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Laughingstock-y: Fatness, Excess, Humor, and the Critical Male Eye in Late 19th and Early 20th-Century Short Stories

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Laughingstock-y: Fatness, Excess, Humor, and the Critical Male Eye in Late 19th and Early 20th-Century Stories

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Laughingstock-y: Fatness, Excess, Humor, and the Male Gaze in Late 19th and Early 20th-Century Stories
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Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century, cultural anxiety centered predominantly around the rise of industry and a nascent middle class. Fatness, emerges at this point as a scapegoat for anxiety about a powerful middle class. The reluctance of many Americans, particularly aristocrats, to accept an economically growing middle class helped to foment a hostile stereotype about the physicality of these people. Cartoons, ads, postcards and stories from the period represent the middle class's innate lack of sophistication that drove them to both to spend and consume excessively, as abundant flesh. Yet, these works that are supposed to promote awareness of the growing threat of the middle class end up focusing mostly on the repulsiveness of corpulence. This focus on corpulence turns into a vehicle for humor, as the middle class were portrayed as foolishly lavish, and oftentimes stupid.

However, the humorous fat body has a gender component too. Though men are often depicted as corpulent "fat cats," their representations are considerably benign compared to those of women. The women who are the focal point of many nineteenth century postcards and stories are placed in front of a judgmental, unforgiving, male audience. Oftentimes, these onlookers are well-to-do men, married to corpulent women who are larger than them. "Particularly the corpulent female body thus bore the guilt of exploitative economic relations as a legible, stigmatic mark upon the body" (Huff 52). In these cases, with men looking on helplessly, women took the brunt of the blame for the exploitation of newly available resources. In the works I will look at, women are depicted unanimously as the ones whose consumption is deplorable while their husbands appear in perfect control of their bodies. As such, fat female subjects in particular were represented as greedy, hopelessly unattractive, clumsy and resigned to a lifetime of isolation and unhappiness unless they could refuse both food and material temptations and "reduce" down to a desirable size.

1. Fatness and the Rising Middle Class

According to the United States government as of 2010, 42.7% of children, adolescents and adults are obese, which does not even account for those who are overweight but below the obesity threshold. With such a sizable chunk of the country's population being overweight/obese, our culture has grown increasingly sensitive yet desensitized in many ways, to the negative portrayal of those who carry excess weight. As such, it has become acceptable for contemporary novels to feature "fat" characters only when they are the protagonists, setting out on a noble weight-loss venture with many valuable life lessons learned along the way. The fat character is only depicted in a negative light to the extent that his or her life could clearly be much improved if only he or she could drop the excess pounds. Subsequently, whatever other baggage he or she may be carrying around goes the way of the weight lost and life becomes a tale of happily ever after. This "story" is also the favorite amongst real life tales. The media is peppered with images of people who have found the magic remedy to their weight problem and have conquered all of their "demons," once and for all. These journeys are often filled with religious rhetoric suggesting that attaining one's goal weight is akin to religious salvation.

As such, it would be challenging to imagine a body of literature and a visual culture in which fat people were overtly the subject of jokes and their weight loss journeys were but another vehicle for humor. It is very possible for one to make this argument about our very own cultural moment. However, as I will demonstrate, the cruelty towards those deemed "fat" was much more explicit and condemnatory from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century, seemingly because it was not officially "politically incorrect" to disdain fatness. In fact, the

conflation of humor with fatness seems to emerge precisely at this moment. The rise of capitalist industry gave way to a new middle class who were viewed by true aristocrats as not worthy of their money. As Susan Bordo asserts in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture in the Body*,

> "Excess body weight came to be seen as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy or lack of will. These associations are possible only in a culture of overabundance, that is, in a society in which those who control the production of 'culture' have more than enough to eat… Increasingly, the size and shape of the body have come to operate as a market of personal, internal order (or disorder- as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual" (Bordo 192)

As a given group gains economic strength and has access to more food, they are expected to be able to regulate their indulgences—if not, they are looked upon as unnecessarily lavish. As such, fatness became a sign of foolishness worn on the body; an externalization of an innate lack of sophistication.

It is easy for us to assume that today's stigma against fatness has emerged as a response to apparent health risks with obesity rhetoric centering around imminent medical danger. However, as Amy Erdman Farrell points out in *Fat Shame,* "the connotations of fatness and of the fat person-- lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, and lacking in willpower-- preceded and then were intertwined with explicit concern about health issues" (4). These associations led to fat's increasing reputation as a "social as well as a physical problem" (4). Farrell goes on to argue that fat was

> "A central protagonist in the cultural development of what constituted a proper American body" and that "the development of fat stigma... related both to cultural anxieties that emerged during the modern period over consumer excess, and importantly, to prevailing ideas about race, civilization and evolution... fat denigration is intricately related to gender as well as racial hierarchies" (5).

Though it is easy to look at fat stigma as a contemporary issue, the bias is so ingrained in our culture because of fat's negative connotation in earlier periods, the majority of which, as I will demonstrate, emerge between the late 1800s and the early 1900s in the form of blatant humor as a result of a distaste for a needlessly extravagant nascent middle class.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, cultural anxieties were centered around the development of industry, the growing middle class, and an expanding push for women's liberation. These trends together created a need for a new scapegoat and fat people were the perfect target as their abundant physicality clearly crossed boundaries. Corpulent bodies represented a literally "growing" middle class-- one that could now afford the luxuries formerly reserved for the true upper class. As the middle class exploited their new privileges, they were portrayed in various mediums as physically larger than the classes both above and beneath them. Meanwhile, a new, factory-dependent lifestyle in which labor was split up into manual and non-manual categories (Blumin 73), with the working class accounting for most of the "manual artisans," called for economy in all facets of life. Thus, the thinner body, which took up less space than the larger body became favorable. Later, suffragettes and women's liberation advocates were drawn in antagonist political propaganda as corpulent and masculine. Much like the depiction of rising middle-class bodies as crossing literal and physical boundaries, "the suffragists' fatness represents the way that their bodies and their desires—for votes and for power—are out of control… Indeed their insatiable appetites have made them into monstrous, mannish women" (Farrell 89). These various phenomena are examples of just how fatness is blamed for the root of all problems, and, can be seen as the root of contemporary

society's war on fat. But, just how did nineteenth century and early twentieth-century literature embody this ethos?

The fat body was not always ubiquitously negative. It once was a sign of good health and prosperity, not the butt of a perpetual joke. However, it was fat's status as a marker of unwarranted[1] prosperity that made it a target for humor. What made the bourgeois *different* from the upper classes was the same thing that made them, or at least portrayals of them, humorous. Bourgeoisie were so concerned with their newfound ability to consume that they allowed their bodies to grow out into veritable symbols of consumption. Thrilled with being able to purchase commodities at their every whim, they mistook class for being about money rather than comport. In turn, they misused what they were able to have because they were too concerned with money's powers rather than the true meaning of wealth.

> "The bulging stomachs of successful mid-nineteenth century businessmen and politicians were a symbol of bourgeois success, an outward manifestation of their accumulated wealth. By contrast, the gracefully slender body announced aristocratic status; disdainful of the bourgeois need to display wealth and power ostentatiously, it commanded social space invisibly rather than aggressively, seeming above the commerce in appetite or the need to eat" (Bordo 191).

True aristocrats exercised appetite control as a way to cultivate an air that would in turn demand a respectable social space. The corpulent bodies of newly successful members of the bourgeois physically usurped the boundaries of that space with their larger frames. Oddly enough, fatness was not necessarily just for a certain class anymore. "Mass production of foods on farms, factory processed foods and better transportation systems meant that people had access to more—though of course not necessarily

[1] I use the term unwarranted here, because the new middle class were not inherently wealthy and upper-class, rather they were seen as exploiting industrialization to become a group of "haves", as opposed to "have-nots."

healthier, food" (Farrell 40). The problem wasn't that only those with money could buy better, but more unhealthy food, rather, that more unhealthy foods became cheaper. Then, fatness and wealth did not necessarily have a causal relationship. Anyone who ate more because it was readily available could grow corpulent. But, the dominant classes decided to exploit fatness, ostensibly because of its physical presence, as a dangerous symptom of an out of control middle class.

Farrell calls fatness before the middle to late nineteenth century the "prerogative of the few" that was "linked to a generalized sense of prosperity, distinction, and high status" (27). As the middle class expanded, gaining wealth along the way, they too had the "prerogative" to eat well and grow corpulent like the upper class always had the resources to do. Presumably, though, these upper class "few" bore their weight in a more dignified way than the now garishly corpulent bourgeois who wore their wealth on their bodies in the form of excess flesh. The reluctance of many Americans, particularly aristocrats, to accept an economically growing middle class helped to foment a hostile stereotype about the physicality of these people. The middle class was trying to emulate the upper class in both behavior and appearance but the reigning upper classes feared that the middling folk were adulterating what it meant to be truly genteel.

Farrell points out that it was in the 1920s when the advertising industry began to capitalize massively on the fear of fat. But, nineteenth-century Americans were already deeply anxious about any kind of excess given the rising middle class, hence the ability of advertisers to galvanize this fear in later decades. Despite the corpulent body's previous reputation as a marker of upper-class status and wealth, "a fat body came to be seen less as one that was successful, healthy, or wealthy, but rather as one that was ineffectively managing the modern world" (Farrell 27). Upwardly mobile middle-class

citizens were unable to demonstrate effective management of their newfound prosperity. The fat body was rendered a symbol of incompetence at wealth management, a “significant shift from earlier understandings of fatness as a sign of superior class status” (27).

While looking through ads from early periodicals certainly validate Farrell’s thesis that fat became a scapegoat for many negative stereotypes, I am interested in locating the humor in these cultural texts. That is, not only were these fat people shamed for their indulgence in more lavish lifestyles than most could afford, but they were made into laughingstocks because of it. There “was no end to the ‘fat jokes’ about these people, portrayed as members of ‘mainstream’ America who seemed to have partaken too much in the pleasures of their relatively easy lives” (40). Strangers to moderation, the new bourgeois were the perfect jocular subject because of their ineffectiveness at wealth management and genuine belief that indulgence was a true marker of capital. Though Farrell asserts that “what is supposed to be funny about these people is their unbridled enjoyment of the privileges that had once been reserved for the upper class,” it seems to me that the propaganda aspect falls flat at some points as the viewer ends up focusing on the corpulent body alone. These ads would not have been widespread if the corpulent bodies of rising middle-class citizens did not, aesthetically, make for funny images due to the way excess was portrayed. Representing those rising up as a legitimate threat, ads focused on the way misusing excess wealth had crushing consequences. What better way to depict that threat than with an overweight person whose sheer size appears simultaneously menacing and out of control?

Yet, Stuart Blumin claims in his *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900*, the term “middle class” is a misnomer-- a

highly ambiguous yet pervasive term which has often been rationalized as the reasoning for more “serious conflicts revolv[ing] around differences of race, ethnicity, religion and region rather than the diverging interests and ideologies of economic classes” (2). Instead of a tangible middle class, what existed was a “pervasive middle-class culture.” Resulting from this culture were: “ways in which unequal distributions of wealth, income, opportunity, workplace tasks and authority, political power, legal status, and social prestige” arranged the “lives and consciousness of specific groups of Americans” (3). In this way, we can understand the correlation between middle-class status and fat humor as an indirect one. It was not necessarily one’s *economic* status as a middle-class American that made them fat, and that fatness inherently funny. Rather, a specific economic level, certainly above that of the working class but below the aristocracy, led to a set of practices that caused fatness. Fatness did not explicitly mean one was a member of the middle class, and all members of the middle class certainly were not fat. If only a set of habits existed rather than an actual middle class, we then can see fat humor as meant for entertainment purposes rather than meant to cultivate any sort of awareness of what Blumin views as a quasi-class. Blumin’s assessment of the term “middle class” dovetails with Amy Farrell’s theory that fatness has historically been used as way to isolate social groups whose ideas and behavioral patterns disagree with hegemonic practices. If fatness serves as an unflattering way to portray the “other,” and things were often blamed on the “middle class,” who did not necessarily exist economically, but rather, socially, we get one very blame-heavy scenario where cruel laughter is pointed without true rhyme or reason.

Though not all of these early cartoons were meant to provoke laughter alongside consciousness of a rising middle class, some certainly were and the distinction is

notable. In a 1908 *Life* magazine cartoon, an extremely overweight man is dangling uncomfortably from a rope pulley, presumably trying to exercise (Figure 1). His eyes bulge out of his head as he is clearly overextending himself. Beneath him is a potion labeled “anti-fat” and a book titled “What a Man Should Weigh and Measure.” A sign hangs above him that reads “Knowledge is Power” and the caption underneath this scene reads “Self-Taut,” punning on the man’s failed attempts to be both “self-taught” and to have a “taut” physical frame. In the background, a cat with a frightened expression looks on. Besides the obvious deprecation of this large man, the cartoon suggests a reciprocal relationship between being stupid and being fat. He cannot lose weight because he is foolish, and he is foolish to have become heavy in the first place by exploiting newly available resources. Both his stupidity and his weight make him the butt of a joke.

Even though this cartoon ostensibly depicts a man who will do anything to gain upward mobility, there is little in the drawing to suggest this man’s efforts are paying off. He is not particularly well dressed; in fact his clothes are shoddy and pulling on his stocky frame. The only commodities in the drawing are a book and a bottle of “anti-fat” potion which suggest that he wishes buy the antidote for fatness in the form of all kinds of concoctions. The man thinks that by consuming these antidotes, he will grow thin, rise up, and be able to afford even more commodities. Weight loss will allow him to more closely resemble a true aristocrat. But, instead of classing himself up, he tries to assimilate via the consumption responsible for his corpulence. He literally tries to pull himself up via a tenuous rope for which he is clearly too heavy. Humor here is pointed towards the man’s sheer foolishness for thinking that the ways he has used the wealth he has acquired thus far will allow him to become a true member of upper class society.

Unfortunately, through these means he highlights his foolishness, provoking laugher and alienating himself even further.

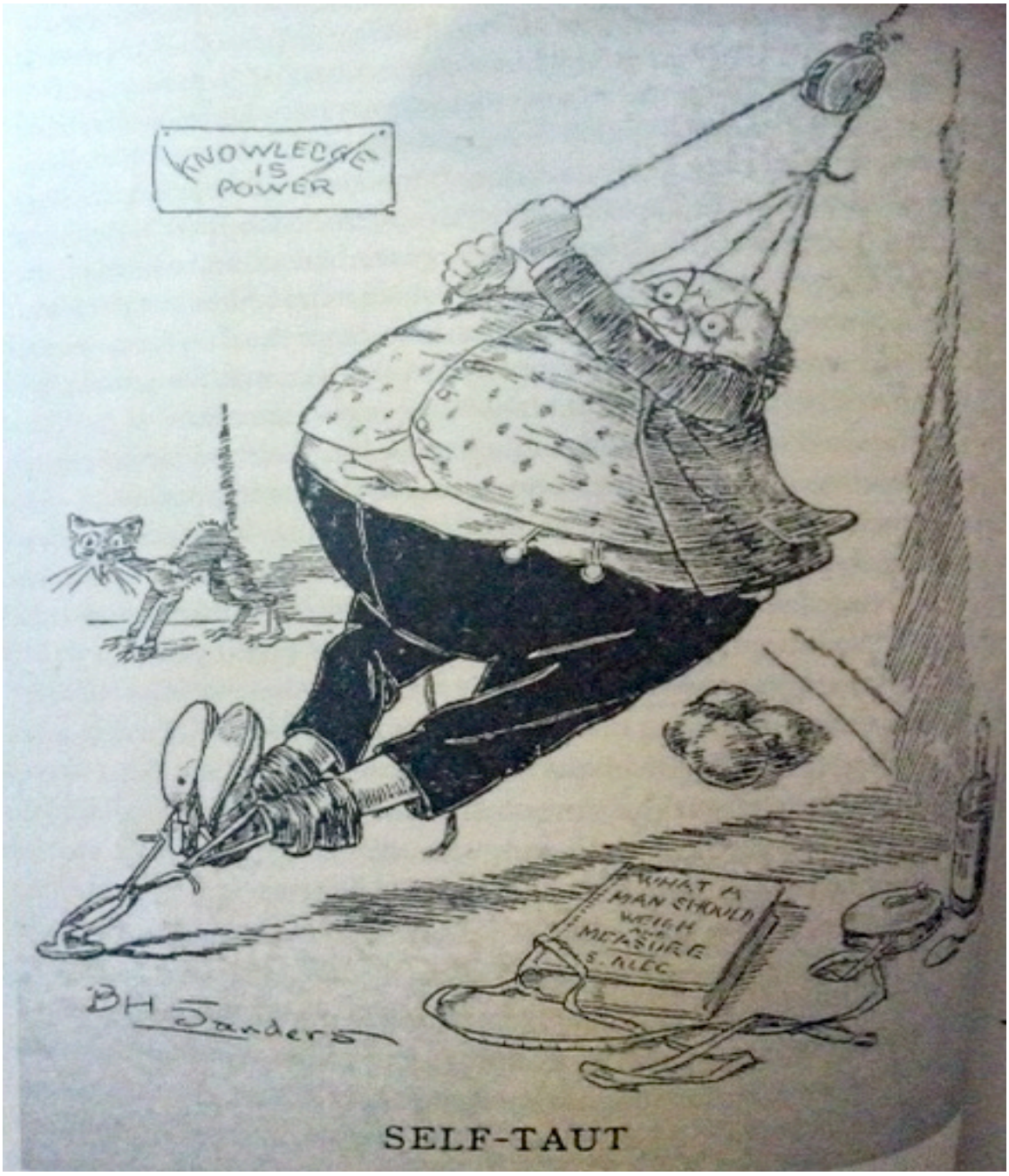

Fig. 1. “Self Taut.” Cartoon. *Life* 12 Mar. 1908: 281. Print.

Similarly, a cartoon from an 1897 issue of *Life* shows a middle-class man whose large body is problematic because it is an emblem of his class ambition. He is

presented against a stark white background, which emphasizes his sheer size. His suit jacket looks entirely too small and his midsection bears the brunt of his weight. His legs, comparatively small for his body, perhaps represent the fact that both his bloated middle and his middle-class exploitative powers rest tenuously upon a tightly constrained, lower class that is exploited for its manual labor. His feet rest on the ground in poiy, delicate shoes. Despite his dapper togs, one cannot help but see that this man has clearly indulged too much. His body does not carry excess well. As a result, he looks too sloppy and out of control to be a member of the aristocracy he aspires to.

Fig. 2. “A Full Dress Suit.” *Life*. 19 Aug. 1897: 147. Print.

2. Criticisms of Female Fatness

Anxieties around the newly powerful middle-class body focused on women even more than on men. I have previously discussed two cartoons that portray middle-class male fat cats as segway into an illumination of the differences between the treatment of the corpulent bodies of males and females. Stories showcasing overweight “fat cats” drew attention to men’s size in a more benign way than the ways in which women are focused on. Most notably, ads and cartoons centered around male bodies lack the critical patriarchal eye that is perpetually upon women. Whereas the men in these two cartoons are the focal point against starkly empty backdrops, stories and postcards that focus on women’s bodies always have an audience, certainly outside the frame but oftentimes within it as well. Though the cartoon of the man dangling from the delicate rope is ostensibly designed to elicit laughter because of his precarious position, there is no snickering onlooker drawn into the picture. Postcards depicting corpulent women and stories about corpulent women either explicitly show, or imply a dissatisfied audience, usually male. Women are then the focus of a Foucauldian gaze—a laughing, mocking stare that seeks to train their out of control (fat) bodies into submission. The woman then “stands in patriarchal culture as the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of women” (Mulvey 834). The women in these ads cannot combat their cruel depiction. Rather, women must sit back and be the “passive/female” to the “active/male” (Mulvey 837). They are the helpless ones being read, rather than

the powerful reader. Oftentimes, this male gaze directs attention onto female bodies in a way, which turns the corpulent frame into a laughing matter.

The women who are the focal point of many nineteenth-century postcards and stories are placed in front of a judgmental, unforgiving, male audience. Oftentimes, these onlookers are well-to-do men, married to corpulent women who are larger than them. “Particularly the corpulent female body thus bore the guilt of exploitative economic relations as a legible, stigmatic mark upon the body” (Huff 52). When there is a married rising middle-class couple present, the woman “took the shape of an older, rich, and no longer attractive matron” (Farrell 30), perhaps because her safety in marriage allowed her a certain lackadaisical nature. In these cases, with men looking on helplessly, women took the brunt of the blame for the exploitation of newly available resources. In the works I will look at, women are depicted unanimously as the ones whose consumption is deplorable while their husbands appear in perfect control of their bodies. These women “needed to be placated and pleased, as they held the purse-strings” (Farrell 30). They exploit their husband’s resources and become despicably corpulent as their husbands look on in horror and shame. As such, fat female subjects in particular were represented as greedy, hopelessly unattractive, clumsy and resigned to a lifetime of isolation and unhappiness unless they could refuse both food and material temptations and “reduce” down to a desirable size. Unfortunately, slimming down was represented as a virtually impossible task for fat and incompetent women. As such, it wasn’t just the fatness itself that was imbued with an uncanny humor, it was the inevitably onerous path towards thinness and the trials and tribulations along the way.

One thing that remains the same between fat portrayals of men and women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is the link between fatness and

incompetence. Authors and artists seem especially to exploit fatness as a trait that points to a low intellect specifically because only the stupid could squander resources so frivolously. A study by Brett Silverstein, which looks at the relationship between perceived female incompetence and body shape, confirms the trend I see across the literature and visual material I have studied. Silverstein says that "it may be fair to assert that an important cause of eating disorders among women is the association between curvaceousness and incompetence" (906). That is, many women, both at the present time and during the 1920s, exhibit signs of eating disorders because women have been considered to be less professional, competent, and intelligent than men, so that women who appear to have more classically "feminine," [curvy], bodies are considered to be less competent than other women. While eating disorders are not the subject of my own investigation, Silverstein's conclusion highlights the common social perception of larger women as less competent than their thinner peers and brings to light yet another bias against the fat female body. When thinness came into vogue via the new woman, and the plump, old, matron went out of fashion, the large female body was marginalized. The corpulent body was then one was that was unable to govern itself properly, avoiding the hegemonic voice which told it to slim down. Stories of women and fatness then find their humor in these women's ineffectiveness and incompetence at managing both wealth and their bodies. These stories use the patriarchal eye as a vehicle for directing humor and humiliation onto the female body, allowing the reader to judge the corpulent woman within the confines of male preference.

Postcards depicting fat women, much like fat males, circulated for the alleged purpose of cultivating awareness about the dangers of a rising middle class—one filled with women who would spend and consume until they literally grew outward. Postcards

showing overweight women push the purported real issue of the rising middle class to the wayside in favor of displaying the fat female body as a humorous subject who has misused her access to free flowing capital. Though the purpose of the postcards I will discuss is supposedly cultural awareness of this phenomenon, again, attention is humiliatingly diverted to the women's oversized bodies. Farrell assesses the cause of this trend to be that "as women gained more political and geographic freedom in the early 20th century, they were increasingly curtailed by a set of body disciplines that mocked and denigrated all those who did not seem to display proper modes of bodily control" (53). To conflate this reasoning with class, one could argue that as women gained economic control, which historically has led to political control, their bodies needed to be held back. This statement strikingly evokes Naomi Wolf's thesis in *The Beauty Myth* that as women gain more social freedoms, their bodies become the target for male criticism and the locus of social control. Every time women display the ability to mobilize and create change, the dominant culture subjugates their authority via other means—this time by critiquing the body. Around the time of second-wave feminism, as Wolf points out, the dominant culture oppresses women by trying to control the size of their bodies. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, attention is again diverted to the size of women's bodies, this time as a source of entertainment and humor as they take on (and continue to bear) the brunt of size-ism, despite the presence of equally large males.

One postcard features a voluptuous woman who takes up almost the entire card, making it aesthetically impossible to avoid looking at her body. She lays by the ocean, posed in a glamorous but suggestive manner. In the background, a police officer reprimands her: "'Get up, Missus, and let the tide come in!'" The postcard is meant to

elucidate the fact that allowing middle-class women new freedoms is a dangerous undertaking. Due to this woman's sheer size, she is literally blocking opportunities for other beachgoers as she lazes about. The focal point of the postcard is certainly the woman's corpulent frame. Ironically, the point of postcards is usually to provide a look into an idyllic, natural setting for the recipient. The purpose of the postcard is then negated, as here, the recipient (or any onlooker) cannot see much beyond the woman's body as she blocks any semblance of a landscape. The audience is built into the postcard in the form of the police officer, whose statement is insensitive and suggests that her largeness disrupts even the earth's natural phenomena. The inclusion of this disgruntled male presence predisposes the audience to sneer at the sunbathing woman whose newfound wealth has allowed her leisure time on the beach. The only thing important to her is her own relaxation. The postcard suggests that she, like the rest of the middle class, is self-absorbed in both her behavior and her motives. Perhaps it is a comment on the unnaturalness of the middle class; a group that cannot claim noble birth, only newfangled money. This postcard seats artifice in the body of a woman. The only thing important to her is her own relaxation.

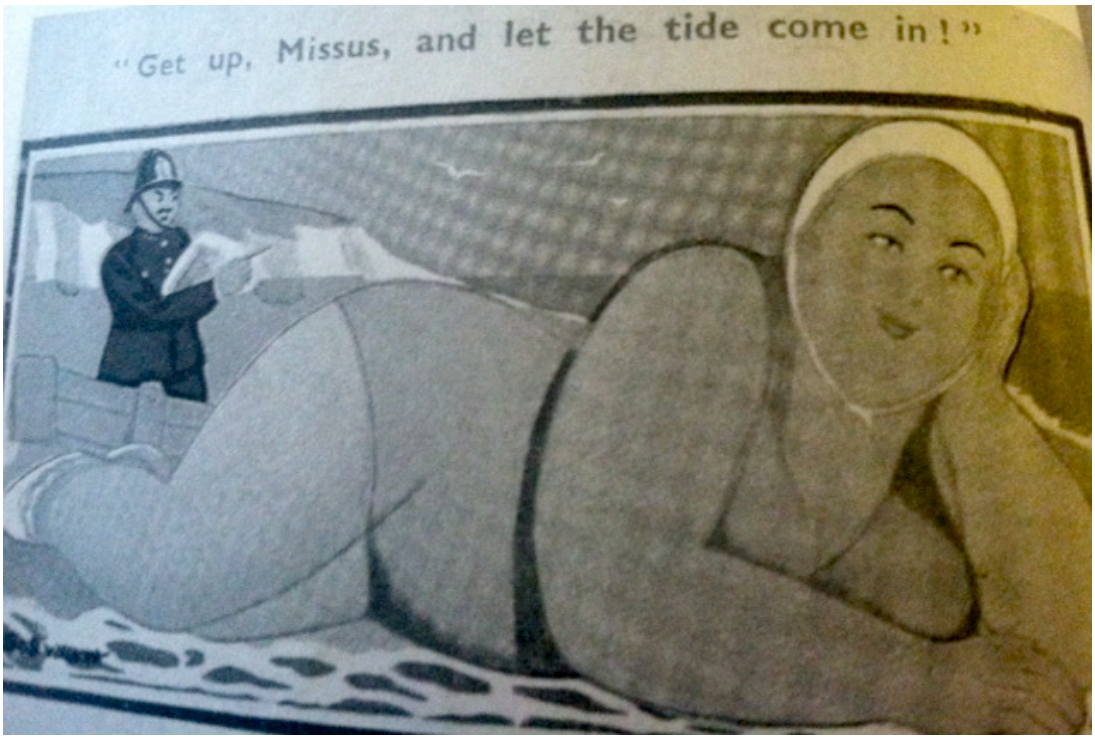

Fig 3. Courtesy of Alice Marshall Women's History Collection, Penn State Harrisburg, Middletown, Pennsylvania.

The woman on the beach is a spectacle, at best and certainly a subject intended for insensitive snickers because of her large, out of control body. Another cruel postcard with the alleged purpose of alerting the public about the threat of middle-class autonomous women, ends up depicting a woman's corpulent body as indicative of a wildly extravagant lifestyle. A couple is loading their car with packages, presumably after a vacation. The woman cannot fit all of the things she has bought during the trip in the trunk so she tries to put some items in the backseat. Both her purchases and her body exceed the car's spatial limits. The postcard shows her large derriere embarrassingly sticking out of the back door as her markedly thinner husband looks on with bulging eyes. Here, the husband is the patriarchal eye who looks on, seemingly agonized that his newfound capital has catalyzed his wife's unfavorable physical transformation. The audience's critical lens becomes the husband's; through his

shocked look, we too are transfixed by her sheer size. Her backside is larger than his entire body. The caption mockingly reads: “travel certainly broadens one.” This blurb brings attention to the fact that this couple now has the means to do extensive traveling and shopping which in turn has led to the wife’s large body. The wife’s body is shown in direct contrast with her husband’s well-dressed, streamlined, frame. He has managed his wealth properly, keeping both his spending and his appearance in check. She has not-- so she is pushed to the forefront. Though, it is certainly possible that the husband has accounted for some of the shopping but the entirety of the blame is placed on her and her larger body. The only time a fat woman will be the center of attention is when she is presented in a negative light: as a laughingstock.

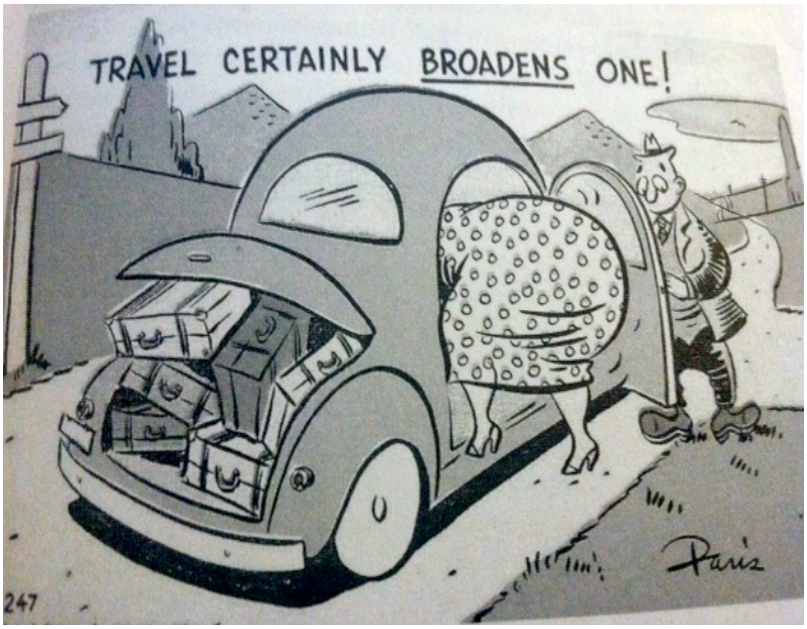

Fig. 4. Courtesy of Alice Marshall’s Women’s History Collection, Penn State Harrisburg, Middletown, Pennsylvania.

As I mentioned previously, it wasn’t just fat that was funny, it was the onerous journey from fat to slim that the corpulent had to take. A 1920 diet book *How to Reduce: New Waistlines for Old* by Antoinette Donnelly mocks fatness and celebrates thinness

all while giving diet advice. The book opens with the sweeping statement: “It has been frequently said that the world is divided into two kinds of people-- those who are trying to get thin and those who are trying to get fat. May we not, for convenience sake, designate the abodes of these two peoples as Slimville and Fatland” (1). With this opening, Donnelly establishes the large gap in lifestyle between those who are overweight and those who are slim. Her separatism mirrors the disparity between the upper and middle class in that they are completely distinct entities, with no common interests. People who differ in body size are so fundamentally different that they cannot even coexist in the same fictional land. Slimville is described as “the land of Utopia and Perpetual Youth... Of Beautiful Women and Attractive Men...The abode of Hipless Helen, Slender Susan and Symmetrical Anne” whereas Fatland is described as “a state with mountains of adipose... Its style of architecture is... square cut... its populace are a slow-moving people, who motto is: EASE AT ANY COST” (2-3). The tone of these few opening phrases is acerbic and mocking. The author reinforces the link between fatness and laziness and between slimness, beauty and success. The rhetoric implies that Slimville is a place of heaven-like bliss whereas Fatland is place of hell-like suffering. If one can achieve slimness, one can ascend to a heavenly utopia. If one remains fat, they remain weighed down by heaviness and hence, unhappy.

Curiously, Donnelly also demarcates Fatland and Slimville by gender. Even though Slimville is a land of beautiful women *and* attractive men, Donnelly explicitly mentions residents of Slimville to be “Hipless Helen, Slender Susan, and Asymmetrical Anne.” Limiting the description of Slimville to only include women reinforces the stifling pressure on women to fulfill a slender body ideal. But, Donnelly does this in a clever and amusing way through alliteration. If Slimville is to include Hipless Helen and women of

the like, should we assume the residents of Fatland would be those such as Fat Fran, Plump Patricia, and Stout Sally? If one could not be described as a Slender Susan, would she inevitably have one of these more unflattering titles fitted to her? It is not enough for women to just have to be slender, they must be coerced into it by the threat of laughter (usually male), and spectacle.

3. Fatness and Literature

The discussion of political cartoons, postcards and Antoinette Donnelly's cookbook serve to contextualize a body of largely ignored literature in which fat people, specifically women, were treated as funny subjects. The mocking, according to my reading, stems from an upper class anxiety about the ways in which the nascent middle class was using their money to try to attain upward mobility. Their lack of spending willpower materialized in the form of gross excess on their frames, which became an easy target for jokes thinly veiled as political material. Fat women's bodies were the perfect target for cruelty and laughter since women, even more than men who had to control their bodies in order to embody the masculine ideal of "muscular, strong and able" (Farrell 46), needed to keep impulses and excess in check. The woman shouldn't indulge, rather she should serve the man; in Bordo's words "'men eat and women prepare'" (119). Denial of food for women was, during the nineteenth century, and still is, the "central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse" (130). Standing beside the middle-class man whose resources now allowed him unbridled enjoyment of food, the sensible choice for the woman would be to restrain herself. If she didn't abstain from gross intake, she'd grow corpulent and have the daunting process of slimming ahead of her.

An 1887 serialized *Harper's Monthly* story entitled "The Stout Miss Hopkins Bicycle" by Alice French, written under the pen name Octave Thanet displays the way in which overindulgence in victuals leads to an onerous, difficult weight loss journey. Unable to restrain themselves, Mrs. Ellis and Miss Hopkins use their financial means to enjoy the finer things in life. The story hinges on the two women's corpulence to entertain readers. This story has no underlying moral. All the reader comes to understand is that immoderation when it comes to food will put one in a situation where one's body serves as a spectacle. One of the main purposes for Miss Hopkins and Mrs. Ellis to be quite as stout as they are is entertainment value. The very title suggests that the story *needs* Miss Hopkins to be stout in order to be told properly.

The somewhat dramatic statement which begins the story: "there was a skeleton in Mrs. Margaret Ellis's closet; the same skeleton abode also in the closet of Miss Lorania Hopkins" (Thanet 3), suggests that this skeleton, "the dread of growing stout," is what stands between the women and true upper class status, conflating the importance of a thin female body with the proper air of wealth. Ellis and Hopkins are described as "more afraid of flesh than sin" (3). Despite the litany of good deeds each had done in her lifetime including generous donations to the poor, and their upstanding moral characters, the women still were overweight, and determined to vanquish their fleshy frames. Presumably, Thanet lists off each woman's merits to demonstrate that they really do not deserve to be overweight—they are quite devout women. They are described as "waging a warfare against the flesh equal to the apostle's in vigor" (5). Again, religious rhetoric is applied to the undertaking of women's weight loss to explain both how hard it is to reduce and what a noble undertaking it is. A " frail frame and lack of appetite signified spiritual transcendence of the desires of the flesh but [also] social

transcendence of the laboring, striving, “economic body” (Bordo 117). If Hopkins and Ellis are able to defeat corpulence, they will be more attractive and hence, more socially acceptable. But, keeping excess flesh from the frame also represents the proper governance over the woman’s body, which is prone to cravings, insatiability and weakness.

Obsessed with becoming thin for no explicit reason other than to keep unsightly flesh from their frames and have their public reputations remain in good standing, Miss Hopkins and Mrs. Ellis try all kinds of things to slim down. They are described as desperate, having unsuccessfully tried many diets. Among those they have tested is William Banting’s diet—one of the most popular early diets in the United States. Banting’s plan was to avoid starchy and sugary foods and subsist mostly on protein instead of fat. Banting swore by “lean meat, dry toast, soft-boiled eggs and green vegetables” (Schwartz 100)—a very bland diet, even by today’s standards. Mrs. Ellis has also tried Dr. Salisbury’s diet, also known as “living on one food at a time” (Schwartz 100). One of the foods Salisbury prescribes as suitable to subsist solely on is baked beans, which needless to say, failed. This anecdote demonstrates the sheer amount of ineffective diets the women had tried and just what lengths they will go to in order to conquer fatness.

“The Stout Miss Hopkins Bicycle” emphasizes the women’s attempts to buy into thinness, which replicate trends of over the top middle-class consumption. Mrs. Ellis and Miss Hopkins act just like the man dangling from the delicate rope who consumes fatness antidotes in order to pull himself upward. These women have the financial means not only to subscribe to many far-fetched newspaper diets, but to experiment with exercise and to hire a personal trainer, who is, of course, male. We are told that in

the past Mrs. Ellis has “bought elaborate gymnastic appliances, and swung dumb-bells and rode imaginary horses and propelled imaginary boats. She ran races with a professional trainer, and she studied the principles of Delsarte, and solemnly whirled on one foot and swayed her body and rolled her head and hopped and kicked and genuflected in company with eleven other stout and earnest matrons and one slim and giggling girl who almost choked at every lesson” (4). Yet, despite Mrs. Ellis’s vast expenditure to lose weight via these means, she still cannot. Only the wheel, according to Shuey Cardigan, can palliate her corpulence plight.

“The wheel” that glittered at Mrs. Ellis’s door the very next week” (5) after she orders it, is further proof of the ladies’ growing wealth. This is not a bottom-line model but one that is dapper in appearance. In fact, the bicycle reproduces what Mrs. Ellis and Miss Hopkins desire—an impressive external appearance. In the 1880’s, the cost of bicycles ranged from $100-$150, about six months pay of an ordinary salary (www.mnopedia.org), but by 1897 when Thanet writes the short story, a low grade model could cost around $30-- still a significant amount of money. In “The Stout Miss Hopkins Bicycle,” Mrs. Ellis asks Shuey Cardigan for the “best” wheel. The explicit mention of the glittering bike means that the two women purchase fancy models rather than a basic bicycle, thinking it will be even more effective for weight loss. The women’s unchecked consumption does not stop even when the goal is to reduce their frames, which are products of over-consumption.

After purchasing her glittering new wheel, Miss Hopkins sits on the stoop with her niece eating cracker-jacks, which her niece describes as a “new kind of candy” (5) suggesting Hopkins has enough money to afford exciting new products, just like the bicycle. But, showing Miss Hopkins eating candy also pokes fun at the fact that she

does not take her reduction venture seriously. She has just purchased a costly wheel in order to slim down but she is still consuming victuals with no nutritional value. Her desire to consume is stronger than her desire to reduce. The same is true of Miss Ellis who admits that she will be drinking champagne with dinner. This exchange leads up to Ellis's admission that she is "going to try something new—the thinningest thing there is," meaning bike riding. Both Ellis and Hopkins are portrayed as too addicted to food to diet. They want to eat decadently and burn off calories by riding their bikes. They are too situated in a life of indulgence to think of giving up luxury foods in order to reduce. Like Miss Hopkins who gets a wheel but is eating Cracker Jacks, Mrs. Ellis is similarly mocked for thinking she can eat poorly but still lose weight.

Similar to the man hanging from a tenuous rope in the political cartoon, Mrs. Ellis is described as going to great, even comic, lengths in an effort to reduce. The description of the various exercises is not an objective catalogue. Thanet describes Mrs. Ellis's exercise endeavors in a way meant to evoke laughter. The reader is not supposed to envision a woman gracefully exercising the pounds away. We are instead to envision Mrs. Ellis cluelessly whipping her body around in various ways, hoping somehow, that she will lose weight. Despite Cardigan Shuey's declaration that the only remedy for the state of fatness, and the women's last hope is to ride a bicycle, Mrs. Ellis expresses concern over how she would look riding a bike: "But how would I *look,* Cardigan?" (4), presumably aware that a woman of her size may appear foolish to onlookers, perhaps males. Her questioning of Cardigan indicates that she is concerned with her corpulent body becoming a spectacle that will evoke laughter.

Miss Hopkins is also self-conscious of riding a bike in public, asking: "how should *I* look on a wheel?" (5), just as Mrs. Ellis does. Mrs. Hopkins's concern is not unjustified,

as her niece, the thin Sibyl Hopkins laughs immediately after hearing Ellis propose the new form of exercise and remarks “[Miss Hopkins] would be a figure of fun on a wheel” (6). Mrs. Ellis, who sees the clear issue with women such as themselves riding in public, assures her friend “’we can have a track made in your pasture, where nobody can see us learning” (6). Again, we are reminded of Miss Hopkins’s economic status. She has significant land and she can afford to have a track built and a personal trainer. Both Miss Hopkins and Mrs. Ellis are concerned about becoming a spectacle, not only because they are biking novices, but, because they are corpulent. Anything they do clumsily will be magnified in the eyes of onlookers by the fact that they bear excess pounds. Yet, even if the two women hide from the public, they cannot hide from curious neighbors including the Winslows, Cardigan Shuey, the male personal trainer, and the audience of *Harper’s Monthly*. All of these people bear witness to their dilettante approach to biking.

Miss Hopkins’s first stab at bike riding in fact does serve as a spectacle in the eyes of her neighbor Mrs. Winslow. As Hopkins begins her first lesson with Shuey Cardigan, Mrs. Winslow sneaks over to watch and gasps “’Land’s sakes!...if she ain’t going to ride a bike! Well what’s next?’” (9). Mrs. Windsor’s shock at Mrs. Hopkins’s bike riding is likely because she perceives Hopkins to be too fat to ride a bike gracefully or “properly.” Mrs. Windslow isn’t wrong in her suspicions. The first time Mrs. Hopkins even tries to mount the bike she “sways frightfully from side to side” (10). The next time she attempts riding, she careens downhill, only to be stopped by Mr. Winslow who she topples over as he tries to help. Mr. Winslow, despite his best attempts, has “not the power to withstand the never yet revealed number of pounds carried by Lorania,” as he catches her he too rolls “down the steep incline,” crashing into a stone wall (15-16). The

open pasture is literally not enough space for the clumsy, overweight Miss Hopkins. Her excess pounds somehow find her toppled over into a wall. Though there is no manifest humor in this scene in specific, the action is centered around Miss Hopkins's fall. Fat is entertainment, even if it is not explicitly funny. Without Miss Hopkins's (and Mrs. Ellis's) "stoutness" the story would have no purpose. The plot literally centers around corpulent bodies, their misadventures, and the amusement those events provide for onlookers.

After Mrs. Winslow's son saves Miss Hopkins from grave injury at the hands of her bicycle, a relationship blossoms, which the story suggests is due to Miss Hopkins's new, trimmer figure. Though Winslow has held Hopkins in high esteem for many years, he has been ashamed to reveal his feelings. Wanting to check up on Miss Hopkins after her downhill plummet, Mr. Winslow mistakes Miss Hopkins from the back for her niece, Sibyl. The reader is reminded throughout that Sibyl is basically a thinner version of the "stout" Miss Hopkins and that the two look very alike. Miss Hopkins turns around blushing and replies "'Has the bicycle done so much for me?'" (17). Miss Hopkins is stunned that she has garnered male interest and attributes it all to her new thinner frame—in her mind, undoubtedly the work of the bicycle. Even though Mr. Winslow reassures Miss Hopkins that she looked good even before she began riding, Miss Hopkins clearly believes that to attract male suitors one must be thin. As the story ends, Miss Hopkins has blissfully begun a relationship with Mr. Winslow, and Mrs. Ellis comments "'but to think of its all being due to the bicycle!'" (18). Despite Mr. Winslow having admired Miss Hopkins from afar for quite awhile, Mrs. Ellis too cannot believe that the two would have united without the bicycle. Of course, the bicycle is the object that literally brought the two together, but Mrs. Ellis is also suggesting that the bicycle helped Miss Hopkins lose weight, which attracted Mr. Winslow to her in a physical way.

In the end, thinness serves as a means to attract positive male attention, begin romantic relationships, and enjoy a more fulfilling life. Though both Hopkins and Ellis live comfortably in terms of their economic status, they are very uncomfortable with their bodies. A habit of overindulgence food leads the ladies to look to consumption as a way to tackle all of life's problems. Yet consumption only leads to trials and tribulations as the women go to extreme means in the efforts to slim down. Ultimately, the only way to improve quality of life is to escape the corpulent body. The reader sees Hopkins and Ellis twist and finagle their bodies and lifestyles in desperate attempts to lose weight. Though the ending is romanticized, for Hopkins at least, her escape from the corpulent body becomes an entertaining, if not mocking story in an issue of *Harper's Monthly*.

"The Stout Miss Hopkins Bicycle" was not the only serialized story that made fatness its central focus for entertainment purposes. There are many of these kinds of stories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to discuss. "Fat" by Grace Sartwell Mason centers around a protagonist, Mrs. Tierney, who is married to an upwardly mobile middle-class man. Much of the talk about Mrs. Tierney's abundance refers to not only her excessive body, but also to her perpetually open purse. The story firmly situates itself as one about the middle class, as Mason is careful to remind us that her husband has built himself up to a position of financial stability—he wasn't always wealthy.

The story adroitly conflates wealth and fatness with humor from the very beginning; instead of simply narrating, Sartwell makes judgments about how Mrs. Tierney's body affects her daily routine. The opening scene of the short story tells us that Mrs. Tierney sits in the back of a limousine. Her "two chins rested snugly upon the back of what had once been a mink" (Mason 56). The limousine is not the only marker

of Mrs. Tierney's position of privilege. Her multiple chins suggest that she indulges in copious amounts of food and drink because she can afford to. Yet, the description of the two chins resting upon her mink is not meant merely to inform us that Mrs. Tierney is wealthy. We could have just been told that she is wearing a mink. This extraneous detail of multiple chins serves to mock her fatness. Similarly, Mason describes Mrs. Tierney's face filled with curves, "meaningless as marshmallows" (57). We are not told simply that Mrs. Tierney has a round face but given a simile that compares her face to an unsubstantial, airy food item. The unnecessary comparison suggests that Mason intends to predispose the audience to scorn Mrs. Tierney because of her fatness and to evoke laughter rather from a biased rather than objective portrayal.

Mrs. Tierney begins her slimming journey because her husband, Payt, focuses his critical eye on her body. But, losing weight is not a simple task for Mrs. Tierney. Her lavish lifestyle is a result of having the means to eat copiously and to hire others to do her work while she relaxes. The story mocks Mrs. Tierney for her lethargy and penchant for sugary, fatty foods and the ways in which the two connect. If it wasn't for Tierney's leisure time, a product of her class status, she would not be able to be chauffeured around to her favorite eateries.

In addition to scorning her penchant for overconsumption and her resultant body, the story comments on Mrs. Tierney's intelligence. Presumably because of her fatness, Mrs. Tierney lacks the competence to pronounce words correctly. She calls the "Professor" who is her personal trainer and diet planner, "P'fessor," which is likely a comment on her subpar intelligence. Mason explicitly remarks that Mrs. Tierney is "so unaccustomed to any thought whatsoever" (59). Yet another facet of both Tierney's incompetence and indolence is her inability to work out properly. Mason turns the

process of losing weight into a comedy for the reader. Much of the action takes place at the gymnasium, a place Mrs. Tierney loathes; she often dreams of food while she is there. She is described as “chasing the most slippery ball in the world” (61) and encountering similar difficulty on the horse and the bicycle. Both her body and her mind have been compromised by corpulence stemming from her sybaritism.

Mrs. Tierney quickly finds out that her indulgent lifestyle and her fatness come with many consequences, the most serious of which is the wandering eye of her husband. Presumably turned off by his wife’s corpulence, Payt is having an affair with a thinner woman whom he has actually asked to *gain* weight. His request suggests that no matter what women do, their bodies are always the subject of male scrutiny and discontent. Mrs. Tierney is too fat for his liking, but his mistress is too slim. There is no perfect female body, because if there were, women’s appearance could not be perpetually preyed upon.

Mrs. Tierney is so fearful of losing her wealth, status and ability to eat expensive foods that upon hearing the news of Payt’s affair, she decides to keep silent. Instead of calling him out on his affair or ramping up her weight loss efforts to win him back, Mrs. Tierney is driven to the very thing that has seemingly caused a rift in her marriage—food. Obsessed with the places she can eat and the decadent food she consumes, she cannot understand why she should deny herself the luxuries she can afford. As she sits in her favorite upscale café *Henri’s* and rehearses how she will confront Payt, she orders rich foods. For every thought she has of how to confront her husband, she orders more food-- first bouillon with whipped cream, then hot chocolate. As she pumps the rich foods into her body, her thoughts, previously “jogged out of alignment,” began to make a clear familiar design” (65). Since the food represents her wealth and what would

be at stake if she suddenly lost her means, she realizes she cannot confront her infidel of a husband. Mrs. Tierney rationalizes: “Suppose Payt, when she had issued her ultimatum, did not take it so well… suppose the flow of bank notes were dried up by Payt’s anger. Suppose the bead bag grew limp and empty, deprived of its sole source of supply” (65). Ironically however, if the bead bag grew “limp and empty,” Mrs. Tierney probably would too, because she could not consume to the extent she did before. Foolishly, her relationship with food and material goods is more meaningful to her than her relationship with her husband, though Payt is certainly no angel.

This last scene is undoubtedly an unfavorable depiction of the disgruntled Mrs. Tierney. The story seems to comment on her morality as she will allow Payt to continue his adulterous ways so she can continue her gluttonous ways. Not only is she fat and incompetent, but she is immoral. The middle classes seek ease and luxury at any cost. Mrs. Tierney is complacent in her marriage to a judgmental adulterer because she cannot bear to lose access to the fruits of his labor. She is further dehumanized in the final pages as she is called a “ball of fur on inadequate feet” that “trundled up [the] avenue,” driven by the news of her husbands affair to consume unhealthy food at *Henri’s*. Her fat body is one that is not in control of itself. She does not walk, she trundles, as her corpulence controls both her gait and her thoughts. The story is explicit that her body has caused a rift in her marriage to Payt. Though “Fat” likely intends to tell a cautionary tale of a woman whose fatness intercedes in her life in detrimental ways, it does so in a way that makes Mrs. Tierney a spectacle and a joke. Though Mason doesn’t make Mrs. Tierney a subject of humor completely throughout the story, subtle digs reference her anatomy in odd and often dehumanizing ways. Ultimately, the biggest joke of the story is that Mrs. Tierney is foolish enough to remain in an

unsatisfactory marriage, love-wise, in order to continue reaping material gains. Like "The Stout Miss Hopkins Bicycle," fatness is central to the story in terms of its entertainment value.

Luke Lovart's 1887 novella *Too Fat*, capitalizes similarly on the rise of the middle class and male scrutiny of the female body. Though it is a British story, and the British middle class is beyond the scope of my historical research, to some extent, the same tropes are evident as in American ones. Lovart presents this novel, admittedly, as an attempt to "try [his] hand at a tale which should be simply humorous." Lovart sets forth a protagonist, Ned, who is so upset with his wife Marian's corpulence that his tunnel-vision catalyzes a humorous mix-up. The story focuses entirely on Ned's cruelty and increasing insensitivity when it comes to his wife's corpulence. His extensive joking and punning on her larger body is a result of his genuine disappointment that his wife has in some sense, let herself go, since they were married. Since Lovart already tells us that this story is for pure humor, it goes without saying that Marian's fatness's prime purpose is to create funny situations which evoke laughter. However, whether Lovart is aware of it or not, his "attempt at humor" illuminates a huge problem with women's perceptions of their own bodies. There is no way for Marian, and most women, to escape the harsh judgment of the male eye. Marian's body problems grow (no pun intended) out of her husband's increasing dissatisfaction and cruelty. She never has the objective lens she needs to view her body; rather she must judge her self-worth from the callous words of her husband.

In this story it is evident that the patriarchy's critical eye is directed towards the female figure despite the insensitivity inherent in such negative attention. Ned's sole focus is on his wife's body, and he literally cannot see past her corpulence or think of

anything else. His narrow-minded way of thinking is evident from the beginning, as he tells us that Marian has always been an angel to him, but as of late “instead of developing wings, she began to develop adipose tissue. Instead of soaring upon the earth, she pressed day by day more heavily upon it. In other words, she grew fatter and fatter” (xii). Like in many stories of fatness and thinness, Ned employs religious rhetoric to first designate his formerly thin wife as an angel. He then negates this angelic designation as she grows fatter, claiming that through her fatness “she still remained to me an angel, though fallen, or at least rapidly gravitating downwards” (28). Caught in a binary way of thinking, Ned associates thinness with all things good, including angels and heaven, and fatness with all things bad, specifically Satan, the fallen angel. After his arrest, Ned protests that he still loves Marian despite the fact that corpulence is the “original sin that is still upon her” (128). This phrasing suggests that even though Ned still loves his wife, she will never be the same because her body has changed for the worst. Despite the serious nature of the actual biblical story, Ned finds Marian’s “fall” worthy of both scorning and poking fun at.

The first scene quite cleverly sets the tone for the rest of the story as Ned continuously puns on his wife’s corpulence to clue her into what exactly about her is bothering him. Through humor he tries to raise his wife’s awareness of what are her imperfections, in his eyes. In trying to confess the fact that her weight is the agitator, he says: “‘it’s a case of gravity… you know, gravity without attraction’” (xii) to which she replies “‘it’s quite a weight on my mind” and he quips back “‘only on your *mind*, dear?’” Compassionless for her corpulence plight, and any feelings of body inadequacy that she herself may harbor, Ned only worries about how his wife’s heavier frame affects him. For the audience, these lines read as if Ned is clearly turning Marian’s corpulence, and

their marital tensions into a joking matter. Visibly angered and amused by his wife's lack of control over her body, Ned is downright insensitive which comes through, again, by way of humor. Instead of encouraging his wife to lose weight, he mocks her current form. He begs Marian to diet: "you will swell, and swell, and swell, till you get to the shape of a bath-sponge; and I, your lawful husband, must look on and do nothing! I know it's very difficult to get round you" (xvii). Invoking the discourse of marriage vows, Ned acts like it's his wife's matrimonial duty, as his lawful wife, to slim down. He warns her that if she doesn't successfully reduce, she will take on a tumid yet shapeless form like that of a bath-sponge. Again, he puns: "'I know it's very difficult to get round you'" (xii) suggesting that her corpulent body is physically difficult to maneuver around but also meaning that her stubbornness toward weight loss is a hindrance of equal proportion in their relationship.

Ned suggests things that Marian should try to slim down, the first of which is the Victorian practice of lacing, implying that he seeks to constrict Marian and her impulses toward overconsumption. Marian had proven incapable of keeping her bodily impulses in check. Since Ned doesn't trust her to reduce on her own, he wishes that he could exert physical control over her body firsthand, a proposition she vehemently rejects. Finally, he recommends the popular Banting diet. Marian agrees to try Banting and Ned makes her promise she will not cheat on her diet behind his back. This spoken agreement is a contract, much like the marriage vows that Ned feels Marian has physically and metaphorically violated with her growing frame. His distrust of his wife later proves correct as Marian has broken their verbal contract. She admits to cheating on her diet, which becomes obvious to Ned as she does not lose an ounce.

The jokes continue as Ned visits Marian's mother to discuss her daughter's corpulence, and the wrench it has thrown into their marriage. Marian's mother calls her daughter's larger frame "'a visible sign of her unfailing good temper"' to which Ned replies "'I should be satisfied with a sign rather less visible'" (17). Marian's mother attributes Marian's corpulence to something positive—a certain jollity often associated with fatness. Ned dismisses this suggestion, linguistically inverting what his mother-in-law has suggested to turn it into a comical statement. He continues "'the young woman—my original wife—whom alone I had promised to love, had disappeared. She was now lost, not in a crowd, but in a mass'" (19). The irony in this statement is that Ned's anger stems from Marian's abundant appearance, certainly not her *dis*appearance. He is aware of the coexistence of his cruelty and comedy. Ned cannot disguise his callousness even when talking to Marian's own mother. His continued use of puns and cheap shots suggest just how much of a laughing matter Ned finds Marian's embonpoint to be. Lovart, who tells us in a foreword that he is writing purely for humor's sake, intended scenes like these brimming with insensitive jokes and clever rhetorical inversions to be funny.

Despite Ned's callousness towards his own wife's body, he too is corpulent. Marian and Ned have considerable capital at their disposal. Most of this comes from Marian's mother who is wealthy, but Ned has earned some of his own money through his career as a quasi-famous author. Despite saying that most of his fortune stems from his extremely valuable unpublished works, Ned nevertheless admits that he travels with a "large sum of money" on his person (96). When Marian and Ned's confrontation is at its apogee, Marian retreats back to her mother's house. Her mother, more wealthy than her daughter and son-in law, accepts her daughter with non-judgmental, open arms, as

only a mother can do. However, her retreat back to a place of wealth suggests that her corpulent body is only where welcome where excess is revered.

Ned's distaste for corpulence in any form is evident by the mix-up that stems from his cruelty towards Marian. Hurt and angered by Marian's admission that she has been cheating on her diet, Ned runs away with the eventual goal of committing suicide. He settles temporarily at a hotel. Since he is a quasi-famous literary author in the community, his disappearance sparks interest, and numerous newspapers publish articles calling it a murder. Ned is taken into custody as his own murderer, since the description of him, the missing man, in the paper does not match his actual appearance. Ned is rather gruff and overweight and the paper publishes a description of him as having a "muscular figure, brisk and graceful…" (98). This description, written by his wife, is meant to flatter Ned who she knows will take offense to a more accurate description. Trying to flatter Ned actually hurts him as he is mistaken for his own murderer, who does not exist. He is very angered by another paper with an accurate description of his "thickset figure." He thinks this unflattering description has been written by his wife and appalled, remarks: "It seemed to me positively monstrous that one's own flesh and blood—for are not husband and wife one flesh? Should thus cast ridicule and contempt on one's personal appearance" (70). Ironically, this entire misadventure has been caused by Ned's casting of ridicule and contempt on his wife's appearance. Ned's anger at the thought that his wife has turned the tables suggest that it is only okay for the male eye to cast judgment on the woman's body—not vice versa. In the end, due to the aggravation she is subject to during this whole encounter, Marian loses the weight Ned wanted her to and keeps it off. Yet again, not only does the thin body triumph over the fat one, the man gets his way.

Luke Lovart has succeeding in creating a humorous story, but not fully in the way he intended. There is little humor in the way Ned callously speaks of his wife's body, but the confusion over Ned's arrest is certainly funny. Nevertheless, both Lovart's clever wordplay and the sequence of events are what he means when he refers to "humor," but only one of them embodies an ethics of humor without cruelty.

Of the fat body as a subject of humor, Joyce Huff writes: "it is possible, however, to imagine a laugh less scornful and more celebratory, a subversive laughter that throws the negative representation of corpulence defiantly back into the face of the society that created it" (Huff 54). The works I have discussed above engage in the sort of laughter that Huff condemns. They laugh at the fat body because they perceive it as displaying a lack of self-control, a distaste for moderation, and a certain kind of lower-class garishness. Fat women, who subvert traditionally feminine self-sovereignty [2]when it comes to earthly impulses, find themselves under the unrelenting male gaze—one that un-forgivingly stares, judges, and laughs.

[2] I use "traditionally feminine self-sovereignty" to refer to a social expectation for women.

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Vita

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