ABSTRACT

Twentieth-Century Hair-oines:
Constructing Femininity in Literature, 1850s-1920s

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Women's hair at the turn of the twentieth century (1850s-1920s) can be read as a visual indicator of changing understandings of femininity during this time. As women began to explore the promise of greater female power and freedom associated with the triumph of suffrage in 1920, they cropped their once burdensome piles of hair in favor of the light and easy "bob." Rich in symbolic significance for the individual women of the time, this event sent social messages about this new generation of women. These messages received strong replies, both positive and negative, which brought issues of femininity to the forefront of cultural discourse. The hair imagery of various authors of the time, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edith Wharton, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, communicated messages – via a fashion language – concerning the tension between individuality and social conformity. When read as a symbolic expression of femininity, hair provides significant clues in understanding the effects of individual and social forces on the construction of femininity and the fashioning of the female body in literature.

Twentieth-Century Hair-oines: Constructing Femininity in Literature, 1850s-1920s

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of English

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Statement of Intent

Women's hair at the turn of the twentieth century can be read as a visual indicator of changing understandings of femininity. As women explored the promise of greater female power and freedom associated with the triumph of suffrage in 1920, they cropped their once burdensome piles of hair in favor of the light and easy "bob." This event, which might at first appear a simple act of fleeting fashion, was rich in symbolic significance for women of the time. While fashion generally advances in slow revolutions, as Agatha Brooks Young notes, this time period saw many such dramatic departures from established trends in the areas of female fashion and deportment, all of which were meant to send messages about the new generation of women. These messages received strong replies, both positive and negative, bringing issues of femininity to the forefront of cultural discourse. Not unexpectedly, then, various popular authors of the time incorporated hair imagery in the characterization of their heroines. Depending on the author, the hair of these characters can be a nonverbal communicator of feminine individuality or social conformity and the tension between these forces. But regardless of the author's conscious or unconscious use of hair imagery, the mention of hair in relation to female characterization can be read as a symbol which provides significant clues in understanding an author's particular understanding of femininity and fashioning the female body.

Because the readership at the turn of the century was mainly comprised of women dealing with cultural changes in femininity and the popular topic of "to bob or not to bob," the literature of the time also dealt with these themes. While the theme of culture and femininity is present in works that are considered "literary" – in that they display a recognized standard of prose, craft, and enduring timelessness regardless of initial sales and reception – the theme is especially prevalent in "popular" novels – those with a broad appeal at the time of their release – as they tend to depict more overtly the cultural particularities of the readers of the time. A lasting gauge of such popularity, the annual Pulitzer Prize, was begun in this time period. That more than half[1] of the awarded authors in the 1920s were women – Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Margaret Wilson, Edna Ferber, and Julia Peterkin – is significant, especially in considering the still lingering impression that authorship was a degrading profession for women, as it speaks to the increased preoccupation with women and the public realm. Indeed, the exploration of femininity is a theme which nearly all of the winning novels of the decade displayed.[2]

Those works concerned with the interaction between femininity and culture explore the theme in terms of women's fashion. Indeed, fashion and adornment lend themselves well to this use, for though they are historically recognized as realms of female dominion, they are also art forms which reflect the cultural milieu – particularly as it relates to women. The exploration via fashion of the interaction of culture and

[1] There were only nine winners because no prize was awarded in 1920, though the annual award began in 1918.

[2] This is clearly true of Edith Wharton and *The Age of Innocence* (1921), Booth Tarkington and *Alice Adams* (1922), Willa Cather and *One of Ours* (1923), Margaret Wilson and *The Able McLaughlins* (1924), Edna Ferber and *So Big* (1925), Louis Bromfield and *Early Autumn: A Story of a Lady* (1927), and Julia Peterkins and *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1929). Arguably, Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* (1926) may be an exception, though this work still touches on the fashion and hair, as later discussed in this paper. The only clear exception is Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1928). But, both Wilder and Lewis subsequently deal more specifically with issues of femininity.

femininity spans the centuries and is just as traceable in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, written mid-nineteenth century, as in those of F. Scott Fitzgerald, written in the twentieth century. But, as a popular and literary author whose Pulitzer-Prize-winning career spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a wealthy socialite, a *de facto* cultural leader, and a woman herself, Edith Wharton particularly understood and illustrated this link between fashion and femininity, or the fashioning of the female self. Illuminated by sociological readings of hair symbolism and fashion culture, her texts show the prominent social influence on the transitioning understanding of femininity during this time.

Wharton's use of fashion and hair to construct femininity suggests that social forces had a more dominant influence on the female self than individual will at the turn of the twentieth century. On the other hand, Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose mid-nineteenth century career belonged to the generation of writers preceding Wharton, contrasts her depiction, allowing his heroines more agency in the construction of their femininity, while still affirming her premise that femininity is indeed a construction. His works thus mark the beginning of a timeline which contains the evolution of culturally constructed femininity at the turn of the century. On the other end of this "turn of the century" timeline, Fitzgerald, like Hawthorne, allows his heroines a certain amount of agency in the construction of their femininity, but, like Wharton, recognizes the dominant and restricting role social forces play in this process. While Hawthorne's heroines escape societal expectation by drawing on individual resources and Wharton's are trapped by their societies, Fitzgerald holds these two poles in tension by allowing his female characters the freedom to construct their own femininity out of the material of societal

expectation, resulting in feminine types. All three of these turn-of-the-century authors are united in their depiction of the feminine self as a construct but differ in the level of influence they allow social and individual forces to have on this construction. The transition between each author's characterization of his or her female protagonists via fashion correlates to the larger role societal and individual forces played in constructing femininity at the time. Because of its anthropological fitness and certain prominent visual changes during this period, hair imagery particularly displays a transition in understandings of the construction of femininity in the texts of these authors. Thus, a comparison of the hair fashions employed by these three authors serves as a chart which shows the transitioning messages which speak to the construction of femininity in turn-of-the-century literature and in American culture at large.

The Language of Fashion

Before an argument can be made regarding the potential of hair and clothing to "say" anything about a female character and cultural attempts to create and receive "messages" about the gendered self, the nature of the nonverbal language of fashion and its translation in a literary text must be discussed. In order to send messages, fashion must be meaningful. Scholars have begun to recognize that fashion is in fact meaningful but continue to debate the hows and whys of this meaning. Most would agree with Malcolm Barnard that this meaningfulness results from the fact that "fashion and clothing are means of communication" (26). But, then, what do they communicate? Is this communication primarily social or individual?

Anthropologists record that body adornments and alterations typically communicate cultural messages. These messages generally symbolize societal values, as

Robert Brain observes: “the decoration of a certain organ is related to the symbolic meaning of that organ in one society” (112). For instance, in a culture that values the eyes as important predatory tools, members will paint the eyes in such a way as to draw attention to them or even paint extra eyes on other parts of their bodies. Steele agrees that regardless of how it comes about, fashion is essentially a phenomenon of cultural import: “Even if fashion design evolves according to internal ‘laws’ or ‘tendencies,’ these are subject to constraint, so that, to some extent, the resulting forms of fashion probably do reflect cultural attitudes toward, say, the body” (23). Thus, fashion behavior sends cultural messages about bodily import within a given society. While the messages sent by such symbolic behavior will differ, it remains true that societal acts and fashion behaviors have cultural meanings and therefore cultural messages to send.

But these messages are not merely social as they are “written” on individual bodies and by individual people. E. R. Leach discusses symbolic human behaviors, such as the fashioning of the body, as having an indeterminate social meaning but also a separate significance for the individual. Yet both are expressed with the same “language” within a common cultural discourse community:

> The main difference between these two effects of symbolic behaviour is that the first is public and the second private. The essence of public symbolic behaviour is that it is a means of communication; the actor and his audience share a common language, a symbolic language. They must share a common set of conventions as to what the different elements in the language mean, otherwise there will be a failure of communication. Every member of such a Culture will attribute the same meaning to any particular item of culturally defined ‘ritual.’ (147-148)

But, such cultural discourse should not be seen as merely social. In addressing Sigmund Freud, Leach acknowledges that sociological researchers would benefit from recognizing potential individual psychological influence in their theories concerning the meaning of

clothing and the fashioned body if only to acknowledge that human experience is necessarily both public, or sociological, and private, or psychological (161). Bridging the gap between psychology and sociology, fashion offers occasion for the interaction of the individual with his or her society, as Barnard explains: "one sends messages about oneself with the fashion and clothes one wears. Everyday experience, in which clothes are selected according to what one will be doing that day, what mood one is in, who one expects to meet and so on, appears to confirm the view that fashions and clothing are used to send messages about oneself to others" (28). By this token, fashion is especially equipped to simultaneously express both the public and private self. In general, then, it can be said that a person's dress communicates, via a symbolic language, certain messages regarding the self to a particular society, all of which are shaped by culture. In this way, fashion is particular fit to symbolize the cultural tension between individual and social forces in a literary text.

However, though Leach calls fashion a "symbolic language," it is a different form of communication than verbal language and so, perhaps, should not be understood as such, as Umberto Eco suggests: "'the question immediately arises as to whether, given that they are nonverbal forms of communication, fashion and clothing may be treated as being in some way analogous to spoken or written language'" (qtd. in Barnard 26). Indeed, certain complexities must be addressed when attempting to understand visual communication as a language. In 1877, Charles Blanc suggested that the artistic aspects of an article of clothing are similar to the aspects of a language: "Colours and forms, so to speak, are the vowels and consonants of the silent language of creation" (60). However, more recent approaches to the subject expose the incongruity of such a comparison.

Valerie Steele distinctly disagrees with Blanc's one-to-one comparison of articles of clothing to articles of speech: "style is related to the total effect of a costume, not merely to single elements, such as the shape or length of the skirt" (23). Steele suggests that if clothing is a language then it must be consistent to be understandable – for instance, that a top hat would always carry a meaning similar to champagne (47). Because "layers of meaning are woven into every article of dress" (Steele 39), cultural messages are too transient and complex to be thus limited. The difficulty of tracing the nature of the changing relationship between fashion and how exactly it reflects culture also makes the comparison problematic. Steele believes that fashion is too self-contained to be a true cultural language: "Whatever connections they may have with the wider culture and with social change, styles of dress are clearly and more directly related to earlier styles and to the internal process of fashion change" (23). Furthermore, fashion is not as intentional as language and so cannot be understood in the same way: "many people are not conscious of making clothing choices that communicate information and create a particular image. Nor is it always easy to 'read' other people's clothing" (Steele 39).

To these concerns, Roland Barthes answers that fashion's fluidity indeed cannot and should not be limited to parallels with verbal language. In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes provides perhaps the most sophisticated and comprehensive contemporary attempt to understand fashion as a form of cultural language. He addresses Steele's concern that fashion does not allow for enough consistency to be a language by suggesting that articles of clothing should be aligned with units of meaning rather than words. Thus, the language of clothing is "not lexical but syntactic" because it is based on units of meaning as a whole not on isolatable terms or articles (*Language of Fashion* 28).

In this way, Barthes maintains, fashion communication is similar to but more complex than spoken language:

> We have seen that a fashion utterance involves at least two systems of information: a specifically linguistic system, which is a language (such as French or English), and a 'vestimentary' system, according to which the garment (*prints, accessories, a pleated skirt, a halter top, etc.*) signifies either the world (the races, springtime, maturity) or Fashion. These two systems are not separate: the vestimentary system seems to be taken over by the linguistic system. (*The Fashion System* 27)

In pulling apart the two aspects of fashion's communication – the interwoven strands of verbal and visual – Barthes lays bare the basic problem with theorizing about fashion messages: these messages are received in at least two different capacities. Because, as previously stated, these messages are also received by at least two different audiences, the individual and his or her society, a multiplicity of meanings is possible.

Further complication is added to the proliferation surrounding fashion meanings when the fashion language is read in translation, that is, when it is presented in the form of written language in a literary text. It would seem that when the substance that provides the common ground between the different meanings of clothing – which is "the garment in its materiality" (Barthes *The Fashion System* 87) – is absent, as it is in a written text, that communication would no longer be possible. But, as Barthes explains in *The Language of Fashion*, the meaning of a garment itself is more complex: "Dress is *a priori* a kind of *text without end* in which it is necessary to learn how to delimit the signifying units, and this is very difficult" (28).

On the other hand, a text which describes a garment is easier to decipher in terms of intended meaning because "speech brings into existence values which images can account for only poorly: speech is much more adept than images at making ensembles

and movements signify (we are not saying: at making them more perceptible): the word places its force of abstraction and synthesis at the disposal of the semantic system of clothing" (*The Fashion System* 119). Because the text reflects the intersection of the garment itself and a statement of its intended purpose, it limits the available meanings. This limitation can be helpful though reductionist. Barthes gives the example of the reductionist tendencies of fashion magazines, stating that such rhetoric

> reduces the signified to a simple utilitarian function (a coat *for* the journey). Whether causality or finality, the phrasing used in a fashion magazine always has a subtle tendency to transform the linguistic status of the clothing item into one of naturalness or usefulness, to invest an effect or a function in the sign; in both cases, it is all about changing an arbitrary link into a natural property or a technical affinity, in short providing fashion creations with the guarantee of being eternal or empirically necessary. (*The Language of Fashion* 42)

Furthermore, Barthes suggests that while treating fashion in terms of function, as related in a particular text, can be helpful to understanding cultural messages, this does not allow for a complete picture, as "an item of clothing that is purely functional is conceivable only outside of any notion of society" (42). In essence, this cuts the object off from the source of its meaning, because "dress is, in the fullest sense, a 'social model,' and it is essentially at this level that it has meaning" (Barthes 14). Therefore, in examining fashion descriptions in literary texts, critics must remember that while authors may be utilitarian in their fashion utterances, intentionally using them to express some cultural message, the description is not merely functional as there will always be unintended social import free from the author's intended usage. Fashion in a text will always retain a freedom of meaning outside its verbal description.

Thus, fashion is more than the nonverbal display of a verbal message. Barthes acknowledges that, like language, fashion has its own particular system within which its messages are constructed and understood through time and across cultures:

> Language and dress are, at any moment in history, complete structures, constituted organically by functional network of norms and forms; and the transformation or displacement of any one element can modify the whole, producing a new structure: so, inevitably, we are talking about a collection of balances in movement, of institutions in flux. (*The Language of Fashion* 8)

In this aspect, at least, Steele agrees with Barthes, in that fashion must be considered on its own terms: "Fashion, like art, has its own history—and changes in style are related not only to changes in the larger culture, but are also reactions to previous fashions" (22). So fashion relates to culture and can send cultural messages but is not *merely* a medium of cultural message. Fashion, being a separate entity, a separate type of language, communicates not as a pseudo-verbal language of culture but as its own fashion language with its own messages and incentives, which tend to but may not overlap with those of the culture in which it exists.

In the end, Barthes' deconstruction of fashion rhetoric serves as a warning to anyone hoping to prove theories that are based on such shifting and multifaceted visual symbols of culture. He suggests that there can be no definitive reading as no single text exists. Instead, meaning derives from a compilation – consisting of the garment itself, the text which describes it, the message it sends to the wearer and others versus the message these parties actually receive, etc. – resulting in fluidity and subjectivity rather than certainty: "Objectivity here consists of defining the rhetorical signified as probable, but not as certain; we cannot 'prove' the rhetorical signified by direct recourse to the mass of its users, since this mass does not *read* the message of connotation, but rather

receives it. There is no 'proof' for this signified, only 'probability'" (233). From the anthropological side of the issue, Leach corroborates, taking issue with theories that assume "anthropologist possess some kind of golden key whereby they can blandly assert that a particular piece of stereotyped behaviour 'stands for' or 'is a symbol of' this, that, or the other thing" (147). Yet Leach rightly goes on to say that though "such interpretation has no sound logical justification […] somehow or other it often proves illuminating" (147).

The argument of this paper will exist within the narrow margin Leach and Barthes construct, by "proving" the conclusion most probably suggested by the evidence in an attempt to illuminate the text under consideration. While fashion has its own lexicon and so cannot be perfectly translated to a written or verbal language, the messages sent within and by a given society are rooted in the same cultural values. Studying one through the other exposes important cultural meaning in the overlap. In other words, while it cannot be proven that an author intends to send messages about his or her characters' feminine selves via hair and clothing imagery, their fashion, as he/she describes it, will send messages nonetheless. While the exact nature of these messages cannot be definitively decoded and read as an explanation of the author's view of the social construction of the female self, their presence is itself illuminating in understanding the transmission of the meaning of femininity in the author's culture and the forces which shape it.

CHAPTER TWO

Why Hair?

Hair Symbolism: Fashion and the Body

In understanding the way in which fashion constructs femininity in a literary text, it is important to understand the role fashion plays in the construction of self in general, and the feminine self in particular. Like the self, fashion is a complex system of interlocking influences. The fluidity of the fashion system is due in part to the same social and individual forces which, as previously explained, change and shape the messages of fashion language. These influencing factors can be understood as realms in which humans seek to self-actualize, to understand the individual self and the boundaries of this self in the context of a greater society composed of other selves. Steele suggests that fashion's ability to minister to this human need is the source of its importance: "all clothing and adornment are significant because of this intimate connection with the self. Clothing expresses a particular image of the physical body, the individual's self-awareness, and his or her social being" (45-46). In the end, fashion is so broadly applicable to understanding human experience both on the individual and social levels because it is, in essence, the presentation of the physical body. Fashion is always a factor of life lived in the physical body, the site where the individual self must begin and the most tangible and clear characteristic that unites the human race.

The argument of this paper will begin with the premise that "fashion" is an inevitable fact of human experience, that the idealized so-called "natural body" does not really exist. Steele concurs, condemning feminists who see fashion as restrictive to the

supposed ideal of the "natural" female body (244). Steele argues that the fashioned body is the natural body because the ideal "natural" form is always being reshaped by cultural change: "The ideal image constantly interacted with the reality of women's lives" (247). Llewellyn Negrin blames the fallacious idea of a natural body or mode of dress on the reactionary tactics of the feminist movement: "feminist dress code was based on the mistaken premise that there is such a thing as a 'natural' body which preexists culture, when in fact, the body is always already encoded by culture" (38). In reality, all people live in their bodies and in so doing, act upon them in such a way as to change them even if by mere lifestyle choices. For instance, someone who overeats fashions their body in a different way than an athlete. Though the fleshy body and the toned body have been alternately triumphed as the ideal "natural" body, the lifestyle choices that produce both can be called "fashion behaviors" even if "fashion" is not the conscious reason for these choices. In the end, any choice that can visually affect the body can be understood as either a conscious or an unconscious fashion behavior, in the sense that the body is being fashioned or constructed through individual and social influence. Thus, terms such as "fashion" and "fashion behavior" will here refer to any actions or behaviors that alter, adorn, cover, or in any way affect the presentation of the human body either tangibly or within a literary text. While "fashion" is typically understood in terms of clothing in modern western culture, this paper extends the term to hair and its styling, since, like clothing, this area of body presentation is also impacted by the fashion cycle. But unlike other elements of fashion, hair is more closely tied to the self because it is a part of the body, the material in which the self is primarily rooted.

Hair is observably important to social and individual understandings of the human self. Anthropologist Robert Brain believes that the talismanic power of hair is rooted in its tangible relationship with the physical self and symbolic relationship with the metaphysical self. Because hair is a part of the physical self and yet can be removed without any apparent physical ramification beyond mere visual alteration, it has held a distinct fascination for most, if not all, human cultures. As the authors of *A Dictionary of Symbols* record, many cultures believe that hair preserves "an intimate connection with its owner even when it ceased to be part of him or her. It symbolized its owner's virtues by concentrating their qualities spiritually, and retained a 'sympathetic' link" (Chevalier 459). Brain's research supports this summary of hair's symbolic power:

> Hair, like bodily secretions such as sweat, blood, and urine, is a magical substance in the thought of all the peoples of the world, since these substances which leave the body are thought to remain in contact with it when abandoned and retain a mystical association with it. Since hair grows constantly (even, according to popular belief, after death), it is associated with life and vitality and its use in sacrifice is convenient, since cutting it off causes no pain and sheds no blood. (121)

But more than these practical reasons behind the use of hair in ritual, its powers of metonymy have imbued hair with a magical power rooted in the self, as Brain observes: "Hair is used in ritual and magic since it is seen as an extension of the whole person" (118). Clearly, hair's importance as a representation of self in social ritual gives it a lasting symbolic weight in a culture and, by inference, in its art and literature.

Because hair is an integral aspect of a person's identity, it can become a cultural symbol representing the self. In anthropology, scholars have shown that in many cultures, the hair is linked to a person's essential self or being, their soul. Chevalier, having done extensive research on the subject, has found that this link pervades global

cultures: “Hair may be considered as the dwelling place of the soul or as one of a person’s souls. In Celebes and Sumatra, a child’s hair is allowed to grow to avoid the danger of destroying the soul living in it” (Chevalier 461). In his seminal essay, “Magical Hair,” E. R. Leach most definitively explains the symbolic significance of hair as a cultural signifier:

> There is substantial though not complete consistency between the hair rituals of different cultures, and it has been a common postulate among anthropologists that human hair has some universal symbolic value. […] The general concensus was that *hair* stands for the *total individual* or for the *soul*, or for the individual’s *personal power* (*mana*). (160)

Leach shows that the symbolic link between hair and the self is nearly universal.

Indeed, a similar understanding of hair and its symbolism of the self in western culture, has led to its use in male/female relationships. At one time, hair and hair tokens played an important and widespread role in courtship and mourning rituals, as Janice Miller notes: “The notion that a part of the self and the soul might reside or be maintained in any part of the body separated from it is suggested not only by folklore, but also by some of the mourning practices in which lost loved ones were memorialized by the wearing of pieces of jewelry, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (187). But, more importantly, this symbolic power has also been used to show one’s ownership of the self in western culture – especially as regards male and female power relations: “One of the most valuable possessions of the Australians was the hair of their wives. Most of it was spun into string, but it was used for special purposes also such as making shoes. An Australian had absolute rights over his wife’s hair and could cut it whenever he chose” (Brain 120-121). Thus, the symbolic weight of hair in a culture can and has been used to exploit, enslave, and otherwise express power over the self.

Both society and the individual vie for hair's cultural and symbolic power over the self. Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang suggest that the universality of hair as a cultural symbol is related to the aforementioned idea that there is no "natural" body and so hair, like the other components of the body, is the subject of fashion. They suggest that hair is one of "the most intangible and fleeting form of fashion there is" and "also one of the most ubiquitous because everyone does something with their hair—and even when the choice is to do nothing, a definite sartorial statement is being made" (3). Thus, through fashion, hair's symbolic meaning becomes subject to tension between social and individual forces. Indeed, in summarizing the various theories surrounding the causes of hair symbolism, Leach notices two interpretive schools: those whose theories prioritize the individual meaning of symbolic behavior and those which prioritize the social meaning. "The distinction is simply a description of the different frames of reference in terms of which the anthropologist and the psychologist respectively examine human behaviour" (Leach 151). Leach describes the difference between these fields in terms of public versus private meaning. In psychological terms, symbolic behavior is innate in the human psyche and the meanings internal or covert. In anthropological terms, the same behavior is "*public* property" (151) and meant to communicate some meaning to an external community. Leach suggests that despite the sometimes radical differences in these approaches, the results tend to support each other: "both the psychological and sociological analyses lead to closely similar interpretations of the 'meaning' of particular symbols" (161). In this case, the "similar interpretation" both fields arrive at is that "magical power typically resides in objects which are detached from individuals in ritual situations – e.g., blood, hair, nail parings, etc." and that they are symbolic of varying

perceptions of the self and sexuality in a culture. This conclusion would seem to suggest that symbolic and ritualized behaviors which involve separable parts of the body, specifically those involving hair, are a compilation of social and individual forces which send messages through a common system of meaning. While this meaning changes depending on whether or not the part is still attached to the body, this paper is only concerned with head hair which is still attached to the body, as it plays a more influential role in the construction of femininity in the society and literary texts under consideration.

Being that hair is not only a detachable body part but also an object of fashion, this conclusion regarding the social and individual influences on the systems of meaning surrounding hair symbolism involves the fashion system. Indeed, George Simmel reaches a similar conclusion in his seminal article, entitled "Fashion," published in 1904. This article is the first serious attempt to understand fashion, its cause, and its meanings, from a scholarly perspective still relevant to modern sociology. Crane credits Simmel with crafting the traditional model sociologists must either build upon or refute when addressing issues of fashion. Simmel constructs a fashion cycle wherein, according to Crane, fashions "were proposed by fashion designers, popularized by leading entertainers, and adopted first by upper-class women or those aspiring to enter that class" (127-8) and only changed once the levels of the social hierarchy were no longer distinguishable from each other and therefore in need of a new way to differentiate themselves. "Thus fashion represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change" (Simmel 543). In this way, the movement of fashion is about setting boundaries, as Linda B.

Arthur suggests, between the individual self and the group while remaining safely on the inside: "Symbols, such as dress, help delineate the social unit and visually define its boundaries because they give nonverbal information about the individual. Unique dress attached to specific cultural groups, then, can function to insulate group members" (3).

Simmel's two-fold understanding of the role of fashion as a tool of social conformity and individual differentiation has been widely accepted. Aubrey Cannon takes the same lesson from Simmel: "Fashion develops in all different contexts as the result of the assertion of self-identity and social-comparison" (24). Arthur also finds that dress plays an important role for her subjects "in the negotiation of their relationships" (96) and thus in their social identities, but also on an individual level "for physical and psychological protection" (96). Arthur concludes that since social organization defines dress, and dress is used "for personal expression" (96), social organization essentially shapes the self via fashion. The social self, then, cannot be separated from the individual self because the individual self is constructed out of the material of society. This relationship exists out of necessity. Simmel explains that the basis of the self is social due to an innate "psychological tendency towards imitation" (542) as a necessary means of self-protection:

> Imitation, furthermore, gives to the individual the satisfaction of not standing alone in his actions. Whenever we imitate, we transfer not only the demand for creative activity, but also the responsibility for the action from ourselves to another. Thus the individual is freed from the worry of choosing and appears simply as a creature of the group, as a vessel of the social contents. (542-3)

He cites this tendency as the basis of class formation and identity whereby one is able to develop a personal identity based on the safer and more stable collective behaviors and

beliefs of their social class. Thus, like Leach, Simmel also suggests that psychology and sociology are again intertwined in understanding symbol cultural behavior.

Simmel applies this premise to fashion, because it too is based on imitation. Fashion, being in essence an art form, is flexible enough to allow for personal freedom of expression and yet, being based on imitation, also allows for social identification.

> Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation; it leads the individual upon the road which all travel, it furnishes a general condition, which resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example. At the same time it satisfies in no less degree the need of differentiation, the tendency towards dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast. (Simmel 543)

Thus, because fashion can display one's group membership without compromising one's individuality, it is an adept form of social communication. For instance, while different bankers may have different colored suits made of different material, in general, all bankers' suits look much different than those of street sweepers, and so the cut of a coat may be enough to suggest one's trade and therefore one's class. This being said, naturally, the street sweeper will attempt to change his coat so that he can appear to join a higher class. But as he begins to succeed, the banker will change the material, for example, in order to keep the distinction intact. This cycle of competition, Simmel suggests, is the basis of fashion trends: "The elite initiates a fashion and when the mass imitates it in an effort to obliterate the external distinctions of class, abandons it for a newer mode—a process that quickens with the increase of wealth" (541). By this model, fashion is moved by and helps to create a status or class system. Like the self, then, fashion creates and is created by social forces.

Cannon suggests that despite Simmel's relevance to his own culture, no model will be able to replace specific analysis of a given culture when attempting to understand

its fashions, what they mean, and why they change: "Only the process of fashion is universal" (28). When specifically related to the nineteenth century in which he is writing, Herbert Spencer finds that Simmel's model is most applicable to "'the woman of the 'leisure class'" (qtd. in Steele 19). In this way, Simmel's model becomes especially relevant to understanding Wharton's female characters, who are members of the "leisure class" at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as those of Hawthorne and Fitzgerald. The femininity of these characters, like that of the real women who read about them, was in part a product of socially sanctioned leisure activity and dress. During this time, fashion behavior and fashionable behavior were the most conspicuous ways in which female gender identities were constructed and displayed.

Simmel himself recognizes that, regardless of time, fashion is a functional agent in a woman's self-actualization and formation, when she is denied other means of expression: "Thus it seems as though fashion were the valve through which woman's craving for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence find vent, when its satisfaction is denied her in other fields" (Simmel 551). He gives the example of the intellectual and philosophical developments of Germany in the 14th and 15th centuries, which – not having extended to the female population – forced the women to dress extravagantly in order to gain social recognition through other means. Simmel compares this situation to that of Renaissance Italy and the vast opportunities available to the Italian women of this time period who, consequently, did not feel the need for such fashion display. Through inductive logic based on his observations concerning women and fashion in various societies, Simmel shows that fashion will gain power as a nonverbal communicator in inverse proportion to an individual's own status or power, thus visually

reinforcing the status – or in this case, gender – of the individual. Hence, the fashions of nineteenth-century American women have more powerful and meaningful messages to communicate because they were otherwise unable to gain status in their society.

Falling under Simmel's model as a fashion item, hair is a particularly apt element in this process of sending messages concerning one's social status. Because it is both a part of the individual body and the social language of fashion, Miller elaborates on hair's role as an individual entity which functions as a social communicant involved in the process of status and gender identity construction:

> The natural place for human hair is the human body, and as such attitudes to it are shaped by a tacit understanding of that body as both a personal and social entity, central to a process of communication within a particular context. Like many other customs concerned with the manipulation and fashioning of the human body, hairstyling and management is part of a range of culturally sanctioned practices and meanings associated with the communication of facets of social identity, including status, taste, sexuality and gender. (184)

Indeed, many anthropologists have observed a link between hair and gender roles in various cultures of the world. For instance, strongly influenced by Leach's "Magical Hair," Jeannette Marie Mageo's article explores "transformations of female sex roles in Samoa from contact to present; it does so by viewing changes in hair styles as indices of changes in these roles" (407). The same is true of hair associations in modern western cultures, according to Brain: "Hairstyles distinguished men from women, and in the West until recently the symbolism was so strong during this century that long-haired men were considered effeminate and short-haired women mannish" (118). The universal applicability of this link between hair and gender would suggest that the source of this symbolism must be some element which is common to all human experience, namely, the body. While all human bodies have hair, cultures frequently make distinctions between

the sexes as to its display: "All human bodies are, after all, hairy bodies, but hair's visible absence or presence operates to make clear the boundaries of normative gender identity at any one time" (Biddle-Perry 99).

Some claim that head hair is used to reinforce gender within a culture because it calls to mind the sex of a human in alluding to the hidden hair which covers human genitalia. Indeed, Brain finds that hair gains cultural power as a symbol of sexuality through its specific association with the sexual organs:

> Hair may be a symbol of sexuality and pollution of the very stuff of sacredness. The Greeks saw the head as the source of male semen in the form of the cerebrospinal fluid and considered the state of the hair as an indication of a man's sexual vigour. The psychologist Charles Berg, followed by some anthropologists, considers hair as a universal symbol of the genital organs, a bodily symbol which gains strength through this association with the genitals. Hair is seen as phallic—either as the actual penis itself or as the semen. As a result, if hair is used in ritual the meaning is usually phallic. (120)

Thus, through its symbolic link to pubic hair, over time, head hair came to represent, in and of itself, sex organs and sexuality in general. Brain suggests that coverings, such as those worn by the women of various cultures to hide their hair, are the result of exaggerated cultural understandings of hair as a "substance imbued with sexuality" (118). Thus, hair aids in the establishment of gender difference by symbolizing the covered object of one's erotic desire, which has typically existed across the lines of sex. Hence, hair is a tool in the fashioning of gender only in so far as gender is related to sexuality.

Yet gender is not determined merely by the sex of the physical body. There is always an element of societal intervention in the formation of gender. Indeed, even if gender were the direct result of the sex of the body, the body is not a static substance but is itself the result of a compilation of forces. As Nancy M. Theriot reminds us, we not

only *are* bodies but we also *have* bodies, which are "two different experiences which we usually do not differentiate" (10). So, too, gender is the result of individual participation and societal intervention. Because they are both shaped by the common influence of the interaction between the individual and society, the fashioned body – specifically hair – serves as a visual and external signifier of the abstract notion of gender. Thus, one may read the messages of a culture's fashions in order to learn of that culture's stance on gender, whether masculine or feminine.

While most theorists readily recognize the tension of social and individual influence in fashion, it is important in determining the meaning of particular fashions and fashion behaviors to distinguish which has a greater impact. Though fashioning the human body is an individual act, in that a wearer independently chooses certain items and puts them on, it is even more strongly a societal act because the wearer will only choose from certain available options which send cultural messages most fully legible to the society that defined them. This situation creates a sort of fashion paradox in which the individual cannot escape social influence, or, as René König notes, a sort of symbiotic, almost parasitic, relationship is formed: "distinction from and forming part of a social group do not rule each other out. A person can distinguish himself only so far as he does something that is acknowledged by the community" (113).

The meaning of fashion is therefore more closely connected to the social realm than the individual. Barthes agrees, suggesting that *dress* – because it belongs to the social realm – is more meaningful than *dressing* – because it belongs to the individual realm: "Dressing is a weak form of meaning, it expresses more than it notifies; dress on the contrary is a strong form of meaning, it constitutes an intellectual, notifying relation

between a wearer and their group" (*The Language of Fashion* 10). The way in which fashion behavior is played out on the individual level will always be subject to the influence of the society that first suggested the behavior and gave it the meaning the wearer hopes to either display or defy. For this reason, Barthes is able to conclude that "dress is, in the fullest sense, a 'social model,' and it is essentially at this level that it has meaning" (*The Fashion Language* 14). Especially in cultures, like nineteenth-century America, in which social hierarchy, being more rigid than in later eras, society more greatly impacts one's individual being and choices, because in a sense, "to change clothes was to change both one's being and one's social class, since they were part and parcel of the same thing" (65). Thus, a culture in which the social hierarchy changes, as occurred in early twentieth-century America, would naturally lead individuals to collectively and individually change their clothes and the messages they send. Because "clothing may seem to be 'meaningless' in itself; so we must then, more than ever, get at its social and global function, and above all at its history" (Barthes *The Language of Fashion* 14). Hence a fashion behavior, such as the dressing of the hair, must be considered in its proper historical and cultural context if it is to become meaningful.

The American Woman and Her Style: 1850s-1920s

The model thus far constructed suggests that fashion, more specifically hair, sends messages about and within a particular culture's values. If a culture values status, as many do, then fashion will reflect and send messages concerning status distinction. If gender is a determinant of one's status in a particular culture, then fashion will aid in distinguishing gender and send messages regarding femininity and masculinity. So many conditionals make it difficult to establish anything factual about the meaning of fashion.

But in establishing cultural values through other means, the meaning of particular fashion messages becomes clearer. Thus, it is essential in deciphering messages regarding femininity sent by the fashions of a particular culture to understand the specific context in which they are sent. In this case, one cannot understand fashion's role in the construction of femininity via fashion messages in turn-of-the-century literary texts until one understands the particular culture in which they are sent.

Of the three authors under consideration, Wharton's life is most relevant to understanding femininity in turn-of-the-century culture. Wharton's lifetime spans both centuries; she was a prominent member of the upper class and thus, keenly felt the disruption of the social system at the time, and, most importantly, she was herself a woman, and so learned about the construction of femininity during this time through firsthand experience. Wharton was born January 24, 1862, in New York City. More particularly, her cultural context, and consequently the subject of most of her novels was, in her own words, "Old New York." Her culture, the world of high American society, was heavily influenced by European ideas, values, and fashions. Characteristic of a woman of high status during this time, Wharton in fact spent much of her time abroad, including a few years in France and Italy before the age of five. Though she admits to few memories of this time, in *A Backward Glance* she can only recall the fashion of Parisian women: "I remember nothing else of my Paris life except one vision […] a beautiful lady driving down the Champs Elysees […] on her rich auburn hair a tiny black lace bonnet with a tea-rose above one ear" (39-40). Many researchers, including Crane, Simmel, and Collins, record that throughout the nineteenth century those styles which were considered "fashionable" began in Paris and trickled down the social ladder,

reinforcing hierarchical societal arrangements in the west. This passage suggests that even at a young age, Wharton intuitively grasped this social importance of fashion and specifically hair and headdress in female life, perhaps because of this early exposure to the center of fashion. Regardless, as a member of the prestigious historic Jones family of the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses," Wharton would soon learn the social implications of fashion as a symbol of status within the rigid hierarchy of Old New York society in the early years of her life.

Even as it was the case in the centuries before, fashion was both influenced by and a perpetrator of a hierarchical societal identity in the nineteenth century, the age of Hawthorne and the young Wharton. "Clothing as a form of symbolic communication was enormously important in the nineteenth century as a means of conveying information about the wearer's social role, social standing, and personal character" (Carne 10). Americans of the period imported social rigidity with their fashions from Paris. Sennett observes that, regardless of time and place, fashion in hierarchical society sent clear messages about social status: "clothing does speak socially; it has a code which can be broken. In 1750, the use of color, emblems, hats, trousers, breeches were instant signs of social place that everyone on the street could know; they may not have been an accurate index, but they were clear if arbitrary signs" (165). Indeed, being a true depiction of nineteenth-century America, Hawthorne's *The Blithesdale Romance* shows the distance between social classes as displayed by fashion by way of his contrasting depictions of the lady Zenobia, richly dressed and adorned with expensive hot-house flowers, and the lower-class Priscilla dressed in a poor gown and adorned with weeds and wildflowers.

But as the bourgeois class grew, the nouveau riche began to break down the once rigid class system in America. Sennett suggests that the move to industrialization and city lifestyle in the nineteenth century contributed to a heightened idealization of society and community that gave it great influence over individual identity: "Far from destroying fraternal community, 19th Century cosmopolitan culture made community seem too valuable" (255). Hawthorne's dedication to the Brook Farm attempt to create a utopian society serves as an example of this intense belief in societal idealization prevalent in the period. Sennett summarizes the belief that, if community is the answer to man's problems, then the lack of it created by industrialization needed to be rectified via a collective communal construction: "Myths of an absence of community, like those of the soulless or vicious crowd, serve the function of goading men to seek out community in terms of a created common self" (255). Initially, this "common self" extended to members of a common class, but within each class there existed a 'common self' which extended to gender as well. This common self inspired intense loyalty which shunned transgression, as is apparent in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, wherein Hester Prynne, having transgressed against the rules of purity appropriate to her status as a middle-class woman, is ostracized from her community.

The Gilded Age, which consisted of the last decades of the nineteenth century in America, saw the making of many fortunes. At the same time, a great influx of poor and jobless immigrants flooded the cities and kept up the economic distinction between the classes. So while the hierarchical social system was not toppled by the growing middle class and nouveau riche, it was certainly being slowly challenged and reshaped – a recurring theme in Wharton's works, written about this time. Family was, increasingly,

no longer the *main* currency of status; wealth was the main currency of status. The American dream, in which anyone could make a fortune and ascend the rungs of society with hard work and a little luck regardless of background, was an observable reality in this time period. Andrew Carnegie, for instance, was born a poor Scottish immigrant, but in building the Pittsburgh Carnegie Steel Company which later merged with U.S. Steel, he became one of the richest and most successful businessmen of the Gilded Age. But, this increasing social mobility challenged the older social models in which people had to learn to accept the circumstances they were born to. In literature, the Jewish businessman Rosedale is such a figure, challenging and seeking to nudge his way into Old New York society in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. This new opportunity to choose one's community and social status under the changing model allowed for new agency in determining one's communal identity.

Capitalizing on the disruption in the economic order of the social hierarchy, women began to openly and covertly challenge their second-class status. For instance, the turn of the century saw a great increase in the number of American women enrolling in higher education though few colleges admitted them. "A few colleges were open to American women early in the century, but women's colleges proliferated in the 1870s and 1880s […] By 1880, one-third of all American college students were women" (Crane 110). Collins records that the increasing numbers of female college students continued into the twentieth century: "the classic training camp for the New Woman was the college campus. The first generation of female college students enrolled around 1870 […] By 1910, when 5 percent of all college-age Americans were enrolled in school, 40 percent were female. Nearly half of all college students were coeds in the 1920s" (292).

Realizing the powerful way this change was rewriting femininity at the time, Wharton anticipated the tension between education and societal expectation concerning female behavior and house-keeping that would become characteristic to the next generation of women whom she called the "'monstrous regiment' of the emancipated" (*BG* 60).

Women also began entering the workforce as more jobs became available in the expanding industrialized cities. However, these changes did not mean that female power and influence rivaled that of men. Though they could become educated and economically independent, women were still objects of masculine pleasure in the workplace rather than free and equal employees: "If the first female office workers faced any problems, it was probably a Victorian version of sexual harassment. At the turn of the century, *Typewriter Trade Journal* reported that nine of ten employers wanted female secretaries and that requests were phrased in 'most peculiar language,' such as 'a pretty blonde'" (Collins 245). As was the case with the social system at large, change had begun but slowly; while the social status of women was being challenged, traditional gender ideas remained in play.

Ever reflective of culture, fashion followed suit; the reordering of society due to economic change during the Gilded Age brought with it changes in fashion. As women began to take on masculine roles their clothing became more masculine. To some extent, this fashion change was for practical purposes: for instance, working women in the coal mines needed to wear men's clothing to do their work safely and effectively (Crane119). Most significantly, the "fashionable" American woman's style no longer came exclusively from the elite fashion circles in Paris. Crane observes that while the French fashions were slow to change at the turn of the century – still featuring traditional

corseted silhouettes; "[b]y contrast, in the United States in the 1890s, the young, athletic woman in short skirts or gym suit became a popular icon along with the Gibson girl in shirtwaist, tie, and long skirts" (107). The Gibson girl look, named after the popular illustrator Charles Gibson whose sketches appeared in most women's magazines and came to epitomize the "fashionable" female of the time, was a symbolic representation of the growing "masculinity" of female gender expectations. In eliminating the hoop skirt and bustle of the previous era's fashions, the simple two-piece ensemble consisting of a floor-length skirt and tailored shirt allowed for more freedom of motion. While the look was still corseted, the popular corset design at the time was also meant to allow for more motion, though the only real difference was an S-shaped silhouette.

There is general agreement that these fashions sent symbolic messages which reflected and helped in the changing female self of this period. Paula Jean Darnell suggests that the increased sense of athleticism of this look was the first step toward a new sense of female agency and individual self-determination: "This was the first sign that women meant to adjust their clothing to their lives rather than their lives to their clothing" (5). This look was threatening to gender roles because the mobility it allowed for implied an entrance into the world beyond the home and sitting room, that is, into the world of men. Charles Blanc, a fashion theorist writing during the Gilded Age, observes that the symbolic meaning of this look involved a desire to be seen in profile, implying a state of motion, as this is how we see someone on the go:

> the toilet became an image of the rapid movement which bears the world onwards, and which threatens to carry away even the guardians of our homes. They are to be seen at this day sometimes clothed and closely-buttoned like boys, sometimes adorned with braids like soldiers, walking on high heels which throw them forwards, hastening their steps, cleaving

> the air, and hurrying their live as though to swallow up space, which in turn swallows up them. (274)

Blanc's fears that such fashions would take women from their homes, then the proper sphere of female influence, demonstrates that this culture understood that fashion and its subversive messages could influence behavior and so have real consequences.

Yet fashion, like culture, was slow in changing, and so the more 'masculine' look of the Gibson girl or the New Woman did not completely replace the more feminine fashions from Paris, a fact expressed in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* in which the Gibson Girl look of May Welland exists alongside the European style of Countess Ellen Olenska. Even within these respective looks, a balance was struck. While the Gibson girl fashions reflected the growing agency and mobility of women in the Gilded Age, they balanced "un-feminine" articles of clothing with "feminine" flourishes. Masculine pieces, such as tailored shirts, were balanced with feminine touches, such as large flouncy bows rather than ties. These "feminine" items were so viewed because their price and physical burden reflected a woman's "femininity" in terms of her continued financial and social reliance on the men in her life. Such feminizing of the look generally involved the fashioning of the head, in terms of hair and hat design. As such, the Gilded Age – true to its name – sought to display its opulence with flamboyant headdress designs. Gale Collins notes that because the "Gilded Age celebrated the outrageous, the splashy, and the outspoken" (242) the women of the period expressed their matching personality with elaborate headdress:

> Fashionable women used hot tongs to curl their hair into effortful coiffures, which were sprinkled with gold or silver dust for special occasions. They wore elaborate hats—huge affairs bearing flowers, lace, organdy, and every possible kind of feathers, from ostrich plumes to

> stuffed birds. Women wore the bodies of entire pheasants on their heads. (240)

Even female coal miners, feeling unsexed by their trousers, "conformed to the Victorian norm requiring head covering by wearing bonnets of padded cotton or scarves. For decoration the women often added earrings, necklaces, flowers, and feathers" (Crane 119). In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton records her memories of this daily feminine display at Newport where the ladies drive in elegant dress as their entertainment for the day: "A brocaded or satin-striped dress, powerfully whale-boned, a small flower-trimmed bonnet tied with a large tulle bow under the chin, a dotted tulle veil and a fringed silk or velvet sunshade, sometimes with a jointed handle of elaborately carved ivory, composed what was thought a suitable toilet for this daily circuit" (7). The needlessness of this feminine display reappears in Wharton's literature, where she expresses frustration with these "shallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans" (*HM* 7). It is apparent from factual and literary example that these individual women were literally and figuratively burdened by their femininity as the Gilded Age society constructed it.

Not coincidentally, the feminizing feature of the Gibson girl look was the dressing and accessorizing of the hair. Writing during the Gilded Age, Blanc's explanation of the reasoning behind the gendered treatment of hair provides insight regarding the symbolic message of this fashion. He suggests that hair reflects certain traits and values inherent to the different sexes; for instance, character was masculine, while beauty was feminine: "The style of dressing a man's hair should not be considered as an element of beauty, but as a mark of character" (Blanc 74). If fashion displays self, then the masculine self is the display of virtuous acts and values while the feminine self was the display of

ornamentation. The fashion of elaborate female hairstyles was feminine because to be a woman was to be a dependent ornament. So a feminine hairstyle would be an ornamental one that a woman could not do by herself, reflecting her dependent status: "woman needs to be adorned with profound skill, and it is not easy for her to dress her own hair" (Blanc 99). Just as the Gibson girl's clothing sent messages about her lifestyle being one of greater mobility, her hair sent messages which reinforced her feminine or dependent persona.

Fashion reflects status and while gender is indicative of status within a class, these women also belonged to a larger social class. Thus, as fashion items, hats and hairstyles not only reflected a woman's secondary status beneath men within her class but also her status within the grander social hierarchy. All the ornamentation that decorated these hats cost money and so a more elaborate hat implied the wearer belonged to a higher economic-social status. But because a hat could be self-decorated and redecorated to match the particular fad or decorative style as they changed, more women could display this sign of status. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton suggests that this fashion allows Lily Bart, who is skilled at redecorating her hats, the opportunity to survive as a poorer aristocrat in the circles of the wealthy. In this way, the fashion reflected the breakdown of clear lines of social distinction in the greater organization of society. As Collins observes, this fashion showed that America was breaking with the hierarchical societal arrangement of Europe, as many immigrants understood:

> In Europe, peasants wore shawls and only women of means wore hats. For poor women who immigrated to the United States in the nineteenth century, buying a hat was a big moment, when they left the old world behind and became Americans. 'They say in this country you don't go to work without a hat,' wrote Rose Pasternak, a newcomer whose brother greeted her at the boat and took her directly to a milliner. (258)

While previously the "fashionable" woman belonged to the highest class in society, in the latter part of the Gilded Age, more women could aspire to be "fashionable." For many, this fashion became synonymous with achieving the American dream in which one's status was not determined by birth. "Beginning in the 1830s, immigrants poured into the United States, seeking opportunity—the chance to become, or help their daughters become, the kind of woman who wore a hat" (Collins 259).

The growth of capitalism into the twentieth century allowed for a wider distribution of fashionable clothing and more leisure time to wear it. Sennett traces the way capitalism and ready-made clothes revolutionized the fashion system: "Industrial capitalism was equally and directly at work on the material life of the public realm itself. For instance, the mass production of clothes, and the use of mass-production patterns by individual tailors or seamstresses, meant that many diverse segments of the cosmopolitan public began in gross to take on a similar appearance" (20). People also had more money to spend on otherwise unnecessary items, such as extra sets of clothing designated for special activities and occasions. Wilson suggests that more people had the leisure time to engage in more of these specialized activities: "This new experience of city life was built upon a new economic order. Life in the nineteenth century was more sharply than before divided between working hours, repaid in wages, and 'leisure' during which wages could be spent […] The spending of money became a leisure activity in itself" (144). This extra time gave rise to new hobbies, activities, and sports for anyone with the leisure time and money to enjoy them. The numbers of those who could afford to participate in leisure activities grew and peaked in the 1920s. For instance, during the twenties, more

people attended movies and shows, giving actors and chorus girls more widespread appeal and influence than they had ever hitherto enjoyed.

This increase in leisure activity was especially popular among the new generation of adolescent girls who were being raised by mothers who wanted to give their daughters the kind of freedom they could not obtain for themselves. As a result, these girls learned to play not serve. This was a revolutionary challenge to the hierarchical societal arrangement in the first part of the nineteenth century in which children, and especially female children, were the last social rung within each class.

> Although changing socio-economic conditions created the possibility of adolescence as a life phase for middle-class youth, mothers were responsible for designing or allowing an adolescent lifestyle for their daughters. According to mid-century observers and late-century women who made up the daughters' generation, the female adolescent lifestyle was characterized by a certain educational experience, a great deal of leisure time for reading, parties, and courting, and the absence of domestic responsibilities. (Theriot 84)

Thus, leisure opened new realms in what society deemed appropriate to feminine behavior. Many of these young girls took up sports, but, more often than not, they were still forced to be preoccupied with attracting a husband and so, spent their leisure time on activities that would aid in courtship and the new phenomenon of dating. The activity which satisfied both, and thus enjoyed the most popularity, was dancing, as evidenced in Fitzgerald's short story, "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," wherein Bernice learns that one's value as a woman is equitable to how many dance partners she can attract.

Again, female fashion reflected this social change, and most sociologists and fashion theorists point to new leisure activities, such as dancing, as the inspiration for the increasingly *sportif* fashions of the time: "Fashionable dressing as a popular mass phenomenon and as a leisure activity in its own right has been influenced by the other

leisure activities of 'the machine age': sport, music, the cinema and television, all of which produced whole new ways of dressing" (Theriot 157). Many theorists admit that dancing may have played the most direct role in forming the design of the "flapper" fashion that swept this new generation of leisured females. Skirts were raised so that women could move their feet to the fast tempo of the Charleston and other dances suited to the jazz music of the time. Irene Castle, a professional British dancer, enjoyed huge celebrity in America at the start of the Jazz Age. When she cut her hair into a short and chic bob in 1914, supposedly so that she would not be troubled by it when she danced, the cut became the crowning element of the flapper fashion. Brownmiller also credits the flapper fashion, particularly the bob, to utilitarian factors like those cited by Castle: "even beyond the problem of hygiene there were other vexations a bob might cure. Freedom from hairpins, freedom from holding combs, […] and freedom, simply from a heavy, burdensome load" (64). The flapper wanted to live freer and the bob was both an aid in doing so and a clear visual message of this desire. The "flapper" – even more than the Gibson girl – was not just a fashionable "look" but a message about a new female persona and lifestyle. In other words, the individual decision to dress like a flapper carried with it the social expectation that one act like a flapper as well.

Though it would seem that an individual commitment to the feminist spirit and practicality were the cause of these new female fashions, this conclusion does not explain why the previous generation of reformers, who indeed shared these qualities, failed in their attempts to change women's clothing. When dress reformers openly attempted to introduce new fashions on the basis of the symbolic message such clothing would send, the fashions ultimately could not gain popularity among the female population at large

and failed outright among "fashionable women," who were generally of the upper class. These reforms were unsuccessful because they relied on appeals to the individual while fashion and the fashioned self is a result of a collective social identity. The successful shift in fashion, which began on a wide scale in 1920, was likely sparked by the success of the suffrage movement in the same year. There are reports of women lined up for blocks outside of barbershops in New York City in 1920. The bob's continued popularity throughout the decade, however, likely had more to do with the reorganization of society. Having gained favor among this society's new elite, actresses like Louise Brookes, the fashion then spread throughout the rest of the classes of women. Brownmiller agrees, suggesting that though Charlotte Perkins Gilman lectured on the utilitarian merits of a short haircut, it was more likely the influence of Irene Castle, "America's favorite dancing partner," and her "Castle clip" wrapped with a pearl strand that really began the popular acceptance of the fad. Whichever aspect of the culture has the greatest impact, fashion trends are not simply prescribed by individual designers in Paris or grow because of multiple individual decisions to wear functional clothing, but are complex expressions of cultural climate and changing societal values. Theriot explains that this ambiguity results from the complexity of the social self: "self is not a static, ahistorical entity with inaccessible private layers; nor is it a simple reflection of cultural messages. Self is a variable and constant reservoir of personal identity that is established, maintained, and altered through social interaction" (12).

Just as Americans from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century were increasingly free to determine their social status regardless of the role they were supposedly born to play in society, so, too, women began to demonstrate their increasing

agency in determining their status in terms of the gender roles they were supposedly born to play. Increased industrialization changed the economic and social makeup of America and allowed for more individual freedom in self-determination. The construction of femininity in this time period thus serves as a microcosmic look at this larger cultural trend. Though fashion was always a means of socially constructing femininity from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, it is unclear how much each woman is allowed individual participation in this construction. The early influence of industry in the nineteenth century created an either/or model of femininity in which either the individual complies with social constructions of femininity via or she is expelled. Increasing agency in twentieth-century society allowed for more individual freedom in constructing the female self. As cultural symbols which sent messages that challenged traditional gender roles, hair and clothing was the means by which women participated in the constant revision of femininity. Though these fashion trends were not necessarily worn by women consciously sending messages of rebellion, consciously or unconsciously, the subversive nonverbal language of women's fashion during this time period was an appropriation of gender-symbolic fashion trends: "through a process of symbolic inversion, items associated with masculine costume were given new meanings, specifically, feminine independence, that challenged gender boundaries" (Crane 126). In the same way, in the texts of Hawthorne, Wharton, and Fitzgerald, fashion functions as a symbol of the individual participation women are or are not allowed in the societal construction of the female self, regardless of authorial intent.

CHAPTER THREE

The Coiled Knot of American Culture

Hawthorne and the Either/Or of the Nineteenth Century

The tension between the individual and social forces which shape the female self is explored in the nineteenth-century texts of Hawthorne, whose heroines are complex depictions of and challenges to the femininity of his time. In determining which of these forces is prominent in the construction of femininity in Hawthorne's text, it is important to first establish that he indeed views femininity as a construct. Pfister points out that Hawthorne does openly acknowledge this belief in *The Blithesdale Romance*:

> Hawthorne did not have to be a feminist practitioner of 'social constructionism' to grasp that femininity and masculinity are culturally produced categories. In *The Blithesdale Romance* (1852), Zenobia, an advocate of women's rights, classifies her pale, emaciated, feminine half-sister as 'the type of womanhood such as man has spent centuries in making it.' (6)

Hawthorne suggests that womanhood is "made" in *The Scarlet Letter* as well. In Hester's initial appearance in the text, just when her specific identity is first provided, Hawthorne acknowledges that ideal feminine constructions can be dated: "And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison" (*SL* 50). If this ideal belongs to a particular culture in history, then the implication is that ideal femininity correspondingly changes as a culture changes. Hawthorne provides a social critique of his own culture's values by contrasting its feminine ideal with other socially constructed ideals when he describes Hester as "lady-like […] after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a

certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace, which is now recognized as its indication" (50). Thus, in establishing that femininity changes from age to age according to the values of a given culture, Hawthorne suggests that femininity is, in fact, a cultural construction.

In *The Blithesdale Romance*, Hawthorne suggests that such socially constructed femininity is artificial. The result is that if a woman is to survive in her society, she must comply with its feminine ideal, submerging her individual identity into that of social expectation, or else act as if she is this ideal until she becomes it or fails – either through death or insanity. Pfister concludes that Priscilla is presented as the first option, a woman who is compliant to the nineteenth-century ideal (83). Indeed, Priscilla is the fainting female, "a slim and unsubstantial girl" (26). As Collins records that slenderness was a prominent feature of the feminine ideal during the nineteenth century: "girls starved themselves to win the ultimate compliment of 'fairylike'" (123). Because such slightness combined with the 'appropriate' female environment of the home led to malnutrition and illness, female sicknesses – both real and imagined – were so prevalent at this time that they became part of the definition of femininity: "just being female made women candidates for perpetual medical care" (Collins 116). Priscilla also meets this ideal: "her face was of a wan, almost sickly hue, betokening habitual seclusion from the sun and free atmosphere" (*BR* 27). Priscilla eventually achieves the feminine ideal through losing her individual self to the influence of her cultural environment.

Significantly, it is a fashion garment – a veil – which symbolizes Priscilla's immersion of self. Her identity, or perhaps anti-identity, as the Veiled Lady is synonymous with her identity as the Victorian ideal, the fainting female. Hawthorne

makes this symbolism clear, as Priscilla "is really going to faint" (116) when Zenobia covers her with a piece of gauze and suggests that she is the Veiled Lady. D. H. Lawrence suggests that this veil actually works toward negating her self: "In Priscilla, the mystic seal of integrity, the integrity of being, is broken. She is strictly a thing, a mystic prostitute, or an imbecile. She has no being, no true waking reality, only a sleeping, automatic reality" (144). Indeed, Priscilla has no individual female self as long as she is the Veiled Lady, as the Magician in Zenobia's story explains, because the veil "is a spell; it is a powerful enchantment, which I wrought for her sake, and beneath which she was once my prisoner" (*BR* 115). Thus, for Hawthorne's women, clothing – symbolized by the veil – overwrites individual femininity by replacing it with a communal social identity. As previously stated, the construction of such communal identities, via fashion or otherwise, in the nineteenth century served as protection. Likewise, the veil is said to have this effect: "And from that moment, you are safe!" (115). But, it is the veil's symbolic representation of the female submission of self to masculine rule that is the real source of safety for Priscilla, who flings off the 'safety' of the veil and runs into the arms of her true protection, Hollingsworth and "was safe forever" (*BR* 203). Thus, fashion can offer no protection or sense of self on its own but only through its meaning – the meaning of Priscilla's fashion, and that of the other fainting females of the time, being rooted in her submission to a male-dominated culture.

Zenobia's feminine self is presented in contrast to Priscilla's throughout the text, both in terms of behavior and fashion. Zenobia's fashion, especially her hair styling, suggests that she believes she can reconstruct the feminine self. Rather than a veil to

cover her hair and thus her individual identity, submerging it into the social, Zenobia wears a flower in her hair to adorn and draw attention to her self:

> Her hair—which was dark, glossy, and of singular abundance—was put up rather soberly and primly, without curls, or other ornament, except a single flower. It was an exotic, of rare beauty, and as fresh as if the hot-house gardener had just clipt it from the stem. […] So brilliant, so rare, so costly as it must have been, and yet enduring only for a day, it was more indicative of the pride and pomp, which had a luxuriant growth in Zenobia's character, than if a great diamond had sparkled among her hair. (15)

Indeed, secluded in her utopian community, it appears that Zenobia was able to construct a feminine self through her fashion. As is the case in the above passage, and increasingly throughout the text, her flower – unique to each day – becomes symbolic of her individualized feminine self. The narrator can hardly separate one from the other, so that the flower is an expression of her self and vice versa: "her daily flower affected my imagination […] The reason must have been, that, whether intentionally on her part, or not, this favorite ornament was actually a subtle expression of Zenobia's character" (45). It becomes clear that rather than drawing herself from the flower, Zenobia bends the flower to her activity of self-construction.

But even an individual construction carries its own rules, for without the flower with which she constructs her self, Zenobia would have no self: "That flower in her hair is a talisman. If you were to snatch it away, she would vanish, or be transformed into something else!" (45); "She had, as usual, a flower in her hair, brilliant, and of a rare variety, else it had not been Zenobia" (155). Indeed, when she finally removes the flower from her hair, bequeathing it to Priscilla who has successfully navigated the complexities of femininity, she drowns very soon afterwards. Unlike Priscilla whose self-symbolizing fashion item draws its symbolic meaning from societal messages regarding male

dominance which protect her, Zenobia finds that when her individual stores give out, she has "no message" (226) and is vulnerable to self-destruction. Having relinquished the fashion item which had become synonymous with her individual femininity, she loses herself and is identified only as "a woman's garments" and "dark hair, streaming down the current" (234) when she is found dead in the river. Despite the fact that her exceptional nature allowed her to escape the censor of society which "most women who transcend its rules" (190) receive, Zenobia herself prophesizes that her individuality was ultimately the cause of her destruction: "the whole universe, her own sex and yours, and Providence, or Destiny, to boot, make common cause against the woman who swerves one hair's breadth out of the beaten track" (224). But Hawthorne allows Zenobia too much agency for her death to be read as a tragic martyrdom; she chooses her death as she chooses the flower for her hair. Pfister agrees, arguing that Zenobia's self-consciousness prevents her death from being read as a tragic fate which befell her like Shakespeare's drowned Orphelia: "If Zenobia winds up looking like Medusa rather than the genteel Ophelia, perhaps it is because she herself intends this self-consciously literary suicide" (94). Thus, her increased agency brings with it an increased culpability. Having cut herself off from society and its expectations, it is not society that fails Zenobia but Zenobia who fails her self. Zenobia's failure reflects Hawthorne's belief that the individual woman cannot construct her own feminine self within the confines of society.

While *The Blithesdale Romance* is a disillusioned view of the successfulness of individual attempts at construction, *The Scarlet Letter* exemplifies Hawthorne's romantic hope for the individual's ability to overcome the tension between self and society. If social forces are too strong and the individual too weak in *The Blithesdale Romance*, *The*

Scarlet Letter offers a chance to the individual woman in her attempts to construct her own identity despite competing social constructions. Though Hawthorne acknowledges that society constructs femininity, immediately in the text, emphasis is placed on Hester's *personal* participation in her individual femininity. Her stature, "tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale" (50), first suggests the "elegance" and "gentility" which allows her to fit the societal ideal and her "dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam" (50) which calls attention to her feminine allure. But more than these, it is "[h]er attire, which, indeed, she had wrought for the occasion, in prison, and had modeled much after her own fancy" (51) which, though it "was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age" (50), gives her feminine beauty a "haughty" and confident splendor that leaps from within rather than impressing on her from without. Hawthorne makes it clear that the same fashion which allows her to fit feminine ideals, the "taste of the age," removes her from the society which constructed them: "It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations of humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (51). Through his portrayal of Hester's physical appearance, Hawthorne suggests that, though a society may construct the feminine ideal, it is through the individual that such constructions are given life and meaning.

Hawthorne suggests that while an individual woman may be able to affect her own embodiment of an ideal, it is not necessarily preferable – as the hardness of Hester's life of external isolation and inner triumph can attest. Regardless of the common internal passions and external persecutions she is able to endure, Hester is already an exceptional, idealized woman. There are certain circumstances – such as her beauty and artistic talent – which make her individual effort possible. In presenting Hester as a talented

seamstress and embroiderer, Hawthorne suggests that she is skilled in the art of fashioning the self. Zenobia was also skilled in this way: "at her feet lay a heap of many-colored garments, which her quick fancy and magic skill could so easily convert into gorgeous draperies" (107). But unlike Zenobia, Hester possesses such an exceptional talent that she is able to live both in and out of society through this ability. She supports herself through the patronage of the women in town though she is abruptly cut off from their society and, being without a husband, would otherwise have been snubbed by them and indeed often still is. Economic independence, if not essential to the individual's ability to fashion the ideal self, certainly makes the process easier. Thus cut off from society, most real women of the time would not be so fortunate, as the life of Lily Bart suggests. Without her virtue, such a woman could not marry to obtain economic support, and those that did have trade-skills—which would not be the case for most of them since generally women were not raised to work or be educated even during Hawthorne's time—would have to rely on the very society that exiled them for employment. In order to meet the basic survival needs of the body, there are certain economic realities to be faced.

Whether it is economically or socially, the individual must make certain public, external concessions in order to live free internally. Hester's concessions to her society are symbolized by her attire, both in the scarlet letter which adorns her dress and the covering that hides her hair. Like Priscilla's veil, head coverings were meant to be cultural symbols of a submission of the individual self to the safety of patriarchal society. Indeed, the covering eventually allows Hester protection during her commercial interactions with her society. In what her society perceives as an act of repentance,

Hester covers her hair: "her rich and luxuriant hair had either been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap, that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine" (150). As a result, the women Hawthorne's narrator calls this "a sad transformation" (150), suggesting that this "studied austerity" (150) is a symbol, like the scarlet letter, that she must make concessions, that her body is not entirely her own and that societal ideals will still interfere with her own attempts to re-form herself. But this transformation is saddest because "some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman" (150). Indeed, this constriction of her appearance works to not only interfere with but to thwart socially perceived messages regarding her femininity.

From the beginning, Hester cannot escape the fact that her hair, like the scarlet letter on her chest, is a potent symbol of the socially constructed femininity she has rejected. While her society believes proper femininity involves sexual restraint, mirrored by restrained or covered hair, Hester lets both free and constructs a new femininity. The luster of her unrestrained hair draws attention to her in her shame as she stands on the platform to be judged and condemned by her society as the novel opens. The messages of covered and uncovered hair, Brain suggests, result from the unique symbolic power of hair which the observer intuits as the covered genitals and substitutes as the object of sexual arousal and possession: "A woman's hair is more easily recognized not as her genitals but as a substance imbued with sexuality" (120). Long hair gained distinction as a highly valued feminine commodity, Gitter claims, because "the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation" (938). Bearing the symbolic weight of a universally coveted commodity, feminine sexuality, Hester's hair understandably gains

mythic import. Gitter writes that "the grand woman achieved her transcendent vitality partly through her magic hair, which was invested with independent energy: enchanting – and enchanted – her gleaming tresses both expressed her mythical power and were its source" (936). Regardless of the sexual messages it may send in her society, initially, the cap does have a unsexing effect on Hester's individual sense of her feminine self: "She who has once been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become woman again is there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration" (Hawthorne 150). Hester does encounter this magic touch and at this moment her femininity, her life, and her hair simultaneously and momentarily return. Dimmesdale, upon encountering her in the woods, "put forth his hand, chill as death, and touched the chill hand of Hester Prynne" (174). During the course of the interview, Hester suggests that they forget their past shame and throws the external symbols of it – the letter and the cap – from her reclaimed body (185). The transfiguration that Hawthorne foreshadowed is immediate. Once unleashed, the sensuality of her hair "upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance" (185) restores her femininity, symbolized by the "radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing forth from the very heart of womanhood" (185), and her sexuality, symbolized by "the crimson flush" (185) on her cheeks. Hawthorne's narrator openly confirms that "[h]er sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past" (186). But before she can fully savor the moment, it is gone and she must re-don these symbols of her self-concession.

Hawthorne believes that women can construct their individual feminine selves only in as much as they are able to escape society's more potent influence. While Hester

is able to hide her femininity away, keeping it alive internally while making concessions externally, Zenobia's public attempts to brazenly and proudly reconstruct her femininity ultimately fail. This distinction between public and private feminine constructions explains the confusion many critics admit to regarding Hawthorne's creation of strong female characters while he was privately and publically opposed to the feminist movement. Millicent Bell discusses this seeming incongruity:

> Hawthorne professed to dislike female propagandists for reform, but in *The Scarlet Letter* as well as in *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Marble Faun,* a feminist woman is the magnetic center of his story, irresistible to others despite her odor of transgression. These books express Hawthorne's distaste for female reformers who campaigned for the rights of political self-expression as well as for the abolitionist cause by raising their voices from public platforms. (16)

It is the publicity of female attempts at self-construction that he disapproves of rather than the attempt itself. As Auerbach claims about this culture, "Freedom for women is freedom in the sphere of the soul, not society; freedom is access to the heavens, not the professions" (26). For Hawthorne, if a woman wishes to escape social constraint she must be internally strong enough to escape the influence of society and not attempt to transform society, forcing it to allow for a less constraining version of femininity. Thus, though they are both strong women, it is Hester who, once ostracized from society, is successfully able to draw on her individual resources to form her own femininity, while Zenobia, seeking to transform society, fails to fashion a livable female self and dies.

Wharton and the Turn-of-the-Century Femininity Trap

Wharton's own life was the stage on which she first played out her theories regarding the construction of the female self. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance,* she dates the birth of her self – an event apparently not concurrent with the birth of her

physical body – as the moment when she became aware of fashion and its ability to represent her gendered self to her society, particularly the men of that society. Significantly, in describing this first memory, Wharton remembers the details of her dress more than any other feature in the scene:

> She had been put into her warmest coat, and into a new and very pretty bonnet, which she had surveyed in the glass with considerable satisfaction. The bonnet (I can see it today) was of white satin, patterned with a pink and green plaid in raised velvet. It was all drawn into close gathers, with a *bavolet* in the neck to keep out the cold, and thick ruffles of silky *blonde* lace under the brim in front. As the air was very cold a gossamer veil of the finest white Shetland wool was drawn about the bonnet and hung down over the wearer's round red cheeks like the white paper filigree over a Valentine; and her hands were encased in white woolen mittens. […] she had on her new winter bonnet, which was so beautiful (and so becoming) that for the first time she woke to the importance of dress, and of herself as a subject for adornment—so that I may date from that hour the birth of the conscious and feminine *me* in the little girl's vague soul. (1-2)

Wharton suggests that a woman does not have an individual self until she is able to separate that self from the social environment in which it encounters itself by awakening to the role the self participates in playing a role and how the role is effected. In her case, and in the case of the women of her culture, the role of the individual self was one of adornment and thus, the fashions with which the body is adorned were essential parts in the creation of this role and the self that enacted it.

Her vision of what women were and what they did would be forever after wrapped up in what they wore. The women she encountered in her society reinforced this gender expectation, whether it was her mother – whose description makes her appear to be a mere shadow in "beautiful flounced dresses" (26) – or even the more active women in her community, like the archeresses "in floating silks or muslins, with their

wide leghorn hats, and heavy veils flung back only at the moment of aiming" (46) whom she admired as a girl. Following these cues and others, Wharton's individual self began its imitative journey toward the societal expectations of womanhood, playing the role which was meant to teach her to form her feminine self. When she reached the age of "womanhood" she was given a coming-out ball, which was meant to signify that her feminine self was consistent enough with societal expectation to begin engaging in that society as an "individual." Appropriate to the display of this achievement, Wharton recalls that she was dressed in the expected feminine adornments of the day for her coming-out: "I was therefore put into a low-necked bodice of pale green brocade, above a white muslin skirt ruffled with rows of Valenciennes, my hair was piled up on top of my head, some friend of the family sent me a large bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley, and thus adorned I was taken by my parents to a ball" (77-78). There is a notable passivity to the way she describes the fashioning of her female self, as if its construction was something done *to* her rather than *by* her. This passivity intentionally highlights what Wharton believed to be the overwhelming influence of society in shaping the individual self, regardless of that self's compliance.

But comply Wharton did, and it was likely the failure of such compliance that allowed her to distance herself from the role she was meant to play and to escape completely losing her individual self to the effects of her repetitive performance. Judith Butler, who writes on the performative aspect of constructing the feminine self, suggests that it is the repetition of gendered performance that eventually leads to the dissolving of individual and social self; the gendered self is the result of the "*stylized repetition of acts*" (392). In the end, she posits, it is impossible to determine to what extent the self is an

individual choice or a social imposition: "The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies" (397). This explains Wharton's simultaneous compliance and disappointment with the fashion behavior by which she constructs her feminine self. In *A Backward Glance*, her response to meeting and wanting to impress Henry James provides an example:

> I could hardly believe that such a privilege could befall me, and I could think of only one way of deserving it—to put on my newest Doucet dress, and try to look my prettiest! I was probably not more than twenty-five, those were the principles in which I had been brought up, and it would never have occurred to me that I had anything but my youth, and my pretty frock, to commend me to the man. (172)

As a woman, Wharton had been trained through repetitive behavior to express herself through fashion and adornment, so that in wanting to greet James with the best aspects of herself, she would have to wear her best clothing. As she describes it, this was her individual response to the question, "How can I *make myself* pretty enough for him to notice me?" (emphasis added) (172). Though this act suggests a certain amount of agency, an ability to "make" herself, she acknowledges that the individual act was informed, even constrained, by societal expectation. Only after her repeated attempts to get James to acknowledge this gendered self-construction fail, having selected "*a beautiful new hat!*" (BG 172) to impress him at their second meeting, does Wharton realize that she has lost her internal individual self to her external social/gendered self. Having met other women, James has already met this self and so, need not acknowledge the initial meeting, for indeed, no initial meeting is taking place. Likewise, Wharton suggests that she does not really meet and become friends with James until after she has learned to distinguish her individual self from her social self: "in the interval I had found myself" (173).

Wharton works out this tension between the individual and the social self in terms of how it relates to femininity in her texts. Just as she was taught to construct her feminine self through fashion, so, too, does the fashion of her characters aid in her creation of their feminine selves. The treatment of fashion in Wharton's most popular works – *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* – and in many of her lesser known writings exemplifies the shifting interpretations of femininity in her society at the turn of the century. As an area of fashion that changed dramatically and significantly during this time period, the dressing of women's hair in her novels serves as a particularly revealing indicator of this theme. Because her career-long exploration of femininity began before the widespread acceptance of the bob made the symbolic potential of hair clear, her unique hair imagery speaks to the transitioning messages of the nineteenth and twentieth century regarding cultural understandings of the feminine self as displayed through the fashioning and adornment of the female form.

Wharton seems to suggest that rather than a set of crimes on which different societies universally agree, the only universal is that society demands a total submersion of the self. Attempted independence in thought and/or deed is the sin that Wharton's protagonists have in common. For instance, in *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen Olenska dares to live her life according to her own desires rather than those of Old New York society, but, as a result, she is ostracized. Unlike Hester Prynne, many of these characters cannot draw on personal resources to exist outside of their culture because they cannot determine where the boundaries of the self begin, if they exist at all. Though Newland Archer is externally complicit with his society's rules, his internal rebellious love for Ellen rather than his wife initially gives him the strength to resist losing his self to

cultural expectation, but in the end he cannot separate out the social ties that claim his self and stamp out his love for Ellen. While victims of external forces, these characters are so colored by their environment that it is inevitable, even fitting, that a rebellion against that environment – like rejecting the air they breathe – is a rebellion against their selves. According to Wharton's naturalism, independent acts – noble or otherwise – are essentially self-destructive, a lesson most clearly taught by the death of Lily Bart.

Wharton expressly believed that one's society is inescapable and inseparable from the individual self. In her autobiography, she expresses her inability to determine the boundaries of her individual self: "What is one's personality, detached from that of the friends with whom fate happens to have linked one? I cannot think of myself apart from the influence of the two or three greatest friendships of my life, and any account of my own growth must be that of their stimulating and enlightening influence" (169). In using the phrase "with whom fate happens to have linked one," Wharton expresses her belief in a kind of determinism, the inevitability of an uncontrollable social influence on the self. This belief is repeated in her fiction as well. In *Twilight Sleep*, Nona expresses the same sense of the blurred and retreating boundaries of the self:

> Where indeed—she wondered again—did one's own personality end, and that of others, of people, landscapes, chairs or spectacle-cases, begin? Ever since she had received, the night before, Aggie's stiff and agonized little note, which might have been composed by a child with a tooth-ache, Nona had been apprehensively asking herself if her personality didn't even include certain shreds and fibres of Aggie. It was all such an inextricable tangle. (201)

It is notable that she includes inanimate objects, not just the members of one's society, in the external elements that press in on the boundaries of the individual self. Wharton understood that everything in one's environment helps to define one's self.

Fashion and hair specifically reflect this belief in the inseparable nature of environment and self. More than the chair one sits in, the clothes one wears shape, literally and figuratively, one's self. Acting as camouflage, fashion functions as an outward display of group membership, and thus provides an element of safety. Social safety is most important for the disenfranchised members of a society, as they are most vulnerable to societal cruelty and attack. Wolff agrees that "[i]n Wharton's estimation the deformities of a debased society will always be shown most clearly in the plight of those who are disempowered" (74). Thus, women, who were disempowered by their lack of political, economic, and social freedom during this time, adhered to the rule of fashion more readily than men. Wharton notes this quality of fashion in *The Age of Innocence,* when Newland muses on May's obsession with dressing correctly on their honeymoon: "he was struck again by the religious reverence of even the most unworldly American women for the social advantages of dress. 'It's their armor,' he thought, 'their defense against the unknown, and their defiance of it'" (169). But fashion, as a result of the various strict regiments and large amounts of money it requires, is more than a visual social life-preserver. As previously noted, certain fashion 'looks,' like the Gibson Girl, came with a lifestyle, a sense of self. Partially through behavior modification, fashion seeps into the very selves of its participants, especially those fashions that concern the physical body rather than the garments that clothe it. The sickly pallor of the fainting female in the early nineteenth century, the robust health of the Gibson Girl in the later part of the century, and the slender, boyish frame of the flapper in the early twentieth century were all fashions which changed the lives, and thus the selves of the women who sought to embody them.

Wharton depicts this reality in the characterization of May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*. May Welland is the quintessential Gibson Girl in both fashion and behavior; not only does she dress the look – "She had put on the low-necked and tightly-laced dinner-dress which the Mingott ceremonial exacted on the most informal occasions, and had built her fair hair into its usual accumulated coils" (249) – but in winning the archery contest, she acts it as well. Wharton makes it clear that the expected behavior of a girl of this sort leaves no time for any independent acts which would set her self apart: "swimming, sailing, riding, varied by an occasional dance at the primitive inn when a man-of-war came in […] All of this keep her very busy, and she had not had time to do more than look at the little vellum book that Archer had sent her" (122). Not coincidentally, then, later, May *is* the part and nothing else: "never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea […] Now she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother" (251). Wharton suggests that this is a tendency which spans generations, for though May turns into her mother who shares her culture, May's daughter turns into a different ideal but the process by which fashion, behavior, and self become fused is the same:

> Mary Chivers was as tall and fair as her mother, but large-waisted, flat-chested and slightly slouching, as the altered fashion required. […] Mary Chivers's mighty feats of athleticism could not have been performed with the twenty-inch waist that May Archer's azure sash so easily spanned. And the difference seemed symbolic; the mother's life had been as closely girt as her figure. Mary, who was no less conventional, and no more intelligent, yet led a larger life and held more tolerant views. (296)

Wharton draws a correlation between the bodily fashion that their respective society's "required" of these women and what these women do, what they believe – in essence, who they are. Unlike fashions which merely protect the self by associating it with a

stronger social body, bodily and behavioral fashions work toward submerging the whole self into the social body.

Hair, as an element that is part of but not integral to the body, exists in the liminal space between self-submerging and self-preserving. On the one hand, May's coiled curls help her to visually submerge herself into the Gibson Girl social identity. It is the languid monotony of the gesture with which May maintains her hair's appearance, "lifting her long arm to fasten a puff that had slipped from its place in her intricate hair" (250), that exposes to Newland the rigid monotony of their lives. The essential sameness of the way in which May presents her body reinforces the static social identity it represents: "though May's outline was slightly heavier, as her goddess-like build had foretold, her athletic erectness of carriage, and the girlish transparency of her expression, remained unchanged" (272). This is contrasted with Ellen Olenska whose hair also obtains societal assimilation and approval at first, as expressed by Miss Blenker: "I do *love* the way she does her hair, don't you?" (193). But, she finds the *coiffures* of this society, like the role it expects her to play, wearying and ill-fit to what comes naturally: "'my hair wouldn't go,' Madame Olenska said, raising her hand to the heaped-up curls of her *chignon*" (141). Once she separates herself from this society, she changes her hair to suit her individual self: "the knot of hair fastened low in the neck under her hat" (196). In encountering her after this change has been effected, Newland is uncomfortable: "'You do your hair differently,' he said, his heart beating as if he had uttered something irrevocable" (197). In pointing out the change in her hair, he has "uttered something irrevocable." He has admitted that she is a new woman now that she exists outside the society in which he knew and loved her; he admits that they are now strangers.

Of course, Wharton would agree that it is reductionist to suggest that a person's or a character's hair is an adequate reflection of their individual complexity. In her autobiography, Wharton expresses frustration over "the reader alive only to outward signs" (211) who reduces a character to hair color, for "it is hardly likely that the psychological novelist would use the colour of her hair as a mark of identity" (211). Nevertheless, physical appearance sends messages about identity regardless of personal choice and, in associating one with a group, is a powerful component in the way others identify one's self and thus how one self-identifies. In literature, this translates to the creation of types, which can be useful to characterization. Wharton herself uses hair in this way when providing the reader of *The House of Mirth* with a first impression of Mr. Rosedale, describing him as "a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type" (17). But, far from suggesting that her society is comprised of clones of different 'types,' in the text, Wharton does admit that there is some individual care involved in the fashioning of Lily's beautiful self: "Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence. She felt she could trust it to carry her through to the end" (53-54). Yet the fact that her unique fashion skills are taught by her society that they might "carry her through" that society complicates their individuality. Thus, a woman's individual self is not replaced so much as dominated by social forces.

Once constructed, femininity becomes a role that women play, whether or not the act becomes a real and incorporated sense of self, as was previously intimated in explaining May's Gibson Girl behavior, or remains a temporary part which will

eventually give way to another, as was the case with Ellen. But more than the lives of May and Ellen, Lily Bart's life exposes the process of such role playing and its negative consequences for the self. Wharton incessantly reiterates that Lily's self-presentation is artificially effected through her fashion sense. Auchincloss notes that there is a close tie between how Lily presents herself and the progress of her life, that one could even "read Lily's whole story in the changes of her appearance" (72), but this point is not developed beyond stating that she shows increasing haggardness as she approaches her death. But more than merely charting her demise, the fashioning of her appearance helps to bring this demise about.

The reader first encounters Lily through Selden's eyes. Selden immediately makes Lily's role playing clear to the reader: "studying herself in the mirror while she adjusted her veil. The attitude revealed the long slope of her slender sides, which gave a kind of wild-wood grace to her outline […] Selden reflected that it was the same streak of sylvan freedom in her nature that lent such savour to her *artificiality*" (15) (emphasis added). Many feminist critics read this as the de-personalizing effect of the male gaze which sees anything other than that which contributes to female sexuality as artificial. Elaine Showalter believes that, in the *tableaux vivants*, scene Selden wants to possess Lily as the object of his desire rather than to know the real Lily: "Selden is enraptured by her performance, finding the authentic Lily in the scene; but it is rather the carefully constructed Lily of his desire that he sees" (93). But what Showalter misunderstands is that this ostensibly constructed Lily is, in fact, the truest Lily. Here Selden encounters a Lily that is most alluring *because* her role playing is laid bare in that here she openly acknowledges that her identity is, in its essence, a construction.

Through Selden's narration, Wharton shows the reader that "the real Lily" *is* Lily as actress, as self-constructor; she is nothing if not a compilation of poses that vary according to audience, situation, and environment. If Selden is wrong to interpret this pose as "the real Lily" then who is the real Lily? Selden's pronouncement that this artificial Lily is "the real Lily" is meant to expose the fact that "the real Lily" does not exist in and of herself. In this scene, Wharton literally holds Lily up on a pedestal as a portrait of the quintessential woman of hypocritical Old New York – a woman who faced with the task of adapting herself to a new century finds that there is no essential self to adapt, only a new role to play, a new mold into which she must pour her ever malleable self.

> Lily is portrayed as a character who prides herself on her ability to control situations. She is the mistress of the art of artifice; she shows an acute awareness of the importance of setting and the need to integrate it with appearance and manner. In fact, she could be said to have bought into the 'display aesthetic' of the times, with her concern for lighting effects, the folds of her drapery, the placement of furniture (props), and her persistent, even fatal, desire for luxury. (132)

Lily's real transgression is not the artifice that all women of her culture are taught, but her awareness of it. Wolff explains that artifice becomes reality for the women in this culture: "where women are concerned, the only reality that the world of pleasure seekers will acknowledge is masquerade" (82). Lily's self-conscious artifice is a dangerous challenge to the "reality" of her society. Unlike May and Ellen, Lily cannot escape the crushing fate that awaits her. Having formed her self around her role playing ability, Lily cannot submit this self, as May Welland does, without becoming a hypocrite, because, as a result of her self-consciousness, she lacks May's innocence. Yet, because this self is based on the rules of Old New York society, neither can she separate herself out enough

to escape intact, as – being able to base a new self on the rules she learned in Europe – Ellen Olenska is able to do. Though she is a product of her society, she can find no way to survive in it, as Montgomery notes: "This frivolous society has destroyed Lily Bart because it can give her no story adequate for the construction of her adult identity, a tragedy not just for Lily Bart but also for all the other women who could find no such narrative" (77).

Lily might have created her own reality out of her own resources, as Hester Prynne is able to, earning a life for herself by her own hands. But Lily's attempts at millinery fail because, despite a natural ability for design, she is unpracticed and untaught; in other words, she is unexceptional. Her fashioned self is too fully enmeshed in her society to see where it ends and she begins. She is not free, and fashion is largely to blame, as Selden's metaphor aptly suggests: "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (10). Montgomery notes that the restrictive nature of fashion pervades Wharton's works: "For Wharton, spectacle and display mean only greater opportunities for both social control and surveillance as well as pressure to conform" (134). The fashion rules that construct femininity and thus provide for a woman's safe incorporation into her culture come with certain behavioral restrictions. Lily is well aware of this fact and tries to explain to Selden the rigidity of the social role that she must enact as compared to his own:

> She surveyed him critically. 'Your coat's a little shabby—but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We

> are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into a partnership. (14-15)

Lily understands that her independent self is vulnerable. Furthermore, as the use of the business phrase "go into a partnership" implies, she understands the economic implications of her position. Having failed at her attempts to support herself by making fashions, she must fashion her body to "go into a partnership" – that is to get married.

Wharton understands that the greatest source of social constraint on feminine constructs at this time was the commodification of the female body. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify "the precise details as well as the crusader contours of the process by which women are socialized as prisoners of sex" (129) as the main subject that permeates Wharton's works. Because the formation of the female self must begin with the material of the body and because the bodies of Wharton's characters are prisoners of societal constraint, their selves are imprisoned as well. In *The House of Mirth*, it is the declining potency of her beauty due to age that heightens the danger of Lily's situation. From the reader's first encounter with her, her bodily decay is imminent though not yet a noticeable interference with the source of her feminine power: "Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing" (6).

The presentation of Lily's fashioned body in the text parallels the state of her self. As Lily's life gets harder, her body loses its feminine charm, specifically traceable in the description of her hair. When she is mistress of her fashioned self, the effect is alluring: "Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness: in the modeling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair—was it ever so slightly brightened by

art?—and the thick planting of her straight black lashes" (7). But as she loses economic safety, she must dispense with some of the support system with which she maintained her appearance, including the maid necessary to coif her hair, her hair betrays the change, as Cary Fisher notices: "Miss Bart, who, having dismissed her maid, sat before the toilet-table shaking out over her shoulders the loosened undulations of her hair. 'Your hair's wonderful, Lily. Thinner—? What does that matter, when it's so light and alive?'" (265). By the time she has fallen out of society, when she meets Rosedale for tea just before her death, her hair is the last sign of the glorious femininity she once wielded:

> The dark penciling of fatigue under her eyes, the morbid blue-veined pallour of the temples, brought out the brightness of her hair and lips, as though all her ebbing vitality were centred there. Against the dull chocolate background of the restaurant, the purity of her head stood out, as it had never done in the most brightly-lit ball-room. (307)

Showalter also identifies the correlation between Lily's inevitable physical and social decline: "Lily's gradual and painful realization that her status as a lady does not exempt her from the sufferings of womanhood is conveyed through her perceptions of her own body as its exquisite ornamentality begins to decline" (150). It is as if her feminine power has been drained from her self and absorbed by her hair as a final enticement to the man who might save her from ruin.

Gitter, as previously noted, explains that hair is common symbol in literature of the nineteenth century. Once externalized into her hair, a woman's power transfers to whoever possesses it. As Gitter explains: "the hair is not simply the outward sign of the woman's inner self, the text that explains her […] Hair becomes, rather, in itself something vital, independent, energetic" (941). Once she has commodified her hair, the hair is bequeathed a power thenceforth contained in and of its self, or as Gitter suggests,

an "independent" vitality which is derived but separate from the woman herself. According to this model, if another gained possession of this independent commodity, in losing her hair, a woman would lose the power she has invested it with. But in retaining her hair, she must be able to care for it. As we have seen, some women have the resources to do this: Hester, Ellen Olenska. Others do not, and so they must either find a purchaser (May) or suffer the consequences (Lily). In this way, Wharton's women are trapped by social forces which change by their own system of values regardless of individual intervention. Attempting to forge their feminine selves in an increasingly industrialized society, these women are commodities in a market which fluctuates based on the internal and unalterable forces of supply and demand rather than personal intervention.

Fitzgerald's Twentieth-Century Types of Flapper Femininity

Encouraged by the success of suffrage and ready to depart from the cultural rules of a generation which sent them to war, the young women of the 1920s sought a new alternative to the old restraint of a socially constructed femininity. Recognized as an independent political community, women formed a new society which was able to rewrite the process by which the female body was fashioned, basing it on the only model they had for economic power and free social agency: men. The flapper raised the end of her hair, her hemline, her activity level and generally a little bit of hell. But the loss of her hair should not be seen as the loss of the femininity and sensuality it represented to the generation of women before her, as Gitter would suggest. Instead, Fitzgerald depicts this new look as one among many feminine selves to choose from, each with their own fashion and thus, each carrying their own messages of femininity. It is not the look of the

bob so much as the woman's power to choose to cut her hair that is important; unlike Hawthorne and Wharton, Fitzgerald's women are allowed an increased agency expressed by fashion imagery which displayed feminine control of the body.

Fitzgerald surveys the different social types available to women in his culture in *This Side of Paradise*. The differing depictions of the four main love interests for the male protagonist Amory Blaine – Isabelle, Clara, Rosalind, Eleanor – crystallize into four types of female selves available during the flapper era which function as mediums through which different aspects of femininity are explored. As Amory is meant to represent the quintessential young man of his day, his tendency to typecast the world around him highlights what Fitzgerald believes is a general "passion for classifying and finding a type" (96) – a tendency which meets his culture's "desire to get something definite" (96) in a society newly restructured and continually challenged.

In first constructing Isabelle's femininity, Fitzgerald deals with the issue of social and individual control of the female body which was brought to the forefront of cultural discourse by the previous generation of feminists and reformers. Isabelle's character explores the successfulness of this campaign to equalize social expectations for gender. However, as Collins notes, while these women sought to raise the bar of morality for men, they only succeeded in lowering it for women (332). As a result, this generation of women could choose to indulge their physical passions, to an extent, without the total societal rejection suffered by women like Hester Prynne. Isabelle is the type of woman who makes such a choice. Extremely concerned with kissing and whether or not a kiss is her choice and/or makes her appear to be "a speed," Isabelle defies the tendency of her culture to treat women like sexual objects. In reclaiming her sexuality, she represents the

increased sense of agency where it concerned the individual female's control over her own body during this age. Sarah Beebe Fryer agrees that Isabelle is a new type of woman, strong and alive to her body and sexuality:

> Isabelle, however, has displayed a strength of character new to women in the flapper era: by freely planning to indulge in a physical display of affection when *her* heart was in it and by refusing to be coerced into such behavior at the whim of a sexist man, she has calmly asserted her right to her own feelings, to a sense of identity independent of her male companion's. (22)

Isabelle is the flapper version of the New Woman from the previous generation, but with the sexual awareness of Zenobia. She is still seeking to publically construct her feminine self within society, rewriting its expectations. As we have seen before, she must control the staging of her bodily presentation to do so, hence her obsessive awareness of her appearance: "She had never been so curious about her appearance, she had never been so satisfied with it" (56). But, while she can control her body, she cannot always control the reception of the social messages it sends, as is expressed in her frustration at being called a "Speed" (57), or even its presentation, as is expressed in the scene where Amory's shirt stud puts a mark on her neck which will be culturally perceived as a devilish mark, as "Old Nick" (83). This type of woman will have to fight to assert her individuality against society and may not always have the power to win.

Clara is also an exploration of a feminine type from the previous generation: the angel in the house or the Madonna figure. Fitzgerald associates her with the type through her physical appearance: "Amory wasn't good enough for Clara, Clara of ripply golden hair, but then no man was. Her goodness was above the prosy morals of the husband-seeker, apart from the dull literature of female virtue" (126). Her golden hair and the simultaneous reference to "dull literature" brings to mind the golden-haired fainting

females and angelic figures often represented in literature of the previous generation, which, as Gilbert and Gubar discuss, was a woman's positive alternative to playing the monster. Ellen Tremper also notes the use of blonde hair in Victorian literature to signify the goodness, wealth, and purity through a conceptual link to the appearance of Anglo-Saxon members of a romantic past (4). However, like Isabelle who is a new version of the New Woman, Clara is a new version of the angel of the household. She is the male-dominated society's ideal of femininity but refuses to be male-dominated herself: "I'd never marry again. I've got my two children and I want myself for them" (133). But despite this independent resolve, she too finds herself contained by society – especially in terms of the fashion of her body. She attributes the shape of her life to the shape and appearance of her body: "It's unfortunate, if I happen to look like what pleased some sloppy old Greek sculptor, but I assure you that if it weren't for my face I'd be a quiet nun in the convent" (134). Clara, like Isabelle, is allowed some individual control over her female body in choosing to save it for her children only, but she also cannot escape the way that society perceives this body and the femininity that is constructed out of this perception.

In changing genres from prose to a play at the introduction of Rosalind, Fitzgerald immediately signals her role-playing approach to femininity. Like Lily Bart, and to some extent Zenobia, of the generations before her, Rosalind's female self is an act. The list of contradictions which make up her personality – "her courage and fundamental honesty" (156) versus her "cowardice, and petty dishonesty" (157) – are explained but her ability to seamlessly transition from one feminine self to another. Again, her physical appearance dominates the societal perception of her person: "But all criticism of

ROSALIND ends in her beauty" (157). The artificiality of her playacting is suggested by the seemingly artificial color of her hair: "that shade of glorious yellow hair, the desire to imitate which supports the dye industry" (157). She also expresses a delight in wearing "costumes" because they help to construct her femininity in making her appear "charming" (157). Her freedom of agency is also symbolically represented by her physical body and her apparent control over its shape through athletic pursuits: "She was slender and athletic, without underdevelopment, and it was a delight to watch her move about a room, walk along a street, swing a golf club, or turn a 'cartwheel'" (157). As opposed to Isabelle, who used theatrical effects to assert her own version of her feminine self, Rosalind *is* an actress, and so the effects are organic to her nature and change as societal expectation requires: "her vivid, instant personality escaped that conscious, theatrical quality that AMORY had found in ISABELLE" (157). Like Lily, she has no self apart from her cultural context, but unlike Lily, she has been taught the rules of the business world and so can compete in the male-dominated market of society:

> HE: I thought you'd be sort of—sort of—sexless, you know, swim and play golf.
> SHE: Oh, I do—but not during business hours.
> HE: Business?
> SHE: Six to two—strictly.
> HE: I'd like to have some stock in the corporation.
> SHE: Oh, it's not a corporation—it's just "Rosalind Unlimited." Fifty-one shares, name, good-will, and everything goes at $25,000 a year.

Rosalind is the most fitting feminine construction for her time. She is the flapper as Zelda Fitzgerald describes the type: "And yet the strongest cry against Flapperdom is that it is making the youth of the country cynical. It is making them intelligent and teaching them to capitalize their natural resources and get their money's worth. They are merely apply business methods to being young" (393). Rosalind understands "the rules," as she

calls them, of her market conscious society and plays accordingly. But all this play and play acting comes at the price of an internal conception of her feminine self: "I'm not really feminine, you know—in my mind" (159). So, clearly, in allowing societal influence to dominate her feminine construction, she loses her individual ability to construct a sense of femininity even within herself.

Eleanor is a true flapper, a new feminine construction, but as the flapper will discover before the decade is over, having nothing to fall back on and still needing to marry, she is more nothingness than woman. The flapper becomes a pose, as Zelda Fitzgerald laments in her "Eulogy on the Flapper," because she has not inherited a philosophy to give her self meaning. When Amory first encountered Eleanor, "it was so dark that Amory could just make out a patch of damp hair and two eyes" (207). Before revealing her name, Fitzgerald significantly refers to Eleanor as "she of the damp hair" (207), thus suggesting that her hair will suffice as a means of identification. Fitzgerald prolongs this identification by having Eleanor cover her face when the lightning flashes so that Amory can only discover that her hair is bobbed. In this way, Eleanor is strongly linked with her bobbed hair in the minds of Amory and Fitzgerald's readers.

But Eleanor's bobbed hair is not an identity as much as it is a resistance of a socially determined identity. In cutting her hair, Eleanor is able to dismiss it, apparently successfully overcoming societal attempts to construct her femininity through her hair: "Yes, it's bobbed. I don't know what color it is […] No one ever looks long at my hair" (208). Through Eleanor, Fitzgerald suggests that even if the flapper is able to overcome societal attempts to construct her, she does not know how to construct herself. She does not like and/or feels ill-suited to her available options: "I have the social courage to go on

the stage, but not the energy; I haven't the patience to write books; and I never met a man I'd marry" (209-210). In this way, Eleanor goes through the available means by which a woman can assert her individual power by choosing from the three options each of the other women have already played with: actress, businesswoman, wife. Like Lily, Eleanor begins to feel the pinch of not choosing: "Every year that I don't marry I've got less chance for a first-class man" (218). Unable to construct a feminine self out of nothing, Eleanor lacks a self, and Amory discovers that the self he found in her was of his own making, only a reflection of his own self. Lacking a self to destroy, she cannot even find confirmation in suicide, failing to jump off the cliff at the last minute. She is not an individual self but the ellipses which ends the poem Amory writes for her.

Fitzgerald goes on to explore the power of the bob as a symbol in the construction of the feminine self in the short story, "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." Bernice, like Eleanor, has found the power to construct her own feminine self within society, but this achievement also leaves her incomplete and unsatisfied. Though, as previously discussed, Gitter effectively shows that women's hair was a powerful symbol of femininity in the Victorian era, she is too strong in her off-hand pronouncement that F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" ironically illustrates "how deliberately and thoroughly the moderns have undone the magic of the Victorians" (953). Gitter admits that the bobbed hair flappers have exchanged their locks for "the more potent gift of speech" (953), but she cannot help but grieve over what she sees as the devaluation of women's hair in the modernist period. Yet, blinded by her grief, she misunderstands the true spirit of the bob. Far from devaluing her hair, the flapper embraces all the aspects of power her hair has inherited from her Victorian mothers and grandmothers. A woman

with bobbed hair boldly refuses to relinquish her hair to any man and thus, symbolically resists relinquishing her self to any man. In other words, the flapper so highly cherishes the sexual, economic, and mythic power of her hair that she cuts it off to keep anyone else from possessing it. She refuses to be "encased in a locket or a ring." Because she wants her very self to become invested with sexual, economic, and mythic power, she cuts her hair off to keep its power for herself; the loss of her hair is not a loss or an ignorance of its power but the incorporation of this power into her very self. Only in this way can she be a whole woman, in possession of herself, rather than a composition of commodities available to the highest bidder.

Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," published in *Flappers and Philosophers* (1920) does not depict the triumph of modernism over "the magic of the Victorians" but is instead a modern reinterpretation of the Victorian elevation of hair as a source of power and identity. The theme of hair as emblem of identity is present even as this short story opens. The first female to appear is Madeleine Hogue, and not surprisingly, the only description provided pertains to her hair: "whose hair still feels strange and uncomfortable on top of her head" (198). The description of Madeleine is brief, but from it one is able to infer that if her hair feels strange and uncomfortable coiled on top of her head, then she most likely acts strange and uncomfortable during the formal occasions during which she wears it this way. Thus, her hair is linked to who she is, at least in front of others. Likewise, Bernice's first personal description informs the reader that "she was pretty, with dark hair and high color, but she was no fun on a party" (200). The reader cannot help but think that, in a story that's takes its name from this character's hair, there must be a connection between this description of Bernice's boring "dark hair" and the

fact that she is herself a bore who "was no fun on a party." Thus, Fitzgerald immediately suggests that hair contributes to one's social identity.

Hair is a source of identity for the women of this story in so far as it is a commodity, just as it was for Gitter's Victorian women. In Fitzgerald's text, while all human selves are influenced by the marketplace of human society, men are allowed more agency in the creation of this self they are to market. The men of the story are first described by where they chose to attend school – Otis Ormonde, Hill School; G. Reece Stoddard, Harvard Law; Warren McIntyre, Yale. As college is the first step toward a career for men, their education is the commodity they market to an employer. The school a man attends is a source of identity in so far as it is the first step in creating a social identity to be marketed to the various employers in the career that will determine how he will self-identify in the world: as a doctor, lawyer, accountant, etc. Likewise, if a woman's business is to be a wife, the first step in this career is to attend social functions, such as dances and petting parties, in order to market herself to potential employers (husbands). While a man's value in the job market is determined by the competitiveness of his college, Fitzgerald informs his readers that a woman's value at a dance is determined by the competitiveness with which she is cut in on while dancing (202). When simple supply and demand principles are applied, it is easy to see that as the dancing woman's availability decreases, her demand increases.

In order to initially increase her demand, the reader is informed that Bernice must be charming to the "sad birds" to later get the attention of the more desirable male partners, as Marjorie explains. According to the pseudo-flapper Marjorie, this charm can be effected through proper grooming, but for the modern woman to avoid the

commodification of her feminine parts she should groom to incorporate her parts into her whole person: “When a girl feels that she is perfectly groomed and dressed she can forget that part of her. That’s charm. The more parts of yourself you can forget the more charm you have” (217). Presumably then, if a woman feels her hair’s presence as Bernice does, it is apparently not an incorporated part of herself and must be done away and forgotten, in a word – bobbed.

Marjorie’s advice that Bernice create intrigue around her hair in order to become “charming” will indeed increase Bernice’s demand, but it is not in keeping with the philosophy of charm that Marjorie has just explained. The threat to bob may seem like a rejection of the previous courtship ritual of offering locks of hair to would-be suitors. The intrigue which develops around Bernice’s threat does indeed empower her, because calling attention to her hair invokes the charm hair has inherited from the previous century. She becomes the bewitching woman who can alone command the symbolic sexual power of her hair. But Bernice’s threat is a fabrication meant to purchase male attention, and thus, she is in fact commodifying her hair like the women of the past. It is not Bernice herself but only her hair and the myth she builds around it that receives attention. That the male to be charmed, Warren, first notices Bernice’s hair rather than herself confirm this: “He liked the way she had her hair arranged, wondered if it was brillantine that made it glisten so” (224).

Because Bernice has commodified her hair, the myth she builds around it gains an independent value and is thus vulnerable to detachment. When her jealousy over Warren’s attention to Bernice is aroused, Marjorie is able to capitalize on the story’s independence by stealing it in the scene where she tells everyone that the story is a lie

Bernice made up to get attention. At this point, Bernice can leave the story in Marjorie's possession, thus relinquishing her hair's mythical power to Marjorie and losing her source of empowerment. Or else, she can take back the myth and absorb its power by showing everyone she was telling the truth, by actually bob her hair, which will put an end to her hair's commodification. She recognizes that the only way to retain power in this situation is to bob her hair and does so. She goes to the barber shop as Marie Antoinette to the guillotine only because she, like Gitter and the Victorians, misunderstands the meaning of the bob, believing that she will be literally cutting herself off from her hair's power rather than absorbing this power into her self. Before it is cut off, her hair is described with more vitality than ever before: "this hair, this wonderful hair of hers, was going—she would never again feel its long voluptuous pull as it hung in a dark-brown glory down her back" (236). Her hair's independent vitality has eclipsed Bernice's self. If Bernice wants to become vital herself, she cannot let anyone else possess her hair; she must sever it to reclaim its power.

Bernice is initially numb toward her decision, feeling as if she has lost rather than reclaimed the power of her hair, she needs only to see Marjorie hold up her own golden hair, displaying it as a commodity meant to inspire avarice in Bernice, before she begins to understand the new redistribution of the power of her hair into her person. Freed from the threat of outside possession via her hair, Bernice is a new woman with real agency. The power structure has reversed, and it is now Bernice who is strong where Marjorie is weak. Because she too has allowed her hair to become an independent commodity, Marjorie's power is not internal, as Bernice's is, but external and therefore vulnerable. Significantly, as the first demonstration of her newfound agency, Bernice steals

Marjorie's golden braids while she sleeps. Bernice then throws Marjorie's braids at Warren's door to signify that Marjorie has already made her choice to commodify her hair and thus her self for Warren's purchase. Ronald Berman aptly notes that Marjorie's freedom of action was always something of an illusion (30). While Marjorie's individual agency is dependent on social, specifically male, expectation and desire, Bernice achieves real agency by removing the object of male desire, her hair. Thus, Bernice's act works to expose Marjorie's fraudulence and the reality of Bernice's own freedom. Only after her hair is bobbed can the flapper "forget" it and gain a sense of wholeness and independence, which is the real source of her charm.

Yet the fact that women must be charming at all remains a problem. Despite her rebellion, the flapper is regrettably still preoccupied with the desires of men. Like an amputated limb that still causes pain, the flapper's shorn hair still tugs her toward home and hearth. Fitzgerald's Marjorie exemplifies the flapper's all too frequent failure to live up to her own ideals, or as Sarah Beebe Fryer describes the problem, "these women who would be whole are often pathetic in their apparent lack of the internalized self-esteem" (4). This lack of internalized self-esteem is a result of the incongruity between the flapper's desire to display agency over her own body by cutting her hair while still surrendering her body to a man in order to obtain economic stability and an identity as his wife. Fryer suggests that while Fitzgerald "identifies one of the most pervasive and influential factors that contributed to the sexual revolution of his era: women's ever-increasing assumption of jurisdiction over their own bodies before, during, and after marriage" (3), his flappers are caught in a paradox of their own creation. As they are still caught up in self-commodification or "work in the female tradition" (Fryer 9), the

flappers' attempts to possess their bodies, not the least of which is the bobbing of their hair, fall flat because they must still trade on their bodies to obtain economic security and identity through men. While Bernice exits her story triumphantly free of the commodities game, Fitzgerald conveniently does not show his reader what happens to her next. We may well wonder what will become of her after she has turned her back on Warren and the security he would have provided. As she must steal Marjorie's hair to display her new supposedly agency, Fitzgerald leaves her more than a commodity but not yet a purchaser or an economically free agent.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Like the hair on one's head, femininity can be individually dressed up in ever new and changing fashions, but women still have to begin with the hair they are born to just as women still have to begin with the definitions of femininity in the society they are born to. Though they allow for varying amount of individual female agency, Hawthorne, Wharton, and Fitzgerald demonstrate that the social construction of femininity is an inevitable reality. Women can construct themselves through fashion, but unless this fashion and the self it creates meets certain social expectations, the average turn-of-the-century woman could not survive outside of the society which helped create her. Even as certain socio-economic changes challenged and helped to reconstruct society, granting early twentieth-century women more cultural freedom, they were still constrained in the construction of their femininity.

The nineteenth-century women of Hawthorne were not equipped to find economic security outside of the society in which they were taught to trade and so were forced to either conform to societal constructions of femininity or leave society. During the Gilded Age, women traded on their bodies, adorning them to attract a buyer while retaining the approval of their peers, who had the ability to shut them out of the market. The bodily symbols of femininity, including hair, thus gained a cultural power that was external to a woman's self. Likewise, the power to shape the feminine self existed outside of a woman's individual self. Hawthorne perceived that if women were externally powerless to shape their femininity, they would have to turn inward to do so. But such inward

turning has an isolating effect. Thus, as Hawthorne's works demonstrate in the cases of Hester and Zenobia, the nineteenth-century woman who attempted to construct an individual femininity had no place in society; she would either be cast out and forced to find some way to draw on individual resources to survive like Hester or be destroyed in her isolation like Zenobia.

Building on the model of Zenobia, Wharton's portrayal of femininity showed the all-encompassing grasp of social constructions of femininity and exposed the inability of the feminine self to exist outside of society. Her works suggest that a woman cannot construct her own femininity because she will always have to work with the constricting principles of her society, just as she will always have to style the hair on her head, be it long or short. In the end, the individual and social self are insperable. Lily Bart cannot even get so far as Zenobia in the process of constructing her feminine self, for the roles she plays hoping to find one to fit her individual designs for herself are written by the society she seeks to escape. Though she wrote during the changes of the twentieth century, Wharton's works confirm that she could not conceive of a way for women to escape the timeless restriction of social forces on the construction of femininity. She had seen the end of the Old New York society that first fashioned her own femininity and the acceptance of suffrage which fashioned that of the new generation, and yet, she perceived that the trap was still laid, ready to catch and either dispatch, like Ellen Olenska, or destroy, like Lily Bart, those women who sought an individualized femininity.

Fitzgerald's flappers are, by contrast, a possible source of hope for individual attempts to construct a feminine self. In *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald suggests that, while Wharton is right that women have to work with the material society gives them, the

increasing agency of the individual in society allows twentieth-century women the opportunity to choose from increasingly various types of feminine selves even if they cannot construct their femininity entirely out of their individuality. The interpretation of Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" argued in this paper suggests that the flapper's attempts to refashion her physical and social self by bobbing her hair in order to retain its power fail because she has no purchasing power. Woman is constrained by material existence – she can cut her hair but it will still grow back. She can claim she is a new woman but, just like Lily Bart, she will still have to play the part her culture has taught her or else become lost in trying to retain her self-possession.

The construction of the feminine self via the fashioning of the body is increasingly important in postmodern society. Contemporary scholars, like Butler, continue to discuss the performative nature of identity and the way that role play ends in a dissolved sense of the self. Based on Sennett's definition, "a 'role' is generally defined as behavior appropriate for some situations but not for others" (33). The self is, then, a product of acting rather than a pre-existing entity, as outlined by Butler in *Gender Trouble*. As Lily Bart's story teaches, this constant flux required to jump from one role to another is disruptive to a continuous concept of self and, ultimately, self-destructive. When the self is merely the result of constantly changing patterns of behavior, then its potential is endless. But in becoming everything, the self is essentially nothing, consisting of "shaky boundaries" (Wilson 60) at best. Wilson suggests that fashion, then, is still a relevant tool in testing and creating the boundaries of the gendered self: "Modern fashion *plays* endlessly with the distinction between masculinity and femininity. With it we express our shifting ideas about what masculinity and femininity are" (122).

The fashioning of the female self in culture and literature is a microcosmic look at a larger tendency toward increased individual agency in society. As industry changes the economy, economic changes challenged the structure of society and the identities built on it. The modern period saw an upset of power structures based on inherited money and prestige via the creation of the *nouveau riche*, which allowed for more social mobility at large. As a result, the individual began to participate in the construction of their social self. Likewise, women began to seek individual participation in the social construction of femininity. This tendency toward the individualization of the self, especially the gendered self continues into the postmodern period.

While advances in industry in the modern period led to an increased interest in individual attempts to construct the self through fashioning the body in terms of mass-produced clothing and new hair styles, technology in the postmodern period has been put to the same use in terms of not only fashion but also surgical self-construction. As Negrin points out, "[r]ather than being seen as determined by nature, the body is increasingly coming to be regarded as a social and cultural construct, capable of radical transformation" (83). The "radical transformation" available through surgical technique, Negrin suggests (91), has only aided in the same process of body commodification seen in the Gilded Age, as discussed above. Ironically, the postmodern individual's "freedom" to construct the feminine self has the same result as the constricting socially constructed femininity of the previous era: the commodification of the female body and the destruction of the female self. Postmodern scholarship would do well to heed Wharton's prophetic depiction of heroines who discover that there can be no feminine self outside of that of social construction.

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