or save her from mosquitoes. The peignoir, garment of the marriage chamber, is virtually nonfunctional, Chopin suggests, and as it marks the boundary of a husband's *sexual* property, Edna listens to the "voice of the sea" as her "loose sleeve slip[s] almost to the shoulder" (24), an image foreshadowing the novel's final scene.

I The Wife as Property

Thorstein Veblen forthrightly examined women's status as property in his classic *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Women's dress within the middle classes, he maintained, could serve as an emblem for the economic principles underlying marriage. Veblen convincingly argued that the institution of private property relates in a very direct way to a culture's propensity for war, to the development of a class system, and to men's and women's differing roles. Individual ownership becomes the basis of reputability and purpose, he wrote, and for both the leisure class and the middle classes, conspicuous consumption of time and goods becomes a "requisite of decency" (41). Such conspicuous consumption marks the Pontelliers' elegant home, which is perfectly appointed with the softest of rugs and most tasteful of draperies. "[T]he cut glass, the silver, the heavy damask," Chopin writes, are "the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier" (69). Edna,

however, maintains a clearly auxiliary link to these possessions so generously bestowed, for it is Mr. Pontellier, not Edna, who derives pleasure from "a painting, a statuette, a rare lace curtain," and it is Mr. Pontellier who places them among "*his* household gods" (69). In Mr. Pontellier's world, consumable goods become gods, invested with a spiritual quality that bespeak his generosity, reputability, and merit-- a process Veblen calls the "spiritualisation [sic] of the scheme of symbolism" (187).

In Veblen's approach the wife is listed among property acquired, and typically, within the middle classes the show of consumption and leisure fell to her. Her costly attire must pronounce her husband's position and wealth and separate her from those lower on the social and economic hierarchy. Material evidence of the period tends to support Veblen's rulings on women's clothes. The lady's gown, sewn from over twenty yards of fabric, when worn over multiple "skirts," hand-embroidered drawers, a corset, and undervests, weighed nearly twenty pounds. When the lady added wraps to step outdoors, she carried twenty-five to thirty pounds of fabric. Construction of women's clothing of the period suggests that the *appearance* of inactivity was no mere illusion. The heavily boned bodice and tightly fitted sleeves of a typical three-piece outfit of 1899 would keep the wearer from reaching the nineteen tiny hook-and-eye fasteners sewn less than an inch apart down the back. She would need a maid to assist her with the over fifty fasteners hooked just to keep the blouse and jacket secure.³⁴

This connection between women's dress and an implied lack of mobility and productivity did not go unnoticed by dress reformers of the

late nineteenth century. In a Symposium on Women's Dress published in 1892 by *The Arena*, supporters of a more "rational" dress for women bemoaned the fact that "an appearance of incapability has come to be looked upon as a mark of good breeding" ("Symposium" II, 621). Linking the appearance of incapacity with "good breeding," these reformers acknowledged middle-class preoccupations with good taste, good manners, and distinction, taking as a given the desire of those within their middle-class audience to establish identities that would align them with the upper classes, whose "good blood" supposedly distinguished them from the "inferior" races. Questioning the validity of women's immobility as a mark of good breeding, these writers did not question the elaborate ideological system underlying women's choices in clothing. Rather, the symposium's nearly forty pages, prepared under the auspices of the National Council of Women of the United States, chronicle opinions of artists, physicians, and women "crippled" by fashion as arguments for seeing "improved" dress as the *preferred* sign of good breeding. Displaying the nineteenth-century middle-class mania for good hygiene, one writer conveyed the foul side of tasteful attire when he included an inventory of debris collected by one woman's "long train now in vogue"; in the rubbish, fraught with invisible "germs and microbes," lay these items: two cigar ends, nine "cigarette do," a portion of a pork pie, four toothpicks, two hairpins, one stem of a clay pipe, three fragments of orange peel, one slice of cat's meat, the half sole of a boot, and one plug of chewed tobacco ("Symposium" II 622). Also writing on health issues related to dress, Grace Greenwood in her autobiographical sketch traced a personal history of deteriorating vitality. Once "a well-grown,

healthy girl," the writer told of "enter[ing] on the second stage of ... thralldom, the [making] and wearing of corsets" (630-31):

I finished the pretty barbarous thing, and I wore it. It hurt me, but I gave no sign. I continued to grow, but unequally. I had, finally, sideaches and palpitations of the heart. I went to sleep exhausted and woke up tired; but I had lost my country color and shape, and was pale and poetic, and "so willowy." ...[M]y slenderness was admired. No girl in the physiology class had so small a waist. The "chunky" corsetless girls measured it with envy. (632)

Greenwood's fainting, "which rendered [her] interesting," was treated by bleeding, but only after she came under the care of a woman doctor who attributed women's maladies to dress that discouraged activity and forced internal organs into unnatural positions, did the writer take up reformed dress and recover her health. Health, divine providence, Darwin, art, and motherhood were all recruited to carry forth the symposium's call for a more rational dress, and in most of the commentary, the plea for women's rights surfaces. Accurately observing the link between dress and middle class women's roles, E.M. King pessimistically predicted the defeat of dress reform:

Dress reformers may well despair, for I perceive that their hopes can never be fulfilled until they go, both in theory and practice, to the very root of the matter. Women must take their rightful place in the sphere of humanity. They must respect and reverence their own bodies and have their rightful sovereignty over them. ("Symposium" II 629)

King's recognition of women's lack of sovereignty over their bodies and his understanding that clothing reflects social realities indicate a strain of thought that had cultural weight in the 1890s when Kate Chopin was preparing to write *The Awakening*. Edna's awakening to her physical

self begins with the loosening of constraining garments. In an episode clearly modelled on the novel's first scene in which Edna's self-inspection reminded her only of her wedding rings, this second inspection ends in self-possession:

She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh. (84).

Edna's taking possession of her own body motivates a gradual relinquishing of her role as middle-class wife. First foregoing the duties of vicarious consumer, she refuses to meet Mr. Pontellier to help him shop for library fixtures. Then neglecting her social obligations and conventions of dress, she prepares her husband for her later abandonment of their bed. Their marital conflicts surface when Edna appears for dinner in a house dress on her reception day, and their ensuing argument shows how the middle class wife's duties circled around rules of propriety.

Propriety, the most important element of middle class constructions of identity, required that women accumulate expansive wardrobes since the different hours of the day required dress of a particular style and cut. Women like Edna Pontellier purchased myriad outfits appropriate for morning, afternoon, and evening wear, keeping in mind that country dress differed from city dress and that shopping required a simple jacketed gown that would be improper for making formal calls.³⁵ Like other middle-class women of the period, Edna performs these time-consuming rituals of dress, preparing her toilet several times a day. Wearing a "white morning gown" as she considers "speaking to the cook concerning her blunders" (73), Edna

begins her day in the typical laced and flounced dress worn by upper middle-class women as they directed their household staffs, made out menus, and saw to the maintenance of the house. Such dresses *must not* be worn in public, though, so on the morning when Edna neglects speaking to the cook, she dresses again, this time in a handsome "street gown" (73), which she wears to make *informal* morning calls on Madame Ratignolle, the Lebruns, and Mademoiselle Reisz. The tailor-made street gown of the period consisted of three pieces--skirt, waistcoat, and coat--and was typically lined with silk; it was long enough to touch the tops of the shoes but not drag on the pavement as women ventured "into the street ... shopping, going to matinees, church, travelling, [or] making informal calls" (*The Women's Book* 211). Chopin writes that Edna looks "handsome and distinguished" in the street gown, a description that underscores her tasteful choices, since women lacking in refinement were apt, according to etiquette manuals of the 1890s, to appear in costumes overly rich in fabric and too eye-catching in color or style. "Black is becoming to every woman, but as she does not dress to be seen when walking, it would be well to wear it, even if she thought it not becoming," one writer observed (qtd. in Kasson 121). The tasteful woman must be guided in her choice of street wear by "suitableness," "harmony," "simplicity," and "refinement" (*The Women's Book* 158). Upon returning home, if the lady were to make afternoon formal calls, she donned a formal day or visiting dress, elaborated with lace ruffles or insets of rich fabric, sashes and ribbons, but always high in the neck. Day décolletage was considered bad taste as was *too much* elaboration: "Day dress should distinguish itself by simplicity and restraint."³⁶ If, instead, she were to receive callers,

she must wear a reception gown, intricately constructed and perhaps more elaborate in style than her other afternoon dresses but still high in the neck. Layers of flouncing, scalloped frills, piping, tucks, and insets of brocade typically trimmed these confections, and it is Edna's failure to be thus attired that brings Mr. Pontellier's reprimand. Angered that she has not kept her formal reception day, he says, "[I]t's just such seeming trifles that we've got to take seriously; such things count" (71). Ostensibly, Edna's execution of what writers of etiquette manuals call "good form" protects Mr. Pontellier's position among men who could, according to him, "buy and sell us ten times over" (71).

The "trifles" of which Mr. Pontellier speaks, those rules of propriety guiding dress and conduct, gleaned their authority from America's upper class, the "blue blood" leisure class living on inherited wealth. Still possessing the right to determine "good taste," this class followed social forms borrowed from the aristocracy of Britain, or as in Louisiana, the French. American popular culture in the late nineteenth century no longer looked to those of the upper class for the energy and initiative demanded by "an American capitalist system founded upon aggressive maleness" (Banta 254); in fact, physiognomy texts picture the refined, aristocratic male as effeminate and describe him as "[s]ubject to neurasthenia and indigestion" (Rocine 39). Yet having been born to privilege, members of the upper class continued to hold the reins on matters of propriety, defining correctness in style, manners, elegance, and good taste. Mr. Pontellier's fear of snubbing those whose "business is worth a good, round sum," as well as his refusal to attend the Ratignolle's *soiree musicales*, which he finds "*bourgeois*" (89),

illustrates his need to align himself with just the right stratum of the class hierarchy. His conspicuous consumption, illustrated by his determination to buy new library fixtures even though Edna hardly thinks they need them (73), corroborates Veblen's observation that the conspicuous spending of business-class men conflated their deeds and the spoils of those deeds. Veblen insisted that the nineteenth century brought on a change in the value that society saw in individuals; what had once been a system whereby esteem was afforded great men had evolved toward esteem afforded on the *show* of greatness (36). When Mr. Pontellier tells Edna that the "way to become rich is to make money ... not to save it" (75), he exemplifies the change in American sensibility that accompanied America's move from scarcity to abundance, a change that made saving less a priority and made commodities increasingly a part of the middle-class cult of respectability. Because through law and tradition, Edna is her husband's property, he expects her to keep up appearances by following the rigid rules of propriety to which he himself subscribes. Veblen maintained that the wife's observance of good form and her display of opulent dress was intended to say much more about the husband than about her:

The women being not their own masters, obvious expenditure and leisure on their part would rebound to the credit of their master rather than *to their own credit*; and therefore the more expensive and the more obviously unproductive the women of the household are, the more creditable and more effective for the purpose of the reputability of the household or its head will their life be. (180-81)

Because dress and conspicuous consumption were so much a part of middle-class identity, which positioned wives as mere adjuncts of their

husbands', Edna's refusal to dress as expected or to buy "new fixtures for the library" (73), marks her rejection of the role of wife and vicarious consumer. Chopin underscores Edna's desire to assume a different identity when Edna stands at the window "seeking herself and finding herself" (72) upon her husband's angry departure. This act of self-recognition prompts her to fling her wedding ring to the floor and stomp on it, but her lady's boot proves as ineffectual at destroying it as was her marriage-chamber peignoir for drying her tears. She destroys, instead, one of her husband's household "gods," and when the maid appears to clean up the broken glass vase and return her wedding ring, Edna is quickly reinstated as Mrs. Pontellier. Veblen's linking of the roles of wife and servant lends significance to this scene and others in which a maid or nurse is juxtaposed with Edna as the two perform their respective service functions. While the positions mistress/servant are socially at opposite poles, the two are united through their service to the "master," and Edna's accepting the ring from the maid becomes a highly symbolic act asserting Edna's (and the maid's) lack of power.

II

Dress and Undress: The Move to Self-Ownership

Throughout *The Awakening* acts of putting on and taking off, dressing and undressing, consistently become symbolic acts. Because dress figures so prominently in Chopin's examination of middle-class propriety and middle-class consumption, *undress* and the bared body function to invert, contradict, or present an alternative to the cultural codes of the middle-class.³⁷ One such inversion occurs through Chopin's depiction of

Mariequita, a servant girl who appears only twice in the novel. Although her character is underdeveloped and glaringly stereotypical, Mariequita functions in the novel as a foil for Edna in her two appearances at structurally significant points in the narrative. She appears first in the Cheveire Camanada episode, most often identified as the scene of Edna's sexual awakening, and then again at the novel's end just before Edna's suicide. Chopin's incomplete portrayal of the servant girl focuses attention in these two episodes on those aspects of Mariequita that Chopin seems intent on drawing clearly: class and sexuality. In effect, Chopin uses Mariequita to invert the pivotal hierarchies of class and gender. When Mariequita appears with bare, dirty feet, she inverts through *undress* the middle-class toilet with its emphasis on decorum and insistence on cleanliness. Rejoinders to Edna's prim, stocking-protected and shoe-enclosed lower extremities (55), such feet, according to physiognomical treatises of the nineteenth century, mark the person as racially and intellectually inferior. With her use of physiognomical markers, Chopin draws on prevailing turn-of-the-century assumptions about race and class, offering a type that her audience would quickly link with female sexuality. Yet for Edna, these markers of supposed inferiority become symbols of the freedom she wants, and later at Madame Antoinette's cottage, the shoes and stockings are the only articles of clothing named as Edna divests herself in preparation for her much discussed "awakening" (55). Edna's fascination with Mariequita's feet shows not simply that "Edna's view of Mariequita is fragmented" (Elfenbein 309); additionally, it demonstrates how the socially peripheral becomes symbolically central within dominant groups' construction of self.

For those of a middle class obsessed with cleanliness, rules of dress, and taboos related to sex, the lower classes excited fear and loathing on the one hand and desire on the other. This combination of fear, loathing and desire, as Stallybrass and White so exactingly show, mark cultural rituals like the carnival, which with their privileging of the bottom parts of the body (feet, buttocks, genitals) allow the middle classes "voyeuristic glimpses" of all that they deny in defining themselves as "a distinct and 'proper' class" (183). Chopin purposefully shows Mariequita parading her lack of propriety with her physical body--the slimy feet she flaunts, the "eyes" she "makes" at Robert, the "mouths" she "makes" sassing old Beaufort. And like other of the novel's dark women--the "generous" Vera Cruz girl who gives Robert a fantastically embroidered silk tobacco pouch (122) or the "stunning girls" who kept Arabin occupied in Mexico so that he thought he "should never get away" (123)--Mariequita suggests a sexual freedom that prevailing turn-of-the-century stereotypes assigned to lower-class (and non-white) women. When Edna strips off her clothes and shoes, she acts symbolically, stripping off middle-class propriety and sexual taboos and a *putting on* of impropriety and sexual freedom.³⁸ The color red, signifier of female sexuality (Giorcelli 112), and by association, signifier of sexual self-ownership, punctuates the Cheniere Caminada episode of *The Awakening*. Mariequita's kerchief signals the scene's red-letter start and Tonie's boat with "red lateen sail" marks the endpoint as it steers the newly born Edna home. The kerchief, garb in the turn-of-the-century South of domestic servants, works like Mariequita's bare feet to locate sexual self-ownership *outside* the middle class.

The scene between Mariequita and Victor at the end of the novel likewise emphasizes only the sexual aspects of Mariequita's life. Devoting the exchange between the two to flirtation and sexual innuendo, Chopin constructs a dialogue in which Mariequita announces her sexual freedom, telling of "a dozen men" who might run away with her (134). Intent on spelling out quite clearly the sexual limitations placed on middle-class women, Chopin shows Victor, a middle-class *male* flaunting his ability to find sexual partners among the working class. Clearly, middle-class taboos against extramarital sex apply to the middle-class *woman* only, and men of Victor's class exercise the prerogatives of choosing sexual partners whom they would never marry and of dismissing male competition whom they judge to be of a lower class ("[A] pig," Victor says dismissively of one of Mariequita's dozen suitors.)³⁹ Chopin's use of the word *fashion* in Mariequita's insistence that "it [is] the fashion to be in love with married people" and to run away at any time (134) recalls an earlier use of the word when Edna's body is described as the opposite of those that appear in fashion plates (33). Linking the state of middle-class dress (as in the fashion plates) with the sexual freedom of undress (as in the fashionable extramarital affairs), Chopin uses this scene to prepare for Edna's final undressing.

Chopin's use of class markers, which play on her readers' assumptions about lower-class and non-white women, work to revise the concept of self-ownership as it was defined by nineteenth-century middle-class women reformers. Beginning with reformer Lucinda Chandler's plea in 1840 that each woman take "control over her own person, independent of the desires of her husband" (qtd. in Stange 203), groups of "domestic

feminists" used the terms *self-ownership* and *voluntary motherhood* to denote a woman's right to refuse marital sex and thus to limit family size.⁴⁰ When Edna turns Mr. Pontellier out of her bed, he complains to Doctor Mandelet of his "devilish" discomfort, explaining, "She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women" (85). Yet, while Edna mouths the discourse of domestic feminists, she profoundly alters their version of self-ownership, for they grounded their concept in assumptions that women's sexuality should *not* be separated from motherhood. Vehemently opposing birth control, these groups feared that contraception would create the sort of sexual freedom that would ultimately dissolve the family by separating sex from marriage and motherhood. Edna's version of self-ownership, because it culls from meanings associated with working class sexuality, introduces a self-ownership that simultaneously asserts sexual freedom. Edna reconfigures *self-ownership* by resisting middle-class reformers' insistence on female passionlessness as a warrant for limiting family size and by boldly incorporating the sexual and physical aspects of the female body. The "super-spiritual superior beings"--what Doctor Mandelet calls the domestic feminists--do *not*, according to Mr. Pontellier, influence Edna's choices. He is right. No middle-class ideologies assuming women's passionlessness, spiritual superiority, and moral gate-keeping undergird Edna's self-ownership. She may throw off ownership by another when she tosses off her role of wife, but she does not throw off sexuality. Her fabrication of a new sort of female self is underscored in the analogy Chopin uses as Mr. Pontellier muses over Edna's behavior:

It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier's mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself. *That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world.* (emphasis added 77)

The new female self, Chopin suggests, must cast aside the merely conventional and assume a truly "becoming outfit," one that affords the individual self a way to enter the social world without total conformity.

III

Outfitting the Hybrid: New Conceptions of Womanhood

Possibilities for a reassembled female self appear in the starkly different characters of Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. These characters have been read in various ways that work to show almost anything critics need to demonstrate regarding *The Awakening*. Few of these readings seem particularly off-target, but by the same token, none precisely hits the bull's-eye, for it is the quality itself *permitting* our multiple readings that most explains these characters' significance. Their capability for embodying contradictory meanings defines both their purpose within the novel and the self each has constructed. As hybrid constructions of womanhood, each pulls from a closet of possibilities the seemingly incompatible to assemble a costume that "becomes" her.

Most often read as the embodiment of traditional womanhood, Adele Ratignolle is the mother-woman bedecked in fluttering garments that suit "her rich, luxuriant beauty as a greater severity of line could not have done" (33). Appearing at the novel's onset in stark contrast to Edna, who wears the "clean and symmetrical" lines associated in the 1890s with the

New Woman, Adele dresses in "pure white, with a fluffiness of ruffles" and "draperies" (33). Fashion historian C. Willett Cunnington, writing in 1937, noted that 1897 marked a change in the style of women's clothing, with the "new conception [being] that the dress should be fluffy and frilly, undulating in movement with ripples of soft foam appearing at the feet" (402). Cunnington took his lead from fashion commentary of the 1890s, and in linking femininity and spirituality his words seem upon first glance somewhat applicable to Chopin's outfitting of Adele: "The new softened outlines, willowy and slender, created the illusion that these aery habitations must be occupied by beings composed of stuff less solid than flesh and blood. It was the old 'feminine mystery' but in a new setting" (Cunnington 402). Like late nineteenth-century writers of manuals on motherhood who imaged mothers as "guardian angels" and "ministering spirits," Cunnington weds womanhood, spirituality, and femininity, a discursive move that Chopin seems to make when she transforms the fluttering, hen-like mother-women at Grande Isle into "ministering angels" (Chopin 26). Yet Cunnington's "aery habitations" and advice writers' "ministering spirits" thoroughly ignore the physical and sensual aspects of womanhood that Chopin so thoroughly accentuates when she fittingly dresses Adele in white, filmy fabrics. Exuding sensuality, Adele seems more akin to the half-clad advertising poster girls posing as fairies or to Botticelli's Venus rising so voluptuously on the half shell than to images of motherhood as they appeared at mid-century. Both physical and spiritual, sensual and chaste, Adele puts on a style that pulls together binary opposites. Hybrid, this "sensual Madonna" (30) serves as a model for Edna's growing comfort with her own body.⁴¹

The complexity of Adele as a character demonstrates how competing discourses at the turn of the century contributed to women's senses of self. Although Adele is feminine, domestic, and maternal, she is not the biologically fragile, wasp-waisted child-woman of the 1850s, the years that marked the height of what Barbara Welter has called the cult of true womanhood. While to today's readers Adele seems quite traditional, her actions display a concern for "modern" scientific approaches to motherhood and domestic life that distinguish her from the type identified by Barbara Welter as the nineteenth century's "true woman,"⁴² a type still strongly influencing expectations of women at the turn of the century. When Adele sews an infant garment, for example, the "marvel of construction" that she shows Edna is an infant "reform costume" like the Gertrude or the Dorothy suits described in *The Woman's Book* of 1894. The manual's writers insist that a baby has "the right to be rationally dressed, and no baby is rationally dressed whose garments in any way impede the involuntary muscular activity" (206). The writer followed recommendations of rational dress reform to provide instructions for sewing a suit, which like the one Adele makes, encloses the baby's body completely. These tiny hooded union suits were intended to replace the typical nineteenth-century infant wardrobe consisting of flannel bands, linen shirts, and layers of skirts fastened with pins. Adele's constructing such a suit shows the influence of nineteenth-century reform movements on the lives of ordinary women, even those who embraced traditional roles. While dress reformers are sometimes characterized as fanatical fringe groups that exerted little influence on the direction of dress, Adele's sewing a Gertrude suit

suggests that reformers' ideas were actually changing the way women like Adele thought about their roles.

When Edna later visits Adele in the city and finds her sorting clothes just returned from the laundry, Adele uses a systematic approach to housekeeping complete with checklists. While efficient housewives always organized domestic work, by the last decade of the century, the language of science and the rationalization of labor permeated main-stream publications like *The Woman's Book*, which announces that a "systematic" housekeeper can manage time and tasks, applying "hygienic principles" and running the home so that the "machinery of daily life ... respond[s] to the slightest touch of the household engineer" (114). Adele's system is like the sorts of changes advocated on a community-wide scale by domestic reformers of the nineteenth century,⁴³ illustrating again the influence of reform, science, and labor management on daily life. Adele blends the mother-as-angel imagery with a very progressive approach to domestic life, an amalgam suggesting that turn-of-the-century women could indeed construct hybrid selves by taking pieces at will from seemingly opposed models of womanhood. While what she says--that the doctor has forbidden her to lift "so much as a pin!"--is in keeping with Welter's cult of true womanhood, what she *does* is quite another matter. The contrast between Adele's words and actions, her paradoxical sensualized spirituality, and her traditional role that she acts out in a very modern way all demonstrate the possibility of piecing together a female self from a variety of seemingly conflicting sources.

While Adele demonstrates this possibility of women's constructing hybrid selves, her choice to pursue motherhood as vocation limits her

capacity for thoroughly challenging prevailing social codes. A more fully alternative self emerges in Mademoiselle Reisz, the reclusive artist whose music evokes intense passions in Edna. Undoubtedly playing a significant role in Edna's decision to pursue her art and move out of her husband's house, Mademoiselle Reisz puts forth an appearance befitting her eccentric temperament. Summed up as "a disagreeable little woman.... with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed," who has "absolutely no taste in dress" (44), she wears one ornament, "a bunch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets," which sits to the side of her false hair. With these details of dress and adornment, Chopin creates a profoundly different "new woman"--the one who wears antifashion.⁴⁴ Because perceptions of dress and the human body are historically specific, those who deviate from the ideal during any given period are "less often noticed and less clearly seen by the collective eye" (Hollander 326). Chopin's neglect of specific details regarding Mademoiselle Reisz's attire suggests that the character resists fashionable dress. With accessories that date her fashion choices to the 1870s, she undeniably prefers outmoded styles, most likely the ones of her youth. Wearing false hair, clumps of curls with comb that declined in use by 1879, Mademoiselle chooses an adornment completely beyond the pale of turn-of-the-century fashion. And while millinery like Mademoiselle's violets and black lace embellished ladies' evening wear in stop-and-go cycles throughout the nineteenth century, only in the 1870s did such pieces enjoy general daytime use. Mademoiselle Reisz's clinging to these outmoded styles not only suggests an individualistic approach to dress but also makes a potentially political, *antifashion* statement. In America's burgeoning consumer society, a woman

like Mademoiselle Reisz who resists the sway of fashion fulfills a cultural role of negation, symbolically opposing consumerism and rejecting what Veblen observed to be women's primary function under capitalism--consumption.

Another snippet of description related to Mademoiselle's attire--the prunella gaiter she mends during one of Edna's visits (82)--underscores her role of negation. Gaiters, button shoes with a cloth upper section, were utilitarian and practical rather than ornamental. Pictured in the 1894 *The Woman's Book* as a part of a reform business ensemble, gaiters are described in detail by the manual writer dealing with dress "for those women whom necessity calls out of their home every day, in all weathers ... that large and constantly increasing class known as professional or business women" (213). Standing in clear opposition to the ruffled tea gowns and velvet-trimmed walking dresses shown elsewhere in *The Woman's Book*, the suit and gaiters adopt the idiom of men's dress, insistently expressing seriousness, activity, and purposeful work.⁴⁵ Mademoiselle's gaiter, like those that dress the professional woman, suggests in its very functionality Mademoiselle's mobility, her leaving her home to teach music and perform. Of course, Mademoiselle Reisz's "old prunella gaiter," shabby and in need of mending, is no careful addendum to a three-piece suit. Indeed, like the other of the material details of her life--the three-room apartment in a racially mixed neighborhood, the "dingy and battered" buffet, or the "little bumpy sofa" (81)--the gaiter implies not only women's changing status but also the economic hardship that often accompanied a choice to shun marriage in favor of independence. Suggesting an economy of scarcity rather than

abundance, Mademoiselle's gaiter shows that independent women were not participating in the consumption seen elsewhere in American culture. As "tasteless" as her other antifashion garb, the shabby gaiter opposes middle class rules of propriety and appearance, but it simultaneously underscores the economic limitations of women who chose to outfit different sorts of female selves.

Turn-of-the-century antifashion obviously stands at a point where various "domains of transgression" intersect (Stalleybrass and White 25). In its odd mix of past and present, Mademoiselle Reisz's antifashion allows flagrant consumerism to meet the remnants of thrift; similarly, it permits women's ornamental status to be upset by images of functionality and productivity. With Chopin's final snippet of description related to Mademoiselle's garb, the musician's antifashion statement punctuates another point of friction where body, gender identity, and subjectivity interconnect. When Mademoiselle appears sick, wearing a red flannel rag around her neck, Chopin signals more than just the presence of a stiff neck, for as critic Christina Giorcelli has shown, red unmistakably symbolizes sexuality within Chopin's careful coding through color imagery (112). While Giorcelli views Mademoiselle as basically asexual and thus "twisted," critic Kathryn Lee Seidel, in examining Mademoiselle Reisz within the context of late nineteenth-century representations of lesbians, shows that Chopin's character, like the lesbian characters in works of George Sand, Zola, de Maupassant, and O. Henry, displays physical deformity, flaunts her hostility of domestic occupation, and pursues art as a vocation. Seidel's argument is quite convincing, and the red flannel rag, when set alongside Chopin's other uses of red, lends support for

Seidel's reading, which shows how Chopin's treatment of an alternative female sexuality draws on nineteenth-century stereotypes of lesbians. The significance of Mademoiselle's sexuality lies, for my purposes, however, in its resistance to easy classification. The stereotypical grotesqueness of her body--her "contortion[s] of the face and all the muscles of the body" (82), her dwarfish stature (108) and twisted neck (99)--present the antithesis of conventional nineteenth-century representations of women. Creating the sort of inversion of the classical body that Bakhtin observes to be the function of the grotesque in carnival, Chopin uses Mademoiselle's sexual body in the same way she uses the musician's antifashion garb. In an odd mix that makes Mademoiselle the antithesis of ideal female beauty *and* the antithesis of ideal male beauty, Chopin blurs categories of male and female. Mademoiselle's body, which settles into "ungraceful curves and angles ... [giving] it an appearance of deformity" (84), symbolically opposes the statuesque beauty and grace of late nineteenth century America's most preferred feminine ideal, the Gibson Girl, but her diminutive stature likewise opposes the Gibson Man. Her grotesque body, too ungraceful to be typically feminine and too small to be typically masculine, symbolically unsettles gender boundaries in the same way her actions do. Dependent on men neither economically nor romantically, she nonetheless remains in the economic position of independent female (not independent male) and seems to romantically involve herself only vicariously. Her independent lesbianism opens up a powerfully transgressive space, for here female subjectivity defines itself not simply by opposing normative categories but by tossing the markers of these categories willy-nilly into a hybrid mix.

Escaping easy categorization, Mademoiselle Reisz forms a heterodox mix of masculine and feminine qualities, but she merges other binaryisms as well. Her art, accepted as the highest of culture and refinement by New Orleans society, supports her only meagerly, thus tossing "high" culture and low economic status together to make her social status ambiguous. And while her hands perform acts of genius that set spirits soaring, their wiry physicality and their proneness to take Edna's "glowing face between [them]" (102) or to touch Edna's "shoulder blades" as her arms enclose her (103) make them difficult to pigeonhole. The difficulty in categorizing Mademoiselle Reisz is revealed during Arobin's seduction of Edna when she interrupts his love-making with a question about the musician. When Arobin calls the musician "partially demented" (104), he seems to be assessing her with what Foucault would call regime-like tactics by confining her to outsider status because she simply *does not fit* into cultural categories. But Arobin's qualifying his judgment with the word *partially* leaves room for Edna to declare that Mademoiselle "seems ... wonderfully sane" (104). Supposedly "demented," but only "partially," Mademoiselle incites dialogue rather than monologue's last word. Dialogic qualities of Mademoiselle's own language are revealed in Edna's musings on Mademoiselle during this same scene. Because Mademoiselle says "queer things ... in a bantering way that *you don't notice at the time* and you find yourself thinking about *afterward*" (emphasis added 103), her discourse, like her gender, is difficult to pin down. Using words that signify simultaneously from within two different belief systems, she employs a double-voiced discourse that signifies differently upon second thought. Hybrid from the top of her head (where

ultra-feminine, evening millinery sits askew at all hours of the day) to the tips of her toes (where gaiters accented with the idiom of masculine dress leak), Mademoiselle Reisz lives out the artistic life amid the common and racially mixed. The artist who "dares and defies," Chopin suggests, chooses *anti-* as her mode of language, life, art, and dress, mixing categories at will as she plants hybrid seeds of change in the crossroads.

Hybrid anti-fashion marks Edna's dress at only one point in *The Awakening*. As she prepares to declare her economic independence and take up her life as an artist in her pigeon house, she works in company with the house maid to take from Mr. Pontellier's house only her own possessions. Chopin's description of Edna's becoming work clothes comes tagged with class coding: "[Edna] was splendid and robust, and had never appeared handsomer than in the old blue gown, with a red silk handkerchief knotted at random around her head to protect her hair from dust" (105). In wearing the "old blue gown" Edna puts on a dress discarded because it has gone out of fashion, thus foregoing any special work clothing, which according to Lee Hall's history of common dress, was itself "a luxury" (Hall 53). Notably, she does not choose either a morning gown or a fashionable wrapper, both of which were designed for middle-class women's light housework. Instead, she employs a mode of dress customary for members of the lower classes, who adapted their worn dress-up clothing to meet the daily needs of work (Hall 53). Edna's anti-fashion outfit fabricates an identity that borrows its inception from the working class, but it clearly alters the materials. Edna's gown, though old, was never working class dress-up wear. And her handkerchief, though knotted peasant

style, is--unlike Mariequita's servant's kerchief--made of silk. Chopin's added descriptor casts a texture of opulence onto this headgear of Southern domestic servants. Turning the peasant's rag into an odd mix that simultaneously signifies wealth *and* its lack, Edna dons for the first time a sort of hybrid antifashion. Preparing through style to take up the artistic life, Edna perhaps plays at transgressing class boundaries, but her attire nonetheless defies easy classification. Retaining her splendid flair but foregoing the economic status bought through marriage, she comes the closest here to finding a style that might ultimately suit her for venturing forth in the real world. Outfitted for work, she puts on her own version of Mademoiselle's outmoded, antifashion ensemble. Symbolically hybrid and sartorially unfixed, she plans to take up life on her own.

IV

Sartorial Statements and Utopian Undress

Edna's plans, of course, never materialize, and readers' questions upon reaching the novel's end consistently aim at searching out the cause of Edna's demise. Readers tend to find answers that fall into one of two categories--failure because of the cultural forces restricting Edna's choices or failure because of Edna's personal limitations that make change impossible. My own reading falls more in line with this latter group, for I see Edna as unsuccessfully struggling to shape into one unified self the desires pulling her in opposite directions. Sartorially speaking, she cannot make a habit of antifashion. Abandoning the pieced-together costume that most becomes her, Edna celebrates her exit as wife with a

gala birthday dinner wearing a gown suggesting royalty.

Chopin's use of regal imagery in *The Awakening* helps us identify how Edna arranges motherhood and autonomous, solitary self into categories that stand irreconcilably opposed. Describing Edna's "attitude" as she sits at the table wearing a shimmering, gold satin gown with a "soft fall" of flesh-colored laced encircling her shoulders, Chopin writes:

There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone. (109)

Such regal imagery appears in only one other scene of *The Awakening*--when Adele walks toward her children "with the grace and majesty which queens are sometimes supposed to possess" (31). Always meticulous with her use of images, Chopin suggests through this particular repetition that power for women possibly emanates from two positions: motherhood and solitude. For Edna, these positions stand at opposite poles, demanding an either/or choice.

Locating Chopin's position on the issue of power for women requires both attention to social realities and a teasing out of the writer's own aesthetic theory. Throughout American culture during the nineteenth century, motherhood formed the warrant for arguments as diverse as those made by proponents of dress reform, birth control, women's suffrage, and free love. With even the most opposed groups looking to motherhood as their common ground, motherhood possessed powerful cultural authority.⁴⁶ Adele's status as "mother-woman" actually enhances her power as a woman, a cultural actuality that Chopin recognizes through her allusions to

Adele's queenly grace and majesty. The implications of solitariness are much harder to sort through, but they are critically vital in discussing a novel originally entitled *A Solitary Soul*. Solitariness is complicated because it exists as both a category of Edna's thought and as a concept scrutinized by Chopin, and clarity emerges only when we separate the character zone from the authorial voice. A careful reading of Edna's regal gown and a subsequent look at Edna's aesthetic responses to music allows the distinction to surface.

A careful reading of Edna's regal gown must place the gold satin evening gown against the background created by Chopin's use of dress throughout *The Awakening*. On the surface the description of "the regal woman" who "rules" and "stands alone" (109) seems to carry connotations of power, but Chopin craftily undercuts the possibility of power by creating a context that elsewhere in the novel has signified "woman as property." Because the gala dinner is as conspicuously sumptuous as any spectacle Veblen might have imagined when he castigated the upper classes for waste and because ownership and consumerism have been so thoroughly brought into question elsewhere in the novel, the context makes troublesome the source of Edna's supposed power. Wearing the sort of opulent gown that Veblen links to a show of the *husband's* power--not the wife's, Edna fabricates the solitary woman with materials taken directly from the garb she aims to put aside. The queen is crowned with a diamond tiara, gift of the husband she desires to escape, as she assumes a conventionalized pose at the very moment she would celebrate freedom from convention. The "attitudes," a system of poses typically practiced by society women at the turn of the century, were thought to manifest bodily

and artful expression⁴⁷, but the context of that expression unquestionably influences its meaning. Ready to move into the house named for yet another domesticated bird, Edna assumes an "attitude" of power, putting on an air that when read against the background of consumerism and middle-class conventions seems pure posturing.⁴⁸

Chopin further separates her authorial voice from the character zone that surrounds Edna by encoding Edna's fantasies with meanings that undercut solitariness as a powerful and thus viable option. Within Edna's response first to the piano music played by Adele Ratignolle and then to that rendered by Mademoiselle Reisz, Chopin provides her own position concerning both solitariness and the role of art in society. As Adele plays a piece that Edna has named "Solitude," Edna imagines a scene that foreshadows the novel's ending; gender, however, oddly distinguishes the vision from the suicide swim at the end:

When [Edna] heard [the plaintive strain] there came before her imagination *the figure of a man* standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a *distant bird winging its flight away from him*. (44).

The image carries a web of interlocking meanings, for it suggests on the one hand that Edna imagines solitariness as a *male* prerogative. Similarly, her vision declares that only a male possesses the freedom to bare the body, stripping away social convention. On the other hand, the position of the bird and the demeanor of the solitary male suggest that solitariness *does not* make one an artist and does not make one powerful. The bird, embodiment of the artist who flies above the plain of tradition, wings its flight *away* from the solitary individual, who stands, not with

an attitude of regal power, but with an attitude of "hopeless resignation" (44). Notably, Edna's vision of the solitary man is evoked by Adele's music, which is performed as conventional adjunct to her role of mother-woman. Adele "isn't a musician," Edna tells her husband in the same breath that she announces, "and I'm not a painter" (77).

Those who dabble in art, Chopin suggests, repeat the forms they see around them in everyday life. Listening to Adele's pleasant, but conventional performance, Edna imagines only forms easily recognizable in life. In addition to the solitary man, she sees, too, other familiar scenes: "a dainty young woman clad in an Empire gown, ... children at play, and ... a demure lady stroking a cat" (44). Similarly, when she draws, she mimics the art of the Masters or paints still-life replicas of the commonplace: "Surely, this Bavarian peasant," Adele says of her sketch, "is worthy of framing; and this basket of apples! never have I seen anything more lifelike" (75). Of note is Edna's dissatisfaction with her drawing of Adele Ratignolle. Competent enough to sell realistic paintings, Edna can make her drawing of Adele bear "no resemblance" to the mother-woman; unable to represent motherhood as it appears tangibly in Adele, she defaces the drawing even though the narrative voice judges it "in many respects satisfying" (30). Not able to represent motherhood as she sees it portrayed by Adele, Edna will not represent it at all. Not able to unite what for her are opposing life choices--the roles of solitary artist and perfect mother, she will *be* neither.

While the dabbler in art mimics life, Chopin suggests, the artist pulls together known forms to forge hybrid compositions. The force of the hybrid, that cross-mix of the seemingly incompatible, is inscribed into

Mademoiselle Reisz's rendering of two compositions by Frederic Chopin. Through Kate Chopin's reference to the other Chopin, the writer does more than simply pen her own "literary punning signature" onto her novel's pages (Showalter 181). Additionally, and more importantly, she theorizes an aesthetics of social change. As Mademoiselle Reisz plays, Edna waits for visual images that never appear, a detail suggesting that true art does not merely mimic the known and the selfsame. Rather than simply restating known forms--be they artistic or social--true art offers a way of *combining* known forms. It offers agency for moving past gender formations wherein only the male possesses autonomy, past social conventions that deny sexual freedom and self-ownership to middle class women, past a motherhood that stands opposite all else that one might desire in life. In other words, art pulls from opposite poles components of identity to form a hybrid creation that partakes of both present realities *and* future innovations. Mademoiselle's first Chopin piece, a prelude, evokes no images of the selfsame; rather, it elicits an aesthetic response that echoes the arousal and lashing that are at once the rhythm of the womb-like sea and the pulsation of sexual union:

the very passions themselves were aroused within [Edna's] soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (45)

Mademoiselle's second rendering, an extemporaneous co-mingling of Chopin's "Impromptu" and Isolde's song, soars forth in the aftermath of her speech about the artist who "would soar above the level plain of tradition" (103). Mademoiselle's hybrid composition leaves Edna wondering "when the

Impromptu began or ended" (84). Performed at dusk amid images of boundary breaking, the music "fill[s] the room" and "float[s] out upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air" (84). Bridging opposites of inside/outside, day/night, earth/air, and land/water, the hybrid composition ventures forth, confronting both the roof-straight and river-crooked, the turbulent, rock-bottom low and the silence of the spiritually high. Aesthetic communication crosses barriers to pull simultaneously from the opposite.

Edna's inability to sustain the sort of boundary crossing needed to construct a new sort of female selfhood that can pull present roles into innovative ones surfaces in the character's visit to Iberville where her children are staying with their grandmother. Immediately following her move into the pigeon house, which has taken her steps closer to "relieving herself from obligations" and to assuming "her strength ... as an individual" (115), this visit in Iberville pulls her toward merger with her children: "She looked into their faces with hungry eyes that could not be satisfied with looking" (115). Arms "clasp" and cheeks "press" as Edna gives her children "all of herself." Undoing the opposition motherhood/solitariness, Chopin defines motherhood as a reciprocal relationship, for although Edna gives all of herself, she also "gather[s] and "fill[s] herself with [her children's] young existence" (115). Chopin's use of pastoral setting in this scene thick with pigs, cows, and mules both romanticizes and naturalizes motherhood, suggesting--as does Adele's blending of sensuality and spirituality in motherhood--that motherhood need not pigeonhole existence. Yet for Edna, motherhood does

pigeonhole; she is either an individual *or* a merger of mother/child. Edna can span the threshold between these two positions only when in transit between Iberville and New Orleans:

It was with a wrench and a pang that Edna left her children. She carried away with her the sound of their voices and the touch of their cheeks. All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul. She was again alone. (116)

Chopin clearly limits Edna's ability to remain on thresholds where autonomy meets love, where middle-class convention meets working-class social practice, where self-possession does not negate ties to others. Not able to metaphorically live on trains or understand that hybrid antifashion might clothe a new sort of woman, Chopin's protagonist is left to imagine a utopian world where ties to her former life magically disappear. Not surprisingly, the state of undress defines the utopian world.

With clothing throughout the novel providing characters with a means for mediating between self and society, Edna's bared body during the previously discussed island awakening scene and then in the final suicide scene underscores the rejection of the social world. On the island, when Edna divests herself of her constraining garments and shoes to nap in Madame Antoine's cottage, she wakes to pretend with Robert that she has slept "precisely one hundred years" (57). Conventions of nineteenth-century utopian fiction mark this episode; Edna perceives that the "whole island seems changed" and that a "new race of beings must have sprung up," leaving only herself and Robert as "past relics" (57).⁴⁹ With this

imaginary leap into an Edenic future rich with sensual pleasures and devoid of former social ties, Chopin suggests the sort of premature utopianism that Terry Eagleton attributes to many nineteenth-century Marxists. Such utopias then and now, he argues, simply risk "making us ill" with desire, for they suggest no starting point from which "a feasible future might germinate" (229-30). Edna's need to rupture all ties with the existing world in order to construct a new self surfaces in her quick question "and when did our people from Grand Isle disappear from the earth?" (57). With her own people disappeared, she might enter a utopian paradise where no demands from the past impinge. Edna's utopian vision ends abruptly and significantly with the word *really*: "But *really*, what has become of Monsieur Farival and the others?" (emphasis added 57). Really, Chopin suggests, a future severed from our present selves simply cannot be. The future must incorporate the present if it is to be feasible. Only a dialectical relationship between present and future can ultimately fuse into one hybrid self the oppositions that if kept isolated threaten destruction.

Not knowing how to incorporate motherhood into her construction of a new sort of female self, Edna fabricates through her death the solitary woman. Having told Adele, "I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself," she goes to Grande Isle at the novel's end to undress and stand "naked under the sky" (136). Utopian dress reform of the late nineteenth century provides a context for reading Edna's final divesting. While some reformers advocated wearing flesh-colored tights and Greek-style draperies, others simply advocated a free and conventionless nudity. These latter dress reformers, espousing an abrupt

shift from constricting corsets to liberating nudity, brandished a violent break between present and future. Edna Pontellier embodies with her death this same sort of break.

The Awakening strongly acknowledges the difficulty of solitariness in the real world. One way to fabricate a solitary self is to make an imaginary leap into a utopia thoroughly severed from present social codes. Edna Pontellier can only throw off the worn, pricking garments of the world, for she can find no vestments to clothe solitariness in a world indisputably social. Her new woman, clothed only in the undress of simple cultural negation gives up the struggle for liberation. No clothes become her.

V

Fashioning the Artist: Kate Chopin and the Art of Dress

Residents of the village of Cloutierville, Louisiana, remembered Kate Chopin years after she had lived there as a young married woman with small children. Most often they spoke of her clothing. One neighbor described her promenading every afternoon on horseback wearing "a fantastic affair--a close-fitting riding habit of blue cloth, the train fastened up at the side to disclose an embroidered skirt, and the little feet encased in pretty boots with high heels" (Rankin 193). Others described her out on walks, sometimes carrying a parasol, but always lifting her skirts of flamboyant "shades of orchid and purple" higher than was necessary when crossing the street (Toth 141). Kate Chopin was at the time precisely the age of her protagonist, Edna Pontellier, who would make her appearance twenty years later in *The Awakening*, but unlike Edna, who

ultimately rejects all "garments with which to appear before the world," her creator at twenty-nine was using dress in ways that challenged notions of propriety.

As a young married woman, Chopin was something of a rebel. She smoked Cuban cigarettes in public, took solitary walks, often rode a horse astride rather than side-saddle, and chose dress that displayed what etiquette advisers of the day staunchly abhorred: "glaring colors and 'loud' costumes" (Young 326-27). Chopin's first biographer, Daniel Rankin, reports that her husband's relatives "shook their heads in wonder or sternly advised him about his duty." Allowing Kate to "go on always in her own way" was "more than unusual, it was horrible" (Rankin 78-82). According to Rankin, both Oscar and Kate Chopin simply made merry with the advice; Kate mimicked the relatives in storytelling that Oscar found "hilarious" (Toth 125). Forging her own hybrid version of womanhood, Kate Chopin at twenty-nine was a married woman who behaved in ways that were not easily tolerated, behavior that her most recent biographer calls her "declaration of independence" (Toth 125).

Later in Chopin's life, after the death of her husband, when she had become a published writer giving public readings, her choice of clothing --at least the clothing she chose to show her public--changed. At a reading for the Wednesday Club of St. Louis in November of 1899, she wore "black satin with white lace trimmings, jetted front and blue velvet toque" (qtd. Toth 371). The reporter for the *Post-Dispatch* praised the costume, and the details of dress suggest that when in public Chopin now chose to wear fashionable, but distinctly tasteful and appropriate garb. In private, however, her taste in dress veered toward what Emily Toth

calls the "ethereal" (380). In watercolor pictures and drawings created by Chopin's son Oscar, she wears ruffled gowns, choosing to write in costumes that fashion commentators of the day called "aery habitations" (Cunnington 402), the sort of gowns that clothe *The Awakening's* Madame Ratignolle. Such French-inspired designs in women's clothing competed at the turn-of-the-century with the more tailored and conservative cut of the English "man-tailored suit." Only Oscar's sketch of his mother that appeared in print--in the *Republic* of December 8, 1900--pictures her in the more conservative dress. Drawing his mother with pen in hand as "a brisk business-woman in a business suit with notched lapels" and wearing spectacles, Oscar's depiction of his mother for public consumption makes the sort of tasteful and appropriate impression that she chose to make during her public readings (Toth 380).

Kate Chopin's reading for the Wednesday Club and the printing of Oscar's sketch in the *Republic* occurred within a year after the publication of *The Awakening*. While the novel had received praise, many--even those who applauded Chopin's style and the novel's strength--passed verdicts on her subject, judging it to be vulgar" (qtd. 348), "poison" (qtd 344), or the product of that "overworked field of sex fiction" (qtd. Toth 347). At twenty-nine Chopin had been a hybrid construction of young womanhood, challenging cultural boundaries with her behavior and dress that some found shocking but others accepted as "charming" or "lovely" (qtd. Toth 141). At fifty, Chopin was still hybrid. Dressing in ethereal gowns as she sat in the privacy of her home writing beneath her statue of a nude Venus, she chose to appear in public in dress that would cut a more conservative image. No solitary artist, Chopin was the mother of five

children, and she worked not in a room of her own but before the fire in the presence of others. It is through her children that Chopin's first biographer learned of her writing habits--details like the lapboard that she used as desk or the paper and ink from the corner grocery that served as her tools. Her children described, too, her quick spurts of writing and the revision process that she completed just as swiftly (Toth 243, 245, 365). While the picture that emerges in her biography is that of a mother enjoying the company and friendship of her children, Chopin also seems resentful of interviewers' inquiries about her family life or about her children's reactions to the controversy over *The Awakening*. Telling one interviewer who asked the number of children she had had that a "woman's reluctance to speak of her children has not yet been chronicled," she went on to answer,

I have a good many, but they'd be simply wild if I dragged them into this [controversy]. I might say something of those who are at a safe distance--the idol of my soul in Kentucky; the light of my eye off in Colorado; the treasure of his mother's heart in Louisiana." (qtd. Toth 365)

Her curt refusal to answer directly the question asked suggests that for Kate Chopin motherhood could exist side-by-side with the artistic life, but that the two were somehow distinctly separate. Perhaps this separation explains in part her ability to write in the presence of her family. Perhaps she could shut them out mentally without appearing to shut them out at all. Chopin's daughter Lelia Chopin Hattersley wrote a letter in 1907 that reveals the daughter's perception of the mother-artist at work:

[My mother] did not have a study or any place where she ever really shut herself off from the household. I know now that she often desired to do this [sort of shutting off] when writing, but on the other hand, she never wished to shut us children out of her presence, and with the natural selfishness of children, we never tried to keep her undisturbed as she should have been.⁵⁰

Lelia's letter suggests that Kate Chopin was able to do what her character could not. She was able to pull from seemingly opposite poles--motherhood and solitude--to create a truly hybrid construction, the mother-artist who might be in a room of her own even when others are present.

If we map ways in which space, body, and internal landscape, and social formations are transcoded across domains, we can perhaps see that Kate Chopin's clothing existed as that room of her own. Enclosed in the ethereal, French-inspired ruffled gowns, the writer at work entered a space apart from the day-to-day distractions of home and family. Perhaps those gowns, fashioned from fabrics as buoyantly foamy as the sea that swallows Edna Pontellier, provided a space apart, an internal, psychic solitariness needed for work. Yet Chopin's isolation never created an irreversible rupture with the social world; she could change clothes, both literally and metaphorically. I am struck by the contrasting styles of Chopin's dress. Her French-inspired gowns become this writer who listed Guy de Maupassant as her inspiration. Yet, at the turn of the century when French-inspired anything spelled decadence, the writer of an "immoral" novel chose to emphasize her social identity as a writer of "serious" fiction; she wore appropriately serious apparel. Both costumes become her.

VI
The Portrait, The Awakening, The House of Mirth:
Studies in Rejecting the Hybrid

Both Chopin's *The Awakening* and Wharton's *The House of Mirth* tell the story of a woman's migration toward identity and self that becomes thwarted by renunciation, isolation, and finally death.⁵¹ Because Edna Pontellier chooses renunciation, rejecting the social world and its garments, she finds no-where as a place of habitation for her newly awakened self. She embraces, thus, a utopian death as the supposed resolution to the troubling polarities of her life. Wharton's Lily Bart seems a very different sort of character. Decidedly social, quick to adapt to the conventional life as society's ornament, and eager to find a man for whom she will gladly function as "vicarious consumer," Lily seems far more primed for success than the dreamy and passionate Edna. Seemingly well-suited to rise in New York's gilded society, she nonetheless ends her life in desperation.

In this discussion of women's searches for meaningful selfhood, I have examined Isabel Archer's accepting a static death-in-life in Gilbert Osmond's house of suffocation. I have discussed, too, Edna Pontellier's rejecting such suffocation, only to accept a suffocating death as she pushes the airless garments of conventionality from her. In Isabel's devotion to duty and Edna's inability to resolve motherly duty with a desire for solitude, both characters have rejected hybrid constructions of womanhood. With Lily Bart, hybridization enters to complicate choices. While hybridization makes possible social change through its combining of seemingly incompatible qualities, hybrids--as Henrietta Stackpole so

telling points out--are not easy to understand. In Chapter Four, I examine hybridization as a quality of the *word*. Using Lily Bart's continual struggle to untangle the threads of meaning encoded in the word *dingy*, I show how hybrid words (and hybrid referents) create problems in reading. Like Isabel Archer and Edna Pontellier, Lily Bart meets a suffocating end, but her path is marked by far more confusing signs than those that Isabel and Edna read. With *The House of Mirth* Wharton expands the problems of reading that her friend Henry James presented when Isabel Archer misreads Gilbert Osmond, and in Lily's treks up and down the social ladder, female selfhood appears in conflict.

Lily's descent and demise frustrated turn-of-the-century readers in a way that Edna Pontellier's death did not. Reviewers of *The Awakening* judged Edna's death as fitting: "her sins and weaknesses bring her no happiness," a sympathetic reviewer noted; another--less sympathetic--intoned, "So the woman who did not want anything but her own way drowned herself" (Toth 340, 337). Readers of Wharton's novel, on the other hand, wanted a happy ending. On an afternoon in 1905, just after the appearance in book-form of *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton met a friend out walking in Lenox, Massachusetts. "I have just finished *The House of Mirth*," the woman said. "It was bad enough that you had the heart to kill Lily. But here you are, shamelessly parading the streets in a red hat!" (Benstock 155).

Edith Wharton's choice of a red hat communicated shamelessness to her enraged reader, showing, I believe, how meaning resides in the one who interprets as well as in the sign. Edith Wharton, who communicated meanings with dress throughout her life, well understood the role of

interpretants in arriving at meaning. As a thirteen-year-old, she sent a handsome handmade outfit to Dr. Washburn, a rector and the father of her tutor, requesting that he give the outfit to the young daughter of an Episcopal missionary (Benstock 33). Wharton's biographer reports that the "workmanship of the clothing was so remarkable that Mrs. Washburn sent a note to thank her, not realizing that 'Miss E. N. Jones' was a girl of thirteen" (33). Very fond of her tutor, who later described her student as "starving for mental nourishment," Edith chose to communicate her appreciation with an exquisite suit of clothes. Greatly attuned to manners, even as an adolescent, and aware that a lavish gift of appreciation could be read by the Washburns as too personal and thus inappropriate, she chose instead to send a charitable gift, a sartorial statement in the best of taste.

At the time that Wharton was writing *The House of Mirth* she wore gowns from the House of Doucet and the House of Worth, high-fashion Parisian couturiers whose dresses make appearances on the pages of the novel. Benstock's description of Wharton during this period reveals Wharton's attentiveness to matters of dress:

Edith wore textured silks and satins in muted browns that enhanced her dusky coloring and layered bodices with eighteenth-century Venetian lace from her mother's collection. She liked hats and feathers and veils, tucked her gloved hands into a mink muff, and carried an umbrella with a carved handle. (123)

The publicity photograph for *The House of Mirth* pictures Edith Wharton at her desk, wearing a lacey, embroidered gown with the sort of serpentine lines that clothe Lily Bart. The lines betray her s-curve corset beneath.

Notes

³²Stuart Ewen's *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* discusses G. Stanley Hall's study.

³³Fred Davis's 1992 study of dress argues that social identity as reflected in dress creates the direction for fashion by eliciting, channeling, and assimilating changes in style. Other studies similarly acknowledge the social content of forms of dress. Elizabeth Hurlock, for example, writing in 1929, determined fashion to be motivated by desires related to social interactions--desire for approval, for social distinction, for sexual display (40-44). More recently, Marybelle Bigelow's 1970 history of fashion specifies that garment designs meet the needs of a culture's established social order (3), and Francois Boucher's 1984 history of costume notes that the choice of a particular form of costume "reflects social factors such as religious beliefs, magic, aesthetics, personal status, the wish to be distinguished from or to emulate one's fellows" (9).

³⁴Details of construction appear in Bradfield's *Costume in Detail, 1730-1930*. Bradfield's drawings of the *inside* view of dresses make possible my inferences about the incapacitating quality of women's dress during the late nineteenth century.

³⁵For information on nineteenth-century rules of dress, see Perrot (87-123) and Byrde (110-129). *The Woman's Book*, published in 1894, gives the 1890s version of rules of propriety and helps me draw conclusions about American middle class women.

³⁶This quotation from an etiquette manual of the period is used by

Perrot in *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie* (93). Cunnington provides fashion magazine quotations that show the differences in types of dress.

³⁷Barbara Babcock defines symbolic inversion as "any act of expressive behavior with inverts, contradicts abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political" (14).

³⁸Lois Banner, in *American Beauty*, discusses the "freer standards of sensuality" among unmarried working-class men and women during the 1890s (175), arguing that the freer behavior of the working class during this period "more than the 1920s middle-class youths" were responsible "for changes in the sensual behavior of Americans in the early twentieth century" (176). Also pertinent is Banner's discussion of sexual mores among working class women during the first decade of the twentieth century (72-73, 81-83). See also Linda Gordon's *Women's Body, Women's Right* (186-201).

These studies seem to suggest that working class men and women exercised a sexual freedom not tolerated in the middle-classes, but because much of historians' work to date on social class in America has focused on the working class, such an assumption is in all likelihood erroneous. Extra-marital sex among the middle classes appears frequently in the fiction of the period. In Wharton's *Age of Innocence*, set in the 1870s, Newland Archer's first love affair is with a married woman, and in *The House of Mirth*, set in the first decade of the twentieth century, sexual restrictions on unmarried women of the middle class persist, but with characters like Bertha Dorset, extramarital sex seems a given.

³⁹Pigs, Stalleybrass and White show, are culturally powerful symbols, carrying a host of interlocking meanings related to class and sexuality. Pigs will figure prominently in my next chapter on Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

⁴⁰Margit Stange's excellent article "Personal Property: Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*" provides an in-depth discussion of feminist reformers who used "self-ownership" as the by-word of voluntary motherhood movements. See also Linda Gordon's *Women's Body, Women's Right*.

⁴¹See, for example, Pat Shaw, who argues that Edna is "aesthetically and perhaps homoerotically attracted to Adele" (66); C.J. Wershoven, who says the scene with Adele foreshadows Edna's "growing discount" (29); and Carole Stone, who writes that Adele "awakens Edna to the sensuality of her own body" (25).

⁴²Barbara Welter's *Dimitry Convictions* has provided the definitive framework for subsequent studies on nineteenth-century womanhood. Describing the Cult of True Womanhood as pious, pure, submissive, and domestic, Welter's work has been recently challenged by Frances Cogan, whose *All American Girl: Real Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century*, argues that a competing nineteenth-century ideal "advocated intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage" (4).

⁴³Domestic reformers were suggesting that "scientific" principles of organization could systemize housework. While proposals included reorganization of space such as the introduction of housing complexes where occupants would no longer have private kitchens but would employ a

staff to work in a common kitchen, the writers of such manuals as *The Women's Book* simply advocated the rationalization of housework. For information on domestic reforms of the nineteenth century, see Dolores Hayden's *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*.

⁴⁴*Antifashion*, the term fashion theorists apply to modes of dress that function as outward signs of protest, included during the nineteenth century the bohemian garb worn by French artists, the "aesthetic" dress favored by the English aesthetes, the bloomer costumes propounded by dress reformers, and the outmoded styles worn by eccentric individualists like Mademoiselle Reisz.

⁴⁵Nineteenth-century unmarried women, forging identities based in their own meaningful work and foregoing the role of economically dependent wives, typically chose more "masculine" dress that would denote function and mobility. More and more women were opting for economic independence and were making inroads in the fields of law, medicine, and the ministry as well as the more traditionally female professions of teaching, nursing, and social work. Only 51% of the first generation of college women ever married, and the percentage of never-married American women reached its all-time high between 1880 and 1900, when it fluctuated around 10% (Shade 16). Clearly, a social identity that offered an alternative to woman as chattel or woman as mother was wielding influence at the time of Chopin's writing of *The Awakening*.

For discussions that compare male and female dress, see Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen's *Channels of Desire* (88-97); Joanne Finkelstein's *The*

Fashioned Self (107–129); Fred Davis's *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (33–54); and Anne Hollander's *Sex and Suits* (116–173).

⁴⁶While advice writers' linking of femininity, womanhood, spirituality, and maternity is certainly to be expected, the writings of social reformers illustrate the pervasiveness of a discourse of motherhood. Dress reformers, for example, called rational dress the "salvation of the race" since it promoted healthier bodies for healthier babies ("Symposium" II 634). Another case in point is turn-of-the-century feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who believed that motherhood, women's "sex-functions," had held back the strength and intelligence of the human race. Yet even Gilman saw motherhood as "the common duty and common glory of womanhood" (246). Domestic feminists, commonly referring to birth control as "voluntary motherhood," argued that women had a right to withhold themselves sexually from their husbands so that "children may be born under better conditions and educated to understand their physical natures and know how to control them" (qtd. in Leach 87). Even so radical a reform group as the free lovers, who throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries opposed marriage as a legal institution, still looked to motherhood as women's most important function. In 1905 free lover Dora Forster wrote of the declining birth rate and the resulting backlash that played on fears of race suicide:

I hope the scarcity of children will go on until maternity is honored at least as much as the trials and hardships of soldiers campaigning in wartime. It will then be worth while to supply the nation with a sufficiency of children.... [E]very civilized nation, having lost the power to enslave woman as mother, will be compelled to recognize her voluntary exercise of *that function as by far the most important service of any class of citizens*. (emphasis added, qtd. Gordon 113).

Suffragists, too, made motherhood a staple of their arguments. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's speech for the International Council of Women argued that the "mothers who rocked the cradle" ought not be denied the vote and that motherhood equipped women to vote. Similarly, proponents of women's education argued that "[s]tupid mothers never did and stupid mothers never will furnish this world with brilliant sons" (qtd. in Gordon 113).

⁴⁷Martha Banta, in *Imaging American Women*, discusses the Delsartean --"the school which inspired the American 'science' of attitude and gesture throughout the 1880s and 1890s" (638). While the arts of posing and gesticulation penetrated all levels of American culture, extant photographs of society women assuming the "attitudes" suggests that "society women spent a good deal of time 'doing Delsarte'" (Banner 141).

For discussions of the Delsarte system, see Banta (638-71) and Banner (140-41). Primary sources include *The Essential Delsarte* edited by John W. Zorn and *Delsarte System of Expression* by Genevieve Stebbins.

⁴⁸Henrietta Dumont's *The Language of Flowers. The Floral Offering: A Token of Affection and Esteem* from 1858 notes that the violet's "love of retired spots have ever made it the emblem of true worth that shrinks from parade." Such meanings are in keeping with the details of Mademoiselle's life--her apartment chosen to "discourage ... callers" (81) or her avoidance of the enthusiastic Grande Isle audience who applaud her music (45). Robert Tyas's 1869 *The Language of Flowers* reiterates that violets signify modesty and worthiness.

My argument that Edna sees Mademoiselle's true worth casts Mademoiselle in a far more affirmative light than do readings like Robert

Collins's "The Dismantling of Edna Pontellier: Garment Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*", which argues that Mademoiselle can be read as a sign of artifice, or Christina Giorcelli's "Edna's Wisdom," which argues that Mademoiselle Reisz is a mythic witch figure. Linda Boren's "Taming the Sirens" argues that Mademoiselle Reisz "has never been touched by passion, and she feels no remorse in evoking the passions of others, in binding Edna to her, enslaving her, we might almost say, through her music" (191). Mary E. Papke's *Verging on the Abyss* argues that Reisz gives up "body and soul in the pursuit of art and that she forces Edna "to contemplate anew a life of solitude" (84).

Readings that have assisted me in thinking about Mademoiselle Reisz's function in the novel include Martha Fodaski Black's "The Quintessence of Chopinism," which argues that Reisz is representative of a third sex, Elaine Showalter's "Tradition and the Female Talent," which argues that the musician can be identified with the masculine romantic ideal of the creative person who finds no home in the conventional world. Showalter comes close to linking Mademoiselle with lesbianism when she writes that the character seems to be a "surrogate lover" (46).

⁴⁹I am indebted to my colleague Anita Rose, whose work on nineteenth-century British utopian fiction has influenced my reading of the Cheniere Caminada episode. Rose shows the persistence with which utopian fiction of this era is set in a space separated spatially and temporally from the dominant culture. Typically, in such utopian fiction a transplanted Victorian experiences a visionary society that inverts the values and beliefs of the culture left behind.

⁵⁰Toth includes this quotation from Lelia's letter in an endnote pertaining to the question of whether or not Chopin had a study (n363, 496). Oscar's drawing shows a study; a newspaper interview describes a "a unique little den" as her study. Toth suggests that Lelia's information about her mother's writing was not always accurate.

What emerges from this question of the study strengthens my impression of Chopin as a mother-artist. Perhaps she had a real study; perhaps she used the family parlor (Oscar's drawing of the "study" shows his mother working in a chair by the fireplace in a room with bookcases and parlor-like appointments.). Whatever the case regarding the study, her children perceived their mother as present and available to them. The hybrid mother-artist, with or without a room of her own, was somehow able to write without making her children feel alienated from her, an extraordinary achievement that strengthens my own resolve that Chopin in some ways faulted her character's inability to pull from opposite poles, motherhood and solitude, to create a hybrid construction that might at once be a mother and artist.

⁵¹C. J. Wershoven's article "*The Awakening and The House of Mirth: Studies of Arrested Development*" helped me the parallels between these two novels. Wershoven argues that both Edna and Lily "break the chain of human development before the final link: human connection of self to others" (27). Wershoven notes the "desperate and dangerous polarities" that drive both of these female characters.

Chapter Four

'Who wants a dingy woman?'

Pigs, Cloaks, and Class in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

"Your coat's a little shabby--but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop--and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership."

When Lily Bart, in an early scene of Wharton's 1904 novel *The House of Mirth*, baits Lawrence Selden with her dress-for-success philosophy, she articulates concerns central to plot and purpose. According to Lily, women exist as society's ornaments, their success derives in large part from their looks, and they marry so they might persist in improving their wardrobes. Unlike Chopin's Edna Pontellier, who ultimately rejects her clothing in renunciation of any of various social identities available to women at the end of the nineteenth century, Lily Bart appears to be almost *wholly* social identity, passionately collecting gowns more elegant than those Edna Pontellier flings aside. In *The House of Mirth* the clothed body clearly *signifies* rather than masks self, yet locating the self becomes if anything even more complex than in *The Awakening*. Lily's self, like her beauty, is never "fixed," and while at the beginning of the novel Lily clearly possesses distinctive facets of self, as the story unfolds she gains aspects that complicate her choices and her life. These

multiple selves cohabit uneasily beneath the perfect and splendidly clothed surface of her body.

William James, whose theory of self has been previously introduced in the introduction to my study, seems to have influenced Wharton's thinking quite profoundly. James's notion of a faceted, multiple self is embodied in the life and decisions of Wharton's Lily Bart, and whether or not Wharton *aimed* to echo James's key concepts about the self (or "selves"), she most certainly examines fictively many of the same questions that he addresses theoretically. Wharton, as a contemporary of James's and a friend of his brother Henry's, in all probability read and discussed *Principles of Psychology*; at any rate, of concern to the two Jameses and to Edith Wharton were questions of morality, which in an age of collapsing frameworks and traditions, called for new answers. ("We hear, in these days of scientific enlightenment," James wrote in *Principles of Psychology*, "a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given us why we should not pray" [301].) Lily Bart, worried over the out-of-date guidance she receives from her Aunt Peniston, tells Selden, "My aunt is full of copy-book axioms, but they were all meant to apply to conduct in the early fifties. I always feel that to live up to them would include wearing book-muslin and gigot sleeves" (11.) Why one behaves properly, how one comes to act morally and choose responsibly, and under what conditions one can sacrifice for "right"--these questions and others receive James's theoretical examination. They find expression, too, in Wharton's novel, wherein America's "crisis of moral authority" becomes Lily Bart's.

I
The Portrait of an Age: Lily Bart Poses

In many ways the smartly dressed Lily Bart, eager to strike conspicuous poses for spectators on the street or in the opera house, could stand as signifier for an American sensibility at the turn of the century. Having been raised by a "neutral-tinted father [who] filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks" (37) and a mother whose "faith" admonished that "whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be ... 'decently dressed,'" Lily suffers the lack of larger frameworks that historians say afflicted American middle-class culture at the turn of the century.⁵² For Lily, traditional beacons of authority like religion, patriarchal control, and stable institutions remain inconsequential, replaced instead by her mother's one guiding principle--above all else, avoid dinginess in life. At the opening of *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart at twenty-nine is looking for direction *and* for a husband to grandly clothe her as she goes on her way, but her only guidance glows from the dim light of her deceased mother's words--"What [is] the use of living if one [has] to live like a pig" (43)?

Consumerism, of course, lays out the course for avoiding pig paths, and Lily, like her mother (and like Americans in general at the turn of the century) yearns for things--fresh flowers for the table even when there are no guests in the house (41), "real lace on her petticoats" (101), "a dressing-case of the most complicated elegance" (147). Things stave off dinginess for Lily, and left with only a small inheritance after her father's financial ruin and then her parents' deaths, Lily must yearn most for a marriage that will allow her to exercise her "naturally lively

taste for splendour" (39). Her story of social descent, which begins with Lily within a hair's breadth of marriage to Percy Gryce and his massive estate, ends in a space more dingy than she could have ever conceived, and in some ways American consumerism has defeated Lily. Through its imaging forth of the promise that "decent clothes" and tasteful interiors can ward off "living like a pig," consumerism has cloaked pigs in opulence, and dinginess has become a quality often disguised to its beholder. Lily's choices, which ultimately create her path of social descent, frequently hinge upon her shifting definitions of *dinginess*, and by tracing the complex web of meanings encoded in this seemingly simple descriptor, I see that money, taste, class, gender, and morality are metaphorically assembled in the gowns and cloaks that so elegantly express Lily's self.

II

Cloaks and Pigs: Cultural Highs and Low

I begin with an opera cloak, one approximating Lily's choice when she purchases an evening toilette with money she receives from Gus Trenor. While Wharton provides no clear visual image of Lily's toilette, an opera cloak designed in 1899 suggests the sort of design Lily might choose. Identified elsewhere in *The House of Mirth* as Lily's *maison de couture* of choice, The House of Doucet at the turn of the century fashioned elaborate opera cloaks with Art Nouveau floral motifs hand-painted on silk taffeta and appliqued on rich velvet. One such cloak, cut and constructed in the shape of an inverted fan, combines green and purple silks, silver sequins, deep purple velvet, and black appliqued lace cutouts using a lily motif. A high-standing appliqued flaring collar, deep flounces of Chantilly lace,

and an outline of white ostrich feathers finish this cloak, which to a modern eye suggests the excesses of the turn of the century. Epitomizing extravagant expenditure and the ultimate in *fin de siècle* fine taste, this opera cloak seems a fitting piece for examining the ensemble of issues and assembly of selves that confront Lily in her quest for success. While this cloak seems the inverse of dinginess, by inspecting its construction, I turn it inside out and find frays that limit its function as a simple metaphor for wealth, brilliance, and all things 'high'. But looking for frays entails a short detour down pigpaths, for if the cloak seems an emblem for all things 'high,' the pig even more certainly seems to embody all things 'low.'

The cultural categories of high and low directs my analysis of *The House of Mirth*, for in mapping out the binary oppositions that appear metaphorically on the material body, across geographic space, and across social psychic formations, the conflicts over self, social class, and "taste"--central conflicts in *The House of Mirth*--take shape. Peter Stalleybrass and Allon White, in arguing that cultures "think themselves" by way of cultural categories of 'high' and 'low,' note that these categories construct not only a hierarchy of social class but of other domains as well. The human body, psychic forms, and geographic space, they show, are laid out through the high/low opposition, and divisions in one domain are continually "structured, legitimated and dissolved by reference to the vertical symbolic hierarchy which operate[s] in the other three domains" (3). Common metaphors that classify place in terms of the human body make clear the sort of transcoding that Stalleybrass and White elaborate. Few people would choose to move to "the arm-pit of the world,"

for example, but metaphors for geographic space can move even lower on the human body. During the nineteenth century, the slums were typically described in the journalistic sketches of American cities as the "lower depths" of the metropolis. Because a city's literal "lower depths" house the city sewer, writers who perhaps unconsciously chose this metaphor were making connections between the slums, the lower class who lived there, and the body's lower stratum. The slums, as the culture's symbolic low, became in the writings of reporters and social reformers an area thick with meanings related to the functions of the lower body—with excrement and low sexual passions. Because slum areas housed the poor, the meanings are thus transferred onto social class. George G. Foster's *New York by Gas-Light* presents just the sort of metaphoric thinking that Stalleybrass and White examine when he states the purpose of his sketch:

to penetrate beneath the thick veil of night and lay bare the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis--the festivities of prostitution, the orgies of pauperism, the haunts of theft and murder, the scenes of drunkenness and beastly debauch and all the sad realities that go to make up *the lower stratum*--the underground story--of life in New York. (emphasis added)⁵³

In *The House of Mirth* the lower stratum is summarized with Mrs. Bart's reference to the pig, the metaphor she uses for those of poor taste or of questionable social status. The pig, as Stalleybrass and White exactly show, has historically occupied an important symbolic place in European cultures, but the pig is slippery, resisting fixed positions. (Stalleybrass and White 49-51). Depending upon the discursive field, the pig might be either low, or it might occupy some intermediate position between low and high; the pig of *Charlotte's Web* is not the same as the

unclean pig of Christian discourse, which would assign to poor Charlotte the qualities of greed, drunkenness, and lechery. As Stalleybrass and White show, the pig inhabits a site "of competing, conflicting and contradictory definitions" (49), and as such, it is a particularly powerful tool to "think with." Because in different domains of discourse, pigs are constructed according to different "grids" (i.e., they line up differently in reference to the human body, geographic space, etc.), when we look at the social ensemble as a whole, such definitions often conflict markedly. This shifting of grid describes precisely the predicament of Lily Bart when she attempts to avoid living like a pig. Because the pig (and the dinginess he roots in) are too slippery to stay put and to mean always the same sort of low, Lily continually makes choices that push her closer and closer to "living like a pig" (43). Throughout the novel Wharton uses forms of the word *dingy* to trace Lily's attempts to avoid pigdom, and by tracing the meanings that emerge along different grids, readers more fully understand the source of Lily's demise.

III

Slippery, Pig-like *Dinginess*, and the Unsettling of Categories

Early in the novel the narrative voice presents through a summary of Lily's history an extensive reflection on dinginess. Recounting how Mrs. Bart reproached her husband, asking him if he "expected her to 'live like a pig,'" the narrative voice notes that "his replying in the negative" justified extravagant purchases like "an extra dress or two" from Paris (39). The pig functions in Mrs. Bart's discourse as a sort of symbolic focal point for all that she considers undesirable and 'low'.

Most specifically, the pig signifies poverty and thus any "grey interludes of economy" when Mr. Bart's income and her own perpetual over-spending have deterred "brilliant reactions of expense" (37). Her reproach clearly equates available money for consumption with the avoidance of pigdom, and for both Lily and her mother, pig-like dinginess stands at the threshold where brilliance can suddenly turn grey. Yet while money is a must for driving the pig from the door, money can sometimes fail. Lily's memories of cousins who "lived like pigs" focus not on these cousins' lack of money but upon their lack of taste. Inhabiting "dingy houses with engravings from Coles' *Voyage of Life* on the drawing-room walls," and employing "slatternly parlour-maids" unschooled in social custom, many of these cousins are rich (39). For Lily, pigdom implies poverty (as in the case of the "dingy woman" uninvited to dinner because of her shabbiness), but it also implies commonness, ugliness, bad manners, and poor taste. To keep the pig at bay, one must *first* have money, but one must also have the aesthetic sense and social decorum to spend it tastefully.

If dinginess (as well as its opposite, radiance) were an easily identifiable category for Lily, she perhaps could have without complication met the task of marrying rich and living tastefully. Had she taken her cues from turn-of-the-century dime novels that invariably end with the working girl marrying her gentleman and thus becoming a lady,⁵⁴ she might have married Percy Gryce or Lawrence Selden or Sim Rosedale, thus avoiding the sweatshop. But Wharton's novel turns the dime novel storyline on its head, *beginning*--with Lily's near-conquest of Percy Gryce--just short of where these formula fictions *end*. As Lily makes choices that lead her further and further from her stated goal, the

guiding principle learned under her mother's tutelage seems less and less a principle that she can successfully employ. While her mother clearly taught her to keep up appearances, Lily learns only after her mother's death that a radiant appearance does not necessarily signify a radiant reality, and Wharton even in the early reflection on dinginess complicates this concept central to Lily's decision-making process. Summarizing Lily's life with the relative who took her in upon the death of her parents, the narrative voice notes,

Mrs. Peniston's opulent interior was at least not externally dingy. *But dinginess is a quality which assumes all manner of disguises*; and Lily soon found that it was as latent in the expensive routine of her aunt's life as in the makeshift existence of a continental pension. (emphasis added 48)

Here, dinginess--disguising itself as opulence in Aunt Peniston's satin-curtained drawing-room--involves not simply money or its lack, not simply good or bad taste, but also the role in arriving at meaning of what Wharton's contemporary, Charles S. Peirce, called the interpretant.⁵⁵ For Peirce meaning occurs within the person who receives the impressions rather than in the word or sign itself, and his notion of the interpretant explains precisely the problem Lily has when trying to steer clear of dinginess. Dinginess does not exist as an intrinsic quality that Lily can use as a stable criteria for judging a 'low' situation, place, or person. Rather, she attaches the word to its object through what reception theory calls a transaction with that object. When she sees dinginess in Aunt Peniston's heavily curtained drawing-room, she has brought to the act of meaning-making far more than the room as artifact; rather, she has brought her own life experiences and a particular cultural context that speak

their own meanings. As she semantically and syntactically directs the word *dingy* toward its attachment to Aunt Peniston's drawing-room, it passes through--on its way toward this attachment--an environment thick with alien words, with images from contemporary cultural and judgments based on aesthetics and fashion. *Dingy* must pass Lily's repertoire of dull experiences in cheap pensions as well as those radiant, exciting, and engaging experiences at the homes of her elite friends where "light tints and luxurious appointments" present a rejoinder to the dreary drawing-room. It perhaps passes, too, images from popular culture like *The Ladies' Home Journal's* monthly installment "Good Taste/Bad Taste." (In 1907, furnishings like Aunt Peniston's ornate, black walnut pieces are invariably judged "cumbersome," "atrocious" and "extremely bad in design" ("Good" 43).) Clearly, Lily's "artistic sensibility" which makes her feel "superior" to those around her, responds to beauty, but for Lily beauty implies the fashionable and up-to-date. What was once considered the epitome of tasteful decor--heavy, dark drawing-room curtains or stately sideboards of black walnut--seems to Lily the epitome of "physical ugliness" (145). Aesthetics--seemingly pure precepts that guide Lily's appreciation of the beautiful--clearly depends upon information other than timeless ideals. Historical moment enters to unsettle standards, thus becoming a part of the atmosphere through which *dingy* must travel on its path toward bringing meaning to Aunt Peniston's drawing-room. In finally attaching itself to its object, *dinginess* has taken on a dialogic quality, and Lily as interpretant has commanded the process of meaning making. But Lily Bart's repertoire of images and experiences often hinders, rather than aiding in her larger attempt to avoid dinginess.

IV
 "A Grey Gown of Devotional Cut"

At three significant junctures in *The House of Mirth*, Lily 'reads' her clothing, actively creating 'texts' that act as *pretexts* for significant life choices. The first of these--her reading of "a grey gown of devotional cut" (69)--comes early in the novel during her visit to Bellomont as she is laying groundwork for her conquest of Percy Gryce and his fortune. Having rung her maid "to have her grey gown laid out" and have a prayer-book borrowed from Mrs. Trenor, Lily intends to represent herself in a way that will "put the finishing touch to Mr. Gryce's subjugation" (69). Instead, she reads her gown's somber lines, creating a plotless text about a boring life with Percy:

She would have to go to church with Percy Gryce every Sunday. They would have a front pew in the most expensive church in New York, and his name would figure handsomely in the list of parish charities. In a few years, when he grew stouter, he would be made a warden. Once in the winter the rector would come to dine, and her husband would beg her to go over the list and see that no *divorcees* were included, except those who had showed signs of penitence by being re-married to the very wealthy. There was nothing especially arduous in this round of religious obligations; but it stood for a fraction of that great bulk of boredom which loomed across her path. (emphasis Wharton's 75).

Routinized weeks building toward routinized yearly patterns sets out the same sort of "expensive routine" that lies latent in the dinginess of Mrs. Peniston's drawing-room. Life with Percy Gryce, though opulently marked by "the art of accumulation" (29), would entail dull routine and Lily's inhabiting his "appalling house, all brown stone without and black walnut within" (28): Life would be dingy, and she *must* avoid dinginess.

While Lily brings to her reading of the grey gown her past of dingy pensions and her aunt's dingier drawing-room, she also brings a recent past wherein Lawrence Selden has created in Lily's mind a rebuttal to Percy Gryce's dullness. Wharton destroys the linearity of the storyline between Lily's *thought* of wearing the gown and the resulting consequence (missing the omnibus to church) with several pages of narrative devoted to Lily's observing the "spectacle" of "mirth" at Bellomont. Part of her observation entails making "a rapid comparison between Lawrence Selden and Mr. Gryce," an act that the narrative voice sees as "her undoing." As Lily reflects on those qualities of Selden that she finds most admirable, she becomes intrigued by his ability to stand as both participant and spectator upon the "great gilt cage in which [the New York elite] were all huddled for the mob to gape at" (71). Then adopting Selden's "certain social detachment, [his] happy air of viewing the show objectively," she surveys the long table, "scanning her little world through his retina" (72). Classifying the Trenors, Carry Fisher, young Silverton, and the others as Selden would, she notes the "vacuity," dreariness, and triviality of her friends. Those, who that afternoon seemed "brilliant," now seem "dull," and Lily, during this scene that disrupts the narrative line concerning the grey gown, expands her definition of dinginess to cover all that Selden judges so harshly. While with her own eyes the world divides messily into confusingly overlapping categories--the radiant and the dingy--through Selden's eyes the world of the conspicuously brilliant becomes dingy. It is no wonder that Lily thinks later how Selden's presence always has "the effect of cheapening her aspirations, of throwing her whole world out of focus" (116). Seeing with Selden's

eyes puts yet another pig at her door: the pig of gluttony and guilt. On occasions when Lily sees this pig at the door, the gilded cage of the New York rich becomes every bit as dingy as poverty, as dingy as poor taste and bad manners, as dingy as Mrs. Peniston and her expensive routine. When Lily rejects the grey gown of devotional cut, she rejects the dull routine of Percy Gryce, but for a moment she also rejects the gilded world of the elite. In effect, she has rejected all her circle except Lawrence Selden, and understanding what entails dinginess for Selden becomes integral to understanding Lily's gradual fall to the sweatshop.

V

The Actual Word that Passes Between Them: *Dingy*

While for Lawrence Selden the New York elite may be dingy in their focus on the material, dinginess also appears for him among the "average section of womanhood" that he observes on the streets of New York. His study of Lily during afternoon rush hour at Grand Central Station sets up a dialogue between the dingy throng and the radiant Miss Bart, and it reveals both Selden's knowledge of aesthetics and the weft of social class and turn-of-the-century culture through which these principles are woven.

Seeing Lily's "vivid head" contrasted "against the dull tints of the crowd" by her "dark hat and veil" (4), Selden--with the help of Lily's choice of attire--executes with this New York scene what Manet executed with Parisian urban settings of the previous generation. Like Manet, Selden captures the immediate moment, contrasting the stark accents of fashionable hats with the random, rough-brush movement of the crowd. And like Manet, he crops the scene, cutting it off arbitrarily so that it

possesses a controlling element.⁵⁶ For Selden, the controlling artistic element is Lily, and her irresolute movements of head and body act to pull Selden's eyes away from her and back again. In aesthetic terms, the scene is ordered through the contrast of color set up between Lily in vivid black and the crowd in their dull tints. *Complication* also works to harmonize the scene through an intermingling of the curved lines of Lily's form and the straight lines in the movements of the crowd behind her. For Selden, Lily becomes the center where the lines of his vision converge, and as co-creators of the street scene--Lily by dressing in contrast and Selden by reading the image--the two compose the scene through *radiation*.

This co-created, Manet-like tableau positions Lily as both object of Selden's artistic reveries *and* subject (i.e., agent) by virtue of her creative act of self-representation. Lily has chosen to represent herself in contrast to the street mob while dressing in an impeccably refined manner that simultaneously preserves prudence and makes her "more conspicuous than in a ball-room" (4). Elizabeth Wilson in *Adorned in Dreams* comments on the paradoxical expressiveness of street dress of the late nineteenth century, noting that the urban bourgeoisie dressed in a discreet style "to preserve their distance from the omnipresent gaze ... of the crowd" (137?). Yet at the same time, she says, this same group adapted a full range of expressive cues, thus subverting their anonymity. "It was still just as important," she writes, "or indeed more important, to let the world know what sort of person you were" (137). Lily brings just this sort of expressive quality to street dress; indeed, *all*, not just Selden, "[linger] to look," for she is "a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train" (4). Lily has obviously

incorporated an approach to dress that works to contrast her image with the masses. Aesthetically, this contrast works to make her image readable to the artistically inclined Selden, but the full range of meanings in Lily's self-representation and Selden's 'reading' depends not only on artistic assumptions but upon their shared assumptions about social class and gender.

Selden's seemingly innocent description of those others who promenade the street exposes the dialogue wherein *dinginess* pulls threads of meaning from a context thick with class and gender distinctions:

[Selden] led [Lily] through the throng of returning holiday-makers, past *sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans*. Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? *The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood* made him feel how highly specialized she was. (emphasis added 5)

Nan Enstad's thesis regarding working girls who 'played the lady' suggests one undercurrent of elitism in Selden's assessment of Lily's beauty. Enstad shows that working-class women infused middle-class dress with elements of exaggeration, choosing huge hats with lots of trim in their desire to display opulence. Hats--very big hats--Enstad says, were a major signifier for this group. The women whom Selden sees hail from the lower classes. They and others who walk, carrying bundles and cheap palm leaf fans, may be lacking in beauty, but clearly their social class in large part determines their averageness. By the same token, Selden's judgment that the women are *sallow-faced* *may* be an accurate description, but within the context of turn-of-the-century America's preoccupation with

'type,' meanings related to art and beauty are quite often interchangeable with meanings related to class.

At the turn of the century, artists, journalists, scientists, eugenicists, and the public at large entered into the mania of classifying 'types.' For propagators of American progress, this mania took the form of scientific discourse regarding the 'best type' of human specimen to carry America into the twentieth century. This classification of types was the nineteenth century's expression of the ancient 'science' of physiognomy, which had first been articulated during the third century B.C. but elaborated during the eighteenth century.⁵⁷ Martha Banta explains the adaptation of physiognomy to nineteenth-century Americans' judgments of the 'best type':

Once the polemicists of physiognomy (highly questionable in its own status as a scientific discipline) took over in America, the formula went like this: one classifies in terms of what one already know the truth to be. In the description of sexual and racial difference, this meant *an emphasis upon physical traits that appeared to distinguish superior from inferior types*; it meant favorable response to external signs which seemed familiar and unfavorable reactions to those which did not. (emphasis added 111)

Not surprisingly, in the nineteenth century, the classification of types acted to limit the preferred American types to the 'right' blood--descendants of the New England and Virginia colonists or in New York, the old families living on inherited wealth. By the turn of the century, the 'right' blood had become somewhat tainted, often associated in popular and scientific writings on 'type' with neurasthenia, over-sensitivity, digestive disorders, and general weakness. The favored female 'type' during the period in which Wharton wrote was statuesque, healthy, and

radiant, and popular culture's Gibson girl stood as the readable sign for this favored type. Lois Banner, in her discussion of Charles Dana Gibson's mass-marketed image that took America by storm, notes that reporters diligently sought Gibson's model among working-class women, settling on one or the other of two possible candidates--the personal maid of a renowned dancer *or* Minnie Clark, a professional model of Irish working-class background. Banner suggests that locating amid the lower class a model for Gibson's creation "seemed living proof that the American melting pot could work, that from the intermixture of racial nationalities could come the perfection of form and features that the entire nation could copy" (158). Wharton's Lily Bart, "much taller than the other attendant virgins" chosen for her cousin's wedding (114) and still possessing a "purity of tint" at twenty-nine, manifests this type precisely.⁵⁸ Wharton's creation, meshing the right look *and* the right 'blood,' presents an essentially backward-looking embodiment of ideal American womanhood. Selden, elite aesthete that he is, reads Lily's image as distinctive beauty and exquisite taste, but his process of meaning-making depends upon a mesh of social distinctions that turns aesthetics into ideology. While aesthetics functions as Selden's conscious interpretive frame, when he uses it to exclude working girls and other sallow-faced 'types' of women, it goes well beyond concerns with beauty. Aesthetics has come to serve not only the interest of his own particular social class but also to maintain women's ornamental role in society.

Again and again throughout the novel, Selden bemoans Lily's background that has prepared her to assume no purpose beyond the ornamental--a "futile shape" (16) in his estimation. Ironically, her

shape receives his continued attention, becoming the primary focus in all his musings on Lily. Always experiencing through Lily "the aesthetic amusement which a reflective man is apt to seek in desultory intercourse with pretty women" (90), Selden muses on Lily's outline not only on the New York streets, but later in his study (6), again at Bellomont (88), twice at the Brys' entertainment (179, 182), and then in Monte Carlo (255). Her ornamental uselessness simultaneously attracts and repels him, and through his continuing obsession with the lines of her body, a sort of eroticized aesthetics emerges. Comparing Lily in the novel's first scene with the "flat-chested" women on the street (5), he appraises her shape aesthetically, focusing on the line which classical art has since antiquity claimed as the most pure and beautiful. The female nude, lending its line to concepts of ideal beauty, while aiming to express lofty, spiritualized concepts, derives significance from its erotic message that acts to mesh lofty spirituality with sexual desire. Selden's aesthetic response to Lily is also an erotic response, and its being two-fold depends heavily upon the fashionable world that Selden so scorns. As Anne Hollander shows in *Seeing Through Clothes*, despite the idealization of the female nude during all periods of art history, each period cast nudity in a mold formed on the template of fashion: "Neo-Classic statues at different epochs, all purporting to follow the originals, can be dated according to the dress of their own period and its influence even on incorruptible Greek perfection" (89). One of Hollander's illustrations--sculptor Aristide Maillol's 1910 female nude *L'Ile de France*--shows the forward-thrust bosom and protruding buttocks that distinguished the fashionable female form at the turn of the century

(135). Hollander's work shows that Selden's aesthetic (and erotic) ruling on Lily's superiority to "flat-chested women" reflects as much about high fashion as it does Selden's concerns over art; although he can muse quite eloquently on the texture of Lily's "clay" and the "fine glaze of her beauty" (6), his musings seem to be influenced primarily by her choice in foundation garments.

Perhaps unbeknownst to Selden, only those women on the New York streets *not* wearing the in-vogue, s-curve corset would appear flat-chested, and such a fashion mistake *never* surfaces (until near the end of the novel) in Selden's descriptions of Lily's "lines." Obviously choosing the new corset essential for the new line in fashion, Lily curves in ways quite pleasing to Selden. The s-curve corset, in forcing the bosom forward and the stomach and buttocks back, gave any wearer's body a dropped and extended "mono-bosom," an outthrust rear, and an arched back (Hollander 152, Banner 149-150, Steele 205). Providing the forward-tilting serpentine line that Selden so admires in the "long slope of [Lily's] slender sides" (16), the corset shifted focus to the bosom. Corset names of the period used language that evokes the same sort of images that Selden employs when he reflects on Lily's "wildwood grace" or calls her a "dryad ... [with] a streak of sylvan freedom" (16). Emphasizing the alluring 's' of women's redistributed natural body, manufacturers drew on myth, romance, or beauty through the names of their corset designs: The Radiant, The Enchantress, Le Svelte, The Serpentine, La Sylphide, a la Sirene (Steele 200-202). Radiant, enchanting, serpentine, Lily Bart represents for Selden all that the dingy, "average section of womanhood" lacks. Lacking both the right blood to bring a rose

to their cheeks and the good taste to wear demure black hats, some of these working class women lack, too, the s-curve corset that might bring their flat chests into 'classical' alignment. By the time Lily Bart becomes enamored at Bellomont with Selden's supposed "social detachment, [his] happy air of viewing the show objectively" (72), the weave of Selden's objectivity has been exposed. It may be *strung* with a passive, unchanging warp of aesthetics, but eugenics, taste, class, gender, and fashion form the very active wefts that interlace and loop to form an intricate pattern. Selden sits weaving a fabric no more objective than that woven by any other interpretant, for the text he forms is, as Bakhtin teaches us, "interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it" (278).

While Lily fails to recognize the weft surrounding Selden's supposed objectivity, she fully grasps the import of interpretants, for it is they who bring meaning to her acts of self-representation. Immediately following her 'reading' of the "grey gown of devotional cut" (69-76), Lily "[assumes] a dress somewhat more rustic and summerlike in style" and strolls out for a morning walk (76). Passing Selden and Bertha Dorset as she leaves the house, she unhurriedly makes her way along the grounds to a "rustic seat" (80) where she sits, composing herself into a living tableau. The experience, though, is wanting:

Lily was not insensible ... to the fact that her presence enhanced [the spot]; but she was not accustomed to taste the joys of solitude except in company, and the combination of handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted. (80)

For Lily, the missing element is audience, an interpretant to see and comprehend her "solitude." After a half hour waiting for Selden or

anyone else who might benefit from her tableau, she feels the "sparkle ... [die] out of her and the taste of life [go] stale on her lips." She walks on with "an inner isolation deeper than the loneliness about her" (80). In Lily's sense of isolation, the significance of a viewer/reader/interpretant surfaces, and the social self emerges as the most pronounced dimension of Lily's self.

As discussed in Chapter One of this study, William James defined a person's Social Self as the recognition that that person receives from others. "Properly speaking," James writes, "*a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind" (emphasis his 282). James sees self as contingent on others, with self emerging in relation to others and with others' interpretations in large part determining the social aspects of self. Individuals' ability to adapt to the distinct groups with whom they associate determines what aspects take shape, and people show "different [sides of themselves] to each of these different groups" (James 282). The prominence of Lily's social selves appears throughout the novel, most specifically in the ease with which she adapts to those around her. Having "no mind for the vagabond life" she first "adapt[s] herself to Mrs. Peniston ... assum[ing] that lady's passive attitude" (49). At Bellomont she "adapt[s] her pace to the object of pursuit," foregoing cards and her scarlet crepe-de-chine dinner gown in an attempt to snare Percy Gryce (57-58). Much later, rejected by Percy Gryce, disinherited by her aunt, and no longer given the opportunity of "adapt[ing] herself" to the "delicate conditions" of travel with her wealthy set (262), she "court[s] the approval of people she ... disdained under other conditions" (315).

Possessing myriad social selves, Lily can make herself pleasing wherever she goes, yet with Lawrence Selden she always experiences a "quicker beat of life" (181) that makes her believe for a moment that "it [is] for him only [that] she care[s] to be beautiful" (181).

Selden's role as Lily's most adept observer/interpretant surfaces in the New York street scene but also in the subsequent exchange between the two at Selden's apartment. While Selden contemplates with "a purely impersonal enjoyment" the tones of color in Lily's face, Lily is caressing Selden's books, "not with the appreciation of the expert, but with the pleasure in agreeable tones and textures that [is] one of her inmost susceptibilities" (12). Each responds aesthetically, he to her "profile ... outlined against the warm background of old bindings" (14) and she to "the ripe tints of good tooling and old morocco" (12). Because each views the world with an artistic eye, Selden can adeptly read the image that Lily sallies forth when she assumes an "attitude [that] reveal[s] the long slope of her slender sides" (16). Between the poses that Lily strikes in Selden's apartment, she pauses to describe for him the importance of clothing for women, and in this discourse on dress, which begins my discussion of *The House of Mirth*, she asks the question that remains crucial throughout the novel--"Who wants a dingy woman?" Having just come from the streets where the "dinginess" of working class women has made him recognize Lily's beauty, Selden in all likelihood interprets the "dingy woman" through reference to this recent experience. Their shared context makes *dingy* signify similarly for the two, at least for the moment. *This word* that passes between them--*dingy*--points up the way words become infused with meanings from the social world around them. Because Lily and

Selden share the context for the sharing of this word, Lily is able to render an image that Selden can read. Selden serves often as her quite perfect, ideal spectator.⁵⁹

VI

Pigs in Opera Cloaks: *Dinginess* as Semantic Hybrid

While the hybrid quality of *dinginess* allows it to signify multiple but mutually understandable meanings in these early scenes of *The House of Mirth*, this quality, of course, also makes Lily's later choices difficult. Because *dinginess* possesses a hybrid quality--allowing Lily to see "dinginess" in Aunt Peniston's drawing room (48), allowing her to unintentionally reject Percy Gryce, allowing her to lump her friend Gerty and the dissimilar Grace Stepney together in a category she labels "dingy people" (161)--it rarely communicates with the reciprocity possible in the early exchange between Lily and Selden. While Lily "hate[s] dinginess as much as her mother ... hated it" and vows with her last breath "to fight against it," it continually floods over her before she can gain "the bright pinnacles of success which [present] such a slippery surface to her clutch" (50). In Lily's vow to fight dinginess and in her inability to grasp success, Wharton sets up the dialogue that serves as crux of Lily's fall in *The House of Mirth*. Elusive and as prone to disguise as dinginess, success slips like a greased pig through Lily's busy grasp.

On the night that Lily first wears the aforementioned opera cloak, dinginess masquerades as radiant success, and the scene tellingly demonstrates the mixed messages Lily must deal with in her quest for success. Although Lily despises Sim Rosedale, a "blond Jewish type" who

wears "smart London clothing fitting ... like upholstery" (17), she fears him, too. Having agreed to appear in Rosedale's opera box on opening night because his invitation came overlaid with distasteful allusions to Lily's having received money from Trenor, Lily on opening night has "effaced" her "apprehensions" with "other impressions" (153). Wearing the cloak, which she has purchased with the first check she received through Trenor's speculation for her on the stock market, Lily feels "inspired by the prospect of showing her beauty in public" (154). Conscious of the "added enhancements of dress," Lily feels herself the "centre" of a tableau she creates, and the "well-poised lines and happy tints" (154) evoke in Lily the same physical sensation she experienced with Selden on their Sunday jaunt at Bellomont when they had discovered "a forbidden height" that veiled "the actual world" (96). At the opera, Lily once again feels her "self lifted to a height apart," this time through "that incommunicable grace which is the bodily counterpart of genius!" (154). Her gown and the sumptuous cloak bring her a "poetic enjoyment," and she has obviously dressed her bodily surface in clothes fitting to her innermost bent for aesthetic interpretation. Lily's active response--the bodily sensation aroused by the intensity of her own image as centre of "the general stream of admiring looks" (154)--corresponds markedly with William James's notion of the Spiritual Self, for he judges this innermost self to consist of faculties that preside over "the perception of sensation" (James 185). In this Jamesian sense, Lily's 'real' self revolves around aesthetic elation, and when she transcends the actual world, moving to this "height apart," she uses art as an agent for reaching spiritual pinnacles. Yet such transcendence dismisses the

prosaic body that lies beneath her splendid and poetic clothes. Just as Lily corsets her physical form so that body might become art, she dresses Trenor's money in elegant opera garb, ignoring the hybrid mix that unsettles this scene of success.

While the opera cloak signifies for Lily a spiritual and thus culturally 'high' poetic enjoyment, the non-idealized female body calls forth dialogic threads of meaning thick with things 'low.' The narrative voice intrudes on Lily's success, reminding the reader of Trenor's claim on Lily:

If Lily's poetic enjoyment of the moment was undisturbed by the base thought that her gown and opera cloak had been indirectly paid for by Gus Trenor, the latter had not sufficient poetry in his composition to lose sight of these prosaic facts" (154).

The prosaic facts entail Trenor's paying money but getting nothing in return.

A link between money and sex lurks beneath the surface of the opera cloak, and this jagged partnership punctures the cloak's exquisite fabric, fraying the 'high' poetic surface and allowing the 'low' to show through. Having been tastefully evasive during her encounter with Trenor that resulted in his speculating for her, Lily has ignored the complexity of dinginess, letting her squeamishness about money stand in the way of understanding this transaction that will ultimately undo her. Only hinting to Trenor that she is less than solvent, she does not even know that she has asked him for money, preferring instead to think he is somehow "borrow[ing] on her securities" (114). Because the "vagueness" of the transaction diminishes its "indelicality," Lily can keep up

"appearances to herself" (108), cloaking Trenor's offer in the garb of independence *from* dinginess: she will no longer have to wear her rich friends' hand-me-down clothes. The narrative voice inserts a telling observation, revealing Lily's tendency to conflate the moral and the tasteful: "[Lily's] personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent, and when she made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain closed doors she did not open" (108).

Behind these doors where tastelessness resides, the jagged pairing between sex and money also stands, but Lily refuses to acknowledge either. "[S]ecretly ashamed" during her early years of her mother's "crude passion for money" (45), money like sex displays a 'lowness,' a dinginess too tasteless to talk about. Relishing the tasteful pleasures of wealth, Lily can accept her friends' used clothing and their food and wine for weeks on end, but she cannot ask them for money. Such a request would create "vulgar embarrassment" (262). She must dream, instead, of marriage to "an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates" (45). Like most other turn-of-the-century women, Lily is economically dependent; thus, her goal of success centers around marriage. Because men like the poetic English nobleman of Lily's dreams (or the prosaic Gus Trenor of her reality) control women's access to money, a partnership between men and women becomes necessary when women "can't"--as Lily tells Selden--"keep it up alone" (15). Because marriage links sex and money in an economic equation, any economic partnerships between men and women *outside* marriage carry sexually charged currents in their wake. In its proper place within the sanctity of marriage, crude money can become in Lily's imagination a force for good; when she contemplates marriage to the English nobleman,

she pictures herself in high places, "standing aloof from the vulgar press ... and sacrificing her pleasure to the claims of an immemorial tradition" (45). Never allowing the particulars of sex and the body to intrude upon her poetic enjoyment, Lily permits both the female body and money to exist only on a 'high,' radiant, and spiritual plane. While Wharton allows three significant oglings of Lily's clothes without her body, she never allows a viewing of the body without the clothes. Only at the entertainment of the *tableaux vivants* at the Bry's do readers get a glimpse the body beneath the dress, and the mix of 'high' and 'low' is underscored in the varying responses of those interpretants viewing Lily's tableau.

Drawing upon a popular form of entertainment at the end of the nineteenth century, Wharton faithfully describes these theatrical stagings of paintings, which were performed in theaters, hotels, and in the private homes of elites.⁶⁰ Using the aesthetic theory of 'types' in her artistic presentation of self, Lily dons pale draperies to become eighteenth-century painter Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Mrs. Lloyd*. This aesthetic theory constitutes the artist's version of the nineteenth-century mania for classifying physiognomic types with the artist's eye seeing not simply the actual object present but also the object as 'type.' The object stands as emblem and essence of the artist's understanding, uniting form and content. When Lily selects in Reynolds' *Mrs. Lloyd* "a type so like her own," she images forth her innermost aesthetic self: [Lily] had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. Selden, Lily's most able interpretant and ideal spectator, sees best the image

Lily wants to project. Responding to her rendition of Reynolds's Neo-Classical painting, he perceives Lily as a sort of Emersonian transparent object that allows him to see spiritual truths, and he thinks that she captures for a moment "a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty [is] a part" (179). Lily, of course, has encouraged such a response, and in a sentence describing Lily's artistic creation and Selden's reception, Wharton fuses point-of-view mid-sentence, suggesting the co-creation of *Mrs. Lloyd* as visual text:

The impulse to show herself in a splendid setting ... had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty.... The noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence, yet lost the sense of when he was not with her. Its expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world. (178-79)

While Selden sees Lily divested of trivialities, others see her as simply divested. Ned Van Alstyne focuses on "the study of the female outline" (179), attending to the body beneath the pale, form-clinging draperies as he tells Selden, "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it" (179). Van Alstyne's later comment about "those goddesses gobbling terrapin" and his continuing focus on "what an outline Lily has" (183) point up the prosaic physicality always present and ready to enter an interpretant's process of meaning-making.⁶¹ Because Lily ignores the 'low' physicality of the body that houses her poetic sentiments, her semi-clad body can seem to her "a touch of poetry" (178) while to others it can look like "[d]amned bad taste" (184). Through her

dress Lily represents a self that reflects her inner bent for poetry, but once put on display, her spectators join in the making of meaning. Whether dressed in Neo-Classical flowing draperies or sumptuously cloaked in an opera cape, her denied body lurks beneath the spectacle of her exquisite surface. And while she remains oblivious to the connection between women, sex, and money, her spectators pull from the culture around them to construct their own meanings about Lily Bart.

VII
Uncloaking the Pig: *Porcus* Unmasked

The meanings that interpretants bring to their readings of Lily Bart unsettle the meaning of *dinginess* again and again in Wharton's novel. Dingy pigs slink past Lily's door, but she recognizes only a few. She can see those wearing her Aunt Peniston's expensively new but slightly old-fashioned black brocade (142, 168) or those perpetually dreary ones carrying prayer books. She recognizes, too, the ones in tastelessly large hats or those donned in seedy, working-class antifashion. Those with Gerty Farish's non-flair, wearing useful colors and subdued lines, never sneak by without criticism: "acquiescence in dinginess [is] evidence of stupidity" (117). Yet naked pigs, wearing nothing at all and too fleshy pink and tasteless for words, linger behind the door where Lily purposefully outfits them with opera cloaks.

While for Lily the pig also stands at this threshold between poverty and wealth, other important cultural oppositions intersect here also: aesthetic elation and gauche worldliness, spirituality and physicality, poetic sentiment and prosaic reality, brilliant scene change

and dull routine, high fashion and low antifashion, the tasteful and the tasteless, the radiant and the dingy. In each of these pairings Lily, of course, chooses the high road rather than the low, and because her "personal fastidiousness [has] a moral equivalent" the high road of art, spirit, poetry, brilliance, fashion, and good taste constitutes a *moral* choice. Conflating morality with all things "high," she imagines that any choice for one aspect of highness brings with it the tastefully correct and thus 'moral' choice. While pigs wear disguises of one sort or another, Lily believes she can recognize one when she sees it. She can control pigs, she thinks. She will simply cloak them appropriately and then refuse to join them when they head off from the doorway to take their jaunts down the 'low' road.

The pig of naked physicality, because Lily denies its existence or cloaks it quickly, most jeopardizes Lily's potential success. Lily's naturalistic classifying of Gus Trenor as a carnivore preying on plover (72) underscores the physicality of Trenor, yet Lily initially judges him simply as "a coarse dull man" who will be easy to handle. Even when Trenor begins taking liberties with Lily, she "obscure[s] the thought of the claim at which his manner hint[s]" (112). Thinking she can contain him in a cage of classification where she has stashed all dull men, she misjudges this hybrid. No simple carnivore, Gus Trenor's twin in the animal world is the omnivorous pig. Describing his "broad expanse of cheek and neck," his "red and massive" sweating body, the "small dull eyes" (105), and his perpetual flush (189), Wharton's naturalism assigns to Trenor pig-like qualities. While Trenor's impulse to help Lily arises from his "highest sympathies" (111), his low physicality immediately

asserts itself. His hybrid mix of 'high' sympathies and 'low' desires fuse in his pig-like body, and Lily fails to recognize the potential sexual undertones inherent in any economic arrangement between a man and woman. Only when Trenor forces open the door behind which the tasteless partners sex and money stand does she understand the complexity of dinginess.

Clothing signals a shift in expected social forms on the night that Gus Trenor forces Lily to acknowledge the truth about their arrangement. Arriving late at the Trenor's, Lily is admitted not by the "expected footman, pushing his shoulders into a tardy coat" but by "a shabby caretaking person in calico" (187). According to Thorstein Veblen, because footmen functioned primarily to call attention to their service to their wealthy employer, elaborately decorated uniforms of these servants, whose main function was display of their employers' wealth, were standard at the turn of the century. Trenor's calico-clad servant attending the door signals a departure from what Veblen calls the "exacting code of forms" (62) regulating the servant class. This sartorial cue--the intrusion of lowly calico--signifies a disruption in high social custom and is followed by Trenor's "[relieving Lily] of her cloak" (187), an action both literal and metaphoric. "[D]rawing her toward a *low* seat by the hearth" (emphasis added 188), Trenor begins to strip the pig of its elegant opera cloak. Forcing her to recognize that the money he invested was not hers and that he expects to receive a sexual return on his expenditure, he brings her face-to-face with his presumption that she will become the dingiest of the dingy: a 'soiled' woman.

Lily's poetic radiance becomes infused with its binary opposite, and suffering what William James calls *alienatus a se*--an alienation from self--Lily leaves Trenor's house, passing along "the familiar alien streets" where all is "the same and yet changed" (196). James views *alienatus a se*--the nineteenth century diagnosis for mental illness, which was treated by early psychiatrists called 'alienists'--as the condition resulting from a profound altering of the Spiritual Self. When a person's "self-satisfaction" with his/her conscience or with the ability to discriminate and to function morally alters, that person "is ... said to be *alienatus a se* (James 283). Lily later explains her feelings of self-alienation to Gerty: "I am not frightened," she says, "that is not the word. Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement--some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that" (218). Lily's core self--what James calls the Spiritual Self--loving radiance and beauty, has confidently presumed its skill at distinguishing dinginess, even when dinginess wears disguises. In seeing that she has prostituted herself for the price of an opera cloak, Lily perceives the pig that Greek and Latin slang codified in its calling the female genitalia *porcus* and using 'pig merchants' as a term for prostitutes⁶². Accustomed to imagining herself through the eyes of spectators but now aware for the first time that these others construct their *own* meanings from the text of her clad body, Lily discerns in the mirror an altered self, grotesquely hideous in its semblance to things low: illicit sex, crude money, dingy womanhood, "damned bad taste." *Porcus* swaddled in Chantilly lace and ostrich feathers fashions for Lily a hideous hybrid, and the no-longer denied female body enters to

disrupt unity between the cloak's aesthetic surface and the self's aesthetic core. Dinginess, already dialogic and given to inversion, pulls into its weft another semantic thread, and Lily drops the opera cloak on Gerty Farish's chair in preparation for her second reading of bodiless clothes.

Just as Lily reads her grey gown of devotional cut as pretext to (and for) avoiding Percy Gryce, on the morning after her encounter with Trenor she 'reads' the gown and opera cloak as prologue for a second important decision. The passage alludes to both the physicality lurking beneath the body's aesthetic surface and the hybrid quality of dinginess:

[Lily] saw her evening dress and opera cloak lying in a tawdry heap on a chair. Finery laid off is as unappetizing as the remains of a feast, and it occurred to Lily that, at home, her maid's vigilance had always spared her the sight of such incongruities. Her body ached with fatigue. (223)

The opera cloak, previously 'high' by virtue of Lily's poetic sentiment, which could use its elegance as vehicle for spiritual transcendence, now looks garishly tasteless in the aftermath of Trenor's forcing a variant reading onto its exquisite lines. Comparing the "tawdry heap" to "the remains of a feast," Lily now sees with the same sort of eyes Trenor used when he commented on "goddesses gobbling terrapin" (183); 'low' physicality enters into dialogue with poetry, and Lily perceives their "incongruities." Similarly, when Lily becomes outraged that "the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents" (225), the incongruous hybrid between 'high' moral dignity and 'low,' crude money asserts itself, and Lily sees the world as "a more sordid place than she had conceived it" (225). The link between sex and money

has appeared in the exquisite but tawdry opera cloak lying on Gerty's chair, and Lily vows once more to avoid dinginess: she will repay the nine thousand dollars that she owes Trenor.

Lily's vow to avoid dinginess, however, is thwarted by her misreading of a subsequent situation that calls for an ability to see *porcus* wrapped in radiance. Leaving New York when her aunt refuses her plea for money, she goes to Monte Carlo where she is to "provide occupation" for George Dorset while his wife carries on an extramarital affair. In so doing, Lily fails to select as elements in her process of meaning-making the dingier aspects of the arrangement; consequently, she overlooks the fact that as the yachting party moves through the Mediterranean, she is receiving financial support for extending the service of cloaking Bertha's sexual involvement with Silverton. Noting only how beautiful the scene is (260), Lily sees only a theme of radiance; the horizon stretched by previous life experiences suggests renewal in new scenes, and she avoids any disturbing themes regarding illicit sex.⁶³ Wharton suggests the importance of the interpretant's context when she writes, "[Lily's] faculty for renewing herself in new scenes, and casting off problems of conduct as easily as the surroundings in which they had arisen, made the mere change from one place to another seem, not merely a postponement, but a solution of her troubles" (261). Wharton's word choice underscores Lily's once again reading a scene through 'high' poetic sentiment that privileges radiance and admits no dingy clouds to intrude: "Unclouded sunlight enveloped sea and shore in a bath of purest radiance" (260).

Lily's reading, of course, is a misreading, for she fails to bring to the experience her recent encounter with Trenor. As the narrative voice notes, moral complications exist for Lily "only in the environment that had produced them" (261). Misreading, Lily fails to synthesize information perceived during her earlier reading of her involvement with Gus Trenor. Wolfgang Iser, in his explanation of how readers comprehend a text, maintains that readers assemble the various perspectives presented by narrator, characters, plot, and reader. By wandering from perspective to perspective, using what Iser calls the wandering viewpoint, the reader builds up a network of interlocking perspectives. While Lily is adept at wandering from perspective to perspective if those perspectives interest her, she lacks adeptness when those perspectives bore her or when they--as in the case of Gus Trenor's--clash with her own. Her alienation from self, resulting as it does from her being forced to see from Trenor's perspective, illustrates her inability to safely maneuver this particular switch in perspective. Not surprisingly, she fails to select from her repertoire of experiences this encounter with Trenor, thus impairing any possibility of foregrounding the Monte Carlo situation against a background that will make its dinginess accessible. Indeed, Lily perceives only a "background of bare and finely-pencilled mountains [quivering] in a pale intensity of light" (260). Because moral complications exist for Lily only in their original contexts, new situations must be interpreted against some other background. Iser notes that in the process of meaning-making, the "as yet unknown meaning would be incomprehensible were it not for the familiarity of the background it is set against" (93). Had Lily perceived on *many* previous occasions

incongruous pairings of 'high' radiance with 'low' sex and money, she would have had within her repertoire the background for apprehending the similarity between her transaction with Trenor and her function with the Dorsets. Had she experienced redundant, hybrid pigs thriving in multiple environments, the as-yet-unknown of Monte Carlo would have been comprehensible. Instead, Lily spirits from her repertoire lines devoid of moral complexity, those finely pencilled lines quiver in intense light, and Lily's misreading provides a context primed to background Bertha Dorset's lie that destroys Lily's prospects.

VIII

Lawrence Selden: Spectatorship as a Subjective Act

While the Monte Carlo section of *The House of Mirth* illustrates the difficulty of reading hybrid and incongruous pairings when the reader's experiences have provided no sufficient background for comprehending such hybrids, it also serves to elaborate Selden's role as spectator of Lily Bart. In Selden's earlier attempts to arrive at meaning regarding Lily, his spectatorship focuses primarily on the aesthetics of her gracefully curved form. In each of these viewings of Lily, Wharton first stresses his supposed objectivity but then immediately makes problematic this quality that Lily finds so compelling in him. Following the scene of the *tableau vivants* wherein he idealizes Lily's beauty, reading her image through a non-objective lens of platonism, Wharton proffers a scene wherein he sees Lily leave Trenor's house on the night of Lily's trauma. Standing on the street outside what appears to be the Trenors' "uninhabited" house, Selden with Ned Alstynne sees Lily and Trenor appear

at the door, and Selden and Van Alstyne perceive what they imagine to be the 'facts' of the situation. Although noting that "appearances are deceptive" (214), Van Alstyne, who is always attuned to sexual innuendo, asks Selden to say nothing of the incident. Selden, disappointed and judging Lily harshly, leaves town to escape his emotions, and Wharton writes that once in Monte Carlo, he "[begins] to feel the renewed zest of spectatorship that is the solace of those who take an objective interest in life" (244). Clearly, whether Selden sees Lily as ideal radiance and beauty or as radiance swaddling either a passion for crude money or a dark, illicit sexual involvement, he brings to his act of meaning-making more than impartial objectivity.

Wharton again and again shows that Selden's aesthetic and supposedly objective response to Lily exists in direct opposition to any sort of intimate, interpersonal response. Emotionally detached and judgmental, Selden's spectatorship depends upon what William James calls the practices of exclusion and negation--casting off from the self any person or thing that one cannot securely possess. Those who protect the self through these acts, he maintains, are "narrow and unsympathetic characters," who look "with chill negation" upon those who do not resemble them or upon those "who will not be [theirs]" (298). This sort of negation and exclusion appears in *The Portrait of a Lady* in the character of Gilbert Osmond, and while Selden seems a much less threatening version of this type, he certainly shares Osmond's penchant for art and for emotional detachment. Upon Selden's first viewing of Lily in Grand Central Station, the narrative voice notes, "As a spectator, [Selden] had always enjoyed Lily Bart; and his course lay so far out of her orbit that

it amused him to be drawn for a moment into the sudden intimacy which her proposal [for tea] implied" (5). While Selden later allows himself to believe briefly that he loves Lily, what he really loves is his 'high,' idealized reading of her, a reading he 'corrects' when he thinks he sees proof of 'lowness.' By the time he views Lily in Monte Carlo, he is celebrating his return to detachment and objectivity, making a "particular study of Miss Bart," admiring not only her beauty but also "her grace, her quickness, her social felicities" and her "bounteous nature." Reflecting on his own spectatorship, he knows that "he [can] give his admiration ... freer play because so little personal feeling remain[s] in it" (288). Thinking how his "real detachment" is occurring at that moment when he can objectively judge the "crudeness" in Lily's choice to be content with the stupid, costly society life she has chosen to live, he renounces any emotional attachment to Lily. As a purely 'objective' spectator, he sees the 'high' radiance but knows that it cloaks a 'low' passion for money.

Selden's spectatorship, taking on the guise of objectivity through its detachment from interpersonal involvement, parallels any other act of interpretation: it brings to the reading the viewer's experiences, prejudices, and judgments, quickly complicating any pretence of impartiality. When sorting through the interconnected and hybrid mesh beneath the surface of the text, the reader/interpretant/spectator selects thematic strands of meaning that match other meanings on the reader's horizon. Selden interprets Lily against two different horizons, but in both he allows an unsettling dinginess into this background. First interpreting her against the background of their abrupt ending when he saw her outside the Trenors', he feels angered by her "readiness and

competence ... [to take] up the thread of their intercourse as though that thread had not been snapped with a violence from which he [is] still reel[ing]" (255). Selden's choice of the passive *had been snapped* ignores his own culpability in their abrupt separation. In Monte Carlo Lily does as she always does, adapting herself to the most delicate of social situations, but Selden misreads her. While she is unchanged, he sees her "skill ... [at meeting] him at a point from which no inconvenient glimpses of the past were visible" as proof that she has had recent practice at deception. Selden, imagining Lily to be changed, ignores his own subjective role in arriving at meaning:

Scarcely three months had elapsed since he had parted from her on the *threshold* of the Brys' conservatory; but a subtle change had passed over the quality of her beauty. Then it had had a transparency through which the fluctuations of the spirit were sometimes tragically visible; now its impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization which had fused her who being into one hard brilliant substance. (emphasis added 255)

Having observed Lily's beauty at a literal and metaphoric threshold where radiance meets dinginess, Selden now places onto Lily the quality that he sees in the gluttony and guilt of the New York elite; she's lost the ability "to turn gold back again into something else" (91). Thinking she cares with a "crude passion" for the material and has lost the quality that made her suitable as an Emersonian transparent object, he feels that she has "at last arrived at an understanding with herself" (255).

Just as Selden obscures his own agency in the break between himself and Lily, he ignores the fact that he has always placed Lily in the passive, object position. Always assuming the patriarchal privilege that

places the female as the object of the male gaze, he has always been the spectator who sees reflected in Lily his own beliefs about beauty. While he now imagines that she has somehow fused her beauty into a gilded quality that makes her no longer the path to transcendence, he ignores the passivity of the object in subject/object relations. If Lily no longer transports him to the realm of the spiritual, he is seeing her differently. Having parted from Lily at a threshold where cultural oppositions intersect, Selden as reader/interpretant/viewer has since that parting selected themes strewn along the 'low' road to help him assemble his reading of Lily: gluttony and guilt, a crude desire for money, and finally a cloak for swaddling *porcus*.

By the end of the Monte Carlo section, Selden's "reason obstinately harp[s] on the proverbial relation between smoke and fire" (293). Here, sex and money enter as 'low' partners to undo his former belief in Lily's pure, poetic, spiritual beauty. Of course, Selden's background adeptly prepares him to believe the proverb. Having just cut off his own illicit involvement with Bertha Dorset at the onset of *The House of Mirth*, Selden is primed to see fire where there is smoke and ponder the possibility of 'low' *porcus* sprawling beneath Lily's now hardened exterior. His experience with Bertha (which, by the way he chooses never to mention), along with "the corroboration of his own impressions," leads him to judge Lily harshly once again. Yet having assembled the elements of Lily-as-text differently under other circumstances, Selden is left to muse, "The worst of it [is] that ... so many alternative readings [are] possible" (284).

Most of Lily's interpretants, of course, do not bother even to ponder the possibility of alternate readings. Regardless of the particular background that each of Lily's social circle bring to their reading of Bertha's lie, many believe that Lily has indeed been involved in an affair with Bertha's husband George. Even those who do not rule outright on her innocence or guilt join in shunning her, and Mrs. Peniston, weakened by the "idea of [Lily's] being in debt, dies soon after hearing the "rumours" about Lily. In her will she leaves Lily only the sum of the debt, and even the payment of this amount is delayed. Ostracized by her former friends, financially bound to Trenor, and without enough money to meet living expenses now that she is turned out of Mrs. Peniston's house, Lily begins moving down the levels of the social hierarchy. Once elite by virtue of old New York blood, she has been disinherited; once used as beautiful ornament in the homes of the 'new' old money, she is now shut out. The nouveau riche, formerly too tasteless to get her attention, embrace her first as friend and then as trusted employee, and Lily must seek approval among those whom earlier she would have disdained for their "dinginess."

IX The Descent into Pigdom

When Lily first meets the Gormers, they occupy a "social outskirts which [she] had always fastidiously avoided" (313). Though they have previously tried to break into high society, they have now "struck out on a line of their own," peopling their mansion with artists, actresses, and anyone "who can make noise enough and doesn't put on airs" (312). Lily's

reservations about joining their social circle emanate from judgments she makes based on discriminating taste: "The people about her were doing the same things as the Trenors, the Van Osburghs and the Dorsets: the difference lay in a hundred shades of aspect and manner, from the pattern of the men's waistcoats to the inflexion of the women's voices" (313). Although Lily has been ousted by the social elite, she still habitually reads those around her through reference to the elite who form the horizon of her experience. While she has added to her interpretations meanings about sex and money that often lurk beneath radiant surfaces, good taste remains always on her horizon, and when marking out her social identity, she marks herself in opposition to the tasteless actors peopling the world of the nouveau riche. Though disapproving, Lily might have remained within the Gormer's circle had Mrs. Gormer lacked "aspirations" (312). When Bertha Dorset befriends the "blond and genial" Mrs. Gormer, Lily becomes a liability to the Gormers' social climbing and loses her place among this group dominated by "more noise, more colour, more champagne, more familiarity" (314).

Lily learns again that she is a liability to certain of the nouveau riche when she decides to focus her efforts on success on renewing Sim Rosedale's wish to marry her. Having once desired the beautiful Miss Lily and having seen her as an asset in his struggle for acceptance among the elite, Rosedale still clearly desires Lily but has begun to read her as an undesirable match. Lily's resistance to hybrid types has weakened, and Rosedale seems no bad conjugal prospect once she has been ousted by her former friends. Being a blond 'type,' he is more easily absorbed into the fastidiously blood-conscious upper crust, and Lily now can imagine being

the wife of Rosedale, at least the "Rosedale she felt it in her power to create" (340). After all, Lily with her fine taste could teach him how to dress less conspicuously. Late in the novel when Lily has decided that her only hope resides in marriage to Rosedale, he is still wearing a "vivid waistcoat" (344) and too many jewels on his plump fingers, but his domestic kneeling on Carry Fisher's hearth indicates that perhaps the upholstered tightness of this clothing has been eased. Although still 'low' by birth, race, and his taste for gluttony, his wealth and acceptable blondness place him simultaneously in Lily's 'high' category. The image of Rosedale kneeling and involved in genuine play with Carry Fisher's child causes Lily to stop at the threshold to contemplate the "quality of homely goodness in his advances to the child" (335). Here the hybrid phrase "homely goodness" underscores the possibility of success within mergers between all that Lily has judged as 'high' and all that she has judged as 'low.' Rosedale, however, now believes that Lily would be an "encumbrance" to his social acceptance, a situation he thinks she can rectify. Suggesting that she use Bertha Dorset's love letters to Selden, he believes that she could blackmail Bertha into backing her readmittance into high society. The word choice in the passage wherein Lily disgustedly rejects Rosedale's suggestion recalls the scene with Trenor. Rosedale's concrete, business-like give-and-take radically inverts Trenor's mysterious talk of tips and deals, yet both are presented to Lily as "freedom from risk" (349, 112). Tellingly, Wharton writes that Lily's disgust with Rosedale surfaces when she recognizes that "the essential baseness of the act lay in its freedom from risk" (349). This interpretation of Lily's makes little sense in terms of logic; thus, it

serves primarily to gesture toward the earlier encounter with Trenor. In terms that Wolfgang Iser would use, Lily sees a theme of freedom from risk against a horizon that encompasses all the aspects of her earlier encounter with a risk-free offer: 'lowness,' crude passion for money, illicit sex. Now attaching pig-like baseness to both situations, she quickly and harshly rejects the plan, making ready her transition to Norma Hatch, the most tastelessly tacky of the nouveau riche.

Finding a position as social secretary to Mrs. Hatch, an aspiring young divorcee living in a "fashionable New York hotel" (368), Lily enters the world inhabited by a lower sub-stratum of nouveau riche. In this world of the rich and gaudy, "beings as richly upholstered as the furniture.... wan from the weight of their sables" drift without purpose between dress-maker's openings, restaurants, and concert halls to return to "the stifling inertia of the hotel routine" (369). Amid this "pallid world," Mrs. Hatch is the "most substantial figure," and Lily is hired to school her in the social decorum needed to develop "an outline" (369). Wharton's use of the phrase "higher guidance" (370) to denote Lily's role as Mrs. Hatch's arbiter of taste, emphasizes that whatever Lily might have learned about 'low' female physicality, crude money, and dingy womanhood, good taste remains 'high.' And in this segment of the novel the emphasis on the relation between dress and class re-emerges with added fervor.

Mrs. Hatch, an unknown Western import with a great deal of money and very little taste, needs Lily's guidance to give her hats "just the right 'look'" (370) and to tone down her "showiness" and her "aggression of dress and voice" (368). The sort of guidance Lily provides appears in *The Ladies' Home Journal* from the period, which counsels:

It is never in good taste to seem dressed up. The woman whose "best silk dress" resolves itself into a quiet setting for her own personality and always brings forth the remark, "How well she looks to-night" is properly dressed; while her less fortunate, badly-dressed sister impresses you only by the expensive materials with which her person is upholstered. ("Mrs. Ralston Talks About Good Taste" 95)

Arbiters of good taste advised discretion--a quality Mrs. Hatch certainly lacks. These writers admonish the tasteful woman never to "stand out" by way of "the most dreadful combinations of colors and the most shockingly inappropriate gowns" ("Mrs. Ralston" 95). Such aggression of dress coupled with aggression of voice equal "badness" according to a writer for *The Jewish Daily News*:

Yes, girls, loudness of speech is bad; but, there is something worse and that is loudness of dress.... Please have a wandering thought ... the very next time you stand in readiness to don that shrieking article of clothing if you would not appear more modest, more woman-like, less conspicuous and in better taste, if, instead, you were to wear a quiet color. ("Just Between")

When Lily is charged with toning down Mrs. Hatch's dress and voice, Wharton reflects turn-of-the-century cultural attitudes equating women's tastefulness with goodness, modesty, and non-conspicuousness. Not surprisingly, those who set the standards for the right "look" in hats eschew the sort of hats that Selden comments upon in the Grand Central station scene. Lily's guidance on this matter of hats most likely includes the sort of judgments proclaimed by a fashion writer for *The Ladies' Home Journal*, who wrote that top-heavy hats, "dreadfully overtrimmed," hats ill-placed, or hats ill-fitting "are in shockingly bad taste and only serve to make the wearer ludicrous" ("As Young Girls").⁶⁴

While Mrs. Hatch swims in a haze "of aspirations culled from the stage, the newspapers, the fashion-journals, and a gaudy world of sport," she desires Lily's approval, wanting "to do what [is] 'nice,' to be taught how to be 'lovely'" (372). Yet from the start Lily is hampered by "rapidly-growing doubts" (372). These doubts do not arise from any concern over Mrs. Hatch's conduct, for Wharton very pointedly absolves her of any wrong-doing, noting that "her divorce record seemed due to geographical rather than ethical condition; and her worst laxities were likely to proceed from a wandering and extravagant good-nature" (372). Lily's doubts arise instead from fear of being associated with another "transaction" (373). The repetition of this word, which recalls Gus Trenor's shady dealings and Sim Rosedale's talk of blackmail, induces Lily to call forth a horizon made seedy by the forbidding link between sex and money. Lily imagines Mrs. Hatch--a hybrid of 'high' Venus-like beauty and aspirations, and 'low' origins and taste--sitting at a Van Osburgh dinner. Although she likes the thought, she dreads "being personally connected with the transaction" (373).

Lily vacillates in her doubts, finally relinquishing her class-bound vision when Selden appears to show her the supposed error of her situation. Coming quickly to the defense of Mrs. Hatch when Selden tells her "You are to let me take you away from here," Lily initially judges his invasiveness to be "a strange assumption of authority" (376). Able to separate Mrs. Hatch's basic good-heartedness from her lack of taste, Lily quickly presents logical arguments to counter Selden's objections. Using the common ground of their conversation at Bellomont to point out the flaw in his assertion that she has "unconsciously placed [herself] in a false

position" (378), she astutely recognizes that Selden's definition of a "false position" now means one "outside of what we call society" (378), and she reminds him that he once judged the "inside" as hopelessly wanting. In alluding to Selden's supposed belief in a "republic of the spirit" (89), Lily comes close to breaking free of elitist interpretations, for she makes problematic Selden's aestheticism that holds at its core a profound contradiction. While on the one hand, Selden insists that the "republic of the spirit" is personal freedom "from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents," he simultaneously embraces an aristocratic ideal of society: "The people who take society as an escape from work are putting it to its proper use," he says; "but when it becomes the thing worked for it distorts all the relations of life" (92). Justifying "the decorative side of life" and a "sense of splendour" but judging harshly those who work so as to consume, he accepts as ideal the sort of conspicuous leisure that Veblen identifies as the primary marker of the aristocracy.⁶⁵ Inherited wealth, in Selden's opinion, enables proper use of society. An antimodernist at heart, Selden's economic principles harken back to a pre-industrial model of class structure; thus, he can self-righteously abhor the conspicuous waste of the nouveau riche and register horror at the thought of Lily Bart working for a living.

X

Internalizing Selden: Lily's Utopian Deathwish

The scene with Selden at Mrs. Hatch's hotel continues to elaborate Selden's role as spectator of Lily, showing once again that his

spectatorship exists in direct opposition to interpersonal intimacy. While Selden's emotionally detached and judgmental intervening at Gerty Farrish's request angers Lily almost to the point of hate, the Selden with whom she shares an affinity for aesthetic response remains untouched:

She was very near hating him now; yet the sound of his voice, the way the light fell on his thin dark hair, the way he sat and moved and wore his clothes--she was conscious that even these trivial things were inwoven with her deepest life. (375)

This passage tellingly shows that Selden has become an integral part of Lily's self but that her internalized view of Selden remains separate from the reality of Selden. Having learned that he cannot interact with her on an equal basis and chooses instead to judge and thus exclude her, she can almost hate his stoic narrowness. Yet, at the same time she can pull into her self the part of Selden that made possible in their first encounter a shared understanding of the word *dingy* and later made possible their shared creation of the *tableaux vivant*. "Inwoven with her deepest life," Selden has moved from serving as her quite perfect, outside observer/spectator to a position *inside* Lily's self.

Lily's parting with Mrs. Hatch relates closely to her experience with Trenor, her misreading of the moral implications of her involvement with the Dorsets in Monte Carlo, and her quick rejection of Sim Rosedale's suggestion that she blackmail Bertha. Having learned to read business transactions as 'low,' she quickly leaves Mrs. Hatch when Mr. Stacy, one of the Hatch hangers-on, suggests financial reward if she co-operates in matching Mrs. Hatch with the heir of the Van Osburgh fortune. Wharton's repetition of *transaction*, the word used several times in Lily's encounter

with Trenor and also used to describe Rosedale's offer, calls attention once again to the theme of crude money on a horizon fraught with things 'low': illicit sex, blackmail, exchange of money between men and women:

The sense of being involved in a *transaction* she would not have cared to examine too closely had soon afterward defined itself in the light of a hint from Mr. Stacy that, if she 'saw them through,' she would ... have a direct reward" (381)

Because Wharton so carefully absolves Mrs. Hatch of any moral offenses, Lily's flight from Mrs. Hatch constitutes another misreading. Because Lily refuses to examine the situation closely, she assumes that this transaction is like any other exchange of money between men and women outside of marriage--a cloak enwrapping things 'low'.

When Lily leaves Mrs. Hatch, she steps from the upper and middle classes into the working class, becoming a sweatshop worker in a milliner's establishment. Working side-by-side with the types of women who in the novel's first scene promenade the New York streets in "preposterous hats," Lily observes these women's "sallow ... dull and colourless" faces. Earlier during Lily's short-lived flight into philanthropy, she had visited girls like these at Gerty Farish's Girls' Club and had supported some of them with money from her stock market "earnings," but her "interest" in them had emanated from her superior social position as she looked down on them "from the happy altitude of her grace and her beneficence" (386-87). Now among the working girls "on a level with them," she finds them "less interesting" (386) and feels "an instinctive shrinking from all that was unpolished and promiscuous" (386). Still elitist and using good taste as a means of making distinctions and

choices, Lily here remains fundamentally true to her mother's early directive--"what's the use of living if one must live like a pig?" Only when she is dismissed from the milliner's shop and must face "nothing to get up for" in the mornings does she encounter her final strand of meaning in *dinginess*--"the clutch of solitude" (431).

When Lily makes her "final decision" to use the letters purchased from Selden's cleaning lady as blackmail, she sits alone "stranded in a great waste of disoccupation" (408). Having entered a restaurant during one of her aimless wanderings of the New York streets, she encounters the dinginess she has been competent to read since her mother's words first advised her. Lily first notes the women and girls "engaged in rapid absorption of tea and pie" beneath the room's "low ceiling" (408). Their gluttonous eating, their "shrill" (and thus tastelessly 'low') voices, and their "sallow" preoccupation, however, do not cause her to shrink from them. Rather, she craves from them "a responsive glance" and seeks among the faces "some sign" to relieve her "profound loneliness" (408). This scene marks Lily's first genuine desire for interaction with classes of women whom she would have earlier disdained. When she gets no response from anyone, she drinks tea and "unconsciously [arrives] at a final decision" (408).

Lily's determination to accept the hybrid, homely goodness of Rosedale is underscored by the curious mix of 'high' and 'low' when Lily leaves her boarding house with Bertha's letters in hand. While the "day [is] still high," the darkened sky threatens rain and the "cold gusts [shake] the signs projecting from the basement shops" (409). Having "benumbed her finer sensibilities" (409), Lily remains "calm and

unwavering" until she comes upon the street where she walked with Selden to his apartment building for tea. Here the "throng of benumbed sensations" loosen and she "[sees] her action as he would see it--and the fact of his own connection with it, the fact that, to attain her end, she must trade on his name, and profit by a secret of his past, [chills] her blood with shame" (410). Suddenly, her hunger to be once more in Selden's "quiet room" amid his "bookshelves" takes her to his door one last time (411).

In Lily's parting scene with Selden, she delineates parts of her social self, telling him that she has come to leave with him the "Lily Bart [he] knew" (417). Having shared with Selden aesthetic readings of life scenes and having interpreted the material through a frame of Emersonian platonism that turned it into the spiritual, Lily must of necessity leave behind this self as she begins a strictly material quest --her intended marriage to Rosedale. Because this poetic self of Lily's has practiced seeing through Selden's eyes to judge the dingy gluttony and guilt of the nouveau riche, she must oust from herself these "finer sensibilities" (409). This poetic self, educated and nourished through her contact with Selden, has become for Lily her *ideal social self*.⁶⁶ She explains the profound connection between this self and Selden when she tells him,

"Some women are strong enough to be good by themselves, but I needed the help of your belief in me.... And then I remembered--I remembered your saying that such a life could never satisfy me; and I was ashamed to admit to myself that it could. That is what you did for me--that is what I wanted to thank you for." (416)

In pulling Selden into her self, Lily has bought his elitist sense of morality, and he has become for her an "ideal tribunal" (James 301). He serves from this point until her death as what William James calls an "ideal spectator" (James 301). This ideal spectator, an internalized rather than actual other, serves as a personification of the principle of "right," James says (301). Deciding now to give up the plan to use the letters she purchased from Mrs. Haffen as a path to marrying Rosedale, she slips them into the fire in a way that goes unnoted by Selden. When Lily burns the letters, she performs the action with only her ideal social self as audience, for Selden's actual spectatorship is no longer of any consequence. She has chosen to keep her ideal social self rather than leave it there with Selden.

Because in *The House of Mirth*, Lily's crisis of moral authority--her dependence on her mother's warning about pigs--has left her without "any continuity of moral strength" (352), we might be tempted to read Lily's self-judgment now as a moral victory. Having thoroughly integrated into her self Selden's former belief in her worthiness, Lily seems to have gained a self now capable of moral strength. But because Wharton has so carefully made problematic Selden's own judgments, there is little reason to believe that such a moral victory exists.

Because Lily has lived out the consequences of misreading, she has moved well beyond Selden in her ability to comprehend situations. Gradually having learned to bring to her understanding many perspectives, a "wandering viewpoint" (Iser 108), Lily has learned the fuller complexity of situations. She has learned that hybrids exist: sallow-faced women in tearooms might comfort her and Rosedale has cloaked beneath the

upholstered guilt of his clothing a homely goodness. In choosing 'right' by using Selden as her ideal tribunal, she has reverted to pulling from her repertoire only those meanings she understood when she set herself apart from the dingy throng on the street, when she and Selden hiked to the poetic heights above the real world, or when they co-created ideal beauty during the *tableau vivants*. Selden's approach to the world, his operating by way of exclusion and negation, however, conflicts with Lily's more expansive and inclusive approach. The personality traits that have enabled Lily to adapt to whatever group in which she finds herself, that have kept her from hating Bertha Dorset even when Bertha sacrificed Lily to save herself or that have made her quick to understand and forgive her former friends' slighting of her, now make her overlook Selden's involvement with a married woman. While her ideal social self can judge harshly the self that wants material comfort, it is not able to exclude--as Selden does--other people. Her ideal social self can see gluttony and guilt and feel shame in wanting Rosedale, but it refuses to see *porcus* smoldering between the lines of Bertha's love letter. If Lily could have resisted Selden's spectatorship or if she could have made his exclusive and judgmental stance her own, she might have judged *him* as harshly as he judges her. She has followed her ideal spectator into an isolated, ideal world, and now he has exited, leaving her alone to the dingiest dingy of all--"the clutch of solitude" (431).

Lily's propensity for expansion and inclusion explain Wharton's including in *The House of Mirth* Lily's subsequent encounter with Nettie Struthers, a working girl whom Lily had supported at Gerty's Girls' Club. While by and large critics read this scene as Wharton's sudden

capitulation to a sentimentalism not in keeping with the rest of the novel, this problematic aspect diminishes somewhat in light of the delineation of selves that Wharton has set up. When Lily holds Nettie's baby, feeling the "child [enter] into her and [become] a part of herself" (427), the expansive qualities in Lily's self are highlighted. Nettie's child, entering into Lily's own self (as one of the social selves, James would say), brings Lily a "sense of human fellowship" (427), and this sense signifies a space opposite from the isolated, ideal world where Selden has left her.⁶⁷ Because Lily judges her ideal (and by extension, isolated) self to be her "best" and most worthy self, she primes the scene for further profound conflict when she allows a sense of human fellowship to overtake her. Selden's ideals, integrated as they are into her ideal social self, cannot co-exist peacefully with her other selves who can read the hybrid complexity of words and situations and still yearn for human contact.

The conflict between Lily's ideal social self and the other more complex parts of her self underscore her actions when she returns to her room and later when she does her third and final 'reading' of her bodiless clothing. Warmed by her encounter with Nettie and the baby, she vows that she will "learn to fall in with the conditions of ... life" in the dingy boarding house. After eating the boarding-house dinner (odorous and cooked in the basement), she continues in her desire to fall in with the conditions of boarding-house life as she sets her possessions in order. Systematically examining the drawers and cupboards, she surveys "the few handsome dresses left--survivals of her last phase of splendour," noting their "long, unerring lines" and their "fall of lace and gleam of

embroidery" (428). Wharton's word choice underscores Lily's act of reading, for each detail of the dresses seems to be "a letter in the record of her past," and she brings to the text her repertoire of life experiences, finding "an association [lurking] in every fold" and allowing each to evoke "the atmosphere of her old life" (428). Examining last the "Reynolds dress she had worn in the Bry *tableaux*," she remembers the "flower-edged fountain where she had stood with Lawrence Selden and disowned her fate" (429). This disowned fate, of course, was her attachment to the real and material world in favor of his isolated, ideal world of beauty. Now this idealized world appears once more, and as she lays each dress away, she sees "some gleam of light, some note of laughter, some stray waft from the rosy shores of pleasure" (429).

Just as Lily's previous readings of her disembodied dresses formed a pretext for action, her reading now prepares her for the arrival of Mrs. Peniston's legacy. Having just read the Reynolds' dress as Selden had read it, she reacts to the arrival of the check from the perspective of her ideal social self: she decides to pay her debt to Trenor. The thoughts that intervene between her decision to pay the debt and the actual writing of the check underscore the conflict between Lily's selves, for she thinks first of the material dinginess that might be erased by using the money in other ways. The image of material dinginess appears to her in the memory of a "Miss Silverton's dowdy figure," but as she 'reads' this image the horizon called forth has little to do with material dinginess:

It was no longer ... from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking.... It was indeed miserable to be poor--to look forward to a shabby,

anxious middle-age, leading by dreary degrees ... to gradual absorption in the dingy communal existence of the boarding-house. *But there was something more miserable still--it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years.* (emphasis added 431)

The self who needs love and human fellowship brings to her awareness the endless isolation that now seems the dingiest of dingy. Isolation, however, defines one of the main qualities of Selden's "republic of the spirit." Wharton, echoing William James's use of the word *renunciation*, emphasizes that Lily's renunciation of "baser possibilities" is also detachment from other people. Choosing with the ideal social self and Selden's way of reading means "the emptiness of renunciation" (433), and this choosing leads her to write the check to Trenor. The conflict between this ideal social self and other selves who read differently appears when Wharton writes,

There was the cheque in her desk ... she meant to use it in paying her debt to Trenor; but she foresaw that when the morning came she would put off doing so, would slip into gradual tolerance of the debt. The thought terrified her--she dreaded to fall from the height of her last moment with Selden. (435)

Lily's overdose of chlorophyll and her death that follows combine elements of decisive action and a hesitant settling for anything that will allow escape. As much a matter of bad luck as conscious choice, her death in either case embraces--as does the death of Edna Pontellier--a utopian dream.⁶⁸ On the one hand, Lily wishes "to prolong, to perpetuate, the momentary exaltation of her spirit" when she is acting as a non-conflicted ideal social self. On the other hand, as she moves closer to death,

curiously, she feels "Nettie Struther's child lying on her arm" (437). Choosing with Selden and her ideal social self, she simultaneously chooses against them.

If William James were called in as a consulting psychologist to do a reading of Lily's final act, he might point out that one's multiple selves must exist in hierarchy. He might explain that if a person cannot subordinate the 'lower' selves and all their conflicting desires to whichever of the selves reigns 'high' on the top, that person experiences a profound fragmentation of self. He might say that Lily Bart was such a person. His auditors, of course, would not know for sure which of Lily's selves he would have helped her read as the 'high' one. Still, his reading would provide a clearer explanation than the one provided by Selden, who is actually called in and presses Lily's dead lips to his forehead as the narrative voice imputes, "Yes, he could now read into that farewell all that his heart craved to find there" (445).⁶⁹ Somehow, James's reading seems more fitting than Selden's and more careful than the one Lily's mother would give: "What was the use of living if one had to live like a pig?"

XI
Hybrids, Dress, and *Sister Carrie*
('Jug' as Collaborator)

While Isabel Archer, Edna Pontellier, and Lily Bart each in her own way resists hybrid constructions of womanhood, Dreiser's Carrie Meeber welcomes opportunities for fashioning her working-class self into whatever shape best emulates the cultural 'high.' While Carrie makes no conscious attempt to merge contradictory impulses or to accept hybrid blends of

social forms, her very being embodies hybrid forms. She *is* the hybrid. Of working-class origins, but always fashioning a self in reference to some cultural 'high,' Carrie progresses by way of hybridization. Differing from Isabel, Edna, and Lily by way of social class, Carrie Meeber differs, too, in that upon the novel's end, she will continue her self-fashioning. Isabel Archer, reconciled to life-in-death with Osmond, returns to his house of suffocation to remain the lady, and Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, each embodying through their deaths a sort of utopian dream, thwart any possibilities for achieving selfhood that can exist in the real world. Carrie, on the other hand, lives at the novel's end, and although she rocks in her chair dreaming her own sort of utopian vision of "peace and beauty which glimmered afar off," we as readers know that she will go on to fashion and refashion her self.

My reading of *Sister Carrie* examines Dreiser's ambivalence concerning his protagonist, whom most critics have read as the writer's indictment against materialism and the artifice of turn-of-the-century consumer culture. While most critics (Robert Penn Warren being an exception) have read Carrie's acting as merely commentary on the unauthentic life--"The characters in *Sister Carrie* are all actors," Kenneth Lynn writes (502)--

my own reading distinguishes between theatre as 'mask' and theatre as 'mirror,' a contrast grounded in turn-of-the-century theatre critics' discourse on art and drama. And while by and large, critics agree with Charles C. Walcutt's ruling that the novel "expound[s] the purposelessness of life," I suggest that Dreiser does not completely condemn Carrie and her pursuits. Rather, he shows that her desire for distinction is a very

human desire. Using the theatre as a means for delineating the paths that desire can take, Dreiser suggests that unquenchable desires propel creative work.

Of working-class background himself, Theodore Dreiser--like Carrie Meeber--fashioned a self. He, like she, used clothing. Before beginning work for various Chicago newspapers, Dreiser worked to collect installment-plan payments for Frank Nesbit, the owner of a store selling "bric-a-brac of garish taste and shoddy workmanship" (Lingeman 87). According to his biographer, Dreiser longed for "better clothes, a necessity for impressing the girls he would someday meet" (Lingeman 88). Pocketing payments made in full while intending to pay his employer the purchasers' weekly thirty-five cent installments, Dreiser bought "a handsome woolen overcoat" but lost his job when his scheme was uncovered (Lingeman 88). Later, as a reporter for the *Republic*, Dreiser chose to "don evening wear when the assignment called for it" (118). One colleague reported that he was "the best dressed newspaperman I ever knew ... a classy dresser" while another judged that he had "a genius for overdressing" (qtd. Lingeman 118). This latter colleague reveals how Dreiser himself struggled to distinguish the gradations of meaning in sartorial one-upmanship: "Just the wrong touch in his effort to be altogether correct ... he was so ambitious so anxious to appear as one 'to the manner born'" (qtd. Lingeman 118). Choosing "soft collars and flowing ties," Dreiser affected a style reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic dress. Dreiser's assuming this sartorial mode corroborates my commentary on Carrie's *Gaslight* costume, which I read as a statement about aesthetics and the role of art. His choice suggests, too, that he saw

dress as a part of artistic self-fashioning. Dreiser's admiration of Wilde's work led him in 1896 to send the dandyish poet's "Endymion" to his future wife Jug (Lingeman 205).

"Jug," nee Sara Osborne White, played an important role in the writing of *Sister Carrie*. Serving as "technical adviser on matters of feminine dress," Jug--according to Lingeman--made minor changes in Dreiser's manuscript: "For example, she changed the backward-running sentence "On her feet were yellow shoes and in her hands her gloves" to "Her brown shoes peeped occasionally from beneath her skirt. She carried her gloves in her hand" (Lingeman 274). Lingeman's comment on Jug's advising--"those yellow shoes had to go," he writes parenthetically--undervalues Jug's advice on feminine dress. Of the novels within my own study, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* most exactingly reflects through details of dress the historical and cultural background. If Dreiser knew no better than to put yellow shoes on Carrie's feet, Jug must have suggested much more than "changes [that] were minor" (Lingeman 274). The details are impeccable. James L. W. West III's *A Sister Carrie Portfolio* includes a manuscript facsimile of questions Jug posed upon her reading of the first three chapters of her husband's novel. Written in Jug's legible hand, the questions seem to call attention to her scrutiny of historical detail: "When did the word 'drummer' first come into use? ... When did the term 'flat' for resident apartments first come into use? ... Had Chicago 500,000 in 1884? ... Where were the first Dept. Stores established + when?"

The details of protagonist Carrie Meeber's dress, so intricately tied to her climb to success and so flawlessly chosen for accuracy,

suggest that the import of Sara White Dreiser's influence on *Sister Carrie* has yet to be fully examined. Theodore Dreiser's life suggests a full awareness of self-fashioning, but the flawlessness of sartorial coding seems to owe much to his collaborator. For Jug Dreiser, details of dress seem to have entered as an element of historical and cultural accuracy, the hallmarks of realist fiction.

Notes

⁵²See, for example, T. J. Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace* and Walter Susman's *Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*.

⁵³John Kasson, in *Rudeness and Civility*, includes this quotation in his discussion of nineteenth-century manners (78).

⁵⁴Nan Enstad focuses on the role of pulp fiction in working class women's practice of "playing the lady," a pastime that worked to create a cohesive culture among working women. Enstad's work shows that dime novels, widespread especially in the Northeast, invariably included the working woman falling in love with an upper-class man, her numerous adventures after a separation from him, her inheritance of a secret fortune, and her restoration to "real" ladyhood at the novel's end.

⁵⁵Throughout my discussion of *The House of Mirth* I will be using the word *interpretant* rather than the more common but misleading term *interpreter*. In emphasizing the role of the agent who makes meaning of the sign before him or her, Peirce chose the term *interpretant*, for it signifies a distinctly triadic relationship between the sign, the observer, and the meaning. As a contemporary of Edith Wharton's and as a colleague of William James's, Peirce in all likelihood influenced Wharton's thinking. Her concern over words and how they come to "mean" echoes the pragmatic theories of C.S. Peirce. Peirce discusses the role of the interpretant in meaning-making in his essay "On a New List of Categories." See also "Letters to Lady Welby," especially pages 403-34.

⁵⁶Linda Nochlin, in *Realism*, writes that Manet was "the city-dweller *par excellence*" (159). She notes Manet's use of dark accents against

"roughly brushed" backgrounds (160), his works' sense of immediacy (162-67), and his assertion of the "controlling element" by the way he cuts off the scene "arbitrarily" (163).

For nineteenth-century writing on aesthetic principles applied to dress, see Blanc's *Art in Ornament and Dress*.

⁵⁷Joanne Findelstein, in *The Fashioned Self*, provides a detailed history of physiognomy and argues that our present "views on identity are grounded in the ambiguous principles of physiognomy and other unexamined assumptions of human nature" (8). Martha Banta's extensive work on 'types' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides discussion of countless works from this period that deal with the classification of groups. Banta is particularly interested in "the refusal of one group to allow other groups the privileges and profits of 'being American'" (93).

⁵⁸For discussions of Charles Dana Gibson's graphic creation, see Lois Banner's *American Beauty* (154-74). Banner notes that reporters diligently sought Gibson's model among working class women, settling on two possible candidates--a renowned dancer's personal maid, who was daughter of a French father and Cuban mother, and Minnie Clark, a professional model of Irish working class background. Locating amid the working classes a model for Gibson's creation "seemed living proof that the American melting pot could work, that from the intermixture of racial nationalities could come the perfection of form and features that the entire nation could copy" (158).

⁵⁹At this point I use *ideal spectator* as a phrase denoting only Selden as observer of Lily's visual presentations of herself. As

observer/interpretant, he is the character most aesthetically and socially attuned to reading Lily's image. Later in this chapter, I will discuss Selden as *ideal spectator* in a Jamesian sense. William James uses the phrase in his paradigm for moral development. In showing Selden's shift from ideal (or perfect) spectator to ideal (as in idealized, internalized) spectator, I explain Lily's choices at the end of *The House of Mirth*.

⁶⁰Martha Banta's *Imaging American Women* (650-55) provides a general discussion of this form of entertainment, and Judith Fryer's "Reading *Mrs. Lloyd*" provides valuable insight into Wharton's use of Sir Joshua Reynolds' painting in Lily's performance. Grace Ann and Theodore R. Hovet's study of visionary rhetoric, "Tableaux Vivants: Masculine Vision and Feminine Reflections in Novels by Warner, Alcott, Stowe, and Wharton," discusses the "centrality of the male gaze in bourgeois society" (348). Barbara Hockman's "The Rewards of Representation: Edith Wharton, Lily Bart and the Writer/Reader Interchange" addresses the role of interpretants in readings.

⁶¹Wharton points up the hybrid mix of 'high' spirituality and 'low' physicality earlier in the novel when the narrative voice explains Lily's father as the source for her penchant for poetic sentiment. According to Mrs. Bart, her husband "wasted his evenings" reading poetry, "and among the effects packed off to auction after his death were a score or two of dingy volumes which had struggled for existence among the boots and medicine bottles of his dressing-room shelves" (45). Clothed in external dinginess and shelved alongside items decidedly unpoetic, even grotesque, through their association with the physical body, Mr. Bart's books contain beneath their surface a poetic sentiment, which he transmits to Lily. The

dingy book that clothes poetry inverts the symbolization Wharton uses when Lily's poetic opera cloak clothes physicality.

⁶²Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their discussion of the "low" discourses include a discursive history of pigs, arguing that "pigs seem to have borne the brunt of our rage, fear, affection and desire for the 'low'" (44).

⁶³Wolfgang Iser, in *The Act of Reading*, explains that readers make meaning of texts by selecting in various combinations from among multiple elements in a text. The selection of elements bring about a background-foreground relation that enables readers to comprehend the text. Encountering new meanings in a text, the reader chooses some element that calls forth other parts of the text to serve as background for the chosen element. The reader's own social and cultural codes help direct this process. I will be using Iser's theory and terminology to explain Lily's 'misreading' in Monte Carlo. Readers choose elements from the 'foreground' and appear against their original context in the 'background' (92-95). Similarly, in wandering from viewpoint to viewpoint within a text, a reader determines the 'theme' of any one particular moment; this 'theme' arrives embracing everything visible from that point--i.e., all other segments of the text that relate to this theme. This interlocking system of previous segments he calls the 'horizon.' (96-99).

⁶⁴For other writings from the period on taste and dress, see Elizabeth Lee's *Talks on Successful Gowning*, Helen Gilbert Ecob's *The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application To Dress of the Laws of Health, Art, and Morals*, and Emma E. Walker's "Pretty Girl Papers."

⁶⁵Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, argues that among the aristocracy the nonproductive consumption of time "is not only a honorific or meritorious act, but it presently comes to be a requisite of decency" (41). In modern capitalist societies, this sense of the unworthiness of productive work is manifested in the vicarious leisure performed by housewives and servants. Veblen writes,

The head of the middle-class household has been reduced by economic circumstances to turn his hand to gaining a livelihood by occupations which often partake largely of the character of industry, as in the case of the ordinary business man of to-day. But the derivative fact--the vicarious leisure and consumption rendered by the wife, and the auxiliary vicarious performance of leisure by menials--remains in vogue as a conventionality which the demands of reputability will not suffer to be slighted. (81)

⁶⁶William James defines the *ideal social self* as that part of the social self that forms through one's pulling into oneself an *ideal spectator*. James sees this ideal social self as integral in moral development, insisting that every person who makes sacrifices for right personify that principle of right, making choices and acting in reference to some "ideal tribunal" (301). For religious persons, the ideal tribunal is God or His equivalent; for others this ideal spectator is the image of someone who judges their actions and whose endorsement they most desire. James writes,

[T]he emotion that beckons me on is indubitably the pursuit of an ideal social self, of a self that is at least *worthy* of approving recognition by the highest *possible* judging companion, if such companion there be. This self is the true, the intimate, the ultimate, the permanent Me which I seek. (emphasis his James 301)

In Wharton's novel, because traditional modes of moral authority have left Lily without "any continuity of moral strength" (Wharton 352), Lily uses Selden as her "little light in the darkness," as her help to "be good" (416)--as her ideal spectator who brings into the self the *ideal social self*.

⁶⁷James himself, in explaining those with inclusive and expansive natures, waxes rather sentimental, writing,

The magnanimity of ... expansive natures is often touching indeed. Such persons can feel a sort of delicate rapture in thinking that however sick, ill-favored, mean-conditioned, and generally forsaken they may be, they yet are integral parts of the whole of this brave world. (298)

Wharton's use of Nettie's baby as vehicle for showing Lily's inclusive and expansive nature echoes in sentiment James's language. James sets up an opposition between such expansive natures and those he calls exclusive, noting that those who "proceed by the entirely opposite way" from expansion define the self by way of exclusion and negation. They "intrench their Me," he says, and their "smallness" of self must be consoled by their absoluteness of outline (298).

⁶⁸Criticism of *The House of Mirth*, like that of *The Awakening*, is driven by commentators offering arguments that account for Lily Bart's suicide. Shari Benstock's "A Critical History of *The House of Mirth*" provides early reviewers' reactions to Lily's demise.

Roslyn Dixon examines narrative structure, arguing that Lily fails to grow morally and that Wharton omits a moral center for the novel, creating "a world without moral positives because she sees in America a society without moral positives, a society lacking the kind of ethical foundation that would give meaning to Lily's struggle" (217).

Current cultural readings discuss the role cultural forces in shaping Lily's choices. Reginald Abbott, in examining the role of Art Nouveau as decorative ornamentation of mass-produced goods, draws links between Lily and the short-lived art movement. Annette Larson, in examining the City Beautiful campaigns of the turn-of-the-century and other forces like Turner's frontier thesis, shows how Wharton's use of physical space articulates class and a means of social control. Lillian Robinson, Robert Shulman, and Wai-Chee Dimock examine the novel in relation to the economic structure of Wharton's society. Robinson discusses issues of gender and class, and how Lily's death points up the broad gulf between the lives of the rich and the poor. Shulman examines the effects of the possessive market society on Lily's concept of self, judging that with no possessions but deeply affected by prevailing views of self-worth, Lily becomes the epitome of "the rootlessness and isolation of the dominant society" (18). Dimock's reading discusses the power of the marketplace in controlling logic and assimilating everything within its domain, showing how the contradictions in the capitalist ethic determine Lily's fate. Yeazell examines Lily through an analysis of Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous waste and class in America.

Feminist readings of *The House of Mirth* examine how sex and gender determine Lily's fall. Frances Restuccia's feminist reading makes the point that Lily's demise is "the result of her being born into a patriarchal world in which a woman is pinned down, transmogrified into a static art object if she is beautiful, and has to be married, as Lily complains, in any case" (415).

Nancy Topping Bazin's "The Destruction of Lily Bart: Capitalism, Christianity, and Male Chauvinism" argues that the money-centered, nonandrogynous society offers Lily only choices that require she compromise her dignity and self-respect. Carol Sapora examines Lily's two selves, showing that the opposition between inner, private self and the outer public self results from women's secondary status in the society. Elaine Showalter, putting the novel in the context of the female literary tradition and Wharton's own life, argues that in "choosing to have Lily die, Wharton was judging and rejecting the infantile aspects of her own self, the part that lacked confidence as a working writer, that longed for the escapism of the lady's world and reared the sexual consequences of creating rather than becoming art" ("Death" 22).

⁶⁹Selden's final reading of Lily Bart, in occurring after Lily's death, depends wholly on Selden's interpretation. With Lily no longer acting, Selden can, without the interference of any co-created messages or two-way communication, imagine what he pleases. Selden craves to find in their final farewell, perhaps, that Lily loved him, but because he craves this love now, the craving seems quite hollow. If she were alive, she would no doubt behave in ways that would disrupt his idealized vision of her.

Because Wharton has throughout the novel examined the problems that arise because of the triadic relationship between word, interpretant, and meaning, the novel's last sentence seems distinctly ironic: "[Selden] knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them *the word* which made all clear" (emphasis mine 445). For Selden the word is probably *love*, but

with Lily dead, *no word* passes between them; he simply creates a text that he can live with.

Chapter Five

When Lace Collars Speak:

Desire and the Fashioning of Self in *Sister Carrie*

If the smartly dressed Lily Bart, striking poses for spectators, can stand as signifier for an American sensibility at the turn of the century, even more so can Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Rising from the working class to assume her place on the Broadway stage, Carrie moves from small-town America to the city where she trades the homely garb of a former life for the promise of something better. Embodying an unmitigated desire for success, Carrie begins her quest by severing the "threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home" (1), thus arriving in Chicago seemingly disassociated from her former life. Once there she begins immediately to fashion a self fit to fill the bill created by America's developing consumer mass society.

The vision of self central to *Sister Carrie* is one that historian Walter Susman has observed in prescriptive literature of the early twentieth century. He and other historians invariably tie this vision of self to the immense changes occurring in American culture, showing that it developed in response to changes in social relations brought on by the shift from production-oriented to consumer capitalism. This sort of self, presented fictively by Dreiser, was well-suited to life in quickly swelling cities where aspirations ran high and desire surged incessantly. *Sister Carrie* suggests that the self of America's developing consumer-oriented society was a self in process, a performing self with eyes

adjusted to spectacle and display, ears attuned to the persuasive pitch of consumable goods, and body ready to assume the perfect "grace" of those worthy of emulation.⁷⁰ In Carrie Meeber's desire to escape the 'low' of her working class origins by continually performing acts of self-creation, Dreiser illustrates how the 'low' acts as an impetus for self-fashioning. But he does more. He suggests that the 'low' can likewise act as an impetus for art. Imprinted across that internal landscape that Lacanian psychoanalysis calls the Imaginary, Carrie's origins direct her desire, marking both her performance within the consumer marketplace and on the stage. 'Low' by birth, but travelling the road toward high success, Carrie embodies intersections where social classes cross and gender codes converge. A hybrid construction of womanhood, Carrie uses the 'low' to propel herself ever upward.

I
'Just Looking': On the Outside Gazing In

Carrie first encounters spectacle and display in a Chicago department store, The Fair, where she goes not as a consumer but as transplant from small-town America seeking work:

Carrie passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, stationery, and jewelry. Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. (17)

Dreiser captures in this scene the appeal of lavishly presented material goods--what one interior designer of a nineteenth-century department store saw as the "intensification of desire" (qtd. in Schlereth 148). This

emphasis on the art of commercial display, which was new to the nineteenth century, was intensified by newly developed technologies. Vast expanses of transparent display windows, made possible by developments in glass technology, and improved visibility, gained through the introduction of electrical lighting around 1880, helped create effects never before seen (Bowlby 2). While such spectacles capture Carrie's eye in the scene at The Fair, at this point in the narrative she does not stop to inspect too closely the wonders on display. Without money and acutely aware of "her individual shortcomings of dress" (17), she compares herself to others in the store, judging herself an "outcast" (17).

With this scene, Dreiser sets in motion the process that will govern Carrie's fashioning of self. Here, as later, she responds to the images before her with self-judgment, and at this point she judges herself to be uncomfortably and completely outside the city's social world. In The Fair she notices "fine ladies" who elbow and ignore her, "brushing past in utter disregard of her presence, themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contain[s]" (17). Carrie's self-judgement derives in part from what Anne Hollander has observed as each period's tendency to invoke "some common vision, some way all women [are] seen and [see] themselves" (*Seeing* 324). Fresh from small-town America, owning a "best dress" described as plain and blue with "black cotton tape trimmings" (4), Carrie does not mesh with this common vision and thus remains invisible to the city's collective eye. Dreiser's meager description of the dress suggests that it could be a ready-made "washdress." From the beginning of the 1880s inexpensive cotton dresses designed for easy laundering were sold in stores and through the mail by

such companies as Montgomery and Ward. Catalogues featuring gingham and cambric dresses "for the country" advertised different grades of dresses, which typically sold for prices ranging from \$.59 to \$2.50. Wearing such a costume, Carrie's silhouette would cut lines quite different from those of fashionable women, many of whom in 1889 would be wearing "a new kind of skirt--one that was so narrow as to interfere with walking ... and that had its weight tied back behind the thighs" (Severa 379).⁷¹ Obviously unfashionable and so sartorially beyond the pale that she has paled to invisibility, Carrie lacks subjectivity as it is constructed in this marketplace. Even the shop girls, employed by such factory-managers as those who have not yet hired her, wear clothes that are "neat, in many instances fine" (17). These shop girls *do*, however, see Carrie, but she recognizes in their eyes "a keen analysis of her own position--her individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of *manner* which ... must hang about her and make clear to all who and what she [is]" (emphasis Dreiser's 17). The "who and what" she is--the self that Carrie has brought to the city--is a wage-seeker without the means to participate in city life as she perceives it, an "outcast" unseen by most and scrutinized only by those who have just recently surpassed her in their own quests for success.⁷² Inside the store's managerial office she finds "other girls ahead of her, applicants like herself, but with more of that self-satisfied and independent air which experience of the city lends; girls who scrutiniz[e] her in a painful manner" (18). Positioning herself in direct opposition to those she encounters, she slinks through the store, an outsider to the city's promise of "wealth, fashion, ease" (17). And

the insiders, finely clad and participating in the dazzling world from which she is excluded, arouse in her a very real desire to belong.

II Desire and the Consumer Citizen

The subjectivity denied Carrie when she feels outside the world of Chicago's department store deserves close examination.⁷³ One way to interpret this lack is to recognize the role of consumption in the forming of self. Baudrillard's account of the consumer citizen establishes my starting point in that he suggests that the consumer's constitution of self as a social subject--i.e., a citizen of consumer society--demands the acquisition of goods (52-55). As Rachel Bowery writes, "What is by definition one's own, one's very identity or individuality, is at the same time something which has to be put on, acted or worn as an external appendage, *owned* as a property nominally apart from the bodily self" (28). Wikse, in *About Possession: The Self as Private Property*, elaborates this tie between identity and ownership, arguing that in a capitalist society the law of private possession becomes the ordering principle for all knowledge and that person's actions and behavior emanate from a "self which understands itself as private property" (16). Noting that both *personality* and *personalty* were used in the eighteenth century to denote "personal belongings" (40), he argues that the concept of personality is inseparable from the principles regulating private possessions. Wikse's argument provides one way of explaining the cultural and economic roots

of such arguments as William James's--that one's "wife and babes," clothing and home are integral parts of the self. Human relationships and material goods have become inseparable from self because ownership has become the operative metaphor for thinking.

When Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* feels "the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally" (17), she feels their claim upon her very self. Owning only the clothing of which she would readily rid herself, Carrie lacks a social identity within this world where goods have the power to form the man or woman, and thus the stage is set for Carrie's process of self-fashioning. Dreiser charges the scene with an undercurrent of sexual desire, which seems no accident in light of ideas he articulated in a 1920 essay entitled "Neurotic America and the Sex Urge." Influenced by the writings of Herbert Spencer, Dreiser maintained that all desires emanate from sexual urges. "[A]ll that is most distinguished in art, letters and social economy and progress generally," he writes, begin as sexual desire, which is displaced into "desires for wealth, preferment, distinction and what not" (134). In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser uses sexual metaphor for explaining the relationship between Carrie and the commodities displayed in The Fair. Of note in this passage is Dreiser's word choice--the "claim" laid upon Carrie, which places her in the typically female position of dominant sexual codes, with the woman's body "taken," laid claim to, by the man. Marx also articulates the commodity/consumer relationship through sexual terms, only in his analogy, commodities are taken [sexually] by *man*: "Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of

them" (*Capital* 51). While Marx's analogy places sexual power with the consumer, Dreiser in this scene places the power within the commodities, reversing the gender positions as first articulated by Marx. The contradictory positions of women in these two analogies suggests the mixed role of consumption in the forming of self. The consumer feels power in seizing and owning commodities and in making them a part of the self, but at the same time he/she feels possessed by the very commodities that grant this power. At the very least, the contradiction suggests that power lies at the heart of consumption and that sexuality forms the readiest metaphor for power.

Carrie's refusal to be seduced by the commodities even though there is "nothing which she did not long to own" (17) foreshadows her later experience on the stage. While in this scene Carrie recognizes the seductive powers of "dainty slippers, ribbons, hair-combs, purses" (17) and while later as a stage star she becomes the object of male desire, she resists both, refusing to stop for either the consumables or for the wealthy men who propose marriage after seeing her on stage. While desires aroused and fulfilled within the marketplace clearly present their own host of complications, it is interesting that Dreiser constructs Carrie's sexuality both in *The Fair* and on the stage outside the traditional ways of thinking about women and sex. That Carrie's desires exceed fulfillment offered in traditional male-female relationships suggests the cultural climate of change besetting gender relations and the ways women were defining self. While Carrie's passivity marks much of Dreiser's text and dominates the critical appraisal of her character,⁷⁴ in many instances--particularly those wherein she occupies an object position--she responds

by exerting agency. Her refusal to stop at the display counters in The Fair prefigures her later refusal to submit to the wooing of her male audience, and at the base of these actions power resides.

The powerlessness that Carrie feels and the subjectivity she is denied in the scene at The Fair results in her setting up a hierarchy between herself and others. The inclination to set up hierarchies and the relation of this action to power is tellingly revealed in Carrie's first experience on stage. As her voice assumes "for the first time a penetrating quality which it had never known" (135), the audience perceives "power" (137) in her presence and performance. Her two lovers --Drouet, who has rescued her from poverty, and Hurstwood, who will sink to poverty because of his drive to have her--respond as they never have before. Hurstwood, Dreiser writes, thinks now "that she [is] beautiful. She [has] done something which [is] above his sphere. He [feels] a keen delight in realising that she [is] his" (135). Similarly, Drouet is "now delighted with his possession" (136). While each feels that he possesses her, Carrie experiences the success as independence:

The independence of success now made its first faint showing. With the tables turned, she was looking down, rather than up, to her lover [Drouet]. She did not fully realise that this was so, but there was something in condescension coming from her which was infinitely sweet.
(141)

On the stage Carrie achieves a power that she has lacked elsewhere, and the relationship between this power that comes through performance and the subjectivity achieved as consumer citizen forms the crux of selfhood as it is presented in Dreiser's novel. Hierarchies--both Carrie's

preoccupation with her own 'low' status that contrasts so markedly with the fine ladies and her later feelings of power whereby she perceives herself as "above" particular "others"--are central to cultural formations in general and become the operative logic behind Carrie's self-in-process.

III Self-Fashioning: Desire for the 'High'

The arguments of Peter Stalleybrass and Allon White, as I have noted in the previous chapters, suggest that cultures "think themselves" by way of cultural categories of 'high' and 'low' and that these categories construct not only a hierarchy of social class but of other important domains as well. The human body, psychic forms, and geographic space are likewise laid out through the high/low opposition, and divisions in one domain are continually "structured, legitimated and dissolved by reference to the vertical symbolic hierarchy which [operate] in the other three domains" (3). As Stalleybrass and White have shown, the extremes of high and low, as well as the further classification that marks off the various levels of social status, reveal more than just information about class.

The interrelated and dependent hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' appear early in *Sister Carrie* when Dreiser maps out the geographic space of Chicago, noting that

Minnie's flat, as the one-floor resident apartments were then being called, was in a part of West Van Buren Street inhabited by families of labourers and clerks, men who had come, and were still coming, with the rush of population pouring in at the rate of 50,000 a year. (8)

The Hanson's flat is located geographically on Chicago's West Side, an area devoted to light industry and housing for white service and factory workers.⁷⁵ The North Side, where Hurstwood and his family live, is comprised of middle- and upper-middle-class homes while the East Side includes the fine downtown hotels and theatres and older upper-class houses along the avenues. The connection between geographic space and social class is obvious, but when we map in the South Side, recognizing it as "the segregated vice district of the city" (Meyerowitz 46), the interrelatedness of geographic space, social class, the human body, and psychic forms surfaces. According to the paradigm laid out by Stalleybrass and White, Chicago's South Side occupies the 'low' position where all that is symbolically base, abject, and thus rejected abides. Housing African-Americans, who were legally and socially segregated, and accommodating both the "bright light" centers of the black community and racially mixed cabarets and brothels, the South Side also provided dance halls, where young, white working women could make "pick up acquaintances" with men. Prostitution and relaxed sexual mores within this area suggest what Stalleybrass and White see as a persistent configuration of high/low hierarchies:

A recurrent pattern emerges: the 'top' attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other (in the classic way that Hegel describes in the master-slave section of the *Phenomenology*), but also that the top *includes* that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. (emphasis theirs 5)

Stalleybrass and White theorize here what sociologist Robert Park in 1916 observed in what he called "moral regions" of the city, defining them as "detached milieus in which vagrant and suppressed impulses, passions, and ideals emancipate themselves from the dominant moral order" (qtd. in Meyerowitz 45). In *Sister Carrie* morality, power, fear of the "inferior," and desire are all played out. In the arenas where Carrie performs her act of self-fashioning, she consistently wrestles with her perceptions of others' superiority, desiring the power, wealth, and happiness that she sees amid the spectacle of the Chicago and New York streets and theatres; traditional morality fails to hold up under the weight of economic distress and the promise of an easier life.

For Carrie, the 'top' and 'bottom'--the 'high' and 'low'--of the social hierarchy carry powerful symbolic weight even though to the reader the subtle gradations within the system quickly surface. For both Carrie and the reader, clothing serves as primary marker of position, but for Carrie clothing likewise defines character. When Carrie leaves The Fair where she has seen the 'high' of fine ladies, she continues to search for work, encountering the 'low' of sweatshop girls' garb in a factory that makes boys' caps. Judging the workers to be "the lowest order of shop-girls," Carrie notes their drabness, their oil-stained faces, and their "thin, shapeless, cotton dresses" rolled up at the sleeves and open at the neck (18). The poorer-quality, mass-produced washdresses that sold for less than fifty cents each tended toward uniformity of style and sizing but were cut to mimic the lines considered fashionable. In the late 1880s, washdresses had close-fitting sleeves that interfered with work, yet women "did not have the option of wearing loose-fitting work clothes,

and there was no popular relaxed cut at the time" (Severa 412). The shop girls Carrie observes have adapted the clothing to suit the work, but their rolled sleeves and open necks (and possibly their lack of corseting suggested in the shapelessness of their form) make Carrie decide that they are "careless and hardened" (20), a judgment that she bases solely on their appearance. Lacking sartorial straight-lacing, the girls seem to lack also the morals that straight-lacing implies, and Carrie's judgment of clothing quickly becomes a judgment of character: "They must be bad-minded and hearted, [Carrie] imagine[s]" (20). Finding the girls and their garb wanting, she continues to search for work even though the foreman in this low place has offered her a position as stitcher at \$3.50 a week.

Carrie reveals her tendency to perceive in strictly binary terms of 'high' and 'low' when she finally gets work at a shoe factory, a firm that she judges to be "a goodly institution" because of its huge, pleasing plate glass window (21). The plate glass, like that which gives other "ground floor offices a distinguished and prosperous look" (12), leads her to imagine contact with the "great owners" and to envision that "her work would be where grave, stylishly dressed men occasionally look on" (26). But just as Chicago's geographic terrain maps out social class, so, too, do its fine buildings. The fascinating and metaphorically 'high' surfaces conceal and oppose the lowly workers within, a reality Carrie observes when she walks past the "shiny and clean" windows to enter "the great shoe company at Adams and Fifth Avenue" (26). After entering an elevator and emerging on the fourth floor, she is led "through dark, box-lined aisles" and enters "a large, low-ceiled room, with clacking, rattling machines at

which men in white shirt sleeves and blue gingham aprons [are] working" (27). Even here she has not reached her destination, since male workers were typically hired at higher wages and often worked at different tasks. Within the hierarchy of the shoe company, distance from the shining, plate-glass windows of the front office lays out the various gradations between management and "the lowest order of shop girls." On the sixth floor--literally high, but metaphorically oh-so-low--Carrie is employed to punch eye-holes in one side of leather shoe uppers. Conditions there are crowded, foul-smelling, littered, and "sordid" (30). Once she joins these workers of the "goodly institution," she immediately feels that "there [is] something hard and low about it all" (30). Thinking dualistically, Carrie now sees the once fine and high shoe factory in a dimmer light.

In an 1896 essay for *Ev'ry Month* magazine, Dreiser writes of the city's "high life," which is made possible only through the toil of the lower classes:

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 hands and hearts, the groups of ill-clad workers, the chambers stifling with the fumes of midnight oil consumed over ceaseless tasks. ("Reflections" 411)

Both the depiction of New York in this piece and the description of the Chicago shoe factory in *Sister Carrie* give the most powerful symbolic charge to the extremes of high and low, but both acknowledge, too, the "graduations" between these extremes. Just as the architecture of the Chicago shoe factory drafts a system of classification among the workers,

Dreiser's reflections aroused by a news story about a destitute man eating refuse from garbage cans elaborates the system of high/low:

And between this [destitute man] and that topmost type, whose clothes are costly and delicate of texture; whose linen is ever immaculate; whose chambers are soft with comforts and ever resplendent in detail; *how many gradations are there?* How many of the half hungry? the half weary? the half clothed? the half happy, are there? ... Ah! this is a wonderfully conglomerate world, filled with a million grades, and still a million, and the one cares not for the want of another. (emphasis added "Reflections" 412-13)

Stalleybrass and White argue that the powerful symbolism of the 'high' and the 'low' do not in any way blunt the subtle gradations within the whole of a culture's classification system. Rather, they say, "'above' and 'below' may be inscribed within a minutely discriminatory system of classification" (3). The power of the extremes, though, "foster a simplifying binaryism of high and low *within which* further classification will be made. In other words the vertical extremities frame all further discursive elaborations" (emphasis theirs 3).

The extremes of high and low and the myriad divisions within each become important to Carrie and her self-fashioning, for Carrie always perceives that which lies socially and sartorially above her as 'high'. And always her present self and circumstance appear to her a stark contrast. Working to fashion a self that will fit her for the 'high', but seeing only 'high' and 'low' rather than the gradations of the system, she must continually desire what seems beyond her reach. Dreiser juxtaposes two scenes that tellingly demonstrate Carrie's simplifying binaryism of the complex system of social classification. In the first scene, one

wherein the boys in the shoe factory flirt with her, she contrasts them (and their clothing) with Drouet, who first appeared on the train into Chicago wearing a suit of "striped and crossed pattern ... brown wool," a "stiff shirt bosom of white and pink strips," and linen cuffs "fastened with large, gold plate buttons" set with yellow agates (3). Dreiser hammers the assumed connection between character and dress, writing,

[Carrie] made the average feminine distinction between clothes, putting *worth, goodness, and distinction* in a dress suit, and *leaving all the unlovely qualities and those beneath notice* in overalls and jumper. (emphasis added 31)

Juxtaposed with this scene wherein Carrie remembers the finely clothed Drouet is a description of Chicago's "high life" (32) as Drouet perceives it. Sitting in the "splendid saloon" of Fitzgerald and Moy's with its "blaze of incandescent lights, held in handsome chandeliers," Drouet purchases whiskey and cigars that "to him [represent] in part high life --a fair sample of what the whole must be" (32). Drouet, a salesman, and others "who [have] not yet reached ... the dazzling height which money to dine here lavishly represent[s]" (32) come to gaze upon the spectacle of prosperous others. At the point in the narrative when Carrie's thoughts of worth, goodness and distinction center on Drouet, Dreiser reveals Drouet's meager position in the social hierarchy by showing him among the "actors and professional men" (32) who frequent the fine restaurants and saloons of Chicago. With the introduction of Hurstwood in this scene, Dreiser shows the way clothing is inscribed with subtle differences:

For the most part [Hurstwood] lounged about, dressed in excellent tailored suits of imported goods, a solitaire ring, a fine blue diamond in his tie, a striking vest of some new pattern, and a watch-chain of solid gold" (33).

A blue diamond supplants the salesman's cat's eye agate, and while Drouet's gold plate glitters as brilliantly as solid gold, the real thing separates the truly successful man from the hope-to-be. Thus Dreiser illustrates how clothing exists within the same sort of intricately discriminatory system of classification as do the social order and spacial location. In reducing the system to its essence, Carrie can see the workmen's jumpers and overalls and smell the foul sweatshops of the 'low'; she can also imagine Drouet with his linen cuffs amid the perfumed 'high'. But failing in her simplifying binaryism to distinguish the myriad subtleties of the system, she must endlessly long for the sweet, pure essence of high life, which ever wafts upward to a position higher and just out of reach. The self in process, fashioned through identification with this upward wafting high, finds, like some Lacanian child of the mirror stage, solace in the fictive image of its reflection.

IV

Mirrors and Self-Fashioning: Props in the Drama of Life

At important junctures in Carrie's fashioning of self, she gazes into mirrors that "convince her of a few things which she [has] long believed" (58). Later the mirror gazer *will become* the mirror when Carrie steps upon the stage, a transformation that links Carrie to the world of Art: "She was created with that passivity of soul which is always the mirror of the active world" (117). Dreiser's use of mirrors throughout *Sister Carrie* suggests the hodge-podge of meanings associated with mirrors at the turn of the century. In late nineteenth-century America, mirrors

carried both negative and positive connotations as well as myriad associations from art and literature--the story of Narcissus drowning out of love for his own image, centuries of art in which mirror-gazers see not themselves but skulls or devils or monkeys, and centuries of pictorial variants of a siren-like woman arranging herself in a looking glass. Material conditions, too, influenced meaning, for innovations in glass production made mirrors of all sorts, fixtures in middle-class homes. Framed wall mirrors and mirrored panels decorated interiors, expanding and illuminating space. Featured in furniture both fine and mass-produced, mirrors graced not only dressing tables and wardrobes but sideboards and hallstands as well. Material culture historian Robert Ames interprets these furnishings as indicative of the era's "auto-voyeurism," and he shows how such pieces were deliberately used in the nineteenth century as "props in the drama of life" (32, 30).

The mirror registers the first shift in Carrie's self-representation just after Drouet has convinced her to accept money to buy a "peculiar little tan jacket with large mother-of-pearl buttons" (51) and then accompanied her on two trips to the department stores for stockings, shoes, a purse, gloves, "a nice skirt and shirt waist" (58). Power, always inseparable from sexuality in *Sister Carrie*, courses beneath the scene of Drouet's compelling Carrie to accept his help, and it defines the image she sees reflected in the mirror. After Drouet slips the greenback's into Carrie's palm, she feels that she holds "something that [is] power in itself" (48), yet she simultaneously feels "bound to [Drouet] by a strange tie of affection" (47). Her feelings demonstrate not only the importance of money and force of materialism in late

nineteenth-century America; they tellingly show women's lack of economic independence. Drouet tells the truth when he insists that shop girls do not earn enough to live on. Joanne Meyerowitz's study of Chicago furnished room districts draws on writings by working women, one of whom wrote, "If I did not have a man, I could not get along on my wages" (qtd. 52-53). Because factory owners justified low wages for women by viewing women's wages as mere supplement to a family's income, self-supporting women could not make ends meet. Meyerowitz shows that dating, pick-ups, occasional prostitution, and temporary alliances provided solutions to economic woes that formed within this particular social and economic context. Arguing that working-class women were working out a revised sexual code, Meyerowitz recognizes women's victimization but argues, too, that many women clearly enjoyed the romantic pleasures and that "economic dependency in these relationships was not necessarily more exploitative or more oppressive than wives' traditional dependence on husbands or daughters' traditional dependence on fathers" (54). While Dreiser by and large denies free will, Carrie at the same time is certainly no victim, and with the power that she holds in her hand in the form of the soft greenbacks, she chooses articles of clothing that serve to empower her. Standing before the mirror, she "[catches] her little red lip with her teeth and [feels] her first thrill of power" (58). Having divested herself of the low garb that marked her as a low wage-earner in the shoe factory, replacing her worn shirt-waist, faded serge skirt, and crupled necktie with the jacket, skirt, and waist that Drouet buys her, she has fashioned herself in relation to what she perceives as high. Upon the mirror's polished surface she sees "quite another maiden" (58).

Dreiser underscores the discontinuity between Carrie's old self and this newly fashioned self in subsequent scenes that show Carrie's split image reflected first in the eyes of a working girl and then on the surface of a wardrobe mirror. Leaving Carson, Pirie's, a major Chicago clothing store, Carrie encounters "a pair of eyes" staring out "in recognition" from "a group of poorly dressed girls" (59). Recognizing a shabby young woman as a co-worker from the shoe factory, Carrie imagines herself clad in her "old dress" standing before the "old machine" (59). Stored in Carrie's Imaginary, that well-spring of desire and the psychic repository of images, are scenes from Carrie's former life. Her desire to avoid this image keeps her from speaking to her former co-worker, and she feels as if "some great tide" has rolled between them. These feelings of separation prefigure the separation from her former self that she perceives later when she begins to think about the moral implications of accepting Drouet's money:

Here, then, was Carrie, established in a pleasant fashion, free of certain difficulties which most ominously confronted her, laden with many new ones which were of a mental order, and altogether so turned about in all of her earthly relationships *that she might well have been a new and different individual*. She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse. Between these two images she wavered, hesitating which to believe. (emphasis added 70)

Taken together, these scenes suggest that Carrie's former self, clothed in lowly, shop girl waist and skirt, judges harshly the prettier, more highly fashioned Carrie, who has traded virtue for a pearl-buttoned jacket. But this ill-clad self, lacking the power associated with the

high of "money, looks, clothes, or enjoyment" (39), exists only as a "secret voice" that asserts itself "feebly and more feebly" (71). Because this low and less powerful self possesses conscience--"the voice of the people" and social convention (70), Carrie is unable to logically place it beneath the prettier self on the hierarchy that structures her thinking. Unable to find her way out of this "labyrinth of ill-logic," she "turn[s] away entirely" (71), and the increasingly feeble "secret voice" of conscience recedes beneath the persuasive pitch of fashion.

Fashioned by mimicking those whom she perceives as 'high', Carrie's self is attuned to the voices of objects-under-glass that sing out from the aisles of the Chicago department stores:

Seeing a thing, [Carrie] would immediately set to inquiring how she would look, properly related to it.... *Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion*; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. *When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear.* The voice of the so-called inanimate! Who shall translate for us the language of the stones?

"My dear," said the lace collar she secured from Partridge's, "I fit you beautifully; don't give me up."

"Ah, such little feet," said the leather of the soft new shoes.... (emphasis added 75)

In moments of synesthesia, lace collars on display can transmute into Carrie-in-collar mirrored in her mind's eye; simultaneously, they can become tender but rhetorically astute voices pleading in dialogue with desire. Such moments underscore the in-process, performative aspect of self as it is presented in Dreiser's novel. Always anticipating the next phase of her self-fashioning, Carrie imagines herself costumed to assume a role among those who perform in ways that seem to her worthy of imitation. Lace collars and soft leather shoes speak their own lines,

promising an appearance that will fit Carrie for scenes among the fine ladies who have disregarded her in the past. By allowing the clothing to speak, Dreiser lets it enunciate its meaning within late nineteenth-century culture, showing that it is, as Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen write, "an arena of social dialogue in which desires are expressed and symbolically met" ("Channels" 173).

Each time Dreiser's Carrie doffs one costume to assume another, she is treated more courteously. In New York, prospective employers, even when they offer her no work, are civil, and once she sheds her Columbia City washdress, no one addresses her as does the foreman in a manufacturing cloak house when he growls early in the novel, "No, no, ... we don't want any one. Don't come here" (20). No more ladies elbow her, either, as if she were invisible. Just as the clothing of Chopin's Edna Pontellier provide her with a social identity, so too do the shirt waists and short jackets that Carrie purchases from the racks of Partridge's and The Fair and Carson, Pirie's. For Carrie, the "who and what she is"--that is, her classification within a particular social and economic class--is not limited to wage-earner wearing a washdress. Albeit superficial, choosing a social identity from the racks proves more powerful than being elbowed out of the way, and to attain the next level of social status, Carrie dresses the part that allows her to be treated as the player of that role. And lest the whole concept of role playing itself sound bleak, I am reminded that social scientists assure us that we all perform in a variety of given roles and that without role playing, cultures could not function.⁷⁶

V

Looking Inside the Performing Self: The Imaginary

Having played out before her mirror the fashion choices that take her from worker to fashioned maiden and from fashioned maiden to "apt student of fortune's ways" listening intently to the persuasive tones of a lace collar, Carrie is ready to begin the most important phase of her self-fashioning--the attainment of grace. The transformation occurs before the mirror and with the aid of its reflective surface. Sensitive to Drouet's critique of women on the street ("Fine stepper," he says) and to his tactless comparison of her to "others better than herself" (76), Carrie begins to mimic the poses and movements of those who, like the railroad treasurer's daughter who lives in their building, possess grace. Imitating before the mirror their "graceful carriage," the manner with which they "[catch] up their skirts," and their subtle movements of lips and head (78-79), Carrie becomes, in Dreiser's words, "a girl of considerable taste" (79). With her "knowledge of grace doubled" (79) and with the influence of her well-dressed friend Mrs. Hale who teaches her "to distinguish between degrees of wealth" (86), Carrie achieves an appearance "as pleasing as perfect grace" (108). To late twentieth-century readers (at least those who imagine themselves immune to "performing" with reference to others), Carrie's efforts seem contrived and artificial, but as Martha Banta points out, Americans at the end of the nineteenth century took very seriously "the language of body" as it was ritualized in "the attitudes" (635). Magazine illustrations from the period surrounding the turn of the century show the prevalence of the

attitudes, a system of stock poses used to register despair, accusation, defensiveness, entreaty, supplication, and so forth. Noting that the seriousness with which the culture approached the attitudes stemmed from studies like Darwin's 1871 *Expression of Emotions*, Banta writes,

Since the language of the body and mind were universal, it was possible for anyone at any time or place to identify the feelings of strangers in the crowd. Under such authority, S.L. Louis' *Decorum* could advise its readers in 1881 to study "the attitudes." Versed in those poses, they could at least display the *outward behavior that suggested the qualities of the lady and the gentleman*. (emphasis added 634-35).

Mimicking the movements of the high lady, any woman could display grace, the quality that Dreiser calls "the lordly power of some women" (*Carrie* 107). Woven within the dichotomy of outward grace/inward grace are issues of concern to many during the nineteenth century, a period when much of America's popular literature asked, "Does 'good blood' or good taste and conduct determine one's ability to be a lady or gentleman?" Although working class by birth and blood, *Carrie* assumes the movements and demeanor of a lady, yet readers are led to believe, too, that *Carrie* possesses an innate superiority, "more imagination" than the "common" shop girls, more refinement and "instinct in the matter of dress" (40). While this issue of "blood" no doubt engages Dreiser, his attention to the dichotomy outward grace/inward grace also points up the worries of those like Henry Adams, who were bemoaning what they saw as the diminished meaning of *grace*. Once a spiritual component of Puritanism and then an outward sign of inner grace, *grace* by the turn of the century often connoted "good taste and the aesthetics of bodily movements" (Banta 660).

Dreiser, in describing Carrie's posing before her mirror as she imitates the graceful movements of those worthy of emulation, uses *grace* in the purely secular sense, signifying her exterior only, and later when Hurstwood contemplates Carrie's grace, Dreiser's narrative voice steps in to tell readers that the grace emanates not from her spirit but from her naturalistic, seemingly soulless body:

Carrie was indeed worth loving if ever youth and grace are to command that token of acknowledgment from life.... The mouth had the expression at times, in talking and in repose, of one who might be upon the verge of tears. It was not that grief was thus ever present. *The pronunciation of certain syllables gave to her lips this peculiarity of formation--a formation as suggestive and moving as pathos itself.* (emphasis added 107)

Dreiser's hammering of the exterior quality of Carrie's grace in this passage and in others that image her graceful imitations before her mirror contrasts with his use of the word when Carrie steps upon the stage as Laura, a shift I will address later in my discussion.

Carrie's exterior as presented in the above passage appears as a free-floating signifier attached to meanings that can only be supplied by those who see her. But in the paragraphs that follow this passage, Dreiser discusses her "spiritual side," which is "rich in feeling" (107). This discussion reveals Dreiser's ambivalence in his treatment of Carrie, for it arrives right on the tail of his presenting her grace as entirely external, split off from any underlying meaning. Because *grace* held a unstable position in late nineteenth-century discourse, perhaps the use of the word itself led Dreiser to allude to its older, more spiritual sense, or maybe he intended that readers read as superficial and therefore

ironic a spirituality that is evoked through image and representation only. On the other hand, the passage insists on the primacy of Carrie's emotions, a quality that he later *praises* in her acting. Regardless of our particular reading of the passage, the presence of mirrors--this time lodged within a kaleidoscope--signals information about Carrie's self in formation. Shifting beneath Carrie's observant eye, the kaleidoscope's mirrors suggest the symbolic roles of 'high' and 'low' in Carrie's formation of self, and the importance of clothing in distinguishing these cultural categories enters as part of the background for the scene. At this point in the narrative, Carrie is waffling between the attentions of the elegant, eloquent Hurstwood and the bond she has formed with the kindly but cruder Drouet. Having distinguished the difference between Drouet's eye-assaulting suits and Hurstwood's vest of "rich scotch plaid, set with a double row of round mother-of-pearl buttons[,] [h]is cravat ... of silken threads, not loud, not inconspicuous" (73), Carrie has come to see in Hurstwood "the superior man" (82). In her typical fashion, Carrie judges the gradation between Hurstwood and Drouet as high/low rather than simply above/below. And to emphasize the impact of these poles on Carrie's judgement, Dreiser uses the kaleidoscope as emblem of the confusing, ever-shifting particulars (like Drouet's suits) that might fall from 'high' to 'low' as quickly as the kaleidoscope's chips of glass or bits of confetti:

[Carrie] wanted pleasure, she wanted position, and yet she was confused as to what these things might be. Every hour the kaleidoscope of human affairs threw a new lustre upon something, and therewith it became for her the desired--the all. Another shift of the box, and some other had become the beautiful, the perfect. (107)

From his discussion of grace and his use of the kaleidoscope to mirror a continually changing 'high', Dreiser launches into the discussion of Carrie's spiritual side. Described in terms of emotion, this part of Carrie's self is comprised wholly of sorrow brought on by "many a spectacle" (107). Studying images on the Chicago streets just as she has studied her own reflection in the mirror, Carrie is pained by the spectacle of the pitiably ill-clad--"white-faced, ragged men" and "poorly clad girls" (107)--and by the memory of her "old father in his flour-dusted miller's suit" (108). Each spectacle focuses on the 'low', and interestingly it is "the hang of faded clothes" that "pain[s] her eyes" (107).

When Stalleybrass and White discuss the ways in which the cultural 'low' is integrated by way of fantasy and eroticism into the 'high'--"the top *includes* that low symbolically," they say--they provide a model for examining what Dreiser calls Carrie's "spiritual side." With each evocative spectacle depicting the working class, Dreiser suggests the continuing importance of Carrie's working class roots. Even though she has rejected for reasons of prestige the "who and what she is"--that low, wage-earner self in washdress, that outcast unseen and inconsequential--she has integrated the low into her psychic makeup by way of portraits gathered from that life. Dreiser's use of framed images calls attention to the 'low' as a dimension of self and psychic formations. Just as the mirror has framed Carrie's high, self-fashioned form, the windows she passes frame faces of the 'low': a face like that of her old father and a shoemaker "pegging at his last, a blastman in some basement where iron

[is] being melted, a benchworker ... his coat off, his sleeves rolled up" (108). The rolled sleeves bring to her mind "the details of the mill," and thus the rejected, wage-earner self is invoked to join the gallery of workers. Images culled from the low of working life are integrated into Carrie's imagination, which infuses them with "a pale, sombre half-light" that Dreiser calls "the essence of poetic feeling" (108). In the Lacanian psychoanalytic work of Julia Kristeva, the Imaginary appears as not simply the unconscious realm where images reside but as the well-spring of poetic language. Kristeva's model would suggest that Carrie has harbored within her Imaginary images from her working class life. Because the attachments formed in her working class home constituted her first desires, they will always inform her self-in-process. No matter what style her high self adopts as she steps before the perfect frame of the mirror, no matter what beauty or perfection reflects in the kaleidoscope's mirroring planes, the 'low' of her origins remains with her: "Her sympathies were ever with that under-world of toil," Dreiser writes, "from which she had so recently sprung, and which she best understood" (108). Sublimated, but ever with her, Carrie's original desire impels all other desires. As noted earlier, Dreiser maintained that all that all desires for wealth and distinction, as well as all that is "distinguished in art," emanates from sexual desire. Carrie's story explores both of these paths that originate within the Imaginary's inner landscape. Carrie more consistently chooses the path toward material success and distinction, and desire consistently marks her seduction by a new 'high' that has appeared in the kaleidoscope's prised eye.

Costuming the 'High'

Detailed descriptions of clothing appear only sporadically amid the myriad generalized descriptions of clothing in *Sister Carrie*, but when they do appear they allow readers to visualize the who and what of Carrie at the different stages of her self-fashioning. We see, for example, the faded-brown, wage-earner serge skirt and the shirtwaist of dotted blue percale, an outfit very much like those bedecking real working girls in a 1898 photograph taken at Brophy Brothers Shoe Company in Lynn, Massachusetts (Lee 65). We see, too, Carrie's short tan jacket with mother-of-pearl buttons, the boa, and gloves that adorn her once she accepts Drouet's greenbacks and once "the narrow life of the country [has] fallen from [Carrie] as a garment" (96). As Carrie walks with Hurstwood in the park, listening to his pleas that she come away with him, a detailed description of her clothing signals her attainment of a new 'high':

She had just recently donned a sailor hat for the season with a band of pretty white-dotted blue silk. Her skirt was a rich blue material, and her shirt waist matched it, with a thin stripe of blue upon a snow-white ground--stripes that were as fine as hairs. Her brown shoes peeped occasionally from beneath her skirt. She carried her gloves in hand. (109)

Having learned from her friend Mrs. Hale "to distinguish between degrees of wealth" (86), Carrie no longer chooses shirtwaists and skirts. Foregoing this frugal choice, which according to Kidwell and Christman, were "a great boon to the working woman, who, with one skirt and a selection of shirt-waists, could appear to have many changes of clothing"

(137), Carrie now purchases a walking toilet, a fashionable ensemble that matches in fabric and coordinates in color, in lieu of separate pieces. The color of Carrie's shoes make a 'high' fashion statement, too, for by the nineties black was no longer "the only, or even the favored, color in shoes; shades of champagne, bronze, and brown were advertised" (Severa 471). Adorned by this costume that is the finest she has worn, Carrie listens to Hurstwood's appeal that she come away with him.

The ways in which the cultural extremes of 'high' and 'low' intersect across different domains appear in Hurstwood's appeal to the finely dressed Carrie. The symbolic 'high' of Carrie's fashion choice is unsettled by Hurstwood's suggestion that Carrie leave Drouet and go with him to Chicago's South Side, a move that he assures her "would be as good as moving to another part of the country" (110). Indisputably 'low' in terms of its symbolic meaning, the South Side, as discussed earlier, signifies illicit sex, strenuous labor, and racial mixing--i.e., all that stands at the opposite pole from the North Side where Hurstwood lives and is known as the distinguished manager of the splendid Fitzgerald and Moy's. Although Dreiser provides no explanation of Hurstwood's choice, saying only that he has "fixed upon that region as an objective point" (110), the cultural meanings encoded into the choice explain why Hurstwood considers the South Side an appropriate destination. While the actual distance to the South Side would provide little protection from the eyes of the moneyed public with whom Hurstwood has contact, its symbolic distance makes it the antithesis of the North and East Sides where Hurstwood is well-known and respected. Also, the South Side's brothels, its hotels renting rooms by the hour, and its furnished-room flats

occupied by heterosexual unmarried couples would mark it as an arena for the playing out of illicit sexual desires; thus, Hurstwood's choice implies the forbidden quality of his obsession with Carrie. Baudelaire's observation that there is "no exalted pleasure which cannot be related to prostitution" (21) perhaps best approximates the connection surfacing between sexual desire and the symbolic significance of Hurstwood's choice. Just as the city's 'high' and 'low' can be located along a vertical axis, so too can Hurstwood's physical body and psychic make-up. Associating sexual desire with both the lower bodily stratum, the genitalia, and with the low and forbidden desires of his unconscious, Hurstwood locates the South Side as the topography most suited for tabooed desires.

The outcome of Hurstwood's appeal to Carrie demonstrates the interconnections between body, geography, social class, and psychic formations. While Carrie gives no further explanation of her refusal to stay anywhere in Chicago than her discomfort at the thought of being near Drouet, she *discursively* shifts the act of leaving with Hurstwood from the low of illicit sex to the high of respectable marriage, telling him "I shouldn't want to get married as long as he [Drouet] is here" (110). Hurstwood's reaction to Carrie's refusal to move to the South Side and her simultaneous reference to marriage illustrates a host of related issues: how women's bodies function as commodity, how marriage legitimates sexual desires, and how exchange value is not fixed but fluctuates:

When [Hurstwood] looked at her now, he thought her beautiful. What a thing it was to have her love him, even if it be entangling! She *increased in value in his eyes because of her objection*. She was *something to struggle for*, and that was everything. *How different from the women who yielded willingly!* He swept the thought of them from his mind. (emphasis mine 110)

Increasing in value by her refusal to sink to the 'low' of Chicago's South Side, Carrie as sexual commodity now seems *worth* hard work and struggle. Because she will not be bought cheaply, Hurstwood will be forced to pay the market price that one pays for a "respectable" woman, and no longer able to lump her into the category of women who yield willingly, Hurstwood can no longer allow her to share space in his mind with lower, "cheaper" women willing to carry on casual sexual liaisons in South Side Chicago's rented rooms.

Carrie's decision-making seems fuzzy at best, for her initial objection to staying in Chicago originates with "something in [Hurstwood's] tone ... which [makes] her feel as if she must record her feelings against any local habitation" (110). While passivity on this account seems to undercut any active decision-making on her part, her desire for marriage implies a very active refusal to move lower in the social hierarchy. While she has carried on an unmarried sexual partnership with Drouet, she never even entertains the thought of entering such a partnership with Hurstwood, and later when she learns that Hurstwood is already married, she abandons thoughts of him altogether. Her 'high' and fashioned self, always in process and always focusing on the 'high', avoids both the 'low' of South Side and the trap of an illicit affair with Hurstwood. In so doing she forces her market value higher, and the price Hurstwood will pay is revealed in his abandonment of his job, of his respected position within the community, and of his family. In abducting Carrie and leaving Chicago, he obliterates his position

within society, which in effect leaves him without a self, thus setting the stage for his decline and eventual suicide in New York.

Carrie's own break with a self fashioned before the mirror in the flat shared with Drouet is signaled by her empty-handed train passage from Chicago to New York with nothing except the clothes she wears. ("I haven't an earthly thing with me," she protests, "not even a handkerchief" (203).) Once in New York, having "married" Hurstwood, who has assumed the alias G. W. Wheeler, Carrie puts on the identity of Mrs. Wheeler, assuming a social status above that which she left behind in Chicago. Calling a dressmaker (203) rather than buying clothing off the racks, keeping a servant, and arranging their New York dining room as "a most inviting spectacle" with white table cloth and red-shaded, four-armed candelabra, Carrie feels "for the first time in her life ... settled, and somewhat justified in the eyes of society as she conceive[s] it" (220). Society forms the mirror that reflects back to her an improved condition, and the phrase *as she conceives* it implies that like the wardrobe mirror verifying a high and fashioned self, society as she imagines it can verify her success. By the same token, the phrase implies that once she conceives society differently, dissatisfaction will "whisper" to the "desirous Carrie ... concerning her possibilities" (225).

Carrie's awareness of a higher 'high' (and thus a higher society to use as measure) comes once more through her making distinctions based in details of dress, and clothing once more makes possible Carrie's self-judgment, ensuing dissatisfaction, and eventual re-fashioning of self. When her new friend, Mrs. Vance, appears to take Carrie to a Broadway matinee, Mrs. Vance is stunningly arrayed "in a dark-blue walking dress,

with a nobby hat to match" (226). Her "trinkets of gold, an elegant green leather purse set with her initials, [and] fancy handkerchief, exceedingly rich in design," pain Carrie, making her feel that she needs "more and better clothes to compare with this woman" (226). Swift seasonal changes in the cut and favored colors in women's attire would result in a swift outdatedness of the dresses made upon Carrie's arrival in New York, and in comparing her attire to her friend's, Carrie sees difference "both of quality and age" (226).⁷⁷ Dreiser includes no commentary on the particulars of the outdatedness of Carrie's attire, but we can assume that her sleeves are tighter and her waistline lower than those of the fashionable Mrs. Vance. Paralleling the detailed descriptions both of Drouet's masher attire, which makes Carrie acutely aware of her own "plain blue dress" (3-4), and of Hurstwood's more tasteful attire, which makes her see the crudeness of Drouet (73), so now the details concerning Mrs. Vance's attire point up once again the judging that precipitates Carrie's next phase of self-fashioning. Dreiser's attention to the details of dress expands in this section of the narrative, for upon leaving for the matinee with Mrs. Vance, Carrie encounters the afternoon spectacle of New Yorkers on parade:

Carrie had never heard of this showy parade; had never even been on Broadway when it was taking place. On the other hand, it was a familiar thing to Mrs. Vance, who not only knew of it as an entity, but had often been in it, going purposely to see and be seen, to create a stir with her beauty and dispel any tendency to fall short in dressiness by contrasting herself with the beauty and fashion of the town.... Carrie found herself stared at and ogled. Men in flawless top-coats, high hats, and silver-headed walking sticks elbowed near and looked too often into conscious eyes. Ladies rustled by in dresses of stiff cloth, shedding affected smiles and perfume. (226-27)

Repeating elements of the Chicago department store spectacle, Dreiser points up the changes in Carrie's appearance and how others perceive her. No longer sartorially beyond the pale and invisible, she is ogled by flawlessly dressed men. Now the elbowing comes from men attempting to get nearer and make eye contact instead of from women who fail to acknowledge her presence. The proximity of "vice," though,--the "rouged and powdered cheeks and lips, the scented hair, the large, misty, and languorous eye" --leaves the exact reasons for the ogling ambiguous. Perhaps clothing indicative of a higher status has improved Carrie's visibility or perhaps the ogling, "not modified by any rules of propriety" (227), indicates the sexually charged atmosphere of the beautiful and the "loose" on parade. The scrutinizing eyes on Broadway recall the scrutinizing eyes of the Chicago shop girls in *The Fair*, who saw in Carrie "who and what she was" (17), and regardless of the particular message cast out by the ogling eyes, they effect a result also reminiscent of *The Fair* scene: Carrie judges herself to be an outcast. Ultimately, the "[p]ompous doormen in immense coats, shiny brass belts and buttons" and the [c]oachmen in tan boots, white tights, and blue jackets," giving the street a "flavour of riches and show," bring about Carrie's feeling "that she [is] not of it" (227). Amid the New York rich, Carrie feels inferior to their liveried servants, and judging her appearance harshly, she resolves not to come "here again until she look[s] better" (227).

Juxtaposing this street scene, which prompts Carrie's feelings of separation and alienation, the scene within the theater itself prompts feelings of a very different nature. As she watches the play, "one of

those drawing room concoctions in which charmingly overdressed ladies and gentlemen suffer the pangs of love and jealousy amid gilded surroundings" (228), she remembers "her one historic achievement in Chicago" (228). Recalling her portrayal of Laura in an amateur production of Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight*, she "wonder[s] at her own solitude these two years past—her indifference to the fact that she had never achieved what she had expected" (228).

VII

The Actress As Mirror: *Under the Gaslight*

Carrie's acting, integral to the self as she fashions it in New York, necessitates careful scrutiny of the earlier *Gaslight* segment of *Sister Carrie*, for with Carrie's acting career Dreiser examines the relation between self and the creative process. Between Carrie's *Gaslight* performance and her memory of that performance as she wistfully rocks in the closing lines of the novel, art displaces desire for material gain while ultimately depending on desire as impetus. And as Dreiser examines the relation of art to desire and of art to cultural configurations of 'high' and 'low', he suggests the ways in which class distinctions become incorporated into the Imaginary.

While Carrie's life is marked by the persistent self-judgment that leads her to place herself on a hierarchy beneath chosen others and then to fashion a self in relation to them, her perception of the first experience on stage is marked not by hierarchy but by its opposite, *communitas*⁷⁸:

Since her arrival in [Chicago] many things had influenced her, but always in a far-removed manner. This new

atmosphere was more friendly. It was wholly unlike the great brilliant mansions which waved her coldly away, permitting her only awe and distant wonder. *This took her by the hand kindly, as one who says, "My dear, come in." It opened for her as if for its own.... Here was no illusion. Here was an open door....* (emphasis added 129)

Literary critics have made much of Dreiser's so-called ironic attitude when he notes Carrie's thinking of the stage as "no illusion."⁷⁹ While this statement can certainly be read as irony, there are other ways to read it as well. Rachel Bowlby, for example, insists that the theatre does not stand in radical contrast to the world outside but "at the peak of a continuum" (Bowlby 64). Bowlby's reading suggests that both image and illusion help constitute what *is* in the nineteenth century's new consumer culture; further, both image and illusion work in a cultural sense to help make up the human subject and "what he or she apprehends as real" (Bowlby 65). Material objects, the "things" of a consumer society, are inseparable from how they look and what they represent to buyers. I agree with Bowlby's reading; I too see that the illusion *is* the reality in *Sister Carrie* and that a continuum does, in fact, span from the subsistence worker without agency to the actor or actress creating illusion. (The extremes of this continuum correspond loosely with what I have referred to as the 'low' and the 'high'.) But the continuum becomes complicated in ways that Bowlby does not address, for Dreiser's view of art unfurls anti-structure into what would otherwise be a very linear tale of Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall. And just as costume throughout Dreiser's novel discloses Carrie's continual self-assessment and subsequent fixing, costume in the *Gaslight* segment of the novel

glosses Carrie's entrance that leads temporarily out of structure and into *communitas*.

Appearing in the role of Laura, a maiden who must relinquish her gentleman when the truth of her low birth is revealed, Carrie is "draped in pearl grey, with a coiled string of pearls at the throat" (138). Both *drape* and the monochrome grey of the gown indicate a choice of costume markedly different from the ordinary clothing of the period. Typical women's fashions in 1890 were cut narrow with very upright lines (Severa 474). Highly complex and featuring cut-outs, reattached bits of fabric, and a proliferation of detail, all of which gave the female form an "upholstered" appearance, ordinary dress tended to deform the shape of the body and to be "completely divided in fabric, color and shape" (Hollander 79). Carrie's choice of costuming suggests instead the influence of late nineteenth century "aesthetic dress," a mode of dress favored by nineteenth-century actresses like Lily Langtry and Ellen Terry, and by others who wanted to bring traditional concepts of drapery into contemporary dress.⁸⁰ Aesthetic dress, taking its inspiration from costumes painted by the Pre-Raphaelites, favored loose, corsetless gowns in the "indescribable tints" from nature favored by Ruskin, and the general impression was one of simplicity, drape, and flow. Other modes of aesthetic dress used classical ideals of beauty, with American dress reformers like Mrs. Jenness Miller designing and wearing Grecian-like costumes. (*The Arena* of October 1892 features Mrs. Miller in a "lovely aesthetic costume," which, we are told, suits so "charmingly" her "graceful figure" (634).) By the 1890s English-style aesthetic dress had been somewhat incorporated into tea gown designs, and American actresses

like Mary Anderson had popularized the Grecian dress by wearing it on and off stage, but while such gowns were worn, they were by no means customary. Far more typical were such theatrical costumes as those favored by the "overdressed" actresses in the "drawing-room concoction" that Carrie attends with Mrs. Vance, and Dreiser's choice of a simple, draped gown in lieu of a more elaborately constructed gown suggests his intent of calling forth images associated with the aesthetic and art--but not art as artifice; art as realism.

Too often the stage, as it appears in *Sister Carrie*, has been reduced to a simple indictment of late nineteenth-century artifice and materialism. Carrie's experiences with the stage, however, are no monologue; instead, they set up a dialogue that examines questions about the arts within nineteenth-century culture. In Carrie's debut on the stage, for example, when Dreiser describes her as "the mirror of the active world," he presents one side of an argument that engrossed his contemporaries like drama critic B.O. Flower, for whom the theatre could signify two extremes--the mask or the mirror. Flower's 1893 article for *The Arena* articulates the dispute over realism as it was manifested in discussions of the theatre, and like William Dean Howells, who attacked sentimentality and falsification in fiction, Flower attacked the artificiality in theatre that masks the actualities of human life:

The theatre of recent years has been *a mask rather than a mirror*; that is to say, it has been afflicted with the gangrene of artificiality.... In other words, only the surface has been ruffled; the almost unfathomable depths of the soul have not been stirred. The pictures and voicings have lacked the true ring of life's verities in anything like a full or vital way.... Only that which is true, only that which is real, or if ideal, is in perfect alignment with the eternal verities as found in life, can produce a

lasting impression on the deeper emotions of humanity.
(emphasis added 226)

Here Flower clearly criticizes productions like the "gilded" rendering of *A Gold Mine*, which Carrie sees with her friend Mrs. Vance. More important to my purpose, though, is the insistence that artifice in theatre sets up a dichotomy between the exterior and interior that cannot be fused. Opposing exterior and interior, Flower presents the same fissure that Dreiser offers in showing Carrie in front of her mirror achieving grace through imitation. Carrie's fine clothes, graceful body, and on-the-verge-of-tears demeanor ruffle her surface only and constitute a mask that shows nothing of her deeper emotions. By contrast, the grace that she achieves when she steps onto the stage as Laura emanates from *within* her: "'Cue,'" said the prompter, close to her side, but she did not hear. Already she was moving forward with a steady grace, *born of inspiration*" (emphasis mine 135). Achieving through the creative process traits superior to those that she possesses off the stage, Carrie speaks with "a penetrating quality which [her voice] [has] never known" (135). What earlier was simply external, "a formation [of her lips] as suggestive and moving as pathos itself" (107), becomes internal, emerging from the emotions she brings to the situation, so that she speaks "with a pathos which struck home because of its utter simplicity" (135).

Earlier in my discussion I established how Carrie's external grace of movement and dress work to erase from her surface the manner and appearance that marked her as 'low' and working class but that she has incorporated the 'low' within her Imaginary, the realm that Dreiser associates with "her spiritual side" (107). That the 'low', working class

self continues to inform Carrie's identity becomes obvious in the *Gaslight* segment of the novel. Awaiting her entrance as Laura, Carrie dredges up from the Imaginary, emotions grounded in the 'low', using them as impetus for her performance: "At the sound of her stage name Carrie started. She began to feel the bitterness of the situation. The feelings of the outcast descended upon her" (134-35). Carrie brings to acting her 'low', wage-earner, outcast self--the who and what she was upon coming to Chicago, the who and what she will continue to be within the Imaginary where a child's early desires are fulfilled or denied. Calling forth aspects of her experience that imbue the scripted role with the reality of lived experience, Carrie employs dramatic technique as it developed among some actresses of the nineteenth-century school of emotionalism, actresses like Matilda Heron at mid-century or Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske at the turn of the century who represented feelings with realism and naturalism. Paving the way for the modern acting techniques that depend upon the actor or actress merging self with role, these emotionalist actresses concentrated on inner feeling and motivation, emphasizing true-to-life movements and speaking.⁸¹ In the transactive moment when dramatist August Daly's world view fuses with Carrie's own experience, she crosses the threshold between *imitating* the character and *becoming* the character, and Carrie's becoming of Laura is what Hurstwood perceives when he feels that "radiating waves of feeling and sincerity [are] breaking against the farthest walls of the chamber" (135). Like the rest of the audience, he perceives power in Carrie's performance.

Throughout most of *Sister Carrie*, power is most often associated with the cultural 'high'--those fine ladies who elbow Carrie out of the

way; the Hurstwood of Chicago, who commands respect from the city's elite; the New York wealthy, whose liveried servants exude pomposity. Derived of privilege that goes hand-in-hand with high social and economic status, such power is born of hierarchy and structure. Dreiser seems intent on contrasting the power that Carrie captures on stage by making it outside usual social structure and more related to *communitas* than hierarchy.⁸² As the audience focuses their attention on Carrie, actress and audience become one body: "Every eye was fixed on Carrie, still proud and scornful. They moved as she moved. Their eyes were with her eyes" (135). As actress and audience merge, the quotidian, workaday world halts, and each spectator, regardless of his or her *usual* social position, becomes Carrie's character, seeing through the eyes of the outcast, a transaction that Hurstwood thinks of as the "magic of passion which will yet dissolve the world" (135). Using images of boundary breaking and disintegration, Dreiser suggests that theatre makes possible a temporary stepping out-of-one's-skin that suspends normal social relations, if only for a moment. When the character is an outcast, as is Laura in *Gaslight*, audience members of the dominant class become their own antithesis--not just *an* other but *the Other*.

The changes that Dreiser executes in Daly's playscript significantly alter the outcome of *Under the Gaslight*, altering too an audience's potential response to the work. Daly's melodrama about mistaken identity, restored nobility, and the cruelty of society becomes within *Sister Carrie* a more realistic work, what would have been called comedy drama during Dreiser's era. Before its alternation under Dreiser's excising pen, Daly's play tells the story of Laura, whose marriage to a

gentleman is thwarted by blackmailers who expose her as a foundling, the daughter of common thieves. Having been raised by an aristocratic New York society woman who passes her off as a niece, Laura is unmasked, descending from life in "an elegant bourgeois townhouse to a poor basement apartment" (McConachie 214). Her pretentious, elite friends become "wolfish," ostracizing her until the play's end when Laura's true identity is revealed and she is restored to the bosom of society. Not a foundling at all but of noble origins, Daly's Laura shows the audience a "natural" separation between the social classes, a "truth" underscored when even the villain admits of the stoic and noble Laura, "How her blood tells--she wouldn't shed a tear."⁸³

Expunging from Daly's script Laura's noble birth and her subsequent restoration to elite society, Dreiser significantly changes the cultural work effected by *Under the Gaslight*. While Daly's script, according to critic Bruce A. McConachie, endorses "the social hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie" (223) and provided comfort for the nineteenth century's typically business-class audiences who needed assurance that even amid shifting tides of fortune, they would still possess superior "blood," Dreiser's version leaves the audience seeing through the eyes of a lower class, outcast Laura. Working to unsettle social hierarchies and their continually shifting high, *Gaslight*, as Dreiser envisions it, opens up a temporary space, a *margin* or *limen*, to use Victor Turner's model, where "the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance" (Turner, *From* 44). The Achilles heel of orderly class structure, art in general and performance in particular *can*,

according to Turner, subvert sociocultural systems, and this is just what Dreiser suggests in the *Gaslight* section of *Sister Carrie*. Standing on stage in her gown that perhaps signifies aesthetic concerns and "anti-structure," Carrie merges with the audience who have arrived in carriages with "a great show of finery" (130). Because Dreiser does not salvage Laura by way of the plays contriving a noble birth, the character and audience are stripped of status. As elites among the audience are forced to experience social hierarchies from an unfamiliar (and culturally 'low') perspective, the potential exists for their questioning of a system that creates the seemingly senseless and unjust suffering of heroines. Dreiser's own realism perhaps undercuts any message of art's subversive function; in breaking the action on stage with the conversation of an inattentive Hurstwood and a garrulous Drouet, Dreiser suggests among other concerns the very limited engagement of the general public with any creative work. Yet, at the very least, the changes he makes in Daly's play explicitly sanction the sort of realistic theater Flower advocates in espousing theatre as mirror. Perhaps even more important, though, is Dreiser's suggesting that art can provide a temporary halt in the perpetual, rocking non-movement whereby those like Carrie fashion high selves, only to discover once more that they are 'low' and cast out.

VII

Desire, Dress, and Meaningful Work

The temporary halt that suspends hierarchies, of course, is just that--temporary, and while Carrie can later in New York sit in the theatre with Mrs. Vance once more "lost in the world [the play] represents" (229),

her self-fashioning picks up where it left off. As might be expected, Carrie begins fashioning an exterior by comparing herself to, and getting help from, Mrs. Vance. Updating her wardrobe, Carrie makes discriminating fashion choices for 1892. The button gloves, for example, were the most fashionable choice for the early 1890s, replacing the "sack" glove, which had been in use for some years (Severa 469). Similarly, the "circular style" in skirts, which Mrs. Vance recommends, was introduced in 1891 as the "French" skirt, "a sweeping, one-seam, near-circular style with three darts at each hip," a style that fit close in the front and flared impressively at the hemline. Even Mrs. Vance's advice to buy "serge" accurately reflects the correct fashion choice since the French skirt flared most effectively when cut from heavy fabrics (Severa 461). Yet just at the point when Carrie feels satisfied that she looks "the well-groomed woman" (231), she meets Mrs. Vance's cousin Ames, who sets the stage for the next level of self-fashioning when he chastises the conspicuous consumption that surrounds their party in Sherry's, a splendid restaurant where "imposing" doormen and uniformed hat-check youths assist elegant gentlemen and diamonded ladies (233-34). Like Wharton's Lawrence Selden, Ames embraces 'high' idealism and a masculine exclusiveness that judges gild as 'low.'

In *Sister Carrie*'s most insistent use of mirrors yet, the scene at Sherry's is set amid multiple mirrors--"in every direction ... tall, brilliant, bevel-edged mirrors--reflecting and re-reflecting forms, faces, and candelabra a score and a hundred times" (235). At this moment when the potential for auto-voyeurism reaches its height and Carrie can see increased a hundred-fold her own image and the "high life in New York"

(235), Ames criticizes the insipid waste he sees displayed on the jewel-clustered bosom of a woman in the crowd. Confused, but certain that Ames "get[s] a hold of things which she did not quite understand, but approve[s] of" (236), Carrie must begin once more to question her worth, and while earlier the clothing of the 'high' ones who banished her to the position of 'low' outcast tormented her, now Ames's discussion of literature makes her feel "the pain of not understanding" (237). His lack of sarcasm leads Carrie to judge him a "scholar" in possession of "kindly thought of a *high* order--the right thing to think" (emphasis mine 237). Significantly, she judges that "[i]t is fine to be so, *as a man*" (emphasis mine 236). Manhood, as embodied in Ames, signifies membership in some high order beyond the material realm ("A man doesn't need [riches] to be happy," Ames tells Carrie); it bespeaks strength, independence, and intimate association with the arts and literature. In a word, manhood bespeaks power, but of a very particular class. For Carrie such power has appeared only once--when she stepped upon the stage as Laura in *Under the Gaslight*, a success borne, on the one hand, of *communitas* and anti-structure, but borne, too, of power as it traditionally appears in male/female relations, (this latter form of power having been revealed in the flash of independence Carrie felt after her performance she turns the tables on Drouet, reversing the hierarchy that existed between them (141).) In linking Ames's power to manhood, Carrie (and Dreiser) seize upon sexuality once again as the readiest metaphor for power and in so doing makes a statement about the sort of self that nineteenth-century women typically fashioned. Now, no longer simply wanting to create a self that reflects prettily in a mirror, Carrie desires the high that Ames

represents, desiring once more to *be* the mirror. Her aspirations to return to the stage as "a fine actress" (238) spring at least in part from her wish to appropriate the knowledge, "high culture," and power that comes with the order of manhood that Ames represents.

While the self that Carrie fashions on the Broadway stage misses the high mark as measured by the scholarly, cultured Ames, she does detect within the theatre where she starts her climb to stardom a power that is "above the common mass, above idleness, above want, above insignificance" (280). Idleness, the absence of meaningful occupation, is of vital consequence here. Since work in the 1890s most frequently involved both working class women and men of all classes, Carrie's reference to idleness--that perpetual condition of women fortunate enough to be numbered among the middle classes--suggests her desire to transgress both gender and class boundaries. Work, but a far more meaningful and pleasurable work than was possible in the shoe factory, distinguishes Carrie's first stage experiences when the "undertakings" give her more "spirit" than she has ever possessed before (120). Dreiser's narrative voice hammers the meaning of work when he intones, "There is nothing so inspiring in life as the sight of a legitimate ambition, no matter how incipient. It gives colour, force, and beauty to the possessor" (120-21). Beauty and power, qualities that always guide Carrie's self-fashioning, emanate from meaningful work, Dreiser maintains. Adding thus another layer of meaning to those framed images from the working class that line the gallery of Carrie's Imaginary, Dreiser suggests that the creation of realistic art parallels creations of other "artisans." The images that Carrie saw framed by the windows of Chicago buildings were images of

working artisans--the maker of bread, the "shoemaker pegging at his last ... a benchworker seen high aloft in some window" (108). Although 'low' and of the working class, these particular workers possess an autonomy lacking in factory life. Dreiser here implicitly critiques the rationalization of labor, which during the nineteenth century put an end to what a writer for *The Arena* in 1900 called the "joyful independence" of the artisan:

The old individuality of the artisan, who with a joyful independence labored at his task, elaborating the details and perfecting the workmanship to the limit of his skill and knowledge, finding in the completeness of his work the interest and satisfaction of life, and experiencing in some degree the ecstasy of creation, though that which he made were no more than a chest or a pair of shoes--this has passed away. (Potter 232)

Like the artisan celebrated in this piece, the shoemaker reflected in Carrie's discerning eye has been lifted from a previous age. With tools in hand he appears in his pre-industrial stance, pegging at his last and contrasting remarkably with modern shop girls who sew only one seam down the left side of an upper. It seems significant that each of the workers chosen for Carrie's contemplation is male. Historically accurate in that more males than females were self-employed artisans, Dreiser's marking of the artisan's gender nonetheless underscores Carrie's desire for male privilege. At least in part, Carrie's wish to become a fine actress appears to stem from a desire to transgress boundaries that made women's work factory work.

The first work that Carrie finds on the stage, of course, parallels more closely the low grind of the shoe factory than the satisfying

independence of the artisan. Working in the chorus line and treated with "brutal roughness" (280), she quickly learns that the hierarchy of high/low structures the production of a Broadway play just as it structured production in the factory. 'Low', when compared to the "high and mighties--the leading ladies and gentlemen," Carrie perceives herself once more as "nothing--absolutely nothing at all" (282), yet as her salary chronicles her rise from chorus girl earning \$12 a week, to head-of-the-line at \$18, to nonspeaking part at \$30, to "chief feature of the play" at \$150, independence becomes the principal byproduct of her achievement. No longer moved by the flattery of men, having "learned that men could change and fail" (315), Carrie breaks with Hurstwood, who has become a drain on her finances and her energy, and she dodges the Stage-door Johnnies who vie for her attention. On the stage as a harem girl she courtesies sweetly and answers the "mocking-fierce potentate" with her ad-libbed "I am yours truly" (314), but no such dependence on men marks her behavior off the stage. When rich admirers in the audience propose marriage, she ignores their offers, and even the ad-libbed line undercuts its own message. While its surface professes a state of sexual subjugation and woman as possessed object, Carrie's act of articulating it constitutes an act of transgression. Because "members of the company had been warned that to interpolate lines or 'business' meant a fine or worse" (314), the brazenness of her utterance subverts its own surface meaning. By understanding male desire and creating a line that announces it to the audience, Carrie uses sex as power. By saying on stage words that she has become too astute to utter once she reaches the wings, she

elicits the delighted laughter of the audience and makes the principal actor scurry for the last laugh.

The independence Carrie puts on aptly shows in the costumes she wears on stage. Not surprisingly, costumes on the chorus line generously displayed the female body, and Carrie's first costume, a "pretty golden-hued" skirt that ends an inch above the knee (283), would allow a freedom of movement far surpassing even the most radical of dress reform costumes. Photographs and drawings of Broadway productions from the 1890s picture lines of women whose exposed legs look distinctly chunky by today's standards. Costumes vary, with some groups appearing in designs that mimic fashionable skirts, but in lengths half (or less) that of street wear and others appearing in fleshings that give the illusion of bare legs. Carrie's friend Lola wears a costume like the latter; "arrayed in pink fleshings and an imitation golden helmet" and carrying "a shining shield" (286), she is decked out for the obligatory "scene with marching women in tights garbed as soldiers" (Banner 117).⁸⁴ America's rising as a world power and the subsequent nationalism that rose in pitch through the waning decades of the nineteenth century generated the joining of the female form with military trappings that celebrated expansion, progress, and power. Dreiser's use of Lola's costume as well as Carrie's second chorus girl garb accurately record such iconography. When Carrie is moved to the front of the line in her second show, she wears a costume of snow-white flannel trimmed with silver and blue and elaborated with "epaulets and a belt of silver, with a short sword dangling at one side" (290). The audience appeal of such costumes hinged on a mix of national pride, American self-congratulatory celebration of military expansion, and the

allure of exposed legs. Sex and power became conflated in the mix, and the actresses could signify to viewers a militant Victory or "an acceptable version of the New Woman, now caparisoned as Warrior and Conqueror" (Banta 484) or simply evocative flesh. Whatever the particular propagandist or erotic message received by viewers, female actresses like Dreiser's Carrie who paraded as iconic celebrations of power were high-stepping past the restrictive attire that dress reformers of the day were linking to other forms of women's subjugation. According to social historian Lois Banner, actresses of the nineteenth century constituted a "vanguard group" to point the way for the emergence of freer modes of behavior and dress during the 1890s. The commentaries on chorus girls that proliferated in the popular press stressed their independence and self-assurance, and essentially the actress and the chorus girl represented "a new, modern conception of womanhood, one that involved independence, sexual freedom, and an enterprising, realistic attitude toward a career" (Banta 183-84).

When Carrie moves off the chorus line and into the harem in another of the typical nineteenth-century fares that offered lavish production sets in exotic lands,⁸⁵ she wears a costume that once more combines eroticism and US interest in expansion. Yet, the Turkish trousers worn by the harem would most likely send messages as mixed as the militaristic garb paraded by the chorus. Popularized by dress reformers like Amelia Bloomer during the 1850s, Turkish trousers persisted throughout the later half of the nineteenth century first as the "American Dress," the chosen style of the National Dress Reform Association, and later as alternative dress worn at health farms and as gymnastic costume. In the 1890s the

extreme popularity of the bicycle brought a massive resurgence of the bloomer, with the April 1896 issue of *Godey's* announcing,

We are told that the bloomer girl is going to outstrip her sisters because of her unconventional attire. At the State University at Berkeley, California, the young women students have decided to don the bloomer costume, which they declare best adapted for a school dress. (qtd. Severa 467)

Wisconsin's *Janesville Weekly Gazette* had already yielded in October 1894, "Today women in trousers riding a bicycle cause little or no comment" (qtd. Severa 467). While Carrie's harem costume would evoke erotic meanings, its design, like that which inspired radical alternative dress and the much-debated bicycle costumes, would likely evoke within nineteenth-century audiences other meanings as well. Turkish trousers, cut to allow a freedom of movement that had long been exclusively the province of male attire, could simultaneously play to male desire and a safe brand of female rebellion. Literally and metaphorically, Carrie wears the pants when she curtly flirts, "I am yours truly" and the audience hee-haws at the expense of the principal actor. In a moment of hierarchy reversal, Carrie prepares to steal the show when she appears as the frowning Quakeress.

Carrie's big break comes with her depiction of "a silent little Quakeress.... gray-suited, sweet-faced, demure, but scowling" (325). Perhaps taking his lead from Edward E. Rice's *Evangeline*, a show that initially filled a two-week summer-scheduling gap at Niblo's Garden in New York, Dreiser plays upon the same unique creation that marked Rice's play -- "a mute observer wandering in and out of the production" (Toll 177). While Carrie's previous costumes depend upon spectacle for their appeal,

the costume she wears as she makes her move to stardom is, like the simple gown she wore as Laura, gray and fairly nondescript. Eyes are on Carrie now, and the "portly gentlemen in the front rows [begin] to feel that she [is] a delicious little morsel" (326). Theatre front rows had for several decades been associated with leering men (Toll 175), and it is this sort who wish "to force away [Carrie's frown] with kisses" (326). Playing again to male desire, Carrie just as before simultaneously undermines the power of the principal actor, who must be placated after he is up-staged by her shenanigans.

VII

Endless Fashioning: Desire and Art

As Carrie moves into stardom, Dreiser's descriptions of her stage costumes and of her widely expanded personal wardrobe abruptly cease; he writes simply, "Her clothes had for some time been wholly satisfactory" (335). Ostensibly, Carrie has fashioned her self to correspond squarely with the a fashion 'high' that can climb no higher; indeed, in *Sister Carrie's* final chapter, he writes,

And now Carrie had attained that which in the beginning seemed life's object, or, at least, such fraction of it as human beings ever attain of their original desires. She could look about on her gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account. Friends there were ... who would bow and smile in acknowledgment of her success. (367-68)

Despite her achievement, though, Carrie has not fashioned a self that suits her. Now performing on the stage in a rote sort of way that requires little work, Carrie again has "*idle* hands [that begin] to weary" (emphasis mine 336). At the novel's end, she sings and rocks and dreams

of inclusion within a new 'high'--those who follow "the old call of the ideal" (354). Ames, having appeared one last time to express his disappointment that Carrie has not pursued acting in comedy-drama, still prompts self-judgment, the staker that has followed Carrie since her first glimpse of *The Fair* in Chicago. Having recognized that "her little newspaper fame [is] nothing at all" (354), she is once more cast out and 'low', left to trouble over his judgment in her rocking chair. Self-fashioning, Dreiser suggests, is an endless process.

While Carrie's self-fashioning reaches no conclusion, Dreiser's novel has, and readers are left to ponder Carrie's "waiting for that halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real" (369). Carrie's self-re-creation, we can assume, will be fashioned through reference to her first experience on stage, given that her encounter with Ames makes her realize her "drifting away from the old ideal which had filled her in the dressing-rooms of the Avery stage and thereafter, for a long time" (356). Perhaps she will, as she tells Lola, "do better in a serious play" (357). But given Carrie's tendency to judge herself as 'low' in comparison to some cultural 'high,' she will never fashion a self that remains satisfied, for a higher 'high' will always appear just out of reach. Like Lily Bart, who imagines a utopian "republic of the spirit" that can simultaneously exclude and include others--or like Edna Pontellier, who with her utopian death wish fabricates a solitary woman--Carrie Meeber sits in her rocking chair dreaming a utopian dream of "peace and beauty which glimmered afar off" (369).

Carrie Meeber differs significantly from these protagonists, of course--at the end of the novel she lives and will continue her self-fashioning:

Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her. It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints distant hilltops of the world. (369)

She will never reach the summit. Utopia, the "no-where," never attainable in this world, will simply continue to be the 'high' against which she will measure herself as 'low.' Yet Dreiser suggests that the 'low,' always present within the Imaginary and always creating an unquenchable desire, can fashion through the creative process Art.

Art, in some ways, was Theodore Dreiser's utopian dream. Of working class background and forced to do hack writing while he envisioned himself an artist, Dreiser, like his protagonist, constantly yearned.⁸⁶ Dreiser wanted to embrace the yearning, his novel suggests. Believing that art and any cravings for social status, wealth, or fame share a common well-spring, he saw the creative process as a continual striving, continual self-fashioning. This striving onward seems to be his message at the end of *Sister Carrie*. A culture's bent toward binaryism and the individual's continual disappointment upon finding him or herself in the 'low' position makes longing a fact of life, Carrie's rocking says. I read Dreiser's coda as promise, albeit romantic and a sanctioning of the status quo, both of which undercut the novel's larger social awareness. Those who desire and long, Dreiser asks us to believe, can channel their endless yearning into artisanship. Such a promise asks us to believe the

implausible, the inconceivable, for it asks us to be actors in a mode of life that has passed. Yet as a reader of Dreiser, I find that my own yearnings ask me to believe him. Oh, the voice of the so-called author!

VIII Women and Work

While Carrie's rocking at the end of Dreiser's novel leaves the reader with a metaphor of perpetual motion with no clear headway, in terms of this study's focus on hybridization and women's becoming, Dreiser's Carrie Meeber marks a leap forward. Carrie survives and will continue striving and self-fashioning, becoming at each new level a re-creation of her former self. Perhaps dangerous in her seeming lack of a moral ethic, Carrie nonetheless learns to subvert prevailing gender codes, assuming the male privilege to search out meaningful work. She will continue to stretch toward some new 'high.' Dreiser has already suggested the next one--a reclaiming of comedy drama, the genre that inspired her initial power as an actress when she had her debut as Laura in his re-visioning of *Under the Gaslight*. This new endeavor will play itself out in a professional production on the Broadway stage, rather than in an amateur exhibition on the stage of a noisy hall. Carrie, in becoming a renowned actress and in pushing toward becoming a *fine* actress, transgresses the class and gender boundaries that made nineteenth-century women's work, factory work.

In terms of hybridization, Carrie with her very self embodies intersections of social class. Working class by birth, internally imprinted with the first desire of a working-class child for its working-

class mother, and continually propelled forward by the etchings of this first desire, Carrie will always be both/and. No matter how 'high' she climbs, her internal landscape carries the cultural codings of her origins. Carrie's social class distinguishes her from the protagonists of *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Awakening*, and *The House of Mirth*. These earlier protagonists, upper middle class and unable or unwilling to transgress class boundaries so as to claim aspects of self from *outside* the dominant class, fail to construct satisfying, meaningful, and/or socially operative selves. Isabel Archer, following a patriarchal morality wherein women must choose with their husbands and "masters," opts for ladyhood. Lily Bart, internalizing Selden's masculine morality that excludes "unacceptable" others, simultaneously hordes the incompatible urge toward acceptance of others; death comes as the freedom from struggle. Also unable to resolve contradictory impulses, Edna Pontellier chooses to remove herself from social structures altogether, opting for death. Because Carrie comes from the lower class, hybridization offers vast opportunities rather than a menacing contamination. Like Wharton's Mrs. Hatch, that working-class, Venus-like beauty who needs Lily's schooling for upward mobility, Carrie is emblematic of the threat inherent in a socially mobile society. Because Carrie can master through imitation the grace of one 'to the manner born,' she jeopardizes the position of those actually born to wealth and distinction. Hybridization facilitates her success; it does not threaten pigdom. At the threshold of desire where lace collars speak, endless striving also pulses. And out of this endless striving, Dreiser suggests, artistic impulse swells. The both/and quality of Carrie as factory-worker-become-professional-actress suggests

that meaningful work for women exists at such thresholds. At these cultural sites where male prerogative meets female striving and 'low' origins meet the highlife--at any site where opposing symbolic forms cross--we find hybridization. And in *Sister Carrie* hybridization breeds meaningful work.

The pursuit of meaningful work for women has been a continuing theme in these works of Realist fiction. Isabel Archer's desire "to do" forms a notable component of her New England self; it is the quality, too, fundamental to Miss Stackpole, James's scribbling woman who will not stand still. Kate Chopin put forth Mademoiselle Reisz, the economically independent woman artist, who mixes established forms, creating models for change, and Edith Wharton provides with Lily Bart the absence of meaningful work. In the final novels of my study--Willa Cather's *My Antonia* and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* the becomingness possible through work continues, and in these writers use of evolutionary discourse, new constructions of womanhood become central rather than auxiliary to the works' narrative structure. Cather's Lena Lingard, melding together an Old World self with one that claims American striving, works to become a dress designer, forging a single life that brings a fulfillment absent in the earlier novels. As I celebrate Lena's happy success, I interrogate those troubling aspects of Cather's novel that make me an ambivalent reader of *My Antonia*. In exploring the ideological implications of Cather's fictional treatment of immigrants, I pose questions about American class structure and the use of representations of women in promulgating American progress and expansion.

Notes

⁷⁰Historian Walter Susman, in examining prescriptive books by Orison Swett Marden, notes that Marden's 1899 work *Character: The Greatest Thing in the World* stresses values necessary in a producer-oriented society. Marden's 1921 work *Masterful Personality*, he says, indicates a shift in Marden's vision of self. Susman argues that the social role demanded by twentieth-century culture was that of a performer: "Every American was to become a performing self" (280). Stressing voice, grooming, clothing, personal appearance, and good manners, the later work replaces Marden's concern with higher laws and ideals of duty and honor with concern for one's surface, self-fulfillment, self-expression, and self-gratification. Susman's model would locate the older vision of self in *Sister Carrie* in the values of Carrie's sister Minnie and her husband Sven Hanson.

⁷¹Lee Hall, in *Common Threads* discusses the washdress (57). For information on mail order catalogues, see Schlereth (148-150). Severa provides an overview of each decade of the nineteenth century in *Dressed for the Photographer*.

⁷²In *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago 1880-1930*, Joanne Meyerowitz provides statistics on self-supporting working women. With 21 percent of wage-earning women in Chicago living single, the city was home to over twenty-two thousand "women adrift":

The expansion of the female labor force accounts for much of the increase in the number of women adrift. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the demand for women workers grew tremendously in nonagricultural sectors of the economy. (4)

The majority of these women worked in the factory-production jobs, but

with the growth of corporate bureaucracies and of retail merchandising, new clerical and sales jobs opened up (5). In 1880, over half of these women were under the age of thirty, and most working women tended to support themselves for only a few years before marriage (6).

Meyerowitz's work suggests to me the probability that Dreiser's scrutinizing shop girls had once been in the same position as Carrie.

⁷³Nan Enstad's work on consumerism among working women continues to influence my thinking on the role of commodities at the turn of the century.

An excellent source for examining ways in which contemporary historians are working to recontextualize consumer culture is Lisa Tiersten's "Redefining Consumer Culture: Recent Literature on Consumption and the Bourgeoisie in Western Europe."

⁷⁴See, for example, Charles C. Walcutt's "The Wonder and Terror of Life" and Robert Shulman's "Dreiser and the Dynamics of American Capitalism."

⁷⁵Joanne Meyerowitz, in "Sexual Geography and Gender Economy: The furnished room districts of Chicago, 1890-1930," charts the physical space and cultural geography of Chicago, arguing that while furnished room districts made working-class women vulnerable to sexual exploitation, these women were active subjects who made their own choices about sexuality. Mapping out the furnished room districts of Chicago (46-48) and showing the relation of these districts to extramarital sexual relationships, Meyerowitz implies the sort of interrelated domains theorized by Stalleybrass and White.

⁷⁶Anthropologist Victor Turner sees performance as an operative metaphor for understanding all cultures, not just Western or capitalist consumer cultures. Turner's work with the African Ndembu, with historical records of the Mexican Revolution, and with ancient Japanese drama--to name just few examples--shows the pervasiveness of role playing to all cultures. Turner argues that performative behavior in art, sports, ritual, play link directly to social and ethical structures and to the way people within a culture live their lives. Turner's thesis will be important to my discussion of *Carrie* on the stage. See Turner's *The Anthropology of Performance, From Ritual to Theatre*, and *The Ritual Process*.

⁷⁷Between summer 1890, Dreiser's date for *Carrie's* and *Hurstwood's* arrival in New York, and the spring or summer of 1892 when *Carrie* attends the matinee with Mrs. Vance, women's fashions underwent significant changes in the cut of sleeves and the positioning of the waistline. Fashion historians of today are able to accurately date costumes of the nineties by noting the degree of tightness in the upper sleeve. While in 1890 sleeves remained very tight in the upper arm, by 1892 sleeves showed a rashly different upper-sleeve puff expanding massively outward from the shoulder but cut very narrow and tight from the elbow to the wrist (the "gigot" or "leg of mutton" sleeves). Similarly, fashion historians can trace waistlines from the extremely long-waisted front of 1890 through the yearly shifts upward until mid-decade.

⁷⁸For a thorough explanation of *communitas*, see *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* by Victor Turner. Turner defines *communitas* as the absence of social structure. He argues that all

societies conceive themselves in terms of both "a differentiated, segmented system of structural positions (which may or may not be arranged in a hierarchy) *and* a structureless, "homogeneous, undifferentiated *whole*" (emphasis his 237). *Communitas* appears in the guise of an Edenic or utopian state, the society we imagine where all can be free and equal as comrades. *Communitas*, he argues, is central to religion, literature, drama, and art, "and its traces may be found deeply engraven in law, ethics, kinship, and even economics" (231).

⁷⁹Sandy Petry, for example, writes of this sentence: "An unequivocal sentence ... states [Carrie's] impression on entering the theatrical space which has been synonymous with illusion since the beginning of western civilization" (107). Another critic who focuses on the artificiality of the stage is Kenneth S. Lynn, who writes,

With its beautiful actresses and suave, well-dressed actors, its glitter and its thousand make-believe excitements, the theatrical world was to Dreiser a microcosm of the glamorous city, a quintessence of its artificial splendors, and the theater magnetizes his characters as well" (502).

See also Robert Shulman, who argues that the illusory quality of the theatre is "well suited to a society of appearance" (570).

⁸⁰For information on aesthetic dress, see Sandra Barwick's *A Century of Style* (48-70) and Alison Gernsheim's *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey* (52, 65, 70, 73, 87). Also see Hollander (78-79, 293, 364). Primary sources include Helen Ecob's "A New Philosophy of Fashion" and *The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application To Dress of the Laws of Health, Art, and Morals*.

⁸¹For a discussion of the school of emotionalism, see Graff B. Wilson's *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre*. Dreiser's *Carrie* well demonstrates the dominant characteristic of this manner of performing:

[T]he actress of this school actually experiences the feelings and passions of her role and surrenders herself to these emotions. She does not simulate but actively participates in the agonies of the mimic characters. (171-72).

Wilson discusses emotionalist actresses Matilda Heron (178-80), Clara Morris, Fanny Davenport, and Mrs. Leslie Carter (265-69), as well as the influence of Mrs. Minnie Fiske (317-23).

See also Barnard Hewitt's *Theatre U.S.A.*

⁸²Anthropologist Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre* and *The Anthropology of Performance*, as well as Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, provide the theoretical framework for my discussion of *Carrie's* performance in *Under the Gaslight*.

Turner's work in comparative symbology suggests that both pre-industrial and industrial cultures ritualize a suspension of normal social arrangements. Turner shows that within a variety of cultural performances, the quotidian, workaday world temporarily stops. Whether these performances be the rites of passage or healing ceremonies of pre-industrial societies, or the carnival, dance, or theatre of industrial societies, they each entail a period when and a space where normal social arrangements pause. A gap in the social structure, a "no-place" betwixt and between two stable positions, this state that he calls *liminal* for pre-industrial societies or *liminoid* for industrial societies, implies a

domain outside the usual seat of authority, a letting go of day-to-day reality, and the use of "privileged spaces" where "taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted" (*Anthropology* 102). Turner argues that performance genres of industrial societies are liminal in nature and that they allow actors and audience to "play with the factors of culture," reassembling them in ways that can be subversive and "highly critical of the *status quo*" (*From* 40). Cultural performance, he maintains, allows the spectator "to treat all he sees in an as-if, subjunctive way" (*From* 121).

Iser's discussion of what *happens* to readers when they assemble a text's wandering viewpoint suggests ways that readers (or spectators of a play) might be changed through their aesthetic response:

Although the reader must participate in the assembly of meaning by realizing the structure inherent in the text, it must not be forgotten that he stands outside the text. His position must therefore be manipulated by the text if his viewpoint is to be properly guided. Clearly, this viewpoint cannot be determined exclusively by the individual reader's personal history of experience, but this history cannot be totally ignored either; only when the reader has been taken outside his own experience can his viewpoint be changed. The constitution of meaning, therefore, gains its full significance when something happens to the reader. (152)

⁸³McConachie's *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* provides analysis of Daly's play, showing how it and other melodramas worked to construct "a social order based on nature rather than on the historical contingencies of wealth, environmental conditioning, or traditional social position" (217). McConachie provides the quotation concerning Laura's blood, which appears in Act III, Scene 3 of Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (216).

⁸⁴Banner notes that from the 1870s to the 1890s hardly a production

failed to include such fleshing-clad soldiers. For information, photographs, and drawings of American musical theatre of the nineteenth century, see Toll's *On With the Show*. Banta traces the use of female form in American iconography of the late nineteenth century, with chapters 11 and 12 of *Imaging American Women* tracing the use of militaristic icons.

⁸⁵Toll provides a discussion of such musical extravaganzas (173).

⁸⁶Dreiser's biographer discusses the writer's bouts with depression and neurasthenia (308-10, Lingeman 343-74, 377-78) that either caused or followed his inability to write. A passage from his diary suggests his chronic unhappiness: "Ah me--Ah me, who is it that tells the truth and is happy" (qtd. Lingeman 348).

Chapter Six

"Material Out of Which Countries are Made:"

Immigration and Becoming American in Cather's *My Antonia*

Willa Cather's *My Antonia* pulls to the center of its narrative structure America's foreign-born women of the turn of the century. The search for becoming outfits--attire that encodes dimensions of self on the surface of the body while it equips the woman for pursuits outside the domestic realm--extends through my discussion of *My Antonia* to include those millions of immigrant women who became Americans during the waning years of the nineteenth century. Because their stories of becoming involved their confronting racial prejudice and learning to negotiate the intricacies of social stratification in a democratic society, any discussion of immigrant women's becoming must examine racial discourse from the decades surrounding the turn of the century. While the closet of possibilities opens to the foreign-born women in *My Antonia* and while the strong female characters each find a costume that becomes her, Cather's method of addressing what was called in at the turn into the twentieth century "the immigrant problem" leaves room for questioning related issues like American expansion and progressive ideas. In examining Cather's immigrant women, the focus on hybrid constructions of womanhood continues, for any story of immigration involves hybridization. In the combining of two cultures and the meshing of a self from one's past with a self suited to life in a new land, a new construction of self *must* emerge.

For many native-born Americans at the turn of the century, immigration and the threats associated with hybridization posed frightening possibilities. Fears of "race suicide"--the widespread belief that an influx of "inferior" racial types could ultimately destroy American democracy--were at their height. Statistics from Cather's Nebraska at the end of the nineteenth century reveal the sort of proportions of foreign stock to native stock that many found disturbing. Comprised of forty-three percent foreign stock (i.e., either foreign-born themselves or born of immigrant parents [Cherny 32]), Nebraska during the years spanned by Cather's novel--roughly 1883 to 1915--experienced an influx of East European immigrants whose backgrounds and racial 'types' were judged as particularly menacing. Cather represents this type with the Shimerdas, and she like other Americans of her period seems intent on classifying racial types and plotting the consequences of these types on America. Nativists--those who opposed immigration because of its supposed hazards for democracy, as well as those who argued that America might eventually be strengthened by the merging of European and American blood, undauntingly entered into the manic drive to categorize racial make-up and social identities of the nearly twelve million immigrants who arrives between 1880 and 1900.⁸⁷ The degree to which fears of "race suicide" pervaded American culture can be inferred from the words of President Theodore Roosevelt, who early in the century exhorted,

If the men of the nation are not anxious to work in many different ways, ... and anxious to be fathers of families, and if the women do not recognize that the greatest thing for any woman is to be a good wife and mother, why that nation has cause to be alarmed about its future." (qtd. Commons, "Amalgamation" 213).

Coming just at the point in history when women were developing aspects of self apart from their lives as wives and mothers, Roosevelt's words hammer motherhood as the native-born woman's patriotic duty. Infused with nativist fears of "race suicide," they call on all Americans to rally against the onslaught of foreign-born. All immigrants created for some Americans a fear that "American blood" would be polluted through biological hybridization, the bloodlines tainted through miscegenation-- a problematic position in itself, given the hybrid mix that formed native stock. Immigrant women were especially vulnerable to prejudice and nativist fears. Because they were thought more "corruptible" than American women, their seduction of American men seemed a more real threat than the immigrant men's seduction of "pure" American women. Having brought from the Old World different sexual mores and alien social customs, immigrant women were often perceived by native Americans as "loose," vulgar, and promiscuous (Zaborowska 46). This fear of immigrant women's sexuality and the prejudice that follows such fears are reflected in *My Antonia* when the immigrant girls move to town to work. Cather's biographer notes the writer's disdain for both social reformers and literature with a social message (Woodress 188, 469), yet any novel, particularly one about immigrants during a time when fears of "race suicide" ran rampant, most certainly carried social meanings meant to persuade readers. The structure that Cather imposed on Jim Burden's story⁸⁸ would have forced her contemporaries to examine and perhaps rethink the so-called "immigrant problem." When Cather (or Jim) makes the prairie a sort of primordial land before the dawn of civilization, she suggests the beginning of a new race of Americans, and in the subsequent

books, she traces a sort of cultural evolution, suggesting the cultivation of social forms and art forms that emerge once a species works beyond worries over survival.⁸⁹ By the time Cather's Jim returns to Antonia at the novel's end, she has become "like the founders of early races," an embodiment of "the country, the condition, the whole adventure of our childhood" (5). Jim's story, which significantly romanticizes his early life and ultimately transforms Antonia by the novel's end into a symbol of the land and country, begins with a description of Nebraska. Telling of a vast emptiness uncut by roads, fields, or fences, Jim uses a metaphor particularly fitting for my study. Likening the land to "material out of which countries are made" (12), Jim can describe this terrain only in terms of what it can become.

I read *material* as cloth, a metaphor that fits snugly into the novel's pattern of textual references to cloth, clothing, and clothiers. Even before Jim picks up the story, the narrative voice mentions in passing garment-makers on strike (4), an aside possibly alluding to the Uprising of Thirty Thousand when New York shirtwaist workers, most of whom were Russian immigrant women, rallied in 1909.⁹⁰ And as Jim begins his own first-person account of immigrants who figured prominently in his Nebraska boyhood and adolescence, we hear of pasts linked intimately with cloth or the construction of clothes. Mr. Shimerda used to be "a weaver by trade ... a skilled workman on tapestries" (22), a craftsman who in his old country made, as Antonia tells Jim, "fine cloth like what you not got here" (97). Other Czech immigrants, first Jelinek's unseen friend Jan Bouska and then Antonia's husband Cuzak worked as furriers in Vienna (86, 268), and Cuzak's shoemaker father, we learn, mended the shoes of a woman

who was later to become a great Czech soprano performing world-wide (265). Cather's allusions to these immigrant characters' European pasts could be simply mimetic, reflecting the backgrounds of foreign-born Nebraskans she knew as a youth in Webster County,⁹¹ mimetic, too, in that they reflect the backgrounds of foreign-born clothiers as they are revealed in the 1900 census.⁹² With Lena Lingard, the Norwegian hired-girl turned dressmaker, though, the references to cloth, clothing, and clothiers move from the quickly sketched (and easily missed) toward becoming integral to the story Jim tells of Nebraskan immigrants' acculturation that like the American clothing adopted to cover their foreign bodies works to fashion identities that are hybrid mixes of their European pasts and American presents. Throughout Jim's telling, the clothed bodies of Americans, particularly those immigrants who arrived during the nineteenth century, form the warp of the material-of-which-countries-are-made. Images of cloth and clothing invite us as readers to interpret land-not-yet-country as a space intimately connected to and ultimately shaped by the bodies of immigrants whose lives underlie Jim Burden's memories of Nebraska. By the end of Jim's telling, the material of which countries are made clothes a history of mythic proportions.

I

Displacement and Adaptation: Nebraska Crossroads Where the Old World Meets the New

According to Jim's telling, the Nebraska land, without civilization, obliterates identity; between the earth and sky he felt "erased, blotted out" (13). This image captures the sense of displacement and fragmentation of self that one immigrant woman recalled for a Jewish

newspaper in 1913: "We gave up a life we were accustomed to. In our middle age, sometimes older, we have to start a new life. We are as if newborn when we come to America" (qtd. Schreier 121). Jim's erasure differs somewhat from the image emerging within this immigrant woman's words, for Jim's displacement disrupts time and history, placing Nebraska "outside man's jurisdiction" (12). *Newborn*, on the other hand, carries connotations of family, a birth into a society and culture. The immigrant women whose remembrances Barbara Schreier examines in *Becoming American Women* recall a passage into an established culture that demanded transformations but not the total death of a former identity that Jim's notion of erasure carries. Most of their stories emphasize the process of acculturation that began with a change of clothes that became emblematic "as an identifiable symbol of a changing consciousness" (Schreier 5). Their accounts, most of which describe new lives in urban areas, would obviously contrast quite markedly from accounts of immigrants who by way of railroad promotional activities bypassed New York and the eastern cities to settle directly on the plains and prairies. Yet in suspending culture altogether, Jim can begin his evolutionary tale of America's new race, a tale in which the self adapts or dies.

Book One of *My Antonia* focuses on the Shimerdas' struggle against nature for survival. Burrowing into the ground like the other of the prairie's "degraded creatures" (29), they dwell in a dug-out carved into a "draw-bank" (23). But unlike the earth-owls and prairie dogs, they have not adapted to their environment. In each of Jim's memories of visiting the dug-out, Antonia and her sister Yulka "shiver" in cotton dresses (34, 53, 59); Mr. Shimerda, always meticulously dressed in a knitted vest, his

neck tied with "a silk scarf of a dark bronze-green, carefully crossed and held together by a red coral pin" (24), wears the refined garb of his old country and former trade, apparel ill-suited to a prairie existence outside "man's jurisdiction." Mr. Shimerda makes attempts at adaptation; he makes rabbit-skin caps for his girls, and for himself a "rabbit-skin collar that he buttons on outside his coat" (58). But reduced to sharing one overcoat and "tak[ing] turns wearing it," they fear the cold, and, as the Burden's hired man reports, "stick in [their] hole in the bank like badgers" (58).

The hired man's words come from his experience on the prairie, but they resonate, too, with the late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century preoccupation with Darwinian thought. In their living "like badgers," the Shimerdas struggle for survival as all creatures do, and the immigrants who in Jim Burden's telling of Nebraska history adapt--or fail to adapt --to their environments compress into the span of one lifetime principles of racial evolution. Jim encodes his stories of individual successes and failures with assumptions about racial type, cultural refinement, and fitness for survival that were typical of the nineteenth century. Within his telling, clothing suited to wearers' levels of refinement cleave to their bodies as surely as the blood that helps define them as gentlemen or peasants surges through their veins. The refined Mr. Shimerda is "tall" (10) and has "white and well-shaped" hands that Jim describes as "calm" and "skilled" (24). He looks to Jim like "old portraits" of Virginia aristocrats, and the old man's decidedly neat dress suits a "dignified manner" (24). After he commits suicide out of longing for his lost past, Jim thinks of Mr. Shimerda's soul returning to Prague but

resting first at the Burden house, "which had been more to his liking than any other in the neighborhood" (81). The Burden house, the only frame structure on the prairie, displays a level of civility and refinement suited to a man whom Jim suggests to be too much a gentleman for Nebraska's harsh conditions.

Mrs. Shimerda, on the other hand, having been born of Bohemian peasant stock, adapts fairly quickly, as do the Shimerda children. The description of these peasant characters depends upon nineteenth-century racial stereotypes. The son Ambrosch, who with his stocky build, "flat head, and a wide, flat face" resembles his mother and displays her brand of stingy arrogance. Jim remembers the mother's and son's "alert and lively" faces and the little "shrewd eyes" that "fairly snapped at the food" that grandmother Burden brought them (23). Animal-like in their drive for survival, they contrast markedly with Mr. Shimerda, whose face looks to Jim "like ashes--like something from which all the warmth and light had died out" (24). Presumably of more civilized blood than that of his lower-class wife (whom he married after he fathered the son when she was working as a servant girl in his parents' home), the cultured Mr. Shimerda lacks the savage qualities that would adapt more readily to the prairie's savage life.

The survival of Mrs. Shimerda and her children to the new environment depends in part upon their adapting the materials of East European peasant life to the demands of their new environment. Jim remembers Mrs. Shimerda "pointing to her feet which were tied up in rags" (59). While her resorting to this method of protection used by East European peasantry (Schreier 27) makes the old women "look accusingly

about at everyone" (59), her ability to make do at the barest level of subsistence gets the Shimerdas through the first winter. The hollowed out hole in the wall where Antonia and Yulka sleep appalls Jim's grandmother, but Antonia assures her that the goose-feather lining makes it an inviting place to sleep (61). And while the grandmother judges Mrs. Shimerda's housekeeping skills harshly, saying the Bohemian woman "managed poorly under new conditions: the conditions were bad enough certainly" (29), at least some of what the Burdens find horrifying--like the sourdough that Mrs. Shimerda intentionally leaves to ferment--makes possible their survival during their first cruel months in America. Having lived in ways that lacked the refinement that Mr. Shimerda's attire signals, Mrs. Shimerda fosters an anger that her husband lacks. Nostalgic for his past, Mr. Shimerda, Jim says, "had come to believe that peace and order had vanished from the earth, or existed only in the old world he had left so far behind" (71). On the Nebraska prairie, his orderly old world attire signifies nothing of the social class, cultural refinement, and artistic accomplishment that it carried in Bohemia; to the hired man Fuchs, who reports Mr. Shimerda's suicide, the old man was merely "fixy" (78):

You know he was always sort of fixy, and fixy he was to the last. He shaved after dinner, and washed hisself all over.... Then he put on a clean shirt and clean socks.... When we found him, everything was decent His coat was hung on a peg, and his boots was under the bed. He'd took off that silk neckcloth he always wore, and folded it smooth and stuck his pin through it. He turned back his shirt at the neck and rolled up his sleeves. (78)

Mr. Shimerda's preparation of his body and garments before death suggest the purpose of ritual: "an attempt to create and maintain a particular

culture, a particular set of assumptions by which experience is controlled" (Douglas *Purity* 128). Not able to control life in America, Mr. Shimerda chooses death, and his ritualistic arranging of body and garments give visible expression to Bohemian social relations and the cultural values of his class, which Jim carefully distinguishes from that of Mrs. Shimerda.

Concerns over "race suicide" thread their way throughout Jim's marking out of the distinctions between Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda. Contemporary writings about the rush of Eastern European peasant stock provide insight into the immigration issues central to Cather's novel and locate Jim's attitudes among those of others during the first decades of the twentieth century. Economist John R. Commons, for example, in a 1903-04 series on the racial composition of the American people for the liberal magazine *The Chautauquan*, provides background on Bohemian immigrants, the first of whom he judged to be "the most highly educated and ardently patriotic of the Slavic peoples" ("Immigration," Part II 434). Carefully distinguishing the social classes of the Bohemians who came during the three mass exits of the nineteenth century, he notes, "Practically the entire migration of the Slavic elements at the present time is that of peasants" (434). In the section of the Austro-Hungary empire from which the Shimerdas came, large estates of the nobility held the peasantry in positions of tenants and farm laborers, who worked for wages at a "bare subsistence level" ("Immigration, Part II 435). Mr. Shimerda, like the skilled craftsmen of the 1866 Bohemian exit, had a trade and thus a social standing higher than that of the peasantry, but having been disinherited for marrying a servant girl, he has limited the economic opportunities for

his children. The son Ambrosch, without trade or land, would have worked as a laborer for subsistence wages. "For Ambrosch my mama come here" (74), Antonia tells Jim, who stays perpetually galled by Mrs. Shimerda and her "flat face[d]" son (23).

Jim's personal responses to the immigrants he comes to know appear to reflect more than simply preferences for one person over another. While another of the Burden's hired men, Jake, groups all the Shimerda's into a category of "foreigners" who cannot be trusted (103), Jim tends to stratify foreigners into classes that take into account their levels of refinement and their family histories. His later comments about Black Hawk residents' inability to distinguish between the Bohemians demonstrates that Jim has learned well his culture's distinctions for judging superiority:

There was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction, of Antonia's father. Yet people saw no difference between her and the three Marys; they were all Bohemians. (155)

The 1904 *Chautauquan* distinguishes between immigrants capable of "improvement" and those who are not, providing criteria for judgment that sounds much like Jim's description of Mr. Shimerda (Commons, "Amalgamation" 224). Other Americans provided other solutions, and their opinions likewise shed light on the distinctions Jim makes concerning the Shimerdas. Many like N. S. Shaler, writing in 1893 for *Atlantic Monthly*, advised the exclusion of European peasants, believing that the "American commonwealth could never have been founded if the first European colonists had been of peasant stock" and that democracy could not be preserved if

"its preservation comes to depend upon such men (655). Shaler's racist (and historically inaccurate) commentary asserts that centuries of "breeding" checked the development of the peasantry's intellectual abilities, motives, and aspirations, and he implies that the signs of inferior breed could be read by the "characteristic mould of body" (654). His commentary as well and the more liberal approaches of those like William Z. Ripley, author of the 1899 *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study*, explain for modern readers the continual attention to details of physiognomy within Cather's novel. Jim's reflection at the end of the novel on the Cuzak children's "good heads" (256) echoes Ripley's study, which states that the "shape of the human head ... is one of the best available tests of race known" (37). For those worried about the weakening effects of Eastern European peasant blood, Antonia's mating with Cuzak should have been reassuring; height, good heads, and clear eyes dominate over both the qualities from Mrs. Shimerda's blood line and those of the "crumpled little" Cuzak (263). Because interest in race, physiognomy, and breeding so thoroughly saturate the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century discussions of immigration, Jim's attention to these issues and his continual reading of bodies fit into his scheme for ordering his evolutionary history of the Nebraska immigrants; if immigrants' bloodlines are to influence the destiny of America, the immigrants must be shown to be capable of evolving and adapting to American ways.

Discussions of race and evolution at the turn of the century often debated the immigrant "problem" in terms of nature/nurture, answering the often-asked question about whether "inferior races" were created by

natural selection or whether the so-called "inferiority" resulted from lack of "the education and training which we call civilization" (Commons, "Amalgamation" 221). The power of civilization to Americanize immigrants figures into Grandmother Burden's opinions about Antonia. While Jim says of Antonia when she begins working the fields after her father's death "[h]er neck came up strongly out of her shoulders.... One sees that draft-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries" (96), his grandmother is convinced that it is "heavy field work" that is spoiling her, not some innate flaw. Like John Commons, Grandmother Burden suggests that environment and mode of life—"civilization, not race evolution" (Commons, "Amalgamation" 221)—forms and transforms the individual. When Mrs. Burden entreats the Harlings to make Antonia their cook, saying that thrashing in the fields is ruining Antonia and that life would have been different if "that genteel old man" had lived" (122), she has in mind the sort of American molding of character that Commons and like-minded Americans were advocating; after all, Antonia was "not too old to learn new ways" (121). Commons, like others who came down on the side of nurture in the debate over nature/nurture, argued that the "delicate fabric" of democracy would best be protected by efforts "to educate and elevate" (Commons, "Race" 34, 35). Commons wrote that the adults from primitive civilizations "seem to be inferior in their mental qualities, but their children, placed in the new environments of the advanced civilization, exhibit at once the qualities of the latter" (221). Antonia's facility to learn English quickly and Ambrosch's skill at farming would have been taken as evidence that America created the conditions for improvement of Bohemian peasants.

The prevalence during the first decades of the twentieth century of discourse on race, immigration, and Americanization helps explain the importance of dress to immigrants and why dress moves to the forefront when *My Antonia's* immigrant girls move from the farms to Black Hawk. Newcomers born with a particular physiognomy or coloring that could mark them as members of an "inferior" race profited by looking as American as possible. Given the heterogeneous mix of English, German, Scotch-Irish, Dutch, and Huguenot that formed the so-called colonial stock, looking American often depended as much upon adopting American style of dress as upon any innate features. Because the racial lines between the American and the un-American tended to so thoroughly blur, a change of clothes could aid movement across that imaginary line separating "inferior" races from "superior" ones. Clothing, immigrant women's writings show, assumed a "complex role as the first step toward Americanization" (Schreier 2). American styles clothes European selves, signaling hybridization in process.

II

The Americanization of the Hired Girls

In Book Two of *My Antonia* Jim traces the Americanization of Antonia and other immigrant girls as they learn to negotiate class differences and the consumerism of Black Hawk. Antonia, who on the farm consistently appeared "barefoot and ragged" (121) or in an "outgrown cotton dress switch[ing] ... over her boot-tops" (96), once in Black Hawk, wears "shoes and stockings" (123). Jim continually appraises the hired girls' footwear, noticing not just Antonia's shoes (123, 124, 165) but those of

Lena Lingard (126, 182) and Tiny Soderball (149, 155) as well. His observations well illustrate what shoe trade journals of the era claimed: that "Americanizing usually starts at the foot" (qtd. Schreier 62). Immigrant Rose Cohen's autobiography reveals the importance of shoes to newcomers when she writes of her Americanized aunt buying her a pair of patent-leather slippers because "shoes more than any other article of clothing showed the greenhorn" (qtd. Schreier 62). The contrast between Mr. Shimerda's hulking boots that Antonia puts on to plow the fields and her new "high-heeled shoes" that later in the novel she slips on to go "downtown nearly every afternoon" (165) display the typical contrast between women's Old World boots, which like men's boots had "thick soles and sturdy laces," and the "elegant American shoes with thin soles and high heels" (Schreier 62). Antonia's adopting American heels takes time, however, and with descriptions of footwear alone, Jim implies the different levels of self-transformation that Antonia and Lena will ultimately make in their processes of acculturation. While Lena opts for "high-heeled slippers" even when Jim and the hired girls hike to the river--a choice that he judges "silly" (182), Antonia moves to town only to incorporate East European peasant ways into her new life. When she first comes to work for the Harlings, she makes herself "cloth working-slippers out of Mr. Harling's old coats" (124), a re-cycling of clothing that one Polish immigrant reported during oral history interviews: "We'd make our own shoes ... like ... fur coat shoes" (qtd. Schreier 27).

Jim's memories of Lena Lingard depict with precision the complexity of America's code of fashion and the power of dress in the immigrants' quests to enter into American social life. When Lena first comes to the

Harlings, she makes "a graceful picture in her blue cashmere dress and little blue hat" (126). While she wears "gray cotton gloves" and the shoes and stockings befitting a lady, Jim notes her "clumsy pocketbook" (126), an assessment that points up the intricacies of American fashion codes. Nineteenth-century fashion commentary rarely mentions handbags at all, but in their rare showings in the fashion plates, they appear as small pouch shapes with chain handles (Severa 306). Fashionable women at the end of the nineteenth century more typically carried tiny, often beaded change purses worn draped over the index finger (Schreier 30). Lena's pocketbook could appear clumsy because handbags in general were uncommon; in any case, a large bag, like a large hat, was perhaps judged in poor taste.

Because Lena is employed by Black Hawk's dressmaker, who sews "lovely things for all the town ladies" (128), she more quickly learns the intricacies of the fashion code that for some immigrants continued to mark them as greenhorns. Jim tells of meeting her downtown "where she would be matching sewing silk or buying 'findings' for Mrs. Thomas;" as they walked, she would describe the dresses she was helping to make (134). The particulars of Lena's clothing in Black Hawk only impress Jim when they seem somehow out of place--like the pocketbook or the "silly" high heels. His lack of comment suggests that early in her dressmaking career Lena has begun to dress in ways that fit the fashion ideal of the era. Tiny Soderball, on the other hand, is forever "tripping by in her short skirt and striped stockings" (155). Jim mentions three times her skirt length, noting at different points her "little feet and pretty ankles" (149), the temptation she created for the townsmen (155), and the "pointed shoes"

into which she nestled her striped foot (226). Pattern books like *The Ladies' Standard Magazine* allow the inference that Tiny wears a "misses" skirt, which was typically offered "in four sizes for misses from ten to sixteen years of age" (86) and hit the leg at about five inches above the ankle. Probably near in age to Antonia, who is seventeen, Tiny--if following proper decorum for maturing girls--should have switched to "ladies'" sizing and long skirts that hit for streetwear just to the toe of the shoe. Small and thus not likely to have outgrown misses sizing, Tiny continues to wear short skirts, which at her age draw the attention of Jim and the other males in Black Hawk.

In perhaps unknowingly challenging conventions of dress in Black Hawk, Cather's Tiny Soderball engages in the sort of behavior that inflamed social reformers who throughout America were focusing on immigrant working women's dress in their attempts to Americanize the newcomers. These reformers, predominantly middle-class women, concentrated on fixing what they saw as a profound lack of taste, advising that immigrant women forego flamboyant ensembles, loud colors, showy jewelry, or big hats. "Their rhetoric," Schreier notes, "suggests a link between social and sartorial control. How could they hope to Americanize women whose very clothing was a statement of insurgency" (109). Schreier also notes that newspaper commentary from the period suggests that immigrant working girls often delighted in their transgressions:

They dressed for themselves and their peers, and they willfully challenged conventional notions of genteel femininity. Asserting their cultural agency, working-class young women actively created their own standard of dress. (110)

The hired girls in Jim's account of immigrant acculturation in Black Hawk exert just this sort of cultural agency. While dress was no doubt an important step in assimilation, the hired girls in *My Antonia* do not seize the trappings of American consumer culture as if they are compelled by a death wish for their old identities. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen have asserted with great overstatement that when immigrants fell prey to consumer culture, customary "bonds of affection and interdependence, born of other circumstances, disintegrated" (*Channels* 49); free of customary bonds, they say, immigrants looked to "the consumer marketplace" as the "source of self-definition" (65). However, the writings of actual immigrants (as well as fictional accounts like Cather's) suggest that clothing more often became a very material manifestation of these qualities supposedly lost. Immigrant women's putting on of American style became a *part of* the affectional and social ties constituting their collective identity. A letter written by an immigrant women in North Dakota, for example, included a scrap of cloth as a means of sharing her life with her cousin back in Norway:

I wish you were here today so I could talk to you for a while. I am very lonely here as my work is not much. I crochet and knit and sew. Right now I am making a skirt for myself. Here you can see a sample of the material of it. It is simple, but good enough for the Dakota prairie.... [W]hen I come to Norway again I am going to have a silk skirt I have been kind of thinking to myself. (qtd. Hampsten 35).

Other Midwestern women tell in their letters and diaries of sewing machines borrowed and carted across the prairie (Hampsten 57, 60) and of fabrics and patterns shared: "I have cut out the dress which Nellie sent

me," one diary writer noted (qtd. Severa 381). In Cather's novel, the immigrant girls share their knowledge and skills as they begin "to make pretty clothes" for themselves (138), and throughout the novel, Lena fashions clothing as a means of supporting her family. The garments knitted for the sod-houseful of little brothers and sisters are replaced by the seams she sews for Mrs. Thomas's customers, but part of the money earned goes "to get [her sister] Mary a new coat" (182).

Not simply appropriating the trappings of a consumer culture as a quick fix for entering the American mainstream, Cather's immigrant girls assemble outfits, which--like the ensembles created by the New York working girls in Scheirer's study--were "more often a parody than an imitation of the elite fashions" (70). Creating their own dresses, the hired girls unsettle hierarchies of class through their parodying of the elite.⁹³ Jim tells, for example, of Lena's directing Antonia to copy "Mrs. Gardener's new party dress and Mrs. Smith's street costume so ingeniously in cheap materials that those ladies were greatly annoyed" (165). The "velveteen dress, made like Mrs. Gardener's black velvet," keeps Antonia at her sewing machine until midnight, but her parody draws "caustic comment" from the townspeople (170). Members of the middle-class, as seen in other works from this period, were eager to set themselves apart from those of the lower classes; Mrs. Gardener, who with her husband owns a hotel and is "admittedly the best-dressed woman in Black Hawk" (143), reacts with indignation, a response that suggests worries over distinguishing not just her clothes, but her social class as well. How dare a servant girl be so presumptuous! This same sort of drive to maintain class boundaries appears in the writings from this

period by Ellen Richardson, a reformer in the domestic science movement, who told of her first visit to a settlement house where immigrant working women were taught skills for their new lives in America:

Did you ever go down to one of the city settlements full of the desire to help and lift up the poor shop girl? There must be some mistake, you thought.... They looked better dressed than you did. Plumes on their heads, a rustle of silk petticoats, everything about them in the latest style. (qtd. Schreier 107)

The link between social and sartorial control that Schreier observes often involved anxieties over inter-marriage and other issues related to immigrant women's sexuality. Etiquette manuals of the period attempted to clearly mark out the boundaries of acceptable dress and proper behavior, as when one adviser insists, "Nothing so quickly points out the low-bred as loudness of conduct or flashiness of dress" (qtd. Kasson 98). Another suggests the link between these boundaries and women's sexuality:

Few things are more distasteful than a party of young women making themselves conspicuous in public places.... If they are careless enough to attract attention in this way they must not be surprised if they bring upon themselves rude notions from some of the other sex. (qtd. Kasson 163)

The immigrant girls in *My Antonia* continually unsettle Black Hawk with loudness of one sort or the other. Enjoying the Vannis's dancing pavilion because "[n]ow there was a place where the girls could wear their new dresses, and where one could laugh aloud without being reproved by the ensuing silence" (152), the girls feed Black Hawks' anxiety by dancing with the young men who "drop in late and risk a tiff with their

sweethearts" (152). Jim also remembers how any one of these respectable young men would "look up from his ledger, or out through the grating of his father's bank, and let his eyes follow Lena Lingard, as she passed the window with her slow, undulating walk, or Tiny Soderball, tripping by in her short skirts" (155). From the first Lena Lingard's transgressions involve her clothing, which accentuates her sexuality. Jim describes Lena's first creation, a made-over dress that called attention to the "swelling lines of her figure [which] had been hidden under the shapeless rags she wore in the fields" (132). Scandalizing the congregation at the Norwegian church by sauntering in late in the new costume and then allowing a married man known to be enamored with her to lift her onto her horse, she incites the man's wife to follow her with a knife. "The country girls," Jim observes, "were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background" (155).

Distinguishable from the properly middle-class old Black Hawk girls, whose "bodies never moved inside their clothes" (154), the immigrant girls as they become American women maintain their distinction as a group, but in doing so they "threaten the 'racial purity' and respectability of old Black Hawk residents" (McNall 25). The fear that old middle-class sons will marry servant girls merges both xenophobia and anxiety over disrupting class boundaries in a way that angers Jim, who despite his ire remains one of the respectable, eager to be diverted later in Lincoln by Lena Lingard's beauty but willing only to marry within his own class a woman who finds him irritating (4). While Jim abhors the small-mindedness of the town, he in actuality simply scorns class

distinctions that are too simple and distill what he sees as a complex system of class difference into the "high" of old Black Hawk and the "low" that includes all foreigners:

I thought the attitude of the town people toward these girls very stupid. If I told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard's grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who could n't speak English. There was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation ... of Antonia's father. Yet people saw no difference between her and the three Marys' they were all Bohemians, all "hired girls." (155)

Jim's classification of immigrants, which ranks the three Marys below Antonia, reproduces the sorts of subtle social class gradations depicted both in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. As a criteria for distinguishing these subtleties, Jim Burden uses "cultivation," a quality that implies the conscious development of taste, intellect, and demeanor. Though less blatant than Wharton's Lily Bart in his insistence on good taste, Jim nonetheless has internalized the "rising standard of refinement" that historian John Kasson says marked nineteenth-century America. Showing that standards of refinement played a major role in the shaping of the middle-class, Kasson discusses how new codes of civility "provided standards by which to assess entire social classes, ethnic groups, and cultures (often justifying their subordination)" (7). Jim's observations concerning class, ethnicity, and non-American cultures illustrate how notions about refinement and cultivation affected the judgments America's middle-class made regarding immigrants; they show, too, that in arranging in hierarchy these levels of cultivation, Jim simply reinforces the middle-class respectability that

he so disdains. Jim's classification system, in all probability a manifestation of Cather's own, lay beneath most middle-class discourse on race of this period.

Although not a Black Hawk resident, Blind d'Arnault, "the negro pianist" (142) is positioned at the bottom of Jim's refinement hierarchy. Jim describes Blind d'Arnault in physiognomic terms, noting "the negro head ... almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck" (144). Just such a head is pictured in Joseph Simms' 1891 *Physiognomy Illustrated*, wherein Simms assesses, "This negro boy, with his feeble intellect, which meagreness he inherited from his forefathers, who cultivated only their animal passions and motary powers, can accomplish very little" (282). When Jim tells of Blind d'Arnault's approaching the "highly artificial instrument [the piano] through a mere instinct" and playing passages that lay "under [his] bones ... definite as animal desires" (146), he mimics the racial (and racist) discourse forwarded both by physiognomists and by the popular press at the turn of the century. One magazine, for example, listed cultural qualities of Africans and "their descendants in this country."⁹⁴ Combining traits like docility, indolence, impulsiveness, and excitability with other supposedly innate markers like strong sexual passion and love of rhythm, the list could well have been composed by Cather's Jim Burden. Though Blind d'Arnault sublimates his non-threatening sexuality by "coupl[ing]" with the piano, which makes "a whole creature of him" (146), sexual passion lies just beneath the surface of Jim's description of the pianist who "could never learn like other people, never acquired any finish" (147). Totally

lacking in refinement and cultivation, this "negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully" seems barely human in Cather's presentation.

On Jim's hierarchy of cultivated immigrants, those East Europeans of the peasant class, like Mrs. Shimerda and the three Marys, rank just above Blind d'Arnault. Mrs. Shimerda's lack of refinement takes the form of an unwillingness to conceal her feelings. Lacking the "dignified manner" that marks Mr. Shimerda (24), she shakes Mrs. Burden's hand "energetically" (23), she "scowls" when displeased (24), "cries" in front of visitors before even saying "'How do'" (59), "drop[s] on the floor" to cry more (60), "groan[s] and wring[s] her hands when worried (105), screams when she is angered (102) and crouches down and kisses hands when she is pleased (106). Mrs. Shimerda in no way displays the polish praised by etiquette manuals of the era: "A sure mark of good breeding," a typical passage reads, "is the suppression of any undue emotion, such as anger, mortification, laughter, or any form of selfishness" (qtd. Kasson 148). Jim's stereotyping of the three Bohemian Marys and judging them as inferior to Antonia stems from his perceptions of their indiscreet behavior (154) and "eventful histories" (156). Having lumped into one category the three Bohemian Marys, categorizing them as surely as the rest of Black Hawk has categorized foreigners in general, Jim judges them, like Mrs. Shimerda, to be lacking in the cultivation that would make them truly respectable.

In terms of refinement, the East European immigrants fall at a much higher position along Jim's scale. Lena, whose grandfather was a clergyman, first impresses Jim as she herds her cattle out on the prairie: "I was astonished at her soft voice and easy, gentle ways" (130).

Especially astonished at her lack of embarrassment over her clothing and body--her "miraculous whiteness which somehow made her seem more undressed than other girls who went scantily clad," Jim tells how she behaved "as if she were in a house and were accustomed to having visitors" (130). Appearing to have mastered the niceties of polite manners, Lena can give a polished performance under the worst of circumstances. Jim's noting Lena's lack of embarrassment says as much about how thoroughly he has internalized codes of proper demeanor as it says about Lena's level of refinement. As Kasson points out, "a new kind of embarrassment and sense of shame" emerged in nineteenth-century America, "one that fed upon uncertainties of status, of belonging, of living up to often ambiguous standards of social performance in a society in which all claims of rank were subject to challenge" (115). In European rank-ordered societies, rules of conduct were far more determined by hierarchical status (whether one were a peasant, a small-farm owner, a craftsman, or a gentleman) than they were in America, where democratic ideals professed the equality of everyone but where codes of behavior "served in unacknowledged ways as checks against a fully democratic order" (Kasson 3). Because Lena has been raised in a society where one's manners were clearly tied to one's more-or-less-fixed class and because she has not learned American codes of behavior, which depend on sensitivity to embarrassment and shame, she can perform with confidence the social amenities of her class without the sort of shame that in America acted as checks on behavior. To Jim Burden, her ability to remain poised and to perform without embarrassment the rituals of polite society mark her level of cultivation.

Other of the East European immigrants that Jim mentions reveal how his hierarchy of cultivation simply parallels the social stratification of Black Hawk. Selma Kronn, "the first Scandinavian girl to get a position in the High School," has been "trained" by her father, who was "something high up in the old country" (183). As the most cultivated of the immigrant girls, Selma is ready to join the Black Hawk mainstream led in part by second-generation Scandinavians like Jim's neighbors the Harlings. Mr. Harling, a wealthy grain merchant and cattle buyer, dresses in "caped overcoats" that make Jim think of "the 'nobles' of whom Antonia was always talking" (125). Black Hawk's elite class includes those second-generation immigrants who have prospered, using their cultivation of American middle-class self-control: "People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution" (168). Jim unknowingly describes people who judge others just as he does. Merely elaborating the town's simplistic system of high and low, Jim reveals how the material-of-which-countries-are-made can be cut and stitched to fit as neatly around class distinction as around democratic ideals. Because the fit is so similar, a would-be egalitarian like Jim (and Cather) does not even notice which garment he wears.

The racial evolution that Jim alludes to when in Book One the prairie appears as primordial landscape awaiting a new breed of Americans continues in Book Two with the hired girl's move to town and the subsequent sexual interest of the young men who follow them to the dance hall. The young men's respectability, though, which makes marriage to these girls out of the question works to limit chances for amalgamation,

a solution to America's "immigrant problem" implied in *The Chautauquan's* series on race when the writer proclaimed, "Frederick Douglass, Booker Washington, Professor DuBois are an honor to any race, but they are mulattoes" (Commons, "Amalgamation" 222). The hired girls, Jim reveals, after working in the Black Hawk kitchens to help their families out of debt, return home to marry the sons of neighbors,--usually of like nationality" (154). The problem of Americanizing some of these immigrants by the time of Jim's telling of his past has been solved through successful assimilation: "the girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are to-day managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the town women they used to serve" (154-55).⁹⁵ Of particular interest for my study, however, is the working girl Lena Lingard who does not return to the farm and who does not marry.⁹⁶ Quasi-assimilated, becoming a success American-style, Lena combines turn-of-the-century social codes and conventions with a total disregard for custom, using a hybrid mix of qualities that at once challenges class and gender boundaries and accepts American definitions of success.

III

Lena Lingard: Hybrid on the Move

As seen in other novels within this study, the hybrid--that curious mix of binary oppositions that disrupts categories--provides a model for social change. Cather's Lena in her process of becoming an American woman, successfully balances the inheritance of the past with American culture in a way that brings her personal success and marks her as a new

sort of woman. Her outfits--the ragged work clothes of *My Antonia's* Book One, the cashmere dress and grey gloves of Book Two, the conventionalized city clothes of Book Three, and the "hat a trifle too large" in book five (259)--allow readers to chart her rise from "scantily dressed," immigrant cattle herder to owner of a thriving San Francisco business, and at each step in constructing an outfit that becomes her, Lena displays the hybrid qualities that allow vital changes.

When Lena first greets Jim on the Nebraska prairie with the poise that he reads as cultivation, she combines the impropriety of immodest dress with the propriety of correct social form. Her bare feet and state of undress, like that of Chopin's servant girl Mariequita, work against the conventions of proper middle-class dress (the toilette, which even on the prairie marked one's refinement); yet in maintaining the ritualistic behavior suited to social calls, she is perceived by Jim as cultivated despite her working class attire. Using hybrid qualities to her advantage, Lena's shamelessness, borne of her rearing in a rank-ordered society, works for her in this encounter with Jim, and it continues to work for her throughout the novel. This poise and lack of embarrassment allow her to challenge propriety in the church scene with 'Ole Benson, but it also allows her later to effect what Jim calls a "very good" manner with her customers: "I ... wondered where she had learned such self-possession," (211), he marvels when he first observes her in her dress shop in Lincoln. He seems to have forgotten that he observed just this sort of ease when she was scantily clad, watching her cows.

Throughout *My Antonia* Lena forms hybrid creations that merge convention with the non-conventional. Like the dress she suggests for

Antonia, which combines the lines of high fashion with the cheap fabric suited to a servant girl's clothing allowance, her behavior and dress again and again merge lady-like deportment with actions not entirely befitting a lady. The "reputation" that makes her a somewhat dangerous match for the proper Sylvester Lovett, who is "cashier in his father's bank" (156), stems from stereotypes about working-class women's sexuality, assumptions that allow the townspeople to see her manner as a wielding of dangerous female sexuality. Lena, like Dreiser's Carrie, combines sexual freedom with the conventional dress of a lady, but she adds to the hybrid mix an unconventional vow to avoid marriage. When near the end of involvement with Jim in Lincoln, he expresses regrets for having perhaps held her back from marriage to one of the other two men in love with her, she says,

"I don't want a husband. Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into cranky old fathers, even the wild ones. They begin to tell you what's sensible and what's foolish, and want you to stick at home all the time. I prefer to be ... accountable to nobody." (217-18)

Telling Jim that she remembered home as "a place where there were always too many children, a cross man, and work piling up around a sick woman" (218), Lena reports a family life on the prairie noticeably similar to the history that emerges with consistency in the personal writings of pioneer women, whose extant letters express preoccupations with "health, personal relationships, sexuality and birth control" (Hampsten 28). One letter, written by a middle-aged woman who had already had several children, reads,

Mamie, I got two hard months before me yet that is if I count right, I just dread the time coming.... O Mamie I wish there was no such a thing as having babies. I wish I took George Willard's receipt and left the nasty thing alone. I will next time you bet I [will] not have any more if I live through this time what I hope I will. Well Mamie it is there and it has to come out where it went in. Well might as well laugh as cry it be just the same. (qtd. Hampsten 106)

The writer, Mary Kincaid, lived through childbirth and wrote when her baby boy was two months old, "I tell you Mamie I don't want no more babies. We all think lots of the baby and the neighbors all was so kind to me" (qtd. Hampsten 106). Letters show that another pregnancy or a false pregnancy followed and that when the child was just under two years old, Mary, who had been chronically ill since his birth, died: "She is through with it and I hope she is in a better place.... She was laid out in her black dress," her cousin wrote (qtd. Hampsten 106). Cather's Lena reports a family history that accurately voices the hardships of women's lives on the prairie, and her aversion to marriage is understandable. More than her witnessing of hardship, however, influences her decision, since her aversion to marriage increases after she leaves Black Hawk. Having told her friends "If I don't get into business, I'll maybe marry a rich gambler" (183), Lena--once she gains economic success in Lincoln--can declare, "Why, I'm not going to marry anybody" (217).

Lena's move from seamstress to owner of a thriving Lincoln business is marked by a significant change in her dress. In Lincoln she constructs a surface "so quietly conventionalized by city clothes that [Jim] might have passed her on the street without seeing her" (200). Having incorporated into her dress the subtleties of urban codes of dress, Lena

wears a "smoothly" tailored black suit and a "black lace hat, with pale-blue forget-me-nots" (201). Abandoning the costumes of her Black Hawk days, she opts for clothing less sexually alluring and far less conspicuously eye-catching. When Jim encounters her in downtown Lincoln, she wears a "velvet suit and a little black hat, with a veil tied smoothly over her face" (211). On the streets of Lincoln, Lena dresses in exemplary fashion for the 1890s, a decade when one etiquette adviser wrote, "Black is becoming to every woman, but as she does not dress to be seen when walking, it would be well to wear it, even if she thought it not becoming" (121). Lena's costume becomes her not just in the sense of the word used by this adviser, who like Lena's customers would expect a dressmaker to attend meticulously to details of proper dress; rather, even in spite of its conventionality, it becomes a part of her very sensual self, functioning as a sort of theatrical prop for her entrances and exits. Jim reports how "Lena slipped her silk sleeves into the jacket . . ., smoothed it over her person, and buttoned it slowly," an action that prompts him to remember his "old dream about Lena coming across the harvest field in her short skirt" (203). Not quite conventionalized by conventional dress, Lena comes the closest to being Cather's offering of an artist figure.

When Jim tells of the "great natural aptitude" that Lena has for her work and when he gives images of her alone in her work-room "draping folds of satin on a wire figure, with a quite blissful expression of countenance" (210), he emphasizes her artistic temperament and her creative process. This portrait fits well into Jim's scheme for outlining the cultural evolution of immigrants. Having survived the prairie by

adapting their garments of the Old World and having assumed the garments of the town by taking on forms fitted to social stratification, the immigrants are ready to cultivate the arts. Jim's continued references to Virgil and poetics, as well as his extended description of a theatrical production of *Camille*, carry forward this thematic thread, as do his asides about Ordinsky, the Polish musician, who with Jim's assistance "attack[s] the musical taste of the town" (216). In terms of assessing the role of clothing within literature and within a given culture, this elevation of Lena to artist stature is noteworthy. In many ways such a use of clothing parallels what Wharton does with clothing in *The House of Mirth*. In both *My Antonia* and *House*, clothing no longer simply symbolically expresses one's social identity; rather, it becomes an art form. Like Mademoiselle Reisz's music or Sister Carrie's drama, Lena Lingard's designs have a distinctive "style" (210). Historically, the elevation of clothing designer to the status of artist occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Jim's use of Lena as artist narratively records this shift that accompanied the proliferation of ready-to-wear clothing that made fashion readily available to the masses.⁹⁷ When Jim overhears the mother of an awkward, overgrown daughter telling Lena that the girl is "really too young to come to an expensive dressmaker" but that she knows Lena can "do more with her" (210-11), he hears a distinctly modern opinion that clothing made by dress designers and professional dressmakers, although far more expensive than mass-produced clothing, hold the allure or personalized styling that made it worth the expense.

Lena's final recorded move up the socio-economic ladder occurs with her relocation in San Francisco, where once again a shift in clothing records a change. Lena, living and working in an apartment around the corner from the now-wealthy Tiny Soderball (246), designs dresses that attract "a fine class of trade" (226). Jim's last glimpse of her, this time in a photograph sent to Antonia, pictures "a comely woman, a trifle too plump, in a hat a trifle too large, but with the old lazy eyes, and the old dimpled ingenuousness still lurking at the corners of her mouth" (259). Having learned that in a town the size of Lincoln, she "would always be gossiped about" (226), Lena moves to the metropolis where her conventional, small hats can give way to oversized ones. Her clothing still becomes her.

For Cather's contemporary readers who would be convinced by discussions of race, Lena Lingard's hybrid lineage--the curious mix of wild, Lapp blood with that of the respectable Norwegian middle-class--provided a genetic model for explaining the hybrid mix of convention and impropriety that forms her self. In terms of so-called "race suicide," Lena would present no threat. Not opting for marriage and motherhood, she displays a carnality that will not end in any proliferation of Lapp blood, perhaps the only Scandinavian race that at the turn-of-the-century would have created the sort of anxiety that East European peasant blood did.

IV

Antonia as America / Romantic Ideology

To finish his tale of the evolution of a new race, Jim returns to an account of Antonia, giving the history of her preparation for a marriage

that never takes place, the birth of an illegitimate child, her eventual marriage to Cuzak, and the birth of her twelve children. His final thoughts on race do indeed show, as McNall has argued, that "[i]n a world in which foreignness was the symbol of insecurity and change, [Cather] made an immigrant woman stand for permanence and stability" (29). Beginning with a strong image of Antonia and then a reading of her physiognomy, Jim notes,

She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. *All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions.*

It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races. (emphasis added 261)

Jim's story in many ways looks beneath the xenophobia so prevalent at the turn of the century, and his story would doubtless forward examination of assumptions about East European peasants and others whose blood was thought to carry markers of inferiority. In other ways, as seen with the discussion of "The Hired Girls" section of the text, he simply reinforces class distinctions by looking for signs of refinement and cultivation. Jim's distinctions are Cather's own, I believe. More troubling, however, and not at all clear in terms of Cather's own position is Jim's romanticizing of rural life and his simultaneous actions that work against the very life and people he so admires.⁹⁸ Jim Burden never mentions his work as corporate lawyer for the railroad; readers hear this information in passing by the narrative voice who introduces Jim's manuscript. Able to separate his imaginative life from his day-to-day

reality, Jim seems unaware that his work with the railroad threatens rural life or that the railroad exploits farmers by escalating prices for shipping grain. In the introduction to Jim's manuscript, the narrative voice insists, "Jim is still able to lose himself in those big Western dreams.... and his sympathetic, solicitous interest in women is as youthful as it is Western and American" (4-5). These observations seem to suggest that Jim through his use of imagination turns people and places into abstractions. A memory of Lena dancing demonstrates the gap between Jim's abstractions and the reality that inspires them:

To dance "Home, Sweet Home," with Lena was like coming in with the tide. She danced every dance like a waltz, and it was always the same waltz--the waltz of coming home to something, of inevitable, fated return. After a while one got restless under it, as one does under the heat of a soft, sultry summer day. (170)

Lena, who at the novel's end has not been back to Nebraska for six years, seems an odd choice to embody "fated return." And as the only character vocally negative about marriage and motherhood, she suggests nothing of the "Home, Sweet Home" that Jim's memory calls for. Having abstracted an ideal of "fated return," he never quite comprehends the reality of Lena, who is as "restless" as he is.

The assumed dichotomy between nature and civilization or between the rural and the urban has been a common strand in American thought since its beginning, and it plays a major role in Jim's romanticism. Jim, like American Romantics before him, uses nature as a means of transcending material reality. Just as he turns Lena into an abstraction, so, too, does he turn Antonia and rural life into abstractions. And if rural

America exists as an abstraction, a place outside civilization and if that area by way of its unsullied primitiveness becomes romantic ideal, as it does for Jim, then unchecked American progress in the form of railroad expansion (and exploitation) cannot touch its purity. "He loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches," the narrative voice explains. "He is always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and has helped young men out there to do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil" (4). Jim's imaginative images of the American West and rural Nebraska fuel unrestricted mining, logging, and oil drilling, a reality quite at odds with the image of Antonia's hand among the crab apples. By the end of the novel, Antonia has become a symbol of "the country," a female of mythic proportions. Because the narrative voice tells us that Jim's interest in women is American, we might look to turn-of-the-century America's mania for images of women as symbols for the US. In the advertisements, posters, and magazine illustrations of this era, images of women over and over work to persuade viewers toward American expansion, patriotic ideals, industrial progress, and military might.⁹⁹

Jim Burden's attitudes about rural America were not unusual, and while he looks beneath the xenophobia so common in a country obsessed with fears over "race suicide," his romanticizing of the plains in very subtle ways argues *against* further immigration. In the dichotomy that makes rural America separate, pure, and superior to the squalor of the city slum lay an assumption for restricting immigration, which was addressed by *The Chautauquan's* series on race in America. By 1904, thirteen years before

the publication of *My Antonia*, John Commons had already discounted farms as any sort of "relief for current immigration" ("Amalgamation" 224):

Great railway systems and land companies in the South and West have their agricultural and industrial agents on the lookout for eligible resettlement sights. But all of these agencies seek mainly those immigrants who have resided in the [US] for a time, and have learned the language and American practices, and, in the case of the railroad and land companies, those who have accumulated some property. (224)

Farming, which Commons judged as the way of life best suited for enabling immigrants to rise "to the best his surroundings exemplify" (228) was no longer a tenable solution. Urban America, "with its separation of classes ... with its mingling of all races and the worst of the Americans" left immigrants with only "dark" hopes, he wrote. Thus, by the time of Cather's writing, the pastoral romance of *My Antonia* simply reinforced the "liberal" middle-class position on immigration restrictions. Because the pure, primal, rural farmlands were no longer available for cultivating newcomers, America would take no more of the world's "weak, hungry, and...."

Ambivalence marks my own reading of Cather's text. Reading against Jim's romanticism, I am disturbed by the beautiful image of Antonia's tow-headed children exploding from the fruit cellar. I think too much about pioneer women like Mary Kincaid who were sighing, "I tell you Mamie I don't want no more babies." Cather's Jim speaks other images that can seduce me, though. As a reader, I love best the image of Antonia's hand touching crisp, white linen on her clothesline. But as a woman, I would prefer living as the hybrid Lena does, draping material around wire forms.

V
Women, Work

With Cather's Lena Lingard, meaningful work brings not simply success but fulfillment. None of the melancholic yearning that qualifies the success of Dreiser's Carrie mars Lena's becoming. As a character in my own narrative of women's becoming, Lena Lingard--like James's Henrietta Stackpole, Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz, or Dreiser's Carrie Meeber--chooses her own mix of cultural forms to clothe a self intent on work. Lena elaborates this narrative, illustrating the means by which immigrant women drew upon their non-American pasts to forge female identities outside the domestic sphere. Foreign-born and of mixed blood, Lena, like Dreiser's Carrie, embodies potent cultural intersections. Dwelling at the metaphoric crossroads where Old World meets New and identity borne of rank-order meets control-through-manners, Lena dresses an unconventional womanhood in respectability, achieving the sort of shameless self-possession that Chopin's Edna Pontellier moved toward but never reached.

In the final chapter of this study, I examine a forthrightly feminist text, showing Ellen Glasgow's fictional presentation of early twentieth-century discourse on the evolution of woman. In *Barren Ground* Glasgow provides a triumphant closure to these tales of becomingness, suggesting that women can re-claim the barren ground of idleness and cultivate self through work.

Notes

⁸⁷The immigration statistic comes from the May 1904 issue of *The Chautauquan*, a liberal magazine that ran a series during 1903 and 1904 on "Racial Composition of the American People." The writer of this series, John R. Commons, was a turn-of-the-century economist with strong labor sympathies. Interested in finding workable solutions to America's social problems, Commons worked to form a middle ground between the extreme points of view on both sides of contemporary social issues. I use Commons' articles, which were later published in book form as *Races and Immigrants in America*, throughout this chapter. Commons' well-documented articles include extensive bibliographic information related to issues of immigration, assimilation, and amalgamation.

⁸⁸Literary critics' work on Cather's *My Antonia* regularly discusses Cather's relationship to her narrator. Deborah Lambert's "The Defeat of a Hero: Autonomy and Sexuality in *My Antonia*," Frances W. Kaye's *Isolation and Masquerade*, and Sharon O'Brien's "Gender, Sexuality, and Point of View" examine Jim as a mask for Cather's own male-identified character. Wallace Stegner's "Willa Cather, *My Antonia*," Terence Martin's "The Drama of Memory in *My Antonia*" and David Stouck's "Perspective as Structure and Theme in *My Antonia*" approach Jim's narration as Cather's structuring device for the novel. Glanche Gelfant's "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Antonia*" examines Jim as an unreliable narrator.

Jim's point of view complicates Cather's novel. A reader's own perspective, more than efforts on Cather's part, seem to determine just how marked the gap between Jim, the narrative voice of the first pages, and Cather herself becomes. Based upon my reading of Cather's life, I

believe that in many ways Jim Burden's romanticism is Willa Cather's own. Within my discussion of *My Antonia* I often use *Jim's story* and *Cather's novel* as interchangeable terms. As a reader I find evidence that the narrative voice at the beginning judges Jim to be excessively romantic. I am not sure, however, that Cather intends that voice to be her own. Because I read the novel as a form as "the maximally complete register of all social voices of [an] era" (Bahktin 430), and because I adhere to a triadic model of reading that makes the reader an active agent in meaning-making, Cather's intent seems somewhat irrelevant. I will distinguish between Jim as a narrator and Cather as the creator of that narrator-character when such distinctions are pertinent to my discussion.

⁸⁹Cather criticism consistently discusses the form of the novel. David Daiches sees the novel as having an "imperfect structural pattern" (19) and in part attributes the problem to point of view. Terence Martin argues that the image of Jim's Antonia provides the principle of unity "that takes the special form of a drama of memory. Wallace Stegner looks at Jim Burden as both narrative device and thematic element, examining how Jim's point of view gives the novel structure. David Stouck examines the five sections of the novel in terms of shared emotional response between narrator and reader.

James E. Miller's "*My Antonia: A Frontier Drama of Time*" has assisted by own thinking about Cather's structure, for Miller argues that Cather presents a cultural hierarchy with Jim's move from the frontier to Black Hawk, then to Lincoln and New York.

⁹⁰For information on the Uprising of Thirty Thousand, see Susan A. Glenn's *Daughters of the Shetel: Life and Labor in the Immigrant*

Generation (183-94) and Ann Schofield's "The Uprising of 20,000: The Making of a Labor Legend." Sources differ on the number of workers involved.

⁹¹Cather and her family moved from Virginia to Nebraska, where they lived for one year on a farm in Webster County before moving into the small town of Red Cloud. In 1890, forty-three percent of all Nebraskans were of foreign stock (Cherny 32). Cather's biographer, James Woodress, writes of her experiences among the foreign-born population of Webster County and Red Cloud, locations that parallel narrator Jim Burden's first two Nebraska homes with his grandparents. Woodress quotes Cather as saying, "On Sunday we could drive to a Norwegian church and listen to a sermon in that language, or to a Danish or a Swedish church. We could go to the French Catholic settlement in the next county and hear a sermon in French, or into the Bohemian township and hear one in Czech" (qtd. 38). Cather also wrote a friend saying that fourteen old immigrant farm women had been on her Christmas list (39), and her interest in the "foreign-born farm families lasted all her life (Woodress 38).

Anna Sadilek Pavelka, the prototype for Antonia whom Cather met during her Red Cloud years, wrote in 1955 to a high school student who had inquired about her life. She noted in sometimes broken syntax that life in a "sod shack" had been "hard on father [because] in the old country he had weaver when it was cold and in the evenings he would sit and make linens and any kind of wearing material always and was always Joking and happy" (Pavelka 278). Anna Pavelka's father, like Mr. Shimerda, committed suicide during a harsh Nebraska winter.

⁹²See Pat Trautman's "Personal Clothiers: A Demographic Study of Dressmakers, Seamstresses and Tailors 1880-1920."

⁹³Nan Enstad, in a lecture at UNCG, made this point about working girls who played the lady.

⁹⁴An article from the November, 1903 issue of *The Chautauquan*, for example, maintains that the "torrid heat and excessive humidity" of Africa "conspires to produce a race indolent, improvident and contented" (Commons, "Negro" 223). Commons lists as cultural qualities of Africans "and their descendants in this country ... aversion to silence and solitude, love of rhythm, excitability ... lack of reserve ... impulsiveness, strong sexual passion, and lack of will power" (223).

⁹⁵Here again Jim echoes the liberal line of thought provided for *The Chautauquan* by John Commons, who writes of rural life as a force for assimilating immigrants:

Next to the frontier the farms of America are the richest field of assimilation.... [O]n the farm [the immigrant child] sees and knows all classes, the best and the worst, and even where his parents strive to isolate their community and to preserve the language and the methods of the old country, only a generation or two is required for the surrounding Americanism to permeate. Meanwhile healthful work, steady, industrious and thrifty habits, have made him capable of rising to the best of his surroundings exemplify. ("Amalgamation" 222-23)

A current study entitled "Agricultural Change among Nebraska Immigrants, 1880-1900," by Bradley H. Baltensperger, suggests that farming in fact serve as a force for assimilation of immigrants. The study, which compares the farming practices of native-born Americans with those of immigrants, suggests that immigrants quickly adopted American farming

practices and that the differences that do appear tend to lessen as the length of the immigrant's residence increases.

Because I have found throughout this study the power of pigs as a cultural symbol, I want to note that one of the few statistically significant differences between immigrants and Americans was in the numbers of pigs in Nebraska: "Swine were reported by nearly all European-born farmers, but more than ten percent of the Americans in Clay County owned none" (182). The difference was most pronounced by 1896 when the number of East European farmers increased.

⁹⁶Sally Harvey, in her study of Cather's reexamination of the American Dream, discusses Lena Lingard as a character who reveals Cather's questioning of material success as the road to self-fulfillment: "Lena Lingard is not the standard model of success although she becomes a successful dressmaker in Lincoln and later in San Francisco" (56).

⁹⁷Elizabeth Wilson, in *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* discusses the "Designer as Artist" (48).

⁹⁸Joseph R. Urgo's excellent study *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* examines the aspects of Jim's narration that I find troubling. Arguing that Jim's view of Antonia is necessary to his psychic momentum and survival, Urgo discusses the novel in terms of Jim Burden's compensatory view of rural America, which functions ideologically.

Robert Scholes's "Hope and Memory in *My Antonia*" and James E. Miller's "*My Antonia* and the American Dream" articulate points that I found troubling and thus assisted in forwarding my own thinking about how Antonia functions symbolically for Jim.

⁹⁹Martha Banta's *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* presents an exhaustive study of the ways in which images of women were used in turn-of-the-century America.

Serafina Bathrick's "The Female Colossus: The Body as Facade and Threshold" examines the ways in which nineteenth-century statues made use of the image of Woman in their attempt to naturalize in industrialization.

Chapter Seven
'You can't farm in skirts': Cultivating Self Through Work
In Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*

Published in 1925, Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* is particularly well suited as a novel for finishing this study of clothing and the female self in American realist fiction. Glasgow's protagonist, Dorinda Oakley, having ostensibly been born when American Victorian ideals like those that influence James's Isabel Archer prevailed, spans with her life the years of immense change that have been the focus of this study. Extending across the years of Dorinda's life from the age of eighteen to fifty-plus, the novel allows a re-viewing of issues prevalent in the 1890s and 1900s and so pronounced in the works of Kate Chopin, Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather. Because Glasgow takes her character into the 1920s, the enormous changes in women's clothing that marked that decade emerge as a sort of sartorial cut-off point that betokens a visible shift away from middle-class Victorian ideals of ladyhood. The "lady," hybrid or otherwise, has become an outdated model of desirable womanhood within Glasgow's work, and the female self that surfaces in Dorinda's struggles is a self cultivated through work. This self, defined through work, emerges as the twentieth century's New Woman--the feminist. My reading of *Barren Ground* in this chapter prepares the way for finishing the seams of this study, and by showing Dorinda's struggles to reconfigure female sexuality and the female self I ready those seams.

I

The Girl in Orange Shawl: Transcodings of Land, Body, and Psychic Formations

The title of Glasgow's *Barren Ground* tells readers that whatever other stories emerge between the book's covers, these stories will overlap and merge with the story of the Virginia farm where Dorinda Oakley was born.¹⁰⁰ Amid Glasgow's telling of her protagonist Dorinda's disillusionment with love, her escape to New York, and her homecoming that leads to the reclamation of Old Farm, the land is ever present, standing between the characters and their experiences, mirroring back to them their own inner landscapes. The outer landscape emerges within the novel's first two pages as a defeated anthropomorphic force, a "bare, starved, desolate" flatness, a "carcass picked ... as clean as a skeleton," the defeated that has been consumed, leaving Dorinda's family and the other farmers of the region struggling to earn a livelihood on a "featureless" terrain." Throughout the novel, this outer landscape becomes transcoded onto the inner landscape, the terrain of the self. In the process, Glasgow weaves together parallel concerns--humankind's relationship with the land and women's relationships with men *and* with work. As in the previous novels in this study, clothing acts to fashion the self in particular ways, and in *Barren Ground*, Glasgow's epigraph for the first part of the novel, "Broomsedge," provides a link that transcodes the *clothed* female self onto the land that lies as "waste places ... cinnamon-red in the sunshine" (3). The line "A girl in an orange-coloured shawl...." printed just beneath the bold section title BROOMSEDGE provides this symbolic link, granting the first equating of the girl in orange with the cinnamon-red land, and throughout the novel Glasgow examines the role

of "nature" in determining both the female self and the wasted, barren ground that will produce nothing.

Glasgow's use of clothing grows out of her larger aims of redefining female sexuality and the female self in *Barren Ground*. Because these larger aims relate directly to polemical writings of the period, a quick examination of contemporary feminist thought and of its relation to parts of Glasgow's narrative help clarify the purposes clothing serves within the novel. By establishing the discursive background from which Glasgow's novel takes shape, I locate the issues at stake in Glasgow's use of dress as both realistic detail and metaphor. Perhaps the best path into these writings is to reflect back to the discussions of racial evolution that underlie Cather's story of the Nebraska immigrants in *My Antonia*. Similar discussions course beneath the surface of Glasgow's work, but with a re-casting of the question posed. Whereas immigration issues of the late-nineteenth-and early-twentieth centuries stimulated questions about whether or not immigrants possessed fixed, biological "flaws" that would make them inherently inept to participate in a democratic society, the "woman question" during this same period cast the nature/nurture controversy in terms of women and their place and rights in society. Writers like Ellen Key, Rosa Mayreder, Olive Schreiner, and C. Gasquoine Hartley--all of whom were mentioned by Glasgow in a 1913 piece she wrote for the *New York Times Book Review*--were examining through their non-fiction works the sources of women's inferior social status, arguing that what was typically taken as biologically determined female "nature" arose not from nature at all but from social forces, the "nurturing" of females that fostered dependence, passivity, and

subservience. As a fiction writer concerned with redefining female selfhood, Glasgow reveals herself to be particularly attuned to the role of literature in the nurturing of females.

Glasgow's *Times* article, which is in part a review of Hartley's 1913 *The Truth About Woman*, begins with a discussion of the literary tradition that perpetuated what Glasgow refers to as a "masculine ideal of woman" ("Feminism" 27). Critiquing writers who invariably created heroines who "exist only in their relation to man" and have power only through "self-sacrifice," Glasgow summarizes the tradition of "the womanly woman" as she appears in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English novels. This formulaic masculine ideal, Glasgow argues, generated heroines whose "modesty, goodness, ... and inordinate capacity for forgiveness" underlie their "wholly passive and perfect ... nature[s]" ("Feminism" 27, 29). Suggesting that literature both mirrors life and creates models for living, Glasgow notes that ages of "false thinking" have bred in women "the dangerous habit of false thinking about [themselves]" ("Feminism" 27). Depictions of male and female characters, she concludes, differ markedly, and she images the difference in terms of dress:

From Richardson to George Meredith there was little change in man's ideal of the womanly woman. In fiction man might wear his cloak of many colors, but woman appeared changelessly white except on the occasions when, for purposes of plot, she was depicted as changelessly black. Never by design or accident could the colors run together.... She lived for man, and failing this, she died for man, and at long intervals she even disguised her sex and wore man's clothes for man--but the beginning, middle, and end of her existence was simply man. Without the prop of man she was as helplessly ineffectual as the "tender parasite" to which Thackeray compared her. ("Feminism" 28-30)

Written within a month of an interview Glasgow gave to the *New York Evening Post*, the *Times* article suggests a tendency to think in metaphorical terms regarding clothing, so it comes as no surprise that she later uses clothing as one of several means for depicting shifts in the female self in *Barren Ground*. Dorinda Oakley was already taking shape and possibly even assuming multi-colored costumes at the time of Glasgow's "Feminism" article and of the *Post* interview. She told the *Post* writer in February, 1913, "I have in my mind the stories of several women. I want to write several books, each taking the life story of one woman and working it out" ("Ellen" 120). Adopting in this interview the standard line that distinguishes "literature" from works with social or political purposes, Glasgow told the interviewer that though she was an ardent suffragist, she would avoid the "woman movement" because as she puts it, "I keep propaganda out" ("Ellen" 120). Yet her review of *The Truth About Woman* suggests that her stories of women would, in fact, attempt to persuade readers toward a redefining of "woman's nature." The new woman novelist--the role Glasgow herself intended to fulfill--would resist the "tradition of the womanly woman," she implied, and would write as honestly and courageously through fiction as Hartley had through nonfiction:

Women novelists are still content, with some honorable exceptions, to copy the models as well as the methods of men, but in the brilliant and fearless books of Ellen Kay [sic], of Rosa Mayreder, of Olive Schreiner, of C. Gasquoine Hartley ... woman has become at last not only human, but articulate. [Hartley's] "The Truth About Woman" is an honest and courageous attempt to view woman, not through man's colored spectacles of tradition and sentiment, but by the clear, searching light of reality. ("Feminism" 32)

For Glasgow, "the clear, searching light of reality" illuminates women's "apparent passivity," showing it for what it really is: proof of how women have lived (35). Her praise of Hartley and *The Truth About Woman* foreshadows what current feminist critics find praiseworthy in Glasgow's own work: "She rejoices in womanhood, but it is a womanhood so free, so active, so conquering, that the word takes a new meaning" ("Feminism" 33-4).¹⁰¹

Seeking to bring new meaning to the word *womanhood* and to the concept of female selfhood, Glasgow, like Hartley and other nonfiction writers of the early twentieth century, presents ideas central to her work within a historical context. Before she moves to filtering the story through Dorinda's consciousness, Glasgow posits a narrator who relates the history of the Virginia countryside. As historian, the narrator tells of the land's settlement by Scotch-Irish Presbyterian yeoman and of the pattern of abuse heaped upon it by the Civil War and tenant farming. While the old farmer Matthew Fairlamb proclaims early in the narrative "Broomsedge ain't just wild stuff. It's a kind of fate" (4), Glasgow's history (like Hartley's history of male-female relations) shows that what *seems* natural and thus fated results from human choice and social forces. Broomsedge, the only crop that grows willingly on barren soil is *not* fate-it is the result of habitual abuse of the land. "The soil," Glasgow writes, "was ... drained of fertility for the sake of the poor crops it could yield.... The tenant farmers, who had flocked after the ruin of war as buzzards after a carcass, had immediately picked the featureless landscape as clear as a skeleton" (4-5). By showing how the farmers' fatalism denies the history of the land's misuse, Glasgow prepares the

reader to question her characters' other assumptions about fate and what is "natural."

Mrs. Oakley, for example, posits male-female relations as a domain also beyond human control. When Dorinda first falls in love with the young doctor, Jason Greylock, who has returned to Pedlar's Mill to care for his dying father, she asks her mother "why people marry" (105). Mrs. Oakley defines marriage as *natural* rather than conventional and social, telling her, "it's nature, I reckon.... Marriage is the Lord's own institution, and I s'pose it's a good thing as far as it does" (105-6). Gender relations mirror the relations of humankind with the land, and throughout the Broomsedge section of the novel Dorinda struggles against a fatalism that seems to leave individuals with no control over the land or over the course of their lives. Before the arrival of Jason Greylock, this fatalism plays itself out in Dorinda's life of routine work on the family farm and in a general store in Pedlar's Mill, a life that feels like a "trap" (57). Her fancy, though, suggests that "a smothered fire, like the wild grass" lay beneath this life of entrapment, and "[a]t twenty her imagination [is] kindled by the ardor that makes a woman fall in love with a religion or an idea" (12). Both her outer life and her inner life prepare her to fall in love with the *idea* of Jason Greylock, and when she does, she feels that "all the laws of her being, thought, will, memory, habit [are] suspended" and that "a force with which she had never reckoned before, dominated her being" (29).

Glasgow's naturalism, which envisions falling in love as "the powers of life" seizing Dorinda as "an eagle seizes its prey" (29), resembles in imagery only earlier naturalists like Frank Norris or Stephen

Crane, for by making "nature" two-fold she consciously limits the degree to which nature destroys human agency. One side of Dorinda's so-called "nature" has been molded by Calvinist theology, romantic fiction, and limited life experiences, and this self does indeed lack agency:

Her *nature*, starved for emotional realities, and nourished on the gossamer substance of literature, found its only escape in the fabrication of dreams.... Some day, so ran the bright thread of her dream, the moving train would stop, and the eyes that had flashed into hers and passed by would look at her again" (emphasis added 12).

In her dream, Dorinda stands passively caught in the gaze of a lover, a script that she later acts out when she sits inarticulate before her lover Jason. Yet in a passage showing Dorinda's passivity in the face of love, Glasgow alludes to a second, more active self:

[I]f *the natural Dorinda* still survived beneath this unreal Dorinda, she was visible only in momentary sparkles of energy. When she was with Jason she talked little. Expression had never been easy for her, and now, since silence was so much softer and sweeter than speech, she sat in an ecstatic dumbness while she drank in the sound of his voice. (emphasis added 109)

In these two passages and elsewhere in the novel, Glasgow uses forms of the word *nature* in ways that perhaps seem rather indiscriminate to modern-day readers. Dorinda's romantic "nature" does not derive from nature at all, but from upbringing, literature, and accepted wisdom. Yet *natural*, as it is used in the second passage to describe a more energetic Dorinda, means real--the "natural" core self that lies *beneath* one's socially acquired veneer. Later in the novel, Glasgow distinguishes with a capital "N" Nature as the ancient and enduring force that has existed since before

the dawn of humankind, before societies erected institutions and myths that serve to define and limit womanhood and the female self, and Glasgow's seemingly contradictory use of *nature* and *natural* early in the novel reflects her need to re-cast the meanings of these words. What is commonly but only apparently "nature" must be stripped bare so that the real--that which emanates from Nature--can emerge. In Bakhtinian terms, Glasgow uses a double-voiced discourse that at once signifies within two linguistic systems. Within her mother's system "nature" simply means that which is sanctioned by God and humankind; within Glasgow's lexicon, which bears the stamps of both Darwinism and feminist thought, "nature" signifies all that predates humankind, all that is "real" and beneath the socially acquired, all that is--to quote Willa Cather--"outside man's jurisdiction."

Glasgow's examination of the role of "nature" in determining the female self as well as the wasted, barren Virginia countryside bears directly on her use of clothing throughout her novel. By tracing the shifts in dress across the years from the mid-1890s to the early 1920s, Glasgow traces an evolution of women's dress that parallels the evolution of a new womanhood. As the girl in an orange-coloured shawl assumes outfits of one kind and another as the years pass, Glasgow explores women's socially constructed "natures" and what she sees as the essential core self--woman's "real" Nature that lies beneath such constructions. As observed in the other novels from this period, clothing in *Barren Ground* can appear both as straightforward descriptive detail--the "changing fashions" observed "respectfully" by the rural community (20)--and as metaphor--Mrs. Oakley's "body like an empty garment" dragging

itself back to the stove (56). Carrying with it a host of associations drawn from both material culture and the pattern of imagery set up within the novel itself, clothing provides Glasgow with one more vehicle for carrying her evolutionary message of a new womanhood.

The orange-colored shawl mentioned earlier appears throughout the first section of the novel (3, 10, 20, 26, 29, 62). Similar in color to the cinnamon-red land, the shawl suggests not simply the broomsedge that overtakes the devoured land; in light of the narrator's history of farmers' abuse of the land, the shawl carries with it meanings also related to human agency--"man's jurisdiction" rather than Nature's. Just as human abuse has created the conditions that make broomsedge the only crop that will grow "naturally" on the land, human institutions have cast young womanhood in a hue that is similarly sterile and also accepted as "natural". When early in the novel Dorinda stands with the shawl thrown over her head, she resembles "some exotic flower" (10), and Glasgow is using here a comparison similar to Wharton's likening of Lily Bart to a "hot-house flower." Both images are grounded in technological innovations that made greenhouses all the rage and exotic hot-house flowers a popular novelty. As such, they suggest nature artificially manipulated by humankind. Glasgow continues this suggestion in her description of Dorinda-in-shawl, walking across the landscape feeling her first flutterings of love for Jason. Appearing as "a floating orange cloud against the dim background of earth and sky" (26), Dorinda assumes the shape of an image snatched from nature but tinted in dream colors. Viewed from a distance by the narrative voice that gave us the history of the Virginia countryside, both the abused, "unnatural" land and the socially

nurtured, "unnatural" woman join to form a landscape surreal but as buoyant as the love that brings "clear golden light" into Dorinda's mind (27). Coming to recognize her by the hue of her shawl, Jason tells her, "I knew there wasn't another woman about who was wearing an orange shawl, and if there were, I'd wait for her just out of curiosity" (62). His comment, suggesting that it is the "unnatural," socially acquired surface that attracts him and that women as such are fairly interchangeable, foreshadows his later desertion of Dorinda to marry Geneva Ellgood.

Throughout the Broomsedge section of the novel, clothing often signifies socially acquired artifice, ornamentation put on as part of courtship rituals. Habitually cleaning her shoes and wishing for "something pretty to wear," Dorinda dresses in calico washdresses like those that Dreiser's Carrie wears when she first comes to Chicago from the small town. Designed for comfort and easy care, these mass-produced or home-sewn dresses mimicked the lines of high fashion, and "in the middle nineties," the narrative voice intones, "women walked the muddy roads in skirts which either brushed the ground or were held up on one side" (20). Such dresses in the mid-1890s would also have been cut with bishop sleeves or with exaggerated, leg-of-mutton sleeves, a fashion Glasgow mentions at other points in the text (71-2, 97, 210). When Dorinda first becomes infatuated with Jason, she thinks of ornamenting her purple calico dress with a collar, and taking down a box where fine needlework collars that belonged to her mother are stored, she feels a "longing for lovely things, the decorative instinct of youth ... as sharp as a pang" (53). The non-determining power of instinct is revealed in Dorinda's refusal to be tempted by the collars: the "character that show[s] in her mouth and chin

assert[s] itself" (53). Collars of the 1850s when Mrs. Oakley was reared by her well-to-do grandfather were of whitework, lace, or tatting (Severa 99), and photographs of the period show them ornamenting both fine dresses and calicos. Only the smaller, standing collars of the period could be worn during the 1890s without looking conspicuously out-of-date. Dorinda's ability to resist these collars, a material reminder of Mrs. Oakley's upper-middle-class youth and her social decline when she fell "victim to one of those natural instincts" and married a "poor white" (9), suggests (aside from what might be inferred about Southern class structure) that instincts might originate in Nature, but they do not have to be acted upon. Part of an evolution of new womanhood, Glasgow suggests, begins with a woman's ability to control instincts that make her a victim of her sexuality.

Elizabeth Hurlock, a psychologist whose *The Psychology of Dress: An Analysis of Fashion and its Motives* was published in 1929, provides a contemporary view of fashion choices and history of dress that pertains to the choices Glasgow makes in her use of clothing as a part of courtship rituals. Hurlock asserts that women vie for men's attention through clothing and that during the "Period of Courtship" interest in clothing is at its peak: "In his advertisements, the clever merchant does not stress the practical, but devotes his entire appeal to the quest for personal beauty" (178). Her review of *Photoplay Magazine's* 1922 study of clothing purchases supports her contention that young woman eighteen to twenty-two years old exert themselves as the dominant force in "present-day fashions" (175). Tracing what she too regards as the youthful instinct for ornamentation through various cultures, Hurlock places these

cultures in hierarchical ranking, judging that the higher the degree of civilization, the more men sacrifice personal adornment for "the pleasures of having the women of their families outrival those of other families" (147). "Survivals of primitive ornamentation in feminine dress," she writes, "attest [to] the fact that the clothing of modern women has not yet been completely emancipated from the tyrannical rule of fashion" (160). Hurlock suggests that youthful interest in dress is rooted in an instinctual "display element," but that through cultural evolution, this element will be eliminated. Writing that women's clothing is designed to bring out "helplessness and dependency" in women, she reiterates the arguments of dress reformers from the 1850s--that slavery to fashion is one of "the main points of feminine inferiority" (163).

Hurlock's study clarifies the significance of the blue dress that Dorinda orders from the dressmaker when she first falls in love with Jason Greylock. Using money that she has been saving to purchase a cow for her family, Dorinda makes a choice that elevates dress-buying to the level of symbolic action:

A blue dress, nothing more. The merest trifle in the sum of experience; yet, when [Dorinda] looked back in later years, it seemed to her that the future was packed into that single moment as the kernel is packed into the nut.... In all her life it was the only thing she had ever had that she wanted. (90)

The dress, sewn from nine yards of "nice, double-width nun's veiling" the color of a bluejay, is cut with a "bell" skirt and "balloon sleeves," the height of mid-1890's fashion. Telling Dorinda of the "figured challis" she is sewing for Geneva Ellgood and of the stylish new "high bandeau" hat

wreathed with wheat and poppies that will complete the ensemble, the dressmaker says, "Courtin' is good for milliners, my Ma used to say, even if marriage is bad for wives" (69).

Purchased at the request of Jason who tells Dorinda to "beg, borrow, or steal" (66) a dress to match her eyes (66), the blue dress is likened to the kernel packed into a nut, an image that places it soundly within the domain of nature and reproduction. Sexual instincts, those for display that lead to sexual union and those that create feelings of passionate love, lead women in Glasgow's novel to unthinkingly perpetuate destructive male-female interactions. Mrs. Oakley, herself a victim of love, according to Glasgow, married a "poor white" and has thus struggled for subsistence on a worn-out farm. The family history she relates tells of women intent on having the men of their dreams, only to suffer or, like Dorinda's great-aunt and namesake, be fished from a mill-race and then "sober down and marr[y] somebody else" (105). Mrs. Oakley's life has been marked by the early loss of her young missionary lover, whose death was reported to her as she "held her wedding dress in her hands" (17). Thwarting her own dreams to become a missionary, Mrs. Oakley later fell in love with Dorinda's father and has spent her life suffering periods of "[r]eligious depression" and then flights of visionary fervor that act as safety valves whereby she might vent her frustration over poverty and the wasted farm because she is "not quite right in her mind" (38).¹⁰² "[M]arriage had been too strong for her," Dorinda thinks, "and had conquered her" (103). Mrs. Oakley's life story is marked with dresses, the "white organdie" wedding dress for the marriage that did not take place, the mourning garb she wore when she met Joshua Oakley (123), the

"dress of black alpaca" and the "widow's bonnet, with the streamer of rusty crape at her back" that she wears to lie in court to save her son (329). Like the "womanly woman" of literature that Glasgow identified in her 1913 essay, Mrs. Oakley self-sacrificingly appears in black and white. When she drags her body "like an empty garment back to the stove" (56), Glasgow suggests the hollow shapelessness of a life determined by conventional, passive womanhood.

Dorinda's blue dress sets the pattern for Glasgow's use of dress for Geneva Ellgood, the woman whom Dorinda's lover Jason marries under pressure from his father and the Ellgood family. Like the suffering women in Dorinda's own family history who become "deranged about some man" (105), Geneva Ellgood appears as a sort of double for Dorinda, living out the life Dorinda might have had, had she married the weak Jason and lived passively and selflessly rather than escaping to New York when Jason deserted her. Years later Geneva, the once exquisitely or "jauntily" clad young woman wearing outfits fashioned of fabrics from New York, appears twice before her suicide-drowning, and in each scene she wears blue. Stopping Dorinda along the country road and "wearing a thin summer dress, though the air was sharp" (359-60), Geneva fabricates a harrowing story about the birth of a child whom Jason killed and buried "under the lilac bushes at the end of the garden path" (361). Geneva's depression that gives way "[e]very six months" to attacks of manic running about "telling everybody that she had a child and [Jason] murdered it" might today be diagnosed as a bi-polar mental disorder, but in Glasgow's day she would be seen as hysterically acting out the behaviors long associated with women's reproductive systems.¹⁰³

First appearing along the country road in an inappropriately thin summer dress with a "faded blue sash with streamers" tied at her waist and blowing out in the wind, Geneva forms an eery sort of Art Nouveau image of demented womanhood.¹⁰⁴ Art Nouveau's characteristic billowing veils, wriggling plants, and rippling, feminine curves are suggested both here and then again just before the suicide when Geneva gestures with a long blue scarf to Dorinda's wedding party from the ruins of the old mill: "there was a distraught intensity in the lines of her thin figure and in the violent gestures of her arms beneath the flying curves of blue silk, which wound about her like a ribbon of autumn sky" (376). Writing this description during the 1920s when Art Nouveau's feminine curves were giving way to the more severe lines associated with Art Deco, Glasgow might have chosen Art Nouveau imagery not simply as historically accurate details of dress but also as a way of adding yet another layer of meaning to Geneva's image in blue. The encounter between Geneva and Dorinda ostensibly takes place around 1909, a period when Art Nouveau's curves still directed fashion, and the s-curve corset beneath blousing monobosoms of filmy, draped fabrics gave a serpentine line to the female form. Although Art Nouveau took its inspiration from nature by merging the female form and flower motifs, its designs typically curl and spiral in ways quite *unnatural*. More impressionistic than naturalistic, Art Nouveau provided what one art historian refers to as "a veiled essence of reality" (Becker 9) rather than an exact copy of nature and reality. Through her use of this imagery Glasgow suggests once more the unnatural manipulation of nature. Just as Art Nouveau designs direct lines originating in nature to curl in unnatural ways that veil reality, so conventional womanhood

twists Nature in ways that absorb all of a woman's self and sexuality into choices that can ultimately prove destructive. Art Nouveau by the 1920s was seen as "bad design;" by using historically accurate dress for the period depicted, Glasgow could simultaneously suggest that the ornamental, selfless woman, also a manipulation of Nature, is an outdated and "bad design."

II

An Evolution of Good Design in Women and Dress

Glasgow's writing from the perspective of the 1920s undoubtedly influences her view of dress as an evolutionary process. Because the 1920s brought significantly shortened skirt lengths and vertical lines that no longer depended upon tightlacing of corsets to achieve the desired silhouette, Glasgow had experienced in her own fifty-odd years the startling shifts in fashion that began around 1909 and took what costume historian Stella Blum calls a "course toward freedom, youth and equality" (3). While vertical lines in fashion demanded less constriction, women in the late nineteen-teens still wore corsets, but ones that more closely followed the natural lines of the female form. By the mid-nineteen teens, skirts were ankle-length, clearing the ground by three or four inches since most women wore heeled shoes or boots. In 1920 skirt lengths rose to two to three inches above the ankle, and by 1922 they reached mid-calf. These changes must have been startlingly liberating to women who had lived through the late nineteenth century when women's clothing was at its most constricting and highly constructed, and cut with trailing trains or in sweeping drapes that as Glasgow writes "brushed the ground" (20). Putting

forth this description of women's clothing in the mid-1890s, the narrative voice judges long skirts "a deplorable fashion" (20). A photograph of Glasgow taken during this period appears in an 1897 *Harper's Bazar* and pictures the twenty-four-year-old author of *The Descendants* in a white frilly gown made of yards and yards of organdie and trimmed with a mass of meringue-like ruffles at the neck and streamers of white ostrich feathers hanging from the shoulders and cumberbun. Receiving attention throughout the early twentieth century for her flair with dress, Glasgow showed a personal interest in clothing that seems to contradict her harsh judgments of women's clothing in the first sections of *Barren Ground*. Perhaps having experienced the increased mobility allowed by simpler, shorter, more light-weight clothing, Glasgow through hindsight really did deplore the constricting clothing of her earlier years. Or perhaps the judgments in the first sections simply derive from her intent to show progressive change and evolutionary movement in dress so that the material aspects of women's existence reflect the other profound changes that occur when a woman's self becomes her own. Whatever the cause for this apparent tension between Glasgow's personal preferences concerning dress and the opinions intoned by the narrative voice, dress early in *Barren Ground* is tied to instinctual, youthful desire for pretty clothing and to women's "natures" that lead them to fashion the self for sexual display. Dress in the first two sections of the novel most often signifies socially acquired artifice that points up how women have not evolved to a higher level of civilization and thus, in the words of Elizabeth Hurlock, "are lagging behind men in their emancipation from primitive forms of ornamentation" (161). Yet Dorinda's feeling as an eighteen-year-old that

the blue dress is "the only thing she had ever had that she wanted" signals that dress can become something other than the means for fashioning a self for others. Dorinda does not beg, borrow, or steal the dress, as Jason jested; rather, she buys it with money she earned herself. Although Dorinda feels remorse over the cow her mother might have had, the blue dress re-emerges throughout the story to show how dress, like other parts of "nature" might be reclaimed by women for women.

The route toward reclaiming dress on her own terms does not occur quickly or simply for Dorinda, and the reclamation of dress occurs within a plotline that recasts the story of literature's "ruined woman." Escaping Pedlar's Mill pregnant by the lover who has married another woman, Dorinda goes to New York, where she searches for work, suffers a miscarriage, and finally ends up working for Doctor Faraday, who treated her during her recovery. Before any sort of reclamation can occur, Glasgow suggests, there must come a period of re-focusing of female sexuality through work, and in the New York section of the novel dress functions to point up the vast contrast between working women and "ladies."

When Dorinda becomes a working woman, Glasgow casts her into scenes that place her side-by-side with Mrs. Faraday, a "lady" who is wife of her employer. In each of these scenes, Dorinda's working woman's attire forms a rejoinder to the elaborate, French-inspired fashions of Mrs. Faraday. Mrs. Faraday's outer winter garment is a mantle of "claret-coloured broadcloth heavily garnished with passementerie" (221). Mantles, women's winter "coats" of the nineteenth century varied in cut to accommodate the style of garments beneath. During the period of huge leg-of-mutton

sleeves, mantles were typically cape-like and cut on the round since no matter how hugely puffed or loose mantle sleeves might be, they proved difficult to wear over balloon-sleeved dresses. (Cunnington 394, 398, Severa 466). Passementerie, an applied mixture of braids, beads, cord, and gimp, marks Mrs. Faraday's mantle as smartly stylish; the January 1896 issue of *Godey's* mentions "splendid passementeries in bold conventional patterns ... used on both black and colored weaves" (qtd. Severa 460). When Mrs. Faraday enters the doctor's office where Dorinda works, she pants "a little from her tight stays and her unnatural elegance" (222). The corset form, Severa notes, was "more a matter of dissension in the nineties than at any other time in the [nineteenth] century" (462). While health advocates had thoroughly established the unhealthy aspects of tight lacing, "really high fashion was based on extreme tight lacing" (462), and many women--like Glasgow's Mrs. Faraday--chose to tight-lace because of the exaggerated curves it offered the female form. Mrs. Faraday's panting under the strain of tightlacing, as well as her historically accurate coiffure--done "in a way that [makes] her temples look skinned" (222)--follow the pattern of dress set up earlier in the novel; dress lies within the domain of society rather than Nature. Dorinda notices the dress of other New York women as well, and Glasgow provides detailed descriptions of the ensembles:

There was a vision of prune-coloured velvet sleeves in a dress of grey satin, of a skirt that rustled in eddying folds over the pavement, and of a jingling gold chatelaine attached to the front of a pointed basque" (211).

Judging her own clothing to be "absurd and countrified" (228), Dorinda purchases new clothing as soon as she begins work, but the "plain simple dress" of navy poplin with "white linen collar and cuffs" is not the attire of an unnatural, elegant woman; rather, it sartorially links her with the fashions marketed for the New Woman.

During the 1890s, these two strains of women's fashion, the elaborately upholstered costume and the masculinized woman's suit existed side-by-side, radically increasing clothing choices. A craze for "man-tailored" English-style suits introduced construction details from men's suits and offered an option decidedly different from the Parisian haute couture that dictated tight-lacing, exaggerated curves, and extravagant detailing and trim (Severa 455-56)). These suits became immensely popular with young university women and with women in the work force, who were models for the New Woman of the 1890s. Depicted in the popular press most typically by the shirtwaisted Gibson Girl, the New Woman also connoted assorted other female types: the intellectual, the spinster, the radical feminist, the "stern [and] unyielding."¹⁰⁵ Between the extremes of the charming Gibson girl and the stern-faced radical, Glasgow's conception of the New Woman emphasizes independence, self-directed desires, and activity, qualities that originate in meaningful work but depend also upon strong bodies.

Dorinda Oakley's choice of dress in the New York office mimics with its sleeker lines the attire of other working women of the period, and throughout the New York section of the novel, Glasgow shows the move toward less restricting clothing for women. When Dorinda vacations with the Faradays at a beach resort in Maine, for example, Dorinda feels

"strange" coming out onto the beach "with no shoes on and skirts up to her knees" (232). Her legs would have been covered, of course, with black tights, but the ease of movement offered by bathing suits and bicycling bloomers created a demand for such ease in everyday wear, fashion historians suggest (Severa 455). According to Hurlock's 1929 study, athletics was the *deciding* factor in the evolution of women's dress: "Short skirts and the discarding of corsets," she noted "came about as the result of the modern girl's interest in athletics" (55). Corsets loosened, and the ideal female body increased in stature and breadth: "Compared with the previous generation," an 1895 fashion commentator wrote, "we are a race of Amazons" (qtd. Severa 455). As more and more American women accepted tailored suits, the English-style, more "masculine" garb associated with the New Woman became as acceptable and tasteful as the Parisian haute couture, which had until this period more or less dictated American fashionable dress.

Dorinda's work uniform of navy poplin in the second section of *Barren Ground* signals a shift away from sexual display and toward an image that projects efficiency and seriousness. Dresses like hers or the mix-and-match ensembles fashioned from interchangeable shirtwaists and dark skirts became the working uniforms of hundreds of young women who flocked to the quickly expanding cities of the late nineteenth century. Not only were women assuming cloaks of any color; they were also choosing ones that were "man-tailored." And if a woman so desired, so proclaimed a writer for the *Arena* in the mid-1890s, her cloak might actually *be* a man's:

the social pressure [to conform in matters of dress] is now more imaginary than real, at least as far as men are concerned. There is no opposition to a woman's wearing

whatever she chooses--even the dress of a man, as most of us do not choose. Some day women will have as rational a costume for habitual wear as men now have--possibly more so--a costume with which freedom-loving girls will be content, feminine and not masculine, but meeting all our needs as man's dress meets his. ("Rational" 315)

This writer like most of the contributors to the *Arena's* symposium on the Rational Dress Movement tells her story of wearing drastically shortened reform-style costumes, most of which anticipated dress of the 1920s with lengths cut mid-calf. All of the writers emphasize the wide-spread interest created by their freer clothing. "'Where can I get the pattern?' was asked of us over and over again," one writes ("Rational" 322). Only the "poorly reared" greeted the reform dressers with "impertinence," another says (323).

Dorinda's donning of clothing associated with the New Woman prepares the way for her later donning of men's clothing when the work wear of the office gives way to the overalls that mark her as a farmer. For Glasgow, however, the change is not as simple as changing clothes. As she noted in her 1913 essay "Feminism," even a "womanly woman" might disguise her sex and wear "man's clothes" since the disguise can grow out of a self and sexuality whose center is not the woman herself but man. The "beginning, middle and end of existence," she writes of the womanly woman "[is] simply man" (30). Clothing, whether it be skirts or pants, must fashion a woman whose sexuality and desires emanate from the essential self--the core that hearkens back to Nature with a capital N.

Glasgow includes in the New York section of *Barren Ground* a scene of epiphany during a concert when the music arouses Dorinda in ways reminiscent of Chopin's Edna Pontellier's response to Mademoiselle Reisz's

music. Because the images of this epiphany scene repeat motifs from a scene in the novel's first section wherein Dorinda and Jason consummate their love, the concert marks a redirecting of female sexuality. When Jason and Dorinda first make love, a part of Dorinda's sexuality escapes, spills over, or lies latent somewhere beyond female sexuality as it is defined in conventional heterosexual relationships.¹⁰⁶ As Jason makes love to her, a presence whose meaning she cannot articulate stands as spectator of the scene:

Though her love was the only thing that was vivid to her, she had even now, while she felt his arms about her ... the old haunting sense of impermanence, as if the moment ... were too bright to endure. However much she loved him, she could not sink the whole of herself into emotion; *something was left over, and this something watched as a spectator.* (emphasis added 116-17)

This spectator--the female self with desires beyond those that can be fulfilled through male-female sexual union--stands apart from Dorinda's sexual body. For Glasgow, female sexuality that exists for the man alone implies barrenness, a judgment she inscribes in the terrible drought that marks Dorinda's summer of sexual awakening: "In the fields the summer flowers were dry and brittle, and over the moist places near the spring, clusters of pale blue butterflies, as fragile as flower petals, hung motionless" (118). The female body is transcoded onto the landscape here with the color blue--signifier of a socially acquired female sexuality--marking the "moist places" in the midst of drought. Glasgow's choice of the word *motionless* underscores the passivity of Dorinda within this scene: "I didn't know what it was until afterwards," she thinks later (164).

This linking of landscape and female body during Dorinda's first sexual encounter is repeated during the New York concert when Glasgow's imagery unites body, land, and music:

Down there, in the deep below the depths of her being, she felt [the music] tearing her vitals. Down there, in the buried jungle, where her thought had never penetrated, she felt it destroying the hidden roots of her life. (239)

Dorinda first experiences this new form of desire as an "inarticulate agony" (239), a response that recognizes the pain entailed in eradicating old desires--those defined strictly in terms of men and love. Yet the uprooting of these desires allows new passion to surface: "Something that she had defeated was marching as a conqueror over her life. Suddenly she was pierced by a thousand splinters of crystal sound" (239-40). Later she recognizes the experience as a transfiguration of passion:

Earlier and deeper associations, rooting there in the earth were drawing her back across time and space and forgetfulness. Passion stirred again in her heart; but it was passion transfigured, recoiling from the personal to the impersonal object.... She had come to life again, but how differently! (244)

The epiphany, which acts to re-direct female sexuality, culminates in Dorinda's decision to return to the wasted Virginia farm, to reclaim the barren land, and to replace barrenness with productivity. The second half of *Barren Ground* chronicles Dorinda's reclamation of the farm that simultaneously reclaims female selfhood to construct a new female-defined selfhood and sexuality based in work. Land continues as a signifier for the female body, with ploughed ground standing as metaphor for the body prepared for a new sort of productivity. Returning to Old Farm, Dorinda

sees the land before her "spread out like an open fan, ploughed ground melting into waste land, fields sinking into neglected pasture" (273). The land, mirroring Dorinda's own inner landscape, becomes "birthplace and burial ground of hopes, desires, and disappointments" (273). Both the reclamation of Old Farm and the claiming of her own sexuality depend upon Dorinda's hard work to alter culturally-ingrained ways of living. Glasgow suggests the very real struggle of trying to plough a ground baked hard by tradition when Dorinda dreams of thistles, each bearing Jason's face (244-45). In this dream and throughout the "Pine" section of the novel, Jason appears as constant reminder of the established order that threatens new visions of female self. Dorinda's vow to plough under the Jason-thistle is a vow to put at bay the fatalism that calls illusions of love "nature" and leaves only one option for women. Jason, the embodiment of all the ideologies that would deny Dorinda's productivity and agency, is a secret enemy "buried somewhere in her consciousness" (252), an acknowledgement that women themselves perpetuate the conditions that deny their selfhood. Within the dream of Jason and the thistles, an allusion to dress appears which explains on a symbolic level Dorinda's insistence on wearing overalls during her first years back at Old Farm. The abandoned fields of the dream emit a "ghostly scent" that reminds Dorinda of "the smell of her mother's flowered bandbox when she took it out of the closet on Sunday mornings" (244). This bandbox, storage place of the fine needlework collars that tempted Dorinda early in the novel, signifies dress worn not for oneself but for sexual display, and when Dorinda returns to reclaim both the Virginia farm, she puts aside women's dress, telling her mother "You can't farm in skirts" (303).

Women throughout the nineteenth century had farmed in skirts. Severa's collection of nineteenth-century photographs depicts rural women in cotton printed housedresses pruning fruit trees (423) and leading cows (422), and Solomon Butcher photographed among many other working farm women a woman in calico wrapper kneeling among her chickens. Most of the work dresses in photographs of farm women are finished with a deep hem flounce, a feature that kept the skirt from between the feet while walking (Severa 422). In part, Dorinda's choice to forego womanly dress seems an economic decision. Describing the first ten years of struggle to turn Old Farm into a productive dairy operation, Glasgow writes,

[Dorinda] scrimped and saved like a miser.... She went without butter; she drank only buttermilk, in order that she might keep nothing back from the market. Her clothes were patched and mended as long as they held together, and she had stopped going to church because her pride would not suffer her to appear there in overalls, or in the faded calico dresses she wore in the house. (347)

Overalls, men's workwear sewn of denim--the sturdy indigo-dyed cotton that Levi Strauss first imported from France to sew miners' pants (Hall 115), at the turn of the century were cheap, tough, and readily available from mail-order houses. Sometimes worn as protection over other clothes, the bibbed pants formed the uniform of farmers who could afford separate wardrobes for work and for dress-up occasions (Hall 132). The overalls Dorinda patches and wears have been discarded by her brother Rufus, but her economizing gesture moves into the realm of symbolic action given the uses of clothing elsewhere in the novel. When her mother tells her, "Well, I hope nobody will see you," Dorinda responds stubbornly, "I don't care.... I'm going to milk my cows my own way" (303). Dorinda asserts

here female selfhood with the sort of disregard for social ostracism that marks the writings of late nineteenth-century women clothing reformers, one of whom wrote,

Concerning the false judgment of the world, in [matters of dress] as in all those which leave the beaten track of social usages, ... one must trust to time to reveal its purity. My own experience proves to me that there is no obstacle to absolute freedom in dress.... Different individualities call for characteristic attire, just as various occupations and professions call for appropriate apparel. In the future the person will fit the dress as well as the dress fit the person. Woman ... cannot successfully compete with [man] or command his wages until she discards conventional skirts. ("Rational" 325)

The human body undoubtedly provides cultures with the most powerful means for communicating meanings related to the society as a whole; as Mary Douglas writes, "The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived" (*Natural* 65). When Dorinda wears men's clothes, she does more than simply challenge rules of propriety, womanly behavior, and dress. Asserting on the surface of her female body a socially *inappropriate* image, she asserts her independence from a society that fosters women's economic dependence, their sinking all of self into romance, and their sexuality directed solely by male desire. The female body dressed for work reclaims barren ground where women's lives have lain sterile.

Dorinda's period of working in men's overalls marks a period of removal from her community. With the death of her parents and her defection from church, "her human associations narrowed down" (348). With her black worker Fluvanna and the Pedlar family as her only companions, she sets out to alter the shape and productivity of the land. Fatalistic views of landscape, which leave no room for human agency, are replaced

with views of landscape as habitat and system, which respond to human intervention.¹⁰⁷ Planting cowpeas and clover to nourish the tobacco-drained fields, Dorinda alters the land, and she no longer perceives it as an all-powerful but vanquished destroyer. Under a new economy, land gives to humankind and in turn receives, the new relationship entailing a reciprocity between human agents and the land on which they live. The changes manifested in the land accompanies a shift in Dorinda's inner landscape as well. In her struggle to reclaim female sexuality as her own, Dorinda often vacillates between an iron-hard rejection of love and marriage and a weak acceptance that "the only thing that made life worth living was the love she had never known and the happiness she had missed" (522). Dorinda's constant battle to push back her feelings for her former lover at times undercuts Glasgow's aim of redefining female sexuality, but the vacillation also serves to underscore the very real struggle of changing socially ingrained ways of being. This period of intense work, social isolation, and wearing of men's clothes anticipates feminist political theory of the 1970s, which advocates a period of separatism and reversal as a necessary stage in the process of political change. Eventually, Dorinda's work, "the flight of the mind from thought into action" (381), leads her to becoming, in her words, a "victor over life" (368), and this shift is recorded with her purchase of new clothes.

Dorinda's new dress, ordered through the mail from a catalogue,¹⁰⁸ is a "stylish" black ensemble with box-pleated skirt and "pointed basque" (359), a fitted jacket with a short, flared skirt. Miss Seena, advising Dorinda on the year's fashionable colors and fashionable cuts, counsels her to buy a new corset as well, since "[t]hese styles don't set well

unless they're worn over a straight front" (359). These details, as well as the ten-year period of overall-wearing, date Dorinda's return to feminine clothing at around 1909, a period of s-curve corsets and elongated monobosoms. Hats like the one Dorinda chooses--a "big one" with a "willow-plume" (359)--appear in the September 1908 issue of *The Ladies Home Journal*, as do long seal plush coats. In *Barren Ground* all the garments are ordered by letter "written by the cramped fingers of the dressmaker" (359), a detail that accurately describes ordering procedures for companies like Sears, Roebuck. Wearing the dress, Dorinda returns to church, tasting for "the first time in her life ... the intoxicating flavour of power" (367). Having made a success of her work on the farm, she translates that success into a different sort of display than the sexual display that underlies Glasgow's use of clothing early in the novel. The linking of reclaimed land with the clothed female self occurs in visual and aural imagery: "[Dorinda] carried the willow-plume high above the dusky cloud of her hair; and the luxurious swish-swish of her satin skirt was as loud as the sound of wind in the grass" (368). Female dress, like female sexuality and the land that puts forth grass not broomsedge, has been reclaimed on Dorinda's own terms.

Dorinda's isolation, marked by her assumption of male dress, ends with her return to church and her later marriage to Nathan Pedlar that leads to her stepping in as mother to his children. Marrying for companionship rather than for love, economic security, or property, Dorinda shares with her husband an ardent interest in farming, and work remains the defining force in her life. She wears for working her overalls or "gingham dress[es]" (403), but for dress-up occasions, she

chooses stylish ensembles like the "navy blue and white foulard" made by the new dressmaker and "cut after the fashionable Princess style" (393). Thus, Dorinda fashions a hybrid female self that dresses and lives as she pleases.

The recognition that the evolution of a new sort of womanhood has occurred in Dorinda's life comes in the character's acceptance of the Virginia land as lover. Early in *Barren Ground*, Glasgow sets forth two possible relationships with the land--love or war; while in Dorinda's early years back at Old Farm, she feels "determined to conquer" (303), by the end of the novel she has evolved toward experiencing a "living communion with the earth" (525). At the end of the novel, Dorinda comes to understand that through years of work she has come to love the land with that "something left over" which stood as spectator years before when she first made love with Jason. The spectator, the permanent, core self, reveals itself in her communion with the land: "The spirit of the land was flowing into her, and her own spirit, strengthened and refreshed, was flowing out again toward life. This was the permanent self, she knew" (524).

By the novel's end, Dorinda has reclaimed not only female sexuality and the barren Virginia farm; she has reclaimed dress. And dress in the meantime has evolved to catch up with the woman in overalls. The last costume noted pairs a woman's shirtwaist with "knickerbockers of brown corduroy," a pairing that had become standard women's sportswear by 1923 (Blum 73). Wearing this costume as she rides her horse across the reclaimed fields, "she look[s] as if the years had been victorious ones" (477). Meaningful work, Glasgow suggests, reclaims barren ground.

Epilogue:
Fabricating Identities

When Florence Winterburn advocated in her treatise *Principles of Correct Dress* that women be guided in their selection of gowns by the "vital touch of *becomingness*," she told a story wherein dress functions as the agency for movement. Winterburn's story simplifies the process of becoming as discussed in my study of dress, self, and social change; yet, in implying the interconnections between the self as encoded in dress and self as a part of a social scene and change, she hit upon the issues at the heart of this study. In discussing novels by Henry James, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, I have examined women during the decades surrounding the turn into the twentieth century as they outfit themselves for settings beyond the parlor and kitchen, a process of self-fashioning that has entailed attention not only to gender expectations but to social class construction as well. The use of dress within these realist works has mapped out a grid where potent cultural meanings are woven on the surface of the body, and in the ensembles gracing characters' bodies, this weave of inter-related issues has shown itself. The power relations inherent in social class and gender constructions, as well as the influences of aesthetics, popular culture, and characters' internal landscapes, have entered this discussion of women's becoming. In fabricating identities, the female characters in realist works propose a model for social change, and in the hybrid forms of womanhood embodied in the various characters from James's Henrietta Stackpole to Glasgow's Dorinda Oakley, the woman as worker engaged in meaningful tasks has emerged.

The now out-of-print work that inspired Ellen Glasgow's 1913 essay "Feminism" provides a long passage that serves as epilogue for my study. Addressing the concept of "barren ground," Hartley writes,

Now ... the great result of the long years of repression has been the sterility of women's lives. Sterility is a deadly sin. To-day so many of our activities are sterile. The women of our richer classes have been impotent by reason of their soft living; the women of our workers have had their vitality sweated out of them by their filthy labours; they could bear only dead things. Life ought to be a struggle of desire towards adventures of expression, whose nobility will fertilise the mind and lead to the conception of new and glorious births. Women have been forced to use life wastefully. They have been spiritually sterile; consuming, not giving: getting little from life, giving back little to life.

But woman is awakening to find her place in the eternal purpose. She is adding understanding to her feeling and passion..... It is true that the change has not yet, except in very few women, reached deep enough to the realities of the things that most matter. Women have to learn to utilise every advantage of their nature, not one side only. They will do this; because they will come to have truer and stronger motives. They are beginning even now to be sifted clean through the sieve of work. The waste of womanhood cannot for long continue. (378-79)

Hartley's words echo the concerns and language of the novels of James, Chopin, Wharton, Dreiser, Cather, and Glasgow, amplifying the gradual shifts that occurred between James's 1876 setting for *The Portrait of a Lady* and the 1920s setting of Glasgow's *Barren Ground*. In the narrative of women's assuming outfits that will take them beyond the nursery, parlor, or shoe-factory workroom to sites of meaningful work, Hartley locates fertility in work rather than in tradition and motherhood. The very forms that send Isabel Archer running toward enclosure, suffocation, and ladyhood at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* signify only sterility for Hartley, and the sterility of the lady's life is now

the "deadly sin." The barrenness of upper-middle-class propriety marking Edna Pontellier's life, the wastefulness of woman as ornament marking Lily Bart's, the struggle against idleness marking Carrie's give way to women being "sifted clean through the sieve of work" in the characters of Lena Lingard and Dorinda Oakley. By the time of Glasgow's 1925 publication of *Barren Ground*, work has become the vital quality in becomingness.

In her call for women "to utilise every advantage of their nature, not one side only," Hartley gestures toward the hybridization that has underlain successful becoming in these realist novels. Standing at the crossroads where cultural categories converge, the hybrid characters of these works--James's Henrietta, Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz, Dreiser's Carrie, Cather's Lena, and Glasgow's Dorinda--have pillaged the closet of forms, reassembling suits that can see them through the changes. From the lady in bustles and trained drapery to the farmer in knickbockers, garments have marked women's becoming.

Notes

¹⁰⁰Many critics have addressed the importance of landscape in Glasgow's *Barren Ground*. Julius Rowan Raper, for example, in *From the Sunken Garden: The Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945*, uses a psychoanalytic approach, arguing that land appears in the novel as "an alternate screen upon which to project [Dorinda's] inner being" (95). Raper reads the novel as a plot of revenge, an argument he reiterates along with alternative readings in "*Barren Ground* and the Transition to Southern Modernism." Recognizing in this second article that "side-by-side existence of Dorinda's mythic success and her psychological failure creates the almost electric arc that gives the book its power and enigmatic interest" (159), Raper acknowledges ambiguities of the text and Glasgow's use of landscape that he overlooked in his earlier reading. Dorothy Kish, in "Toward a Perfect Place: Setting in the Early Novels of Ellen Glasgow," examines Glasgow's early works as "apprenticeship years" for her use of landscape in *Barren Ground*.

Several critics have examined Glasgow within the pastoral tradition. See, for example, Tonette L. Bond's "Pastoral Transformations in *Barren Ground*, which shows how *Barren Ground* fits traditional pastoral forms. See also Beth Harrison's *Female Pastoral: Women Writers Re-Visioning the American South*, which examines Glasgow's use of landscape as a means of developing female character and shows how Glasgow was one of several women writers of her era to establish an alternative pastoral tradition.

¹⁰¹Linda W. Wagner's 1982 *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* established Glasgow's feminism. Saunders' *Writing the Margins* suggests

that because of her feminism Glasgow has consistently been judged as a writer of lesser stature than Edith Wharton. Saunders' study examines how Glasgow works to redefine of the "ruined woman." Josephine Donovan's *After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow* discusses the ways in which Glasgow's works portray woman's fall from the mother's garden to a male Darwinist social jungle.

Recent feminist studies examine Glasgow within the context of a female literary tradition. Elizabeth Ammons' *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* includes a chapter that examines Glasgow and two other women writers and their depiction of hunger and anger. Helen Fiddymont Levy in *Fiction of the Home Place* argues that the body of Glasgow's novels show a movement from the male-centered city to loving community close to the land. Pamela Matthews in *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Tradition* examines the Glasgow canon and criticism within the context of women's traditions.

¹⁰²Clement, in "Enclave, Esclave," discusses built-in safety values by exploring the use of hysteria in the ritualistic dance of peasant women in Apulia in southern Italy. Noting their oppressive lives and their belief that they have been bitten by tarantulas, which do not exist in the region, she argues that the spectacular hysteria acted out by the women allows a momentary release that enables the women to resume their oppressive lives. Mrs. Oakley's hysterical symptoms parallel such a cultural phenomenon.

¹⁰³See Anne Douglass Wood's "The 'Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and Their Treatments in Nineteenth-Century America."

¹⁰⁴Reginald Abbott's "'A Moment's Ornament': Wharton's Lily Bart and Art Nouveau" influences my reading of Geneva Ellgood's character. For discussions of Art Nouveau, see Vivienne Becker's *Art Nouveau Jewellery* and Laurence Buffet-Challie's *Art Nouveau Style*.

¹⁰⁵As Martha Banta's thorough study of images of American women around the turn of the century shows, the New Woman was such a widespread icon that separating representations that forward feminist intent is impossible by listing characteristics or even looking at images. For some a Daisy Miller-like girl updated with a Wellesley education epitomized the New Woman. For others, like the writer of a *New York World* piece, the New Woman was no charmer at all: "It will be seen at once that the composite new woman has a strong face. It is an intellectual face, and--it is said with some regret--possibly, a stern unyielding face" (84).

¹⁰⁶My reading of Dorinda's sexuality uses Raymond Williams' notion of structures of feeling. Williams argues that there is a tension between fixed social forms and the actual lived experience. He says that this tension manifests itself as "an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency: the moment of conscious comparison not yet come" (*Marxism* 130). Within Glasgow's novel, male-defined female sexuality appears as a fixed form. Williams argues that there are "experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize" and that these feelings, although social and material, exist in an "embryonic phase" before they can become fully articulated and defined. The "something left over" in Dorinda's lovemaking with Jason, I argue, exists as a structure of feeling to which fixed male-female relationships do not speak.

¹⁰⁷For discussions of landscape interpretation and the ideological implications of viewing landscape through various interpretive lens, see Denis Cosgrove's *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, D. W. Meinig's *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, and Vera Norwood's *The Desert is no Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women's Writing and Art*.

¹⁰⁸Stella Blum discusses the role of mail-order catalogs in American fashion:

The first mail-order catalog was issued by Aaron Montgomery Ward in 1872; Sears, Roebuck and Co. produced their first in 1896. During the first part of the twentieth century innumerable firms joined the mail-marketing business and the volume of sales was prodigious.... People living in isolated hamlets, on far-flung farms or in the less-affluent sections of the cities, awaited each new catalog with excited anticipation. (1)

Though mail-order companies did not project fashion trends, they did "inform their readers of what was currently espoused and accepted" (1). Blum notes that lag time between the appearance of a fashion in the French magazines and on the pages of Sears, Roebuck catalogues was only about one year and that the clothing reveals "a surprising amount of chic and elegance" (3). Sears, Roebuck, which boasted that all orders were filled within 24 hours, carried dresses that ranged from under \$3 to over \$30. *Barren Ground's* Miss Seena is on-target when she tells Dorinda, "They put everything in catalogues now" (358)

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