

PASSING FIGURES: FASHION AND THE FORMATION OF MODERNIST
IDENTITY IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers the way in which the figure of fashion expands and complicates the field of literary modernism. My project treats “fashion” as more than just clothing and other bodily adornment, broadening it to include certain spaces, locations, and objects organized by social hierarchies of performance and display. I focus on the way in which characters—often in the texts of authors on the margins of mainstream modernism—use fashionable dress and the manipulation of social spaces to defy constraining social positions. I argue that fashionable expression allows characters to revise personal history and represent a self in opposition to externally imposed perceptions of identity.

The readings of fashionable “moments” I consider show how fashion, like the modernist aesthetic itself, allows authors to fragment and remake conceptions of self and persona, meaning and value, and past and present, all categories scholars now argue were at the heart of the aesthetics of modernism. In chapters on Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, Nella Larsen, and William Faulkner, I explore the production of womanhood as anti-modern, the generation of personhood through new relations to things, the relations of the signs of race to the more general fashion system, and the relation between the domestic, modernity, and the American South. Examining texts through the lens of fashion reveals the ways in which modernist moments are produced by characters, subjects and authors often considered to be outside the boundaries of the modernist movement through an engagement with concepts of the fashionable, and the remaking of the self it allows. Building on the history of scholarship on modernist aesthetics, and on

recent work on the role fashion played in the production and growth of the spirit of modernity, I show how, at the fringes of the American aesthetic, the frictions that brought literature in contact with the fashion system allow us to rethink the history of the early twentieth century.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the glittering opulence of one of the parties in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway and Jordan Baker, two of the only guests invited to Jay Gatsby's lavish display of nouveau riche extravagance, encounter a man called Owl Eyes in Gatsby's library, where he is marveling over the collection of books. Assuming Nick will want to do the same, Owl Eyes assures him that he has already determined that the volumes are, in fact, real. Removing a book from the shelf as evidence, Owl Eyes triumphantly declares it to be a "bona fide piece of printed matter" (50). While he had initially assumed that the books would be a "nice durable cardboard," he now lauds Gatsby's choice: "It's a triumph," he declares. "What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn't cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?" (50).

Well, what do we expect? In a novel about, among other things, the evolution of class-based identity in America, the books speak to the nature of Gatsby's epic social climb, inspired by his love for a woman whose old money family prevents their marriage. Gatsby's mysterious rags-to-riches, quintessentially American story is motivated by his desire for Daisy, but *The Great Gatsby* is more than a romance; it is also the story of a man seeking the mythic privilege of the nearly impenetrable upper echelons of the aristocracy.

The books are symbolically complicated by Gatsby's desire. Owl Eyes expects a newly rich interloper like Gatsby to settle for the cheap alternative—false cardboard backings designed to establish an ersatz library, or he might suspect him of being the type to feign having read the books. But the fact that the books are real communicates

something about Gatsby, and they are a part of his carefully crafted self-portrayal. Though their presence cannot compare to the cultural capital of handed-down family property, Gatsby's books still suggest that their owner understands the importance of having a well-stocked library in his home. While “fake” books would imply that the owner understands the significance of books but can either not afford the “real thing” or does not care about the content of the books themselves, real books signify an attempt to take part in the prestige of venerable lineage and aristocracy. As Gatsby has not cut the pages and has made no pretense of having read them, it could be said that he thinks the form more important than the content. And as the price of these books in the early twentieth century would have been exorbitant, they imply that the owner is willing to spare no expense to communicate a desirable image of himself. Gatsby is no avid reader—instead, he understands the books as complementing his image and speaking to his purchasing power as a member of a certain part of the upper class.

Owl Eyes knows that the books are more complicated than this. In characterizing them as a sign of “realism,” he implies that they are a part of an artistic work. In this case, the work of art—the library, the mansion, or Gatsby himself—is fashioned in part by the books. As a decorative item that signifies access to knowledge, leisure, and worldliness, the book becomes akin to an accessory, a sort of jewel whose presence signals a host of qualities belonging simultaneously to the object and its wearer. Particularly because the pages are uncut, the books' more usual meaning as purveyors of knowledge is obscured by a more artistic or symbolic dimension. Gatsby could not have read the books—and does not care to make anyone think he has. As Owl Eyes says, he knew “when to stop”;

cutting the pages could confuse the issue and allow for a different image, that of the avid learner or the voracious reader. But Gatsby does not cut the pages, making it clear that the books serve as status symbol or a purchasable luxury that adds to the image he hopes to present.

The books' appearance in *The Great Gatsby* complicates and expands their usual meaning—intersecting as they do with Gatsby's class identity and self portrayal, they participate in the construction of self relative to surroundings. As a result, they are a part of something bigger, and take part in the hierarchical arrangement and organization of individuals in society; they take part in the fashion system. The more traditional modes of fashion—clothing, accessories, and jewelry—have been the main way by which individuals are understood and organized into categories by others. Gatsby's books function similarly—they signify facts about their owner to those who see them, and become a part of the system that make individuals readable. If fashion can be defined as the system by which individuals and groups are organized into manageable, comprehensible categories, it includes by definition the things through which the fashionable performance is staged. Speech, posture and etiquette can all be included, along with stylized details of private space, like the “interior architecture” Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman discuss in *The Designing of Houses* or the way in which seating at the opera house serves as a visible correlate to social standing in Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*. As a backdrop for the individual, a space like Gatsby's library with its surprisingly real books supplements his performance of an alternative self, functioning more like a fine fabric or a well-tailored suit. This moment, in which the library signifies

in place of clothing, bodily adornment, or family name, makes it clear that the books participate in the fashion system, and that looking closely at their function in this modernist text allows for a new vision of fashion's potential.

To begin, a question: what does fashion *do*? In its most basic form, fashion is a stylized way of understanding clothing. In *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930), J.C. Flugel writes that clothing decorates and protects the body from the elements and modest inclinations—dress also communicates nationality, sex, or status, even in small tribal societies. These last qualities, outlined by Flugel early in his study as the most basic of clothing's functions, are already social in nature. Designed to communicate a more desirable image of the self, dress of this nature is social, dynamic, and dialectical. Or, we might say, at the moment that it starts to have something to say for itself, and for the wearer, clothing becomes fashion. This is my contention. What fashion *does* is communicate a message from wearer to viewer, whether it be one of intimidation, rebellion, sexuality, nationality, gender or class identity, or a myriad of other possibilities. Fashion tells people something, and serves as the means by which an individual declares and performs his or her own selfhood. In the twentieth century, fashion becomes a means by which that self mediates alienating and undesirable conventions of identity; the fashion system is the way in which modern anxieties about these traditional roles are expressed and confronted.

I come to this conclusion by way of the work of a variety of scholars and critics as well as by way of the close study of literary representations and descriptions of fashion. For example, Roland Barthes' book *The Fashion System* analyzes clothing described in

writing, understanding fashion as the linguistic phenomenon that transforms clothing worn to fashion imagined and represented. Breaking the fashionable signifier into linguistic units, Barthes considers the fashionable object as something mediated by various qualifiers and social expectations. This understanding of fashion places the impetus on the act of recreating clothing as a written image, abstracted through the imagination of any reader. While this centers on descriptions of clothing, it also includes the communication between individuals or groups, the wearer and the writer and even, perhaps, any number of readers. Elizabeth Wilson frames the idea slightly differently, suggesting that fashion, a social phenomenon she characterizes as dress with change, both divides the body from society physically and connects it to social constructions. These articulations manifest a social aspect of fashion—whether it is the other presence who describes what is worn or the individual who, by articulating a changing relationship to society, in turn changes clothing, fashion *happens* through the socialization of clothing and the communication of messages.

One of the most compelling understandings of fashion's paradoxical social nature is put forth by Georg Simmel. In his 1904 essay “Fashion,” he sees the constant change in fashionable dress as motivated by the “competing desires” that are part of human nature. One of the primary means of the expression of class identity, clothing is used both by individuals seeking to differentiate themselves from their inferiors and those hoping to assimilate into the higher classes. The “dualistic nature of man” (541) is expressed, according to Simmel, through his simultaneous desires for “imitation” and “differentiation” (543) or “union” and “segregation” (542). He writes:

Social forms, apparel, aesthetic judgment, the whole form of human expression, are constantly transformed by fashion, in such a way, however, that fashion—*i.e.*, the latest fashion—in all things affects only the upper classes. Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes on merrily. (545)

Fashion operates as a sign of the ever changing class borders, nebulous and unseen lines only made visible by the clothing and forms that are used by individuals on and around these borders. Walter Benjamin sees fashion as the articulation of that “barrier—continually raised anew because continually torn down—by which the fashionable world seeks to segregate itself from the middle region of society” (75). The necessity for constant change most affects people near these borders—whether it be those who feel themselves above or below them—as one group tries to improve status while the other tries desperately to retain privilege by differentiating itself from potential interlopers. Fashion's highly dynamic nature cannot be separated from class envy and the hopes for the social mobility that American society offers.

No matter their origins, individuals who are part of the fashion system are inevitably performers. Their stage is the street, the urban spectacle that Theodore Dreiser turns into the scene of Carrie's feminine awakening. Their audience is all around them, but at the same time, these viewers are also performers. This is what Benjamin calls the “true dialectical theatre of fashion”(64). Encouraging the simultaneous presence of Simmel's notion of competing desires, the theatre of the street motivates an ever-changing fashionable display. Its vast public spaces and crowded sidewalks inspire new and varied fashions. Highlighting this connection, Wilson argues that fashion is an

inherently urban phenomenon, discussing the manner in which the city allows for a particular individualism through fashionable performance. In the city, as the classes mix freely on the stage of the promenade, people can hide their origins and transmit a new message (26-7). Thus fashion allows individuals to navigate the “changing conditions of modern social experience” (Piess 6) and, most importantly, it allows them to reimagine their own position in relation to the conditions of existence.

From this understanding of the fashion system, my work in *Passing Figures* begins.¹ As an examination of fashion's representation and function in American literary modernism, the project relies on the work of established scholars to begin a consideration of the way in which fashion generates a modernist aesthetic in certain early twentieth-century American novels. But modernism is something for which there are few concise definitions. For my understanding of the movement, I look, in particular, to the work of Michael Levenson, Rita Felski, Frederic Jameson, Michael North, T.J. Clark, Ulrich Lehmann, Bonnie Kime Scott, and Susan Stanford Friedman. Their work grounds the understanding and working definition of modernism from which this project begins. But, as Benjamin Schreier puts it, modernism's critical understanding “has been too much the victim of the enticements of recognition, of the urge to describe the emergence of the phenomenon by means of what we already know how to see” (xvi-xvii). In other words, modernism has been greatly influenced by connecting theories and texts, by pointing out similarities rather than ruminating on the nature of the theories themselves. Thus, rather

¹ Many theorists have contributed to the great body of work on the theory of fashion, including, in addition to those already listed, Jennifer Craik, Ann Hollander Daniel Purdy, Sharon Zukin, Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans. The work of Roland Barthes, Herbert Blau, J.C. Flugel, Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, Judith Butler, Ulrich Lehmann, and Thorstein Veblen provide a more

than simply pointing out the moments in these novels in which fashion appears and seems modernist in these established terms, my analysis of these instances hopes to generate some understanding of the form of modernity, and, more specifically, to develop a perspective on the history of literary and cultural modernism.

Modernism is, by its very nature, difficult to define. Invoking at once “modern,” “modernity,” and “modernist,” the term suggests a myriad of contradictory and ultimately unsatisfying associations, all of which have in common only a vague sense of newness to unite them. In addition, modernism as a phenomenon can be associated with a variety of forms, including literature, art, architecture, dance, etc., and its varied expression in these media destabilizes the term in confusing and discordant ways. For the sake of this project, my “modernism” will be limited to the literary, the traits associated with that medium, and the time period associated with the literary movement. Of course as an entity modernism resists periodization—it might be loosely connected with the years 1890-1930 or, more specifically, 1908-1922, as Michael Levenson's subtitle declares, or even as revolving around the great literary events of 1922—but it is usually acknowledged to be an aesthetic, medium, or phenomenon most likely to appear in the works of writers in the very late-nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth. But since relying on dates seems problematical, we might turn to the multifarious descriptors used to define the aesthetic itself. In *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski argues that modernity is characterized by fragmentation (40). It has been associated with alienation, formal experimentation, subjective narration, a tendency to allegorize epics, and a fixation on so-

theoretical grounding for my understanding of fashion in this project.

called primitive cultures and arts. While these observations seem often to be accurate, the looseness of this list of characteristics allows for a great deal of scholarship that seeks to qualify the works of authors who occupy the edges of the modernist canon, whether it be temporally or because of the fact that they might only exhibit one or two of these modernist traits. The establishment of the canon itself has become a scholarly enterprise in and of itself.

That is not to say, of course, that this is not productive work—quite the contrary. However, it is not the work of this project. Instead, I seek to examine the nature of these ambiguous and overlapping theorizations and consider what this focus on definition tells us about the nature of modernism. Some authors on the fringe of the modernist canon might show some modernist tendencies but not others; as a result, their work is characterized by tensions between old forms and new and between realism and the evolving aesthetic of modernism. These tensions between literary periodization and aestheticization mirror a tendency that I see as a defining trait of modernism itself. In an essay that explores the problematic nature of defining any word with the root “modern,” Susan Stanford Friedman begins with a sequence of parataxes, by which she demonstrates the way in which “oppositional meanings” dominate the landscape of “modernism” as a conceptual field (498).² Thus the oppositions that occur aesthetically

² She goes on to elaborate on the grammatical and semantic problems of the issue: “The stories began with the problematic of *modernism*, but drew us inexorably into a web of words—*modernism* and its siblings, *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernization*. Not only does the meaning of the concept deny fixity but so do its grammatical and semantic aspects. The root word *modern* is both noun and adjective, whether signifying descriptively or normatively. The different suffixes herd the word into different grammatical functions that carry semantic weight. The *-ity* of *modernity* limits the word *modern* to a noun—a status as a thing or condition that is distinguishable from other things or conditions. The *-ism* of *modernism* turns the noun *modern* into an advocacy, a promotion, a movement presumably centered

within the texts themselves are repeated in critical and scholarly understanding of the nature of the movement itself.

This leads me to contend that the modernist concern with form in its stories and poems inspires a parallel critical reflection on the form of the movement itself. The disparate theories, formulations, and hypotheses are centered in the time period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and a list of anxieties that many of these texts share. What unites these theories of modernism, to my mind, are the tensions that characterize them all. Whether it is the discordance between the individual and his father's generation, the affectation of dialect that Michael North discusses, or the disconcerting relationship between the fragmented pieces of a thing once considered to be a whole, the themes of modernism are characterized by the striking tensions that vibrate in texts. The temporal tension in particular becomes apparent, according to Jameson, in the manifestation of a technological lag or an uneven development—"the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history—handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance" (307). For me, this is the quintessential modernist moment—the peasants in front of the factory or the horse and carriage parked in front of the skyscraper, the simultaneous presence of old and new forms thrown into relief. As a result, I take my definition of modernism from Jameson and focus on not just the technological lag, but, rather, the temporal tension, a feature which informs my understanding and treatment of modernism throughout this

around a systematic philosophy, politics, ideology, or aesthetics. The *-ization* of *modernization* signifies a process, an evolution or revolution from one condition to another, with modernity as the condition achieved by modernization" (498).

project.

To define my terms, then: “modernism,” for me, is a manifestation of a tension demonstrated by certain kinds of literary texts in the events, characters, and themes of its narrative. It might be a tension between old and new, a rejection of past forms in the context of working from the style and story of epic traditions, a friction between the subjective narration of a text and the simultaneous presence of another character, or a tension between the fragmentation and a increasingly interiorized, individualized experience in the rising cities. All of these experiences can be understood in relation to the foregrounding of that tension, the relationship that only magnifies the difference each experiences from another. As a result, my use of the terms “modern” and “modernity” will be qualified by this working definition of “modernism.” To be “modern” is of course not to be “modernist”—after all, *modernism* is something invented and maintained by critics and scholars—but it is, for the purposes of this project, the temporal tension of the simultaneous presence of past and present, or the anxiety of the heightened experience of new, disconcerting forms and ways. The modern man's *modernity*, then, is only heightened by his comparison to the traditional man. And the modern is importantly related to this idea of the “new,” a concept which can only exist in relation to the “old.” Modernity, then, must thereby be the situation created by these relationships; it is a term that can be used here to describe a climate characterized by this general preference for and attitude towards novelty in relation to tradition. In understanding the ways this relates to literary texts of the early twentieth century—especially in terms of subjective narration and formal experimentation as well as attention paid in the text to the condition of

modernity—I come to an understanding of modernism that I can hope to grasp, even briefly—or at least until the end of this project.

Because modernism is so difficult to pin down, beginning from a working definition and examining it further, through an appropriate lens, allows me to better understand it as a phenomenon. For my purposes, considering the way in which modernist tensions relate to and become complicated by the treatment and representation of aspects of the fashion system allows for a rereading of literary modernism. In all of its complicated manifestations, the fashion system relies consistently on similar tensions. Its evolution is motivated by the dissonance that occurs around the class boundaries, the friction between the external perceptions of self and a more individualized understanding of identity, and the performative nature of its interaction between wearer and viewer. Suggesting a relationship between fashion and *modernity*, Ann Hollander has argued that like fashion, modernity needs the conflict of dialectic to maintain itself (30). The dialectical “theatre of fashion,” to use Benjamin's term, is “‘modern' by nature, when modern means being consciously concerned with process” (Hollander 15). That process can also be understood as the fashioning of selfhood, an idea I explore in chapter three in relation to Stephen Greenblatt's characterization of the identity of the individual who does not inherit title or fortune. The modern interest in the experience of the subject is reflected in fashion's participation in the construction of bodily selfhood; Craik characterizes fashionable expression as “an active process or technical means for constructing and presenting a bodily self” (1). Navigating “existence,” as Craik puts it, is another way in which fashion represents and mitigates the anxieties of a modernist

existence.

But fashion's most prominent tension might be temporal. In its cyclical nature—the way in which people say things will *always* come back into fashion—is at once “ancient” and “modern,” as Herbert Blau writes, the “past before it began” (54). Despite Benjamin's claim that “each generation experiences the fashion of the one immediately preceding it as the most radical antiaphrodisiac possible” (79), fashion repeatedly and almost methodically “quotes from old traditions” (Hollander 15), bringing old and new into striking contemporaneity. Like the carriage in front of the skyscraper, which heightens the alienating effects of the newness of the building, the old parts of fashion—revised, reused, and reframed—heighten the aesthetic effect of the new garment. This constant revision of past forms, according to Blau, provides for a temporal slippage: “[i]nstead of the modernist reality of the new,” he writes, “we have the past before it began” (54). Or, as Ulrich Lehmann puts it, fashion “appears as the immediate present, affecting the future with its constant change, yet it always quotes from the past” (xviii).³

All of this talk of pasts, presents, and futures makes it clear that fashion reflects the same kinds of tensions that generate the modernist aesthetic I have been describing. The trope of fashion thus provides a particularly apt medium for considering the nature of American literary modernism. I do not intend to suggest that the two aesthetic phenomena are the same, or even very similar, but rather to explain how the fashion system serves as a compelling point of entry for this consideration of modernism. In their treatment of the frictions between the individual's experiences in the modern world,

³ Lehmann's book title comes from Benjamin's concept of the “tiger's leap,” which appears first in *Theses*

modernism and the fashion system demonstrate methodologies that resonate with one another when set in relief. Thus fashion serves as a mirror, a means to reflect back the intricacies of modernist fiction, a lens by which to analyze the movement itself.

I began with Owl Eyes' admiration of Gatsby's books to show what is at stake—the understanding of the modern individual, the story Gatsby creates about himself, and the modernist treatment of the fashion system. In this scene, the books communicate more about Gatsby's performed identity than the rainbow of tailored shirts that Daisy takes as a sign of the opportunity she missed in turning away from her ex-lover. I am more interested in the books because while the shirts speak to Gatsby's riches and the acquired taste of the newly rich, the books represent a deeper transformation; they show a keen understanding of the way in which his performance cannot be complete without the objects that stage and surround him. Because things like Gatsby's books can communicate even more about an individual than those ornaments on his person, they too are part of the fashion system, along with social spaces like parties or opera boxes, mannerisms such as speech patterns and posture, or physical locations like houses or neighborhoods. Understanding the importance of the books as objects in the fashion system clarifies Gatsby's complicated relationship to class identity in this quintessential American modernist novel and expands the possibilities for the expression of literary modernism.

The dissertation begins with “Designing Modernism: *Sister Carrie* and Desire.” This first chapter explores the ways in which the development of a woman's desire to

stake claim to her own self—as representation of a private identity rather than that of the man with whom she is associated—takes form through fashionable expression. Because femininity has traditionally been associated with what Rita Felski calls the “unfragmented” premodern, the modern man has often been characterized by a need to disentangle himself from the hindrance of traditional family ties. As a result, women must seek an alternative mode of modernist expression. Rather than settling for the circumstances of her life or the dreary opportunities of working in urban factories, Dreiser's *Carrie* learns first how to use men as resources to change her life situation and then how to displace her desires from disappointing men to aesthetic and material objects. Through her relationship with performance, fashionable and otherwise, *Carrie* learns to create a design for herself. In establishing herself as a desiring modern subject, alienated from personal relationships and eventually from her surroundings, *Carrie* develops a methodology for engaging with the modernist aesthetic.

The second chapter, “Edith Wharton's Modern Fashions: The Exclusive Nature of Fashionable and Academic Modernism,” shows how Wharton's 1913 *The Custom of the Country* describes the way the crumbling of the aristocracy allows room for the newly rich to attempt to remake themselves through fashion. Undine Spragg, the newly rich protagonist, ruthlessly lays siege to Old New York's exclusive ranks. Repeatedly marrying above her station, Undine reveals the importance not only of wearing the right thing, but also, more importantly, knowing the right places to be and be seen. Through the investigation of competitive desire, the blurring of temporalities, and the exploration of fashionable spaces and places (as well as the more literal manifestations of fashion), I

argue that Wharton's fiction demonstrates that fashion allows some individuals excluded from mainstream modernism access to the movement. Further, I argue that modernism in fact thrives upon this sort of exclusivity, as the movement itself is constructed through a theoretically similar tendency to use fashion to exclude. For this reason, the chapter shows how fashion allows for an often unexpected engagement with modernism.

The third chapter, “Portrait of a Body: The Modernist (Self) Fashioning of Helga Crane,” interrogates the manner in which fashion expresses a particular relationship between modernism and race. Understanding race as something that is worn on the body and perceived from without, this chapter considers fashion as something more individualized, originating from within the body. Beginning from *Quicksand's* Helga Crane, a woman of mixed race, few family ties, and a strikingly personal style, I understand fashionable dress as a means to represent a self in opposition to externally imposed, restrictive identities. By considering both the portraiture that provides a significant subject in the novel as well as Manet's famous *Olympia*, I analyze this art form as a representation of these opposing concepts of self. The result is an inevitably modernist fragmentation of the identity. By comparing the fictional portrait of the extravagantly dressed Helga (who is compared to a prostitute) and the nude painting of a prostitute, I consider the importance of “fashioning” the self to the body—particularly the racialized body—in relation to modernism.

Finally, in “The “Eyes of the Strange”: *Absalom, Absalom!* and Domestic Modernism,” I address the Southern lady's reclamation of domestic goods and labor after the collapse of the society that once filled them with value. Faulkner writes that the South

turned women into “ladies” before the Civil War turned them into “ghosts”; as a result, the collapse of that lifestyle left the former ladies of the South learning once again how to be women. Forced to turn to the domestic labor from which they were always kept distant, the women of the novel take up the work traditionally associated with feminine existence. As Susan Edmunds writes, one way of developing a modernist aesthetic is through approaching one's surroundings with the “eyes of the strange” (3). These women bring a “strange” perspective to domesticity, and from the perspectives of ghosts, allow a modernist reading of the domesticity in the Old South.

The readings of fashionable “moments” like Owl Eyes's evaluation of Gatsby's books show how fashion, like the modernist aesthetic itself, allows authors to fragment and remake conceptions of self and persona, meaning and value, and past and present, all of which were at the heart of the aesthetics of modernism. This dissertation explores such issues as the production of womanhood as anti-modern, the generation of personhood through new understandings of things, the relations of the signs of race to the more general fashion system, and the dynamic between the domestic, modernity, and the American South. Examining texts through the lens of fashion reveals the ways in which modernism is produced by characters, subjects and authors often considered outside its boundaries through an engagement with concepts of the fashionable, and the fashioning of the self such concepts allow. Building on the history of scholarship on modernist aesthetics, and on recent work on the role fashion played in the production and growth of the spirit of modernity, I show how, at the fringes of the American aesthetic, the frictions that brought the system of literature in contact with the fashion system allow us to rethink

the history of the early twentieth century.

CHAPTER I: DESIGNING MODERNISM: *SISTER CARRIE* AND DESIRE

It would be nearly impossible to begin a study of clothing and fashion in early twentieth-century American literature without starting with Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Published in 1900, at the advent of the new century, the novel tells the story of Caroline Meeber, a young woman who arrives in the great city of Chicago with little more than the clothes on her back to live with her sister, to find a job, and, it is assumed, to find a man to marry. In other words, Carrie hopes to live a woman's version of the American dream—to alter her circumstances through marriage and find access to the riches and upper reaches of society she is taught to covet.

The novel, which Walter Benn Michaels has called “arguably the greatest American realist novel,” suggests at the outset that the young girl's quest is hardly hopeful and certainly not her own. Limited by a lack of agency, a woman such as Carrie, the narrator suggests, will find her fate decided by two options: either “she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes a cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse” (Dreiser 1). In other words, according to Dreiser's realist portrayal, she has little control over her own fate—without “saving hands,” presumably those of a man, she will have no options for sustaining herself and fall into the moral depravity that so often accompanies poverty. But, as Michaels goes on to suggest, realism in *Sister Carrie* is a “sign of economic decline...the literature only of exhausted desire and economic failure” (385). According to Michaels, Dreiser's realism depicts the capitalist reality of consumption and the impossibility of satisfying desire. The real myth,

he argues, is the belief that the satisfaction of that desire “can be distinguished from death” (383). Thus, the reality the novel presents is one that is driven by a desire that fuels the fire of capitalism. It is the story of the rising passion for purchasing power and goods in a capitalist society that makes upward mobility imaginable.

Sister Carrie pays particular attention to a specifically feminine experience of desire. The novel, which, as Leslie Fiedler says, is not about love but “the traditional ‘consequences of seduction’” (250), focuses on the way in which its titular character is seduced more by her desire for material goods than by the men themselves. It suggests that while a woman still requires “saving hands” to avoid the inevitable moral depravity that presumably accompanies low wages, her relationship to men need not be veiled in the language of romance.¹ No longer a sentimental pawn in a marriage plot, Dreiser's heroine finds a new way to facilitate her goals. As Kevin McNamara suggests, Dreiser “fashioned his novel as a seductive advertisement for these emergent economic and social relationships by using discourses of a seeming realism to construct for the reader a vision of a ‘better order,’ one in which the heroine's desires are effortlessly fulfilled as she rises with the tide of economic and social development” (57). In this dream of a “better order,” a woman's desires have the power to alter the seeming reality of her situation.

The fulfillment of this desire—and in fact even the development of feminine desire itself—is made possible by the setting of the great city. An inherently urban novel, *Sister Carrie* could not be written without the bustling metropolitan streets, the brushing of the shoulders of rich and poor on busy streets, or the simultaneous displays of the

¹ David Sloane writes that “‘low wages are the chief agent of sin’ (28), although he uses sin in a “secular

consumption of luxuries alongside scarcity and need. In modern Chicago and later in New York, Carrie experiences the proverbial highs and lows—walking in the cold in search of an hourly position in a factory, living with more money than she knows how to spend as a celebrated actress, carefully planning out the use of a meager allowance to manage an ever impoverished household. Her portrayal is inextricably tied to the experience of class in the city. With an incredible density of population in close proximity, a woman walking to her job at a shoe factory might walk alongside a young woman for whom any sort of manual labor would be unthinkable. As a result, class difference is simultaneously heightened and compressed—because rich and poor are physically close together, this arrangement allows the lower classes, particularly, to see and understand the drastically unequal distribution of wealth. With just a short walk, Carrie can find herself far from the distasteful manners of the factory girls and the young men who approach them freely; in one neighborhood, she wants to stand out, while just a few blocks away, she wants nothing more than to fit in. As she walks the city streets, she learns to see what she is *not*, and what she hopes to become.

Sister Carrie's thematic complexity—presenting issues of gender, class, realism, concerns of style, and preoccupation with material goods and labor, to name a few—is one reason why it occupies an influential place in American literary history. Critics have paid it considerable attention; as a result, it is difficult to craft a completely new argument about the novel or to find an original contribution to an already extensive volume of scholarly work. Despite the fact that there is already such a vast body of scholarly work

on the novel's attention to clothing, I want to build on this work to consider the way in which a specifically feminine desire for clothing allows a framework for understanding the relationship between fashion and the modern urban experience. The novel is a place to begin—it teaches us how to start thinking about the nature of fashion, and it is a vehicle by which we can better understand the advent of literary modernism. For my purposes, the novel serves as a beginning to a story, or a lens through which to begin to see the way in which fashion functions as a piece of the aesthetic of modernist literature.

First, let me begin with a description of the theoretical foundation for the understanding of fashion that informs my reading of the novel. As a means of self-expression, fashion is a method by which an individual develops an active relationship to his or her place in society; it provides one of the most readily visible representations of the seemingly insurmountable differences of class-based identity in early twentieth-century America. The recognition of social inequalities incites envy of position and excess—envy of position leads the individual to covet the accoutrements that manifest elevated status.² A realization of difference—the awakening to the arbitrary nature of class identity—causes a reevaluation of the way in which others see the self, and perhaps even the desire to remake that version of the self. As a result, many turn to fashion to satisfy what Simmel calls the “competing desires” of “union” and “segregation” (542). Torn between the need to be “on equal footing with the more affluent when they ventured into public” (Matt 21) and a simultaneous hope of someday being better than those they envy, people are inspired to use fashion to attempt to remake their social position. In

² In *Around Quitting Time*, Robert Seguin sees “the recognition of inequality” as the origin of envy (6).

Theory of the Leisure Class, Thorstein Veblen sees fashion as “the heart, supposedly, of what was desired” (92). Yet fashion, what Veblen calls “the cult of the new” (9), demands “constant change and incessant newness” (92). As fashion drives the development of novelty it simultaneously maintains and drives desire for goods and the position that enables their purchase. This paradoxical shift between old and new prompts a continual tension perpetuated by this sort of understanding of one's own body's place in society.

Particularly attuned to the relationship between the female subject and her surroundings, the novel situates clothing and material goods at the center of this new kind of modern feminine consciousness. In *Carrie*, it presents a woman who, failing an advantageous marriage, and with no opportunity for professional improvement, turns to clothing, jewelry, and others forms of the fashionable to improve her appearance and satisfy her developing desires. By imitating the fashions of those whose position they covet, women can lessen the differences between themselves and their social superiors. This performance of an alternate self—particularly in the urban setting that allows almost endless possibilities for new beginnings—provides a vehicle for the expression of a distinctly (if not uniquely) feminine desire and a way to participate in the construction of one's own identity. Fashion enables this sort of personal performance, as William Leach writes in *Land of Desire*, to make women “feel special, to give them opportunities for playacting, and to lift them from a world of luxury to pseudo-luxury, beyond work, drudgery, bills, and the humdrum of everyday” (91).³ Even in the presentation to potential

³ Leach works from Veblen to argue that part of the excitement of fashion was its “constant change,

buyers, fashion merchandising lured women into developing a desire for luxury items simply through their display. This sort of aggressive marketing “was a theatrical strategy *par excellence* that embodies the quest for the new. Like window display and the toy store, it democratized desire” (Leach 91). Tempting store windows provided a display of luxuries that anyone could desire, no matter their class.

Sister Carrie's treatment of fashionable goods suggests a keen understanding of the way in which a specifically feminine capitalist desire is essential to the understanding of that modern female subject. Initially offered to the helpless Carrie by men whose agency highlights her own lack thereof, fashionable goods teach her to cultivate that desire. Initially, Dreiser makes it clear that she brings no design to the city, no plan for success other than finding a job whose difficulties she has not begun to imagine; he portrays her as naïvely ignorant of the expenses of daily life, forgetting that she will need to purchase winter clothing or contribute to her sister's household expenses. She only conceives of money as something to satisfy desires for pretty things. Even Carrie's attraction to Drouet and Hurstwood is largely based on appearance—particularly in the way it translates to their potential to improve her own relation to material things. But as she begins to realize the men's limitations, Carrie learns to understand herself differently. For Carrie, who must initially rely on the “saving hands” of a man to make her way in the city, fashionable desire provides the medium through which she learns to take a life for herself that does not rely on others. In this way, the novel suggests that Carrie is a character whose learned desire inspires a new understanding of her relationship to the

incessant newness,” but this focus on novelty was also necessary in the “context of the American mass

men on whom she has always been dependent. It implies that this desire is the means by which she learns to reimagine her vision of success in the modern city.

In learning to desire, Carrie constructs a design for her own identity. This “desiring subjectivity” that Rita Felski argues characterizes a feminine access to modernity, is one sign of the novel's developing relationship to modernism (87). When Michaels locates the novel's realism in its treatment of “exhausted desire and economic failure” and the “identification of power with desire” (385, 387), he highlights the importance of desire to the novel's stylistic structure. While *Sister Carrie* is hardly part of the generally accepted modernist canon, the novel's realist style disguises a more modernist thematic impulse. Felski, however, considers desire in a different light; instead of understanding it in relation to these inevitably realist themes, she understands the cultivation of one's own desire as a sign of a developing modernist subjectivity. Following a character that evolves in relation to that desire, the novel teaches its readers the value of that desire in literature. Considering the way in which the novel treats the subject of feminine desire and the fashion that is so often its object can provide some insight into the evolution of the literary aesthetic that we know as modernism, as well as the way in which fashion can produce a point of access for the women so often excluded from its canon.

Throughout *Sister Carrie*, performance provides a medium for the development and expression of fashionable desire. Fashion is an inherently performative phenomenon, enacted in relation to other individuals with whom one hopes to find acceptance or from

whom one hopes to establish distance. As she learns to establish a concept of selfhood, Carrie cultivates a desire that results from the performances she witnesses and participates in; from the spectacle of strolling on Broadway to the literal stage, performance allows Carrie to envision the possibilities for embodying a completely different role. In this novel, fashion provides a vehicle for the development of a feminine desire for performance, and, simultaneously, a design for modeling a more modern version of selfhood. Tracing the way in which Carrie learns to desire and to design for herself begins to provide an understanding of the way in which *Sister Carrie* lays a foundation for the turn towards literary modernism that would begin in the next decade.⁴ The novel's treatment of its title character, the heightened prose, the sentimentalized tale, illustrates its tenuous relationship to the realist movement with which it is usually associated. Carrie's relationship to clothing and her development of the desire to fashion a self independent of men show a character moving, to borrow a phrase from one of Sloane's chapter titles, "Towards a More Modern America." As *Sister Carrie* chronicles the journey to this more modern time it also follows a path to a more modernist novel.

Learning to Desire

When Caroline Meeber comes to Chicago, the narrator focuses on her clothing and accessories. Her "total outfit," we are told, "[consists] of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box and a yellow leather snap

⁴ As I mentioned earlier, Michael Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism* takes as its subject the years

purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister's address...and four dollars in money” (Dreiser 1). Dressed in her best, her few possessions packed in a shabby case, Carrie hopes to look the part of the young city woman, on her way to success in Chicago. In the opening pages of the novel, the narrator informs us that Carrie is “a fair example of the middle American class,” that she has an alluring “mass of hair,” that she “could toss her head gracefully” and that she was “interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things” (2); the narrator implies that she is aware of the importance of her image to her success, especially in Chicago. She has never been to the city, but she is eager to improve her material circumstances and her appearance; the reader understands her to be a realistic, if pretty, average middle class girl.

Even before Carrie leaves the train, she begins to realize that these charms, though they might have been adequate in Columbia City, will not be enough in Chicago. She is quickly approached by the “drummer” Drouet, whose appearance dominates the first chapter. He has

Flush, colourful cheeks, a light moustache, a grey fedora hat... His suit was of a striped and crossed pattern of brown wool, new at the time, but since become familiar as a business suit. The low crotch of the vest revealed a stiff shirt bosom of white and pink stripes. From coat sleeves protruded a pair of linen cuffs of the same pattern, fastened with large, gold plate buttons, set with the common yellow agates known as 'cat's-eyes.' His fingers bore several rings—one, the ever-enduing heavy seal—and from his vest dangled a neat gold watch chain, from which was suspended the secret insignia of the Order of Elks. The whole suit was rather tight-fitting, and was finished off with heavy-soled tan shoes, highly polished, and the grey fedora hat. He was, for the order of intellect represented, attractive, and whatever he had to recommend him, you may be sure was not lost upon Carrie, in this, her first glance. (3-4)

This extended description contrasts with the relatively short description of Carrie's outfit. It is clear from the narrator's descriptions that Drouet is better dressed than Carrie, but also that there is something disconcertingly excessive in his appearance. Because this sort of attention to sartorial detail is traditionally considered to be the province of women, Dreiser's extended description of Drouet's appearance draws attention to a changing masculine aesthetic. For an inexperienced girl like Carrie, Drouet is striking and unnerving, a sign of a fashionable impulse with which she is not yet familiar. He marks the development of a new relationship between the self and its surroundings, an understanding manifested through this evolved masculine relationship to the body's aesthetic.

Drouet's appearance communicates status to Carrie. A man's clothing, according to the narrator, can fall into several categories, divided by a line that indicates to a woman which men "are worth glancing at and those who are not" (4) and another line "at which the dress of a man will cause her to study her own." (5). Drouet, falling into the latter category, causes Carrie to "become conscious of her own inequality. Her own plain blue dress, with its black cotton tape trimmings, now seemed to her shabby. She felt the worn state of her shoes" (5). Drouet's clothing, then, not only contributes to the manner in which a woman might judge him and react to him, but also to the way in which she understands her own image. In this way, Carrie arrives in the city, aware of the fact that a man such as Drouet finds her attractive, but haunted by her own inadequacy. All of these realizations, both about others and about herself, are enacted through the relationship between fashion and the complicated class system of the urban space.

As Carrie arrives in the train station of the great Midwestern city of Chicago, which Seguin calls “the interface between the metropolis and the wilderness” (20), she quickly becomes aware of the difference between her plain, working-class sister and the impressive image cut by her new acquaintance Drouet. Her sister's flat, revealing a “lean and narrow life,” has poor furniture with a “hurriedly patched together quality sold by the instalment houses,” walls “discordantly papered, floors covered with matting and the hall laid with a thin rag carpet” (11). Immediately, Carrie feels the “drag” of these surroundings, so different in style and appearance from Drouet's fashionable clothes and fine shoes. She realizes she cannot have Drouet call on her here; she claims that this is because the flat is too small, but it seems more likely that she would be embarrassed to have him see the modesty of her family connections. His finely-dressed presence in the apartment would only heighten Carrie's displeasure with her own situation. Carrie reads her surroundings and realizes that her place in the city, if it must be yoked to her sister's, is far from desirable.

In the city streets, or even standing down at the door of the apartment building watching passers-by in the street, Carrie sees optimistic potential in its vibrant growth. Dreiser tells us that Chicago was rapidly growing, its population increasing by 50,000 a year and already at 500,000 at the turn of the century (10, 13). In anticipation of more growth, street car lines had been extended far outside the city, “a pioneer of the populous ways to be” (14). An exploration of the “urban pastoral” (Seguin 26), *Sister Carrie* presents Chicago as full of potential for capitalist success. The “casual wanderer” would find offices with a “distinguished and prosperous look,” that might “overawe and abash

the common applicant” and make “the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep” (14, 15). Philip Fisher sees Dreiser's consideration of the city as “simultaneously a synecdoche for America...and on the other hand...a metonymy for Carrie” (129); he argues that the city, with its unfinished “trolley tracks and strings of gas lamps” represents her plans for the future. The city, then, serves as a representation of the American dream that is both comforting and disconcerting. Like Carrie's interaction with Drouet on the train, it makes her aware of her shortcomings and inspires her to covet more.

Feeling her inadequacies keenly, Carrie looks for a job, earnestly seeking her own version of the American capitalist dream. Yet she feels a “certain indefinable shame” at the thought of being “caught spying about for a position,” feeling more comfortable assuming “an air of indifference” (16). Intimidated by entering the stores and factories, Carrie finds it takes all her energy to apply at a shoe factory, only to be turned down, “made to feel her unfortunate position.” She finds most of the stores and factories “grimy and low,” and perhaps more importantly, filled with girls who were “careless and hardened”; as a result she assumes they must be “bad-minded and hearted” (24). Once she secures a position, she fears becoming one of their kind, as if their manners and morals as well as their appearance might rub off on her through proximity. Throughout Carrie's short time in the shoe factory, before she becomes ill and loses her position, the narrator implies that the other employees are indeed of a lower class, both through their appearance, their lower-class grammar and speech, and the free manner of behavior with which both the boys and girls are comfortable. In this context, it is clear that Carrie feels

herself to be above her coworkers. Compared to Drouet, who remains the image against which she judges the others, the boys seem “uncouth and ridiculous” (37).

Carrie learns to desire through these experiences: the filthy, lower class environment of the factory, the clean if boring surroundings of her sister's flat, and her acquaintance with and subsequent idealization of Drouet. She recognizes the widely disparate lifestyles and classes occupied by people who live in the same city. Her critique of the women in the shops makes it clear she would not last long, even if she stayed healthy. She finds them to be

drabby-looking creatures, stained in face with oil and dust, clad in thin cotton dresses and shod with more or less worn shoes. Many of them had their sleeves rolled up, revealing bare arms, and in some cases, owing to the heat, their dresses were open at the necks. They were a fair type of nearly the lowest order of shop-girls—careless, slouchy, and more or less pale from confinement. They were not timid, however; were rich in curiosity, and strong in daring and slang. (22)

They are dirty, rude, and ill-mannered, but Carrie objects most to the fact that no one in the shop pays her any attention. In a group such as this, Carrie undoubtedly fears that if she prompts no interest, soon enough she will blend in with this unfortunate group and become one of many girls who sacrifice their standards and the fashions to which they have grown accustomed in this loose work environment.

Besides her fear of becoming one of this undesirable group, Carrie's desire for fine things—clothing, jewelry, accessories, fashion—motivates her intense desire to improve her situation. The department stores in particular, in which one is not separated from the objects of desire by glass, let a woman like Carrie walk among the “busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, stationery” (Dreiser

20).⁵ She cannot “help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable on her personality... There was nothing there which she could not have used—nothing which she did not long to own” (20). Walking through the overflowing aisles of a store such as this, Carrie cannot help but feel the “drag of desire,” cannot help but envy her “more fortunate sisters” who brush past her with “utter disregard” (21). The experience causes Carrie to reevaluate the way in which these other women perceive her and to realize “how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart” (21). Because of her insatiable desire, Carrie classifies herself as “an outcast,” whose inability to purchase would be readable in her very appearance.

Dreiser depicts the manner in which fashion contributes to individuals' experience of their class identity, particularly as a concept relative to others. The city, the place in which the classes are closely compressed and where upward mobility begins to be imaginable, finds its streets and its stores to be the sites of a fashionable display that haunts Carrie. This spectacle and its tendency to incite envy and desire is part of what Matt calls “an emerging emotional and behavioral style that supported the expansion of the consumer economy” (2). It “emphasized the value of pleasure, indulgence, and desire and downplayed the importance of restraint and delayed gratification” (2). With the rise of stores like the one that incites so much desire in Carrie, Matt argues, people could see with “unprecedented color and clarity the desirable goods that they could not always afford” (3). The act of shopping itself, as Sharon Zukin suggests, allows individuals

⁵ These scenes call to mind the frenzied, ecstatic scenes of Zola's *Au bonheur des dames*, a novel set

“both to take account of [their] place in society and to imagine what it would be like to rise above it” (29). Thus the possibility of upward mobility begins to take shape in the crowded public spaces of the department stores where women of all social classes and financial means may mingle, looking and even touching the goods they imagine are all they need to remake their circumstances.

Fashion provides the vehicle for the cultivation of this desire. If it is the means by which Carrie judges herself to be above some women and below others (as well as perhaps below Drouet), then it is also the means by which she hopes to communicate to others that she is a part of a more desirable social group. Clothing allows the individual, as Jennifer Craik suggests in *The Face of Fashion*, to “articulate the relationship between a particular body and its lived milieu” (4). In this way, the individual can use fashion to articulate, in particular, a more desirable relationship between herself and her surroundings. This is the phenomenon Walter Benjamin refers to in *The Arcades Project* when he suggests that fashion allows a woman to become “*contemporaine de tout le monde*” (66). By this logic, fashion can allow a woman to erase the difference between herself and a social superior; at the same time, it is “the barrier—continually raised anew because continually torn down—by which the fashionable world seeks to segregate itself from the middle region of society” (Jhering qtd. in Benjamin 74). It can provide the “union” that Simmel argues is one side of fashion's dichotomous nature just as it can “segregate” the privileged individual from social inferiors (542).

One way in which an individual might unite herself with a more desirable class

largely in a wildly popular department store in Paris.

and segregate herself from her origins is through the imitation of the styles and mannerisms of the upper classes. Wearing fashionable clothing, Pierre Perrot writes, "allows individuals to merge with the group"(13) and allows them to act the part of a different social group. Before the advent of mass-produced, ready-to-wear clothing, such imitation would have been more difficult; however, as intricate and expensive-looking clothing began to be easier to make and cheaper to purchase, the bourgeoisie found it must easier to buy into the appearance of the upper class. With the rise of department stores, "imitation luxury goods allowed the middle and working classes to emulate the upper class styles they admired" (Matt 3). While the upper classes had heretofore preserved class difference through the maintenance of complicated social rituals and the performance of conspicuous consumption, the lower classes were able to challenge this system through conduct manuals, costume jewelry, and cheaper mass-produced clothing. By way of these aids, a woman who could afford just a few decorations could buy into the image of privilege through "prestigious imitation" (8).

Through shopping, and clothing herself, Carrie seeks to imitate the manners and image of a more desirable position. Walking through the aisles of smart jackets and alluring hats and gloves, Carrie finds that each article inspires a comparison to her more "fortunate sisters" (21); she learns to see the clothing's potential to improve herself. As Gail McDonald puts it, Carrie fixates on a "peculiar little tan jacket with large mother-of-pearl buttons," because "she is delighted with the charm she possesses in it, with her beauty measured against that of other shoppers (233). Shopping for Carrie then, is not only the act of "acquiring *goods*; it is a social encounter, a research operation, and both a

moral and an aesthetic experience of acquiring values” (Zukin 61). Carrie realizes what she lacks and becomes aware of her own imperfections; she learns to covet clothing and to realize its power to transform her relationship to her surroundings. Her trips to the department stores and to the promenades inspire more passion than any of her relationships with men. Because “[a]ll shopping is shopping for possible selves” (McDonald 234), Carrie is incited by the possibilities that shopping for clothing allows her to imagine for her life.

Each of these “possible selves” is a role that the woman may aspire to perform. Each item allows her to imagine herself in a different role, and their simultaneous presence, all arrayed in front of her, becomes not only a sensory overload, but also a collection of possible fantasies for her own life. In cultivating a desire for a different life, Carrie demonstrates the representative potential of fashionable goods in the densely populated, labyrinthine city. On its crowded streets, alternatives are everywhere and the possibilities easy to imagine. Each decoration becomes a prop and each article of clothing becomes a piece of a costume that belongs to character she might perform. In this city space, where origins are less visible and the classes mix freely on the public streets, it becomes all the more possible that people might start to believe the performance.

In learning this kind of desire, Dreiser's Carrie begins to develop signs of the modernist aesthetic that would dominate the literary aesthetic of the coming decades. The novel's presentation of her developing desire—a sign of “desiring subjectivity”—begins to create a foundation for the evolution of that movement. Carrie begins the novel understanding only her lack, fulfilling it through Drouet and his “power to produce

material goods” (Corkin 611). Because it makes her aware of these shortcomings, the city is the novel's catalyst for Carrie's burgeoning desire, even if that desire is eventually satisfied through a man. Dreiser's presentation of the urban experience and its ability to incite fashionable desire highlights the fact that “in contrast to the modern public sphere based in politics and production, the public sphere of consumption has mainly been constructed by, and for, women” (Zukin 33). As Fisher suggests, Dreiser “invented the figures and the motifs by means of which the city became visible as a cultural fact in America” (138). As the setting of the ever-present American Dream, the city makes a particularly feminine version of that dream visible and imaginable. It is the birthplace of a modernizing desire.

Designing Carrie

One problem with feminine desire in America, circa 1900, is the fact that a woman had very few outlets for developing and displaying her own designs. Carrie realizes this almost immediately after she arrives in the city, finding herself continuously disappointed by how little her salary of four-fifty a week will buy her. After she pays her room and board to her sister's husband, Carrie must decide between necessities like new shoes and winter coats and luxuries like street car fare and a smart umbrella. The “half-equipped little knight” finds that a girl with no experience will be lucky to find any sort of employment (2), let alone anything relatively glamorous and feminine like shop girl or actress. Relegated to the misery of long, physically exhausting and socially degrading

labor in the shoe factory, Carrie realizes that the American Dream is far from the grasp of a woman with no money, little family support, and no social connections.

For a woman, improving one's station in life is inevitably tied to others—most likely, a man. Other than marrying above her station, a woman has few options for gaining in social and financial status. Carrie realizes this fact very quickly when it becomes evident that working hard at her job will likely not even keep her in shoes to walk to work. It is clear early in the novel—from the moment that Carrie's mass of hair attracts the well-dressed Drouet on the train—that her appearance is the only asset that will truly help her improve her life. And if she does not get some new clothes, Carrie knows that her looks and manners will no longer appeal to the successful men. Because of her upbringing, however, Carrie has mixed feelings—she recognizes that there is something about Drouet's appearance that, while fine, is slightly excessive. She knows instinctively not to meet her sister with him by her side, and she knows not to have him call at her house. Indecisive, she does not make plans with him; Dreiser saves her from an indiscretion by allowing them to meet again by chance.

When Carrie does meet Drouet again, he attracts her with the promise of satisfying her desires. After a discouraging day of job hunting, turned down even for a position as waitress, Carrie finds that Drouet alters her circumstances immediately by bringing her to his table as a diner instead of a server. Literally tempting her with the menu of expensive and rich foods, Drouet's carefree attitude about prices that seem exorbitant allows Carrie to imagine a different relationship between desire and money. While she worries about the prices, Drouet orders without even considering the cost,

worried only about satiating his desires. In serving Carrie a “rousing plateful,” he “appeared to great advantage behind the white napery and silver platters” (56). Aware now of the difference in their respective financial positions, Carrie notes: “what a thing it was to have money! What a thing it was to be able to come in here and dine! Drouet must be fortunate. He rode on trains, dressed in such nice clothes, was so strong, and ate in these fine places. He seemed quite a figure of a man” (56). Watching Drouet and noting his ability to satisfy both of their desires, Carrie understands her own lack of value in relation to him.

Drouet's fine appearance is not only attractive in its own right—it also represents his ability to purchase things for Carrie. With a seemingly genuine interest in her happiness, Drouet notes that Carrie does not look well and offers her money to buy clothing. The bills, described as “loose in his vest pocket,” almost seem like an afterthought to him, money he had perhaps forgotten was even there. The greenbacks are “soft and noiseless,” and Drouet crumples them carelessly in his hand as he gives them to Carrie. His suggestion that she should buy new clothing makes her realize how shabby her appearance has become. As Leon F. Seltzer suggests, Drouet satisfies Carrie's “more or less conventional desire for material acquisitions, particularly attractive clothing. The larger part of her seduction by Drouet centers on his appeal to her vanity through offerings of fashionable apparel” (199). While Carrie claims to feel “that she liked him—that she could continue to like him ever so much” (57), it is clear that what seduces, as Seltzer explains, is the purchasing power he clearly represents. As Alfred Kazin asserts, “Carrie allows herself to be bought by Drouet” (242).

Carrie's ambivalence about Drouet's money becomes harder to fight when she is once again amidst the fine things. She is "lured by desire, and yet deterred by conscience or want of decision" (64). Intimidated by the department store when she entered without the means to buy, she returns, having developed a high opinion of the shop; with money in her hand, she feels comfortable pausing "at each individual bit of finery, where before she had hurried on. Her woman's heart was warm with desire for them. How would she look in this, how charming would that make her!" (64). After spending a long time browsing among these luxuries, Carrie lingers in the jewelry department and wanders through the jackets, but she decides nonetheless to return the money. She finds herself lunching with Drouet and affected by his "clean, handsome, well-dressed, and sympathetic" appearance (65). In his presence, she can see that the city is "admirable and great...so fine when you are not poor" (65). Under the influence of "Drouet's radiating presence" (67), guided by his strength and his choices, Carrie accepts the new clothing. Despite the desire that these fashionable objects cultivate in her, Carrie finds that without Drouet's guidance, she can neither choose the objects she already thought she wanted nor purchase them. His assured presence—and his money—allow her to articulate and act on her desires.

Drouet begins to transform Carrie by influencing her tastes and preferences—in short, by constructing an image he finds pleasing. As McNamara suggests, Drouet begins to change Carrie by making offhand remarks about attractive women they pass on the street. His comments "awaken in her 'little suggestion[s] of possible defect[s] in herself' that lead her to practice in front of a mirror until she can reflect what he desires to see.

She is not thereby becoming the master of her own desire or indulging in self-speculation; her better looks are less resources that she deploys than the means by which her exchange value is increased' (qtd. In McNamara 85). Thus the desire that she is only beginning to learn is appropriated—at the very least controlled and redirected—so that “others help Carrie to want” (61).⁶ McNamara goes on to suggest that “[a]s she is made and made over by those characters who force her vague desire, she becomes an example of how wealth and a self are produced through the social and economic institutions of an interdependent society” (61). McNamara point out that Carrie demonstrates the interrelated nature of consumption and particularly feminine identity in early twentieth-century America.

Carrie's identity, constructed as it is through Drouet's money, clothing, and fashion, cannot exist independently. Thus when she leaves him, she can only leave him for another man, because she has little agency, desire, or identity that is at all her own. As for her clothes, she “possesses them only because Drouet brought them to make her fit his image of the stylish woman, and thus to show himself to advantage. As she leaves, her clothes and mannerisms, traces of Drouet's desire grafted onto her, are all the identity she has” (McNamara 85). Her clothing, like most, McNamara argues, is “structured by the syntax of masculine desire” (86). Even her mannerisms—performed in reaction to Drouet's criticism or compliments of other women—derive from his opinions. Despite the fact that Carrie's circumstances are improving, she nonetheless gives up her agency to be a man's creation. When she accepts Drouet's money and allows his preferences to

⁶ McNamara uses from Michaels' argument to frame his own about the novel.

override his own, Carrie becomes a woman designed by male agency.

The novel reinforces this characterization of Carrie when she allows another man to change her mind; judging him based on what seems to her to be a relatively superior taste and intellect, Carrie now relies on Hurstwood to make choices for her. Now, in comparison, Drouet is “too buoyant, too full of ruddy life, too assured” (90). Since she is “used to Drouet's appearance,” she finds herself transfixed by Hurstwood's strikingly different tastes:

The coat lapels stood out with that medium stiffness which excellent cloth possesses. The vest was of a rich Scotch plaid, set with a double row of round mother-of-pearl buttons. His cravat was a shiny combination of silken threads, not loud, not inconspicuous. What he wore did not strike the eye so forcibly as that which Drouet had on, but Carrie could see the elegance of the material. Hurstwood's shoes were of soft, black, calf, polished only to a dull shine. Drouet wore patent leather, but Carrie could not help feeling that there was a distinction in favour of the soft leather, where all else was so rich.” (91)

Thus Carrie's initial interest in Hurstwood results from a realization that his taste might be subtly finer, less ostentatious and therefore of a higher class than that of Drouet. Rather than dramatically insisting upon one's success and fine taste, Hurstwood's clothing indicates a subtle confidence that supercedes insecurities now revealed in Drouet's overstated, bourgeois preferences. The novel suggests that Carrie intuitively knows this, and while she still relies on men to satisfy her desires, she wants the man with the finest aesthetic sensibility to guide her own.

This masculine investment in fashion serves to heighten Carrie's alienating experience in the city; because fashion has been considered the realm of women since men renounced ostentation for the black business suit, the fact that men such as Drouet and Hurstwood make it such a priority makes her uncertain of her own tastes and

understanding of value. The long descriptions of both men's clothing demonstrate that Dreiser intends their fashion choices to communicate something to Carrie as well as to other men. For a man, assumed to be a part of the more serious, concrete world of business, fashion and other frivolous things were once thought to be the province of their wives and daughters. To covet an abstract position and the things that represent it was left to the women. But as Matt suggests, bourgeois men in particular were encouraged to

act on their envy and display their ambitions by purchasing prestige goods. By acquiring and displaying well-cut suits and fine cars, bourgeois men could engage in subtle competition and one-upmanship with coworkers. Through such actions, men gradually redefined success” to include the material condition of the body as well as its surroundings. (9)

Hurstwood, a successful manager of a popular bar, represents his successful status through his quietly fine clothing. Without any mention of an upper class family background, Hurstwood appears to be of the ambitious middle class. This group, Matt argues, “found it somewhat easier to express their envy and generally faced less censure when they did so” (7); Drouet, too, as a “drummer” or traveling salesman, is part of a new kind of business practice, a man making his fortune on his own. Without family connections or a name to speak to status, class, or success, this new class of man must use his appearance to represent a more desirable self image.

The women in these men's lives also serve as an outlet or an expression of fashionable desire on the part of the men. While men take some direct part in their own presentation, they still use women almost like the women themselves use decoration. Dreiser's brief but detailed description of the Hurstwood family—to whom he only returns briefly—indicates that he considers that these characters reflect something about

Hurstwood, who is to become a central figure in the novel. The character is at best ambivalent about his wife and describes her as an accessory or an interior decorator. Early in the chapter, the narrator describes a stylish dining room characterized by a “sideboard laden with glistening decanters and other utilities and ornaments in glass, the arrangement of which could not be questioned” (79). There is no praise of the aesthetic value of the dining room's appearance, only assessment of its correctness. The women, too, while not pleasant, are attractive, if expensive to maintain. Hurstwood's daughter, Jessica, “wanted fine clothes, and Mrs. Hurstwood, not to be outshone by her daughter, also frequently enlivened her apparel” (84). Mrs. Hurstwood's “knowledge of life extended to that little conventional round of society of which she was not—but longed to be—a member” (80). Her desire for clothing is part of this, as it allows her to hope to be on “equal footing with the more affluent when they ventured into public” (Matt 21). Hurstwood and his family, then, are motivated by envy and the desire to find a way to elevate their social status, whether it be by taking a box at the races or having the correct new dress. As they represent him, Hurstwood may be annoyed at the women's demands, but his pride rests upon his being able to grant them what they desire. More importantly, it must *appear* to be no trouble at all.

Because Hurstwood associates a fine appearance with other desirable qualities like novelty, prosperity, and success, he finds himself attracted to Carrie. As a rule, he “looked upon most women with suspicion—a single eye to the utility of beauty and dress” (113). He accepts Drouet's invitation to meet Carrie in the interest of seeing “a new baggage of fine clothes and pretty features” and instead finds a “woman whose

youth and beauty attracted him” (114). Having previously seen a woman's clothing and her features separately, Hurstwood finds his intense attraction to Carrie's qualities—her clothing and her features alike—make her in his eyes into a whole woman. He sees Carrie as a potential part of a successful image and finds himself driven by the need to acquire her, frustrated that she is not for sale. Kazin sees Hurstwood's interest in Carrie as a central part of Dreiser's commentary in the novel, and remarks that Dreiser “knew that for such a man as Hurstwood, success included the acquisition of Carrie at any risk. So much sexual greed, shocking as it may have been to those who would not admit lust as a counterpart of the general acquisitiveness, was inherent in Dreiser” (241).⁷ Hurstwood's need to acquire Carrie as a partner, according to Kazin, cannot be separated from his need to be able to acquire things—or, perhaps more importantly, to be able to buy them.

What, then, does the woman do for the man's self-worth that money alone cannot do? Sexual attraction aside, the woman provides an outlet for the sort of fashionable display denied to most men. In *Sister Carrie*, Drouet and Hurstwood both use Carrie as a sort of blank canvas upon which they can inscribe their own desires. In short, she is a woman designed to fulfill exactly what they want. “To the always alienated and radical Dreiser,” Kazin writes, “Carrie represents the power of transformation, the woman as catalyst” (240-1). In Kazin's eyes, Carrie facilitates the change that men like Drouet and Hurstwood want to see in their own lives, a change in the status quo. In other words, the man can design a woman who might help him change his circumstances by projecting his

⁷ Kazin is also interested in the way in which the book deals with sexuality. As he writes, “the original manuscript is more explicit about the sexual illegitimacy that is so important to the book” (244), and the book was largely censored by the publisher's wife.

own desires onto her appearance and her life. Clothing, a mutable, ambiguous, representative medium, allows a means for designing a woman that satisfies the man's fashionable desires.

While men can purchase and produce the material goods that give meaning to some women's lives, the women themselves are not powerless: they have the ability to influence and restructure other women's desires. The crowded streets of Chicago and New York in particular provide the perfect setting for the sort of fashionable display that changes the way in which women understand themselves. In particular, Dreiser focuses on the spectacle of Broadway's promenade, where, unlike the high fashion parties of the rich, anyone can come to view the display of riches and luxury. As the narrator suggests, Broadway was “an imposing procession of pretty faces and fine clothes. Women appeared in their very best hats, shoes, and gloves, and walked arm in arm on their way to the fine shops or theatres... Equally, the men paraded with the very latest they could afford” (285). A fine piece of clothing was given meaning by the act of wearing it on this fashionable street; as the novel suggests, any individual with a fine new suit or hat would want to hurry immediately to give it “its first airing” on Broadway (285). This is the place that gives fashionable display its impetus, the setting for its unending performance.

Yet “the flavour of riches and show” is not always satisfying (285). Instead, it often inspires jealousy, and the self-critique inspired by comparing oneself with the richer and more finely dressed. Carrie, initially feeling herself less handsomely dressed, finds the experience “[cuts] her to the quick” (286). Accompanying her wealthier neighbor Mrs. Vance to the theatre, Carrie finds that the finery of the other women causes her to

experience her own inferiority keenly and to reenvision her own image of her self. In this way, the spectacle of Broadway becomes the means by which individuals are ordered and learn their place in society. Mrs. Vance, Carrie realizes, goes “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, on the other hand, less comfortable with her appearance and the nature of the display, “found herself stared at and ogled” (285). In this two page section, the narrator uses some form of the word “parade” three times; this space of performance places Carrie squarely “in fashion's crowd, on a parade in a show place—and such a show place!” (286). And yet, unlike the parade the more modern reader might imagine, in this case, everyone on the street parades—all are performers and all are viewers. Fighting for the right to dominate the scene, members of “fashion's crowd” feign disinterest in their surroundings. The spectacle of the street, inherently performative and performed, as much designs the individual as the individual designs the spectacle.

The finely dressed women, in particular, inspire envy, shame, and self-evaluation for an individual like Carrie who has no class connections or background to support her. In its materialism, this sort of performative fashion system is part of the “emotional style” that Matt argues emphasizes indulgence over restraint (2). According to this logic, the aesthetic style that encouraged this kind of sumptuary display results from a larger scale trend in attitudes toward social behavior. While men's clothing was limited by the more standardized, minimalist conventions that kept them in relatively conservative suits, women came to serve as the outlet for that fashionable indulgence. According to Pierre

Perrot, women began to replace “the lace and jewels banished from men's clothing” during the renunciation and they were adorned in a way that demonstrated the men's status (35).⁸ They became the “visible correlate of the economic and social standing of their menfolk” (Craik 47). In order to accept this condition, women learned to see the men as the background for this sort of display or the authors of the roles they embody.⁹ As a result, the women become the performers of this fashionable display, the men remaining more like the stage itself, the essential foundation for the exhibition.

As the stage—the foundation on which the performance occurs, the physical structure that makes its actors visible—the man is essential to the performance. But by allowing the woman the space to perform, the means to be seen, and the accoutrements necessary to act the part, the man allows the woman a point of entry into her own social identity. The cultivation of this desire, performative in nature, begins to lay the foundation for an engagement with modernism that is distinctly gendered feminine. Men like Drouet and Hurstwood, though they are inherently patriarchal and unconsciously misogynist, are essential to the development of Carrie, the representative woman. If fashion is the manifestation of a desire to take an active part in the performance of selfhood, women on the edge of modernism find that desire placed onto them by the pressure to perform. Even if the desire and the acquisition of the means of this social performance are facilitated by a man, to conceive of the performance is the beginning of the development of the modern subject's departure from realism. It is the belief in the

⁸ Perrot grounds his argument in Veblen's work.

⁹ In *Tigersprung*, Ulrich Lehmann works from Baudelaire to argue that “woman's individuality becomes immediately apparent in the particular clothes she wears at any given moment” while the “uniformity of the masculine [provides] the backdrop for the sartorial excesses of the feminine” (39).

possibilities of departing from one's own social reality.

Carrie's Design

When Carrie first tries her hand at acting, she acts, at Drouet's suggestion, under the name "Carrie Madenda." Drouet, who most likely hopes to hide his illegitimate relationship with Carrie, chooses a random name that has no obvious connection to his own. The lodge members "knew him to be single" (149) and he obviously does not want to commit to his relationship with Carrie in the way that any sort of public acknowledgment would force. Appealing to Carrie's vanity, Drouet explains that this stage name is in case she doesn't "make a hit" (148). While she has been using the name Drouet, it is no more her "real" name than "Madenda." This new name separates her from both Drouet and her family and with this false name, she enters the world of the stage playing a role before she even begins. Unattached to Drouet, Carrie is a success in the play, and the audience experiences her performance as a woman, as an actor, and as an individual. "Carrie Madenda" is a sign of her new design for herself, a nullification of her past.

In the role of the single, independent woman—a role that could be interpreted as fact or fiction—Carrie begins her experiment with performing a different design for herself. At first, however, she feels uncomfortable with the idea of playing a part. When Drouet offers Carrie the part in the play the Elks are preparing to put on, she resists, pleading inexperience, but finds herself nevertheless "drawn toward the proposition"

(144). Rather than deciding on her own merit, Carrie asks Drouet if he thinks she could act, and when she finally does accept, she tells him that it will be his fault if she fails (144, 145). But the appeal of praise and admiration is too strong—she takes the part, and finds herself the center of attention in front of a “well-dressed, good-natured, flatteringly-inclined audience” (159). Not used to the attention of such a crowd, Carrie's first performance starts out lackluster at best, but it improves after a backstage visit from Hurstwood and Drouet. Seeming to thrive on the personal attention they pay her, Carrie channels their approval and becomes more comfortable on the stage. Her performance inspires Drouet to resolve to marry the woman others think to be his wife; it inspires jealousy in the man who forgets his own. Each character, seeing Carrie in the bright lights of the stage, finds his understanding of Carrie changing; indeed, even Carrie's opinion of herself begins to change on the stage. What becomes clear is that Carrie's stage performance motivates all three main characters to imagine themselves outside their current situation. Acting under a different name, Carrie is temporarily free from her relationship to Drouet, from Hurstwood's desire, and from her own conception of self.

Here, and in her subsequent rise to fame in New York, Carrie's good looks are supplemented by a knack for mimicry. Dreiser's narrator suggests that her very nature prepares her for the stage. “She was,” he says, “created with that passivity of soul which is always the mirror of the active world. She possessed an innate taste for imitation and no small ability” (146). She is also motivated by considering the stage, like she considers men, as a means by which she might acquire more material goods. Just thinking about the performance, Carrie's “mind delights itself with scenes of luxury and refinement,

situations in which she was the cynosure of all eyes, the arbiter of all fates” (147).

Carrie's affinity for fine things and luxuries connects to her desire to be on the stage.

Imagining the glamorous actresses she has learned to admire in her limited exposure to the theatre, Carrie associates acting with high fashion and luxury. She imitates them in hopes of tapping into the riches that the theatre represents. While Carrie fixates on luxuries and fine things throughout the novel, the stage allows her a means to think about acquiring these things independently. While the men's desire is still implicit in her growing success in the theatre business—the men who watch her perform may not be able to hope for a direct satisfaction of their desire for Carrie, but her fame still rests on that desire—she is nonetheless able to use the stage to create success for herself while maintaining a distance between herself and that desire.

Like the social “technique” of fashion, the stage allows the actor the means to access prestige and class privilege that seem inaccessible to the individual on her or his own. Carrie's first endeavor on the stage, as Susan A. Glenn suggests, is a way she seeks to elevate her own status; she “learns the ways of the world and constitutes a series of selves by mimicking the styles, expressions, and gestures of the upwardly mobile women around her.” The stage, Glenn argues, allows its actors “a personification of a feminized urban consumer culture where being and imitating were one and the same” (54).¹⁰ The connection between acting and “feminized urban consumer culture” highlights the complicated relationship between fashionable and stage performance. In both, the performer takes on the mannerisms and style of another identity and divorces herself

¹⁰ In “Give an Imitation of Me’: Vaudeville Mimics and the Play of the Self,” Glenn considers the

from her personal circumstances. The actor, of course, repeats the performance and plays different roles, while the fashionable imitator, who takes on the mannerisms of an individual of a different social position, imagines a more long term immersion in her role, in which “being and imitating” are indistinguishable. The woman of fashion seeks to segregate herself from her former identity and disappear seamlessly into the ranks of a new class. In this way, the theatre provides good practice for the “upwardly mobile” social climber.

Thus Carrie learns a method for developing a “series of selves” through imitation and performance, a practice she extends to her real life as well as the stage. Carrie's first experience on the stage makes it easier for her to leave Chicago with Hurstwood and accept their new names and identities in New York City; having been Carrie Madenda and Carrie Drouet, she tries the parts of Carrie Hurstwood, Murdock, and Wheeler. Now, even though her new identity still relies on a man for its foundation and its name, she still understands herself to be making a choice. Flying in the face of tradition, she rejects one pseudo-husband for another. Although neither marriage is legal, Carrie's altered circumstances allow her “to have a few opinions of her own” (269). As she realizes the possibilities for remaking herself, Carrie begins to develop a set of values by which to evaluate those around her. That is to say, as she learns the possibilities for acting one's way into a new situation, she begins to judge those who do not take the initiative to do so. She takes on her new role as Hurstwood's wife, and she becomes indistinguishable from the part itself. Thus the practice of acting on the stage facilitates a real-life

transformation.

Having grown used to men providing her with the props and costumes necessary for a new role, Carrie finds herself dismayed at their absence in her life as Carrie Wheeler.¹¹ Hurstwood, unaccustomed to working without the social prestige and capital that allowed him success in Chicago and without connections and references, finds that white collar work is much harder to procure than he had so smugly assumed. Physical labor, initially, is too far beneath his former station to comprehend, so even after having forced Carrie to endure the shame of moving to a less desirable neighborhood and lowering her standard of living, Hurstwood prefers avoiding the cold, hard shame of job seeking by spending his afternoons hiding in plush hotel lobbies. Even though he is not fooling anyone, Hurstwood prefers to try to maintain the appearance of success over the horror of being seen looking around.¹² His performance, then, is one that clings to a former role rather than accepting the new. Still, at heart, the ambitious bourgeois man who knows the importance of appearance and fine clothing, he staves off his social plunge by avoiding work and looking the part in public. Having failed at home in his masculine duties, providing for his so-called wife and household, the emasculated Hurstwood no longer dresses at home. But in the hotel lobby, he can still perform his old self when he is out in public, among people who do not know him. He gambles and buys himself fine dinners: “Like the morphine fiend, he was becoming addicted to his ease. Anything to relive his mental distress, to satisfy his craving for comfort. He must do it”

¹¹ Wheeler is the pseudonym Hurstwood adopts after his crime in Chicago. Throughout the novel, Dresier still refers to him as Hurstwood, as I will do here.

¹² This sentiment echoes Carrie's at the beginning of the novel, demonstrating another way in which the men are subject to the same vanity of the women.

(335). Hurstwood insists on maintaining his performance, if only for himself.

Having learned to truly appreciate sartorial performance, Carrie finds Hurstwood's declining appearance even more upsetting than their ever-decreasing standard of living. She can avoid having company at her depressing flat, and she can keep herself neat and as well-dressed as possible for interactions in the public spaces of shops and streets. Hurstwood, however, soon begins wearing his old clothes at home; giving up the role in which he presented himself to Carrie, he finds that as “his self-respect vanished, it perished for him in Carrie” as well (326). She begins to challenge him, resenting the fact that she continues to try as he loses hope. When she encounters her former companion Mrs. Vance, Dreiser uses the latter's perspective to describe Carrie, as she remarks upon the unimpressive address, and the more startling fact that “Carrie's appearance had modified somewhat” (329). Fearing that Mrs. Vance might call and see Hurstwood looking poorly, Carrie pressures him to wear his good clothing, but his “lack of pride and interest [makes her] almost hate him” (332). After Mrs. Vance does call, Carrie is horrified that her friend has seen Hurstwood in this pathetic condition. The experience makes it clear that Hurstwood's appearance influences Carrie's social standing, as hers does his. She experiences his deterioration most acutely through the eyes of a third party, just as she understands her own image best through the observation and judgment of the other *flâneurs* on Broadway. Here, Hurstwood functions much like last year's fashions—he reflects poorly on Carrie, altering her position. Through the gaze of another person, Carrie realizes her true relationship to Hurstwood, and the impact he will have on her future.

Hurstwood's failure forces Carrie into a new identity; it forces her to design a plan for a new future. Deprived, even, of her household allowance money, Carrie finds her identity almost eradicated. This is the event that inspires a return to the compellingly liberating space of the stage. She finds herself drawn to the opportunity to play a role once again. And with work, “her need of clothes—to say nothing of her desire for ornaments—grew rapidly as the fact developed that for all her work she was not to have them” (356). The “new order,” which finds her doling the money out to Hurstwood, seems to incite her; soon she finds Hurstwood's questioning to be an “infringement on her liberty” (361). No longer telling him how much money she makes, she buys new clothes for herself and stays out socializing with her new friend in the theatre company. In short, money empowers her, roles are reversed, and the new clothes she can now buy only empower her more. Carrie measures her success as well as her independence in her clothing .

The novel suggests that Carrie's uniquely feminine success can be measured by her growing wardrobe. This, of course, is nothing new, as the accumulation of property has long been considered a sign of success. As Veblen writes, property is the most “easily recognised evidence of a reputable degree of success... It becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property, in order to retain one's good name....the accepted badge of efficiency (1994, 29). This theory suggests that success in modern society is characterized by different signs than in previous years; as capitalism gained power in the industrial revolution, success became measurable by white collar work and the ability to buy rather than more traditional methods of construction, fabrication, and accumulation.

Women, however, are granted few points of entry into material success. Like marriage, the stage provides one of the only ways a woman like Carrie could improve her status, and, quite literally, make a name for herself. No “Mrs. George Hurstwood,” Carrie Madenda truly finds a uniquely independent and feminine mode of measuring achievement.

In his characterization of Carrie's ultimate victory, enacted through the stage but measured in her access to fashionable goods, Dreiser crafts a story of this uniquely feminine kind of success. Throughout the novel, Carrie never strives for the traditional feminine goals of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity—instead, she dreams of being able to buy fine things and beautiful clothing, a more modern capitalist feminine fantasy. The stage, which is the one form of work that can produce the purchasing power she desires, also attracts Carrie because it literalizes the belief in the transformative agency of performance. An upwardly mobile woman like Carrie hopes to become equal to her social superiors by dressing a part different from the one into which she was born; the stage provides a simpler route to transformation. She learns to desire the release that she imagines successfully embodying a role will provide, as well as the props, costumes, and sets she needs to stage the scene.¹³ The characters' fascination with the stage represents a larger scale interest in the possibilities for imagining and embodying new kinds of roles. It parallels the desire to use fashion to design a more modern approach to selfhood.

In a highly stratified society, this desire is magnified by the constant presence of

¹³ As a result, as first name Wittmeyer writes, the “theatre pervades Dreiser's first novel. His characters go to plays, act in them, hobnob with the stars of the day, and become stars themselves. They are fascinated by the world of gaslight and greasepaint because it seems to offer the glamor and total fulfillment they perpetually seek” (236).

visual alternatives to the facts of one's own circumstances. To the realists, Amy Kaplan suggests, class difference was “less as a problem of social justice than as a problem of representation” (11).¹⁴ In turn-of-the-century America, amidst the crumbling of the once rigid aristocracy, the conditions were ripe for dreams of social take over. As Kaplan suggests, Dreiser's novels are deeply invested in exploring the complications of class identity, alternately praising “working-class life” and the “spectacle of consumer culture”; they “construct a world in which consumption is offered as a problematic solution to the power relations of a class society” (12). While Kaplan refers to the problem of representation, I would suggest that her argument can be extended to include the problem of self-representation on the part of the characters. Performance and display dominate the novel, whether it be on a literal stage, or the more metaphorical stage of the urban street. For *Carrie*, the novel suggests, the problem of representation for a woman with no family background or financial stability consists in the fact that she inherits no script for the kind of performance she hopes to enact. A woman like Carrie begins to realize her part in her own representation, that hers is an image of identity which she may to some extent design.

In order to believe in fashion's potential to enable an individual not only to act like a different person but to become a different person, Carrie must believe, on some level, in the nearly magical transformative properties of fashion. The correlation has a

¹⁴ In *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Kaplan explores in detail the relationship between realism and the depiction of American social classes. Rather than arguing that the novel is characterized by the “main naturalist strategy” of reinscribing “class power-relations as formal narrative divisions between the spectator and the brute,” she argues “that realistic strategies tend less to regulate conflict by formalizing otherness than to negotiate conflict in the narrative construction of common ground among classes both to efface and reinscribe social hierarchies” (11).

long history, as Elizabeth Wilson has noted: “The progression from ritual to religion, then to secular seriousness and finally to pure hedonism seems to have been common to theatre, music and dance—the performing arts—and dress, itself a kind of performance, would seem to have followed this trajectory from sacred to secular. Fashion, too, contains the ghost of a faint, collective memory of the magical properties adornment once had” (56). Wilson's characterization of the relationship between fashion and theatre suggests that both are imbued with the hints of the older, ethereal qualities with which they were once associated.

If, as Fiedler suggests, *Sister Carrie* is a tale of seduction, it is the tale of a woman seduced by a belief in residual magic of fashion and adornment.¹⁵ Rather than a traditional cautionary tale that warns women of the dangers of following in Carrie's footsteps by engaging in extramarital affairs and leaving the men who seduced them, Dreiser's novel rewards Carrie for her choices. It suggests instead that while a woman can succeed without a man, she cannot succeed without certain kinds of objects; that is, her identity cannot be performed without the objects in relation to which she constructs her self-image. In fact, the men in Carrie's life function more like fashionable objects than partners; even Carrie's so-called romances with Drouet and Hurstwood, according to Corkin, can be understood in relation to things. Drouet, he writes, “is lost among the objects that surround him” and “appears as one object among many. (611). Hurstwood, meanwhile, attracts Carrie “as he makes money and produces goods,” but *he* loses

¹⁵ Fiedler addresses Dreiser's portrayal of love and romance, claiming it was “impossible for him to write convincingly about the act of love; his subject was, like theirs, when erotic at all, the traditional 'consequences of seduction’” (Fiedler 250).

interest in *her* as he loses interest in commodities, “placing her finally in the category of objects, as merely one among many” (616). Corkin suggests that what some might term a fickle nature on Carrie's part can instead be attributed to the fact that the men she discards fail to perform as well as the other objects in her life.

This reinforces the allegorical relationship between man and stage, between the woman and her performance. In this fashion system, the men become an integral part of the performance, serving as the stage itself for the woman's sumptuary display. Through the majority of the novel, Carrie's performance accordingly revolves around two kinds of relationships—her relationship to men and her relationship to fashionable goods. By leveraging these things against one another—and either one can be used to acquire the other—Carrie improves her status and changes her role in the spectacle that is the urban stage. The city streets, which Wilson notes multiply the possibilities for social identities and relations (27), are the ideal background for this sort of performance of identity; a place where one can be both highly visible and anonymous, the street allows for repeated, revised roles. On these streets, Dreiser's Carrie sees the shiny department store windows that teach her to desire an alternative. Looking in these windows, Carrie “must see among the objects for sale her own image reflected in the glass, as she would have imagined her own face on the stylish young women depicted in the popular magazine illustrators of the period” (McNamara 86). On the arm of a man with the power to purchase those things for her, Carrie can learn to hope; later, when tired of him, she can make her own plans for her future. Thus the novel suggests that the man is the vehicle through which this desire is cultivated and developed, the means by which her own design for selfhood is aroused.

If Carrie can be considered successful—rich and sought after but not necessarily happy--that success is uniquely feminine in that it relies upon her appearance and her body; it is largely measured in clothing, luxuries, and fame, rather than more masculine constructions of property. It begins to rely more on the objects in her life than the men. In Carrie's case, Corkin suggests, “the focus shifts to the objects that surround her, and from these her character begins to take on definition” (608). Carrie's triumph, he goes on to argue, happens because she realizes that “self is at best a transient quality...When Carrie changes her clothes, she becomes the meanings that these garments produce. That she is not tied to a particular sense of self allows her to transform herself fully into these new characters. (616). To take this a step further, when Carrie changes *men*, she develops even more possibilities for selfhood, so that shopping for clothing and shopping for men can all be understood as “shopping for possible selves.” Thus Carrie's stage career, in which she adopts many roles, mirrors the many selves she develops through her personal life. As it allows her to become independent of these men, who continually disappoint her, Carrie's stardom is anchored by the objects she desires, rather than the men who continually disappoint her or any limiting sense of self.

To be a successful actress—then as well as now—is to be objectified: literally, through the actress's role as sex symbol, but also in a different way, through the connection to luxuries and fashionable objects. Because feminine success comes through beauty, fashionable clothes, and a luxurious apartment, it cannot be separated from a woman's status as sexual commodity. Having finally acquired all the objects she needs—having more money than she even knows how to spend—Carrie finds now that her

“image or name is placed in relation to objects to accredit *them* as having value” (McNamara 87). Her success, still connected to objects, relies upon her own ability to appear as a fashionable object on stage. Having “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,” Carrie “could look about on her gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account” and hardly hope for more (458). She has achieved her goal, only to find herself an object in that same system she once so admired. The objectification of the stage becomes a way of literalizing the performance, of articulating a clearer relationship to the future of feminine identity.

Fashionable performance, like theatrical performance, results in an inevitable conflation of individual with commodity. This is what leads to Carrie's uneasy discontent at the end of the novel; the objectification that results from Carrie's success leaves her triumphs empty. As Corkin contends, working from Marx, the “alienation so often found in the industrial world permeated the culture as a whole as the process of objectifying self and all interpersonal relations became the norm. Conversely, as humans tended more and more toward a reduced definition of self and others, objects began to acquire disproportionate meaning, as commodities served as vital components of self-definition, seemingly filling a void created by the alienation of industrial life” (607). This alienation—a characteristic of the literary modernism that will characterize the works of the not so distant future—results from not only the objectification that comes through fashionable and theatrical performance but also, more literally, through the isolated self-sufficiency Carrie enjoys at the end of the novel. Kazin writes that while she may not

truly understand her “automatism,” “Carrie—this is Dreiser's 'modern' insight—is a construction of society... Naively wrapped up in her own life, she is unable to imagine another's. This may be the fate of 'modern' people whose personalities are constructed for them by 'want' and fulfilled by 'society’” (243). But even if Carrie cannot imagine or empathize with the plight of others around her, she can imagine other lives for herself. She is guided by the myriad possibilities for herself that reflect back upon her as she looks hopefully into the windows of the clothing shops, and as she breathlessly tries on a new fashion in the department store—each possibility results in a fragmentation of the self in the present and the development of a desiring modern subjectivity.

Dreiser's “modern insight,” awash in modernist alienation and ambiguity, also shows that the objects that liberate Carrie also lead to her burgeoning modern discontent. When Carrie finally acquires the things she felt sure would lead to her happiness, the reader does not delight in the luxurious fabrics and glittering diamonds. As Seltzer writes, “The nature of these delights is, however, left obscure, so that the reader can formulate no very clear idea of what Carrie seeks to gain through financial prosperity.” We realize that “Carrie's yearning is futile not because her desires (like everyone's) are unfulfillable, but because her yearning is hopelessly misdirected, focused on objects that cannot relate her mentally and emotionally to others” (200). Thus the book leaves Carrie sitting alone, an “illustration of the devious ways by which one who feels, rather than reasons, may be led in the pursuit of beauty” (460). Filled with melodramatic prose, the final paragraphs make it clear that Carrie is not happy. The narrator laments to Carrie: “by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream

such happiness as you may never feel” (460). The novel's final sentences suggest that Dreiser's “modern insight” leaves his heroine alienated and alone with her things.

Thus fashionable display becomes the means by which one understanding of the modern woman is born. Through her desire—awoken, cultivated, and liberated—she develops a modernity that is well-suited to the fragmentation of self that sets the stage for a feminized understanding of literary modernism. In *Sister Carrie*, the importance of the theatrical stage emphasizes the role of a different kind of performance, the spectacle of the fashionable parade, the scene of the urban street. This is the stage on which each actress imagines boldly claiming a different role—if only she might seize the necessary costume. The desire to do so—the very possibility of imagining these alternatives—is one way by which fashion cultivates and develops the modern self, a sign by which *Sister Carrie* understands the plight of the modern woman in the American city. Eventually, hers will be the life of fragmented disconnect, the alienation of modern malaise, and the dissatisfaction of unfulfilled desire. And yet, Carrie's uncertainty is the sign of imagining an alternative reality for herself; her questioning becomes the modern woman's design.

CHAPTER II: EDITH WHARTON'S MODERN FASHIONS:
THE EXCLUSIVE NATURE OF FASHIONABLE AND ACADEMIC MODERNISM

Edith Wharton's literary works—dozens of short stories, novels, critical work, and even texts on architecture and gardens--dominate the landscape of the modern age.¹ A prolific and successful writer in the late nineteenth century America, Wharton was one of the first female authors whose career allowed her to buy her own home, win the Pulitzer Prize, and become an active part of the male-dominated literary circles of the day.² While the turn-of-the century American canon is characterized by the names of great men like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, James, and Eliot, just to name a few, Wharton has recently been included as a significant figure in some literary histories. She forged an intimate professional and personal friendship with Henry James, and some other active, if less known, literary figures of the early twentieth century. Not surprisingly, however, Wharton's financial and literary success was complicated by turn-of-the-century understandings of women's roles. Personally, Wharton encountered these prejudices early in life when she had an engagement broken off by a mother concerned by her “preponderance of intellectuality” (45).³ Her interest in literature and education made the average woman see her as less than a desirable potential daughter-in-law. And as a

¹ Wharton's first publications were poems, published by Scribner's in 1889. Her first short story, “Mrs. Mantsley's View,” was also published by Scribner's in 1891. Her last work, *The Buccaneers* was published posthumously in 1938.

² Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence* (1920) in 1921.

³ R.W.B. Lewis writes that while newspaper articles at first listed the wedding as postponed, it was later suggested that Harry Stevens's mother objected to Wharton's literary aspirations. The Newport *Daily News* speculated that forbade the marriage because of a “preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride. Miss Jones is an ambitious authoress, and it is said that, in the eyes of Mr. Stevens,

literary figure, Wharton also found herself left out in the proverbial cold; two of her most famous works, *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, were published during the height of the what we historically consider the modern period (1905 and 1920 respectively), and yet hers is a name rarely included in discussions of modernism.⁴

Wharton's exclusion, so long institutionalized that it is easy to forget it, relies upon an assumption that modernism is something that she, as a writer is *not*. Varying definitions of modernism—some competing, some seemingly almost unrelated, some overlapping—converge in a consistent canonization of classic modernist figures like Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and Joyce. In truth, the names of these famous proto-modernists do more to distinguish the movement than any of the definitions that would follow. Their work, their explicit statements about their goals as writers, and their names are the signposts around which modernism is constructed.⁵

While there are many definitions of modernism, one thing the movement consistently prioritizes is the new. Beginning from Pound's famous edict, modernists sought to abandon the restrictive forms of the past and manifest “a ruthless break with any or all preceding historical conditions.”⁶ Rejecting the realist modes of previous generations, modernists privileged subjective narration over realist modes and created the “radical break” upon which modernism relies (Jameson 2). Their aim, then, was not

ambition is a grievous fault” (Lewis 45).

⁴ Recall Michael Levenson's book, *A Genealogy of Modernism*, which features the subtitle: “A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922.”

⁵ Many modernists wrote explicit manifestos declaring their goals for their work, including T.S. Eliot's famous “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Wyndham Lewis's manifesto in *Blast* (1914), and Mina Loy's “Feminist Manifesto” (1914).

⁶ This quotation, originally from Bradbury and McFarlane's *Modernism* (26), is part of Friedman's compilation in “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism.” Her

simply “fidelity to the visible universe”--rather, modernists avoided relying upon “speechless” words and events in favor of “an animating subjectivity.”⁷ Instead of striving for empiricism or objectivity like their literary forefathers, modernists tended to focus on new forms and surfaces and assumed that the individual artist would bring them some sort of deeper significance.

But the new in modernism is rarely so simple; rather, it involves revision, return, and the temporal tension created by the simultaneous presence of old and new. Afraid of a loss of what Michael Levenson calls “epic significance,” many authors make use of the “mythic method” to reclaim Greek mythology as subject material in a new form.⁸ Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” advises poets to understand themselves as just one in a long tradition of writers, inseparable from the tradition out of which they arose. To revisit the past, changing and modernizing it, creates a sort of temporal tension as old and new are put into relief. Rather than an all-encompassing newness, modernity is instead marked by the “radical disjunction” created by the simultaneous presence of the past and the signs of the future.⁹

exploration of the ever vacillating definition of modernism focuses on a theory of a break, but in its very nature, demonstrates the difficulty of ever empirically defining the movement.

⁷ Levenson’s contention in Chapter I: Consciousness is that Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* unites surfaces through this “animating subjectivity” (2-3). Further, he writes that the formerly “extra-individual category (the God of creation) has been located on grounds of individual consciousness” (12).

⁸ In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt explains that description becomes the writer’s “substitute for the epic significance which has been lost” (127). However, Levenson relates this to Eliot’s “mythic method,” by which he unties old and new to form the modern. Levenson also discusses Ford’s fears of standardization and the vulgarization of art in conjunction with these ideas. Thus, the modernists are motivated by an intense fear of the loss of the power of the epic and a simultaneous need to differentiate themselves from the past.

⁹ In *Postmodernism*, Frederic Jameson lists characteristics of modernism: “expressionism, existentialism, high modernist poetry (Stevens), etc., the traditional city and its older neighborhood culture (by way of radical disjunction of the new Utopian high-modernist building from its surrounding context), elitism, authoritarianism (associated with the imperious gesture of the charismatic Master)” (2).

This simultaneity that disrupts traditional narration and notions of temporality produces a tendency towards fragmentation essential to gendered definitions of modernism. Relying on a theoretical break creates a “never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations.”¹⁰ In *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski argues that modernism is constructed around the assumption that that the modern woman no longer represents a “more natural past” and “the lost cyclical rhythms of preindustrial organic society,” but “in fact symbolizes the social production of desiring subjectivity in modernism” (39, 87). This concept of woman served as an other against which men could define themselves, something necessary to the representation of the distance many modernists felt from the previous generation. Felski sees the dandy as effecting this same perceived separation by appropriating femininity. In order to participate in modernism, a the movement that had appropriated femininity to represent the premodern, women had to reject the understanding of women as whole and unfragmented in order to break from the role of antimodern other.

Long associated with the unfragmented premodern, female authors writing in the period have often been excluded from the modernist canon. Indeed, much of the work done over the past twenty years by feminist scholars of modernism has involved the retrieval of work by female writers whose works, still connected to the realist traditions, have left them out in the scholarly and intellectual cold, derided as popular or dismissed as residual effects of the experimentations of classic modernists like Joyce, Proust, or Woolf. As Bonnie Kime Scott demonstrates in one of the early major attempts to think

¹⁰ This is another quote Susan Stanford Friedman compiles for her article, originally from Harvey's *The*

“the gender of modernism,” the fact that the modernist exclusion—which operated both in literary circles and in scholarly ones—tended as a result of its articulation of modernist literary principles to clear practically the entire terrain of serious fiction and poetry of women writers (with the notable exception of Woolf) suggested that the “golden mesh” that bound together the modernists “[vibrated] with sexual energies and anxieties” (4). As she goes on to argue, if the modernists did in fact follow Pound’s “make it new” dictum, feminist scholars must “work on identifying the process and the pronouns” by which the exclusion is enacted (16).

It is not surprising, therefore, that of the many attempts made by feminist scholars to reform the modernist canon in the 1980s and 1990s, most focused on returning to the field of modernist aesthetics the work of those female authors deemed to be too realist to be considered modernists. As a result, critics tended to adopt a strategy typified by works with titles such as *Willa Cather’s Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique*, the more general *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, or and even the essay “Is Everyone Going Modern?”¹¹ These works attempted to make room in the modernist canon by arguing that the seemingly realist features of a particular writer’s prose could in fact be understood as *actually* modernist, if looked at from the proper critical angle.¹² Scott’s book, for example, lists twenty-six woman writers (although she does not include Wharton), and argues for an understanding of their work as a certain kind of modernism.

Condition of Postmodernity.

¹¹ JoAnn Middleton, Houston A. Baker, and John B. Stephenson handle modernism as something that appears in its less recognized participants in modified forms.

¹² Articles such as Jennifer Wilks’s “Writing Home: Comparative Black Modernism and form in Jean Toomer and Aime Cesaire” and Leah Rosenberg’s “Caribbean Models for Modernism in the Work of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys” mirror the structure that argues for the inclusion of historically excluded

Scott, like Felski, argues that women participate in modernism, but in a particularly gendered and modified way. That is, any signs of modernism on the part of women are only a kind of alternate or nonnormative modernism.

But if the exclusion of women results in the construction of a gendered understanding of the movement, it follows that the subject matter considered modernist has by its very nature excluded women. And yet it might also be argued that the mere fact of being a woman writer itself encouraged a modernist aesthetic, since the political and social dislocation inherent in the relation between femininity and what Gertrude Stein called “patriarchal poetry” effectively acted as a radicalizing, jarring, and post- or hyper-realist substrate undergirding all of women’s writing. Because women were, by nature, law, and custom, excluded from participating in dominant cultural forces like politics, economics, and other public discourses, their status as outsiders granted them a particular understanding of the modernist aesthetic.

Edith Wharton could certainly be approached in a similar manner. While Scott’s book does not devote a chapter to Wharton as modernist, other critics have attempted to argue for her inclusion in that privileged canon. Jennifer Haytock has argued that Wharton’s approach to women’s lives was modernist in its very nature, asserting that *Twilight Sleep* questions “people’s ability to establish a sense of self and to communicate and connect, suggesting that human relationships—whether between husbands and wives, parents and children, or even friends—are a central concern to modernist writers” (217). Her argument, then, is that Wharton’s modernism is one of content rather than of form; it

echoes Judith L. Sensibar's thesis about Wharton's treatment of the bachelor. And Sharon Kim asserts that Wharton's use of the epiphany places her on the periphery of modernism, neither in nor out. These arguments, while convincing in terms of their assertion of what might be termed modified modernism, rely upon the tradition of attempting to make room in the established canon for liminal modernists. Examining the claims to modernism presented by a variety of critics might say something about these writers, but it does little to change canonical understandings of modernism.

It is not my intention here to argue, simply, that Wharton is a modernist and should be included in what seems to be a rather exclusive club. After all, people have been doing this—and successfully—for years. What might be more productive than trying to set down some sort of modernist checklist, or a membership list, for that matter, is to think about the ways in which modernism thrives on the very exclusion to which Wharton and other writers have been subject. Both on the level of the construction of the field from without and the evolution of the aesthetic itself, modernism is narrowly defined. In fact, one of modernism's foundational principles is that of exclusion. Like many categories, the category of modernism functions not just to identify those within its boundaries, but perhaps more importantly, to mark those who are explicitly *not* part of the group. Modernism, with its particular emphasis on the *avant-garde*, makes a practice of including those who have purposely excluded themselves from mainstream society. In order to be modernist, a writer or artist must in fact be actively pushing against social norms. In order to be a modernist, you must exclude by excluding yourself.

Consider, for example, the claim that modernism thrives upon a kind of formal

experimentation. Peter Burger's book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* claims that modernism constitutes “an attack on traditional writing techniques,” and he furthers his argument with Adorno's assertion that modernism in fact “negates tradition” (59). Such a theory assumes a conscious and deliberate move to separate oneself from literary forefathers. And while many aesthetic forms or fashions may arise out of a need to distinguish the new from the old, modernists were particularly invested in establishing and reinforcing a divide between themselves and their realist counterparts' style. As Woolf writes in “Modern Fiction,” life is “very far from being 'like this'”; according to her essay, “life is a luminous halo...from the beginning of consciousness to the end,” rather than any kind of “systematic arrangement” rendered in “the accepted style” (397). Woolf's words, which speak to the modernist desire to challenge formal conventionality, hint at an *avant-garde* textuality, a liberation of literature from the rigid traditional forms of narrative. One need only glance at the clean, sparse dialogue of Hemingway, the stream of consciousness writing of Joyce or Faulkner, or Pound's multicultural *Cantos* to identify them as decidedly *not* realist—but most importantly, to mark them as different. As Michael North suggests, modernists often represent a feeling of difference, or separation from previous generations of writers by the use of different stylistic voices. Their conscious differentiation results in distinctive styles and narrative voices that sever ties to the “realism” of societies and cultures that they attempted to remake.

This differentiation manifests itself in more than just formal experimentation; in fact, almost paradoxically, many of the modernists also shared a common fear of the “vulgarization of art.”; Ford, for instance, was disenchanted with what he saw as a

growing concern with standardization, the “decline of excellence,” and the “passing of great figures.”¹³ In the face of a rapidly growing and industrializing society, modernists hoped to maintain high aesthetic standards. Accordingly, a fear of producing art that appealed to the masses brought about an implicit belief that the best literature should only be appreciated by an elite few.¹⁴ To react against the vulgarization of art produced to sell, to be copied in bulk, is to legitimate a system that can only validate things not valued by the majority of the population. Many modernists sought not to sell their work for great financial gain to the “voracious masses.”¹⁵ Thus to be modern is “often paradoxically to be antimodern, to define oneself in explicit opposition to the prevailing norms and values of one's own time” (Felski 11). Based on a system that assumes value lies in texts unpopular to the majority, modernism not only accepts the fact that many are incapable of understanding its aesthetic, but in fact relies upon it.

Because the modernist system relies upon this exclusivity of readership, the system also validates the same sort of exclusivity in its own ranks. This selectivity, perpetuated by the authors themselves as well as the literary scholars whose work reinforces its boundaries as a category, creates a modernism that excludes many things—majority opinion, tradition forms, and historically most women and writers of color. While Woolf and Stein are permitted honorary membership in the club, there were for a long time few others who were not white men. These politics of exclusion extend to the

¹³ Levenson lists Ford's concerns in his Chapter Four: “Ford: The Passing of Great Figures.”

¹⁴ While this may be the stated intention of many modernists, this is not to say that they were not fraught with contradictions. Despite insistence to the contrary, many were in fact interested in the commercial. See Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz's *Bad Modernisms*.

¹⁵ This quotation is from Tristan Tzara's 1918 “Dada Manifesto,” in which he makes it clear that to produce good literature is to produce something that these masses will in fact *not* value.

fashions of literary scholars, resulting in the trend I discussed earlier to attempt to carve out a spot in the modernist canon for one author or another. And while many of these arguments seem valid and these authors have undoubtedly been influenced by or demonstrated some characteristics of modernism, continuing to push for their inclusion tells us little new about modernism. What it might tell us, however, is something about the way in which modernism thrives upon the politics of exclusion.

The fashionable nature of exclusivity in the modern period has undoubtedly shaped the way in which literature is understood and taught in institutions. Reflecting the system of value in the works that are its subject, literary scholarship has reinforced these same categorical exclusions that form the foundation of the modernist canon in the academy today. And while there have been many attempts within the academy to address this situation by considering multiple modernisms, defined by race, time, or different themes, they rarely change large scale concepts of period or aesthetic.¹⁶ Each of these new or revised versions of modernism, while interesting and productive for understanding something about the thing excluded, tends to do very little to influence the way modernism is taught in institutions or the way it is understood by those who specialize in other periods. The club itself—the anthologies, the syllabi, the list, the general understanding—remains the same while the construction of marginal or mediated modernism(s) happens on the periphery.

Wharton's fiction may be read in terms of modernist tendencies such as her

¹⁶ Just a few examples include Ann Ardis's "The Dialogics of Modernism(s) in the New Age," James Burkhart Gilbert's "Many Modernisms," and Russell Potter's "Black Modernisms/Black Postmodernisms."

interest in fragmented female desire and subjectivity, the fear of the “commercialism of creativity,” or her focus on the points of contrast between old and new.¹⁷ But rather than simply argue for her inclusion, I want to look instead at what we might call modernist moments, and the context out of which they arise. In Wharton, these moments, rather than being formally experimental, are more likely to be structures or themes that engage the dominant ideological constructs of modernism. So rather than simply saying Wharton *is* or *is not* a modernist, rather than attempting to tally up these instances in order to create some sort of absolute formula or checklist as to what makes a modernist, my hope is to identify and understand the triggers or factors that set these moments into motion.

This is where Wharton's fiction has something to teach us. In what follows, I will consider her 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country*, which features the bold, young Undine Spragg. Disregarding not only what she should and should not do, but also what should be possible, Undine pushes against a variety of social boundaries, showing the reader which are immovable and which may give under pressure. And while Undine, like any newly rich girl trying to make her way in high society, understands the importance of the right dresses and glittering jewels to her social status, she learns that these luxuries speak not so much to who women are, but “to *where they are*” (Banta 51).¹⁸ Looking more closely, then, at Wharton's use of a more malleable conception of the fashionable allows for an understanding of the world that includes any space, place, concept or thing coded by the organization of social hierarchies and subject to the politics of exclusion.

¹⁷ Dale M. Bauer uses Stuart Ewen's phrase the “commercialism of creativity” to describe the trends Wharton feared (67).

¹⁸ Martha Banta's article “Wharton's Women: In Fashion, In History, Out of Time,” to which I will return to later, discusses the ways in which fashion can map more than just a woman's social identity.

Here, Wharton demonstrates her most striking understanding of the way these politics applied to literature, the world, and ultimately, to herself.

Modernism, an aesthetic constructed from within and without by the politics of exclusion, is naturally subject to the fashions of its own time as well as those of literary criticism. Because the exclusionary nature of this movement has made it difficult for anyone other than white males to consistently join or remain in its ranks, writers already navigating the difficulties of underprivileged identities found different ways to participate in the liberating *avant-garde* stance that became a foundational tenet of modernism. In this case, Wharton's keen understanding of the powerful position of the one who can exclude proves to be a way in which she produces modernist moments in order to participate in her own way in the movement. Further, her attention to this phenomenon shows her to be someone who understands and anticipates precisely the politics of exclusion that would, after her death, organize her reputation.

Undine's Competitive Desires

The custom of the county, writes Edith Wharton, is that "the average American looks down on his wife"; while it may be "normal for a man to work hard for a woman" she continues, "what's abnormal is his not caring to tell her anything about it" (132). Well into her novel *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton uses her mouthpiece Charles Bowen to illuminate the meaning of the novel's title. Bowen and Laura Fairford pronounce the novel's protagonist a "monstrously perfect result of the completest proof"

of the system's triumph, but Bowen's assessment is not a misogynist condemnation (132).

When his companion insists that Undine would be bored if her husband attempted to teach her about money, Bowen continues:

Just so; she'd even feel aggrieved. But why? Because it's against the custom of the country. And whose fault is that? The man's again--I don't mean Ralph, I mean the genus he belongs to: homo sapiens, Americanus. Why haven't we taught our women to take an interest in our work? Simply because we don't take enough interest in *them*... Then again, in this country, the passion for making money has preceded the knowing how to spend it, and the American man lavishes his fortune on his wife because he doesn't know what else to do with it. (132)

Here Bowen elucidates a theory undoubtedly important to Wharton herself; if men lavish their fortune on women, it is only because they have never received an education in how to spend or use this capital. If Undine Spragg is shallow, materialist, and disinterested, it is only because she is the product of a system that sees her as an object.

Wharton demonstrates the importance of the above passage to the novel by connecting it to the title. The customary division of the sexes, she explains, has given rise to a system that, with its exclusion of women from the workplace and means of production, encourages and in fact necessitates women's fixation on commodities, luxuries, and fashions. With propriety and accepted concepts of femininity leaving them no choice but to live in a world completely separate from the men in their life, an American woman like Undine find herself immersed in a system of fashionable materialism. Rather than leading any sort of independent lives, Undine and her female counterparts must focus on the "leavings tossed them by the preoccupied male—the money and the motors and the clothes—and pretend to themselves and each other that *that's what* really constitutes life!" (132). Thus, Undine's world is one made up of

fashionable things and people, with a system of value constructed simply for the sake of creating value in individuals excluded from the systems of production.

Published in 1913, *The Custom of the Country* finds its subject in the changing social class identities resulting from the increasing American industrialization. Despite the fact that it appeared between Wharton's more famous *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), this novel feels like it belongs to a different, later era. Rather than providing a glimpse into a generation past or the life of a woman incapable of adapting to the ways of the future, *The Custom of the Country* features Undine Spragg, a young woman more than willing to make use of the ways of New York's newly rich, bourgeois society. Her father, a (usually) successful businessman, acquires the resources necessary to bring his daughter to New York City, but Undine soon finds that physical proximity does not necessarily bring her closer to the fashionable society whose company she covets.¹⁹ In this novel, which was published the same year of her own divorce, Wharton depicts the changing American culture of the early twentieth century by engaging not only the divorce industry, but also the rise to power of the newly rich and the crumbling American aristocracy.²⁰ It is a novel deeply invested in the importance of fashion and high society to the newly rich woman.

Undine, despite being just that, refuses to be limited by the old-fashioned

¹⁹ Basically, the novel is a story of a newly rich man who tries to erase his daughter's earlier imprudent marriage. She marries into an Old Money family in New York, forces a divorce in favor of a marriage to a French noble, and then forces another only to remarry the now fantastically rich man she married first as a child.

²⁰ Wharton explicitly addresses divorce in *The Age of Innocence*, when Newland Archer tells Ellen Olenska that while their "legislation favors divorce, our social customs don't" (78). Critic Ticien Marie Sassoubre considers the assertion that the date of the novel's publication likely means that for Wharton, this was a novel about divorce. However, in "Property and Identity in *The Custom of the Country*,"

conventions of birthright.²¹ She marries—repeatedly—above her social station, and disregards the disapproval of the female social superiors who nearly destroy her “career.” But during her ambitious and fairly successful social climb, there are moments of uncertainty; at times, Undine misjudges, misunderstands, or oversteps, clearly demonstrating that the boundaries of Old New York are still relatively immovable. In these moments, in which Undine realizes her limits and mistakes, her attempt at aggressive takeover is at its most revealing. Her desires—and the fact that they are even imaginable—demonstrate that “mobility is possible and desirable,” a concept Yuniya Kawamura argues is essential to the modernist aesthetic (26). Undine’s greatest desire is to move up the social ladder, demonstrating a female desire that marks her, without her even knowing it, as part of modernity. And while she may not always be successful, her exploration of high society shows how fashionable spaces—whether they are literally places or the more nuanced, complex relationships between families and peers—and objects continually reproduce the power relationships that maintain the hierarchy. By simply imagining the possibility of social mobility, those entrenched in tradition work all the harder to maintain their exclusive status.

Undine’s exploration of fashionable society makes it clear that the remnants of Old New York society, like any social being or group, function on the basis of exclusion. In its very nature, as I have established above, fashion relies upon competing the human instincts that Georg Simmel terms “[u]nion and segregation,” or elsewhere, “imitation

Sassoubre asserts that to reduce the novel to a story about divorce ignores many of its significant issues.
²¹ Undine’s name has its origin in the legend of the water sprite by the same name, as well as Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s novella *Undine*. In this story, Undine comes to land from the sea soulless, and must marry a man to gain a soul. On another note, Stuart Hutchinson remarks that Undine’s initials are

and distinction” (542, 543). In order to avoid being excluded from any given group, an individual must find balance between disappearing into the crowd and boldly setting new trends. Undine, whom Wharton calls “fiercely independent yet passionately imitative,” finds herself continually torn between these desires. For example, when she writes the letter to Mrs. Fairford on her own gaudy pigeon-blood paper she finds her confidence shaken by the other woman’s plain white paper; Undine cannot be certain as to whether it would be better to stand out or blend in.²² Her ambivalence serves as the perfect model of Simmel's competing desires; Undine hopes to represent herself through her choice of paper, in order to elevate her social status and establish herself as Mrs. Fairford's equal. Whether fashion functions as a tool by which people may either enact “social equalization” or “individual differentiation and change,” Undine's hesitation results from an inability to map her precise location in fashionable society (Simmel 543).²³

Wharton's interest in the dichotomous nature of fashionable society becomes clear at the beginning of the novel when the Spraggs move to New York City. Undine and her family navigate the competing desires for distinction and conformity immediately upon their arrival in New York City by their choice of residence, the extravagant Stentorian Hotel. Having acquired the means to enable this move, they look for a new social space to conquer. Following the advice of Undine’s childhood friend Mabel Lipscomb, whose New York upbringing once earned her social prominence, the Spraggs establish

“emblematic,” inviting “attention as an expression of a developing New World” (948).

²² I am thinking here of Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, in which she discusses the importance of women accomplishing their tasks with “sweet ease,” suggesting there might be some value to the subtle (127).

²³ Elizabeth Wilson's work *Adorned in Dreams* characterizes this ambivalence as “contradiction and conformity,” an ambiguity she feels is inherently modernist (6).

themselves in this gaudy hotel, eager to conform and take advice. Within, the women are "enthroned in two heavy gilt armchairs" in a room of "highly varnished mahogany...with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe." And in the middle of the "florid carpet a gilt table with a top of Mexican onyx sustained a palm in a gilt basket" (3). Framing the narrative that follows, the novel's opening description of the hotel's extravagant, *nouveau riche* décor situates the characters as a part of a fashionable, appearance-oriented society. Further, the hotel is a public building that attempts to give its guests a temporary, purchased feeling of privacy, helping them to hide their origins and assimilate into the group. Perhaps the most disconcerting destabilization of identity occurs because the hotel functions as "a manifestation and resonant image of such cultural transformation, of the collapsing of the distinction between public and private, home and market, person and commodity" (Tichi 99). This conflation actually brings together things, people, and places, as all of these things actually function as commodities that can be exchanged in relation for their social value.²⁴ Performance spaces by nature, the great New York hotels, Cecelia Tichi argues, serve as "scenes or displays in which one is both viewer and viewed" (99). Here, Tichi's expansive definition of the pleasure of the gaze again reinforces the binary of this fashionable space; a place both to actively inspire envy and for continually affirmation,

²⁴ Once things become fashionable, Simmel argues, their individual or intrinsic value is erased. In "Fashion," he writes that "[b]rutal violence is hereby committed against the individuality of things; all variation is destroyed by the curious supremacy of this one category of expressions, for example, when we designate all things that happen to pleasure for any reason whatsoever as '*chic*,' or '*smart*,' even though the objects in question may bear no relations whatsoever to the fields to which these expressions belong. In this manner, the inner world of the individual is made subject to fashion, and thus reflects the aspects of the external group governed by fashion, chiefly by reason of the objective absurdity of such individual manners, which illustrate the power of the formal, unifying element over the objective

the hotel as social location manifests the paradoxical impulses of the fashionable.

Like any woman of fashion, Undine perpetuates this paradox by continually reevaluating her desires in relation to and those around her. Exemplifying the female “desiring subjectivity” that characterizes modernity, Undine constantly reevaluates herself in order to strike some sort of fashionable balance between her own desires and her desire to fit in (Felski 87). Opposed to previous constructions of femininity as “organic wholeness untouched by the ruptures and contradictions of modern age,” Felski sees fragmentating and complication of desire as sign of woman’s participation in modernity (40). Realizing the importance of being seen at the opera, Undine sets her sights on a new goal, and prevails upon her doting father to “take a box” for her at the opera the following Friday. This, she has learned, is the “stylish” night at the opera, the night that all of the best society will be seen in their boxes, but as she quickly specifies, orchestra seats will not do because nearly anyone can buy those seats. Thus the opera box's fashionability lies in its simultaneous achievement of differentiation and assimilation. It separates by its location, but it also enables more formal networking because of its walls and door. But most importantly, to sit in the opera box literalizes the social hierarchy: she had “looked down on them, enviously, from the balcony—she had looked up at them reverentially, from the stalls; but at last she was on a line with them, among them, she was part of the sacred semicircle whose privilege it is, between the acts, to make the mere public forget that the curtain has fallen” (38). Now on the same level as those who had previously been out of her reach, Undine feels she has become the equal

rational element” (554).

of all those present.

But once Undine has been able to level the playing field by the acquisition of the fashionable opera box, she immediately feels the need to differentiate herself once again. She realizes that there is a greater luxury than the box itself when she notices an unused box on the “stylish night”: “one, just opposite, tantalized her by its continued emptiness. How queer to have an opera-box and not use it! What on earth could the people be doing—what rarer delight could they be tasting?” (39). As soon as she realizes that others do not desire what she herself possesses, do not seek to move to her level by coveting what she has, she immediately realizes that the greatest luxury is to have no need of even society’s most unobtainable delights. And yet, the opera box is still necessary—to have the box, to be above the desire to use it, but more importantly, to continue to pay for it anyhow represents another level of wealth and luxury. Not only do the richest and most prestigious of New York’s high society have no need of anything, they are in fact above even the desires of those outside of their set. The desire specific to the highest ranking members of society is the desire to declare themselves free of desire. This performance on the part of the Van Degens, the rich owners of the box—their conscious, deliberate move to leave the opera box empty—devalues the luxury Undine has finally acquired. The evolution of her fashionable desire constantly rearranges the competing instincts for “union” and “segregation” described by Simmel.

These seemingly contradictory terms depend upon their relations to the tendency to exclude; just as the excluded seeks to conform in order to avoid negative attention, the individual immersed in the group seeks voluntarily to separate herself from the pack that

erases individuality. This fractured group mentality results from the “wish to make subtle distinctions in order to differentiate [oneself] from others” (Kawamura 25).²⁵ Fashion and the fashionable perpetuate this differentiation by making certain that class identities are always visible. Undine’s opera box functions in just this way—in an age that saw the rise of used clothing shops, enabling anyone to buy the luxurious clothes of the upper class, the opera box embodies more lasting differences in social rank at the opera. Undine even thinks acquiring an opera box might be able to erase the difference in birthright that leads her to deem Popple, an artist, superior to Ralph Marvell, with his old family money. Having finally acquired the opera box that once seemed the seminal social victory, Undine lacks the education that would have taught the difference in social rank without this physical representation. Because of the popularity of a man like Popple, individual class differences come dangerously close to eradication. But the truly ambitious woman hopes this will never happen, because she must always hope to eventually separate herself from those once considered her equals.

Because Undine is afraid that the system will no longer validate her own social climb, she hopes to enforce a double standard. Although Undine makes use of these complex ambiguities to advance herself, she hopes that her feat cannot be duplicated. The same definitions she bends to change her social status serve to separate her from those she hopes to exclude from her newly acquired position. In defining itself based on what one is *not*, this concept of the fashionable leads Undine to judge others as somehow

²⁵ Elizabeth Wilson’s “Fashion and Modernity” demonstrates the way in which the “rhetoric of fashion as personal style seems to banish the second definition of fashion as a collective agency” (12). As she writes, “[c]lothes function as a representation of a not immediately visible personality” (2005, 11).

inferior to her. During Undine's later marriage to Raymond de Chelles, she is angered by his inability to distinguish between her and someone one might meet "at a skating rink" (307). Looty Arlington, whose name serves as a humorous commentary on her purpose—she is an American heiress whom Raymond's brother marries to finance the restoration of the *Hotel de Chelles*—strikes Undine as "common." He sees only Americans, who to him are most importantly *not* French. Undine uses other constructions of the fashionable to assign to other women an inferior status—for example, judging Harriet Ray based on her average looks. Hoping to maintain the hierarchy she has ascended, Undine now adamantly resists the possibility of social mobility. When Walter Benjamin writes that fashion allows a woman to be "*contemporaine de tout le monde*," his words recognize a crucial and inevitable fact of fashion—as much as it influences social spaces, it is also essentially a temporal phenomenon. While one woman might employ an expensive dress to elevate herself above her past, another might use the place to which she wears that dress to judge her as inferior and improve her own present situation. Constantly putting past history and present position at odds, fashion is not only temporal but inevitably combative. Thus as one woman climbs, the novel suggests, she might also push others down.

In just this way, fashion can allow for a reinforcement of social categories that rely upon an active exclusion. Women, who must often access modernity through modes and things associated with femininity, begin to separate themselves from previous conceptualizations of the feminine by way of the modernizing forces of production. Modernity itself, which can be understood as "the development of consumer culture in

the wake of eighteenth and nineteenth-century industrialization,” relies upon a change in individuals’ relationship to consumption (Beward and Evans 1). However, as mass production made it so that finery no longer required weeks in Paris at a dressmaker’s shop, women learned that their exclusion need to be based on more than image to avoid an usurpation of social privilege.²⁶ As a “group of aesthetic movements that “represented these changes in sensibility and experience,” modernism itself is tied to the growing consumerism that produced the fashionable, changing society of turn-of-the-century America (1).

While fashion may be inextricably linked to the elite’s ability to maintain status, it simultaneously allows for aspirations of this same usurpation. The more common, physical definition of fashion—the one that includes clothing, accessories, and other things worn on the body—has been understood by many critics as a means by which identity might be escaped, or at the very least, shifted. Usually involving an imitation to some degree, fashionable dress associates one’s costume with the presumed identity of the inspiration for the outfit. Imitation, Simmel writes, is the “child of thought and thoughtlessness,” and it “gives to the individual the satisfaction of not standing alone in his actions” just as it allows freedom from the “condition of...birth” (542-3). To imitate, according to Ulrich Lehmann, is to free oneself from “self-definition” (147). Thus, imitation allows for not only liberation from the limitations of one’s birthright, but also the protection of assimilation. Rather than bearing responsibility for her or his own self-

²⁶ Pierre Perrot's book *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie* makes a study of the way in which fashion “[trickles] down from the affluent to the poor through used-clothing dealers and thus affected dress at all levels of society that material progress, evolving social relationships, and acculturation had opened to economic, social, and cultural change” (25). The rise of the used-clothing dealers allowed for the sort of emulation

presentation, the imitator can simultaneously break free from origins and the burden of personal choice.

While imitation may at first glance seem like a passive gesture, or a way of avoiding responsibility for any kind of self-fashioning through a kind of conformity, it can also become a rejection of traditional methods and forms of organizing society. Because the rise of new forms of fashion included using the modernizing forces of clothing shops, mass production, and better transportation, Perrot sees it enabling a bourgeois usurpation of upper class privilege. By appropriating the fashions of the elite, the middle class triggered not only a redefinition of the upper class, but also a change in the ways in which the class divide was marked. The middle class participates in what Jennifer Craik calls “prestigious imitation.”²⁷ By appropriating and blurring the boundaries of upper class identities, “prestigious imitation” allows the individual a more active choice in self-fashioning, but also, in its self-conscious protest against traditional forms of organizing society, becomes a modernist impulse in and of itself. Using fashion to navigate the exclusive upper ranks of society, the middle class woman who uses fashion to improve her position understands the politics of exclusion inextricable from the modernist aesthetic.

Because *The Custom of the Country* is a novel about the conspicuous consumption of the American bourgeoisie, it finds its subjects in the population most susceptible to the fashions that will allow them the social prestige they desire. Spurred on

I have been discussing.

²⁷ Jennifer Craik’s work focuses more on the late twentieth century fashion industry and the models who have helped bring about a change in the contemporary female form. However, her concept of the “prestigious imitation” addresses the way in which fashion can blur the boundaries of identity.

by being continually excluded by New York's highest society, the newly rich become unintentional modernists. Caught as they are between the desires to fit in and to stand out, these individuals actively resist the politics of exclusion that are necessary to the social system they both hope to master yet simultaneously maintain. In order for the middle class to gain any true power, the system that excludes must remain in place. The representation of a self other than that with which one was born marks a rejection of an exclusion that has been assigned at birth by a system that relies upon it. This aspiring class of newly rich occupy a unique position—close enough to aspire yet far enough away to feel keenly the power their betters wield, they most clearly manifest the competing desires for “union” and “segregation.” As students of exclusionary tactics, Wharton suggests that the members of this nebulous class have the best understanding of the politics that organize not only their own situation, but that they also enact and even allegorize the modernist movement happening around them.

Nothing but the Future, the Present, and the Past

Like many aesthetic movements, modernism is characterized by a consciously represented difference from its predecessors. But rather than focusing solely on difference or separation from past modes—although there are many specifically modernist attempts to do so—many modernist texts instead prioritize the new, or novelty. Associated with the future by its attention to forms, the rush of new and groundbreaking technology, and even the Futurists who found in it their name, modernists found time and

the change it brought a compelling subject.²⁸ As technological innovation and social progress developed alongside the preservation of customs and heirlooms in the upper classes and the poorer conditions of those who could not afford new advancements, the modernist time became a thing characterized temporal difference.

The technological lag characterized by simultaneous presence of the old ways and new forms is essential to modernism. Recall the quintessential modernist moment I mentioned earlier, in which Jameson imagines a horse and carriage parked in front of a skyscraper, or "the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history—handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance" (307). Modernism is characterized by this destabilization of linear temporality, which is produced by rapidly advancing technology and the maintenance of old ways—either by stoic commitment to the social forms that maintain elite status or the inability to adapt quickly to the new. The tension persists through the continual, simultaneous presence of both the old and the new.

While Wharton's other works engage the importance of temporality as well, *The Custom of the Country* seems to address most directly the conflicting themes of tradition and progress that characterize this aspect of modernity. Undine, who tries to erase all evidence of her past, becomes uncomfortable when traces of her inauspicious beginnings find their way into her present. The reappearance of her first husband Elmer Moffat for example, threatens to destabilize the new identity she has created for herself by revealing

²⁸ In *Postmodernism*, Jameson writes that our "cultural languages are today dominated by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism" (15).

to society that she has been married before.²⁹ Perhaps more importantly, knowledge of this previous marriage makes any myth of innocent femininity impossible to maintain. She finds most references to her past equally disconcerting: for example, on her honeymoon, bored by the “sylvan abandonments” of the “heavy Italian summer” that please Ralph so well, Undine complains about the heat and her inappropriate wardrobe (90, 89). Ralph asks her: “[w]asn’t it ever as hot as this in Apex?” She responds: “[y]es—but I didn’t marry you to go back to Apex!” (91). She equates unhappiness, discomfort, or any kind of dissatisfaction to her lackluster Apex origins, so in this moment, Undine finds herself disconcerted by the mention of her past in her luxurious present. Wharton, at best on the outskirts of the modernist movement that thrives on these kinds of temporal shifts, may represent her own discomfort with Undine. Because her heroine is only beginning to achieve the things many modernists hoped to reject, Wharton may be representing her own discomfort with modernism in her writing of the novel.

Undine's Old Money husband Ralph Marvell, however, remains caught in the past that legitimates his position, and resists the change that will lessen his privileged station in life. Despite having married the daughter of a newly rich business man, he remarks bitterly that “[t]he daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders and the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box” (49). Converting this classist attitude to racism, Ralph critiques the system that gives him privilege; Undine does the same thing when she criticizes Raymond’s brother for

²⁹ In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg's first social mistake was to marry Elmer Moffat. Quickly discovered by parents with loftier goals for their daughter, the first marriage is ended and Undine presented in New York City as if she is a young, never married girl.

marrying Looty Arlington. Each character seems to displace her or his own self-loathing onto other, slightly more unorthodox situations in order to protect the privileged status from other invaders, others breaking the rules. Stuart Hutchinson writes that Wharton herself demonstrates this tendency, seeming to “stigmatize emerging energies as belonging to invaders, even though Ralph’s fascination with Undine is also hers” (949). As fashionable society seeks to maintain its elite status, its established members find themselves using terminology that demonizes those newly arrived and who “invade” their long established and privileged space. In order to maintain the power to exclude, it becomes necessary to reestablish the terminology to justify the structure.

One of the ways in which Ralph’s old money “race” reinforces this exclusive rank is through the necessity of idleness. While most cannot afford to avoid work, the elites of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries held to this lifestyle at all costs. Despite his family’s financial problems, it was traditional for the men in Ralph’s family to

lapse into more or less cultivated inaction. The only essential was the he should live 'like a gentleman'--that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations, one or two mixed principles as to the quality of wine, and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and 'business' honor. No equipment could more thoroughly have unfitted the modern youth for getting on: it hardly needed the scribbled pages on the desk to complete the hopelessness of Ralph Marvell's case. (47)

Raised to be nothing but a gentleman, Ralph has become a man whose disdain for business and lack of work experience makes even the noble pursuit of literature a distant and impossible goal. “[C]ultivated inaction,” exemplified by the empty opera box, represents lack of need by not only the inaction but the time commitment required for this so-called cultivation. To learn and cultivate, simply for their own benefit and not for the

purpose of making money through teaching or producing, is the sign of the gentleman and the privileged idleness of social rank. Wharton writes that this lifestyle unfits “modern youth for getting on,” a significant word choice that places Ralph between the traditions of his past and the modernity necessary for the future, almost between childhood and maturity. His disdain for “mere money-getting” connects to the modernist *avant-garde* sensibility and Levenson’s assertion that the modernists were motivated by a fear of the “vulgarization of art.” At this point, Ralph, as he characterizes his own wife as an “invader” and scoffs at business, demonstrates an exclusionist tendency, similar to that of the modernists, without the ability to reject tradition completely.

Modernism, despite its declared break from the past, finds the forms of previous generations a constant presence in its work. And tradition remains a surprisingly powerful force in the early twentieth century of Wharton’s novel. During a visit to Mr. Spragg, Old Mr. Dagonet, Ralph’s grandfather, leaves no doubt as to the manner in which Ralph has been raised. Bristling at the other man’s use of the word “business,” Mr. Dagonet prefers to use the word “profession” (76). A reference to an historical family of elite status in New York to which Wharton herself was connected, the name Dagonet signifies Old Money and upper class society. And yet the money itself, often assumed to accompany the status, is more signified than signifier. While Mr. Spragg wonders if Ralph wasn’t “ever *taught* to work,” Mr. Dagonet responds that he “really couldn’t have afforded that” (76). Whether he intends this literally or figuratively, Mr. Dagonet implies that to work for a living, rather than dabbling at the law, would come at some cost to the family name. Ever practical, Spragg considers finding his soon to be son-in-law place in his business,

but Mr. Dagonet stresses that it will benefit them both to “keep him out of business” (77). Aware both of the importance of the aforementioned “inactivity” and Ralph’s inability to function in the business world, Mr. Dagonet demonstrates an understanding of society that echoes Veblen’s thesis in “The Economic Theory of Women’s Dress”: just as women must appear “to be idle in order to be respectable” so too must the gentleman icon of the leisure class.³⁰

Eager to maintain the exclusive nature of Ralph’s class identity, the family insists on keeping him out of the fast-paced world of business. Encouraged, instead, only to dabble and to write based on desire rather than need, Ralph is a “decadent bourgeois [protagonist]” in his artistic longings who “lacks the self-discipline and persistence necessary to such an endeavor, and, we may suspect, the talent as well” (Lawson 292). Undine becomes interested in her husband’s alleged career only when she considers the new, fashionable circles into which it might grant her entry, or the money it might make her. But Ralph’s later attempts to venture into the business world prove too late to save him from a death that signifies the extinction of his kind in Undine’s world. Ralph, who becomes almost anachronistic in a changing society, provides the presence of the past generation that brings the old and the new into a modernist relief. In the novel, Undine’s first two marriages become unions of old money and new, making this a novel deeply invested in what happens when the two societal forms are brought together. Because the

³⁰ In this essay, Veblen discusses the fact that women’s clothing was, at the time, designed in such a way that it physically impeded women from working, an unfortunate detail for a woman who hoped to retain respectability while needing to work. While Ralph’s clothing would not have prevented him from working, his fashionable upbringing certainly would. He even lists “Ineptitude” as one of the essential tenets of the evolution of dress: “[i]t must afford prima facie evidence of incapacitating the wearer for any gainful occupation; and it should also make it apparent that she is permanently unfit for any useful

marriages are more about being fashionable than they are about sentiment or even financial success, they mark Wharton's interest in the connection between the temporal friction inseparable from modernism and the way in which that same issue is part of the fashionable.

As fashion both enables and manifests seemingly dichotomous desires of “union” and “segregation,” it also comes to represent a temporal tension that plays an integral role in modernist texts. The modernist moment Jameson describes, highlighting difference rather than technological innovation, is much like the dichronous nature of fashionable self-representation. Fashion's reliance on change and the subsequent continual revision of past forms makes it “nothing more than a combination of a fragment of the past with a fragment of the future” (Simmel 547).³¹ When Undine imitates the ways of those whose social position she covets, she brings her past and her hopes for the future into sharp relief. And yet this representation, made of pieced together fragments, is not a simple gesture of emulation; rather, such a move actively shapes understandings of the past as well as the present, and allows for fashion to be “[a]t once 'ancient' and 'modern'” (Blau 54). Thus the fashionable impulse is one that, like the modernist aesthetic, requires the old in order to define the new.

But rather than simply drawing attention to temporality by bringing the past, the present, and the future together, fashion actually challenges the linearity of time itself. If, as Blau argues, fashion is at once “ancient” and “modern,” “[i]nstead of the modernist

effort, even after the restraint of the apparel is removed. From this rule there is no exception” (1894).
³¹ Daniel Purdy explains that fashion's “obsession with change, its constant search of the newest design [gives] it a formal similarity with other systems that demanded continuous innovation” (1).

reality of the new, we have the past before it began” (54). Blau's words destabilize linear constructions of time and in fact portray fashion as capable of reordering and even redefining temporality and history. As fashion provides the “past before it began,” the fashionable individual may believe herself able to change the past and rewrite history, thus making the possibility of challenging origins at least imaginable. Blau's words, which imply a cyclical motion, are only slightly different from Ulrich Lehmann's characterization in *Tigersprung*; borrowing from Benjamin, he sees fashionable imitation as the “tiger's leap” into the past. Developing his own idea, he argues that to be fashionable is to “appear as the immediate present, affecting the future with...constant change,” but to “always [quote] from the past (142). Just as Blau sees the simultaneous presence of the “ancient” and “modern,” Lehmann builds on previous work to again reorganize the relationships between past, present, and future. In both cases, temporalities are no longer static and linear, identities are altered by self-conscious presentation, and fashion participates in modernity through its mobility.

Wharton's work in *The Custom of the Country* portrays a commentary on the state of American capital in the early twentieth century. The juxtaposition she provides in Undine's husbands—the upwardly mobile, no name Elmer Moffat, the Old Money American Ralph Marvell, and the French nobleman Raymond de Chelles—brings representatives of different generations of social structures onto the same scene. The old-fashioned ways of French nobility require the support of the new money American sorts like Moffats and Arlingtons and the Marvells of New York are attracted to the flashy daughters of the up-and-coming Spraggs. Because of the inevitable relationship between

the seemingly exclusive social categories of turn-of-the-century America, the marriages that drive the plot of Wharton's text represent the evolving power structures of the modern period. As power is maintained by neither the old money aristocracy nor those eager to replace them in the new century, the ambivalence of Wharton's fashionable society reflects the traditions out of which it arose.

By nature, modernism too concerns itself with time in its investment in the past. From Pound's edict to "make it new" and Eliot's assertion of the importance of historical consciousness in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," any *avant-garde* gesture to either revise classics or simply "negate" the past, as Burger writes, involves an engagement with the past that makes it inescapable. While both uncertain about the women's movement and simultaneously advocating for women by her representation of strong, assertive women pushing boundaries, Wharton finds herself situated between two competing movements—two competing eras, really—in the history of women.³² In having its origin in this liminal space, *The Custom of the Country* demonstrates the ways in which Wharton, already a marginal figure in relation to the *avant-garde* work making news in her era, approaches the movement by studying the same politics of exclusion that structure modernism itself. Fashion, with its same kind of organizing structures, serves as the medium by which Wharton's characters find a point of entry into the exclusive ranks of high society, but also by which Wharton herself approaches the changing literary forms of her own time.

³² In *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics*, Dale M. Bauer writes that Undine, as well as *The Reef's* Sophy Viner and *Summer's* Charity Royall manifest Wharton's ambivalence about the New Woman. Despite her voiced dissatisfaction with the movement, her characters suggest a more complicated view of the New Woman.

Mind Your Manners, Know Your Place

Among the many changes taking place with the onset of modernity—social, aesthetic, technological—there is also a change in the way people experience and understand space. Edith Wharton's motor car, a novelty during her early life, was a harbinger of the way in which distance was closed by modern technology. But it was not only literal distance that seemed lessened in the modern period. The gaps between the social classes tightened, as the newly monied denied the rich the space they had once claimed with certainty for themselves. Thus, as Ralph must remain in “cultivated inactivity,” he does so not only to maintain the traditions of the previous generation, but also to reinforce the distance between his elite family and the many people hoping to lay siege on their space of privilege. As the populations of American cities grew exponentially through increased immigration and a shift in the dominant modes of industry, that distance could no longer be manifested physically; instead, social spaces became organized by the rules of social custom, changing constantly with the fashions. As Wharton's texts as well as the very fact of her writing them will demonstrate, the rules, if less obvious in the changing space of the modern period, remain a powerful force.

And while class boundaries may have blurred, the rules that govern gendered space often proved harder to bend. Women were still largely relegated to the feminized space of the domestic, and expected to abide by the custom of the country that explicitly dictated that they would remain outside of financial matters and male-dominated fields

like architecture, law, and literature. Wharton, who was in some ways traditionally feminine, “undermines the boundaries” not only “between feminine and masculine,” by virtue of her lifestyle, but between “private and public” and “home and business” through and her successful career as a writer (Kaplan 434). By insisting on participating in the early twentieth-century literary world, Wharton's texts initiate an understanding of the rules that organized not only the social spaces in which her characters would exist, but also those spaces in which she herself lived. Her work, which asserts a space for female writers in a community of authors, simultaneously navigates the complicated and often contradictory domestic space of fashionable society. By participating in both, Wharton lays claim to a sort of gendered middle ground.

As it became fashionable to join literary circles, the community of authors that controlled them inevitably became more exclusive. Because they thrived on the same elitist politics that guarantee privilege, Wharton found it difficult to gain access into the community of contemporary writers. Her interest in Ralph as writer likely results from her own commitment to establishing herself as a professional author in a traditionally male-dominated field. Amy Kaplan argues that Wharton may attempt to “write herself out of the private domestic sphere and inscribe a public identity in the marketplace,” an assertion that contests “both the traditional view of Wharton as anti-modernist” and the theory that she was “entrapped in the domestic realm” (434). This claim that she was a member of the profession required a “revision of genteel models of authorship,” “the prescriptions for women’s work,” and her “own class’s disdain for and fear of work, which was treated as a dirty word—akin to sex or money” (435). Kaplan's argument

reflects Veblen's theory that the excess wealth of the upper class has caused its women to be placed "above all imputation of vulgarly productive labor" (quoted in Kaplan 439). Indeed, Kaplan writes, the "ethos of professionalism...posits a creative realm outside of and antagonistic to the domestic domain, and its imagines a way of entering a cluttered literary marketplace while transcending its vagaries and dependence on popular taste" (440). Kaplan's work suggests a tension between the kind of authorship Undine thinks she might market, in Ralph and his "artistic longings" and the profession that so long kept Wharton outside its closed doors. Both Wharton and her character Ralph find themselves trapped between the traditions that created them and new customs with which they are not completely comfortable.

Wharton understood the tendency of established authors to exclude others from their midst. Her first published work, *The Decoration of Houses*, marks an explicit and deliberate attempt to usurp the largely male privilege of authorship.³³ Insisting that the decoration of houses be considered "interior architecture," and thereby removing it from the stigma of domestic art, Wharton demands that a field typically associated with the feminine involves function, logic, rhythm, and tailoring to the individual (11). Annette Benert explores Wharton's active participation in the traditionally masculine field of architecture, and argues that she uses "physical properties of the space in which women live to illustrate...[t]heir characters" (57). In other words, Wharton's characterization of "interior architecture" insists that feminine experience and spaces be taken into consideration on the same terms as those of their male counterparts. In her association of

³³ Wharton published this book with Ogden Codman in 1897.

interiors with exteriors, spaces typically coded feminine and masculine respectively, Wharton breaks down binaries, but also implies that the space in which women live and control can share the power of masculinity.³⁴ Refusing any social code that prohibits women's participation in from the fields of literature and architecture, Wharton once again demonstrates her interest in the way in which fields understood to be professional or academic are constructed by a exclusion of women.

Wharton's women, who understand the pressure of fashionable society, allow an exploration of fashionable space in a more literal or geographical sense. In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine hopes that her social move from newly rich to old money will improve her living space. But the move from hotel to private home only leaves her disappointed. More permanent and costly than the space of a party, the space in which one lives proves to be subject to at least as many rules as more abstract spaces. Her marriage to Ralph disappoints again, when Undine finds her new home a detriment to her social success. While it was originally "understood...that the young couple were to be established within the sacred precincts of fashion," financial difficulties and dependency necessitate the couple's occupation of the house "which represented Mr. Spragg's first real-estate venture in New York" (126).³⁵ Undine, having told her husband she "didn't mean to worry" about their finances, finds herself incapable of eliminating financial

³⁴ Benert explores the importance of architectural metaphor when she reminds her readers of James's Isabel Archer, imagining her husband looking down from a window in order to mock her. For James, and Isabel, the space between the characters as well as their relative positions helps express a feeling, a situation, a condescension.

³⁵ In *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics*, Dale M. Bauer writes that Undine, as well as *The Reef's* Sophy Viner and *Summer's* Charity Royall manifest Wharton's ambivalence about the New Woman. Despite her voiced dissatisfaction with the movement, her characters suggest a more complicated view of the New Woman.

difficultly by the strength of will alone. To be literally housed within the product of her father's capitalist ventures ties her closely to her family's new money fortune.³⁶ Her house, as far in distance as it is in fashion from the place where she would like to live, reminds her daily of her unsatisfactory condition, as she finds herself still "submitting to the incessant pin-pricks inflicted by the incongruity between her social and geographical situation...and the deeper irritation of hearing her friends say: 'Do let me give you a lift home dear--Oh, I'd forgotten! I'm afraid I haven't the time to go so far'" (127). Without the luxury of her own car to make such hardship seem worthwhile, Undine feels the pressures of her social situation keenly. To be in the upper echelons of society without having all the necessary accoutrements now seems worse than being the richest girl in a slightly less prestigious social stratum. Distanced literally as well as metaphorically from her desires, Undine finds the exclusive nature of fashion a bit too limiting. Subject now to the same exclusion she has used to further her own social goals, Undine finds the stigma of her father's new money literally mapped onto her home.

Later, when married to French nobleman Raymond de Chelles, Undine finds that living in a new country means learning different rules to gauge the importance of her new home. Here, the space in which they live can be as much of a burden as a privilege. In the family city home, the Hotel de Chelles, Undine finds the suite she and her husband occupy disappointing. The best rooms being let to others in the interest of financial gain,

³⁶ It seems useful to note Gerard Sweeney's argument here that *The Custom of the Country* notably marks one of the first cases in which the way in which the newly rich actually made their fortunes. Unlike Simon Rosedale and James's Adam Verver, Abner Spragg's business dealings are no secret. As he writes, Spragg's rise to riches is strikingly similar to that of one of Wharton's actual relatives, Joseph Wharton. But perhaps more interestingly, this move to finally discuss matters financial undoubtedly represents Wharton's own move from an attitude more like Ralph's to one more modern, like that of the

her own quarters seem relatively modest. More a responsibility than a luxury, the building must be renovated with the money from Raymond's brother's American heiress. Like the immense size and responsibility of the country home, Saint Désert, the city house requires money and business knowledge. Grasping neither, Undine suggests selling the house, and is told she simply “[doesn't] understand” (336). Not being raised with family heirlooms or traditions, something Pierre Bourdieu writes is an integral part of constructing personal taste, Undine fails to realize that the house is in fact more than a building, but, rather, what Annette Benert calls an “inveterate [record] of dominion” (82).³⁷ These “buildings and streets, houses and rooms,” she argues, “serve as active agents in the acquisition and maintenance of power” by the upper class and continue the separation between Ralph's “invaders” and “natives” (58). Undine's suggestion that Raymond sell some of the things in the house seems to him an insult to both the house and the family—the House—it represents. With no power to wield other than that of her body Undine tells her husband the consequence of his withholding luxury will be a withheld child; Raymond, she says, had better give up on the child he hopes for and “leave it to [his] brother to perpetuate the race. There'll be more room for nurseries in their apartment!” (321). Undine's logic equates a child for her husband to a luxurious bargaining chip in her quest for luxury. For a man, the baby might represent consummate masculinity, in that the child as metaphor alludes to virility, consummation of the marriage, and the family's history. For a woman confined to the domestic sphere, a

Spraggs.

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu writes this experience of growing up around heirlooms and culture is one of the things that separates the newly rich from the old money aristocracy (53).

fashionable apartment serves a similar, but more appropriately contained purpose.

This conception of the importance of place and domestic spaces to the novel's characters indicates that any understanding of the fashionable, particularly in the context of modernism, cannot be limited to dress, objects, and people. Instead, as technology evolves to allow a changing relationship that makes it possible to surmount previously prohibitive distances, metaphorical distance must be created in order to maintain the social hierarchies that the privileged have come to enjoy. Seemingly insignificant changes in fashionable dress came to be the clues by which social spaces were read or construed, and the spaces themselves—buildings, rooms, homes, the logic of social events—become just as readable through the lens of fashion. Martha Banta argues that while Wharton was “too shrewd to make the mistake of automatically equating the wearing of new fashions with the living of superficial lives,” she certainly “knew the validity of studying the surfaces upon which women reside” (55). Banta even goes so far as to suggest that if Wharton were to write a history of her own time, a suitable title might be “Nothing Changed but the Fashions” (51). Wharton, she suggests

viewed women's fashion as one of the more important markers by which she traced shifts in the social habitus occupied by her fictional characters in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century. The clothes with which her female protagonists adorn themselves *speak...to where they are*. That is, where they are in relation not only to the physical geographies mapped by prevailing social structures, but also to chronologies experienced by three generations of women on the move through history. (52)

While it seems unlikely that Wharton, or anyone who lived through the time period would argue that nothing had changed, it does seem productive to think about the changes that did happen as they represent themselves through fashion. Undine, who may

not have been the beneficiary of an education that would have taught her to think outside of the box of fashion, may not be able to understand and categorize what she sees, but she may read her surroundings through the feminized perspective of fashionable society.

As Banta suggests, the fashions Wharton's novels highlight may mark generational location, a kind of temporal mapping that aids in conscious separation of one generation from its predecessor. Or, to return to Benjamin, it is in this way that "each generation experiences the fashion of the one immediately preceding it as the most radical antiaphrodisiac possible" (79). Thus every generation reconstructs and reenvisions fashion in order to separate itself from its parents' generations. Spurred on by this need for change in each generation's hope of establishing independence, fashion relies upon forward progress. The fashions of modernism functioned in strikingly similar way—in order to separate themselves from their forbearers, the modernists created new fashions in literature. Michael North's book, *The Dialect of Modernism*, explores the ways in which modernists generate the new out of an antagonistic relationship with the past. The use of dialect, for example, allows for a "break with their cultural past," as "the affectation of radical difference represents the radical difference felt between themselves and those who they had been before" (North 66).³⁸ Similarly, he argues that the use of dialect in the work of Pound and Eliot, for example, manifests a similar feeling of difference or separation. Thus the fashions of modernism arise out of a need to make it new, to exclude the past from the present, and to highlight the differences in generation or period by

³⁸ The use of the African mask as trope functions similarly—the modernists' assumption that the mask is "elemental and intriguingly artificial" relies upon the assumption that native peoples are either part of nature or completely unreadable (65).

contrast. Like Jameson's technological lag, new fashions illuminate the difference between old and new through their difference as much as their own formal qualities.

And yet, neither fashion nor the modern value the new serve as a complete rejection of the past. Undine, perhaps better classed as a symptom of modernism than a student of its ways, simplistically places value in the new, rather than understanding the nuances of what might be more usefully termed the revised. Usually misunderstanding Ralph's family's system of value, Undine misjudges—she dismisses Miss Harriet Ray for “wearing last year's model” dress, and focuses instead on Clare Van Degen's bejeweled restlessness. Undine focuses on the new at all costs, serving to illustrate Beverly Voloshin's characterization of the woman's commodity fetish. Voloshin writes that what “stimulates desire are the characteristics of commodities—newness, freshness, beauty, stylishness—rather than the objects themselves” (99). This is Undine's fixation—glittering newness, a rejection of the old ways—*her* old ways—at all costs.

Thus she repeatedly places value in the new instead of understanding the cultural significance of the old. She finds the old-fashioned décor of the Fairford home disappointing; there is no “gilding, no lavish diffusion of light,” and the room features “rows of books from floor to ceiling” (21). Reminded, distastefully, of the old library in Apex, Undine does not realize that cultural significance of the book. Like the books that signify so much in *The Great Gatsby*, these books undoubtedly represent the aristocratic education that “cultivated inactivity” makes possible—unlike Gatsby, however, the family may have read some of the books that line their shelves. Incapable of understanding the value of old things, Undine does not see that the library might

represent “a noble permanence of taste,” validating aristocratic aesthetics, privilege and the family’s class (Benert 85). The resonance of artifacts held for generations, untouched by changing fashions, actively excludes those not fortunate enough to possess timeless artifacts. And without the cultural education necessary to understand the value of heirlooms and antiques, Mrs. Spragg mistakes the “quaint” look of the Dagonet family engagement ring as an attempt to “scrimp” on the ring (53). Heirlooms, as Veblen writes in “The Economic Theory of Women’s Dress,” are outside of the system that repeatedly values the new because they are “of sufficient permanence to become heirlooms, and of surpassing expensiveness as normally to be possessed only by persons of superior (pecuniary) rank” (1894, 204). Privileging the new without grasping the cultural significance of the old, Undine and her mother enact their own exclusion by failing to perceive the aesthetic that organizes their social space. The importance of the new, mediated by the significance of luxury maintained by long-held power, is continually reified by each of its new owners. To give the heirloom again is to renew—or revise, as it is never the same in its new context—its novelty, but each time it is given the item’s antiquity contrasts more dramatically with its modernizing surroundings.³⁹

The tension between old and new so central to the power to exclude relies upon

³⁹ At some point, however, those not fortunate enough to grow up surrounded by the privilege of heirlooms or with the elite status that affords them understand only the new and not the importance of contrasting the old with that novelty. Undine finds the Marvell’s wood fire alien, noting that “instead of a gas-log or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of ‘Back to the farm for Christmas’; and when the logs fell forward, Mrs. Fairford or her brother had to jump forward and push them back into place, and the ashes scattered over the hearth untidily” (21). The aesthetic value of the gas log or ruby glass supersedes the value of the original it replaced to the point that Undine no longer understands why anyone would have an actual fire, the form losing any association with the function. Undine, however, barely recognizes the old form, recognizing only aesthetic value rather than the functional. The fashionability of the gas-log or glass functions by a formal separation from the older form, making the fire itself akin to a foreign object.

the fact that the evolving fashion industry in the early twentieth century intended to debunk outdated, aristocratic definitions of the fashionable. While the landed aristocracy maintain their elite status by actively excluding and prioritizing items that cannot be acquired outside of their set, the new fashions are just the opposite; as Veblen writes, women's clothing “must afford *prima facie* evidence of having been worn but for a relatively short time” and demonstrate “evidence of inability to withstand any appreciable amount of wear” (1894, 204). Thus the world of new fashions fights fashionable society by instituting a system of aesthetic value by definition in opposition to the system that values antiques. Instead, implying delicacy creates value because it means that the wearer will not be performing hard labor, that the garment will not be long lasting (therefore more likely to be replaced as fashions change), and perhaps more importantly, that the wearer has the financial means to replace the garment not as need dictates, but as fashion dictates. Veblen even lists “Ineptitude” as one of the essential tenets of the evolution of dress: the dress itself must give “evidence of incapacitating the wearer for any gainful occupation; and it should also make it apparent that [the wearer] is unfit for any useful effort, even after the restraint of its apparel is removed” (1894, 204). In fact, Elizabeth Wilson writes that fashion breaks down another seeming binary by uniting the “corrosive toil” necessary to its manufacture and “glamorous façade” of high fashion (90). Even as the delicate garments of the fashion-conscious wealthy imply lack of need and resistance to work, the negation itself brings the two concepts into relief. The luxury of having the newest fashions coupled with the social capital of heirlooms allows for simultaneous access to old and new.

The “surfaces” upon which women live and the spaces within which fashionable society is organized become the sites of the production of modernist moments in Wharton's work. The performance of fashion, both on the part of those coveting social position and those attempting to maintain it, is both the cause and the result of a desire associated with the feminine. While femininity itself has long been considered to be “either a primitive condition of arrested development or an edenic condition of organic wholeness untouched by the ruptures and contradictions of the modern age,” women can gain a certain kind of access to modernism by participating in drastically changing turn of the century fashion (Felski 40). In rejecting this simplistic characterization, women can use fashion as a tool to move from “nature to culture” (Kawamura 25). Because the modern individual is assumed “to be an autonomous male free of familial and communal ties,” women, excluded by nature from modernism, looked to consumption and things coded feminine to free themselves from their status as modernity's other (Felski 2).⁴⁰ In fact, women's participation in fashions and therefore consumer culture allowed a participation in modernity. As Felski writes, the “consumer was frequently represented as a woman,” so “the category of consumption situated femininity at the heart of the modern” (61).⁴¹ Fashion, constantly revised and made new, allows women points of access for the modernity so often denied to them.

Thus the act dictated by desire—particularly a feminine desires—is yet another

⁴⁰ Felski also suggests that women have often been treated as “the ahistorical other and the other of history against which modernity is defined” (38).

⁴¹ Consumption changed greatly with the rise of capitalist mass production. Walter Benjamin discusses this subject in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), as does Bill Brown in *A Sense of Things*. Brown argues that the United States' capitalist economy was energized after the Civil War by “new forms of mass distribution, most notably new retailing institutions: mail-order

way women fight their exclusion from the business of men, social hierarchies, and the modern itself. Wharton's work in *The Custom of the Country* presents Undine as one way in which a woman might navigate both the modes of femininity necessary for social success as well as the desires that characterize the modern. Serving simultaneously as object of desire and a desiring subject, Undine Spragg is a woman who appropriates the typically patriarchal attitude of considering the men she marries as objects that will give her pleasure.⁴² But if the reader finds herself reacting to Undine with distaste, it may be the management of her own trade that generates what Beth Kowaleski-Wallace calls “misogyny.” Undine, she argues, keenly “recognizes the terms upon which she, as a woman, must necessarily advance herself. She recognizes, in short, that she must ‘make herself’ through marriage” (46). The “custom of the country,” she argues, is the thing that Charles Bowen articulates, the fact that most Americans simultaneously shield their wives from knowledge of their business and disdain them for this ignorance.

This, then, is the perverse American custom: two separate and distinct spheres, the office and the drawing room, the former a place of masculine exploit and “enterprise,” the latter a place of feminine ignorance and indifference, where women are encouraged to consume flagrantly and parasitically the fruit of their husbands’ labors. Yet such feminine isolation from the meaning and practice of masculine enterprise results in the flawed moral and psychological development of the female psyche. Encouraged to pay no attention to the realities of her husband’s work, a woman fails to achieve a level of mature insight concerning the meaning of money. (46)

This, Kowaleski-Wallace writes, is “the late nineteenth century bankruptcy of ideology”;

houses, chain stores, department stores” (5).

⁴² Debra MacComb considers “the booming divorce industry” as a part of the “rotary system of consumption” that makes spouses and families disposable (771). To remarry—repeatedly—is to renew the joy of consumption. For MacComb, Undine “both exemplifies and exploits the intimate bond between her consumable and consumer status.” Her value on the marriage market is based on her ability to “stimulate consumer desire” (777).

the separation of spheres that forces women into what amounts to childhood. When a woman, like Undine, attempts to appropriate personal space by consorting with her own friends, and forming her own life outside of her marriage, she becomes unsympathetic to many readers. When she forgets her son's birthday, she becomes even more distasteful, but this reaction disguises the ways in which her actions resist the dominant understanding of appropriate behavior for a woman—especially a married one. Her choices refuse any understanding of femininity that insists upon a wife centering her life on the domestic space created by her husband.

This is essential: this novel, strikingly different from the majority of Wharton's work, presents a woman who teaches the reader about the politics that organize the space she navigates by constantly changing her place in society. The system she exposes values buildings that serve as a monument to an immovable family history, and heirlooms that testify to the prestigious name of the House. It expects people to be organized by an unspoken but understood set of rules that will maintain metaphorical distance in place of literal distance. It insists upon the maintenance of women as ornaments to the privatized, domestic space that validates the exclusive privilege of the highest social classes. Wharton uses Undine's usurpation of social privilege to question the power of the traditional. As the influence of modernity simultaneously destabilizes the old ways, the novel's treatment of fashionable space indicates that Wharton, perhaps more a student of modernism than the contemporaries we now associate with the movement, understands the possibilities for the fluid, changing fashions of the period will be the modes of the future.

The Politics of Exclusion

Because Wharton is an author who published many famous works during what has been understood as the modernist period, and has simultaneously been understood as, at best, a marginal figure to the movement, her work, not surprisingly, presents instances of engagement with modernism. A modernism of content, seemingly, rather than form, the symptoms of the literary history evolving around Wharton arise, rather consistently out of her treatment of fashionable society. The literary field the academy has come to call modernism is subject to as many trends as the high fashion society that fills the pages of Wharton's novels. Her work demonstrates her keen understanding of the politics of the period in which she lived, as well as those which would structure her reputation after her death.

In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine's aggressive push against social boundaries serves as a mirror to the dominant social structures at play in the early twentieth century. Torn between the desires for "union" and "segregation," Undine changes and tries to write her own identity to carve out space for herself within fashionable society. Because of the various levels of society represented by fashion, Undine realizes that it is through this tool that she may be able to change her circumstances. With the threat of the burgeoning middle class nipping at the privileged heels of the upper class, fashion was a means by which a definitive and limiting identity might be escaped. The "prestigious imitation" by which one of a lower class might mimic the ways of a higher class challenges traditional modes of social organization. By rejecting the rules of a system that

excludes, if only to usurp the privilege implied and exclude once again, Undine makes use of the same power that the modernists used to establish and maintain their own aesthetic and social power.

But her social conquest represents more than just the competing desires of emulation and distinction; Undine's success indicates that while the old ways and the power structures of the previous generation remain the guardians of cultural capital, their inability to hold on to material wealth necessitates at least partial acceptance of the new ways of the newly rich. Like the modernists who saw the point of entry to new forms in the ways of the past, Undine begins her social climb with a husband who represents America's old ways. Because fashion's relationship to temporality challenges the linear, Undine relies on ever changing fashionable society to destabilize the exclusive power structures of the old aristocracy. As modernism itself culls its power from those previously excluded, Undine's social triumph serves as another way in which Wharton engages the modernist aesthetic.

Undine's journey through the complexities of the social comes from the perspective of an already excluded identity: that of a woman ostracized for her gender, her family's lack of prestige, and the lack of cultural education necessary for social advancement. Her appropriation and reevaluation of the heirlooms and artifacts that validate social prestige further challenges the exclusive ranks of the old money families, a feat similar to the gestures modernists made to make room for themselves in the exclusive ranks of the dominant literary canon. By rejecting or, more specifically, revising the literary modes of their predecessors, modernists relied on the power of

emerging fashions to establish their preeminence over the past. In a similar manner, Undine's newly rich last husband Elmer Moffat buys the family tapestries her second husband had refused to sell to hang them in his extravagant new home. While it is easy to find this gesture at least a little distasteful, it serves as a rejection of the system that had no room for the voice of an "invader," and definitely not that of a woman.

In all of these ways, Edith Wharton demonstrates a keen interest in the politics that organized the modernist movement as it unfolded around her. While she may not have been a member in name, neither to her contemporaries nor the scholars that would follow, her work proves her to be, perhaps more interestingly, compelled more by the structure of the movement than the traits that characterize the more well known works. More interested, then, in the cause than the effect, Wharton spends her time exploring the forces that inspired the move to formal experimentation, the affectation of difference, subjective narratives, and other modernist traits. Instead, as a woman excluded by a very fashionable modernist movement, Wharton shows how a woman of a new generation might makes use of those same cultural phenomena to fight her own exclusion.

CHAPTER III: PORTRAIT OF A BODY:
THE MODERNIST (SELF) FASHIONING OF HELGA CRANE

In *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, Pierre Perrot considers fashionable dress to be a proclamation; sumptuary laws and vestimentary ordinances, he argues, were “protectionist measures” that kept “social ranks visible and proclaimed the nobles’ monopoly of luxury that distinguished them from rising classes” (14). His observation has several implications: for one, it means that individuals relate to one another through visible signs, by observing the way in which the body is fashioned; secondly, it recalls the terrifying truth that the signs that mark class—be they dress, posture, etiquette, or manner of speech—are not intrinsic to the landed nobleman or the Old Money aristocrat. The stakes are clear: if the marks of “quality” must be cultivated, learned, and even regulated by laws controlling how an individual presents herself, then it becomes difficult to argue for an inherently superior class into which one must be born. Such a proclamation reinforces the idea that clothing has the power to represent an individual’s place in a hierarchal society, in which individuals understand how to treat one another based on external signs. It articulates the unspoken fear that at some point, the signs might become unreadable and the message lost.

In the absence of dress regulations, the individual retains much more freedom to control the way others perceive her within society. In the case of the newly rich, fashion and dress can serve as a means by which a young woman may alter her circumstances, may attempt to force her way into elite society. By participating in the fashion system by

taking control of readable, external signs, a person stakes a claim to selfhood outside of rigid class structures. This system by definition includes race, which can function in a similar manner. Unlike the stigma of lower class background or New Money wealth, race is much more difficult to alter. Usually considered to be readable in the color of one's skin, it seems, at first consideration, to be a fact of identity. Written permanently on the body, and impossible to separate from the society into which it is constructed, racial identity serves as a sign by which an individual is understood in relationship to his surroundings. Therefore, in a manner similar to that of fashionable dress, an individual's skin color informs others as to how to treat that person.

In this way, the skin becomes the primary site of signification, the most readable of visual signs. That is not to say, however, that skin as a sign of race is the only sign by which a woman of color can be read. For those individuals with financial means, the fashion system can still provide a means by which women of color can, as Kimberly Roberts argues, displace “the color of one's skin onto the color of one's visible exterior, one's clothes” (109). In literary texts, she argues, such a move can allow an author a “kind of code for discussing not only race, but a number of class, gender and sexuality issues as well (109). Indeed, this displacement often allows for the assumption that a woman's “clothing is a text where her morality can be read, an external manifestation of her inner being” (110). Fashion continues to signify essential facts about an individual's life, even if it can be easily misread.

But rather than understanding fashion as a vehicle onto which generalizations and criticisms might be displaced, I want to consider fashion as a means by which women of

color can displace the burden of self-identification. I also want to consider the way in which this claim to ownership over one's identity marks an engagement with modernism. No longer limited to the signficatory power of the color of one's skin, fashion becomes a tool Black women can use to attempt a new sort of self-definition. While skin color is fixed, the clothing set against it allows for a different and literally contrasting view of the individual. Thus the body carries the image of not only the socially inscribed self but also the self fashioned through clothing. The simultaneous presence of these two selves allows for a fragmentation that Rita Felski argues characterizes the female modernist subject.¹ Through fashion, then, the otherwise marginalized woman of color may find an access point to modernism. In this chapter, I will argue that it is through an interaction between the racialized self perceived from without and a more personal projection of self, manifested through fashion and aesthetics, that a woman of color might hope to alter her circumstances. As I will argue, this is one way in which fashion mediates the modernist anxiety about race.²

To analyze this phenomenon in more detail, I turn to Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

¹ I return here to Felski's argument that the presumed lack of modernist fragmentation is one reason why women have been historically excluded from the movement, and, further, that this generalization is in fact untrue.

² The fashions of literary criticism itself show how important race is to the classification of individuals. The Harlem Renaissance and modernism, often considered to be mutually exclusive literary movements, seem to be separated more by race than by theme or content. For just a few examples of critical consideration of this distinction, consider Adrienne Gosselin, who argues that the assumption that this is just a "categorical distinction" is far from harmless. Houston A. Baker, Jr., while claiming that few would "disagree that the Harlem Renaissance marks a readily identifiable 'modern' movement in Afro-American intellectual history, and most would concede that the principal question surrounding the Harlem Renaissance has been 'Why did the renaissance fail?'"(89). One reason might be found in the work of Michael North, who argues in the *Dialect of Modernism* that many modernists manifested the difference they felt from their parents' generation as well as the literary generation that precedes them though the affectation of racial difference, and the interest in "the primitive." See also Nathan Huggins's pivotal work *Harlem Renaissance* on the literary divide between modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.

(1929), a novel featuring a heroine of mixed race whose ambiguous identity makes her as difficult to categorize as Larsen's literary works. Partially because of her own lack of immediately obvious and understandable racial identity, and partially because of the precisely individual nature of her personal history, Helga Crane has a particularly personal style and an intense relationship to her own self-fashioning. In *Quicksand*, I consider skin color separately from something more personal, or something more innate. The protagonist's ambivalent relationship to race and its politics, as well as her passionate love of fine things and beautiful, exotic clothing, serve as an entry point for understanding the ways in which one's perception by others can be cast into a modernist relief by an engagement with the fashion system. And perhaps more importantly, Larsen's work provides an understanding of the way in which fashion mediates the complicated manner in which modernism relates to race.

Portrait of a Body

As a way of beginning my consideration of Larsen and how *Quicksand* represents a modernist relationship between race and fashion, I want to turn first to an earlier and more controversial artistic work's representation of the interaction between body and identity. Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, the 1863 painting of a nude *courtisane*, caused a great scandal in the salons of Paris when it first appeared. The painting features a nude figure—presumably a prostitute--reclining on a bed. She gazes directly at the viewer of the painting, unabashed by her nudity, which is mediated only by a choker-style necklace

tied around her neck, a bracelet, a flower in her up swept hair, earrings, and decadent slippers. Seemingly in no hurry to dress—a sign of her acceptance of her profession—the woman lounges on an embroidered, tasseled throw blanket. Olympia (which was a common name for prostitutes in the period) does not acknowledge the flowers being presented to her by her Black servant.³ Her only other companion is an arching black cat at the foot of her bed.⁴

Olympia was not the first to display a naked body in salons in the late nineteenth century; indeed, the painting itself is rife with symbols already traditionally associated with sexuality, like the Black cat and the orchid, and even invokes a “tradition of the reclining nude in which a black woman is used as a marginal figure to intensify the sexual content of the portrait” (Sherrard-Johnson 847).⁵ As T.J. Clark has pointed out in his pivotal study of the painting, the scandal was not simply that Olympia was nude. In fact, the painting was based on Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538).⁶ But something about Manet's painting was different, despite the fact that its detractors seemed incapable of articulating their disgust. The reviews were filled with admissions of an inability to

³ The name was chosen by Baudelaire's friend, who was amused because it was “on the face of it a dignified name,” but it was also a “pseudonym favored by prostitutes...the better class of brothel was full of Floras, Aspasia, Lucretias, Delphines, Thalias, Sidonias, Azelinas, Calliopes, Lodoiskas, and—inevitably--Virginias” as well as Olympias (86).

⁴ Clark has several things to say in regards to the cat. On page 93, he suggests it is a revision of the Renaissance painting, which had a dog. He also tells us that critics suggested the cat was a “possible culprit” to blame for Olympia's dirty body (96). Clark and other also note that the cat often stands as a symbol of sexuality.

⁵ Just before this quotation, Sherrard-Johnson suggests that Larsen's portrait scene in face “revises” Manet's *Olympia*, and that both “women interrupt the gaze and insert themselves as spectators viewing Olsen's art, just as Olympia's gaze and the gaze of her maid disconcert viewers by preventing easy identification and erotic pleasure” (847-848). While Sherrard-Johnson does make the connection between Manet and Larsen, her argument moves in a different direction from mine, as her title, “‘A Plea for Color’: The Iconography of the Mulatta,” indicates.

⁶ Titian's 1538 painting, *Venus of Urbino*, features a nude woman reclining innocently. The setting of the two paintings is similar, but the innocence often attributed to Titian's work does not characterize

adequately describe and address the subject of the painting, but despite this, the collective tone remained vitriolic. Clark cites their criticism in detail, but suffice it to say that they find Olympia “dirty,” “strange,” “prematurely aged,” and “putrefying” in color. Repeatedly, she is described as a creature of “horror,” “cadaverous,” and “grotesque.”⁷ In general, the criticism repeatedly associates the painting with the horrifying and death, rather than focusing more predictably on the immorality of the painting's subject.

So it is not just that Olympia is nude—it is rather that her nudity is unpleasant and disconcerting in a certain way. But what, particularly, is the way that Olympia's body disconcerts? For one, Clark asserts, it is manner in which she presents the category of prostitute or *courtisane*. As he suggests, Olympia, unlike the consort of the rich who “was supposed not to belong at all the world of class and money” but rather, to exist outside of typical categories of class identity, Olympia was to the critics explicitly “working class” in her uncleanliness (87-8). His point, then, is that it was easier for the average viewer to accept the portrait of the prostitute as the upper class lady of leisure, who, pampered by her master, lived a life in which every desire was satisfied. Instead, Olympia made viewers think of the true implications of prostitution, of the dirt, the grit, and perhaps even the sexual acts themselves.⁸ The unspoken horror of the sex industry is instead displaced onto Olympia's body.

Worse yet to some critics was the sense of “shamelessness” which they felt

Olympia.

⁷ Clark details the responses of the critics in detail, but these themes seem to be repeated by many of the critics he cites. See pages 95-98.

⁸ The horror her body inspires inevitably calls to mind the grotesque nature of the prostitute's body as described in Zola's *Nana*. In his 1880 novel, Zola has Nana die a horrifying death from small pox, in which the breakdown of her body is described in uncomfortable detail.

characterized *Olympia* (94). The “mark of the nude,” Clark asserts, is “chastity and abstraction,” as it “hides nothing because there is nothing to hide (128-9).⁹ *Olympia*, it would seem, is decidedly “undressed” rather than “nude,” not adored by infants and goats like the more “innocent” nudes, but instead gazing back at the spectators with no shame. Her gaze implies a viewer other than the innocent observers of the nude, an adult and perhaps guilty voyeur. The stakes are high, as the nude is “the place in which the body is revealed, given its attributes, brought into order, and made out to be unproblematic...here, after all, is what Woman looks like; she can be known in her nakedness without too much danger. That is because her body is separate from her sex” (Clark 130). Thus the nude must remain imbued with a sort of innocence so that the woman's body cannot be sinful. Instead, *Olympia* acknowledges that sexuality—both her own and that of the viewer—cannot be separated from her body and the system which she cannot escape. Her shameless honesty disputes the claim that the *courtisane's* “great game was to play at being an honest woman,” acknowledging instead the unpleasant truth that the categories of *femme honnête* and *courtisane* were dependent upon each other for definition (111).

As Clark suggests, Manet's painting's subject—the prostitute—engages modernity by making explicit the often unspoken class conditions of the lower classes. “The *courtisane*,” he writes, “was the person who moved most easily between roles in the nineteenth century, trying on the seemingly fixed distinctions of class society and discarding them at will, declaring them false like the rest of her poses. And falsity was what made her modern” (111). Citing Flaubert, Clark argues that it is this “falsity” that

⁹ The second quotation in this sentence is from art critic Camille Lemonnier in 1870, and quoted in Clark

characterizes modernity, particularly as it destabilizes constructions of class identity and comfortable understandings of sexuality. Charles Bernheimer has also considered *Olympia's* relationship to modernity, arguing that the painting's "scandalous modernity...is due to its simultaneous activation and exposure of the dynamics of the production of woman as fetish object in patriarchal consumer society" (256). The exposure Bernheimer probes in his argument connects to Clark's thesis that *Olympia* exposes class relations as well as the politics of the sexual labor industry. To expose existing and established structures becomes part of modernity in Manet's *Olympia*.

But one structure in *Olympia* that Clark does not engage in detail is the issue of race. He does acknowledge that the presence of the Black servant traditionally serves as a symbol of heightened or excessive sexuality, but this is not the crux of his argument. However, other critics have considered the implications and intersections of gender, race, and sexuality in *Olympia*. Jennifer DeVere Brody, for example, considers the various pieces that she feels serve as inter-texts to the painting, and argues that Black feminist readings of the painting "revive the black figure, erased in the title of the painting, and reveal her presence. They show how she grounds the figure of whiteness. Indeed, the two-tone twinned identities of the 'women' in the picture are represented not simply in formalist terms as the sutured light and shadow of chiaroscuro but rather as political representations" (102). Brody argues that as in the dichotomy of "*femme honnête*" and the "*courtisane*" addressed by Clark, the white body is in fact dependent on the "black figure" for her (relatively) privileged position. If this is the case, then the sociopolitical

positions of bodies are revealed through juxtaposition and relief.

The issues raised by this painting have inspired literary figures as well as critics. These contrasting bodies are an essential part of Harryette Mullen's poem *Trimnings*, seen by many to be a revision of Stein's "A Petticoat" (from *Tender Buttons*). The poem clearly invokes *Olympia*: "A light white disgraceful sugar looks pink, wears an air, pale compared to shadow standing by. To plump recliner, naked truth lies. Behind her shadow wears her color, arms full of flowers. A rosy charm is pink. And she is ink. The mistress wears no petticoat or leaves. The other in shadow, a large, pink dress" (15). The imagery, obviously similar to that of the painting, brings attention to the colors that demarcate race, and simultaneously calls into relief the dress of the servant to the nude body of the "recliner." As Deborah Mix has argued, in her engagement with both Stein and Manet, Mullen brings attention to the fact that the "servant's sexuality, even her identity, appears to be subordinated to her mistress's sexual power and to the power of the gaze" (13). This sexuality or lack thereof is highlighted by the frumpy dress (which Mix suggests may have been a gift from the mistress) while the "white woman luxuriates in the 'rosy charms' of her pink nudity, the dark-skinned maid 'wears [the white woman's] color.'" Still cloaked in traditional "pink and white," the servant apparently exists to complement the aestheticized privilege of Olympia's femininity and sexuality. Olympia and her couch are painted on top of the murky background of heavy draperies and, of course, her servant, whose presence is highlighted primarily through the dress she wears rather than through her own body" (13). The bodies' difference from each other—both in appearance and position—is highlighted by the ways in which they are ornamented, as well as how

their sexuality signifies to the viewer of the painting.

Olympia, the painting, and Olympia, the presumably fictional subject of that painting, have inspired debates about sexuality, the gaze, class, sexual labor, gender, and race. But what interests me about Olympia and her subsequent contemporary, critical, and creative treatment is the way in which clothing and its lack come to reveal more than just the fashions of the time; rather, the boldly sparse ornamentation of the body of the painting's subject, Olympia, only serves to accentuate her defiant nudity, her unabashed refusal to deny her sexuality or her profession. In the case of the Black servant, the dress both camouflages her sexuality by hiding the shape of her body and speaks to issues of class and race as a cast off, outdated sign of need and social inferiority. The two bodies, cast inevitably into relief by their striking difference, draw attention to the implications of each woman's relationship to not only her sexuality, but also her social position.

But to take it a step further, the painting also reveals the ways in which skin color functions more like a fashionable ornament or decoration than a fact of biological heritage. In this case, Olympia's skin, unabashedly displayed in all of its “rosy [charms],” “wears no petticoat or leaves”; it is as defiant in its refusal to conceal as her gaze. The servant's body, however, in its “ink,” finds most of its critical discussion displaced onto the dress that could be a discarded hand-me-down. In this case, the dress, second-hand as it may be, may be a preferable source of identification than the “ink” of skin indelibly marked by a prejudiced society. Clothing may have representative power but, in its absence, *Olympia* reveals that skin can replace it with meaning.

The distinction Clark makes between the “undressed” and the “nude,” so clearly

represented in the scandalous nature of Olympia's guilty state of undress, indicates that an individual can have a certain kind of relationship to her body—that is, “undressed”—that makes the body itself function in the fashion system. The undressed body cannot help but draw attention to the clothes it is not wearing, that have been removed. One cannot help but wonder what sort of clothes they might have been or in what manner they were removed. The sort of skin in the painting—in this case dirty, unwashed, and white—leads the viewer to make certain assumptions about the reclining nude. In this case, Olympia's skin communicates to the viewer because it is the location of her “shamelessness,” because it is the literal site of her metaphorical unwashedness, but also because the absence of clothing, as in the case of the traditional or classical nude, could never be associated with innocence.

The undressed body inevitably leads the viewer to think of the highly sexualized act of removing clothes, but it also highlights the skin as the chief ornament of the body. As J.C. Flugel writes, it can be the site of corporeal decoration such as tattooing, painting, or scarring (39-40). In its simplest and most unaltered form, skin can represent race, age, or class, all of which are important facts for understanding one's relationship with another. But as Larsen's fiction will demonstrate, the perception of skin color can often be influenced by factors such as context, social status, and generalization. Because it is a physical characteristic that is more or less fixed, and beyond one's control, it is easy to see how many individuals—particularly those of mixed race—would want to mediate the skin's power to represent through other things more under their control.

Because the identities enforced by others' perceptions of the body can be

undesirable or limiting, as they generally result from hierarchical and prejudiced conceptions of race or class, many individuals seek to displace the burden of identification from the skin and the body to factors more under their control, like dress and decoration. In the case of Olympia, the refusal to deny or mediate what many would call a shameful or undesirable situation by hiding her body incites a scandal. But for some, the possibility of attempting to project a more desirable identity, one that seems to come more from the individual and as a result of personal taste is a welcome relief from a society that organizes based on the visual signs of race.

I want to consider the ways in which race and the skin color associated with it may be located on the body by society, but an individual's ability to dress and fashion the self is located within. In his early and groundbreaking study of dress, theorist J.C. Flugel argues that the pleasures of the naked body are displaced onto clothing (85-86).¹⁰ This means that the qualities of the naked body can not only be displaced onto clothing, but might in fact serve to redefine one's body in society. Elizabeth Wilson writes that clothes “articulate the relationship between a particular body and its lived *milieu*,” (4). And Anne Hollander suggests that they can also represent the *desired* relationship between men and women.¹¹ In representing what they desire for themselves rather than what others assume

¹⁰ Flugel's argument is worth citing in detail: “As already indicated, it would appear that the young child in his earliest years has little interest in dress. Considerations of ornamentation and of modesty are alike foreign to him; at most there may exist for him something of the comfort of clothes as a protection against cold and as an unconscious means of the regression to the pre-natal state...Gradually, however, there awaken certain tendencies, which, through they do not in themselves provide an interest in clothes, nevertheless are capable of being 'displaced' on to clothes, and, when thus displaced, become the main sources of the development of interest in dress in the individual—and therefore, ultimately in race. I refer to the pleasures derived from the naked body—and in particular, the exhibitionist tendency” (85-86).

¹¹ Hollander writes that “no matter how similar the clothes of men and women may appear, or how different, the arrangements of each are always being made with respect to the Other. Male and female

about them based on skin color, individuals marginalized by race can hope to remake their social position as well as their own identities.

I argue, then, that if race, as it functions in hierarchical society, is something located on the body from without by others, fashion and taste are things located within the body by the individual. In this case, the self-fashioning in the early twentieth century has implications that link it to modernism. Because modernism is a movement that consistently prioritizes the forms of the alienated individual, the act of taking part in one's own self-definition serves as an active engagement in the aesthetic. To examine this argument in detail, I will consider Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Quicksand*, in which Helga Crane, a young woman of mixed race, moves restlessly from location to location in hopes of finding a place where she feels a sense of belonging. Helga, like Larsen herself, is the daughter of a Danish woman and a West Indian father. While Helga's father deserted her mother, and they may not even have been married, Larsen's mother remarried a white man after her father's death, leaving her daughter stranded an outsider in an all-white home. As a result, Helga, like Larsen is understood by others to be Black despite having few ethnic or cultural similarities to the Black African Americans with whom she is assumed to belong. Helga's other distinctive feature is her fine taste in clothing and decoration, something that separates her from the other women around her. Rather than relying on these externally imposed judgments of value, Helga may, in her careful dress, create an "ambiguity" between her clothing and her body (Craik 4). In what follows, I will argue that Helga's attempt to take control of the presentation of her ambiguous,

clothing, taken together, illustrates what people wish the relation between men and women to be" (7).

misleading body onto her meticulously chosen clothing is a modernist gesture that allows her to take control of the way her own image influences perceptions of her identity. This self-fashioning, this “ambiguity” freeing the individual from the restrictions of bodily identity, will prove to be one way by which fashion serves as a place of intersection for modernism and race.

Helga Self-Fashioning

The beginning of *Quicksand* finds Helga Crane exactly where she might seem to belong. An instructor at the respectable all-Black, southern school Naxos, Helga appears to be part of the respectable, upper-class Black population aiming to improve the situation of the race.¹² The school, designed to educate and improve the situation of young Blacks, also prioritizes the performance of a conservative Black identity.¹³ Taught to conform rather than resist or protest, the Naxos population must represent their conformity visually by following a system that mandates bland and impersonal dress.

Dissatisfied, Helga imagines “*A Plea for Color*”:

Turning from the window, her gaze wandered contemptuously over the dull attire of the women workers. Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks. Fragments of speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts--'Bright colors are vulgar'--'Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people'--'Dark complected people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red'--

¹² According to Greek mythology, Naxos was the island where Theseus abandoned Ariadne after she helped him escape the labyrinth. Later, she there married Dionysius.

¹³ Larsen's biographers detail the ways in which she was dissatisfied with her time at both Fisk and Tuskegee. Sent away from her family at age fifteen, Larsen attended Fisk for one year, but was asked not to return, perhaps because she did not follow the dress code completely. Later, as a nurse at Tuskegee, she was overworked, frustrated by Booker T. Washington's policies, and eventually left.

The Dean was a woman from one of the 'first families'--a great 'race' woman; she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto, but something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colours *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed, the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins. (17-18)

Helga's reaction to the dean of women's prescriptions for respectable dress is to vehemently oppose drab conformity for Black women. She does not necessarily oppose the idea that there is a certain "fitting" color palette for an individual or a race, but, rather, that that color palette should be one of "ruinous" blacks, browns, and grays. She objects to conformity, but particularly, to the assumption that bright colors seem to be the privilege of a more privileged race.

Helga's "intuitive...unanalyzed driving spirit" rebels against the conservative urge to espouse a rhetoric of aesthetic conformity intended to avoid drawing attention to the body of color. By associating "bright colors" with the "vulgar," the dean of women threatens any women or girls attracted to the "gorgeousness" of bright colors with the stigma of vulgarity.¹⁴ Her language relies upon the rules of fashion to hide her actual reason for persuading her female subordinates to dress in what Helga considers "dull attire"—rather than admit that she fears the association of sexual licentiousness for Black women who fail to represent themselves as conservative and completely desexualized, the dean of women threatens the women with the dangers of a fashion *faux pas*. To wear bright colors would be to wear clothes that clash with the dark complexion. Rather than acknowledging the language of race and prejudice, this speech masquerades as fashion

¹⁴ The dean's language also alludes to the dangerous stereotype of the hypersexualized Black woman. Black women's sexuality was consistently represented in literature as "immoral" and less "feminine"

advice from one woman to another.

The dean of women fears that the Black women must avoid drawing attention to their bodies, as they are already part of a racist, misogynist discourse. As an institution, Larsen's Naxos is deeply invested in achieving what Simmel calls "union" or "imitation" (542, 543). The dress code suggested by the dean of women marks an exaggerated "imitation" of "the 'purity,' the sexual morality of the Victoria bourgeoisie" (McDowell xiii). Encouraging assimilation into this conservative iconography may result in some "union" among the students and faculty at all-Black institutions like Naxos, but it still visually reinforces racial segregation. In uniting the Black women in this way, Larsen understands that the conservative and almost invisible clothing highlights the Black women all the more. As a result the skin color as readable sign remains imminently visible and defining.

But dress as she may, Helga, no matter how hard she tries, always clashes with her surroundings. Her taste for beautiful and exotic things immediately characterizes her as different from those around her. In fact, before Larsen describes Helga Crane's body or character, she details the objects with which she fills her rather limited space. Her room boasts a "shining brass bowl," "many-colored nasturtiums," a stool covered with "oriental silk," and a "shaded light" (1). And her clothing—a "vivid green and gold negligee" and "glistening brocaded mules"—adds to the evidence of what Larsen calls an "intensely personal taste" (3, 1). While the beautiful things in Helga's room seem to help define her character, she feels certain that "it was this craving, this urge for beauty, which

than that of their white counterparts, according to Mary Helen Washington (38), and Pamela Barnett

had helped to bring her into disfavor in Naxos—“pride” and “vanity” her detractors called it” (6). Pride and vanity, characteristics of individualism and self-interest, become here hubristic traits that lead Helga down the path to Simmel's “segregation” or “distinction” (542, 543). Helga emphasizes her individuality through her clothing rather than attempting to emulate those around her, thus distinguishing herself rather than conforming.

At Naxos, the question of how to solve the race problem is always answered with conformity. Faculty teach students how to fit in rather than how to stand out, and to embrace a creed that encourages a spare, modest lifestyle that will render them virtually invisible. But Helga, with West Indian and Danish heritage, remains a “despised mulatta,” disconnected and out of place. Thus she finds it difficult to follow the conformity advocated by her employers. Helga does not attempt to hide her perceived difference from those around her at Naxos. Her outsider status is continually reinforced by her affinity for unusual, exotic things and clothing. Indeed, she had

tried not to offend...with small success, for although she affected the deceptively simply variety, the hawk eyes of dean and matrons had detected the deceptively simple variety, the hawk eyes of dean and matrons had detected the subtle difference from their own irreproachably conventional garments. Too, they felt that the colors were queer; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens or heavy, clinging, silks. And the trimmings—when Helga used them at all—seemed to them odd. Old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades. Her faultless, slim shoes made them uncomfortable and her small plain hats seemed to them positively indecent. Helga smiled inwardly at the thought that whenever there was an evening affair for the faculty, the dear ladies probably held their breaths until she made her appearance. They existed in constant fear that she might turn out in an evening dress. The proper evening wear in Naxos was afternoon attire. And one could, if one wished, garnish the hair with flowers. (Larsen 18)

sees its portrayal as characterized by “exoticization and objectification” (578).

Despite Helga's best efforts, she finds it impossible to become one of the uniform masses in population at Naxos. Larsen's language emphasizes the “queer” nature of the colors, in that the purples are “dark,” the blues “royal,” and the greens “rich” (18). For Helga, her outsider status perpetually reveals itself in her “personal,” exotic taste, and her unique and outsider status manifests itself in a desire for further, individualized, distinction.¹⁵

Helga's distinctive taste certainly helps to establish her status as other, racial or otherwise. Indeed, as Ann Ducille has argued, “Perhaps even more than her yellow skin, Helga Crane's clothes mark her racial and sexual alterity” (431).¹⁶ These preferences indicate that as a woman of mixed racial background, Helga will always be guided by a distinctive and unique set of desires. Larsen points here to the simplistic association of race and color by suggesting a more complicated dynamic of shades and backgrounds that is often intensely visual. Thus Helga cannot help but be perceived as a “pathetic mulatta, who, because of increased social mobility as well as the circumstances of her birth, finds that she is seldom understood as a person in the black or the white world. Instead, she is an image” (Christian 53).¹⁷ Aware, perhaps, of her status as readable image, Helga disrupts any sort of understandable social hierarchy with her fine taste and love of uniquely beautiful things. Debra B. Silverman has argued, “the black female body [is] already a readable text,” and Larsen uses Helga to reject not only the dominant reading of hegemonic white society, but also to demonstrate that a Black woman—even

¹⁵ Larsen's mother Mary was a skilled dressmaker who took in work at home throughout Nella's childhood, a fact that undoubtedly contributed to her love of fine clothes throughout her life and in her fiction.

¹⁶ DuCille interrogates the cultural split in the Black community through the divide she sees as assigning women to either the blues community or the bourgeois identity left for Fauset and Larsen.

one of a complicated, mixed background—can take some control over how her own body is read and understood (601).

More than just a sign of racial “alterity,” Helga's finely tuned taste also speaks to her commitment to maintaining individuality in the face of enforced conformity. Her individuality, representing her racial alterity, also surfaces in her “intensely personal” taste. As Pierre Bourdieu has written, taste is a marker of heritage and background, something that is crafted through one's family background, and is usually only altered through certain sorts of education.¹⁸ Since Helga lacks that background, her taste must be only her own. After realizing the impossibility of completely assimilating into conformist Naxos, she no longer tries to subjugate her preferences to those of the school. Helga's taste—essentially, inevitably different—marks her as the eternal outsider. In this case, Larsen's attention to dress, emphasizes Helga's individuality, racially, aesthetically, and otherwise; Helga's individualism serves as one of Larsen's engagements with modernism.

Helga's distinctive, personal dress, as it perpetuates that outsider status, constitutes a deliberate kind of fashioning of the self. These words inevitably call to mind Stephen Greenblatt's famous *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which, although it focuses on a different literary and historical period, speaks to the complicated nature of the relationship between self and other. Greenblatt's concept, which he uses to describe individuals who do not inherit title and fortune, appears “at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien” and in relation to something perceived as alien, strange or hostile,” which “must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and

¹⁷ Christian explores these ideas more fully in her book *Black Women Novelists*.

destroyed” (9). Larsen's heroine, Helga, with “no people,” is just such an individual, with no inherited wealth, status, or history. But in her case, the “encounter” with an alien authority, can be reevaluated and understood as the conflict between the self and an externally imposed identity. As a member of a race that consistently serves as the other of the majority, Helga cannot separate herself from her status as other or alien. Larsen's idea of self-fashioning involves what we might call a modernist approach to the issue of race. In Greenblatt's definition, self-fashioning takes place almost exclusively through language while Helga's version of self-fashioning is a more literal manipulation of clothing the self. It is a means by which she can mediate the perception of self imposed by others with her own understanding of her identity. For a modernist movement focused on visual form, the self-fashioning that occurs through clothing and manipulating the form of the body replaces Greenblatt's concept of linguistic self-fashioning.

For her, to self-fashion is to displace the representative energy from the skin, always coded other and implicated in the rhetoric of union perpetuated by Naxos, and to locate it instead in a carefully selected aesthetic object associated with the self. A fashionable garment, as Ulrich Lehmann writes in *Tigersprung*, has the ability to transfer that representation from the skin; this representative power makes it a part of the fashion system.¹⁹ He further asserts that modernism itself is a “by-product of a quest for original and artistic distinction,” resulting in a movement that allows for “individualized myths”

¹⁸ Bourdieu discusses this in detail in his chapter “The Aristocracy of Culture,” in *Distinction*.

¹⁹ Working with Gautier, Lehmann quotes: “The garment of the modern age has become for man of a sort of skin, which he is not prepared to forsake under any pretext and which clings to him like an animal's hide, nowadays to the point that real shape of the body has been quite forgotten” (qtd in Lehmann 212). Furthering his own point, Lehmann writes, “[a]lthough clothing is worn, it does not belong to the wearer. In representative fashion like formal attire, it even remains essentially alien to its possessor”

(353). And Helga is a personification of this sort of new individualized myth.²⁰ As a woman of mixed race, who is not “comfortable either in an all-black world or an all-white world, she cannot fully cross the line into one or the other,” and her “discomfort with the way her own blackness is perceived in a white world” allows no communal myth by which to live (Silverman 608). With no family history or racial group to conform to or identify with, Helga, the “despised mulatta” is able to create her own individualized and modernist story.

Larsen portrays Naxos as the locus of a conservative homogeneity that advocates the eradication of any identity through conformity. She critiques the dress code she finds to be a gesture of submission, and invents a dynamic, highly individualized heroine with whom most readers will empathize (if not sympathize). Through Helga, Larsen shows that she realizes that clothing serves as an expression of the desired relationship between individuals; she places her in exotic clothing that will always cause her to stand out.²¹ Her portrayal of Helga, then, shows that the submissive behavior espoused by some Black Americans is not her answer—or, at least, not the modernist answer. She filters the narrative through Helga's consciousness, prioritizing a “racial need for gorgeousness” (18). Larsen's “desired relationship” is not the conformity expressed by the Naxos women. Instead, her novel validates Helga's choices, the fine clothing, exotic tastes, and gorgeous details that allow her to stand out. Larsen then proposes an alternative aesthetic.

(212).

²⁰ I am thinking here of Lukács's characterization of the way in which “Epic individual, the hero of the novel, is the product of estrangement from the outside world” (66)

²¹ I am thinking again here of Hollander's concept that fashion represents the desired relationship between men and women, and thinking of it instead in relation to Helga's desired relationship to her surroundings.

Rather than supporting the attempt to camouflage the skin color that bears the weight of racial identity behind drab and uniform clothing—although it can never truly be hidden—she suggests that a woman might be more comfortable in her own skin if she highlights it, fashioning her own self, denying the versions perpetuated by others.

In *Quicksand*, Larsen suggests that Helga, already singled out as a “despised mulatta,” is just the sort of woman to prefer to emphasize her otherness rather than hide that which can never be hidden. Happy neither in the conformity of Naxos nor in the fiery, activist environment of Harlem, Larsen's Helga dreads being “yoked” to others.²² Despising the way in which group identity erases any accurate portrayal of her true self, she uses fashion as a “technique of acculturation,” or an means of becoming “visually at home...in culture” (Craik 10).²³ Larsen suggests that to be “at home,” for Helga, is something entirely different from what is expected. Rather than assimilation, she finds comfort in representing her alterity.²⁴ If, as Jameson suggests, modernism is characterized by attention to individualized, subjective forms, Larsen's attention to form privileges the individual and revises the modernist attention to literary form to consider the form of the body, as not only “something on which to hang lovely fabrics,” but also the site of the

²² After leaving Naxos, due to a stroke of luck, Helga finds herself living in Harlem as the companion of Anne Grey, a high society member of Black society, and whose fine taste suits Helga's desire for fine living quarters. She attends parties, finds a job, and seems generally successful, until an overwhelming and growing distaste for politics and the race question leads her to depart for Copenhagen, effectively denouncing one part of her heritage for another. As she leaves, she vehemently demands “in fierce rebellion,” why “should she be yoked to these despised black folks?” (55).

²³ In *Postmodernism*, Jameson writes that postmodernism is characterized by the movement of individuals into groups, and the development of “group consciousness,” implying quite clearly that modernism is quite the opposite. (322-323).

²⁴ Jameson suggests nearly “inimitable styles,” such as those of Faulkner, Lawrence, Stevens, etc., characterized modernism. (16).

refashioning of identity (123).²⁵

What Larsen brings to the discussion of modernism is an insight into the way in which fashion and dress help mediate the pressures of racialized identity. As I have argued, race is superficially understood as located on the surface of the body. Fashion and taste, however, originate from deeper inside the individual, and allow a more subjective attention to one's form than that projected by unexamined racist societal structures. Thus the ability to self-fashion provides a means of escape from these artificially imposed understandings of identity. It, as Greenblatt suggests, mediates the “encounter” with the authority, which is in this case a hierarchal society that constructs understandings of one's own body. To literally self-fashion, with and through fashion, then, is Larsen's answer to the question of how a woman of color might deny an inferior social position, and engage with a modernist movement that already understands her as Other.

The Fashioned Body

After experimenting with living in “teeming Black Harlem” and wearying of the stifling nature of the politics of race, Helga sails for Denmark.²⁶ Effectively rejecting one half of her heritage for the other, Helga, who spent time with her Danish relatives as a

²⁵ Helga eventually marries the Reverend Green, a physically unattractive man who moves her to the deep south. Here, she is almost constantly pregnant, and “she, who had never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics had now constantly to think of it (123).

²⁶ Despite having social success in Harlem, and landing in an rich, sophisticated environment that seems like it should please her Helga grows weary of the activist nature of her friends, all of whom are preoccupied with the “race question.” Helga finds those around her to be superficial, hypocritical and boring. Thus she moves, restless again.

child, joins her mother's family in Copenhagen.²⁷ But while she is nervous, she finds, almost immediately upon disembarking from the boat, that her aunt, a “smart woman in olive-green” with a “carelessly trailing purple scarf and a correct black hat,” might just be wearing the “[perfect] costume” (65). Filled with “the fervent gladness of...relief” at her aunt’s impeccable taste, Helga fears “herself a little shabbily dressed” (65). Helga's concerns indicate that she judges others' character by appearance and assumes others will do the same.

While Helga is initially relieved at the sight of her Danish relatives' fine taste, she soon finds that having her every desire granted does not give her the happiness she assumed would follow.²⁸ Throughout her life, she had always “wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things” (67).²⁹ Never previously having had the means to acquire the things that would allow the self-presentation she desires, Helga now finds herself surrounded by luxuries:

There were batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and

²⁷ Larsen's biographers attempt to detail Larsen's travels. Davis is skeptical that she ever went to Denmark, as there is no record of Larsen having had a passport in the year she allegedly went. George Hutchinson disagrees and argues that a young girl with a Danish mother would not need a passport. This is part of a trend in which Larsen's earlier biographers seem interested in proving Larsen's exaggerated details about her past.

²⁸ Taste, which Bourdieu describes as the “mutual adjustment of all the features associated with a person,” or the “practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinctive signs” serves, more specifically, as a “symbolic expression of class position” (174, 174, 175).

²⁹ Such a desire for feminine things, according to Rita Felski, is one way women access modernity, as being the representative consumer for the family “[situates] femininity at the heart of the modern” (61). Traditional women's roles and interests continuously undermined, Felski argues that women cannot help but be “portrayed as victims of the ideology of consumerism” as “Any pleasure derived from fashion, cosmetics, women's magazines, or other distinctively feminized aspects of consumer culture has been read as merely another symptom of women's manipulation by institutionalized mechanisms of patriarchal control” (63). And while these feminine pleasures are devalued by dominant views that fashion remains the frivolous domain of women, Felski argues that women's transformation into “desiring [subjects]” is essential to modernism (87).

black dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood-red, sulphur-yellow, sea-green; and one black and white thing in striking combination. There was a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera-cape. There were turban-like hats of metallic silks, feathers and furs, strange jewelry, enameled or set with odd-semi-precious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels. Gradually Helga's perturbations subsided in the unusual pleasure of having so many new and expensive clothes at one time. She began to feel a little excited, incited. (74)

Helga's *Plea for Color*, it would seem, has been answered. Her new clothes are always the brightest and most exotic of hue, with fine fabrics, "odd" stones, and a perfume that can only be characterized as "nauseous." But the joy of ownership of all these fine things "[incites]" her and she enjoys the rush of foreign admiration and public display.

Never having known the joys of such decadent display, Helga finds herself intoxicated—but not for long. Soon she realizes that rather than affording her space as an actual family member, her relatives in fact further her status as exotic Other, as deliberate outsider, by continually marking her as thus with overly extravagant dress. Her clothes, chosen by her Danish relatives, are characterized by "screaming colors" like "blood-red, sulphur-yellow, and sea-green," and are "Eastern," "black Manila," "semi-precious, and "turban-like" (74). When Katrina Dahl points to her niece's Chinese red dressing-gown, she declares that this "suits" her (68). But Katrina's association of Helga with the Chinese gown indicates that she does not differentiate between the two exotic cultures, and even further, that she does not even recognize the fact that such a difference exists. As a result, Helga realizes "her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock" (73). Like her Naxos colleague's characterization of her as "ornament," her Danish family sees her as more of an aesthetic object that one might display and show off.

Helga's realization that she lives a peacock's life is astute: like a peacock, Helga's defining characteristic in Copenhagen is her brilliant finery. But her defining color, her most shining feather, is the unique color of her skin. Helga may wear the vibrant colors of the Chinese dressing gown because she is an outsider to Danish society, making her realize “in an exotic, almost savage way, she wasn't one of them. (70). But unlike the people at Naxos, her relatives find that the bright colors in fact suit her darker skin tone. These complementary color palettes are not accidental; they represent her unique status as much as they flatter her body. By exaggerating the color that represents race, the Dahls regard Helga as exotic pet calling attention to rather than attempting to camouflage or downplay her racial difference. If dressing to conform is a way for individuals to “merge with the group,” then the Dahls' manner of dressing Helga indicates that they have no belief in Helga's ability to merge into their society (Perrot 13). With no hope of hiding her difference, they display it as spectacle. The colors of fashion become so bright as to eclipse the darker nature of racial hierarchy.

But it is not only Helga's exotic clothing that allows her this peacock's life. She notices early on that no other woman is “so greatly exposed” (70). Were she a white Danish woman, her clothing would be considered immoral and scandalous, but finding that she “[doesn't] at all count,” Helga can wear whatever she wants, as no one considers her a serious social rival. Her skin, which they find a pleasing accent to outlandish and overdone clothing, is more than just this—it is not only a part but in fact the very framework of Helga's striking costume. In this case, her skin is part of her fashionable appearance, an essential part of her dress. Like the outfits she dons each morning,

carefully crafted and chosen by overeager relatives, her skin is an essential part of her self-presentation and stylized image. Racialized skin, then, is worn and experienced in a manner that skin that is considered to be “normal” is not.

The Dahls use Helga as bait to ensnare the exotic painter Axel Olsen. With his blazing red hair, the flamboyant, “affected,” and even “theatrical” Olsen is a man whose colorful nature matches Helga's own. His status as other is not racial, but his eccentricity finds physical form in hair and costume as well. In this case, hair, which often serves as a sign of race, marks a different kind of otherness. Reading Helga as the possession—the exotic, pet really—of her family, as he can see no further than the image fashioned by her relatives, Olsen assumes he might have an affair with her. Despite the fact that she belongs to a respectable Danish family, Helga's skin makes Olsen see her as a purchasable commodity, an exotic pet, or a kind of racial stereotype.

Olsen's view of Helga, which takes form in the infamous painting, finally reveals the real importance of the body as visual sign and extension of self. Helga's acquaintance with Olsen, which begins when he seeks her out as a model for a portrait, appeals to her family because they see the potential match as advantageous. But when Helga meets Olsen, while she has some trouble following his Danish, she does understand that something in his treatment of her objectifies; he categorizes her features as he would appraise a valuable jewel or a work of art. He lists her fine qualities, almost as the poet of a *blazon*: “superb eyes...color... neck column...yellow...hair...alive...wonderful,” having evidently come to the party judge her value as a potential subject (71, ellipses original). Olsen's “delight in her exotic appearance,” as well as his inappropriate advances, indicate

that he understands Helga as not only essentially different but also intensely physical, a compilation of body parts and exotic skin. (77).

Attracted to Helga's exotic appearance, Olsen is eager to paint her, but Helga finds his painting disconcerting:

The picture—she had never quite, in spite of her deep interest in him, and her desire for his admiration and approval, forgiven Olsen for that portrait. It wasn't, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. Herr and Frü Dahl had not exactly liked it either, although collectors, artists, and critics had been unanimous in their praise and it had been hung out on the line at an annual exhibition, where it had attracted much flattering attention and many tempting offers. (89)

After prompting so much interest, the painting becomes an inarticulate insult. Her contention, that the painting represents her as a “creature,” suggests that he dehumanizes her. Unlike an “ornament” or a “peacock,” a “creature” implies an animal nature. It reflects Olsen's treatment of Helga, which indicates that he understands her as essentially different from the other Copenhagen women and not necessarily deserving of the same respect. His painting, Helga insists, is not “herself at all.” In spite of the approval—or perhaps because of it—her own reaction is negative; Helga realizes on some level that what people appreciate is not something with she would like to be associated. While Olsen contends that his “picture is, after all, the true Helga Crane,” her aunt and uncle also find it distasteful, and the maid finds it “wicked” (89). Olsen's portrait represents hidden assumptions about her and her body. In representing Helga as “an animalistic, sensuous creature,” Olsen's painting typifies a tendency to project stereotypes brought on by perceived readings of Helga's body (Carby 1987, 172). To those who actually know Helga beyond her status as peacock, the painting is unpleasant, but to Olsen's adoring

public, this picture of her is a thing of beauty.

Larsen's careful treatment of the portrait in *Quicksand* reveals a keen understanding of the complicated nature of the art form, and as a result, several critics have examined the relationship between her work and art or portraiture. For example, in her article "My Picture of you Is, after All, the True Helga Crane': Portraiture in Nella Larsen's 'Quicksand,'" Pamela Barnett points out that Helga is "recurringly presented as a painting, a sculpture, or a moving exhibition. Like a portrait painter, Larsen's narrator positions Helga inside frames and strategically places her at the center of the settings in which she appears" (575). Sherrard-Johnson, understanding the importance of visual portrayal in *Quicksand*, provides a "painterly" reading of Larsen's work (836). Anna Brickhouse's article, "Nella Larsen and the Intertextual Geography of *Quicksand*," also associates Olsen's painting with prostitution. She writes that Helga refuses "not only the offer of marriage he has cast in the language of prostitution...but also the mode of representation of which he is an agent. She refuses, that is, to be bought as his aesthetic material, to participate in the propagation of an artistic formula" (552). These articles address the way Larsen's narrative style is visual in nature and related to the aesthetic theory of painting; they provide a solid foundation for analyzing artistic portrayal in Larsen. Building from this, I wish to move to consider the way the painting, as a representation of another's perception of the subject, becomes the location of the divide in perceptions of self.

Helga's objection to the painting—"that it wasn't, at all, like her"—suggests the violence the painting does to her own identity (89). Reading only on this manipulated

surface, Olsen sees first her race, the color of her skin, the hues and shapes that mark her as different. But the way he reads Helga, by simplistically categorizing the externally visible markers of race on her body, suggests the idea that race is located on the skin and body in ways that fashion, as an individually stylized form of self-presentation, is not. The fact is that when Olsen views Helga from without, studying her as work of art or a model, he produces a painting that she feels “wasn't she” shows that one's own concept of self can easily be obfuscated by a category such as race, that often supersedes other identity markers because of the intense nature of racism in societies (89).³⁰ By viewing her only as a compilation of intensely racial features, the artist appropriates the privilege of representation, prioritizing racial identity over any sort of more intellectual or emotional self—that is to say, he prioritizes the external over the internal.

One way in which individuals like Helga, whose actual experience rarely matches the experience others read from her body, represents that difference between surface and interior is through fashionable dress. Her problem in Copenhagen is that her relatives take away the freedom to rely upon her own taste. As George Hutchinson explains in his recent biography, Larsen clearly believes that a “woman's ability to dress herself in garments of her own choosing would always signify, in Larsen's fiction, her freedom and

³⁰ Larsen deals with the topic of miscegenation in *Quicksand* more than once. First of all, while in Harlem, Helga is disgusted by her host, Anne Grey's condemnation of Audrey Denney, a young Black woman who can pass, because she spends time with whites. Disgustedly, Anne Grey remarks that Audrey Denney “gives parties for white and colored people together. And she goes to white people's parties. It's worse than disgusting., it's positively obscene” (61). Later, in Copenhagen, Helga claims that she does not believe in miscegenation, and her aunt responds that people are not concerned about that there. But she mediates it with the disclaimer: “Not in connection with individuals, at least” (78).

Larsen also deals with the complications of miscegenation in her other famous novel, *Passing*, in which Clare Kendry's Black background is unknown to even her husband. Her attempts to reconnect with her former friends eventually lead to her death.

personal agency” (41).³¹ Much of Helga's anxiety in Copenhagen arises from her Danish relatives' appropriation of her right to manage her own image. She becomes uneasy, admitting: “[c]ertainly she loved color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and Gypsies know. But she had a deep faith in the perfection of her own taste” (69). Ornamented with “barbaric bracelets,” “dangling ear-rings,” powder, and rouge, Helga feels uncomfortable with the way in which her agency has been stripped by her family's exotic costuming. Reduced then, to a stock image rather than a dynamic and multifaceted woman, Helga finds she has lost the ability to fashion her own image, and that her family has appropriated that right to remake her in the image they feel would be most marketable.

Hence in front of Olsen and his offensive portrait, Helga feels, appropriately, “stripped” of the self she has worked so hard to construct (86). Once she has refused his last-ditch effort to bed her—a marriage proposal—Olsen reveals his true reading of Helga. Engaging now with what Barnett calls “the exoticization and objectification of black women's sexuality,” he tells Helga he believes her to have “the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but...the soul of a prostitute” who will sell herself “to the highest buyer” (87). She responds angrily: “But you see, Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not

³¹ Hutchinson writes that Larsen's mother, Mary Larsen, was a skilled dress maker, and while she did not have formal schooling in sewing, she was an “expert in making over dresses as an adult... She had unusual appreciation for textiles and fashion, and she enjoyed exchanging clothes with friends or giving them away. In old age, living alone on a nurse's salary, she always had 'beautiful things,' but she got them cheaply and in used clothing stores, and she knew how to alter them and fix them up. Larsen's novels not only lavish detail on women's dress and other fabrics, but even describe features of the landscape in terms of fabric textures” (41). For Larsen, he writes, a “woman's ability to dress herself in garments of her own choosing would always signify, in Larsen's fiction, her freedom and personal agency. Larsen's love of fabric and what could be done with it, the comforts it afforded, derived from her youth, when her mother, from whom she would be separated by the color line for most of her life, taught her to cut, fit, and sew” (41).

to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you" (87). Olsen's insult invokes the stereotype that the "warm nature" of Black women might lead them to sexual promiscuity. But as Sherrard-Johnson argues, Helga realizes "too late that like her favorite tea sandwiches, the smørrebrød, which are displayed in an 'endless and tempting array' at every social event in Denmark, she is being consumed" (846). Olsen sees her only as the sign of an exotic and different culture, a limiting and superficial reading of Helga's body. Therefore feeling "stripped" is a logical reaction—stripped her choice of clothing and the right to selfhood, Helga is reduced to what others choose to believe about her body. As her family fashions her like a luxury or sumptuous feast that can be purchased or used, they objectify and commodify her body as woman and other.

While calling a woman a prostitute has traditionally been considered an insult, in this case, Larsen's use of the comparison casts Helga in an inevitably modern role. While most traditionally feminine roles and interests have been relegated to the role of simplistic, holistic premodern, the prostitute remains a complex, isolated figure, far from the confines of the family. As the modern man is generally characterized by being "free of familial and communal ties," women have often been understood to anchor the familial ties central to the society against which the individual defines himself (Felski 2, 3).³² The prostitute, divorced from the typical familial roles of mother, daughter, and wife, serves as just such an autonomous individual. Helga, who has "no people," is just such an individual, free from the feminized world of family ties. And the prostitute to which Olsen compares her divorces herself even more fully from conventional, sentimentalized

³² I am still working with Felski here, but she also builds from Gail Finney's *Women in Modern Drama*:

women's roles. As Felski writes, the prostitute is a clear indicator of women's potential for modernity:

Both seller and commodity, the prostitute was the ultimate symbol of the commodification of eros, a disturbing example of the ambiguous boundaries separating economics and sexuality, the rational and irrational, the instrumental and the aesthetic. Her body yielded to a number of conflicting interpretations...the prostitute was an insistently visible reminder of the potential anonymity of women in the modern city and the loosening of sexuality from familial and communal bonds...a 'figure of public pleasure.' (19)

So the prostitute's body becomes the site of a modern fragmentation, as women become capable of separating themselves from the “premodern” association with the traditional family.³³ The anonymity of the body, upon which ownership is not inscribed, “doubly applies to Helga, who is defined by her race, sex, and beauty as a commodity shadowed by the history of slavery and illegitimacy” (Sherrard-Johnson 846). Helga's body then, impossible to categorize in terms of racial identity and fashioned as commodity by her Danish relatives, leaves her a fragmented, multi-faceted individual who becomes a desiring modern subject. But perhaps most compelling is the fact that it is the fashioning of others that allows the body to become the site of this different kind of modernist production.

The fictional painting of the woman presumed to be a prostitute warrants a return to Manet's *Olympia*. Its scandal lies in its honest presentation of bodies and sexual immorality. Rather than refusing to acknowledge the state of affairs, *Olympia* stares blatantly at the viewer, forcing her or him to be a part of the tawdry scene rather than

Freud, Feminism, and European theatre at the turn of the Century.

³³ Felski argues that the modern individual is “assumed to be an autonomous male free of familial and communal ties” (2).

simply the detached observer of a painting. Larsen, who would have been aware of the painting and the scandal it caused, cannot help but channel Manet in her careful and extended consideration of Helga's portrait. This is not to say that she intends *Quicksand* as an explicit engagement with *Olympia*; that, we cannot know, and even if we could, it would not necessarily matter. What is important, however, is the fact that Larsen, in engaging portraiture as both a subjective image of the subject, and a medium that inevitably portrays subject, clearly realizes the painting's potential for engaging problematic identity.

The paintings in question have some commonalities, but they are different in theme and subject matter. To begin, the subject of *Olympia* is white, while the subject of Olsen's fictional painting, Helga, is considered by most to be Black. She is of course fully clothed while her counterpart is nude. One is a prostitute, while the other is a member of a respectable family. And even more obviously, one is a real, historical painting while the other is literary, fictional, or imagined and, for that matter, barely described. But beneath the surface, similarities linger. The politics of race, while obvious in neither painting, lurk in both. The figure of the prostitute, so obvious in one, is suggested in the other. And both paintings showcase the body in ways which, while different, suggest alternative modes for understanding the body as a visual sign in a hierarchical society governed by fashions.

In her consideration of painting, Larsen reworks the site of the subjective portrayal, making her readers aware of the image's potential for communication and the importance of the viewer as the recipient of that communication—but she does it through words. In the case of *Olympia*, the woman engages the viewer—even though he may

prefer to continue as an unnoticed voyeur—and blatantly pulls him into dialogue with the painting. Her insolent gaze, so different from the innocent glance towards the heavens of most earlier nude paintings, incorporates even the most unwilling viewer. It makes something outside of the painting, off the canvas, part of the tableau. In *Quicksand*, Larsen uses Helga's dissatisfaction with the painting—her assertion that it “wasn't, at all, like her” (89)—to not only include the viewer, but also to further the divide between that viewer and the viewed. In this, they are both the same and not the same, as Helga is ostensibly the subject, but when she sees it she insists that it is not she. The painting bears the mark of the viewer who formed it, the painter himself, and invalidates any other viewer's perspective. In that case, however, if the subject is not Helga, and the viewer is not Helga, then she is no longer in the painting at all. Going further than the consideration of the way in which the viewer is inevitably a part of the site of the painting, Larsen revises Manet's work to suggest that that it is the presence of the viewer that can cause the divide between the subject of the painting and the self.

The undeniable engagement with the sex industry furthers an uncomfortable relationship between viewer and painting. *Olympia* not only shamelessly presents the body of a prostitute, but also denies the viewer the comfort of having her be clean, demure, and conforming to a respectable image of womanhood. The scandal surrounding the painting, as Clark has written, was the result of not only the painting's subject—a nude and presumably a prostitute—but of an uncomfortable realization that the subject would not allow the continued fiction of the luxurious life of the *courtisane*, that Olympia's dirty skin was the sign of an unhappy working class life, of the true facts of a

life in the sex industry. The “shameless” picture, to make matters worse “was suspected of reveling in that state of affairs, marked as it was by a shifting, inconsequential circuit of signs—all of them apparently clues to its subject's identity, sexual and social, but too few of them adding up” (79). That the painting does not “add up” *per se*, suggests a discord much like that created by Helga's portrait. Rather than refusing to acknowledge the state of affairs, Olympia stares blatantly at the viewer, forcing her or him to be a part of the tawdry scene rather than simply the detached observer of a painting.

Larsen's consideration of prostitution also engages a viewer, but this time it is the viewer alienated by her own painting. While not an actual prostitute, Helga finds that Olsen treats her as if she were—he not so subtly suggests they have an extramarital affair, something she feels certain he would not have done had she been another (white) woman. Olsen, rebuffed, tells Helga she has “the soul of a prostitute” who will sell herself “to the highest buyer.” (87). When she denies even his marriage proposal, she also denies him the right he presumes: the right to purchase her. The manner in which he addresses Helga speaks to the biases he already holds as he paints her, of the way in which the painting that offends her so much is inevitably colored by what he thinks of her. If it is not her behavior that inspires this evaluation of her, it must be her body. Again, her body, which Sherrard-Johnson calls “painterly,” when viewed by another, becomes separated from her self. In this case, the body of a woman of color will always be a part of the rhetoric of sexual licentiousness.

Through her creation of Olsen's portrait, Larsen reveals that this image Helga considers to be so unlike her results from his interpretation of her body as readable

image. But her skin is not the only readable part of her body. In Copenhagen, Helga finds her freedom to dress herself mediated by her relatives' desire to display her, by her peacock's life. The clothing, characterized by vibrant color, ostentatious jewelry, newly-shortened skirts, and highlighted by cosmetics, makes Helga uncomfortable, but not simply because it is not her taste. After her portrayal of Helga's dress at Naxos, Larsen demonstrates that it is Helga's loss of the right to self-fashion that leads to Olsen's misreading of Helga's body, portrayed as it is by her relatives' choice of clothing. Thus individualized fashion can be considered to originate from a more intimately personal place than the color of one's skin becomes dangerous when appropriated by another. The projection of selfhood, no longer the individual's own, not only displaces the signficatory power from the skin and it also perpetuates an irreconcilable version of the self. Thus her body becomes too ambiguous—Olsen can read race; he can read her relatives in her clothing; and he can read stereotypes—but he cannot read Helga. Larsen's revision of the site of portraiture shows, here, that the displacement of the subject can happen both by way of he who portrays, and through the manipulations of they who fashion.

This concept of displaced identity is key to the way in which Larsen deals with fashion, modernism, and race. *Olympia* reiterates the way in which clothing can displace the burden of identification: no ornaments to displace the identificatory impetus, with nothing but the dirt on her skin to distract the eye, her lifestyle is all too clearly visible. In the case of the painting, the clothing she has shed would have allowed her to feign respectability, but she refuses to participate in the facade, to deny the facts of her existence. Her lack of clothing and the manner in which that causes the responsibility to

fall to the body itself suggests that dress itself can allow the displacement of that responsibility. In Olympia's case, her naked body increases the “indeterminacy” of her image: “a body on a bed, evidently sexed and sexual, but whose appearance was hard to make out in any steady way, and harder still to write about.” Indeed, her sexuality is “displaced,” perhaps onto the viewer (Clark 96). If Olympia's body does not “add up,” it cannot be read as a recognizable image.

Working from *Olympia's* revelation of the anxiety caused by a body that refuses to be coded in the system of signification, Larsen shows her readers what happens to Helga's body when she allows it to be encoded and classified by others. Fashioned by her relatives and Olsen, Helga's body becomes unrecognizable in the painting. *Olympia* reveals the consequences of not representing oneself as a recognizable and acceptable sexual image. *Quicksand*, on the other hand, suggests that in a similar manner, to not represent oneself as a more accepted representation of a Black woman—or, for that matter, to not represent oneself at all—will be to be relegated to a hypersexualized stereotype of Blackness. Larsen's treatment of the portrait engages Manet's painting by furthering the discourse the painting represents; race and sexuality are connected, and for those who cannot escape their more marginalized categories, variations are not acceptable. *Olympia* lays the groundwork for this thesis, not only through its treatment of the prostitute's nude body, but also through the safely stereotyped image of the Black servant's body. Readable particularly through her clothing, this woman provides a backdrop of both otherness and traditional imagery against which Olympia's body is set.

To cast the unreadable woman into the taboo role of prostitute then is to reveal the

way in which the tension created between the racial identity located on the body and the identity fashioned by the individual can become an engagement with modernism. Her body becomes the source of discord, a contradiction between idealized identities.³⁴ This tension, similar in function to the temporal tension that Frederic Jameson defines as one of the defining characteristics of modernism, highlights difference. As he writes, in a passage worth repeating, modernism might be “seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development...the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history—handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance” (307). Relatedly, the difference between the way in which viewers perceive Helga—whether it be (incorrectly) as African American, simply an exotic Other, an aesthetic object, or a prostitute—and the way in which she perceives and fashions herself serve to highlight her defining qualities. Creating a tension between the two, this modernist body is characterized by a fragmentation made inevitable by these different perceptions.

An individual's ability to self-fashion, to deliberately construct and even revise a presentation or performance of selfhood, is uniquely suited to modernism. Because modernism is a “by-product of a quest for original and artistic distinction,” as Ulrich Lehmann has argued, its forms are particularly appropriate for an expression of distinct identity. Particularly useful in cities, which Wilson argues can help to hide origins,

³⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman writes that “the contradictions of [Helga's] identity within conflicting systems of race, class, gender, national origin, and sexuality induce a kind of pathological hysteria, which leads ultimately to her suffocation within the conventional role of mother and minister's wife in the deep South” (18). While Friedman examines the contradictions in order to better understand the ending of the novel, which many consider unbelievable or disappointing, these are the same contradictions that produce the difference in representation that leads to the modernist themes in Larsen's work.

fashion allows Helga to rewrite her own relationship her surroundings when she finds that none allow for the “union” Simmel describes (26). While Phillipe Perrot argues wearing fashionable clothing may allow for “individuals to merge with the group,” Helga finds that she herself cannot wear accepted clothing (13). As she finds at Naxos, her unique taste always reveals itself in a subtle choices of jewelry, fine cuts and fabrics, or unusual colors. Her decorative dress begins to serve as a metaphor for content, or for her inherent identity.³⁵ In other words, “distinctive dress,” to use Flugel's terminology, may, as he argues, stimulate “sexual instinct instinct”—and this seems clear by the comparison of Helga to a prostitute—but it can also do more; in this case, “distinctive dress” reinforces the subject's position, contradicting and perhaps even denying the assumptions made by others based on the color of their skin.

Skin color in this context comes to represent an identifying system of classification externally and artificially imposed. In a system that limits individuals based on race, Nella Larsen's major works *Quicksand* and *Passing* find their work in exploring the limiting, inaccurate, and even elusive nature of these identities. In the context of this piece, fashion serves as a means of expressing the desired relationship between individuals or groups, and in fact becomes an indicator of a private identity. To express a desired relationship implies that there is more to the individual than the way in which others understand him. Applying this concept to race provides a particularly liberating space; to find a private identity that one might generate from inside the body, rather than

³⁵ As Lehmann writes, “[i]n modernity, the artistic rendering of a subject becomes its own *raison d'être*. For the modern poet, the decoration, whether jewelry, embroidery, or—in textual terms—metaphor was as significant as the content (95).

from the skin color that cannot be separated from a hierarchical and racist society, is to declare oneself Other and apart from the system itself. This difference, this separation from the system of race, allows a woman of color to declare herself a woman first, to declare herself something more individual and privatized. Just as the technological “lag” or temporal tension highlights the difference between old and new that characterizes modernism, so, too, does this self-fashioning highlight the difference between self and the system.

In presenting the self as inherently distinct from the body, Larsen's engagement with fashion characterizes an explicitly modernist relationship to race. In this novel, and in *Olympia*, it becomes clear that the portrait painted by an other exterior to the self will inevitably create an antagonistic relationship between the image and the self. And yet the exaggerated nature of that image, influenced and inflated as it is by stereotypes and judgments, is what makes these systems visible. Its conflict with the self, set in relief as it is by the act of the subject viewing its own image painting by another—in the moment that Olympia “shamelessly” meets her viewer's eyes, when Helga denies that the painting is her—creates the modernist tension between inside and out that fashion and the ability to self-fashion allows. By relying on dress and decoration to serve, as Lehmann suggests, as a metaphor for internal content, Larsen provides an inherently modern woman, as she denies the externally opposed identity and fashions her own.

This is just one answer, then, to the question of how modernism uses fashion to address the complex issue of race in the early twentieth century. In its maintenance of the often mutually exclusive categories of modernism and Harlem Renaissance, literary

scholarship also maintains a divide that keeps writers of color inexplicably outside of what is considered to be modernism. Larsen provides one answer as to how this gap might be bridged. By using fashion to represent an alternative identity to the one projected onto the body from without, from the rhetoric of a racist society, a woman of color may escape the divide. Rather than relying on the identity located on the body, assigned through skin color, Larsen's Helga shows that fashion may be located deeper within, and that when the right to self-fashion is taken away, the individual will be back inside the system.

CHAPTER IV: THE “EYES OF THE STRANGE”:

ABSALOM, ABSALOM! AND DOMESTIC MODERNISM

Early in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Mr. Compson tells his son Quentin that it is his duty to listen to the eerie ramblings of an old woman he barely knows. “Years ago,” he says, “we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?” (7-8). In explaining to his son why he must honor the wishes of Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson compellingly articulates the plight of women in the Old South. His remarks, which establish an essential class distinction between women and ladies, also assume that the crumbling of the system on which these identities rely results in the destabilization—the eradication, even—of the identities themselves. For the ladies who once played an essential part in the symbolic order of the Old South, life was given meaning by a system that has since been destroyed. Elevated by an aristocratic code, Southern ladies were revered as symbols of a unique lifestyle, where chivalry and exaggerated gender stereotypes kept them safe from the burdens of the feminine domestic labor that characterized the lives of the majority of the women around them. With the Civil War came the destruction of the South that constructed the idealized “lady”; relieved from the duties of women then deprived of the status of lady, she finds herself in the strange place of having no recognizable role to occupy, no concept of femininity with which to live.

Mr. Compson articulates a problem of Southern class-based identity that frames the narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* Presenting characters who suffer from the

displacement that results from the destruction of the system in which they lived, the novel explores the way in which this sort of destabilization of established social hierarchies and labor relations changes constructions of identity. In the Old South, a small group of elite white men held a concentrated majority of power and money. These men, whom Kevin Railey terms the “Plantocrats” (14), occupied the highest position on the social ladder.¹ This privilege was of course the result of land ownership, the most valuable resource in this plantation-style agriculturally-dependent society, and the ability to buy, maintain, and control the slaves who performed the hard labor on the land. The wives of these landowners were furnished with house slaves, leaving them free even from the burdens of domestic labor. Their only duty was to give birth to the heirs of the plantocracy and to exist as icons and testament to the Southern way of life. These idealized white ladies of the South became “the most potent symbol of white male supremacy and their protection became a potent rationalization and justification” not only of white male supremacy, but also of a violently classist and rigidly structured society (Railey 16).

At the heart of this privileged identity was the societal investment in the Southern lady's purity and the distance her class-based identity provided her from the depravity of need or work. Her idle lifestyle, an essential facet of that image of purity, becomes a cause to be defended in the Old South. But a larger part of that mercilessly stratified

¹ Throughout his first chapter, Railey elaborates on the way in which the Southern planter's attitude arose out of a paradoxically liberal approach to paternalism that was validated by land ownership. He views paternalism “as a social order that is stable, hierarchical, consciously elitist, and therefore fundamentally antithetical to liberalism” (7). He goes on to suggest that “Paternalism establishes men as moral examples, and paternalists hold a sense of honor in dealings with others, even those they consider below them, and feel a sense of responsibility toward society. Liberalism encourages men to strive for profit in the marketplace and places women in the role of moral exemplars” (7). Thus, he writes, Southern ideology was driven by the inherently “antagonistic” relationship between paternalism and

society was slavery, the main source of labor on the large plantations that were the foundation of Plantocrat wealth. While, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues, the “determination of men to have power, prestige, and self-esteem and to immortalize these acquisitions through their progeny was the key to the South's development,” “the white man's honor and black man's slavery became in the public mind of the South practically indistinguishable” (16). Thus the honor of the white man cannot be upheld without the labor power of the enslaved Black. The white women were another key piece of this Southern iconography; they were not expected to be “mere ornaments, but were to fulfill duties commensurate with male prestige” and to both “show courage and to remind men of their marital, protective duties” (Wyatt-Brown 51-2). The necessity to protect these women and their children came to justify and provide a rationale for the system of slavery upon which the entire Southern plantation aristocracy was founded; the idealization of the women’s lives—free from the dark realities of labor and slavery—was equally essential.

The Southern lady occupied a complicated symbolic position within this idealized structure. Although her lifestyle appeared idle, her position was far from simple. Her existence was part of what Diane Roberts sees as a Southern narrative of justification that insists

on its divisions between classes, genders and races. The South resisted emancipation, delayed ratification of women's right to vote and concocted laws that designated race according to (in some states) one-thirty-second part of 'black blood.' The idea of ladyhood had (and still has) a currency and significance in the South beyond its status in the rest of the country. As a society, the South has based its ideology on hierarchies or oppositions where a person is defined by what he or

liberalism.

she is not. (xiii)

An essential part of a system based on negative definition, rationalization, and resistance to progress, the Southern woman had to be understood as a desirable ideal in order to justify the binaries that maintained established power structures. The “designated work of art” on the plantation,” the Southern lady was understood to be strong in virtue but delicate in body, “[combining] the images of belle and warrior” and “[embodying] the religious, political and gender discourses of the Civil War” (1). In the name of her virtue and delicacy, the Southern lady was shielded from the domestic labor that has long been a traditional feminine duty; instead, her femininity was defined by the freedom from labor and socializing. Her idealized position, far from the violence and abuse of slavery and war, justified the cruelty and exclusion that stratified her society. Because of her symbolic investment, the Southern lady was an inviolable paradox, at once powerful and innocent, diligent and idle—she represented and justified the Plantocrat's privilege by being herself above the domestic work of women.

Accordingly, domesticity—as labor, art, understanding of private space, or way of life—has a complicated theoretical history. It is a concept inextricably linked to understandings of gender, social class, and progress, a way of life often rejected only to later be reclaimed. Not surprisingly, its representation in art and literature has been equally fraught, particularly in the texts of literary modernism, a movement deeply invested in representations of the new and modern world. As the traditional setting for family life, the domestic sphere conflicts with the modern man's solitary image, the urban

individual free from “familial and communal ties” (Felski 2).² As a result, some of the most famous examples of modernist texts dealing with domesticity tell stories of its suffocating effects. Women writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, Nella Larsen, Edith Wharton, and Elizabeth Bowen (to name a few) wrote stories detailing the alienating experience of enforced domestic life. In texts like the “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Awakening*, the unhappy heroines find insanity and death preferable to a confining domestic life. Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* depicts her protagonist's final experience with motherhood as a prison that will eventually, inevitably, lead to her death. Wharton's novels, filled with unhappy socialites and impoverished aristocrats, suggest that private life leaves few options for improving one's conditions. And Woolf, in perhaps the most famous modernist portrayal of domestic malaise, creates *Mrs. Dalloway*, a book that suggests that the modernist alienation men experience may even be heightened for the women with few options for leaving domestic life.

In short, it was not, then, that modernist authors—male or female—could not concern themselves with the domestic; they could do so, successfully even, especially if their goal was to depict the restrictive nature of the domestic way of life.³ The private sphere, the scene of family life, was more likely to be associated with the traditions of the past. Restrictive and burdensome, the domestic space was a point of departure for the

² Felski defines modernism as “a specific form of artistic production, serving as an umbrella term for a mélange of artistic schools and styles which first arose in late-nineteenth-century Europe and America. Characterized by such features as aesthetic self-consciousness, stylistic fragmentation, and a questioning of representation, modernist texts bore a highly ambivalent and often critical relationship to processes of modernization” (13).

³ Women writers like Willa Cather (*The Professor's House*) deal with the way in which men experience the alienation of domestic life, and male writers such as James Joyce (*Dubliners*, parts of *Ulysses*) also address this issue.

modernist writer. As a result, the women who were often limited to domestic life and labor had to go that much further to escape its negative connotations; by definition, the feminine was not an obvious part of literary modernism. Instead, women were associated with the lifestyles of the past, a point of reference by which to define what modernism was *not*. If the domestic was a part of modernist texts, it was usually as a representation of the traditional way of life, the sign of the last generation that was rejected in the name of modernity.

Despite domesticity's traditional association with the “antimodern,” modernism and domesticity need not be considered mutually exclusive. As Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei suggest, there is such a thing as a “domestic modernism,” a term they use in the title of their book: “the domain of the private, the interior, and the everyday [replaces] the public sphere,” they write, as domestic space begins to operate “as a site of agency and a mode of communication for female novelists and protagonists” (1). Echoing these sentiments, Victoria Rosner contends that the private space of the home can indeed be a “generative site for literary modernism” (2). Substituting the public for private, modernist domestic novels suggest that the “experimental modernist techniques” of more canonically modern texts are only one way of expressing the modern (Briganti and Mezei 1). Instead, Rosner suggests, the intricacies of the domestic realm “compose a kind of grid of social relations that shifts and slips, often upending the individuals who traverse it. Modernist spatial poetics,” she suggests, “are attuned to architectural dynamics of privacy and exposure, spatial hierarchies demarcating class, the locations and routines surrounding the care of the body, and the gendering of space” (2). Attention to the

domestic, it follows, allows for a laying bare of the constructions of identity, routines, and assumptions about daily life that structure reality.

What makes characteristically domestic texts modernist is not just their attention to the “grid of social relations” of daily life. In *Grotesque Relations*, Susan Edmunds argues that modernism is “marked by a broken or alienated relation to the favored subject matter and representational modes of an earlier era” (3), a theory that echoes the work of theorists like Michael North, Michael Levenson, and Frederic Jameson.⁴ Edmunds's work allows us to characterize this alienation from the past as only a symptom of a larger phenomenon. Modernism, she writes, “teaches us to regard the world with startled eyes, to question the unquestionable, to find the ordinary strange” (3); this line of thinking suggests that the alienation from the past that has traditionally been associated with literary modernism represents just one form of this questioning of the “unquestionable.” Not only then does modernism teach alienation from the past, but it also encourages alienation from one's own surroundings. These “eyes of the strange,” Edmunds goes on to argue, reveal the modernist moments in the domestic scene; they “[allow] us, the ones who stayed home, to see our own lives as startling” (4).

Bringing these strange eyes to literary modernism itself, Rosner seeks to “dismantle a myth that literary modernism tells about itself” (11) and argues that private life can indeed be its setting. Defining modernist interiority as the relationship of the “representation of consciousness to the reorganization of home life,” she argues that this

⁴ As I argued in earlier chapters, North's *The Dialect of Modernism*, Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism*, and Jameson's *Postmodernism* all advance theories of a break from the past that characterizes the modernist aesthetic.

phenomenon “is rooted in the design of the domestic interior” (12). In other words, the space of the home can be a manifestation of the individual's experience of the outside world. This understanding of the material culture of the home can be modernist, Daniel Miller argues, in that it “appears as both our appropriation of the larger world and often as the representation of that world within our private domain” (1).⁵ Both Rosner and Miller's works argue that the landscape and contents of the home allow individuals to mediate their relationship to the outside world and offer an alternative setting for the scenes of literary modernism. The exploration of consciousness and subjectivity—what Rosner calls “modernist interiority” (11)—is manifested in the redefinition of the domestic sphere. By seeing her domestic surroundings through Edmunds's “eyes of the strange,” the fallen Southern lady brings the alienated perspective of distance to domesticity.⁶ In this chapter, I will consider the way in which the “strange” eyes of women—the ghosts of the South—with no conventional relationships to domestic labor allow them to craft a new relationship to domestic labor and, simultaneously, to demonstrate the modernist potential of the home.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner presents Ellen and Judith Sutpen and Miss Rosa Colfield as just the sort of women who “stay home” and allows the reader to see their lives through “the eyes of the strange.” As women born into the class that would have kept them far from the stigma of domestic labor, their eyes allow a different view of the nature of domestic and the gendered nature of that space; their perspectives also

⁵ Daniel Miller edits the volume *Home Possessions*, a book he imagines as a text “that attempts to change our understanding of the significance of the homes as a route to social and cultural analysis and to question some assumptions about what might have been though to be the 'obvious' nature and implications of the home” (1).

problematize class identities themselves. Each of these women has no conventional relationship to domestic labor. In Ellen's case, she is kept in the prison of Sutpen's Hundred, the wild, undomesticated house her husband builds as a monument to himself, far from the spaces organized by social hierarchies that value her. With no encouragement to fulfill her duty as the “visible correlate of the economic and social standing” of her husband (Craik 47), Ellen's liberating (if brief) reappropriation of her former complicated iconic status allows for a relatively positive reading of her insistence on maintaining her class-based privilege. Her daughter Judith, turned into a “ghost” by the Civil War's destruction of family structure and social standing, learns the hard labor required of her half-sister Clytie, who works as a house slave. And Miss Rosa, the forgotten child with no mother and four years younger than her own niece must learn her own relationship to feminized labor—with no women to teach her how to be a lady, her relationship to domesticity becomes a return to tradition, a reclamation of a never-learned feminine identity.

If the women of *Absalom, Absalom!* are changed from ladies to “ghosts,” their metamorphoses are affected as much by developing a “strange” relationship to traditionally female identities as they are by the Civil War. In creating female characters who develop a conscious, almost rebellious attitude towards established feminine roles, Faulkner suggests in this novel that while the War may have begun the destabilization of traditional identities, the deliberate return to these roles paradoxically continues it. His characters look at the world with eyes that teach us to reconsider the ordinary. In

⁶ Edmunds calls the resulting experience of the domestic space the “domestic exterior” (5).

examining spaces and identities that seem, at first glance, to be conventional, Edmunds provides a methodology for expanding canonical literary modernism. These women, who Mr. Compson claims are changed from ladies into “ghosts,” are the vehicle for one story in the novel—the story of women's relationships to their own identities and the ways in which it is enacted and expressed through domesticity. In this chapter, I will consider the new and reimagined relationships to domestic labor in *Absalom, Absalom!* to better understand the way in which this second look can expand the nebulous boundaries of literary modernism to include topics and characters usually considered to be outside of the movement. *Absalom, Absalom!* does more than just teach us to see domestic labor and roles with strange eyes: in its representation of a return to the more traditional forms of domestic labor, the novel turns the gaze of modernism to a society that relies upon a complex construction of gender to structure its class system. It allows us to see the way the ladies of the South—turned into “ghosts” of their former selves by the destruction of their way of life—fashion a new relationship to domesticity.

The Southern Lady as the Plantation's Work of Art

While Faulkner begins the novel with the words of Miss Rosa Coldfield, the women's story truly begins when Ellen Coldfield, daughter of a reputable Jefferson man and the consummate Southern lady, marries Thomas Sutpen. Having arrived in town with little more—quite literally—than the clothes on his back, Thomas Sutpen is hardly the desirable husband for a lady such as Ellen. But the tears that Ellen covers with powder on

her wedding day are not shed over the man himself; she cries over the lackluster wedding ceremony, the event attended by only ten of the hundred people invited, a failure despite the unspoken desires of her husband and the desperate pleas of Ellen and her aunt. Intent “no longer on merely thrusting Sutpen down the town's throat, but thrusting the wedding itself,” Ellen's aunt, this “grim virago of female affront,” insists upon the large wedding meant to force Sutpen “back into the gullet of public opinion” that had “agreed never to forgive him for having any past” (40). The women want a wedding that will live up to Ellen's symbolic value, a testament to family name and social status. By insisting on the townspeople's attendance, the women imply that the town should support the event that is an essential part of a system in which they have all been implicitly complicit.

Sutpen is the central character around whose actions *Absalom, Absalom!* revolves, and the novel focuses largely on his relationships the women in the novel. As a man looking to erase the stigma of the labor that allowed his social climb, Sutpen recognizes that the key to his design is the social capital of a “stainless” Southern lady, an icon of the South.⁷ But first, Sutpen must lay the groundwork for his new identity; he works in the fields, slathered in mud and indistinguishable from his slaves. Since he does not inherit a house for his family, he must be an active part of building his own. While this is not the labor of a Southern gentleman, the house is the first step in beginning a family dynasty that defies his own origins. In building the house that will shelter his House, Sutpen furthers the design that Edgar A. Dryden suggests relies on an “image of himself as

⁷ Sutpen, born in what would become West Virginia to a family that lives in a one-room cabin, may experience his most vital moment when he is turned away from the front door of the local estate by a Black man “who every day wore better clothes than he or his father and sisters had ever owned and ever expected to”; as a result, he “coveted the shoes” (184).

founding father” (142). The house, a symbol of the social status he covets, begins his plan to alter “the direction of the future” by creating his own dynasty (142).⁸

Sutpen's plan depends on the creation of legitimate heirs and a family, but establishing himself as the “founding father” requires a woman. This identity implies an essentially generative power while neglecting to mention the mother and suggests the beginning of a powerful family unit or a dynasty. Before Sutpen can begin to achieve these aspirations, he must fill the home—the scene of family life—with the necessary goods: “not the least of which furniture,” Miss Rosa says to Quentin in retrospect, “was that wedding license” (39). Sutpen knows he needs not just “the anonymous wife and the anonymous children, but the two names, the stainless wife and the unimpeachable father-in-law, on the license, the patent” (39). In this way, Faulkner suggests that the man's identity depends on his relationship to women and to those women's relationship to labor and class. The woman's family name, though silenced in marriage by the taking of her husband's, remains an essential building block in the dynasty and a piece of the foundation of family identity.

Ellen's “stainless” name on the marriage license is the cornerstone of the House that begins his design. Sutpen's courtship of Ellen begins when he comes to town to “lay deliberate siege” on Ellen's father: “he had exhausted the possibilities of the families of the men with whom he had hunted and gambled and he had now come to town to find a wife exactly as he would have gone to the Memphis market to buy livestock or slaves”

⁸ In his *The Form of the American Romance*, Dryden understands the self-consciousness that Sutpen experiences at the butler's rejection as allowing him to realize “the importance of his freedom, his history, and his historicity” (141).

(31). When a man comes to town to buy labor power for his plantation, he comes knowing that if he has the currency necessary for purchase, he will certainly go home having purchased that which he intended to buy. Livestock and slaves, each available to anyone willing to pay the price, are commodities for purchase. They represent the power of the plantation owner, both in terms of production and a socioeconomic status. Sutpen's seeks a wife in the way he seeks goods and labor, hoping to acquire a woman who will improve his own status and that of his heirs. As the Southern lady, the wife of a plantation owner, Ellen's duty is now to represent her husband's wealth, or to serve as the "visible correlate" of her husband's wealth and rank (Craik 7). Like livestock or slaves that represent social status, Ellen represents his power in the community and improves to the respectability of the children who will be his legacy.

In his portrayal of Ellen, Faulkner suggests that many Southern ladies, raised to occupy such an iconic role, accepted these circumstances in exchange for the maintenance of their material and social needs. Ellen only truly becomes discontented when she realizes that Sutpen is not a gentleman who can maintain the appearance of things. From behind the shield of his "stainless" marriage, Sutpen does not feel the need to uphold appearances. No longer craving social acceptance, Sutpen returns to fraternizing with the slaves and fights them for sport: "That is what Ellen saw: her husband and the father of her children standing there, naked and panting and bloody to the waist and the negro just fallen evidently, lying at this feet and bloody too save that on the negro it merely looked like grease or sweat—Ellen running down the hill from the house, bareheaded" (21). As when he works in the fields alongside his slaves, covered in

mud and virtually indistinguishable from them, Sutpen rejects the system that insists they be divided—he does not hesitate to mix with the Black men who are his slaves (nor does he hesitate to sleep with their wives and daughters). While the white women of the plantation traditionally remained in the house, “isolated in their sexually untouchable domestic sphere” (Roberts 4), Ellen runs from the house bareheaded, out of the domestic space and into the proverbial wild; disheveled, she is no longer the symbol she once was.⁹ Soon, the barbaric conditions in which she is forced to live lead her to the disenchanting reality of being a symbol of something that does not exist. In this case, it is not so much the Civil War that has turned Ellen into a ghost of her former self; it is her own husband's attempts to distance himself from the traditional segregation of Southern plantation lifestyle. Alienated now from the family that once provided the foundation of her identity, Ellen finds herself abandoned by her husband as well as the rest of her family. She realizes that being sequestered in the rural wasteland of Sutpen's Hundred prevents her from performing the role she was born to play. By failing to uphold the class and racial divides upon which Southern identity rests, Sutpen undermines Ellen's identity and she becomes a symbol of a lost traditional value, a ghost in a world that no longer values her.

Faulkner's characterization of this moment, certainly the representative moment of Ellen's growing dissatisfaction in her marriage, suggests that the root of Ellen's unhappiness lies in her husband's failure to uphold the distance between his wife and the family's labor power. As Ellen runs from the house “bareheaded,” she is forced to leave

⁹ Roberts suggests this iconography of Southern ladyship was reinforced by literary traditions of strong heroine and “queenship”: “The best-loved novels of the elite classes were often concerned with aristocratic, high-minded women. Scott and Dickens were perhaps the two best-selling British novelists in America “ but it was “Scott and his adventurous heroines who took firm hold in the South” (4-5).

the symbolic space of the white privileged family, the house which has served thus far as the representation of Sutpen's "design" for the future. In calling attention to the fact that Ellen is "bare-headed," Faulkner implies that this disruption has caused Ellen to fall to her husband's level of impropriety. As a symbolic representation, the Southern woman must keep her body groomed, well-dressed, and clean—in perfect order and physically far from the site of labor, she "tidily represents the white upper-class southern woman, estranged from her own physicality, divorced from the 'low' by class convention, frequently pictured as standing on a pedestal like the statue from which the classical body derives its imagery" (Roberts xiv). The woman's body then becomes the site of the manifestation of disrupted order. If the Southern lady is "bodiless," or "an unfilled space, 'pure' so that the ideology of the plantation South may be inscribed on her" (2, 32), Faulkner's foregrounding of the intimate site of Ellen's bare head suggests a breakdown of sorts. Outside the house, forced to approach and interact with the chaotic, wild scene in her own yard, Ellen finds herself far from the symbolic value her marriage promised.

With the present in disarray, Ellen and Sutpen must look to the next generation—as the parents of the House, the next generation that will manifest Sutpen's "design" for dynasty, they displace desire onto their children.¹⁰ And while children are often valued as the heirs to a family name or representatives of the father's power and virility, Ellen finds agency in her daughter's life as well. By throwing herself into her daughter's courtship and marriage preparations, Ellen reestablishes her own traditional identity as mother of

¹⁰ Eric Sundquist argues that the "flaw" in Thomas Sutpen's grand 'design' is, of course, his first son's supposed black blood' (100). He compares Sutpen to Lincoln, "each of whom labors heroically to build or preserve a magnificent 'house' symbolic of his national and personal dream, and both of whom, at about the same time, face a crisis in the house and try desperately to postpone it" (105).

heirs and daughters who can be married to other respectable families. When Judith reaches marriageable age, her mother sees the opportunity to assist in the arrangement of a marriage that might allow her to reclaim her lost position. In engineering a socially viable marriage for her daughter as her father did for her, Ellen becomes an active part of her daughter's future self. Her insistence on participating in the rite usurps a part of the father's traditional role of arranger of marriages and alliances. She sees Judith as the daughter “of the great house who is the focus of the romance, the focus of [her] 'design'” (Roberts 33). Ellen brings her daughter to town to buy new clothes and finds “actual stardom in the role of matriarch” (Faulkner 69). Ellen changes:

Her carriage, air, now was a little regal—she and Judith made frequent trips to town now, calling upon the same ladies, some whom were now grandmothers, whom the aunt had tried to force to attend the wedding twenty years ago, and, to the meager possibilities which the town offered, shopping,—as though she had succeeded at last in evacuating not only the puritan heritage but reality itself; had immolated the outrageous husband and incomprehensible children into shades, escaped at last into a world of pure illusion in which, safe from any harm, she moved, lived, from attitude to attitude against her background of chatelaine to the largest, wife to the wealthiest, mother of the most fortune. When she shopped (there were twenty stores in Jefferson now) she unbent without even getting out of the carriage, gracious and assured. (54)

Going to town gives Ellen the “regal” air that she cannot experience in the rural, isolated environment of her husband’s home—his, exclusively, to the point that it is branded with his name. Ellen's prestige is restored in town, as she once again stands for the Southern lady, the icon of the Old South. In preparing for Judith's marriage, Ellen reopens lines of communication long closed, reinserting herself into society and relying on the traditional Coldfield family identity. Back in town, the “world of pure illusion,” Ellen can reestablish her symbolic value by reclaiming her identity as the wife of a wealthy man

and mother to a socially viable daughter. Shopping allows her to demonstrate her purchasing power and social capital, and it also allows her to consider the value of feminine things like clothes for a daughter who will soon be married.¹¹

While she returns to society for her daughter, Ellen's actions constitute an attempt to refashion herself in opposition to the situation she finds so alienating. “[U]nimpeded by the weight of stomach and all the heavy organs of suffering and experience” Ellen is no longer marked solely by her role as the bearer of Sutpen’s heirs; she can adorn herself as she sees fit and present herself as independent of that role. She takes her daughter to “Memphis to buy Judith clothes; yes, a trousseau” (55). Assembled in anticipation of a wedding, the trousseau symbolizes hope and the future, but also, like a dowry, the bride’s family's obligation to present the bride as an offering, decorating and ornamenting her like an object to be purchased. And yet, in this case, the simple act of buying these clothes constitutes an act of self-liberation from the prison of her husband’s home.¹² In engineering a traditional marriage for her daughter, Ellen reclaims her former status in the system by attempting to participate in a fashionable social act that also reclaims traditionally feminine power for herself and her daughter. As opposed to the displacement and lack of value Ellen experiences at Sutpen's Hundred, Judith's wedding promises a meaning their current lives deny.

Ellen's conscious performance of purchase takes back her position on the

¹¹ Shopping, of course, figures importantly in my treatment of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* in Chapter One; it also calls to mind Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies' Paradise*), in which the spectacle of shopping in the department store arouses a uniquely feminine desire.

¹² Roberts considers Judith to be “a collection of competing and complementary texts 'written' by Rosa Colfield, Jason Compson, Quentin, Shreve, and Faulkner himself, all theorizers of the feminine” (25). In this way, she writes, “Judith haunts the narrative” (26).

Southern lady's pedestal—if only for awhile. Once again the lady about town, she buys the clothing, adornments, and decorations that speak to her social status. After being six years “absent from the world” (54), Ellen ceremonially leaves the house—unlike when she is forced to leave the house bareheaded to stop her husband's fighting with the slaves—to return to the society that once defined her value. Because the shopping trip is more about the performance of privilege than the purchase itself, Ellen remains in her carriage, bidding “merchant and clerk fetch out to her the cloth and meagre fripperies and baubles” to “finger and handle and disarrange and then reject” (57). Shopping, particularly in a small town where people will witness the purchasing power, is, Sharon Zukin writes, a “social encounter” (31). It also allows the shopper to “imagine what it would be like to rise above” her social status (29); as Gail McDonald contends, “all shopping is shopping for possible selves” (233). Ellen's shopping trip marks a brief time as another self, in which she seems “not only to acquiesce, to be reconciled to her life and marriage, but to be actually proud of it” (Faulkner 54). Away from the uncivilized space of the acres of Sutpen's Hundred, far from financial need or physical or domestic labor, Ellen once again takes on the role of the iconic Southern lady, the part she was born to play.

Through its style—the blurring of temporality, the stream of consciousness narrative voice, and the multiple narrators—*Absalom, Absalom!* frames Ellen's traditional preparation for her daughter's (not-) wedding through the “eyes of the strange.” The novel's characteristic voice is what truly allows the reader to see this shopping trip with “strange eyes.” Throughout this brief section, because of the novel's overlapping,

nonlinear narrative, the reader already knows that Judith will not marry Charles Bon, that Ellen's efforts will do nothing for her daughter or herself. But during this brief period, Ellen is “at the absolute halycon of her butterfly's summer” as she focuses on her daughter, with “the added charm of gracious and graceful voluntary surrendering of youth to her blood's and sex's successor” (58). These seemingly mundane events, presented through the novel's complex and unique narrative style and the distance of time, are seen from the alienated perspective of narrators removed from their story by time and War.

From this removed place, the strangeness of the tale is accentuated by the way in which the characters react to constructions of identity and relationships to class and labor that seem antiquated, patriarchal, and elitist. In this way, the novel narrates the story not of the South, but the story of a woman who is a uniquely Southern creation. Ellen's relationship to domesticity—that is to say, her cultivation of an image that represents her distance from any sort of labor—represents a larger Southern trend to veil slavery, racism, and misogyny behind the guise of protecting and idealizing its women. The novel's destabilization of that system allows for the view from Ellen's eyes, revealing the way in which the loss of this traditional identity threatens her with a loss of her own traditional value. In its ability to not only question the “unquestionable” but also to bring an unexpected perspective to this sort of patriarchal aristocracy, *Absalom, Absalom!* suggests that the Southern woman's pedestal allows her a place and a means by which to invest herself with value.

A Ghost of a Woman

Despite the fact that *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel that centers on Thomas Sutpen and his family, and the fact that majority of its plot is set decades before the novel's present, the story is shaped, told, and forged by the narration of characters in the present moment. Separated from many of the events of the story by the momentous decades of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the beginning of the industrial revolution, the novel's narrators tell the story from a great distance; none of them are immediate members of the Sutpen family, and some have never even met them. The narrator closest to the family, the woman who initiates the story's telling, is Miss Rosa Colfield, a woman still searching for her place in the family. Alienated, even from her own family, by age difference, death, and distance, Miss Rosa summons Quentin Compson to her house to listen to her version of her family's story. Despite the fact that she is related to most of the major characters in the novel, she does not have a conventional relationship to them. Born twenty-eight years after her sister Ellen, four years after her own niece, and at the time of her mother's death, Rosa Coldfield is a nearly forgotten child, a girl who cannot help but grow up to be a ghost of a woman.

In beginning with Miss Rosa, the novel foregrounds a character whose life has been defined if not destroyed by the rise and fall of the Old South. Born into the system that understood the “stainless” value of Ellen Coldfield, she comes of age—if she can be said to come of age at all—in a time of change, amidst the crumbling system in which she has no social value. The unnamed narrator begins the story by characterizing Miss Rosa

as a strange, disconcerting relic of a past that most people would not care to remember even if they could. Meeting Quentin in her home, Miss Rosa wears “the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or nothusband none knew” (1). Her loss, ancient, forgotten, and repeated, cannot even be articulated. The house is filled with “the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity while the wan haggard face watched him above the faint triangle of lace at wrists and throat from the too tall chair in which she resembled a crucified child” (4). In its very structure, the novel frames Miss Rosa in uncertainty, suggesting at the outset that her history is forgotten even by the town, unknowable outside of—or even within—the system into which she was born.

Rosa has no place in Southern society. This lack of definable place in her life begins when she is “born too late” (15) to prevent her sister's marriage and the tragedy that dominates her family. With her mother gone and her sister married and out of the house before she is even born, Miss Rosa is also born too late to belong in her own family and does not know how to relate to them. Her late arrival leaves her to be raised by her aunt. Always standing there “like she might have been fifty instead of fifteen” (73), Rosa never occupies the role of Southern belle that made her sister so valuable. Her liminal place—neither child, woman, nor lady--renders her at once as “old,” virginal, and childlike (1,4). As Olivia Carr Edenfield suggests, her “lack of place in her southern town centers around the fact that [she] never marries, that she spends her life wanting to fit into the prescribed role of wife and mother, earning her right to exist (57).” Even as a girl, she seems like a spinster, meaning she has no value as as the virtuous “shield”

Sutpen seeks in her sister.¹³ Miss Rosa occupies no readable position in the town or even in her own family. She is at once a child and an old woman, never married, and always uncomfortably out of place. With no women to teach her how to find her place in the system, Rosa remains an afterthought, a sign with no referent and a symbol with no value.

Rosa also has no socially viable identity. Her father's role as proprietor of the country store allows her to stay removed from the reality of financial concerns and trade. Even as an adult, Rosa “actually could not count money...had never had the actual cash to see, touch, experiment and prove with (60); the other merchants allow her to take things from their stores with the assumption that her father will pay her debts after she leaves. In this way, her father's position as respectable community member supplements his failure to teach and raise her.¹⁴ Treated as the daughter of privilege, Rosa is afforded the goods and rights of her birthright without ever being instructed as to how to use them. Living her life “not as a woman, a girl, but rather as the man which [she] perhaps should have been” (144), Miss Rosa has none of the graces of a rich woman nor any of the skills of a laboring woman. She is neither girl nor woman, and hence has no readable place in society, has virtually no identity at all. With no traditionally feminine role to occupy, Miss Rosa finds her lack of place is reinforced by the town.

From her first appearance in the text, Miss Rosa's clothing marks her with a

¹³ Sutpen proves this when he insults Miss Rosa later in the novel by suggesting that he will consider marrying her if she can give birth to his son first.

¹⁴ Railey points out that the market for commodities and other ornamentation became limited, as the local country store was all that remained of this “elaborate system” (12). If the store in fact represents the old system, her refusal to participate in the system of her father’s country store becomes a kind of rejection of the larger system.

telling ambiguity. It makes her look like a child, her actual age and history obfuscated by her ambiguous appearance. Just as clothing can represent a person's social class or position, Rosa's *lack* of discernible place is represented through her clothing. Early in her life, Miss Rosa could not even properly shop for her the materials and domestic goods that dominate the interests of many of her contemporaries. Even her clothes are handed down, outdated, after her aunt no longer has any use for them. Without having had the intensely feminine experience of "shopping for possible selves," Rosa does not have the opportunity to develop a set of aesthetic preferences of her own (McDonald 233). Because shopping for objects of their own choosing is a means by which young people learn to be "autonomous," Rosa's lack of that experience contributes to a sort of prolonged adolescence (Zukin 54). A Southern lady like Rosa would have shopped for fabrics for the elaborate dresses to be made for her rather than for ready-made clothing off the rack, but that act of making a choice and exchanging money for goods would still constitute an "aesthetic experience" of "creating value" (61). With no woman to take her shopping, Rosa wears her aunt's abandoned clothing, having developed no real aesthetic theory for her own preferences. Like Sutpen, who realizes the shabby state of his "worn out" and "inherited" clothing, Rosa wears clothing that does not communicate any readable status. Without the experiences that typically define the women in her family and around her, Rosa remains an uncategorized woman, a ghost in her own family and town.

Miss Rosa's changing relationship to clothing as a commodity and a sign of social status relates to the changing social value that comes with the destabilization of the Old

South's aristocracy. Without the security of the role of lady, Miss Rosa turns to a different relationship to clothing, taking to domestic labor traditionally well below her station in life. Torn by the “vicarious” desire inspired by her niece's impending wedding (Faulkner 61), Miss Rosa turns to one of the oldest of feminine pastimes to stake her claim to a piece of this event—she begins to sew and make clothing herself. Rosa, whose aunt “taught her both to keep house and how to fit clothes by climbing out a window one night,” begins “secretly making garments for Judith's trousseau” (60). As the white, privileged daughter of a man with property and house slaves, Rosa would not have been taught to sew, but she, abandoned by her surrogate mother, the aunt, learns the duties of woman and female domestic in order to complete her secret project.¹⁵ With no one interested in her, Miss Rosa finds her own way to participate in the feminine rite. Motivated by her need to stake a claim to her “vicarious bridal,” she takes action, abandoning her symbolic position and the class privilege that keeps her removed from domestic labor.

Miss Rosa's sewing project, clumsy and unskilled, subverts the dominant understanding of a Southern lady's relationship to domestic labor. Faulkner's characterization of Rosa's upbringing indicates an awareness of the ideological system into which a woman such as she was born. As a girl, she had “never been taught to do anything practical because the aunt had raised her to believe that she was not only delicate but actually precious” (65); this mindset was not only a luxury but a necessity, as

¹⁵ Miss Rosa's project occupied her days and nights making the goods for niece's trousseau, “which she had to keep hidden from her father,” who does has no relationship with his Sutpen and his family, and also “from the two negresses, who might have told Mr. Coldfield” (61).

the entire Southern Plantocrat society relied on the feminine icon to represent the “precious,” the delicate, and the frailty enforced by this system. But when Rosa's aunt leaves and her father, disgusted with the looting of his store during the chaos of the war, climbs into the attic and nails the door shut behind him, Rosa loses the authority figures that give her life structure. Without a mother figure to which she can be a girl and a father to cement her symbolic value, Rosa must reevaluate her own relationship to her surroundings. No longer able to maintain her position of privilege, Miss Rosa teaches herself to perform domestic labor in order to sustain her father's life and contribute to the trousseau that represents her niece's social status.

In coming to domesticity from the perspective of dethroned aristocrat, Miss Rosa knows none of its burdens and finds in its performance only the comfort of a manageable feminine identity. By identifying with Judith, appropriating a piece of the “vicarious bridal,” Miss Rosa takes on another traditionally feminine role—that of bride. Rather than admit to her own fate as a spinster, she sews “tediously and without skill on the garments which she was making for her niece’s trousseau...whipping lace out of raveled and hoarded string and thread and sewing it onto garments.” Ignoring the news of the crumbling nation, Rosa continues on, “losing the knell and doom of her narrative land between two tedious and clumsy stitches on a garment she would never wear and never remove for a man” (78). Rosa's bull-headed insistence on her awkward participation in her sister's and niece's lives is, as Paula Elyseu Mesquita suggests, an attempt to “compensate for the vacuum in her own life” (58). She argues that despite the fact that Rosa's relationship to these women is at best ambivalent, she is clearly “interested in

playing out in an imaginary dimension the more fulfilling female roles—mother, lover—which were theirs in the real world” (58). This desire for more “fulfilling female roles” is manifested in Rosa's insistence on making clothing for Judith. In an attempt to find a new feminine role, Rosa displaces her desire onto the garments she pieces together for her niece.

When Faulkner writes that that Rosa's stitches provide a “narrative land” for her story, he also suggests that Rosa's domestic practice allows her a distinctly feminine means of expression that begins the telling of her story; as scholars have pointed out, the trope that associates weaving, sewing, or stitching with storytelling reverberates through the novel. For example, Eric Sundquist suggests that when Miss Rosa tells her story, she is still “sewing those marital garments in her memory, and still unable to put them on or take them off forty-five years later” (116). Easier to remember than the tale of her nothusband, sewing in this case is a metaphor that expresses the unspoken disappointment of her life.¹⁶ Just as she insists on sewing for her niece, Rosa insists on telling her story. As Dryden argues, the narrator “makes the voices of all the characters sound alike, echo one another, although each stands for an individual who once tried desperately to tell his or her own story, to weave his or her own pattern into the rug of life” (148). Articulated in terms of sewing, stitching, or weaving, the story is tinged with the traditions of feminized domestic labor. This “ghostly presence” insists on telling a tale that not only illuminates the plight of the Southern lady, but also allows its teller to “weave his or her own pattern into the rug of life” through the empowering act of

¹⁶ Alain Geoffroy sees Rosa's identification with Judith as “a desperate attempt to escape mental

narration.

In its treatment of Miss Rosa, the novel paints a portrait of a Southern lady without her Old South. Rosa's turn to domestic labor destabilizes the system that insists she stay far from its toil. Reduced to the labor of her slaves in order to keep up the appearances of her former empire—the trousseau that testifies to a family's riches—Rosa's domesticity is largely motivated by a desire to keep up social performance. Her father's death forces Rosa to “step out of her own political nonexistence into a new mode of social participation. A complete redefinition of Southern womanhood was evidently in order” (Mesquita 59). This “redefinition” happens largely through this reimagining of the role that a woman—a *lady*—can play in her own self-presentation. Rather than maintaining the distance of idle privilege, Rosa, Faulkner's representative ghost of the old South, brings her foreign perspective to domestic labor to keep up the appearance of upper class prestige.

Rosa's transformed relationship to domestic tasks allows for a different view of the established order, one that allows for their reevaluation not just in relation to the system, but also in spite of it. Her unskilled approach to things coded feminine—not only sewing and cooking but also roles such as mother, sister, aunt, bride, and wife—allows for a “questioning of the unquestionable” nature of construction of feminine identity that is defined by *not* performing domestic tasks (Edmunds 3). The strangeness with which Miss Rosa approaches the roles that are assumed to be natural for women suggests that *Absalom, Absalom!* seeks to tell a different story. Rosa is one of Faulkner's women who

disorders” (317).

are “active disruptive subjects in their narratives; theirs are voices which denounce and subvert male power” (Gwin 8).¹⁷ But more than just rejecting male dominance, Rosa's voice challenges the restrictions of female tradition, bringing to it the strange perspective of a girl who never learned to be either a lady or a woman. This form of alienating oneself from the immediate past and the return to a classical, older tradition of femininity suggest that Miss Rosa's modernist eyes question the established understanding of domestic labor and locate a liberating gendered identity outside of the restrictions of class-based identities.

Miss Rosa's approach the tradition of domesticity is one aspect of *Absalom*, *Absalom!*'s portrayal of a uniquely feminine approach to literary modernism. Because of the difference between Rosa's social place and the reality of her situation, she challenges assumptions about the role of domestic labor in the Southern lady's life. Allowing for a “questioning of the unquestionable,” her distanced perspective allows for the “strange” view of the domestic, a gaze that reveals the modernist potential in the domestic sphere. The tensions between the expectations for the Southern lady and Miss Rosa's approach to domestic labor become clear as she seeks her place in a rapidly changing society. By serving as the point of intersection between competing definitions of femininity, this strange view of domestic labor provides a strikingly modernist view of Southern womanhood.

¹⁷ Gwin sees Rosa Coldfield as the “hysterical woman who 'reads' the inexplicable repressiveness of masculinist ideology articulated in the shared texts of Thomas Sutpen, Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve. Together these patriarchal texts, with their culiminative authority, devalue woman and silence women who, like Rosa, speak difference from the position of subject” (29). Her appropriation of

No Longer Bodiless

Tracing the women in the novel's evolving relationships to domesticity provides a view of one of its narrative arcs—the story of the construction and subsequent eradication of Southern lady as feminine icon free from domestic labor. From Ellen's reclamation of the pedestal of privilege that keeps her far from domestic labor to Rosa's clumsy insistence upon making the garments that testify to her niece's social prestige, the women of *Absalom, Absalom!* begin a new understanding of Southern femininity. Judith Sutpen, left at the plantation home that bears her family name with no choice but to participate in the household labor, presents a provocative alternative to deliberately avoiding domesticity. Truly turned into a ghost by the destruction of the Civil War, Judith can no longer be the lady for whom a trousseau would be expected, far removed from any sort of labor. Instead, hardship forces her to allow the breakdown of class and race barriers, even within house and family, necessitating an entirely different construction of the private space in which they live.

Judith Sutpen begins her life seemingly destined to become the ultimate Southern lady and ends it as the representative Southern ghost—more than any other lady or woman in the novel, she intensely experiences the displacement resulting from the collapse of Southern society. She is also the least present in the narrative, “practically bodiless,” according to Roberts (32), who goes on to suggest that Judith is most physically present in the novel when the novels' narrators imagine her surrounded by

feminine identity can then be seen as a rejection of masculinist ideology as well.

clothing; Rosa imagines her in a patched-together wedding dress, waiting for a wedding that will not happen, and later Quentin imagines her standing in her “underthings,” “looking at the door, the yellowed creamy mass of old intricate satin and lace spread carefully on the bed” (qtd. in Roberts 33). As Roberts suggests, Judith stands provocatively *about to be dressed* as a bride, “the emblem simultaneously of the virgin and the sexual woman” (33). Here Roberts focuses on the way in which Judith’s “practically bodiless” character is made present in the novel through her relationship to the wedding that is not to be. Going a step further, I see Judith’s character as made particularly present by the clothing, the cultural signs of the wedding and femininity, the representation of the dichotomous feminine position of bride. The clothes, which not only symbolically speak to that relationship, also give shape to her body, making her a more physical, anchored person in the unanchored narrative. As Judith has largely served as a vehicle for her mother’s desires and the woman upon whom her two brothers displace their anxieties, the novel’s late focus on Judith’s body, hardened by labor and changed in appearance by worn clothing, makes it the setting for her story.

Judith, a “collection of competing and complimentary texts” written by “theorizers of the feminine” (Roberts 25), changes throughout the novel, her own identity evolving alongside her relationship to clothing and domestic labor. More specifically, the novel tracks Judith’s social decline through her relationship to her half-sister Clytie.¹⁸ The illegitimate child of Thomas Sutpen, Clytie occupies a liminal space, living in the house but serving her own father and half-siblings. The two sisters, living side by side,

¹⁸ Her name, short for Clytemnestra, alludes to the Greek story in which Clytemnestra, one of the

exemplify the race-based class difference in the South. Each woman occupies a uniquely feminine place—one the privileged daughter of the house, the other the house slave who serves the women—but their contrast heightens the lack that each one experiences; Judith does not participate in the traditionally feminine activities of keeping house, sewing, or cooking, while Clytie does not experience the courtship her half-sister (almost) enjoys. Judith's initial privilege in the family and the house is accentuated by the presence of her sister, a fact that continually emphasizes Judith's removal from the labor her sister performs.

The sisters' relationship begins to change at the beginning of the war, when privilege and social spectacle can no longer be maintained; Faulkner again represents this change through Judith's relationship to her clothing. After receiving a letter from Charles Bon claiming they have “waited long enough,” she and Clytie begin “at once to fashion a wedding dress and veil out of rags and scraps” (81). Instead of the fine, decorative clothing of the Southern elite, like the hoop skirts that manifested the woman's removal from the need to work, this wedding dress will be made of “rags and scraps.”¹⁹ Far from the fine dresses and hats that were the fashion in those days, this homemade dress is an unlikely substitute. Like the dress that Scarlet O'Hara fashions out of velvet curtains in *Gone with the Wind* to maintain her image as Southern lady, this dress brings the women

daughters resulting from Zeus's rape of Leda, later goes on to kill her husband Agamemnon.

¹⁹ Pierre Perrot argues that clothing has traditionally assisted in the representation of aristocratic privilege by presenting the woman as incapable of work. Likewise, it can physically reinforce the manners and gait of the upper class by literally making it difficult to walk. For high society women, walking “was made perilous by the fullness of their dress, a highly symbolic physical hindrance. As a corollary, the drama of a tear or a spot was understood as more than an involuntary offense against the aesthetic order: it was the shameful evidence of 'excessive' movement” (95).

in touch with the domestic practices that characterize other women's lives.²⁰ Like her father, Judith knows that the spectacle embodied in the dress and the traditional ceremony must be performed to maintain the status she feels slipping away from her.²¹ In other words, Judith and Clytie find it more important to preserve the traditional ceremony than the image of luxury and excess. Thus the clothing is the site of the articulation of a new relationship between the sisters—the dress is still made for the white sister, but they both work together with the remnants of their former life to make it.

Mothered into two different social classes, the two women find their inequality erased through necessity.²² With the departure of the men for the war, Judith finds herself working alongside her sister in the basic tasks of household subsistence. Together, she and Clytie plant a garden, learn to manage the mule, and make their own clothing. No longer the young lady who took ceremonial shopping trips to town with her mother, Judith becomes a woman in a “homespun dress and sunbonnet seen before a closed door again in a cloudy swirl of chickens”(148). These words, which imply overuse, need, and the filth of labor, describe an unlikely costume for Judith. But the plantation is now the enterprise of toiling women; together, the “three women [weave] their own garments and [raise] their own food and cut the wood they [cook] it with” (148). Judith, who was once defined by her removal from domestic work, now finds herself not only working like a

²⁰ Scarlett O'Hara makes a dress out of curtains to present herself as still wealthy, rather than ravaged by the poverty and labor of running the plantation at the end of the Civil War (544-545).

²¹ Even upon his return from war, Sutpen still remembers the importance of appearance, as he and Sartoris arrive in regimental garb “sewed together out of silk dresses” (63).

²² Rosa notes, with shock, that Clytie and Judith “even slept together, in the same room but with Judith in the bed and she on a pallet on the floor ostensibly. But I have heard how on more than one occasion Ellen has found them both on the pallet , and once in the bed together” (112).

female slave in the house, but also working like a man, performing tasks of cutting wood or working the land: still “the spinster in the homemade and shapeless clothing, with hands which could either transfer eggs or hold a plow straight in the furrow” (151). The novel continuously reinforces the fact that Judith's body is now marked by work, both by her newly skilled hands and the repeated emphasis on her faded “homespun” dress. The work she performs, which blurs both gender and class lines, demonstrates the way in which Judith represents a new feminine relationship to labor and the management of the home.

In addition to being able to plow fields and cut wood, Judith learns to perform other traditionally masculine tasks. After her father's death, Judith runs his store responsibly in addition to carrying out her other duties around the house. When someone calls, she comes, “hailed from the kitchen or the garden or even from the field since she and Clytie now did all the plowing which was done” (152). She does not keep the store open, but instead keeps the “keys in her apron pocket” until she can find a buyer for it. Judith's proprietorship of the store calls to mind her aunt's strange visits to Mr. Coldfield's store; unlike her aunt, who does not even understand money or how the exchange of goods and currency works, Judith guards the store carefully, protecting it from looters without giving up her duties to the household. Keeping the keys in her apron pocket draws attention to Judith's femininity, and her crumbling position. From Southern icon to domestic and plantation laborer and store owner, Judith's transformation denies the stigma of helplessness with which femininity is burdened. As it does so, it simultaneously destabilizes the patriarchal aristocracy that relied upon an image of idle femininity in

order to justify the actions of its men.

The women's neophyte approach to labor—domestic or otherwise—allows the reader to see the domestic arts outside of the patriarchal history that initially condemned them and to realize the possibility such work has for the exploration of an alternative Southern femininity. Judith, once the daughter of a respectable family, eventually finds herself working in that house planting, sewing, cooking, and performing other tasks that would once have been relegated to slaves. This new relationship to the domestic shows the regenerative power of an action other than childbearing; as Judy Attfield and Paul Kirkham argue, one might even “equate the *process of making* with the *construction of meaning*” (7, emphasis original). In other words, the making of domestic goods allows the women to participate in shaping their own social identities. To perform the work of the domestic space likewise results in a feeling of control: as Singal suggests, Judith provides an example of the release domestic work can provide, as she “learns...to act decisively in a world without meaning”; just after her not-fiance's death, “Rosa Coldfield finds her calmly giving orders for preparing dinner and building a coffin (212).²³ In this way, the women learn to understand themselves as women not only against the image of lady that once defined them but also in relation to the ghostly position they were forced to occupy after the war. Instead, they learn to construct new meaning through their actions.

This new view of domesticity not only instigates a change in the racial and class-based relationships between the sisters, but it also allows for a redefinition of the space of the House. While the family house often serves as testament to the paternal family line, in

²³ Judith also contacts Charles Bon's octaroon wife, and soon finds herself caring for his son.

this case, Sutpen's Hundred is run by the work of women, the unspoken categories of legitimate and illegitimate blurred by necessity during the Civil War. If the construction of the house speaks to the image of Sutpen as “founding father,” the fact that Sutpen's unmarried white daughter and his unacknowledged Black daughter take control of the house (and the House) speaks to Patrick O'Donnell's theory that the Sutpen design is all based on fear: “the dynasty and history Sutpen wishes to conceive” he argues, “is founded upon the repression of what he fears most. What he fears—a fear that builds an empire—is that his 'manhood' is based merely upon a word” (31). In other words, the novel's characters are motivated by a fear of the power of categories of identity, and the book itself challenges those very categories. In this way, the novel “speaks to the nature of identity as a construction that occurs within narrative and cultural frameworks (O'Donnell 43), as the women's collective appropriation of the masculine responsibility of labor destabilizes categories of race, gender, and the narratives of familial legitimacy that maintain social hierarchies.

As Judith and Clytie take control over Sutpen's Hundred while their father is away during the war, the novel suggests an alternative model for the Southern lady-turned-ghost. Rather than maintaining the performance of an idealized, privileged leisure, many ladies found themselves faced with what Mesquita terms a “redefinition of Southern womanhood” (59). As Doreen Fowler suggests, “during the Civil War, the lady recreated herself to accommodate, even valorize, hardship” (3). She goes on to suggest that this revised version of “[t]he Confederate Woman image allowed women to take on traditionally masculine roles with no sacrifice of what the culture identifies as *essential*

white femininity: maternal feeling, sexual chastity, adherence to a male economy where property (land) is all-important (3). According to this theory, this “redefinition” of womanhood still relies on the land that grounds the Southern aristocracy; in addition, it retains the essential tenets of the original Southern lady—chastity, maternity, and an economy based in traditionally masculine values. In the terms of this argument, that redefinition takes place as the Southern lady redefines herself in relationship to that land, learning to perform the work of subsistence from she was previously kept distant.

This theory certainly informs my reading of Judith, who clearly evolves a closer, more-labor oriented relationship to the land that authorized her former privilege. More important than this, though, I would argue, is the way in which Judith's degraded class identity is manifested through an changing, strange relationship to domesticity. Forced to consider the practical rather than the aesthetic aspects of materials, like many Southerners Judith begins, as Rebecca Saunders writes, to see new potential in the objects that once testified to her former privilege:

rags become dresses, barns become hospitals, curtains become bandages, and boards from the carriage house become a coffin for Charles Bon. And this transformation is, moreover, a revaluation: an object's value as sign is replaced by its value as material. A dress or a curtain's value no longer inheres in its ability to function as sign--of taste, status, prosperity--but in its ability to function as material--with which to cover the body or a wound. This remade "property" of the lamentation is, further, no longer "proper" to its possessor. Such redistributions of identity, that is to say, effect an alienating disjunction--a *méconnaissance*--between a "possessor" and objects. (734-735)

As Saunders suggests, this sort destabilization of identity results in an alienating confrontation with the modernizing effects of change.²⁴ Indeed, this is a sign of the

²⁴ As I discussed earlier, Frederic Jameson argues in *Postmodernism* that one characteristic of modernism

novel's modernist tendencies—mediated as it is by the distance between the times of happening, telling, and writing. More specifically, this alienation occurs between the character, Judith, and her relationship to the fabrication or “remaking” of these objects; while the relationship between “possessor” and object is an integral part of the prestige that allows for this alienation, my argument relies on the novel's alienated perspective on this transformation. Judith's story is the tale of a lady who becomes a woman whose life not only requires domestic labor, but in fact will come to be defined by it.

Hers, then, are the strange eyes of modernism. The unlikely partnership between Judith and Clytie, running the house that was intended to serve as a monument to the prestige of the Sutpen family, allows for a questioning of the previously unquestionable division between them. Working together to fashion a wedding dress out of rags, sleeping side by side on the pallet in Judith's room, the women's collaborative domestic management of Sutpen's plantation emphasizes the change in Judith's circumstances. By bringing an inexperienced woman like Judith to domestic work, the novel challenges the its traditional association with the premodern. Because the concept of domestic labor was essential to the understanding of the Southern lady's privilege, the novel suggests that its representation, particularly through the strange eyes of the fallen gentlewoman, allows for the development of a tenuous modernity in the South.

The novel's style and complicated temporal shifts provide an additionally

is a preoccupation with time rather than space and what he calls a technological “lag.” In other words, “modernism is characterized by a situation of incomplete modernization” meaning that postmodernism is more modern than modernism itself...if modernization is something that happens to the base, and modernism the form the superstructure takes in reaction to that ambivalent development, then perhaps modernity characterizes the attempt to make something coherent out of their relationship. Modernity would then in that case describe the way ‘modern’ people feel about themselves” (310).

alienated view of the changing nature of domestic labor in its portrayal of the Old South. As women like Judith were forced to adopt a more active role in the maintenance of their homes and families, that private space comes to serve as more than a metaphorical trophy case for the Southern woman's pedestal; Instead, it becomes a “site of agency and mode of communication for female novelists and protagonists, with the domain of the private, the interior and the everyday replacing the public sphere” (Briganti and Mezei 1). In this way, the private space provides a schematic for the mapping of the new possibilities for feminine identity. No longer prohibited from adopting a more traditional identity through the performance of tasks classified as recognizably female, women like Judith couple these domestic tasks with the management of the masculine jobs. In its literary reimagining of the Southern plantation and home, the novel also reconceives of the House, the dynasty desired by the aspiring Sutpen. It presents a dynasty of illegitimate children, mixed race heirs, and laboring daughters, all of which allow for that strange view; it provides a point of departure for a modernist return to complicated and established gender roles. Still driven by the tensions of forced and damaging labor relations, the novel expands the possibilities for understanding the Southern lady's disappearance and the way in which domestic labor lets her become more than just a ghost of her past life.

Domestic Fashions

One of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s stories is that of the erosion of the feminine

privilege that was the icon of the South. While the novel tells many tales—with its many overlapping narrators, its nonlinear plot development, and its rich, distinctive language—this less-examined facet represents the dissolution of a traditionally severely divided class system. It traces the disintegrating social status of the novel's three most prominent upper-class women through their evolving relationships to domestic labor. From Ellen's insistence upon the maintenance of distance from need, to her sister's clumsy sewing of the goods for her niece's trousseau, to Judith's eventual turn to varying degrees of hard domestic work at Sutpen's Hundred, the novel suggests that women, their interests, and their labor, are an integral part of the story of the American South.

In the case of this novel, that feminine sphere is one largely represented through clothing and aesthetic objects. Visibly representing privilege and social status, clothing is an integral part of the readable system that denotes and maintains privilege—Ellen's insistence on the performance of shopping and outfitting her daughter's courtship indicates a clear understanding of its power. The public nature of Ellen's shopping trip indicates that this action is a part of the fashion system, in which society is organized by visual signs. Rosa's inept sewing project, begun in hopes of keeping up the appearances of her niece's trousseau, also participates in this system. And yet, this is a different sort of performance—rather than a commitment to the highest quality garments and the fanciest materials, Rosa's story suggests that the actions signify more than the items themselves. As the dresses Rosa makes will never look like the things a truly privileged woman would buy or have made for her, they testify instead to a deeper commitment to challenging the restrictions of class identity, but simultaneously and even contradictorily,

they mark Rosa's move to conform to a more recognizable feminine identity and a refusal to be erased by the destruction of the system into which she was born. Rosa's sewing results in clothing that functions in the fashion system, but the items communicate more about their maker than their intended wearer.

Like the distinctive style or the signature piece of a high fashion designer, homemade clothing like Rosa's can signify the work and identity of its maker; it can also speak to the complications of the identity from which she labors. Faulkner's characterization of Judith's transformation furthers this line of thinking, in that Judith brings her strange perspective to not only the creation of clothing, but also to the performance of traditionally masculine, physically challenging tasks (plowing, cutting wood, etc.). Judith labors along side her sister Clytie to maintain the plantation, no matter how poorly it functions. Judith's clothing—that repeatedly mentioned “faded sunbonnet” and “homespun dress”—signifies the decreased finances of her once wealthy family. Her seeming acceptance of her sister as equal and her varied labor around the house and the plantation speaks to that declining status. It also suggests that the novel sees these actions as readable in a different light. Judith's work, removed from the rigidity of fiercely stratified social system, can also be read as a move away from traditional limitations and restrictions, a denial of the class, race, and gender hierarchies she is expected to uphold. From the perspective of “ghost,” the women's journeys are an unexpected way in which the story of Southern femininity becomes a part of literary modernism.

The characters of *Absalom, Absalom!* come to domesticity with the strange perspective of modernism; that is to say, the distance from which they approach its labors

allows for an expansion of traditional understandings of the potential of domestic labor. Coming to domesticity from this perspective, the women of the novel cannot help but see with strange eyes what many of their contemporaries—and many of ours—would not think to question. Their strange perspective allows them to see domesticity with eyes untarnished by the weariness of necessity and experience. Instead, they see strategies for claiming an identity, or a means to survive in a world collapsing around them. In questioning the stigma placed on the category of domestic, the novel suggests that social structures are organized and reinforced by even the most private and forgotten forms of labor.

More importantly, the novel illustrates that domestic labor functions in the fashion system in its ability to categorize people, individuals and spaces. While it often includes the making and maintenance of clothing, domestic labor is not limited to the garments themselves. It incorporates the performance of tasks, often visibly and for the viewing of others, that contribute to the organizing agency of the fashion system. Because performing one's own domestic tasks generally implies need and the inability to pay someone else to do them, this sort of labor is a readable, class-based behavior. In addition, if clothing appears to be homemade—like Judith's ubiquitous sun dress—it implies and makes that labor visible. Because, as I argued earlier, the fashion system includes behaviors and mannerisms coded by social hierarchies, it includes by definition, the performance of labor and the visible implication of that labor in garments that appear to have been made through need rather than easily purchased from another laborer.

By way of the domestic, *Absalom, Absalom!* finds its way into a modernism that

is not fashionable but is certainly a kind of fashion. As women whose idealized distance from labor once served as the icon of a way of life, the Southern ladies in this novel bring the distance of privilege and class prestige to their domesticity. They use clothing and domestic labor to paradoxically defend a way of life that once relied on their distance. In this way, the women of the novel question the “unquestionable” ways of life into which they were born, as well as the stigmas and negative associations of domestic labor in the social hierarchy. As it helps to navigate the complications and tensions that define both private and public feminine experience, domesticity provides the point of view from which to turn the “strange eyes” of modernism to the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*

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